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OMAN'S PATH TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Oman is a site of pre-historic human habitation, stretching back over 100,000 years. The region experienced significant influence from various powerful invaders, such as other Arab tribes, as well as colonial powers like Portugal and Britain. At its zenith, Oman extended its reach from the Persian Gulf to as far south as the island of Madagascar, with notable territories including Zanzibar, Mogadishu, and Gwadar. The objectives of this research are to develop a comprehensive understanding of the history of urban development in Oman since 1970, and to provide insights into the decision-making processes that have taken place during this period. Additionally, it aims to explore contemporary decision-making processes in urban planning, including the perspectives of decision-makers and citizens on urban sustainability. The study seeks to identify both the challenges and successes in these areas and to formulate an improved strategy for urban planning that ensures an effective and equitable sustainable urban future. The study has been carried out in several phases, beginning with the identification of key dimensions of urban sustainability relevant to this research. It then proceeds to map the history of urban development planning, highlighting its main objectives, policies, milestones, and challenges. A triangulated methodology was employed to conduct this research and approach that consists of: historical analysis of milestones and projects within the development of town planning in Oman over the past forty years, semi-structured interviews of decision makers, and the assessment of behavior and attitudes of the general public towards sustainability through the use of focus groups and questionnaires. The research focused on several case studies from existing districts in Muscat, the capital of Oman. The study was structured around 16 urban sustainability dimensions (USDs), which serve as a comprehensive agenda for any in-depth examination of urban sustainability specific to Oman.

Keywords: *Urban Development; Town Planning; Urban Sustainability.*

Introduction

Similar to its neighboring countries, Oman has experienced remarkable social and economic growth over the past few decades. This growth has been primarily driven by the oil sector, leading to a somewhat one-dimensional socio-economic development. The government has consistently sought to balance the exploitation of natural resources with its development agenda, demonstrating an early commitment to sustainability and environmental protection. However, the pressure to make substantial investments in development and economic progress has significantly influenced its success in maintaining this balance. Therefore, it is crucial to address this issue within the context of urban sustainability.

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The core contribution of this thesis lies in analyzing the decision-making process related to urban planning and development in Oman over the past forty years. This analysis is aimed at guiding these processes towards a more sustainable urban future.

The research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of urban development in Oman since 1970, offering insights into the decision-making processes during this period. Additionally, it seeks to understand contemporary urban planning decision-making processes, including the perspectives of decision-makers and citizens on urban sustainability. The research also aims to identify challenges and successes in these areas and to develop an improved urban planning strategy that supports an effective and equitable sustainable urban future.

The study has progressed through several phases. Initially, it identified the key dimensions of urban sustainability relevant to the research. This was followed by mapping the history of urban development planning, focusing on its main objectives, policies, milestones, and challenges. The research utilized a triangulated methodological approach, which included a historical analysis of milestones and projects in Oman's town planning over the past forty years, semi-structured interviews with decision-makers, and an assessment of public attitudes towards sustainability through focus groups and questionnaires.

The research centered on case studies of existing districts in Muscat, Oman's capital. The study's framework comprised 16 urban sustainability dimensions (USDs), which serve as a critical agenda for any in-depth examination of urban sustainability specific to Oman. The problem analysis phase produced a list of issues, challenges, constraints, and drivers that can be used to enhance future urban development. It was evident that Oman had undertaken serious strategy development across various urban development disciplines, particularly up to 1995. The process analysis phase revealed a gap between strategy development and implementation, with the research identifying 14 strategy shortcomings and 24 implementation shortcomings. As a result of this analysis, the research offers a comprehensive list of recommendations for each urban sustainability dimension, which can assist consultants and professionals in developing and implementing future urban planning strategies.

Future research could involve translating these urban sustainability dimensions into indicators to measure progress and success in relation to government actions and other sustainability initiatives. Additionally, a product analysis phase could be conducted, involving case studies within Muscat, to assess the alignment between outcomes and the strategies developed, as well as their implementation. Furthermore, the findings of this research could be tested against the ongoing progress and development of the Oman National Spatial Strategy, which has been under development since 2008.

The qualitative analysis in this research would be enhanced by conducting quantitative analysis into the decision-making process and to measure the gap behind strategy and implementation.

