

Post-Disaster Restoration of Erbil's Qaysariya Bazaar

Mahmood Khayyat, Israa Abdollah, Hana Al-Baldawi, Zena Husham

(Prof. Mahmood Khayyat (PHD), University of Kurdistan Hewlêr, Erbil, Iraq, mahmood.khayat@ukh.edu.krd)

(Israa Abdollah, Architectural Engineering and Sustainability, programme year 4 student, University of Kurdistan Hewlêr, Erbil, Iraq, israa.mahmod@ukh.edu.krd)

(Hana Al-Baldawi, Architectural Engineering and Sustainability, programme year 3 student, University of Kurdistan Hewlêr, Erbil, Iraq, hana.hayder@ukh.edu.krd)

(Zena Husham, Architectural Engineering and Sustainability, programme year 4 student, University of Kurdistan Hewlêr, Erbil, Iraq, zena.abbas@ukh.edu.krd)

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1 ABSTRACT

The Qaysari Bazaar in Erbil, one of the city's most important historic commercial centers, was severely damaged by a fire in May 2024, resulting in the destruction or partial damage of approximately 270 shops and the loss of income for many families. This research investigates the renovation process, material and structural strategies, service implementation, and the social impacts of the project on shopkeepers and visitors. Data was collected through interviews with two project engineers, twelve shopkeepers, and around twenty visitors, in addition to site observations. The findings show that a damage-based classification approach allowed collapsed shops to be reconstructed in their original form, while less-damaged areas received surface renovation, preserving architectural authenticity through the use of traditional and locally sourced materials. Infrastructure systems such as ventilation, sewage, lighting, and fire suppression were upgraded to improve safety and functionality. Socially, most shopkeepers expressed satisfaction with the final design and felt that the bazaar retained its heritage identity; however, they reported serious financial hardship due to a year of unemployment and insufficient governmental aid. Visitors generally perceived the renovation as successful and restorative of the bazaar's cultural character. Overall, the project demonstrates a strong balance between heritage conservation and modernization, while also revealing the need for greater social and economic support mechanisms in post-disaster heritage restoration projects.

Keywords: disaster management, planning, restoration, renovation, infrastructure

2 INTRODUCTION

Located near the Erbil Citadel, the Qaysari Bazaar is one of the most important historic commercial centers in the Kurdistan Region, forming a core part of the city's economic life and cultural identity. It is both an architectural heritage site and a living marketplace that supports hundreds of livelihoods and preserves traditional crafts.

The 2024 fire exposed the vulnerability of heritage markets and the need for restoration approaches that protect authenticity while allowing necessary modernization. The renovation of Qaysari Bazaar stands as a significant example of post-disaster heritage rehabilitation in a socially and economically sensitive context.

This research examines the renovation process through technical strategies, material choices, service upgrades, and user feedback, highlighting the importance and impact of the work carried out in preserving the bazaar's identity while improving its functionality and safety. functionality, and the well-being of local communities (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Panels A and B show the restored interior of the Qaysariya Bazaar, while C, D, and E document the active commercial life within its renovated shops. The map in Panel F illustrates the bazaar's layout, highlighting the streets in yellow and the specific shops that have undergone renovation.

3 BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

3.1 History of the bazaar

Located directly south of Erbil Citadel in the historic core of the city, Qaysari Bazaar, locally known as (Bazar Qaysari), is considered one of the oldest and most significant commercial centers in the Kurdistan Region (Ghafour 2021; Roy Choudhury 2023). Historical sources indicate that market activity in this area dates back to the early 13th century during the rule of Sultan Muzaffaraddin Gökböri, serving the Citadel's inhabitants (Ghafour 2021).

The bazaar is characterized by narrow alleys and specialized commercial corridors, with mudbrick walls. Corrugated vaulted roofing shelters the dense passageways, forming its distinct spatial identity (Ghafour 2021).

The Qaysari developed into a compact commercial network of approximately 270 shops. Today, it predominantly accommodates tailors, artisans, and traditional clothing shops. It also functioned as a social hub including few tea houses and restaurants. Many vendors representing multigenerational family businesses sustaining traditional Kurdish craftsmanship (Bazarkurdistan 2025; Ghafour 2021; Roy Choudhury 2023).

