



ASLI QoL2019



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<http://www.amerabra.org>; <https://fspu.uitm.edu.my/cebs>  
7<sup>th</sup> AMER International Conference on Quality of Life  
Wina Holiday Villa, Kuta, Bali, Indonesia 16-17 Feb. 2019



## Economic Diversity by Sustaining Historical Buildings: Case Study: King Abdul Aziz Palace

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### Abstract

Within the long history, Saudi Arabia has a diverse range of heritage buildings and sites which still exist until today. Palace of the Emirate in Qebah town is one of the most significant historical buildings which were built by order of King Abdul Aziz in 1351 AH in Al-Qassim Region. Saudi Vision 2030 is a plan to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil, diversify its economy, and develop public service sectors such as infrastructure, recreation, and tourism. This paper aims to discuss the sustainability of historical buildings in Al Qassim Region with the help of the implementation of conservation policies to enhance the diversity of the economy in the country.

Keywords: Sustainable; Historic Buildings; Heritage Conservation; Economic Diversity

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v4i10.1556>

### 1.0 Introduction

Saudi vision 2030 is planning to reduce the dependence on oil. The country is moving forward especially in developing the economic sector sources. In line with the Saudi vision 2030 to the diversify sources of the economy, safeguard the old buildings which have architectural and historical significance, it is one of the programs adopted in 2016 (K.S.A, 2016). The paper discusses the implementation of policies, how it helps to ensure the sustainability of the historical buildings in heritage areas and the responses of the residents. It has focused on Qebah town, Qassim Region. The government has played its vital roles to ensure economic diversity by adopting various strategies. The paper elaborated in three sections. The first section concerns the historical background of the area, as one of the oldest heritage sites in the Kingdom. Furthermore, Al-Qassim has identified as the number one province in the Kingdom in organizing festivals and events, within a rich in heritage, nature, and traditional handicrafts, and its geographical location makes it the hub of diverse cultures and various festivals (SCTA, 2014). The second section presents and interprets the role of the local government in the survival of the buildings. In both steady structure of the old buildings and the policies imposed by the local authorities particularly on King Abdul-Aziz historic building. The third section discusses the residents' responses to the conservation policies and the suitability of the old structures to the current requirements.

### 2.0 Literature Review

The economic diversity is one of the essential programs that was originated by Saudi vision 2030 in 2016. From Saudi vision 2030, it declared that areas with an attractive character and strong sense of identity must be maintained and enhanced and, where practicable,

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other areas are enhanced to provide an improved sense of identity and place. This include historical and heritage buildings (K.S.A, 2016). This part provides a review of background on heritage sites conservation and historical buildings. It begins with a definition, the importance and the responsibility of heritage sites conservation, giving an introduction to heritage conservation issues, also in this part the study reviews the conditions of the case study (King Abdul-Aziz palace) that it was identified as historic building based on local authority, Qebah Municipality (SCTA (2012).

## 2.1 Heritage and Conservation

Heritage is our past that has been preserved or conserved not only for the benefit of the present generation but will also be inherited by the future generations. Old and historical buildings are a symbol of cultural identity and heritage of a particular community of particular. For this reason, we find the best-preserved examples of former splendor in smaller towns and "hidden" landscapes, in Saudi Arabia as well as anywhere. However, anything cannot become heritage, unless recognized as a site which attempts to recreate historical settings to simulate past periods, in another word it says the historical setting is sites of natural or designed space which comprise the setting of individual or historic areas (Rahimah Abdul Aziz 2017). For that preservation of the old buildings which have architectural and historical significance, is one of the requirement the diversify sources of the economy which adopted by Saudi vision 2030 (KSA, 2016). It is clear that conservation lacks a proper definition, but generally, conservation is a technical activity towards historical buildings. It involved action to preserve the fabric and material of the heritage buildings (Hari Srinivas. 2015). It is a process to prevent decay and action is aiming to prolong the life of the buildings. Although the meaning quite easy to understand but in the reality conservation always been thought as renovation (Harun 2011). Furgeson, (2011) according to his article on sustainable tourism giving a fascinating insight on how a well-planned urban renewal project initiated by local authority with collaboration by local business associations, chamber of commerce, tourism board, together with residents can successfully turn a dying and forgotten Edinburgh Old Town into a tourist destination without inserting excessive commercialization and modernization (as Edinburgh New Town is already designed for both purposes). Also according to Furgeson, (2011), in Edinburgh, it is widely recognized that visitor's perception of the quality of the environment that dictates their economic contribution. In other words, the better the environment, and the livelier the place can be, economically. Thus, conservation ultimately is also about promoting good land uses, for the benefit of people, future generations and the land itself (Byrne, 2014). It helps a community to protect its economically valuable physical assets and to preserve its history and environment besides protecting the community's sense of identity and continuity.

