



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As with many historical sites in the Gulf region, urban regeneration of the Old Town District of Ras Al Khaimah (RAK), United Arab Emirates (UAE) presents a challenge in maintaining the balance between preservation and refurbishment. This policy paper aims to highlight and convey the significance of the Old Town District as a historical and cultural site to policy makers in the emirate. In doing so, it outlines the District's potential for becoming an agent for the development of RAK through an urban regeneration project.

The paper begins with a brief historical overview of RAK and the urban development of the Old Town District. It then goes on to discuss the opportunities offered by the area. A description of the District's building materials and urban morphology is also discussed. The paper concludes with a list of recommendations for the urban regeneration of Old Town. The author conducted fieldwork and collected data for this paper between 2009 and 2011 as part of two courses for her bachelors and masters degrees at the American University of Sharjah.

## Urban Regeneration Case Study of the Old Town of Ras Al Khaimah

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### Introduction

The Old Town District of Ras Al Khaimah (RAK) presents both an urban challenge and an opportunity for the future urban development of the emirate. RAK is currently at the verge of an economic and urban renaissance whereby the city is embarking on a forward-thinking path towards development. Part of the new development agenda includes greater capitalization of existing touristic strengths, including waterfront development, preservation of the ecological environment, and restoration of historical sites. This has to be achieved while improving the urban quality of the city as a whole for its residents.

One neighborhood of particular interest, as it contains all three strengths, is the Old Town District. The Old Town District of RAK offers a rare urban planning opportunity as there is the possibility that the regeneration of this neighborhood may provide a realistic guide for other such regeneration projects in different parts of the city. This policy brief outlines the historical development of the Old Town District, its current state, and the possibilities for regeneration. The brief concludes with recommendations for policy makers that include seizing the opportunity to pilot a regeneration plan on a smaller scale in the Old Town District rather than waiting decades to witness them on the entire city of RAK.

Figure 1: Map of the Gulf in 1606



(Retrieved May 2011 from <http://www.persianguftonline.org/maps.htm>)

### Historical Development of Ras Al Khaimah

For thousands of years, RAK has been a prominent historical site in the Gulf region. Previously known as Julfar, the city's rich culture, archeological significance, and strategic location as a major trade route has made it attractive to a continuous line of settlers from across Asia, Africa, and Europe. As water currents physically reshaped the coastal boundaries of the city, archaeological evidence illustrates dramatic shifts in Julfar's location over time. This can be seen in a comparison of historic maps (Figures 1, 2, and 3). Archeological excavations prove that early Julfar was located in the Shamal area, geographically closer to other



Figure 2: Map of the Gulf in 1800's



(Retrieved May 2011 from <http://www.persiangulfonline.org/maps.htm> taken from the book *The Arabian Peninsula in Old European maps*)

Figure 3: Map of the present-day Gulf



(Retrieved May 2011 from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/media/1998/The-Persian-Gulf>)

historical sites such as Sheba's Palace and the Umm Al Nar tombs, the largest tombs in the Arabian Peninsula. Julfar then shifted closer to present-day Iran (Rogers, 1995).

One of RAK's greatest historic architectural structures was its defense wall. Built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the wall shielded RAK from invading enemies. The wall was impeccably designed to include watchtowers and a strong fort or *ghuree* on the southwestward side of the wall. Further protection was offered by an army of 6,000 to 7,000 men and a navy of about 80 boats with mounted guns. Friendly relations with Bandar Lingah, a harbor city in present-day Iran, also added to the city's overall defense system as boats were stationed there to act in anticipation of attacks. Julfar's strategic relations with nearby harbor cities furthered its success in trade (Rogers, 1995).

“The wall was impeccably designed to include watchtowers and a strong fort or *ghuree* on the southwestward side of the wall.”

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Qawasim sheikhs established the port of Ras Al Khaimah as their capital, but ensured that their power extended beyond the coastal boundaries and into the Hajar Mountains of Oman (Heard-Bey, 2004). By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British had become more aware of the Qawasims' expanding trade. They considered the Qawasims a serious threat to the British East India Company's trade in the Indian Ocean and to British imperialism as a whole. In an effort to remove the Qawasims' hold on RAK, the British navy seized RAK between December 1819 and July 1821. After finding a common threat in the Ottoman Turks, the British and the Qawasims signed the *General Maritime Treaty of 1820* under Sheikh Sultan bin Saqr Al Qasimi. The treaty made RAK a protectorate of Britain. However, further expansion of the British rule eventually led Sheikh Saqr bin Muhammad Al Qasimi to unite RAK with the UAE, making it the last emirate to join the country on February 11, 1972 (Rogers, 1995).

## Old Town District Since the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

### Geography

The Old Town District is the site of first human settlement in RAK and has an area of about one square kilometer (Figure 4). The very tip of Old Town is located at latitude 25°48'26.66"N and longitude 55°57'1.31"E (Google Earth, 2011).

The strategic location of RAK's Old Town District on a peninsula with direct access to the Gulf encouraged rapid human settlement. RAK's location was more favorable than the other emirates as it was the first settlement a boat would encounter as it entered the Gulf after passing

through the Strait of Hormuz from the Indian Ocean. People used the Gulf for fishing, pearling, and trading with other countries (Kay, 1994).

### Urban Development

According to Percy Cox (1925), "The town of Ras Al Khaimah is built on a long narrow spit of sand running parallel to the coast and enclosing between it and the mainland a wide lagoon which provides a very convenient and sheltered anchorage. It was this quality, no doubt, which made it such a popular resort for pirate craft in days gone by." As the settlement grew into the peninsula, it became the primary area where fishermen, traders, and pearl merchants resided (Lancaster, 2011).

