

**CONSERVATION OF TANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN OMAN: CASE STUDY,  
MATRAH TRADITIONAL MARKET**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Traditional markets in the Arabian Peninsula constitute the most important focal points in or are an essential factor in trade, entertainment, and also an essential factor in community interaction. There are many traditional markets in the Sultanate of Oman, the most prominent of which are: Muttrah Souq and Al Haffa Souq. In this paper, we will study Muttrah Souq - Muscat Governorate - and we will evaluate in all details the three chosen spaces, the markets within the Souq, by studying several aspects, including: spatial, social and cultural aspects, and we will also carry out monitoring and behavioral mapping procedures. Through this paper, we will reach results, the most important of which is understanding the spaces in Muttrah Souq and the resulting activities. . And also important results for security and safety. Finally, the missing factors in the market and how to attract more users to visit the market.

**Keywords:**

Souq, Mrket; Aspect, Cultural Heritage, Factors

**INTRODUCTION**

Due to the importance of tangible heritage in the Arab countries, especially Oman, which is characterized by a distinctive and unique traditional character, it issued a modern system and detailed it in order to protect the cultural heritage in the Sultanate. It is considered one of the latest legislation in the Arab world, as it provides broad protection for the heritage and culture that is considered the country's wealth. The year 1994 was declared the year of national heritage in the Sultanate of Oman. Traditional markets are important centers in the trade process and also include entertainment factors and social interaction in the region. This interaction has existed in commercial market areas since ancient times, such as the times of the Jordan Valley - Greece - and the Arabian Peninsula was also characterized by traditional markets and had an intermediary character in antiquity.



*Figur1: view of Muttrah district; showing also Souq Muttrah main spine(2023)*

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Matrah markets contain shops, mosques, and public toilets. They are also multi-use places and sometimes contain religious schools. It is possible to classify markets into seasonal markets and permanent markets. There are many seasonal markets that have declined and ended, and some of them may continue and turn into a permanent market. In this paper, we will study Muttrah Souq, which is considered one of the permanent markets. Muttrah Souq is strategically located in the city center. It has an area of 1,000 square meters, and the Souq extends to a depth of 51,200 square meters (measured by Google Earth in 2013). From the north of the market, there is the sea road and the Sea of Oman, and from the south, there are two gates facing the street to Muttrah Market. The market is also surrounded by towering mountains reaching a maximum height of 200 meters above sea level. When it rains, the market corridors fill with water, because the sea faces the market from the north, so the markets must be raised by a sufficient amount of 4-5 metres. The number of expatriates in Muttrah increased by an estimated rate of 5.47% in 2003 to 102,637 in 2010. At the same time, the number of Omanis in the market decreased by 19% according to the 2010 Oman statistics. Its main entrance was referred to as "Muttrah Darwazat." The characteristics of the market started to take shape when "Sur Al-Lawatiya" was constructed, and a main market known as "Souq Al-Dalam" developed. Prior to being transformed into warehouses, individual rooms of residential homes inside "Sur Al-Lawatiya" served as the original storage space. The rooms were gradually given special doors to become shops that looked out onto the exterior paths. These external paths are corridors that were constructed by skilled Omani workers as well as laborers from India and other Asian nations, which resulted in the darkness of these corridors.

Muttrah went through different stages throughout history, in terms of formation and growth, as it was influenced by various tribes and was also influenced by foreign powers: the Orangemen in the sixteenth century, the British in the 19th and 20th centuries. Until 1970, when Sultan Qaboos bin Said assumed the reins of power in Ana, where he witnessed... Muttrah Souq has a remarkable development, as well as the development in the entire country. During the nineties, the market faced many challenges, especially those related to security and safety, and it also suffered from exposed electrical cables and flammable materials. The market was also suffering from a lack of water and the absence of water taps. The market was also suffering from theft and looting during that period, and there were solutions, but implementation came late because the market needed a lot of money and it was not available.

