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A Critical look at the Re-Heritage Project Management Plan, Bhutan

Heritage work in Bhutan is never just about old buildings. It's tied directly to Gross National Happiness (GNH), the country's famous development philosophy where culture and the environment matter as much as money. This paper looks at the Re-Heritage Project, run by the Heritage Sites and Archaeology Division under the Department of Culture and Dzongkha Development (n.d.). The project tries to solve a very real problem: what to do with old wood from historic dzongs and temples that are being repaired. Traditionally, people burned these beautifully carved beams or sold them cheaply as firewood. The Re-Heritage project decided to collect, restore, and turn them into something new.

Vision Statement

The project's vision is: *"To be a beacon of cultural preservation and sustainability in Bhutan, ensuring that the historical essence of our heritage is revitalized, celebrated, and passed on to future generations through innovative and sustainable practices"* (Department of Culture and Dzongkha Development, n.d., para. 2).

I'd say this vision works well because it fits right into Bhutan's GNH framework. It promises both preservation *and* innovation, which is rare in heritage circles where people often just want to leave things untouched. What I like is that it doesn't pretend old things can't have new life. But honestly, it's a bit vague. What does "beacon" mean here? Are we talking about saving every scrap of old wood in the country, or just a few showcase pieces? And how do we measure "passed on to future generations"? Ten years? A hundred? The vision sounds inspiring, but it lacks concrete targets (Mukai, 2023).

Objectives

The project doesn't list its objectives as neat bullet points on the website, but if you read carefully, three main goals stand out:

1. Recycle historical timbers without losing their cultural meaning.
2. Turn them into marketable products that still feel significant to Bhutanese culture.
3. Get more people involved in heritage protection, and use any money made to fund more preservation work (Department of Culture and Dzongkha Development, n.d.).

I think these objectives make practical sense. They follow a clear chain: save the wood, make something useful from it, then use the profits to save more wood. That's a sustainable loop, not just a wish list. The problem, though, is that nothing is measurable. What counts as "broadened involvement"? Five villagers? Fifty artisans? Without clear numbers, how will anyone know if the project succeeds or fails? Also, the objectives don't say what happens if sacred temple wood ends up for sale to tourists. Is that always okay? Probably not, but the plan stays quiet on that tension.

Value Statement

The Re-Heritage project implies a value statement more than it declares one outright. The core idea is that salvaged timbers carry "immense heritage value" that people previously ignored. By transforming them into treasured artifacts, the project preserves the "stories and significance of Bhutan's past" (Department of Culture and Dzongkha Development, n.d., para. 4).

This dual approach—valuing wood both for its history and its usefulness—fits Bhutan's Buddhist worldview well. There's no strict separation between sacred and practical. You can honour the past while giving old materials a new job. I see similar thinking in the Nobgang stewardship plan, where an old traditional house documented in 1905 photographs was restored as a community-run restaurant (Department of Culture and Dzongkha Development, 2021). Value there wasn't just about preservation; it was about local people earning a living. That's smart.

Still, the value statement has a blind spot. If a 17th-century temple beam becomes a tourist souvenir, has its heritage value really been preserved—or has it been turned into merchandise? The project assumes the value transfers smoothly from wall decoration to product for sale. I'm not entirely convinced. And what about spiritual sensitivity? Some

timbers come from lhakhangs (temples) where they held ritual meaning. The plan never sets a boundary for when repurposing becomes disrespectful.

Critical Analysis

Putting all three components together, the Re-Heritage project is genuinely creative. It solves a waste problem, creates economic opportunities, and keeps historical material in public view. That's more than many heritage plans achieve. But the lack of measurable indicators and ethical guidelines is troubling. Without those, commercial pressure could slowly push out cultural sensitivity. You start by saving sacred wood but end up selling it to the highest bidder without even realizing you've drifted.

Compare this to the Lingzhi Dzong conservation project, which used more traditional preservation methods after an earthquake, or the Punakha Dzong disaster risk management plan (National Museum of Bhutan, 2025; Mukai, 2023). Those plans focused on keeping things exactly as they were. The Re-Heritage project is bolder—it embraces change. Whether that's brilliant adaptation or unacceptable loss depends on your perspective. Personally, I think Bhutan needs both approaches: strict preservation for the most sacred sites, and creative reuse like Re-Heritage for less sensitive materials. The key is being clear about the rules upfront.

In the end, the Re-Heritage project shows what happens when a small country tries to honour its past while facing modern pressures. The vision, objectives, and value statement all point in roughly the same direction. They just need sharper definitions and better safeguards.

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