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The Concept of Thematic / Topic-Based Routes as a Strategy for Planning Heritage Tourism in the Old City of Mosul

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Abstract

Following the extensive destruction of the Old City of Mosul during the events preceding and accompanying its liberation in 2017, large-scale reconstruction and rehabilitation initiatives were launched by national and international organizations. These efforts led to the restoration of major religious and heritage landmarks and encouraged the gradual return of tourism activities within the historic urban fabric. Despite these developments, heritage tourism in the Old City remains fragmented, with heritage sites largely treated as isolated attraction points rather than as parts of an integrated cultural system.

This research proposes the adoption of thematic/topic-based routes as a strategic framework for planning and managing heritage tourism in the Old City of Mosul. Building on international literature on cultural and thematic routes, the study develops a comprehensive methodology for identifying, organizing, and implementing thematic routes that reflect the city's diverse cultural identity. The proposed methodology integrates heritage inventory and mapping, thematic identification, spatial linking of heritage assets, interpretive planning, and participatory evaluation.

Based on a questionnaire survey involving heritage experts and stakeholders, four principal thematic routes were identified: the Diverse Religious Heritage Route, the Trade and Traditional Markets Route, the Urban Life and Ottoman Architecture Route, and the Conflict, Memory, and Reconstruction Route. A detailed application of the methodology is presented through a case study of the Diverse Religious Heritage Route, emphasizing interreligious coexistence, post-conflict resilience, and shared urban space. The study concludes that thematic routes offer an effective and sustainable tool for enhancing heritage tourism, strengthening cultural interpretation, and supporting socio-economic revitalization in post-conflict historic cities.

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Introduction

Following the extensive destruction suffered by the Old City of Mosul before and during the liberation operations in 2017, reconstruction processes began with the participation of numerous governmental and non-governmental entities at both local and international levels. The primary objective of the first phase of reconstruction was the recovery, repair, and rehabilitation of approximately 124 partially destroyed heritage houses, funded by the European Union. Reconstruction efforts also included a number of iconic heritage buildings, such as the Great Al-Nuri Mosque and its leaning minaret (Al-Hadba), the Clock Church, and Al-Tahera Church, funded by the United Arab Emirates and supervised by UNESCO, as well as Ziada House and Al-Tutunji House, funded by the World Heritage Fund.

These reconstruction processes were accompanied by the establishment of a number of civil society organizations, whose most prominent objectives were to disseminate and enhance awareness of Mosul's tangible and intangible heritage, promote it locally and internationally, and organize heritage-related festivals and forums. These institutions also began receiving visitors who started to flock to the Old City of Mosul to explore the reconstructed heritage sites, in addition to other distinctive heritage locations.

As a result of improved security conditions, increased feelings of safety and stability, and noticeable development in tourism services such as hotels, restaurants, and others, the number of tourists increased, forming groups coming from within Iraq and from abroad. These groups began visiting heritage sites in a separate and independent manner, detached from other sites. This paper presents a future-oriented vision for planning heritage tourism in the Old City of Mosul through adopting the concept of **thematic/topic-based routes** as a strategy that goes beyond the current approach to dealing with important heritage sites in the Old City of Mosul as what is referred to in heritage tourism literature as *individual tourist attraction nodes*, toward integrating them into a coherent network of attraction nodes that immerse visitors in a rich and profound heritage tourism experience in the Old City of Mosul

Thematic / Topic-Based Routes: Definition of the Concept

Studies have presented multiple definitions of thematic/topic-based routes, each focusing on different aspects of the concept. For example, UNESCO's World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Programmer defines thematic (topic-based) routes as organized travel routes that link heritage sites through a unifying theme or topic, thereby creating a framework for the conservation, interpretation, and sustainable promotion of cultural and natural heritage.

Rátz and Puczko (2000) define thematic routes as a series of natural and man-made attraction nodes unified by a particular theme, characterized by accessibility through various modes of transportation, and capable of immersing visitors in an experience that simultaneously integrates learning, recreation, and entertainment while adhering to sustainability principles.

Silbergh et al. (1994) describe thematic/topic-based routes as integrated, sustainable, and environmentally sensitive interpretations unified by a specific theme, developed through services and marketing activities that take into account the needs of both visitors and local residents, as well as environmental considerations, and that generate positive economic, social, and cultural impacts.

The Relationship Between Thematic Routes and Cultural Routes

The concept of thematic routes is closely intertwined with that of cultural routes in heritage and heritage tourism literature. However, there are important differences between them in terms of nature, geographical scope, and function.

Cultural routes are networks of routes that possess historical, cultural, or symbolic value, embodying exchange and movement across time and space. Spatially, they

may extend across regions and countries and are employed to promote dialogue among cultures, identities, and collective memory through tangible heritage (ICOMOS Draft Charter, 2008). Cultural routes are usually officially recognized by international institutions such as UNESCO.

Thematic routes, on the other hand, are designed to connect heritage sites and group them around a specific cultural theme of value, highlighting a particular story or message. They are usually developed on a more local scale and for purposes of tourism, education, and raising community awareness of culture, and are typically directed toward tourists and local residents alike.

Based on the above, thematic routes can be seen as elements or subgroups within cultural routes, and as local interpretive tools that help convey the broader and more comprehensive narratives embedded in cultural routes. Finally, the relationship between the two concepts is reciprocal but asymmetrical: every thematic/topic-based route is necessarily a cultural route, but not every cultural route is a thematic one.

Thematic / Topic-Based Routes: Historical Development of the Concept

A review of the literature on thematic/topic-based routes reveals that this concept has evolved through four main phases over time, as follows:

1. Pre-Concept Phase

The idea of forming routes that connect cultural, religious, or commercial sites is very ancient. For example, the Camino de Santiago in Spain dates back to medieval Europe between the 9th and 12th centuries AD. Pilgrimage routes to Mecca also date back to the early days of the Islamic state. Likewise, ancient trade routes—such as the Silk Road linking China to the Mediterranean—and the winter and summer trade journeys constituted physical networks of cultural and commercial exchange. These can therefore be considered early applications of the thematic route concept (Berti, 2013; Iakovaki et al., 2023).

