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Article

Adaptive Reuse of Russian-Influenced Religious Architecture in Harbin: Architectural Identity and Heritage Tourism

Se Yan [1], Shiran Geng [2], Hing-Wah Chau [2,*], Tian Wang [3,*], Elmira Jamei [2] and Zora Vrcelj [2]

1 Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC 3052, Australia; sey@student.unimelb.edu.au

2 Institute of Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, Victoria University, Melbourne, VIC 3011, Australia; shiran.geng@vu.edu.au (S.G.); elmira.jamei@vu.edu.au (E.J.); zora.vrcelj@vu.edu.au (Z.V.)

3 School of Architecture and Design, Harbin Institute of Technology, Key Laboratory of Cold Region Urban and Rural Human Settlement Environment Science and Technology, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Harbin 150006, China

* Correspondence: hing-wah.chau@vu.edu.au (H.-W.C.); t_wanghit@163.com (T.W.)

Abstract: Adaptive reuse is a widely employed strategy for heritage conservation and management, especially within the context of heritage tourism. However, its application to religious architecture presents unique challenges that have not been thoroughly explored. In Harbin, a city in northeastern China known for its Russian-influenced heritage, many abandoned religious-affiliated buildings have been repurposed for other functions. Such transformations raise concerns about how the architectural features and the functionalities of these buildings have been preserved and reused. This study investigates the adaptive reuse strategies applied to Russian-influenced religious buildings in Harbin, focusing on how these strategies impact architectural preservation and sustainable heritage tourism development. It begins by documenting the distinctive architectural styles of Russian-influenced religious buildings in Harbin, followed by a detailed analysis of the selected case studies. The study evaluates the current conditions and uses of these buildings, identifying both the opportunities and constraints of adaptive reuse. The findings reveal a balance between preserving external architectural features and adapting interior spaces to accommodate various functions, particularly in sacred-to-secular transformations. This study highlights the complexities of reconciling historical authenticity with economic viability by comparing sacred-to-sacred adaptations—which retain community relevance—with sacred-to-secular conversions—which prioritise cultural utility. It further examines how historical events and the Western and Chinese conservation dichotomy shape current adaptive reuse practices and preservation priorities in Harbin, offering broader insights into balancing cultural symbolism and functionality in heritage tourism. The findings provide valuable recommendations for policymakers to optimise adaptive reuse practices in religious heritage buildings, ensuring the preservation of architectural identities while supporting sustainable heritage tourism.

Keywords: architectural conservation; cultural heritage management; Russian colonisation; religious building preservation; heritage tourism strategy; sacred-to-sacred; sacred-to-secular

1. Introduction

Adaptive reuse has become a key topic in heritage conservation, enabling historic buildings to fulfil various functions while retaining their architectural and cultural essence. Douglas (2006) defines adaptive reuse as any work carried out to a building, beyond maintenance, to change its capacity, function, or performance [1]. However, religious heritage sites present distinct challenges, as their symbolic and spiritual significance often complicates their transformation for contemporary use. The adaptive reuse of heritage buildings with religious significance is a growing trend in heritage adaptations globally. Such practices allow for the sustainable preservation of historical sites by integrating new functionalities that meet contemporary social and economic needs. However, the adaptive reuse

of religious buildings presents unique challenges due to their symbolic nature, spatial configurations, and historical contexts. This trend has been partly driven by the increasing vacancy of religious heritage sites, often caused by declining congregations, changing societal values, and shifts in urban development patterns. Repurposing these sites for alternative uses, for example, as community spaces, cultural centres, or commercial venues, addresses these vacancies and fosters economic sustainability [2,3]. The transformation of these religious sites is beneficial for heritage tourism but poses significant challenges in maintaining their architectural and cultural integrity. Understanding the impact of adaptive reuse on such historically and culturally significant buildings is essential for informing future heritage strategies. Heritage buildings also serve as critical assets for preserving cultural identity and promoting sustainable development [4,5]. Heritage buildings are structures that embody historical, cultural, architectural, or social significance, warranting preservation for their value to society [6]. Liang et al. (2023) also suggest that heritage buildings are not solely defined by their physical attributes but also by their intangible associations, including cultural narratives, community identity, and historical context [6]. Meanwhile, heritage tourism plays a pivotal role in economic regeneration and cultural preservation, with experiential engagement, destination branding, and community involvement emerging as key strategies used to balance conservation with adapted demands [7–9]. This context is particularly relevant in regions where colonial influences have shaped distinctive architectural legacies, such as the Russian-influenced religious buildings in Harbin, China. The city of Harbin offers a unique example of adaptive reuse that reflects a confluence of cultural and historical influences. Harbin, the provincial capital of Heilongjiang Province, emerged as a key junction city on the Chinese Eastern Railway in the early 1900s. Russian migrants had a significant impact on the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation of the city. Russian features can be identified from Harbin's architectural profile, which is unique compared to other Chinese cities. Among Harbin's architectural structures, religious buildings such as churches, synagogues, and mosques stand as significant cultural landmarks that reflect Harbin's historical role as a meeting point of Eastern and Western cultures. In particular, churches and synagogues were mostly built during the Russian colonial period from 1898 to 1931. The city's architectural heritage has faced challenges over time due to political changes, economic development, and shifts in tourism dynamics, which have affected the use and preservation of these religious structures. As a result, numerous religious buildings in Harbin have been subject to substantial changes in use, transforming from active places of worship to cultural venues and tourist attractions [10].

Heritage tourism has become a core aspect of Harbin's economic and cultural profile, with Russian-influenced religious buildings serving as prominent attractions. Recent tourism statistics indicate that Harbin received 135 million tourists in 2023, generating a revenue of CNY 169.245 billion, demonstrating the city's growing appeal as a heritage destination [11]. While architectural preservation contributes significantly to this growth, its impact is amplified through strategic planning and marketing efforts. In particular, Harbin demonstrates how content-driven operational strategies have advanced urban renewal and tourism development. By utilising both online-generated content and user-generated content, the city has effectively integrated its architectural landmarks, such as the Saint Sophia Cathedral, into its broader tourism narrative. These efforts, combined with flagship events like the Harbin Ice and Snow Festival, position the city's architectural heritage as a central element of its identity [12]. This approach highlights the convergence of adaptive reuse, heritage conservation, and strategic marketing, creating a framework for cultural tourism.

This strategic integration of architectural landmarks within Harbin's tourism narrative highlights the pivotal role of adaptive reuse in transforming Russian-influenced religious buildings into culturally and economically significant assets. Recognising the importance of these buildings in the heritage and tourism scene, this study focuses on understanding how adaptive reuse strategies have been applied to Russian-influenced religious buildings in Harbin and analyses the balance between preserving architectural identity and accommodating new uses. Through a comprehensive examination of key case stud-

ies, this research seeks to contribute to the discourse on heritage conservation by offering insights into the opportunities and constraints of adaptive reuse in the context of Harbin's culturally complex and historically rich environment.

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the distinctive architectural styles of Russian-influenced religious buildings in Harbin, and how do they contribute to the city's historical identity?
2. What adaptive reuse strategies have been applied to Russian-influenced religious buildings in Harbin, and what are their current functionalities?
3. What are the challenges and opportunities associated with repurposing Russian-influenced religious buildings in Harbin for sustainable heritage tourism and cultural development?

To address these questions, this study employs a qualitative approach that incorporates archival research, case study analysis, and field observations. By evaluating the adaptive reuse of religious buildings in Harbin, the research assesses the effectiveness of these strategies in preserving architectural identity and fostering sustainable heritage tourism, while providing an overview of the different reuse strategies and typologies within the city.

2. Literature Review

Research on adaptive reuse can be categorised into several themes, including architectural preservation, social and cultural sustainability, and the adaptive reuse of religious heritage sites, the latter being particularly significant due to the unique challenges posed by their spiritual and cultural values associated with such sites. Among these, religious heritage sites present distinct challenges, as their adaptive reuse must balance the preservation of spiritual and cultural values with the need for functional transformation. Misirlisoy and Günçe (2016) argue that a holistic approach is crucial in adaptive reuse projects, ensuring that new uses respect and maintain the original cultural and historical value of heritage sites [13]. Plevoets and Van Cleempoel (2011) further emphasise the importance of integrative strategies in adaptive reuse, highlighting the need to balance functionality and cultural significance to ensure heritage sites retain their historical identity [14]. Malhotra and Dobriyal (2023) explore how the adaptive reuse of heritage architecture can be leveraged as a sustainable development tool, highlighting its impact on cultural preservation and social engagement [15]. Yarza Pérez and Verbakel (2022) address how the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings can promote social inclusion and preserve cultural values, offering a framework for assessing heritage significance and community impact [16]. Foster (2019) suggests incorporating circular economy principles into adaptive reuse strategies to strengthen the sustainability of heritage tourism. By minimising environmental impacts and promoting resource efficiency, these strategies can enhance the long-term viability of heritage sites [17]. This approach is highly relevant for Russian-influenced religious buildings in Harbin, which serve as symbols of the city's distinctive architectural and multicultural identity, in need of a sustainable heritage tourism future [18]. However, Nasser (2003) points out that the integration of technology in heritage tourism should be managed carefully to prevent the loss of authenticity and cultural value in heritage sites [19]. While previous studies have explored the impact of adaptive reuse in the heritage field with reference to current technologies, there is limited research on its effectiveness in balancing preservation with adaptive reuse, particularly in the context of religious and cultural significance. To address these gaps, this review examines the interplay of these challenges and strategies through the following four key themes: sustainability and community engagement, the dichotomy of interior and exterior preservation, the philosophical tension between Western and Chinese conservation frameworks, and the contextual gaps in the adaptive reuse of religious heritage in Harbin.

