

Redemption of Marginalized Heritage: A Comparative Study of Spatial Politics, Narrative Power, and Governance in Urban Regeneration

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Abstract. In the context of rapid urbanization and socio-spatial inequalities, cultural heritage tied to marginalized communities and everyday histories often faces neglect, erasure, or commodification. This study reconceptualizes "redemption" of marginalized heritage as an active process of spatial, symbolic, and ecological reintegration rather than mere preservation. Employing a comparative qualitative analysis of Beijing's Shougang Industrial Park and Mumbai's Dharavi Koliwada, it investigates how these sites are reframed within contemporary urban planning and regeneration efforts. Findings reveal that marginalized heritage can foster community empowerment, promote diverse narratives, and contribute to environmental justice, ultimately supporting more equitable and sustainable urban futures. This research highlights the importance of inclusive heritage engagement in contesting dominant urban imaginaries and advancing spatial justice.

Keywords: Marginalized heritage; Urban regeneration; Spatial justice; Community empowerment; Environmental justice

1. Introduction

The contemporary urban condition remains characterized by an enduring tension between accelerated development and the mounting demands for cultural inclusivity and social justice. Predominantly shaped by neoliberal globalization, urban planning tends to prioritize economic growth, real estate valuation, and standardized aesthetic norms. Consequently, planning practices frequently marginalize or erase cultural landscapes and built environments that deviate from hegemonic narratives or dominant aesthetic conventions (Logan & Reeves, 2009; Smith, 2006). Informal settlements, post-industrial ruins, vernacular architecture, indigenous sacred sites, and places imbued with subaltern memories are often dismissed as obsolete or undesirable. Subjected to demolition, gentrification, or aesthetic sanitization, these spaces are recast under the guise of progress or urban renewal.

Yet, critical heritage studies increasingly challenge the conception of heritage as a static collection of monuments or traditions. Rather, it is posited as an active, contested process, deeply shaped by power relations, identity politics, and collective memory (Harrison, 2013; Waterton & Smith, 2009). Such a shift necessitates a fundamental rethinking: whose heritage merits preservation, who holds the authority to define its value, and by what means it is integrated into visions of urban futures. As cities worldwide confront intersecting crises of social inequality, climate change, and cultural homogenization, the imperative to harness marginalized heritage in pursuit of equitable and resilient urban practices becomes ever more pressing.

Positioning itself within the expanding discourse on heritage redemption, this paper interrogates the roles of planners, communities, and institutions in reconceptualizing marginalized heritage—not as inert relics of the past, but as dynamic agents in the ongoing shaping of urban life. It advocates for a paradigmatic shift: from preservation understood as a static safeguarding of history, toward redemption conceived as a continuous process of re-engagement, reinterpretation, and socio-spatial transformation. Such a process not only recognizes the intrinsic worth of overlooked sites but also empowers communities to reclaim cultural agency and spatial justice.

In alignment with the thematic priorities of the 2025 International Conference on Urban Planning and Human Geography, this study foregrounds the critical function that cultural heritage can fulfill in addressing the social, cultural, and environmental challenges generated by contemporary

urbanization. Through this critical lens, it explores how the redemption of marginalized heritage may foster more inclusive planning practices, enhance environmental resilience, and cultivate place-based identities that resist the homogenizing pressures of globalization.

2. Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework underpinning this study is anchored in critical heritage studies and relational urban theory. It elaborates on Laurajane Smith's (2006) foundational argument that heritage should not be regarded as a neutral or universally valued assemblage of objects or sites; rather, it constitutes a process of cultural meaning-making deeply entrenched within social power structures. This notion is further developed by Rodney Harrison (2013), who posits heritage as a performative and negotiated practice, wherein meaning is continuously produced through encounters with the past in the present.

