

**Heritage Preservation Frameworks in Oman:  
Strategies on appropriate Ways of Dealing with “dynamic Heritage” in Oman**

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## **Acronyms**

UNESCO	=	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WHC	=	1975 World Heritage Convention
GDP	=	Gross domestic product
MHT	=	Ministry of Heritage and Tourism

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Geographical, Historical, and Cultural Context of Oman

*"Our heritage is our identity, and without it, we risk losing the very essence of who we are."*

- Hassan Fathy

The Sultanate of Oman is a country ruled by an absolute monarchy under the leadership of Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said. It is located on the Arabian Peninsula, by the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman.<sup>1</sup> Because of its unique location in the Middle East, the country has a long history of connecting diverse people from multiple countries. With the silk route running through the historical landscape of Oman and its unique location by the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea and neighboring countries like Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, Oman developed into a prosperous nation with a strong tradition in seafaring and trade which can be traced up to the current day.<sup>2</sup> A diverse range of people from Africa and Asia passed through the territories of current-day Oman and left their marks in many ways, culturally, ethnically, artistically, and architecturally.<sup>3</sup> Oman is not only a place of peaceful encounters between people of various backgrounds, but is also shaped by multiple armed conflicts, which have led to numerous remains of defensive architectures that Oman is especially renowned for today.<sup>4</sup>

In the aforementioned quote, Fathy commented on the significance of heritage to people and its link to their identity. The quote is more than a simple invocation to illustrate the tangible beauty of heritage and culture. Heritage preservation is explicitly emphasized as a crucial means to stay in touch with where people come from and how to interact with their past and present in their current environment. It allows future generations to understand the history, value, and experience that shaped their present and enables them to blend tradition with

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<sup>1</sup> Alessandro Gugolz, "The Protection of Cultural Heritage in the Sultanate of Oman," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 5, no. 2 (1996): 291–309, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0940739196000069>.

<sup>2</sup> Gugolz, 291.

<sup>3</sup> H. Al-Hinai, W.J. Batty, and S.D. Probert, "Vernacular Architecture of Oman: Features That Enhance Thermal Comfort Achieved within Buildings," *Applied Energy* 44, no. 3 (January 1, 1993): 233–58, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0306-2619\(93\)90019-L](https://doi.org/10.1016/0306-2619(93)90019-L).

<sup>4</sup> Silvia Mazzetto, "Assessing Heritage Reuse Interventions in the Gulf Countries," in *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, vol. 1026, 2022, 963–64, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/1026/1/012044>.

progress.<sup>5</sup> Architecture significantly shapes and preserves a community's cultural, historical, and social identity.<sup>6</sup>

Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said, who ruled the Sultanate of Oman from July 23, 1970, until he died in 2020, put a considerable emphasis on this symbiosis during his reign and was internationally renowned for his efforts in leading the country into modernization with respect towards its heritage, customs, and traditions.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike any other country in the Middle East, the Omani government has put an exceptional effort into preserving its rich heritage. Since the Omani Renaissance in the 1970s under the lead of Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said, the foundation for rapid, unprecedented developments from an economic, political as well and social perspective has been laid.<sup>8</sup> The Sultan's vision included a modernization in all aspects of daily life based on oil-driven export revenues, while at the same time preserving and honoring the country's unique history and tradition.<sup>9</sup> This emphasis on preserving the Omani culture and identity while leading the country into modernization is a principle the current government of Oman aims to respect and follow. However, following it comes with serious challenges in the way of combining this progress with suitable ways of preserving traditions and identity while at the same time profiting from it economically, and they are yet to be discussed and evaluated to develop appropriate ways of dealing with this extraordinary kind of heritage.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Nowadays, as opposed to many countries on the Arabian Peninsula, the Sultanate of Oman intends to spread its main source of economic wealth not only on oil-based profits but to create a sustainable source of income primarily derived from tourism. Therefore, considerable efforts are dedicated to preserving and capitalizing on cultural heritage structures, such as

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<sup>5</sup> Ruchi Khakurel, "Cultural Identity and Architecture," *Rethinking the Future*, 2024, <https://www.re-thinkingthefuture.com/architectural-community/a10403-cultural-identity-and-architecture/>.

<sup>6</sup> Mariam al Mashrafi, Heritage in Oman - Interview with Mariam al Mashrafi, Architect at F&M ME Engineering Consultancy LLC, April 8, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Gugolz, "The Protection of Cultural Heritage in the Sultanate of Oman."

<sup>8</sup> Stefano Bizzarri et al., "A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Conservation of Salūt, Sultanate of Oman," *Studies in Conservation* 67, no. sup1 (August 10, 2022): 23–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2022.2084965>.

