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Article

Unpacking Shifts of Spatial Attributes and Typologies of Urban Identity in Heritage Assessment Post COVID-19 Using Chinatown, Melbourne, as a Case Study

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Abstract: Many studies acknowledge the significance of assessment frameworks for urban heritage sites in preserving their identities. Due to the pandemic and its impact on heritage sites and visitors, the spatial features and identities of many heritage sites have undergone inevitable shifts, challenging the current assessment frameworks. As numerous urban heritage sites are being revitalised post COVID-19, this study aims to explore how heritage-assessment frameworks can be adapted during the pandemic to sustainably capture the identity of urban heritage sites, particularly from a spatial perspective. Methodologically, the study first examines existing urban-heritage-assessment frameworks, including typologies, embedded spatial attributes, and analysis methods, through a literature review. The research adopts the methodology framework for collecting and assessing evidence to demonstrate the cultural significance outlined in the 'Guidance on identifying place and object of state-level social value in Victoria' under Criterion G by the Heritage Council of Victoria. Chinatown, Melbourne, serves as the case study to address the research questions, utilising qualitative data from archival review and field observation. The results highlight the shortcomings of current heritage assessments, particularly in urban contexts, emphasising the overlooked importance of spatial attributes for understanding urban identity. This is exemplified by the exacerbated identity crisis in Chinatown, Melbourne, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the study recommends future heritage assessments incorporate spatial attributes with a thematic approach tailored to diverse cultural-heritage backgrounds in the post-pandemic era. The study acknowledges the sample size and encourages future studies to test the framework with case studies of varied backgrounds.

Keywords: urban heritage; heritage assessment; urban identity; spatial characteristics; heritage conservation; heritage-value typology

1. Introduction

Before COVID-19, many urban heritage sites were rapidly developed and gentrified, while preserving the urban identity of these sites can be challenging and may cause damage to the site [1]. COVID-19 has generated adverse effects on heritage sites and the tourism industry. As a result, urban heritage sites have undergone inevitable changes in spatial characteristics and subsequent identities, which existing frameworks often fail to capture. Before the pandemic, many studies proposed multicriteria/multifaced heritage-assessment frameworks for holistic heritage evaluations [2–6]. However, these heritage-assessment frameworks that aim to categorise all values associated with heritage sites often fail to deliver an adaptive and flexible assessment [7,8]. Fredheim and Khalaf (2016) argue that value typologies are adaptable. The value of heritage also resembles mutability, where the baselines of values often shift [9]. As heritage values shift over time, especially in the pandemic era where changes are rapid and complex, it is unlikely that making typologies that aim to cover all themes will ever be sufficient. At the same time, the World Heritage Committee and many scholars in the field argue that it is not appropriate to treat urban

heritage as isolated monuments or groups of buildings. Heritage-value typologies are recommended to cater to urban heritage sites, recognising the Outstanding Universal Value (by the World Heritage Committee) and attributes of urban heritage identity [10]. Each city or settlement should have its list of urban heritage identity attributes that inform the description of local significance and local and regional identity.

The authors of this paper argue that such a challenge in urban identity needs more attention in the post-pandemic era. This study aims to unveil whether spatial attributes should be addressed in heritage frameworks to adapt to post-pandemic heritage sites and how those features can be better incorporated to enhance cultural sustainability. Defining the identity concerns of urban heritage in the post-pandemic period is challenging without understanding how urban-identity-assessment frameworks currently address spatial characteristics. In the literature review, this study begins with exploring how current heritage frameworks address spatial characteristics that form a part of the heritage's urban identity. Chinatown, Melbourne, is incorporated as a case study to scrutinise the changes it underwent during the pandemic as an urban heritage site. This study also provides transferable implications by aligning these changes in the case study with recommendations for future heritage frameworks and suggestions on developing an adaptive typology to reflect urban identity themes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Heritage Assessment, a Value-Based Approach for Heritage Conservation

Cultural-heritage protection has evolved under broad definitions with tangible and intangible attributes over the past century. Decision-makers often decide on conservation solutions based on the heritage sites' cultural significance, primarily through a value-based assessment [11]. In the context of heritage assessment, a value-based approach is often defined as seeking to recognise and enhance significance, which can be understood as heritage values [7,12]. Keeney's book, *Value-Focused Thinking: A Path to Creative Decision-Making*, advocates for a paradigm shift in decision making, urging for a greater emphasis on eliciting values and actively pursuing goals. The book provides practical frameworks for value-focused thinking, emphasising the importance of clarifying values to generate new alternatives, which also apply to decision making in the heritage context based on values [13]. Cultural significance is a well-acknowledged concept with the Burra Charter, a 'doctrinal treaty' designed initially to convey conservation solutions in Australia, which soon became influential worldwide [14]. Accordingly, cultural significance was accepted worldwide as 'embodied in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects' [15]. Subsequently, cultural values are usually referred to as the reason for considering a heritage site significant [16,17]. The term 'attribute' describes qualities and characteristics symbolising cultural values [18]. However, scholars in the field often argue that there is a need for more systematic methods and tools for monitoring and assessing the attributes that define the cultural significance of heritage [7,17,19,20].

Consequently, value-based approaches for heritage conservation have become dominant in the discourse since the early 1900s, where conservation is viewed as a 'dynamic process of change management' [15]. According to Fredheim and Khalaf (2016), value-based approaches have been espoused to various categories of cultural heritage, including urban and rural landscapes [12,21], historic buildings [22], archaeological and historical objects, and archaeological sites [15,23]. Within the European Green Deal framework, emphasising human-centred adaptive reuse for heritage, Girard and Vecco (2021) discuss the transfer of the concept of intrinsic value from natural ecosystems to cultural-heritage sites. They suggest that integrating anthropocentric instrumental and intrinsic values should be emphasised for assessing and managing cultural heritage [24]. The approaches above induce a spotlight on understanding how heritage is valuable. A statement of significance is often formalised to address the values. Thereby, value-based frameworks often have an uncontested emphasis on what is valuable about heritage. Heritage is deemed to be signifi-

cant for many different reasons and values. A wide range of possible heritage values have been suggested in the existing research. Such lists of heritage values encompassing heritage significance are called 'value typologies', often utilised in heritage and conservation policy assessments. Some value typologies list their values and attributes, while others provide merely the values. For instance, Australia ICOMOS lists aesthetic, historical, scientific, and social as the critical attributes for heritage-value typologies [25]. Robles (2010) suggests that typological, structural, constructional, functional, aesthetic, architectural, historical, and symbolic are the crucial attributes in a value typology [26].

