

Intangible Cultural Heritage in Local Shopping Streets: Toronto's West Queen West

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Abstract: This paper utilizes Toronto's West Queen West shopping strip as a case study to uncover the importance of a seemingly mundane area to the local community and why local shopping streets should be considered grounds for intangible cultural heritage production. Building upon previous research done on intangible cultural heritage of local shopping streets, this paper uses personal interviews, observations, and data collection to analyze three ways in which local shopping streets shape local intangible cultural heritage: 1) aesthetics, 2) collective memory, and 3) the urban village model. This paper suggests the three proposed ways exclude the necessary element of transmission of intangible culture; thus, the element of transmission through the concept of "safeguarding, without freezing" should be included as the fourth way local shopping streets develop and shape intangible cultural heritage. The combination of these four elements not only secure local shopping streets as producers of intangible cultural heritage but also serves as criteria to determine whether a local shopping street is one that requires protection.

1. Introduction

Local shopping streets are often seen as tourist destinations or chaotic and mundane places where people go to fulfill everyday duties; however, these streets generate a large amount of intangible cultural heritage and are important to the wellbeing and cohesiveness of the local community. The art, culture, and leisure activities lining the street are crucial in creating subconscious interactions between visitors and their surroundings, which gives rise to intangible cultural heritage [1]. Unlike standardized shopping malls and modern shopping streets, local shopping streets are imbedded with the area's memories, practices, and lifestyles and collectively serve as the "face" of local identity.

Despite local shopping streets bearing an important cultural purpose and benefitting the local community, they are seldomly recognized as spaces that exhibit and generate intangible cultural heritage. Moreover, the intangible heritage that is generated in these spaces, do not fall within the traditional five broad categories of intangible cultural heritage [2]. Therefore, when it comes to developing frameworks for intangible cultural heritage, local shopping streets are left out, or only their tangible, built heritage is considered. The concept of protecting something intangible that is created in a casual space, that is not a tradition or art that is passed down, is new to many and possibly not as well understood, but is growing in prominence and acceptance [3].

2. Elements of intangible cultural heritage in local shopping streets

Local shopping streets should be recognized as important grounds of intangible cultural heritage creation and the definition of intangible cultural heritage should be expanded to include the social practices and heritage generated in these areas. Local shopping streets exhibit the four elements the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (“UNESCO”) states as being defining elements of intangible cultural heritage, namely: 1) traditional, contemporary, and living at the same time, 2) inclusive and contributes to social cohesion, 3) representative of its communities for generations, and 4) recognized by its community [4]. A local shopping street exhibits a unique aesthetic that combines the past, and present urban practices of cultural groups. Collective memory provides a sense of continuity and storytelling that links the past with the present, and by maintaining and operating as an ‘urban village’, the community is tight-knit and serves a large *local* community rather than one-time visitors. This keeps the experiences and stories localized, representative, and grounded in the community.

In addition to exhibiting the elements of intangible cultural heritage, local shopping streets are also capable of passing down its intricate social practices. In conducting research on an Amsterdam shopping street, Zukin [1] established three ways local shopping streets shape and develop intangible cultural heritage: 1) through aesthetic themes, 2) collective memories, and 3) through operating as an “urban village”, but the ability of these shopping streets to transmit heritage to future generations was not captured. A key element of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is transmitting cultural heritage in a way that is relevant, accessible, and able to be recreated or the heritage risks disappearing [5]. Not examining how these spaces transmit heritage not only disregards a core element of intangible cultural heritage, but also disregards a fourth way shopping streets shape intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, this paper proposes transmission through UNESCO’s concept of “safeguarding, without freezing” as the fourth way local shopping streets develop and shape intangible cultural heritage.

This paper uses Toronto’s West Queen West as the case study to demonstrate how this local shopping strip shapes intangible cultural heritage through its aesthetics, collective memory, the urban village model, and transmission through safeguarding. This research uses correspondence with six business owners, interviews with Rob Sysak (the coordinator of the West Queen West Business Improvement Area (“BIA”)), correspondence with a local tech company, and the researcher’s own observations to draw connections and gain insight into West Queen West’s operations, stories, and local identity.