3.2 Fire accident and its effects

On May 5, 2024, a tragic fire severely damaged the historic market. The blaze destroyed 227 shops and seven warehouses, but its reach has affected a total of 270 units, and injured more than 100 people (Bazarkurdistan 2025). Combustible materials and wooden structures facilitated the rapid spread of the fire.

In September 2024, the Erbil Governorate allocated 5.3 billion Iraqi dinars (approximately \$3.6 million) for a comprehensive restoration project (Bazarkurdistan 2025). This reconstruction prioritized the architectural preservation. The Old Qaysari section of the bazaar was rehabilitated without structural alteration. The partially demolished upper floor was restored to its 19th century Ottoman character employing traditional construction methods, while the newer Qaysari was fully renovated (Bazarkurdistan 2025).

By April 2025, restoration was completed and shops were returned to their owners, marking the reopening of a market that remains both an economic engine and a central symbol of Erbil's cultural resilience (Bazarkurdistan 2025).

4 METHODOLOGY

Data collection was conducted across numerous sources through semi-structured interviews with experts, shop-owners and visitors. Two interviews were conducted with experts who were involved in the project, meanwhile twelve interviews were conducted with on-site shopkeepers and owners. Furthermore, around twenty visitors of different nationalities and perspectives were spoken to in hopes of understanding what the general public's view of the renovation was. They were asked a range of questions, such as their opinions on the design, how the renovation affected their life, and how the current services in the area operate. With most of the shopkeepers, the interviews turned into a fruitful discussions which allowed us to understand their circumstances. In addition to this, on-site observations and site-visits were done to understand the material used, circulation patterns and the overall conditions of the bazaar. The collected data was analyzed through comparative and descriptive approach linking technical interventions with social feedback from users and was quantified based on similar responses from the users.

5 RENOVATION PROCESS

5.1 Renovation background

Following the major accident, there was a huge sense of urgency to restore the area so that the shopkeepers could go back into business. This project had a certain intensity behind it as the Qaysari Bazaar does not only represent a vital part of the city's economic climate, but also a cultural one. The fire damaged the bazaar in three different ways: some shops were not damaged, some shops were partially damaged, and some shops were destroyed. This variation of damages required the teams behind the renovation to adopt different strategies when working.

The primary objectives of this renovation is to restore the damaged area in a way that benefits the shop-owners the most but also ensures the bazaar does not lose its cultural heritage and identity. The project was fully funded by the government, and the restoration team worked with local companies such as Qallay Khanzad and Bitwen. In this research, we discussed this renovation with two on site engineers Sangar Muhammed and Rebaz Salih, who currently work at Municipality One in Erbil, and who worked on the project. They had provided us with great information regarding the process such as the background of their objectives when it came to this restoration, alongside vital details regarding the operation, cost, and services.

5.2 Renovation process

The approach that was taken in the renovation process is called damage-based classification approach, ensuring that each area was treated based on the damage it sustained during the future. The entire renovation process cost around 3.6 million USD. Shops that completely collapsed during the fire were reconstructed to match their original form, while the others that were slightly affected or not affected at all got surface renovation to match the newer identity of the bazaar.

A huge deciding aspect was material authenticity and keeping the identity of the materials the same. Bricks identical to the original ones were used by reactivating traditional brick factories and reproducing the materials using raw components and specific molds. Furthermore, a huge part of the stone materials were imported from Mosul, and timber was obtained from the surrounding environment. The local aspect of the materials also contributes to the sustainability considered in the project, and the desire to ensure that the heritage of the area isn't lost through keeping the components local.