However, such value-based approaches and their value typologies have been criticised [8,27,28]. Some researchers argue that the value-based approach often fails because decisions are made upon an incomplete understanding of heritage and its value [3,4,29]. Many of these scholars then propose multicriteria frameworks. Some studies argue that the full context of heritage value needs to be captured using less definitive and adaptive aspects of value and value typologies [7]. For instance, by establishing a three-step value-typology framework; Fredheim and Khalaf (2016) suggest associative, sensory, evidentiary, and functional could be the four aspects of value needed to assess heritage. Studies also discuss the mutability of values and how shifting baselines might impact heritage assessments. For instance, Spennemann (2022) explores the impact of shifting baselines on community heritage studies, accentuating how individual contributors' biases and experiences can shape the identification and evaluation of heritage assets. The study advocates for a comprehensive approach involving diverse contributors and ongoing reassessment to address potential inaccuracies resulting from evolving perspectives. The role of the assessors and their epistemology of the nomination and valuation in this context is also vital and often missing in the discourse of the studies [9]. Spennemann's research in 2023 examines the suitability of futurist concepts like heritage stewardship. It recommends contemporary heritage to adopt a heritage-assessment model that positions accessors in a strategic foresight-derived future 'reality', enabling the application of standard hindsight-assessment methodology [30].

While other researchers practice a more thematic approach, where capturing all values is not the focus, but instead focusing on tackling a specific value theme through establishing value typologies and developing assessment methods. Studies support the thematic perspective by claiming the destined failure of any attempts to categorise all values [8]. Examples of these themes include aesthetic [31], economic [32], social network [33], and historic [34]. This study aims to explore the possibility of addressing the significance of urban heritage sites by adopting a thematic approach with dedication to a spatial theme which impacts urban heritage's identity.

Urban-Heritage-Assessment Methods

Variegated types of heritage require heritage assessment. Existing studies argue for the need to tailor assessment frameworks and attached value typologies in a site-specific or heritage-specific way, including for urban heritage. Gustavo Giovannoni first used the term' urban heritage' in 1931, campaigning for urban-scale heritage protection [20]. He defined a historic city as a monument and a dynamic living fabric. Then, in the World Heritage Convention 1972, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) he created a category of cultural properties named 'groups of buildings'. Since then, UNESCO has promoted a comprehensive approach to urban heritage beyond the physical environment and has incorporated social, economic, and functional dimensions [10].

In the *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, it is stated that urban heritage is often defined as the layers of historical, physical remains that constitute contemporary urban areas, that is the built heritage with architectural and historical value or the monuments of a city (churches and other religious buildings, castles, city walls, palaces, and institutional buildings) [35]. Some people also use urban heritage to denote the city as heritage, a unique cultural property mainly associated with neighbourhoods, centres, and historic cities. Urban heritage is both tangible and intangible, including the culture of the people who live in

the areas and places that are less tangible but important for articulating space and the built environment [36]. In this study, urban heritage refers to urban landscapes (historic centre, neighbourhood) with heritage values (cultural significance) from the historic buildings on site and the current use of these spaces that might have adapted to urban life. It is vital to access the spatial aspects of these sites, as they are currently being marginalised. Hence, the study focuses on the built-environment aspect of these urban heritage sites, mainly concerning spatial attributes and associated urban identity.

The UNESCO's World Heritage Centre plays a leading role in heritage conservation, along with three advisory bodies: ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property), ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), and IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature). Increasing concerns about heritage sites in urban contexts have been raised [10]. There is a need to refine methodologies that identify and evaluate changes that impact heritage sites in the dynamic urban context. Iterations of Heritage Impact Assessment have been developed to facilitate decision making in urban heritage conservation based on different value typologies, including ones created and adopted by the ICCROM, ICOMOS, and IUCN. With the ongoing revisions of the Heritage Impact Assessment being carried out by ICCROM and IUCN in cooperation with the World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS, the World Heritage Committee meeting (January 2020) suggested that there is a need to first determine urban identity attributes clearly and to establish a methodology to manage change and new development in and around heritage in the urban context. An indicative typology of Attributes of Urban Heritage Identity was developed in the meeting, acknowledging indicative elements/typologies, including the broader context, urban elements, monuments/buildings, and intangible cultural-heritage elements. However, as indicated in the above literature review, long lists with no theme are suggested as impractical, complicated, and unsuccessful for inclusivity due to their potential failure to capture all values and attributes [8]. It is also argued that heritage is increasingly complex; the traditional tangible/intangible and cultural/ natural heritage divides can be insufficient and unsustainable [7,37,38].

A recent systematic review conducted by Spennemann (2023) contributes to the definition of a 'heritage conservation area', characterising it as a spatially circumscribed collection of heritage assets with a shared theme, allowing for the application of multi-criteria assessment. The study notes that various countries use 'heritage conservation area' under different names, emphasising the common thread of spatially circumscribed and thematic heritage conservation [39]. The review highlights that many overseas jurisdictions predominantly focus on the architectural significance of included buildings, street patterns, and historical dimensions, particularly emphasising the visual appearance of 'heritage conservation areas', including those in the urban setting. Based on the review, Spennemann defines a heritage conservation area as 'an area of land recognised and valued for the collective nature of buildings and elements that distinguish it from other places and its surroundings' [39]. Extracting the essence of Spennemann's study in 2023, the authors of this study aim to examine whether the existing framework can recognise those 'distinct identities' through spatial features, reflected in the case study as an urban 'heritage conservation area'.