3. Case Study: Toronto’s West Queen West

West Queen West’s history and prominence is rooted in being a distinct shopping strip nestled within more modern and upscale surroundings. Aside from being a shopping strip, the area has a rich history as one of Toronto’s prominent arts and cultural centres in the 1990s, and to this day continues to incorporate the works of and support Toronto’s local arts and cultural communities. Despite being predominantly a shopping street, it is also known as a neighbourhood due to the residential areas bordering the street and the goods and service that cater to the surrounding area. This research follows suit and refers to West Queen West as both a “shopping street” and “neighbourhood” interchangeably.

West Queen West is one of three major segments along Queen Street West, one of the oldest streets in Toronto dating back to 1793. This segment is about two kilometers in length stretching from Bathurst St. to Gladstone Ave and is also known as the “arts and design” district. Its variety of amenities can be described as “visual symbols of local identity” in the form of opera houses, art museums, places of entertainment, parks, memorials, marketplaces, shops, and restaurants [6]. The amenities and cultural experiences allow the neighbourhood to fully function within its confines and service the local community, ultimately operating like a small city within the big city of Toronto.

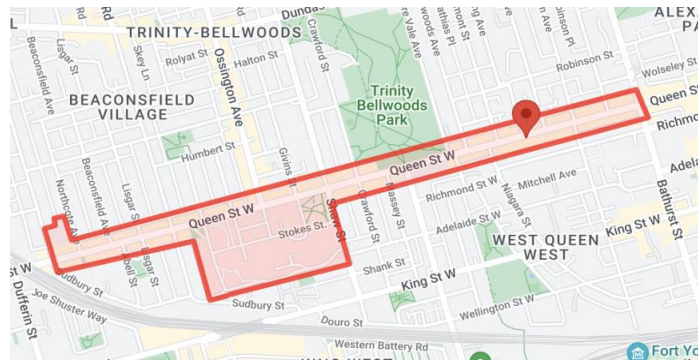


Figure 1: Location of West Queen West from Bathurst to Gladstone Ave. Photo from Google Maps.

3.1. Aesthetic themes

West Queen West’s aesthetics not only derive from its built heritage but also from the atmosphere and “vibe” created by the local artist community. Architecturally, the area has remained relatively unchanged since the first businesses opened. The area is mostly comprised of uniform two to four storey buildings, 97% of which are between 1-2 stories high, in part due to regulations that prohibit building over five stories tall and restrictions on materials allowed to maintain the façade for restoration [7]. These buildings generally have a narrow storefront ranging from 2-7 metres with the lower floor being the business and the upper floors being residential space. The street is bound by the 501 streetcar, one of the longest streetcar routes in Toronto, that runs from east to west. These architectural elements combined with its pedestrian-oriented characteristics and accessibility, presents a sense of cohesiveness and unique rhythm compared to the rest of the bustling downtown core.



Figure 2: Both sides of West Queen West from road view. Photo by author.



Figure 3: Architectural style. Photo by author.

The aesthetic coherence owes itself to the “Main Street” commercial development in Toronto in

which the city was laid out as large networks of main streets that defined neighbourhood pockets. Queen Street West was one of the first streets that allowed movement from the west to the east. The convenience of transportation led to the accumulation of businesses and residential areas that created the mixed-use commercial and residential space it still is today. Most of the buildings were constructed between the 1880s and 1920s, reflecting the architectural typologies that were prominent in those eras [8]. Despite remaining relatively unchanged in style, Sysak says, the first 10-15 ft of the buildings have gone through multiple renovations to accommodate the changing businesses but above that, the buildings still exhibit original architectural elements. According to the Queen St. W. conservation heritage district study, buildings continue to contribute to the heritage character if they still display architectural elements of that period and if the missing elements are not too numerous [8].



Figure 4: Architectural style in 1919. Photo from Toronto Archives.



Figure 5: Present architectural style. Photo by author.

Local artists have impacted West Queen West's character and aesthetics in tremendous ways. The area began to take shape in the early 1980s when the artists moved further west along Queen Street West in search for cheaper rent [9]. West Queen West had been in decline since the 1960s with a reputation for drugs, prostitution, and crime. This movement of artists into the area immediately shifted the atmosphere and changed the type of businesses and amenities that opened. Galleries, cafes, fashion retailers, and furniture stores suddenly began appearing, which attracted a younger creative audience. The area experienced another resurgence in the mid 2000s driven by the reopening of the Drake Hotel and the Gladstone Hotel; the movement of the Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art (MoCCA) into the area in 2005 further propelled it into what it is now [9]. Despite many of the buildings being built in the 19th century, there was and continues to be an effort to blend them into modern day society by incorporating artists' work and allowing them to add their touch to reflect the current times and social movements. For example, the Gladstone and Drake Hotel aid and support

the local artist community by incorporating creative programs and galleries within the hotels to stay true to the artistic soul of the street.



