



Traditional Architecture as Cultural Heritage: Living Spaces, Memories and Knowledge

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Abstract

My understanding of traditional architecture changed during my visit to the City Palace Museum in Udaipur. Before the visit, I mainly understood heritage through physical elements such as stone walls, courtyards, jalis, paintings and decorative surfaces. While walking through the museum, however, I became more interested in the way the building was experienced. Although the palace rises through several levels, I never felt that I was simply moving through a conventional five-storey building. The movement was more gradual, with rooms opening into passages, courtyards, terraces and finally an upper garden. This experience made me think about how traditional architecture uses movement, light, scale and landscape to create a sense of place. The miniature paintings in the museum further helped me imagine the people and activities associated with these spaces. The museum identifies Mewar paintings with courtly life, including processions, rituals, celebrations and hunting scenes (City Palace Museum, n.d.). This chapter therefore examines traditional architecture as living cultural heritage, where buildings are connected with memory, craftsmanship, social practices and environmental knowledge. It argues that conservation should preserve not only physical structures but also the knowledge and meanings that allow heritage to remain relevant.

Keywords: Traditional Architecture, Cultural Heritage, Mewar, Udaipur, Living Heritage, Architectural Memory, Craftsmanship, Jali, Conservation, Adaptive Reuse

1. Introduction

When I first started studying traditional architecture, I mostly looked at it through its physical appearance. I noticed materials, forms, decorative details, courtyards, openings and construction techniques. These are all important aspects of architecture, but my visit to the City Palace Museum in Udaipur made me realise that there is another side to traditional architecture that cannot be understood only through drawings or photographs.

It is connected with **memory and experience**.

Walking through the City Palace was different from looking at it in a book. I did not experience the palace as one single building. Instead, the building revealed itself gradually. I moved from one room to another, through passages, courtyards and changes in level. At some points the spaces became narrow and enclosed, while at others they opened towards the outside.

One thing that stayed in my mind was that I never felt I was walking through a conventional five-storey building. Even though the palace has considerable vertical development, I did not experience the levels



as a simple stack of floors. The spaces were connected through movement, views, courtyards and open areas. Eventually, reaching the upper garden gave me a completely different feeling from the enclosed museum spaces.

This made me realise that the scale of architecture cannot always be understood simply by counting floors. The City Palace developed over a long historical period and contains courtyards, gardens, halls and other architectural spaces connected with the history of Mewar. The relationship between the building, its collections and its historical setting is what makes the experience particularly meaningful. The official museum material also presents the palace's collections as closely connected with Mewar's courtly culture.

For me, this was the starting point for understanding traditional architecture as something more than an old structure.

2. Experiencing the Palace Through Movement

One of the strongest memories I have from the City Palace is the experience of walking through it. The building did not reveal its entire form at once. Instead, I discovered it gradually. A doorway led to another space, a passage opened into a courtyard and a change in level created another visual connection. Because of this, I became more aware of movement than I normally am when visiting a museum. This made me think about **spatial sequence**.

In many contemporary buildings, especially institutional buildings, floors are clearly separated. A person enters, takes a staircase or lift and reaches another floor. The movement is efficient and predictable. At the City Palace, the experience felt less direct. The sequence was more layered. I would move through an enclosed room and then suddenly see an open courtyard. From one area, I could notice another level above or below. The changing scale made the building feel larger than I expected, but it did not feel overwhelming. This was especially interesting because the palace contains many different types of spaces. Instead of understanding the building as a single mass, I began to understand it as a collection of interconnected experiences. When I finally reached the upper garden, the change was very noticeable. After spending time in enclosed spaces, the open sky and garden created a sense of relief. The museum identifies Baadi Mahal as the uppermost part of the palace and describes it as an open-roofed courtyard and garden. For me, this demonstrated how architecture can create an emotional experience through movement.

3. The Upper Garden and the Importance of Open Space

The upper garden made me think about the relationship between architecture and landscape.

Before visiting the palace, I had usually thought about a roof as the final part of a building. In this experience, the upper level did not feel like a simple roof. It became another occupied space and an important part of architectural experience.

The transition from interior to garden changed the quality of light, air and movement. It also changed the sense of scale.

I remember thinking that if I had only seen photographs of the City Palace, I would not have understood this experience in the same way. A photograph can show the appearance of a courtyard or garden, but it cannot completely communicate the way a person moves towards it.



This is important when studying traditional architecture.

Architecture is not only experienced by looking at façades. It is experienced through the body.

We walk.

We stop.

We turn.

We look up.

We look through openings.

We move from shade to sunlight.

These physical experiences become part of our memory of a place.

The upper garden therefore became important to me not simply because it was beautiful, but because it completed a sequence that had begun much earlier in the building.

4. Miniature Paintings as Memories of Architectural Life

Another important part of my visit was the miniature painting collection.

At first, I was mainly attracted by the paintings because of their colours and intricate details. The figures were very small, but the scenes contained a surprising amount of information. I could see people, animals, costumes, landscapes and different activities.

The City Palace Museum explains that successive Maharanas of Mewar patronised artists whose work became associated with the Mewar school of painting. The paintings represent different aspects of court life, including royal processions, celebrations, rituals, religious visits, hunting and other activities. While looking at these paintings inside the palace, I began to think about the spaces represented in them.

The paintings were not architectural drawings, but they helped me imagine architecture as it was occupied.

I started asking myself questions.

Who was standing in that courtyard?

Who was watching the procession?

Where were the musicians positioned?

How did people move through these spaces?

What did the palace sound like during a celebration?

These questions changed my relationship with the building.

I stopped seeing the palace only as a historical monument and started imagining it as a place that was once full of people and activity.

This is where I began connecting **architecture with memory**.



5. Architecture as a Carrier of Memory

A building can survive for centuries, but the people who created and occupied it eventually disappear. What remains are physical traces, objects, paintings, materials and spaces that can help later generations imagine the lives associated with them.

This idea is closely connected with the modern understanding of intangible cultural heritage.

UNESCO explains that cultural heritage is not limited to monuments and collections. It also includes living traditions, social practices, rituals, knowledge and skills that communities transmit across generations (UNESCO, n.d.).

This definition helped me understand my experience at the City Palace.

The building was tangible.

The memories associated with it were not.

The craftsmanship was partly visible, but the knowledge behind that craftsmanship was not always immediately visible.

The paintings were physical objects, but the stories and practices represented through them added another layer of meaning.

ICOMOS similarly argues that tangible and intangible heritage are closely connected. Its 2024 Charter explains that cultural practices and knowledge transmitted across generations give meaning, value and context to physical sites and spaces (ICOMOS, 2024).

For me, this makes heritage much more than preservation of an old structure.

It becomes preservation of relationships.

6. The *Jali*: More Than Decoration

The *jali* was another element that made me stop and look more carefully.

I had seen *jalis* in drawings and photographs before, but seeing them within the actual palace made me think about their multiple functions.

A *jali* can filter sunlight, allow air movement and create a degree of visual separation. At the same time, it can have social meaning because it controls how people see and are seen.

The City Palace Museum's information about the Zenana provides an important historical context for understanding spaces associated with royal women. The museum presents the Zenana as an area connected with royal women's lives and activities within the palace.

This made me think differently about the *jali*.

I could no longer see it only as a beautiful pattern cut into stone.

I started thinking about the person on the other side of it.

What could they see?

How much could they see?

Could they remain visually connected to an event while maintaining privacy?

These questions show that a small architectural element can carry several meanings at the same time.

The *jali* can be understood environmentally, architecturally and socially.

This is why I think traditional architectural elements should not be copied only for their appearance.

Their underlying purpose should also be understood.

7. Craftsmanship and the People Behind the Building

Another thought that developed during my visit was about the people who actually made the palace.

When we study historic buildings, it is easy to focus on rulers and patrons. Their names are recorded in history, while the people who physically constructed and decorated the buildings often remain anonymous.

But a palace could not exist without craftsmen.

Masons, stoneworkers, painters, carpenters, metalworkers, plaster workers and other artisans contributed to the building. UNESCO makes an important point about traditional craftsmanship: safeguarding should focus not simply on protecting finished objects but on maintaining the knowledge and skills required to produce them and ensuring that these skills are transmitted to future generations (UNESCO, n.d.).

This made me reconsider the meaning of conservation.

If a historic wall remains standing but the traditional technique used to repair it disappears, then something has still been lost. Similarly, if a traditional decorative pattern is reproduced mechanically but nobody understands the original craft process, the visual form may survive while the knowledge disappears.

For me, this is one of the biggest challenges in architectural conservation.

We need to preserve not only **what was made**, but also **how it was made**.

8. Mirror Work and the Sensory Experience of Architecture

The decorative mirror work inside the palace also made me think about craftsmanship.

At first, I saw it mainly as decoration. However, when I spent more time in the space, I became aware of the relationship between the reflective surfaces, light and movement.

The experience changed as I moved.

This made me realise that architecture is not experienced only visually.



It is also experienced through light, texture, sound, temperature and movement.

A photograph can document mirror work, but it cannot fully recreate the experience of standing inside the room.

This is particularly relevant to traditional architecture because many historic interiors contain handmade details that contribute to the atmosphere of the space.

UNESCO's approach to traditional craftsmanship is useful here because it shifts attention from the finished object to the knowledge and skills of the craftsperson (UNESCO, n.d.).