## 2.2 Economic Diversity

Over the past two decades, tourism exports have been a significant driver of economic growth in many emerging and developing countries (Peter Walkenhorst. 2013). Therefore, the Saudi vision 2030, it is stated that heritage areas with an attractive character and strong sense of identity must be maintained and enhanced the diversity of the economy in the country. Increased tourism revenues automatically translate into structural transformation and broad-based economic development. Drawing on cross-sectional data various studies show the extent to which tourism has contributed to economic diversification in a large sample of developing countries. Three main trends were adopted by Saudi Arabia 2030, the most important of which is the second and third dimension, which is to be a pioneering investment force, linking the three continents as a result of its strategic position. Many questions have been asked about how to achieve this ambitious vision for a diversified economy. The Saudi vision 2030 has adopted several strategies, and for example, the economy diversifies by the development of a vibrant society and an attractive environment for investment (K.S.A, 2016). Furthermore, investment in various sectors, including the tourism sector by ensuring the sustainability of the historical buildings in heritage areas within the human values and unique features, showing the depth of civilization and the human dimension of the region and the responses of the residents.

## 2.2 Qebah History

Al-Qassim is the wealthiest region per capita in Saudi Arabia; it has more than 400 cities, towns, villages, and Bedouin settlements, ten of which are recognized as governorates. (Nola Abboud, 2012). Qebah town has been mentioned in many references as one of the oldest heritage towns in Al-Qassim region, where the oldest reference pointed out to Qebah town is Ibn Mandhur, in 1312. Also according to SCTA (2012), emphasized that Qebah town has many historic buildings, since the Abbasid period, including the oldest road that started from the city of Kufa in Iraq and ran to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. The road was constructed in the reign of Harun Al Rashid and was named after his wife, Zubeida.

Furthermore, it is one of the most important tourist areas in Al-Qassim, where it is characterized by desert tourism and the primary destination for snorkeling enthusiasts and wild trips with its nature, valleys, and forests. Moreover, Qebah town has a beautiful atmosphere almost in the spring season, where it is covered with a greenery surface, whether sandy or mountainous, and its unique location between the desert and the mountainous terrain made it attractive. According to the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTA, 2014), Al-Qassim has been recognized as the number one province in the Kingdom in organizing festivals and events, with an anniversary number of 173 events in 2014. The geographical location of Al-Qassim Province makes it one of the richest in heritage, nature, and traditional handicrafts, in Saudi Arabia. King Abdul Aziz Palace was built more than 70 years ago with a total area of 7500 square meters constructed of folded clay within a one-meter thickness of its walls. It is located in the center of Qebah town of Al-Asayah Governorate in Qassim. See Figure 2.1 It is considered one of the most prominent landmarks in the region, which was built for security reasons (SCTNH, 2017). See figure 2.2.



Figure 2.1 the location of King Abdul-Aziz Palace  
Source: (SCTA (2012))

### 2.3 Conservation Policies

Conservation policies may be different from one country to another depending on the economic and social circumstances. The overall objective of any conservation policy is how it helped to ensure the sustainability of the historic buildings in the heritage areas, and the responses of the residents. Following the conservation principle, the practice of building conservation should maintain as much as possible the original building structure and fabric (Macdonald, & Cheong 2014). According to the United Kingdom guidance (UKIC, 1983), any conservation policy should be taken to conserve heritage buildings is preserving the authenticity of the heritage base on the original or historical evidence. In another word by what method to save the true nature of an object includes evidence of its origins, its original materials construction.

