

Chapter 5

Discussion

5.1. Introduction

The primary objective of this study has been to gain better understanding of the historical value of the old town of Muharraq, its social structure, to determine the current state of its various heritage elements in the context of its demography and morphology and finally to assess the impact of modernization on the heritage and recommend measures to protect it from further losses.

The study is crucial from the perspective of protecting its identity as unique Islamic town, which has over 2000 years of history and held an identity as a crucial port on a major trade route between east and west. A town, which is fast falling prey to modernization and westernized cultural influence, is losing its social cohesion, culture and traditional values. The Commonwealth Government's draft guidelines 'Draft Heritage Tourism Guidelines' (AHC, 1999) has suggested an increasing focus in cultural heritage tourism due to growing number of visitors to places of cultural heritage significance, which could generate sustainable economic growth. Considering this fact, it becomes more imperative to increase focus towards protecting the intangible heritage of Muharraq, with appropriate attention towards its heritage architecture and urban elements, thereby making it making it habitable for its native citizens and revitalizing it economy through tourism and associated industries.

The information about the town is fast vanishing due to declining local population and scarcity of studies in this area. Foremost, there is a need to gather as much information as possible about the past of the town and save it for the future and also to

educate the people. This study is an attempt in this direction. During this study it has been determined that there is significant amount of data lying in the form of historical archives, maps and digital datasets holding potential information about the history and elements of heritage significance of the town. The historical maps, travellers accounts in the archives and descriptions by some surviving senior citizens of the country are enriched with indispensable historical information which is unfortunately not easy to collate and visualize in an integrated mode through traditional and manual processes, to make collective assessment and interpretations. Collation and analysis provides a different perspective on the past which is otherwise incomprehensible when items of information are analysed individually.

The Geospatial tools used in this study have helped collate disparate data sources on different scales, as well as non-geospatial datasets, and facilitated projecting them onto a common scale to perform integrated analysis. It also showed that visualizing the results of analysis through thematic mapping provides a different perspective towards hitherto hidden facts about history, heritage and social distribution through comparisons between datasets of different ages.

The technique has demonstrated the advantages over conventional methods of assessments and interpretations of historical facts. It has also simplified assessing the existing situation, estimating loss of heritage values in terms of morphological and demographic parameters, which in turn help accurately determine the conservation and preservation strategies.

5.2. Discussion

The literature review and analysis of a variety of data, maps and historical information have provided significant insight into the history of Muharraaq. It has helped establish

the most important outcome of this analysis which has been the determination of elements critical to the conservation of heritage of the town. These elements include the – (i) the first areas of settlement or cores from which it emerged into a prosperous town, (ii) the type of people and their occupations and the pattern of their settlement which formed the fabric of the town, and (iii) the fortifications of the town and its elements, such as the wall, towers and the forts.

History of Establishment

The study has illuminated the fact that Muharraq was initially established in the region currently known as Bu Maher, a suburb of the town, establishing the first nucleus of the town with a mosque and houses of rulers. This fact has been verified through the location of forts, travellers accounts, profile pictures and descriptions about the town and its fortifications, which when mapped together clearly prove the assumption. This is critical for the understanding of the origin of the town and its subsequent growth, which in turn would help establishing the significance of Bu Maher.

Subsequently the town expanded onto the main Muharraq island and consolidated the capital. The town was surrounded by a matchlock defence wall to protect against any aggression. This is proven by demonstrating the second and third phases or cores of settlement over the high points on the main island of Muharraq. During that time the main island used to have six prominent mounds and the rulers first established the town of Muharraq atop one of those mounds in the centre of island. It was determined through digital terrain modelling techniques which demarcated the six mounds. These are otherwise completely obscured by dense urbanization and lack of any written accounts about them. The only supporting account was provided by an elderly citizen who had some vague idea passed onto him by his forefathers. During one of the recent excavations by my team, as shown in fig 5.1, it was established that the initial buildings of the rulers were indeed built on top of those mounds. This excavation was performed

behind one of the famous houses, Sheikh Hamad house, where the team encountered ground water at almost five meter from the ground level, confirming the height of the region.



