

Reconceptualizing the Ethics of Architectural Ornament Reconstruction in Southwest Asia: A Case Study of Post-War Heritage in Iran and Syria

Fatemeh Alimirzaei 

PhD in Conservation and Restoration, and Expert in the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Research Institute. Tehran. Iran.

Keywords:

Conservation Ethics
Reconstruction
The Middle East
Heritage in Conflict
Authenticity

Received: January 04, 2025

Accepted: April 25, 2025

Published: June 21, 2025

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Reuse and distribution are permitted with proper citation. Published by Heritage of Southwest Asia Journal.

Abstract: This article critiques the negative stance towards reconstruction prevalent in international conservation charters, examining the ethical justification for restoring decorative elements in the historic architecture of the Middle East. Through case studies of significant projects in Iran and Syria, it argues that within this specific cultural context, reconstruction under certain conditions is not only permissible but can be an ethical imperative. The findings indicate that the conventional emphasis on "material authenticity" is insufficient for engaging with the living heritage of the Middle East. Reconstruction gains ethical legitimacy when it addresses cultural continuity, social function, and collective memory alongside physical authenticity. Consequently, the study concludes that it is essential to develop a context-specific ethical framework that recognizes reconstruction as a means to enhance cultural resilience and foster community recovery.

<https://doi.org/10.22034/hsaj.2025.549765.1007>

1. Introduction

The Middle East, a cradle of ancient civilizations, possesses a dense concentration of architectural heritage that has frequently suffered irreversible damage from armed conflict, natural disasters, and rapid urban development. The decorative ornaments of these structures from the tile work of Iranian mosques to the stone carvings of Palmyra are not merely expressions of advanced artistry and technique; they are core components of cultural and national identity. However, mainstream international conservation approaches, predominantly rooted in Western theories of "Material Authenticity," encounter significant practical challenges when applied to this unique context (Al-Houdalieh and Jamal, 2025).

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the more recent invasions by extremist groups like ISIS in Syria and Iraq have led to the destruction of iconic monuments, including the Atiq Mosque in Isfahan, the temples of Palmyra, and the market of Mosul (Ashrafi and Abuei, 2024; Bokova, 2015). These events have prompted profound ethical questions: Should these buildings remain as ruins? Is reconstruction permissible? If so, on what ethical and practical grounds should it proceed?

Traditional conservation philosophy, crystallized in documents like the Venice Charter (1964), often views reconstruction with skepticism, citing concerns over diminished authenticity, historical ambiguity, and disrespect for the original fabric (Jokilehto, 2017). Yet, the specific conditions of Middle Eastern heritage including the continuous use of religious buildings, local economic dependence on tourism, and the symbolic role of architecture in rebuilding collective identity demand a critical re-examination of these positions (Munjeri, 2004; Harake, 2025).

This article proceeds from the premise that reconstruction under specific conditions is not only permissible but can be an ethical imperative. It aims to propose a context-sensitive ethical framework for reconstructing architectural ornaments in the Middle East. Its central research

question is: How can a balance be struck between a monument's authenticity, the needs of the local community, and its symbolic values? In addressing this, the article draws upon both international doctrines and regional guidelines such as the Sharjah Charter for the Preservation of Islamic Architectural Heritage (ICCROM, 2023).

2. Theoretical Framework: Towards a Contextualized Ethics

This research employs an integrative, region-centric approach to develop an ethical framework for reconstruction. The theoretical foundation combines internationally recognized, value-based conservation principles (e.g., authenticity, integrity) with concepts more resonant with the local context, such as "Cultural Inheritance Right," the balance between material and functional authenticity (Al-Houdalieh and Jamal, 2025), and "Cultural Resilience." These concepts are particularly crucial in the living cultural-religious contexts of the Middle East, where historical buildings often remain in active use.

