



ADAPTIVE REUSE OF HISTORIC HERITAGE BUILDINGS IN GUANGZHOU, CHINA: RETHINKING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CASE STUDIES

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Abstract

With the rapid advancement of urbanisation, the digital age's demands on historic heritage buildings have put pressure on and created challenges for Guangzhou (China)'s historic heritage buildings. This study investigates the adaptive reuse of three key Guangzhou heritage sites, Chen's Lineage Hall, Sai Kwan Mansion, and Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall, to understand their contribution to urban sustainable development and future trends. We evaluate their new uses in modern cities and their comprehensive environmental, economic, and social impacts. Findings indicate that while Guangzhou has progressed in heritage protection and reuse, adaptive adjustments are necessary to meet contemporary demands. The current reuse process, though diverse, lacks international perspectives. This paper recommends policy improvements, drawing lessons from successful international cases like the Tate Modern Museum, and addressing digital age requirements to foster sustainable development of historic heritage buildings. Through strategic planning, Guangzhou's historic heritage buildings can preserve their historical value, enhance their role in urban development and socio-cultural activities, and boost their social status. Protecting and innovating cultural values will further economically benefit, aiding Guangzhou and other cities in revitalising cultural heritage within a global context, promoting harmonious economic, social, and cultural growth.

Keywords: Adaptive reuse, Historic heritage buildings, Sustainable development

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INTRODUCTION

The global preservation and reuse of built heritage is a growing trend, guided by international conventions such as the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (Kahvecioğlu & Arslan Selçuk, 2023). These frameworks ensure the preservation of physical structures, history, and cultural narratives, exemplified by projects like St. Vincent de Paul Church in Brooklyn and London's Tate Modern. In Guangzhou, the 2015 Regulations for the Protection of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities provide legal and policy support for heritage conservation, promoting sustainable use and overall cultural protection. These regulations emphasise the importance of conservation and provide specific management measures and conservation methods to promote the sustainable use of historic heritage buildings and the overall protection of the city's cultural heritage.

Guangzhou, situated in southern China, is an ancient city with a history spanning over 2,200 years. It was also the main terminus of the ancient Silk Road and has been an important commercial centre in China since ancient times (Lin et al., 2022). These structures not only symbolise the city's cultural identity but also drive sustainable urban development by retaining historical value and boosting economic vitality and community engagement. For instance, Chen's Lineage Hall attracts numerous tourists and locals through cultural events, fostering cultural and economic growth.

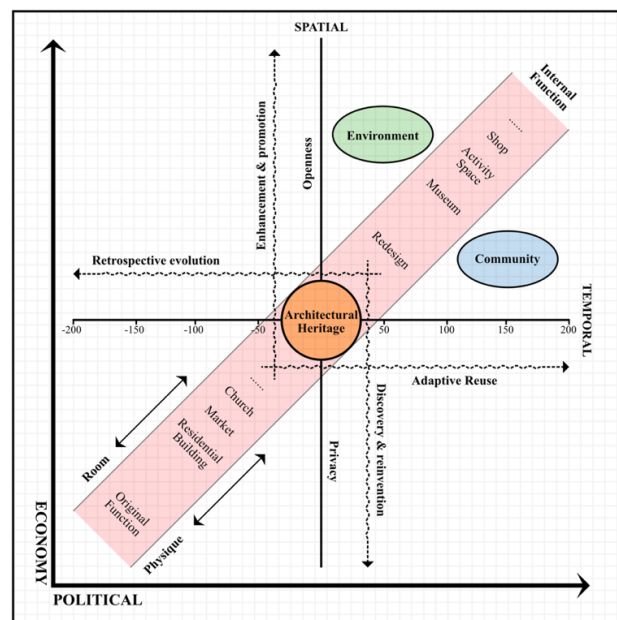


Figure 1: Conceptual model of sustainable development research in Adaptive Reuse
Source: Author's Designed and Self-made

Despite these efforts, rapid urbanisation poses challenges to Guangzhou's historic heritage buildings, particularly due to the high demand for land resources (Zhuang & Meng, 2021). The digital age further necessitates a re-evaluation of sustainable development strategies for these buildings (Ma et al., 2025). Chen's Lineage Hall, Sai Kwan Mansion, and Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall serve as crucial case studies, demonstrating the balance between preservation and commercial pressures and their contribution to sustainable urban development through policy support and public awareness. This study employs a four-dimensional framework, Political, Economic, Temporal, and Spatial, to analyse sustainability issues in the adaptive reuse of Guangzhou's historic heritage buildings (Figure 1), aiming to address challenges in Guangzhou and similar cities.