The availability of spaces in the market will be an attractive factor and facilitate access to the area. Space is also an important factor in maintaining a city that is easy to live in and is an urban area. Despite these factors, this point is sometimes ignored. Muttrah Souq is considered one of the most attractive places for tourists in the Sultanate, which must be given great attention, focusing on spaces and exploiting them in an orderly manner so that it becomes a more urban area. In this paper specifically, research will talk about the three gates of Muttrah Souq.

### METHODOLOGY

The methodology includes a comprehensive assessment, procedures, and mapping of the three entrances to Muttrah Souq. We explain it in points and Table 1.

The criteria for choosing the spaces and facades of the Muttrah Souq gates include several aspects, including:



- The quality and diversity of the available spaces, where space 1 is open and space 2 is covered.
- The geographical location of the gate [north end - to the south center - south end of the market].
- Changes and developments vary with different areas, and these changes lead to differences such as: social, spatial, and economic.

**1. To what degree is the architectural character of the market Entrances linked to Oman culture?**

**2. Do the activities of this market entrances represent the cultural identity of Oman?**



*Figure2: Aerial photos of the site of the gates in Souq Muttrah (Google Earth,2023)*

Description of Selected Space	Spatial Qualities
<p><b>North Main Entrance Facing the Waterfront— Comish</b></p> <p>The main north entrance to Souq Muttrah is located in this area. With taxi parking spaces and a single tourist bus stop, it is a popular destination for drop-offs for many tourists. Because of its orientation and the presence of a unique structure constructed by the municipality during the 2004–2005 development process, it is typically shaded.</p>	
<p><b>First Gathering Node from the North</b></p> <p>When approaching from the north main entrance, the area is the first significant enclosed gathering node. It is the biggest node as well. A circular roof made of glass reinforced plastic (GRP) with a unique design covers the area. A tiny amount of daylight comes in through the roof. As a result, artificial light from the nearby stores contributes significantly to the area's lighting.</p>	

<p>Space 3: South-West Back Entrance (Figure 4)</p> <p>The area is the south drop-off area and the main back entrance. There is a police station nearby, and it has the benefit of a parking lot. Mutrah Gate is a significant landmark located there. Fixed seating throughout the area encourages social interaction. Despite being near the street, it is still safe for pedestrians to cross and get to their destinations because cars drive slowly through the area.</p>	
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*Table1 : Description with pictures of Muttrah Souq gate(2022).*

Conservation of Tangible Cultural Heritage in Indonesia: A Review Current National Criteria for Assessing Heritage Value:

Keywords: Tangible cultural heritage; cultural heritage value; assessment criteria; community involvement National criteria for assessing Indonesian cultural heritage properties are mentioned in Article five under the Law 11/2010 on Cultural Property. The results of the study highlighted the crucial need of involving community in reviewing current national criteria, to improve assessment criteria for cultural heritage values. 2015(Faizah Ahmadb)

Valuing Built Cultural Heritage in a Malaysian Urban Context: Built cultural heritage is a dominant urban component. Experts assess the value of built cultural heritage based on criteria set by a particular regulating organisation. This paper establishes the significance and conservation worthiness of a built environment that considers sustainable practices and in turn, provide guiding principles for policies in heritage conservation.(Norhati Ibrahim 2014)

Maimoon Palace Heritage District in Medan, Indonesia: What we preserve and why we preserve?

Preservation includes both tangible and intangible elements. Maimoon Palace Heritage District is a tourism area known as Medan city landmark whose landscape was formed during Dutch Indies period. By combining qualitative and quantitative method, this study aims to determine the preservation aspects based on place identity.(Nurlisa Ginting”, N. Vinky Rahman2015)

Public Perception on the Cultural Significance of Heritage Buildings in Kuala Lumpur:

Every heritage building has its values or cultural heritage significance, and its values are being perceived differently by various stakeholders. The results showed that the public and the experts' view on cultural significance are similar, and this undoubtedly contributes to sustainable practice for heritage conservation. Today, the task of assessing the heritage significance does not depend solely on the experts but also to the public as well.

