This is a summary report of the work undertaken by the students on the MA International Architectural Regeneration and Development programme of Oxford Brookes University (UK) in the 2008-09 academic year. The project was undertaken in collaboration with Sharjah American University (UAE) and Parsons The New School of Design (USA). The group of 15 students and two members of staff visited Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah in January 2009.

What we offer is a series of illustrated ideas for the regeneration of the historic quarters of Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah developed by the students working initially in groups and then individually. The proposals must be accepted as student work, but we hope they will stimulate discussion and future ideas and projects for the area and indeed other places in the region. In effect it is a small contribution towards the preservation and development of the region’s unique architectural heritage and character for the benefit of present and future generations.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank our partners at Sharjah American University for welcoming the group to the UAE and their continuous cooperation throughout the project. The virtual studio and collaboration would not have been possible without the support of Bon Education.

Dr Aylin Orbaşlı, course tutor and fieldwork leader
UAE Urban Identities is an experimental studio and research initiative between students, professors and consultants from the American University of Sharjah (UAE), Oxford Brookes University (UK), Parsons The New School for Design (USA), KAIST University (South Korea) and Bon Education. The collaboration focuses on key urban heritage areas within the United Arab Emirates allowing participants to research, analyze, plan, design and present innovative architectural and technological solutions that contextualize and develop public awareness and appreciation of historical urban sites in Dubai, Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah.

The goals of the project are:

- To provide participants and the greater public with a comprehensive understanding of the historical, cultural, socio-economic, political and theoretical forces that shaped the development and evolution of major UAE heritage areas.
- To reposition UAE heritage sites as meaningful and distinct national treasures that warrant the attention of local developers, tourism companies, businesses and the public.
- To empower participants and the public to engage in efforts that preserve and sustain UAE heritage sites, while remaining mindful of the rapidly changing contemporary urban landscape that has left these valuable places largely marginalized.
The Arabian Gulf coast has been the home of numerous settlements for centuries. Many of the current settlement centres flourished in the late nineteenth century, fuelled by growing trade interest in the region and pearl diving. Trade brought the inland desert peoples in contact with the coastal populations, while traders from Persia and India started to settle in what were then known as the Trucial States.

The convergence of several cultures contributed to a distinct architectural style in the region. Forts and fortifications followed inland Najdi examples and are recognisable for their distinct crenellations. Merchants houses were clustered into small neighbourhood groups, where the more prominent coral stone houses with their large courtyards were surrounded by simpler barasti (palm frond) dwellings. Narrow connecting alleyways characterised the urban morphology and a large part of settlements were made up of residential buildings with only a relatively small part of the urban fabric used for commerce.

As Persian traders started to settle permanently in the area in the early part of the twentieth century they enriched local architectural practices with new features such as wind towers that have today become a symbol of the UAE’s urban heritage.

Common characteristics of the coastal architectural forms are the internal shaded courtyards, both guarding a family’s privacy as well as contributing a cooling effect. Simple air vents integrated into the walls and the wind towers capturing the sea breezes and hung with damp fabric in the hot summer months, also assisted in keeping interiors cool in the hot and humid climate. The buildings would invariably be constructed of coral stone and rendered with a plaster known as sarooj. Other building materials included shellstones or mud bricks, and palm fronds which were commonly used for the simpler houses and structures.

The discovery of oil in the early 1960s played a significant role in the rapid and unprecedented level of change and urban growth in the region, most notably in centres like Dubai and Sharjah.

Within a short period of time, the historic quarters were all but abandoned and many of the houses demolished to make way for new developments and road networks. Some, such as those in Ras Al Khaimah, survive but are in a very poor state of repair. Recent initiatives in Dubai and Sharjah have seen small clusters of historic buildings being repaired and rebuilt. Hardly any members of the local community live in traditional buildings anymore and in areas where buildings have been restored they invariably have tourism related functions.

This study explored the ways in which the historic fabric of cities like Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah can maintain a sociocultural relevance in the present day and contribute to the distinct identity of each city.
With a population of 800,000 Sharjah is the third largest Emirate of the UAE. Today it is best known for its impressive array of cultural projects, including 17 museums, some of which are in close proximity to the historic centre.