The research model provides a multidimensional analytical framework for adaptive reuse, focusing on political, economic, spatial, and temporal axes. Historic heritage buildings are central, with their evolution and transformation explored along a timeline. The model illustrates how political and economic factors influence original functions and physical structures, including changes in economic value and political status. The temporal axis tracks evolution from original state to adaptive reuse, integrating heritage into modern urban contexts. The spatial axis highlights the building's openness, environmental relationship, and community impact. Adaptive reuse involves not only physical redesign but also functional contributions to the community. This model demonstrates how historic heritage buildings can adapt to modern needs while retaining original value, merging history with modernity to support urban sustainable development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adaptive Reuse of Historic Heritage Buildings

Adaptive reuse involves transforming existing buildings to meet new societal needs while preserving their historical and cultural values (Bullen & Love, 2011). This concept addresses sustainability in architecture and urban planning, aiming to preserve cultural values by redefining building use (Nik Hashim et al., 2024). Originally developed for resource sustainability in cultural heritage preservation, it revitalises old buildings. Adaptive reuse extends a building's lifespan and enhances its social, cultural, and economic value (Foster & Kreinin, 2020). Heritage preservation emphasises retaining original materials and structures while allowing modernisation for new uses.

The concept of adaptive reuse evolved through four stages (Figure 2). The early to mid-20th century was the embryonic stage, with foundational concepts developing as industrialisation led to abandoned urban facilities in Europe. These sites became redevelopment resources, laying the groundwork for adaptive reuse theory (Bullen & Love, 2011; Tam & Hao, 2019). The term

“adaptive reuse” was coined in 1937 but gained international attention three decades later.

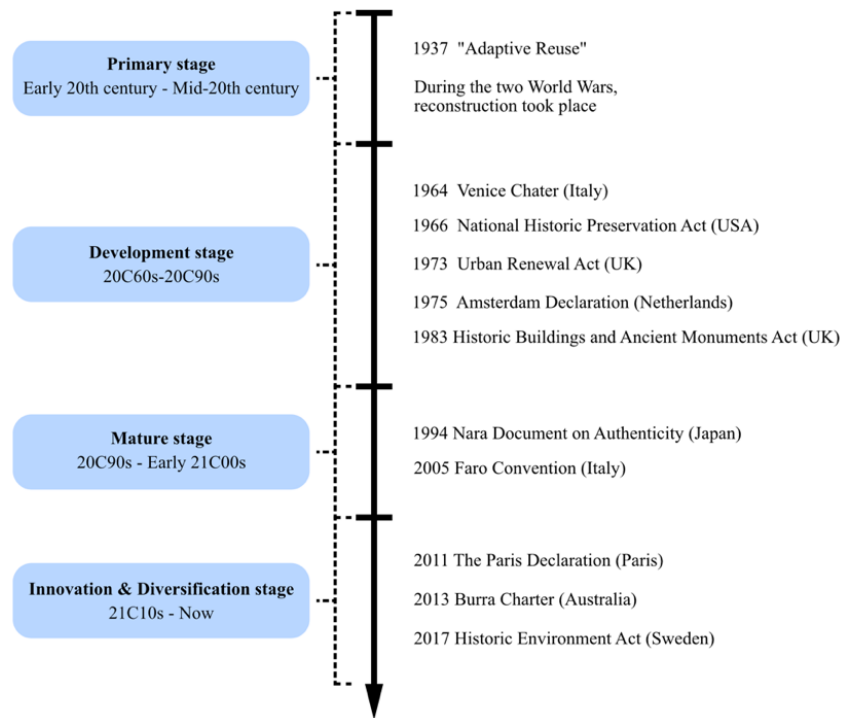


Figure 2: The development of the concept of “Adaptive Reuse”

Source: Author's Self-made

The second stage, from the 1960s to the 1990s, saw the concept’s development and popularisation (Yarza Pérez, 2022). The 1970s environmental movement highlighted sustainable development, with adaptive reuse recognised for resource conservation and waste minimisation. *The 1964 Venice Charter* standardised cultural heritage protection methods. Subsequent acts and declarations, such as *the US National Historic Preservation Act (1966)*, *the UK Urban Renewal Act (1973)*, and *the 1975 Amsterdam Declaration*, provided legal frameworks and emphasised the social and use value of historic buildings (Vardopoulos, 2023).