(Norhati Ibrahim 2014)

Community perception of heritage, values regarding a global, monument in Ghana: implications for sustainable heritage management

Purpose – Scholarly discourses regarding heritage values for sustainable heritage management abound in heritage literature but appear elitist as they tend to exclude the perspectives of the people at the lower echelons of society. It



was guided by Costin's heritage values, community attachment theory and values-based approach to heritage management. The study explored the values ascribed to a global heritage monument by the people living around a global heritage site in Ghana and the implications of their perceptual values for sustainable heritage management.(Justice Mensah 2021)

In Cultural Capital of Sea Salt Farming in Ban Laem District of Phetchaburi Province as per the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS),The researcher found that the primary goal of enhancing and preserving agricultural heritage is for food security Also in another study that was about Heritage Site: The Case of Kulangsu (China), Researchers talked about China's difference from the Western world , it significantly evokes wide discussions at the regional level and emphasises the sustainable development of the local community by concerning the priority of improving living conditions and sharing benefits from urban heritage conservation.

In the research that was entitled . Community perception of heritage values regarding a global monument in Ghana: implications for sustainable heritage management.

Researchers talked about that s “our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations.” The sustainable development goals (SDGs) recognise the relevance of heritage for sustainable development (SD). Hence, the goals have some targets embedded within them that focus on issues bordering on heritage management. Goal 11 of the SDGs aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Target 11.4 of this goal relates to strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the value of world heritage. In heritage conservation management, a value is a set of positive characteristics or qualities that society attributes to the heritage object or site (Mason, 2002). Heritage values influence interests, attitudes, preferences, sentiments and dispositions, which are expressed in the identity and attachment to the heritage, thereby, showing its importance and the need for its proper management.

In a similar study, it was entitled Renewable Energies and Architectural Heritage: Advanced Solutions and Future Perspectives ,The researcher talked about . The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Convention defines “cultural heritage” as any “monument” (e.g., paintings, sculptures, architecture, inscriptions, cave dwellings), “group of buildings” (e.g., buildings with similar architectural value thanks to the presence of a continuous historical process of modification and transformation), and “site” (e.g., historic town, archeological site)“( . . . ) with an outstanding universal value that express history, art, or science of a specific culture”. In this study. Climate Change and UNESCO World Heritage-Listed Cultural Properties: A Systematic Review, 2008–2021

**The researcher wrote:** , torrential rains feeding into the Indus River caused a serious flooding event that had devastating impacts throughout much of Pakistan. More than 1300 people were killed and millions lost their houses, with news reports showing people struggling through waist-deep water to reach dry land.

### Case Study



The Matrah Traditional Market, nestled within the vibrant fabric of Omani culture, is a historical emblem of trade, craftsmanship, and community engagement. Its alleys adorned with vibrant textiles, aromatic spices, and the bustling ambiance resonates with centuries of cultural significance.

#### Assessment Criteria Application:

Applying the criteria delineated in the methodology section, an exhaustive assessment of the Muttrah gates was undertaken. Criteria including spatial diversity, architectural uniqueness, geographical positioning, and socio-economic influence were meticulously analysed. This comprehensive assessment revealed the nuanced layers that contribute to the market's cultural heritage value.

#### Mapping and Documentation:

Visual documentation played a pivotal role in capturing the essence of the market. Maps delineating the three distinct entrances, coupled with photographs showcasing the varying spaces and facades, provided a tangible representation of the market's multifaceted nature. These visual aids served as invaluable resources for understanding the market's intricate dynamics.

#### Community Engagement:

Engaging with the local community was instrumental in uncovering the intangible aspects of the market's heritage. Conversations with seasoned merchants, artisans, and residents illuminated the market's historical narratives, underscoring its centrality in the community's collective memory. Their impassioned accounts further emphasized the market's significance beyond its physical structures.

#### Challenges and Opportunities:

While the market stands as a cultural beacon, it faces challenges. Urban developments, changing consumer behaviors, and the need for sustainable conservation practices pose significant hurdles. However, within these challenges lie

opportunities for innovation. The integration of modern preservation techniques while respecting traditional authenticity presents a promising path forward.