For me, the mirror work became evidence of human effort.

It represented time, patience and skill.

9. Climate and Traditional Knowledge

Traditional architecture also made me think about environmental design.

Today, architects frequently discuss passive cooling, natural ventilation, solar shading and climate-responsive design. However, many traditional buildings already developed responses to local environmental conditions through experience. Courtyards, shaded passages, screened openings and thick walls could influence the movement of air, light and heat. The important point is not that contemporary architects should copy historic forms.

Instead, we should ask why these forms developed.

For example, rather than simply reproducing a *jali*, we can study how screening affects solar radiation and ventilation. Rather than copying a traditional courtyard, we can understand how a courtyard creates relationships between climate, movement, vegetation and social interaction.

This approach allows traditional architecture to become a source of knowledge rather than a collection of decorative references. UNESCO's understanding of intangible heritage includes knowledge and practices concerning nature and the environment, which is relevant to the way traditional communities developed responses to their surroundings (UNESCO, n.d.).

10. From Historic Building to Living Heritage

One question that developed in my mind during the visit was: **What makes a building heritage?**

Is it simply its age?

I do not think so.

If age alone made something heritage, every old building would have the same cultural importance.

For me, a building becomes meaningful when it carries relationships between people, place, memory, knowledge and identity.

This is why the concept of **living heritage** is useful.



UNESCO explains that intangible heritage is continuously recreated by the communities that carry it. Its transmission does not mean repeating something in exactly the same way; practices can evolve while knowledge and meaning continue (UNESCO, n.d.).

This is important because it means heritage does not have to remain frozen.

A tradition can change and still remain meaningful.

A craftsperson can adapt a traditional technique.

A historic building can receive a new use.

A contemporary architect can reinterpret traditional environmental principles.

What matters is whether the connection with the underlying knowledge and cultural meaning remains.

11. Adaptive Reuse: Giving Historic Buildings a New Life

Historic buildings often cannot continue performing exactly the functions for which they were originally built.

Society changes.

Family structures change.

Technology changes.

Buildings therefore have to adapt.

Adaptive reuse can be one way of allowing heritage buildings to remain part of contemporary life.

However, adaptive reuse is not automatically successful.

A new use may introduce services, partitions, circulation systems, accessibility requirements or commercial functions that alter the original character of a place.

This creates an important conservation question:

How much change can a heritage building accept before it loses the qualities that make it significant?

I think the answer has to be considered on a case-by-case basis.

The ICOMOS 2024 Charter emphasises the importance of managing heritage sites while recognising the relationships between physical places, intangible practices and the communities connected with them (ICOMOS, 2024).

Therefore, adaptive reuse should not mean simply finding a profitable new function.

It should mean finding a new use that allows the building's cultural meaning to continue.

12. Contemporary Architecture and the Question of Authenticity

My experience also made me think about contemporary buildings that take inspiration from traditional architecture.

This is common in Rajasthan, particularly in hospitality architecture.

But there is an important difference between **using traditional forms** and **understanding traditional architecture**.

A contemporary building may use a *jali* because it visually communicates a Rajasthani identity. Another building may reinterpret screening because it provides shade, privacy and environmental control.

The appearance may be similar, but the intention is different.

For me, the second approach is more meaningful.

Tradition should not become a decorative vocabulary that can be added to any building.

Instead, architects should understand the principles behind traditional forms.

The same applies to courtyards, terraces, shaded passages and local materials.

This approach can create architecture that feels contemporary while still being connected to regional knowledge.

13. Authenticity Does Not Always Mean Repetition

This leads to the question of authenticity.

I used to think that being authentic meant maintaining something exactly as it existed in the past.

After studying living heritage, I have started to think differently.

If a tradition is constantly transmitted and recreated, then some degree of change is inevitable.

UNESCO specifically describes intangible heritage as something that is continually recreated and transmitted from person to person and generation to generation (UNESCO, n.d.). (

Therefore, authenticity may not always mean copying the past exactly.

It may instead mean maintaining a meaningful relationship with the knowledge, values and cultural practices of the past.

For architecture, this could mean using traditional environmental principles in a new building, supporting traditional craftsmanship in contemporary construction or adapting a historic building without destroying its significant character.

The building can change.

The knowledge can continue.

14. Architecture as a Record of Social Life

The City Palace also helped me understand how architecture can record social relationships.

The organisation of rooms and courtyards can tell us something about how people interacted.

Entrances can control access.

Thresholds can create different degrees of privacy.

Courtyards can become places of gathering.

Screens can control visibility.

Separate spaces can reflect differences in status, gender or function.

The Zenana is particularly interesting because it shows how architecture was connected with the lives of royal women. The museum's interpretation of the Zenana presents it as a distinct part of palace life rather than simply an architectural enclosure.