<sup>9</sup> Mohammed Ali K. Al-Belushi and Nawal Ahmed Al-Hooti, "Preserving the Past, Shaping the Present: Insights on Oman's Built Heritage and Its Identity," *European Journal of Architecture and Urban Planning* 2, no. 3 (August 31, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.24018/ejarch.2023.2.3.31>.

reconstructing historical defensive architectures like forts and castles or orchestrating Bedouin tensile structures.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, in many cases, the preservation tends to focus more on maintaining their physical appearance rather than preserving the cultural and functional significance that these buildings once held.<sup>11</sup>

However, today's economic profitability of heritage seems to be prioritized over conserving the value and essence of the structures for its users. This can be derived from shifting the legal responsibilities for heritage concerns. What previously fell under the responsibility of the "Ministry of Culture and Heritage" was renamed to "Ministry of Heritage and Tourism" on February 14, 2002, by Royal Decree 10/2002.<sup>12</sup> The renaming of the ministry illustrates the shift in value and significance given to heritage.<sup>13</sup>

### 1.3 Relevance of the Topic

Although the ways of preservation become predominantly driven by tourist and economic profit, there is still a considerable amount of pride and identity connected to these structures by the population of Oman. Granted that managing cultural heritage structures underlies the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, there are many legal challenges. For example, the definition of what is considered heritage and, therefore, shall be preserved, and who oversees maintaining the objects is not always clear since structures worthy of safeguarding may be located on private properties, or it is unclear who is responsible for maintaining which structures. Although owners of such properties and professionals in the field are often highly motivated to preserve their heritage, they are often confronted with unclear frameworks and a lack of guidance on how to approach this task.<sup>14</sup> With this Study, I seek to answer the following research question:

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<sup>10</sup> Hafidh Al Riyami, Hamed Almuhrzi, and Noel Scott, "Heritage Hotel Experiences in Nizwa, Oman," *International Journal of Tourism Research* 24 (September 1, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2492>.

<sup>11</sup> K. Al-Belushi and Al-Hooti, "Preserving the Past, Shaping the Present: Insights on Oman's Built Heritage and Its Identity."

<sup>12</sup> "Ministry Objectives.Htm," n.d.

<sup>13</sup> Mohamed Ali Mohamed Khali and Eman Hanyeh Mohamed Nasr, "The Development of Legal Framework for the Management of World Heritage Sites in Oman: A Case Study on Bahla Oasis," *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development* Volume 13, Number 1 (2021): 146–66, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCHMSD-07-2020-0106>.

<sup>14</sup> al Mashrafi, Heritage in Oman - Interview with Mariam al Mashrafi, Architect at F&M ME Engineering Consultancy LLC.

## Research Question

*How can architects and urban planners approach heritage-related projects to preserve and integrate Omani architectural heritage in urban development, considering the absence of comprehensive legal frameworks and amid tourism-centered economic developments in Oman?*

### 1.4 Methodology

This study uses a multi-method qualitative approach, starting with an in-depth case study of *Bait al Safah* in Al Hamra, an example of domestic Omani mudbrick architecture, to explore its architectural and cultural significance. Subsequently, **literature** on established **international** approaches to dealing with architectural heritage and living heritage, like the **UNESCO framework**, is examined. This is complemented by a review of **the national legal framework of Oman**, given by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, and the development objectives stated in Vision 2040. Semi-structured **interviews** were conducted with professionals from architecture firms, urban planning offices, and academic institutions to gain insights into the societal, political, and economic realities of heritage preservation in Oman. The findings of these sources are examined through comparative analysis to develop strategies for heritage integration in contemporary urban and economic developments in Oman.

## 2. Chapter I: The Case: Bait Al Safah, Al Hamra

*Bait al Safah* (Arabic for “house of soft stones”) in Al Hamra is one of the few well-preserved residential buildings in traditional construction in Oman and was used as the home of a sheik family. The village is one of the oldest settlements in the country and dates to the Yaruba dynasty (1624 - 1743) (Fig.1).<sup>15</sup>

The following chapter deals with the traditional residential architecture of Oman using the example of *Bait al Safah*, which is in the Hajar Mountains, near the highest mountain in Oman, Jabal Shams. The focus lies on the construction and use of the building.

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<sup>15</sup> “Bait Al Safah” (Guided Tour, Interview, Sultanat Oman, Al Hamra, 2023).



Fig. 1: Sophia Scheiwe, Bait al Safah, South, 2023, Al Hamra

## 2.1 The Site: The Village Al Hamra

Al Hamra is a village located in the Hajar Mountains and originates from the Yoruba dynasty. During this time, the ruling *imams* were wealthy and invested in developing irrigation systems (*falaj*) in the mountainous regions. These irrigation systems enabled the establishment of several settlements and encouraged the spread of agriculture in areas far from the coast.<sup>16</sup> Through these initiatives, the imams of the Yaruba dynasty supported, among others, the befriended Abriyin tribe, which settled in Al Hamra and based its livelihood on cultivating dates and other fruits. Thus, Al Hamra became the political and economic center of the region around the Wadi Bani Awf for the following centuries, from which the water source for the *Falaj* system in Al Hamra originated.<sup>17</sup> The *sheiks*, the tribal leaders of the Abriyin tribe, lived in Bait Al Safah during this time. Today, evidence of the dwellings of that time can still be found in Al Hamra. Many of them were still inhabited until the late 1970s. However, most of the houses are now in ruins. Like residents of many traditional oasis settlements, today's inhabitants of Al Hamra have mostly moved to modern houses on the opposite side of the palm grove or to the edge of the old village during modernization.<sup>18</sup> Only a few buildings are still maintained - among them the Bait al Safah, the former residence of the *sheiks*, which can now be visited as a museum and serves as the subject upon which the international and national legal framework for heritage preservation practices is evaluated.