2. Concept Formulation Phase

It can be argued that the formal articulation of the thematic/topic-based route concept, as a tool for heritage and cultural tourism development, began in Europe during the 1970s and 1980s. The term emerged within the context of linking cultural policies at the regional level in Europe, particularly with the launch of the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes Programme in 1987 and the recognition of the Camino de Santiago as the first official thematic route. This event represented the formal acknowledgment of thematic/topic-based routes as a heritage concept.

3. Early Application Phase

This phase, extending from the 1980s to the 1990s, witnessed the first practical applications of the thematic route concept. In addition to the aforementioned thematic route, the Viking Routes were established, aiming to highlight the cultural and maritime history of Viking civilization in Northern Europe. Furthermore, the Cistercian Abbey Routes were introduced as a network

of monasteries in France and Spain, showcasing the religious and architectural heritage of the regions they traverse.

4. Expansion Beyond Europe

This phase has extended from the 1990s to the present day. During this period, thematic routes began to spread beyond Europe, influenced by UNESCO's efforts in the 1990s to develop the Silk Roads as heritage corridors. With the beginning of the twenty-first century, thematic routes became increasingly linked to sustainable tourism requirements and heritage management strategies that prioritize beneficiary communities. In addition, industrial heritage routes emerged, linking early industrial sites with heritage tourism.

Main Roles of Thematic / Topic-Based Routes in Heritage Tourism

A review of studies concerned with thematic routes indicates that, throughout their evolution, the following roles have been attributed to them:

1. Interpretive Presentation of Heritage

Thematic routes function as frameworks for structured narratives that connect dispersed heritage assets—such as ruins, buildings, and traditions—into meaningful and valuable stories (Ham, 1992). In this way, thematic routes immerse visitors in a coherent narrative experience of a place's history and heritage through the diversity of heritage stations, thereby supporting the management of these heritage sites (Lin, 2020, MDPI). Cultural routes also enhance the visual experience of cultural heritage, its interpretation, and its promotion by adopting new media technologies and presenting heritage as a coherent narrative (Lakaroki, 2023).

2. Cultural Continuity and the Promotion of Cultural Diversity

Thematic routes highlight and trace long-term cultural processes and shared identities, particularly practices that demonstrate human resilience in areas such as religious pilgrimage, trade, and artistic development as historically distant social dynamics (Nagy, 2012). As journeys through space and time, cultural routes also serve as important tools for demonstrating how diverse cultural heritage contributes to building a shared social identity based on principles of dialogue and pluralism.

3. Tourism Development and the Promotion of Innovation

Thematic routes provide deep and diverse tourism experiences and stimulate visitor immersion by presenting them as valuable tourism products. They also offer exceptional opportunities for creativity in presenting more engaging attractions and targeting new visitor groups. In this context, thematic routes do not remain merely interpretive frameworks for heritage but also act as catalysts for innovation in tourism products and developmental tourism initiatives (Nagy, 2012).

4. Heritage Conservation

Thematic routes contribute to heritage conservation by linking diverse heritage assets—both well-known and lesser-known—within coherent narrative frameworks. This encourages their sustainable use and investment, which in turn stimulates the efforts of local communities and relevant institutions to protect historical environments and preserve their components (ICOMOS Draft Charter, 2008).

5. Economic Revitalization

Thematic routes are considered efficient tools for supporting and revitalizing local economies by attracting visitors interested in authentic local cultural experiences, accompanied by demand for local products, handicrafts, and hospitality services. This generates financial returns for communities located along the route and establishes a sustainable tourism economy rooted in heritage values. Moreover, the introduction of thematic routes in deteriorated historical areas creates opportunities to restore their cultural and economic value (Timothy & Boyd, 2015).

Structural Components of Thematic Routes

A review of relevant studies shows that thematic routes, in general, despite their differences and diversity, share six core components that constitute their basic structure:

1. Theme or Narrative Topic

This refers to the idea or heritage story intended to be highlighted and promoted. A thematic route is usually shaped around a unifying concept through which a group of heritage assets is interconnected, providing a coherent narrative framework that visitors receive intentionally (Iakovaki, 2023).

2. Heritage Assets

Studies concerned with archaeological and heritage conservation, as well as cultural tourism, have proposed numerous definitions of the term *heritage assets*. Synthesizing these definitions, heritage assets can be defined as elements or entities of recognized value within a society's culture, historically (in relation to a specific time) and geographically (in relation to a specific place). These entities may be man-made or natural, tangible or intangible, and are of great importance to present and future generations. Monuments, historic buildings, cultural landscapes, traditions, languages, and oral heritage are examples of heritage assets that societies strive to conserve, interpret, and manage sustainably to ensure their protection, transmission, promotion, and meaningful engagement within heritage, culture, and cultural tourism contexts (English Heritage, 2015; Timothy & Boyd, 2015; UNESCO, 2021; ICOMOS, 2008).

3. Connections Between Heritage Assets

These refer to the linking lines between heritage sites. A thematic route implies a spatial organization that connects heritage sites to one another. These connections may be physical or symbolic, resulting in visitor movement journeys between sites. Such connections may operate at various scales, including local, regional, or transnational levels (Timothy & Boyd, 2015).

4. Interpretive Presentation

This refers to the techniques used to educate visitors and engage them in the tourism experience. A thematic route is expected to integrate various interpretive methods and tools, such as signage and wayfinding systems, exhibitions, and digital media. These techniques facilitate the narrative process of the selected theme and immerse visitors in a rich and enjoyable educational and recreational experience (Nagy, 2012).

5. Stakeholder Network

This refers to the various concerned parties that collaborate to ensure the success of thematic routes. This network includes local communities, governmental departments responsible for managing heritage and heritage sites, as well as tourism operators. Cooperation and

coordination among these stakeholders are essential to ensuring authenticity and sustainability of heritage sites (Berti, 2013).