Figure 6: Drake Hotel, original building on left, expansion on right. Photo by author.



Figure 7: Gladstone Hotel. Photo by author.

The Drake Hotel struggled in the 70's turning into a flophouse but was renovated and reopened in 2004. The original building is covered in white brick making it stand out among the predominantly red brick building surroundings, while the new expansion although having a white exterior, exhibits a more modern contemporary feel creating a unique balance between the old and new. The Gladstone Hotel was built in 1889, included as a heritage property in 1973, and designated as a heritage site under Part IV of the *Ontario Heritage Site* in 2004. Since the 2000s, the Gladstone has been an arts hub for the community and continues to support through the hosting of art installations by local and regional artists and incorporating artists' work in every guest room. While the reopening of these hotels undoubtedly influenced local businesses and played a role in gentrification, they changed the fabric of the community by generating a surge of trendy restaurants, bars, nightclubs, and live music settings that target a younger audience.

West Queen West's aesthetics are reflected in more than just the architecture. While the architecture has undoubtedly stood the test of time and reflects the historic development and characteristics of the area's beginnings, the area is also infused with the identity of the locals and residents through the expression of freedom and creativity. It is distinctive walking through West Queen West the important role art and culture has played and continues to play in the development of the area's aesthetics, as well as the neighbourhood's connection with its roots through its programs that support and incorporate the local arts scene.

3.2. Collective memory

Amid rapid development, Toronto has attempted to preserve historic sites by designating them as heritage sites or designating full neighbourhoods as Heritage Conservation Districts. West Queen West has seemingly developed at a different pace than the rest of Toronto. Areas of cultural significance that link the community with the past are still relatively present, the tight-knit community allows stories to pass on to future generations, and the active art community reminds those who visit of what the area represents.

It is important to understand how an area's experiences can directly impact an individual's experiences. Blokland offers two ways to interpret collective memory. The first refers to "collective" as not being tied to a specific single event, rather, it is the *process* of recalling memories; adding bits and pieces to each other's stories, thus forming a collective memory. Secondly, collective memories can be thought of as a "container" of stories about the past that does not have to be lived through personally [10]. Cordonnier says the interactions between the individual and the plural are reciprocal in nature because individuals always evolve in the backdrop of social frameworks, but the collective would not exist without its members. Therefore, collective memories should be thought of as an hourglass with the collective on one end, the individual on the other, and the sand as the memories. Each flip results in the combination of collective and individual memories [11]. Thinking of collective memory as interactions between the group and individual helps us understand how despite not personally living through the memories, a group's collective memory can have personal effects on the individuals of the group and aid in cohesion.

Much of the memories surrounding the neighbourhood involve the area's multicultural beginnings, the arts and music history in connection with the early segment of Queen St. W., and the absences throughout the years. Toronto is known for being one of the most multicultural cities in the world but how multiculturalism in Toronto came to be is rarely recognized. This reputation owes a lot to Queen Street West being one of the earliest hubs where large groups of working-class immigrants first settled and opened their businesses [12]. The street was home to immigrants and refugees, such as the Irish fleeing from the potato famine, black Americans escaping slavery, migrant Italian labourers, and Jews escaping Europe. In the two decades after World War II, many of the buildings in the area that now contains City Hall and the Eaton Centre were torn down to make way for civic buildings, offices, and hospitals. As a result, these cultural enclaves split and relocated to other areas where they re-established new enclaves and started businesses.

