POLICY PAPER

SHEIKH SAUD BIN SAQR AL QASIMI
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cultural heritage plays a considerable role in society. It reflects and shapes the values, beliefs and aspirations that define national identity. It is also a source of pride for new generations and gives a sense of belonging to communities.

The remains of old architectural structures, which are surviving the creep of modern concrete buildings in historical locations in Ras Al Khaimah, are signs of a rich cultural heritage that has evolved more elaborately compared to many cities in the region. The lack of records on these houses and their urban forms, however, increases the likelihood of potential knowledge loss related to the Emirati heritage that they embody.

The aim of this paper is to raise awareness among the community, especially the youth, about the importance of cultural heritage in Ras Al Khaimah through engaging academic institutions. One way to preserve this cultural heritage is through documentation of the current physical conditions for select historic houses in the Old Town area of Ras Al Khaimah using architectural drawings, images, and photos. A pilot experiential learning project that engaged American University of Ras Al Khaimah (AURAK) architecture students in a documentation process for six buildings highlights the potential for similar approaches at other academic institutions and demonstrates how collaborative partnerships may result between various stakeholders and academic researchers, students, and practitioners in a mutual effort to preserve cultural heritage.

Raising Awareness of Cultural Heritage: Experiential Learning, Architecture Education, and Documentation of Historical Architecture in Ras Al Khaimah

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Introduction

Beginning in the 1980s, the Gulf region, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has witnessed greater interest in cultural heritage[1], increasingly so in the last two decades (Hadjri & Boussaa, 2007; MacLean, 2018; Mazetto, 2018). Attentiveness to heritage began partly as a homage to national identity, invoking both pride in the past and the promise of new nationhood[2]. The establishment of the Department of Antiquities and Museums in 1986 marked the institutionalization of heritage preservation in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah (Hilal et al., 2015). Yet efforts toward preservation, and a race to document and save vanishing architectural structures, especially those from the 20th century, have been constrained by the limited time and resources of the small group of professionals that form the Department of Antiquities and Museums (Hilal et al., 2015). To help address these challenges, heritage preservation should be integrated into broader development plans for the emirate as a means to support economic growth, such as through cultural tourism (MacLean, 2018).

Before conservation efforts can begin, however, documentation plays a crucial role as a "basic pre-requisite for understanding a historic building or site" (Muhammad, 2013). Accordingly, documentation becomes a mutual responsibility of all sectors of society which share the commitment of preserving tangible heritage. Conservation should depend on the "existing human and material resources readily available within the society" (Jokilehto, 1999, p. 292). One such available resource is educational institutions, which could incorporate the documentation learning process within relevant degree programs. The students who graduate from these programs may serve to further the knowledge gained and utilize it in their future careers.

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[1] Heritage includes both tangible and intangible components. Buildings, monuments, cultural landscapes, artworks, and artefacts form tangible heritage; intangible heritage is comprised of traditions inherited from the past such as vocal and performing arts, habits and norms, rituals, celebrations, folklore, and knowledge (UNESCO, n.d.).

[2] The federation of the UAE was established in 1971.

Conceptual Framework: Experiential Learning, Architecture Education, and Cultural Heritage Preservation

This paper focuses on the means to raise awareness of the importance of cultural heritage in the community and for the youth. It brings to light the importance of the traditionally built environment and the necessity of preservation through a process of documentation. To do so, the paper links the social problem of preserving heritage buildings with the learning process of architectural students, through implementing experiential learning of cultural heritage documentation. Experiential learning is "an intentionally designed, inquiry-driven learning opportunity" through which students can "understand and solve or address a real-world problem or situation through the lens of the discipline" (Roman, 2018, p. 188). Experiential learning is especially important for students of architecture. Kolb (2014) proposes one model of experiential learning, consisting of a cycle of four phases: 1) concrete experiences; 2) reflective observation; 3) abstract conceptualization; and 4) active experimentation. Furthermore, Salama (2010) argues that "integrating assessment research" through experiential learning can engage students in the "production of knowledge" while "exposing them to primary sources of information." He concludes that "the contribution of inquiry-based learning to architectural and design pedagogy" (p. 288) is critical as it leads to students' critical thinking and reflection.