Engineer Rebaz Salih discussed their approach to the project and how they aimed to maintain consistently throughout the bazaar. Any shops that had height differences or misalignments were also modified and fixed, ensuring that the entire bazaar was consistent within its levels. Some structural elements required strengthening and additional supporting elements to ensure their stability. Afterwards, roof coverings, finishing details, and ground tile were implemented (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

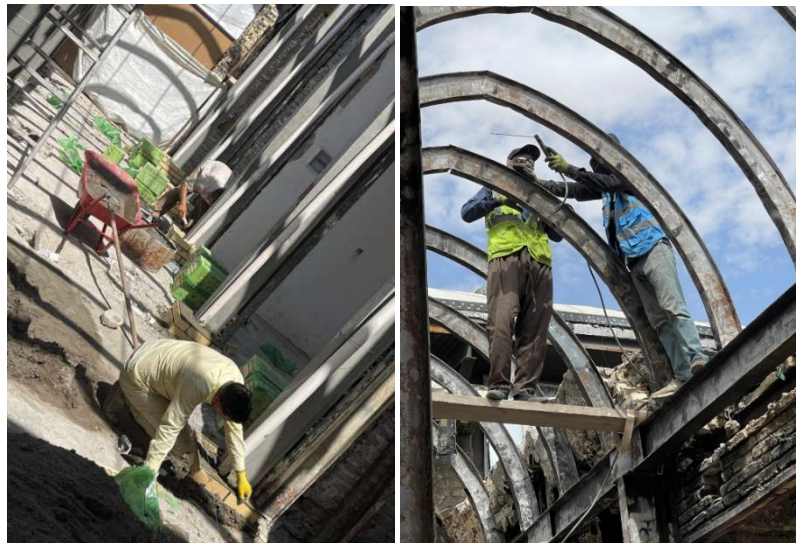


Fig. 2: Restoration and Correction of the Floor Levels. Fig. 3: Restoration of the Vaulted Roofing Structure

5.3 Service implementation

Modern service systems were implemented carefully through the historic fabric of the bazaar to ensure safety and improve functionality without hurting the heritage value of the land. Infrastructure systems such as ventilation and sewage networks were upgraded and fixed according to their state. The site engineers discussed how there were earlier leaks in the shops which were considered and fixed. In addition to this, they also considered future incidents and implemented a fire suppression system that is still being upgraded and worked on.

The current implementation of an underground infrastructure for sprinkler systems is still under review as it has high costs and involves the co-ordination of multiple governmental authorities and branches. Despite this, they have already begun laying the foundational works of this system as it seems to be the most

beneficial for the bazaar in the long run. Furthermore, to ensure fire regulations are met more thoroughly, new operational regulations have been established and implemented. For example, shop owners are now required to keep merchandise inside the stores and prohibited from keeping their products on display after closure.

When it comes to services such as lighting, it was designed by the project team, ensuring that each shop is well lit and provides visual comfort to shopkeepers and visitors alike. Shopkeepers were also allowed to implement their own lighting and electrical works within their shops based on what they required, however through maintenance and checkups these services were approved.

6 MAINTAINING THE HERITAGE

6.1 UNESCO involvement

UNESCO's involvement in the renovation of the Qaysari Bazaar was only during the initial stages of the project where they provided supervision and guidance in terms of heritage conservation principles. However, their role did not continue during the implementation period as their operational pace did not align with the needed pace of the restoration of this project. While the project on restoring the Erbil Citadel may be capable of extending over a large timeframe, the same could not be said for the Qaysari Bazaar as people's livelihood is dependent on the area. This meant that UNESCO's involvement was short-lived and not needed, and the restoration relied on the local engineers and government.

6.2 Maintaining the heritage through social life and architecture

The preservation and restoration of the Qaysari bazaar after the fire was not only an architectural process, but also a process related to the social life of the area. Not only does the Qaysari bazaar represent a huge part of the city's economic life, but it is also representative of the city's identity (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5)



Fig. 4: Shopkeeper inside Qaysari Bazaar. Fig. 5: Restored section of Qaysari Bazaar

7 SOCIAL ASPECTS

7.1 Shopkeepers' feedback

7.1.1 Experience with the Fire

Shop-keepers represent the primary users of the Qaysari Bazaar, and listening to their feedback is the most insightful way to understand the social and economic aspects of the fire, the renovation, and the maintenance of the heritage throughout the process. All the shopkeepers that had been interviewed were affected by the fire severely and have been put out of employment for a year. They had all struggled with uncertainty and loss, especially as most of the businesses had been family-owned as seen in the charts (see Fig. 6 and Fig.7).

