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Heritage-Led Urban Regeneration: Integrating Kofar Mata Dye Pits into Sustainable Urban Design in Kano Metropolis

[1]Usman Muhammad Gidado, [2]Abdullahi Muhammad Usman, [3]David Ileza Adamu, & [4]Amina Ahmed.

[1,2&3] Department of Architecture, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria
[4]Department of Architecture, Aliko Dangote University, Wudil

Abstract

Heritage-led urban regeneration has evolved as a sustainable method of revitalising ancient towns while retaining their cultural identity. This research looks at how the Kofar Mata Dye Pits, one of Africa's oldest surviving indigo dyeing sites and a UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List item, may be integrated into Kano Metropolis' sustainable urban design plans. Despite their historical, socio-cultural, and economic significance, the dye pits face increasing threats from urban encroachment, inadequate conservation, and declining patronage. The research employs a qualitative case study method, combining field observations, stakeholder interviews, and document reviews to examine the potential of heritage-driven regeneration in enhancing both cultural preservation and urban resilience. Findings reveal that the dye pits can catalyze tourism development, creative economies, and environmental sustainability if integrated into broader urban design frameworks. Strategies such as adaptive reuse of surrounding spaces, community-based management, landscape interventions, and improved accessibility are identified as critical pathways for strengthening the site's role in contemporary urban life. The study emphasises the significance of coordinating historical conservation with sustainable urban development by presenting the dye pits as a living heritage resource as opposed to a remnant of the past. According to the paper's conclusion, heritage-led regeneration presents a workable paradigm for African towns struggling with the continent's fast urbanisation, offering chances to strike a balance between socioeconomic growth and cultural preservation. Integrating the Kofar Mata Dye Pits into urban planning helps create inclusive, resilient, and sustainable city futures while also protecting Kano's traditional character.

Keywords: Cultural Landscape, Heritage-Led Urban Regeneration, New Urban Agenda, *Kofar Mata* Dye Pits, Sustainable Urban Design,

1.0 Background

Heritage-led urban regeneration has gained prominence as cities seek development pathways that couple economic revitalization with cultural continuity and environmental stewardship. Conceptually, heritage-led regeneration frames historic assets, both tangible and intangible, as catalysts for place-based development, social inclusion, and urban sustainability, rather than as constraints on growth (Pendlebury et al., 2018; Veldpaus & Pendlebury, 2022). In the developing nations of the world, this paradigm is rapidly advancing to address rising urbanisation, unequal development, and cultural degradation by emphasising adaptive reuse, creative economies, and

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community engagement (Clemente & Hernández-Martínez, 2019; Labadi, 2013). African case studies demonstrate both opportunity and risk: where integrated policies exist, heritage can anchor resilient, low-carbon, and identity-affirming urbanism; where they do not, modernization pressures and speculative redevelopment accelerate loss of historic fabric and living traditions (Alemayehu et al., 2024; Depala, 2025).

Kano, one of West Africa's oldest metropolitan centres, exemplifies these processes. Its historic centre is marked by a constellation of legacy assets: the Ancient Kano City Walls, Dala Hill, the Emir's Palace, and Kurmi Market, the latter founded in the 15th century under Sultan Muhammadu Rumfa and long related to trans-Saharan commerce in textiles, leather, and dyes (Britannica, 2025; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). Within this landscape, the Kofar Mata Dye Pits constitute a unique industrial-craft heritage: a continuous, community-maintained indigo dyeing tradition widely reported to date to the late 15th century and often described as among the oldest of its kind in Africa (Young & Samah, 2021). Beyond their historic value, the dye pits embody living, place-based knowledge, materials, techniques, apprenticeship networks, and place identity that align with UNESCO's 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003).

Yet the Kofar Mata Dye Pits face well-documented pressures: land-use encroachment, environmental degradation, declining patronage amid globalized textile markets, and limited investment in conservation and visitor infrastructure (Young & Samah, 2021). Similar vulnerabilities affect the broader Kano heritage system; uncontrolled urban growth has contributed to the deterioration and partial loss of the city walls and gates, reflecting a pattern of neglect, material extraction, and competing development priorities (Cultural Property News, 2018; Mohammed et al., 2015). These trends mirror broader debates about heritage commodification, where tourism-centric strategies stimulate income but can marginalize resident communities and underplay wider sustainability objectives if not carefully governed (Labadi, 2013; Veldpaus & Pendlebury, 2022).