Figure 1: Old Ras Al Khaimah Map

Old Town Survey from 2002/2003
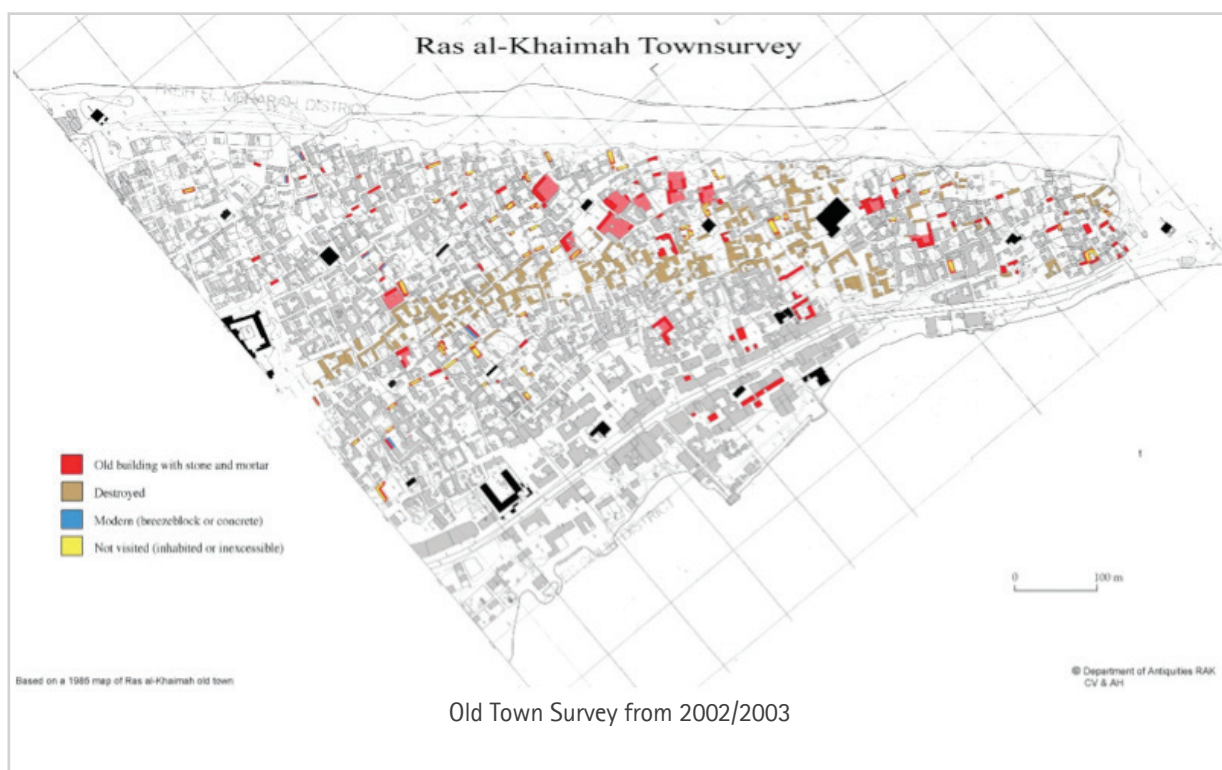
Courtesy: Ras Al Khaimah Department of Antiquities and Museums

Historic Ras Al Khaimah as an Experiential Learning Case Study

Ras Al Khaimah is a pertinent case on which to center the conversation on architectural heritage preservation and provision of associated experiential learning opportunities. Occupying the northern tip of the federation, the emirate is a rich cultural region, defined by continuous settlements throughout 5,000 years of human history, from pre-historic including the Neolithic period to the pre-oil times. Ras Al Khaimah's strategic location at the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz helped it to expand on the trade routes between the east and the west. Its natural environment, a combination of coastal areas, agricultural meadows, desert, and mountains, have encouraged the development of diverse settlements over the course of its history.

This history of civilizations and human habitation left behind a wide array of vestiges. Considerable archaeological efforts towards excavations have revealed these buried aspects of cultural heritage in various parts of the emirate, many of which are exhibited in the National Museum of Ras Al Khaimah (Hilal et al., 2015). These include "prehistoric shell middens, Early Bronze burial cairns, Bronze and Iron Age tombs, occupation mounds, post-14th century urban sites, pottery kilns, and 18th century and later standing buildings such as towers, forts, mosques,... [and] traditional houses built of stone and mud brick" (Hilal et al., 2015, p. 149).

