

**WORLD
BUILDER**

What worlds shall we build?

CONCEPT & CREATION BY

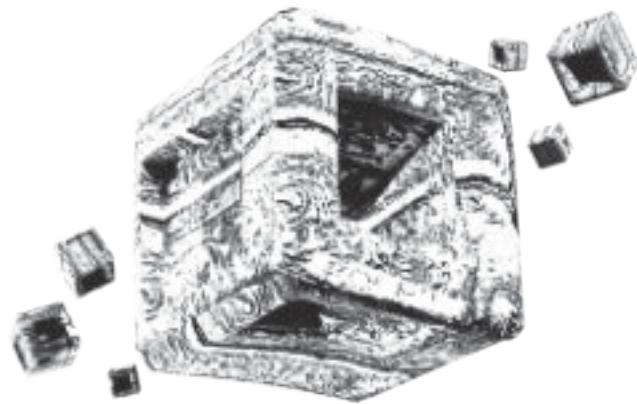
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*"One cannot just be an architect... The idea is to become a sthapati
[one who has the soul of a builder]."*

~ Balakrishna Doshi

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Introduction

Speculative Heritage and the Digital Commons

Since the brink of human civilization, worldbuilding could be considered an ongoing investigation. What we see today around us, and our methods of interaction, are technically the results of generational cascading worldbuilding mastered by several artists, scientists, merchants, individuals in power, and many more who have had an effect in curving earth to where it is today. In fact, you may find evidence of worldbuilding in your time on earth as well, whether it be in the form of creating blanket tents and playing house-house, to building rules and methods to manage your personal finances. Worldbuilding in this context is all encompassing, which makes it a challenging train of thought to catch. Dividing worldbuilding into its multiple verticals seems to make the challenge plausible, yet divided in its approach requiring re-alignment. Lets study one such crossroads that has been a point of contention for generations, especially in the Indian context as well.

The intersection of cultural heritage and digital technology is currently situated at

a precarious yet fertile threshold, where the traditional preservation of static monuments is being supplanted by the conceptualization of heritage as a dynamic, living, and often contested system. Insights from the Worldbuilder roundtables in Ahmedabad and Delhi reveal a critical community of practice—comprising architects, historians, game designers, and conservationists—that is actively redefining heritage futures through the lens of new media and speculative worldbuilding.¹ This transition is not merely technical but deeply political, occurring against a backdrop of increasing monocultural pressures, neoliberal co-option of cultural assets, and the persistent shadows of colonial archival structures.¹ By grounding these contemporary dialogues in theoretical frameworks, a nuanced understanding emerges of how digital infrastructures might either study existing power hierarchies or serve as catalysts for a radical, pluralistic reimagining of our shared pasts.

Through the Worldbuilder Roundtable settings held in Delhi and Ahmedabad in

“Worldbuilding began in speculative fiction and fantasy, where writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien sketched entire worlds into being—lands with their own terrains, cultures, histories and internal logics that readers could step into and inhabit.

First conceived as a literary method for imagining alternate realities with coherence and depth, it has since extended into other cultural domains such as cinema, theatre, architecture and gaming, where its principles help shape and communicate complex narrative environments.”

~ Mrinalini Ghadiok, author, architect and worldbuilder.

2025, we set out on a research initiative to build a causal diagram to analyse generative and overlapping systems built alongside revered cultural practitioners in the fields of art, media, history, speculative thinking and design pedagogy.

Worldbuilding is a multi-dimensional practice where diverse disciplines—from linguistics to architecture—interlace to create cohesive realities that transcend simple storytelling. It is anchored by J.R.R. Tolkien's (Lord of the Rings) pursuit of "enchantment" through linguistic and historical depth, a standard of internal consistency that serves as the bedrock for all modern sub-creations. This literary foundation is scaled by George Lucas (Star Wars) into a transmedia mythology, where the "used future" and the "Hero's Journey" provide a psychological framework that Hideo Kojima (Death Stranding) later evolves through systemic interaction, using meta-narratives and "strand" mechanics to break the "fourth wall" and challenge the player's own reality. While James Cameron (Avatar) pushes this evolution into the realm of technical spectacle, achieving an "immersive realism" through scientifically feasible biomes, he famously draws inspiration from the "lived-in" and embodied ecologies of Hayao Miyazaki (Studio Ghibli), who treats landscapes as oblique reflections of a character's emotional state rather than mere backdrops. These virtual and animated impulses find their physical

counterpart in the architecture of B.V. Doshi (Architecture), who viewed buildings not as static monuments but as "living organisms" and "vessels for memory"—habitats that, like the most enduring fictional worlds, remain in a constant state of flux to serve as a backdrop for the manifestation of life. Together, these perspectives reveal worldbuilding as a feedback loop where technical precision, cultural resonance, and human experience continuously inform one another to manifest living systems. Worldbuilding itself is interconnected and several practitioners have used the core definition of this process in their works, inspiring our world as we go, and now it is our turn to inspire from a legacy of worldbuilders to craft new futures, and build a new perspective on what heritage stands for.

How do you read this publication?

The five chapters in the document represent the five 'worlds' (topics) that were explored in the two roundtable conversations referenced and cited in the appendix, and are identified by the superscript (¹). These conversations were held under the Chatham House Rules, which allows people to speak as individuals, and to express views that may not be those of their organizations, and therefore it encourages free discussion. People usually feel more relaxed if they don't have to worry about their reputation or the implications if

they are publicly quoted. The Chatham House Rule helps create a trusted environment to understand and resolve complex problems. Its guiding spirit is: share the information you receive, but do not reveal the identity of who said it.

The Rule reads as follows:

When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

In summary, when you see the superscript (¹), you can understand that this statement originates from the verbal discourse facilitated by the Worldbuilder curators at the Worldbuilder roundtable conferences.

This publication, by Unbox Cultural Futures and Worldbuilder, offers you the tools to navigate the cascading complexities of designing for a heritage future, through the lens of worldbuilding. Building worlds is a highly inquisitive and critical act, where each world crafter is a product of the existing accessible resources, the worldbuilder's lived reality and an effectively modular creative methodology. The latter of which we will explore in this publication, with the worlds charted ahead.

Worldbuilder x Heritage Futures is a focused edition of the Worldbuilder

series that explores how immersive technology is transforming the way we think about cultural heritage. Using Unreal Engine as the core creative tool, this event brings together artists, technologists, educators, and cultural practitioners to experiment with new approaches to storytelling, memory, and preservation.

From real-time rendering to interactive worldbuilding, the program highlights the powerful role of Unreal Engine in enabling creators to imagine heritage not as a static archive, but as a space of participation, reinterpretation, and future-making.