The Great Hall is a monument that represents 125 years of West Queen West history. This protected building is symbolic of the Polish community who resided at West Queen West, but also has been the headquarters for various organizations throughout history, the campaign stage of political events, and a performing arts centre. Built in 1889, it is now a hub for entertainment, live music, visual arts, and performing arts, but in the 1940s was the home to the Polish National Union where it held offices and printing presses for the local Polish newspaper and during the second world war, served as temporary housing for refugees from Europe [13]. Memories of multiculturalism also reside in notable people who have lived in the neighbourhood for a long time. Sysak reminisced about Ms. Hanna, a teacher in her 80s now who taught at the school across the street. He said she would make a point to learn a couple words in her students' languages and introduce herself in their language. This stayed with the community because each time she came into their business, they would be reminded of what she did for her community at a time when different cultures were not always welcome.

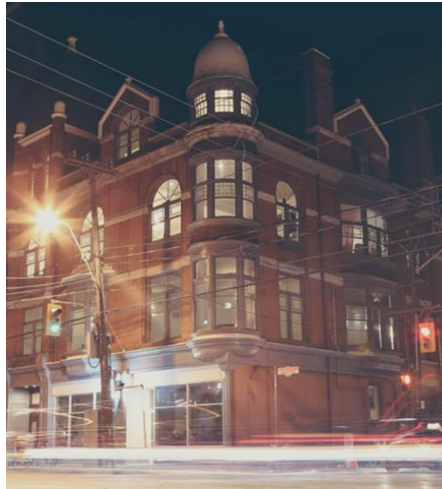


Figure 8: The Great Hall. Photo from the official website.

While local businesses themselves may not exhibit longevity, West Queen West is unique in that the *types* of businesses have remained fairly consistent throughout history; the majority of them being independently owned and local. The area has not been affected greatly by modern consumer culture and has not seen a significant number of large retailers or big box stores move in. When asked about the reasons behind the continuity of the type of businesses in the neighbourhood, Sysak said it mainly has to do with the design of the buildings and maintaining architectural cohesiveness throughout the street. The small storefronts and lack of square footage makes it difficult for large chain stores to enter West Queen West. The area is also not as susceptible to modernization due to its proximity to well-known neighbourhoods designed with consumerism in mind, such as Yorkville, Bloor St., and the Financial District. Businesses along West Queen West also tend to offer unique and one-of-a-kind finds that are not offered elsewhere. Due to the local and often specialized nature of the businesses, customers who visit know what they want, and they know the owners are trustworthy and knowledgeable of their industry and products. While the pandemic closed a number of businesses, the area remains in high demand, and has had no problems getting new businesses to fill their place. Sysak says new businesses want to enter West Queen West because of how unique and different it is that it essentially markets itself.

Live music venues have also not ventured far from the neighbourhood, creating a sense of continuity with the area's art and music past. The owner of a well-known live music venue reminisced, "In the 80s, the area was filled with independent record and bookstores, used clothing stores, tons of small independent restaurants and live music venues. I think back to the sound/music scene a lot." Another live music venue owner who has been in business for 35 years said, "The Queen West area was the "wild west" when we opened. Bikers, gangs, drug trade, prostitution, illegal gun sales and more exciting criminal activities kept the real estate prices down. This created opportunities for places to take a foothold in the entertainment/bar/restaurant industry."

Absences also make up a group's memories [1]. The plaque that commemorates Ali's 1966 visit to Toronto was installed in the six-storey condo that used to be the Earl Sullivan's Toronto Athletic Club where Ali trained. The community fought against the condo but lost at the Ontario Municipal Board; however, the developers agreed to have the plaque installed with no hesitation. A less tragic absence is the prostitution and drug use that plagued the streets. According to several business owners and Sysak, prostitution and drug use used to be rampant, especially in Trinity Bellwoods Park. The absence of illegal activity is a reminder of what the area used to be and how far the neighbourhood has come to combat it. The pandemic is the most recent driver of absence. The closures of restaurants, music venues, performance halls were detrimental on local artists, musicians, and creators because many had part-time jobs while they were pursuing a career but had no opportunities to showcase their talents. As a result, young Canadian talents moved out of Toronto to places with cheaper rent or

started a new career entirely. The pandemic generated significant absences that although are very recent, have impacted the neighbourhood significantly and will loom over the community for time to come. The closure of businesses but also the resilience of the area to bounce back after the pandemic will be the source of stories for future generations.