Moreover, similar to other regions in the UAE, Ras Al Khaimah's historical urban core (referred to as Ras Al Khaimah Old Town) was previously a center of the pearling

and fishing industry (Hawker et al., 2005). This significant history is manifested in the physical architecture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which includes old buildings and houses of pearl merchants and other traders. However, less attention has been paid to the emirate's living heritage in Ras Al Khaimah Old Town and elsewhere. Living heritage refers to the buildings that are still standing, at times in extreme fragility, from the early 20th century to the late pre-oil and early modern period. Many of these late pre-oil and early modern period houses have been abandoned and are not yet considered a formal part of the emirate's cultural heritage.

Ras Al Khaimah Old Town remains historically significant in the region because many of its buildings have not been destroyed and are still standing (Hawker, 2007). Due to rapid modernization and economic development following the discovery of oil, similar urban cores across the region have been lost or substantially changed. Examples include Abu Dhabi's pre-oil urban core that was demolished and Sharjah's urban area that was transformed into museums. Although Doha has installed a semblance of pre-oil dwellings, the authenticity of the past has been reduced (MacLean, 2018; Mazzetto, 2018).

While Ras Al Khaimah's transformation has been slower and evidence of its cultural heritage still exists (Hawker, 2007), development pressures remain an issue and have begun to impact the historic fabric of Ras Al Khaimah Old Town. Lack of alignment between historic preservation and urban development planning has led to major interventions in the heart of the area (Figure 1). Modern buildings and wide vehicular roads have begun to replace older traditional houses and narrow alleys, disrupting the original urban fabric, and increasing the usage of cars (Hilal et al., 2015). Such transformations in the physical fabric of Ras Al Khaimah Old Town were encouraged by increasing property values and new development plans that did not consider the cultural value of existing structures. These developments resulted in the loss of a considerable number of old houses, which unfortunately did not have any documentation. Additionally, the Emiratis who built these traditional houses have left to live in modern concrete villas in the city's suburbs. Abandoned or occupied by low income workers, the

houses have been negatively affected and subjected to misuse and lack of maintenance. As a result, original features of many houses have disappeared.

Without a systemic protection and documentation process, this heritage will undoubtedly be lost. In this unique context, the need to preserve Ras Al Khaimah's cultural heritage in the form of the older buildings from the 20th century becomes an urgent need. Moreover, the need for awareness and advocacy is also apparent. This project sought to increase the community's awareness of the importance of cultural heritage and hopefully contribute to a strategy that will be taken into consideration by policymakers both at the level of higher education planning as well as the stakeholders in Ras Al Khaimah who are responsible for cultural heritage and its importance to the growth and development of the emirate.

Documenting Ras Al Khaimah Old Town and its Cultural Heritage

Documentation has become one of the key activities in the conservation and management of cultural heritage. It is also a pre-requisite for informed conservation, as it provides information needed to make decisions on how to intervene and conserve heritage. Documentation can also serve as guiding principles for all who are managing heritage places and is particularly useful for anyone who is interested and wishing to learn more about heritage.

The building traditions visible in Ras Al Khaimah Old Town share certain typologies, building techniques, and use of materials with other cities in the UAE. Building techniques relied on the use of natural materials, including arish (palm fronds), coral, mountain and beach stone, and palm logs (Hawker et al., 2005). Coral stones in the walls dating back to the early 20th century is a unique characteristic of houses in the region (Figure 2 & Figure 3).

Figure 3: Coral stone walls in buildings of the 1950s

Figure 2: Traditional House of Ras Al Khaimah Old Town

The Department of Antiquities and Museums in Ras Al Khaimah has managed to protect around 100 of the remaining houses by marking them archeological sites that are not to be removed or demolished. The sign posted on the building in Figure 2 is an example of this mandate for protection. Ras Al Khaimah Municipality supports these efforts by preventing any new buildings or renovations to the protected buildings. The remaining houses, although legally protected, are yet threatened by decay and may eventually disappear. Therefore, documentation is necessary for future generations to benefit from the knowledge of past architectural forms.

