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## The Role of Cultural Heritage Tourism in Regenerating Old Muharraq in Bahrain

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### Abstract

The historic city of Muharraq in Bahrain encompasses a unique cultural heritage. Since the discovery of oil in 1932, Old Muharraq started to be abandoned by its original inhabitants who moved to the periphery. Due to neglect, the old houses were decaying and collapsing. In order to prevent further losses, the government launched several rehabilitation projects in Muharraq. The pearling path is one of these significant regeneration projects that will be explored here. This paper focuses on the role of cultural heritage tourism and its implications for urban regeneration in old Muharraq. The methodology used is based on the case study approach. A comprehensive onsite study was carried out to identify the challenges of urban regeneration. In addition, a number of informal interviews were conducted with Bahrain Authority for culture and Antiquities representatives. The paper concludes with a number of recommendations to revive old Muharraq via a sustainable cultural heritage tourism strategy.

**Keywords:** Urban Regeneration, Cultural Heritage Tourism, Identity, Sustainability.

### 1. Introduction

In the field of urban planning and design, the concept of urban regeneration is challenging for both scholars and practitioners. Urban regeneration which is also called urban renewal or urban redevelopment is a multi-sided field. This requires deep theoretical vision in addition to act to solve social, economic, physical, and environmental problems causing the urban environment in vibrant cities (Lak, Gheitasi, & Timothy, 2019). Urban renewal planning can be applied through rehabilitating heritage areas and historic buildings. The latter can have a significant role in urban regeneration through highlighting the local identity, sense of place, and promoting residents' sense of belonging.

The term 'Regeneration' is usually connected to economic development, as it ignores the local conditions that lead to renewal. It is obvious that heritage and urban redevelopment are essentially linked, however, the different aspirations of various stakeholders may be concealed through simple assumptions about their connections. (Timothy, 2011, Amen & Nia, 2020 ) defined heritage as "elements of the past that are positioned for, or utilized in contemporary situations, is mobilized for a variety of present objectives and public policy purposes". Urban regeneration is a tool used to mobilize tangible and intangible heritage. Additionally, cultural heritage tourism has been developed by cities as a strategy to create jobs and produce new sources of income, as well as improving cultural opportunities and quality of life for residents (Uysal & Özden, 2011, Al-Dujaili & Amen, 2018 ). The relationship between cultural heritage tourism and urban regeneration has been highly mentioned in academic studies, however, it has not been well examined in the context of the Gulf.

This paper investigates the concept of cultural heritage tourism in the context of urban regeneration, and examines how can cultural heritage tourism play a significant role in regenerating old Muharraq city, Bahrain. The historic city of Muharraq has a rich historic culture due to its long-time cultural industries which included pearl diving, ship building and Bahraini art of "Kurar" (a form of embroidery using a golden thread). These various cultural assets can be utilized to develop cultural heritage tourism in the city and bring life back to it. Correspondingly, the government launched several rehabilitation projects in Bahrain which included the pearling path project in old Muharraq. The paper focuses on this project as a case study and comes up with a list of lessons learnt.

### 2. Materials and Methods

The method adopted in the paper is a case study approach to investigate how urban regeneration affected the development of old Muharraq city in Bahrain, through cultural heritage tourism. The case study approach gives a better understanding of specific issues needed to be highlighted through looking into real-world examples. Muharraq city represents a unique case which needed to be described and investigated to provide knowledge of the role of cultural heritage tourism in urban renewal. The paper uses secondary sources and documents in addition to in- depth field studies and observations, as well as informal interviews with representatives from Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities. The structure of the paper includes first literature review which explores the concepts of cultural heritage tourism and urban regeneration and the interconnection between them. Then the paper will examine in-depth the pearling path project in old Muharraq and will finally come out with a list of lessons learnt for a sustainable cultural heritage tourism strategy.

