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Article

From Heritage to Experience: Architectural Mediation and Meaning-Making in Bahrain’s Historic Sites

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Abstract

Aim: This study advances visitor research by examining how visitors interact with and derive meaning from Bahrain's Historic Site Interpretation Centers (HSICs). **Methodology:** Using a mixed-methods ethnographic approach, we collected data from four sites (Qal’at Al Bahrain, Shaikh Salman Fort, Bu Maher Fort, Al Khamis Mosque) through 113 surveys and 22 interviews. **Key results:** The findings confirm that architectural context and curatorial techniques have a significant influence on visitors’ meaning-making. While many valued the dual interpretation formats, issues such as decontextualization and misalignment with local identity sometimes disrupted the intended narratives. HSICs are identified as essential centers for information and cultural identity, fostering emotional connections among visitors. **Conclusion and implications:** This study confirms the connection between architectural design, display strategies, and user expectations, providing insights into how these factors shape visitors’ experiences. It provides implications for curatorial design and inclusive engagement strategies in similar settings. The VE-HSIC model introduced here serves as a framework to enhance visitor engagement, deepen understanding of visitor interactions, and explore how museum practices influence the creation of meaning.

Keywords: visitor experience; meaning-making; heritage interpretation; museum design; Bahrain; architectural design; heritage centers

1. Introduction

Historic Site Interpretation Centres (HSICs) play a vital role in conveying cultural heritage and fostering visitor engagement. These centres are designed to enhance understanding by contextualizing historical narratives through various exhibits, architectural elements, and interpretive strategies. As heritage interpretation evolves from object-centred displays to participatory experiences, scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of these centres in facilitating deeper visitor engagement [1–3]. However, empirical research on how HSIC design influences visitor meaning making in the Middle East is limited. This study addresses that gap by exploring the complex meaning-making processes at sites rich in cultural, spatial, and historical context. In Bahrain, a country steeped in archaeological and cultural heritage, the emergence of HSICs—often situated near UNESCO-listed sites—reflects institutional efforts to present history in accessible and engaging ways. Functioning across dual interpretive modalities—“in situ” (at the site) and “in context” (within curated settings)—these centres offer unique opportunities for visitor experiences. Yet, the impact of this duality on visitor engagement is underexplored. Issues such as decontextualization and design misalignment can hinder intended educational outcomes [4–6].

Our study addresses these gaps by investigating how visitors perceive and respond to HSICs in Bahrain. Using a mixed-method ethnographic approach, focusing on four sites—Qal’at Al Bahrain, Shaikh Salman bin Ahmed Al Fateh Fort, Bu Maher Fort, and Al Khamis Mosque—the research examines the connection between architectural setting, interpretive methods, and visitors’ cognitive and emotional engagement. In summary, this study aims to determine the role of HSICs in visitor

meaning-making by exploring the relationship between architectural context, interpretive strategies, and visitor engagement at these four sites in Bahrain.

By addressing this question, this article contributes to the field of visitor studies, particularly regarding interpretation practices in non-Western or underrepresented heritage contexts. Additionally, it provides practical insights for enhancing the design and communicative functions of interpretation centres in similar socio-cultural environments. The following sections present the theoretical background, methodology, results (including the proposed VE-HSIC model), and implications of our findings for design and heritage interpretation.

Theoretical Background

1.1.1. Museum Visitor Studies and Meaning Making

Several essential studies and models analyse how visitors experience cultural institutions. Key among them is Falk and Dierking's Museum Experience [1] and Packer and Ballantyne's Visitor Experience Framework [7]. Falk and Dierking identified three core contexts for the museum experience: the personal context, which encompasses prior knowledge and experiences; the social context, referring to the visitors; and the physical context of the museum environment. However, these models do not specifically address the dual in situ versus in context nature of HSICs. Together, they form the Interactive Experience Model. In contrast, Packer and Ballantyne highlighted factors like the "opportunity for an experience," the "immediate subjective experience," and "the experience remembered." Each is influenced by visitor perceptions—before the visit, including motivations and background knowledge, and during the visit, through interpretations, narratives, and transformations. While these models conceptualize visitor experience, they do not link this experience to the actions taken by the museum, gallery, or heritage site where it occurs. Neither model explains how the "in situ" and "in context" settings impact and shape the visitor experience, providing limited guidance for site museums or Historic Site Interpretation Centres (HSICs) to integrate into their work. Although these models clarify what constitutes visitor experience, they do not specify how institutions can influence or harness these principles in their design. In contrast, the concepts and practices of Visitor Engagement at Historic Site Interpretation Centres (VE-HSIC) and Heritage Interpretation, conceptualized by Tilden [8], address these gaps by effectively connecting contextual features with a meaningful visitor experience.

User Experience (UX) in museums, especially at historic sites and HSICs, primarily centres on the emotional and holistic experiences visitors encounter when interacting with exhibits and interpretive materials, conceptualized by Don Norman [9]. User-Centred Design (UCD) focuses on placing the visitor and their needs at the heart of the design process, resulting in exhibits that are engaging, informative, and meaningful in real-world contexts. While UCD emphasizes understanding the visitor, UX focuses on the specific interactions visitors have with museum artifacts and displays.