Its sheltered creek made Sharjah a desirable location for a trading port and the town developed in the early part of the 19th century when the population was around 3,000. With an economy based on fishing, pearl diving and trade the town soon became home to traders from around the Gulf region.

The historic centre, restored and largely rebuilt in the 1990s is characterised by single storey courtyard houses separated by narrow passageways.
Sharjah: Site Analysis

Tamsin Walmsley
Sharjah: Issues

1. The wall

The wall is oppressive, impenetrable and segregates the heritage area from the rest of the city.

2. A disconnected area

The souk, waterfront and the fort are all separated. Tourism occurs in pockets, with daily life continuing independently from tourism trade.

3. Traffic congestion, fuelled by the road network

Competition occurs on both sides of the Fort.

4. Undesirable public open space

No places to sit and rest in the shade.

5. Undeclared vacant land

Undeclared vacant areas of land.

Tamsin Walmsley, Caroline Ford & Adeola Bakare
A regeneration strategy for Sharjah

Tamsin Walmsley, Caroline Ford & Adeola Bakare
Following the regeneration strategy the students identified a number of key projects that would contribute to the regeneration of the historic quarter. Each of the projects contributes to the larger whole. Much of the exploration has been on infill developments and interventions that will increase the activity and attractiveness of the area to a wider user group. The proposals also specifically consider the design language for the interventions in the context of the historic character of the area.

Tamsin Walmsley carefully inserts new courtyard housing following the traditional morphology but with contemporary design layouts and specifications. Sawsan Al Nahhas also experiments with the courtyard form, in this case for a hotel, a theme also picked up by Peter Preston. The hotel connects to the outside through the ‘wall’ while at the same time providing guests with their own secluded courtyard rooms at the heart of the heritage area.

Adeola Bakare set out to re-connect the souq Al Arsah while Caroline Ford working in the opposite direction proposes a new green axis and urban park with designs inspired by the patterns of the coral stone.

Taking a more pragmatic approach with the coral Zachary Jones investigates the potential for training craftsmen in the conservation of coral and other traditional building techniques.
“The courtyard not only provided private outdoor space for the family but also assisted with cooling in the hot summer months”
New build high spec housing units inserted into the heritage quarter - Tamsin Walmsley
“Once the necessary time and instruction has been provided for students to have mastered the skills needed, they will be able to apply into the UAE conservation society, the AHCS. This body will be responsible for providing the necessary skilled craftsman to work on government approved conservation initiatives but also responsible for monitoring the conservation practices and standards of private sector conservation projects.”

“Through structured apprenticeship, the training program will focus on the preservation, maintenance and conservation of heritage buildings in the heritage area through skills training and apprenticeship style instruction. Training would be overseen by skilled craftsmen, ideally with some vocational training skills, instructing successful candidates in work practically on site using learned classroom and shop skills and knowledge to improve, conserve, rebuild and maintain existing heritage buildings.”
Ras Al Khaimah is the northern most Emirate of the UAE located between the Arabian Gulf and the Hajjar Mountains and bordering the Sultanate of Oman. The name Ras Al Khaimah means the tip of a tent. The Emirate has a 5000 year history of settlement and the historic quarter seen today was a bustling centre of activity for over a hundred years up until the 1960s.

Relocation of the new town to the other side of the creek has both isolated and in effect ‘saved’ the historic area from demolition. The area of largely coral and shell stone single storey buildings is currently home to a considerable immigrant population who rent the properties from the original owners. Approximately 50 of the coral and shell stone buildings are under preservation orders.
Ras Al Khaimah: Site Analysis

KEY:
- Site Boundary
- Existing Housing
- Archaeologically Protected Buildings
- Mosques
- Greenery

SCALE: 1:2000

01 EXISTING HOUSING

Kiran Sharma & Stefano Ambrosoli
With years of abandonment and lack of maintenance the building fabric is in very poor condition.

The largely immigrant tenant population are too poor to invest in building maintenance.

The area lacks basic infrastructure and services which is negatively impacting on environmental quality.