Other buildings from more recent periods, the 1960s and 1970s, were built next to the older structures and sometimes replaced parts of them (Figure 4). These buildings used sea-sand bricks bonded with cement mortar in their construction (Figure 5). This can be observed from the existence of seashells in the bricks. At later periods, cement and reinforced concrete were used exclusively. Despite the abandonment and deterioration of the old houses, many of them are still standing.

The map in Figure 6 shows the locations of all heritage buildings protected by law in Ras Al Khaimah Old Town (marked in red). While the remains of all historical structures in Ras Al Khaimah Old Town need to be documented, due to the limitations of time and resources, five were chosen to include in the experiential learning case study and are addressed in this paper. Houses were all from the 1950s era and selected based on historical significance, conditions of the house, and accessibility.

Figure 4: Modern houses from the 1960s

Figure 5: Sea-sand bricks with cement mortar in the buildings of the 1960s

Figure 6: Map of heritage buildings in Ras Al Khaimah Old Town

Courtesy: Ras Al Khaimah Department of Antiquities and Museums

Figure 7: Map showing houses in Ras Al Khaimah Old Town and Al Mu'areed documented during project

Courtesy: Ras Al Khaimah Department of Antiquities and Museums

Additionally, one house was selected from the nearby Al Mu'areed district from the same time period for comparison purposes. Figure 7 shows the locations of the houses documented as part of this project.

Methodology

The process of physical documentation consists of field work, studio analysis and implementation of the data, and exhibition of the results. The process was undertaken by 12 advanced undergraduate architecture students at the American University of Ras Al Khaimah (AURAK) as an experiential learning component for their curricular courses in Urban Planning, Urban Design or Conservation of Traditional Architecture. These courses comprise the core and elective requirements in their fourth year of study. Students were divided into groups and assigned to the six houses included in the project.

The experiential learning documentation process took place in six phases: (1) reviewing and inspecting the existing literature, including conducting interviews and collecting data on the houses; (2) establishing the theoretical framework; (3) undertaking field work, including assessment of current site conditions and working with a professional surveyor to make necessary measurements; (4) data analysis and production of drawings for each house; and (5) documentation, and presentation of the results, including data entry into drafting and digital modeling software (programs used: AutoCAD, Revit and Sketch Up).

The project was undertaken in cooperation with local government agencies such as Ras Al Khaimah Municipality, the Waste Management Department, and the Antiquities Authority. In addition, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), a well-known international organization in cultural heritage capacity building, also lent technical support for the project.

Availability of Resources

A number of multidisciplinary studies have been conducted on Ras Al Khaimah Old Town. Some examine the socio-economic aspects of the city (Al Tabour, 2003). Anthropological studies on Ras Al Khaimah consider the area as part of a larger context (Deakin, 1976). Other studies promote heritage preservation for purposes of tourism (MacLean, 2018). However, further studies are required on the urban forms of Ras Al Khaimah Old Town. The lack of resources in both Arabic and English on the architectural and urban content of the area makes it necessary to create repositories of knowledge that explain both the tangible and intangible traditions of the emirate's culture. This will enhance the awareness of the cultural heritage among the local community as well as for interested scholars globally.

During the course of observation and study, we found no evidence of detailed documentation work previously done to fulfil the objectives set for our project. We therefore engaged relevant authorities and departments in Ras Al Khaimah. Ras Al Khaimah Municipality and Ras Al Khaimah Department of Antiquities and Museums provided us with maps and studies that had been conducted on the area. Detailed development projects for Ras Al Khaimah Old Town had been submitted by external consultants from outside the UAE but were

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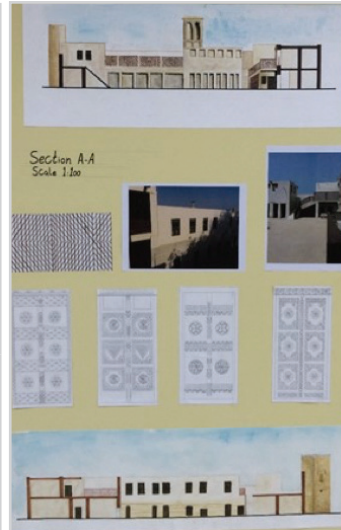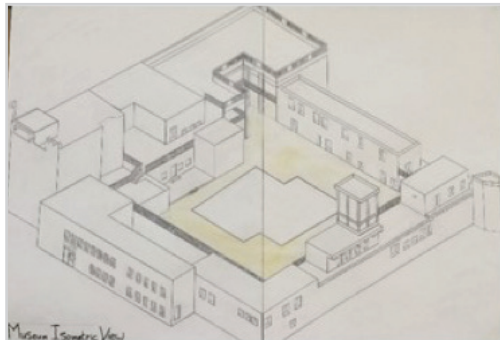**Figure 8:** Mohamed Bin Salem Mosque

