

OMAN – HERITAGE @ RISK!



Mirbat (South Oman), collapsed house of a rich merchant (Beit Sidouf)



Mirbat, collapsed house



View of the city of Birkat (North Oman)



When Oman made its great development in the early 1970s towards a most modern nation, a major change also took place in the lifestyle: people left their traditional housing and built new houses with modern material and equipped for the comfort of air-conditioning. This resulted in an almost unique phenomenon: the desertion of almost all traditional settlements beside which new settlements were built. Today we still can count more than seventy traditional complete cities and almost innumerable small settlements and house complexes built of mud brick on stone foundations in the north and stone and wood houses in the south of Oman. Out of the complex of traditional architecture only the many forts have been preserved, of which one, Bahla, is on the World Heritage List.

As in many young nations, in Oman also traditional housing does not yet have a high value in public opinion. This may be one of the reasons why they are not yet protected heritage places and why the mostly private owners of the buildings do not take care in maintaining them. Therefore these cities and settlements stand like ghost cities: roofs are collapsing, streets are empty, walls are deteriorating with the wind and rain.

In less than 10 years even the still-standing buildings will be eroded to a heap of clay, and the remaining wood will be taken away by people. The most recent trend has started: antique dealers have begun to collect the old delicately carved doors, window frames and utensils, which often are still in the rooms. Antique pieces of the abandoned towns and villages are sold in the antique markets of Muscat and Nizwa.

As a massive endangered record of Oman's past, these cities and villages have to be documented and their most precious settings and buildings preserved. A very recent program is considering the full documentation of this cultural heritage. In addition, Oman is one of the first countries, which has included conservation programs in archaeology.

## Case Study 1 – Mirbat, South Oman

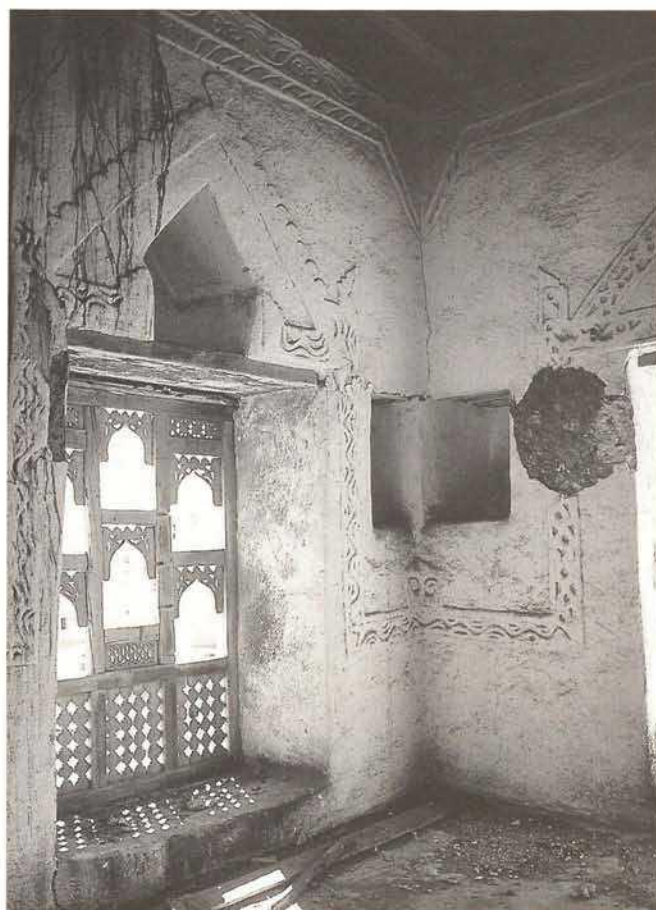
Mirbat, like most of the other sea towns in the province of Dhofar, South Oman, was also involved in the frankincense trade. It took over the port tradition from al-Balid in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries and became a well-known port, trading also with Hadramaut, whence architectural influence still can be seen. Today, almost the entire historic city has been abandoned in favour of a new centre built in concrete. One of the largest structures, the Bayt al-Siduf, a merchant's house, has even almost completely collapsed, but still shows the former beauty of the traditional architecture.

Mirbat, like Taqah and Salalah, are witnesses to Oman's glorious past as a seafaring nation. Therefore, the old quarters of these cities should at least be documented and, if possible be preserved for the coming generations.

