



Aga Khan Award for Architecture

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W I N N I N G P R O J E C T S

Revitalisation of Muharraq

Muharraq, Bahrain

Patron: Sheikha Mai Bint Mohammed Al Khalifa, Manama, Bahrain

Project director: Noura Al Sayeh, Manama, Bahrain

Project description

The pearling industry was historically crucial to Bahrain's economy, with the former capital Muharraq as its global centre. Following the development of cultured pearls in the 1930s, the town went into decline and Manama rose to become capital through oil wealth. Muharraq's indigenous population was largely replaced by migrant workers, mostly single males sharing rented accommodation.

Initiated as a series of restoration and adaptive reuse of a number of edifices under the Sheikh Ebrahim Centre for Culture and Research, the project evolved into a comprehensive programme entitled *Pearling Path, Testimony of an Island Economy involving various architects, planners and researchers*. The project both highlights the town's pearling history and aims to re-balance its demographic makeup, enticing local families back through improvements to the environment and provision of community and cultural venues. Facilitated by private–public partnerships, it involves the preservation of a number of sites and numerous buildings, from humble divers' houses to prestigious courtyard residences to commercial warehouses; plus the upgrading of other façades, and the construction of four new buildings. All of these are connected through a visitor pathway, with vacant plots left by demolitions landscaped as public spaces.

The preservation/restoration of the traditional buildings included reinstating lost wind towers for natural climate control. The materials employed match the originals – notably coral stone reused from demolished structures, and wood. Terrazzo, which became popular in the area in the 1940s for flooring, is utilised extensively for street furniture, and contains flecks of oyster shell. Spherical white streetlamps atop terrazzo posts bring further pearl-related symbolism and assist way-finding.

The new buildings respect the historic environment's scale and street lines while making bold contemporary architectural statements. The Pearling Path Visitor and Experience Centre and the House of Architectural Heritage adopt a Brutalist aesthetic, the former's forms echoing the wind towers and coral blocks of traditional neighbouring structures; the Archaeologies of Green Pavilion features a series of interlinking gardens containing indigenous plants; and the Dar Al Jinaa Centre for Traditional Music is inventively cloaked in chain mail, shielding against solar glare while allowing a constant breeze. Music events here and elsewhere



in the programme include performances of pearl-fishers' songs.

Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, all new planning applications are reviewed by the project team to ensure further developments are in keeping with the scheme's overarching objectives.

Jury citation

The Revitalisation of Muharraq responds creatively to the challenges of neglected urban cultural heritage and social life. Drawing on Bahrain's heritage of a pearl economy, it has reawakened a local sense of pride while infusing new cultural life in a deteriorated urban area

It is important to note that the revitalisation is based on an audacious array of public and private interventions using a contemporary and dynamic – yet discrete – architectural language.

The restoration of existing buildings and the introduction of well-designed contemporary ones provide a vessel for curated cultural activities. Using an elegant way-finding lighting network, the “Pearl Route” guides visitors through the area's heritage in a socially sensitive manner.

The excellent, yet affordable, upgrading of public spaces provides the local community with opportunities for social interaction. The project successfully establishes an open platform where citizens can actively engage. Professionals of different backgrounds can interact and collaborate. Public-private partnerships and local businesses can thrive.

The Programme thereby achieves an urban revitalisation process that strikes a balance between improving the residents' quality of life and enhancing visitor experience.

These integrated, incremental, evolving, open-ended and process-based interventions – extending over almost two decades – demonstrate the perseverance and long-term vision of the project's instigators. They are a reminder that institutionalisation, the building of local capacities, and *seeking the best possible rather than the perfect* – are all keys to achieving sustainable impact.

Project data

Patron

Sheikha Mai Bint Mohammed Al Khalifa, Manama, Bahrain



Shaikh Ebrahim Centre for Culture and Research

Nuzul Guest House, Kurar House for Traditional Embroidery:

Architects: Gulf House Engineering, Manama, Bahrain

Interior: Design Habib Associates, Manama, Bahrain

Contractor: Ewan Al Bahrain, Manama, Bahrain

Memory of the House:

Architect: Habib Associates, Manama, Bahrain

Contractor: Ewan Al Bahrain, Manama, Bahrain

Search Library:

Architects: Atelier Bow-Wow, Tokyo, Japan

Contractor: General Contracting & Trading, Manama, Bahrain

House for Architectural Heritage:

Architects: Noura Al Sayeh, Manama, Bahrain

Leopold Banchini Architects, Geneva, Switzerland

Contractor: Ewan Al Bahrain, Manama, Bahrain

Pearling Path, Testimony of an Island Economy

Noura Al Sayeh, *project director*

Ghassan Chemali, *head of urban conservation*

Alaa Al Habashi, *head of urban conservation strategies*

Britta Rudloff, *coordinator of the Nomination Dossier to the UNESCO World Heritage List*