### **Recommendations Implementation:**

Building upon the insights garnered from this study, implementing community-driven initiatives emerges as a pivotal step. Empowering locals as stewards of their heritage, coupled with adapting assessment criteria to suit the market's unique context, forms a solid foundation for sustainable conservation efforts.

The recorded data and texts were analyzed to identify the main problems related to the Muttrah Souq gates, such as spaces, and gate restoration. This data was collected and compared with research and reports written to solve the problems of the Muttrah Souq gates. We supported the research with some studies that include proposals to reshape the market and reconsider the locations and appearance of the gates. The process aims to highlight the strengths and weaknesses associated with market portals. Which contributes fully to the comprehensive analysis of data. The data or results of the questionnaire indicated that theft and the form of theft gates, and that the gates have a connection with the Omani culture and have a connection with the Omani entity.

**External gates are in the current state:** The Muttrah Souq Gate comprises several key components that contribute to its unique and culturally rich appearance:

**Woodwork:** The gate is primarily crafted from wood, showcasing the skilled artistry of Omani craftsmen. The wood used is often of high quality, allowing for intricate carvings and detailing.

**Traditional Design:** The gate's design incorporates traditional Omani motifs and patterns, reflecting the region's cultural heritage. These designs often include geometric shapes, arabesques, and floral patterns, showcasing the mastery of local artisans.

**Intricate Carvings:** The gate is adorned with elaborate carvings, showcasing detailed craftsmanship. These carvings might depict cultural symbols, historical references, or religious elements, adding depth and meaning to the gate's aesthetics.

**Symbolism:** Elements incorporated into the gate might hold symbolic significance, representing aspects of Omani culture, such as hospitality, unity, or spirituality. These symbols contribute to the gate's cultural narrative.

**Functionality:** Apart from its ornamental value, the gate serves the practical purpose of marking the entrance to Muttrah Souq. Its design and placement act as a welcoming beacon for visitors entering the market.

**Maintenance and Preservation:** Efforts are often made to maintain and preserve these gates, as they are not only architectural elements but also cultural artifacts that represent Omani heritage.

Overall, the components of the Muttrah Souq Gate blend craftsmanship, cultural symbolism, and functionality, offering visitors a captivating entry point that symbolizes the richness of Omani culture and tradition.

### **MAPPING:**

The gates of Muttrah Souq showcase a blend of traditional Omani architectural elements and materials, each contributing to its unique appearance and functionality.

#### **Building Materials:**

**Architecture:** The gates exhibit traditional Omani architectural styles with the use of local materials like stone, wood, and intricate metalwork.

**Stone and Wood:** These materials are commonly used for the structural elements, such as the gateways and surrounding walls, showcasing local craftsmanship and durability.

**Metalwork:** Intricate designs and patterns in metal are often incorporated into the gates, adding ornamental beauty to the entrances.

**Extraneous Elements:**

**Decorative Accents:** Carvings, geometric patterns, and calligraphy can be found adorning the gates, reflecting Omani culture and heritage.

**Symbolism:** Some gates might feature symbols or motifs representing aspects of Omani history, traditions, or beliefs, adding cultural significance to the entrances.

**Elements of Operation and Improvement :**

**Functionality:** While maintaining their historical appearance, these gates are often restored or renovated to ensure their functionality as entry points to the souq.

**Maintenance:** Continuous efforts are made to preserve and improve these gates, ensuring they remain structurally sound and aesthetically pleasing.

**Community Engagement:** Efforts might include involving the local community in restoration projects or incorporating modern amenities without compromising the historical integrity of the gates.

Overall, these gates not only serve as entryways to Muttrah Souq but also stand as symbols of Omani heritage, showcasing traditional craftsmanship and architectural styles while adapting to modern needs through careful maintenance and improvements.