Courtesy: Ras Al Khaimah Department of Antiquities and Museums

Figure 9: The National Museum of Old Ras Al Khaimah

Courtesy: Ras Al Khaimah Department of Antiquities and Museums

**Figure 10:** Sample student documentation of Ras Al Khaimah National Museum

never implemented. Buildings like the National Museum of Ras Al Khaimah and the Mosque of Mohammed Ben Salem were documented and renovated under an official mission in the 1980's (Figures 8 and 9). Our students created documentation for the renovated museum and mosque in a design course and produced drawings and models as shown in Figures 10 and 11.

Additionally, Ras Al Khaimah Municipality has been studying possibilities for revitalizing the area by preparing proposals for selected urban spaces located along the main road between the aforementioned museum and mosque (highlighted in yellow on the map in Figure 12). The Municipality has also prepared an ownership parceling plan. A valuable document, the plan records the limits of each ownership, its area, and a parcel number. However, there is no evidence of documentation or information gathering for the existing houses located on specific parcels. Other individual examples, such as the traditional houses of Jazeerat al Hamra, may exist in other locations of the city. However, in Ras Al Khaimah Old Town there is no additional evidence of any buildings being documented or renovated by the authorities mentioned above.

Figure 11: Sample student documentation of Mohammed Bin Salem Mosque
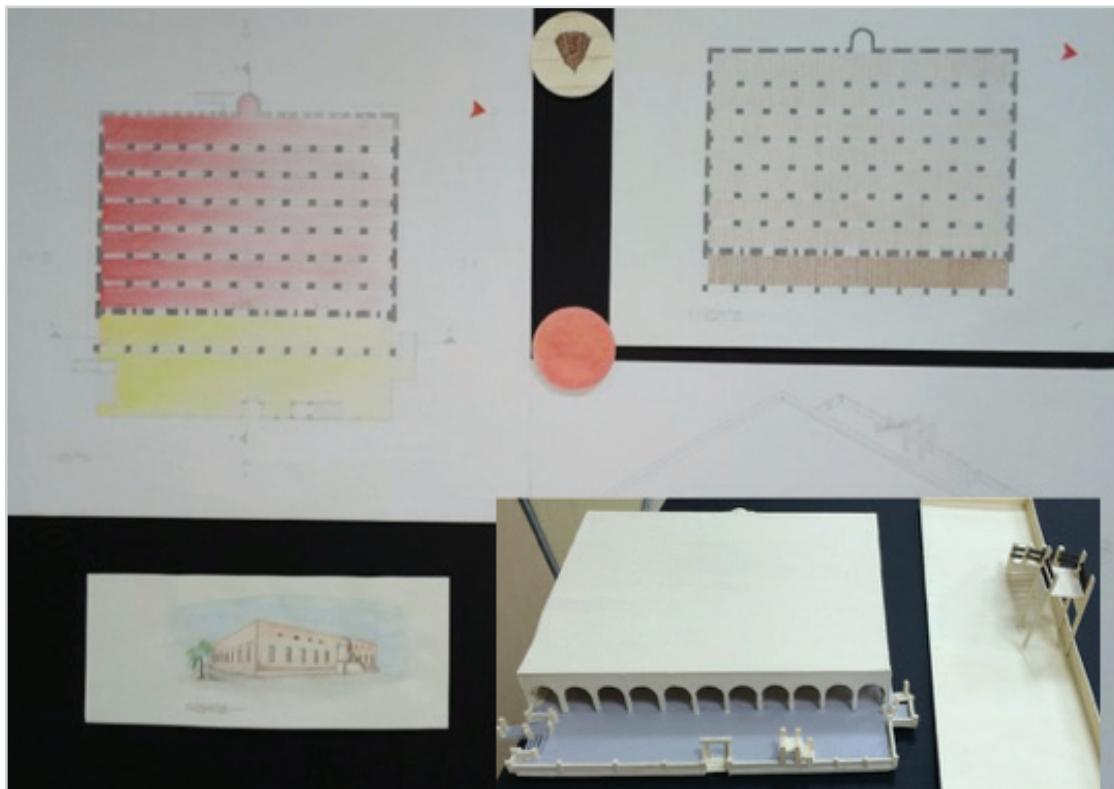
Figure 12: Map of old Ras Al Khaimah showing protected houses and selected development areas