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Integrating the Kofar Mata Dye Pits into sustainable urban design offers a pathway to balance conservation with inclusive growth. International experience suggests that heritage-led regeneration contributes to compact, walkable districts; adaptive reuse of vernacular structures; cultural and creative economy clustering; and nature-based public-realm improvements that enhance climate resilience (Clemente & Hernández-Martínez, 2019; Alemayehu et al., 2024). For living heritage specifically, UNESCO guidance highlights aligning urban planning with "living" practices, securing production spaces, safeguarding apprenticeship and transmission, supporting circular resource use (e.g., plant-based dyes), and embedding communities as co-managers of change (UNESCO, n.d.-a; UNESCO, n.d.-b). In Kano, this implies designing safe, accessible pedestrian linkages between the dye pits, Kurmi Market, and other nodes; creating micro-infrastructure for clean water, waste management, and shade; enabling mixed-use craft hubs and interpretation centers; and formalizing governance frameworks that protect affordability and customary use rights for artisans.

A heritage-led approach is also consistent with Nigeria's institutional architecture for heritage stewardship, notably the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), and with contemporary urban policy goals emphasizing cultural industries and tourism as levers for local economic development (NCMM, n.d.). However, scholarship cautions that many regeneration schemes over-privilege visitor economies post-inscription or branding while neglecting housing, livelihoods, and everyday social sustainability (Veldpaus & Pendlebury, 2022). For Kofar Mata, success hinges on treating the dye pits as a living production landscape within a wider cultural ecosystem, not merely as a tourist spectacle: safeguarding intangible knowledge, improving artisan incomes, and embedding climate-sensitive landscape design (canopy, ventilation, water reuse) to improve working conditions and urban microclimate.

Positioning the Kofar Mata Dye Pits at the heart of a connected heritage corridor within Kano's historic core can thus advance multiple objectives: conserve a rare craft tradition; strengthen circular, low-carbon local value chains; enhance public realm quality and access; and reinforce Kano's

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cultural identity within a contemporary, resilient metropolitan vision. This study situates Kofar Mata within international debates on heritage-led regeneration and articulates design-policy instruments to operationalize living-heritage integration in the urban fabric of Kano.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Foundations of Heritage-Led Urban Regeneration

Heritage-led urban regeneration (HLUR) has gained scholarly traction as cities worldwide seek to address urban decline while safeguarding cultural assets. At its core, HLUR frames heritage not as a static relic but as a dynamic resource capable of driving inclusive growth, environmental stewardship, and social cohesion (Pendlebury et al., 2018; Veldpaus & Pendlebury, 2022). Scholars argue that the integration of heritage into regeneration processes allows cities to pursue sustainable development models that simultaneously respond to global challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and cultural homogenization (Labadi, 2013; Clemente & Hernández-Martínez, 2019).

Three interrelated themes dominate the literature. First, adaptive reuse positions historic sites as assets for contemporary uses, extending their lifespan while embedding sustainability in design practice (Bullen & Love, 2011). Second, community engagement is considered essential in legitimizing regeneration projects, particularly in contexts where heritage functions as a lived practice rather than a mere monument (Waterton & Smith, 2010). Third, creative economies and tourism are widely discussed as levers for heritage valorization, though scholars caution against over-commodification that marginalizes local users (Labadi, 2013; Jones & Varley, 2020).

2.2 Heritage and Sustainable Urbanism

The intersections between heritage and sustainable urbanism highlight heritage's contribution to compact, walkable, and identity-rich cities. UNESCO and UN-Habitat have advanced frameworks emphasizing heritage as a pillar of the "New Urban Agenda," urging planners to integrate cultural assets into strategies for resilient, inclusive, and low-carbon cities (UNESCO, 2016; UN-Habitat, 2017). Specific pathways include linking heritage with green infrastructure, circular economies, and

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climate adaptation strategies (Alemayehu et al., 2024).

However, critics stress that heritage policies often privilege monumental assets over "everyday heritage," resulting in uneven benefits across socio-economic groups (Veldpaus & Pendlebury, 2022). For living heritage practices such as crafts, markets, and rituals, scholarship underscores the need for planning frameworks that secure spaces of production, uphold affordability, and safeguard intangible cultural transmission (UNESCO, 2003; Logan, 2012).

