

Strategies and processes for the recovery of Gaza's cultural landscape

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Abstract

Years of protracted conflict in Gaza have devastated a region whose urban landscape was shaped over centuries by successive civilisations. The destruction has compromised the physical built environment and cultural heritage, severely damaging them and undermining social cohesion and the territory's deeply embedded symbolic values.

This paper first outlines a culturally sensitive reconstruction strategy for Gaza, drawing comparisons with previous cases and approaches to urban recovery and investigating the cultural significance of the different layers of heritage.

The second section presents a methodological framework of principles and challenges for rebuilding a cultural urban landscape that has been severely damaged or completely destroyed.

Finally, the paper concludes with targeted suggestions for rebuilding cultural urban landscapes, proposing actions and roles aimed at rehabilitating and restoring cultural and residential assets in crisis contexts. This ensures that recovery efforts respect and preserve the area's identity and characteristics.

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Keywords

Gaza, Cultural landscape, Urban landscape recovery, Area-based approach, Open spaces and healing gardens.

Preface: Beyond destruction, towards a project of collective rebirth

The devastation that has struck Gaza in recent years represents one of the gravest humanitarian emergencies of our time. Faced with such destruction, urban reconstruction cannot be approached as a mere technical process, but requires a broad vision, rooted in the history and social fabric of the city.

The issue, therefore, of reconstruction after a catastrophic event such as that in Gaza, compels both architecture and society to profound reflection: it is not merely a matter of repairing what has been destroyed, but of considering how the traumatic event influences identity, both personal and collective.

Each individual and every community attribute unique meanings to these events, which are intertwined with their histories and determine the modalities and outcomes of rebirth.

The only way to face the abyss that opens before us is through active and collective engagement. Architecture, aware of its own limits, is called to mobilise, directing its gaze towards a new perspective: recognising that the history of humanity and its dwellings is an integral part of the history of the planet.

The Academic Senate of the Polytechnic University of Bari, in June 2025, expressed its support for peace and the reconstruction of Gaza, confirming a firm condemnation of all ongoing wars, wherever they occur, as well as against all

forms of violence affecting civilians, minorities, and the most vulnerable segments of the population. It is a continuous commitment to spreading a culture of peace, dialogue, collaboration, and respect for human dignity—values that are indispensable for scientific, civil, and democratic progress.

In a global context marked by numerous conflicts, it is emphasised how the attention of public opinion and the international community is powerfully drawn to the dramatic situation in the Gaza Strip, made increasingly evident by news, direct testimonies, and reports from humanitarian organisations.

This “catastrophe” does not concern only the survivors, but mobilises a wider consciousness; we have all become participants in an involvement that goes beyond the boundaries of direct experience. We have internalised the event and recovered a radical twist of perspective, which consists, first and foremost, in suspending the obvious and cultivating the ability to see the world from a different viewpoint—a true “reversal” or “overturning,” which does not necessarily carry the negative meaning we attribute to it today.

Thus, devastation/destruction represents a turning point, the interruption of continuity—a discontinuity that takes on decisive value because it puts an end to the previous order, a “leap” from one state to another, the breaking of a morphological and structural equilibrium which produces an irreversible mutation of form.

The “Gaza Phoenix” 2024 project and the “Resilient Horizons” strategy represent an important opportunity for a deep and collective reflection on the meaning of the “leap,” intended as a moment of regeneration and redefinition of socio-cultural identity. These initiatives emphasise the need to avoid the risk of a “tabula rasa” which, under the banner of modernity and well-being, could lead to a mystification of

reality, instead of enhancing the memory and roots of the territory.

On the contrary, it is necessary to recognise and integrate the historical, social, and spatial roots that update the character of an ancient city built and destroyed over time. This perspective allows us to tackle the complexity of reconstruction in a gradual and sustainable way, avoiding top-down solutions and favouring instead a participatory and conscious process.

In this context, historical memory becomes a precious resource. Evaluating and appreciating different points of view—even those far from one's own background—enriches the creative process and strengthens the bond with the territory. Considering the territory, the place, as a source of information, supplemented by other sources, brings out new pathways for research: on the one hand, an analysis of landscape physiognomies for descriptive purposes; on the other, the study of representations, meanings, and values that different observers attribute to the place.