## Case Study 2 – Birkat al-Maws, North Oman

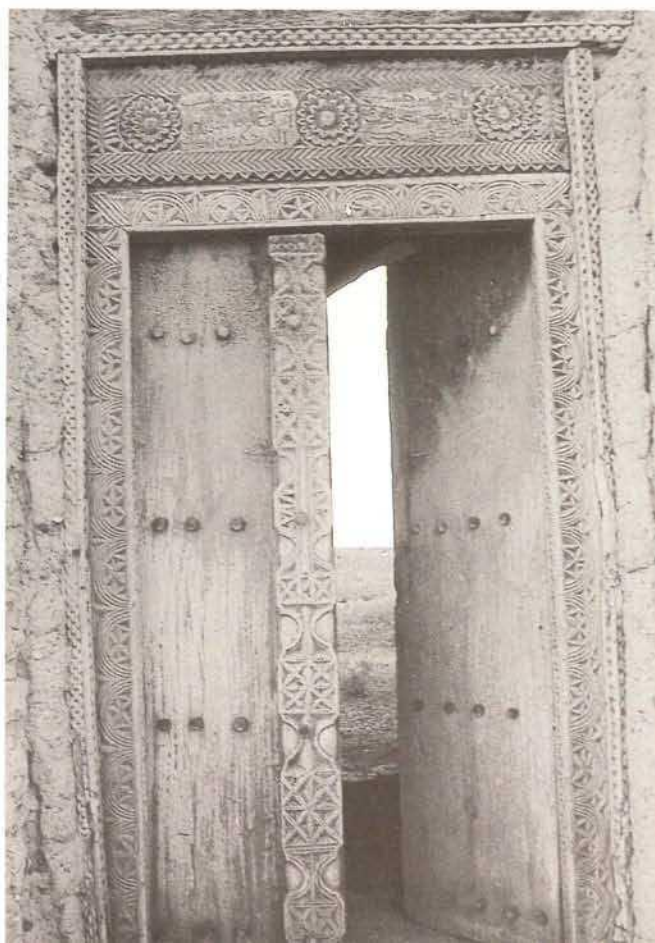
The city of Birkat al-Maws lies at the foothills of Jabal Akhdar between the historic towns of Izki and Nizwa, again two examples of fast disintegrating historic places. Birkat can be seen from the major road leading to Nizwa, where a modern city has replaced the old quarters. The city comprises city walls, hundreds of houses with *falaj* systems and elaborate bath houses and a fort on top of the city.