2.2. Heritage Assessment: A Value-Based Approach for Heritage Conservation

Research on urban identity can be traced back to the 1950s when modernist planning and architecture led cities to inheriting similar and repetitive characteristics [40]. The repetitiveness of these built environments was often coupled with a sense of losing the place's identity [41]. Hence, researchers in built-environment disciplines began to report on issues involving the identity of cities. Concepts that progress as a reaction to this phenomenon of losing distinctive place peculiarities are often regarded as the origin of urban identity. Many of these concepts are still used as alternative terms for urban identity today [42]. As Cheshmehzangi (2020a) summarises, terms of such connotation

include 'sense of place' or 'image of the city' [43], 'genius loci' [44], 'placelessness' [45], 'townscape' [46], and 'place identity' [35,47–49]. Since then, urban identity has been widely discussed in many disciplines, including urban planning, architecture, human geography, and environmental psychology [50].

Acknowledging the complexity of this concept, Cheshmehzangi (2020a) suggests that urban identity could be defined as a 'socially constructed relationship between human and his space, space and its elements, and elements with other elements'. He also reports that urban identity could be contextualised and delineated in different spatial levels by setting up a four-level framework, including the global, urban, environmental, and personal perspectives. Cheshmehzangi (2020b) employs the framework to Chinatown in Melbourne to explain urban identity in an urban-setting scale [51]. He points out that urban identity at this scale is often achieved through the visual sense, such as spatial form and architectural language, which can formulate a distinctive place. In his view, urban identity on the urban-setting scale often epitomises a particular architectural language, which cannot represent the whole city. Early fundamental literature in this field by Kevin Lynch (1960) also referred to the Little Tokyo of Los Angeles as a 'strong ethnic concentration, probably known to many people. . .as only a subsidiary portion of the city's image'. Lynch (1960) recognised that built cultural-heritage sites with distinct urban identities are often influenced by the 'intrusion' of another culture that may seem out of place, such as the two sites mentioned above. For instance, introducing a foreign culture through migration can impact the urban identity [43]. More specifically, historical and innovative buildings are suggested to affect the 'place identity' on an urban scale [41,52–55]. These studies also indicate an undeniable link between the spatial characteristics of an urban setting and its identity, which is further addressed through the case study in this article.

Official heritage-conservation guidelines also acknowledge the concept of urban identity and its underlying cultural significance, which is worth protecting. The Burra Charter 2013, established by the ICOMOS, defines cultural significance as aesthetic, historical, scientific, social, or spiritual value for past, present, or future generations, which is embodied in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places, and related objects [15]. The place is defined as 'sites, area, land, landscape, building, group of buildings and may include components, contents, spaces and views'. A study by O'Connor (2000) indicates that a 'sense of place' is deeply embedded in the heritage-assessment framework in Australian heritage-conservation guidelines, including the Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975 (amended to become the Australian Heritage Commission Act 2003 and the Guidelines for the Assessment of Place for the National Heritage List 2009) and the Burra Charter 1979 (amended to become Burra Charter 2013) [56]. In the Guidelines for the 'Assessment of Place for the National Heritage List' of the Act, the implicit depth of assessment inherent in each place is reinforced by evaluation criteria such as aesthetic, scientific, historical, and social significance, summarised as 'cultural significance'.

More specifically, in the Burra Charter 2013, 'understand the place' is placed in stage one of the steps in planning for and managing a place of cultural significance before steps two and three, namely 'develop police' and 'manage in accordance with policy'. Although conservation guidelines in Australia recognise the prominence of urban identity and its cultural significance, very few studies have attempted to formulate a framework to examine the urban identities of relevant urban heritage sites. The official criteria are also inclusive and target not only built cultural heritage but also natural cultural heritage. Although the importance of urban identity is reflected in the guidelines, evaluation methods have yet to be specified to standardise the process. Most examples in the guidelines employ descriptive text to highlight their cultural significance. Methods derived from architectural and planning perspectives could be incorporated to thoroughly examine the built cultural heritage's urban identity. Within the heritage-value typologies developed by official organisations and other researchers, urban identity is always underlined and mixed with other aspects. According to Rudolff (2006), defining the typologies to capture a range of values may be unadaptable and inflexible [8].

The above-mentioned systematic review by Spennemann (2023) also considers the two current legal frameworks for heritage protection in Victoria, Australia, including the Heritage Act 2017 and the Planning and Environment Act 1987 [39]. The review exposes that the close connection between buildings and elements in a 'heritage conservation area' generates a meaningful sense of place valued by the community and possessing cultural-heritage significance deemed worthy of preservation. The cultural significance and heritage values of such an area can stem from various factors, including historical origins, subdivision patterns, building materials, styles, age, planting elements, common uses, and layering of historical elements providing evidence of the area's development over different periods. A discussion derived from the above research concerns managing changes that allow for development but ensure it echoes the local streetscape character and respects the area's cultural significance. Spennemann's (2023) study on heritage conservation areas and attributes leads to the next part of the literature review, where more components of urban identity are unveiled.

Components of Urban Identity

Researchers have provided different conceptual understandings of urban identity. Kaymaz (2013) contends that urban identity can be evaluated from the spatial, social, cultural, and economic aspects [57]. Ziyaee (2018) conducted a literature review on existing studies that provide characterisations of urban identity [58]. Among them, the study by Smith and Relph (1978) on the characteristics of place identity includes three components: physical features and appearances, activities, and meanings and symbols [45]. With an emphasis on the physical aspect of urban identity, Ziyaee (2018) suggests that urban identity can be realised from a combined understanding of different physical urban elements, including streets, squares, buildings, public spaces, urban furniture, and sculpture [58].

Researchers often provide urban-identity frameworks that include both physical and non-physical characteristics. Lynch, in his book, *Image of the City* (1960), argues for three aspects to analyse a city's image: identity, structure, and meaning. The three characteristics created are for what Lynch defines as 'manageability'. He identifies five elements that showcase the imageability of cities: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. Although in Lynch's research five physical elements are determined as attributes of the imaginability of cities, he still emphasises meanings and emotions, which are often viewed as intangible. Ziyaee (2018) hybridises factors of place identity with the characteristic elements of the cultural landscape, presented as a matrix. With the new matrix, the study provides an analysis framework emphasising place identity from the cultural aspects of the urban settlement, derived from both physical and non-physical perspectives [58]. Punter (1991) and Montgomery (1998) also focus on attributes shaping the sense of place in urban public spaces [59,60]. Physical settings, activities, and meanings are listed by Punter (1991). Similar to Ziyaee's study (2018), Montgomery's study (1998) categorises elements determining a user's cognition of a place, including forms, activities, and images. Also, according to Carmona (2010), physical and non-physical aspects of urban identity are often interrelated [61].