Within this framework, marginalized heritage denotes cultural narratives, practices, and spatial expressions systematically excluded from dominant heritage discourses—frequently owing to their associations with working-class communities, minority identities, contested histories, or vernacular aesthetics. Such heritage forms typically remain overlooked by institutional conservation efforts and often lack formal recognition or protection. As Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) elucidate in their exploration of dissonant heritage, the inherently selective nature of heritage production privileges certain histories while silencing others, thereby generating landscapes of memory that are fundamentally partial and politicized.

In this context, redemption is conceptualized not as a nostalgic return to an idealized past, but as a forward-looking, transformative process. It encompasses both symbolic and material re-engagement with marginalized heritage sites—acknowledging their histories, integrating their values within urban design and policy frameworks, and enabling processes of ecological and social reconciliation. Drawing upon Doreen Massey's (2005) conception of space as relational and dynamic, this study reconceives heritage sites not as isolated remnants of the past but as nodes embedded within networks of social, cultural, and ecological interrelations. This relational perspective underscores the interdependence of place, identity, and memory in shaping urban experiences.

Concurrently, the theoretical lens engages with landscape theory as articulated by James Corner (1999), who reconceptualizes landscape not as a static backdrop but as an active medium through which ecological and cultural processes unfold. This approach undergirds the argument that heritage redemption entails the transformation of physical sites into living, multifunctional spaces that accommodate present and future urban demands while retaining their layered historical narratives.

Conversely, scholars such as Watson (2009) and Roy (2009) emphasize how postcolonial urbanism destabilizes universal planning logics by foregrounding informality and situated practices. Their analyses reveal that urban governance in the Global South resists technocratic, top-down planning approaches predicated on modernist rationality. In a similar vein, Chakrabarty (2002) critiques the hegemonic dominance of Eurocentric historical narratives and advocates for the “provincialization of Europe,” thereby creating intellectual space for plural urban experiences. Collectively, these perspectives call for a fundamental rethinking of heritage and planning paradigms within contexts marked by uneven development, historical violence, and informal governance structures.

Further enriching this framework, postcolonial urban theory critiques the epistemological hegemony of Western planning models and advocates for context-sensitive, participatory, and decolonial methodologies (Escobar, 2001; Watson, 2009). Such perspectives are indispensable for understanding how marginalized heritage can be mobilized as a resource for alternative urban futures—futures that prioritize community knowledge, spatial justice, and cultural continuity.

3. Case Studies

The redemption of marginalized heritage unfolds through complex configurations of agency, narrative authority, and spatial transformation. To elucidate this dynamic, this section examines two contrasting case studies: the state-led redevelopment of the Shougang Industrial Park in Beijing and the grassroots heritage assertion efforts of the Dharavi Koliwada community in Mumbai. Although both cases engage with neglected or undervalued urban spaces, they operate within markedly distinct political economies, governance structures, and epistemologies of heritage.

The Shougang Industrial Park in Beijing exemplifies a top-down initiative, wherein the state strategically mobilizes heritage as an integral element of national modernization and international image-making. Once a pivotal steel production site contributing to China's industrial rise, Shougang was decommissioned in 2010 owing to environmental concerns and urban encroachment. In anticipation of the 2022 Winter Olympics, the site underwent a comprehensive transformation guided by principles of adaptive reuse, environmental remediation, and cultural repurposing. Key industrial structures—blast furnaces and cooling towers among them—were retained and reimagined as observation platforms, art venues, and innovation hubs. The integration of ecological restoration, particularly the cleaning and revitalization of surrounding lakes and river systems, signals an effort to reconcile post-industrial degradation with emergent environmental urbanism (Qian, 2021).

Nonetheless, while the project exemplifies successful material and ecological redemption, it simultaneously prompts critical reflections on narrative control and commodification. The selective celebration of industrial aesthetics aligns closely with a state-sanctioned narrative of technological progress and urban renewal, frequently marginalizing the lived experiences and labor histories of former workers. In this regard, the Shougang redevelopment typifies what Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) describe as “authorized heritage discourse,” wherein state or elite institutions curate and regulate historical meaning. Consequently, despite its visual and programmatic innovation, the site's transformation risks perpetuating cultural sanitization that effaces inconvenient or discordant memories.

