

TIMELESS TREASURES: THE JOURNEY OF RUMAH WARISAN UWAN ROBAH (RUWUR)

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Abstract: The unique architectural heritage of Negeri Sembilan, one of the 14 states in Malaysia, is influenced by Minangkabau culture and is a significant aspect of the state's identity. This study highlights the Negeri Sembilan state's initiatives, with a special heritage conservation grants launched in 2021 for 10 selected houses/buildings in Negeri Sembilan. The objective of this study is to analyse the impact of this initiative including identifying issues in the conservation projects and suggesting methods to increase the heritage buildings' value. The methodology involves collecting primary and secondary data through mixed methods. Stakeholders were engaged through survey, semi-structured interview sessions and focus group discussion (FGD). The researchers ultimately employ thematic and interpretive analysis to derive meaningful insights, with Generative AI being utilized for qualitative data analysis (QDA). This particular paper highlights the findings of Rumah Warisan Uwan Robah (RuWUR), as one of the houses/buildings who received the special heritage conservation grant by Negeri Sembilan. It is presented as a case study of RuWUR, with a proposed Business Model Canvas (BMC) for its sustainability in heritage conservation. The study found the imperative for collaborative endeavours among diverse stakeholders, including governmental entities, non-profit organizations and local communities, to secure the legacy of heritage sites such as RuWUR. Ultimately this case study offers practical recommendations to improve conservation efforts and support the state's decision-making in conserving its cultural and historical heritage as part of the government's socio-economic development initiatives.

Keywords: conservation, heritage, strategic direction, Business Model Canvas, socio-economic development.

1. Introduction

Heritage conservation stands at the intersection of preserving cultural identities and fostering sustainable development. In recent years, governments worldwide have increasingly recognized the imperative to safeguard and promote their cultural heritage as a cornerstone of national identity and economic vitality. This study examines the pivotal role of Negeri

Sembilan's state initiatives in heritage conservation, focusing on their multifaceted impact on social cohesion, tourism and sustainable urban development. Governments play a crucial role not only as custodians of tangible and intangible heritage but also as facilitators of policies that ensure their preservation for future generations. From stringent regulatory frameworks to proactive funding mechanisms, these initiatives encompass a spectrum of interventions aimed at balancing heritage preservation with contemporary urban planning challenges. Such initiatives are not merely regulatory but also aspirational, aiming to harness heritage assets as catalysts for economic growth while ensuring their intrinsic value is retained.

In this context, this study analysing the impact of the heritage building conservation initiatives started from 2021 to 2024 amounting to RM4 million by the Negeri Sembilan state. It was questionable whether this initiative should be continued after much has been spent by the Government. Of the 10 buildings that have been granted, Rumah Warisan Uwan Robah (RuWUR) is selected to be studied in-depth. The main research question of this study is how does this heritage conservation initiative impact local socio-economic development? This led to the objective of identifying issues in RuWUR conservation project and suggesting methods to increase and sustain the heritage building's value.

2. Literature Review

Heritage conservation has emerged as a pivotal tool for socio-economic development, offering a bridge between cultural preservation and economic growth. This literature review synthesizes insights research papers to explore how heritage conservation drives socio-economic development, the challenges faced and the strategies employed to enhance its effectiveness.

2.1 Community Involvement

Community involvement is crucial for effective heritage conservation. Frullo and Mattone (2024), Bakari et al. (2024) and Gantait et al. (2024) emphasize that engaging local communities ensures that conservation efforts align with local needs, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility. For instance, in Tanzania, community involvement in cultural heritage tourism has led to job creation and economic development, though challenges like inadequate infrastructure persist (Bakari et al., 2024). Similarly, in India, community-based tourism in the Sundarbans has empowered locals and promoted economic diversification (Gantait et al., 2024).