Redefining Heritage

From Monumental Permanence to Ecological and Embodied Systems

The conventional definition of heritage has long been tethered to the "monument," focusing on the physical longevity of stone and the institutional validation of grand architectural sites. However, through referenced conversations with worldbuilders in India today, it seems to signal a decisive shift toward a more holistic, systems-based understanding that prioritizes "living" and "ecological" heritage.¹ In this emergent framework, heritage is not a found object but a discourse—an ongoing theory and idea created by people.¹ This emergence partially exists also with the wave of critical design that

has submerged several creative practitioners in a quest to question and introspect design processes through a critical and political lens. This ontological shift in the context of heritage and worldbuilding recognizes that natural landforms, such as mountains, lakes, and bio-geological wonders such as the living root bridges of Meghalaya, constitute our "first form of heritage," yet they are often the most vulnerable to the intersecting crises of the anthropocene and industrial encroachment.¹ The discourse in Ahmedabad specifically highlighted the tension between the

"permanently impermanent" nature of the built environment and the rigid conservation mandates often imposed by international bodies.¹ For instance, while Ahmedabad's status as a World Heritage City (WHC) was intended to preserve its historic core, participants noted a lack of progress in the eight years since the declaration, often due to a failure to address the lived realities of the residents.¹ The proposed move toward "sensitive adaptive reuse" suggests that heritage must be allowed to breathe and change, responding to "extreme surroundings" and the shifting behavior of the Indian subcontinent's populations.¹ This approach contrasts sharply with the "gentrification" models of heritage development, which often prioritize revenue over the social health

of the community.¹ Furthermore, the roundtables introduced the concept of the "body as the primary container of history," where heritage is found in the residues of performance, sound, and atmosphere.¹ This "embodied history" challenges the binary of the tangible versus the intangible, suggesting that digital spaces—which are inherently ephemeral—might be better suited to capturing the "lost" materialities of sound and memory that traditional archives dismiss as fleeting.¹ The integration of these embodied histories into digital worldbuilding allows for the creation of spaces where heritage "still breathes," moving documentation away from the static capture of the past toward an interactive, speculative future.¹



"Nobody talks about the natural landforms, the mountains or whatever there is. And so we have to tell them that, everything has a cultural aspect to it. If you just take a lake, you separate it from it, there is no identity. But you add a cultural significance to it, it becomes your heritage."

Worldbuilder Roundtable Discussion at Delhi



Figure 1.0 : Comparative frameworks of heritage definitions, from monumental constructed concepts to emergent, living systems as spoken about in roundtable conversations.

Ayaz Basrai's Thoughts

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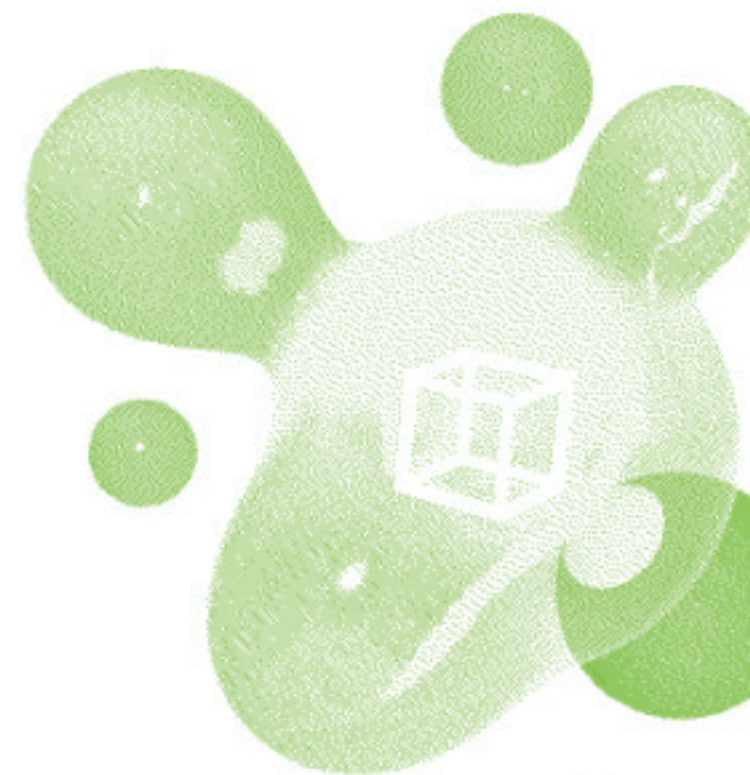
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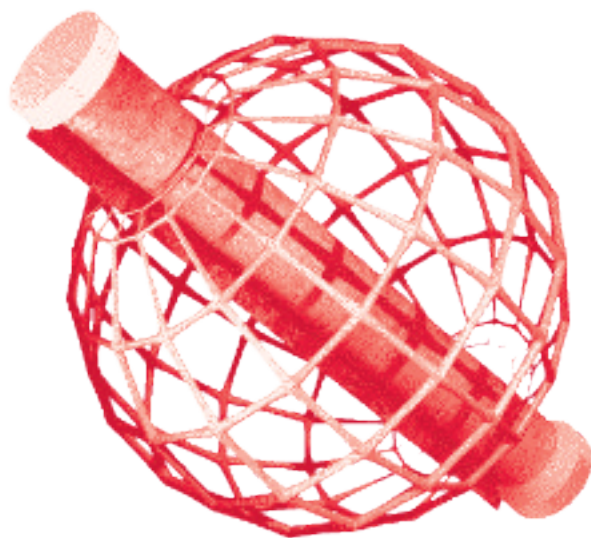
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Worldbuilder Heritage Futures

Images from ayaz





Power and Gatekeeping

Navigating the Tension Between Monoculture and Diversity

A central concern articulated across the roundtable was the weaponization of heritage to feed a specific political agenda, particularly the drive toward a "monoculture" that erases India's syncretic past.¹ Participants identified a "massive appropriation of culture" where history is no longer seen as a shared human legacy but as a "treat" or a tool of propaganda to control the narrative of national identity.¹ This process often involves the erasure of syncretic histories—such as the multicultural origins of Urdu on the ramparts of the Red Fort or the inclusive performances of Ustad Bismillah Khan—in favor of a

singular, simplified narrative.¹ This political imperative is deeply intertwined with a "neoliberal business mindset" that views culture through a purely transactional lens.¹ The Secretary of Culture's mindset, as reported by participants, was to "take one rupee and make it 100," signaling a prioritize of "footfall" and profit over authentic preservation and engagement.¹ In such a climate, the act of asking critical questions or exploring alternative histories is increasingly framed as "anti-national," creating an environment of fear and self-censorship that stifles cultural evolution.¹

Theoretical resistance to this monocultural push can be found in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, which was cited as a foundational text for rethinking the narratives of worldbuilding.¹ Le Guin disputes the "Techno-Heroic" narrative—the story of the spear—which follows a linear trajectory of conquest and focuses on a singular protagonist.¹ This stands in a fun contrast to Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey*, which seems to speak the opposite. Instead, she proposes the "carrier bag" or the "vessel" as the primary human tool, which allows for a

"big jumbled mess of stuff" where multiple protagonists, wimps, klutzes, and everyday stories can coexist.¹ In the context of heritage, this theory supports a move away from the "Hero's Journey" toward a "multiverse of archives" that celebrates a multiplicity of voices and avoids the "othering" inherent in binary conflicts.¹



"The central tension of the discussion revolved around a critical duality: while emerging technologies offer unprecedented tools for democratizing the creation and preservation of heritage, they are also susceptible to co-option by state-driven, neoliberal agendas that promote a singular, monetized version of history."