2.1. Sustainable Adaptive Reuse

Sustainable development is a central concern in the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings, particularly in urban environments where the reuse of existing structures can con-

tribute to environmental sustainability and economic growth [20]. In Harbin, adaptive reuse initiatives can align with broader sustainable development objectives by reducing the need for new constructions and minimising the environmental impact of heritage conservation projects. Mazzetto and Vanini (2023) discuss how policy-driven approaches to heritage conservation in Saudi Arabia have successfully integrated adaptive reuse into the country's sustainable development goals [21]. Similar strategies can be adopted in other heritage sites by embedding sustainable development objectives within heritage conservation policies, ensuring that the adaptive reuse of religious buildings supports both cultural preservation and urban revitalisation. Triratma et al. (2023) provide a strategy for the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings based on sustainable architecture principles, using the De Tjolomadoe building in Indonesia as a case study [22]. Grecchi (2022) also accentuates the importance of stakeholder engagement and community participation in achieving sustainable outcomes in adaptive reuse projects [23]. Furthermore, Ramirez-Guerrero et al. (2024) emphasise the role of territorial and community factors in successful adaptive reuse, noting that the inclusion of local stakeholders and alignment with territorial strategies enhance sustainability and cultural relevance [24].

Community engagement is pivotal in preserving the values of disused religious heritage buildings, which often require solutions that address emotional, spiritual, and functional needs. Aigwi et al. (2019) emphasise that collaborative processes catalyse urban regeneration and empower communities. Religious heritage buildings highlight the interplay of sustainability and community engagement [25]. The adaptive reuse of religious heritage buildings in contexts affected by conflict or social change poses unique challenges in preserving both tangible and intangible heritage values [26]. Franco (2024) argues that the adaptive reuse approach for religious buildings needs to respect the material integrity and the spirit of the place while promoting sustainability and cultural continuity [27]. Goyvaerts and Vande Keere (2020) suggest that adaptive reuse religious projects, such as the transformation of the St. Odulphus Church in Belgium into a columbarium, not only need to preserve architectural and liturgical values but also engage communities by offering renewed spiritual and communal functions [28]. Jordan (2023) expands this view by discussing how religious practices have adapted to new spatial contexts, maintaining religious engagement through architectural reconfiguration [29]. Reusing religious heritage sites often involves complex challenges, such as balancing conservation with new uses and navigating socio-political and ethical issues, especially in the case of faith-to-faith conversion [2]. This tension is evident in the transformation of churches to mosques in politically charged regions, where adaptive reuse can disrupt existing identities and create conflicts over the ownership and interpretation of heritage sites [2]. This is particularly crucial for buildings that have experienced multiple transformations, as each new use can impact the preservation of their original cultural significance in a sustainable way [30].

2.2. Interior and Exterior of Heritage Buildings

The dichotomy between the interior and exterior of heritage has long been a central debate in conservation literature. Traditional practices often prioritise the preservation of exteriors, particularly façades, due to their high symbolic and public value. Exteriors are regarded as critical for maintaining the historical and visual continuity of heritage buildings, a principle reflected in the Burra Charter's emphasis on safeguarding cultural significance through conservation [31–33]. Scholars have increasingly argued for the equal importance of interior preservation in maintaining the holistic architectural and cultural narrative aspects of heritage sites. Interiors frequently embody the functional essence and symbolic meanings of a building, as well as its decorative elements and spatial configurations. Misirlisoy and Günçe (2016) identify the challenges of preserving interior spaces which often undergo significant alterations to meet functional requirements [13]. Plevoets and Van Cleempoel (2015) explore the 'interior approach' in adaptive reuse, emphasising a strategy that respects the original memory and interiority of a building while creatively integrating new uses, to avoid sharp contrasts and promote a more generous, empathetic evo-

lution of heritage sites [34]. The systematic literature review by Vafaie et al. (2023) further confirms that preservation efforts must include interior aspects to achieve truly sustainable adaptive reuse [32]. Adaptive reuse projects often reveal tensions between preserving historical authenticity and accommodating contemporary uses. Exterior preservation typically maintains the building's public identity, while interior transformations are driven by new functions, sometimes at the expense of historical integrity [14,34]. Langston and Shen (2007) stress the importance of comprehensive value assessments during the early stages of reuse projects to weigh the relative significance of interior and exterior features [20]. These assessments enable decision-makers to prioritise heritage values in alignment with project goals and constraints. To address these tensions, dynamic conservation approaches have emerged, such as insertion, intervention, and installation, which allow for reversible modifications while respecting the heritage values of interiors and exteriors [35]. Collaborative decision-making, emphasised by Aigwi et al. (2019), further helps balance functional adaptation and historical preservation by integrating diverse stakeholder perspectives [25]. Examples of adaptive reuse that respect original layouts and symbolic spatial divisions include the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, which was converted into a heritage site with minimal spatial alterations, and the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, which retained its central nave and dome despite its transitions in religious use. Similarly, the Pantheon in Rome has been preserved in its original form while accommodating new functions. These cases demonstrate how adaptive reuse can maintain architectural integrity and cultural symbolism, serving as models for balancing preservation and functionality.

2.3. Western vs. Chinese Heritage Conservation Philosophies

The tension between Western and Chinese conservation philosophies remains a focal point in contemporary heritage practices, especially regarding adaptive reuse. Western frameworks, such as the Venice Charter (1964) and the Burra Charter (2000), prioritise material authenticity, minimal intervention, and the preservation of historical fabric, emphasising tangible heritage [31,36]. Chinese conservation, deeply influenced by cultural traditions and philosophies like Taoism and Confucianism, values visual coherence, functionality, and cultural continuity, which are often expressed through practices like rebuilding and repair, where material substitution is permissible to sustain symbolic and functional significance [37]. Key distinctions between these philosophies lie in their conceptualisation of authenticity, intervention, and integrity. Western approaches advocate for preserving original materials and ensuring minimal alteration, reflecting the ethos of permanence and historical spatial context [38]. Conversely, Chinese methodologies view cultural authenticity as paramount, prioritising the 'spirit of place' and cultural relevance over strict material preservation. This perspective is evident in frameworks like the 'China Principles' (2000, revised in 2015), which incorporate traditional restoration techniques, such as flexible timber architecture, while increasingly aligning with international norms [18,39]. Efforts to bridge these philosophical divides include documents like the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), which recognises the plurality of cultural contexts in defining authenticity [40]. The Qufu Declaration reinforces this by advocating for restoration practices that respect traditional materials and methods while embracing socio-economic goals and adaptability [39,41,42]. For example, Zhu (2012) highlights how Chinese conservation practices emphasise intangible heritage, underscoring the spiritual and functional essence of heritage sites [42]. These approaches stand in contrast to Western minimal intervention doctrines, reflecting broader cultural philosophies of impermanence and renewal [43]. Adaptive reuse presents a pathway to harmonise these diverse philosophies, as it facilitates the integration of heritage within contemporary contexts while respecting global conservation standards. Comparative studies, such as those examining urban conservation in Qingyan, China, and Chester, England, illustrate how shared challenges, like balancing economic development with heritage preservation, can foster cross-cultural learning [37,41–43]. These endeavours highlight the evolving nature of conservation as a field, one that increasingly

seeks to mediate between Western material-centric standards and the Eastern values of cultural and spiritual continuity.