6. Supporting Services and Infrastructure

This includes transportation services, accommodation, and visitor facilities. Thematic routes must be supported by appropriate infrastructure, such as transportation systems, hospitality services, and visitor amenities, to facilitate movement and enhance the overall visitor experience (Berero, 2018).

Themes / Narrative Topics

Thematic routes are generally dedicated to highlighting specific themes. A review of theoretical studies, practical applications, and institutional frameworks related to heritage and heritage tourism indicates that these routes vary according to the domains associated with their themes and narratives, depending on purpose, context, and available resources. Although there is no fixed or exhaustive number of such domains, the main thematic domains agreed upon in the literature include (Berti, 2013; Timothy & Boyd, 2015):

1. Religion, spiritual practices, and rituals
2. Trade and exchanges
3. Agriculture, food, and gastronomy
4. Culture and arts
5. Historical heritage and politics
6. Industry and technology
7. Natural heritage and environmental issues

At a later stage, and in response to recent global developments and events, additional themes and narratives emerged, particularly those related to memory, migration issues, and post-conflict reconciliation (Berti, 2013). On the other hand, international charters such as the *ICOMOS Draft Charter on Cultural Routes (2008)* do not define an exclusive list of themes, but rather emphasize the methodology and importance of establishing and developing routes, while encouraging relevant stakeholders to create locally meaningful themes of historical value.

Representative Examples of Thematic Routes

No.	Theme / Topic	Description of the Thematic Routes	Most Well-Known Examples
1	Religion and Spiritual Rituals	Pilgrimage routes, sacred landscapes, or religious traditions across regions	<i>Camino de Santiago, Zubaydah Trail</i>
2	Trade and Economy	Traces historical trade networks, markets, production areas, and routes of economic exchange	<i>Silk Road, Phoenicians' Route</i>
3	Agriculture, Food, and Culinary Arts	Explores traditional agricultural systems, food heritage, local production, and gastronomy	<i>Olive Tree Route</i>

4	Culture and Arts	Focuses on the dissemination of artistic movements, music, handicrafts, or performance traditions	<i>Andalusian Music Route</i>
5	Heritage, History, and Politics	Traces significant political events, empires, or historical landmarks with long-term regional influence	<i>Napoleon Route, Roman Frontier Route</i>
6	Industry and Technology	Highlights the legacy of industrial development, transportation, and innovation in urban and rural areas	<i>European Route of Industrial Heritage (ERIH)</i>
7	Natural Heritage and Environment	Routes that reveal interactions between humans and the environment, natural heritage, eco-cultural regions, or significant heritage landscapes	<i>Wachau World Heritage Trail (Austria)</i>
8	Memory and Post-Conflict Reconciliation	Routes that revive collective memory, post-conflict reconciliation processes, and migration events	<i>Memory Routes in Sarajevo</i>

Thematic Routes According to the Material Nature of Cultural Heritage

A review of the literature related to heritage and heritage tourism indicates that thematic routes can be classified according to the material nature of the heritage they primarily highlight. In general, thematic routes can be divided into the following types:

1. Routes Focusing on Tangible Heritage

These routes are concerned with presenting tangible heritage assets such as archaeological remains, architectural ensembles, monuments, and natural landscapes. For example, the *Camino de Santiago* thematic route in Spain utilizes tangible monuments, churches, and natural scenery, in addition to associated heritage traditions.

2. Routes Focusing on Intangible Heritage

These routes revolve around cultural practices, traditions, and knowledge, even though they are linked to places with a real physical presence. Examples include routes that highlight culinary arts and gastronomic heritage, olive oil routes in Mediterranean cities, as well as musical traditions and folk arts, such as the Andalusian Music Route in Morocco. There are also routes centered on traditional crafts, such as the Silk Road, which supports intangible exchanges of ideas, languages, and handicrafts.

3. Hybrid Routes

Most contemporary thematic routes are characterized by a hybrid nature, combining both tangible and intangible heritage. In such routes, physical sites—such as buildings, archaeological landmarks, and natural landscapes—constitute essential elements of the thematic route, while intangible components provide living cultural dimensions, including

rituals, traditions, and narratives. The *Pearling Path in Bahrain* represents a clear example of this type of thematic route, where tangible coral stone houses, oyster beds, and coastal areas are integrated with intangible knowledge and experiences related to pearl diving, social traditions, and other rituals accompanying the pearl extraction process.

Scale of Thematic / Topic-Based Routes

Thematic routes can be classified into two main groups in terms of scale: **regional-scale thematic routes** and **urban or city-scale thematic routes**.

1. Regional-Scale Thematic / Topic-Based Routes

These routes connect multiple heritage sites or cultural assets that extend across a wide geographical area, such as several neighboring countries, a province, or a region within a single country. Regional-scale thematic routes aim to highlight shared heritage narratives—whether religious, cultural, historical, or natural—and therefore offer large-scale tourism experiences. They typically pursue objectives related to both cultural conservation and economic development.

Among the most prominent examples of regional-scale thematic routes is the *Camino de Santiago* (Spain and Europe), which is perhaps the most famous pilgrimage route, extending across Spain and Europe and linking cathedrals, monasteries, and cities. It has become a benchmark model for heritage tourism corridors (Timothy & Boyd, 2015).

Another notable example is the *Silk Road*, a trans-regional thematic route connecting centers of trade and cultural exchange from China to the Mediterranean Sea. UNESCO has included it on the Tentative List of World Heritage cultural routes of Outstanding Universal Value (Council of Europe, 2002).

Additionally, the *Zubaydah Trail* represents the first transboundary thematic route in the Arab region, extending approximately 1,300 km. It is a historical pilgrimage and trade route dating back to the Abbasid era, linking Kufa to Mecca. The trail is named after Zubaydah bint Ja'far, the wife of the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid, who established its stations and service and water facilities, most notably *Ayn Zubaydah*. Iraq and Saudi Arabia jointly submitted this route as a thematic route to the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List in 2022 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

2. Urban-Scale Thematic / Topic-Based Routes

At the urban scale, thematic route's structure visitor experiences within a city by linking the most significant historical, cultural, and architectural assets and grouping them within a coherent and logically interconnected theme. These routes typically consist of pedestrian pathways that assist both tourists and residents in understanding the multilayered heritage of a city, while simultaneously distributing tourism flows across different urban sectors and districts.

