

Rufei Li*

The Role of Urban Transformation in Saudi Arabia's Nation-building: The Case of al-Balad, Jeddah**

دور التحول الحضري في عمليات بناء الأمة في السعودية: المدينة التاريخية القديمة في جدة "البلد" نموذجًا

Abstract: The built environment of Jeddah's Historic District, known as *al-Balad*, has undergone significant transformations since the mid-19th century, shaped by several rounds of conservation. Drawing on fieldwork and existing scholarship, this article argues that the urban transformation of *al-Balad* is the outcome of state-building and nation-building processes in Saudi Arabia. In turn, *al-Balad*'s transformation has deeply impacted Saudi Arabia's nation-building. Although the rapid modernization and urbanization process sidelined serious efforts to conserve *al-Balad*, triggering profound changes in the district, the renewed emphasis on national identity and the rise of an indigenous "Saudi" culture in the early 21st century has repositioned *al-Balad* from a site of socio-economic changes into a source of cultural symbols.

Keywords: Jeddah; al-Balad; Saudi Culture; Nation-Building.

المخلص: مرّت جدة التاريخية، المعروفة أيضًا باسم "البلد"، بمراحل متعددة منذ منتصف القرن التاسع عشر من حيث البيئة الحضرية، وقوبلت بعدة جولات من جهود الحفاظ عليها. تجادل الدراسة، استنادًا إلى بحث ميداني وسبر للأدبيات السابقة، بأنّ عملية التحول الحضري لجدة البلد هي نتاج عمليّتي بناء الدولة وبناء الأمة، التي أثّرت في دور البلد في جدة في عملية بناء الأمة في المملكة العربية السعودية على نحو كبير. وعلى الرغم من أنّ عملية التحديث والتحضر سريعة الوتيرة قد أهملت الجهود الجادة للحفاظ على منطقة جدة التاريخية؛ ما تسبب في تغييرات عميقة في المنطقة، فإنّ الحاجة إلى هوية وطنية ونشأة ثقافة «سعودية» أصلانية في القرن الجديد حوّلت المنطقة من متلقية للتغييرات الاجتماعية والاقتصادية إلى مانحة للرموز الثقافية.

كلمات مفتاحية: جدة؛ البلد؛ الثقافة السعودية؛ بناء الأمة.

* Master's student at the Department of Arabic Language and Culture, School of Foreign Languages, Peking University, China.

Email: saidli@pku.edu.cn

** This study was originally published in Arabic in: Rufei Li, "Dawr al-Taḥawwul al-Ḥaḍarī fī 'Amaliyyāt Binā' al-'Umma fī al-Su'ūdiyya: al-Madīna al-Tārīkhiyya al-Qadīma fī Jidda 'al-Balad' Namūdhajan," *Omran*, vol. 13, no. 51 (Winter 2025), pp. 45-65.

The Urban Transformation of Jeddah and Its Twofold Implications

Known as “the bride of the Red Sea” (*‘arūs al-baḥr al-aḥmar*), the city of Jeddah has long stood as a commercial and intellectual hub. The city’s Historic District, *al-Balad*, has served since Ottoman times, as a key transit for pilgrims and a prosperous hub of trade and commerce. As oil revenues began to rise drastically in the mid-1960s, Jeddah witnessed a surge in population and a subsequent expansion of its urban boundaries. Despite early calls for conservation by some intellectuals, officials, and urban planners who recognized the potential negative impact of this accelerated urbanization the old city centre sustained substantial damage in the last three decades of the 20th century. A cursory examination of the contemporary history of Jeddah reveals the extent to which *al-Balad* was neglected in terms of conservation amid the city’s fast-paced expansion during this period.¹

Following the ascension of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in 2015, the kingdom launched an ambitious scheme of national transition in 2016, branded “Vision 2030”. Not only is the plan concerned with economic diversification, it also places emphasis on forging a “Saudi” national identity and a corresponding indigenous culture.² Within this new context, *al-Balad* was included in a new conservation plan. Under the auspices of the newly established Ministry of Culture, the “Historic Jeddah Revitalization Project” was introduced with a mandate to preserve and manage the district’s “tangible and intangible heritage”.³

While the project’s goals and government support aligns with previous conservation plans dating back to the 1970s, the apparent consistency of these efforts stands in contrast to the physical decay of *al-Balad* – a contradiction that has drawn critical attention from international scholars.⁴ Given *al-Balad*’s historical significance and cultural distinctiveness, two questions were of particular concern. First, how has *al-Balad* undergone physical and social transformation in modern times? Second, how does the new revitalization project differ from previous efforts, particularly in light of the project’s emphasis on *al-Balad* as an integral component of Saudi national heritage?