Between the 1990s and early 2000s, adaptive reuse matured, driven by professionalised laws and regulations. Documents like *the Nara Charter (1994)* and *Faro Declaration (2005)* underscore its importance for urban development and cultural heritage preservation, emphasising reintegration into modern urban life while maintaining historical values (Baharuddin et al., 2022). In the 21st century, technological advancements have led to innovative and diversified

adaptive reuse practices. Recent research highlights the multidimensional benefits of this approach, particularly in terms of environmental sustainability, by reducing construction waste and increasing energy efficiency (Bullen & Love, 2011; Hassan, 2023). Adaptive reuse also promotes social and economic development and contributes to environmental sustainability by creating shared cultural heritage communities, aligning with circular economy principles (Figure 2).

Urban regeneration, in the context of sustainable development, aims for a balance between economic, social, and environmental factors. Cultural heritage is increasingly recognised as a catalyst for urban regeneration, enhancing city identity and attractiveness (Ma & Roosli, 2025). Adaptive reuse of historic buildings is a key strategy, transforming underutilised structures into valuable community assets, thus promoting sustainable urban development.

Historic heritage buildings are structures of significant historical, architectural, cultural, or social value. They represent a tangible link to the past and are crucial for cultural identity and collective memory (De Gregorio et al., 2020). The scope of heritage has expanded from monumental structures to include vernacular architecture and industrial sites, reflecting diverse historical narratives.

Preservation and adaptive reuse of these buildings are essential for maintaining cultural continuity and promoting sustainable development. International charters like *the Venice Charter (1964)* and *the Burra Charter (1999)* provide principles for conservation, emphasising minimal intervention and authenticity. Adaptive reuse allows these buildings to meet contemporary needs while retaining their heritage significance, ensuring their continued relevance and contribution to urban life (Bullen & Love, 2011).

In Guangzhou, historic heritage buildings reflect its rich history as a major trading port and cultural hub. These include ancestral halls, traditional residences (like Sai Kwan Mansions), and colonial-era structures. Efforts to preserve and reuse these buildings are crucial for maintaining Guangzhou's unique urban character and promoting sustainable tourism and cultural development (Lau, 2020; H. M. Li & Lee, 2022). Challenges include balancing preservation with modernisation pressures and ensuring that reuse strategies are economically viable and socially inclusive.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research is to examine the adaptive reuse of historic heritage buildings in Guangzhou, China, emphasising their role in sustainable urban development. The study employs a qualitative methodology, conducting detailed case analyses of three significant sites: Chen's Lineage Hall, Sai Kwan Mansion, and Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall. Each case highlights specific challenges and

successful practices, providing deep contextual insights into Guangzhou's adaptive reuse approaches.

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on case studies to explore the adaptive reuse of historic heritage buildings in Guangzhou. The research framework, as introduced in the Introduction (Figure 1), guides the analysis through Political, Economic, Temporal, and Spatial dimensions. This multi-dimensional approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the sustainability issues and contributions of adaptive reuse projects.

Data collection begins with a literature review establishing a theoretical basis on sustainable heritage preservation. Subsequently, the current status, functions, and community impacts of the selected buildings are examined, identifying commonalities and differences in their adaptive reuse processes. Additionally, a comparative analysis involving an internationally recognised example (Tate Modern) provides further insights, highlighting universal principles and localised strategies within adaptive reuse practices.