2.2 Socio-economic Development

Sustainable tourism is a significant driver of socio-economic development. Cultural heritage tourism can generate economic opportunities while preserving cultural assets. In Tanzania, heritage tourism has boosted local economies, particularly in areas like Serengeti National Park (Bakari et al., 2024). In China, integrating traditional handicrafts and culinary innovations into tourism has enriched tourist experiences and empowered local communities (Han & Li, 2024). However, challenges such as site degradation and overtourism must be managed to ensure sustainability (Wani et al., 2024). The preservation of historical buildings can significantly enhance the economic viability of small businesses in suburban areas. Historic districts often attract tourists who are drawn to the unique cultural and architectural heritage of

these areas. This influx of tourists creates a demand for local goods and services, benefiting small businesses such as restaurants, shops and accommodations. For instance, in the San Antonio Missions Historic District, the preservation of historical missions has been instrumental in fostering a thriving heritage tourism economy, which in turn supports local businesses (Doganer & Dupont, 2013; Doganer & Dupont, 2015).

In addition, empowering women in heritage conservation can have dual benefits which is to preserve cultural heritage and promoting economic competitiveness. Women in developing countries can leverage traditional wisdom and entrepreneurship to create sustainable livelihoods (Surti et al., 2024). However, women often face socio-cultural obstacles and limited resources, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to address these challenges. On the other hand, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) plays a multifaceted role in sustainable development. ICH, including traditions, rituals and indigenous knowledge, can foster social cohesion, economic growth and environmental stewardship (Shandidy, 2023). For example, cultural festivals and artisanal crafts can attract tourism and create jobs, particularly in rural and marginalized areas.

2.3 Challenges in Heritage Conservation

Despite its potential, heritage conservation faces several challenges. Factors such as administrative inefficiencies, financial constraints and insufficient stakeholder involvement are also found as key impediments to effective heritage management (Seila et al., 2025). Additionally, challenges such as cultural commodification, inadequate infrastructure and limited community involvement can undermine the socio-economic benefits of heritage conservation (Bakari et al., 2024; Wani et al., 2024). Small businesses in historic districts often face challenges such as increased competition from larger chains and rising property values. Additionally, the influx of tourists can lead to gentrification, displacing long-standing residents and small business owners. This phenomenon has been observed in various heritage districts, highlighting the need for sustainable tourism practices that balance economic growth with social equity (Doganer & Dupont, 2015; Chang, 1997).

Effective policy frameworks and collaborative strategies are essential for leveraging heritage conservation for socio-economic development. The importance of integrated multilevel strategies and collaborative approaches to overcome critical issues in heritage conservation (d'Angella & Carlo, 2024). Similarly, sustainable management strategies are needed to balance heritage conservation with tourism development (Sampieri & Bagader, 2024). Additionally, community involvement is essential for the successful preservation of historical buildings and the development of sustainable tourism. Involving local residents in decision-making processes ensures that their needs and concerns are addressed, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility. In the case of the Kayutangan Heritage Corridor in Malang, Indonesia, community activities and participation were instrumental in revitalizing the area, leading to economic growth and cultural preservation (Antariksa et al., 2024). Sustainable tourism practices are crucial for maintaining the delicate balance between economic growth and environmental preservation. In Lasem, Indonesia, the development of sustainable tourism practices has been shown to reduce the negative impacts of tourism on cultural heritage areas, such as vandalism and environmental degradation. These practices include responsible travel, environmental preservation, and social inclusion (Kurniati & Nurini, 2024).

Based on the previous literature, it is clearly emphasized that this heritage conservation is an important agenda and needs to be effectively managed by all sectors such as the Government, agencies, private institutions, NGOs and the community themselves.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs the purposive sampling method (Merriam, 2009) whilst RuWUR is selected as the unit of analysis since the house meets the criteria set by the research objective. Amongst the 10 conserved buildings, RuWUR is advanced with their potential by having a strategic partnership with Benevolent Malaysia. Purposive sampling is a common and appropriate method for qualitative research, where the focus is on understanding the experiences and perspectives of individuals. Semi-structured interview protocol was prepared in advance and shared with the informants prior to the meeting. The interview session was conducted with RuWUR's inheritor and manager. Feedback also was received from stakeholders such as Unit Perancang Negeri (UPEN) and Lembaga Muzium Negeri Sembilan (LMNS). Additionally, secondary data was referred from RuWUR's social media and other websites. Once the interview ended, audio was uploaded to GenAI platform namely Google NotebookLM for transcription process and further to generating themes for qualitative data analysis (QDA). The themes generated then were cross-checked using manual thematic analysis procedure suggested by Yin (2014).