2.3 African Perspectives on Heritage Regeneration

In African contexts, HLUR has emerged as both an opportunity and a challenge. Scholars document cases where heritage revitalization has anchored cultural tourism and strengthened community identity (Alemayehu et al., 2024), while other studies highlight risks of displacement, commodification, and heritage neglect under pressures of modernization (Ndoro et al., 2008). For example, the Stone Town of Zanzibar demonstrates how heritage branding can catalyze international tourism but simultaneously displace residents due to gentrification and rising property values (Siravo, 1996; Komu, 2018).

Nigeria provides similar lessons: despite its rich tangible and intangible heritage, weak conservation institutions, insufficient investment, and urban growth pressures undermine effective regeneration (Mohammed et al., 2015; NCMM, n.d.). Scholars point to the deterioration of historic city walls, markets, and sacred spaces as emblematic of systemic neglect and the absence of integrated cultural-urban planning (Cultural Property News, 2018).

2.4 Heritage in Kano: Contextualizing the Kofar Mata Dye Pits

Kano Metropolis, an ancient urban centre shaped by centuries of trans-Saharan trade, is home to notable heritage assets including the city walls, Kurmi Market, and the Emir's Palace (Britannica, 2025). Within this constellation, the Kofar Mata Dye Pits occupy a unique position as one of Africa's oldest surviving indigo dyeing sites, continuously maintained since the 15th century (Young & Samah, 2021). The pits exemplify industrial-craft heritage, embodying artisanal knowledge systems, apprenticeship structures, and eco-friendly material practices rooted in plant-based dyes.

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Nevertheless, the dye pits face existential threats. Urban encroachment, weak visitor infrastructure, competition from industrial textiles, and limited conservation funding have eroded their vitality (Young & Samah, 2021). These pressures echo broader African debates on living heritage vulnerability: without formal integration into urban policy, such sites risk either decay or reductive commodification (Labadi, 2013).

2.5 Integrating Kofar Mata Dye Pits into Sustainable Urban Design

International experience suggests that sites like Kofar Mata can anchor heritage corridors, linking cultural landscapes to economic clusters, walkable public spaces, and eco-friendly infrastructure (Clemente & Hernández-Martínez, 2019). UNESCO's recommendations for safeguarding living heritage stress co-management with communities, supporting apprenticeship networks, and embedding heritage in urban planning processes (UNESCO, n.d.-a; UNESCO, n.d.-b).

For Kano, this translates into practical design-policy instruments: pedestrian connectivity between the dye pits and Kurmi Market, adaptive reuse of surrounding spaces as craft hubs, incorporation of green infrastructure for shading and water reuse, and governance frameworks that prioritize artisans' rights and livelihoods. By situating the dye pits within a wider urban design framework, regeneration could catalyze creative economies, strengthen cultural identity, and foster climate resilience in Kano's historic core.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the integration of the Kofar Mata Dye Pits into sustainable urban design and heritage-led regeneration in Kano Metropolis. The case study method is appropriate for investigating complex socio-cultural and spatial dynamics within real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). By focusing on Kofar Mata Dye Pits, an active heritage site with significant historical and economic value, the research explores how cultural heritage can catalyze urban regeneration and sustainable development. The research employs a multi-method qualitative design, combining field observations, semi-structured interviews, spatial analysis, and document review. This approach ensures triangulation, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

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3.1 Study Area

The Kofar Mata Dye Pits, established in the 15th century, represent one of the oldest traditional indigo dyeing industries in Africa and remain a critical cultural and economic hub within Kano Metropolis (Fasinro, 2021). The surrounding urban fabric is characterized by dense residential settlements, informal economic activities, and gradual encroachment, making the site an ideal case for exploring heritage-led regeneration. The Dye pits, near the city's mosque, is surrounded by narrow lanes, courtyards, and workshops. It's known for high pedestrian flows and frequent trade interfaces. The pits, located in a commercial corridor, use low-energy, biodegradable indigo fermentation (See Plates 1 & 2). However, challenges include limited wastewater treatment, localized odour, and potential soil/water quality impacts.