Worldbuilder Roundtable Discussion at Ahmedabad

Institutional Mindsets and Cultural Control

The roundtable discussions highlighted how institutional gatekeeping extends beyond the state to academic and cultural organizations.¹ For example, the "excommunication" of artists who take traditional forms to secular stages illustrates the rigid boundaries maintained by self-appointed custodians of culture.¹ Even in prestigious institutions like the National Institute of

Design (NID), questions arise regarding who has the right to access objects and stories.¹ The tendency for institutions to become passive, focusing solely on their primary role in education, often leads to a failure in outreach and a reluctance to open archives to the broader public, often out of a fear of critique or a lack of understanding of the "value" of digital twinning.¹

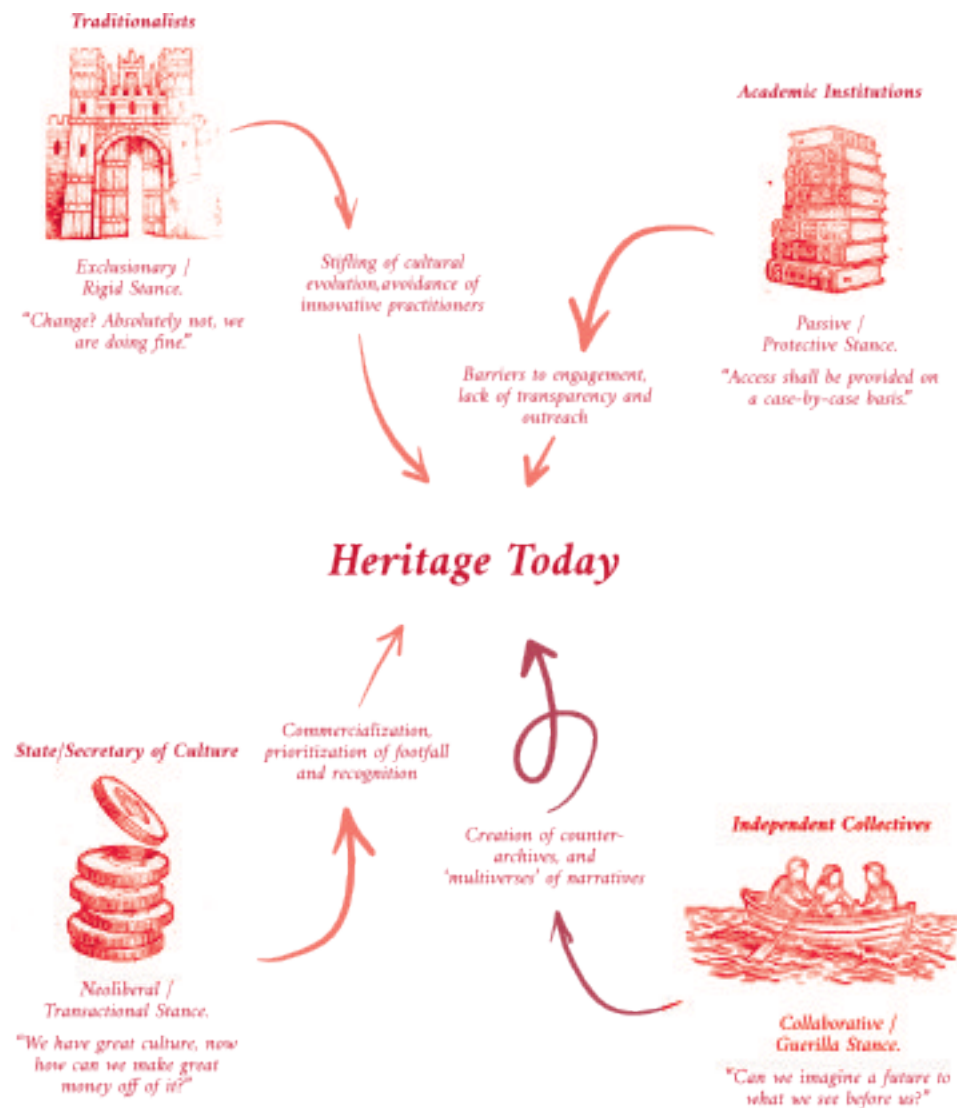


Figure 2.0 : Visualization of the effect of mentioned actors in the heritage space, their predominant mindset and the resulting impact on the heritage, as it is today.

Bhargav Padhiyar's Thoughts

The digital future of Cultural Heritage is not merely about digitization; it is a space for active experimentation with historical narratives, heritage sites, and traditional arts. As we leverage digital mediums to engage with artifacts and living traditions, we are forced to confront fundamental philosophical questions regarding cultural capital, ownership, and authenticity. These inquiries, **Whose heritage is it? Who is authorized to preserve it? How do we ensure its continuity?—require constant critical reflection to establish an ethical and meaningful standpoint in the field.**

The ecosystem of Cultural Heritage is shaped by diverse stakeholders, including government bodies, non-profits, researchers, and entrepreneurs. Each operates within distinct power dynamics and socio-economic conditions, influencing how heritage is documented and perceived. Within this landscape, educational institutions and universities serve as pivotal stakeholders. While their primary mandate is pedagogy, their dual role in research and knowledge dissemination grants them significant soft power. They are uniquely positioned to facilitate collaborations for

innovation, universities can provide a safe institutional platform that can invite diverse stakeholders to collaborate without risk fears. Universities can offer the necessary available resources to reflect on critical ethical questions that ground-level practice often overlooks. However, beyond academic silos, universities have a responsibility to transform their campuses into inviting spaces where the public can engage with research and digital innovation. A couple of digital heritage initiatives to be noted here which highlights the success of their university engagement and collaborations. The Living Waters Museum, a virtual museum dedicated to India's water heritage, has utilized academic institutions as partners and its operational base since its inception. Formerly based at the Centre for Heritage Management, Ahmedabad University, the museum leveraged the campus to host several multidisciplinary gatherings involving artists, scientists, and citizens (*Image 1*). It continues operating in this spirit currently while being housed at IISER, Pune, maintaining a bridge between academic infrastructure and public awareness.

Another initiative, CEPT University & Worldbuilder (2025): The Ahmedabad Edition of the traveling Worldbuilder symposium was hosted at CEPT University Ahmedabad in September 20204. Through this curated program CEPT University and Worldbuilder provided an open platform to over 300 young participants, fostering inspiration for Indian Game Design and facilitating unique inter-university student engagement (Image 2). Additionally, the technological landscape of the last decade has shifted significantly. Emerging tools for Digital Heritage such as Extended Realities (XR), Phygital Twins, and Artificial Intelligence demand extensive computing power and human capital. These resource-heavy explorations are often beyond the reach of individual practitioners or small-scale researchers. Consequently, there is a **need for Indian universities to develop robust digital infrastructures for their research and development.** These facilities should drive collaborative, cross-disciplinary experimentation while simultaneously providing forums for public dissemination. A project to highlight here would be a project done in 2023 at Southampton, UK. Through the University of Southampton's Digital Humanities lab, this project recorded multiple Victorian-era drinking fountains using 3D scanning (Image 3). These late available digital 3D objects were placed in an immersive exhibiton designed inside the Digital

Humanities Lab's Cave Virtual Reality (CVR) system, a 360 degree display where you can enter and explore and interact with the 3D objects in a physical space around you to learn about their histories (Image 4). By opening the space to the public during University Open Days, the project successfully reimagined local history and made high-tech research accessible to the broader local community to whom this local heritage belongs to. This was made possible only through the university's ability to provide both the technical platform and open up to the public opportunity for engagement.