The choice to use local materials and to promote a technique nourished by humanism—far removed from both futurist totalisation and the media mythology of technology—represents a path towards more conscious dwelling, in harmony with nature and places.

“Nature becomes landscape for us only when we accept and seek it without purely utilitarian purposes” (Hellpach, 1960). Starting from the complexity and multiplicity of meanings of the concept of reconstruction, the text advocates a point of reference for the construction of an architectural palimpsest, where image and reality intertwine to transcend traditional oppositions and identify new connections. New landscapes are determined by the relationship between the observer and the overall view—an experience involving environments, people, and culture, accessible through the gaze, the mind, and the knowledge of each individual.

In this view, reconstruction is interpreted as a representation of the territory itself, configured as a complex combination of elements and phenomena in functional relation, constituting an organic unity.

A central element of this strategy is the active involvement of local communities. Only through respect for social dynamics and the promotion of resilience, via the use of recycled materials and the reinterpretation of traditional architecture, can we hope to restore authentic urban life to Gaza. The aim is not only to rebuild buildings, but to rewrite a lesson on how to read the past to design the future, an architecture capable of dialogue with the new, often unknown, horizons of contemporaneity.

The guiding principles of this rebirth must include the safeguarding of memory, mitigation of environmental impact, respect for private property, and the development of sustainable infrastructures. Only in this way will it be possible to build the foundations for an equitable and lasting rebirth, capable of uniting digital experimentation and respect for tradition.

The reconstruction of Gaza represents an epochal challenge but also a unique opportunity to rethink the very meaning of architecture and dwelling. Supporting a courageous, innovative, and profoundly human vision is the first step in restoring new hope and a better future to the city.

The School of Architecture at the Polytechnic University of Bari, which was established and continues to grow thanks to the intuition of Prof. Claudio D'Amato, is based on a precise educational model, the result of considered choices and solid theoretical references. It adopts and enhances principles of settlement and recognition of the *genius loci*, integrating tradition with a contemporary vision.

This School is rooted in the clear and inalienable idea that Architecture is, above all, the Art of Building. This method is expressed through a profound relationship with History,

to be explored and reinterpreted with a critical eye, adopting the “Mediterranean landscape” as a privileged key to interpretation—an operational and concrete human habitat, characterised by complex and non-linear paths.

The choice of stone construction, among many possible options, becomes an essential necessity for coherently reading and defining the meanings, forms, and identities of such unique places.

In these lands, architecture becomes the expression of a process of structuring physical identity space, organically linked to the places that host it and taking on the unique character of the spirit of the place.

A deep and authentic connection with the territory, rooted in original traditions and the use of local materials. Architecture originates from the careful extraction and processing of elements from the earth, generating spaces of extraordinary quality where the trace left by the quarried stone becomes measure and memory. This measure of extraction transforms into a constructive rule, manifesting a true cult of the earth, which gives architectural spaces an unmistakable identity, the result of a way of operating intimately belonging to a culture.

The theory underlying this method is linked to the definition of organic architecture: capable of describing general principles in which all the individual parts exist in a relationship of reciprocal necessity, generating each time different, unique, and thus unrepeatable forms.

If architecture forgets *Firmitas*, as Vitruvius says, it loses its most extraordinary power. Architecture is a bridge between generations, across time and space, possessing the exceptional ability to unite the living and the dead—one of humanity’s greatest achievements; if it does not endure, this dialogue is interrupted and its immortal function is lost.

An idea of Architecture that sits between art and practice, as the authentic expression of *τέχνη*—not pure technique, but technical and creative knowledge.

A constant search for a balance between innovation and tradition, where “innovation must rest on durable construction technique; experimenting with techniques that free us from the absolute freedom of reinforced concrete and iron means bringing architecture back under the control of functionality and beauty, achieving the perfect Vitruvian synthesis”. Just as reading architecture can give the pleasure of the text, designing means joining this debate, embracing the idea of an organism where the space is unitary but neither exclusive nor dogmatic. The past becomes a travelling companion, and logic together with history contribute to redefining the vision of the representative space of our time. Shared responsibility is needed, capable of turning tragedy into an opportunity for growth and rethinking how we inhabit and live together.