<sup>16</sup> Abdullah Al-Ghafri, *Overview about the Aflaj of Oman*, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Maher Nagieb et al., "Siedlungsgeschichte Einer Bergoase Im Nordoman - Untersuchungen Zur Landnutzung Und Archäologie," in *Die Erde*, 1st ed., 135 (Kassel, Berlin, 2004), 81–106.

<sup>18</sup> Mohammad Al Zubair, *Oman's Architectural Journey* (Sultanat Oman: BAZPUBLISHING, 2013).





Fig. 2: Sophia Scheiwe, Panorama of the Ruins of the mudbrick buildings in Al Hamra behind the Palm Tree Grove, 2022, Al Hamra

## 2.2 Architectural Features of Bait al Safah

### 2.2.1 Materials

The predominant materials are mud and palm trees, both of which are typical materials in traditional Omani architecture. Bricks are made from mud, which is bound with mud and plastered.<sup>19</sup> Rubble is used to build the foundations. Palm trunks are used to make beams for ceilings and roofs, or the construction of lintels for windows and doors. The palm fronds are used to weave patterned mats, which are used as a separating layer and can be seen as a decorative element from below.<sup>20</sup>

### 2.2.2 Construction Methods

The foundation of the *Bait al Safah* is set into a shallow excavation pit, which is lined with clay and filled with local rubble and gravel. The massive walls, mainly mud bricks plastered

<sup>19</sup> Bizzarri et al., "A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Conservation of Salūt, Sultanate of Oman."

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Ragette, *Traditional Domestic Architecture of the Arab Region*, ed. American University of Sharja, 3rd ed. (Zlín, Tschechien: Graspco CZ, a. s., 2012); Dr. Naima Benkari, "Omani Domestic Architecture" (Vorlesung, Vorlesung in Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanat Oman, Maskat, 2022).

with clay on the ground floor, stand on this foundation.<sup>21</sup> The higher the building reaches, the greater the use of constructions made of palm trunks, which reduces the load on the walls on the first floor. The ceilings consist of a layer of palm trunks as beams and narrower branches that rest on the beams as rafters. Oil-coated mats of palm tree leaves separate layers, and a layer of clay seals and waterproofs the ceiling. The roof was also built using this construction method. There are no doors in the house itself. The only doors to be found are the lavishly decorated doors to the outside, which were made of wood, a precious material in the region.<sup>22</sup> Cross-ventilation is key to maintaining a stable and comfortable climate in *Bait al Safah*. The building facing south uses the cool air coming from the palm tree groves. While the ground floor area barely has any windows, the windows on the upper floors are relatively large and positioned low to the ground, allowing even gentle breezes inside and cooling the rooms.<sup>23</sup> Small ventilation openings in the house's interior walls contribute to an even distribution of cool air throughout the building. A specific configuration of terraces further channels wind into the interior of the house and down to the lower levels, enabling warm air to escape.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, thick, heavy walls block direct sunlight while absorbing the cooler nighttime air, which is gradually released during the day, whereas the heat taken in during daytime is emitted at night, maintaining a fairly stable indoor atmosphere at all times.<sup>25</sup>

### 2.3 Specialties in Usage

The respective uses of *Bait al Safah* are divided vertically into three levels according to the level of privacy. The *sheik's* power and wealth are represented by the size of the building, but also by the decoration on the outer walls and especially the entrance doors, which are intended to distinguish the house from the surrounding buildings.

The ground floor was used to store produce and house livestock such as goats or donkeys. Small, very high openings to the outside introduce light and air circulation into the space.<sup>26</sup> The second floor is accessible via narrow mud stairs. This is where people reside and spend the night, and there is also a lavatory.<sup>27</sup> The rooms used as bedrooms are located on the north

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<sup>21</sup> "Bait Al Safah."

<sup>22</sup> Benkari, "Omani Domestic Architecture"; Ragette, *Traditional Domestic Architecture of the Arab Region*.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Hinai, Batty, and Probert, "Vernacular Architecture of Oman: Features That Enhance Thermal Comfort Achieved within Buildings."

<sup>24</sup> "Bait Al Safah."

<sup>25</sup> Al-Hinai, Batty, and Probert, "Vernacular Architecture of Oman: Features That Enhance Thermal Comfort Achieved within Buildings."

<sup>26</sup> Benkari, "Omani Domestic Architecture."