Figure 4: Map of RAK with Old Town District highlighted



(Image from Google Earth May 2011 and analyzed by author)

“The town of Ras Al Khaimah is built on a long narrow spit of sand running parallel to the coast and enclosing between it and the mainland a wide lagoon which provides a very convenient and sheltered anchorage.”

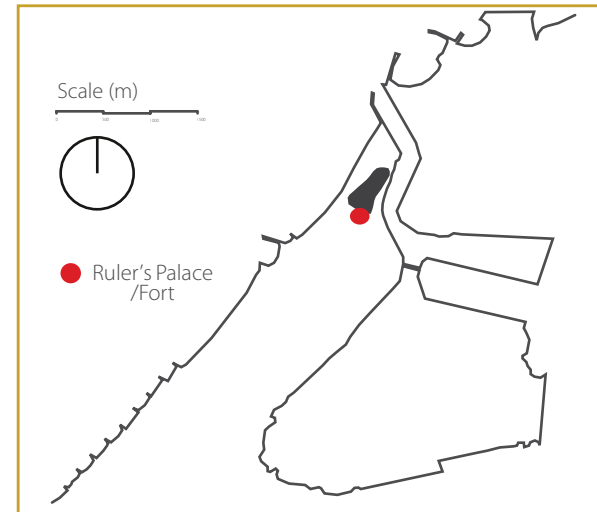


Figure 5: Aerial photograph of RAK in 1935



(Image provided by Christian Velde February 2011)

Figure 6: Map of development in RAK in 1935



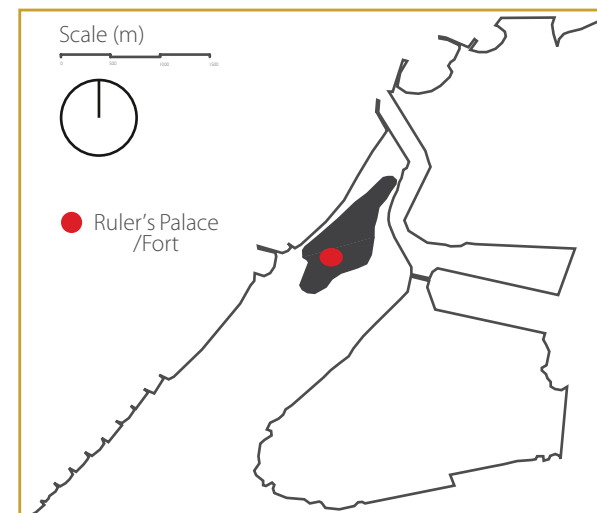
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Figure 7: Aerial photograph of RAK in 1961



(Image provided by Christian Velde February 2011)

Figure 8: Map of development in RAK in 1961



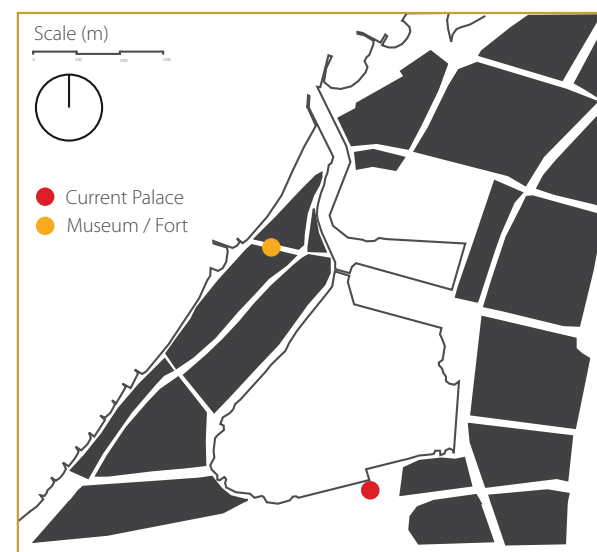
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Figure 9: Aerial photograph of RAK in 2012



(Image created from Google Earth May 2011)

Figure 10: Map of development in RAK in 2012



(Image created by author)

Aerial images illustrate the evolution of urban development in the Old Town District throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate how minimal development was in 1935, with the ruler's palace at the southern edge of the settlement. By 1961 the city had grown further into the peninsula shifting the ruler's palace towards the south, maintaining its protective and strategic location at the unprotected edge of the town (Figures 7 and 8). Figures 9 and 10 show the development of RAK today, including the palace of the current ruler and the earlier palace which is now the Ras Al Khaimah National Museum.

### Significance

The Old Town District is the most authentic and least manipulated site out of all the UAE's historic settlement cores, and it contains the most preserved urban fabric. For example, the historic core of Sharjah was very much refurbished when the process of restoration began in the 1990s in an effort to recapture the past and the emirate's identity. Dubai's historic core, a prominent tourist destination currently known as Bastakiya, lost most of its authenticity when it was destroyed in the 1970s to make way for new development projects (Dalmuji, 2006).

In addition to being the least manipulated historic settlement in the UAE, RAK's Old Town District remained far more complacent with traditional Arabic architecture styles than its counterparts across the country. According to archaeologist Christian Velde, "The wind towers and the decoration on the outside of buildings in Bastakiya is all brought from the other side of the Gulf " (Reinl, 2007). However, this is not the case in RAK where the decoration remained inherently of an authentic Arabic character (Figure 11) (Reinl, 2007).

The significance of RAK's Old Town District as being an accurate representation of the entire emirate lies in the fact that it highlights RAK's three primary attractions: unspoiled waterfront, historical heritage, and an ecologically significant environment (Figure 12).