Background of the Case Study

The fact that the way forward for sustainable urban development in Oman is currently being considered through Oman National Spatial Strategy (ONSS), floated as a consultancy tender in 2008 by Supreme Committee for Town Planning (SCTP, 2008b) highlights the significance of strategy development. Moreover, the recent announcement of the government initiative (Observer, 2014), through its recently established Supreme Committee of Planning, to develop the economic vision for Oman 2040 as a follow on from its predecessor Oman 2020 (Economy, 1996), shows the magnitude of confidence on necessity for strategy development. What happens after strategy development is what actually matters the most. The knowledge available in this regards is not sufficient to enable the researcher or the decision maker in establishing best practices and lessons, as well as gaining knowledge about challenges and barriers during the strategy development or the implementation process.

After intriguing the available literature surrounding urban development in Oman, the following gaps were clear:

- History of town planning in Oman is not sufficiently documented.
- The governance, accountabilities, responsibilities and policies in Oman's town planning are somewhat vague, and not adequately understood especially for initiating serious steps towards implementation of sustainability in Oman.
- Society's assessment, behaviour and attitude towards town planning and sustainability

This chapter is intended to introduce Oman as a country within a few contextual dimensions including its physical, historical, economic, and social context. It will be followed by a brief recall of the literature on Oman's urban development and architecture before and after 1970.

Physical Context

Oman is bordered on the northwest by the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E), on the west by Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and on the southwest by the Republic of Yemen. Oman has a total area of around 309,000 sq. km. approximately 82% of the total area is sandy desert; mountains occupy 15% and coastal areas represent only 3% of the total area. Total arable land is around 2.2 million hectares, or 7% of total area with 173,000 acres under cultivation, making the per capita cultivated land about 0.07 acres. The coastline stretches for over 3,165 km along the Arabian/Persian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the Indian Ocean. It has one of the world's hottest and most arid regions which pose many challenges to human settlements, including shortage of water and desertification (UNEP/ROWA, 1993). Along the coast, the climate tends to be more humid, while it is extremely hot and dry in the interior deserts. The southern Region of Dhofar attracts the summer monsoon that arrives from the Indian Ocean which is called alkhareef by the locals.

This section looks at the events in history that shaped the country to its present form. Here, the discussion is designed to acquire some knowledge of the recent history of Oman with special emphasis on the rule of Sultan Qaboos, the current ruler.

Historic Context

This section will look at the events in history that shaped the country to its present form. Here, the discussion is designed to acquire some knowledge of the recent history of Oman with special emphasis on the rule of Sultan Qaboos, the current ruler.

Before 1970

Oman embraced Islam in the seventh century, during the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammed.

Oman has remained independent for most of its history, apart from the invasion by Persia and Portugal. In 1508, Portugal invaded the coastal parts of Oman and remained there for over a century when they were expelled in 1650. Some of their traces are still evident in Muscat with a few defense forts that were built on top of coastal mountains. During the chase against Portugal, The Sultan of Oman extended his rule to Zanzibar and the eastern coast of Africa. At that time, Oman was the strongest empire in the Arabian Peninsula. In 1833, during the rule of Sultan Said bin Sultan, the first Omani ship visited the United States of America and a treaty was signed. The empire also had a strong hold on the Indian Ocean with some degree of control on the ports of Makran and Bandar Abbas in what is known today as Pakistan and Iran. Much of this power started to disintegrate after the death of Sultan Said. The country was divided between his descendants and later, in 1960, Zanzibar became independent of Oman.

Under the rule of Sultan Said bin Taimur (the father of the present-day ruler, Sultan Qaboos), up to 1970, Oman was devastated with conflicts, disease, poverty and illiteracy. Sultan Said inherited a state that was shattered by civil wars and economic burdens that captivated any Development efforts. The country lacked any sort of income and there was no economy as such, apart from insignificant trade and the export of fish and agricultural products (dates and lemons). Many Omanis migrated to nearby states for search of employment as the life for them in Oman was unbearable. The country was divided into two regions: Muscat and the coastline were ruled by the Sultan, and the interior was ruled by an elected Imam, a religious leader. The sultan overthrew the Imam after the conflict in the 1960s which escalated around the period when oil was discovered in the interior desert of Oman. This is how the official version under the current government describes that period in history.

