

# Revitalizing Cultural Heritage: Strategies for the Conservation of Merewether Tower in Karachi, Pakistan

Qurat-ul-Ain Rehman<sup>1</sup>, Rafique-ul-Hassnain Soomro<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Science & Engineering, Queensland University of Technology,  
Brisbane, Australia.

qrehman.buic@bahria.edu.pk

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## Abstract

Karachi has been home to the British occupiers in the 19th century and is therefore rich in Victorian era architecture. However, most of these buildings are in a state of dilapidation although the government is working to preserve them. In fact, there is a dire need to preserve them as soon as possible before they collapse and disappear. One such building is the Merewether tower; the significant cultural heritage structure of Karachi. This iconic structure is one of the few that are still in a good condition, but sources claim that from the inside, it is slowly getting degraded. Once the gateway to the city, it has been forgotten by the authorities although for the public, it is a significant landmark. In this context, this paper examines the existing conditions of the tower and how it can be revitalized in order to preserve its historical and cultural significance. It analyzes how the conservation of this cultural heritage structure can enhance the urban character and contribute to the communities that interact with it.

It employs international case studies of similar monuments that have been preserved before to understand the issues and the solutions. It also employed field research and interviews from the stakeholders as data gathering techniques, to reveal what could be done to preserve the structure as well as its surroundings.

The research concludes that development and revitalization of Merewether Tower is essential not only for the preservation of heritage but also for the cultural development of the locality. This research develops a methodology for revitalization and enhancement of urban cultural heritage in general and specifically this tower. The paper demonstrates that it is necessary for the city to preserve the Merewether tower for the benefit of the communities and stakeholders who rely on it as a cultural anchor, a component of urban identity and most critically, as a heritage landmark in Karachi.

**Keywords:** Culture, Historical Architecture, Heritage Conservation, Merewether Tower, Revitalization, Karachi, Pakistan.

## Introduction

As Khalid (2010) points out, heritage is part of the cultural tradition of any society. It includes many objects and places and specifically the buildings with architectural and historical values to the people whose past is encapsulated. Culturally significant, they can be defined by the ways in which people relate to them. Heritage is diverse and is subject to change. The factors that determine culture such as the religions, languages, living standards, norms, and traditions are inherently intertwined with heritage. Heritage buildings are tangible but there are also intangible heritage; In other words, culture also consists of tangible things such as buildings, statues, places of worship etc, as well as the intangible aspects such as the beliefs and values. As Hassan (1994) shows however, unfortunately, important cultural heritage sites are often ignored which leads to the destruction of the tangible part of culture.

It is undeniable that heritage sites are assets in any development process. Indeed, they are important means to urban developments. For this reason, the heritage sites need to be saved so that a region's history may be preserved. As Lari (1996) says, historical sites not only add beauty to a region but also serve as a reminder to the region's past in a way that no book can describe.

In this connection, Cheema (2007) argues that keeping in mind the importance of heritage sites, it is widely accepted that no matter the condition of heritage sites are, they should always be preserved in a way that has a positive impact to the society. Therefore, they need to be revitalized, to ensure that they last for a long period.

To revitalize means to imbue something with new life. One way to revitalize culture is to conserve historical sites that take a person back several years to witness the culture that was present at that time. Undeniably, this needs to be done to the Merewether tower in Karachi too.

Merewether tower is one of the structures of Victorian architectural history that has survived the history of Karachi. In fact, it is one of the most significant heritage sites in Karachi. However, over the years, it has been neglected and is now receiving some attention in terms of conservation.

Today, the place where the tower stands is one of the most crowded areas of the city. In fact, its location has attracted a lot of street vendors that have congested the site. Along with the street vendors, the place has become a very famous bus stop. Hence, it remains crowded for most parts of the day especially in the evenings. Unfortunately, this overcrowding has led to the neglect of the place. As it is also a major bus stop in Karachi, and one of travel routes through the major nodes of city, people travelling in buses are familiar with this term because conductors shouting out 'tower' to suggest the area the bus will be travelling to. In this way, even those who have never visited this place become familiar with it.