### 3. Cultural heritage Tourism and Urban Regeneration

The process of tourism has been widely used as a tool for growth and evolution all over the globe because of its capability to generate more jobs, increase tax incomes, encourage commercial activities, refine infrastructure and recreational opportunities, encourage residents, and overall improve the quality of life in a specific destination. cultural heritage tourism can activate economic development more than any other types. It is suited to enhance cultural attractions, protecting heritage, renew old urban quarters, injecting a sense of community pride, identity and solidarity. Historic cities have always had a competitive advantage in the tourism sector. The reason behind that is their unique marketable cultural heritage resources which attract large segments of travelers (Lak et al., 2019).

Jolliffe and Smith defines tourism as a widespread international activity and a defining characteristic of contemporary societies. They also mentioned that cultural heritage tourism is a part of the tourism activity that uses shared heritage of localities to develop products that may attract visitors to an area. Currently, cities with decline in traditional economies seek to identify heritage as a resource for economic development and regeneration through tourism. Heritage is a mode of cultural production in the present that has resources to the past. The notion of heritage has evolved from a focus on values, traditions and ideas to a direct association with the material cultural heritage of societies (Jolliffe & Smith, 2001)

Culture-led regeneration has many significant social and economic impacts which includes; creating employment, attracting more visitors and boosting the tourism sector, boosting local business, stimulating and supporting creative sector growth, developing the skills, knowledge and confidence of residents, enhancing community cohesion and pride, bringing enjoyment to residents and therefore supporting enhanced resident health, attracting inward investment, and enhancing the area's image in addition to help attract skilled people and business investment (Hatch Regeneris, 2019)

In recent years, some heritage tourism and urban renewal global trends have emerged. One of these trends is to increase government interest in heritage tourism which is obvious looking to the efforts of administrators to reorganize economic structure. This points out that there is a shift from traditional production towards service-based economies, which directly effects the relationship between urban heritage and tourism (Lak et al., 2019).

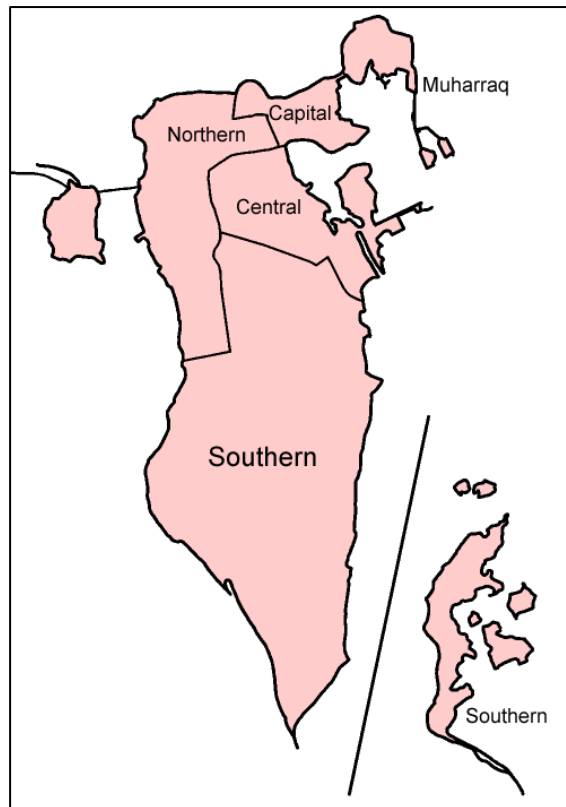
Cultural heritage-based tourism is a type of tourism that is related to a regions' culture, specifically its lifestyle, history, art, architecture, religion, and all what defines life in that specific region. Moreover, in cities it includes culture; facilities such as museums, theaters, and sports. In the 1970s much focus on the role of culture and heritage in the field of urban development started. In specific, when the first urban redevelopment projects began to commodify cultural facilities as tourism attractions, improved urban images began to emerge (Lak et al., 2019).