In contrast, the Dharavi Koliwada community in Mumbai embodies a bottom-up approach to heritage redemption, grounded in community-led resistance against state-driven redevelopment. Situated within one of Asia's largest informal settlements, Koliwada serves as the historic home to the Kolis—a fishing community recognized as Mumbai's original inhabitants. Unlike the Shougang project, redevelopment plans in Dharavi have frequently treated the area as a *tabula rasa*, privileging land value and private capital over cultural continuity. Official proposals commonly overlook the site's profound entanglement with maritime traditions, spatial logics, and communal lifeworlds (Anand & Rademacher, 2011).

In response, Koli residents have mobilized cultural and spatial strategies to assert their heritage and claim urban rights. Through participatory heritage mapping, the organization of community festivals, and the formulation of alternative planning frameworks, residents strive to preserve not merely physical structures but an entire way of life. These endeavors exemplify what Harrison (2013) terms “heritage as a performative practice,” whereby communities actively produce meaning and visibility via place-based interventions. Thus, Koliwada functions as a site of both cultural resilience and political resistance—where heritage emerges as a vehicle for spatial justice amid extractive urbanism.

The juxtaposition of these two cases reveals the spectrum of possibilities and challenges intrinsic to heritage redemption. Whereas Shougang demonstrates the potential of large-scale, state-led interventions to incorporate industrial heritage within contemporary urban imaginaries, it simultaneously exemplifies the perils of top-down aestheticization. Conversely, Dharavi Koliwada illuminates the agency of marginalized communities in reclaiming and reinterpreting their heritage, albeit under persistent threats of displacement and policy neglect. Collectively, these examples underscore the imperative for context-sensitive, participatory approaches that conceive heritage not as a static commodity but as a living, contested, and transformative process.

4. Discussion

The comparative analysis of the two case studies—Shougang in Beijing and Dharavi in Mumbai—highlights the inherently complex, multi-scalar, and contested processes involved in redeeming marginalized heritage. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in discourse analysis and spatial observation, this study reveals how competing values, divergent planning paradigms, and uneven power relations actively mediate the preservation, transformation, or erasure of culturally significant yet institutionally peripheral spaces. Crucially, this comparison foregrounds the tension between top-down heritage frameworks shaped by state and market imperatives and bottom-up, vernacular practices that assert alternative meanings and resist homogenization.

4.1 Reframing Heritage Value: From Monumentality to Relational Significance

A key insight emerging from this study is the critical need to broaden and problematize conventional heritage definitions that predominantly valorize monumental aesthetics, official narratives, and technocratic rationales. The transformation of Shougang—once a decommissioned steel plant reimagined as an Olympic venue and innovation hub—illustrates how state apparatuses strategically mobilize symbolic capital through selective preservation. This process aligns with Smith's (2006) concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), wherein heritage becomes a tool to project narratives of industrial progress, modernization, and national pride, often at the expense of obscuring labor histories, environmental degradation, and socio-economic dislocations embedded in the site's past. Harrison's (2013) critique of heritage as a performative apparatus underscores how such official narratives function to naturalize hegemonic power structures under a veil of neutrality, effectively marginalizing dissenting histories and voices.

Conversely, Dharavi presents a starkly different paradigm, embodying a bottom-up, vernacular heritage production rooted in everyday lived experience, spatial ingenuity, and socio-economic resilience. Unlike Shougang's monumental symbolism, Dharavi's heritage is manifested through non-iconic, relational spatialities—vernacular typologies, informal economies, and shared memories that resist reduction to singular aesthetic or economic value. Tunbridge and Ashworth's (1996) notion of dissonant heritage is instructive here, highlighting how such grassroots heritage often remains invisible or illegible to dominant state frameworks, rendering it precarious and vulnerable to erasure through aggressive redevelopment agendas. This juxtaposition challenges the dominant monumentality-focused heritage paradigms and compels a shift toward relational and processual understandings of heritage (Massey, 2005), which foreground social meanings, affective attachments, and ongoing negotiations rather than fixed, objectified sites.