Fig 5.1. Excavation at Sheikh Salman house, showing the ground water at around 4.5 meter depth.

The cores were the political centres, and surrounding them were the various communities based on their occupations and importance, such as the ruling families, goldsmiths and the masons lived close to the ruling tribes whereas the merchants, sail makers and seafaring tribes were located on the outskirts. These communal neighbourhoods had their unique identity which is to some extent still preserved in the names of the areas and the most important element, the mosque belonging to the community. The most notable element for identification of the neighbourhoods has been the mosques, as each tribe used to have its own mosque, and these have all been identified and mapped in this study with their accurate date of construction. This verifies the period of settlement of respective neighbourhoods. Thematic mapping explains the reasons why some tribes settled in particular parts of the town, like Al Bin

Ali, a major community. This was situated on the north-east shore as they were mainly traders who possessed three large ships and five smaller ships.

Cultural Assessment

The most critical element of the town assessed has been the ethnicity. And it was explained that after the Al Khalifa, the rulers established themselves in Muharraq, and people from neighbouring areas converged from the surrounding regions for the next century at least. This was due to the richness in natural pearls, the abundance of drinking water, and the healthy environment and unique position in the trade routes between the Far East, Middle East and the West. These factors have played a significant role in shaping the urban characteristics of the town.

The analysis of demographic parameters provided critical clues about the state of various neighbourhoods which belonged to various communities. However, the current state of the old quarters of Muharraq suggests a rather bleak and disappointing state, which is getting lost to the modernisation and migration of local inhabitants out of their native places in search for better living environments. And it is crucial from the perspective of conserving the cultural and traditional heritage of the town. Thematic representation of census data of the local versus the expatriate population demonstrated the degree of loss of native population from their native place. It depicted a declining population of young and old Bahrainis in the Al Sheikh Hamad, Sheikh Abdullah and Bin Khater and Suq neighbourhoods threatening the very culture, traditions and integrity of these neighbourhoods. It also displays the growing nonconformity in the population characteristics in Al Gassaser, Bin Khater and AL Sheikh Hamad neighbourhoods due to the influx of the expatriate and mainly worker class of population. This is further tested through the statistical analysis of employment data which showed that employed Bahraini are declining and employed expats are growing in those old areas of Muharraq. The situation is very serious in certain

neighbourhoods where the population is dominated by non-Bahrainis in most of the age-groups and more specifically the working class people. This suggests a serious impact on the traditional Islamic values due to the proliferation of external entities into the cultural heritage of this town.

Based on the analysis it has been determined that the three basic elements of heritage – the urban fabric, the neighbourhoods and the buildings - have been affected in most of the study area. The first core of Muharraq - the Bu Maher neighbourhood - is the worst affected. The other neighbourhoods have undergone significant transformation of the living spaces and the buildings, hitherto difficult to assess. In terms of basic elements of heritage it has been established that there are three main neighbourhoods – Al Kharo, Sheikh Abdulla and Bin Khater which preserve a significant degree of heritage. These areas represent the second and most important core of Muharraq as well as the important suq or market of the town. These areas are experiencing the worst loss of cultural heritage in terms of the traditional tribal peoples. These neighbourhoods also preserve a significant number of traditional buildings, as compared to other neighbourhoods, which are important as they belonged to famous people in the past.

Urban Fabric

The most characteristic element of an Islamic town has been its urban fabric and Muharraq is rich in it, with narrow alleyways, buildings concentrated around the centre, prohibiting an isolated or spread out urban fabric and signifying close social bonding. The mapping and visual interpretation of open spaces and urban fabric since 1931 suggest that there is no major loss of the fabric as such, most of the network of narrow alleys in the core of the town still persists, albeit the network has been altered due to expansion and restructuring of the town and obviously lost its functional significance

due to new land reclamation and construction of a major road network surrounding the core and old fabric.