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2. The second gate of Muttrah Souq, known as "Bab Al Kabir" or the "Grand Gate," is distinguished by its operational elements, decorative aspects, and use of building materials.

**Operating Elements Entrance Function:**



**Entrance Function:** Bab Al Kabir serves as a significant entry point into Muttrah Souq, facilitating access for visitors and locals alike.

**Traffic Management:** Similar to other gates, it manages the flow of foot traffic, ensuring a smooth transition between the souq and its surroundings .

**Decorative Elements:**

**Architectural Grandeur:** Bab Al Kabir often boasts grander architectural elements compared to other gates, with larger proportions and more intricate designs.

**Ornamental Details:** It might feature intricate carvings, arabesque patterns, and ornate metalwork, showcasing a blend of traditional Omani craftsmanship and aesthetic beauty.

**Standards for Building Materials:**

**Local Materials:** The gate likely uses locally sourced stone, wood, and metals, maintaining the traditional Omani architectural style seen throughout the souq.

**Craftsmanship:** Skilled artisans employ their expertise in creating and maintaining the gate, ensuring high-quality construction that embodies Omani heritage.

**Preservation and Restoration:** Preservation efforts aim to retain the authenticity of the original construction while employing necessary renovations to sustain structural integrity over time.

Bab Al Kabir stands as a prominent gateway, not only serving practical purposes but also representing the grandeur of Omani architectural traditions through its decorative elements and adherence to regional building material standards.

3. The third gate of Muttrah Souq, referred to as “Bab Al Mathaib” or the “Gate of Lamps,” is characterized by its operational elements, decorative features, and choice of building materials:

**Operating Elements:**

**Functional Access:** Bab Al Mathaib provides access to Muttrah Souq, serving as a passage for visitors and locals entering or exiting the market area.

**Traffic Management:** Similar to other gates, it likely regulates foot traffic flow, ensuring a controlled and organized movement within the souq vicinity.

**Decorative Elements:**

**Symbolism of Light:** The gate's name, "Gate of Lamps," might influence its design, possibly featuring motifs or decorations related to light sources or traditional lamps.

**Artistic Embellishments:** Expect to find intricate carvings, ornamental details, and perhaps representations of Omani cultural symbols, adding aesthetic value and cultural significance.

**Standards for Building Materials:**

**Local Construction Materials:** Bab Al Mathaib likely employs locally sourced stone, wood, and metal in line with the prevailing architectural style of the souq.

**Craftsmanship Quality:** Skilled artisans would have used traditional techniques to construct and maintain the gate, showcasing the artistry and expertise of Omani craftsmanship.

**Conservation and Upkeep:** Preservation efforts aim to preserve the authenticity of the gate's original construction while incorporating necessary restorations to ensure structural durability and historical continuity.

Bab Al Mathaib, known as the “Gate of Lamps,” not only functions as an entry point but also embodies decorative elements that reflect Omani culture and aesthetics, utilizing local building materials and craftsmanship while adhering to preserving standards for its upkeep and longevity within the Muttrah Souq.

**Discussion and Recommendation:**

**The first gate:** The project aims to preserve the historical and cultural identity of the city, preserve the historical status of Muttrah Souq, restore historical buildings and preserve them from extinction, and study the possibility of rehabilitating some sites.



**Glass and ceramics:** Stained glass or ceramics may be used to add an aesthetic touch and reflect the artistic heritage on the windows or interior details of the dome. These materials are used professionally and artisanally to create the domes, which are considered an essential part of the architectural and aesthetic identity of the gates

The arches at the entrance to Muttrah Souq in Oman are usually made of a variety of materials, reflecting the cultural and architectural heritage of the region.

**Stone:** Local stone is used to build arches; It is skillfully shaped and coordinated to create the desired architectural shapes.

**Clay and bricks:** Traditional clay or bricks are sometimes used in arch construction

**Stone:** Fences are often built of local stone. The stone is skillfully created and arranged to build walls in styles .

**The Second gate:** In the traditional gates of Muttrah Souq in Oman, wood is used in the ceiling and arches to give a traditional aesthetic and achieve a unique architectural identity .