<sup>27</sup> Ragette, *Traditional Domestic Architecture of the Arab Region*.

side. Compared to the spaces on the south side, they are smaller and narrower. The rooms on the south side, the *majlis*, are mainly used to welcome guests and are comparable to living rooms. The *majlis* is strictly separated by gender. A smaller room for the ladies on the south side and a small balcony facing, the large main *majlis* is usually reserved for shared use by the nuclear family. An opening in the roof above the main *majlis* provides plenty of light. A device made of palm fronds can cover this opening and protect the room from rain. The men's *majlis* is located inside the building and has a hatch to ensure that the ladies of the house do not enter the men's *majlis* but can still serve their guests dates and *kawa* (Omani coffee). There are windows outside the rooms to provide light and ventilation. Niches in the walls where shelves are fitted to allow for storage space. The ceilings of the *majlis* are usually decorated with colorful ornaments.<sup>28</sup>

The third floor offers additional rooms, roof terraces, and kitchenettes where people can also sleep and dry food, which is made possible by exposure to the sun and ventilation. The terraces include decorative railings that serve as privacy screens and are also designed for ventilation. Additionally, some rooms are not designated for use and can be used flexibly.<sup>29</sup>

The roof of Bait al Safah is completely accessible and offers a view of the surrounding area and houses. The lowest terrace faces northeast, allowing winds from the coast into the building while protecting it from the southern sun by shading the rooms on the second floor from each other.<sup>30</sup>

## 2.4 Design Principles

Traditional (domestic) architecture in Oman is strongly influenced by the predominant religion - Islam. There is a strong sense of family, and a particular value is placed on protecting privacy. For this reason, and as protection from the extreme environmental influences of the region, traditional residential architecture in Oman can be characterized as introverted.<sup>31</sup> Usually, the exterior walls on the ground floor offer few openings at eye level, whereas openings in the upper third of exterior walls are common<sup>32</sup>. This can also be observed in *Bait al Safah*. Three entrances to the building make it possible to enter the rooms separately to enable gender-segregated access and access depending on the occasion. There are several staircases for the same purpose. One, for example, is located directly at the

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<sup>28</sup> "Bait Al Safah."

<sup>29</sup> Ragette, *Traditional Domestic Architecture of the Arab Region*.

<sup>30</sup> "Bait Al Safah."

<sup>31</sup> Benkari, "Omani Domestic Architecture."

<sup>32</sup> "Bait Al Safah."

entrance and leads to the *majlis*, meaning it is only used to welcome guests; as soon as the house is entered through the front door, visitors reach an antechamber that prevents direct insight into the entire interior and thus further protects the residents' privacy. Like the entrance door, this room is lavishly decorated with paintings and wood carvings and is intended to be inviting but also to represent the wealth of the *sheik*.<sup>33</sup> In comparison, the *majlis* is very large and inviting. High ceilings, larger windows, and a roof opening allow plenty of light into the rooms.

A mezzanine floor for the ladies' *majlis* protects them from unwanted views inside but allows them to partake in conversations. Thanks to the complex system of various staircases and entrances, it is possible to move through the house without crossing certain areas. The private rooms, i.e., bedrooms, washrooms, lavatories, ladies' rooms, and kitchens, can be accessed separately. The value placed on the protection and privacy of the family and the woman is evident here. However, many rooms can also be used for different purposes at different times of the year and day, as furniture does not determine their use.<sup>34</sup> Only the kitchen and washrooms are predefined. This flexibility in the (re)use of space stems from the tradition of nomadism and is expedient, as the family size can expand rapidly due to the marriages of family members and the spontaneous need for space. The large number of rooms that can be used flexibly, especially on the upper floors, is also advantageous, as the temperature differences in the mountain regions, such as Al Hamra, and thus *Bait al Safah*, can be very significant.<sup>35</sup>



Fig. 3: Salma Samar Damluji, *The Architecture of Oman, Bait al Safah Grundrisse*, Garnet Reading, 1998. Sophia Scheiwe, 2023, edited: blue: private – red: public – green: flexible

<sup>33</sup> Ragette, *Traditional Domestic Architecture of the Arab Region*.

<sup>34</sup> Benkari, "Omani Domestic Architecture."

<sup>35</sup> "Bait Al Safah."

*Bait al Safah* is a well-preserved example of traditional Omani mudbrick architecture, reflecting the typical construction principles of the region as well as the traditional daily life and societal interactions within the local community. Particularly noteworthy is the building's flexible space utilization, which adapts to different times of day and seasons despite a strong emphasis on gender separation. *Bait al Safah* demonstrates a unique spectrum of spatial flexibility within a relatively small volume due to its strategic horizontal and vertical organization of spaces, which incorporates both specialized, use-specific areas and numerous undefined spaces that can be adapted for various functions.

Because of its unique flexibility in use and its trait of undergoing constant adaptation and change in spatiality, highly dependent on the specific needs of its inhabitants, the Thesis will hereafter refer to a heritage of this kind as *dynamic heritage*.

*Dynamic Heritage* describes a category of architecture that requires careful handling when engaging with it in terms of preservation and adaptation efforts. Therefore, the categorization as *dynamic heritage* points out the unique characteristics and need for a framework guiding professionals in the field of architecture and urbanism when facing projects of that category.

The relevant frameworks currently utilized for heritage preservation in Oman will be discussed and evaluated in terms of applicability for preserving this type of architecture, its success, and its effect on the local community in the following chapters.