Since the World Heritage List gives the opportunity to promote tourism, many countries prepared lists of their cultural and natural assets to be considered by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) for inclusion on the UNESCO list. The reason behind that is the increasingly visible branding linked with UNESCO. UNESCO World Heritage Lists includes many cultural and natural sites. Branding a country's heritage by UNESCO, is an opportunity for the site to be recognized globally as an impressive example of human heritage. Therefore, its economic value will increase owing to the site's significance, sacredness, and charm. On the national level, specific countries created competitive branding programs for national heritage (Lak et al., 2019).

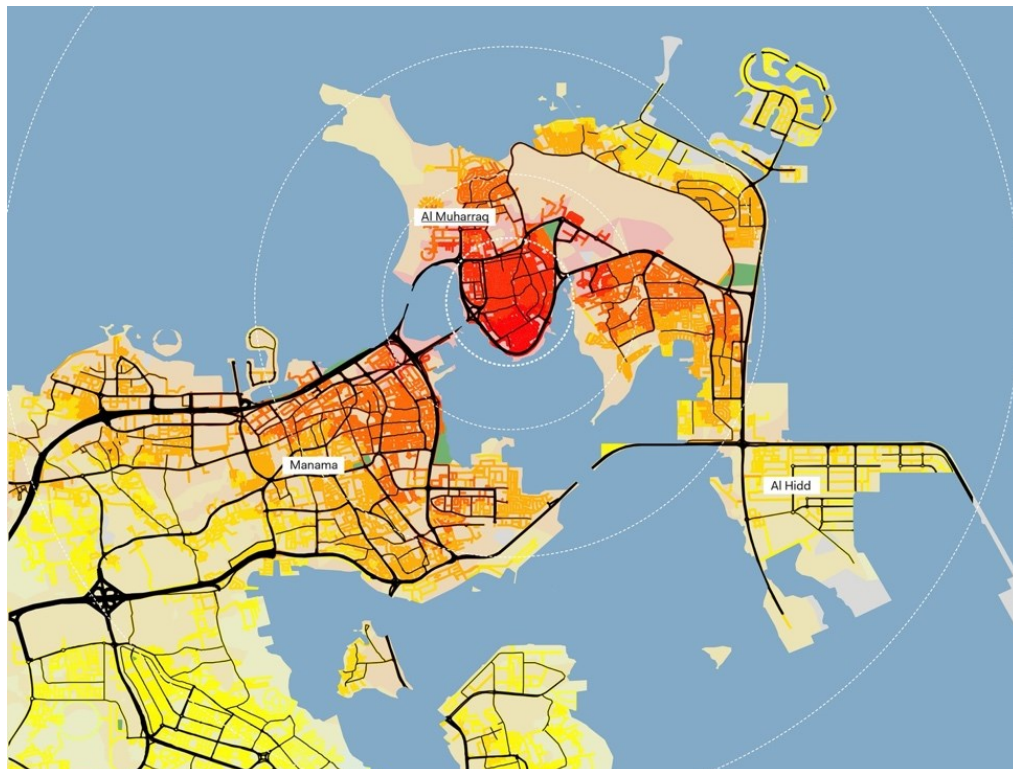
Expectations from cultural tourism often go beyond short-term benefits that cities seek long lasting and sustainable changes in the built environment and adapt culture led urban regeneration as an urban policy. In the long run, culture led urban regeneration is assumed to contribute in urban economy, conservation and promotion of urban heritage, redevelopment of city centres, revival of former industrial zones and waterfront sites. Culture led urban regeneration is also considered as a tool to protect and promote cultural diversity. Similarly, cultural heritage tourism adds value to the area by promoting the existing ethnic and cultural identity (Uysal & Özden, 2011).

