Reconstruction of Jahili Fort /Al Ain

by: ADACH (Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage)

The oasis city of Al Ain sits in the desert that straddles the border between the UAE and Oman. To the east lie the Hajar Mountains of Oman. To the west are the endless dunes of the Rub‘ Al-Khali, the Empty Quarter. Closer to Al Ain is the extraordinary mountain outcrop of Jebel Hafit, dominating the horizon to the south of the city. Famous as ‘the garden city in the desert’, Al Ain has long welcomed visitors and travellers. These days, they come to enjoy the city’s parks, gardens and cultural attractions. But, thousands of years ago, it was water that first drew people here...

The history of human settlement at Al Ain can be traced back 5,000 years. It is the site of a series of oases, fed by permanent groundwater, and from the earliest times has been filled with date palms, gardens and farms. This lush and inviting environment, a green island in an otherwise harsh landscape, has always been a desirable place to live and the oases soon became small settlements and villages.

In the past, forts protected many of the village communities in and around the oases. Border disputes, raids and skirmishes made the forts and watchtowers essential. Many of these constructions, together with the ancient aflaj, have survived and can still be visited today. Until the 1940’s, Al Ain was a remote farming community with a few thousand residents. Yet today it is a planned city of nearly over 400,000 people and rising. This remarkable transformation was brought about by the vision of one man, the late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan (may his soul rest in peace). Born in Al Ain, around 1918, Sheikh Zayed spent time as a young man in the desert with the local Bedouin, and came to share their passion for falconry, horses and camel racing. He also developed a love of the natural world and realised the importance of preserving it. In 1946 he was appointed the Ruler of Abu Dhabi’s Representative in Al Ain, a post he held for the next twenty years. In that time, he set about helping Al Ain to modernise, but without losing sight of its heritage and traditional values. It was an invaluable apprenticeship for the man who was to become the Ruler of Abu Dhabi and, in 1971, the first President of the UAE.

Jahili Fort is the largest of Al Ain’s many traditional mud-brick forts and one of the UAE’s oldest landmarks. It has an important place in the history and culture of the city of Al Ain and of the country as a whole. The fort was built by Sheikh Zayed Bin Khalifa Al Nahyan, Zayed the First, between 1891 and 1898. The inscription over the main entrance to the fort reads: A door of goodness is opened in glory’s chapter, Where joy and happiness with high glory reside, The blessings of honour said “Mark this house, A house of high standing built by Zayed Bin Khalifa”.

The fort was used as a royal summer residence away from the heat and humidity of the coast and became a symbol of the political stability Sheikh Zayed the First created during his long reign (from 1855 to 1909). Attached to the fort is a mosque that may have been built at the same time as Sheikh Zayed’s original fort. Old photographs reveal that the oasis settlement lay next to this mosque in the area where the gardens now are. The falaj serving the mosque and settlement has recently been re-discovered during the restoration works at Jahili.

Sheikh Zayed’s fort consisted of two buildings; a square fort and a separate round tower with a very distinctive design of concentric tiers. This tower is probably older than the square fort and may have originally been a simple watchtower to guard the oasis from raiders. The present design of the tower, however, may reflect a very ancient tradition of fortification in the oases of Al Ain; a circular tower of similar construction, dating back four thousand years, was excavated at Hili, some ten kilometres away.

Today, the tower at Jahili Fort has become an icon of the UAE. The original square fort has cylindrical towers at three of its corners, while the fourth houses the Sheikh’s majlis, or reception area, where guests were entertained and official duties carried out.

Like the rest of the forts in Al Ain, these original structures were built in sun-dried mud brick. During the 20th century, they were used less and less and gradually fell into disrepair. In the early 1950s, British forces came to Al Ain and used the fort as a military base. Barracks and other buildings were
Oman, 1949 | Portrait of Wilfred Thesiger
Taken by his close Bedu companion, Salim bin Kabina, on their last journey together, to the interior of Oman.
(PRIM 2004.130.22424.1, Copyright of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford)
added, all within a large new courtyard that incorporated the earlier fort and tower.