The Sharjah Charter (ICCROM, 2023) is utilized as a vital complement to the Venice Charter. By emphasizing the preservation of the "spirit of place" and the role of local communities, it provides a normative-practical framework for addressing region-specific challenges. Furthermore, inspired by scholars like Matravers (2019) and Harake, (2025), "reconstruction" is conceptualized not merely as a compensatory act but as an evolutionary, identity-forming process that can help mend the socio-cultural bonds severed by war and destruction.

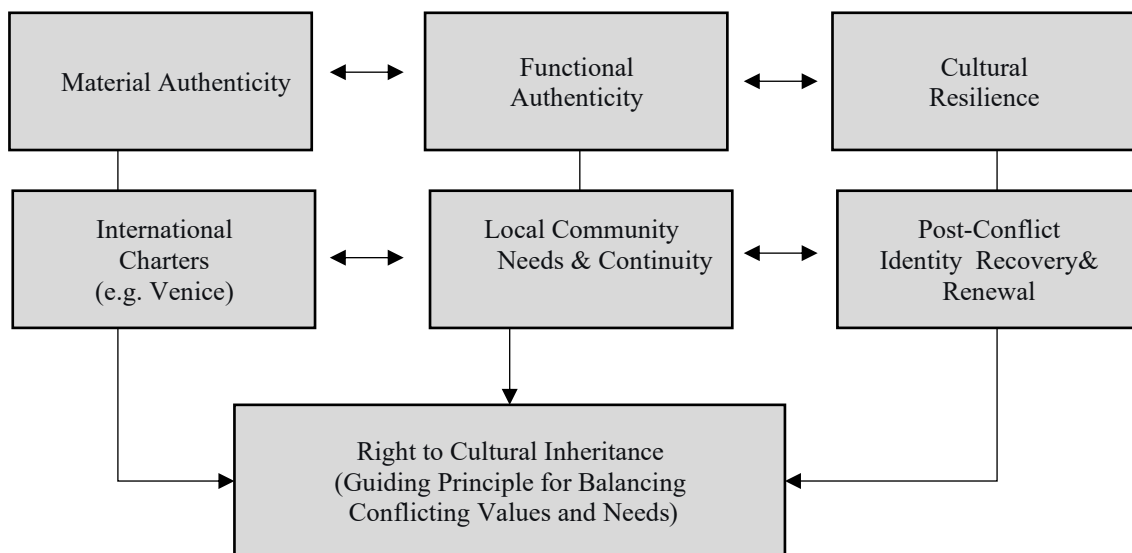


Figure 1. Research Conceptual Model.

3. Methodology

The primary methodology is a comparative-descriptive analysis of case studies, supported by qualitative content analysis of theoretical texts and conservation documents. The study adopts a multiple-case study design, focusing on significant examples from Iran (the Atiq Mosque of Isfahan, the Imam Jomeh House in Tehran) and Syria (Palmyra). The selection criteria were based on similarities in architectural ornament style (e.g., use of tiles, stucco, stone carving), the nature of the threat (intentional war-related destruction), and diversity in the reconstruction approaches employed.

Data were gathered through library research (specialist literature, conservation reports, visual documents, maps), limited field observations where accessible, and analysis of international and regional charters. Thematic analysis was used to categorize and evaluate arguments for and against reconstruction under key themes: authenticity and integrity; reconstruction ethics and stakeholder rights; cultural resilience; and technical considerations.

Table 1. Comparison of Theoretical Conservation Frameworks: International Approach versus the Middle Eastern Contextualized Approach.

	Component/Concept	Internationally-Oriented Approach (Based on the Venice Charter)	Approach
1	Core Concept of Authenticity	Material Authenticity	Integration of material authenticity with functional and spiritual authenticity
2	Attitude towards Reconstruction	Generally, with caution and as a last resort	As an essential and ethical option under specific circumstances
3	Primary Focus	The historical monument itself (Object-centered)	The historical monument within its living socio-cultural context (People-centered)
4	Role of the Local Community	Stakeholder	Right-holder and active participant
5	Component/Concept	Preserving the monument for future generations as a historical document	Preserving cultural continuity and strengthening community resilience
6	Core Concept of Authenticity	The Venice Charter (1964)	The Sharjah Charter (2019)