### 5. Cultural Heritage Tourism in Old Muharraq

Al Muharraq is one of the islands of Bahrain archipelago, in the Arabian Gulf (Figure 1), and was the former capital of the Kingdom of Bahrain from 1810 until 1932. It is situated on the northeast of the island and is linked to Manama, the capital city by three causeways (Figure 2). It is the third largest city in Bahrain; with an area of 66.74 Sq. Km and a total population of 268,626 on 2018 (Survey and Land Registration Bureau, 2018).



**Figure 1.** Map of Bahrain showing the location of Al Muharraq city (<https://favpng.com>).



**Figure 2.** Muharraq Accessibility Map (<https://www.systematica.net/project/bahrain-pearling-testimony-unesco-site-mobility-study/>).

The city has unique architectural characteristics with an organic urban fabric. The organic and compact urban fabric, which evolved with time, displays a harmony with the prevailing cultural, natural requirements and linked different parts of the city together. The appearance of its condensed urban fabric consists mainly of narrow alleys

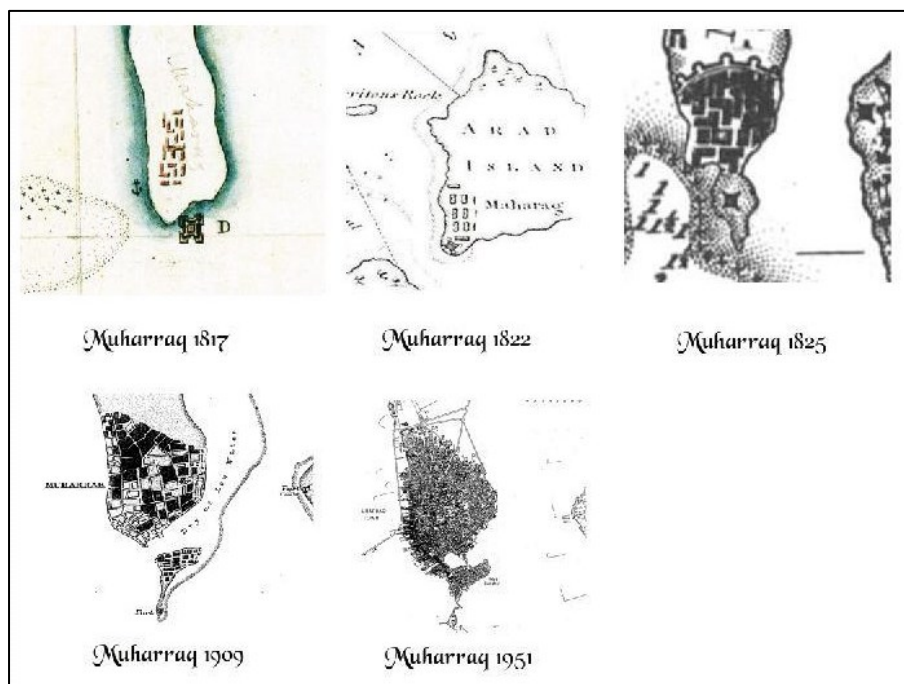
(Sikkas) (Figure 3 and 4) and courtyard houses (Yarwood, 2005, 2011).



**Figure 3 & 4.** Narrow Alleys in old Muharraq (Author, 2020).

As many other traditional Arab cities, the evolution of Al Muharraq went through a long process of innovations, adjustments and refinements. It has a traditional architecture expressing the interaction between the society and the natural environment. It used local resources to respond to a complex of interconnected social, cultural, spiritual, religious, economic and physical requirements. This resulted in establishing a strong unity between culture and the built environment, and between the man-made and the natural environments. Besides having buildings with functional and economic values, it reflected many intangible cultural symbols and meanings. Therefore, a visual image was established with the use of available materials and talents along with expressive forms and elements (Yarwood, 2005, 2011).