Another aspect of urban identity is the soundscape, which stimulated numerous discussions during the pandemic. For urban areas at large, Lenzi et al. (2021) investigate the impact of reduced social and economic activity during the COVID-19 lockdown on the soundscape of an urban neighbourhood in the Basque Country. Perceptual analyses reveal changes in aspects such as acoustic richness, technological sounds, and sound related to indoor human activity and birdsong, emphasising the significance of the soundscape in urban design strategies. Such impact also occurs in the context of urban heritage. Spennemann and Parker (2020) address the challenge of preserving auditory heritage, including soundscapes that contribute to the cultural-heritage identity. It highlights the struggle to integrate auditory heritage into heritage legislation and management frameworks, addressing conceptual and managerial challenges. Additionally, their study discusses the impact of the pandemic on soundscapes in heritage, suggesting that the enforced silence during

lockdowns presents an opportunity to evaluate and recognise the potential heritage value of sounds that have been overlooked. Expanding into religious heritage, Spennemann (2022) furthers the discussion by highlighting the cultural significance of the church bell ringing, emphasising its role in creating a distinctive community soundscape with heritage values. The pandemic showcases the impact of individual preferences on soundscapes, underlining the need to formally acknowledge the heritage value of religious sounds within comprehensive heritage frameworks.

Other non-physical aspects of urban identity are also argued to be vital in providing a place an identity for urban heritage sites [58]. The Historic Urban Landscape approach views spatial organisation and connection as essential considerations for the intangible dimensions of urban heritage [62]. Valera (1998) claims that the social characteristics of a place take a special role in making a place a symbolic urban space. Different dimensions (e.g., traditional, temporal, behavioural, psychosocial, social, and ideological) of a built environment can influence the identity of the place [63]. Rapoport (1970) argues that people react to the environment based on their perception of the environment's meaning [64]. His approach to urban identity relies much on feelings and experiences caused by material objects for users of spaces.

Although spatial attributes are often rephrased and sorted into different themes (e.g., some components under the theme 'form' in Montgomery's framework and five elements of imageability in Lynch's framework), it is apparent that spatial attributes have an unneglectable impact on urban identity, from both tangible and intangible perspectives. In other words, urban identity comprises several aspects, including the spatial aspect. The impact could be made from tangible (e.g., spatial configuration) and intangible (e.g., spatial experience) changes. Formulating a typology of spatial attributes/characters (both tangible and intangible) of urban identity for urban heritage can add to the existing scope of the study, where spatial attributes are often mixed in the overall typology under different themes of factors. In existing studies, having the spatial attributes blended with other characteristics of urban identity limits the potential of creating a standardised and targeted conservation assessment, which can inform explicit solutions.

3. Materials and Methods

The literature review shows that current heritage-assessment frameworks, particularly those that consider the urban identity aspects of heritage sites, need more emphasis on spatial attributes. To best address the research aim, this study proposes to engage a case study with qualitative methods as the main research methodology. The methodology of this study is adopted and developed based on the suggested methods for collecting and assessing the evidence to demonstrate cultural significance in the 'Guidance on identifying place and object of state-level social value in Victoria' under Criterion G [65,66]. The Heritage Council Victoria (HCV) advises that for a place/object to be included in the Victoria Heritage Register, it must meet at least one of the following criteria (Table 1). The purpose of adopting such a suggested method by the heritage council is that the methodology framework has been practised in many local places to assess its social value, identity, and cultural-heritage significance and for possible inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register under Criterion G. Also, when looking at Chinatown in the contemporary context, Criterion G is the most suitable for a precinct that is actively being adaptively reused with social values and cultural significance. When using the framework, the focus is to, firstly, describe the evidence that demonstrates the existence of a current community or cultural group(s), including describing the community's core/distinguish characteristics; secondly, present the evidence that demonstrates the social value of a place/object to the community/cultural group(s) through the facets of time depth, intensity of attachment/association, and the nature of the community, ensuring that the connection between the place/object and the social value is evident [65].

Table 1. Criteria for inclusion in the Victoria Heritage Register by HCV.

Criterion A	Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history
Criterion B	Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history
Criterion C	Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Victoria's cultural history
Criterion D	Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places and objects
Criterion E	Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics
Criterion F	Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period
Criterion G	Strong or special association with a particular present-day community or cultural group for social, cultural, or spiritual reasons
Criterion H	Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Victoria's history

As seen in Figure 1, the HCV recommends three possible approaches, including people within the communities, representatives of the communities, and observations of the communities. As this study has a spatial focus, representatives of the communities become the focal point with maps and use place as primary evidence. The study will engage the two-step approach between direct and observed engagement. First, community websites and publications (archival review) about the precinct are scanned through. Then, on-site observation is conducted to gather evidence on the use and mapping of the site. Archival review and field observation capture the shifts in the case study during the pandemic, particularly spatial changes.
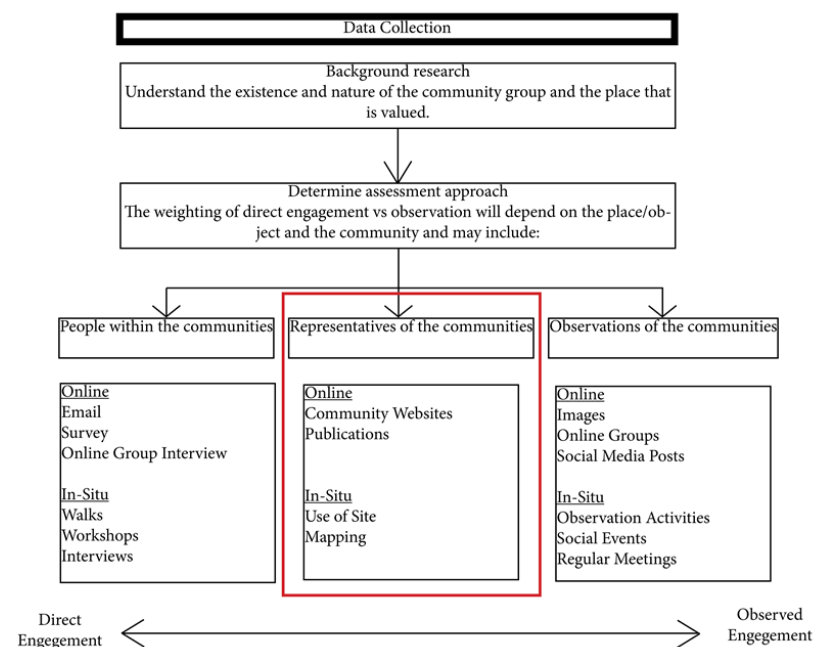
Figure 1. Suggested evidence-collection methodology framework by HCV.