Language and status are a barrier for the inhabitants to access basic services.
“Traditional tribal social patterns act as the model for environmental improvement through strengthening of relationships with the old town’s multi-national population”

“The side effects of wider development efforts will benefit the project priorities of social inclusion, heritage conservation and environmental improvement”

Julia Wedel, Ursula Ludoweig, Patricia Coyle & Miki Yashihara
Within the framework of the regeneration strategy the students identified a number of key projects or prototype projects that would contribute to the regeneration of the historic area by ensuring the architectural heritage was preserved, the community spirit of the ‘neighbourhood’ was maintained and living standards of the inhabitants improved.

Kiran Sharma and Stefano Ambrosoli both offer proposals for low cost housing developments that follow the traditional forms and use locally available materials. Kiran’s proposals explore ways in which existing historic buildings can be sensitively mended.

Glenn Horsfield proposes a much needed healthcare facility that is responsive to the surrounding traditional buildings, local climatic factors and cultural sensitivities. Ursula Ludoweig and Miki Yoshihara have investigated the opportunities responsible tourism might offer to the area. Ursula explored the possibilities of rejuvenating a square as a gateway to the area, while Miki has investigated opportunities to develop a traditional hotel on the tip of the peninsula.

Finally, Patricia Coyle sets out strategy to address the waste disposal problems in the area, considering options for recycling and composting. Julia Wedel concludes the overall regeneration strategy by developing proposals that will enable the project to be funded and accepted by the various stakeholders.
New build housing units integrated with the historic fabric - Stefano Ambrosli
Mending the historic fabric and adapting buildings for contemporary use - Kiran Sharma
Revitalising the square

Ursula Ludoweig
The old town hotel project

Miki Yoshihara
“This strategy seeks to demonstrate waste disposal solutions and methods that are conducive to the site that will deliver potential benefits both to the residents and the site of Ras Al Khaimah Old Town. In particular, the case is made for composting in alleviating waste reduction whilst delivering economic benefits and considering the re-use of materials in ways that can help generate income and provide environmental awareness in an area where it is lacking.”
“The aim is to establish a partnership system that will allow owners and tenants to contribute to the conservation and care of the building stock with mutual benefits, aided by the government offices promoting and supporting heritage conservation.”
TENANT CONSULTATION
CONSULTATION LEVELS

RESIDENT PRIORITIES
• Dwelling quality?
• Neighbourhood character?
• Environmental issues?
• Others?

CONSULTATION TOOLKIT
International Architectural Regeneration & Development at Oxford Brookes University

This unique international and multi-disciplinary programme has been established in the belief that the regeneration and development of the historic built environment is an essential component of sustainable development. The course draws on two established areas of expertise at Oxford Brookes University, combining an interest in international vernacular architecture studies with that in architecture in regeneration. Focusing on both rural vernacular traditions and historic urban centres, it promotes the re-use and integration of existing buildings, technologies, skills and knowledge in contemporary design and development, taking into account the wider political, cultural, economic and environmental context.

The aim of the programme is to provide students with the knowledge, skills and tools that will enable them to recognise the potential of and contribute creatively to the reuse, regeneration and development of the inherited built environment in countries around the world.

The programme aims to develop a critical understanding of the complex and dynamic relationship between the built environment and its economic, social and cultural values. It promotes an interdisciplinary approach that combines critical thinking and analysis with creative design, using a teaching and learning programme grounded in theory, field research, master classes, workshops and design studios.

The international field work is an integral part of the International Architectural Regeneration and Development programme. The objective of these visits is to experience first hand reuse, regeneration and renewal projects to observe different levels of intervention and associated outcomes in different cultural contexts. The field study develops and enhances the content and learning outcomes of the first semester taught modules. The fieldwork is undertaken in collaboration with local partners and the objective is not only for students to benefit from a real or live project situation but also to provide useful feedback to the process.

On return to the UK students build on the study visit findings and working in groups develop area based regeneration proposals and then work individually to develop building reuse projects or propose new buildings and/or urban realm improvements in accordance with the regeneration objectives set out in the group work.

Programme leader: Dr Marcel Vellinga

Course tutors: Dr Aylin Orbasli, Jonathan Bassindale, Prof. Paul Oliver, Prof. Rod Burgess

More information on the programme and Oxford Brookes University can be found at: http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/be/architecture/postgraduate/iard/index.html