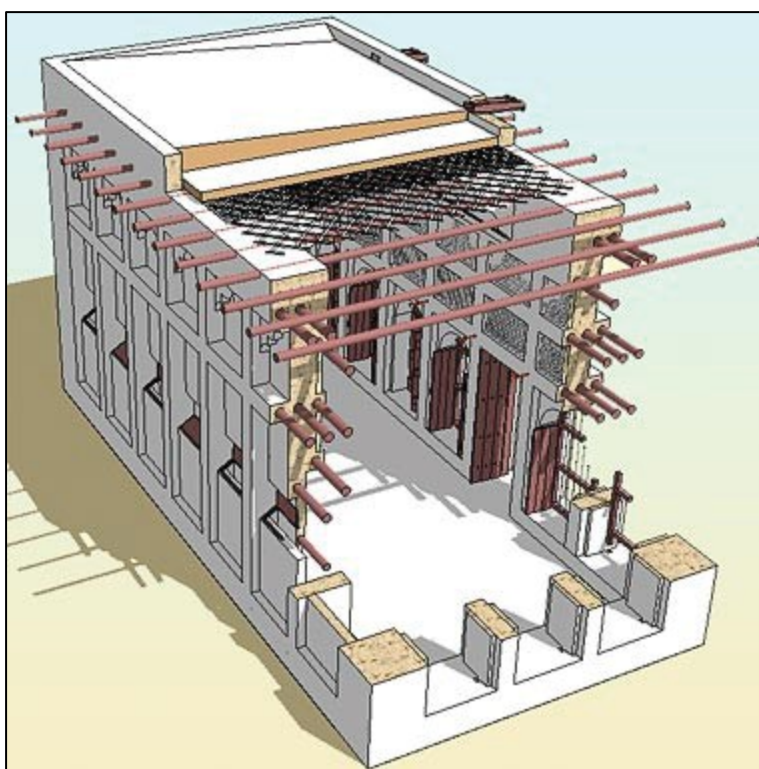
Just like any other Arab city, urbanization in Muharraq city was affected by traditional tribal measures and therefore it shares many physical characteristics of Arab Islamic cities (Figure 5). With its unique organic form and architecture that is manifested in the urban network of houses, mosques and trade complexes, the city can be considered as one of the remaining models of the traditional Gulf urbanization (Alraouf, 2014).



**Figure 5.** The Evolution of Muharraq From 1817 Until 1951 (AlSulaiti, 2009).

Although Bahrain has settlements from much earlier periods, the current architectural development of Muharraq is a result of a period with flourishing economy which was based on pearl trading during the second half of the 19th century and until the middle of the 20th century. The wealth of the pearl economy brought knowledge of new building techniques and materials to the city. After the discovery of oil in 1930s, the traditional domestic architecture made of palm leaves and mangrove were replaced with stone masonry in addition to other materials imported from outside (Alraouf, 2014).

As a result, the local construction techniques which consisted of thick walls and small openings has been developed progressively to a trabeated system. The system consisted of columns made of stone and attached by beams and tie beams made of palm trees or mangroves called danchal filled with coral stone panels called furush, while the roof was made out of bamboo (Figure 6). For decoration, gypsum was used to create decorative panels, cornices, or it was even mixed with lime and other additives to be used as a plaster or mortar (Chemali, 2017). Later, other construction materials were introduced into the area by the British with respect to the vernacular architecture. Mortar and plaster was replaced by Portland cement, reinforced concrete or metal beams were a substitute for palm trees, mangroves, coral stones and bamboo. This construction system disappeared slowly with the decline the pearl industry since the 1930s (Motisi et al., 2019).



**Figure 6.** Sketch of the traditional construction system showing a typical elaborately designed room (<http://catnaps.org/islamic/gulfarch3.html>).