The integration of AI into qualitative research has emerged as a transformative trend, particularly in thematic analysis (Yan et.al, 2023; Echeverría et al., 2024; Naeem et.al, 2025; Nguyen-Trung, 2025). Findings from Naeem et al. (2025) highlight the strengths of combining GenAI with human analysis, such as improved data processing and theme identification, while also addressing challenges like managing inconsistencies in GenAI outputs and the need for rigorous validation to ensure research validity. This complementary relationship underscores the importance of human expertise in maintaining interpretative depth alongside the efficiency offered by AI tools. AI tools like ChatGPT have limited contextual understanding, which can lead to misinterpretations of nuanced data. This limitation necessitates human oversight to ensure that themes are accurately captured and interpreted (Echeverría et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2023).

The integration of AI into thematic analysis in qualitative research represents a significant shift in how researchers approach data analysis. While AI offers substantial benefits in terms of efficiency, scalability and cost-effectiveness, it also presents challenges related to trustworthiness, contextual understanding and ethical considerations. Hence, by embracing a collaborative approach will leverage the strengths of both human researchers and AI tools.

4. Findings and Discussion

Based on the interview conducted, several key themes have emerged related to Rumah Uwan Robah (RuWUR) and the broader heritage conservation efforts in Negeri Sembilan.

4.1 Preservation and Heritage

This is the central and most prominent theme, focusing on the ancestral house (*Rumah Pusaka*) itself and the commitment to its upkeep and historical authenticity. The house, inherited by Puan Kamsiah, the third generation from Wan Robah, is described as having "sentimental and traditional value." It was restored starting in 2017 after being neglected and abandoned for "30 years." The motivation for restoration was a personal sense of guilt and a desire to save it, as many other ancestral homes in the village had been demolished. Emphasis is placed on "preserving its authenticity as a heritage site" and maintaining its traditional structure, which is also seen as "environmentally friendly."

The house plays a vital role in fostering community activities and a sense of shared identity. It is a space for "community experiences" and is intended for "social activities." Since its restoration, it has hosted numerous community programs, including the "*Sirih Pulang ke Gagang*" event for family and neighbours, a free health check-up program, and a land management seminar. There are plans for future programs such as elderly care management sessions and initiatives to boost local economic empowerment, particularly for the B40 income group, by encouraging entrepreneurship.

The owners actively "collaborate with the local community" and neighbours for support, such as managing access for visitors when they are not present. The house is being developed as a cultural tourism destination and a learning centre for heritage, culture, and *Adat Perpatih*. Thus, it is marketed as a "cultural heritage tourism destination" and an "*Adat Perpatih* learning location." Key activities involve "cultural tourism visits" and the "organisation of community and educational programs." Their customer segments include "cultural tourists (local and international), students and researchers." For this effort, a Heritage Gallery has been established to inform visitors about the house's history, its restoration, traditional Negeri Sembilan architecture and the local social system based on *Adat Perpatih*. The house, while not attracting frequent walk-in visitors (about twice a month), is open to visitors and researchers, with students occasionally staying overnight for their studies.

4.2 *Adat Perpatih* (Matrilineal System)

The house is a tangible representation of the *Adat Perpatih* customary law, particularly its unique inheritance system. The house is inherited by Puan Kamsiah as the female heir, a core principle of *Adat Perpatih* where "female descendants" are the inheritors. Mr. Yunus, as the "*orang semenda*" (in-law), plays an active management role, clarifying the distinct responsibilities within the Adat where men manage but do not inherit land or the house. The Heritage Gallery includes segments explaining the "social system of the local community" which is rooted in *Adat Perpatih*.

There is an explicit goal to "promote and popularise *Adat Perpatih*," which is seen as "quite submerged, quite diluted." The *Adat* system is highlighted for its role in ensuring women's financial security, preventing them from being displaced upon their husband's death.

4.3 Partnerships and Collaborations

The ongoing efforts to preserve and promote RuWUR are heavily reliant on various external partnerships. Key partners include the Lembaga Muzium Negeri Sembilan, Luak Terachi and cultural institutions, NGOs (such as Benevolent Malaysia), universities (USIM, UKM), Ministry of Tourism and local authorities.

The owners actively engage with the museum and local customary institutions (Luak Terachi) to organise cultural programs. There is a strong desire for more active involvement from all levels of government and relevant agencies, including the Ministry of Tourism, to collaborate in promoting the house as a tourism destination.

