

Restoration Methodologies as Negotiated Practice: Multidisciplinary Approaches from the House of Wonders, Zanzibar

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The restoration of historic buildings often requires approaches that move beyond purely fabric-centered conservation toward more integrated and context-sensitive practice. This conference contribution examines the restoration of the House of Wonders in Stone Town, Zanzibar, to understand how restoration methodologies are shaped in practice under conditions of incomplete documentation, material uncertainty, local regulatory oversight, limited resources, and uneven availability of specialized conservation expertise.

Rather than treating restoration as a fixed sequence of technical steps, it is understood as a process unfolding through interpretation, decision-making, and adaptation. In this sense, restoration involves not only the careful study of historical evidence but also sustained engagement with material conditions, institutional requirements, and the realities of the site.

The contribution draws on a qualitative case study based on interviews with key actors involved in the project, including an architect, engineers, a quantity surveyor, a historian, and a conservation artisan. The findings suggest that restoration develops through a set of interrelated practices in which negotiation is key, rather than a single defined method.

Four aspects are particularly evident. First, restoration begins with documentation and the reconstruction of architectural knowledge where original records are missing. Second, it depends on material and structural assessment, combining traditional knowledge with investigative and digital techniques such as 3D scanning. Third, it is shaped by planning and conservation policies and approval procedures that regulate intervention. Fourth, it relies on multidisciplinary collaboration, including site-based craft knowledge, while also revealing shortages in specialized skills and experience.

Considered in relation to one another, these observations suggest that restoration operates as a negotiated practice, in which methodologies are shaped through the interaction of historical, technical, institutional, and practical forms of knowledge. This highlights the need for architectural education to engage more directly with interdisciplinary collaboration, heritage governance, material diagnosis, digital documentation, and craft-based learning.