Interestingly, however, in the recent years, people have begun to value the heritage of the city. In this regard, the passing of the Sindh Cultural Heritage Act in 1994 paved the way for the conservation of several British-era architecture that are considered priceless in a city where heritage sites being destroyed to make room for modern buildings (Hassan, 1994). The project will convene the needs of locals, tourists and hosting place by balancing these objectives.

This act gave the government an opportunity to preserve some of the most important cultural heritage sites and later, development work started in order to restore them. However, due to the law & order situation, as well as maintenance, most of the beautiful architecture remains unnoticed. Although the government has done a great job to protect and renovate some buildings, they have failed to implement a policy whereby the structures renovated could be maintained.

It is well-known that the revitalization of heritage sites has a positive impact on the morphology of the region in which they exist. In any urban development process, cultural assets are the most important features, especially in the areas where cultural heritage is rich and has

the ability to improve tourism (Khalid, 2010). Therefore, it has been assumed that the renovation of the Merewether tower will help people to realize the importance of urban renewal.

In this context, this research examines the current condition of the Merewether tower and its impact on urban morphology. Its objectives are as follows.

1. To determine what has to be done in order to preserve it and promote a positive impact on the surrounding areas,
2. To initiate discussions with the stakeholders of the conservation of Merewether tower and the revitalization of the area.
3. To raise awareness about the critical state of the tower, importance of heritage buildings and the impact that its revitalization will have on the local environment.

### **Review of Literature**

Comprehensive research has been conducted by Fatima Bana in 1989 in which she has analysed and addressed the current state of the Merewether tower and its surroundings. She has also proposed a way to redevelop the place. In the report, the main focus has been the improvement of the streets and solving the traffic issues which is definitely the major issue of the locality (Bana, 1989).

However, in this report she did not critically examine the government's role in sustaining this heritage. Considering the fact that it is the government's responsibility to maintain such heritage, the deterioration of this site clearly shows the failure on the part of the government in addressing this issue. This site can never be redeveloped unless the government takes promising steps to ensure the sustainability of the site.

However, the proposals to redevelop the area can be considered even today since it gives a good description of the things that are missing and what needs to be done in order to restore the area.

It has been 29 years since the report by Fatima Bana was conducted in 1989. A lot of changes have taken place since then. By comparing the analysis of the maps provided in the report and the current map, it can be seen that the population in the area has grown substantially. The population of the entire city has also increased by a huge amount and thus, putting pressure on the infrastructure. However, the structure itself has degraded due to the pollution as predicted by Bana, (1989). In fact, the state of the neglect by the government can be judged by visiting the site. It is heartbreaking as the community watches a masterpiece slowly fading away. Infrastructure around Merewether tower at the time of its construction has been according to the population of that time and with the rising population of this metropolitan city. The surroundings of the Merewether Tower have not been developed with respect to the present day needs, thus putting pressure on the local infrastructure.

### **Research Methods**

This research employs following methodologies

- Review of existing literature on the topic and the Merewether site,
- Feedback from the stakeholders through a structured & semi structured questionnaire ad interviews with the local stakeholders.
- International case studies.

It is vital to conserve the built heritage for sustainable development of any area, in order to represent the cultural and historic identity (Doratli et al.,2004). Orbasli (2000) identifies three interrelated objectives of urban conservation, Physical, spatial and social conservation. Strategies to conserve the Merewether tower can be adopted from several sites all over the world. Following are some examples of historical sites renovated in order to preserve the history of the region:

Bab Al-Saraya – Lebanon  
Gateway Of India-Mumbai  
Arc de Triomphe – France

## Merewether Tower: an Introduction

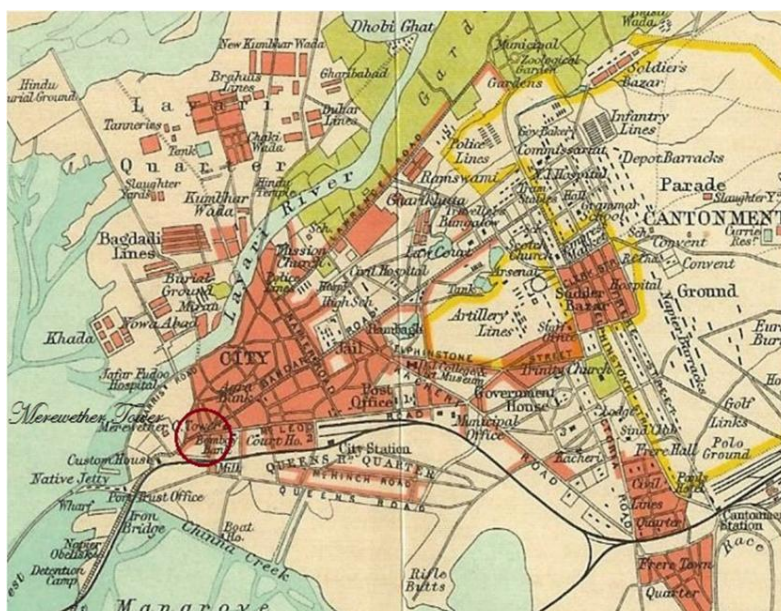


Fig. 1: The Location Plan  
Source: Google Maps

Merewether tower is one of the Victorian architectural gems that have survived the hammer in Karachi. It is located at a strategic place, waiting to greet people who arrive in to the city by sea. When the city was still young, foreigners and travellers arriving in the city would find this monument a dramatic welcome to the city (Hassan, 1993). Since Karachi was a station for soldiers, it had several sites that portray the culture of the time. Merewether Tower, erected in memory of Sir William Merewether in 1839, is a great example of Victorian culture in Karachi.

Before the Mereweather tower was constructed, its site was a point for socialization and relaxation. In fact, it was a point where social meetings were held to discuss any issue in the society. It is located at the point where two of the most important roads in the city meet, namely: I. I. Chundrigar Road and M. A. Jinnah Road (Bana, 1989), previously known as McLeod Road and Bandar Road.

Merewether tower, a fine memorial raised by public subscription to a former commissioner in Sindh, is also a memorial to Mr. J. Strachen, the municipal Engineer who designed it among many other public buildings in Karachi. It is in the middle, Pointed Style of Gothic architecture and has the form of an Eleanor cross. Standing on a 44 feet square base, it rises to 102 feet and goes up to at an elevation of 70 feet, a clock tower with four faces, each 7 feet in diameter. The large bell, which strikes the hours, weighs 3 cwt, whilst the smaller bells, for the quarters, weigh 1 cwt., each. The foundation stone was laid by Sir James Fergusson, Governor of Bombay, in 1884, and the completed structure has been opened to the public and handed over to the Municipality by Sir Evan James in 1892 This tower portrays the culture of the British and serves as evidence of the British rule in this region (Gazetteer of the Province of Sindh, Karachi District, 2003).



**Fig. 2:** Merewether tower (early 1900s) when the city was under British rule.  
Source: Adil, 2015



**Fig.3:** An aerial view of the Merewether Tower that shows increasing population and traffic  
Source: Ali, 2016.

## Similar Case Studies

### Case Study 01: Bab Al-Saraya – Lebanon

The rehabilitation of Bab Al-Saraya in Lebanon is a good case study of how a site that was in a shabby condition has been transformed into a major tourist destination. Before the rehabilitation, the site has been in a bad shape with broken structures and sanitary issues. The rehabilitation has included the renovation of the site as well as its surrounding areas in order to restore it. This has included the reuse of historical buildings as modern shops promoting the local food industry. The rehabilitation project has had a comprehensive vision that focuses on cultural tourism for the sustainable economic and social development. It has used Heritage trail as a strategy that has the ability to relate different development features within a comprehensive understanding that includes place, tourism and local people for their shared and successive areas of interaction that are; conservation and rehabilitation practices and heritage interpretation and local economic development. Overall, the rehabilitation of this site has been a major success which has resulted in the protection of an important cultural heritage (Khalid, 2010).