A wide range of scholarly debates has addressed the history of Jeddah and the development of its urban fabric. In her analysis of Jeddah’s history, Ulrike Freitag closely examines the exceptionality of Jeddah, arguing that the “Jeddawi” or “Hejazi” identity has retained its resilience despite the impact of rapid modernization. She also cast light upon the re-emergence of tensions between Hijazis and Najdis in 21st century Saudi Arabia, especially given the inter-regional disparity in terms of conserving architectural heritage.⁵ Much scholarly attention to Jeddah’s urban transition since the 1960s has focused on conservation efforts in *al-Balad*, with several works by Saudi scholars emphasizing the district’s potential for cultural tourism.⁶ Drawing on conservation plans, interviews, and local archives, Mohammed Bagader presents a thorough analysis of conservation policies in *al-Balad* and their impact on the built environment.⁷

¹ For a contemporary record, see: Tawfiq M. Abu Ghazzeḥ, “Built Form and Religion: Underlying Structures of Jeddah Al-Qadimah,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 49-59.

² On the rise of Saudi nationalism, see: Madawi Al-Rasheed, *The Son King: Reform and Repression in Saudi Arabia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 154-174. From the government’s side, the establishment of the Ministry of Culture by dividing the old Ministry of Culture and Information and the former’s task with releasing annual report on “the state of culture” demonstrates the kingdom’s increased concern with this realm. See the 2019 and 2020 reports as examples: Ministry of Culture, *Report on the State of Culture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2019: Facts and Figures* (Riyadh, 2020); Ministry of Culture, *Taqrīr al-Hāla al-Thaqāfiyya fī al-Mamlaka al-‘Arabiyya al-Su‘ūdiyya 2020: Raḡmanat al-Thaqāfa* (Riyadh, 2021).

³ “About Us,” *Jeddah Historic District* (2024), accessed on 28/8/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4dYknae>

⁴ Hanadi Eid Al-Harbi & Samirah Saad Al-Saleh, “al-Āthār al-Siyāhiyya lil-Muqawwimāt al-Tārīkhiyya fī Madīnat Jidda,” *Majallat al-‘Ulum al-Insāniyya wa-l-Ijtima‘iyyah*, vol. 5, no. 15 (December 2021), pp. 104-119.

⁵ Ulrike Freitag, *A History of Jeddah: The Gate to Mecca in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 339, 363.

⁶ Abdelaziz Elfadaly, “Cultural Heritage Management Using Remote Sensing Data and GIS Techniques around the Archaeological Area of Ancient Jeddah in Jeddah City, Saudi Arabia,” *Sustainability*, vol. 12 (2020), pp. 1-15; Mohammed Alosan et al., “Strategies for the Preservation of Historic Areas within Existing Middle Eastern Cities: The Case of Historic Jeddah,” *Buildings*, vol. 14, no. 3 (March 2024), pp. 1-21.

⁷ Mohammed Abubaker A. Bagader, “The Evolution of Built Heritage Conservation Policies in Saudi Arabia between 1970 and 2015: The Case of Historic Jeddah,” PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, Manchester, 2016.

Nevertheless, the relationship between conserving Historic Jeddah as a cultural heritage and forging a new Saudi culture remains understudied.

At the state level, a more recent body of literature addresses the social and cultural aspects of Saudi Arabia's ongoing transition. Jörg Matthias Determann examines the historiographical narratives of modern Saudi Arabia, highlighting the state's dual role as both sponsor and censor.⁸ Rosie Bsheer, in her study of construction projects in Riyadh and Mecca, argues that the Saudi government is deliberately rewriting the "material history" embodied in historical city quarters and sponsoring "heritage protection", such as in Diriyah, to reinforce state legitimacy.⁹ Despite these important contributions, Historic Jeddah has received only limited attention. Few studies have incorporated it as a case study for examining the government's heritage projects through the lens of nation-building frameworks.