4. A Typology of Reconstruction and its Impact on Heritage Value

Understanding the ethical implications of reconstruction requires a clear typology of its methods. The article identifies and analyzes six common types in the Middle Eastern context:

- Complete Reconstruction: Recreates the entire building based on precise documentation. While it can restore visual identity and function, it risks "musealization" and a loss of lived authenticity if not executed with extreme care (e.g., reconstruction of the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf).
- Partial Reconstruction: Addresses only damaged or missing parts. It aims to preserve original fabric and visual harmony but can create a dissonance between old and new if poorly integrated (e.g., parts of the Aleppo Souq).
- Symbolic Reconstruction: Recreates elements symbolically for commemorative or educational purposes. It can aid psychological healing but may reduce historical accuracy (e.g., the 3D-printed Arch of Triumph in Palmyra).
- Functional Reconstruction: Adapts the building for contemporary use. It ensures economic viability but can compromise authentic historical-spatial values if the design is insensitive (e.g., conversion of caravanserais into hotels).
- Conservation-Oriented Reconstruction: Focuses on structural stabilization to prevent further decay with minimal intervention. It prioritizes material authenticity but may not address community needs for revival (e.g., post-earthquake conservation of Bam Citadel).
- Speculative Reconstruction: Rebuilds areas with little historical evidence based on conjecture. It fills visual gaps but carries the highest risk of historical distortion and disrespect.

The choice of method must be contingent on the degree of remaining authenticity, the monument's symbolic value, local community needs, and technical capabilities. In this region, preserving the "semantic continuity" of heritage within its cultural-religious context is as vital as its physical reproduction.

Table 2. Typology of Reconstruction Methods and Their Ethical-Conservation Consequences in the Middle Eastern Context.

Type of Reconstruction	Appropriate Conditions for Application	Opportunities (Ethical Justification)	Threats / Ethical Considerations
Complete Reconstruction	Complete documentation (maps, photos) is available.	Reviving the complete visual and functional identity; significant psychological healing.	Risk of "falsifying history"; overlooking later historical layers.
Partial Reconstruction	Original sections are distinguishable.	Preserving the maximum existing authenticity; completing the integrity of the monument.	Creating a duality between old and new; requiring very high skill.
Symbolic Reconstruction	The monument is of national/religious symbolic value; documentation is incomplete.	Conveying a message of resilience; lower cost and time.	Historical misguidance; reducing the monument to a "logo".
Functional Reconstruction	There is a need for the socio-economic continuity of the building.	Ensuring sustainable conservation by creating a benefit.	Damage to authentic values due to poor design.
Preservation-based Reconstruction	The monument is at imminent risk of collapse.	Rescuing the monument for future generations; minimal intervention.	May not be satisfactory for the local community.
Speculative / Hypothetical Reconstruction	No documentary evidence exists.	Filling a visual void; aiding spatial understanding.	Highest risk of historical distortion and disrespect.