3.3. An urban village: Keeping it local

West Queen West has managed to consistently serve a large local community rather than tourists. This allows the experiences and stories that occur in the area to stay in the area. The locality of the street stems from the specialization of the businesses and the expertise and services shopkeepers are able to provide. Shopkeepers and pedestrians also develop a relationship with the artists, whether personally, or through the murals, exhibitions, and sculptures. The artists play a role in keeping the neighbourhood unique and are a factor in attracting people from all over the city to the strip. The relationships between local artists, community organizations, visitors, and shopkeepers create an ecosystem that generates a sense of community in the neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood's "village-like" and "neighbourly" atmosphere also derives from the large amount of third and fourth spaces that generate place attachment. "Third spaces" are public areas such as pubs, cafés, and shops where shoppers and passers-by engage with their social group and businesses. Local streets generally contain a large amount of these neutral third spaces that facilitate social communication regardless of social rank [14]. Fourth spaces are like third spaces in that they are informal social spaces, but are more socially diverse in terms of user groups and social relations than third spaces [15]. In fourth spaces, the primary activities are the in-between activities, such as people watching, walking, waiting, and "killing time". Fourth spaces are also not limited to a particular type of business but refer to the "left-over" spaces, such as paths, benches, and edge spaces that are publicly accessible and anonymous in character. Fourth spaces are tools that add a degree of rhythm, spontaneity, and social contact [15]. People seamlessly flow from third places into fourth places and vice-versa, immediately changing the type of people they interact with. Local shopping streets are designed to allow and provide people places to take a break and rest without disturbing the fabric and cohesiveness of the street. This is different from the fast pace of modern shopping centres where people are often engineered to get in and out as fast as possible.

Third and fourth places also create emotional attachments that can be very strong after a single visit. Place attachment occurs when three elements come together: 1) when people have a positive experience in that store (place identity), 2) when that store provides them with what they need (place dependence), and 3) when they have formed interpersonal relationships with the people e.g., associates, fellow customers (social bonding) [16]. These same elements can be taken out of the confines of physical stores and applied to a community. When an individual has had a positive experience in a neighbourhood, when that neighbourhood is able to provide the individual with what they are looking for, and when this individual is able to build social relationships in the neighbourhood, emotional attachments form and these close-knit relationships encourage this person to come back to the area, allowing the neighbourhood to keep business local, competitive, and circulating within its boundaries. Aside from place attachment, West Queen West's abundance of amenities keeps the area functioning like a shrunken down city where visitors do not need to leave the neighbourhood to satisfy their needs. The various mundane interactions between visitors and amenities make for the creation of mundane social, economic, and habitual transactions that form an intricate cultural ecosystem within West Queen West.

3.4. "Safeguarding, without freezing": The incorporation of technology

Transmission of intangible cultural heritage through safeguarding should be added as the fourth way local shopping streets shape heritage because these areas are able to recognize that intangible cultural heritage exists, sustain the development of it, and pass it down to future generations. Local

shopping streets exhibit unique aesthetics, collective memory, and a sense of urban sociality, but without safeguarding measures in place, the area risks gradually losing its history and heritage.

The goal of safeguarding without freezing is to recognize that cultural heritage exists within a place, preserve it, but also consistently adapt it to the current time to make it relatable and accessible to generations to come [5]. This requires an area to strike a balance between preservation and modernization, which has become increasingly difficult given the fast consumer age. West Queen West has opted to use technology to strengthen the ability for the area to provide continuous evolution of intangible cultural heritage. Considering how deeply entrenched technology is in our everyday lives, how it facilitates communication, and helps generate connections, technology has not only become the very fabric of social practices, but is also the most effective and accessible medium to transmit information.

The incorporation of technology into cultural spaces is not a new concept, but few have applied it to explore and communicate the arts, culture, and heritage of local shopping streets. West Queen West's incorporation of technology and artificial intelligence into their plans is not only indicative of a shopping street's ability to adapt to the new age of technology, but is also an innovative way to share and preserve the stories of locals to future audiences.

Research done on resilience in city centres have shown the benefits of using digital platforms, apps, or AI/AR to promote cities and increase foot traffic in shopping streets and city centres. A study done in Leipzig found that digital applications serve as solutions for vulnerable city centers and can improve resilience [17].