Moreover, in adopting any conservation policy of historic buildings, it was emphasized by scholars that its original character must be preserved as much as possible (Bagader, 2014, Al Saud, 2013, and Zalina, 2009). Conservation policies are thus laid in one way or the other to ensure that the heritage buildings are handled to retain its originality. Thus, the enforcement of conservation policies is another aspect that can help to ensure the survival of historic buildings. However, the management of the compliance of the policies is not an easy task. This is particularly difficult if the historic buildings are public properties (Wan Ismail 2012). Saudi Commission for Truism & Antiquities (SCTA, 2014) has made a survey and in-depth studies to a lot of victorious Arabs and international experiences in the field of developing a conservations heritage policy, which represent the historical building with an environmental, cultural, and economic dimension. SCTA came out with their policy taken in consideration the state authority is responsible for the general policy in respect of the planning of the development and use lands as well as buildings within the area of every local authority in the state. The current policy, decide that conserving heritage buildings is based on the historical and cultural factors, taking into consideration the uniqueness of the architecture of the historic buildings as a historical and cultural contribution. In the current policy, three approaches always apply in the conservation of heritage buildings, restoration, preservation, and reconstruction.

### 3.0 Methodology

The case study on King Abdul-Aziz palace, Qebah has been applied as the research methodology since it was identified as a historical heritage building based on local authority (Qebah Municipality, 1995). Moreover, the study area and the region as a whole have many advantages, making it the best area as a good example that represent the status of conservation policies in Saudi in general and Qassim region in particular. The methods adopted for this study were both quantitative and qualitative surveys (Osuala 2001). The main principal survey techniques used were site observation, photographs, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires. The case study technique is applied in order to examine the sustainability of historical building (king Abdulaziz palace), the implementation of any conservation policies in the area of study, and investigate the significance of culture and built heritage as part of development growth in the country and al Qassim Region in particular. Where, the in-depth interview was conducted with three officials and five administrators in the local authority, who are also familiar with the case study area while the questionnaire was distributed to 70 of the residents.

## 4.0 Results and Discussions

### 4.1 Case Study: King Abdul-Aziz Palace (Observation)

From the observation and the site visit to the case study area, it becomes clear that the King Abdul-Aziz palace was an important historical building which is considered as one of the most prominent landmarks in Al Qassim region, it was built for security reasons such as controlling the smuggling operations that damage the national security of the Kingdom. The palace consists of several different buildings which are the main components of the palace as shown in figure 4.1 and it is as follow:

1. An external wall in the shape of a rectangle (100 × 75 m) with four Conical shaped towers with a base of 6 m they used as an observation and defense towers.
2. Prince residence,
3. Hospitality building, *kohugi* houses, and chefs area
4. The prison.

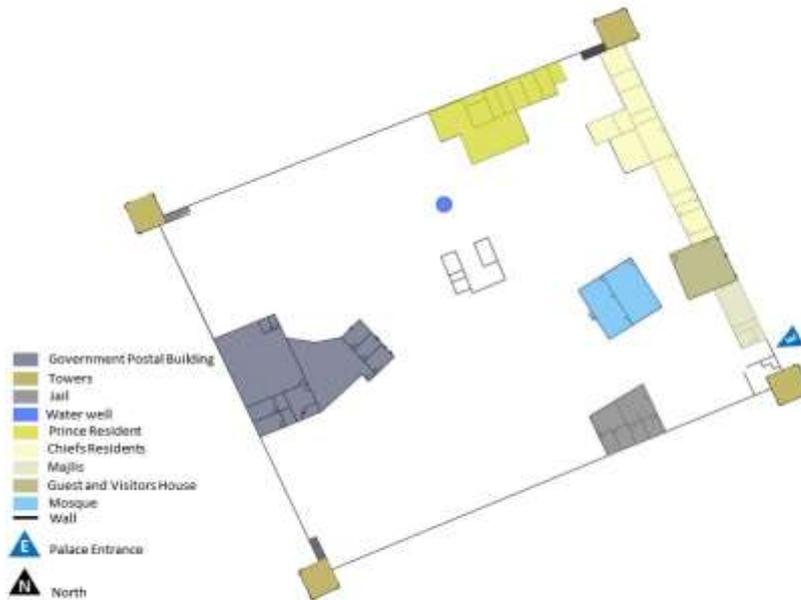


Figure 4.1 components of the palace  
(Source: Author)