2.4. Contextualising Adaptive Reuse in Harbin: Challenges and Frameworks

There is a significant lack of research on the adaptive reuse of religious heritage buildings in Harbin [44,45]. Zhang (2018) highlights the necessity for conservation frameworks that incorporate value assessment in preserving 20th-century architectural heritage in China [46]. The study concludes that China lacks sufficient frameworks to address these assessment issues comprehensively, which is particularly relevant for Harbin's Russian-influenced religious buildings. Applying robust heritage frameworks to Harbin's architectural context can help ensure that adaptive reuse projects strike a balance between heritage conservation and the evolving cultural and economic needs of the city. The Cultural Revolution significantly impacted many of Harbin's religious heritage buildings, resulting in the loss of decorative features and symbolic elements. Zhu (2012) documents these movements and argues that the damages sustained during this period underscore the need for nuanced conservation approaches that account for historical trauma and material loss [42]. In Harbin, the challenge lies in addressing these damages while aligning restoration efforts with adaptive reuse objectives, ensuring these buildings meet both cultural preservation and contemporary needs. This contextual gap in research underscores the importance of advancing studies on adaptive reuse in Harbin. Russian-influenced religious buildings in the city hold immense cultural and architectural value but require more comprehensive studies to establish frameworks that consider local heritage narratives alongside global conservation standards. Building on the growing body of research on adaptive reuse, this study integrates multidimensional evaluation frameworks with context-specific considerations of sacred-to-secular and secular-to-secular transitions. Arfa et al. (2022) and Bosone et al. (2021) provide critical insights into the effectiveness of adaptive reuse, emphasising criteria such as social value creation, environmental sustainability, economic regeneration, and innovation [47,48]. These frameworks underscore the potential for adaptive reuse to extend its impact beyond architectural preservation, aligning projects with broader goals of sustainability and community development. Sabri (2024) and Hackworth and Gullikson (2013) delve into the complexities of adapting religious heritage buildings, highlighting the symbolic and cultural challenges inherent in faith-to-faith and sacred-to-secular transitions [2,3]. These studies underline the socio-political sensitivities and historical narratives that often shape adaptive reuse in such contexts. This research bridges these two perspectives, demonstrating how the multidimensional criteria for effectiveness intersect with the symbolic, cultural, and spatial dynamics of adaptive reuse in heritage buildings.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a structured qualitative methodology to examine Russian-influenced religious architecture in Harbin, with an emphasis on preserving architectural identities and exploring adaptive reuse strategies. The research follows a multi-step methodology framework. In the first step of the study, a review of the existing styles of Russian-influenced architecture with religious affiliations is conducted. Then, based on this, the study examines heritage buildings with original religious functionalities. By combining these methods, the study can identify the current adaptive reuse strategies and their implications on the Russian-influenced religious architecture in Harbin, which builds on a comprehensive understanding of the relevant styles.

The study begins with a comprehensive review of Russian architectural influences in Harbin, particularly on religious structures. This review is informed by extensive archival research, historical plans, maps, and the relevant literature sourced from the Harbin Archives Bureau and the Harbin Institute of Technology Library. The primary aim is to identify and summarise key stylistic elements of Russian religious architecture in the region, including ornamental details, spatial configurations, and building layouts. This foundational understanding of the architectural styles serves as the basis for selecting and analysing case

studies, ensuring that each is contextualised within the broader architectural and historical landscape of Harbin. It is essential to review the various architectural styles that have influenced religious buildings, as these styles are predominantly manifested in religious architecture and represent the most well-maintained structures in the city. By focusing on these specific styles, the study can directly link the analysis to the adaptive reuse strategies applied to these churches, which are critical for preserving their architectural identities and historical significance.

A comparative case study approach was selected to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the diverse impacts of adaptive reuse on different religious buildings, allowing for a comparison of preservation outcomes. This method has been suggested to facilitate a deeper understanding of the selected case studies regarding their preservation, the impact of relevant heritage strategies, and their current functionalities [49]. The case studies are selected from the official list of heritage buildings [50]. The process is guided by several criteria to ensure the relevance and significance of each case, including the historical and architectural relevance to Russian influence, representation of diversity, and cultural significance. The categorisation of religious building utilisation typologies, including extended use, adaptive reuse (sacred-to-sacred and sacred-to-secular), and disuse, is informed by Sabri (2024), who examined adaptive reuse frameworks [2]. These buildings are representative of the cultural and religious diversity of Harbin during the Russian period, including Catholic, Christian, Islamic, Jewish, and Orthodox architecture [51]. This approach ensures that the study covers a diverse range of buildings, providing a representative sample for analysis.

Data collection for each case study involved a combination of archival research, literature review, and field observations conducted between January and September 2024. Archival research examined historical records, architectural plans, and prior documentation to understand the original design intentions and subsequent modifications. The literature review contextualised the cases within broader discussions on adaptive reuse and preservation strategies, providing a theoretical framework for analysis. Field observations systematically documented the physical condition, architectural layout, and current uses of each building, with a focus on stylistic features, materiality, and symbolic elements. Detailed notes and photographic documentation were used to capture key architectural features and assess their preservation under adaptive reuse strategies. Each building was categorised into the sacred-to-sacred, sacred-to-secular, or unused categories based on their original and current functionalities. For the sacred-to-secular category, the comparative analysis examined how adaptive reuse impacted exterior and interior elements, focusing on preservation, adaptation, or loss. These transformations were evaluated against the buildings' new functionalities and the constraints posed by architectural modifications and changes in symbolic significance. The analysis compared documented architectural transformations with historical and archival references and field observations. The comparative analysis results provide insights into preservation challenges and opportunities, such as balancing functional demands with architectural integrity.

4. Results

In the following result sections, Section 4.1 reviews each style, focusing on the architectural characteristics and their manifestation in Harbin's religious buildings. Building on the fundamental review of these styles, the study then evaluates the broader implications of adaptive reuse for Russian-influenced religious architecture in Harbin. Subsequently, Sections 4.2 and 4.3 focus on the detailed comparative case study analysis of the selected buildings, exploring how they have been preserved or adapted in the context of their reuse categories, functionalities, and evolving demands.

4.1. Russian-Influenced Architectural Styles in Harbin

The architectural heritage of Harbin is deeply influenced by Russian culture, with many of its distinct styles prominently manifested in religious buildings such as churches,

synagogues, and mosques. These structures reflect a blend of traditional Russian and European architectural styles adapted to the local context. The major styles include Traditional Russian vernacular architecture, Eclecticism, Western-influenced styles, Chinese Baroque, and Islamic styles. These styles were highly prevalent in the late 19th century and early 20th century in Harbin, reflecting the architectural traditions of Russian settlers arriving in the city during this period [52]. These styles present distinct challenges in adaptive reuse, demanding a careful consideration of their unique architectural characteristics and historical context.

4.1.1. Traditional Russian Vernacular Architecture

Traditional Russian vernacular architecture was introduced to Harbin by Russian migrants and is characterised by the use of local materials such as wood and clay, as well as its adaptation to harsh climatic conditions [53]. This style is often associated with rural Orthodox churches and public structures, displaying intricate wooden carvings and simple yet functional layouts. Traditional Russian vernacular architecture traces its origins to the mediaeval period in Russia, roughly between the 10th and 17th centuries, when it evolved to meet the functional and climatic needs of rural communities [54]. Many of these buildings employed timber construction techniques that required minimal use of nails, showcasing the craftsmanship of Russian builders. The use of decorative elements such as gabled roofs and wooden domes was common, reflecting the influence of early Russian religious architecture [55].

Neo-Byzantine architecture, a sub-style of the Russian Revival movement, was later introduced as a more elaborate form of church architecture in Harbin. It is characterised by distinctive onion domes, arched windows, and decorative brickwork, combining traditional Russian elements with Byzantine influences [56]. The style often employs cross-in-square plans and ornamental façades that highlight the spiritual significance of the buildings. Neo-Byzantine structures in Harbin are noted for their grandeur and attention to detail, making them prominent landmarks in the city's architectural landscape [45,57]. Their architectural features, such as decorative arches and complex spatial configurations, require careful preservation to maintain their integrity during adaptive reuse projects.

4.1.2. Eclecticism

Eclecticism in Harbin is defined by the merging of multiple historical styles—Classical, Mediaeval, Renaissance, and Baroque—each reflecting different influences from Europe [52]. The style emerged as a dominant architectural trend in Europe during the 19th century, spanning approximately from the 1830s to the early 20th century, as architects combined elements from various historical styles to create unique designs [52,58]. This stylistic approach was frequently applied to religious buildings constructed by various communities during the period of mass Russian migration, blending symbolic and functional elements. Classical eclecticism, with its symmetrical façades and columned porticos, often signified stability and authority, making it a popular choice for churches and synagogues built for Russian and Jewish communities [55]. Gothic elements, such as pointed arches and spires, were sometimes incorporated to evoke a sense of historical depth and reverence, contributing to the spiritual atmosphere of the buildings [45].

Renaissance influences, seen in the use of geometric shapes and harmonious proportions, were particularly evident in Catholic churches, which sought to convey the ideals of balance and beauty [53]. The Renaissance influence often included elements such as rounded arches and decorative pilasters that enhanced the visual symmetry of church façades [57]. Baroque eclecticism, characterised by its lavish ornamentation and dynamic forms, was more commonly employed in synagogues and other religious buildings that sought to project a sense of grandeur and spiritual importance [59]. The diversity of stylistic elements in these eclectic buildings poses challenges for conservation, as each element contributes to the overall historical value and requires different preservation approaches.