THE CLASSIC CASE OF ADAPTIVE REUSE IN GUANGZHOU, CHINA

Chen's Lineage Hall

Chen's Lineage Hall in Guangzhou, constructed from 1890 to 1894, covers 15,000 square meters, with buildings occupying 8,000 square meters. Funded by the Chen clan across 72 counties in Guangdong, it initially served as an ancestral shrine and educational academy, exemplifying traditional Lingnan architecture with nine halls, six courtyards, and promenades (Figure 3). The building is in the north-south direction, with a depth of 80 meters, and is a typical Lingnan courtyard pattern with nine halls, six courtyards, ten compartments, and promenade alleys. It is not only a masterpiece of architectural art but also carries rich cultural and historical connotations.



Figure 3: Chen's Lineage Hall Plan

Source: Author's Self-made

The adaptive reuse of the hall spans five key stages. Initially repurposed from an exam hall to the Chen Industrial Academy in the late Qing to early Republican era, it continued serving educational roles through 1949 without major structural changes. From 1950 to 1980, it underwent partial restoration but suffered damage from industrial misuse, before full restoration in 1981 led to its reopening as a cultural site. Between 1980 and 2000, state support grew, earning it national relic status in 1988 and 4A tourist attraction recognition by 2008. Since 2000, the hall has embraced sustainable practices, digital innovation, and intelligent management, enhancing cultural engagement and global visibility.

Chen's Lineage Hall, now the Guangdong Folk Crafts Museum, has become a significant cultural and tourist attraction in Guangzhou through adaptive reuse, drawing substantial visitor numbers and economic revenue. Within a 0.5-km radius, it is surrounded by 63 neighbourhoods, 23 offices, 8 shopping malls, 6 hotels, 123 public facilities, and 91 educational institutions, supporting a dense residential population. In 2023, visitor numbers reached a record 1.88 million, up approximately 30% from 2019. Annual ticket revenue was 12.2 million yuan, with cultural product sales exceeding 10 million yuan. This tourism boom has stimulated local dining, accommodation, retail, and related creative industries.

Table 1: Data Sheet on the Surrounding Situation of Chen's Lineage Hall.

Population			
Size (Thousand)	119.3	Density (People / km ²)	151897
Community			
Number	63	Households	29372
Office Building			
Number	23	/	/
Commercial Facilities			
Commercial street	/	Shopping centre	8
Hotel Facilities			
Youth hostel	/	Star hotel	1
Chain hotel	3	Rest house	2
Public Facilities			
Traffic	80	Bank	23
Hospital	20	/	/
Educational Facilities			
Kindergarten	5	Primary school	2
Middle school	2	Education & Training	82

Source: Author's Calculation and Self-made

Culturally, adaptive reuse transformed Chen's Lineage Hall into a museum showcasing traditional Lingnan crafts, employing digital exhibitions to enhance educational impact. Economically, it boosted local businesses and community prosperity through increased tourism. Socially, it evolved from a purely cultural site to a multifunctional community hub, offering diverse activities and educational programs that significantly improved local cultural life and community cohesion.

Sai Kwan Mansion

Sai Kwan Mansion, a prominent Qing Dynasty residence in Guangzhou's Xiguan (now Liwan District), exemplifies traditional Lingnan residential architecture. Built over 200 years ago, it features a symmetrical layout combining halls, patios, and gardens, predominantly constructed of brick, wood, granite, and green bricks (Figure 4). Originally numbering over 800, fewer than 10 complete examples remain due to extensive urban redevelopment and modernisation during the early Republic of China period.