Representing a sudden change in an arrangement leads us to reflect on origins in search of a new possible equilibrium; at the same time, it compels us to lay bare the open wound, giving voice, with intensity, to the experience of a bitterness that erupts suddenly and from which escape seems impossible, highlighting the gap between those who limit themselves to analysing causes, meanings, and possible explanations—perhaps in an attempt to provide rational justifications or answers—but what matters are the effects: destruction should not be met with knowledge, but with being. A collective being.

Introduction

The destruction in the Gaza Strip has unleashed an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe, displacing a vast

portion of the population and dismantling the region's living traditions, social networks, and cultural continuity. Within the area, entire urban areas have been reduced to rubble, erasing not only homes but also the intangible heritage embedded in the urban fabric—spaces of collective memory, identity, and everyday life.

The situation remains extremely complex and fragile today. Basic services and infrastructure are almost entirely absent, creating conditions of extreme vulnerability. Water, electricity, and sanitation systems have collapsed.

Compounding these challenges, the severe damage to Gaza's urban landscape also endangers the most significant aspects of its architectural and cultural identity. The state of monuments and remaining residential traditional buildings and urban areas, many of which are severely damaged, are critical: historic quarters, traditional housing and public spaces have been devastated, as has the entire urban fabric. This has left behind a fragmented environment that urgently requires recovery in terms of its social, architectural and economic fabric.

This is particularly important for an area with origins dating back to ancient times, when Gaza was a strategic port and trade hub developed along caravan routes linking Egypt, the Levant, and Arabia. Over the centuries, Gaza flourished, leaving behind a legacy of vernacular and monumental architecture. The Great Mosque, now in ruins and standing on the site of an ancient Philistine temple that was later used as a Byzantine church before being converted in the early Islamic era, symbolises this layered history by embodying transformations across religious and political contexts. Traditional Ottoman courtyard houses, known as “ahwash”, with their stone masonry, vaulted rooms and shaded gardens, demonstrate how architectural form can be integrated with environmental sustainability and cultural norms. Gaza's historic urban fabric therefore embodies

millennia of layered civilisation, including Philistine, Roman-Byzantine, Mamluk and Ottoman influences. Ensembles of courtyard houses, mosques, churches, markets, madrasas and khans (such as Qasr al-Basha, the Great Omari Mosque and St. Porphyrius Church) still punctuate the urban landscape, as do archaeological strata.

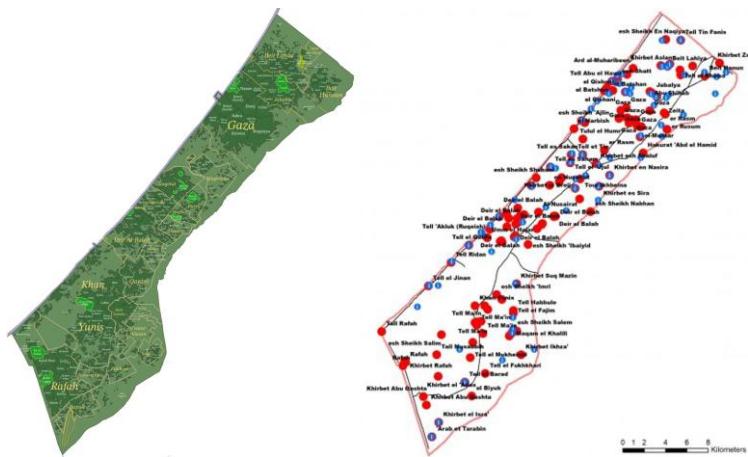


Figure 1 - Distribution of settled areas and archaeological sites in the Gaza Strip.

Today, this heritage is under severe threat due to widespread destruction and displacement. The loss of monuments, traditional housing and public spaces endangers not only the city's architectural integrity, but also the intangible cultural values embedded in its spatial organisation. Therefore, preserving and reconstructing Gaza's historic urban landscape, alongside with its overall reconstruction, is crucial for safeguarding its identity, ensuring cultural continuity, and enabling the community to return and rebuild in harmony with its past.

In this context, clear recovery guidelines alongside a reconstruction masterplan are essential to facilitate urban rebuilding. Reconstruction would therefore present not only a technical challenge, but also a cultural imperative, as the aim would be to restore Gaza's rich and layered heritage, which defines the sense of place and belonging in the area.