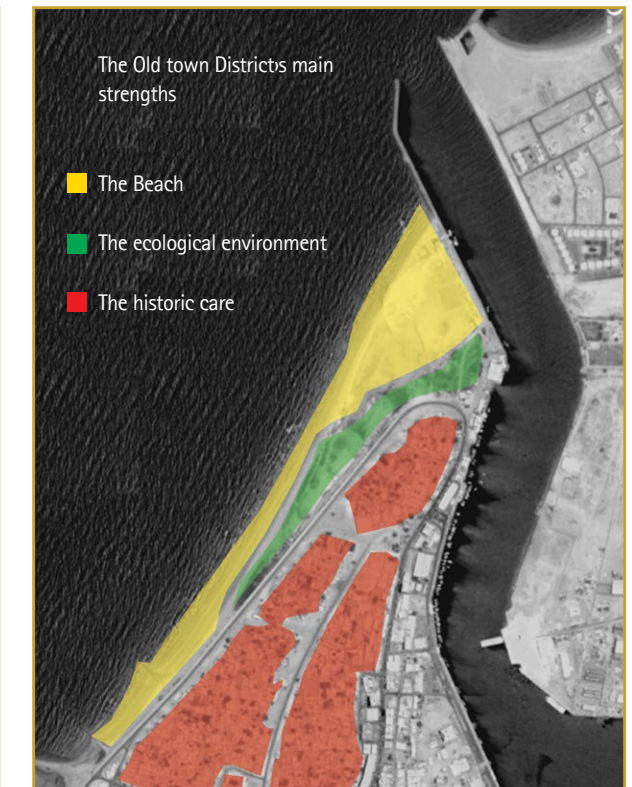
The Old Town District is the most authentic and least manipulated site out of all the UAE's historic settlement cores.

Figure 11: Building decoration in RAK's Old Town District



(Image by author)

Figure 12: Tourist strengths of the Old Town District



(Image from Google Earth May 2011 and analyzed by author)



Figure 13: Inhabitants of Old Town shopping at the area's eastern commercial district



(Image by author)

Figure 14: Barren, unused land surrounding buildings in the Old Town District



(Image by author)

Figure 15: Dilapidated condition of buildings in Old Town



(Image by author)

Another significant characteristic is that the Old Town District is still inhabited and alive with both residential and commercial activity rather than being abandoned such as Jazirat Al Hamra (Figure 13). This makes rejuvenating the area that much more essential and urgent.

Historical Structures

Most buildings within the historic core are one-story residential spaces and are surrounded by areas of barren, unused land (Figure 14). Many buildings also contain internal courtyards. Due to the lack of maintenance and proximity to the Gulf Sea, most buildings are incredibly dilapidated (Figure 15). They are made out of *sarooj* or sun-dried bricks consisting of limestone and coral (Figures 16 and 17). These materials were readily available when the buildings were constructed and very much suited to the harsh environment. The courtyard arrangement helped in creating a cooling effect by way of convection currents. Moreover, the porous corals allowed for the breeze to actually penetrate the buildings and cool them down (Damluji, 2006).

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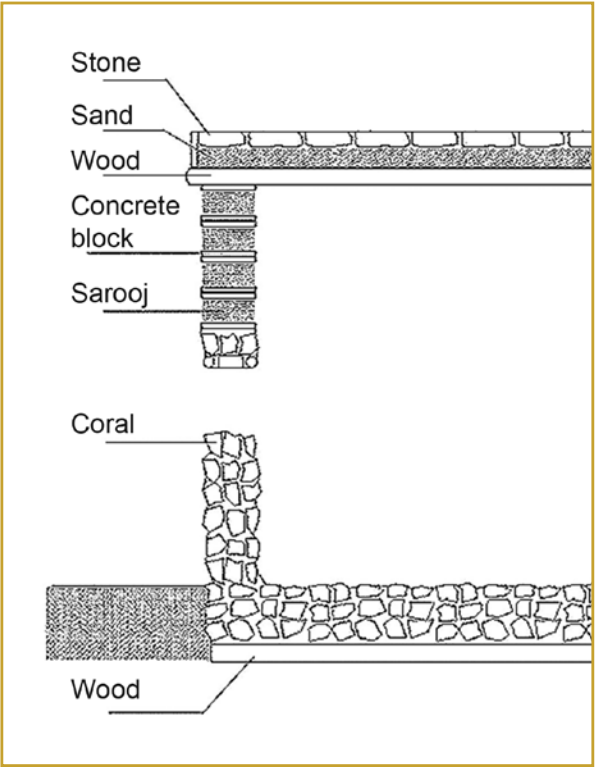
Urban Morphology

The Old Town District of RAK holds certain defining architectural elements, which Samia Rab (2011) discusses in her article entitled *Sharjah: Seascape Urbanism in a Khaliji Port City*. According to Rab, port cities in the Gulf all boasted similar urban elements. These elements were the *souq*, *al hisn*, *sahil* and *fareej* (Figure 18, next page). The

*souq* is the market where goods were exchanged and was strategically located near the *sahil* or water's edge. *Al hisn* is the fort and ruler's residence generally located at the very edge of the *fareej* or residential neighborhood.

RAK's Old Town District also had a tight, intricate, and organic urban form. In his book *History of Urban Form: Before the Industrial Revolutions*, Morris quotes Hassan Fathy who explains why the tightly woven organic urban fabric was "universally adopted by the Arabs" for various reasons (Morris, 1996).