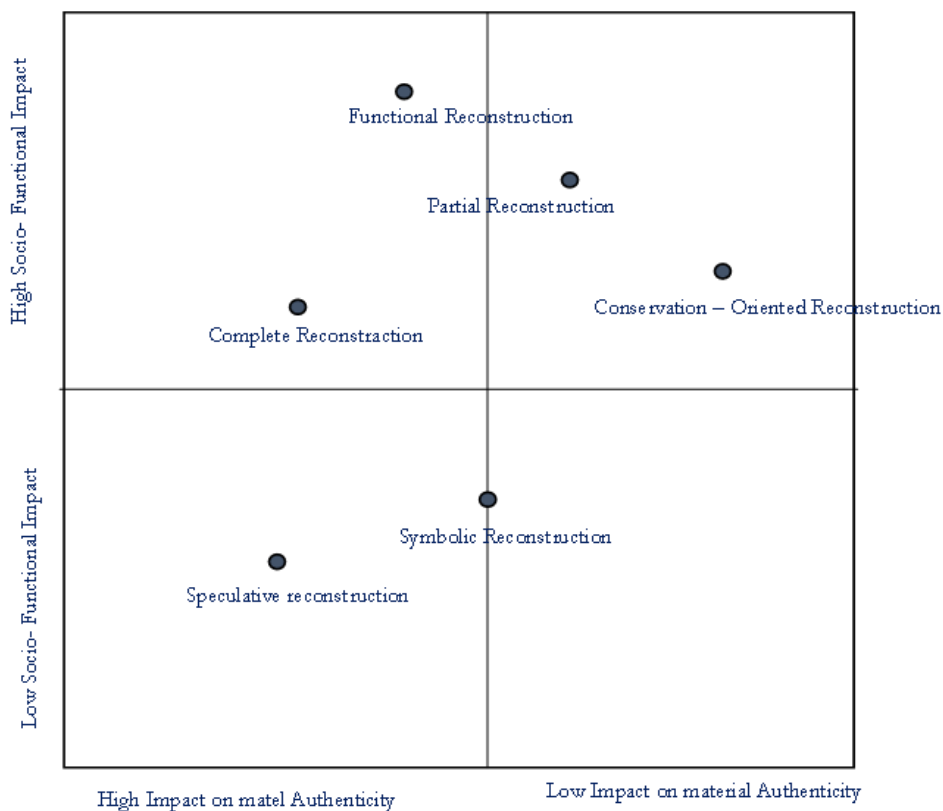


Figure 2. Risk- Impact Matrix of Methods.

5. Ethical Considerations in the Middle Eastern Context: A Critical Reappraisal

The ethical debate on reconstruction in the Middle East extends beyond technical conservation, acquiring complex socio-cultural dimensions. The article critiques three major anti-reconstruction arguments through a regional lens:

-The Value Reduction Argument: Critics contend that reconstruction diminishes value by introducing new materials. This view, however, relies on a narrow definition of value as "material authenticity." In the Middle East, value is multidimensional. Reconstruction can restore the "integrity" and "functional authenticity" of a living monument (e.g., a mosque), thereby enhancing its overall socio-cultural and spiritual value, even if material authenticity is relatively reduced.

- The Disrespect Argument: The claim that reconstruction inherently disrespects the original artifact is challenged by the Islamic concept of "I'mar" (development/act of building), which can frame rebuilding—especially of religious sites—as a respectful, even obligatory, ethical duty when conducted responsibly.

- The Misinformation Argument: The concern that reconstruction creates a false historical narrative, while valid for speculative projects, can be mitigated through modern practices like precise documentation, public transparency, and the use of digital tools to distinguish old from new.

Furthermore, two additional ethical considerations are paramount:

-The Rights of the Local Community: Reconstruction must involve the active participation of local communities, respecting their collective memory and values. Failure to do so can lead to marginalization and project failure.

- Cultural Resilience: In post-conflict zones, reconstruction can be an ethical necessity for fostering social healing and strengthening collective identity, thereby supporting a community's cultural resilience.

6. Case Study Analysis

The framework is tested against four key case studies:

- Atiq Mosque, Isfahan (Iran): A case of documentation-based reconstruction using traditional techniques after war damage. While questions about the authenticity of new tiles remain, the project is ethically justified by its success in restoring functional and spiritual continuity, visual integrity, and community resilience.

- Palmyra, Syria: A case of symbolic reconstruction using digital technology following intentional destruction by ISIS. While archaeologically contentious, it can be defended from a cultural resilience perspective as a global symbol against violence, contingent on absolute transparency about its symbolic nature.

- Aleppo Souq, Syria: A model of functional and social reconstruction. Through the participation of local communities and merchants, using local materials and techniques, it successfully revived the building's socio-economic function, ensuring sustainable conservation and urban resilience.

- Imam Jomeh House, Tehran (Iran): This case presents the challenge of balancing restoration and reconstruction. An ethical solution may involve a hybrid approach: preserving some damaged areas as historical documents while undertaking limited, well-documented reconstruction in others, carefully negotiating between authenticity and the need for preservation.

