

BAHLA SITE – STATE OF CONSERVATION REPORT (C433)

SUMMARY

The magnificently restored Bahla Fort, Oman's first World Heritage site, opened to the public in November 2012. This flagship project in what was once a capital city of Oman's interior honours the principles that inform the Sultanate's national heritage policy: to prolong the valuable life of vernacular workmanship, respect the originality and uniqueness of local architectural design and traditional materials and preserve historic authenticity. Already the Fort is welcoming scholars and looking to expand its educational, cultural and tourist value.

A minimally invasive approach was adopted to sympathetic effect in the restoration of Bahla Fort, and this approach is carried through to other ongoing projects at this site, as well as throughout the Sultanate.

Preliminary studies, shoring up work and excavations are completed at Bahla Souq, where the aim of the current works is to restore the Souq to its place as a fully functioning and fully integrated commercial hub. Regular consultation is crucial to this process, given the many stakeholders involved and the need to balance traditional needs with the demands of an expanding modern urban space. A flexible but structured management approach is in place to guide the process. Archaeological findings indicate much earlier settlements within the Bahla Oasis site that merit further exploration.

The work of updating and collating regional map data is at an advanced stage. A traditional mud brick factory built to supply various restoration needs at the site is in addition feeding a growing data bank on the aging of bricks. Parking proposals are being examined with a view to meeting the needs of an expanding city with centrally located major tourist attractions, such as the Fort and Souq.

Projects at earlier stages of progression include the rehabilitation of the al Aqar settlement, which will require extensive work, restoration of the 10th century shrine of prominent Islamic scholar Sheikh bin Barakah, Al Khair mosque and associated buildings, and major flood protection works to protect the entire site. A full report on handling the threat of flooding was commissioned by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and has been completed, recommending the construction of two dams and rehabilitation of old channels.

All of these projects are considered from a people-centred and holistic perspective that aims to conserve visual context, integrate new constructions without attempting to replicate the old, promote functional diversity through innovative thinking. This is achieved through the consultation process, in which both public and private sectors, as well as the young generation, are engaged in the process.