Figure 16: Layers of many buildings in the Old Town District



(Image from author's studio group February 2011)

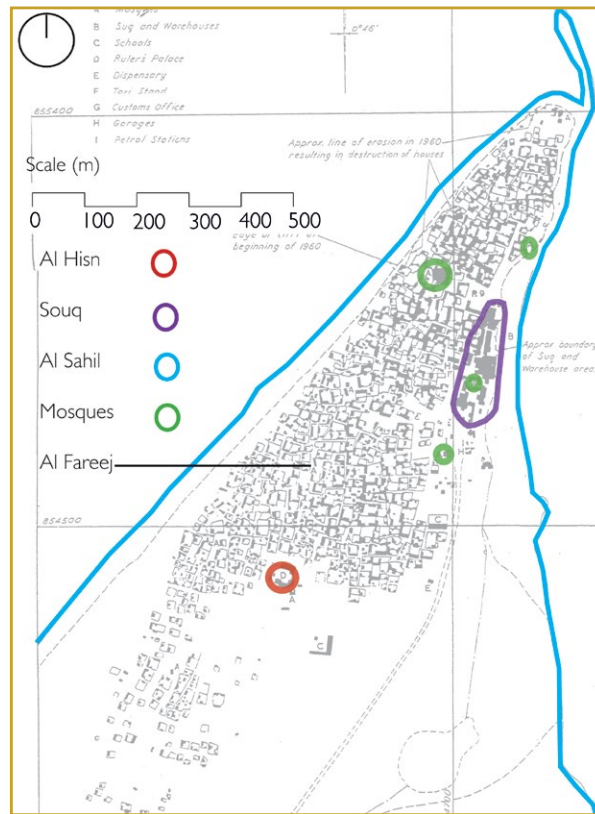
Figure 17: Coral and mud breaks used in buildings



(Image by author)

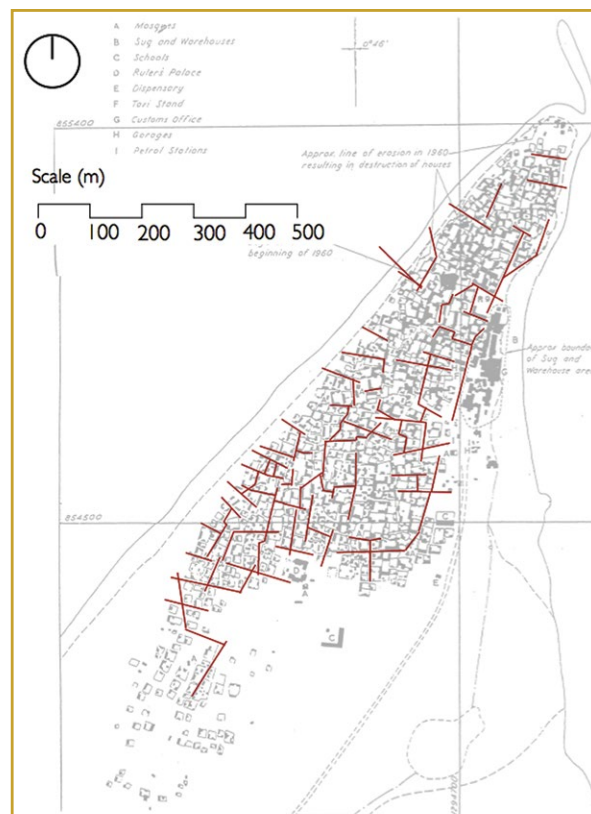


**Figure 18: Urban morphology of the Old Town District**



(Image provided by Halcrow and analyzed by author)

**Figure 19: Private narrow streets and cul de sacs of Old Town District**



(Image provided by Halcrow and analyzed by author)

According to Fathy, the narrow winding streets enabled residents to avoid the "hot desert winds." Houses were clustered together to "facilitate domestic domain security and which was to become an essential characteristic of Islamic Urban Morphology." The narrow surrounding lanes were to be used only by the recognized owners of the houses and not by outsiders whose presence would be noticeable (Figure 19). Instead, the settlement utilized the souq as a public space that "promoted social encounters." Although it was not created solely for that purpose, it accommodated most of the public activity of the settlement. Mosques also served as public spaces where people met and congregated five times a day for prayer (Kostof, 1999).

According to contemporary scholar Besim Hakim (Morris, 1996), another reason for adopting the organic urban fabric of the Old Town District is because the traditional Islamic city lacked wheeled vehicles. The use of wheeled vehicles would have mandated the creation of straight streets to ease the maneuver of these vehicles. However,

Most of the area's residents are unaware of its historic value.

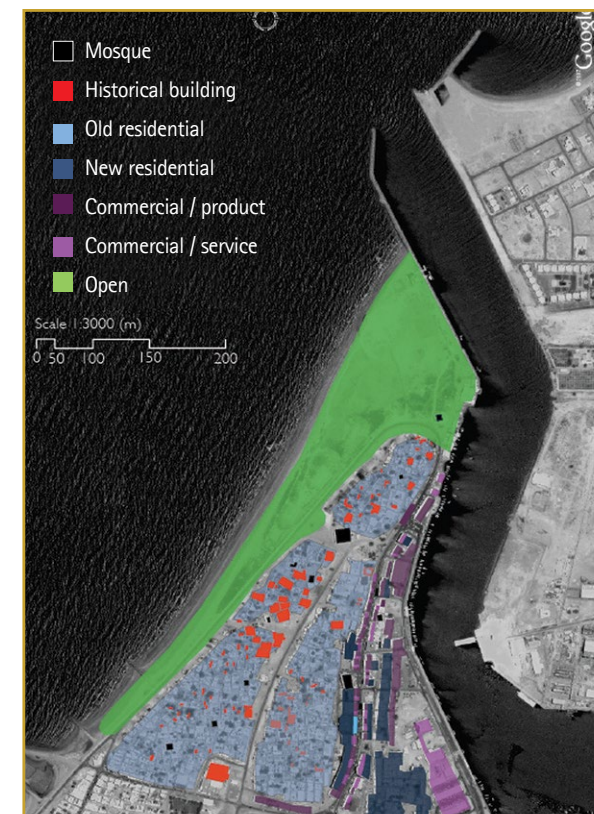
the streets needed to be wide enough for animal traffic only. Finally Hakim stresses the importance of need-based incremental expansion of the settlement. RAK's Old Town District was a combination of what Rab refers to as "Gulf

Port Cities" and what Morris terms "Islamic cities of the Middle East" (1996).