Comparative analysis reveals that the ethical justification of reconstruction hinges on factors like the degree of local community participation, the method's adaptability to cultural-religious values, transparency in documentation, and attention to functional continuity.



Figure 3. Images of the damaged sections of the Atiq Mosque following the attack by the Iraqi Ba'athist regime (Ashrafi & Abuei, 2024).

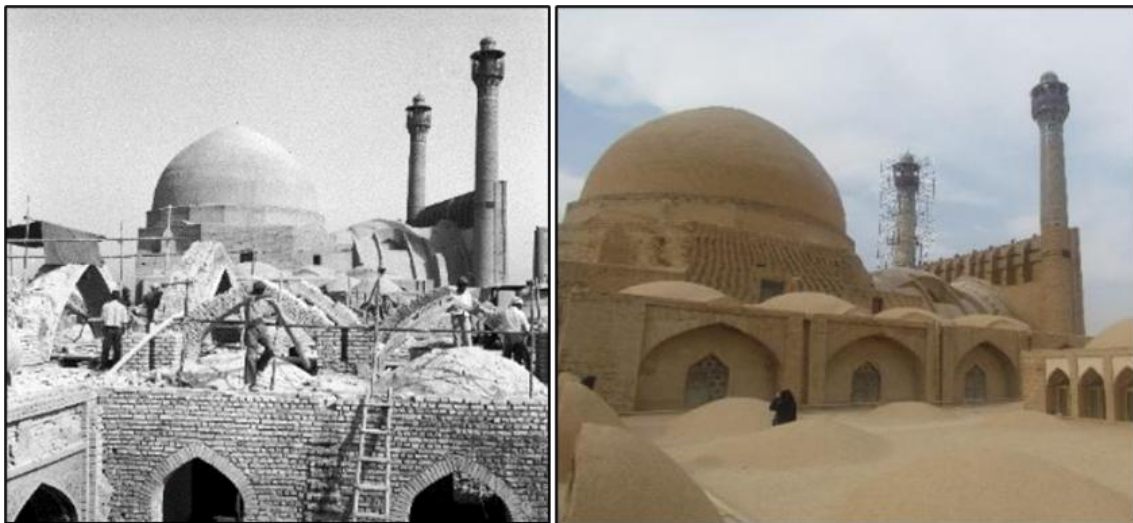


Figure 4. Images during and after the restoration of the damaged sections of the mosque (Ashrafi & Abuei, 2024).



Figure 5. The city of Palmyra, (Left) before and (Right) after the ISIS attack (Source: Shushan News and Analysis Platform).



Figure 6. Images of destruction in Aleppo, (Left) before and (Right) after the war (Source: Iranian Students' News Agency - ISNA).



Figure 7. Images of the Imam Jomeh House in Tehran, (Left) before and (Right) after destruction, and after reconstruction (Source: Website of the Fund for Development of Handicrafts and Hand-Woven Carpets and Revitalization and Utilization of Historical and Cultural Places).

Table 3. Comparison of Four Case Studies with Reference to Key Factors for Ethical Justification of Reconstruction

Case Study	Key Factor for Ethical Justification	Primary Ethical Risk	Risk Mitigation Strategy
Atiq Mosque, Isfahan	Cultural Resilience and Functional Authenticity	Loss of Material Authenticity and Lived Experience	Detailed documentation and use of traditional techniques
Palmyra	Psychological Healing and Symbol of Resistance	Historical Misinformation and Reduction of the Artifact	Complete transparency in presenting the reconstruction
Aleppo Souq	Community Participation and Local Sustainable Development	Overlooking Historical Micro-narratives	Planning centered on local stakeholders
Imam Jomeh House, Tehran	Responsibility towards Future Generations	Blurring the Line between Original and Reconstruction	A hybrid approach (preserving historical evidence + limited reconstruction)

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This article demonstrates that rigid, anti-reconstruction stances rooted in Western theoretical frameworks are inadequate and often inappropriate for the living, complex heritage landscape of the Middle East. Based on the analysis, it argues that the reconstruction of architectural ornaments in this region, under specific conditions, is not only permissible but ethically essential. This necessity is founded on the primacy of social, spiritual, and functional values for communities whose cultural heritage remains a living entity.