### 5.1. The Pearling Path: Testimony of an Island Economy

During the past decade, the government authorities in Bahrain conducted several urban revitalization projects across the city of Muharraq which included the pearling path project. The project represents the pearling era in Muharraq which was globally well known to be the most significant pearling society and economy for many centuries (Ministry of Culture & Information, 2011). The project has first initiated as a series of restoration and adaptive reuse of a number of edifices under the Sheikh Ebrahim Centre for Culture and Research. It then evolved into a comprehensive programme entitled Pearling Path, Testimony of an Island Economy. The aim of the project is to focus on the history of the town with the pearling industry in addition to rebalancing the demographics through attracting local Bahraini families to come back to the town through improving the environment and providing community and cultural venues (Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 2019).

To give adequate account of the importance of this grand island narrative, the proposed theme emphasizes on human interaction with the environment and modes of subsistence, represented in a human and economic system based on the exploitation of a natural sea resource. In this manner, the site is the first listed site to include an

economic form of sea-use since the addition of sea-use criterion in 2005. It includes underwater cultural heritage components which are considered rare on the World Heritage List. This is, in addition to its vernacular architectural testimony consisting of structures reflecting the last stage of the pearling economy in the late 19th and early 20th century which is considered as a symbolic property in a typological framework being the first in the Arab Region (Ministry of Culture & Information, 2011).



**Figure 7.** Aerial view of Muharraq in the 1960s (Ministry of Culture & Information, 2011).

The overall vision of the project focused on stimulating culture in social and economic development. Therefore, in the assessment process of the project, significant factors were recognised; economic, social and cultural factors. The project main goals is property conservation using international standards, offering public accessibility to the site, providing knowledge about the economic, social and cultural area context, as well as fostering a community based approach to solve urban issues. The project also aims to document the stories and practices of the pearling era to preserve its memory (Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities, 2017).

The buildings visibly indicate the major social and economic roles and institutions associated with the pearling cultural tradition and the wealth it generated between the second century and until the 1930s. In 2012, the Pearling Path was designated by the UNESCO as a world heritage site. The listed building includes a residence of wealthy merchants, shops, storehouse and a mosque. Memories of the pearling industry are evoked in these buildings and its supporting social and economic structures along with the cultural identity it created. The importance of the creation of the pearling path goes beyond reconstruction, it is hoping to improve the economy by developing cultural heritage tourism as well as making Muharraq a more pleasant place to live in (UNESCO, 2012).

The property includes a serial site of 15 property components, encompassing maritime sites, seashore site, and urban properties. The maritime site includes 3 offshore oyster bed located in the northern territorial waters of Bahrain, while the seashore consists of the Bu Maher fort located at the southern tip of Muharraq island, were boats used to set off for the oyster beds, while the urban sites consist of 11 architectural properties encompassing 17 architectural structures (Figure 8 and 9) (Ministry of Culture & Information, 2011).



**Figure 8.** A Map Showing the location of the buildings (Bahrain Authority for Culture & Antiquities, 2019).

**Figure 9.** Pictures of some of the houses in the sites (UNESCO, 2012).

The preservation of the sites and numerous buildings in addition to upgrading their facades and the construction of four new buildings was facilitated by private-public partnerships (Figure 10). All of these sites were connected through a visitor pathway, with vacant demolished plots left as public spaces. The process of restoration/preservation of the traditional buildings consisted of reinstating lost wind towers which were built for natural ventilation purposes, while the used materials were similar to the originals such as; reused coral stone from demolished structures, wood and terrazzo which was used extensively for street furniture consisting of flecks of oyster shells. Additionally, to further symbolize pearls and assist way-finding, spherical white streetlamps were added (Figure 11) (Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 2019).



**Figure 10.** Pictures of some of the houses in the sites (Author, 2020, 2019).



**Figure 11.** Open space in old Muharraq (Author, 2019).

The finance of the project included both the public and private sector. The framework included façade upgrade, the addition of visitors and experience centres, public spaces, the pearl museum, the creation of cultural festivals and boat trips to the fort and seashore, in addition to four multi-storey carparks (Bahrain Authority for Culture and

Antiquities, 2017). The chosen sites are considered to be vulnerable, therefore extensive work was needed to ensure satisfactory stability. The original fabric was restored with great care with the usage of traditional materials and processes to ensure the provision of tangible links to that period (Figure 12 and 13) (UNESCO, 2012).