### Present

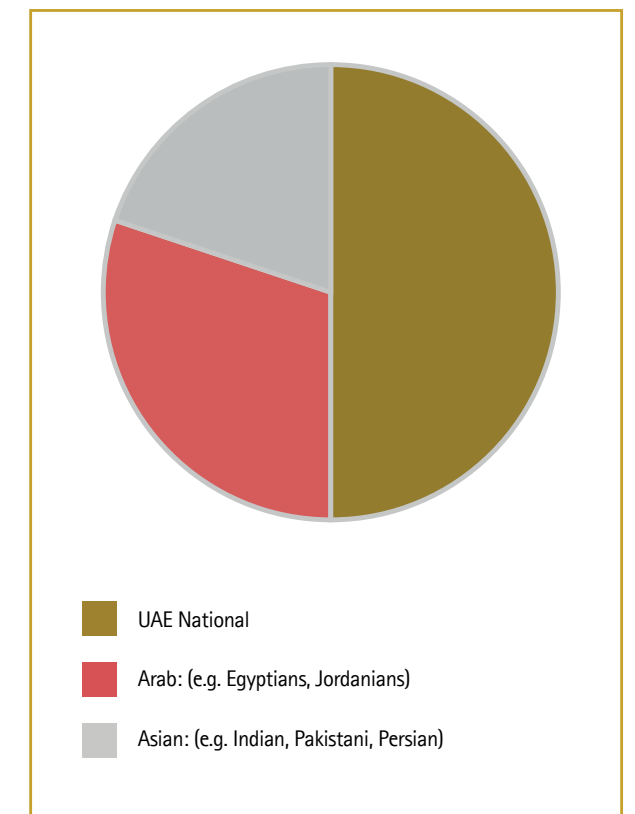
Today, the Old Town District exists in a very fragmented state. As Figure 20 illustrates, the area contains linear land-use layers segmenting the site into vertical strips extending from the northwest to the southeast. The land-use layers include an old residential area, a new residential area, a commercial district, another new residential area, and another commercial district in that order from west to east. The separation between the commercial and residential areas began only recently after the oil boom when low-rise apartment buildings emerged and created new residential layers further separating the old layers.

**Figure 20: Present-day land use zoning in Old Town**



(Image from Google Earth May 2011 and analyzed by author)

**Figure 21: Nationality of residents in the Old Town District in 2005**



(RAK 2005 Census)

The old residential area, which contains the historic core, hosted the first homes of the local Emirati people in RAK. The majority of locals, however, abandoned the area when the government provided them with new housing and modern amenities after the oil boom in the 1970s (Frauke, 2004). Each of the land-use layers is attributed to a different type of stakeholder today (Figure 21). According to the RAK 2005 Census, the old residential area currently houses low-income expatriate residents—primarily from the Indian subcontinent—who adapted the historic buildings to fit their needs (Figure 22). The new residential areas contain a mix of Arab, Iranian, and Indian subcontinent middle-income expatriate residents. The commercial district houses a mix of local and expatriate shop owners and fishermen who work in the area.

### Methodology & Results

Upon concluding academic courses where the author studied RAK's Old Town District from current and historical urban perspectives, she conducted a series of site visits to develop recommendations for the area's regeneration as a pilot project for the rest of RAK. The site visits were conducted during different times of day and on different days of the week in order to observe how people within the Old Town District interacted and

**Figure 22: Modern air conditioner perforations in historic walls**



(Image by author)

inhabited the space. During the course of the visits, the author conducted 25 interviews with a random sample of people from Old Town. The author approached Emirati merchants and fishermen as well as expatriates and spoke to women in the souk as well as laborers residing in the area. The author even spoke to some of the children playing between the houses. After moving to RAK herself, the author later spoke to an additional 25 people who are residents of other neighborhoods in RAK.

In the Old Town District itself, the author discovered that most of the area's residents are unaware of its historic value. The various urban layers within Old Town don't interact or influence one another except through the commercial activity as illustrated in Figure 23. The different stakeholders do not convene regularly and that has contributed to further social segregation.