Michael Jansen, ICOMOS Germany

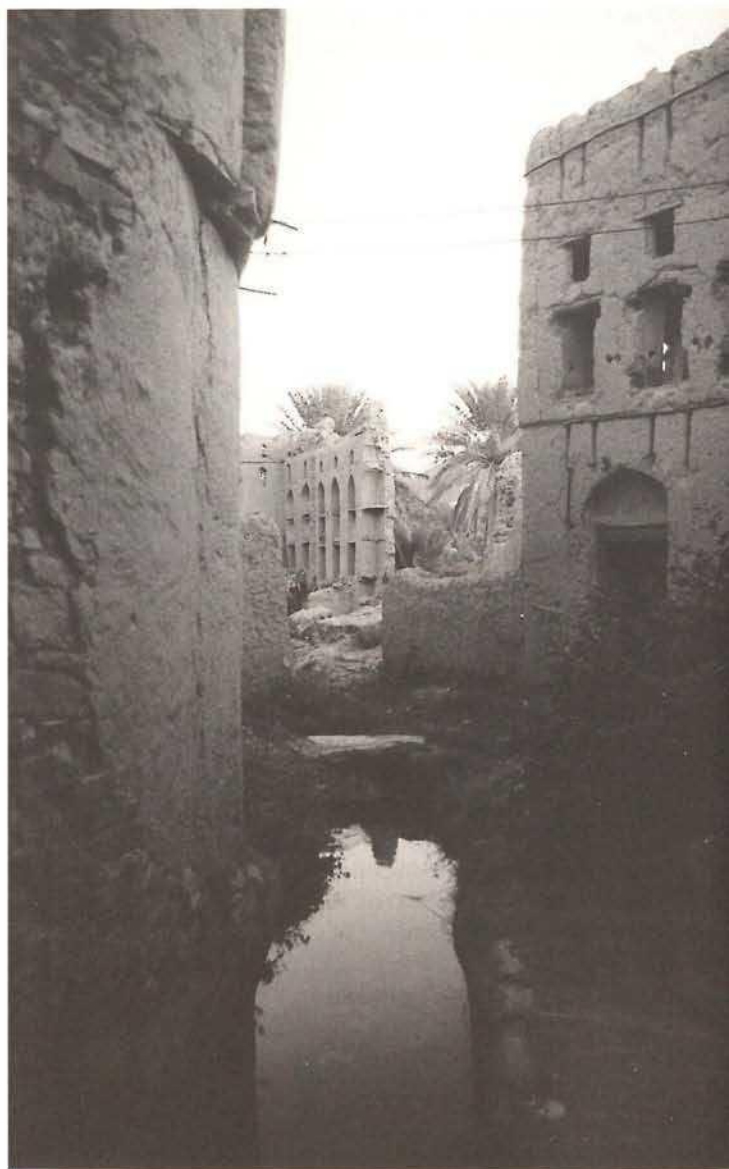
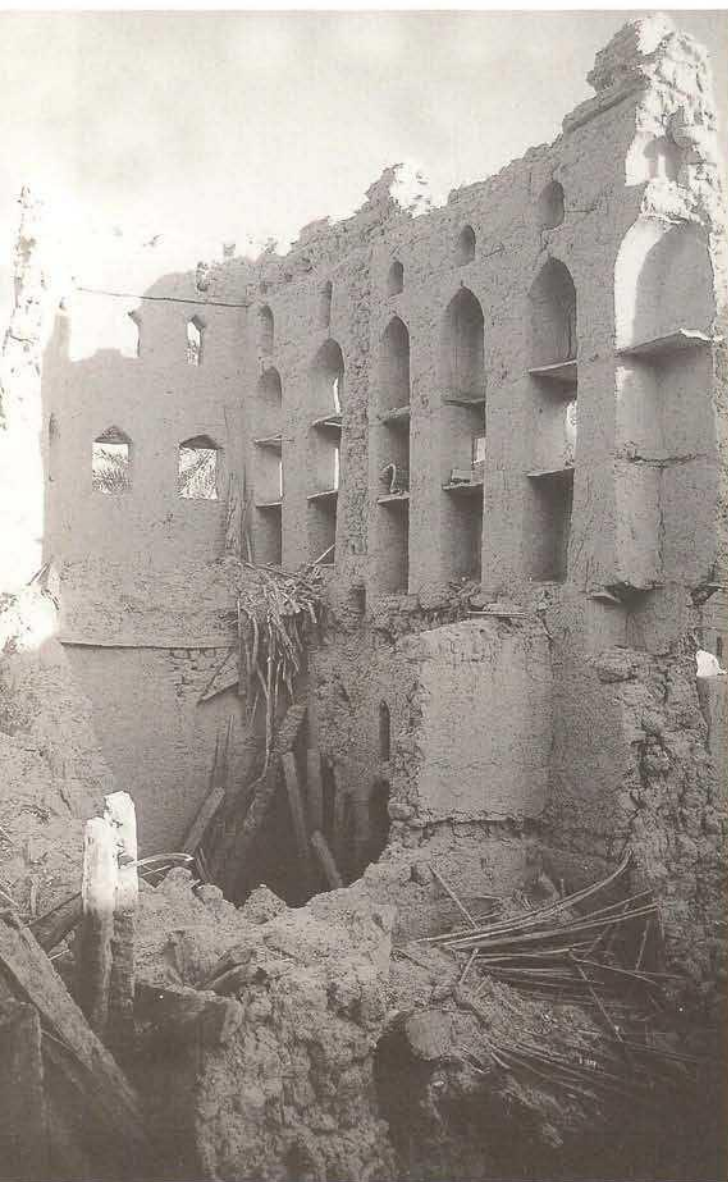


Interior of a house in Mirbat

Maybe, the carved door will soon become the booty of an antique dealer.







◀ Decaying houses in Birkat (North Oman). Not only in Oman but in many other countries of the Arab World the testimonies of historic earthen architecture are threatened by decay. Even the ruinous state still shows the beauty of this architecture. ▶



◀ The town of Izki surrounded by a wall has been left to decay. ▶



