

# OMAN'S URBAN TURN

Why research urbanization in Oman? ETH Studio Basel's interest in Oman can be summarized by the same parameters that have led to the founding of the German University of Technology with a Department of Architecture and Urban Design in Oman seven years ago. The Sultanate is in a state of transition witnessing unprecedented economic and population growth. This wealth is based on diminishing fossil fuel resources. The social structures are deeply rooted in traditional tribal systems. Millennia of cultural heritage and un-spoiled landscapes are the assets with which the country aims to attract tourism. At the same time Muscat features an extremely hot and humid climate. These parameters hint at the larger question of durable development, of which urban development is the key component. ETH SB's study on this dynamic territory complements a larger project of examining different global phenomena of transformation, and can be seen as much as a project in documenting, analyzing and visualizing, as a territorial design project.



Highway Sohar to Al Ain (UAE), Studio Basel Preparation Trip 2012

Urbanization in Muscat differs from the development of cities like Dubai or Doha which have now become synonymous for the modernization of the Arab Gulf. Unlike the Emirati city-states run by single families, Oman is characterized by a fragmented tribal culture. The topographic setting of Muscat between the Indian Ocean and the Hajar mountains is opposed to the flat coasts of the Gulf. Reflecting on traditions the government restricts the use of steel and glass in the architecture and limits the height of buildings to eight stories. As a result urban development is decentralized, low-rise and sprawling. The necessary infrastructure required to maintain a city of the areal expanse of Los Angeles with a fourth of the population density has long reached absurd dimensions. The dependency on cars and the production of water and electricity by burning fossil fuels make Muscat one of the least sustainable cities in the world. Yet these specific differences to other Gulf cities, and the necessity to react to vanishing resources, poise Oman to potentially become a showcase for sustainable urbanization in the Arab world. Imported models of sustainability, as currently applied in the Abu Dhabi 2020 Vision or the Dubai Green Building Guidelines are proving inadequate for the local climatic, cultural and economic conditions. An Omani model of sustainable urban development needs to source the specific local conditions – a dedicated aim of the research conducted by GUTech.

The exchange with Studio Basel was furthermore an experiment in architectural education. Students of a European background join forces with students of Arab and Indian backgrounds. Undergraduates meet graduating students, young women and men work together across cultural barriers. To do so, both teams adopted a format of symposia, workshops and field trips to explore, research, map and synthesize the territory of urban transformation. This pedagogical experiment exposed both sides to a culture otherwise only remotely accessible to them. The exchange allowed the young researchers to penetrate and absorb their respective counterparts lives, thought-processes and design methods. Each group of two Western and four Arab students formed a mobile urban research squad, constantly recording the city and its territory with digital media, updating and cross-referencing their peers. Collectively, they produced an astonishing database of photos, maps, figures, diagrams and interviews forming the base of this study. As such this exchange was also an experiment in collective authorship, where the nightly downloads of memory sticks and the planning of the next day's agenda resembled a cybernetic feedback loop. ETH Studio Basel's visit to Muscat in March 2013 coincided

with a research project entitled "Towards Sustainable Patterns of Urbanization in Oman" conducted at GUTech with the sponsorship of The Research Council of Oman. Both works done in multi-disciplinary teams examine Muscat from different angles. While one attempts to understand a territory in its breadth, the other research focuses on urbanization patterns by mapping case studies, analyzing land use policies and preparing recommendations for sustainable development. Both works come at a crucial moment when Oman is about to develop a comprehensive national spatial strategy targeted for 2016, implement a GCC wide railway network, open a port and freight terminal in Duqm and expand the cities located along the Batinah coastal plain and in the interior. The dynamic of transformation is un-precedented in the region and the process is manifold. Oman is urban!

Aurel Freiherr von Richthofen, GUTech, Oman, 2013