### **3. Chapter II: The International Consensus**

Since February 10, 1972, the Sultanate of Oman has been a Member State of UNESCO<sup>36</sup> and accepted the World Heritage Convention on October 6, 1981<sup>37</sup>. The Sultanate of Oman has five sites listed as cultural heritage on the UNESCO World Heritage List. These include: the Bahla Fort, the Archeological Site of Bat, Al-Khutm and Al-Ayn, the Aflaj Irrigation System of Oman, the Ancient City of Qalhat, and the Land of Frankincense. Given the active engagement with UNESCO, its legal frameworks are particularly relevant for preservation efforts in Oman and will be explored in the following subchapters in terms of their applicability for further conservation and urban integration of vernacular architectural heritage such as *Bait al Safah*.

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<sup>36</sup> UNESCO, "List of the Member States and the Associated Members of UNESCO," accessed April 16, 2025, <https://pax.unesco.org/countries/ListeMSChrono.html>.

<sup>37</sup> UNESCO, "World Heritage Convention States Parties - Oman," accessed April 16, 2025, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/om/>.

### 3.1 UNESCO - Charter of National Commissions for UNESCO

The Preamble of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Constitution outlines that "a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world, and that the peace must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind."<sup>38</sup> UNESCO is a political specialized agency of the United Nations that promotes education, science, and culture, as well as communication and information, strengthening peace and security and facilitating international cooperation<sup>39</sup>. Founded on November 16, 1945, UNESCO was initially established to support the reconstruction of education and culture in Europe after the Second World War.

UNESCO is mainly financed by contributions paid by its member states, which are derived from the respective GDP, but private donations and UNESCO funds also contribute to the financing of the organization and its projects.<sup>40</sup>

UNESCO classifies heritage into different categories, including cultural and natural heritage under the 1972 World Heritage Convention<sup>41</sup>, and intangible cultural heritage under the 2003 Convention<sup>42</sup>. These categories include specialized forms or are governed by additional UNESCO conventions, which help determine the financial, artistic, scientific, technical, and intellectual support required for their conservation. Additionally, the threat level, the urgency of intervention, the local/national capacity, and inclusion in endangered lists play key roles in determining the financial assistance and international cooperation.<sup>43</sup>

UNESCO's classification helps prioritize preservation efforts and tailor them to the specific needs of each type of heritage. Since its founding in 1945, UNESCO has developed many policy instruments and conventions that express the organization's mission and structure its programs and initiatives for preserving and promoting cultural, natural, and intangible cultural heritage. To examine how UNESCO's frameworks apply to traditional Omani mudbrick

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<sup>38</sup> UNESCO [9348], "Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2022 Edition," 2022, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382500>.

<sup>39</sup> UNESCO [9348].

<sup>40</sup> "UNESCO – Organisation der Vereinten Nationen für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur," Internationales Büro, accessed April 16, 2025, <https://www.internationales-buero.de/de/unesco.php#:~:text=als%2050%20Außenstellen.-,Haushalt,Beitragszahler%20nach%20China%20und%20Japan.>

<sup>41</sup> UNESCO, "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage," November 16, 1972, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>.

<sup>42</sup> UNESCO, "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," October 17, 2003, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>.

<sup>43</sup> UNESCO, "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage."

houses, the concept of cultural and intangible cultural heritage according to UNESCO will be discussed in the following subchapters.

### 3.1.1 Cultural Heritage

According to the “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage” from 1972, UNESCO considers monuments, groups of buildings, and sites as “cultural heritage,” often also referred to as tangible heritage.<sup>44</sup> It differentiates “cultural heritage” from “natural heritage,” defining “natural heritage” as “natural features [...] of physical and biological formations [...], geological and physiographical formations [...], and natural sites[...].”<sup>45</sup>

The participation in UNESCO draws significant duties regarding identifying, protecting, conserving, presenting, and transmitting heritage situated on its territory to future generations. State Parties of the Convention are expected to actively protect and manage the heritage within their territories by providing strong frameworks in terms of legislation, education, research, and maintenance to prompt long-term public engagement and conservation.<sup>46</sup> To implement the WHC, the World Heritage Committee, the main decision-making body of UNESCO, was established to evaluate potential Heritage List nominations, monitor conditions of listed sites, and distribute assistance and financial aid from the World Heritage Fund.

The Budapest Declaration on World Heritage from the year 2002 and the 31st session of the World Heritage Committee offer a set of objectives, called the “Five Cs,” to foster a more holistic implementation of the WHC.<sup>47</sup> The “Five Cs” – credibility, conservation, capacity-building, communication, and communities –strengthen this implementation, providing a broad spectrum of aspects that need to be considered when preserving and maintaining UNESCO Heritage Structures.<sup>48</sup>

Architectural heritage is often defined by visible, tangible characteristics, which naturally draw attention to the study of its physical structure. Analyzing spaces from this perspective helps understand a building’s logic, construction techniques, geometric composition, and the way it fits into its environment. In an interview with Omani architect and urban planner

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<sup>44</sup> UNESCO, arts. 1–2.

<sup>45</sup> UNESCO, art. 2.

<sup>46</sup> UNESCO, arts. 5–6.

<sup>47</sup> UNESCO, arts. 8–14.

