

Mardin: The Role of Multicultural Heritage in Culture-led Regeneration

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Abstract: This paper explores the role of multicultural heritage in culture-led regeneration using the example of Mardin, a historic city in south-eastern Turkey. In the context of globalisation and urbanisation, Mardin has developed regeneration strategies through the integration of its rich multicultural heritage, covering the restoration of historic buildings, promotion of cultural tourism, cultivation of creative industries and community participation. The study found that Mardin's practices have successfully contributed to economic recovery, social inclusion and heritage conservation. However, the sustainability of this process is constantly threatened by the over-exploitation of tourism, which has led to permissive culture, as well as by the rise in property prices and social inequalities that have resulted from the regeneration. Therefore, this paper emphasises that culture-led regeneration needs to address the relationship between heritage conservation and urban development. This paper attempts to demonstrate that cultural heritage is not only a status symbol, but also a core driver of economic and social development, and hopes to provide lessons for the regeneration of similar multicultural areas.

Keywords: Culture-led regeneration; Multicultural heritage; Cultural tourism; Heritage conservation

DOI: 10.62639/sspjiss05.20250204

1. Introduction

In the modern world of globalization and urbanization, culture plays an important role in urban development (Zukin, 1995). Culture is now the foundation for tourism appeal and city competitiveness. Cultural heritage is also becoming a key resource in urban and regional revitalization plans. Many cities and regions use their historical and cultural assets to promote urban revitalization (Evans & Shaw, 2004), economic development (Florida, 2002) and social inclusion (Belfiore, 2002). This approach, called culture-led regeneration, is a common method to boost urban renewal and drive social and economic change (Miles & Paddison, 2005). It focuses on combining culture, heritage, and creativity with city planning policies (Widiyanah et al., 2023). Stevenson (2013) says cultural planning is an essential tool for shaping cities and helping them adjust to globalization while keeping their identities.

Culture-led regeneration works well in places with rich historical and cultural heritage. Evans and Shaw (2004) believe culture can help renew areas, especially in post-industrial or struggling regions. Using a city's cultural resources is now seen as a competitive advantage (Scott, 2000). Cultural resources help cities grow tourism, bring in investments, and create pride and belonging for local people. But Bailey et al. (2004) warn these efforts must consider the geography and culture of the place. Without this, culture-led regeneration can be shallow or even harmful, damaging the heritage it is meant to protect.

Mardin, a historic city in southeastern Turkey, is an example of culture-led regeneration. Mardin is famous for its multicultural heritage, which mixes Assyrian, Arab, Kurdish, and Ottoman influences. However, Mardin

(Manuscript NO.: JISS-25-4-62015)

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has faced problems like economic slowdown, people leaving, and modernization challenges. Since the early 2000s, Mardin has used a culture-led regeneration strategy to boost its economy and society. This approach has had a positive impact on the local economy and society, reshaping its unique position in modern society and providing an example for similar regions.

Based on the above theoretical information, this paper will take Mardin in Turkey as an example to study how the region has used its multicultural heritage to carry out culture-led regeneration in the context of its own particularities and historical background, and to explore the success of its regeneration practices and the challenges it may encounter in continuing its development.

2. Background of Mardin

Mardin is a modern city in Turkey, located in the southeast of the country, near the Syrian border on the site of an ancient fortress (Elif Keser-Kayaalp, 2018). It is located 'in the upper part of an area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what was historically known as "Al-Jazeera" or "Upper Mesopotamia" (Geyik, 2020). For thousands of years, it has been a meeting point for civilizations, cultures and trade routes. Mardin is located on the historical Silk Road and was once an important commercial city in the Ottoman Empire (Engin 2017). Mardin's decline in economic power and loss of power began in the 17th century, when the Silk Road was clearly marginalized, the Atlantic economy gradually emerged, and the European world economy also rapidly rose (Wallerstein 2011). By the 18th century, the situation deteriorated further with the restructuring of trade routes and transportation systems. Mardin was not included in the 19th century European inter-state division of labour, and thus declined further (Özcoşar 2006, 2009). Then in the 20th century, there were many major riots, and the city became closely associated with political unrest and poverty. (Çaglar & Glick 2018) After centuries of decline, Mardin's economy has almost come to a standstill. In response, the city's leaders have embarked on a culture-led regeneration since the early 2000s. Brown (2012) notes that culture has been used in many forms to reshape the image of the city and regenerate it. Mardin's leaders have sought to change Mardin's reputation by capitalising on the local culture, with the intention of making it a multi-faith, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual centre for historical and cultural tourism. (Çaglar & Glick, 2018)