There is an ongoing debate about the definition of UX [10], but it generally focuses on designing experiences that improve visitor well-being and emotional responses rather than just usability. As Hassenzahl [11] noted, UX is defined as "a momentary, primarily evaluative feeling (good–bad) while interacting with a product or service." This includes both functional elements—such as clarity of information and accessibility—and non-task-related aspects, like aesthetic appeal and the emotional connections that develop from the experience.

The distinct nature of UX in museums is shaped by each visitor's prior experiences and expectations [10]. Key factors influencing UX include the context of the visit, the visitor's mood and motivations, and their perceptions of the museum and its exhibits. Marc Hassenzahl's [11,12] stated that the process-oriented model is among the most widely adopted in UX. It illustrates how various exhibit features combine to create an overall visitor experience, further shaped by the visitor's situation during the visit (Figure 1). Pragmatic qualities refer to functions like label clarity and display

interactivity, whereas hedonic qualities encompass aesthetics, emotional impact, and the personal bonds visitors form with the content.

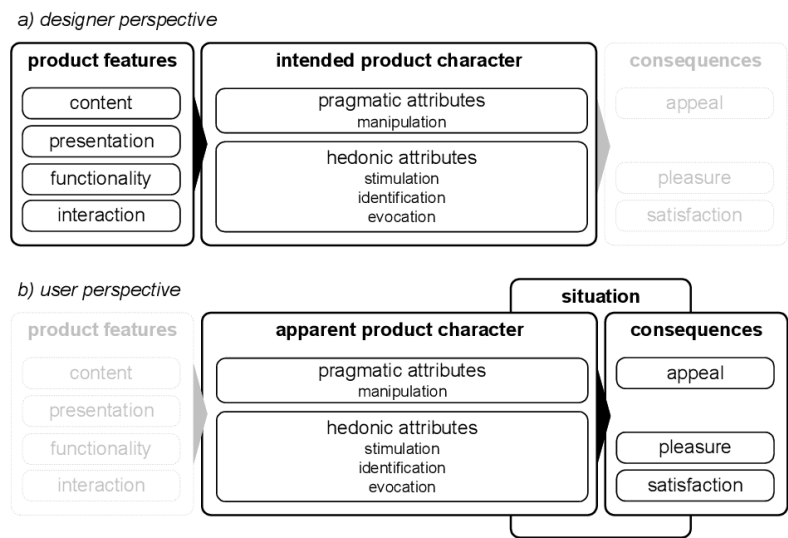


Figure 1. The UX model, adapted from Hassenzahl [12]. It consists of two main perspectives: the Design Perspective and the User Perspective. This division emphasizes a crucial aspect of UX: there is no assurance that users will engage with a product as designers intend. Consequently, the product's character can only be seen as "intended." The user's circumstances always influence how the product is experienced, leading to real outcomes.

Hassenzahl suggested that pragmatic qualities are driven by "do-goals" (such as grasping the historical importance of an artifact). In contrast, hedonic attributes are influenced by "be-goals" (like feeling linked to history or culture) [3,13]. The satisfaction of these be-goals and the pleasurable aspects of the experience significantly enhance a positive UX in museums, increasing visitors' engagement and their connection to the cultural heritage presented.

For museum designers, pragmatic and hedonic qualities converge to create the intended character of the exhibit. For visitors, these qualities manifest as the exhibit's apparent character. This distinction is vital in UX: there is no assurance that visitors will perceive and appreciate the exhibit as designers intended. The evident character reflects the visitor's interpretation of the designer's intentions. It is influenced by their current situation, including social, cultural, and contextual contexts, as well as their motivations for engaging with the exhibit. This interpretation occurs with every interaction a visitor has with the museum. Therefore, there is no guarantee that a visitor's experience outcomes align with the designer's original intentions. Designers can only strive to foster qualities deemed essential for "good UX," such as feelings of pleasure, positive emotions, and an overall enjoyable experience for the visitor.

Furthermore, John H. Falk [14] argued that visitors to museums are motivated by various factors affecting their experiences and expectations. Explorers are driven by curiosity and a genuine interest in the content, hoping to discover something captivating and educational. Facilitators focus on enabling others' learning within their social groups. Hobbyists or enthusiasts often connect with the content related to their passions, aiming for specific goals. Experience seekers view the museum as a destination to say they've experienced it. Rechargers seek contemplative or restorative experiences, using the museum as a refuge. These motivations influence visitor interactions and experiences.

We particularly concentrate on historic site interpretation centres, exhibits, and interpretation strategies, rather than on the broader institutional framework and its activities. The UX model, adapted from Hassenzahl [12], looks at typical museum visitors who mainly browse exhibits without engaging in specific programs or activities. This means their interactions are often indirect, happening through displays instead of experiencing exhibits in both 'in situ' and 'in situ' settings at

HSICs. These visitors are a diverse and complex group, but they constitute the core audience of museums, so understanding them is crucial.

This relates to the concept of heritage interpretation, first introduced by Tilden [8] and developed further in recent years. Heritage interpretation is increasingly regarded as a participatory process of meaning-making between heritage sites and their audiences. Rather than merely conveying factual information, it is understood as a communication approach rooted in visitors' cognitive, emotional, and social experiences [7,15]. In this collaborative method, visitors are seen as active contributors to meaning, drawing on their memories, expectations, and cultural backgrounds. Silverman [16] describes museum visitors as meaning-makers instead of passive recipients, supporting this study's constructivist perspective on HSICs. This aligns with Piaget's educational theory, which highlights that individuals understand the world through their personal experiences [7,17].