At the micro level of conservation and protection of the heritage town are the individual heritage elements which collectively give the town its identity. Another important element of history that still persists is the traditional building. Some of these are quite old and unique. The old and heritage buildings are the other most crucial elements defining a heritage town and this was evaluated through spatial analysis and visual assessment. And it suggests that many old buildings have been obliterated to pave way for new structures or broadening of roads, however, that number is still not alarming and an immediate action to prevent further demolition could assist protection of this crucial heritage element. The patterns of demolition or change in building characteristics observed from old aerial photos and the latest satellite images indicate that -

- a. Buildings have been demolished close to the major roads or congested streets to accommodate more traffic.
- b. Old mosques have been rebuilt, completely depriving them of original features
- c. Courtyards have been covered, to provide better protection from the harsh climate.
- d. Construction of apartment buildings has taken place to accommodate the increased poor expatriate labour work force.
- e. Buildings are also being demolished due to demand for shops.

In terms of the traditional buildings, it suggests around eight percent loss of buildings in the old quarters of the town whereas a significant twelve percent of the buildings seem to have been altered, possibly due to modernization. Almost all the old mosques have been rebuilt, except for Syedi mosque, which has been preserved by the Ministry of Culture, as it was bought from the owner in 1970's.

In this study a comprehensive field survey was also performed to identify and map the individual buildings in the three core areas and assess their conditions. And it was found that almost half of the buildings surveyed were architecturally significant for the purpose of conservation while others are heritage buildings with ordinary architecture, but it is still important to preserve them in order to maintain the morphology of the neighbourhood. The outcomes of the analysis are already being applied in several conservation and restoration projects in Bahrain under my supervision, some of which are mentioned in the following text.

Sheikh Salman House

Sheikh Salman house is one of the oldest surviving buildings, which was built when the ruling family moved from Bu Maher to the main island of Muharraq. This house was approximately built around 1820 (Fig 5.2). This house, which has been uninhabited for a long time, and has deteriorated due to poor maintenance, has now been one of the top priorities for the restoration, as shown in Photo 5.3. The building is being restored with its original architecture using original construction materials and specially trained masons and craftsman, working under my supervision for the Ministry of Culture, Bahrain.



Fig 5.2 Sheikh Salman house as it exists now in dilapidated condition.

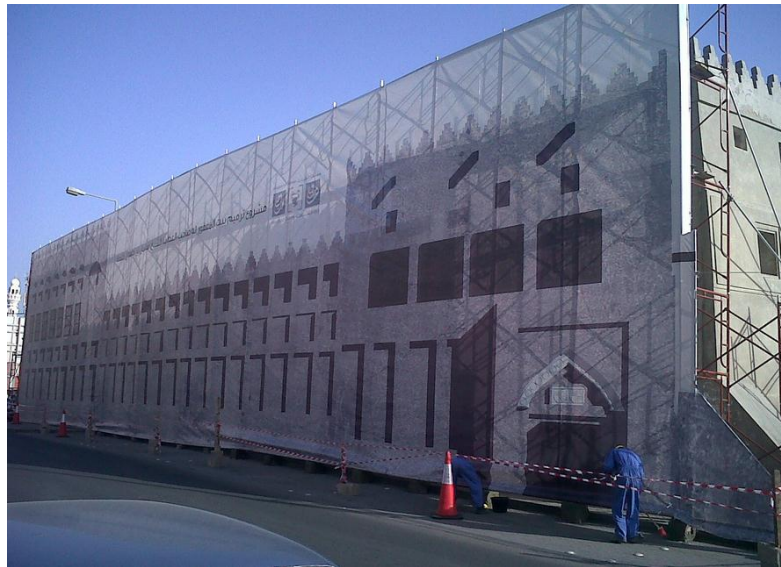


Fig 5.3 Restoration of Sheikh Salman house in the first core of Muharraq.

Bin Khater Mosque

Another element identified as important for heritage is the bin Khater mosque which was built in 1844. This mosque was constructed by a famous trader bin Khater who used to have a palm tree farm on Sitra island and all the sales of dates were used for the maintenance of this mosque, as shown in documentary evidence unearthed during this work (fig 5.4).

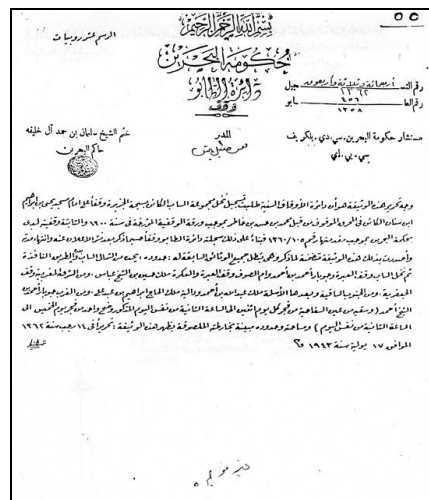


Fig 5.4. Document describing the will of bin Khater to use money from the sales of dates for the maintenanc of bin Khater mosque in Muharraq.

Sheikh Hamad House

One of the most important buildings being planned for reconstruction is the Sheikh Hamad house, the first house built in the second core of Muharraq. The house, which was in ruins, was demolished in the mid 1980s to pave way for widening of the streets. Figure 5.5 shows the photographs of house prior to demolition. Now, based on my recommendations justifying the importance of the house, the government is initiating a project to reconstruct the house. For this I created a digital model of the house using the photographs and description in the document as shown in Fig 5.6. Currently finer details are being worked out and plans are being drawn prior to commencing actual reconstruction at its original location.



Fig 5.5 Photographs of the Sheikh Hamad house in ruins, prior to its demolition.

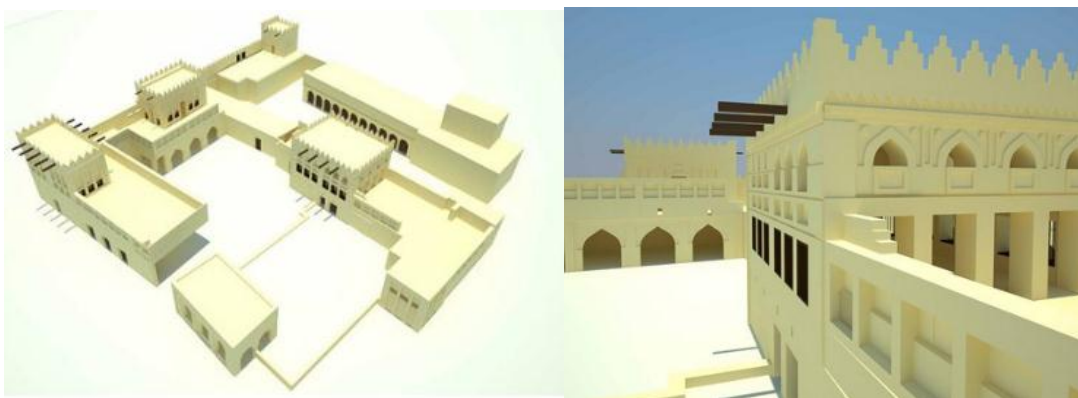


Fig 5.6 Graphic design of Sheikh Hamad house based on photographs and documentary evidence.

Bu Maher Fort

Another important landmark in Muharraq is the fort of Bū Māhir which has been in existence since the 16th century, but currently only one of the four towers remains as shown in figure 5.7. The fort has been the most crucial defensive structure for the first core of Muharraq, which is now Bu Maher. It was important for the protection of pearling fleets into the harbour. It protected the main water source of Muharraq City, an underwater sweet water spring located in the adjacent sea which nowadays is found active only sporadically. After the peace in the region the defence function ceased to play a role and the decline of the fort began. However, it remained important as a viewpoint during the *rakbah* and *quffāl* festivals signifying the return of pearling fleets or bidding them farewell on their departures. The people would climb the ruins to gain a better view (fig 5.7) of the fleets. The fort thus became an important memory marker of these important events in history. Justifying this historical significance it has been recommended strongly to reconstruct the lost portion of the fort for which I have created a digital model of the fort from sketches and descriptions of the fort drawn by various sailors, as shown in fig 5.8.



Fig 5.7 The only surviving tower of Bu Mahir fort, and on the right are the fishing boats returning to harbour towards Bu Mahir fort in the far distance.

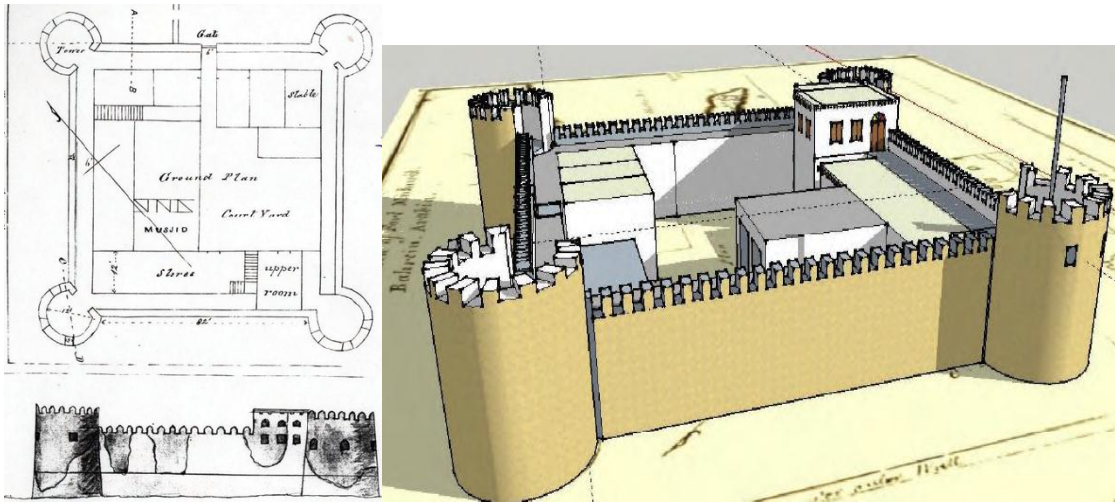
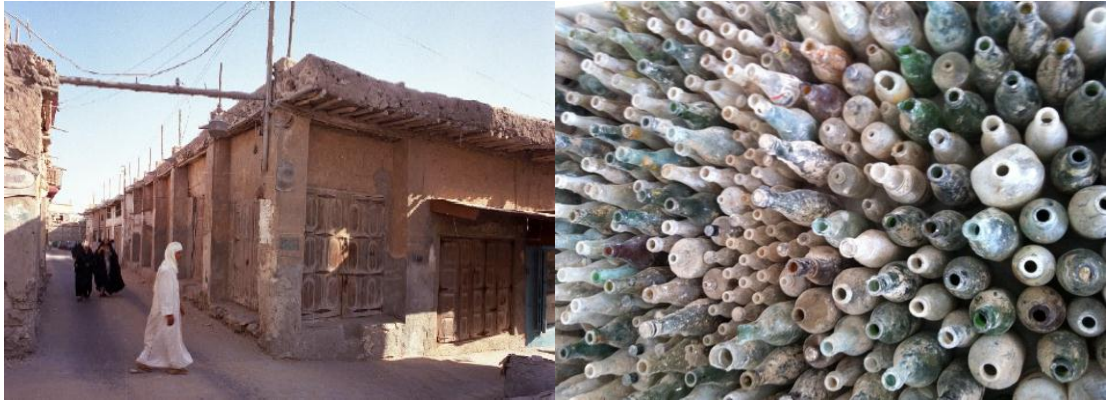


Fig 5.8 Plan and elevation of the original Bu Mahir fort by Lieutenant Lovell, 1868 (Yarwood, 1988). And 3D reconstruction model of the fort of Bu Mahir.

Suq Qaisariya

The Suq is an integral part of an Islamic town, and in Muharraq, it is **Suq** al-Qaysariya which has been in existence since the town evolved. The Suq itself is significant architecturally with its shared back walls, opening vistas, careful overall architectural expression despite the topographic differences, and many other hidden societal qualities that were the bases of development. Practicality and efficiency are core distinguishable features, and the physical output is rather homogeneous and compatible with the environment. But since it lost its link to the seashore, it began losing its functional significance and old prominence. In this effort, I have already initiated plans to revitalize the suq and bring it to prominence for the benefit of local people and tourism. Already a design has been developed and very soon the project will be realized for its reconstruction.



5.9 The Suq al Qaysariya in 1970 and pottery recovered during recent excavation in the area.



5.10 Artistic design for restoration of the Suq al Qaysariya to revive its lost significance and glory.

Finally, this study has some inherent limitations owing to the quality of the data and the time of collection. Due to time constraints the field data has also been restricted to the three neighbourhoods. It is therefore imperative to enhance the recommendation for evaluating heritage through more comprehensive data collection of buildings and

population characteristics. Towards this initiative I have been sharing my knowledge through various media and one of these is shown in figure 5.11, which shows my interview to Bahrain television in front of Siyadi mosque, in an effort to educate people about the inherent significance and tremendous heritage that the people of Bahrain have inherited, which needs to be preserved not just in terms of buildings and forts, but also its cultures and traditions to make it a living city.



Fig 5.11 My interview to Bahrain television in 2010, describing the heritage of Muharraq, in front of Siyadi mosque.

5.3. Challenges to Conservation and Preservation

From first-hand experience gained during this study and through various projects in the Ministry of Culture it has been determined that there are numerous challenges for the Conservation and preservation of the unique heritage of Muharraq. Some of these challenges are summarized in the following paragraphs.

The Contractors and their staff are not well acquainted with basic principles of conservation, and thus long processes of debate and discussion are required to get those principles through.

It requires extensive capacity building, which was not encountered in the preparatory phases of the project, in order to educate contractors.

The lack of previous conservation models and references makes the process difficult, as nobody from all the parties involved can visualize the need for a certain sensitive dealing with weak historic fabric.

Despite the amount of literature that exists and the experimentations that the Ministry of Culture has been doing, there is still a lack of comprehensive study on historic building materials and techniques. All that is available is still vague and general. In depth studies on those topics are needed to guide and support future conservation works.

There is significant lack of an adequate number of staff specialized or acquainted in conservation to supervise the implementation works and to understand the urgency to check all the details without overlooking any.

There is a lack of a proper coordination between various conservation projects and the Ministry's laboratories to conduct quick and efficient tests on materials.

In many cases, the properties are not registered; therefore it is difficult to issue permits.

There is a lack of trained specialized locally available conservators who can conduct proper conservation work on the architectural decorative elements.

The proper conservation materials, equipment, and chemicals are mostly not available in Bahrain.

There is a lack of studies on the effect of the summer heat and humidity on traditional building materials and on conservation materials.

Finally, there are no obligations on the contractors to keep their personnel who were trained in conservation to continue working in the field. Thus training sessions are usually repeated all over again and again for new projects.

5.4. Conclusion

It can be summarized that there has been significant loss of heritage around the second core of Muharraq town. The town is rapidly losing both the heritage buildings as well as the original inhabitants of the neighbourhood. Only some symbolic elements of the original settlements remain – such as the mosques, the road fabric and certain buildings. Most of the heritage buildings have been demolished or altered to meet the growing demand for more people and modern designs. The urban road fabric which existed prior to the discovery of oil still persists, however, the majority of the fabric has lost its significance due to enormous land reclamations surrounding the original town of Muharraq. It still preserves the old characteristics, but has been altered in many parts to make way for increased traffic and parking spaces. It has also been determined that the traditional Islamic Urban fabric is under threat due to a growing number of open spaces resulting from demolition of buildings for widening of roads or making space for other purposes, which is against the principle of cohesive and closely spaced Islamic principles of living. Therefore, it is essential to take urgent preventive measures to protect the town from any further loss of heritage, to revive of its cultural and traditional values, to reverse the migration of its native people and reduce further dilution of its culturally unique neighbourhoods.