**Fig.4.** Bab al Saraya- Lebanon  
Source: <https://www.archnet.org/sites/20041>

### Case Study 02: Gateway of India – Mumbai

Just like the Merewether tower, the Gateway of India welcomes passengers who arrive by the sea. However, the major difference between the two is that the Gateway is well preserved and is a major tourist attraction in the country. Nature has played its part in corroding the surface of the structure and it has faced decolorization. Along with this, the number of people visiting this place has increased significantly leading to overcrowding. Therefore, in 2008, the Government of India has begun a major restoration project to preserve its beauty. It also has developed the surrounding areas to reduce the issue of over-crowding, making it a proper tourist destination and pedestrian friendly area (Kathpalia & Bharucha, n.d.). Although not as old as the Merewether tower, the Gateway has been continuously maintained by the government that has ensured that this site maintains its status as a major tourist attraction of India. Keeping in mind the overcrowding of the areas around the Merewether tower, these areas need to be developed just like the way it has been done with the Gateway of India in order to provide easy access to the site.



**Fig.5.** Gateway of India-Mumbai  
Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gateway\\_of\\_India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gateway_of_India)

### Case Study 03: Arc de Triomphe – France

The Arc de Triomphe has been built in 1836 and is a major tourist attraction. Despite its age, it is very well maintained. It does not look old as of its age, though it has been constructed 36 years before completion of the Merewether tower. This structure is surrounded by greenery which improves the urban environment and provides a soothing sight compared to the hustle and bustle of the city. Such a magnificent structure requires constant maintenance.

The interior has been renovated from 2006 to 2008, giving viewers a spectacular view of its details (Arc de Triomphe, 2009). In contrast to the Merewether tower that has been continuously ignored, this building is evidence of how a structure can survive for decades if continuous care is taken to maintain it. If the government changes its stance towards the Merewether tower and maintains it continuously just like the Arc de Triomphe, it can definitely last for years to come. Along with this, revitalizing its interior just like that of the Arc de Triomphe can give visitors a great view of a historical masterpiece.

As Merewether Tower is a heritage listed structure, its inventory is mentioned below which has been prepared by the Heritage Cell, DAP NED UET in February 2006. This photographic documentation of the existing condition of the Merewether tower shows that the structure is still in good condition and if proper care is provided, it will become an important part of the sustainable development of the city.



**Fig.6:** Arc de Triomphe, France

Source:

### **Interviews with Stakeholders**

The stakeholders include 50 hawkers, 20 bus drivers, 50 workers/employees of the adjacent government and private offices, and 50 students. Interviews were conducted in order to unearth the views of all the stakeholders. A summary of the interviews are as follows:

#### **Hawkers**

When asked about their reaction if they were to relocate, every hawker claimed that they would never move out of this region since they earned their living by selling various things on the streets around the Merewether tower. The adjoining area of Kharadar is highly populated and is a good source of income for these people. However, they were interested for a properly designed and pedestrian friendly market area.

#### **Bus Drivers**

The reactions of bus drivers were the same as the hawkers. Merewether stands at the junction of two important roads and the surrounding area of the tower serves as a bus stop. Therefore, the bus drivers argued that there is no way they can be relocated since important roads lead to this place. Although these buses are one of the main causes of traffic jams in the area, they were reluctant to accept this fact.

Another perception found common among the hawkers and the bus drivers was that both claimed that they would be pleased if the tower is developed as it will increase their business and would be a beautiful addition to the city.