When institutions integrate high-tech research with deep critical inquiry while remaining accessible to the public, they foster a shared sense of belonging and agency. This collaborative model creates lasting public value, ensuring an ethical, inclusive, and exciting future for our digital heritage.

– Bhargav Padhiyar
Digital Heritage Professional
Assistant Professor at
CEPT University Ahmedabad



Worldbuilder Heritage Futures



Image 2



Image 1



Image 3



Image 4



Archives as Living Systems

From Institutional Foucaultian Order to Disobedient Entropy

The traditional archive is often perceived as a site of documentation and organization, yet the roundtables challenged this notion by introducing the concept of 'archive entropy'.¹ Drawing on Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, the institution typically seeks to shove material into neat categories; however, the reality is that the archive itself is continuously changing and often "does not want to be organized".¹ This inherent "disobedience" of the archive suggests that meaning is often found not in the document itself,

but in the disorganized space beyond it—the "digital residue" that is easier to extract and pass on through interactive narratives.¹

The concept of "disobedient archives" or "disobedient pedagogies" is essential for reimagining the archive as a site of production rather than a repository of loss.⁴ In this framework, learning is viewed as an "immanent" process that takes us beyond the established parameters of practice. By taking archival material out of the confines of classification systems, it can lead "digital

lives" that are relevant to contemporary conditions, such as the climate disaster or political erasures.¹ This "transversal use of archives" allows scholars, artists, and students to do "whatever" with the material, fostering a collaborative best practice that resists top-down objectives.¹

The Role of Counter-Archives in Crisis and Erasure

In environments characterized by destruction—such as the current situation in Gaza or the erasure of syncretic histories in India—the "counter-archive" becomes a vital tool for capturing what is lost.¹ These archives are not bound by linear narratives but function through "hypertextual or networked structures,"

much like Le Guin's "intricately woven nets".⁹ Which is a networked and associative storytelling structure that holds a "jumbled mess" of interrelated people, objects, and experiences. This allows even small details in lived realities to reveal profound significance - once laboriously unknotted. The use of digital tools to record partition histories from Sindh to Bombay, for example, creates a counter-archive of physical residues that allows women's experiences to be heard.¹ Furthermore, the "piracy element" described in the building of the National Film Archive of India (NFAI)—where copies were made during screenings to ensure institutional access—suggests that guerilla-style archiving and digital twinning may be necessary acts of resistance against restrictive copyright and ownership models.¹

"Counter-archives, with so much destruction, how do you capture what is going on around, the silences in the archive, the erasures, what is destroyed..."

What do you do when everything is lost, where do you start or where do you go back?"

Worldbuilder Roundtable Discussion at Ahmedabad

Charuvi Agrawal's Thoughts

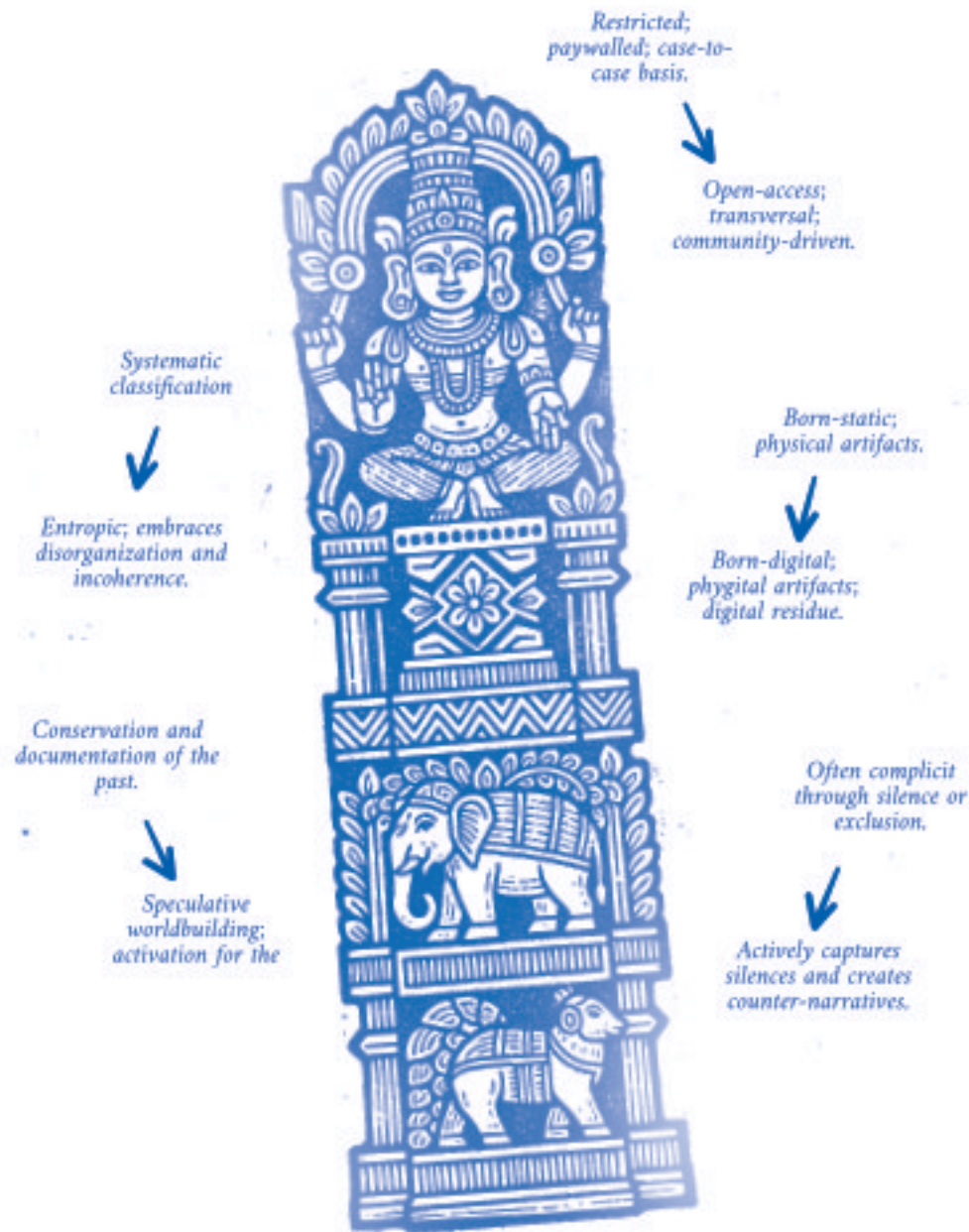


Figure 3.0 : Changes in the concepts of organization, access, goals, materials and stances on erasure from traditional archive models to living systems and disobedient models

Project creation has quietly become one of the most consequential forms of archiving. In the nineteenth century, "heritage" was often stabilised through monuments, antiquarian collections, and state-led canons; today, heritage is increasingly produced through pipelines, photogrammetry, LiDAR, real-time engines, spatial audio, and interaction design, where the work product is not merely an interpretation or simulation, but a durable knowledge object. UNESCO's Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage makes this shift explicit by treating born-digital materials as a form of heritage whose fragility (format decay, platform obsolescence) demands intentional preservation strategies. In parallel, the ICOM museum definition positions museums as institutions that "research, collect, conserve, interpret and exhibit" both tangible and intangible heritage, an agenda that increasingly requires computational methods rather than vitrines alone.