In this study, Chinatown, Melbourne, is chosen as the case study due to its significant decline as an urban heritage precinct during the pandemic. Such a case study provides an opportunity to test the capability of the existing framework to capture changes, and the related adaptability of policies. The Victorian Heritage Register identifies three levels of protection from the state level (highest level of heritage significance) to the local level, namely the Victorian Heritage Register, Heritage Inventory, and Heritage Overlay [66].

With the entire precinct being recognised as having national value, most of Chinatown, Melbourne, recognised with heritage significance by Heritage Victoria, establishing the quarter as a key heritage site in Melbourne. As the precinct has been recognised with heritage significance at the national level since the 1980s, most recent heritage registrations within the precinct focus primarily on individual buildings with state-level significance [66]. Testing the precinct with Criterion G's framework in the modern context provides many new insights into how social value, cultural significance, and identity have shifted in the modern context, particularly in the era of post-pandemic revitalisation. Such an examination also provides researchers with a new layer of understanding of attachment type, intensity, and time-depth when facing adaptative reuse of the historical and commercial precinct.

Through such an examination, the study also aims to see if the current framework can capture the spatial features within the precinct and if there is a need to add such spatial measures in future frameworks. Using Chinatown, Melbourne, as a case study also provides high transferability of results, as there are many ethnic enclaves across the world possessing similarly high heritage significance, many of which underwent a decline phase due to the pandemic [67]. In terms of data collection, field observation is critical in this study, as spatial changes are hard to capture through textural evidence, such as data gathered through archival and literature review. Results of field observation are documented through field notes and photos. To provide further qualitative data, archival materials such as migration records, historical photos, maps, and the existing literature were obtained from the Victoria Heritage Register database, the Museum of Chinese Australian History, the National Library of Australia, the State Library Victoria, and the University of Melbourne.

Then, these results were analysed to scrutinise changes within the case study during COVID-19 and to observe whether the changes are effectively captured in existing frameworks, particularly from a spatial perspective. To execute the results, this study refers to the 'Guidance on identifying the place and object of state-level social value in Victoria' to support the explanation of the field observations [65]. To best interpret/determine the cultural significance of the place based on its social values, the guide recommends a three-layer approach, as presented in Figure 2, where the type of community, the intensity of attachment and the time depth are considered. The results will be presented following the three-layer approach. Archival review mostly answers the first question, while field observation and mapping studies address the second and third aspects.
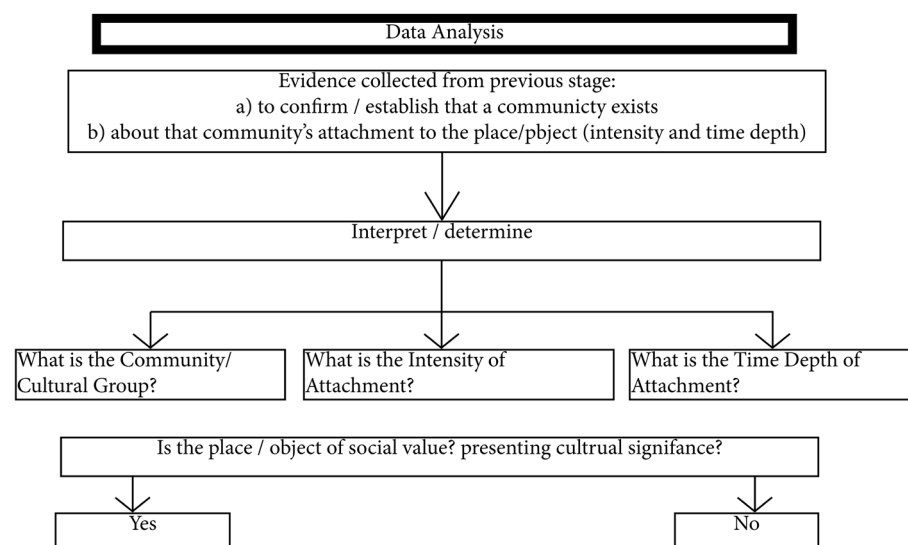

Figure 2. Suggested data analysis/interpretation framework by HCV.

Through critically analysing the results, the last step of this study is to address the research aim and to propose recommendations for future assessment frameworks on how to be more adaptable and sustainable and to better recognise the identity of urban heritage sites in complex and shifting situations concerning spatial aspects. The chosen methodology of this study from the HCV guide is labelled in red in Figure 1. One identified limitation of this study is the lack of direct engagement with the precinct users. Interviews and surveys can be engaged in future studies to collect more evidence based on direct engagement with the community in the precinct. Future research is recommended to test such a methodology framework on other heritage sites outside Victoria.

4. Case Study Results

Field observation, map analysis, and archival review methods were incorporated to comprehensively review the shifts in Chinatown, Melbourne, during the pandemic, including phenomena such as the declining of business, types of occupancy, and the spatial adaptability of the precinct. The results are also interpreted with the city council's rejuvenating strategies for the ethnic enclave. Upon looking closely at those shifts, this article addresses how existing heritage assessments are applied to the precinct and if they effectively capture those shifts during the pandemic to facilitate the building and rebuilding of the precinct's identity.