4.1.3. Other Western-Influenced Styles

Western architectural movements such as Art Nouveau and Art Deco also exerted their influence on Harbin's religious architecture, adding a layer of stylistic complexity [60]. Art Nouveau, with its emphasis on organic forms and flowing lines, was used in buildings designed by Russian architects who sought to blend adapted aesthetics with traditional religious symbolism. This style originated in Europe in the late 19th century, specifically between the 1890s and early 1910s [52]. Art Nouveau often features stylised floral patterns and curved window frames, reflecting a departure from the rigid forms of earlier styles [50]. In contrast, Art Deco, which emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, is marked by its bold geometric patterns and streamlined forms, favouring modernity over ornamentation. These styles were particularly influential in the design of synagogues and other religious structures intended to reflect contemporary trends while maintaining a connection to cultural heritage. The preservation and reuse of these styles often focus on maintaining their decorative features while allowing for modern interior redesigns.

4.1.4. Chinese Baroque

Chinese Baroque developed as a unique hybrid style in Harbin's Daowai district, where Chinese and Russian cultural influences intersected [61]. The style blends Western Baroque elements, such as elaborate cornices and pediments, with traditional Chinese motifs, including stylised representations of peonies and cranes, which symbolise peace and prosperity, respectively [62]. The Baroque architectural style originated in Europe in the late 16th century, around the 1580s, and became popular through the 17th and early 18th centuries before being adapted and merged with local elements in Harbin in the late 19th century and early 20th century [63]. Chinese Baroque buildings were typically constructed by Chinese Christians and featured a combination of commercial and residential spaces. The façades of these structures were often heavily ornamented to attract attention, while the interiors followed traditional Chinese layouts, with courtyards and wooden corridors [62]. The preservation of Chinese Baroque buildings presents unique challenges, as both the external decorative elements and the internal spatial configurations contribute to the overall identity of the architecture [64]. Only one Chinese Baroque church (currently known as the Daowai Church of Harbin) is on the heritage building list of Harbin, as most of the buildings in this style are used for residential purposes with street-facing shopfronts [50].

4.1.5. Traditional and Chinese Islamic Styles

Although not influenced by Russian architecture, Harbin's Islamic buildings showcase the city's architectural diversity through traditional Islamic styles and Chinese–Islamic adaptations. Traditional Islamic architectural styles, such as those seen in mosques, date back to the early Islamic period in the seventh century, with significant developments during the Abbasid (750–1258) and Ottoman (1299–1923) empires [65]. These structures reflect the cultural identity of Harbin's Muslim communities during the late Qing dynasty and the early 20th century, shaped by migration and urbanisation [61,62]. Traditional Islamic styles, exemplified by the Tartar Mosque, feature domes, minarets, and geometric patterns, emphasising symmetry and spiritual aesthetics [65]. In contrast, Chinese–Islamic architecture integrates elements like upturned eaves, timber structures, and decorative carvings with Islamic design principles [66]. The Daowai Mosque and Acheng Mosque reflect this synthesis, blending courtyard layouts and Chinese-style roofs with functional Islamic elements, highlighting the adaptability of Islamic architecture within local cultural contexts. Unlike the Russian-influenced architecture that defines Harbin's Christian and Jewish heritage buildings, Islamic architecture evolved independently, emphasising the distinctiveness of Harbin's architectural landscape.

4.2. Comparative Case Study Analyses of Russian-Influenced Religious Buildings in Harbin

Based on the contextual understanding of Russian-influenced architectural styles in Harbin, this section consolidates key religious buildings in Harbin under various influences, highlighting their original and current uses, architectural styles, and preservation strategies. The most recent update in 2021 on 'Historical Buildings in Harbin' lists 219 heritage buildings, with a significant reduction from the 308 buildings previously listed [50]. This reduction is primarily due to the reclassification of several buildings into higher heritage protection levels with national or state significance. Consequently, many structures that were originally included in Harbin's local heritage list have been transferred to the national 'Heritage Protection List' due to the elevated perception of their cultural and historical value. The study finds that most of the buildings on the new 'Historical Buildings in Harbin' list are more strongly associated with the Chinese Baroque style, while the buildings assigned higher heritage protection levels are more associated with traditional Russian-influenced architecture. The four categories of heritage protection in China are as follows:

- Major Historical and Cultural Sites Protected at the National Level;
- Historical and Cultural Sites Protected at the Provincial Level;
- Historical and Cultural Sites Protected at the Level of a City Divided into Districts or at the Level of an Autonomous Prefecture;
- Historical and Cultural Sites Protected at the County Level (State Administration of Cultural Heritage, 2002).

An overview of the key Russian-influenced religious buildings in Harbin is presented in Table 1, detailing their protection levels, construction timelines, architectural styles, religious affiliations, and current functionalities. These data highlight the diversity of preservation strategies applied to these heritage sites. According to Sabri (2024), intra-religious adaptive reuse occurs within the same faith tradition (e.g., Christian to Christian), while inter-religious adaptive reuse involves a transition between different faiths (e.g., Christian to Muslim) [2]. Also, Hackworth and Gullikson (2013) provided insights into sacred-to-secular conversions, particularly those driven by urban redevelopment, while Hartson (2021) examined material expressions of the sacred and secular in reused heritage buildings [3]. These frameworks and references guided the terminology and classification used in the table below, ensuring consistency with the established scholarly frameworks.

Table 1. Overview of religious heritage architecture in Harbin: original affiliations, current use, and adaptive reuse categories.

No.	Building's Original Name in Chinese	Building's Original Name in English	Protection Level	Construction Timeline	Architectural Style	Original and Current Religious Affiliation	Current Functionality	Current Status the Building Use
1	圣·索菲亚教堂	The Saint Sophia Cathedral	National Level	Project started in 1907 Project rebuilt from 1923–1932	Neo-Byzantine	Original: Orthodox Current: N/A	Harbin Architectural Museum	Sacred-to-Secular
2	圣母守护教堂 圣母帡幪教堂	Church of Intercession	Provincial Level	Project started in 1902 Project extended in 1922 Project rebuilt in 1930	Eclecticism (Classical and Byzantine Influences)	Original: Orthodox Current: Orthodox	Harbin Dongzheng Church	Sacred-to-Sacred (intra-religions)
3	圣母安息教堂	Holy Dormition Church (Including Bell Tower)	City Level (Bell Tower under Immovable Artifacts)	Project started in 1908	Russian Baroque Architecture	Original: Orthodox Current: N/A	Part of Harbin Cultural Park or Harbin Amusement Park (Exterior display only)	Unused
4	圣·伊维尔教堂	Church of Our Lady of Evel	City Level	Project started in 1908	Neo-Byzantine Architecture	Original: Orthodox Current: N/A	Church of Our Lady of Evel (Not in-service)	Unused
5	士课街教堂 圣·阿列克谢耶夫教堂	Saint Alekseyev Church	Provincial Level	Project started in 1912 Project completed in 1931	Renaissance Eclecticism	Original: Orthodox Current: Catholic	Harbin Catholic Church	Sacred-to-Sacred (Inter-religions)
6	呼兰天主教堂	Hulan Catholic Church	Provincial Level	Project started in 1908	Gothic	Original: Catholic Current: Catholic	Hulan Catholic Church	Sacred-to-Sacred (intra-religions)
7	南岗礼拜堂 南岗基督教堂 基督教德国路德会教堂	Lutheran Church	City Level	Project started in 1912 Project completed in 1916	Gothic Eclecticism	Original: Christian (Lutheran) Current: Christian (Protestant Christian)	Harbin Nangang Christian Church	Sacred-to-Sacred (intra-religions)

Table 1. *Cont.*

No.	Building's Original Name in Chinese	Building's Original Name in English	Protection Level	Construction Timeline	Architectural Style	Original and Current Religious Affiliation	Current Functionality	Current Status the Building Use
8	新阳路教会 基督复临安息日会	Christianity Church for Fulin Sabbath Rite	Immovable Artifacts	Project started 1920	Traditional Russian Vernacular	Original: Christian (Seventh-day Adventist) Current: Christian (Protestant Christian)	Harbin Daoli Xinyang Road Christian Church	Sacred-to-Sacred (intra-religions)
9	基督教会礼拜堂 共济会教堂	The Baptist Church	Immovable Artifacts	Project started in 1920 Project renovated in 1935 Project completed in 1936	Chinese Baroque	Original: Christian (Baptist) Current: Christian (Protestant Christian)	Daowai Church of Harbin	Sacred-to-Sacred (intra-religions)
10	犹太新会堂	The New Jewish Synagogue	National Level	Project started in 1918 Project completed in 1921	Baroque Eclecticism	Original: Judaism Current: N/A	Harbin Jewish and Cultural Museum	Sacred-to-Secular
11	犹太总会堂	Main Jewish Synagogue	National Level	Project started in 1907 Project initially completed in 1909 Project rebuilt in 1931	Art Nouveau	Original: Judaism Current: N/A	Laohuitang Concert Hall	Sacred-to-Secular
12	鞑靼清真寺 土耳其清真寺	Tartar Mosque/Turkish Mosque	Provincial Level	Project started in 1901 Project initially completed in 1906 Project rebuilt in 1922 Project completed in 1937	Traditional Islamic	Original: Islam Current: N/A	Tourist site	Sacred-to-Secular
13	道外清真寺	Harbin Daowai Mosque/Harbin Mosque	City Level	Project started in 1897 Project renovated in 1904 Project extended in 1935	Chinese–Islamic	Original: Islam Current: Islam	Harbin Daowai Mosque	Sacred-to-Sacred (intra-religions)
14	阿城清真寺	Acheng Mosque	National Level	Project started in 1777 Project completed in 1900	Traditional Islamic	Original: Islam Current: Islam	Acheng Mosque	Sacred-to-Sacred (intra-religions)