Plate 1The image depicts dye pits integrated into a dense residential area, posing conflicts between heritage preservation and urban development. These pits are hubs for informal economic activities, demonstrating their role in local livelihoods.

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Plate 2 The Kofar Mata dyeing complex is a courtyard-like enclosure with dozens of circular pits, each 1-11.5 meters in diameter and 1-2 meters deep, arranged in geometric clusters, maximizing space efficiency.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

On-site visits were conducted to document the physical conditions of the dye pits, surrounding infrastructure, and patterns of use. Photographs were produced to capture spatial arrangements and environmental challenges. Structured interviews were held with key stakeholders, including dye pit operators, community leaders, urban planners, heritage conservation officials, and residents. These interviews explored perceptions of the site's cultural value, challenges of preservation, and opportunities for urban integration.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes across interviews, field notes, and documents (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The findings were organized into themes such as cultural significance, urban integration, economic potential, and sustainability challenges.

4.0 Results and Discussion

4.1 Cultural Significance and Intangible Heritage

The study reveals that the Kofar Mata Dye Pits are not merely functional spaces for textile dyeing but are deeply embedded within the cultural identity of Kano

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Metropolis. Interviews with artisans and community leaders consistently emphasized their symbolic role in preserving indigenous artisanry, spirituality, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. This aligns with global perspectives that regard heritage assets as powerful instruments for reinforcing local identity and social cohesion (Ashworth & Graham, 2019). The persistence of traditional dyeing methods amidst urbanization highlights the resilience of intangible heritage, even as modernization poses significant challenges.

> As one artisan explained, *"These pits are more than workspaces; they carry the spirit of our ancestors, and every cloth we dye is a continuation of their legacy."*
>
> A community elder highlighted the role of the pits in sustaining cultural continuity: *"We teach our children not just how to dye fabric, but how to respect tradition. The pits remind us of who we are as Kano people."*
>
> Another participant observed the resilience of the practice despite rapid change: *"Even with modern machines around us, people still come here because the dye from Kofar Mata has a soul that no factory can reproduce."*

These local perspectives align with global scholarship that underscores heritage assets as powerful instruments for reinforcing local identity and social cohesion (Ashworth & Graham, 2019). The persistence of traditional dyeing methods amidst urbanization thus illustrates the resilience of intangible heritage, even as modernization poses significant challenges.

4.2 Economic Relevance and Livelihood Support

Despite a decline in large-scale patronage due to industrialized textile production, the dye pits still support local livelihoods, employing artisans, apprentices, and traders. Observations and stakeholder accounts indicated that income generated from the dye pits sustains households and contributes to the informal urban economy.

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As one artisan noted, *"Even if the big factories have taken many customers, what we earn here feeds our families and keeps our children in school."*

An apprentice similarly explained, *"Learning this work gives us a skill to survive. We may not be rich, but at least we do not beg."*

Community leaders highlighted the wider impact on Kano's informal economy, with one remarking, *"The dye pits are not just for the dyers. The tailors, cloth sellers, and even food vendors around here benefit. It is a chain that keeps many people going."*

As another participant lamented, *"If there were better facilities and promotion, tourists would come more, and our work would bring even greater value to the city."*

Like heritage-led regeneration projects in Marrakech and Fez, heritage industries have demonstrated potential for tourism-driven revitalization when linked to creative economies (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012). However, without investment in marketing, branding, and infrastructure, this potential remains underutilized.

4.3 Spatial and Environmental Challenges

Spatial analysis revealed significant urban pressures on the dye pits, including overcrowding, informal housing encroachment, and inadequate access roads. Environmental challenges, such as seasonal flooding, poor waste disposal, and limited green buffers (Plate 3), were also noted. Artisans reported that dye effluents contribute to localized pollution, exacerbating public health risks. This indicates a pressing need to embed environmental management strategies, such as green infrastructure and eco-friendly dyeing techniques, into regeneration plans.