A culturally sensitive reconstruction strategy must respect the stratification of urban history, restore key architectural typologies and revive the social and economic functions of historic neighbourhoods. It should also return homes and residential districts to local inhabitants. By doing so, Gaza can reclaim its role as a living cultural organism in which heritage and modernity coexist to create a sustainable and resilient urban future.

Therefore, the recovery of Gaza must go beyond physical rebuilding. A holistic approach is required that integrates cultural heritage preservation, urban resilience and sustainable development. The reconstruction process should seek to rebuild the urban fabric of residential areas, respecting traditional layouts and reviving the cultural landscapes that have historically shaped Gaza's identity. Only through this kind of approach can the city reclaim its role as a living organism, ensuring that its memory, diversity and uniqueness are not lost to history.

Rebuilding cultural urban landscapes: Principles and challenges for Gaza

Reconstructing a damaged historic environment requires a pluralistic approach that prioritizes cultural continuity, tradition, and the restoration of collective memory (UNESCO, 2011; Bandarin & van Oers, 2012, Marcinkowska & Zalasinska 2019).

In historic areas, reconstruction should be conceived as a process, not merely a technical intervention. It must aim to preserve both explicit and implicit attributes of heritage, encompassing the built environment, social structures, and the functional uses of buildings. This is essential to avoid phenomena such as gentrification or the gradual erosion of authenticity caused by replacing damaged structures with inappropriate building typologies and urban/landscape morphologies (ICOMOS, 2016).

In the case of Gaza, the challenge lies in maintaining the overall remaining features of authenticity, while integrating participatory processes and acknowledging cultural, ecological, and economic transformations driven by prolonged conflict (UN-Habitat, 2023).

Future recovery should be envisioned as a complex, multidisciplinary process, requiring the development of methodological and site-specific guidelines to address the layered nature of Gaza's urban and social landscape. Actions should emphasize the sense of place, ensuring continuity and consistency with the surviving historic urban fabric, in line with international charters (UNESCO, 2011). Reconstruction strategies should focus on "building back better" (UNISDR, 2017) while safeguarding authenticity, linking tangible and intangible heritage through cultural spaces, fostering reconciliation, and promoting understanding of cultural expressions and places of significance (UNESCO, 2011).

Within this framework, community involvement is critical: the active engagement of inhabitants in decision-making processes ensures that reconstruction reflects local identity and social needs. Moreover, recovery efforts should aim to create safer, greener, and more sustainable cities, integrating cultural heritage into urban resilience strategies and supporting a heritage-based economy that contributes to

long-term sustainability (UN-Habitat, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

Implementation process

Recognising that an urban landscape is the result of the complex interplay of physical, cultural and natural values, encompassing the natural and built environment, open spaces, gardens, visual relationships and cultural practices, Gaza's reconstruction must be approached within a comprehensive sustainable development framework.

The challenge extends beyond the mere physical restoration of stones, monuments, and iconic landmarks. Rather, the recovery process requires an integrated strategy that considers all the diverse urban layers (e.g. monuments and landmarks, archaeology, public buildings, open spaces, courtyard houses) and aims to rebuild them using differentiated objectives and methodologies.

Planning strategies must be developed to ensure continuity between reconstruction efforts and the existing urban fabric. This involves focusing on the holistic reconstruction of the historic urban landscape, including clusters of traditional courtyard houses, monuments and public buildings, archaeological remains and the layout of open spaces. The goal is to "build back better" by preserving and enhancing the tangible (natural and built) and intangible cultural characteristics that have historically shaped—and continue to shape—the identity of Gaza's urban landscape (UNESCO, 2011).

Reconstruction should therefore be viewed as an opportunity to address pre-existing vulnerabilities, improve building and urban conditions, and remediate problematic situations. This approach requires integrated strategies that respect cultural continuity while promoting resilience and

sustainability. This ensures that the city's heritage becomes a foundation for future development.

Reconstruction: Consciousness or amnesia?

Long-term reconstruction can erase the memory of war (Violi, 2017). However, in the aftermath of urbicide — the deliberate destruction of the urban fabric (Coward, 2009) — reconstruction is never neutral. It involves choices that shape collective memory (Halbwachs, 1980), identity and the city's future, not merely future use, new functions or targets to be addressed.