To bridge the existing gap in scholarly literature, this study argues that the urban transformation of *al-Balad* should be understood as a diachronic process with twofold implications. On the one hand, the physical development and administration of Jeddah are closely related to the growth of the state apparatus and its rent- and distribution-based capacities.¹⁰ On the other hand, the diminishing of *al-Balad*'s symbolic value then its exploitation reflects the government's cultural politics, which serves the nation-building process.¹¹

This study examines the urban transformation in Jeddah, with a particular focus on *al-Balad*, by elucidating the effects of this process on both the state-building and nation-building processes. The analysis integrates primary and secondary sources with empirical insights gathered during two fieldwork visits to Jeddah and Riyadh, carried out in February and August 2024. During these trips, we surveyed the built environment of *al-Balad* and made three visits to Al Tayebat International City Museum of Science and Information, which exhibits relevant artwork and miniatures of *al-Balad*. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Jeddawi shop owners, expatriate workers in Historic Jeddah, senior diplomats, and stakeholders in the tourism industry who provided their perspectives on the district's conservation project.¹²

The first section examines the formation of "Jeddawi" identity and the evolution of interregional dynamics in Saudi Arabia, with particular attention to Hijazi-Najdi tensions leading up to the 1960s. The second section focuses on the mid-1960s to the early 2000s, a period during which the Saudi state-building project significantly shaped Jeddah and *al-Balad*. The third section analyses the transformation of *al-Balad* since 2005, exploring the implications of recent development projects within the framework of Saudi nation-building. The study uses "*al-Balad*" to refer to the urban space and the building complex that principally constituted the historical core of the city of Jeddah. The terms "Historic Jeddah" and "Old Jeddah" are also employed interchangeably to denote the same area.

Jeddawi Identity and Interregional Dynamics in the Making

The early- to mid-20th century stands as a vital period for the Arabian Peninsula, with the Hijaz and Najd experiencing the most significant transformations. In political terms, the post-World War I period witnessed a direct conflict between Sharif Hussein bin Ali (r. 1916-1924) and King Abdulaziz Al Saud (r. 1926-1932), culminating in the collapse of Hashemite rule in the region and the consolidation of the Third Saudi State.¹³

⁸ Jörg Matthias Determann, *Historiography in Saudi Arabia: Globalization and the State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 111.

⁹ Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), pp. 141-145.

¹⁰ For a more detailed account, see: Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 10-12.

¹¹ As mentioned before, Rosie Bsheer's study on Riyadh and Mecca has demonstrated the validity of this approach. See: Bsheer, pp. 141-145, 172-190.

¹² The author intended to conduct interviews with senior government officials in charge of the Historic Jeddah project and Saudi scholars specialized in the transformation of Jeddah. However, initial emails did not receive any reply.

¹³ For the history of Al Saud's conquest of the Hijaz, see: Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 37-45.

The conquest of the Hijaz held profound significance for King Abdulaziz and, subsequently, for the Al Saud family in many perspectives. While Hijazi religious and secular intellectuals – mainly from Mecca and Jeddah – came to prominence in the Saudi state, the relation between the Hijaz and the central government was largely confined to the symbolic value of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and to the state's access to pilgrimage tax, which at the time functioned as its economic lifeline.¹⁴

While the political landscape in the Peninsula underwent decisive change, the cultural differences among its various regions were consequently inherited by the Saudi state. In addition to the long-standing conflict between sedentary (*ḥaḍar*) and nomadic (*badū*) peoples, tensions between the Hijaz and Najd also came to the forefront within the kingdom's newly "united" territories.

The Dihlīz of Mecca and Jiddah Ghayr: "Jeddawi" Identity Materialized

For much of its history, Jeddah served as the port of Mecca, securing its position as the gateway (*dihlīz* or *dahlīz*) to the holy city of Islam. In the 19th century, the prosperous coastal town functioned as a key stopover for travellers journeying to or from other Hijazi cities.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the port occupied a prominent position in the entrepôt trade of the Red Sea region. Intensive flows of goods and people, combined with a cultural sophistication sustained through interactions with the outer world, shaped the exceptionality of Jeddah, encapsulated in the popular phrase used by its residents, "Jeddah is different" (*Jiddah ghayr*).¹⁶