This also shows that Mardin's historical significance lies not only in its former status as a commercial centre, but also as a centre of cultural exchange. Mardin's strategic location facilitated exchanges between Assyrian, Persian, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Kurdish and Ottoman cultures (Bayraktar, 2015). Historically, the city has been a place where many languages are spoken. People here speak Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, and Syriac (Bayraktar, 2015). This mix of languages has helped people share ideas and understand each other better. This multicultural environment is a rich resource for culture-led regeneration.

Mardin's architecture is an important part of its cultural heritage. The city has many civil buildings that combine different styles. Mardin's old town sits on a rocky hill overlooking the Mesopotamian plain. The honey-colored limestone buildings are a key feature. These buildings have intricate carvings that show the skill of Assyrian, Arab, and Ottoman builders. The arched windows and courtyards of traditional houses mix Assyrian and Arab design ideas. These houses are both functional and beautiful, reflecting the city's rich multicultural heritage.

The historic city centre of Mardin is of exceptional cultural landscape value. In 1979, the region covering the historical city of Mardin, which is also referred to as 'Mardin Cultural Landscape,' was given protection status with its designation as 'urban heritage site' (Geyik, 2020). The site of Mardin Cultural Landscape entered into the Tentative List for World Heritage Site on criteria (ii), (iii) and (iv) in 2000 (Geyik, 2020). This recognition highlights the importance of Mardin, which is not only a city, but also a cultural and historical treasure that

needs to be protected.

3. Mardin's Culture-led Regeneration Practices

A cultural regeneration is characterised by the use of local cultural facilities, arts and cultural activities as catalysts and their integration into regional strategic development (Evans, 2005). The culture-led regeneration plan for Mardin also makes full use of the rich local cultural resources, and its practice of culture-led regeneration also centres around the local multicultural heritage. Mardin's culture-led regeneration began with the preservation and adaptive reuse of its built heritage. Key projects included the restoration of iconic buildings such as and traditional stone houses. These efforts not only preserved the city's historic fabric, but also created opportunities for tourism and cultural activities. For example, the restored building now houses a museum, art gallery, and cultural center dedicated to showcasing Mardin's rich history and multicultural traditions. (Turkish Museums, 2000). The Mardin Museum is a key example of using multicultural heritage. It is located in a restored post office building and displays the city's Assyrian, Roman, and Ottoman history. By combining modern technology with traditional storytelling, the museum offers visitors an engaging experience while deepening their understanding of Mardin's cultural heritage (Tourturka, 2024). In addition, Mardin has also transformed historic mansions into boutique hotels (Begüm, 2022). These restored spaces blend traditional architecture with modern amenities to offer visitors an immersive experience that both contributes to the local economy and preserves the area's cultural integrity.

As Bassett (1993) argues, tourism has become an important component in revitalising local economies. Today, cultural tourism, which draws on multicultural heritage as a key resource, has also become a cornerstone of Mardin's regeneration strategy. The city has developed themed tourist routes that highlight its historic landmarks and traditional markets. Turkish leaders have also been proactive in implementing policies that benefit the Mardin region, such as attracting funding from the EU and neighbouring multinational companies to develop sustainable tourism projects (DİKA, 2014). The aim is to increase the city's competitiveness by rebranding and increasing tourism. The annual Mardin International Film Festival and the Mardin Biennial also attract artists, filmmakers and tourists from around the world. The Biennial paves the way for an exchange of ideas between local and international artists and renowned international art centres. (Biennial Foundation, 2010) and reinforces Mardin's reputation as a cultural centre. Capitalising on local strengths has become a key focus of development policy. (Buck , 2005). Local crafts also play an important role in Mardin's tourism industry. Markets and workshops specialising in copperware, handwoven textiles and filigree jewellery not only generate income for the artisans, but also provide visitors with the opportunity to make tangible connections with the city's cultural heritage. (UNESCO CCN., 2022) Projects such as 'Artisans of Mardin' provide training and support for local craftspeople, ensuring the sustainability of these traditional skills (Mardin Chamber of Commerce, 2023). These handicrafts have not only regained popularity in the domestic market, but are also exported to international markets, generating economic benefits for the region. As a result, local Assyrian embroidery, Kurdish music and multilingual traditions have been preserved and promoted (Smith, 2006).