Additionally, this supports the Contextual Model of Learning [1], which emphasizes that meaning is created through the interplay of the physical environment, visitor identity, and previous experiences. In heritage settings, interpretation involves hermeneutic processes where visitors engage with narratives via spatial, symbolic, and aesthetic cues that shape their understanding [18,19]. This is particularly significant in contested or complex historical contexts, such as in postcolonial Gulf societies, where interpretation is closely tied to issues of identity, memory, and political importance [20].

Our approach to 'meaning-making' is informed by hermeneutic theory (e.g., Ricoeur's concept of understanding through belonging) and semiotics (Eco's theory of signs) as they apply to museum contexts.

1.1.2. Historic Site Interpretation Centers in the Gulf Region

Historical site interpretation centres, particularly those close to archaeological ruins, serve as hybrid spaces combining exhibition elements with spatial storytelling. [21,22]. These centres utilize both 'in situ' (on-site, immersive) and 'in context' (off-site, curated) approaches to interpretation, as described by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [5]. While 'in situ' displays allow visitors to engage directly with heritage, 'in context' exhibits present curated narratives that reinterpret original settings for broader comprehension.

The design elements of interpretation centres—such as layout, materiality, and technology significantly influence visitor engagement [6,23,24]. However, challenges like decontextualization and architectural incongruity can impede visitors' ability to derive meaningful connections [4,25]. These issues are particularly relevant in regions where modern architectural styles clash with local historical identities [26–28].

Research on museum visitor experiences in the Gulf, especially at site museums adjacent to archaeological ruins, is emerging but remains limited [4,29,30]. While cultural tourism is expanding rapidly in Gulf states like Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, empirical studies on how diverse visitor groups—nationals, expatriates, and tourists—interact with interpretation centres are still scarce [31,32]. Understanding these interactions is crucial, as visitor engagement is often shaped by collective memory, prior knowledge, and socio-cultural identity, influencing perceptions of authenticity and meaning [6,33–35]. Existing studies also highlight gaps in participatory design, contextual storytelling, and multilingual accessibility, which affect the experiential dimensions of interpretation [3,6,13]. This misalignment with local contexts underscores the need for research that emphasizes visitor segmentation and affective engagement, prioritizing the voices and experiences of visitors.

While the literature highlights the interpretive role of historic site interpretation centers, research on Gulf region museum visitors, especially at site museums near archaeological ruins, remains limited. Few studies examine how visitors experience dual interpretation techniques in Gulf regions. The emotional and cognitive aspects of finding meaning in vibrant cultural landscapes are understudied. To address this gap, our study examines how visitors interact with 'in situ' versus 'in context' settings and how their backgrounds influence their understanding. In particular, we analyse

responses from four Bahraini HSICs (Qal’at Al Bahrain, etc.) to link site features with perceived meaning and engagement. The research study received full ethical approval from the United Arab Emirates University’s (UAEU) Institutional Review Board, as documented in Social Sciences Research Ethics (ERS_2018_5728).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Methodology and Research Design

A convergent mixed-method approach is suitable for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon [36,37]. This study employs both qualitative and quantitative techniques, aligning with best practices for mixed-method research and multiple case studies [38,39]. Such an approach enables complementary data collection and helps resolve discrepancies between qualitative and quantitative outcomes [40]. It also improves validity and reliability, especially in exploratory social research.

The mixed-methods strategy aligns with the exploratory aim of this research, emphasizing the physical attributes of HSICs from users' perspectives. Data collection co-occurs with separate analysis before integration [36]. The case study approach evaluates how these centres shape visitors' understanding, selecting cases with varying contextual ties to historic sites in Bahrain. A multi-ethnographic toolkit, which includes archival materials, observations, surveys, and interviews, is used to gather insights from diverse stakeholders. After analyzing quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interviews and observations) data independently, we compared and merged the results in the discussion to develop a comprehensive model (VE-HSIC).

2.2. Rationale and Justification of Research Design

Qualitative methods, particularly case studies, offer a comprehensive understanding of events within specific contexts [39,41]. The case study approach provides insights into how Historic Site Interpretation Centres shape visitor experiences, highlighting aspects such as architectural design and spatial arrangement [3,24,42]. Four key case studies in Bahrain—Qal’at Al Bahrain Site Museum, Shaikh Salman bin Ahmed Al Fateh Fort, Bu Maher Fort, and Al Khamis Mosque were selected to illustrate various ways centres interact with their historic environments. These four sites were chosen to capture a range of contexts (from a major UNESCO site museum to smaller visitor centers at forts and a landmark mosque) and interpretive modes (in situ vs. in context). Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of each case study site.

This approach allows for broader generalization and greater external validity compared to individual case studies [40]. Moreover, Ethnographic research, involving researchers engaging with participants in their natural settings, investigates how individuals derive meaning from their environment [43]. Different qualitative techniques, such as analysing archival materials, conducting surveys, observing, and interviewing, provide a broad perspective on visitor perceptions and emotional responses.

Table 1. HSIC's selection rationale and justification.