This reminded me that architecture should not be studied separately from social history.

At the same time, historical spaces should not be reduced to one simple interpretation.

A screen can provide privacy but can also restrict visibility.



A courtyard can be a place of freedom for some people and controlled movement for others. Architecture can therefore contain contradictory meanings.

15. The Palace and the Larger Cultural Landscape

Another important realisation was that the City Palace cannot be separated completely from Udaipur itself. The palace is connected to the lake, the surrounding landscape, the old city, streets, markets and other historic structures. This relationship became particularly clear when I reached higher levels of the palace. The building offered views towards the wider landscape, and the landscape in turn helped me understand the building.

This made me think about heritage as a **cultural landscape**, rather than only a collection of monuments. The meaning of a palace is partly created by its surroundings.

Similarly, the identity of a historic neighbourhood comes from the relationship between buildings, streets, open spaces, people and everyday activities.

This is important for conservation because protecting an individual building while allowing its surrounding context to disappear may not protect the character of the place.

16. The Risk of Losing Traditional Knowledge

One of the biggest concerns I have after studying traditional architecture is the gradual loss of knowledge. Traditional construction methods require skilled people.

If younger generations do not learn these skills, the techniques can disappear.

UNESCO explains that the continued existence of intangible heritage depends on the transmission of specialised knowledge and skills to future generations (UNESCO, n.d.). (

The problem is therefore not only that old buildings may be demolished.

Even when buildings survive, the knowledge needed to understand, maintain or repair them may become less common.

This is why conservation training should include traditional materials and construction techniques wherever appropriate.

Architecture students should have opportunities to interact with craftspeople, observe traditional processes and understand materials through practice.

This could create a stronger connection between architectural education and heritage conservation.

17. What Should Actually Be Preserved?

I do not think that every historic building should be frozen exactly as it is.

Buildings have to respond to present needs.

A historic building may need improved accessibility, new services, structural strengthening or a different function.

The challenge is deciding what is essential.

For me, the most important things to preserve are not only the visible forms but also the relationships and knowledge that give those forms meaning.

A *jali* should not be preserved only as a pattern.

The understanding of its environmental and social function should also be recorded.

A craft surface should not be preserved without supporting the craftspeople who know how to make or repair it.

A historic courtyard should not be treated simply as an empty architectural space if its cultural meaning depends on how people use it.



UNESCO describes safeguarding as supporting the continued viability and transmission of intangible heritage rather than simply preserving fixed physical manifestations (UNESCO, n.d.). (Intangible Cultural Heritage)

This is a useful principle for architecture.

18. What My Visit Changed for Me

Looking back at my visit to the City Palace Museum, I realise that I entered with one understanding of traditional architecture and left with another.

Initially, I was attracted to the visual qualities.

I noticed colours.

I noticed paintings.

I noticed *jalis*.

I noticed mirror work.

I noticed courtyards.

But gradually, I became more interested in the people and knowledge behind these things.

The miniature paintings made me imagine people occupying the spaces.

The *jalis* made me think about privacy and climate.

The mirror work made me think about craftsmanship.

The movement through the palace made me think about scale.

The upper garden made me think about the relationship between architecture and landscape.

Most importantly, I realised that the building did not feel like a conventional five-storey structure.

While walking through it, I never experienced the levels as simply floors placed one above another.

The movement felt continuous and exploratory. I could move through enclosed spaces and then suddenly arrive at an open courtyard or garden.

This was one of the most valuable architectural experiences I have had because it made me understand something that drawings alone cannot communicate.

Architecture has to be experienced through movement.

19. Conclusion: What Should We Carry Forward?

My experience at the City Palace Museum changed the way I understand traditional architecture.

I no longer see heritage only as an old building that needs protection. I see it as a combination of physical space, memory, craftsmanship, environmental knowledge and social relationships. The palace is important because of its architecture, but its significance becomes much deeper when we consider the people who used it, the artists who recorded its life, the craftspeople who created its details and the knowledge that continues to influence how the region understands its architectural identity.

UNESCO's approach to intangible heritage emphasises transmission, knowledge and skills, while the ICOMOS 2024 Charter stresses that tangible and intangible heritage should be understood together (ICOMOS, 2024; UNESCO, n.d.). (ICICH)

This has changed the question I would ask about conservation.

Instead of asking only:

“How can we preserve this building?”

I think we should also ask:

“What knowledge, memory and experience does this building contain that we should carry forward?”



For me, this is the meaning of living heritage. Traditional architecture does not have to remain unchanged in order to remain relevant. Its forms may evolve, its functions may change and its techniques may be adapted. What matters is that we understand the ideas behind them.

The City Palace taught me that heritage is not simply something that belongs to the past.

It can influence how we design the future.

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