'A diverse place is a sign of a place open to outsiders' (Florida, 2002:227). Mardin's regeneration practice not only focuses on heritage conservation and tourism, but also aims to make the creative industries an important part of its regeneration strategy. The city hosts artist-in-residence programmes, inviting creative individuals to engage with local culture and create site-specific works. These projects, often presented in the form of exhibitions and performances, enrich the city's cultural landscape while fostering intercultural dialogue (Biennial Foundation 2010). The local government also supports local artists and entrepreneurs by providing funding, training and access to international markets. This programme has not only strengthened the city's

creative economy, but also raised its global profile. Adaptive reuse of heritage spaces has played an important role in this process. Former mansions and caravanserais have been transformed into co-working spaces, design studios and boutique hotels, blending historical charm with modern functionality. These initiatives have not only attracted entrepreneurs and creative individuals, but also boosted the city's economic vibrancy. However, such conversions have also increased demand for historic buildings in the old town, tripling property prices (Çaglar & Glick 2018). This could mean that the cost of living for the local poor rises to the point where they lose their space to live.

Another feature of culture-led regeneration in Mardine is the emphasis on community participation. Cultural objectives cannot be based on the personal preferences of a single group, but must be based on an understanding of a culturally diverse community (Lozano, 1990). Local Mardine residents actively participate in heritage management and cultural projects to ensure that regeneration plans reflect their needs and aspirations. Seminars, public forums and volunteer projects provide platforms for the community to exchange views and collaborate (Ergun, 2013). Local residents are also prioritised as workers and project consultants in the building restoration projects, ensuring that they benefit from the revival. Courses in traditional crafts, languages and folklore are also offered in schools and community centres to instil a sense of pride and heritage in the younger generation. In addition, the Women's Weaving Cooperative teaches local women traditional weaving techniques and provides them with opportunities to sell their products in domestic and international markets (UNESCO CCN., 2022). This initiative not only preserves traditional handicrafts, but also supports economic empowerment. Overall, Mardin's culture-led regeneration practices are based on the region's multicultural heritage, integrating heritage conservation, tourism, the creative economy and community engagement into a coherent development strategy. This indeed demonstrates the great potential of multicultural heritage in urban regeneration.

4. Success and Challenges

How can a culture-led regeneration be considered successful? This involves a number of evaluation criteria. According to Evans and Shaw (2004), the success of a culture-led regeneration depends on three aspects: economic impact, environmental impact, and social impact. First, in terms of economic impact, this usually includes an increase in tourism revenue, an increase in employment opportunities, and the promotion of the local economy by the creative industries. Mardin's culture-led regeneration, which is based on multicultural heritage, has achieved results in all of these areas. Mardin's cultural tourism industry attracts a large number of domestic and foreign tourists. According to the statistics of the Turkish Tourism Board, the number of tourists received by Mardin exceeded 2 million in 2022, a year-on-year increase of 35%, of which 40% came from the international market (Turkey Tourism Board, 2023). Culture-led regeneration has also provided a wide range of employment opportunities, with more than 5,000 new jobs created in heritage conservation, tourism services and the handicraft industry (UNESCO CCN., 2022). Mardin's traditional handicrafts have also been transformed into a creative industry through modernisation. And through collaborations with international designers, traditional Assyrian silver jewellery has been able to enter the European and Middle Eastern markets. In 2022, Mardin silver jewellery exports reached 2.5 million US dollars (EU Cultural Heritage Report, 2020). Secondly, Culture-led regeneration in Mardin has also played a positive role in terms of environmental impact. It strikes a good balance between protecting historical heritage and meeting the needs of modern development. On the one hand, it protects the ancient buildings through modern restoration technology, and increases the service life of the buildings on the basis of maintaining the original characteristics of the buildings. On the other hand, the development of tourist flow control measures, which is to reduce the pressure on the environment, in order to avoid excessive tourism on the negative impact on the environment (Erdoğan, 2025). In terms