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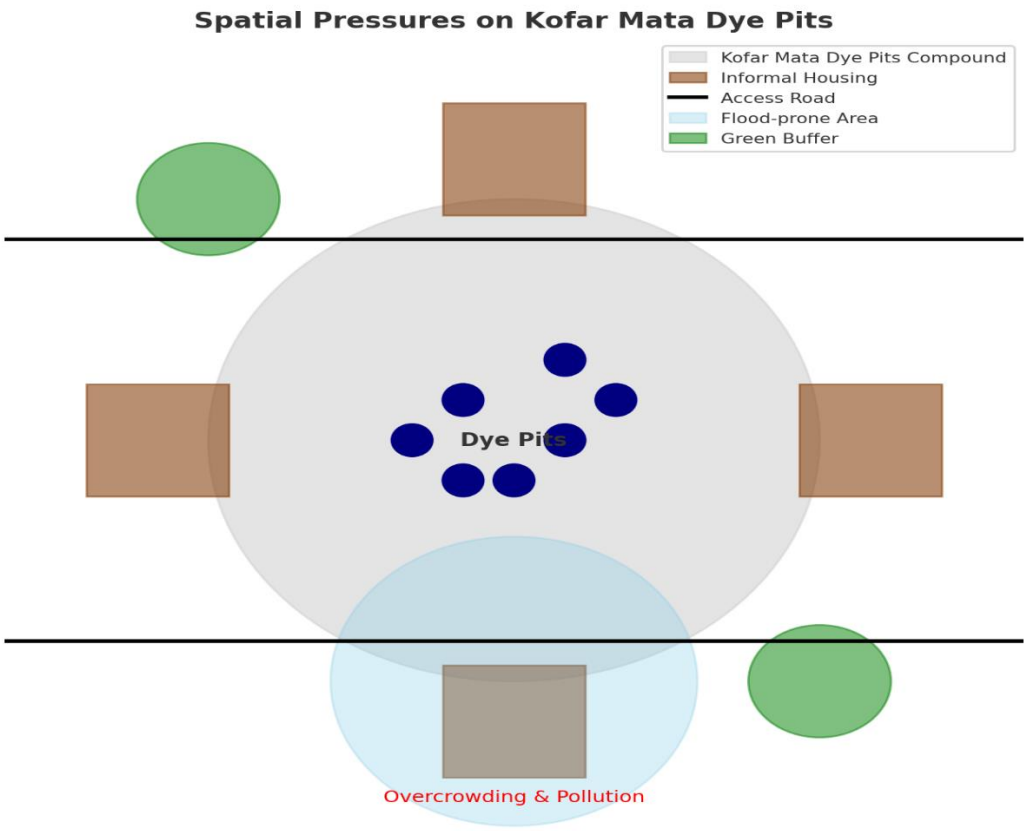


Plate 3 Here is a spatial map of the Kofar Mata dye pits, illustrating their enclosure, clustered pit arrangement, and the surrounding urban pressures, including informal housing encroachment, overcrowding, narrow access roads, flood-prone zones, limited green buffers, and localized pollution risks.

These findings corroborate earlier studies that emphasize the vulnerability of heritage sites in rapidly urbanizing African cities (Ajala, 2020). The Kofar Mata Dye Pits in Kano face challenges from urban development, environmental risks, and poor infrastructure. The site's survival depends on heritage-led urban regeneration, which integrates conservation efforts with broader planning to address these pressures and ensure its future as a vibrant part of the city.

These findings corroborate earlier studies that emphasize the vulnerability of heritage sites in rapidly urbanizing African cities (Ajala, 2020).

4.4 Opportunities for Heritage-Led Urban Regeneration

The study demonstrates significant opportunities for integrating the Kofar Mata Dye Pits into broader urban design strategies:

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a) Tourism and Cultural Economy: The dye pits could serve as a focal point for heritage tourism, particularly if supported by visitor centers, interpretive signage, and guided cultural trails. This would align Kano with global best practices where heritage-led regeneration has revitalized declining urban quarters (Tweed & Sutherland, 2007).
b) Urban Infrastructure Renewal: Upgrading drainage systems, pedestrian walkways, and public spaces around the dye pits would enhance accessibility while contributing to neighbourhood revitalization.
c) Community-Centered Planning: Empowering local artisans and residents through participatory design ensures that regeneration strategies remain culturally sensitive and socially inclusive (Healey, 2010).
d) Sustainability Integration: Embedding climate-responsive urban design—such as shading, open green spaces, and water-sensitive design—can transform the dye pits into a resilient urban landmark.