The ultimate objective of such routes is often to enhance urban identity, cultural interpretation, and sustainable tourism by connecting museums, monuments, religious sites, and cultural markets (Timothy & Boyd, 2015).

One of the most renowned examples at the global level is the *Barcelona Modernisme Route* in Spain, which links major works of Catalan Modernism, including buildings designed by architect Antonio Gaudí—such as the Sagrada Família, Casa Batlló, and La Pedrera—as well

as works by Lluís Domènech i Montaner and Puig i Cadafalch. This route highlights the narrative of the modern architectural movement in Barcelona and simultaneously serves educational and tourism objectives (Pardo, 2017).

Another example is the *Ringstrasse (Vienna) thematic route* in Austria, located in the historic center of Vienna. It connects governmental buildings, museums, opera houses, and monuments to present the narrative of imperial modernity in Vienna's historic core (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000).

In Istanbul, walking routes have been developed within the historic peninsula—listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site—to link Byzantine and Ottoman monuments such as Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace, and the Grand Bazaar, emphasizing civilizational continuity and serving as interpretive tools for religious and cultural heritage at the urban scale (Yazici & Ozturk, 2012).

Finally, the *Historic Jeddah Route* in Saudi Arabia consists of a set of thematic routes developed to connect major heritage houses—such as Nassif House and Ba‘shan House—with historic mosques and traditional markets. The thematic focus is placed on the identity of Hijazi architecture and the commercial heritage of the Red Sea, highlighting Jeddah's role as the gateway to Mecca. This route has been considered central to heritage tourism strategies in Saudi Arabia, presenting both built heritage and intangible practices such as storytelling narratives, traditional crafts, and culinary traditions (UNESCO, 2014).

Geometric Organization of Thematic Routes

The geometric organization of thematic routes refers to the spatial layout and structural system through which heritage sites and focal points of interest are organized and connected within a specific urban context. This organization plays a crucial role in shaping how visitors move through space and how they are immersed in the sensory and experiential dimensions of the thematic route. Consequently, it influences both the sequencing of interpretive presentation and the manner in which different heritage sites are interconnected.

Thematic routes typically adopt forms that correspond to specific geometric patterns. A review of relevant studies indicates that thematic routes, in general, belong to one or more of the following geometric typologies.

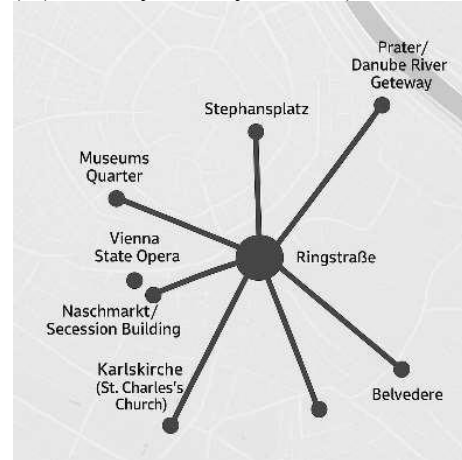
1. Linear Routes

Linear routes are routes that follow a straight or near-straight path between two points along the route. Historical trade routes and pilgrimage routes typically conform to this geometric pattern. One of the most significant examples of this type is the **Zubaydah Trail**, which extends between Kufa in Iraq and Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Along this route are various service-related sites, most notably water wells, forming a continuous pilgrimage corridor.



2. Radial Routes

Radial routes are routes that originate from a central focal point—such as a historic urban center or a monumental landmark—and then extend outward in a radial pattern. One of the most prominent examples of this type of geometric organization is the **Classical Music Heritage Route in the city of Vienna**, which consists of a set of routes radiating from the city center. In this route system, each path represents a narrative thread of Vienna’s classical musical heritage (Mozart, Strauss, opera culture, and others) (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

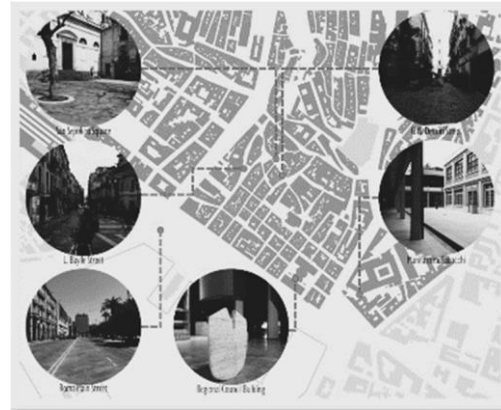
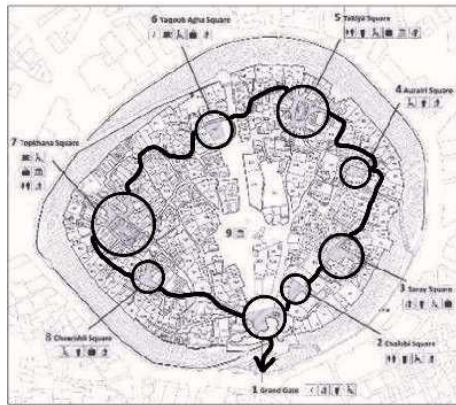


3. Circular / Loop Routes

Circular or loop routes are routes that take the form of a closed loop, with no defined beginning or end. This pattern is well suited to achieving thematic continuity and ensuring a continuous flow of visitor movement. It also provides an effective immersive educational experience for exploring multiple interconnected heritage sites. The **circular thematic route in the city of Erbil in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq** represents a prominent example of this type of geometric organization.