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Findings

Participating in this experiential learning case study as part of their class projects raised students' awareness regarding the importance of cultural heritage as well as their overall interest. It also helped them to personally connect to the local community in a new way. As an example, one student, chose to explore ways to conserve, revive, and integrate old houses in Ras Al Khaimah Old Town through adaptive reuse as the focus for his graduation capstone project. Learnings and experiences from this project helped him to build his design proposal for the capstone.

Additionally, this case study was also a good example of how we can maximize benefits from educational approaches through partnership with other organizations. Local government entities gave the students insights into how planning takes place and decisions are made. Working with an international organization such as ICCROM enabled the students to learn about the most recent technology used in the documentation of historic buildings and develop new skills for their future careers.

Students' Work

As outlined in the methodology section, the students selected six vacant houses from the 1950s to conduct the documentation work as part of the experiential learning component in their fourth-year coursework. The exact build dates and history of the houses was not available in this study; however, such information can be investigated if further socio-cultural studies are conducted related to this historical period.

For each house, the students took measurements from the field and created the required drawings. They also photographed all the architectural details to help them create AutoCAD drawings. Such pictures can also be considered as part of the documentation process and findings for the project.
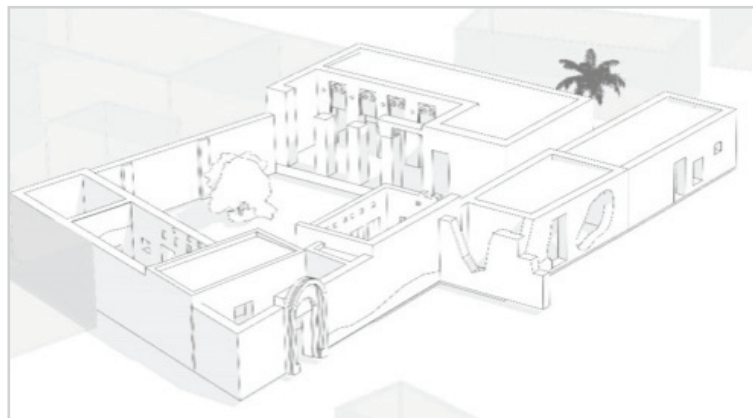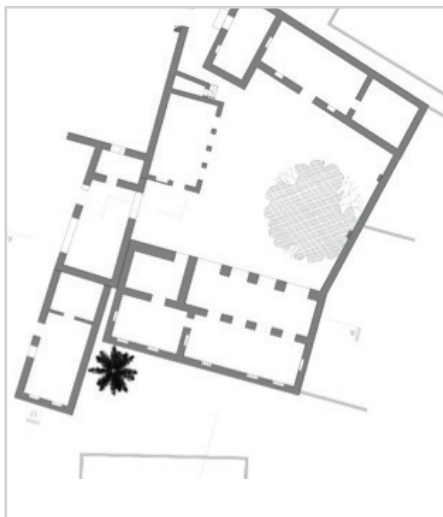
Figures 13-16 provide samples of their findings.