Site Name	Site Typology	Interpretation Mode	Notable Feature
Case Study #1 Al Khamis Mosque Visitor Center	Religious heritage	In situ	Interpretation via a glass floor over ruins
Case Study #2 Qal’at Al Bahrain Site Museum	UNESCO site	In situ + In context	Major archaeological fort with panoramic museum view
Case Study #3 Shaikh Salman bin Ahmed Al Fateh Fort (Riffa Fort)	Restored fort	In context	Dual-function cultural center with scenic terrace

Case Study #4	Reconstructed fort	In situ + water-based link	Linked by boat shuttle to Pearling Trail
Bu Maher Fort Visitor Center			

Quantitative methods focus on gathering measurable data to generate general insights into social phenomena [36]. Surveys, a prevalent tool, help detect patterns and allow for result generalization [2,44]. Online surveys were chosen for their convenience and ability to efficiently reach large audiences. Additionally, observational data and archival documents contribute to understanding participant behaviours and evolving trends over time.

2.3. Data Collection Methods and Analysis Procedures

2.3.1. Archival Documents

Archival documents from the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities, including visitor records for 2018—the only available year—were collected. These included architectural design drawings and aerial photographs utilized in the case study analysis. Visitor statistics provided annual insights, though fewer sessions limited observations. Integrating archival documents with other data collection methods enhances the robustness of the research [45].

2.3.2. Online Survey: Design and Pilot Test

Online surveys are a standard tool in museum research for gathering user preferences and insights [3,46,47]. They are popular because they are user-friendly, cost-effective, and provide strong statistical data [48,49]. This study's survey focused on the visiting habits and perceptions of historic sites among Bahrain residents, featuring various question types, including dichotomous, multiple-choice, checkbox, and open-ended questions. A review panel edited the questions for clarity and relevance. Pilot testing played a crucial role in validating the survey design, ensuring questions were clear, and keeping participants engaged [50]. The pilot was conducted on Instagram, targeting followers in Bahrain, categorized as locals and expatriates, to confirm community interest in historic sites. The final survey was available in both Arabic and English to improve accessibility and distributed via social media and WhatsApp. Respondents were Bahraini residents, comprising ~60% local citizens and 40% expatriates (as per self-identification), with a diverse mix of age groups.

2.3.3. Unobtrusive Observation

Unobtrusive observation is a fundamental method in ethnographic research, allowing researchers to observe daily activities without affecting participant behaviour [51]. It complemented survey and archival data, providing insights into visitor behaviours across the four case study sites. Systematic observations were conducted under various conditions, including weekdays and weekends, from December 2018 to July 2019, with a focus on visitor interactions and demographics. As observers we noted approximate group size, activities (e.g., photography, walking), and, where discernible, visitor type (e.g., local vs. expatriate, inferred from language or group context).

2.3.4. Semi-Structured Open-Ended Interview Design and Pilot Test

Semi-structured interviews aimed to explore stakeholders' perceptions and emotional experiences [52]. This method is suitable for collecting qualitative data and was tailored to meet specific research goals. Pilot interviews helped refine questions and improve clarity, leading to adjustments based on feedback. Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders, including site managers/staff (service providers) and visitors, to gain in-depth perspectives. Transcripts were created for analysis, ensuring responses maintained their original context. We employed thematic analysis to uncover underlying themes in participants' experiences through a structured coding and categorization process. To enhance reliability and validity, participants reviewed their transcripts, and consistency was maintained throughout data collection.

This comprehensive approach provided a deep understanding of the context and experiences within Historic Site Interpretation Centres. A Summary of the data collection by site is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of data collection by Historic Site.

Method	Qal’at Al Bahrain	Riffa Fort	Bu Maher Fort	Al Khamis Mosque
Surveys (n = 113 total)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Interviews (n = 22)	7 participants	5	6	4
Observation (50+ hours)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Archival Analysis	✓	✓	✓	✓

For this research, we employed three primary analytical methods. First, a descriptive case study analysis of archival architectural drawings at the site, building, and interpretation levels. This evaluates the connection between the historic site and its surroundings, the architecture of the structures, and the meaning created through exhibits and presentation methods. Second, quantitative analysis is conducted on visitation records, online survey data, and field observation notes. Visitation data are summarized visually in Microsoft Excel. Survey results from Google Forms are converted into percentages to interpret participant responses. Observation field notes are organized into tables and visually compared to show subjects in their natural environment. Third, qualitative analysis involves thematic coding of interview transcripts, focusing on the meanings and language used [52]. This includes reading, coding, and identifying themes [53], and reviewing these themes [54]. Content analysis is also applied to photographs and the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities’ Instagram account. Validation occurs through participant verification of findings. Overall, this mixed-methods approach combines case study, quantitative, and qualitative techniques to offer a comprehensive understanding of the study (Figure 2). It aligns with our aim of exploring visitors’ experiences with services designed as forms of meaning-making through historic sites and amenities.