Within this contemporary frame, "heritage futures" scholarship argues that heritage work is not only about saving the past, but about negotiating

relationships between present and future societies, what we choose to carry forward, how, and for whom.

Charuvi Agrawal's practice (across animation, AV museum design, public sculpture, and immersive environments) is useful here because it treats the project as a contemporizing archival apparatus. A designed encounter that stores research, aesthetic decisions, and community-facing narratives in forms that can travel, update, engage, and re-contextualise.

Consider five distinct modes. First, experience-centre worldbuilding: CDL's work on the Adani Green Energy Experience Centre is described by the studio as shaping spatial narrative, visitor flow, and interactive storytelling, heritage-making applied to contemporary industrial "memory," translating infrastructure into civic legibility. A finalist at the Inavation awards to be held later this year in Spain, this 2000 sq. feet space sought to contemporize the cultural language of Kutch, Ahmedabad and rural Gujarati art forms through the installations created. Second, public art as deep-time citation: Monolithic Guardians, a large

installation, locates heritage in everyday urban circulation rather than institutional entry, and public descriptions link the work to Bhimbetka's rock-art lineage.

Third is gallery installation plus digital complement, exemplified by Lumena and Eterna from the Shakti: Fair & Fierce exhibition produced by MOSA (Museum of Sacred Arts, Belgium), a dual artwork re-interpreting the feminine part of the duality of timeliness existence, a concept within the broad theme of Shakti. The two artworks, while bringing forth a more aesthetic dialogue, uses contemporary mixed media (quite literary) to preserve the narrative.

Fourth is multi-sensorial myth-to-media translation through the Hanuman body of work, useful here not for religion per se, but for its modern distribution design: sculpture, painted objects, a short film, and technologically mediated viewing co-exist as one archival system. Reporting on Hanuman: Images Beyond Imagination exhibited in the year 2014 documents the 25-foot "26,000 Bells of Light" sculpture alongside film screenings and mixed-media pieces, including AR, VR, an app, and a large hologram which was re-showcased recently at the national gallery of modern art in Delhi.

Fifth, feature/anthology animation as cultural transmission: Dastaan-e-Shahadat is presented as a multi-film anthology chronicling Guru Gobind

Singh's life, an approach that formalises episodic historiography through high-end CG production across uniquely designed galleries.

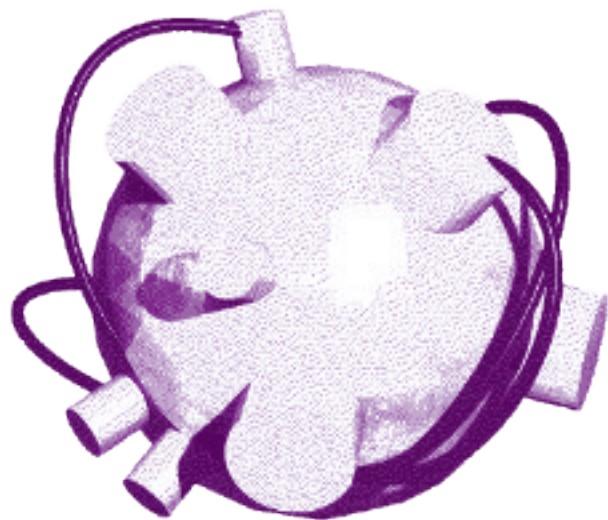
What makes such works academically significant is not simply "technology used," but the documentation logic they imply. If projects are to be "immortalised" beyond the exhibition cycle, artists must treat assets as archival records: versioned 3D scenes, production bibles, research annotations, rights metadata, and interpretive rationale. Cultural-heritage documentation standards (e.g., CIDOC CRM) exist precisely to structure provenance and relationships across objects, events, places, and narratives, making future re-use and re-interpretation possible without erasing context.

In short, modern artists can build heritage futures by designing works that are simultaneously (1) compelling public experiences and (2) well-structured, preservable knowledge systems, so that tomorrow's creators

inherit not only images, but also the methods and evidentiary chains that produced them.

~ Charuvi Agrawal,
Visual Artist,
Animator & Sculptor
Founder at
Charuvi Design Lab





Technological Infrastructure and Ephemerality

The Asset Gap and the Materiality of the Virtual

While the proliferation of free, open-source tools like Unreal Engine and Blender offers unprecedented opportunities for heritage worldbuilding, a significant technological hurdle remains: the 'stark lack of culturally specific digital assets'.¹ This is exemplified by the "Delhi smog cloud" problem, where creators struggle to find digital assets that accurately represent local Indian environments, textures, or lighting conditions.¹ This asset gap forces creators to either 'naturalize' Western aesthetics or spend immense

resources building homegrown assets, reinforcing the dynamic where India is a consumer rather than a producer of technological innovation.¹ Moreover, the technology itself is often more ephemeral than the heritage it seeks to capture.¹ Participants noted that "legacy media" like paper or stone can last centuries, while digital media such as floppies and CDs are prone to rapid obsolescence.¹ This necessitates the development of 'emulation software' and labs for antiquated media to retrieve "born-digital" material.¹ The transition to

"phygital" artifacts—objects that exist at the intersection of the physical and digital—is seen as a potential way to decentralize knowledge, provided that this technology is taken to communities outside of resource-abundant urban contexts.¹

The Politics of Asset Creation and Digital Repatriation

The roundtable discussions connected the technical lack of assets to broader issues of 'digital repatriation'.¹ International institutions, such as the British Museum or archives in Europe,

often hold digital scans and high-resolution data of Indian heritage (e.g., Mohenjo Daro) while restricting access to Indian creators due to bureaucratic hurdles.¹ This "colonial knowledge monopoly" dictates the conditions of access and repatriation as an assertion of Western superiority, often under the guise of superior conservation facilities.² A policy framework for digital repatriation is therefore essential to compel these institutions to return digital copies of artifacts to their source communities, allowing for a "digital return" to a land that may no longer exist in its original form.¹



"Consider that the technology is much more ephemeral than the heritage... [but] Technology is a tool, tech today will also be heritage for the future."