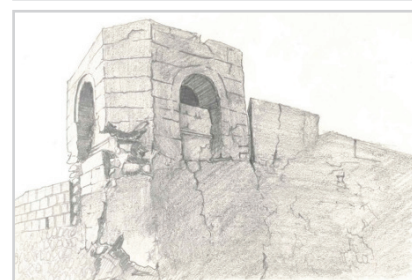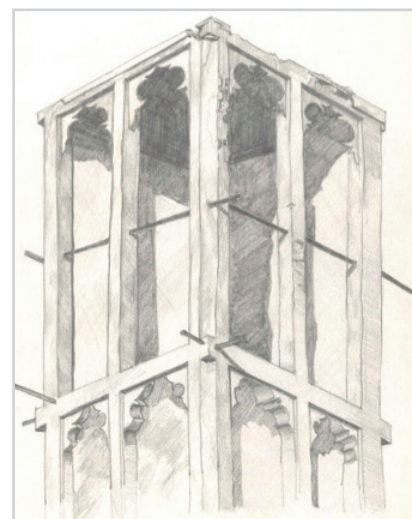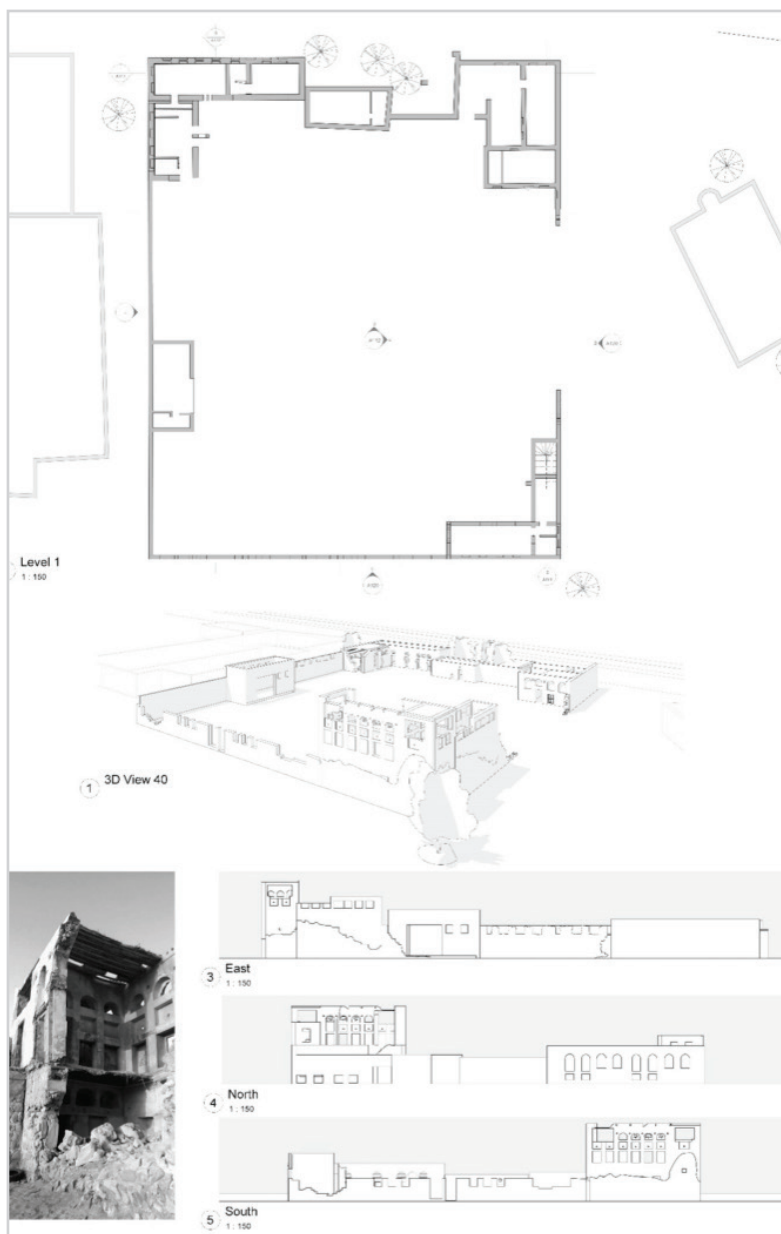**Figure 13:** House 3 in Al Mu'areed: student drawings and pictures

Figure 14: House 5 in Old Ras Al Khaimah, student drawings and pictures

Figure 16: Student sketches of architectural elements in Ras Al Khaimah Old Town for exhibition

Figure 15: Sample of student drawings for exhibition (Al Mu'areed house)

Documentation Challenges

The process of documentation for old houses can extend to include multiple issues related to cultural heritage that are also linked to the physical environment. To explain this further, a house which was built 80 years ago reflects many aspects, including but not limited to, the following: the building type and its components; the relationship between the buildings and the shape of the urban space between them; the building materials and technologies used; any structural defects such as cracks and partial or complete failure of structural components; the lifestyle of the inhabitants; the social and cultural constraints that shaped the house; the economic aspects and professions of the owners; the influences from other regions (which also reflect certain relationships and socio-cultural attributes); climatic and environmental awareness which are reflected in the design as well as in the building techniques and treatments.