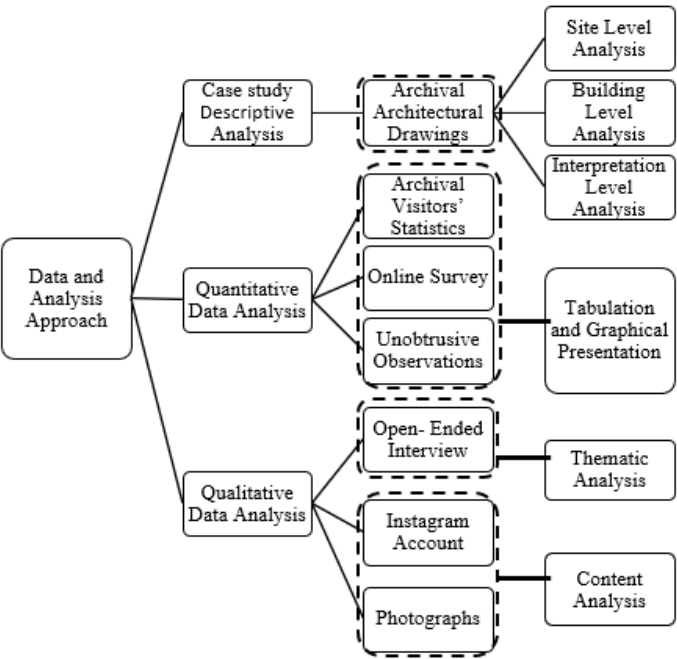


Figure 2. An analysis framework illustrating the analysis approach, data sources, and the analysis techniques.

2.3.5. Data Collection Procedure of the Open-Ended Interviews

The open-ended interviews took place in December 2018 and January 2019, with 10 out of 22 interviews being tape-recorded with participants' permission; the remaining interviews were documented manually. We employed probing, follow-up questions, and paraphrasing to facilitate participants' expression of their perceptions and emotions. These interviews were conducted randomly during field observation sessions with volunteers who agreed to participate. At the same time, service providers such as archaeologists and curators were selected based on their roles and willingness to participate. Eighteen interviews took place onsite at the Historic Site Interpretation Centres, two were conducted at the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities offices, and one interview each was conducted via telephone and email with participants outside of Bahrain.

This multi-method approach enabled us to cross-verify findings and identify relationships between archival records, reported perceptions, and observed behaviors.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Analysis of Visitors' Records and Experience

This section examines the visitation records at the four selected case studies for 2018, as well as feedback from Bahrain residents who have visited or intend to visit the sites, and the experiences of visitors in this context. Analysing these records and experiences provides us a better understanding of the selected case studies' popularity and significance, as well as factors influencing visitation patterns, such as climate and events. The multiple data collection approach determines the validity and reliability of the gathered data, enabling the researcher to find relationships between archived, reported, and observed data. It should provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation, as well as the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

3.1.1. Visitation Records of Historic Site Interpretation Centers and Historic Sites

Archival data from 2018 indicates a total of 26,624 visitors to all four historic sites and Historic Site Interpretation Centres. Qal'at Al Bahrain attracted almost half of the visitors (12,293), followed by Shaikh Salman Bin Ahmed Al Fateh Fort (7,075), Bu Maher Fort (4,604), and Al Khamis Mosque (2,649). The popularity of Qal'at Al Bahrain may be attributed to its status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and its hosting of various events. Al Khamis Mosque's lower visitation may be related to its religious nature. A review of Qal'at Al Bahrain site museum's yearly records indicates that 2015 saw a peak in visitors due to Bahrain's participation in the Milan World Expo and the launch of the "Cultural Tourism Passport" initiative. The monthly distribution of visitors at the four sites reveals a similar pattern, with increased visitation from October to January, likely due to the cooler months. Significant events, such as the 'Spring of Culture' and national day celebrations, also lead to higher visitation.

3.1.2. Survey Findings: Visitor Perceptions and Suggestions

The online survey focused on three themes: visitation patterns, perceptions of display and presentation techniques, and behaviour/suggestions. The survey, distributed in English and Arabic, received responses from 113 participants. Key findings suggested that most participants (99 out of 113) expressed a preference for museums as physical entities and showed a greater tendency to approach historic sites over Historic Site Interpretation Centres, with Qal'at Al Bahrain being the most visited or intended destination. A combined mode of visitation to both settings ('in situ' and 'in context') was preferred by 46% of participants, who also demonstrated interest in walking around historic sites, reading information panels, visiting nearby Historic Site Interpretation Centres, and joining guided tours. Interactive applications were favoured in both settings, while conventional techniques were also valued. Walking for pleasure and exercise emerged as the most common activity (77%), followed by sightseeing (65.5%) and taking photos (61%). Climate was a major limiting factor (as 69% noted), followed by entry fees and access to toilets. This highlights the importance of

providing comfortable facilities and possibly seasonal programming to enhance visitation. Interestingly, while participants prefer to visit open-air historic sites in person, a majority still felt that artifacts should be housed and displayed in context (indoors) rather than left in situ at the ruins, and around 30% suggested 'better presentation techniques,' such as more guided tours and interactive elements.