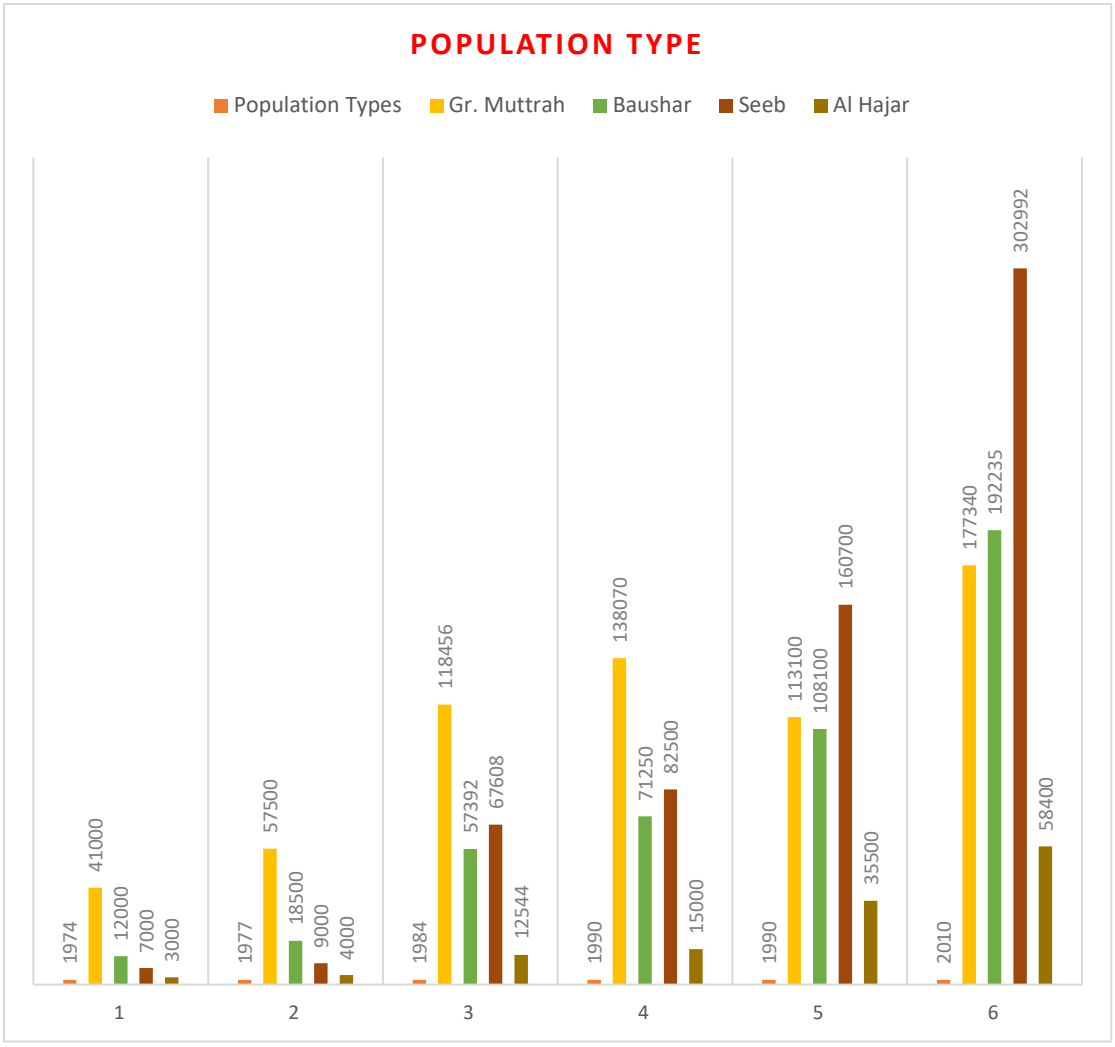
Social Context

The total population of Oman as of end of August 2013 is 3,897,000 (Statistics & Information, 2013). Oman has a young population. 43% of Omani nationals, and 35% of all Omani residents (including non-nationals), are below the age of 15 years. This young population is a challenge as well as a potential for the future development of Oman, and the government is busy with identifying key initiatives to ensure that it creates the best for this young population. Approximately 43.9% are expatriates (Statistics & Information, 2013). Table given below provides a comparison between various statistical forecasts and actual counts for the population in Muscat throughout the last forty years.