For our study, we limit the documentation task to the physical formation of the houses and their building elements and materials. Future studies can consider the findings of this study and extend it to the study of intangible aspects related to the local culture. This process includes the following challenges:

Challenges Related to the Physical Sites

1. The unstable structural conditions of the buildings made it dangerous, in many cases, to touch or even come close to them (Figure 17).

2. The accumulation of garbage and other waste dumped by neighbors without permission, which was an obvious problem in nearly all the vacant houses. (Figure 18)

3. Most houses are occupied by either workers or workshops or used as storage for contracting or trading companies (Figure 19). A few local Emirati families are still living in their original houses after making additions and improvements to meet their contemporary needs.

Figure 17: Unstable structures of houses from Ras Al Khaimah Old Town

Figure 18: Garbage dump in a vacant house

Figure 19: Old house used as an air conditioner workshop

Challenges Related to Experiential Learning

1. Students lacked previous knowledge in documentation work, so time had to be invested to provide sufficient background understanding.

2. Students had other obligations and time constraints that sometimes conflicted with the time required for field work.

3. Weather conditions impacted the limited time during which students were able to go to the field and conduct their work.

4. Suspicion of the occupants in neighboring houses and their concern about privacy, especially when it came to taking pictures.

5. Availability of equipment necessary to perform professional documentation, such as digital surveying tools.

6. Difficulty in reaching the original owners to hear stories about their houses and learn more about certain aspects and rationales behind the design decisions of the houses.

Policy Recommendations

To better understand our policy recommendations, we considered them from two distinct focusses, the educational level and the public sector level.

At the Educational Level

Focus on generalizing the issue of cultural heritage awareness among all students of AURAK (and other locally-based higher education institutions). Offering of at least one course from the general education program on the cultural heritage of Ras Al Khaimah would support this effort and could be built into the core courses for academic programs.

1. In university architecture program curriculums, design courses should include projects which address local cultural heritage issues. Students in early level courses can select design issues in Ras Al Khaimah Old Town that require documentation work. Annually, at least one student graduation project should address the cultural heritage of Ras Al Khaimah.

2. Organize regular workshops in departments of architecture for students and other interested personnel from the local authorities to learn about cultural heritage issues and documentation techniques.

3. Organize public lecture series on cultural heritage and local architectural issues to engage the broader community.

4. Collaborate with international agencies specializing in the documentation of cultural heritage, such as ICCROM and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), to update students about recent technologies used in the documentation and visualization of heritage buildings.

5. Emphasize the importance of media in disseminating the knowledge pertaining to heritage and all forms of culture.

At the Public Sector Level

1. Build collaborations between educational institutions and local public authorities to facilitate the work of students and researchers on projects related to cultural heritage, which includes sharing of relevant data and resources.

2. Conduct community outreach by offering public lectures and exhibitions focused on the cultural heritage of Ras Al Khaimah. The outreach should target both school students and the local community, including expatriates.

3. Offer incentives to house owners to encourage them to improve their properties and protect them from decay and destruction.

As a result of this study, we recommend forming a taskforce comprised of representatives from AURAK and relevant local government departments (e.g. municipality, antiquities, public works, infrastructure, environmental control) to conduct a comprehensive documentation process that covers all of the protected houses in Ras Al Khaimah Old Town. This process should lead to the creation of inventories with full data about the physical and nonphysical information for each house or structure, which could be incorporated into a future national register for historical houses and structures in the emirate.

Conclusion

Documentation of heritage sites in Ras Al Khaimah should be a critical priority in order to coordinate and align conservation priorities with future development planning efforts. This pilot project demonstrates how educational institutions such as AURAK can contribute to these efforts, facilitating student learning while supporting the responsible local authorities in meeting their mandates. By working together, a road map can be created to develop a comprehensive Heritage Register to document all structures that fall under the classification of Cultural Heritage. Coordinated efforts will also help to foster greater awareness and community pride in Ras Al Khaimah's heritage assets, many of which are unique in the region, and protect them for future generations to learn from and enjoy.

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