3.1.3. Observation Findings: Visitor Behaviors On-Site vs. In Centers

Observations were conducted at four locations over a year, from 2018 to 2019. At Qal'at Al Bahrain, 333 individuals were observed, with significantly more visitors to the historic site than to the site museum. Visitor numbers rose in winter and declined in warmer months. Slightly more expatriates than nationals were observed. Most visitors appeared in small groups at the historic site, engaging in sightseeing, walking, and photography. At Shaikh Salman bin Ahmed Al Fateh Fort, 149 people were observed, but fewer visited the site and its interpretive centres, primarily using it as a link to the café and restaurant. Bu Maher Fort had only 22 visitors, with similar numbers of nationals and expatriates, who usually socialized and took photos at the water shuttle. No visitors were observed at Al Khamis Mosque during our observation period, which we suspect may be due to either limited promotion or the site's strictly religious nature. This finding aligns with respondents' feedback that Bahrain's harsh climate can inhibit visitation. Overall, historic sites attract more visitors than interpretive centres, mainly for sightseeing and entertainment. Expatriates participate more actively both in situ and in context, while nationals prefer to attend events. Among all, Qal'at Al Bahrain remains the most visited site. The interpretive centres' presentation techniques received negative feedback, with visitors preferring more interactive and entertaining experiences. This suggests that residents engage with heritage sites more frequently for special occasions. In contrast, expatriates treat them as tourist or leisure destinations, a distinction that is important for tailoring interpretation strategies. Data from archives, surveys, and observations provided valuable insights into current visitor behaviour.

3.2. Data Analysis of Open-Ended Interviews

All interviews were transcribed, translated, and manually coded manually. The first four interviews were reviewed to identify gaps for follow-up and to refine initial findings. During transcription, data analysis focused on standard codes and themes, grouping similar topics to reveal emerging patterns. This process was repeated for all 22 interviews, resulting in 29 codes organized into 11 themes. Excel spreadsheets tracked narratives against these codes, ultimately categorizing them into four main groups based on connections among the physical setting, visitor experience, meaning making, and suggestions for enhancement (Figure 3). The analysis highlighted key factors influencing visitors' experiences, and the meaning-making process discussed in the study was also examined.



Figure 3. Frequency codes and emerging categories from the 22 narrative interviewees.

3.2.1. The Role of Physical Context in Shaping Visitors’ Experience and Meaning-Making

The physical environment of historic sites and HSICs greatly influences visitors' experiences. Three key themes emerged. First, the importance of these centres as spaces for interpreting meanings and revealing hidden stories was highlighted. Participants stressed their role in connecting personal, local, and global cultural histories. For instance, visitors said these centres help locals explore their history and culture, underscoring their importance as authentic sources and links between the past and the present [55]. The second theme concerns architectural design. Architecture is crucial to storytelling, as features such as the exterior look and spatial layout significantly impact understanding. The discussion of localization within globalization strategies reveals Bahrain's efforts to gain international recognition while preserving its local identity [4]. The third theme relates to presentation methods. Display techniques impact message delivery, with many noting that while some centres provide overviews, they often lack the depth needed for academic or detailed study. Practical interpretation combines various methods such as graphics, guided tours, and interactive displays.

3.2.2. The Dynamics of Visitors’ Experience and Meaning-Making Process: Opportunities and Challenges

Visitors generally prefer experiencing 'in situ' at historic sites rather than visiting interpretation centres. This preference is shaped by factors such as social bonds and movement habits, as people often look for entertainment and social interaction, which are more readily available at historic sites. Several participants highlighted this trend, clearly favouring landmarks over museums. Additionally, seasonal changes and visitor flow significantly impact visitation numbers; we observed an increased attendance during favourable weather, especially in winter. Figure 4 presents interview captions from visitors grouped by interests, cultural backgrounds, and collective memory, which serve as motivations and barriers to their visits.

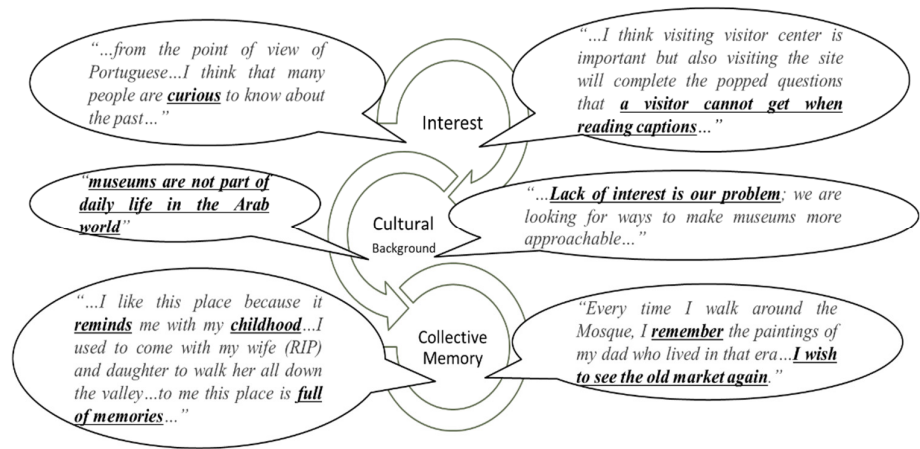


Figure 4. Visitors’ Interests, Cultural Backgrounds, and Collective Memory: Drivers and Barriers.

3.2.3. The Aspects of the Meaning-Making Process

Visitors derive meaning from their experiences and motives, which are shaped by two key themes. The first involves meaning-making within a particular physical space. The design of interpretive centers influences how well visitors can relate artifacts to historic sites, and removing artifacts from their context can impede understanding. The second theme pertains to meaning as a bodily experience. Visitors emphasized the significance of physically engaging with artifacts and the environment, pointing out that personal interactions and emotional connections enhance the process of creating meaning.