Worldbuilder Roundtable Discussion at Ahmedabad

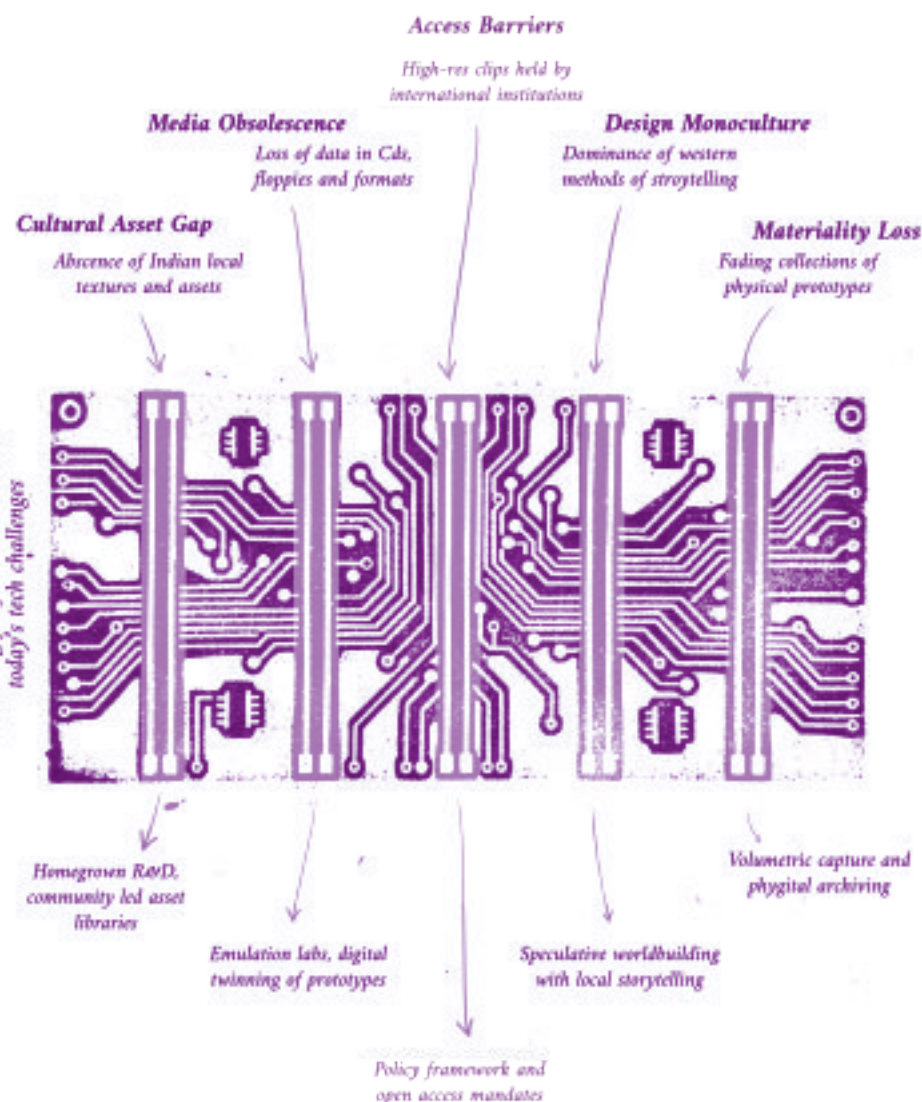


Figure 3.0 : Pathfinding diagram and observational analysis for the group on tracing technical challenges today to proposed infrastructure for tomorrow.

Avinash Kumar's Thoughts

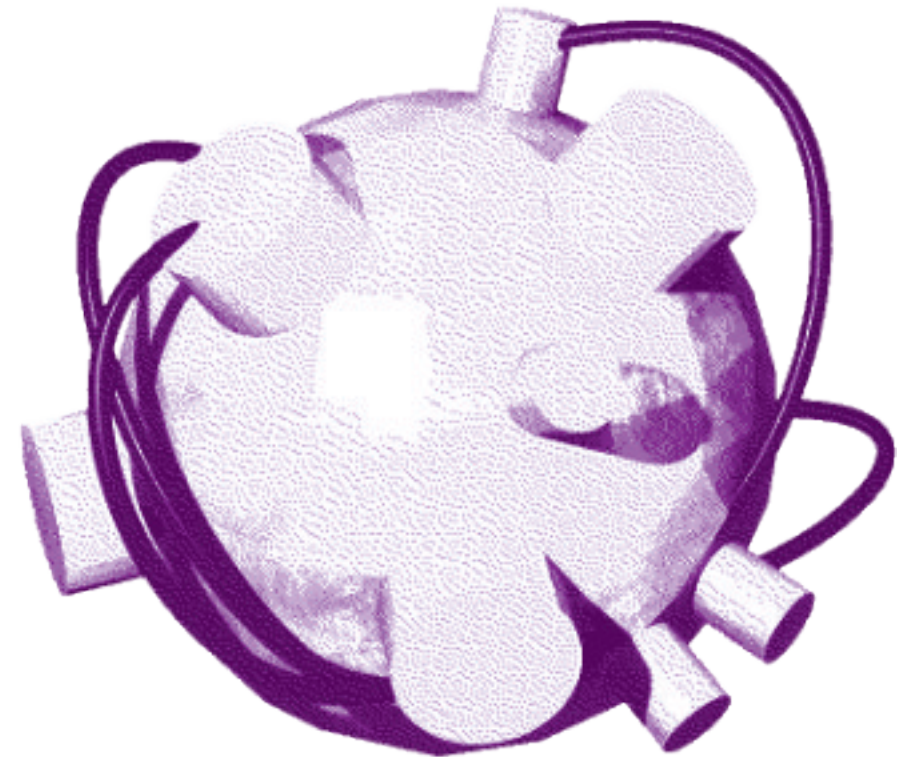
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Ethics and Economics of Digitization

Representation, Equity, and the "Weaponization" of IPR

The digitization of heritage is not an ethically neutral act; it involves profound questions of representation, ownership, and equity.¹ The roundtables identified a risk of "mining history" in a way that is exploitative, particularly when neoliberal agendas monetize cultural assets without benefiting the source communities.¹ To counter this, radical financial models were proposed, such as a "weaponized version of IPR" where cultural assets are broken down into micro-financial streams.¹ For instance, a system could be envisioned where "paisa" gets credited

back to the owner of the source knowledge every time a digital asset is referenced, ensuring intergenerational equity and sustainable livelihoods for practitioners of disappearing traditions.¹ The ethical dimension also extends to the "accuracy" of digital representation.¹ The tendency to "naturalize" heritage in interactive media—rendering historical characters or architecture according to modern Hollywood or Bollywood archetypes—can mislead audiences into accepting creative reimaginings as objective historical fact.¹ This

"naturalized heritage" necessitates the use of disclaimers and the creation of "choice-based narratives" where players are presented with different historical

interpretations, thereby fostering critical thinking and "real learning" rather than passive consumption.¹

"Even with the digital as a tool, a lot of politics on where this is being stored or with who – who does it belong to now that it is online, just because it's online, doesn't mean it's free."

Worldbuilder Roundtable Discussion at Ahmedabad

Decolonizing the Museum

Digital repatriation is positioned as a parallel complement to physical repatriation, acknowledging that colonization and cultural expropriation have turned access to information into a privilege.⁵ It aims to translate "researcher-friendly" technical analysis into real-world community resources.⁵ Projects such as the digital museum for the Naga Gaidinliu collection illustrate how digital repatriation can serve as an ethnographic method to rethink the role of museums as "distributive institutions" rather than merely "conserving locations".¹⁰ By circulating digital collections via social media and social networks, the archive is returned "home," triggering new narratives and responses

from the community.¹⁰ However, the preservation of these digital materials remains difficult due to climate degradation and limited institutional infrastructure.¹¹ Advancements in Artificial Intelligence offer opportunities for safeguarding rare manuscript collections and vernacular archives, but these must be governed by inclusive and ethical policies that complement rather than replace traditional practices.⁷ The goal is to move beyond "tokenism" and ensure that the digital experience—while not the same as the real thing—serves as a catalyst for awareness and a renewed dialogue between cultural and scholarly communities.¹

Digital Repatriation

Translation of inaccessible data into community resources.

for

Decolonization of global museums; distributed knowledge.