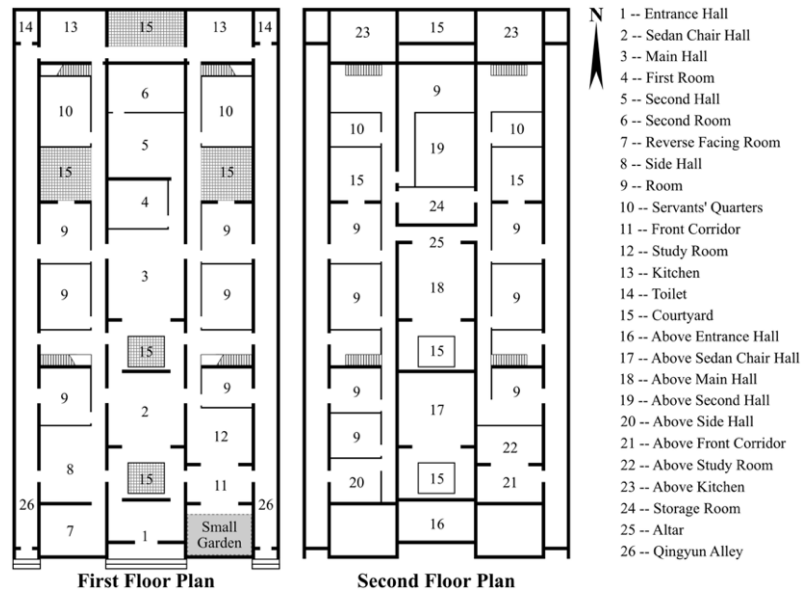


Figure 4: Plan of the main building of Sai Kwan Mansion in Guangzhou

Source: Author's Self-made

Sai Kwan Mansion's adaptive reuse unfolded in three phases. In the mid-20th century, early protection efforts amid urbanisation focused on structural repairs, preserving its architectural integrity. By the late 20th to early 21st century, comprehensive restoration and functional diversification, into museums, cultural parks, boutique hotels, and leisure zones like Enning Road, boosted cultural tourism and economic growth. In the 21st century, digital innovations such as intelligent inspection systems improved preservation and visitor experience, positioning the Mansion as a model for heritage conservation in the modern era.

Sai Kwan Mansion has been transformed into a cultural and creative park, introducing commercial businesses and cultural activities that have revitalised the community. This adaptive reuse has generated employment, enhanced the local economy, and enriched cultural life through exhibitions, lectures, and workshops. The creative industries foster a vibrant cultural atmosphere and improve residents' quality of life with better leisure and living environments.

Unlike the educational focus of Chen's Lineage Hall, Sai Kwan Mansion reflects traditional residential life and emphasises community-centred development. Within a 0.5-km radius, the area includes 30 neighborhoods, 70 public facilities, and 33 educational institutions, supporting a population of 63,700 with a density of 81,105 people/km² (Table 2). The project highlights the

role of community participation in achieving sustainable urban renewal, blending economic growth with cultural preservation in a livable, humanistic environment.

Table 2: Data Sheet on the Vicinity of Sai Kwan Mansion.

Population			
Size (Thousand)	63.7	Density (People / km ²)	81105
Community			
Number	30	Households	15578
Office Building			
Number	6	/	/
Commercial Facilities			
Commercial street	1	Shopping centre	3
Hotel Facilities			
Youth hostel	1	Star hotel	1
Chain hotel	1	Rest house	3
Public Facilities			
Traffic	44	Bank	15
Hospital	11	/	/
Educational Facilities			
Kindergarten	5	Primary school	3
Middle school	2	Education & Training	23

Source: Author's Calculation and Self-made

Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall

The Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall, originally Sun Yat-sen's presidential office, completed in 1921 and later rebuilt from 1929 to 1931, commemorates Sun Yat-sen with a distinctive blend of Chinese palace and Western architectural elements. Occupying 60,000 square meters, it serves as a key venue for cultural activities in Guangzhou (Figure 5).