3.2.4. Visitors’ Suggestions for Enhancing HSIC Experience

Participants proposed various ways to improve visitor experiences. One suggestion involves artifact repatriation and alternatives, where returning artifacts to their original contexts could enhance understanding of the narrative. Creating replicas can also help bridge storytelling gaps. Another idea is to utilize different presentation methods, such as live performances and printed materials, to increase engagement and clarity. Participants further recommended offering free admission, noting that complimentary entry and guided tours could significantly boost attendance. Other suggestions included adding photo booths with traditional costumes and using traditional boats for transportation to promote cultural immersion.

4. Discussion

Our findings reinforce Falk and Dierking’s context model – we saw personal context (visitors’ prior knowledge) and physical context (site design) strongly shaping experiences. However, unlike generic museum settings, the ‘in situ vs in context’ dual experience in HSICs introduces unique dynamics not fully explained by existing models [15]. This underscores King et al.’s (2023) point that exhibition user experience requires its own model [3], which our proposed VE-HSIC model aims to provide.

4.1. Contribution of Historic Site Interpretation Centers to Meaning-Making

The study examines how Historic Site Interpretation Centres (HSICs) assist visitors in forming meaning. This process is primarily influenced by two factors: the significance of the historic site and the interpretive centre’s effectiveness in conveying that significance.

Bahrain’s historic sites highlight the Arabian Gulf’s multicultural heritage, attracting many locals and expats who prefer exploring them in person rather than through HSICs. This preference aligns with earlier studies by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [5], Flexner [56], and Dastgerdi and De Luca [57], which emphasizes that historic sites provide value beyond their physical features, reflecting a lively sociocultural environment.

The ancient remains at these sites illustrate past life and shape modern culture. Therefore, establishing HSICs nearby is crucial for conveying and interpreting their significance.

The study identifies three types of relationships between HSICs and historic sites in Bahrain: nearby locations, those accessible by unique transport modes, and those integrated within the historic sites. For example, Bu Maher Fort benefited from a sea shuttle, enriching the visitor experience. Conversely, interpretive centres within sites, such as at Shaikh Salman bin Ahmed Al Fateh Fort, might reduce visibility and access. This supports Ricoeur's [58] claim that "not all interpretations are equal." While HSICs add interpretive value, they shouldn't replace direct site engagement, as noted by Barry and Robert [59] and Stewart [60]. This validates the dual modality on which HSICs are premised, but with an emphasis on interactive, experience-driven features in both settings.

HSICs' architecture impacts message communication. Well-designed centres increase engagement, while contrasting materials can weaken the message. Design should blend modern elements with context, as in The New Acropolis Museum [61–63]. Spatial layout and display strategies are crucial for meaningful exhibits. They should reflect the narratives of historic sites to improve storytelling and visitor engagement. Removing objects from context risks losing their meaning, as stated by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [5]. HSICs must maintain visual connections to historic sites and employ creative presentation to enhance visitor engagement.

Meaning making is mainly semiological, shaped by architectural features, interactions between places and visitors, and their socio-cultural backgrounds. Architectural elements serve as symbols that convey cultural significance [33,64,65]. Including local details enhances cultural relevance and visitors' comfort. However, some HSICs lack regional identity, underscoring the need for designs that are attentive to local culture and climate [66]. This underscores the importance of considering visitors' backgrounds and cultural contexts, aligning with Ricoeur's [67] ideas on understanding through belonging.

Objects in HSICs hold cultural value, but many depend on artifacts from non-original sites, causing decontextualization. This disconnect lowers visitor experience and alignment with museum goals. Effective presentation techniques can bridge these gaps and boost understanding.

Reevaluating the link between place, people, and culture is essential, as this connection serves both as a catalyst and a barrier to understanding. Using Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology [68] shows that meanings in HSICs depend on context and are shaped by visitors' needs and cultural backgrounds. Outdoor experiences at historic sites give visitors insights into past environmental interactions. However, Bahrain's climate might limit engagement, as suggested by online survey respondents. Well-designed models, such as the New Acropolis Museum, demonstrate how deliberate design can enhance visitor experiences while preserving historic ties.

Applying Frampton's concept of critical regionalism, we suggest HSIC designs should prioritize local climate, materials, and cultural context over universal aesthetics [69]. Our findings (e.g., visitor comments on the lack of regional identity in some centres indicate that architecture deeply affects visitor connection. Thus, architectural mediation is key to meaning-making – design can either bridge or widen the gap between the artifact and its original site. This aligns with Ricoeur's [58] idea of the paradox between modernity and tradition, fostering meaningful coherence in specific environments. Focusing on local relevance helps HSICs enhance their interpretive role and function as distinctive museums.