Choice-Based Narrative

Presentation of multiple historical perspectives.

for

Critical thinking; rejection of singular "naturalized" history.

Data Sovereignty

Inclusive policies for AI-driven manuscript preservation.

for

Preservation of vernacular archives; regional identity production.

Intergenerational Equity

Micro-transactions (e.g., 5 paisa model) for knowledge owners.

for

Sustainable livelihoods for craft and oral history practitioners.

Phygital Co-Creation

Collaboration between digital creators and tribal/rural artisans.

for

Diversification of tech; decentralization of digital power.



Figure 5.0 : Navigation of the economic or ethical model under scrutiny, from its key principles today, to a future outlook tomorrow.

Tanishka Kachru's Thoughts

I believe that we are experiencing a period of transformation in this World, where cultural heritage's survival is challenged by shifts in identity due to three key things - technology, globalization and climate change.

On one hand, digital realities have helped in the reimagination of approaches to heritage conservation, making diverse cultures more accessible and easier to engage with. While on the other hand, **Heritage, once regarded as a "national" public good, has evolved into a commodity with immense tourism and economic potential.** According to consulting firm KPMG's 2024 report on heritage tourism, the global heritage tourism market reached US\$587.1 billion in 2023 and is estimated to touch US\$813 billion by 2032. We must push for policies to expand focus from the mere economic exploitation of the country's rich heritage to initiatives that address fundamental challenges such as poor documentation, database creation and management, and public participation, to preserve and promote India's heritage. The Indian government has some initiatives for virtual museum/heritage site tours, using GIS data

collation and AI language translators but gamification technologies as an extension to conservation are still novel concepts in our heritage conservation space. **We must invest in researching educational methodologies, narrative techniques, and gamification strategies to enhance the learning experience while promoting cultural heritage.** Today, there is no doubt that Metaverse applications should be considered as a potentially relevant tool for cultural and heritage documentation and preservation, but the question is - how do we use it responsibly and effectively?

How does what we make as designers and technologists effect how people view and protect their heritage? How can Digital preservation through virtual museums and online archives offer a resilient way to protect cultural heritage? How can we support and design community led initiatives that align preservation efforts with local values and needs?

As a design educator it is important for me to engage with worldbuilding. This is because I believe that designers need to play an important role in visualising

alternative future narratives that provoke, question and seek collective action to re-align socio-technical systems for transition to the future. or as Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar writes in *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2018) "channeling design's world-making capacity toward ways of being and doing that are deeply attuned to justice and the Earth."

If we look at game mechanics and the elements that are present in most games, we will see an overlap with play theory. Experiment, failing, receiving feedback, revising strategies, and reattempting play are all components of games. So we know that clear parallels exist between Play Theory and Game-Based Learning. Whether it is gameplay or other forms of play, Play creates an environment of low-pressure learning, allowing for failure to become a learning opportunity. Play creates trust and relationships. Building trust and relationships creates conditions for increasing cooperation and collaboration. I think the answer to our inquiry lies in developing a better understanding of the role of play in unlocking our imagination for hopeful Worldbuilding.

A 2018 project with HIAL, founded by Sonam Wangchuk in Ladakh, had students of Exhibition design from NID Ahmedabad consider the role of **narrative-based strategy in enhancing the transmission of values and messages through Worldbuilding practice.** One of

the design proposals to come out of this interrogation was a card game called 'Ladakhi Futures' that allows for Participatory visioning of future worlds through gamification. Another was a design proposal for a Play Room in the 'Future House' (mirroring the existing 'traditional' house) that will engage young people in solving problems by working together. The theory underlying both the design proposals is to use gamification to promote Learning with play > experiment, fail, receive feedback, revise strategies, and reattempt play. These ideas also allow for narratives based on distributed knowledge and rejection of singular "naturalized" history.

In 2024, again taking these ideas out of the classroom, a group of students collaborated with me and Aayush Mahale to develop a gamified Worldbuilding workshop and tested it with a diverse group of people gathered at Kani Home, Srinagar, J&K. The inquiry was driven by the question of - **How might we harness the power of worldbuilding practice in promoting shared and collective imagination, activating a process of cultural and narrative change?** Using speculative design methodology, we designed a participatory visioning game, incorporating role-playing and co-design activities- for a group that included policy makers, educators, and entrepreneurs- to collectively explore the diverse dimensions of their shared

heritage and futures. The act of gathering was explored as a powerful tool for shared dreaming about regional identity production.

The most important thing these examples from real-world educational experiments demonstrate is that collaborative research between designers, artists, technologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, historians and local communities can help develop pathways for sensitive preservation practices to meet the challenges of technology, globalization and climate change.

~ Tanishka Kachru,
Design Historian,
Discipline Lead
(Exhibition Design),
NID Ahmedabad



Tools of Heritage Worldbuilding

Through the Worldbuilder event series, creatives from across the country found a platform to express their versions and tools of worldbuilding. It behaved as a cascading and overlapping collection of frameworks, methodologies, activities and showcases that directly linked to worldbuilding, tugging it to expand its definition.

While speculative design does come accompanied with studios and practitioners continuously experimenting and creating new frameworks and tools, worldbuilding (being a further umbrella term for blue sky creation) is massive enough to humble framework builders. The question here lies in the context and interpretation in reference to the worldbuilders themselves (in this case the creators who joined us at our roundtable conferences) to build tools to assist young worldbuilders to tackle the gargantuan thinking required to construct these worlds.

In this segment we will explore and experiment to discover the worlds that we will build, and how we will build them. The following tools are

experimental and creative, so they can be up to your own interpretation, and are not prescriptive in their nature.

Key Values of Worldbuilding for Heritage Futures

While the magnitude of content generated in both roundtable discussions seems to appear overwhelming, it's possible to draw out specific insights that encourage projects and creators to take a journey to approach and define heritage futures to themselves.

From a creative standpoint, making a stance on heritage may seem like a daunting task. Budding creators may be questioning their validity in addressing heritage and more experiences heritage practitioners may be struggling to find their place on the technological spectrum. While circumstances of creators continue to be at crossroads, this publication aims to build a collaborative ecosystem, and courage to create more content on our shared heritage futures.