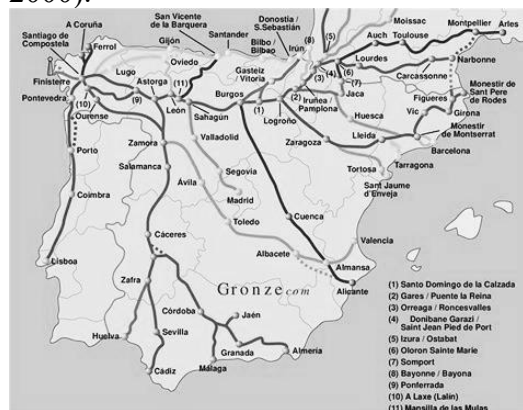
4. Grid Network Routes

Grid network routes consist of an interconnected system of multiple intersecting linear axes, which are often orthogonal, with squares, intersections, and heritage assets located at regular or near-regular intervals and characterized by high visual permeability. This geometric pattern is distinguished by its mobility flexibility, enabling visitors to select different paths, encouraging walking, and providing multiple options for detours or movement along alternative routes. One of the most prominent examples of this pattern is the thematic routes developed in the historic center of the city of **Cagliari, Italy** (Garau, Annunziata, & Yamu, 2020).



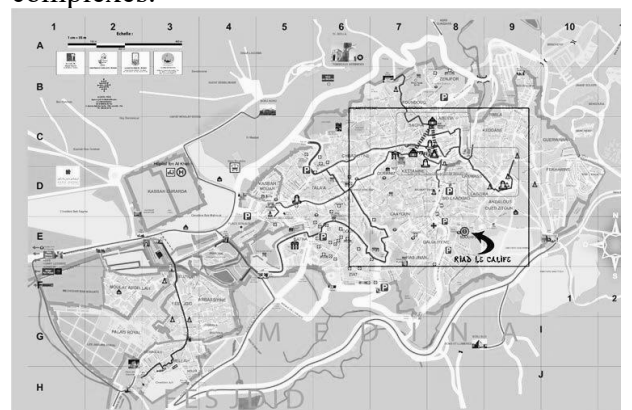
5. Branched / Tree-Like Routes

Branched or tree-like routes are routes that begin with a single main axis from which secondary or subsidiary thematic routes branch out. This geometric pattern is particularly suitable in cases where there is a primary narrative theme that is subdivided into secondary narratives. The *Camino de Santiago* thematic route in Spain represents a clear example of this geometric pattern, as it consists of a main trunk that terminates at **Santiago de Compostela**, into which secondary branches originating in other locations converge, forming a complex system of thematic routes (Gitlitz & Davidson, 2000).



6. Organic / Meandering Routes

Organic or meandering routes are irregular routes whose geometric organization adapts to the topography and the urban fabric of traditional cities in the Islamic world, the Mediterranean region, and pre-industrial cities. These routes are characterized by a spatial experience based on gradual exploration and the element of surprise revealed through bends, turns, and hidden courtyards. The city of **Fez in Morocco**, which has preserved its medieval traditional character to a remarkable extent, represents one of the most prominent examples of this pattern, where interpretive thematic routes extend through artisanal quarters, cultural landmarks, and various religious complexes.



Previous Studies on Thematic / Topic-Based Routes in the Old City of Mosul

The Urban Renewal Study of the Old City of Mosul, presented in 2008, addressed the concept of “*thematic routes*” within the context of planning objectives for urban renewal areas in the Old City of Mosul. The study identified a set of *thematic routes*, each associated with a specific theme, intended to guide urban renewal interventions toward deeper areas within the narrow alleys of the Old City, reveal their internal potentials, and enhance visitor attraction.

The study identified five thematic routes covering the urban fabric of the Old City of Mosul, as follows:

1. Spiritual Route

This route consists of narrow pathways leading to multiple religious sites, including mosques, congregational mosques, churches, and monasteries.

2. Cultural Route

This route includes cultural landmarks such as museums, schools, and libraries.

3. Traditional (Heritage) Route

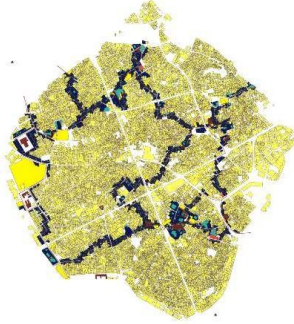
This route encompasses heritage features such as traditional houses with their decorated entrances, as well as other heritage elements that characterize the Old City area, including arches, kiosks, and similar features.

4. Commercial Route

This route includes traditional markets, covered bazaars (*qaisariyyas*), heritage caravanserais (*khans*), and handicraft shops.

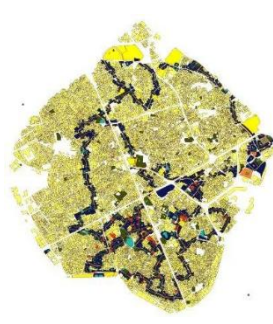
5. Garden Route

This route was proposed to be developed with the aim of creating green spaces, which are notably lacking within the urban fabric of the Old City of Mosul.



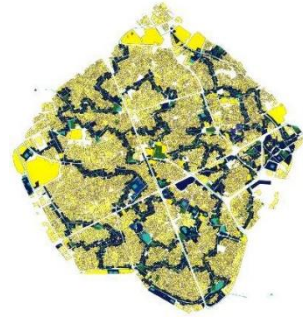
**The Thematic /
Cultural Route**

*According to the 2008
Urban Renewal Study*



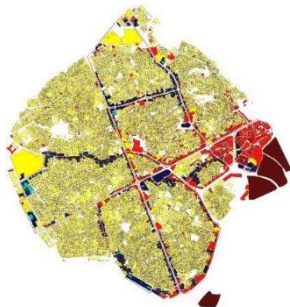
**The Thematic /
Spiritual Route**

*According to the 2008
Urban Renewal Study*



**The Thematic /
Heritage Route**

*According to the 2008
Urban Renewal Study*



**The Thematic /
Commercial Route**

*According to the 2008 Urban
Renewal Study*



**The Thematic / Garden
Route**

*According to the 2008 Urban
Renewal Study*

Critical Review of Previous Thematic Routes Proposed for the Old City of Mosul

However, an analytical and evaluative study of the *thematic routes* proposed in the Urban Renewal Project, conducted in comparison with the results of a field survey of the actual conditions, found that the routes proposed by the study were far removed from reality. Consequently, the study concluded that there was no sound strategy in selecting urban axes with high cultural, spiritual, and heritage value. Many important urban elements and landmarks within the area were neglected, either due to the weakness of field survey processes at the time or due to a lack of attention and focus on the part of those conducting the survey (Al-Qaymaqji et al., 2013).