4.4 Challenges

The project faces several practical and strategic challenges, but the owners hold clear visions for its future. Nevertheless, challenges in preservation include issues with contractors who sometimes deviate from traditional building practices, leading to costly reworks and a need for more technical expertise. The financial viability and long-term maintenance of the heritage house is a significant concern. The initial restoration cost over RM200,000, primarily borne by the owners. While the house received an RM50,000 grant from the Lembaga Muzium Negeri Sembilan (LMNS), this amount is considered insufficient, especially compared to other houses that received up to RM300,000.

The management of the house is explicitly stated as "not business-oriented" or for personal profit, but rather to keep it "active" and cover maintenance costs. Since charging an entrance fee for visitors is not permitted by the authorities, though setting up donation boxes or QR codes for contributions to maintenance is being considered.

A major challenge highlighted is the lack of "continuous funding" from higher authorities, and there is a strong appeal for the government to recognise heritage preservation as an "obligation" and provide sustained financial support.

A significant challenge for tourism is the house's location "far from the main road," making it difficult for buses to access, and requests have been made to widen the road. The owners also hope for improved infrastructure, such as better lighting and internet connectivity, to enhance the visitor experience and overall management of the house.

Challenges also include the distance of the owners' main residence from the house, making consistent oversight difficult. This led to the lack of dedicated event management or sufficient local support that limits the consistent organisation of programs. Lastly, it is also a crucial aspiration to identify and cultivate a suitable female heir among the younger generation to ensure the legacy of the house continues.

From the key themes emerged, Business Model Canvas (BMC) is proposed for RuWUR to ensure their sustainable commitment towards the conservation of the house.

4.5 Business Model Canvas (BMC) - Rumah Uwan Robah (RuWUR)

The Business Model Canvas (BMC) (Figure 1) is a strategic visual tool used to plan, analyze, and innovate business models for business development (Ningsih et.al, 2023). It helps entrepreneurs, managers and organizations understand how value is offered to customers and how operations and finances are structured to support that value. Based on the analysis conducted on RuWUR, a BMC with the nine blocks namely, value proposition, key activities, key resources, cost structure, key partners, customer relationships, customer segments, channels and revenue streams (Murray & Scuotto, 2016) is proposed to ensure the sustainability of this heritage house. This BMC can also be adapted to other heritage houses according to their respective contexts. The explanation of BMC for RuWUR is as follows:-