*Find your personal
heritage, that which comes
naturally to you.*



*Collaborate and absorb
knowledge openly, with
individuals and
institutions alike.*

*Apply a meaningful logic
to your approach that is
compelling, yet structured.*



*Build resources to define
your idea, and support a
growing community
repository*

*Find new pathways for
sensitive preservation to
meet today's real world
challenges.*



Meet the Worldbuilders

<i>Avinash Kumar</i>	<i>(Antariksha Studio / Quicksand)</i>
<i>Mrinalini Ghadiok</i>	<i>(Architect / Writer)</i>
<i>Ayaz Basrai</i>	<i>(The Busride Design Studio)</i>
<i>Tanishka Kachru</i>	<i>(NID Ahmedabad)</i>
<i>Bhargav Padiyar</i>	<i>(CEPT University / Studio IF)</i>
<i>Charuvi Agrawal</i>	<i>(Charuvi Design Lab)</i>
<i>Abhay Mangaldas</i>	<i>(The House of MG)</i>
<i>Sahil Thappa</i>	<i>(NID Ahmedabad / Sonic Architect)</i>
<i>Rebecca Reubens</i>	<i>(Studio Rhizome)</i>
<i>Saman Quraishi</i>	<i>(CEPT University)</i>
<i>Savyasachi Anju Prabir</i>	<i>(NID Ahmedabad)</i>
<i>Kathyayini Dash</i>	<i>(Ahmedabad University)</i>
<i>Dhruv Jani</i>	<i>(Studio Oleomingus)</i>
<i>Deepika Srivastava</i>	<i>(Design Historian)</i>
<i>Maitri Sheth</i>	<i>(Design History Society, UK)</i>
<i>Shemal Pandya</i>	<i>(NID Ahmedabad)</i>
<i>Abhishek Das</i>	<i>(Architect / INTACH)</i>
<i>Anirudh Kaniseti</i>	<i>(Historian/Author)</i>
<i>Hitesh Kumar</i>	<i>(Varaha World)</i>
<i>Supreet Kaur</i>	<i>(Epic Games)</i>
<i>Kriti Sood</i>	<i>(LAND)</i>
<i>Abraham K</i>	<i>(Ayelet Studio)</i>
<i>Dimple Bahl</i>	<i>(NIFT)</i>
<i>Karan Parikh</i>	<i>(Green Rain Studio)</i>
<i>Madhav Raman</i>	<i>(Anagram Architects)</i>
<i>Ritu Sethi</i>	<i>(Craft Revival Trust)</i>
<i>Anant Haldia</i>	<i>(VolumX)</i>
<i>Arvind Neelakantan</i>	<i>(Epic Games)</i>
<i>Kabir Punde</i>	<i>(Studio Griot)</i>
<i>Pooja Sood</i>	<i>(Khoj)</i>
<i>Aayush Mahale</i>	<i>(EyeSpy NID / Quicksand)</i>



Synthesis and Foresight

The "Worldbuilder x Heritage Futures" roundtables in Ahmedabad and Delhi conclude that the journey toward a resilient heritage future requires a collaborative, pluralistic, and technologically engaged approach.¹ The challenges are immense, ranging from fighting systemic propaganda and institutional gatekeeping to bootstrapping independent projects against incredible financial odds. Yet, the commitment to building a "multiverse of archives" and a "thinking forest" for India's heritage suggests a path forward.¹

By integrating local storytelling, filling cultural asset gaps, and supplanting western or traditional worldbuilding by networked and cascading models of thought, creators can move away from the "Heroic" narrative of domination toward one of "gathering, holding, and sharing".³ This facilitates an "infinite game" of continuous cultural production rather than a "finite game" with a clear end-goal.¹ The tangible next steps—including the development of university electives, the launch of fellowship programs, and the push for digital repatriation policies—are the first seeds of this ecosystem.¹ Ultimately, the goal is

to create a space where heritage still breathes, where the digital and physical co-exist in a "phygital" synthesis that empowers marginalized voices and ensures that the world of today is a heritage of tomorrow that we can be proud to leave behind.¹

The shift from "conserving" to "activating" heritage is essential in an era of climate crisis and political instability.¹ Whether through the procedural generation of historical architecture or the volumetric capture of intangible dance, technology must be used not just to replicate the past but to interrogate it.¹ This requires a radical openness—a "disobedient" stance toward existing power structures—and a commitment to the ethics of representation and equity.

Only through such a multi-faceted approach can the "immense multicultural universe" of ideas that defines the Indian subcontinent be preserved and reimaged for the generations to come.¹

The synthesis of these roundtable insights reveals that heritage is not a static legacy to be guarded by elite institutions, but a living, breathing field

of action. The transition from "monuments" to "living systems" is a call to recognize the agency of communities, the materiality of the digital, and the profound political consequences of how we choose to archive our collective existence. By embracing the "disobedient" potential of technology and the networked and hyperlocal logic of inclusive storytelling, we can manifest heritage futures that are resilient, equitable, and truly representative of the diverse tapestry of human experience.

Editorial Note

From the Ahmedabad transcript, the research drew on discussions regarding the city's World Heritage status and the failure to address residents' lived realities, alongside theoretical frameworks like "archive entropy" and the "permanently impermanent" nature of built environments. It also incorporated the specific dialogue from Ahmedabad concerning the "disobedient" nature of archives and the role of the body as a primary container of history. From the Delhi transcript, the research extracted the more overtly political and economic critiques, such as the "culture-as-business" mindset (the "one rupee to 100" mandate) and the erasure of syncretic histories like the birth of Urdu at the Red Fort. It also specifically used the Delhi session's focus on technical hurdles, such as the "Delhi smog cloud" asset gap and the ethical case study of

the Son of Tanjai project.

By combining these, the report was able to link Ahmedabad's focus on archival theory and ecological systems with Delhi's focus on power dynamics and the economics of digitization. We hope through this publication, the conversation continues to grow and inspire worldbuilders everywhere.

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Museum



Worldbuilder @
CEPT University

Avinash's Thoughts

Ayaz's Thoughts

Charuvi's Thoughts



UNESCO charter



Hanuman Project

Tanishka's Thoughts



Kilab, Kashmir



HIAL, Ladakh

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Digital Tools

1. Google Images and Docs
2. Affinity (Publication Design)
3. Google Gemini (Transcription - Studied afterwards)
4. Blender (3D Visuals)
5. Zotero (Citations)

EESAB-Rennes, Typography creation studio, Master Graphic Design, 2018. Made in France, Made in Brittany. Distributed by velvetyne.fr.

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Credits and Mentions

Intellectual Property

Worldbuilder is the intellectual property of Unbox Cultural Futures LLP.



Concept and Curation

The conceptual development and curation of this program were led by the teams at Antariksha Studio and Green Rain Studio.



Powered By

This venture would not have been possible without the support of Unreal Engine and Epic Games. Their partnership has been instrumental in facilitating these critical conversations and paving the way for Worldbuilder to engage with several aspirational creators across India.



Venue Partners

We express our sincere gratitude to our host venues, Alliance Française Delhi and the National Institute of Design (NID) Ahmedabad, for offering safe and inspiring spaces for cultural collaboration.



Other Collaborators

We extend our deepest appreciation to all the ground team members, staff, note-makers and behind-the-scenes individuals whose hard work and dedication were vital to the success of these events.



The Worldbuilder Team

This festival, and the roundtable conversations within, were curated and facilitated by Avinash Kumar and Mrinalini Ghadiok.

The Worldbuilder project was managed and mobilized by Amishi Mehta, and the design effort was a product of Aayush Mahale, residents of Unbox Labs Goa, and Denver Fernandez. The sketchnote effort was made by Purva Bhandari, Nikita Lakkaraju and Hriday Lodh from NID Ahmedabad.

The Worlbuilder team could not be happier about the ongoing success of this initiative, and we hope to continue to give a stage to visionary Indian worldbuilders, unite creative practitioners, conduct provocative heritage futures conversations, and build a unique and holistic definition of worldbuilding in the Indian context.