

Between Overcrowding and Decay: Processes and Effects of Village Revitalization in Rural Oman

A Reflection on the first Workshop of the Inclusive Cities Project in November 2025

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In Oman, efforts to preserve and revitalize historic urban fabric have gained increasing momentum in recent years. As part of a nationwide program, these initiatives form part of a broader strategy to sustainably transform and diversify the country's economy. The first workshop of the Inclusive Cities Project explored and discussed different approaches to preserve and revitalize historic villages. This text reflects on the sites visited during the workshop and on how they informed our approach to conceptualizing a participatory strategy for the preservation and revitalization processes.

Context and Aims

In November 2025, we, a delegation of eight students of the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar made our way to Muscat to participate in the first workshop of the “Inclusive Cities” project. This project, as part of the DAAD program “Academic dialogue with the Islamic World” aims for collaboration on community-based participation and sustainable urban development, in this case together with the Scientific College of Design in Muscat, Oman, and the Notre Dame University in Beirut, Lebanon. After getting to know our colleagues from the partner institutions, we turned towards the objective of the week: developing approaches for participatory planning in the context of preserving urban heritage.

The broader context for that shows in the Oman Vision 2040, a strategy with the main goal being a broad diversification in economic, cultural and social terms (Government of Oman 2020). Beyond the oil and gas sector, preserving heritage and promoting tourism are playing important roles. Along that vision, the Oman National Spatial Strategy (ONSS) translates and explains this vision at the spatial level (Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning 2023, pp. 43-44).

As a student in the “European Urban Studies” program, which focuses on urban social science research, I was especially interested in the societal implications of these transformation processes. By assessing them from a tourist’s perspective – since I was one myself – and discussing with our Omani colleagues throughout the trip, we tried to grasp the bigger picture of these developments. I now aim to recollect the impressions, the exchange and thoughts, which emerged and surrounded us during that time, especially within the excursion days that brought us to different historic sites, each of which showed its own characteristics.

Between Overcrowding and Decay



During the first two days, we enjoyed several bus field trips through the northeastern interior land of Oman, specifically the governorate Ad Dakhiliyah and within that, the Wilayat al Hamra. First off, we visited the village of **Birkat al Mouz**. The historic part of the village lies next to the “new” one and is in a visible decayed state. Coming from an environment, where the access to urban heritage is usually regulated and restricted, I found the situation somewhat surprising. Visitors could freely roam the built environment, climbing over walls and stepping on fragile elements, which we felt crumbling beneath our feet as we did the same.

Image 1: Members of our workshop among other tourists in the ruins of Birkat al Mouz. Credits: Leon Wiesemann.

What remained clearly visible and tangible however, was the original layout of the village, with its houses merging into a single, interconnected structure. Even in its deteriorated state, we could still sense how effectively these traditional buildings had been adapted to sustain life in the hot and arid climate, naturally keeping their interiors (or what now remained of them) noticeably cooler. Traditional Omani houses were constructed from locally available materials like sun-dried mud bricks, clay and date palm fronds, which need regular maintenance to protect them from erosion.



Image 2: Visible village layout, construction style & materials, Birkat al Mouz. Credits: Gwendolin Nietzsche.

With the technological advancements, the need for these dedicated structures vanished and as in most other parts of the world, housing developments rapidly got more spacious and private (Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning 2023, pp. 43-44). As the new houses stand right next to the old structures, the passage of time has become very apparent.

The next day, we visited the historic part of the village of **Al-Hamra**, which presented itself a bit differently to us. The former market place being in the center had still been in regular use until a few years ago, as a local representative told us.



Image 3: Decaying market stall, still in use recently, Al-Hamra. Credits: Gwendolin Nietzsche.



Decay was visible here as well, however not as advanced as in Birkat al Mouz. Combined with “contemporary” elements showing its rather recent usage, this made walking through the village and the souk an eerie experience. The built environment was still mostly intact but was empty and lacking what it was built for, human interaction. However, we stumbled upon some signs of revitalization of that space as we saw a “Heritage Inn” having opened.

Image 4: Newly opened “Heritage Inn” – Hotel in Al-Hamra. Credits: Gwendolin Nietzsche.

The further exploration of this case was our task for the last two days. We considered different ideas for preserving that built environment and revitalizing the urban fabric, possibly making it accessible for visitors and a local source of income. A participatory approach was the goal, leaving the decision-making authority at the local level, within the ones who inhabit the village. Before sitting together, discussing and contemplating that, we visited our last stop of the excursion, the village of **Misfat Al Abriyyin**. Being abandoned for some years, now it presents itself as revitalized and as an accessible tourist destination. Thus, we were confronted by a construction site dedicated to visitors’ new parking lots. As the existing ones were full, drivers were struggling to find their way, maneuvering in and out of the scarce parking space.



Image 5: Construction of new parking lots, Misfat Al Abriyyin. Credits: Leon Wiesemann.

Since 2015, Misfat Al Abriyyin has undergone efforts of preservation, restoration and revitalization. The village, laying very picturesquely on a hillside, was bustling with local vendors selling their products, a wide variety of coffee and souvenir-shops and lots of visitors roaming in between. While the hotel industry continues to expand locally, walking through that village felt rather cramped. What really stuck with me were signs aiming to prevent visitors from intruding on locals' (private) spaces, like praying areas, a pool and private homes.



Image 6: Swimming pool only for the local population, Misfat Al Abriyyin. Credits: Leon Wiesemann.



Image 7: Sign to keep tourists out, for keeping local's living space private, Misfat Al Abriyyin. Credits: Leon Wiesemann.

Final Reflection

All those impressions gave us a lot to talk about during the group work. From our Omani colleagues, we got to learn a lot about local circumstances, family life, traditions and all the immaterial heritage which is part and interconnected with the built environment thus also being considered when thinking about approaches to preserve and restore.

Questions of who decides on what to preserve and what is worth preserving kept us discussing. What does it actually do with the surroundings, with the infrastructure, who is extracting value out of heritage and history?

Our European experience with preserving heritage along economically revitalizing historic urban contexts led us to discuss the notion of “overtourism”, which describes a state where the urban fabric is so far commodified and exploited that the local population cannot sustain the pressures of these processes and gets displaced. Even my hometown of Bamberg, Germany, bears the World-Heritage status, “containing all elements necessary for the Outstanding Universal Value” (UNESCO n.d.). Drawing that many tourists, of course, benefits the local economy, while at the same time exerting pressure on the space and the local population in their daily lives – a discussion which has taken place not only since receiving that World-Heritage status in 1993.

This is a discussion that takes place in most regions where cultural or natural heritage is being preserved for such reasons, but especially in Oman, where preservation efforts for the built environment are a central part of the country's economic and spatial strategy, as outlined in the *Oman Vision 2040* and the corresponding *ONSS*.

Therefore, as described above, we commenced our groupwork with the goal to conceptualize a participatory approach including and emphasizing the local population's voices in those revitalization processes. Trying to include our very diverse perspectives, experiences and opinions was not an easy task but definitely resulted in a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of the topic in that local context.

From all the experience, impressions and discussions taken place during that first workshop, what is left to say is that I remain very eager to keep track of the developments, not only with preserving/restoring/revitalizing historic villages, but also with the project itself in its current and future developments.

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