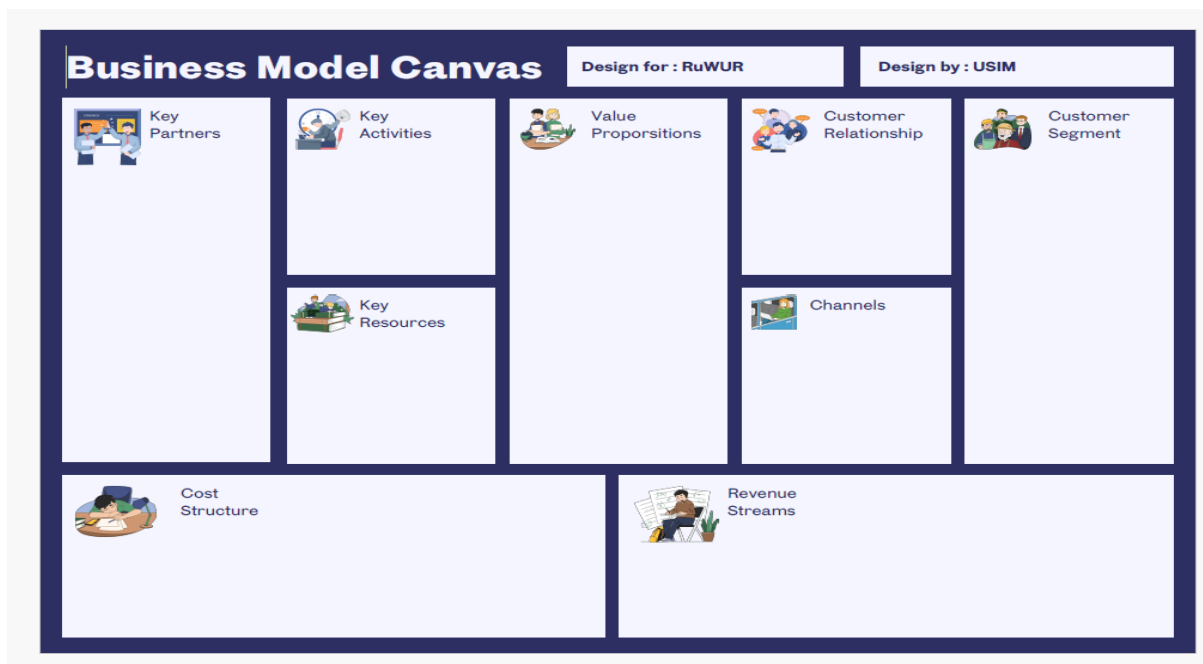


Figure 1: Business Model Canvas (BMC)

1. Key Partners

- Negeri Sembilan Museum Board, Local Authorities/District Office: Provide policy support, preservation, and promotion.
- Luak Terachi and Customary Institutions: Contribute local customary knowledge and legitimacy.
- Universities (USIM, UKM): Offer academic collaboration in research and heritage education.
- NGOs such as Benevolent Malaysia: Support social programs and funding.
- Heritage conservation experts: Assist in professional preservation work.
- Local community: Involved in management, activity content, and ongoing conservation.

2. Key Activities

- Maintenance and physical conservation of the heritage house.
- Organizing community and educational programs such as workshops, tours, and seminars.

- Managing the Heritage Gallery and visitor cabins as exhibition spaces and tourist attractions.
- Entrepreneurship and community training to empower local residents.
- Documentation and research of customs to preserve cultural and historical values.

3. Value Proposition

- Authentic and educational cultural heritage tourism destination.
- Learning location about Adat Perpatih, specific to Negeri Sembilan.
- Community experience – visitors can immerse themselves in traditional house living.
- Contributes to social activities and community economic impact.
- Empowerment of women in the matrilineal system through highlighting women's heritage roles.

4. Customer Relationships

- Authentic and friendly visitor experience, such as personalized service.
- Scheduled visits or advance bookings to ensure smooth visits.
- Engagement through workshops and community programs that build two-way relationships.
- Communication and promotion via social media (Facebook, Instagram).

5. Customer Segments

- Cultural tourists from within and outside the country.
- Students and researchers interested in Adat Perpatih and local history.
- Local community as participants and primary beneficiaries.
- NGOs and CSR agencies that can support social and conservation programs.

6. Key Resources

- Heritage house and site as the main attraction.
- Key figures such as Puan Khamsiah and Mr. Yunus who manage RuWUR.
- Heritage Gallery and physical facilities.
- Promotional materials, logistics, and visitor amenities.
- Funds and grants from the government or NGOs.
- Volunteers and technical experts in conservation and management.

7. Channels

- Physical visits to the house and gallery.
- Social media such as TikTok, Facebook and Instagram for promotion and updates.
- Negeri Sembilan Tourism Board / MOTAC – official tourism channels.
- Educational and research agencies – deliver academic and historical information.
- Collaboration with NGOs in conservation and training activities.

8. Cost Structure

- Conservation and maintenance costs of the house and basic infrastructure.
- Physical restoration costs such as access, lighting, and security.
- Community program, training, and event costs.
- Marketing and management expenses.
- Honorarium for facilitators and external technical experts.

9. Revenue Streams

- Contributions and donations from individuals, corporations, or NGOs.
- Paid guided tour packages.
- Rental of cabins or event locations such as cultural ceremonies or workshops.
- Sales of handicrafts and souvenirs produced by the local community.
- Government grants.
- Paid workshops and training for visitors, students or the community.

5. Conclusion

Heritage conservation is a powerful tool for socio-economic development, offering opportunities for economic growth, social cohesion and environmental stewardship. However, its success depends on addressing challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited funding and insufficient community involvement. By fostering community engagement, promoting sustainable tourism and implementing effective policy frameworks, heritage conservation can achieve its full potential in driving socio-economic development. Thus, it is suggested that this heritage conservation initiative by Negeri Sembilan state should be continued to provide more opportunities to other heritage buildings that need to be conserved.

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