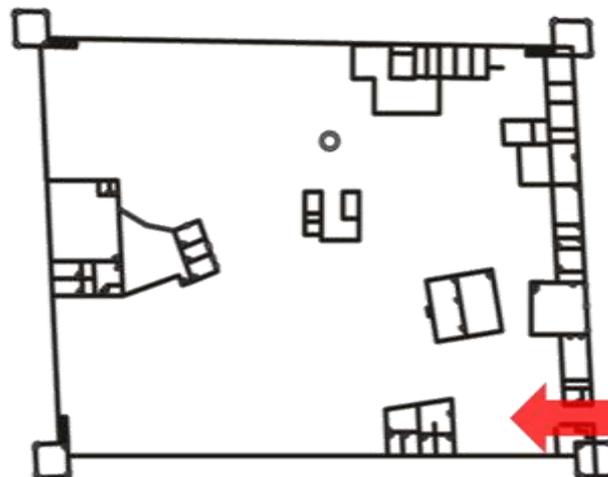


Figure 4.2 Red arrow shows the main entrance to the palace.  
(Source: Author)

The government owns the palace; it was built on the traditional method using local materials. Where clay was used for walls and finishing works, while the Stone used for foundations, palm leaves for ceilings, and timber used for doors and windows. The main entrance to the palace is located in the southeast corner of the palace see figure 4.2; all its details and elements are in their original condition. See photo 4.1 & photo 4.2. The external walls of the palace are in good condition. See photo 4.3, but by observation, all upper buildings and ceilings are rundown See photo 4.4. This is related to that the palace has been restored and maintained more than 30 years ago.



Photo 4.1 Local materials for construction



Photo 4.2 The main gate of the palace



Photo 4.3 The exterior walls of the palace

From the discussion above, the study concluded that King Abdul Aziz Palace suffers from some neglect and has not been maintained for a long time. This is due to the shortage of heritage conservation studies within the historical buildings, and the absence of proper Conservation Policies to preserve the historical buildings in heritage sites. Photo 4.3 The exterior walls of the palace is on the main street, by street side, and looks in good condition.

#### 4.2 Case Study: King Abdul-Aziz Palace (Interview)

This part present and discusses the result of the analysis of the data derived from the interview with the local authorities, and officers, as well as those responsible for concepts and issues of heritage conservation. The questions asked in these interviews were about the, (i) most essential problems faced the historic buildings within the heritage conservation sites (ii) study on implementation and application of conservation plan by the local authority. The case study is unique with a combination of architectural and cultural significance within the heritage area. Participants cited several problems with the historical buildings and heritage areas sites. Findings from the Local authorities that the structure plan of the area it is a general policy related to landscape, townscape and there is no any specific programs or conservation policies implemented by the local authorities in the area, except some restoration work have been done in the past. Some of them indicated that the absence of an overall heritage conservation framework and guidelines added with no single body with overall responsibility for devising or implementing conservation policies makes the situation dangerous. There are needs to provide further attention to aspects of modern development that have visually and physically changed alongside aspects of community involvement in heritage conservation and integrity of historic areas.

#### 4.3 Case Study: King Abdul-Aziz Palace (Questionnaire Survey)

The authors had explained to the residents and introduced what the study it was about, it is an essential pace to verify on the resident's basic knowledge on conservation heritage buildings and whether they have any interest on the matter. It is a necessary measure as the residents themselves will mostly be the initiator for the success of the heritage building conservation efforts later.

Resident's opinion on the importance of heritage building and why heritage buildings in Qebah should be conserved is discussed in the survey as shown below:

**i. Importance of Heritage Building Conservation in Qebah Town**

Resident's perception was used as a measurement tool on the importance of heritage building conservation in Qebah town using a five-point Likert scale in the first section of the survey. The perceptions answers have been categorized from "Not Important" to 'Very Important,' whereas the unsure respondents could select the option "Neutral." Table 1 shows the level of importance in the conservation of heritage building among the residents.