4.5 Summary of Findings

The study of the Kofar Mata Dye Pits reveals their multifaceted significance within Kano Metropolis, while also underscoring the pressing challenges and regeneration opportunities they face.

i. Cultural significance and intangible heritage. The dye pits are more than functional spaces; they are deeply interwoven with the cultural identity of Kano. Artisans and community leaders emphasized their symbolic role in preserving indigenous artisanry, spirituality, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Despite pressures of modernization, the persistence of traditional dyeing practices reflects the resilience of intangible heritage and its continued relevance for cultural identity and social cohesion.
ii. Economic relevance and livelihood support. Although large-scale patronage has declined due to industrialized textile production, the dye pits remain vital to local livelihoods. They sustain households by employing artisans, apprentices, and traders, while also supporting ancillary economic activities such as tailoring and trading. Stakeholder

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accounts illustrate the potential for tourism-driven revitalization, though this remains underutilized due to limited investment in marketing, infrastructure, and branding.

iii. Spatial and environmental challenges. Spatial analysis revealed significant urban pressures, including overcrowding, informal housing encroachment, and inadequate access roads. Environmental issues—such as flooding, poor waste management, and limited green buffers—exacerbate localized pollution, with artisans acknowledging that dye effluents contribute to public health risks. These findings highlight the vulnerability of the pits within Kano's rapidly urbanizing landscape, aligning with broader concerns about heritage erosion in African cities.

iv. Opportunities for heritage-led urban regeneration. Despite these challenges, the study identifies clear opportunities to integrate the dye pits into urban regeneration frameworks. Potential strategies include developing heritage tourism infrastructure, upgrading surrounding urban facilities, embedding community participation in regeneration planning, and incorporating climate-responsive and environmentally sustainable practices. Such interventions could reposition the dye pits as a vibrant cultural and economic landmark while preserving their historic value.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Kofar Mata Dye Pits are not only functional spaces for textile dyeing but also living heritage assets that embody the cultural identity, social memory, and economic resilience of Kano Metropolis. The pits continue to sustain livelihoods through artisanal production and informal economic networks, while also serving as a repository of intangible heritage passed down through generations. However, their survival is increasingly threatened by spatial pressures such as overcrowding, informal housing encroachment, and inadequate infrastructure, alongside environmental risks including flooding, waste mismanagement, and dye effluent pollution.

Despite these challenges, the dye pits present significant opportunities for heritage-led urban regeneration. Their cultural symbolism, coupled with potential for

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heritage tourism and creative economies, offers a pathway to reposition them as a vibrant urban landmark. This requires aligning conservation efforts with broader urban planning frameworks to ensure sustainability, inclusivity, and resilience.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Heritage Protection and Conservation: Prioritize the preservation of the Kofar Mata Dye Pits through legal protection, routine maintenance, and adaptive reuse strategies that safeguard both the physical pits and the intangible cultural heritage they represent. Integrating conservation into urban planning frameworks will ensure that modernization does not erode the authenticity and continuity of indigenous practices.
2. Tourism and Cultural Economy Development: Position the dye pits as a centrepiece of Kano's heritage tourism by developing visitor facilities, interpretive signage, and cultural trails that link the site with other historic landmarks. Collaborating with local artisans and entrepreneurs to brand and market indigo textiles as authentic Kano heritage products will enhance cultural visibility and create new income streams within the creative economy.
3. Infrastructure and Environmental Management: Upgrade drainage systems, pedestrian walkways, and access roads to improve mobility and reduce flooding risks, while integrating eco-friendly dyeing methods, waste treatment facilities, and expanded green buffers to mitigate pollution and improve spatial quality. Embedding sustainability principles into regeneration efforts will not only enhance public health but also transform the pits into a climate-resilient urban landmark.
4. Community Empowerment and Inclusive Governance: Adopt participatory planning approaches that actively engage artisans, apprentices, and residents in decision-making to ensure that

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regeneration strategies remain socially inclusive and culturally sensitive. Capacity-building programs, micro-financing for local entrepreneurs, and partnerships with educational institutions can empower communities to sustain livelihoods, transfer knowledge, and strengthen ownership of the site's future.

By embedding these recommendations within a heritage-led urban regeneration framework, the Kofar Mata Dye Pits can be safeguarded not only as a cultural landmark but also as a catalyst for sustainable economic development and urban revitalization in Kano Metropolis.

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