Towards Inclusive Heritage Digitisation in Sri Lanka: Overcoming Socio-Cultural Impediments

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Declaration

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree award of the Master of Science in Architectural Conservation of Monuments and Sites. The research presented herein is the original work of the author and has been compiled based on independent investigation, fieldwork, data collection, and analysis undertaken in accordance with the academic guidelines of the programme. All ideas, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this dissertation are those of the author and are not intended to be binding upon any institution, organisation, or individual referenced within the study.

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The author gratefully acknowledges all reference materials consulted in the preparation of this dissertation, including publications, journal articles, archival documents, digital sources, and verbal communications obtained through interviews with professionals, custodians, and experts in the fields of heritage conservation and digital documentation. Every effort has been made to appropriately cite and credit all sources of information.

While care has been taken to ensure accuracy and fairness in representation, any interpretations or conclusions that may be considered debatable remain the responsibility of the author.

Abstract

Addressing the socio-cultural impediments that influence the development of inclusive heritage digitisation in Sri Lanka constitutes the primary aim of this research. While global digitisation initiatives have demonstrated the technological potential to document, interpret, and preserve heritage assets, Sri Lanka's progress in this field remains fragmented and inconsistent. The study seeks to understand not merely the technical feasibility of digitisation, but the deeper cultural, institutional, and ideological factors that influence its acceptance, resistance, and sustainability within the Sri Lankan context.

Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates a thematic inquiry into community and stakeholder perceptions with a qualitative project analysis of selected digitisation initiatives undertaken between 2015 and 2024. Semi-structured interviews with heritage professionals, digital strategists, architects, and conservation practitioners are analysed using content analysis to identify recurring themes and sub-themes. These are complemented by survey findings and a review of project documentation, enabling a layered understanding of how digitisation unfolds both discursively and practically.

The findings reveal that resistance to digitisation in Sri Lanka is less a matter of technological incapacity and more a reflection of socio-cultural sensitivities, institutional inertia, fragmented governance, and ambiguities surrounding ownership, access, and custodianship. Religious authority, fears of misuse, concerns about commercial exploitation, and weak regulatory frameworks emerge as key impediments. There also exists a parallel recognition of digitisation's potential for education, repatriation, climate resilience, and global collaboration. The collapse of national-scale initiatives such as the E-Heritage platform further highlights the critical importance of long-term infrastructural planning, transparency, and institutional accountability.

Ultimately, this dissertation demonstrates that the digitisation of Sri Lankan heritage buildings is both feasible and necessary, but cannot succeed through technology alone. It requires a culturally sensitive, legally structured, and institutionally coordinated framework that recognises the layered meanings of heritage within Sri Lankan society. By situating digitisation within broader debates on sacredness, power, ownership, and narrative control, the study contributes a context-specific understanding of how digital heritage initiatives may be responsibly developed in postcolonial settings.

Key words: *Digitisation; Socio-cultural resistance; Feasibility; Conservation*

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List of Abbreviations

AHD	Authorised Heritage Discourse
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ANT	Actor-Network Theory
AR	Augmented Reality
BIM	Building Information Modelling
CAD	Computer-Aided Design
CFCHC	China Foundation for Cultural Heritage Conservation
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DRM	Digital Rights Management
FZA	3DFlow Zephyr Aerial
HBIM	Historic Building Information Modelling
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ICTA	Information and Communication Technology Agency
IFAP	Information for All Programme
IP	Intellectual Property
LiDAR	Light Detection and Ranging
MVS	Multi-View Stereo
RQ	Research Question
SfM	Structure from Motion
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VR	Virtual Reality
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization