Preserving the Past, Shaping the Present: Insights on Oman's Built Heritage and Its Identity

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ABSTRACT

Oman possesses a rich and diverse built heritage, spanning from ancient times to the present, characterized by varying architectural styles, building materials, and construction techniques. This heritage holds profound cultural significance for Omanis, symbolizing their identity and ancestral interactions with the environment. However, the rapid and unprecedented development since the 1970s has brought about changes in the perception and management of this heritage, with functional aspects transforming due to shifts in societal and economic values. While the government has made notable efforts to preserve and conserve the built heritage, questions arise regarding the extent to which the preserved structures truly represent Oman's architectural essence. This preliminary discussion delves into the status of architectural heritage in Oman, focusing on its preservation, conservation, and protection. The study explores the alignment of current heritage management practices with the present state of Omani society. Additionally, it investigates potential collaborations and conflicts between architectural heritage and modern development in both rural and urban regions of Oman, seeking to establish a balanced approach that harmonizes the two. The paper aims to shed light on the challenges and opportunities in preserving Oman's built heritage while taking into account the evolving needs of the country and its people.

Keywords: Architecture, Built heritage, Conservation, Heritage Management, Identity, Oman.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Built heritage encapsulates the cultural, social, political, economic, and environmental factors that have shaped the identities of places and people. It serves as a crucial source for identity formation and fosters a profound sense of history and shared destiny among members of society.

The crucial role of built heritage in constructing, consolidating, preserving, and expressing identity has been extensively studied (e.g., Smith, 2006; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996; Shennan, 1989; Silberman, 1989; McBryde, 1985). Smith (2006) asserts that built heritage serves as tangible symbols that establish connections between communities and their past, reinforcing their identity, values, and cultural pride. Similarly, according to Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003), built heritage is a tangible manifestation reflecting identity and empowering individuals and communities to build bridges that link them to their past, present, and future.

Built heritage serves as a significant driving force that strengthens the sense of place for individuals and communities. Notably, historical buildings hold a vital place in the local environment, actively engaging with people and fostering a profound sense of attachment and rootedness (Relph, 1976; Massey, 1994). They encapsulate the essence of the past, thus establishing a sense of historical continuity, belonging, and shared identity for individuals and communities (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000). By preserving the built heritage in its diverse forms and representations, societies can construct narratives about their past, offering a sense of cultural continuity and reminding members of their shared history, thereby shaping their collective identity (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000). Consequently, when discussing the preservation of identity through built heritage, involving the communities responsible for creating that heritage over time becomes crucial. According to Timothy and Boyd (2003), local communities play a fundamental role in heritage preservation, fostering a sense of ownership and pride among them.

The role of built heritage in shaping identity has been scarcely studied in Oman and other Arabian Gulf states (with exceptions being Potts, 1998; Insoll, 2005). However, due to rapid and unprecedented development, leading to significant societal changes, national identity has emerged as a critical issue in these states.

Today, built heritage holds great significance for Omanis as a symbol and representation of their identity, history, and culture, reflecting their ancestors' interactions and adaptations with the environment.

Nonetheless, this diverse and unique heritage has experienced significant transformations over time concerning architectural styles, building materials, and construction techniques. The rapid pace of development witnessed since 1970 has exposed a considerable portion of the historic environment to erosion threats (Al-Belushi, 2008). The establishment of essential infrastructure in both urban and rural areas has resulted in the degradation of various elements of the built heritage (Al-Belushi, 2008), influencing the perspectives of both the state and the populace towards this heritage. Consequently, certain inherited values linked to this heritage have inevitably been impacted due to changes in cultural and economic values within society.

This paper offers valuable insights into the importance of Oman's built heritage in preserving identity. It explores the current state of preservation and conservation efforts concerning built heritage in Oman, assessing the alignment of management practices with contemporary Omani society. Moreover, the paper investigates the interactions and conflicts between built heritage and modern development in various rural and urban areas of Oman, presenting potential strategies to maintain a harmonious balance between these aspects.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Sultanate of Oman boasts a diverse and exceptional built heritage, serving as a prominent symbol of the nation's identity and cultural richness. Nevertheless, the rapid and unprecedented development since the 1970s has posed numerous challenges, particularly in preserving the heritage's identity and ensuring its sustainability. Despite the government's considerable efforts, the preserved segments of Oman's built heritage fail to fully capture its essence, diversity, and significance. Additionally, the repercussions of modern development, including urban sprawl, have exposed parts of this heritage to the risks of decay and disappearance, sparking concerns about the adequacy of current management practices and the need for a delicate balance between built heritage and modern progress. Thus, this paper aims to explore how the Sultanate of Oman can effectively safeguard and conserve the identity of its built heritage amidst the relentless pace of development and evolving societal values.

This necessitates a discussion on the present state of efforts to preserve and conserve Oman's built heritage while emphasizing the challenges arising from the clash between the heritage's functional value and the societal changes impacting its cultural, social, and economic significance. Moreover, exploring collaborative strategies and potential conflicts between built heritage and modern development is imperative. By addressing these aspects, this study aims to propose strategies that strike a balance between heritage preservation and the demands of contemporary society.

III. METHODOLOGY

This preliminary discussion employs a descriptive approach to offer insights into the preservation of built heritage in Oman and its significance for preserving the Omani identity. The study primarily relies on analyzing literature, reports, and published articles related to built heritage, architecture, and cultural identity specific to Oman. Descriptive analysis is utilized to examine the historical, architectural, and cultural dimensions of Oman's built heritage. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this initial discussion, as it is descriptive in nature and does not involve experimental research. The study draws on personal observations and available literature. However, it serves as a foundation for future research endeavors exploring the preservation, management, and interplay between built heritage and cultural identity in Oman. It is worth noting that this discussion is based on a presentation given by the first author during a workshop titled "Heritage and National Identity Construction in the Gulf: Between State-building and Grassroots Initiatives" which took place at the London School of Economics (LSE), Middle East Centre on December 5-6, 2019.

IV. CURRENT STATE

Despite the evident and commendable efforts undertaken by the state to preserve and conserve this heritage over the past five decades, a cursory examination of its remaining components raises questions regarding the mechanisms, criteria, and strategies being employed to manage this diverse heritage.

The government's attention to built heritage emerged in the early 1970s, following a period of civil war and isolation from the global community (Al-Belushi, 2008). In response, several organizations dedicated to safeguarding this heritage were established, including the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, and legislative measures were introduced, marking the first of their kind in the country's history.

With rapid development and a steadily growing population, the issue of urban expansion became inevitable (Al-Belushi, 2013). The threats of urbanization to the traditional architectural fabric prompted planners to seek approaches that would preserve the essence of the place. In the 1970s, most early town planning approaches revolved around integrating the preservation of built heritage into proposed urban development plans. These approaches have significantly influenced subsequent government-led development plans. Today, their influence is evident in the urban landscape of Omani towns and cities (Damluji, 1998; Al-Belushi, 2013).

The State has demonstrated significant endeavors in safeguarding diverse components of the nation's built heritage, encompassing forts, towers, castles, old houses, quarters, mosques, and the traditional irrigation system of aflaj. To ensure preservation, legislative measures such as the National Heritage Protection Law (Royal Decree, 6/1980) and the Cultural Heritage Law (Royal Decree, 35/2019) have been enacted, protecting historical remains. Consequently, built heritage in various regions of the country has been effectively safeguarded, and the essence and principles of traditional Omani architecture have been integrated into the design of modern buildings.

The State has undertaken extensive restoration efforts on numerous historical defense and civic structures. While restoration has primarily been the responsibility of the State, certain buildings and monuments owned by individuals have also undergone restoration. These restoration projects were not limited to the Ministry of Heritage and Culture; various government agencies, including the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, focused on restoring historic mosques, and the Diwan of Royal Court took part in the restoration of historic houses and defense structures in old Muscat. Subsequently, some of these restored monuments have been made accessible to the public as tourist attractions (Al-Belushi, 2008).

The government actively promoted built heritage as a symbol representing Omani identity to the public. Various communication channels, such as school educational curricula, museums, cultural exhibitions, and popular textbooks, have been employed for this purpose (Al-Belushi, 2008). The curricula, in particular, have played a significant role in instilling the values of Omani identity among the younger generation. A brief look at school textbooks reveals that they include a substantial amount of information and photographs related to built heritage. Within these textbooks, built heritage is portrayed as synonymous with authentic identity.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Identity Preservation

Oman's built heritage is a testament to the imaginative ingenuity of humans and their harmonious engagement with the surrounding environment throughout history. It serves as a tangible expression of personal and regional identity, encapsulating accumulated knowledge, experiences, and architectural customs. Nevertheless, the preservation of this heritage confronts challenges primarily stemming from rapid development, urbanization, evolving societal needs, and varying levels of awareness regarding its significance.

Presently, the townscapes in Oman comprise a blend of old and new architectural styles, posing a challenging task of integrating them in a country experiencing extensive development affecting all aspects of life. Traditional styles coexist alongside modern ones in nearly all Omani urban and rural areas. While some modern buildings echo traditional architectural styles, others seem incongruous with the surroundings. This raises pertinent questions, such as: To what extent has the architectural identity, as well as the identity of the place itself, been impacted by these unrelated new buildings? Is this phenomenon gradually shaping a new architectural identity?

The architectural styles have not noticeably impacted the identity of the place. However, the layout of residential settlements and the arrangement of buildings and houses have undergone evident changes. As a result of these modifications, inhabitants of modern settlements have experienced a loss of certain social values and norms that were integral to their old settlements, including social cohesion. Nevertheless, the degree of privacy offered by the new settlements has emerged as a critical factor influencing people's decisions regarding the location and design of their new homes.

In the past, houses in old towns were closely connected reflecting the cohesive nature of the society. However, the current distribution criteria for new land plots can lead to neighbors from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, each with distinct local identities. Consequently, modern settlements now comprise a mixture of people hailing from various regions and cultures.

Each element of the traditional Omani quarters' architectural fabric served distinct functions and held specific roles. These components were interconnected through a network of spatial and functional relationships, collectively forming an essential part of the quarters' architectural identity. Today, architects have successfully incorporated certain characteristics and features of these components into modern designs. For example, internal divisions like the majilis (reception room) and other architectural elements

related to residents' privacy have been preserved. However, some features no longer exist, or have changed to accommodate the new needs of inhabitants. As a consequence, this has undoubtedly impacted the social relations that the old quarters naturally fostered among their residents.

The rapid pace of modernization has brought about a dramatic shift in architectural styles for both public and private buildings, much like in other Arabian Gulf countries. However, unlike other parts of the world where architecture evolved gradually, this change occurred abruptly (Al-Belushi, 2015). Consequently, there is a significant discontinuity in the indigenous built heritage, leading to townscapes dominated by new and imported architectural styles. This has undoubtedly impacted people's sense of place and their emotional attachment to it.

B. Function and Perception

Preserving the built heritage faces numerous challenges, particularly in reconciling the functional value of these structures with the evolving needs of society due to continuous societal changes. In countries like Oman, significant transformations have occurred across social, economic, and political domains in the last five decades. These changes have brought forth new preferences in urban planning and architectural styles. Smith (2006) argues that shifting societal preferences often prioritize modernization over heritage preservation, which can diminish the significance and symbolic value associated with the built heritage. Graham and Howard (2008) assert that adapting to the demands of contemporary life and pursuing functional architectural objectives can lead to the replacement of old buildings with modern counterparts, resulting in the loss of tangible connections to the past and altering how the new generations perceive and appreciate the built heritage. However, Omani regulations and legislation governing city planning, urban development, and housing strive to achieve sustainable urban growth aligned with the objectives of the future vision "Oman 2040" while placing the preservation of the Omani identity as a paramount pillar. These efforts necessitate a well-considered balance between meeting societal needs, safeguarding the built heritage, increasing community involvement in preservation and conservation initiatives, and enhancing awareness of the importance and sustainability of this heritage.

C. The Interplay of Old and New

The conflict between old and new architecture arises from the global modernization processes and urban development occurring across the globe. As cities expand and flourish, striking a harmonious balance becomes crucial. On one hand, contemporary societies demand functional and aesthetically pleasing designs that cater to their needs. On the other hand, it is essential to safeguard the cultural identity ingrained within the existing architectural heritage (Frampton, 2002).

The preservation of built heritage stands as a paramount element in safeguarding cultural legacy and reflecting the historical essence of a location. It signifies the cultural accomplishments of both individuals and societies. Attaining a harmonious coexistence between the old and the new necessitates urban planning that not only incorporates modern architectural designs but also respects the cultural value embedded within the built environment (Harvey, 2001).

In Oman, most of the modern renowned structures pay homage to the country's traditional built heritage. The Royal Opera House Muscat stands out as a prime illustration of this approach, aiming to bridge the gap between the present and the past. Nevertheless, this approach encounters obstacles when it comes to designing contemporary buildings that successfully incorporate modern functionality and aesthetics while preserving the historical built environment (Lefaivre & Tzonis, 2020). When replicating modern architectural styles inspired by the built heritage, the extent of authenticity achieved in this emulation becomes a pertinent question. According to Pallasmaa (2011), such imitations often fall short of authenticity and fail to capture the true essence of traditional architecture. On the other hand, Brandi (1963) contends that this replication can evoke the past, safeguard cultural identity, and enrich the sense of place.

The introduction of new imported architectural styles in Oman has sparked inquiries regarding their level of connection to the essence and authenticity of the local built heritage. Undoubtedly, certain architectural endeavors have successfully drawn inspiration from traditional architecture, establishing a meaningful conversation between the past and the present. This achievement has been facilitated by regulations and legislation formulated by entities responsible for urban planning, housing, and municipalities. Nevertheless, caution must be exercised during this process of inspiration, as it is intricate and demands a profound comprehension and sensitivity to the cultural context for it to flourish.

Achieving harmony between imported architectural styles and the local built heritage is contingent upon comprehending the cultural context of the region and demonstrating reverence for the values intertwined with it. Triumph in this endeavor undoubtedly amplifies the pivotal role architecture assumes in conserving the built heritage, while simultaneously bolstering cultural identity and fostering a profound sense of place.

The clash between old and new architectural styles prompted urban planners and designers to seek reconciliation between the two contenders. Urban planners began prioritizing the preservation of authenticity and historical significance in their plans (Al-Belushi, 2015). Likewise, architects started

incorporating many elements of traditional architecture into the design of modern government buildings. Nowadays, it is rare to find a governmental building in Oman that does not echo the traditional architectural style. For instance, structures like royal palaces, ministries, royal mosques, courts, city gates, government banks, municipal buildings, bridges, schools, and new markets draw inspiration from traditional Omani architecture. However, there are a few buildings (though impactful) constructed by the government that deviate from indigenous architecture and rely on imported styles, such as Muscat International Airport, one of the largest modern buildings in Oman. These buildings reflect the government's endeavor to strike a balance between preserving its deeply rooted history and embracing modernity.

D. Potential Collaboration

Striking a delicate balance between preserving the built heritage and meeting the needs of modern Omani society necessitates exploring avenues for collaboration between the two. One prominent approach to achieving this cooperation is integrating elements of the built heritage into the fabric of contemporary urban environments. Furthermore, the adaptive reuse of traditional buildings holds the potential to forge a connection between the present and the past, enriching individuals' sense of place, fortifying their attachment to their identity, and fostering social cohesion.

Realizing these goals necessitates extensive collaboration between urban planners, architects, and those responsible for managing and conserving the built heritage. Overcoming the enduring conflict between these stakeholders can be achieved by jointly developing projects that incorporate cultural sensitivity, respect for people and places, and an understanding of the natural and historical surroundings. Such cooperative efforts would give rise to an appealing Omani urban environment where the past and present harmoniously converge, showcasing creative integration.

VI. CONCLUSION

Built heritage possesses inherent dynamism due to its close connection with the cultural identity of people and places, rendering it a delicate matter. In a rapidly modernizing country like Oman, development will inevitably impact built heritage. Thus, it becomes imperative to collaboratively protect the historical essence and uniqueness of this heritage, recognizing it as a fundamental pillar of both the identity of the people and the places themselves.

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