## Workers / Employees

Workers and employees were praying that the government redevelops the area as it will not only beautify the area but will hopefully get rid of the traffic jams caused by the bus drivers and hawkers who setup their stalls on the road; thus, narrowing it. They were also aware of the historic value of the building and were interested to know more about it. They thought that the beauty of the locality would also improve, eventually attracting visitors and increasing the business of the local community.

## Students

Fifty students were interviewed between the age of 12-20 years and they were perhaps the most ambitious of all the people interviewed. They all wished the tower and adjoining areas to be developed and have more green space, where they can sit, study and relax. Noting that the students were ambitious, they were also asked their views about how this place could be redeveloped. Needless to say, they all came up with interesting ideas.

The important points of the interviews were recorded in order to determine the proportion of people giving specific opinions. The factors that should be considered while deciding to redevelop the region were as follows:



Fig. 7: Factors identified by Stakeholders

The results of the interviews showed that the locals value this Victorian era building as its own cultural asset, as the history of the city is associated with it. They acknowledge the fact that the city of Karachi has been developed by the British and Parsis and it has always been multicultural and diverse. Although most of the major stakeholders were reluctant to do an individual effort and did not agree to relocate, almost all the respondents valued this building and wished that it should be renovated so that the beauty of the locality would be enhanced and this masterpiece of British architecture would survive the test of time.

## Physical Field Survey

### Existing Condition of the Merewether Tower and the Surroundings

The Merewether tower faces the same neglect as other heritage buildings in the country although it is the government's duty to preserve it. From far, the building looks like it is in good shape, but a close inspection reveals that it needs a complete restoration. In fact, the tower is in a state of neglect although the Karachi Stock Exchange did carry out some work in order to beautify the small portion of land where the tower stands. Since the stairs leading to the top is broken, there is no way to keep the clocks in a working condition and the tower is gradually deteriorating.

The lack of effort from the part of the government and the increase in pollution around the site is also destroying the tower. Added to these are the activities of the people around the tower which damage its aesthetics. Activities such as pasting posters, wall chalking, broken

pedestrians, electric and telephone line wires, straying of drug addicts and the illegal encroachments of the hawkers, all contribute to its deterioration. At the same time, the tower is constantly facing the elements of pollution from the vehicles evident in the images recorded.

**Physical Field Survey**

**SEQ 00077**



**Merewether Tower**

**1884-92**

*SR-17, I. I. Chundrigar (McLeod) Road/M. A. Jinnah (Bunder) Road*

Other Refereces  
 Enlistment No: **1995 -077**  
 H.F. Register Ref. No: **KAR/SEQ/001 G**

Parameters for Merit:

- (10pts) external architectural features, including decorations, etc.
- (10pts) representative of typical or unique plan typology.
- (10pts) evidence of unique craftsmanship.
- (10pts) record of variation in construction materials and building technology.
- (10pts) representative of social, cultural and economic values.
- (10pts) contributes to the group value of an area or cluster.
- (20pts) landmark value.
- (20pts) rare survivor & expression of a cultural tradition.
- (20pts) unique building type.
- (20pts) independent compound with public open spaces, visible from main road.

**Public Monument**

#Name?

Present Usage

Ground Floor	—	—
First Floor	—	—
Second Floor	—	—
Third Floor	—	—
Fourth Floor	—	—

Ownership Occupancy

**Government (Provincial) Owned**

Present Status Threat Level Alterations

**Well Maintained Good State of Condition —**

Prominent Architectural Features

**Columns, Arches, Arched Decorative Window, Round/Rosette, Pilasters, Clock Tower, Spire.**



Location Map



Photos of Details



SERAI QUARTER  
FEBRUARY 2005

**Fig. 8: Records of the Physical Field Survey**

### Existing Condition of the Merewether Tower

Source: Author's Photography



Fig. 9: Electrical Lines around the tower.



Fig. 10: Encroachments of hawkers & drug addicts around the tower site



Fig. 11: Environmental Degradation through heavy smoke.



Fig. 12: Lack of Maintenance & Care.



Fig. 13: Kiosks, Hawkers residing onsite.