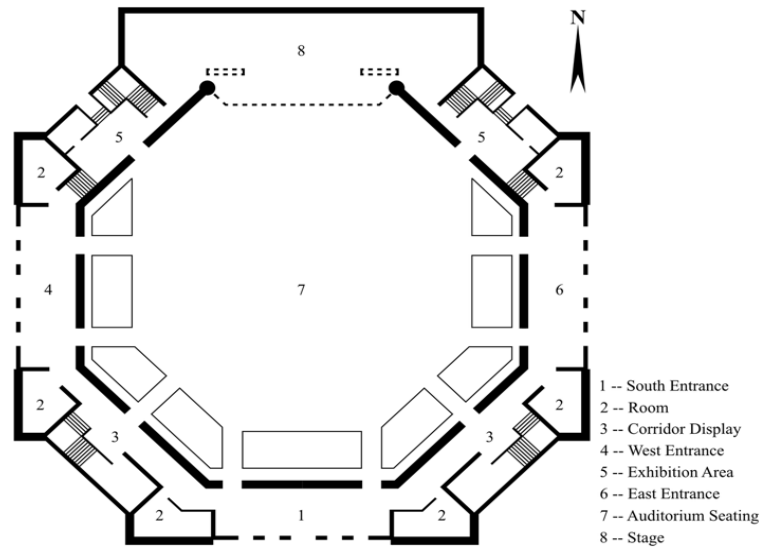


Figure 5: Plan of Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall

Source: Author's Self-made

Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall's adaptive reuse history includes three key phases. From the 1950s to 1990s, restoration efforts repaired structural damage, introduced historical displays, and modernised facilities, making it a prominent cultural and educational venue. Between 1998 and 2010, further upgrades enhanced infrastructure and exhibition spaces, expanding its role in cultural events and civic life. Since 2011, multimedia and interactive technologies have been added, enriching visitor experiences and reinforcing its status as both a tourist attraction and international cultural platform.

Compared to the other two cases, the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall distinctly maintains its original commemorative role while expanding into multifunctional public services, cultural exchanges, and tourism. It is surrounded by a resident population of 79,100 within a 0.5-km radius, with a density of 100,713 people/km² (Table 3). The area includes 20 office buildings, half of which are government-related, along with 94 public facilities such as hospitals and banks, and 12 educational institutions across all levels. Commercial facilities are limited, with only one shopping centre and three hotels. This relatively modest commercial scale reflects the Memorial Hall's solemn character and its avoidance of over-commercialisation. While it lacks strong entertainment or leisure functions, its adaptive reuse has maintained the building's cultural integrity and contributed to a stable, well-supported community environment.

Table 3: Data Sheet on the Vicinity of Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall.

Population			
Size (Thousand)	79.1	Density (People / km ²)	100713
Community			
Number	37	Households	14633
Office Building			
Number	20	/	/
Commercial Facilities			
Commercial street	/	Shopping centre	1
Hotel Facilities			
Youth hostel	/	Star hotel	2
Chain hotel	1	Rest house	/
Public Facilities			
Traffic	68	Bank	17
Hospital	9	/	/
Educational Facilities			
Kindergarten	1	Primary school	1
Middle school	2	Education & Training	8

Source: Author's Calculation and Self-made

INTERNATIONAL SUCCESSFUL CASES AND EXPERIENCES

Tate Modern

The Tate Modern, a globally renowned museum of modern and contemporary art in London, exemplifies successful adaptive reuse. Originally the Bankside Power Station, it was transformed by Herzog & de Meuron in 1995, preserving its industrial exterior while modernising the interior (Logan, 2016). Today, it functions not only as an art museum but also as a hub for education, community engagement, and cultural tourism. Through a comprehensive digital strategy, Tate Modern has embedded digital capabilities across its operations, training staff, integrating digital tools into governance, and using metrics for content, engagement, and revenue. This digital transformation enhances both visitor experience and institutional efficiency.

Its adaptive reuse aligns with cases like Chen's Lineage Hall, Sai Kwan Mansion, and the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall in Guangzhou, all of which preserve historical identity while integrating modern functions. The Tate retained key industrial features (e.g., turbine hall and chimneys), similar to how Chen's Lineage Hall and Sai Kwan Mansion preserved Lingnan architectural elements. These sites now serve modern cultural and social roles, from education to tourism. Economically, all four sites have spurred local development through

increased tourism, commerce, and services. Socially, they promote community engagement through exhibitions, educational programs, and public events, transforming once private or underutilised spaces into inclusive cultural assets.

However, the historical context and cultural environment have a profound impact on the remodelling strategies and effects. Western projects like Tate Modern often emphasise structural integrity and architectural symbolism while incorporating cutting-edge design. In contrast, Chinese projects focus more on cultural heritage transmission and community integration, e.g., Lingnan traditions at Chen's Lineage Hall or revolutionary history at the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall. In addition, Tate Modern also leads in environmental sustainability, employing energy-efficient systems and sustainable materials. Its expansions, such as the new 'Switch House' (now known as the Blavatnik Building) in 2016 has increased exhibition space and public facilities, further raising its profile in the international art world.

Therefore, both Western and Chinese cases illustrate the transformative power of adaptive reuse. While strategies differ due to historical, cultural, and economic contexts, they collectively demonstrate how heritage buildings can evolve into dynamic platforms for sustainable cultural, economic, and social development.