This study identifies 14 heritage buildings with religious affiliations listed under the four categories of heritage protection in China. These buildings fall into the following three types of typologies: sacred-to-sacred (eight buildings), sacred-to-secular (four buildings), and unused buildings (two buildings). The categorisation highlights the diverse approaches in preserving their historical and cultural significance while adapting to contemporary needs. The majority of these buildings were designed and constructed by foreign immigrants during the Manchurian period and include churches, synagogues, and a mosque. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the city had over 80 religious buildings, including 28 Christian churches, 22 Eastern Orthodox churches, 3 Catholic churches, 3 synagogues, as well as a Ukrainian and Armenian prayer hall, according to the Manchurian Religious Records [44,45,51]. However, many of these structures were destroyed either during the Cultural Revolution or through natural deterioration over time [42]. Currently, around 20 religion-affiliated buildings remain, most of which are listed under different levels of heritage protection. The remaining ones mostly sustained damage to their decorative features, both exterior and interior; however, restorations have taken place for all the ones that are assigned with a function again. Some mosques have been recently constructed; hence, they are not included in this study. The study finds that most of the mosques were not built under Russian architectural influence or their common religious practice during the colonial period. Hence, their current religious affiliation remains mostly the same as before to meet the demand of the Islamic community in Harbin. The study will focus on discussing the remaining 11 religious-affiliated buildings built under Russian influence during the colonial period. Table 2 provides a visual overview of the key architectural features and modifications across the 11 case study buildings, supporting their typology classifications by highlighting specific exterior and interior changes.

Six of the eleven buildings represent the sacred-to-sacred reuse category, continuing to serve their original or adapted religious purposes, mostly intra-religion purposes with one inter-religion case. These include the Church of the Intercession, the Saint Alekseyev Church, the Hulan Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the Christianity Church for Fulin Sabbath Rite, and the Baptist Church. Restoration efforts for these buildings have ensured their structural stability while preserving their historical interiors and exteriors. For example, the Baptist Church exemplifies the Chinese Baroque style, blending Western Baroque elements with traditional Chinese motifs, such as stylised peonies and cranes [62].

As documented in Table 2, the Church of the Intercession has been well-maintained post-restoration, with minimal structural changes; meanwhile, the Hulan Catholic Church has undergone renovations to meet contemporary safety standards, while safeguarding its architectural integrity. Similarly, the Christianity Church for Fulin Sabbath Rite has retained its historical interiors through continuous maintenance by the local community. These cases highlight how sacred-to-sacred reuse accommodates religious practices while preserving the historical and cultural value of Harbin's religious buildings. One of the six buildings represents the only example of the sacred-to-sacred reuse category (inter-religious reuse), where its religious affiliation transitioned between faiths. The Saint Alekseyev Church originally served as an Orthodox church but was adapted for the Catholic faith due to the decline of the local Orthodox community in Harbin [44,45]. Significant modifications were made to the interior, such as dividing the spacious interior into two levels, one for religious activities and the other serving as living quarters for church staff. While the interior design now reflects Catholic traditions, the exterior retains its original Orthodox architectural features, exemplifying a balance between functional adaptation and architectural preservation.

Table 2. Visual documentation of the case study buildings.
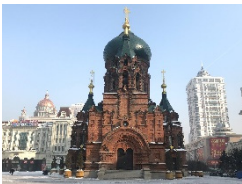
Original Name of the Building in Chinese and English	Full Exterior View	Key Exterior Feature	Main Interior View	Key Interior Features
圣·索菲亚教堂 The Saint Sophia Cathedral				
	Neo-Byzantine onion domes	Intricate brick façade with decorative arches and gabled windows	Open-plan gallery space adapted for exhibitions and performances	Decorative wall paintings reflecting symbolic religious narratives
圣母守护教堂 圣母帡幪教堂 Church of Intercession				
	Eclectic style with wooden gabled roofs and ornate carvings	Arched window and door frames in vernacular religious style	Original timber door frame and arched openings	Minimal alterations to preserve the altar and central worship space
圣母安息教堂 Holy Dormition Church (Including Bell Tower)			Not in Service	Not in Service
	Russian Baroque elements, including a bell tower with ornamental details	Domed structures and stylised cornices	N/A	N/A

Table 2. *Cont.*

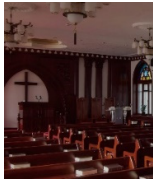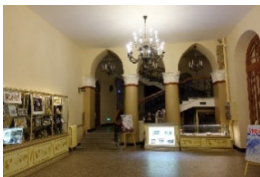| Original Name of the Building in Chinese and English	Full Exterior View	Key Exterior Feature	Main Interior View	Key Interior Features
圣·伊维尔教堂 Church of Our Lady of Evel			Not in Service	Not in Service
	Neo-Byzantine design with arched windows and domes	Partially restored symmetrical façade with decorative arches	N/A	N/A
士课街教堂 圣·阿列克谢耶夫教堂 Saint Alekseyev Church				
	Renaissance Eclecticism with intricate cornices and symmetrical detailing	Stone ornamentation near the entrance	Worship space with retained historical elements	Symbolic decorations in the worship space and on the wall
圣·阿列克谢耶夫教堂 Hulan Catholic Church				
	Gothic design with pointed arches and intricate tracery	Vertical spires and stained-glass windows	Worship space centred around a preserved altar with interiors renovated and repainted	Stained-glass windows and symbolic wall decoration
南岗礼拜堂 南港基督教堂 基督教德国路德会教堂Luth Church				
	Simplified façade with decorative arches and wooden elements reflecting Gothic Eclecticism	Symbolic detailed decorations near the entrance	Minimal modifications to accommodate worship	Interior has been restored and repainted with some new digital devices

Table 2. *Cont.*

Original Name of the Building in Chinese and English	Full Exterior View	Key Exterior Feature	Main Interior View	Key Interior Features
新阳路教会 基督复临安息日会 Christianity Church for Fulin Sabbath Rite				
	Traditional Russian vernacular design façades without a dome	Pitched rooflines and arched openings with decorative symbols	Contemporary openings not aligned with the original stylistic features	Wooden benches and an unaltered worship layout
基督教会礼拜堂 The Baptist Church				
	Chinese Baroque style façade, renovated and repainted	Chinese Baroque courtyard of the church with brick finish and arched openings	Adapted interior for worship needs	Traditional Chinese calligraphy about Christian beliefs, reflecting the blend of Western and Chinese in the Chinese Baroque style
犹太新会堂 The New Jewish Synagogue				
	Baroque Eclecticism with a restored dome and decorative façade elements	Restored cornices and arched opening and new glazing panels	Exhibition space integrated within the original spatial layout, the interior is substantially renovated	Symbolic artefacts and decorations
犹太总会堂 Main Jewish Synagogue				
	Art Nouveau with curved cornices and reconstructed domes	Removed annex structures on the façade, overall ornaments have been simplified	Interior largely restored and repainted according to the original space	Concert hall adapted with acoustic modifications and tiered seating

Within the 11 case studies, 2 buildings fall under the inactive or unused category, highlighting the challenges of preservation for heritage buildings without active functionality. As shown in Table 2, the Church of Our Lady of Evel and the Holy Dormition Church

are currently not in service. The Holy Dormition Church within the Harbin Cultural Park serves as a visual historical exhibit rather than a functional religious space. Both churches have not been restored to their original interior conditions and are primarily preserved for external display. The interiors of both buildings remain inaccessible to the public due to structural degradation and incomplete restoration efforts.