Key findings can be summarized as follows:

- Reconstruction should be redefined as the "revival of cultural continuity" rather than the "recreation of a museum object".
- The ethics of reconstruction are synonymous with the ethics of participation; without the active involvement of local communities as right-holders, no project can claim moral legitimacy.
- There is a critical need for a region-specific ethical framework for reconstruction in the Middle East, guided by principles such as Functional Authenticity, the Right to Cultural Inheritance, Transparency in Documentation, and Cultural Resilience.
- Responsible reconstruction necessitates a constant balance between "authenticity" and "necessity," achievable only through historical responsibility, transparent documentation, and respect for collective memory.

Ultimately, the ethics of reconstruction in the Middle East cannot be confined to pre-defined global templates. They must be cultivated through field-based engagement with specific cultural contexts, local needs, and fluid values. This research aims to be a step towards developing such a contextualized discourse (This section was drafted with the assistance of ChatGPT (personal communication, March 10, 2025).

Authors' Contribution

All stages of writing this article, from the idea and purpose to the scientific, linguistic, and terminological editing of the content, were carried out by one person (the corresponding author).

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Financial Support

This research was conducted without any financial or non-financial support.

Access to Materials and Data

The data of this research will be accessible through correspondence with the author.

References

- Al-Houdalieh, S., & Jamal, R. (2025). Material and functional authenticity in living heritage sites. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 31(2), 45-67.
- Ashrafi, A., & Abuei, R. (2024). Analysis of the bombing incident at the Jameh Mosque of Isfahan with a focus on social-physical damages (Case study: Southeastern portico, Araban Bazaar). *Journal of Modern Urban Planning Studies in the World*, 5(2), 110–120. (In Persian) <https://upjournal.ir/fa/paper.php?pid=277>
- Bokova, I. (2015). *UNESCO's response to the destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East*. UNESCO Press.
- Fallahi, A. and Jalali, T. (2013). Resilient Reconstruction from the Urban Design Point of View, After 2003 Bam Earthquake*. *Journal of Fine Arts: Architecture & Urban Planning*, 18(3), 5-16. (In Persian) <https://doi.org/10.22059/jfaup.2013.51313>
- Harake, M. (2025). *Rebuilding with Integrity: Ethical Project Management for Post-War Public Works*.
- ICCROM. (2023). *The Sharjah Charter for the preservation of Islamic architectural heritage*. ICCROM Publications.
- Jabal Ameli Abdullah. (2013). History of the Developments of the Grand Mosque of Isfahan. *Quarterly Scientific Journal of Athar*, 34 (61), 29-66. (In Persian) <https://journal.richt.ir/athar/article-1-53-fa.html>
- Jokilehto, J. (2017). *A history of architectural conservation* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Khalaf, R. W. (2021). Cultural heritage reconstruction in post-conflict settings: Ethical considerations. *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 28(3), 345-367.
- Khunti, R. (2018). Digital documentation of endangered heritage in conflict zones. *Digital Applications in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*, 11, 1-12.
- Matravers, D. (2019). The ethics of cultural heritage reconstruction. In *The Routledge companion to cultural heritage* (pp. 234-248). Routledge.
- Munjeri, D. (2004). Heritage conservation and community involvement: African perspectives. In *Linking universal and local values* (pp. 89-103). UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2021). *Rehabilitation of the ancient city of Aleppo: Technical assessment report*. UNESCO World Heritage Centre.
- Venice Charter. (1964). *International charter for the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites*. ICOMOS.

Alimirzaei, F. (2025). Reconceptualizing the Ethics of Architectural Ornament Reconstruction in Southwest Asia: A Case Study of Post-War Heritage in Iran and Syria. *Heritage of Southwest Asia*, 2(1), ID3. <https://doi.org/10.22034/hsaj.2025.549765.1007>