Furthermore, this reframing invites critical engagement with postcolonial and decolonial theories of heritage (e.g., Harrison, 2013; Watson, 2009), which problematize Eurocentric heritage frameworks and advocate for epistemological pluralism that recognizes diverse cultural values and historical experiences, especially those marginalized in global urban contexts.

4.2 Spatial Strategies: Adaptive Reuse and the Politics of Integration

The spatial strategies observed in both Shougang and Dharavi reveal the deeply political and ecological stakes of heritage redemption, where space becomes both a contested site and a medium of power. In Shougang, adaptive reuse is orchestrated through state-sanctioned zoning, large-scale architectural spectacle, and event-driven urbanism. This approach resonates with Corner's (1999) understanding of landscape as a generative medium but simultaneously risks transforming industrial ruins into sanitized "heritage enclaves" disconnected from their embedded socio-material contexts. Logan and Reeves (2009) emphasize the moral and political complexity of presenting "difficult heritage", cautioning against the depoliticization of sites laden with histories of exploitation and trauma. Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image offers a powerful interpretive lens: industrial ruins, when presented as layered, fractured narratives, can expose the tensions and contradictions of capitalist modernity—making visible histories of labor, decline, and

environmental degradation, and inviting critical reinterpretation rather than nostalgic fetishization (Benjamin, 1999).

In contrast, Dharavi's spatial politics exemplify "subaltern strategies of localization" (Escobar, 2001), where incremental spatial adaptations, mixed-use morphologies, and informal knowledge production constitute everyday acts of resistance and survival. These spatial practices not only foster community cohesion but also generate forms of knowledge and governance that contest dominant urban redevelopment paradigms. However, these strategies remain structurally fragile, constantly threatened by state-led top-down redevelopment that prioritizes modernization narratives often resulting in displacement and social exclusion. This contrast elucidates the limitations of adaptive reuse and hybrid zoning when divorced from redistributive governance frameworks. Meaningful heritage redemption must be embedded within participatory governance mechanisms that redistribute power, recognize community stewardship, and sustain ecological and social resilience over time.

This spatial analysis challenges dominant neoliberal urban regeneration paradigms, which tend to commodify heritage as a marketable asset while marginalizing local communities. It underscores the necessity of politicizing spatial practices as acts of negotiation and contestation rather than neutral technical interventions.

4.3 Temporalities of Redemption: From Intervention to Ongoing Negotiation

Heritage redemption is revealed as a dynamic temporal process rather than a discrete event or fixed outcome. In Shougang, the redevelopment aligns with "event urbanism"—a state-led urban spectacle designed around mega-events such as the Winter Olympics, where heritage is instrumentalized to serve nationalist and global branding agendas. Massey (2005) warns that such temporal fixity risks foreclosing plural and conflicting narratives, privileging a singular, homogenized version of the past that silences alternative histories and experiences.

By contrast, Dharavi's heritage redemption manifests as a cyclical, improvisational temporality, expressed through seasonal rituals, economic cycles, and evolving spatial arrangements. This temporal multiplicity resonates with Waterton and Smith's (2009) call for a performative, everyday heritage approach that privileges lived experiences and ongoing social practices over curated, static narratives. This perspective emphasizes heritage as a negotiated, contingent process requiring long-term commitment, flexibility, and institutional support to accommodate diverse and evolving meanings.

This temporal analysis problematizes linear, project-based conceptions of heritage conservation dominant in many official frameworks, advocating instead for frameworks attentive to duration, change, and multiplicity—dimensions crucial for justice-oriented heritage practice.