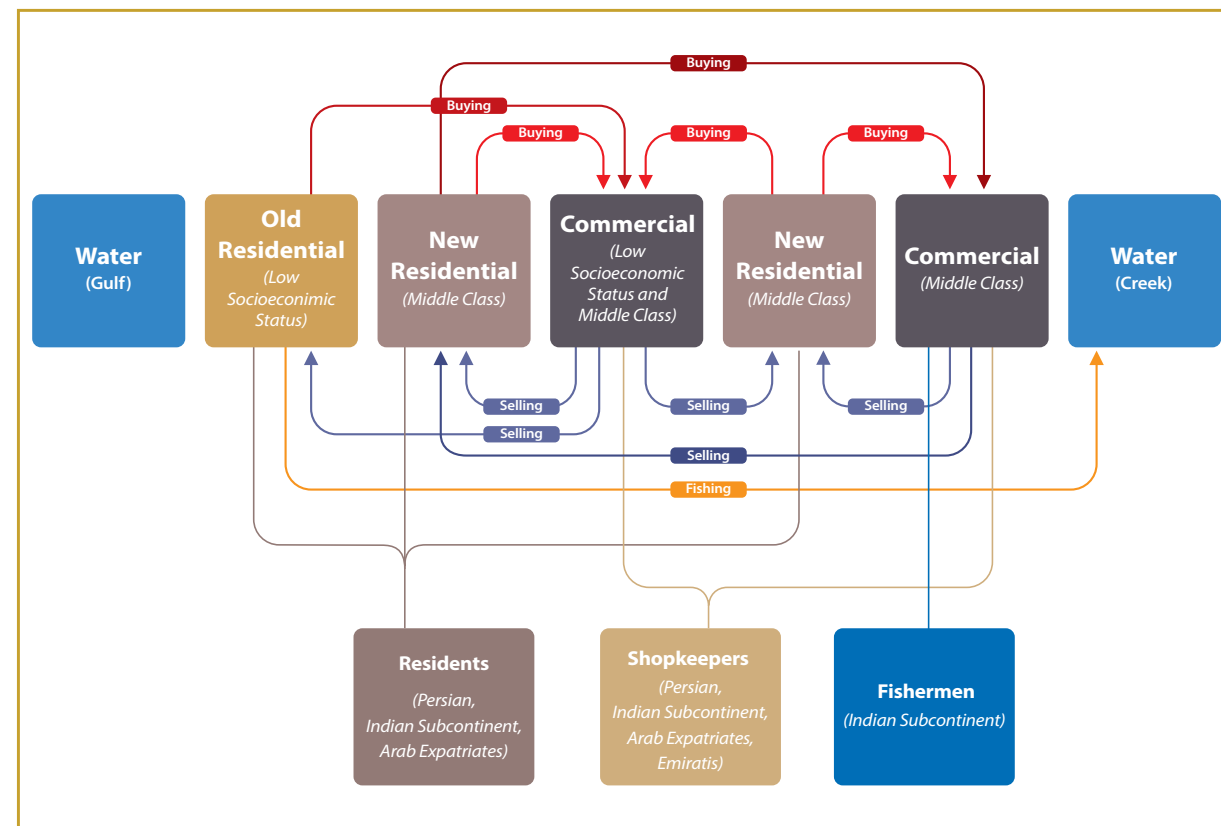
In the rest of RAK, most of the expatriate residents are also unaware of the Old Town District's significant historic value. The area's segmented state and peninsular seclusion, combined with the lack of vehicular or pedestrian access except from the southern edge, further obscures the historical significance of Old Town and contributes to its anonymity.

## Challenges to Regeneration

RAK faces many significant challenges that need to be addressed before initiating the regeneration of the Old Town District and developing the area to its full potential. The first major concern is the fact that many historic houses are still privately owned by Emirati families. Some of these houses have been rented to immigrants and are a source of income to the owners. The government will have to find a way to either negotiate with the owners or re-claim the houses and provide just compensation. It should be noted, however, that often times the owner's agreement is critical and difficult to attain (Reinl, 2007). In addition to owning some of the area's houses, a number of Emirati owners work in the eastern commercial area of Old Town. These individuals have more at stake financially even though they don't reside in the area. They are among the major stakeholders, and their support will factor greatly into the success of the regeneration process (Reinl, 2007).

The second issue that has to be addressed before work commences is the disposal of garbage in the area. The Old Town District suffers from a serious land pollution issue whereby the streets and corners are all used as informal dumping grounds for residents. The garbage will not only have to be cleared, but a new disposal system will need to be designed and implemented as part of the regeneration process.

Figure 23: Current vertical land use layers and stakeholder activities in Old Town



“Architects should refrain from transforming the old houses into modern structures. This approach would not only detract from the uniqueness of the traditional houses but would also intensify the artificial architecture of the new structures.”

The third challenge is finding the right team of people to undertake the regeneration process who are aware of RAK's history, culture, heritage, and significance. This knowledge would guide them to implement a planning system that is specifically tailored for RAK's Old Town District as opposed to importing a culturally irrelevant Western model.

The final obstacle is in devising a suitable approach to regenerate RAK's Old Town District. This depends largely on the dedication of designers and restoration teams to preserving the area's history at the initial stages of the project development. Care needs to be taken to not over-work the area to the point that it loses its historic identity. The architects will also be required to balance "new" additions with the "old" in order not to overwhelm or obscure traditional houses with large, modern, or extreme structures. At the same time, architects should refrain from transforming the old houses into modern structures. This approach would not only detract from the uniqueness of the traditional houses but would also intensify the artificial architecture of the new structures. Therefore, a middle ground needs to be achieved whereby the new structures are different and genuinely modern yet do not over-shadow the older buildings. In conducting the project, planners should also ensure they collaborate closely with tourism authorities in order to maintain the neighborhood's original authenticity.