On the other hand, although the Urban Renewal Project for the Old City of Mosul has not had the opportunity to be implemented on the ground throughout the past period—for various reasons beyond the scope of this discussion—a review of the 2008 Urban Renewal Study in relation to this issue reveals that the approach adopted toward *thematic routes* was superficial and did not correspond to the significant importance of their role in the process of conserving the cultural heritage of the Old City of Mosul.

In addition to the lack of sufficient objectivity in the 2008 Urban Renewal Study regarding the identification of thematic routes—as concluded by Al-Qaymaqji et al. (2013)—the present research, based on the theoretical framework of *thematic routes* and its various components discussed in the preceding sections, considers this approach to be deficient and lacking the fundamental requirements of proper thematic routes. For example, the study does not clearly or explicitly present the considerations upon which the themes of the thematic routes were determined, nor does it propose criteria upon which the selected routes were chosen. Furthermore, it fails to fulfill the structural components required for thematic routes, rendering them theoretical propositions whose feasibility of implementation on the ground remains uncertain.

Accordingly, the present research aims to propose a more comprehensive and objective methodology for identifying *thematic routes* that are appropriate to the heritage characteristics of the Old City of Mosul.

Developing Thematic Routes in the Old City of Mosul: A Proposed Methodology

In this section, the research paper presents an outline of a proposed methodology for establishing and developing thematic routes that can serve as a primary tool and strategic framework for enhancing heritage tourism in the Old City of Mosul. This strategy consists of seven stages—each comprising a set of procedures—identified through a review of the relevant literature, as follows:

1. Heritage Inventory and Mapping

This stage involves conducting a comprehensive inventory of both tangible heritage assets (such as buildings and monuments) and intangible heritage assets (such as traditions and narratives) within the city's urban fabric and mapping them accordingly. The objective of this step is to understand the spatial distribution of heritage assets as a basis for heritage tourism planning. To efficiently accomplish this step, appropriate tools and equipment are used to document and record spatial relationships between heritage sites, in addition to employing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software (Garcia-Hernandez, 2017).

2. Identification of Themes and Their Historical Contextualization

This stage includes conducting an analytical study aimed at establishing a coherent and unifying concept or narrative (such as religious heritage, craft traditions, or post-conflict resilience). These themes are expected to emerge from local historical contexts, cultural values, or community identity. Furthermore, the narratives should hold significance and relevance for both local residents and visitors alike (Timothy & Boyd, 2015).

3. Linking Heritage Sites and Structuring Routes

This stage involves creating a network of geographically proximate or symbolically connected sites, organized according to specific geometric patterns (such as linear, circular, or radial), in alignment with the overall geometric characteristics of the urban fabric and visitor flow patterns. Thematic routes are considered essential tools for managing interconnected heritage values as a coherent spatial strategy (ICOMOS Draft Charter, 2008).

To ensure the efficiency of thematic routes, integration and coordination with urban transport systems—such as pedestrian movement zones, public transportation, and wayfinding requirements (e.g., signage)—are necessary to ensure accessibility and sustainability (Moscardo, 2004).

4. Planning the Interpretive Presentation

This stage includes procedures for developing interpretive content that highlights the theme of the route. Conventional and digital signage, mobile applications, and storytelling stations are employed to explain and clarify thematic connections between heritage sites. To enhance the experiential efficiency of the thematic route, these measures are often integrated with digital tools that provide immersive educational experiences and promote interaction through multisensory engagement.

5. Evaluation and Feedback

This stage involves establishing and monitoring key performance indicators for thematic routes, measuring them through visitor participation and collecting feedback from the local community. The aim is to assess the effectiveness and performance of the thematic route from a tourism perspective and to introduce necessary adjustments on an ongoing basis.

Questionnaire Survey and the Role of the Participatory Approach

Adopting a participatory approach and engaging local communities, heritage experts, urban designers, and tourism specialists in determining thematic and topical priorities is considered a fundamental principle for ensuring authenticity and conferring social legitimacy and value (Corsame et al., 2007).

Accordingly, a rapid questionnaire survey was conducted to elicit responses to two main questions related to the implementation of the first and second stages of the proposed methodology, with the aim of identifying the most important thematic routes for the Old City of Mosul at the present time. It should be noted that the participatory approach also plays a significant role in the later stage of evaluating and modifying these routes.

The questionnaire, which was distributed to 40 individuals of different specializations, affiliations, and age groups—united by a shared interest in heritage and heritage tourism—contained the following questions:

Question1:

List no fewer than seven (7) heritage sites or buildings in the Old City of Mosul that you believe possess value qualifying them to serve as tourist attraction points for visitors from within Iraq and abroad.

Question2:

List no fewer than five (5) of the most important features and issues that distinguish and

characterize the cultural and social identity of the Old City of Mosul and its community, which you believe should be highlighted within heritage tourism development plans. Based on a rapid statistical analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire responses, implementation of the proposed methodology was initiated to identify and develop thematic routes of social and cultural value in the Old City of Mosul that can be employed for heritage tourism purposes.

Stages of Implementing the Proposed Methodology

Stage One

The Old City of Mosul map prepared by the **Mesopotamia Heritage Organization** was adopted, as it includes the vast majority of tangible heritage assets in the Old City of Mosul.

Stage Two

Based on the questionnaire results, the heritage assets deemed most valuable by the surveyed sample were identified and marked, noting that more accurate results could be obtained by increasing the number of survey participants.