4.1. What Is the Community/Cultural Group in the Precinct?

Like many Chinatowns worldwide, Chinatown, Melbourne, was initially settled by migrants from China. However, with the urban sprawl, the number of migrants and the preference for suburban housing, more migrants prefer to live outside of Chinatown [68,69]. Cafes and specialty shops, with a clientele from diverse backgrounds, represent the most-recent post-war phase of the quarter [67,70]. Only one residential tower was observed in the precinct during the field observation. A study by Geng et al. (2023) suggests that such gentrification and change of occupancy type started in the 1940s when the precinct was claimed to be 'a place to dine for the westerns' by Chau et al. (2016) [67,71]. Then, with the removal of the White Australian Policy and the implementation of the Chinatown Historical Precinct Act and the Chinatown Action Plan, the government started to use Chinatown as an urban symbol to represent multiculturalism and tourism with a 'Chinese' character [72]. Some of the buildings in Chinatown incorporate Chinese decorative motifs, while most represent mainstream European architectural styles.

On top of financial reasons and pandemic-related policies, Geng et al. (2022) point out that the singularity of occupancy in the precinct also leads to the precinct's identity crisis. From the field observation and the map analysis, limited buildings in Chinatown, Melbourne, are associated with cultural usage. Most of the precinct is occupied by commercial activities, with restaurants as the dominant typology [67]. From the observation and archival review, this study argues that the Chinese community in Chinatown, Melbourne, no longer resides in the precinct. The Chinese community in Chinatown, Melbourne, are mostly business owners serving clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. This can be seen as one of the contributing factors to the identity crisis of Chinatown, Melbourne, where the original occupant typology shifted its role from residents to business owners, who only run Chinese-themed businesses in the precinct that aim to attract customers from all cultural backgrounds. Post pandemic, the identity crisis is primarily intertwined with the precinct's ability to attract business owners and customers.

4.2. What Is the Intensity of Attachment?

The intensity of the Chinese attachment remains high, as most businesses are owned and run by Chinese people. Apart from most of the restaurants and shops serving Chinese cuisine and selling Chinese goods, most of the cultural-related dwellings resemble a Chinese background, such as Chinese churches, museums, and regional associations in the precinct [67]. The field observation and archival review show these destinations are popular

among local Chinese people. It is interesting to see the different types and intensities of attachment co-existing in the precinct [73]. On one hand, non-cultural-related functions, such as restaurants, aim to attract customers from all backgrounds inclusively; on the other hand, cultural-related functions possess attachment with local Chinese people.

A different level of density is also evident during the map analysis (see Figure 3). As a heritage precinct, a need for more emphasis on cultural functions is identified during the field observation. The Victorian Heritage Register does not confine buildings to specific usage. As seen in the filed observation, only three (the Chinese Mission Church, Her Majesty's Theatre, and the Num Pon Soon Society) of the seven Victorian Heritage Register buildings within the enclave still possess cultural functions. Located at the end of the precinct, Her Majesty's Theatre does not necessarily reflect any Chinese-related cultural themes. The limited cultural usage of identified heritage buildings and the tourism focus of the precinct are causing unclear strategies targeting different types of attachment groups. This brings us back to the issue of an identity crisis. Particularly during the pandemic, when tourists were not visiting the precinct, and with limited residents the precinct has undergone a decline in commercial activity [67,74]. Despite the decline during the pandemic, the intensity of Chinese business owners remains the predominant type of attachment within the precinct.

Figure 3. Map analysis with information on Heritage Inventory and Victorian Heritage Register (source: author SG).

4.3. What Is the Time Depth of Attachment?

The precinct has had a long history of occupation by Chinese migrants. Geng et al. (2023) elucidate that Chinatown, Melbourne's, urban identity has undergone radical changes due to non-organic cultural and identity shifts set by the authorities. Their study scrutinises the precinct's urban identity evolution through key phases, ranging from the 'slum' lounging house area and fruit wholesale market to the current heritage ethnic enclave. The current urban identity of the precinct is primarily built upon the pursuit of the original Chinatown Action Plan 1985 with some modifications, where the precinct is now a multicultural enclave with various functionalities, including entertainment, hospitality, and some cultural activities that suit visitors and locals. Throughout the history of Chinatown, Melbourne,

the attachment of Chinese residents has been relatively lower than before. However, the Chinese business owner's attachment to the precinct remains high [67,70].

Occasionally, the precinct is used as a gathering spot for Chinese festival events (Figure 4) [70]. Limited spaces within the precinct are occupied with cultural usage in the long term. Although the most-recent direction given by the government in the 1980s suggested Chinatown, Melbourne, should act as a multicultural tourism spot, the precinct nowadays is still mostly that it is 'a place to dine', which has faced a significant decline during the pandemic. However, when the precinct is used to celebrate Chinese festivals, the intensity of the attachment peaks, often causing traffic congestion. According to the official website of Chinatown, Melbourne, (run by the Chinatown Precinct Association), the Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn festivals are the most celebrated festivals. The Melbourne Dai Loong Association performed dragon dances during those two festivals on Little Bourke Street [75].

Figure 4. Lunar New Year gathering in Chinatown, Melbourne, outside Cohen Place (source: author SG).

Overall, the precinct is well-known, with a prolonged history of having Chinese attachment. The challenge of revitalising the precinct is to maintain the Chinese attachment and culturally sustain such an attachment. Having such a long time depth of Chinese attachment can be a double-edged sword. The intensity and time depth can be used well to enhance tourist attraction. However, such prolonged history and cultural resonance can be constraining for business owners.

Undeniably, Chinese attachment has a great time-depth influence and attachment with the precinct. However, the type of attachment has indeed shifted throughout the year. Now, Chinese cultural events only happen occasionally every year [75]. With most of the precincts functioning as commercial precincts, the question now concerns less about the residents with Chinese backgrounds and business owners and more about clients from all cultural backgrounds. Further research can look into the precinct's client profile and attachment level.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Precinct's Value and Identity Based on the HCV Framework

Based on the three aspects above as part of HCV's framework for Creation G, it is undoubted that Chinese people are the predominant attached community to the precinct. However, this study finds that Chinatown, Melbourne's, attachment group, intensity, and time depth have changed dramatically throughout the precinct's history. Currently, the

precinct only acts as a cultural gathering spot during Chinese festivals. Limited dwellings resemble cultural functions. With the precinct having been acknowledged as a place with national-level heritage significance a long time ago, it is not facing the issue of not being recognised with heritage value and cultural significance. With the relative flexibility of adaptive reuse, the Chinese cultural background becomes a double-edged sword, causing blurring of recognition of its cultural significance. The precinct is celebrated with unique cultural significance and is constrained on some level. The identity crisis is significantly related to the current mixed type of attachment, where people with Chinese backgrounds are mainly business owners trying to attract visitors of all backgrounds. The precinct faces a severe identity crisis with limited residents and pandemic-related low visitor levels. A question that needs to be answered is whether when facing revitalisation during the pandemic, is the precinct opening to attached business owners with no Chinese background, or is it trying to maintain the current typology and attract more visitors?