4.4 Narrative Power and the Contestation of Meaning

The discursive framing of heritage plays a decisive role not only in shaping public perception but also in determining resource allocation, legitimacy, and ultimately, the survival of marginalized cultural spaces. Both case studies reveal heritage narratives as sites of ideological struggle and power contestation.

In Shougang, the state monopolizes heritage storytelling, aligning it with narratives of national pride, technological futurism, and urban progress. This top-down authorship exemplifies Smith's (2006) Authorized Heritage Discourse, where elites and experts define legitimate heritage, marginalizing subaltern voices and flattening complex social histories into celebratory spectacle.

In contrast, Dharavi's heritage emerges from a counter-narrative co-produced by grassroots actors, NGOs, and local artisans, framing heritage as cultural resistance and socio-political assertion. Yet, the asymmetry of discursive power ensures these narratives remain marginalized within formal planning regimes, exposing the limits of inclusion in conventional heritage governance. As Watson (2009) argues, planners and policymakers must transcend the role of neutral technicians to become

active facilitators of memory, identity, and social justice, embracing a decolonial epistemology that privileges diverse voices and structural integration over tokenistic participation.

This entails profound institutional transformations—recognizing heritage as a contested terrain of knowledge and power, where justice requires redistributive mechanisms that amplify marginalized epistemologies, dismantle colonial legacies embedded in planning, and foster equitable co-production of urban futures.

5. Conclusion

This study has undertaken a comparative analysis of two markedly divergent urban heritage contexts—Shougang in Beijing and Dharavi in Mumbai—to critically examine the intricate, multi-scalar power dynamics and spatial politics inherent in the redemption of marginalized heritage. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in discourse analysis, site observation, and visual documentation, the research elucidates the pivotal roles played by diverse actors, spatial interventions, and temporalities in shaping heritage practices within post-industrial and informal urban landscapes.

The findings underscore the imperative to transcend conventional heritage paradigms centered on aesthetics, economic utility, and technocratic rationality, advocating instead for a reconceptualization of heritage as relational, social, and ecological. Heritage emerges not merely as the preservation of the past, but as a dynamic, negotiated process embedded in quotidian urban life, privileging plural social meanings and cultural expressions—particularly crucial in contexts where official narratives marginalize or instrumentalize collective memory.

In Shougang, state-led adaptive reuse and spectacle-oriented redevelopment confer renewed symbolic capital upon industrial ruins, yet risk reproducing hegemonic discourses and occluding alternative histories. Conversely, Dharavi exemplifies a more inclusive, grassroots mode of heritage production rooted in community agency, spatial resilience, and vernacular practices, albeit one that remains precariously vulnerable to top-down redevelopment pressures and systemic marginalization. The juxtaposition of these cases highlights that effective heritage engagement necessitates not only spatial strategies but also participatory governance, sustained social commitment, and equitable distribution of narrative authority.

Theoretically, this study contributes to ongoing scholarly shifts away from the “authorized heritage discourse” (Smith, 2006) towards more inclusive, performative, and justice-oriented frameworks (Waterton & Smith, 2009; Harrison, 2013). It also aligns with postcolonial urban scholarship that advocates for decolonizing Eurocentric planning norms and incorporating plural epistemologies and voices within heritage governance (Roy, 2009; Watson, 2009).

Practically, the research recommends that urban planners, heritage professionals, and policymakers adopt more flexible, context-sensitive approaches that recognize informal heritage practices as legitimate cultural productions, embed community participation in governance, and attend rigorously to the social and ecological sustainability of heritage interventions. Fundamentally, heritage should be understood as an ongoing, dynamic process through which cities perform memory, identity, and social justice—rather than as a static asset to be managed.

In an era characterized by rapid urban transformation and escalating social inequalities, the redemption of marginalized heritage is a profoundly political endeavor that demands careful, humble, and justice-driven praxis.

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