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Abstract

Sustainable Futures Through Living Heritage: A Canal-Led Urban Regeneration for Alappuzha's Heritage Zone †

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Amid global efforts to meet Sustainable Development Goals, it is vital to address small towns of the Global South to assess true global progress. Rapid environmental degradation and climate change underscore the urgency for sustainable urban strategies in these regions. This research focuses on Alappuzha, a historic port town in Kerala, India, known for its fusion of 18th-century Dutch town planning and vernacular architecture. Once a thriving port, Alappuzha now faces socio-economic and ecological decline, despite a tourism-driven economy. This research intends to explore the relevance of the canal system in the past, present, and the future of the Heritage Zone in the town of Alappuzha and the ways in which it can be utilized to revive the heritage. The interwoven fabric of canals and built heritage in urban areas necessitate an exploration and investigation on complex multidimensional interaction of functional, cultural, ecological, institutional and social contexts. An interdisciplinary approach, drawing from fields of history, architecture, urban planning, socio-cultural, environmental, and governance studies, is used to investigate how the canals can serve as an integral part of heritage revival and urban regeneration. This can influence the planning, implementation and management of the Alappuzha Heritage Zone, in particular.

The town's complex relationship with its canals is investigated through a historical mapping with the aid of a literature study and a spatial analysis using GIS to assess urban transformations across temporal scales. Eight critical aspects that can be directly linked to the canals—Heritage, Transportation, Commercial Activities, Drainage, Water supply, Waste Disposal and Sewerage, Ecological Sensitivity, Negative Spaces and Climate Change—are analyzed and mapped. A critical literature review of three revival and rejuvenation projects in Alappuzha in the past two decades, based on the canals, observed that the gains achieved are often short-termed. The long-term life, ecological implications, and the capacity of these initiatives to withstand the changing urban requirements is questionable at times due to the lack of responsibility and periodic maintenance.

Findings highlight the crucial role and potential of canals in shaping Alappuzha's identity and resilience. Taking inspiration from successful European case studies, research recommends heritage-led, context-specific regeneration strategies, centering the canals, to align historical identity with contemporary sustainability imperatives. These insights contribute to urban planning discourse on inclusive, heritage-based approaches in under-represented urban contexts of Global South.

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