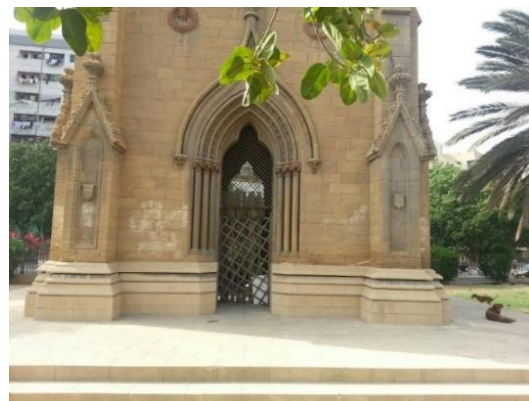
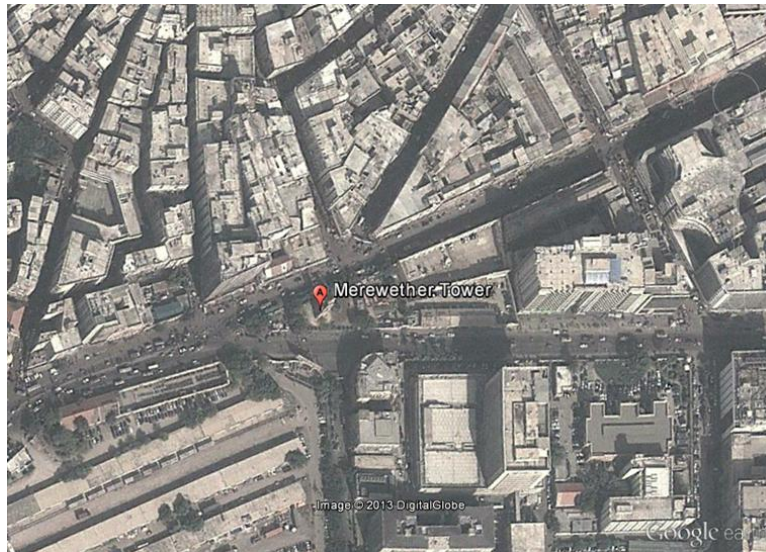


Fig. 14: Broken door, wall chalking & posters.

A close inspection of the area reveals that there are lot of streets leading towards the site. However, since those streets have not been designed to accommodate today's traffic in Karachi, the absence of a proper traffic management systems keep this place always congested. It is evident in the map below. Adjacent to this tower is the area of Kharadar which houses several thousand houses and shops, thus adding to the complexity to the issue.



**Fig. 15:** Surrounding of the Merewether Tower

Source: Author

### Expert Advice

Expert Advice was sought from Mr. Kamran Ahmed, an employee of the Pakistan Heritage Foundation. He suggested that the Merewether tower has to be renovated as soon as possible because it is deteriorating quickly due to neglect and pollution. According to him, conservation of this site will not require much effort, but the redevelopment of the adjacent area will be a monumental task involving several stakeholders. He pointed out that despite the area around the tower being fenced, it is used extensively by drug addicts who sleep there at night. The solution can be the guarding of the place throughout the day. Mr. Kamran informed that the government has already conducted surveys of the site but the proposal to redevelop the site remains on shelf.

Another discussion was done with Arif Hassan, an architect, socialist, academic and researcher. He says that Merewether tower and many other British era buildings have been destroyed in Saddar and the old city, but they are significant cultural heritage of Karachi. He also says that the heritage buildings are no longer used for the purposes for which they were initially built. He suggested that revitalizing the building can be done only through the functions which can revitalize the environment and adaptive reuse or bringing back the original spirit of the building.

### Discussion

How the historic sites discussed in the case studies have been developed and preserved shows that the same can be applied to the Merewether Tower. It is thus argued that it can be made as an interactive public space and a major tourist attraction in the city. One thing common in all the three sites mentioned above is that they are pedestrian friendly. They thus reduce the impact of pollution. In order for this to be done, an extensive survey has to be conducted in order to improve the surroundings and revamp the locality. The main focus should be to first restore the structure and then continuously maintain it in order to preserve its beauty.

### Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that Merewether Tower site requires a huge redevelopment. This redevelopment project should encompass the renovation of the structure, relocation of the hawkers, maintenance of the modern bus stops near the site, reconstruction of the streets leading to the site & provision of basic amenities to the residents of the region. Furthermore, for this purpose, following recommendations are also made.

## **Recommendations for the Revitalization of the Merewether Tower Renovation of the Structure**

Since the main structure is intact, it will not need a lot of renovation, however, the inside of the tower and the clocks need to be completely renovated. This work can be achieved by using materials that are easily available. Cleaning and preservation of stones is required as the façade stones have turned grey due to pollution and has chalking on two of its sides. The entrance door is also broken and need repair. The expertise of a conservationist is required to for the building to regain its original form.

## **Relocation of Street Hawkers/ Redesigning the Street Market**

It is noted that the street hawkers are reluctant to move away from the site. The provision of a proper designed temporary market around or nearby this heritage site will most probably be the ideal and acceptable proposal for the hawkers. Hence, the stress on the heritage site will reduce, if an alternative market is made available. It will instead provide positive impacts by making it more viable for the public.

## **Development of a Planned Bus Stop**

Considering the fact that the tower is located at an important junction, it is not possible to relocate the current bus stop. Therefore, it is suggested that a planned bus stop be built near the tower in order to facilitate the passengers. A transport management system should ensure that the streets do not get congested.

## **Reconstruction of the Streets**

In order to facilitate the people of the locality to visit this magnificent place, the streets leading up to the Merewether tower require upgrading to give the place an aesthetically pleasing appearance. This will also increase the businesses in the area and benefit the urban morphology.

## **Provision of Basic Amenities**

The provision of toilets and drinking water is essential to attract the tourists and increase the number of visitors to the site. These amenities were once present but are now dysfunctional.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the significance of heritage sites expands beyond the value of their monuments and artifacts. They have to be seen within a broad perception that relates the tangible and non- tangible aspects of heritage. All of these aspects of heritage work, as creating community assets, can be utilized to the benefit of the community. Revitalizing cultural heritage is a domain through which the community can connect with its cultural heritage assets.

The basis of urban morphology depends on the quality of life in the region and includes several factors such as housing, infrastructure, beauty, environment, and recreation. The main goal of developing Merewether Tower is to improve the beauty of the locality and give the residents a recreation space. The rejuvenation proposal includes a proper designed street market, a planned bus station and other supporting amenities and services that may be offered to divert the crowd from the site instead of removing them. This alone shows that the redevelopment of the Merewether tower will bring about a major improvement in the morphology of the region. The advantages of such renovations are limitless. In the short-run, the place will notice a major change in the attitude and living standards of the people. However, in the long-run, it will provide further benefit to the region as it develops activities such as tourism and increase business opportunities for the community. Therefore, the redevelopment of heritage sites is essential for the preservation of history and improving the morphology of the surroundings.

Indeed, conservation of the Merewether tower is not an option but a must for the city. Ignoring it will result in the whitewash of an important part of the city's colonial history. This

project thus requires a lot of efforts but the advantages are vast. Revitalizing apart from being important to the culture of the city, the preservation of this tower will lead to an improvement of the lifestyles of the community and improve the ecology by providing a function of the site as a space of social gatherings. Considering the fact that the city is growing in all the directions, redevelopment of this site will lead to the construction of a peaceful environment compared to what exists presently and lead towards a long-term harmony.

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### Ethical Conduct

This research was conducted in accordance with the standard ethical practices. Although it involved constant interactions with people, they were carried out with their consent. They were fully aware that they could withdraw from the research any moment and were not coerced to respond. No person has been identified in the written text.

### Availability of Data:

The data supporting this study are derived from various archival sources, and literature. They are available from the author upon reasonable request.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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