When proposing the incorporation of a digital map for West Queen West, Sysak said they are useful, but often do not showcase and educate visitors on the culture and local stories. To resolve this, the BIA has been in negotiations with a Toronto interactive map and AI company to create an interactive map that not only displays the businesses in the area, but more importantly, provides information on the culture, heritage, history behind a building, art sculpture, or art piece using AR technology depending on where the user is located along the street. Sysak says, "there are so many intangibles and stories that need to be shared and there's no better way to do it than using technology. People don't go anywhere without their phone on them. So many people see a mural but don't know the story behind it or which artist did it. This is a way to tell people more about West Queen West; this will reach a wider audience and people can know West Queen West in a different way." A representative from the company says they partner with a variety of organizations to create interactive maps to help visitors explore the area from the perspective of locals. When asked why this is important, the company said exploring from the perspective of locals means knowing about the lesser-known areas and the backstories associated with these areas and allows visitors to view them as more than a tourist destination. The organizations have free reign to incorporate the elements they wish to showcase and be the expert in their own neighbourhoods. The incorporation of locals into safeguarding measures aligns with the ICH Convention's call for the participation of local culture bearers in the safeguarding process to aid in the development of programs and activities to revitalize intangible cultural heritage [18].

The use of maps and AR technology to showcase West Queen West's history, aesthetics, and heritage is also an innovative way to increase place attachment and collective memory. Hearing stories is one element, but AR technology means visitors will be able to see and experience through their phones what the area used to look like and read about the historical or cultural significance of a particular landmark or art piece. Through this technology, visitors and even locals may experience stronger place and emotional attachment with the neighbourhood. Recalling Blokland and Cordonnier's interpretations of collective memory, collective memory does not have to be lived through personally but is the process of combining pieces of memories together. The adoption of this technology allows locals and visitors to connect with each other but also piece together memories relating to West Queen West that may be newly established due to the digital platform. With the incorporation of this technology, visitors are given an authentic experience and a shopping street that seems mundane is transformed into a wealth of cultural experience that showcases the

neighbourhood's collective memories and local identity.

Technology is one means of safeguarding cultural heritage and ensuring it gets passed down to future generations. While safeguarding can look different in different settings, West Queen West is one of Toronto's few public spaces that has incorporated technology to transmit the area's cultural heritage to future generations. It is important to note that safeguarding measures need to be a collaborative effort between members of the neighbourhood in order for the heritage that is being preserved to be representative of the community. West Queen West's incorporation of technology as a safeguarding mechanism may be a useful blueprint for other neighbourhoods in Toronto and around the world to consider.

4. Conclusion

Local shopping streets are often only recognized for what they are on the surface-level—a cluster of businesses and amenities where people go about their day and fulfill mundane activities. However, these mundane habitual activities generate intangible cultural heritage that is representative of the local identity and adds cohesion within a certain group. Suddenly, these mundane activities are given substance. West Queen West exhibits four elements of intangible cultural heritage: 1) it invokes unique aesthetics, 2) there is an abundance of collective memory that generates local identity, 3) it operates as an urban village highlighting the intricate local connections, and 4) it is able to transmit its heritage by adopting safeguarding measures using technology. These elements work together to reflect and mold the intricate inner-workings and relationships that occur within local shopping streets. The addition of transmission through safeguarding as the fourth way local shopping streets exhibit and shape intangible cultural heritage recognizes an area's ability to recognize that heritage exists, an ability to keep the heritage relevant and evolving, and an ability to ensure heritage is transmittable to future generations; this is an element that was neglected in previous research on local shopping streets. Despite the advantages these spaces have to offer, the recognition of these spaces as grounds that generate intangible cultural heritage and the need to preserve the ways of life that occur in them is lacking. The importance of these spaces beyond their casual exterior need to be recognized and considered in heritage preservation frameworks to ensure that the local identity and stories have generational impact and these areas can continue to benefit the local community and city at large. In saying this, it is important to note that these four elements can be regarded as criteria when assessing whether a local shopping street should be included in preservation frameworks i.e., simply being a local shopping street does not necessarily mean it is a producer of intangible cultural heritage. This research supports the notion that these spaces deserve to be included in intangible cultural heritage frameworks, and the recognition of what constitutes intangible cultural heritage should be expanded to include the social practices and ways of life in local shopping streets. This research also hopes to serve as a reminder for people who often visit these areas to take a second to look around and observe the intricate details in their surroundings as intangible cultural heritage creation can occur in the most unexpected, seemingly mundane places.

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