One of the most striking manifestations of Jeddah's multifaceted exceptionality is its architectural splendour. The city's multi-storey residential houses were constructed using coral limestones and other stones locally quarried from Lake al-Arba'een, a lagoon to the northwest of Historic Jeddah.¹⁷ A defining feature of these structures is the Arabian wooden balcony (*rawshan* or *mashrabiyyah*), intricately carved with delicate designs and adopted for both its aesthetic appeal and functional advantages.¹⁸ Influenced by Egyptian and European styles and shaped by technical advancements in architecture, the buildings' architectural style changed significantly before it was finalized during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.¹⁹

Landmarks including mosques, markets (*sūqs*), and the two gates – *Bāb Makkah* and *Bāb al-Madīnah*, all enclosed within the city wall – also figure prominently. For Jeddawis, this built environment held a significance rooted deeply in their identity, not only for its architectural beauty but also for its connection to social practices in the Hijaz region, where "ceremonies are confined to the privacy of the home because their observance takes place in defiance of official rules".²⁰

As Nelida Fuccaro notes, "traditional urban forms are increasingly acting as a source of 'cultural/national' identity by functioning as a catalyst of collective memory".²¹ Nevertheless, a critical question emerges concerning the "limit" of *al-Balad* as a complex assemblage of "traditional urban forms". This question is often overlooked in studies that focus on "conserving" the material artefacts of the built environment, but it is essential for bridging the gap between grasping *al-Balad* simply as a site of urban transformation and pinpointing its position in the process of Saudi nation-building. In this context, this study argues that *al-Balad* is not to be reduced to a solely spatial and architectural concept but must be

¹⁴ Mai Yamani, *Cradle of Islam: Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 54-55.

¹⁵ John Keane, *Six Months in the Hejaz: Journeys to Makkah and Madinah 1877-1878* (Manchester/ Beirut: Barzan Publishing, 2006), pp. 186-187; John Lewis Burckhardt, *Travels in Arabia* (Abingdon: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968), pp. 1-3.

¹⁶ Freitag, p. 1.

¹⁷ Rihab Abdulrahman Ahmad Fadil, "Madīnat Jidda: Dirāsa Tārīkhiyya Ṭahlīliyya," *Majallat al-Qulzum li-l-Dirasat al-Tarikhīyya wa-l-Hadariyya*, no. 14 (March 2022), p. 82.

¹⁸ Abdulquddus al-Anṣari, *Mawsū'at Tārīkh Madīnat Jidda*, 4th ed. (Jeddah: Dar al-Manhal li-l-Sahafa wa-l-Nashr al-Mahduda, 2018), pp. 57-82.

¹⁹ Sameer Mahmoud Z. Al-Lyaly, "The Traditional House of Jeddah: A Study of the Interaction between Climate, Form and Living Patterns," PhD Thesis, Edinburgh University, Edinburgh, 1990, p. 23.

²⁰ Yamani, p. 23.

²¹ Nelida Fuccaro, "Visions of the City: Urban Studies on the Gulf," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Winter 2001), p. 181.

conceptualized as a conglomerate encompassing both the actual built environment within the limit of the old city wall and the original “Jeddawi” community with its cultural symbols.

Figure (1): Maps of Historic Jeddah in 1894 (left) and 1960 (right)



Source: Allies & Morrison, “Al-Balad: Public Realm Strategy and Design Manual,” jeddahabalad, pp. 20-21, accessed 15/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRdd>

On this basis, the formation of *al-Balad*'s built environment was completed before the advent of Saudi rule in the Hijaz. The subsequent period was marked by both the physical deterioration of the district and a decline in cultural sophistication and exceptionalism.²² Crucially, the underlying political logic for *al-Balad* rested on a decentralized authority and collaborative governance among residing families, which is further reinforced by “its lack of a central space allocated to governmental and religious institutions”.²³ As will be discussed below, this decentralized model was fundamentally disrupted with the imposition of a strong central government. The Hijaz-Najd dynamics gradually deprived Hijazis – including Jeddawis – of their economic and institutional advantages, setting the stage for the conservation of Historic Jeddah as a heritage site.

Changing Interregional Dynamics: The Political-Economic Context

The volatility of Hijazi-Najdi relations was embodied in the strife between two political entities led by Sharif Hussein and King Abdulaziz respectively. A series of campaigns eventually ended the Hashemite rule in the Hijaz, with Mecca surrendering on 5 December 1924 followed by Jeddah on 16 December 1925.²⁴

Obtaining political recognition and new sources of income was the major development that followed. Abdulaziz first received the pledge of allegiance from the Hijazi notables, followed by recognition from Great Britain, the USSR, France, and the Netherlands.²⁵ Overland trade routes were secured, and the royal court now had access to the pilgrimage tax levied in Jeddah.²⁶

Upon signing the Treaty of Jeddah on 20 May 1927, Abdulaziz was addressed as the ruler of “the Kingdom of Najd, Hijaz and its Dependencies”.²⁷ While political and economic consolidation in the region

²² Freitag, pp. 51-60.