This study also finds that the current framework needs to capture the spatial and architectural aspects of the precinct. The depth of the framework could be improved. Constraints and opportunities generated by the spatial setting of the precinct have yet to be identified using the framework provided, as it is mostly ignoring the architectural or built-environment features. The framework is also designed for places and objects, which is a deemed limitation. Referring to the literature review, as Spennemann (2023) elucidates in his definition of the historical conservation area, the spatial aspects of the precinct's identity also contribute significantly to the place's overall identity and heritage value [30]. Historical conservation areas' cultural significance and heritage values can stem from factors, including historical origins, subdivision patterns, building materials, styles, age, planting elements, and common uses, which are not identified in the existing framework tested in this study.

5.2. Aspects That the Current Framework Fails to Capture

Spatially, the adaptability of spaces in the precinct is low [73]. As observed in the maps, the precinct layout has mostly stayed the same due to the Hoddle Grid layout of Melbourne City. Throughout the years, small-scale layout renovations have been implemented in Chinatown, Melbourne, including widening pedestrian pathways and opening/closing laneways [73]. The original Chinatown Action Plan (1985) suggests that Chinatown, Melbourne, is set to be a valley-type precinct with low- to medium-rise buildings and narrow laneways on the side of the main street (Little Bourke Street). The grid layout restricts the flexibility of large-scale renovations in the precinct, such a plan set by the 1985 Action Plan remains unchanged [76]. With the restrictions of extensive spatial renovations in the precinct, the rejuvenation of the precinct largely relies on temporary installations and events under the top-down lead of the local government's initiatives.

A recent council media release in 2022 mentions that a night market is introduced in the precinct on Heffernan Lane, one of the only laneways that is open-ended and wide enough to accommodate the night market vendors/stools (Figure 5) [77]. Also, the outdated guidelines/identity strategies are contributing to the identity crisis of the precinct. Due to the rigidity of the grid layout, the local council has been actively implementing strategies to rejuvenate the area. However, there needs to be more emphasis on the identity development of the precinct. Most of the strategies are temporary and focus on the decorative features of the precinct (Figure 6). For instance, one recent implementation in 2023 was the streetlamp installation, which received 1.5 million in funding from the local government [75].

In 2021, Spennemann explored the nature and range of built-ups linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, including aspects of its containment and management. The study delves into both permanent and temporary structures developed as a result of the pandemic, including permanent structures and sites, temporary (ephemeral) emergency hospitals, facility extensions, testing facilities, border-control stations, morgues, and cremation grounds (Spennemann, 2021). The study argues that the ephemeral structures cannot be preserved

as heritage items and need to be documented while in operation to provide strategies only after the structures become obsolete. Limited spaces within the precinct were transformed into permanent or temporary sites for COVID-19-related functions. However, the discussion between permanent and temporary renovation applies to Chinatown, Melbourne. Many current implementations in the precinct may have an ephemeral nature due to their decorative and temporary nature.

Figure 5. Heffernan Lane night market (source: author SG).

Figure 6. Lunar New Year theme decoration on Tattersalls Lane (source: author SG).

From the field observation and archival review, spatial shifts in Chinatown, Melbourne, are usually the last to occur after business or occupancy changes decline, as spatial changes require layers of approval by the local authorities. With the existing Hoddle grid layout of the Melbourne City area, significant changes in spatial layout are often constrained [70,78,79]. The existing laneways are also viewed as hidden treasures, but spatially, it is difficult for shopfronts to attract new visitors. Secondly, organic change can occur, but most buildings are protected under Heritage Victoria with minimal modifications allowed. Under the heritage-protection restrictions, the heritage façades must usually be preserved with no changes allowed. This means the distance between the shopfronts and the main road can hardly be changed without changing the pedestrian pathways. This also relates to the case study results. Spatial constraints must be considered when establishing identity-development strategies for the precinct's revitalisation. However, the opportunities brought by the existing spatial layout can also add to the precinct's identity.

The current heritage guidelines mainly provide restrictions to maximise the preservation of the original precinct's external features on the main street. Limited studies look at the internal occupancy and layout of the side laneways, contributing to the precinct's overall identity building. Spatial changes and identity shifts in Chinatown are usually interrelated and cannot be viewed separately in this case study. Most studies address heritage-preservation policies and focus on individual buildings or facades. There is a lack of heritage guidelines and assessment frameworks that address the adaptive reuse of the area in dual consideration of the heritage image and spatiality of the precinct.

5.3. A Magnifying Factor of the Identity Crisis of Chinatown, Melbourne: COVID-19

In March 2020, as daily COVID-19 cases exceeded 200 in Australia, the national response was initiated, involving the implementation of social distancing and lockdown measures [72,80]. As cases rose, all states implemented partial lockdowns in their first-wave response. In most states, non-essential businesses closed, retail remained open, and cafes and restaurants operated through takeaway services [81]. Compared to other states, Victoria had the most stringent measures in response to the second wave of COVID-19, marked by school closures, business shutdowns, and travel restrictions, including a night-time curfew. Throughout this period, Melbourne became the most-locked-down city, significantly impacting the local hospitality industry [81,82]. The national border closure began in March 2020, with reopening starting in December 2020 and concluding only in March 2023, targeting travel to and from various regions worldwide at different stages. With border closures at both national and state levels and lockdown strategies in Melbourne, the impact on the hospitality industry has been amplified [80]. As Chinatown, Melbourne, relies primarily on the hospitality business, the impact of the pandemic on the precinct is magnified.