<sup>48</sup> UNESCO, “Budapest Declaration On World Heritage,” 2002, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/1217/>.

Abdullah Al Saadi, reflecting on heritage preservation practices in Oman, he underscored the risk of neglecting the importance of traditional architectural construction materials and methods. Drawing from a project in Al Rustaq, he gave an example of a failed souk restoration project, due to the use of concrete as an unauthentic construction material opposed to the original mud brick construction, which resulted in public disengagement, as locals abandoned the new structure. This case highlights the need for guidelines and context-sensitive frameworks tailored to the unique characteristics of the heritage structure while dealing with preservation projects, according to Al Saadi.<sup>49</sup>

However, buildings are not solely functional enclosures that offer protection from external influences. They also accumulate intangible meaning over time, are shaped by customs and traditions, and experiences, which strongly influence determining the value of a structure.<sup>50</sup> Given the complexity of architectural heritage and the traditions, customs, and values it holds, UNESCO defined this concept in the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.<sup>51</sup>

### **3.1.2 Intangible Heritage**

According to Article 2 of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.”<sup>52</sup>

Having sites listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List means that they have been recognized for their outstanding universal value and are deemed to have exceptional cultural, historical, scientific, or natural significance. Along with this status come several important implications, such as international recognition, national and local pride in its culture, tradition, and values, a boost in tourism and economy as people travel to visit these culturally significant places, and financial and intellectual aid to conserve and manage the heritage

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<sup>49</sup> Abdullah al Saadi, Heritage Frameworks in Oman - Interview with Abdullah al Saadi, Urban Planner at LEA Associates South Asia Private Limited, April 8, 2025.

<sup>50</sup> Lilia Makhoulfi, *Tangible and Intangible Heritage in the Age of Globalisation*, 2024.

<sup>51</sup> UNESCO, “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.”

<sup>52</sup> UNESCO, art. 2.



site.<sup>53</sup> While having Heritage inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List is considered a prestigious honor for a cultural heritage site, it also entails substantial responsibilities and preservation efforts. This designation increases costs and organizational challenges for the nations involved, which UNESCO does not fully cover.

With the increase in tourist interest in the site, careful management to avoid over-tourism and its potential negative impacts are crucial, and once a site is listed, there is an international expectation to maintain its integrity, which involves regular monitoring by UNESCO to ensure that the site continues to meet the standards required for its protection and preservation.<sup>54</sup> Most of the protection, conservation, and preservation efforts are expected to be provided by the State of origin of the cultural and natural heritage objects and sites, implicating immense responsibility and maintenance efforts for the States.<sup>55</sup>

#### **4. Chapter III: The Framework in Oman**

Since the Oman Renaissance in the 1970s, the Omani government recognized the importance of preserving its cultural and natural heritage and made it a key component of the country's national vision. This commitment is formally anchored in the first written constitution, the Basic Law, issued under Royal Decree 101/1996, making it a fundamental pillar in the country's identity and vision for development.<sup>56</sup> The Omani government continues to prioritize revitalizing its architectural heritage as part of a broader vision for its cultural identity and the sustainability of its economic future. The evolution from an oil-dependent economy towards a more diversified, tourism-centered development places significant economic pressure on heritage conservation, challenging planners and policymakers to balance development with preservation. The following subchapters explore the two currently most influential frameworks provided by the Omani government and evaluate their performance in terms of the success of authenticity of preservation of their integrity on site and in respect of economy-driven ambitions of the government in Oman.

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<sup>53</sup> Călin Veghes, "Does Presence on the UNESCO World Heritage List Support Sustainable Development? A Market-Driven Exploratory Approach," *European Journal of Sustainable Development* 12, no. 2 (2023): 274–86, <https://doi.org/10.14207/ejsd.2023.v12n2p274>.

<sup>54</sup> UNESCO, "UNESCO in Brief," UNESCO in brief, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/brief>.

<sup>55</sup> UNESCO, "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage."

<sup>56</sup> Ali Mohamed Khali and Hanyeh Mohamed Nasr, "The Development of Legal Framework for the Management of World Heritage Sites in Oman: A Case Study on Bahla Oasis," 149.

#### 4.1 Ministry for Heritage and Tourism

Originally, the ministry was established in 1977 under the name “Ministry for Heritage and Culture” and was tasked with the protection, documentation, and management of the nation’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage.<sup>57</sup> The responsibilities expanded over time and included the preparation of World Heritage nominations files and reporting on the conservation status of listed sites. In 2020, the Ministry was renamed to “Ministry of Heritage and Tourism” (MHT) by Royal Decree 9/2020, marking a shift in priorities and restructuring towards heritage preservation tied to tourism development.<sup>58</sup>

The website of the MHT focuses its ambitions towards transforming the country into a leader in cultural preservation while at the same time creating one of the most sustainable and attractive tourist destinations in the Arab region. The key objectives stated include a considerable increment of employment of Omani nationals in the tourist sector, boosting tourism through steady annual growth, and enhancing the country’s share of visitors within the GCC. The strategy outlines the significance of the preservation of natural and cultural heritage and, at the same time, emphasizes its ambition in fostering public awareness about the value of tourism in combination with heritage. This approach encourages a strong collaboration between public institutions and the private sector.<sup>59</sup>