²³ Al-Lyaly, p. 31.

²⁴ Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 43-44.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Tim Niblock & Monica Malik, *The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 21-22.

²⁷ Tim Niblock, *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 28; Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p. 45.

advanced steadily, no serious attempt was made to culturally incorporate or assimilate the Hijazis, as doing so would have required penetrating the region's longstanding social structure. Important elements remained alive in the collective memory of Hijazis, such as the superiority of the region and its cities in terms of material affluence and cultural sophistication.

Within the new context of Saudi rule, the Hijaz – and notably Jeddah – retained a degree of prominence in the tension with Najd, represented by Riyadh. Jeddah remained the kingdom's economic pillar and gateway to the outside world. Income from the Hajj “provided 60% of the government's total revenue of 12 million riyals in 1932”. Diplomatic missions to Saudi Arabia gravitated to Jeddah,²⁸ and the city's port came to receive the bulk of the kingdom's international trade.

As oil gradually became the main source of government revenue, the economic significance of Jeddah began to decline. The changed political-economic dynamics soon manifested socially with the rise of the Najdi middle-class and the growing centrality of Riyadh as the capital city.²⁹ As will be discussed in the next section, this new landscape impacted the built environment of Historic Jeddah significantly, while social changes in the district and its proximity caused a decisive “rupture” between the material heritage and its original residents.

“Protecting” al-Balad in the Modernization Period

Beginning in the mid-1960s, Saudi Arabia embarked on an unprecedented phase of modernization, coinciding with the ascension of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and a substantial increase in oil revenues.³⁰ The expansion of state capacity, including planning, administration, social welfare, and economic projects, became the central concern of the Saudi government. To that end, administrative frameworks were introduced and plans for the development of major cities were devised. While the “state” of Saudi Arabia gradually fledged, the “nation” of Saudi Arabia remained underdefined. Modernization functioned as the main source of social mobilization and regime legitimacy throughout much of the mid- to late-20th century, effectively postponing the need to define a “Saudi” nation and resulting in a gap between state-building and nation-building processes.³¹

Modernization and Economic Rationality

When King Faisal ascended to the throne, the material infrastructure of the Kingdom remained severely underdeveloped, and government ministries were constrained by limited budgets.³² As economic resources began to expand steadily, King Faisal launched a major modernization project. Urban development received substantial attention at the state level, and a series of measures were introduced to regulate the future development of Saudi cities. In the case of Jeddah, a UN committee tasked with advising the Saudi government on regional and urban planning, upon the request of Department of Municipal Affairs, recommended engaging the English firm Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall & Partners (RMJM) as consultant to the Jeddah Municipality and the entire “Western Region” for devising a master plan for urban development.³³

By that time, Jeddah had witnessed substantial growth in both size and population, while *al-Balad* remained the city's centre.³⁴ In 1947, the city wall was demolished to make way for the construction of new accommodations and a ring road surrounding the old city core. Modern commercial buildings were

²⁸ Quoted in: Yamani, p. 54.

²⁹ Niblock, *Saudi Arabia*, p. 44.

³⁰ Hertog, pp. 61-65; Niblock & Malik, pp. 32-52.

³¹ Al-Rasheed, *The Son King*, pp. 164-174.

³² Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 116-117.

³³ George Orr Duncan, “The Planning and Development of the City of Jeddah: 1970-1984,” PhD Thesis, Durham University, Durham, 1987, pp. 51-52.