DISCUSSION

Jane Jacobs, in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, emphasised that reusing existing building stock can foster vibrant, diverse urban environments (Morel & Dorpalen, 2023). As sustainability becomes a core concern in architecture, incorporating new uses into existing structures has become a defining feature of contemporary design (Tam & Hao, 2019). From an urban development perspective, adaptive reuse serves as a key strategy to revitalise post-industrial areas, mitigate urban sprawl, and regenerate shrinking cities.

Globally, adaptive reuse projects like New York's High Line and Paris's Louvre demonstrate how historic preservation can simultaneously enhance a city's global image and improve residents' quality of life. Industrial heritage buildings, in particular, have become focal points in adaptive reuse research for their historical and technological significance, offering opportunities to retain cultural identity while adopting new, functional roles (De Gregorio et al., 2020).

A comparison of classic cases of adaptive reuse of historic heritage buildings in China and Western countries shows the gap between the two (Table 4). China focuses more on cultural heritage and community functions, utilising cultural connotations as a driver for development. In contrast, Western countries aim to transform historic heritage buildings into cultural or artistic centres with global impact. Tate Modern not only considers the inheritance and innovation of

history and culture but also global art exchange, sustainability, social responsibility, economic benefits, and urban development.

Table 4: Comparison of Tate Modern with Chen's Lineage Hall, Sai Kwan Mansion, and Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall.

Aspect	Tate Modern	Chen's Lineage Hall	Sai Kwan Mansion	Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall
Original Function	Bankside Power Station	Ancestral hall and Academy	Residential Buildings	Memorial and Assembly Hall
Location	London, UK	Guangzhou, China	Guangzhou, China	Guangzhou, China
Preservation Strategy	Retained industrial exterior, modernized interior	Preserved Lingnan architectural style	Preserved traditional Lingnan style	Preserved historical structure
Modern Adaptation	Modern art exhibitions, community and education centre	Cultural exhibition, tourist attraction	Cultural exhibition, community use	Modern exhibition and public service functions
Cultural Impact	Significant cultural destination, promotes modern art	Promotes Lingnan culture and attracts scholars	Showcases historical and cultural heritage	Educates about revolutionary history
Economic Impact	Boosts local economy through tourism	Increases tourism, boosts local businesses	Economic benefits through tourism	Economic benefits through cultural tourism
Community Engagement	Extensive public and educational programs	Cultural activities and heritage education	Community cultural events and education	Educational and commemorative activities
Digital Transformation	Comprehensive digital strategy, digital skills training	Limited digital transformation	Limited digital transformation	Limited digital transformation
Environmental Sustainability	Implemented energy-saving technologies	Focus on cultural and social sustainability	Focus on cultural preservation and modern use	Emphasis on historical and educational significance

Source: Author's Summarizes and Self-made

Stephen Hepworth highly praised Tate Modern for influencing London and the international art map, prompting other institutions to redefine their roles. Rem Koolhaas commented that its success lies not only in its design but also in its multiple cultural, social, and economic impacts. Tate Modern was established to support art and its value to society. Behind this is the Western emphasis on innovation, global art exchange, and international status. In China, adaptive reuse is more culturally and socially sustainable, whereas in Western countries, both environmental and economic sustainability are considered. This gives historic heritage buildings a more significant sustainability capability.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the adaptive reuse of three landmark heritage buildings in Guangzhou, China. It evaluates their economic performance, social functions, and cultural vitality after conversion. The analysis also compares these cases with London's Tate Modern.

This study shows that Chinese examples protect heritage and benefit local communities. There are many similarities between these buildings in terms of preserving historical features and introducing modern uses. Meanwhile, the adaptive reuse of historical heritage buildings in China and the West not only differs in strategies and goals but also in processing techniques and functional settings. This result provides an important lesson for future research and practice in China and similar studies: that is, historic heritage buildings need to focus not only on the realisation of cultural heritage and community functions but also on innovation and global artistic exchanges in adaptive reuse renovation. By preserving and innovating cultural values, economic benefits can be further enhanced. In addition, sustainability needs to be considered in the transformation process, not only cultural sustainability, but also architectural and economic sustainability.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research received no external funding. Data are contained within the article. Thanks for the guidance provided by Dr Ruhizal Roosli during this research.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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Received: 2nd February 2025. Accepted: 15th November 2025