In an Interview, Dawood al Jahwari, Dean and Head of Department of Logistics, Tourism and Service Management at GUtech in Oman, stated that there has been a major increase in interest of the public towards persevering and adapting heritage properties because “people started to realize the importance of economic impact in developing [heritage buildings].“<sup>60</sup> Whereas there is an increasing demand for heritage-related architectural projects, an architect and project manager at F&M ME Engineering consultancy, Mariam al Mashrafi, identified a lack of updated, collected guidelines in Oman. The MHT, while formally involved in the approval processes of UNESCO World Heritage projects and restoration projects, often takes a relaxed approach to enforcement. Designer sand developers are therefore left uncertain, and the architect expressed the wish for more elaborate and clear frameworks.<sup>61</sup> The development

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<sup>57</sup> Gugolz, “The Protection of Cultural Heritage in the Sultanate of Oman.”

<sup>58</sup> Ali Mohamed Khali and Hanye Mohamed Nasr, “The Development of Legal Framework for the Management of World Heritage Sites in Oman: A Case Study on Bahla Oasis.”

<sup>59</sup> “Ministry Objectives,” Sultanate of Oman Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, n.d., <https://mht.gov.om/objectives>.

<sup>60</sup> Ercan Ağırbaş and Dawood Al Jahwari, Heritage Frameworks in Oman - Interview with Ercan Ağırbaş and Dawood Al Jahwari from GUtech in Oman, April 9, 2025.

<sup>61</sup> al Mashrafi, Heritage in Oman - Interview with Mariam al Mashrafi, Architect at F&M ME Engineering Consultancy LLC.

and elaboration of such frameworks and guidelines are also part of the objective of “Oman Vision 2040” and will therefore be explored as follows.

## **4.2 Oman Vision 2040**

“Oman Vision 2040” is the Sultanate of Oman’s long-term strategic development program, which aims to diversify its economy, modernize government institutions, and position Oman competitively in the global realm. In the program of Oman’s “Vision 2040,” it states, “a sustainable investment in heritage, culture, and arts to contribute to national economic development” as one of the main objectives regarding identity, national heritage, and culture.<sup>62</sup> While Oman Vision 2040 emphasizes the importance of preserving national identity while embracing progress, strengthening cultural pride and responsible citizenship is seen as essential to maintaining social cohesion and safeguarding traditions.<sup>63</sup>

However, the evolution from an oil-dependent economy towards a more diversified, tourism-centered development places significant economic pressure on heritage conservation, challenging planners and policymakers to balance development with preservation.

Al Jahwari described the restoration of historic towns like Nizwa as a good example of this development. The current-day Nizwa provides many tourism-oriented functions in historic structures, such as cafés, hotels, and restaurants, illustrating the economic potential of heritage. Alongside this development, Jahwari also pointed out the complexity of challenges connected with the ambitions of using historic structures for economic purposes and revitalizing them.<sup>64</sup>

Although the inclusion of heritage in education and media is emphasized, the approach lacks clarity on how these values are operationalized, especially in a rapidly changing urban and economic context. The reliance on cultural tourism, institutionalized in the MHT as a means to foster national pride among youth, risks commodifying heritage rather than cultivating genuine engagement. Furthermore, the state's emphasis on social cohesion and national identity, while promoting openness to the world, reflects a top-down narrative that may overlook local variations in cultural expression and lived experience. Tying cultural heritage

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<sup>62</sup> Sultanate of Oman, “Oman Vision 2040,” Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.oman2040.om/?lang=en>.

<sup>63</sup> Sultanate of Oman.

<sup>64</sup> Ağırbaş and Jahwari, *Heritage Frameworks in Oman* - Interview with Ercan Ağırbaş and Dawood Al Jahwari from GUtech in Oman.

and intangible cultural heritage inseparably to economic goals bears the risk of prioritizing monetary intentions over serving a community and its needs.

These contradictions point to the need for more grounded, community-driven strategies that can navigate the complexities of identity in a globalized era.

Dean and Head of Department of Urban Planning and Architectural Design at GUtech in Oman, Ercan Ağırbaş, stated in an interview about heritage frameworks in Oman that differentiating between “heritage of material” and “heritage of behaviour” is a very important distinction when it comes to developing ways of dealing with vernacular Omani heritage. Furthermore, he emphasizes the need to equip the local community with awareness and the ability to assess the quality and value of the heritage they are dealing with to assure the integrity of future conservation projects.<sup>65</sup>

In 2024, Jahwari conducted a study related to the community involvement in World Heritage Sites, specifically the Bahla Fort and Oasis. One of the main outcomes of the study was a lack of clear legal frameworks and a multitude of challenges that hinder the restoration of historical structures. He mentioned that the policies are distributed among different parties in the government, such as the municipality of Bahla, the MHT, and UNESCO, depending on the site. Another challenge is the lack of people trained in traditional construction techniques and the ability to assess the structure’s structural condition, as well as high restoration costs.<sup>66</sup>

## **5. Chapter VI: Conclusion**

Investigating the former residence of a Sheikh in one of the oldest settlements in Oman offers valuable insights into traditional construction methods and the way of life in a typical Omani village and serves as a suitable example for further exploration of traditional typologies of architecture that are often overlooked in this region concerning heritage preservation.