³⁴ By 1978, the metropolitan area of Jeddah covered 1,215 square kilometers, with 97 square kilometers developed. A 1974 census indicates that city population stood at 561,104. See: Fadil, p. 70.

built west of the ring road, while the area surrounding *Bāb Makkah* became a residential quarter, largely composed of newly constructed houses and shops. In 1970, part of *al-Balad* was demolished to open a new north-south motorway, al-Dhahab Street, which cut through the traditional urban fabric.³⁵

The Master Plan proposed by RMJM acknowledged the need to protect *al-Balad* as an inseparable part of the city. As the only governmental plan in the 20th century to provide directions for protecting *al-Balad*, the Master Plan had a lasting impact. However, the logic behind the development of the Historic Area requires reassessment. First, the Plan effectively justified the growing human activity and changes in the built environment that followed the removal of the walls by preserving the status quo, rather than adopting a stricter approach to prevent the Historic Area from further exposure to damaging exploitations. The Master Plan divided the Historic Area into four large zones: 1, 2, 3, and 3a. Zone 1 encompassed the coastal area; Zone 2 was designated as the central commercial zone, accommodating commercial centres and high-rise residential buildings; Zones 3, 2a, and 2b comprised the traditional residential zone; and Zone 3a was designated as a new mixed-use zone.³⁶ While this delineation met the municipality's request to define the boundaries of and within the Historic Area, maintaining the status quo for this area effectively meant that little was done to regulate or mitigate the intensive commercial and living activities. As a result, *al-Balad* remained exposed to significant adverse impacts.

Figure (2): Historic Area Delineation in the Master Plan



Source: George Orr Duncan, "The Planning and Development of the City of Jeddah: 1970-1984," PhD Thesis, Durham University, Durham, 1987, p. 256.

Second, in terms of cost, the Master Plan estimated that the comprehensive conservation of traditional residential neighbourhoods would require \$200 million (approximately SAR 706 million in 1976), amounting to 28.6% of the total \$700 million originally allocated for the implementation of the entire Plan. This figure also represented 4.6% of the annual budget allocated for the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs (MoMRA), which was elevated from committee to ministry in 1976. In addition, the city of Jeddah in the 1970s was already preoccupied with two major infrastructure projects: the construction of King Abdulaziz International Airport and the Jeddah Islamic Port.³⁷ In the competition for governmental financial as well

³⁵ Allies & Morrison, "Al-Balad: Public Realm Strategy and Design Manual," *jeddahalbalad*, p. 20, accessed on 15/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRdd>

³⁶ Duncan, p. 220.

³⁷ Anthony Axon & Susan Hewitt, *Contemporary Archive of the Islamic World*, vol. 5: *Saudi Arabia, 1975-2020* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 115, 135.

as administrative resources, it became clear that the conservation of the old city, perceived as offering marginal economic and symbolic benefits, had to be sidelined.

In addition, the implementation of the Master Plan was tied to specific individuals. Its preparation and initial implementation coincided with the tenure of Mohammad Said Farsi (r. 1973-1986) as mayor of Jeddah. A Jeddawi himself, Farsi prioritized the preservation of the Old City and actively coordinated governmental resources.³⁸ However, beyond his tenure, the preservation of traditional buildings in *al-Balad* was poorly executed due to strife between various governmental bodies and disputes between the government and landowners or tenants. Moreover, despite the involvement of local stakeholders, the municipality viewed the traditional houses as simply based on “a Turkish or an Egyptian model”,³⁹ emphasizing the district’s “imported” characteristics and downplaying its indigenous features.

The cost of the project, combined with flaws in the Master Plan and challenges in its implementation, led to the further deterioration of *al-Balad* from the mid-1980s onward. Although the Saudi government introduced the Law on the Preservation of Historic Jeddah in 1981 – officially designating the district as the country’s sole recognized architectural heritage at that time and providing a framework for its preservation – the Master Plan’s recommendation to establish a specialized body to manage and restore *al-Balad* was never realized, resulting in a lack of sustained, effective execution of the law by the Jeddah municipality.⁴⁰

Social Dynamics: Deprivation of “Local Communities”

In addition to top-down conservation measures, community changes within *al-Balad* during this period not only contributed to the built environment’s decay but also to a decisive disengagement between that built environment and its Jeddawi inhabitants. Although official statistics are lacking, native families living in *al-Balad* began to relocate as early as the 1960s – either selling or renting out their properties, or allowing them to fall into disrepair – to newer neighbourhoods offering modern amenities.⁴¹ Over time, low- and middle-income labourers from Muslim countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Yemen came to form the bulk of *al-Balad*’s population. By the 1980s, all locals had moved out.⁴² It was only after this period that the Hijazi elite began to express a renewed interest in reclaiming a local identity,⁴³ an impulse epitomized by the “*Jiddah Ghayr*” Festival in 1998.⁴⁴