In particular, the food practices and habits of Australians have shifted greatly due to the pandemic [83]. Online meal ordering is gaining popularity and becoming a common practice in Australia [84]. Han and Liu-Lastres (2022) argue that it is critically important that restaurateurs understand predictors of consumers' dining behaviours to better foster strategies to recover their revenue [82]. The pandemic is, hence, a discriminating factor in the use and revitalisation of the urban heritage precinct that relies heavily on food services. As the restaurant is the predominant business type in Chinatown, Melbourne, declining businesses in the precinct are inevitable [72]. Moving away from COVID-19, business types in Chinatown can be diversified to help the precinct become more resilient and adaptable [2]. The common identity crisis for Chinatowns around the world existed long before COVID-19. Both the intensity and the time depth of the Chinese attachment have evolved. After the pandemic, many studies argue that such concerns in global Chinatowns are becoming more confronting. Evidence shows that such an identity crisis results from multifaceted factors. Geng et al. (2022) unveil that a decline in shopfront occupancy has occurred in Chinatown, Melbourne, during COVID-19 [70]. Combining the results presented in Section 4.1 with the fading of local residents, the precinct is primarily a commercial district that utilise

the Chinese background as a key business/tourism attraction. The types of communities attached to the precinct are blurred by the indistinguishable backgrounds of the visitors and singular cultural background of business owners. From the results, this study finds that the pandemic has amplified the identity crisis of Chinatown, Melbourne, which is interrelated with both the tangible and intangible values of the area.

5.4. Suggestions for Future Framework

With the current assessment framework focusing on individual buildings, capturing changes in the precinct is difficult. A recent study by Geng et al. (2023) suggests that Chinatown, Melbourne, has undergone radical spatial changes since the last official guideline, published in 1985 [67]. The protection of precincts should be emphasised in any existing policies or assessment frameworks. The city council does play a leading role in guiding the protection of the Chinatown heritage precinct. External experts are consulted occasionally during major heritage renovations. For instance, the gateway renovation was completed with the assistance of the University of Melbourne. Seemingly, no systematic guideline or assessment framework targets Chinatown, Melbourne. With its unique cultural background, applying a uniform framework to Chinatown, Melbourne, can result in more-apparent heritage-protection principles. Developing a separate set of heritage-protection guidelines for the precinct can also be challenging. As seen from the existing studies, a thematic approach can provide a feasible solution to such an issue, where key themes or features are extracted to form a guideline for heritage protection. With the lack of such direction/theme, the identity crisis of Chinatown, Melbourne, is leading the precinct to become a tourist district with no cultural emphasis. Occasionally, individual standalone buildings or precinct features are conserved or renovated. Spennemann (2023) also asserts that Victoria is the first state in Australia to enact heritage legislation, but the act pivots around stand-alone buildings (Historic Buildings Act of 1974) [39]. A clear guideline is needed to provide a thematic direction, which can negatively impact the precinct's overall identity building and ease the identity crisis amplified by the pandemic.

As seen from the case study, the current assessment framework does not sufficiently capture the changes and decline of the precinct, resulting in unclear directions for identity restoration and development in the precinct [2]. From the case study, major spatial changes have not occurred due to the pandemic. However, as Geng et al. (2022) discussed, spatial changes in the precinct happen as an accumulation of events/policies [73]. It is essential to capture the spatial changes on an urban level to better the heritage-protection process, including retaining and developing the precinct's identity. From the literature review and case study results, instead of categorising values as tangible/intangible, this study proposes to use a thematic approach and focus on the spatial attributes of urban identity on an urban heritage scale for urban heritage precincts like Chinatown, Melbourne. Unlike traditional heritage-assessment approaches, where attributes in the value typology must reach a certain length/complexity to capture all values, this study suggests urban heritage precincts should focus on a thematic perspective [85]. Different from looking at a standalone heritage building, urban heritage precincts can be more complex as both the urban factor and the heritage factor need to be thoroughly addressed [39]. It is often common to see urban heritage sites being heavily involved in adaptive reuses. Therefore, sustaining their identity is ever more critical to ensure the cultural sustainability of these urban heritage sites. Hence, to capture the overall urban spatial identity, the authors of this study recommend similar heritage sites to incorporate a thematic approach for heritage assessment where spatiality can be one of the themes [86]. To address the spatial theme attributes such as the spatial layout, street network, architectural typology, building characteristics, public spaces, urban policies, mobility, and citizens' perceptions can be examined [73]. However, the choice of attributes should be site-specific to ensure the openness and adaptability of the thematic approach assessment.

6. Conclusions

To conclude, this study first investigates current value-based heritage assessments, particularly those addressing urban heritage. Within the scope of heritage assessment for urban sites, spatial attributes impacting the site's urban identity have often been neglected. The literature review reveals that assessment frameworks attempting to capture all aspects of a heritage site often fail due to a lack of focus, thus advocating for a thematic approach when addressing identity issues. Examining the identity and value shifts of Chinatown, Melbourne, during the pandemic within the HCV framework, the study finds that the identity crisis is exacerbated by a blurred distinction among the communities associated with the precinct. This stems from the indistinguishable backgrounds of visitors and the singular cultural background of business owners. The intensity and time depth of their attachment have also evolved. The study argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified this identity crisis, revealing its interconnectedness with both tangible and intangible values within the area, such as spatial constraints, architectural aspects, and the impact on the hospitality industry.

To address the research aim, this study concludes that investigating spatial characteristics and attached urban identity is vital for urban heritage sites, especially those adapted to modern functions in complex urban settings in the post-pandemic era. Although mapping and functionalities are involved in the methodology, the current HCV framework does not capture the spatial features of the case study well. A site-specific understanding of spatial characteristics and the embedded identity can facilitate policymakers in making better conservation and adaptation decisions. Hence, the study suggests that future heritage-assessment typologies incorporate spatial attributes with a thematic approach, which can adapt to different heritage sites considering their identity pursuits. The current assessment framework is criticised for not adequately capturing spatial and architectural elements, leading to suggestions for a thematic approach to heritage assessment that considers both tangible and intangible aspects, especially in the context of urban heritage precincts like Chinatown, Melbourne. Future studies are encouraged, to test the framework in case studies of different cultural-heritage backgrounds.

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