Overall, referring to Harbin's religious-affiliated heritage buildings (detailed in Table 1), each style and reuse typology poses distinct challenges in preserving architectural identity while meeting contemporary demands. The findings highlight key challenges in adaptive reuse, including structural complexities, as seen in the Church of Our Lady of Evel and the Holy Dormition Church, where deterioration has limited their reuse potential; functional challenges, exemplified by the Saint Sophia Cathedral and the Main Jewish Synagogue, where significant adaptations were necessary to meet contemporary demands; and symbolic challenges, as in the Saint Alekseyev Church and the Main Jewish Synagogue, where changes in use required the careful negotiation of religious and cultural meanings. The following section examines these challenges in detail through case studies, focusing on how they balance the preservation of architectural identity with evolving functionalities.

4.3. Detailed Analyses of the Sacred-to-Secular Case Studies

Three of the eleven case studies have been repurposed with non-religious affiliations, exemplifying the sacred-to-secular reuse category. To fulfil the research aim, this section provides detailed analyses of the three case studies in this category, including the Saint Sophia Cathedral, the New Jewish Synagogue, and the Main Jewish Synagogue. Table 3 highlights the changes to the exteriors for sacred-to-to-secular adaptive reuse, while Table 4 examines the interior transformations, detailing the key functions and the retention or adaptation of symbolic elements. The case studies highlight different adaptive reuse approaches. The exteriors of the Saint Sophia Cathedral and the New Jewish Synagogue were restored to their original styles, whereas the Main Jewish Synagogue underwent more substantial modifications. For internal spaces, the Saint Sophia Cathedral prioritises exhibitions and music performances, and it serves as a landmark with an open square; the New Jewish Synagogue retains a few original features, focusing on its role as a cultural exhibition space; and the Main Jewish Synagogue has been adapted for concerts and additional uses.

Table 3. Exterior comparison of sacred-to-secular case studies.

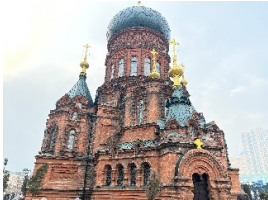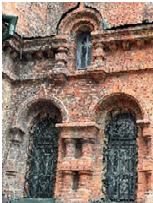| Key Aspects of Exterior Observation	圣·索菲亚教堂 **Saint Sophia's Church**	犹太新会堂 **The New Jewish Synagogue**	犹太总会堂 **Main Jewish Synagogue**
Current Secular Use	Harbin Architecture Art Gallery	Harbin Jewish and Cultural Museum	Laohuitang Concert Hall
Exterior Before Adaptive Reuse			
	Photo of the original building displayed in the gallery exhibition.	Photo of the original building displayed in the museum exhibition.	Photo of the original exterior displayed near entrance space.

Table 3. *Cont.*

Key Aspects of Exterior Observation	圣·索菲亚教堂 Saint Sophia's Church	犹太新会堂 The New Jewish Synagogue	犹太总会堂 Main Jewish Synagogue
Exterior Post Adaptive Reuse			
	The exterior has been repaired and restored, with cracks sealed, damaged plaster replaced, and structural integrity reinforced to address safety and aesthetic concerns.	The exterior has been renovated, with decorative elements restored, the dome reconstructed, and the original architectural appearance reinstated.	The exterior underwent extensive renovation to restore its original appearance, including the reconstruction of the dome and the removal of annex structures on the walls.
Exterior Features Retained			
	Original brickwork patterns have been preserved, and the windows have been renewed in alignment with the building's historical style.	Some Jewish symbols on exterior decorations have been carefully restored.	The exterior patterns and framing follow the original design, while the windows have been renewed.
Ground Level/Site Functionality			
	The building is situated on a square where surrounding structures were demolished to make it a prominent tourist site. Tourists often use the square for taking photos.	Limited ground-level activities observed; residential apartments are positioned adjacent to the site.	Outdoor seating extends from the indoor café, and some landscaping features enhance the site.

Table 4. Interior comparison of sacred-to-secular case studies.

Key Aspects of Interior Observation	圣·索菲亚教堂 The Saint Sophia Cathedral	犹太新会堂 The New Jewish Synagogue	犹太总会堂 Main Jewish Synagogue
Current Secular Use	Harbin Architecture Art Gallery	Harbin Jewish and Cultural Museum	Laohuitang Concert Hall
Main Interior Space			
	The original space, once used for prayer, is now repurposed as an atrium/exhibition space and a performance stage.	The original prayer space is now used as an atrium and exhibition space.	The original prayer space has been converted into a performance stage with seating arrangements.
Key Function			
	Most of the interior space is dedicated to exhibitions, with temporary panels used to subdivide the space.	The interior has been fully renovated to meet contemporary exhibition requirements.	A portion of the interior now serves as a music study centre, integrated into the concert hall building.
Original Interior Features			
	Visible burn marks were observed; the interior has been restored to reflect the original symbolic language.	Limited original features remain, for example, some window frames and openings retain the original symbolic language.	Some original symbolic features associated with synagogue design are preserved in the main space, while other interior areas have been extensively renovated.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Key Aspects of Interior Observation	圣·索菲亚教堂 The Saint Sophia Cathedral	犹太新会堂 The New Jewish Synagogue	犹太总会堂 Main Jewish Synagogue
Current Interior Features			
	Symbolic paintings are displayed as decorative elements around the main space.	As a cultural museum, many symbolic artefacts are exhibited. Some wall decorations, railings, and lighting also reflect the symbolic language.	Door frames and lighting have been renewed, with Jewish symbolic language visible on the door panels. The original timber door panel with the same symbols is displayed in the lobby space.

4.3.1. The Saint Sophia Cathedral

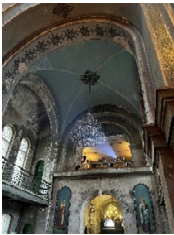The Saint Sophia Cathedral exemplifies the delicate balance between preserving historical authenticity and adapting to contemporary uses. Its iconic neo-Byzantine exterior, comprising onion domes, intricate brickwork, and decorative arches, has been meticulously restored, addressing structural issues such as cracks and wear to ensure both safety and aesthetic appeal. These efforts included plaster replacement and structural reinforcements, reaffirming its role as a cultural landmark in Harbin's urban landscape (Table 3). Internally, the transformation to accommodate exhibitions and performances significantly altered the church's spatial dynamics. The original hierarchical flow of the nave and apse, central to its religious function, has been replaced by open gallery layouts prioritising cultural versatility. While lighting and exhibition panels dominate the space, decorative paintings and symbolic restorations echo the original design, maintaining its cultural resonance. Notably, burnt marks from the Cultural Revolution remain visible, offering a strong connection to its layered history (Table 4).

4.3.2. The New Jewish Synagogue

The New Jewish Synagogue represents a successful integration of heritage conservation with contemporary museum functionality. The exterior underwent extensive restoration, including structural stabilisation, dome reconstruction, and the careful reinstatement of its original architectural design. These efforts not only enhanced the building's structural integrity but also reinstated its role as a prominent cultural asset within Harbin's heritage tourism framework (Table 3). The interior retains much of its original spatial layout, complemented by symbolic features such as decorative railings and lighting, which are augmented with contemporary design elements. Although limited original decorative features remain, the refurbishment aligns with current museum standards, transforming the space into a cultural exhibition venue. Interactive displays, archival collections, and educational exhibits contribute to its new function as the Harbin Jewish and Cultural Museum, blending contemporary design with Jewish symbolism to enrich visitor experience (Table 4).

4.3.3. The Main Jewish Synagogue

The Main Jewish Synagogue's transformation into the Laohuitang Concert Hall underscores the challenges and opportunities of adaptive reuse for cultural functions. Its Baroque-style exterior has been carefully restored, with reinforced structural elements,

dome reconstruction, and the removal of annex structures to align with the original design. Added landscaping, including outdoor seating and pathways, enhances its usability and connection to the surrounding urban fabric (Table 3). Inside, significant modifications were necessary to repurpose the space for concerts. These included the installation of soundproofing materials, tiered seating, and acoustic enhancements, all of which altered the original spatial layout. Despite these changes, key symbolic features, such as door panels with Jewish motifs, were preserved to maintain a connection to its historical and cultural identity. Extended functionalities, including a café and a music school, further integrate the site into Harbin's cultural and social life (Table 4).