### Wooden portal roof:

- The roof is made of local wood, which is durable and environmentally friendly. The wood is carefully shaped to form the main roof structure that supports the portal.
- The wood may be used to form delicate ornaments and decorations on the ceiling, enhancing the traditional aesthetic.

### Brackets:

- Artistic, wood bows are professionally made
- The wood is shaped with precision and craftsmanship to create arches that are circular, wavy, or have other artistic details.
- Wooden arches add a unique aesthetic, reflect the traditional architectural identity of the market, and highlight uniqueness and artistic beauty.

**The third gate:** Al-Darwaza Gate in Muttrah Souq is considered a distinctive and attractive entrance, as it is a large gate decorated with traditional Arabic art. They are distinguished by their delicate decorations carved into the brick, often surrounded by geometric carvings and drawings that reflect the traditional culture and art of the region. It may contain decorative arches and columns that highlight the beauty of traditional Arab architecture.



Castle-inspired shapes are often characterized by solid vertical structures and interlocking towers. These forms appear in architecture in detail through the use of corner towers and interlocking designs that embody the character of historical castles. These forms may include large arches, thick decorated walls, and small decorated windows resembling those found in ancient castles. These elements are distinguished by fine details and geometric formations that reflect the beauty and strength of castles.

The decorative arch in brick is a part of traditional architecture and is distinguished by its exquisite artistic details. This arch is usually formed using brick in an architectural form that allows for the formation of distinctive shapes such as decorative arches and arcades. Bricks are used in arch construction in different ways, whether it is arranging the bricks in a curve to create the arch or using different brick pieces to create patterns and ornate details on the arch itself.

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**Community Involvement:** Advocate for increased community participation in the conservation efforts of the Matrah Traditional Market. Highlight the benefits of engaging locals in decision-making processes regarding heritage preservation.

**Adaptation of Assessment Criteria:** Recommend a review or adaptation of existing assessment criteria for tangible cultural heritage, taking into account the specific context of the Matrah Traditional Market.

**Documentation and Awareness:** Stress the importance of comprehensive documentation of the market's different aspects and the dissemination of this information to raise awareness among locals and visitors about the significance of the market.

**Sustainable Practices:** Propose sustainable practices for conservation, such as maintenance techniques that preserve the authenticity and historical value of the market while accommodating contemporary needs.

**Education and Training:** Suggest educational programs or workshops aimed at both the community and stakeholders involved in the market's management to ensure a shared understanding of its cultural importance and effective conservation methods.

These recommendations aim to bridge the gap between academic findings and actionable steps that can positively impact the conservation efforts for the Matrah Traditional Market. They should be specific, feasible, and tailored to the context of the market and the community involved.

### CONCLUSION

The application of assessment criteria highlighted the market's diverse spatial, architectural, and socio-economic faces. Capturing these variations through mapping and documentation underscored the need for a comprehensive approach to conservation—one that respects historical authenticity while accommodating contemporary needs.

Crucially, the engagement of the local community yielded invaluable perspectives on the market's cultural significance. Their involvement not only validated the market's importance but also emphasized their role as custodians of this heritage.

Despite its historical significance, the Matrah Traditional Market faces challenges in terms of conservation, from changing urban landscapes to the need for sustainable maintenance practices. However, these challenges also present opportunities. Recommendations highlighted in this study, such as increased community involvement, adaptation of assessment criteria, and sustainable practices, offer pathways toward a more holistic and effective conservation strategy.

In conclusion, the conservation of the Matrah Traditional Market demands a collaborative effort—one that involves not only experts and policymakers but, more importantly, the community whose lives and history are intricately woven into its fabric. Through a concerted and inclusive approach guided by the insights gleaned from this study, the preservation of this tangible cultural heritage can be ensured for generations to come.

This research serves as a stepping stone, urging further dialogue, action, and toward commitment to safeguarding not just a market but a living testament to Oman's vibrant cultural legacy.

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