Moreover, post-traumatic contexts often generate aspirations for renewal and modernisation, which can lead to the adoption of globalised urban models, particularly when foreign actors exert significant influence. In the conflict between universal civilisation and national culture (Ricoeur, 1961; Frampton, 1983), globalised architecture often triumphs while historical typologies, which are repositories of accumulated layers of meaning, are marginalised or obliterated.

Past experiences of reconstruction have been characterised by several key approaches to rebuilding devastated urban areas. Some have aimed to restore the city's former appearance, recreating its historical form and spatial continuity, as in the case of Warsaw (Bugalsky & Lawrence 2023). Others have focused on rebuilding emblematic buildings as symbols of resilience and cultural heritage, as with the reconstruction of the Mostar Bridge, which became a powerful symbol of reconciliation (Hadzimuhamedovic & Bouchenaki, 2018). Alternatively, reconstruction can be linked to political processes of conservation, transforming the narrative of memory into a narrative of identity. An example of this is Beirut, where the rapid and controversial

reconstruction prevented not only archaeological excavations, but also efforts to highlight the local identity by enhancing the traces of the historic built environment (Rowe & Sarkis, 1998). In the future, Aleppo could hopefully demonstrate how an area-based (UN-Habitat, 2023) regeneration approach involving courtyard houses, markets, streets and mixed-use ensembles could restore morphological continuity to a devastated urban landscape, prioritising civic spaces as places of dialogue to foster social cohesion in a fractured community (Neglia, 2020).

In the case of Gaza, this dilemma is particularly urgent. The need for rapid reconstruction, coupled with severe economic constraints and ongoing political instability, increases the risk of rebuilding efforts defaulting to standardised, globalised models. While such approaches are expedient, they often disregard the unique cultural identity and historical depth of the place. If reconstruction becomes merely a technical exercise that smooths over the scars of conflict and obliterates the richness of heritage, it will compromise the very possibility of cultural resilience and collective memory.

Conversely, prioritizing the recognition and safeguarding of fragile and vulnerable sites can transform reconstruction into a vehicle for continuity rather than rupture. Pilot projects focusing on emblematic buildings and open spaces as “anchor points for memory”, complemented by neighbourhood-scale fabric rehabilitation, would help maintain symbolic coherence within the urban landscape. These interventions would restore physical structures and reaffirm the cultural narratives embedded in them, thereby reinforcing a sense of identity and belonging.

Furthermore, these principles could inform the development of context-sensitive housing prototypes, the revitalisation of local markets and the design of public spaces that integrate memory into their spatial logic while meeting contemporary

performance standards. By embedding cultural meaning within functional upgrades, reconstruction can transcend mere physical repair and become a catalyst for social recovery and long-term resilience.

Rebuilding cultural urban landscapes: Actions and roles

In order to achieve these goals, the local community must be at the heart of the reconstruction process. Recovery cannot be imposed from outside; it must emerge from participatory mechanisms that empower residents to shape their own urban environment. This approach ensures that reconstruction is technically effective, socially legitimate and culturally meaningful.

For this reason, the international community must play a critical role—not as distant decision-makers, but as enablers and partners. Support should extend beyond financial aid to include structured programmes of training, capacity building and technical assistance. Such initiatives could bolster local expertise in heritage conservation and enhancement, sustainable construction techniques, architectural, urban and landscape design, while fostering collaborative platforms where knowledge is shared and adapted to Gaza's unique context.

Support throughout the process is also vital: mentoring local professionals, facilitating community workshops and promoting inclusive governance models will help ensure that reconstruction becomes a catalyst for resilience rather than dependency.

By investing in human capital and participatory frameworks, local and international communities can transform rebuilding efforts into a long-term strategy for cultural continuity and social recovery by providing the following

actions in accordance with Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015) and recovery frameworks (UN-Habitat, 2021).

Community empowerment through digital documentation and damage assessment.