Table 1. Level of importance in the conservation of heritage buildings among local residents

| Importance   | Not Important | Slightly Important | Neutral | Important | Very Important |
|--|---------------|--------------------|---------|-----------|----------------|
| To protect the scenic beauty of the historic building    | 3%            | 3%                 | 12%     | 30%       | 52%            |
| As tourism landmark and attraction                       | 2%            | 1%                 | 10%     | 20%       | 67%            |
| To sustain history and narration of the city's existence | 1%            | 4%                 | 15%     | 57%       | 23%            |
| To document all the past architecture                    | 2%            | 5%                 | 17%     | 27%       | 49%            |
| As living evidence for the future generation             | 2%            | 3%                 | 12%     | 25%       | 58%            |

(Source: Author)

**ii. Why heritage buildings in Qebah should be conserved**

Various reasons have been received from the residents during the pretest survey, but only five reasons are listed then for the final questionnaire as indicated in the above table. It is surprising to know that most respondents have favorable agreement on the importance of conserving heritage buildings in Qebah town where most of them have responded 'Important' and 'Very Important.' It is a positive remark to be considered as this result may point to a high level of awareness from the residents on saving heritage buildings in Qebah town. This was supported earlier by the interviews conducted with the officials and the officers. First and foremost, heritage buildings are said to be important as tourism landmark, and attraction in the town of Qebah with 67% of respondents chose 'Very Important.' This is consistent with what the local authority mentioned in the previous part of the study, as Case study area is one of the richest and oldest heritage area in Al- Qassim Region, and it has been recognized as the number one province in the Kingdom in organizing festivals and events and a specific occasion that made by the local government on prompting Qassim region by organizing various events and festivals are held in the markets, museums, and other locations as per the nature of the event. Such festivals and the most famous hosted in Qassim are the Buraidah Recreational Festival, and the Al-Mithnib Summer Festival. According to 57% of respondents, they claimed that heritage buildings were desired to sustain history and narration of the town's existence. They agree and believe that heritage buildings are the living evidence to document all the past architecture for the benefit of the future generation. This is Affirms as living buildings are the only physical evidence of history. A percentage of the respondents where else answered 'Neutral' to the question about the importance of heritage buildings.it can be assumed that their opinion can be considered incorrect as they are not sure about the historical facts of the buildings due to various reasons. As to compare the 'Neutral' respondent's characteristics with the whole sample, the 'Neutral' respondents do not refer to any significant degree. However, based on Table 1, minimum respondents think that heritage buildings have the least importance. This can be seen with the shortage 'Slightly Important' and 'Not Important' percentage of respondents. in Other words, it can be seen the difference between those who do believe in the importance of heritage buildings in Qebah Town with those who do not. It is a positive start to the research, with the knowledge that respondents or to be more accurate, the residents, are all very encouraging in conserving those precious heritage buildings found throughout the Qassim region.

**5.0 Conclusion**

It can be concluded that there is a lack of awareness among the local authority on some policies imposed by the government regarding the historic buildings. Therefore, efforts need to be done. On the other hand, this study has led to the result that, there is the importance of conserving the heritage buildings in Qebah town to the residents. Besides functional as tourism landmark and attraction to the region as all, heritage buildings are efficient in protecting the scenic beauty of Qebah town. However, the lack of resource of knowledge and exposure to the residents on any conservation efforts throughout the country especially heritage sites like Qebah town is to look into. Residents both with the local authority awareness should be seriously harnessed through promotions and educations nationwide. The study recommends the Continuous promotion should be held via mass media and events such as newspaper, television, radio, brochures as well as the internet to create more awareness among all level of society. On the hole, the findings of the research suggest that the building within the area were well sustained and the buildings can be a part of the economic diversity. The residents had both positive and negative perceptions on the Neglecting building (king Abdul-Aziz palace), but the majority of them find the historic buildings as suitable places to improve their life with some strategies are thus needed to ensure the continuation of sustainability.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia for providing administrative and technical support.

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