Shatha Abu El Fath, Ahmad Abd El Nabi, Mario Affaki, Fatema Al Hayki, Ahmad Al Jishi, Amal Al Saffar,

Batool Al Shaikh, Lulwa Al Malood, Mustafa Al Zurki, Ronan Dayot, Wissam Fadlalah, Lucia Gomez, Yehya

Hassan, Ali Marzooq, Marwa Nabeel, Tamer Nassar, Faisal Soudaga, Shadi Taha

Pearling Path Visitor Centre:

Architects: Valerio Olgiati, Flims, Switzerland

Emaar Engineering, Gudaibiya, Bahrain

Contractor: AlMoayyed Contracting Group, Al Musalla, Bahrain

**Pearling Path Squares:**

Architects: Bureau Bas Smets, Brussels, Belgium

OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, Brussels, Belgium

Gulf House Engineering, Manama, Bahrain

Contractor: Aradous Contracting, Al Hidd, Bahrain

Archaeologies of Green Pavilion:

Architect: Studio Anne Holtrop, Muharraq, Bahrain

Landscape: Anouk Vogel Landscape Architecture, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Structural Engineering: Mario Monotti, Locarno, Switzerland

Gilbert Van der Lee, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Contractors: Restaura Srl, Vimercate, Italy

General Contracting & Trading, Manama, Bahrain

Dar Jinaa:

Architects: OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, Brussels, Belgium

Emaar Engineering, Gudaibiya, Bahrain

Contractor: AlMoayyed Contracting Group, Al Musalla, Bahrain

Bu Maher Fort Visitor Centre:

Architects: PAD architects, Manama, Bahrain

Contractor: General Contracting & Trading, Manama, Bahrain

Suq Al Qaysariyyah Rehabilitation and Conservation, Rehabilitation of Siyadi and Murad Clusters, Shaikh**Isa Bin Ali House:**

Architects: Studio Anne Holtrop, Muharraq, Bahrain

Structural Engineering: Mario Monotti, Locarno, Switzerland

Conservation: Gaetano Arricobene, Milan, Italy

Landscape: Madison Cox Landscape Architects, New York, USA

Contractor: AlMoayyed Contracting Group, Al Musalla, Bahrain

Muharraq Conservation Plan:

Jean-Bernard Cremnitzer, Paris, France



Muharraq Mobility Study:

Systematica, Milan, Italy

Project Data

Site area: 330,000 m²

Cost: 110,000,000 USD

Commission: 2010

Design: 2010–2018

Construction: 2002 – ongoing

Occupancy: ongoing

Sheikha Mai Bint Mohammed Al Khalifa

President of the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities, Sheikha Mai Bint Mohammed Al Khalifa previously served as Minister of Culture from 2010 to 2014, Minister of Culture and Information from 2008 to 2010 and Assistant Undersecretary for Culture and National Heritage at the Ministry of Information. MA in Political History from Sheffield University, UK, she was listed as one of the 50 most influential women in the Arab world by *Forbes* magazine in 2008. She was awarded the Watch Award by the World Monument Fund in 2015 – the first Arab personality to receive the award – in recognition of the singular role she has played in the preservation and protection of culture and heritage in Bahrain. In 2017 she was made the Special Ambassador of the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

Sheikha Mai has published a number of books and articles including *Charles Belgrave: Biography and Diary* (The Arab Publication Establishment, 2000), *100 Years of Education in Bahrain: The Early Years of Establishment* (The Arab Publication Establishment, 1999), *Mohammed Bin Khalifa 1813–1890: The Legend and the Parallel History* (Shaikh Ebrahim Center for Culture & Research, 2014) and *The Qarmations: From Concept to State* (Shaikh Ebrahim Center for Culture & Research, 2019), among others.

Sheikha Mai is the founder of the Shaikh Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Center for Culture and Research and President of its Board of Directors. An NGO that was established in Muharraq in 2002, the Center has since hosted over 500 speakers, philosophers, poets and thinkers, who have presented their thoughts in the its weekly lecture programme. It has conserved and rehabilitated over 25 traditional Bahraini houses and spearheaded the urban regeneration of the historic city of Muharraq.

Under the leadership of Sheikha Mai, the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities has significantly expanded the number of cultural institutions and programming in Bahrain, including the establishment of the Bahrain National Theatre, the Khalefeyah Library, the Dar Al Muharraq and Dar Al Riffa for traditional music, the Qal'at Al Bahrain site museum and the Al Khamees Mosque visitor centre, as well as the



creation of a number of cultural festivals and the inscription of three sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List. She was the commissioner of Reclaim, Bahrain's contribution to the 2010 Venice Biennale, which was awarded the Golden Lion for best national participation in that year, as well as the commissioner of the Bahrain Pavilion at Expo 2015 in Milan, which was awarded the silver medal for Best Architecture and Landscape.