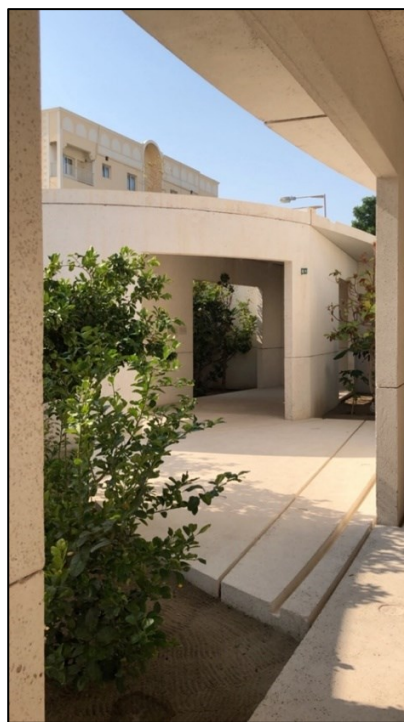


**Figure 12.** Renovated House old Muharraq (Author, 2020).



**Figure 13.** Narrow Alleys in old Muharraq (Author, 2019).

In addition to the preservation of the existing buildings, new building was built to ensure better visitor experience. These new buildings respected the scale of the historic environment and the street lines, however, it focused on making bold contemporary architecture (Figure 14 and 15) (Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 2019).



**Figure 14 and 15.** Green pavilion (Author, 2020, 2019).

A holistic approach was set to rehabilitate old Muharraq under two key perspectives, legal and societal. The creation of new laws was needed to constrain unplanned construction and population, to avoid the decline of the urban fabric and to safeguard the sites (UNESCO, 2012). The project is still under progress in three different layers; area conservation, urban renewal and visitor facilities (Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities, 2017). The current efforts focuses on the preservation of the structure of the existing buildings with respect to The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and The International Scientific Committee on the Analysis and Restoration of Structures of Architectural Heritage (ISCARSAH) restoration principles (Motisi et al., 2019).

Many of the existing buildings are still owned by the families related to the pearling community, which is considered as an asset added to the value of the property. This asset includes the memory of these families and therefore needed to be protected. Consequently, these families have become key partners in the preservation of the project and have signed long-term legal agreements to understand the requirements of usage and conservation (Ministry of Culture & Information, 2011).

## 6. Lessons Learnt

From this case study, a number of lessons can be learnt;

- The introduction of the tourist pathway to regenerate Muharraq.
- The utilization of the geographical location and historic value of the city, as the site visibly indicates the social, economic and cultural values;
- To understand the tangible and intangible values of the social, economic, and cultural factors;
- To improve the economy through cultural tourism and improve sustainability;
- The protection of vulnerable sites and the organic urban fabric through maintaining integrity which is achieved by stabilizing the restoring these sites;
- The usage of traditional materials and processes in the restoration to provide tangible links to the pearling era;
- To set a holistic approach to preserve the historic characters of Muharraq under two key perspectives, legal and societal;
- The addition of new laws to limit the increase of unplanned construction and population to avoid the deterioration of the heritage buildings and urban fabric;
- The refurbishment of houses with good structures while the deteriorated houses were removed and reconstructed;
- The inclusion of both public and private sectors to finance the project;
- The conserve the property components with international standards;
- The development of a community-based approach to deal with urban issues.

## 7. Conclusions

To conclude; the importance of the usage the existing social and cultural assets of a city and understanding its tangible and intangible values is essential in its renewal process. It is also important to set a holistic approach with the involvement of different stakeholders including the authorities, private sector and the community. The approach should set new laws to prevent further deterioration of the cultural assets, to increase the local economy, and ensures residents satisfaction and to improve the quality of life in the city.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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