Stage Three

Based on both the questionnaire results and previous studies on the Old City of Mosul, an initial identification of the most important themes at the present time for the Old City and its community was conducted. At least four thematic route titles were identified, covering the urban fabric of the Old City of Mosul. These routes are as follows:

No.	Name of the Thematic Route	Dominant Theme	Main Heritage Assets	Narrative Focus	Components of the Tourism Experience
1	Religious Heritage Route	Shared spatial presence of religious heritage	Mosques, churches, and shared interfaith landmarks	Highlighting the historical role of Mosul as a city of religious diversity	Spiritual journeys and architectural tours
2	Trade and Traditional Markets Route	Trade heritage and handicrafts	Khan Al-Kumruk, traditional markets, and craft workshops	Reviving the Old City of Mosul as a historical node connecting trade routes and handicraft production	Market tours and handicraft exhibitions
3	Ottoman Urban Life and Architecture Route	Domestic spaces and handicraft culture	Al-Tutunji House, Ziada House, and Al-Sa'igh House	Exploring social history, domestic spaces, and handicraft traditions	House tours and traditional craft experiences
4	Conflict, Memory, and Reconstruction Route	Post-conflict recovery and identity	Restored mosques, churches, and community centers	The journey of Mosul from destruction to reconstruction as a global model of heritage resilience	Storytelling narratives, exhibitions, and heritage workshops

within the urban fabric of the Old City of Mosul, in terms of width, length, ease of access, and respect for social privacy.

Figure (2) below presents a comprehensive proposal for the thematic route of diverse religious heritage in the Old City of Mosul.

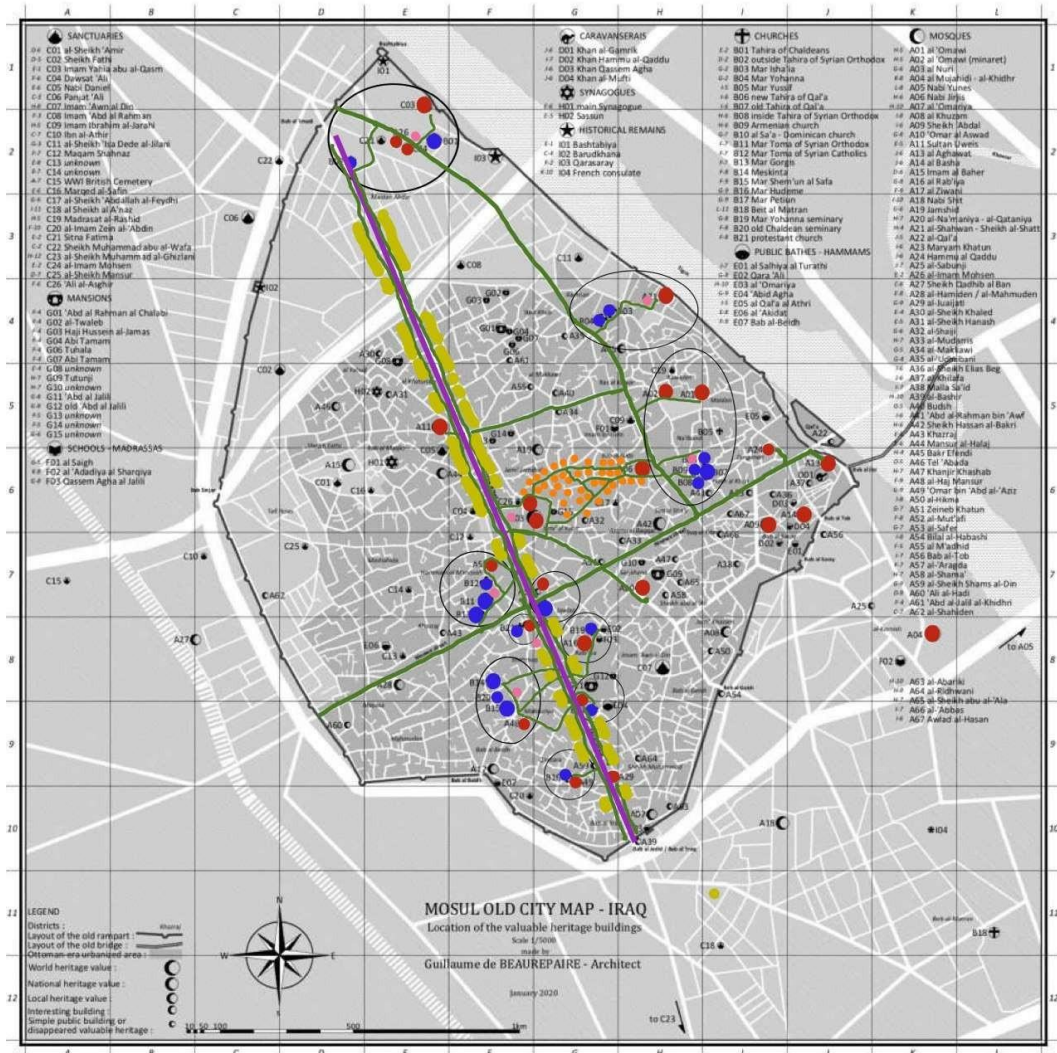


Figure (2)

Proposed Final Geometric Organization of the Thematic Route for Diverse Religious Heritage in the Old City of Mosul

Specifications of the Proposed Thematic Route for Diverse Religious Heritage

The final section of this research is concerned with presenting the specifications and characteristics of the proposed thematic route for diverse religious heritage in the Old City of Mosul, in light of the key concepts and components of thematic route theory.

1. Dominant Theme of the Route and the Associated Heritage Assets

The dominant theme of the proposed route is **interreligious coexistence**, articulated through linking the most prominent and representative religious landmarks—mosques (marked in red in the plans) and churches (marked in blue in the plans)—alongside rehabilitated heritage houses (marked in orange in the plans). This configuration establishes a spiritual route that

narrates centuries of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and a shared urban fabric among Mosul's communities.