## Recommendations

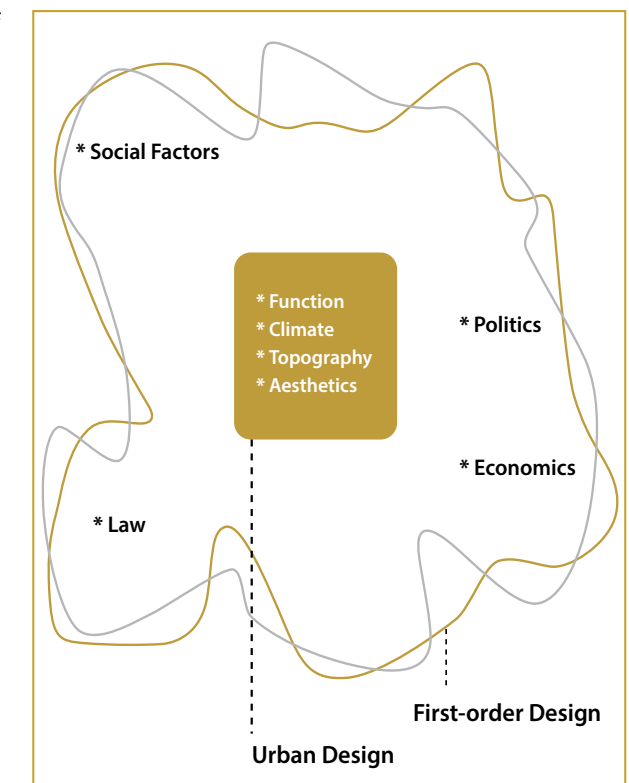
### Recommendation Area #1: Take an urban perspective

Once all of the challenges are addressed, planners would need to capitalize on all of the opportunities that RAK's Old Town District has to offer. Programs and functions

would need to be proposed to maximize the strengths of the area and to promote its development. All of the proposed programs would be required to generate an income for the neighborhood's stakeholders and at the same time be sustainable, location appropriate, and aim to stitch the segregated urban layers together. This can be achieved only through careful consideration of each project's effects on an urban scale (which covers the entire neighborhood) rather than on an architectural scale (which only considers the project's site). This responsibility lies with the urban planners and designers rather than with the hired renovation architects.

Varki George (1997) explains the need for the urban design profession in his article *A Procedural Explanation for Contemporary Urban Design*. His argument that urban design is a "second order relationship" as opposed to an architect's "first order relationship" with the designed object (in this case, Old Town) expresses how an urban designer's approach needs to be far more inclusive and considerate of the design environment (Figure 24). In taking on this role, the urban designer acts much like the architect, as well as the decision-making body due to the multiple and varied stakeholders involved in the process (George, 1997).

Figure 24: The role of the urban designer



(Image provided by Varkii George)



## Recommendation Area #2: Optimize strengths

In proceeding with the development of the urban plan, planners should identify, recognize, and then optimize the Old Town District's main strengths, both from a cultural and design standpoint. The area has three important strengths for attracting tourists and employing residents:

- First, Old Town contains a significant portion of RAK's historic remains given the area's derelict houses and renovated museum (Figures 25 and 26). These historic remains are valuable as they are true representations of RAK's heritage. The spaces surrounding the buildings can be formalized and made accessible for tourists. The residents can be employed in providing hospitality services and tours
- The second important strength is the long stretch of undeveloped, perfectly usable sandy beach (Figure 27). This beach is long enough to accommodate a high-end development for tourists and visitors as well as a completely serviced public beach to serve the public.
- Third, RAK's Old Town District contains an ecological environment that needs to be protected and can be used to attract ecological tourism, in the form of ecological parks for example. The area contains

to a growing tourist population. This would not only foster cooperation amongst residents and generate higher income within the tourism sector, but it would also assist low income expatriates residing in the area through the creation of new jobs and increased economic activity.

Figure 25: National Museum of Ras Al Khaimah located in the Old Town District



(Image by author)

Figure 26: Historic buildings in Old Town



(Image by author)

a rich array of naturally occurring plants that offer a diverse animal and bird habitat as illustrated in Figure 28.

## Recommendation Area #3: Consider open space and social impacts

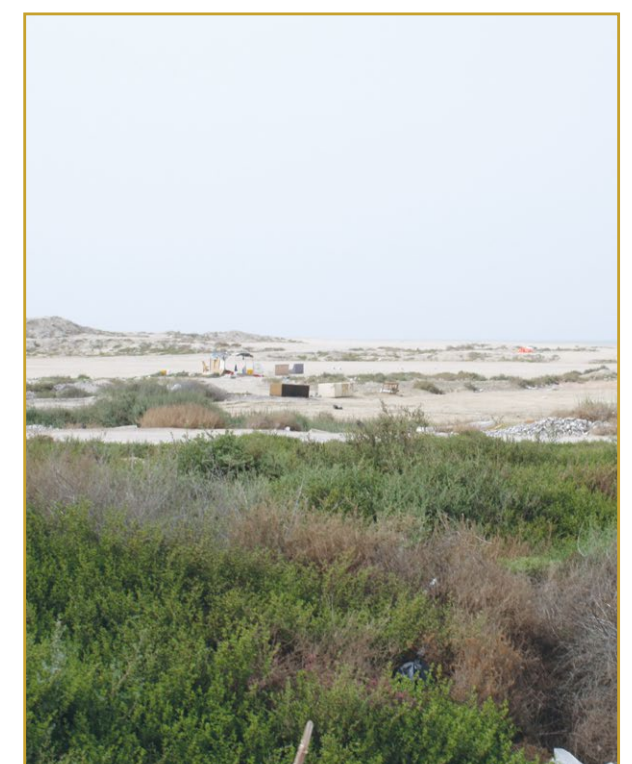
- The planners also need to optimize the Old Town District's potential for the stakeholders previously discussed. This includes addressing the multiple open spaces within the area's urban fabric that are waiting to be utilized, as well as the existing market that can be further developed, formalized, and shaded.
- Another type of open space is the road Halcrow created, which divided Old Town's historic urban fabric (Figure 29, next page). Although creating a road by demolishing historic buildings is an uninformed method to revitalize the area, the space can still be positively utilized. It can be turned into a pedestrian-only traditional souq that parallels and complements the existing eastern souq. The souq can also be made auto-accessible to services at certain times of the day using bollards, for example.
- Another social issue that needs to be tackled in the Old Town District is the lack of a communal feel. The neighborhood needs a supportive environment where entertainment and extracurricular activities
- According to the 2005 RAK census, the population of Old Town is primarily comprised of Muslims and Hindus (Figure 31, next page). Although the neighborhood does a good job appealing to the Muslims by hosting many mosques, it does not host a Hindu temple to appeal to the Hindus' sense of loyalty and community. Therefore, building a temple could be an effective use of the available spaces, for instance.
- Finally transportation within the neighborhood needs to be adapted with the aim of connecting the neighborhood to the rest of RAK and reduce its isolation. This could be achieved through adding a second bridge that mimics the action of Al Hisn Bridge, which connects the tip of the peninsula to the area of Mamoura. This bridge can be made shallow with slow traffic that seamlessly accommodates Mamoura's traffic. The bridge will improve visibility and accessibility to the Old Town District through enhancing linkage to and interaction with the rest of RAK.