The action aims to activate the role of the international community by promoting the use of digital technologies to document cultural heritage and foster an understanding of its value. Technologies such as 3D scanning, GIS mapping and immersive platforms offer innovative tools for recording, analysing and disseminating information about heritage assets, ensuring their preservation for future generations. Beyond the technical dimension, the initiative emphasises the importance of raising awareness of the intrinsic value of local heritage and fostering a deeper understanding of its historical, social and cultural significance. Support is needed to strengthen the connection between local and international stakeholders in the documentation and preservation of urban sites, integrating local narratives and traditions into global heritage discourses. Ultimately, this action contributes to the development of resilient cultural ecosystems where urban sites are documented and preserved through a combination of local expertise and international support. In doing so, it reinforces the notion that cultural heritage is a common good whose protection requires collective responsibility and innovative strategies.

Community empowerment through connection between local and international academia.

The proposed action aims to strengthen the connection between local and international academic communities, fostering a deeper, shared understanding of the cultural, historical and social value of local heritage. The initiative emphasises the importance of knowledge exchange and capacity building as fundamental tools for heritage recovery. By encouraging collaborative research, joint educational programmes and interdisciplinary dialogue, the initiative aims to establish robust international academic networks that serve as platforms for disseminating best practices, innovative methodologies and digital solutions for heritage documentation and management. These networks facilitate scholarly cooperation and local empowerment, enabling communities to access global expertise while preserving their agency and cultural identity. Thus, academic collaboration becomes a strategic resource for reinforcing local resilience, promoting sustainable development, and ensures that local narratives and traditional knowledge systems are incorporated into global academic discourse. This synergy between local and international academia contributes to the creation of a participatory framework for urban landscape recovery, in which research and education act as catalysts for community-based practices. Ultimately, the initiative seeks to establish a transnational academic ecosystem that promotes the safeguarding of cultural heritage as a shared responsibility, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals 11.4 (Protect the Worlds Cultural and Natural Heritage).

Community empowerment through connection between local and international experts.

The proposed action is designed to activate and strengthen the role of local communities in preserving heritage and

promoting urban sustainability. This is achieved by raising awareness of, and promoting knowledge of, the cultural, historical and social value of both tangible and intangible heritage, which is an essential component of collective identity and social cohesion. In line with Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable) the initiative recognises that heritage conservation is a strategic driver for sustainable urban development as well as a cultural imperative.

Empowering local communities requires the creation of participatory frameworks that integrate bottom-up initiatives originating from citizens and local stakeholders with top-down strategies developed by institutions and policymakers. This multi-level approach ensures heritage management is inclusive and responsive to local needs, while also benefiting from institutional support and global expertise. Furthermore, the initiative promotes inter-scalar strategies, connecting neighbourhood-level interventions with city-wide and international policies. This fosters coherence between local practices and global agendas (UNESCO 2011).

Through a combination of awareness-raising activities, capacity-building programmes and digital tools for documentation and dissemination, the initiative aims to empower local communities to become active custodians of their heritage. This participatory model strengthens cultural identity and enhances resilience against socio-economic and environmental challenges. Ultimately, this approach contributes to the creation of sustainable urban ecosystems in which heritage preservation and community empowerment reinforce each other, ensuring that cultural assets become a resource for inclusive growth and long-term sustainability.

Community empowerment through the knowledge of urban landscape and forms.

The proposed action is designed to empower and activate the role of local communities by raising awareness of the cultural, historical and social significance of tangible and intangible heritage. Strengthening this knowledge base is essential for fostering a sense of identity and belonging, thereby supporting the sustainable development of urban environments. Ultimately, this aligns with the principles of SDG 11 (Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable).

To achieve this, targeted support is required for developing and applying strategies to recover and revitalise traditional residential areas and open spaces for urban landscape restoration. These techniques offer a systematic way of understanding the spatial and structural features of historic urban areas, enabling interventions that honour local identity while meeting modern requirements. Integrating heritage-sensitive design strategies with modern urban landscape contributes (e.g. healing gardens) to preserving cultural continuity, enhancing social cohesion, and promoting sustainable urban regeneration.

Community empowerment through the awareness of urban values and forms.

This action is designed to activate and strengthen the role of local communities by fostering an in-depth awareness of the cultural, historical and social value of tangible and intangible heritage. Such awareness is fundamental to sustainable urban development and aligns with key global objectives, particularly SDG 11 (Making cities and human settlements

inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable), and SDG 5 (Achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls).