4.2. A Produced Model for Meaning Making and Visitor Experience at HSICs (VE-HSIC)

The study highlights the importance of linking historic sites, interpretation centres, and visitors. It suggests that these centres can effectively convey site significance through the principles of critical regionalism [70]. This approach highlights design context by concentrating on geographic factors such as climate, light, and culture rather than aesthetics. Enhancing visitor understanding improves site interpretation. The study demonstrates how architectural style and spatial layout impact visitor experience and can serve as a guide for architects and curatorial practice in Bahrain and other locations. The produced model for meaning making and visitor experience at HSICs (VE-HSIC). This is summarized in Figure 5. The link between "Visitors" and "Context" in architectural design aims to

foster the strongest connection between them. Under "Visitors," three main aspects are defined: physical, visual, and emotional interactions, including memory, feelings, and excitement. These factors shape how visitors perceive and interact with their environment. Conversely, "Context" encompasses architectural appearance and spatial layout, highlighting their influence on visitor experiences. The diagram also emphasizes sensitivity to context and the interplay between content and environment. It advocates that effective architecture should seamlessly blend visitor experiences with the surrounding environment, fostering engaging and meaningful spaces. Unlike Falk & Dierking’s general museum model, our VE-HSIC model explicitly incorporates the dual setting (‘in situ’ site + ‘in context’ centre) and emphasizes architectural context as a mediator of experience, which has not been detailed in prior models.

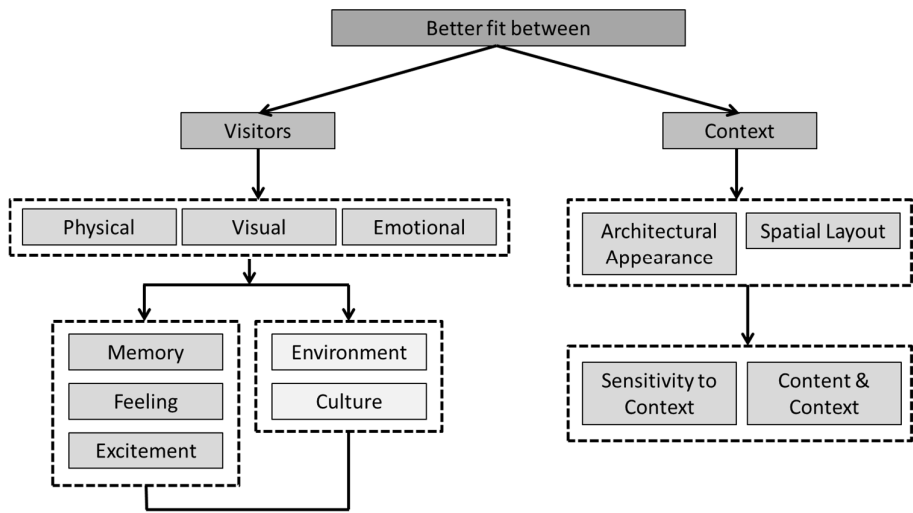


Figure 5. Proposed VE-HSIC model for better meaning-making and visitor experience at Historic Site Interpretation Centres (HSICs).

This research emphasizes the importance of creating Historical Site Interpretation Centres (HSICs) that genuinely reflect and stay connected to their original sites. A list of key recommendations is provided below:

- Design HSICs with strong visual and narrative connect with their original sites, like using vantage points, sightlines to ruins, or incorporating local materials, to prevent decontextualization.
- Add some interactive elements to exhibits to make them more appealing to casual tourists and heritage enthusiasts, helping to boost their engagement and enjoyment.
- Incorporate local cultural elements like art, language, and stories, along with climate-sensitive features such as shaded outdoor areas. This approach, inspired by critical regionalism, helps create a more comfortable and meaningful experience for visitors.
- Balance “in situ” authenticity with “in context” interpretation by creating on-site experiences (living history, guided tours) that complement indoor exhibitions.

While the recommendations for designing Historical Site Interpretation Centers (HSICs) offer valuable insights, several limitations in this research should be acknowledged, as listed below.

- This study examined four sites in Bahrain and may not cover all HSIC configurations, especially newer ones. Visitor responses mainly came from those interested in heritage, possibly biasing results toward more engaged visitors.
- Although the VE-HSIC model is based on local case studies, more research is needed to determine its applicability in other cultural or national settings. Future studies could apply this model in different regions or with larger sample sizes.

- Data were collected in 2018–2019; visitor behavior may change over time or due to external factors (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on museum visitation), which were not captured here.

Applying this research to other Gulf countries or assessing post-pandemic visitor engagement would be valuable next steps.

5. Conclusions

In response to our research question, HSICs help visitors make meaning by bridging the gap between the artifact and the site, providing contextual information, eliciting emotional connections, addressing gaps in visitor studies, especially in the Gulf, and advocating for designs that reflect local geographic and cultural contexts. We conclude that HSICs play a vital role in strengthening cultural identity and emotional bonds among visitors, a role that is often underappreciated. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the crucial role of architectural design in heritage interpretation. By thoughtfully mediating between heritage and experience, heritage can transform how visitors connect with the past, ensuring that cultural heritage remains resonant and meaningful for diverse audiences.

Our proposed VE-HSIC model is meant as a practical framework for curators and designers, and we hope it will guide future improvements to interpretation centers in the Gulf. By emphasizing local context in design, we argue that HSICs can better connect with visitors and genuinely serve as bridges between past and present.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

HSIC	Historic Site Interpretation Centers
UX	User Experience
UCD	User-Centered Design
VE-HSIC	Visitor Engagement Model at Historic Site Interpretation Centers

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