IS YOUR BUSINESS FAMILY OWNED



HOW DID THE RENOVATION YEAR AFFECT YOUR LIFE

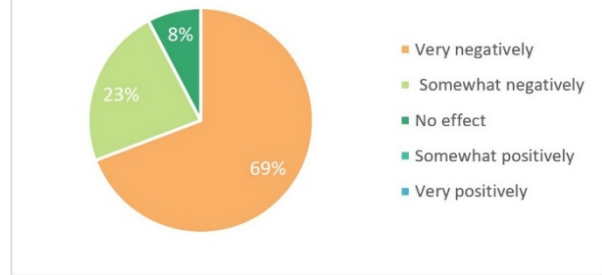


Fig. 6: Ownership structure of surveyed shops. Fig. 7: Perceived impact of renovation on shopkeepers' businesses

7.1.2 Year of Unemployment

The full year of unemployment had severely affected the entire workforce, keeping them out of consistent pay for a long time. All the shopkeepers have discussed their desire for financial aid from the government that was not handed to them as seen in (Table 1). This lack of care when it comes to both worker and the consideration of heritage sites should be criticized and considered, as most people who work in heritage sites are not considered the priority in comparison to modernized urban areas.

FINANCIAL AID FOR SHOPKEEPERS			
Did you receive financial aid from the government	Yes	No	
	92.31%	7.69%	
Was the financial aid enough	Yes	Partially	No
		16.67%	83.33%
Did you request additional aid	Yes	No	
	66.67%	33.33%	
If you requested more aid, was it approved	Yes	No	Still Waiting
		25%	75%

Table 1: Assessment of financial aid and support after the fire.

7.1.3 General Feedback

The shopkeepers all enjoy the design and the choices made to maintain it as they feel it had provided them with a new start after the incident while also maintaining the integrity of the heritage of the area, as illustrated in (Fig. 8) both visitors and shopkeepers expressed overall satisfaction. However, there have been some struggles with the folded doors implemented as seen in (Fig 8 and Fig. 9). The renovation had also fixed issues that the design was suffering before the incident such as leakage when natural elements such as rain hit, and the uneven and non-consistent height levels of the shops. Most store owners feel as if the design retained the identity of the city and hadn't disrespected its heritage.

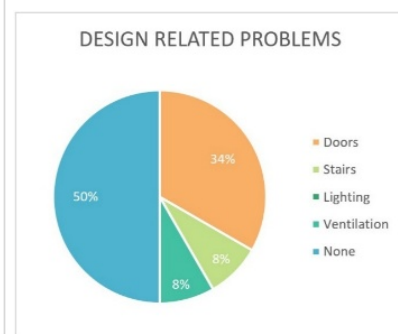


Fig. 8: Shopkeepers, Locals and Visitors. Tourist Feedback of the Renovation. Fig. 9: Reported design-related problems following renovation.

7.2 Visitors' experience and feedback

The incident hasn't completely changed the life around the bazaar as the area is cemented on the social and economic life rather than the architecture itself. Most visitors who frequent the area kept on coming back afterwards and appreciated the renovation and feel as if the area maintained its cultural heritage. They had also agreed that the renovation had bettered the circumstances around the infrastructure, and was restorative of the cultural identity of the bazaar. The slight modernization of some aspects also seem to be enjoyed as proves the bazaar to have longevity and stability.

8 CONCLUSION

The renovation of the Qaysari Bazaar demonstrates that heritage sites can be restored in a way that respects historical character while integrating modern services. The damage-based classification approach, use of local materials, and careful service implementation helped retain the bazaar's identity. Shopkeepers and visitors generally view the project positively, recognizing improvements in safety and appearance. However, the year of unemployment and limited financial support highlight the need for stronger social protection alongside physical restoration. Future heritage projects should combine technical conservation with greater attention to the livelihoods of local communities as heritage is ultimately connected to the social life of an area.

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