In the 1980s, the fort’s use changed again, with the large courtyard becoming a venue for events. The present monumental entrance, flanked by large towers, was added at this point. Then, in 1985, the former Al Ain Department of Antiquities and Tourism, now part of the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, began the restoration of the fort. This saved the buildings from ruin, but it was soon clear that the fort had even greater potential. The idea of a new cultural centre was born.

Since 2007, Jahili Fort has been at the centre of an exciting conservation, restoration and development project. Its aim has been to preserve the fabric of the historic buildings, whilst transforming the site into a rewarding visitor destination and cultural centre. The Abu Dhabi Authority implemented the project for Culture and Heritage (ADACH), the government institution responsible for conserving and promoting the heritage and culture of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

A multi-disciplinary team was involved in the project, including architects who restored the buildings and re-designed the interiors, a curator who oversaw the cultural content, an archaeologist advising on the archaeological significance of the building, and a conservator, responsible for the preservation of the building’s fabric. The Masterplan for this ambitious project outlined a sensitive redevelopment of the fort using a combination of traditional materials and new technologies. The goal was to alter the building as little as possible, whilst at the same time equipping it with the modern requirements to enable its future use. Minimising the environmental impact of the buildings was also an important consideration. The new architectural design followed the historic floorplan of the fort and echoed the original openings of the historic buildings. Arcades that had been added in the 1980’s were now enclosed with glass, while new internal spaces were created to house exhibitions and the Visitor Centre. Construction used traditional mud blocks, mud plaster and palm logs, and reused existing historic building materials whenever appropriate.

Jahili Fort is the home of a permanent exhibition exploring the life of Wilfred Thesiger, better known in Arabia as Mubarak bin London. World famous as an explorer, travel writer and photographer, Thesiger spent his life travelling, often on foot, to wild and remote places. In the course of his long life he lived in and explored Ethiopia, Sudan, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, amongst many others.

It was, however, his time in Arabia, exploring the desert of the Empty Quarter, he chose to describe as ‘the five happiest years of my life’. Born to British parents in Ethiopia in 1910, Thesiger had an exotic and unusual childhood, absorbing sights and sounds that gave him a lifelong passion for wild landscapes and traditional peoples.

After his education at Eton and Oxford, he returned to Africa, working for the British colonial administration in Sudan. During the Second World War he fought for the British in both Africa and the Middle East.

At the end of the war, he was offered a job collecting information on desert locusts in Arabia. He wrote later, ‘All my past had been but a prelude to the five years that lay ahead of me.’ Thesiger arrived in Arabia in 1945 and made contact with the desert tribes whose help and guidance he knew he would need.

Between October 1946 and May 1947, Thesiger and his Bedouin companions made their first crossing of the Empty Quarter. Throughout their journey they suffered relentless thirst, aching hunger, extremes of heat and cold, and the constant fear that their camels might collapse – a death sentence for them all.

The second crossing, in 1948, was no less arduous. In Saudi Arabia, they were briefly thrown into jail before journeying for two months to reach Abu Dhabi. From there, Thesiger and his party rode to Al Ain, where they met Sheikh Zayed for the first time. Sheikh Zayed made Thesiger welcome; providing hospitality, camels, hunting dogs and guides. His influence and standing in the region also made it possible for Thesiger to travel into Oman - then a country largely closed to Westerners. In between his travels, Thesiger spent a month hawking with Sheikh Zayed. Mounted on camels, and using falcon and salukis, they tracked and caught bustard and hares. The two men remained friends for the rest of their lives.

On all his journeys, Thesiger took photographs. Always shooting in black and white, his images capture the grace and dignity of traditional people and the often stark beauty of the landscapes he preferred.

He only began writing about his travels when friends urged him to do so. In 1959, ten years after his second crossing of the Empty Quarter, his first book, Arabian Sands was published. It became a best seller and has never been out of print since. Thesiger always found writing arduous, but his precise, understated prose conveys vividly both the hardships and the rewards of his style of travel. This exhibition draws on Thesiger’s own photographs and words to offer a glimpse into his life and to provide, as do so many of his books, a window onto a vanished past.