More specifically, the thematic route highlights the following aspects:

- Religious diversity (Islamic and Christian) and its contribution to Mosul's collective memory.
- Resilience and renewal, through connecting sites reconstructed by **UNESCO** and the **European Union** after their destruction in 2017.
- Tangible cultural heritage as a means of reconstructing intangible heritage and the social fabric.
- Architectural harmony between residential and religious spaces, demonstrating how different identities coexisted side by side within a shared spatial setting.

2. Geometric Organization of the Thematic Route

The proposed thematic route is characterized by a **branched linear network structure** (marked in green in the plans), featuring clustered nodes of religiously diverse buildings. This form of organization is well established in thematic cultural routes, where diverse heritage values are embodied through interconnected and distinctive urban cores.

This organization can be described as follows:

- A branched linear network structure, in which the route begins from the **Al-Nuri Mosque area**, located at the heart of the urban fabric of the Old City of Mosul, and extends northward and southward along major linear axes.
- These primary axes intersect with secondary routes, which in turn lead to:
- **Clustered nodes of religiously diverse buildings**, represented by groups of religious sites (mosques and churches) enclosed within black circles in the plans. These nodes symbolize the theme of existential coexistence among diverse religious beliefs.

3. Mobility System of the Thematic Route

The proposed route for diverse religious heritage utilizes significant components of the primary movement system in the Old City of Mosul. This system consists of the main streets that cut through the historic urban fabric in the form of straight linear axes, constructed during the first half of the twentieth century—most notably **Al-Farouq Street**, **Nineveh Street**, and **Prophet Jirjis Street**.

From these streets, secondary routes branch out through relatively wide alleys that provide sufficient capacity and ease of access to spatially adjacent clusters of religious buildings. These clusters are employed as tangible manifestations of the theme of existential coexistence among diverse religious beliefs.

4. Narrative Logic and Interpretive Presentation Techniques of the Thematic Route

- The narrative logic of the route is based on maintaining thematic unity (faith-based coexistence), spatial clarity (walkable continuity), and historical authenticity.
- The route delivers a clear and intentional narrative, whereby movement from a mosque to a church to a traditional house represents a spatial dialogue of coexistence, experienced through a deep, immersive educational journey.
- It is essential to establish stopping points in the form of rehabilitated heritage buildings (marked in pink in the plans) or kiosks distributed along segments of the thematic route to narrate personal stories of Mosul's residents. These should be supported by multilingual interpretive panels and interactive digital applications employing

augmented reality to visualize reconstructed heritage sites, thereby deepening the narrative process.

- It is also important to provide integrated craft demonstrations within heritage spaces.
- The route may be modular, allowing for thematic sub-routes (such as a “Church Route,” a “Mosque Axis,” or a “Traditional Heritage Route”).

5. Supporting Infrastructure of the Thematic Route

- The proposal includes transforming **Al-Farouq Street** from a vehicular corridor into an **electric tram route**—an idea that has gained increasing attention in recent years (marked in purple in the plans). This tram system would function as an urban sightseeing system (*City Seeing System*), transporting large numbers of tourists to the numerous clusters of religiously diverse buildings located along both sides of this north–south axis of the Old City of Mosul.
- The proposal also includes **adaptive reuse** of buildings located along the diverse religious heritage thematic route passing through Al-Farouq Street (marked in yellow in the plans). Ground floors would be redeveloped to accommodate heritage craft workshops and small markets for displaying and selling diverse products, while upper floors overlooking the route would be converted into small hotels, serviced apartments, or heritage motels. This approach would open opportunities for economic development along Al-Farouq Street, which currently suffers from a high concentration of war-damaged buildings or functionally neglected structures due to low economic returns.
- Additionally, the proposal incorporates **sustainable environmental development** of the urban design of Al-Farouq Street’s cross-section to enhance environmental conditions along the main axes of the thematic route. This includes reinstating the concept of colonnaded sidewalks (*colonnades*), which were implemented during the early decades of the street’s construction, to provide climatic protection for pedestrians from solar radiation and rainfall, thereby improving the quality of the pedestrian experience along the thematic route.

Conclusions

Within the broader objective of constructing a future vision for planning and managing heritage tourism in the Old City of Mosul, the present research introduces the concept of **thematic/topic-based routes** as one of the most fundamental concepts underpinning this vision. Given the absence of adequate foundations and objective criteria in previous projects for identifying culturally valuable thematic routes in the Old City of Mosul, this research adopts the goal of proposing an objective and comprehensive methodology for identifying routes that cover the urban fabric of the Old City and embody high-value themes reflecting the diverse dimensions of its cultural identity.

Accordingly, the selected thematic/topic-based routes can be regarded as strategic tools for managing, developing, and enhancing cultural tourism in the Old City of Mosul. The formulation of the proposed methodology is grounded in identifying the core components of thematic route theory as articulated in cultural tourism studies, World Heritage site literature, and heritage management frameworks, in addition to a wide range of applied practices implemented in such sites.

By employing participatory methodology procedures and a questionnaire survey involving specialists and stakeholders interested in heritage and heritage tourism, the proposed methodology was applied to select the most appropriate set of thematic routes aligned with the cultural heritage characteristics of the Old City of Mosul. The relevant themes/topics were identified, enabling the classification, grouping, and organization of cultural heritage sites accordingly.

In general, four thematic routes were identified as frameworks for planning, developing, managing, and enhancing heritage sites in the Old City of Mosul:

1. The **Diverse Religious Heritage Route**
2. The **Trade and Traditional Markets Route**
3. The **Urban Life and Ottoman Architecture Route**
4. The **Conflict, Memory, and Reconstruction Route**

In greater detail, a preliminary plan and a comprehensive plan for the Diverse Religious Heritage Route were presented as an example of the full application of the proposed methodology, with the intention of applying the same approach to the remaining routes in future detailed studies. The specifications, characteristics, and potentialities of the Diverse Religious Heritage Route were presented in a manner that ensures its success in achieving the objectives within which it has been defined and established.

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