The initiative emphasises the importance of community engagement as a means of heritage preservation and a driver of social inclusion and gender equity. By promoting participatory processes, this approach ensures that diverse voices, especially those of women and marginalised groups, are integrated into decision-making, thereby reinforcing democratic governance and social cohesion.

To translate these principles into practice, specialised support is needed to define and implement innovative design techniques for the regeneration of public spaces and the revitalisation of urban communities through urban landscape restoration. This involves rethinking public spaces as multifunctional environments that encourage interaction, cultural expression, and ecological resilience. Urban Landscape Restoration is a holistic strategy that combines environmental sustainability, cultural continuity, and social empowerment, not merely a physical intervention. Drawing on interdisciplinary methodologies such as urban design, landscape architecture, and community planning, it regenerates degraded areas, restores ecological balance, and creates inclusive spaces that reflect local identity.

Ultimately, this action contributes to the creation of cities that are environmentally sustainable, socially vibrant, and equitable, where heritage becomes a living resource for innovation and community well-being.

Thinking out of the box: Cultural landscapes as healing gardens

This action aims to strengthen the connection between local and international communities in the recovery and

reconstruction of historic urban sites by leveraging advanced approaches and solutions to urban open spaces design. The initiative is grounded in the principles of SDG 11 (Promoting inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and communities) and SDG 5 (Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls), particularly Target 5.b (Enhancing the use of enabling technologies, especially information and communication technologies).

Building on this vision, the initiative embraces the concept of cultural landscapes as “healing gardens”, positioning restored urban spaces as therapeutic and inclusive settings that nurture social well-being and ecological balance, as well as being functional environments. The concept of healing gardens stems from environmental psychology and landscape architecture, emphasising the restorative power of nature and culturally significant spaces in alleviating stress, promoting mental health and strengthening community bonds.

In the context of historic urban sites, cultural landscapes serve as living archives of collective memory, identity and tradition. By reimagining these landscapes as healing gardens, the project takes a multidimensional approach, integrating heritage conservation, ecological restoration and social empowerment. This involves:

- Designing green and open spaces that incorporate native vegetation and traditional spatial patterns to reinforce cultural continuity and improve environmental resilience;
- Creating inclusive environments where women, children and vulnerable groups can safely gather, interact and participate in cultural activities, thus aligning with SDG 5 and SDG 11 objectives.

Healing gardens within cultural landscapes thus become catalysts for urban regeneration, offering spaces that heal both the physical environment and the social fabric. These gardens promote biodiversity, mitigate urban heat islands

and provide psychological relief. They also serve as platforms for cultural expression and intergenerational dialogue. This holistic approach transforms restoration into an ecologically and socially inclusive recovery process where technology and tradition converge to shape sustainable futures.

By combining innovation with community engagement, this initiative aims to establish a heritage restoration model that is socially equitable, environmentally sustainable and culturally respectful. It views urban landscape recovery as a catalyst for empowerment, inclusion and resilience in urban landscapes.

Conclusions

Rebuilding Gaza is not merely a technical challenge; it is a cultural and social imperative that demands a holistic and inclusive vision. The devastation of its residential areas and historic urban fabric has erased spaces of memory and identity, threatening the continuity of traditions that have shaped the city for millennia.

Reconstruction must therefore embrace an integrated approach that combines heritage conservation, urban resilience, and sustainable development, ensuring that recovery does not default to standardized global models that obliterate local character. Instead, strategies should prioritize authenticity, participatory processes, and context-sensitive design, linking tangible and intangible heritage to foster social cohesion and cultural continuity.

International cooperation will play a crucial role, not only through financial support or top-down processes but by enabling knowledge exchange, capacity building, and innovative methodologies that empower local communities.

By embedding cultural meaning within functional

upgrades—such as housing prototypes, revitalized markets, and inclusive public spaces and green areas—reconstruction can become a catalyst for healing and resilience rather than rupture.

Gaza's recovery offers an opportunity to transform post-conflict reconstruction into a model of sustainable urban regeneration, where memory and modernity coexist. In doing so, the city can reclaim its identity as a living cultural organism and lay the foundation for a future that is equitable, resilient, and deeply rooted in its heritage.

Authorship credits

LF: Preface; GAN: All other sections.

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