Figure 27: Undeveloped beach in the Old Town District



(Image by author)

Figure 28: Natural ecological environment in Old Town



(Image by author)



Figure 29: Map depicting areas affected by policy recommendations

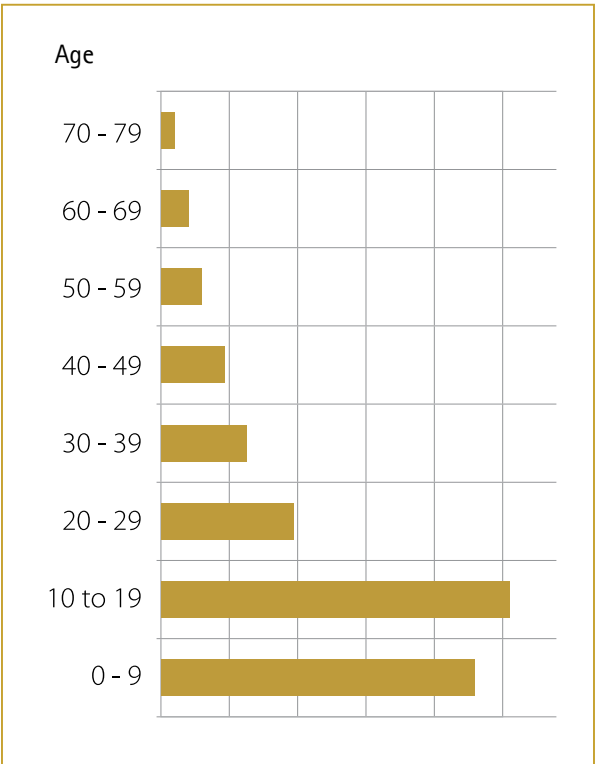


(Image from Google Earth May 2011 and analyzed by author)

## Conclusion

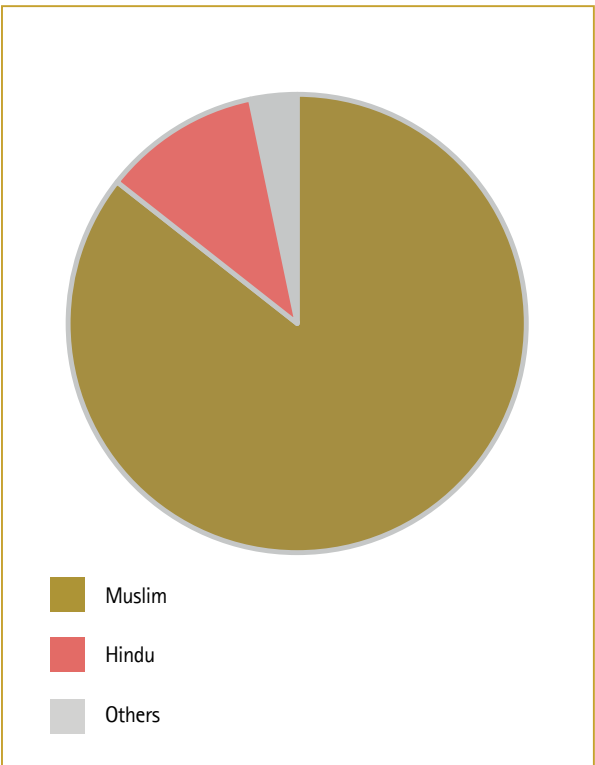
The Old Town District has much to offer the emirate of RAK: unspoiled waterfront, historical heritage, and an ecologically significant environment. Old Town has natural human resources found in its residents and stakeholders that can allow for building a self-sustaining neighborhood. If appropriate actions are taken by decision makers and municipal bodies to take advantage of these resources, then the regeneration of RAK's Old Town District can be deemed successful. If managed efficiently and effectively, these resources can transform Old Town into RAK's most established district providing a unique and authentic experience for both its residents and visitors. The neighborhood can become a mixing node for different cultures and backgrounds to coexist in a healthy urban and communal environment. It can also offer residents immense social and economic benefits through its newly devised urban life. Along with renewed economic and social wellbeing, a regenerated Old Town District can provide residents with new appreciation for the rich heritage their city holds. Successful regeneration is also likely to attract attention from surrounding countries. It can also allow RAK to further develop its economic sectors. In doing so, the development of the Old Town District may allow planners to foresee the effects of regenerating the rest of RAK's urban neighborhoods, which contain similar resources on a larger scale.

Figure 30: Ages of residents in the Old Town District in 2005



(RAK 2005 Census)

Figure 31: Religious affiliations of residents in the Old Town District in 2005



(RAK 2005 Census)

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- Enrich the local public sector, especially education, by providing educators and civil servants in Ras Al Khaimah with tools to make a positive impact on their own society, and
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