5. Discussion

5.1. Architectural Styles and Conservation Approaches in Harbin's Russian-Influenced Religious Buildings

The findings of this study illustrate the rich architectural heritage of Harbin's religious buildings, which are characterised by their unique blend of Russian, Chinese, and Western influences. These styles include Traditional Russian Vernacular, Eclecticism, and Chinese Baroque, each reflecting the multicultural history of Harbin during its period of Russian influence. These architectural styles are not merely aesthetic representations but are imbued with deep cultural and symbolic meanings. Understanding these stylistic features is essential for heritage conservation, as they contribute to the identity and historical narrative of Harbin. The preservation of these architectural forms is therefore critical for maintaining Harbin's cultural heritage. Adaptive reuse strategies must be sensitive to these stylistic elements, ensuring that any modifications respect the original design language and its symbolic value. While the study finds that the conservation efforts in Harbin's religious buildings should aim to maintain the stylistic authenticity of these Russian-influenced architectures, the application of Chinese conservation principles, as noted by Zhu (2012), introduces a complex layer of cultural interpretation that can sometimes obscure the original intent and material integrity of these structures [42]. Zhu's research on Chinese conservation practices highlights a fundamental tension between preserving the 'spirit of place' and adhering to international standards of material authenticity. However, the Venice Charter and the Nara Document on Authenticity advocate the preservation of historical monuments with minimal intervention, emphasising that any restoration should reveal the historical and aesthetic value of the site without compromising the original material and context [36,40]. These principles are particularly relevant to Harbin, where Russian, Chinese, and Western influences intersect, creating a complex conservation landscape that requires the careful consideration of authenticity and local narratives [67]. This study finds that Harbin's Russian-influenced religious buildings, originally reflecting Western architectural styles, have mostly undergone the transformation of Chinese adaptive reuse practices and principles. While this approach uniquely integrates contrasting conservation philosophies, it has resulted in irreversible changes to the architectural and spatial authenticity of these sites. This raises critical questions about whether such methods effectively preserve the historical and cultural significance of these buildings. Further research, including comparative studies with global precedents, is needed to evaluate these practices in Harbin.

This hybrid approach introduces a novel dimension to the field of conservation, demonstrating how adaptive reuse evolves in response to specific cultural and historical contexts. For instance, the Saint Sophia Cathedral partially applies Western conservation strategies, retaining visible burn marks and restoring the paint to its original colour, thereby preserving elements of historical authenticity. In contrast, other case studies reveal a different trajectory, where older ornamental elements, often removed due to deterioration, were replaced with simplified features that symbolise rather than replicate the original design. This approach results in buildings that superficially resemble European architectural styles but diverge significantly from their original forms, reflecting the complexities of Harbin's adaptive reuse practices. These practices blend preservation with reinterpre-

tation in alignment with local conservation philosophies, showcasing a distinct evolution in conservation methods. In Harbin, this tension has led to interventions such as the repainting and redecoration of many heritage religious buildings, which may sustain the visual impact and symbolic meaning but risk diluting the historical authenticity of these sites. The prioritisation of symbolic continuity over material preservation raises critical questions about the authenticity of restored buildings and whether they reflect the true essence of Harbin's multicultural heritage, or whether they are a reconstructed narrative influenced by contemporary interpretations. The findings reveal that while external features such as façades, domes, and rooflines have been largely preserved, internal features have frequently been compromised.

This dichotomy between exterior and interior preservation challenges conservation priorities, as prioritising exteriors often undermines the holistic identity of heritage buildings. Equal emphasis on both, as advocated by some theories, acknowledges their shared role in maintaining architectural and cultural narratives. The decision to prioritise external preservation over internal authenticity is often driven by the desire to maintain a visually cohesive heritage landscape that appeals to tourists, thereby enhancing the city's tourism potential [42]. The case of the St. Nicholas Church, reconstructed based on historical records, illustrates this dilemma. While the completely reconstructed church serves as a visual reminder of Harbin's Russian architectural legacy, its status as a replica has raised concerns about authenticity [55]. Critics argue that such reconstructions may create a distorted historical narrative, presenting a superficial representation of the past rather than an authentic preservation of heritage. Conversely, proponents assert that these reconstructions can enhance Harbin's heritage appeal, providing a tangible link to its colonial past [45]. Similarly, the simplification of older ornaments in other buildings reflects a prioritisation of symbolic relevance over craftsmanship and material and technical accuracy, aligning with Chinese conservation philosophies that often emphasise cultural and symbolic continuity. This distinct approach, which balances preservation and reinterpretation, underscores the challenges of conserving Harbin's religious architecture within a dynamic cultural and political context. It highlights the need for further research to critically assess whether this hybrid strategy of renovating the interior and removing some exterior details without accuracy in pursuit of symbolic relevance, while innovative, represents the most effective solution for preserving architectural and cultural significance. Comparative studies with global precedents could offer valuable insights, fostering a deeper understanding of how adaptive reuse practices can respect both local narratives and broader conservation standards. This unique integration of philosophies contributes to the conservation field, offering a fascinating example of how adaptive reuse can evolve to address specific cultural and historical needs.

5.2. Adaptive Reuse Strategies: Balancing Functionality and Heritage Preservation

Adaptive reuse strategies in Harbin's Russian-influenced religious buildings have primarily focused on transforming these structures into cultural and tourism-related venues. Among these buildings, the change in religious affiliation of the Saint Alekseyev Church is a unique example. However, the study finds that the unique religious transformation is best categorised as an adaptive reuse example, as the original space was significantly modified to suit its new religious purpose. Interior and exterior transformations aim to maintain the public relevance of these buildings while providing new functions that support heritage tourism in Harbin. However, the study's findings indicate that these strategies often necessitate substantial internal modifications that can compromise the architectural integrity of these buildings. Due to the Cultural Revolution and the resulting damage to these heritage buildings, restorations were unavoidable in this context. For example, while the Saint Sophia Cathedral's exterior, including its iconic onion domes and brick façades, has been preserved, the internal spatial reconfigurations required to accommodate museum exhibits have altered the original religious spatial experience. Similarly, the repurposing of the Main Jewish Synagogue into a concert hall involved extensive interior

alterations to meet the relevant acoustic requirements and seating arrangements, thereby disrupting the original layout and symbolic spatial divisions. Despite these challenges, adaptive reuse has enabled the continued use and maintenance of these heritage buildings, preventing them from falling into disrepair. Examples of adaptive reuse that respect original layouts and symbolic spatial divisions include the Selexyz Dominicanen Bookstore in Maastricht, where a 13th-century Gothic Dominican church was converted into a library. This adaptive reuse retained the original nave's grandeur while introducing adapted elements in a reversible manner, ensuring minimal disruption to the church's spatial and symbolic integrity [27]. Similarly, the Limburg Regional History Centre, also in Maastricht, transformed a Franciscan monastery and church into an archive and reading room. This project preserved the serene environment of the former prayer spaces while repurposing the building for contemporary use, maintaining its historic and symbolic character [54]. These cases highlight how careful interventions can ensure the preservation of sacred spaces while enabling functional adaptability.

In the context of Harbin, ethical considerations and socio-political influences are also critical in determining the conservation approaches adopted. For instance, local authorities may prioritise tourism development by reconstructing facades to meet tourist expectations, which can obscure the authentic historical narrative of these buildings. This ethical dilemma mirrors similar challenges faced by other historic cities, such as Kathmandu, where public space is negotiated between cultural sustainability and development needs [68]. It is clear that while external visual identities are often restored following Chinese conservation pursuits, internal modifications present a significant threat to the preservation of architectural authenticity through their spatial characteristics. This raises critical questions about the extent to which adaptive reuse can be considered successful when the architectural identity is compromised. Harbin's focus on preserving external appearances while altering internal spaces for modern functionalities raises questions about the prioritisation of visual impact over historical integrity, a concern echoed in the Venice Charter [36]. The spatial layout and internal divisions of religious buildings in Harbin are integral to their architectural identity and authenticity. These elements reflect the original liturgical functions and cultural narratives embedded within the structures. For example, the Saint Sophia Cathedral's reconfiguration into a museum disrupted its hierarchical spatial flow, which was designed to direct worshippers from the nave to the sanctuary, diminishing its spiritual resonance. Similarly, the Main Jewish Synagogue's transformation into a concert hall prioritised adapted functionalities, such as optimised acoustics and seating, over the preservation of its symbolic spatial organisation. Such changes highlight the challenges of balancing historical authenticity with contemporary adaptive reuse demands. Recognising the significance of spatial divisions in maintaining architectural identity underscores the need for reuse strategies that respect the intrinsic cultural and symbolic values of these spaces while accommodating their new functions. Future adaptive reuse projects in Harbin should therefore prioritise a balance between functional adaptation and architectural preservation to ensure that both external and internal identities are preserved.

Comparative Analysis of Sacred-to-Sacred and Sacred-to-Secular Transformations

The comparative analysis of sacred-to-sacred and sacred-to-secular adaptations in Harbin's Russian-influenced religious buildings underscores a critical tension in the adaptive reuse of heritage architecture. This tension is framed by the significant losses suffered during the Cultural Revolution, a period when many of Harbin's religious buildings were destroyed due to their associations with foreign influence and religion. The typologies of adaptive reuse observed in the case study buildings often correspond to the extent of damage inflicted during this period.