Understanding the distinctive features of heritage structures is critical for selecting and developing appropriate preservation methods. Only once the character, cultural, societal, and historical values are properly assessed can it be determined which aspects of the structure are worth preserving and how they can be protected best. This understanding is crucial for developing and applying suitable frameworks that ensure the long-term successful integration into a modern urban landscape. A thorough analysis of historical architectural and urban remains can lead to a deep understanding of their core characteristics, traditions, and values.

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<sup>65</sup> Ağırbaş and Jahwari.

<sup>66</sup> Ağırbaş and Jahwari.

Categorizing them into heritage typologies, preservation efforts can follow more systematic and targeted approaches.

However, pure analysis in terms of construction and design needs to be accumulated through the involvement of the local community. Enriching the analysis of these structures with experiences and interactions of the community gives life to the findings of the technical aspects and provides valuable emotional, symbolic, or functional meanings that may not be visible through architectural study, which can further help categorize the structure to determine the best framework for handling heritage structures.

While UNESCO's guidelines on tangible and intangible heritage preservation present important concepts, they fall short as a practical framework for preserving cultural heritage with distinct characteristics, such as the Islamic-nomadic influenced traditional mudbrick houses in Oman, on a practical level. Instead, they serve as useful starting points for identifying and categorizing heritage structures within a global context. In practice, protecting cultural heritage requires tailored, object-specific regulations.

The "Vision 2040" program explicitly outlines the Omani government's goal of making the country's economic landscape more sustainable by diversifying it from oil exports to tourism.<sup>67</sup> In this context, preserving traditional structures is seen not only as a societal benefit but also as a key economic component in achieving this broader objective. However, the role of heritage structures like the mudbrick houses in Al Hamra in serving their primary users - the local community - seems increasingly overshadowed by the growing focus on economic gains driven by tourism.

To bridge the emerging discrepancy between economic ambitions and societal interests in preserving the traditional mudbrick houses of Oman, it is recommended to develop a framework specifically tailored to the concept of "dynamic heritage." This approach would respect both the evolving nature of these structures and the need to balance preservation with contemporary societal needs and economic goals.

Architects, urban planners, and other stakeholders working on heritage-related projects in Oman should begin such a careful analysis and documentation of the historical structure. The

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<sup>67</sup> Sultanate of Oman, "Oman Vision 2040."

Involvement of the local community enriches this analysis significantly, and ideally, also individuals with experience in the concerning traditional construction techniques should be consulted.

Once a well-rounded picture of the key assets and value of the structures is identified, existing regulatory frameworks can be assessed in terms of applicability, as UNESCO conventions and local guidelines can provide useful reference points, although in most cases, they should be adapted rather than applied directly.

Throughout the planning stages, the needs of the local community should always be prioritized to maintain the authenticity and integrity of the sites, which will also enhance their long-term economic value.

## **6. Chapter V: Discussion and Limitations of the Study**

Investigating the former residence of a Sheikh in one of the oldest settlements in Oman cannot fully showcase the diversity of Oman's rich architectural tradition and culture. However, it can serve as an example of how to develop a thorough analysis and showcase the importance of developing specific categories for this kind of architecture to preserve it in the best way possible and integrate it into the modern urban landscape of Oman.

Oman is a young country, and numerous areas of heritage research have not yet been explored or have been explored only briefly. It is currently undergoing rapid development in societal, infrastructural, and economic aspects while also working on its legal frameworks regarding heritage preservation. Thus, there has been very little research done regarding appropriate ways and frameworks for dealing with and determining architectural heritage worthy of special protection.

While this Paper offers two preliminary insights to support architects and urban planners on how to encounter projects related to Omani heritage architecture and structures, it does not claim to present a complete framework of design regulations or building codes.

This Study is exploratory, emphasizing an understanding of architectural and cultural traditions and analyzing their value to a modern Omani society.

Crafting a detailed, universal set of instructions would require extensive interdisciplinary

collaboration, accompanied by further case studies across various types of architectural historical remains in Oman.

Yet, the study offers guidance to architects and urban planners on how to approach projects involving architectural heritage within the current legal conditions in Oman, and how to preserve and integrate historic structures into modern urban contexts.

In combination with the successful practices of professionals in the field, these findings can serve as a starting point for future efforts aimed at developing more structured and culturally aware approaches to heritage-sensitive design that can eventually pave the way to developing tailored frameworks and guidelines.

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Fig. 1: Scheiwe, 2023, Bait al Safah, South, Al Hamra, own image.

Fig. 2: Scheiwe, 2022, Panorama of the Ruins of the mudbrick buildings in Al Hamra behind the Palm Tree Grove, Al Hamra, own image.

Fig. 3: Damluji, 2023, The Architecture of Oman, Bait al Safah Floorplans, Garnet Reading, 1998. Scheiwe, edited: blue – private, red – public, green – flexible.