Table 1: Population in Muscat governorate by district – comparison between estimated and actual over the last forty Years

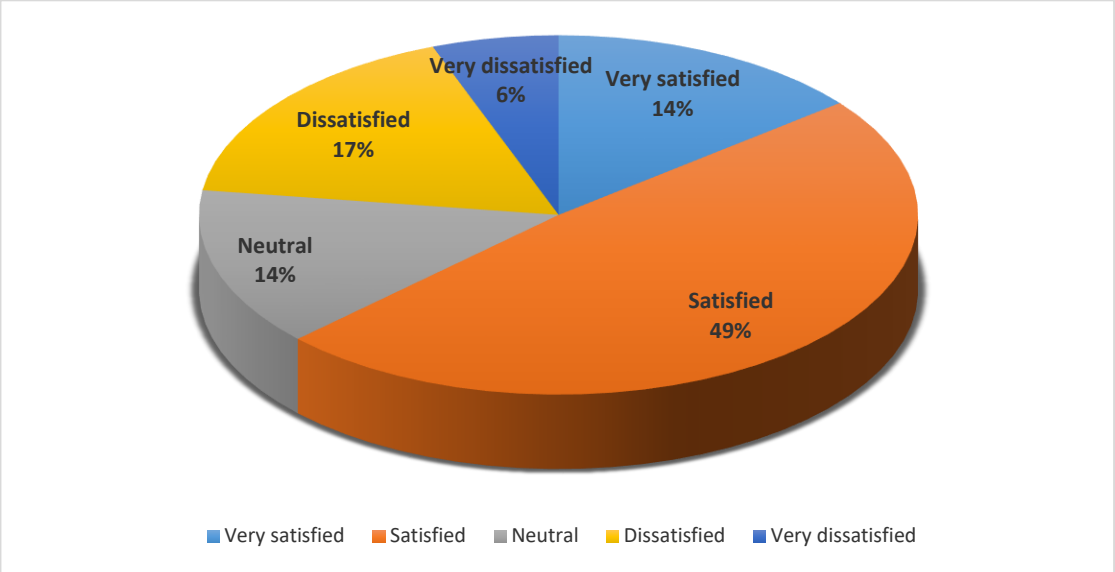
Population Types	1974	1977	1984	1990	1990	2010
Gr. Muttrah	41000	57500	118456	138070	113100	177340
Baushar	12000	18500	57392	71250	108100	192235
Seeb	7000	9000	67608	82500	160700	302992
Al Hajar	3000	4000	12544	15000	35500	58400

(Source: Structure Plan 1977 (Llewelyn-Davies, 1977), Sample Survey 1984, Muscat Regional Plan Phase 1 Survey Report 1989 (Weidleplan and Muamir, 1989b), Muscat Area structural plan phase 2 (Weidleplan and Muamir, 1990a), (Statistics & Information, 2013)



The above figure provides a comparison over 2010 to 2012 for the total population in Oman against the population density and the area for each governorate. Figure 2.3 provides the statistical details for the total population in the Sultanate by nationality from 1985 to 2012. Figure shows the map of Oman against the localities by size of population in 2010. Figure 2.5 shows the Population Pyramid in 2012 for Omanis and for the total population.

How satisfied are you with the current population density in Muscat?						Total
Quick Survey (%)	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	
	14.3	48.6	14.3	17.1	5.7	100
Focus Group (%)	0	73.3	6.7	20	0	100



The above table shows that only 12.5% of the public questionnaires' participants were willing to consider living in a neighborhood with a higher population density in order to improve the sustainability of Muscat. In comparison, table 9.6 shows that 74% of the focus group and quick survey participants agree or strongly agree that living in a neighborhood with a higher population density has an impact on the sustainability of Muscat.

Conclusion

There is always more than one way of looking at an issue and addressing it. One appropriateway, for sure, is to address the issue within its context and not to come to conclusion towards it based only on a wider global view. That's how I have tackled urban sustainability in Oman. Throughout this research, the debate was framed around key urban sustainability dimensions, USDs, which have been carried all the way throughout the research and up to the recommendations. Another clear difference in how I approached this topic is the view that the overall strategic approach towards urban sustainability is our closet bet towards solving theissues surrounding urban development in Muscat and Oman, as opposed to merely a project here and there, or only resorting to push the community to change its lifestyle (energy conservation, etc.) which undoubtedly have shown impressive results in various communities around theworld.

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