Sacred-to-sacred adaptations, predominantly intra-religious, as seen in the Church of the Intercession and the Hulan Catholic Church, emphasise preserving continuity within the same faith. These buildings have undergone minimal internal modifications, focus-

ing primarily on structural reinforcement and compliance with contemporary safety standards. This approach has allowed these sites to maintain their religious and symbolic functions, reflecting a commitment to community relevance and the preservation of spiritual and cultural identity. Conversely, sacred-to-secular adaptations, such as the Saint Sophia Cathedral and the Main Jewish Synagogue, involve significant transformations to repurpose these structures for cultural or tourism-related uses. Spatial layouts, central to the identity and authenticity of these buildings, often reflect their original religious purposes. For instance, the Saint Sophia Cathedral's reconfiguration into a museum disrupted its liturgical spatial hierarchy, while the Main Jewish Synagogue's adaptation into a concert hall prioritised acoustics over symbolic spatial arrangements. These adaptations frequently necessitate extensive interior reconfigurations, resulting in the loss of original spatial arrangements and liturgical symbolism. For example, the Saint Sophia Cathedral, now the Harbin Architectural Museum, retains its iconic onion domes and brick façades, but its interior has been restructured to accommodate exhibition spaces. Similarly, the Main Jewish Synagogue, repurposed as a concert hall, has prioritised modern acoustics and seating arrangements over the preservation of its original spatial layout and religious symbolism. While these transformations ensure the buildings' continued use and economic viability, they also raise concerns about the erasure of their original sacred narratives.

The Cultural Revolution's legacy remains palpable in Harbin's surviving religious architecture. The few buildings that escaped widespread demolition now serve as poignant reminders of the city's Russian-influenced heritage. However, their adaptive reuse reflects a dual challenge, balancing the preservation of architectural and cultural identity with the demands of contemporary functionality. In the context of the case studies, sacred-to-sacred adaptations strive to preserve symbolic continuity and maintain their role within the religious community. In contrast, sacred-to-secular transformations prioritise cultural and economic utility by repurposing these structures for tourism and public use, often at the expense of preserving their original architectural and spiritual authenticity. This analysis highlights the urgent need for adaptive reuse strategies that balance transformation with preservation. In light of Harbin's historical context, targeted conservation policies should integrate community engagement and site-specific guidelines to address these competing priorities. Such approaches can ensure that the remaining heritage buildings not only serve as meaningful links to the past but also adapt to the city's evolving cultural and economic landscape.

5.3. Challenges and Opportunities of Adaptive Reuse for Heritage Tourism and Cultural Development

The adaptive reuse of Russian-influenced religious buildings in Harbin presents a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities. One of the primary challenges is reconciling the need to preserve the historical and cultural value of these buildings with the functional demands of new uses. The study's findings indicate that adapting these religious sites for heritage tourism often requires modifications that can conflict with conservation pursuits. For example, the integration of modern amenities such as heating, ventilation, and lighting systems may necessitate changes to the building's original structural framework, potentially compromising its architectural integrity. Future research can assess the indoor environmental quality and post-occupancy feedback of these buildings. Moreover, the symbolic significance of religious buildings can complicate their repurposing. For many communities, these buildings hold profound spiritual and cultural meanings that are difficult to translate into new, secular uses. Religious buildings hold a unique cultural and spiritual significance, extending beyond their architectural value. Unlike non-religious structures, the interior layouts and symbolic elements of religious buildings are integral to their identity, reflecting liturgical practices and community heritage. Stricter standards for adaptive reuse are therefore justified to preserve these intangible cultural aspects, even when congregations no longer actively use the space. This approach ensures that the building's historical and cultural resonance remains accessible to broader audi-

ences, safeguarding its role as a cultural artefact rather than merely an architectural one. The transformation of the Saint Sophia Cathedral into a museum, while beneficial for heritage tourism, has sparked debates about the loss of its religious identity. This tension between maintaining historical authenticity and accommodating new uses highlights the need for adaptive reuse strategies that are sensitive to both the tangible and intangible heritage values of these sites. A participatory approach is advocated for future considerations to prevent conflicts and promote sustainable heritage adaptive reuse strategies.

Adaptive reuse also offers significant opportunities for heritage tourism and cultural development in Harbin. By integrating these buildings into the tourism scene, Harbin has been able to attract a diverse range of visitors, enhancing its profile as a heritage destination. The repurposing of religious buildings into museums, concert halls, and cultural centres has provided new avenues for cultural expression and community engagement, revitalising underutilised spaces and contributing to the local economy. For instance, the recent city branding and tourism marketing campaign in Harbin has integrated these buildings into content-driven strategies, such as online-generated and user-generated content, enhancing their global appeal in the heritage tourism domain. However, these opportunities must be balanced against the potential risks to the architectural and cultural integrity of the sites. Developing guidelines that specify acceptable levels of modification, along with involving local communities in the decision-making process, can help mitigate these risks and ensure that adaptive reuse contributes positively to both heritage preservation and tourism development. A more critical evaluation of Harbin's restoration methods is also required to compare these practices to the standards set in international guidelines.

The findings of this study emphasise the significance of adaptive reuse in balancing cultural preservation with contemporary needs, aligning with most studies in the heritage field. As demonstrated by Harbin's religious heritage buildings, sacred-to-sacred adaptations often adhere to minimal intervention principles, preserving community relevance and symbolic continuity. In contrast, sacred-to-secular transformations prioritise functionality and economic utility, frequently requiring significant modifications. This duality mirrors broader trends observed globally, where adaptive reuse strategies navigate tensions between heritage conservation and urban development goals [69]. For example, cities like Barcelona and Istanbul have employed adaptive reuse to revitalise urban spaces, integrating historical narratives into relevant tourism frameworks [2]. Drawing from these global practices, Harbin's approach can benefit from developing context-sensitive frameworks that not only preserve architectural authenticity but also incorporate local cultural narratives into tourism and urban planning strategies. Also, by engaging communities and leveraging innovative technologies, such as virtual tours and immersive tools, Harbin can strengthen its position as a heritage destination while maintaining the integrity of its Russian-influenced religious architecture [70]. This research advances adaptive reuse theory by highlighting the interplay between symbolic and functional values, offering transferable insights for heritage tourism and urban revitalisation in other culturally rich and historically significant cities.

6. Conclusions

This study examines the adaptive reuse of Russian-influenced religious architecture in Harbin, assessing its impact on architectural preservation and heritage tourism. The findings reveal that while adaptive reuse has effectively repurposed these buildings for cultural and tourism-related functions, it often compromises the internal spatial and symbolic integrity of these sites. Although external facades are restored to maintain visual identities, interior modifications for adapted use pose a threat to their architectural authenticity, manifested through their stylistic spatial usage and layout. The study highlights the challenges of balancing modern functionality with historical preservation. It also identifies opportunities for heritage tourism and cultural development, as repurposed buildings attract diverse visitors and contribute to Harbin's economic growth. The comparative analysis further emphasises that sacred-to-sacred adaptations prioritise preserving symbolic

and community relevance, while sacred-to-secular transformations focus on cultural and economic utility, often at the expense of architectural and spiritual authenticity. These contrasting approaches underscore the need for adaptive reuse strategies that balance preservation with contemporary demands, tailored to the unique historical and cultural contexts of each site. Preserving spatial divisions, along with exterior features, ensures the holistic conservation of architectural and cultural narratives in religious heritage buildings.

The findings of this study have significant implications for both the theory and practice of adaptive reuse and heritage conservation. This research advances the discourse on adaptive reuse by highlighting the nuanced dynamics of sacred-to-sacred and sacred-to-secular transformations in religious heritage sites, offering new insights into how architectural integrity and cultural symbolism can be preserved amid evolving functional demands. By addressing these dual challenges, the study contributes to refining adaptive reuse frameworks for religious heritage buildings globally. Theoretically, this research contributes to the discourse on adaptive reuse by emphasising the complexities of preserving architectural identities in religious buildings that have undergone functional transformations. It suggests that adaptive reuse should not be limited to external preservation but must also consider the internal spatial and symbolic dimensions of architecture. This broader conceptualisation of adaptive reuse challenges conventional approaches that prioritise external aesthetics over the holistic preservation of architectural heritage. By advocating for the equal consideration of interiors and exteriors, this study contributes to the broader discourse on holistic conservation, highlighting the need for strategies that respect both spatial and functional heritage continuity. Stricter standards for religious heritage sites are also essential to protect their cultural and spiritual identities, which extends beyond architecture. This ensures their historical narratives and societal relevance are preserved, distinguishing them from non-religious heritage sites. The study also addresses how Chinese conservation philosophies and practices have been practised in Western-influenced architecture in Harbin, highlighting a significant research gap.

Practically, the study provides insights for policymakers in transferable heritage contexts on how to approach adaptive reuse in a way that balances preservation with modern functionality, particularly concerning buildings with religious affiliations. Establishing targeted conservation guidelines that specify the acceptable levels of modification for different architectural styles and involving local communities in decision-making can help ensure that adaptive reuse strategies align with broader heritage conservation goals. By adopting a more inclusive and context-specific approach to adaptive reuse, Harbin can enhance its heritage conservation efforts and support sustainable heritage tourism development.

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