of social impact, as Mardin encourages its multi-ethnic to participate in heritage protection and cultural activities together, it has enhanced cultural exchanges between different ethnic groups and promoted social integration. Culture-led regeneration projects also provide financial and market support for craftspeople, allowing them to regain their economic independence (EU Cultural Heritage Report, 2020). Furthermore, as tourism and the creative industries develop, low-income families have more employment opportunities and room for development. This helps to change social inequalities, thus making society more stable. Tourists' interest in and appreciation of Mardin's cultural heritage also enhances the pride of the residents, inspiring a passion for cultural preservation and a sense of identity with the revitalization project.

Therefore, Mardin's Culture-led regeneration can be considered a success. However, this practice is not without its challenges. These challenges not only threaten the current achievements of the regeneration, but may also affect its long-term sustainability. With the rapid growth of tourism in Mardin, the risk of commercialisation of multicultural heritage has gradually emerged. The problem with commercialisation is that cultural heritage is given a commodity attribute to meet the needs of foreign tourists, while ignoring its important function as a cultural expression and identity of the local community. For example, some traditional handicrafts and cultural activities have been oversimplified in order to cater to tourist preferences, losing their original historical value and cultural depth (Gotham, 2005). Take Mardin's handicraft textiles and copperware as examples. Traditional Assyrian silver jewellery has begun to be mass-produced, affecting the uniqueness and craftsmanship value of the handicraft. This phenomenon not only may weaken the function of cultural heritage as the core of local identity, but also puts the livelihood of traditional craftsmen at risk. In addition, over-exploitation by the tourism industry may lead to the emergence of 'performative culture', which has occurred in many cultural tourism destinations (Smith, 2006). Performative culture refers to traditional culture being repackaged as performance content for tourists, rather than being part of the daily life of the community. For example, some traditional festivals in Mardin, although an important part of the beliefs and customs of local residents, have gradually become more of a marketing tool to attract tourists in recent years. This form of cultural reproduction may weaken its significance as the core of community culture, while also gradually depriving local residents of their initiative in cultural reproduction. On the other hand, the economic growth and urban regeneration brought about by cultural regeneration have also exacerbated social inequality to a certain extent. Although Mardin's economic recovery has been positive for some groups, its impact on vulnerable communities is a cause for concern. With the city's regeneration and tourism boom, housing and real estate prices have risen sharply, and the overall cost of living in the city has risen (Çaglar & Glick, 2018). This phenomenon not only affects the social stability of local communities, but can also undermine the inclusiveness and sustainability of rehabilitation projects. More seriously, social instability and unbalanced local interests may have a negative impact on the long-term planning and implementation of regeneration projects. Therefore, in order for culture-led regeneration to become a truly sustainable practice, Mardin needs to prioritize the preservation of the authenticity of its multicultural heritage and the balance of community interests in its future planning.

5. Conclusion

This case study looks at the practice of Mardin's culture-led regeneration based on its multicultural heritage. Miles (2005) says the culture and identity of a place are shaped by its history and ability to adapt over time. This paper focuses on how Mardin's culture-led regeneration connects to its multicultural heritage, using a study of the area's history and current culture. The analysis shows that Mardin's culture-led regeneration has mainly used its rich multicultural heritage. It has done this by including heritage conservation, tourism, the creative economy, and community engagement in its regeneration plans. Through these plans, Mardin has

shifted from simply protecting its multicultural heritage to using it in active ways. This includes restoring historical buildings, organizing cultural events, and promoting creative industries. These efforts have helped preserve and grow local culture while also supporting the economic, environmental, and social progress of the region.

However, there are still challenges for the future. The commercialisation of cultural heritage could harm its authenticity. Social instability could also affect the success of regeneration efforts. Leaders need to make sure development strategies are fair and long-lasting. Mardin's culture-led regeneration offers important lessons for other regions with rich cultural heritage. This is further proof of the important role of multicultural heritage in Culture-led regeneration. Not only can it protect and pass on local culture, it can also become a central driving force for the economic, environmental and social development of the region.

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