As the traditional Jeddawi community disintegrated, the symbolic significance of *al-Balad* was thus reduced to the aesthetic value of the built environment itself, along with scant cultural symbols. This observation is subtly reflected in the displays at the Al Tayebat International City Museum of Science and Information, where a large number of paintings from the 1980s and 1990s depict *al-Balad*’s urban landscapes. This commemoration of the built environment, rather than living scenes or local traditions, echoes the results of the 1978 questionnaire survey conducted by RMJM, in which more than half of the respondents said that the architectural form of *al-Balad* “reminds them of the past”, reflecting a kind of nostalgia ingrained in the community.⁴⁵

³⁸ Bagader, “Evolution,” p. 256.

³⁹ Quoted in: Al-Lyaly, p. 49.

⁴⁰ Bagader, “Evolution,” p. 111.

⁴¹ Tim Niblock, *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), p. 171.

⁴² Stefan Maneval, *New Islamic Urbanism: The Architecture of Public and Private Space in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia* (London: UCL Press, 2019), p. 38; Bagader, “The Evolution of Built Heritage Conservation Policies in Saudi Arabia between 1970 and 2015,” p. 126.

⁴³ Yamani, p. 19.

⁴⁴ “‘Ām / Mahrajān ‘Jidda Ghayr’ Yadhkūl ‘Āmahu al-Rābi’ ‘Ashar bi-Tanawwu’ fī al-Fa’ ‘āliyyat li-Da’im al-Siyāha al-Mustadāma bi-l-Mamlaka,” *Saudi Press Agency*, 20/4/2012, accessed on 17/10/2024, at:

<https://bit.ly/3Nr5SAF>

⁴⁵ Duncan, p. 229.

Figure (3): A 1980 Sketch of al-Balad, Displaying Central Features Such as Unpaved Roads and a Horse-Drawn Watercart



Source: Photo by the author at Al Tayebat International City Museum.

Figure (4): Oil Paintings Depicting Street Views of al-Balad



Source: Photo by the author at Al Tayebat International City Museum.

In sum, the social dynamics of this period – mainly the demographic change – converged with a state-building process that prioritized economic development, effectively “hollowing out” *al-Balad* of both its architectural beauty and original inhabitants. The lack of adequate infrastructure combined with the influx of foreign workers led to the deterioration of the built environment. This, in turn, was compounded by the limited participation of local residents and their upholding of “traditions”, rendering *al-Balad* a passive recipient of governmental conservation schemes, which often aimed at sustaining economic development rather than saving the site from decay and loss of cultural values. Therefore, the Saudi state-building process during this period reduced *al-Balad* to merely an architectural compound with limited symbolic value.

The New Millennium and the Turn to Material History

In the early 2000s, the Kingdom’s need to address domestic problems and improve its international image prompted a series of institutional changes and the advent of more liberal cultural policies. Under King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (r. 2005-2015), the conservation or redevelopment of historical sites also began to gain momentum, with Mecca and Riyadh at the forefront of these initiatives.⁴⁶ During this period, the concept of “tangible heritage” was formally introduced into the decision-making process concerning

⁴⁶ Bsheer, p. 25.

the preservation and redevelopment of historical sites, ushering in a new period of heritage conservation and tourism – not only in Saudi Arabia but across the wider region.⁴⁷

Amid this renewed attention, *al-Balad* entered a new phase of urban transformation, with increasing emphasis on harnessing its touristic potential and cultural significance.⁴⁸ In the preceding period, the physical decay and social hollowing out of *al-Balad* had rendered conservation efforts insufficient to restore the old city core's status, let alone the tourism development it entails. At the same time, the erosion of cultural symbols made *al-Balad* a relatively “malleable” site in terms of functioning as a complex set of cultural symbols.

Forming a “National Brand”

In 2006, King Abdullah approved the nomination of “Historic Jeddah” for inscription on the World Heritage List and instructed the Supreme Tourism Authority to make the necessary preparations. As in earlier phases of *al-Balad*'s conservation, personal factors influenced the implementation of policies. Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (1956-), then Head of Board of the Supreme Tourism Authority, personally prioritized the preservation of *al-Balad* and used his influence to convince the Municipality of Jeddah to accept the guidance of the reorganized Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA).⁴⁹ However, UNESCO rejected the initial nomination in 2011 due to several reasons, including the substantial damage. It took three more years before *al-Balad* was inscribed on the World Heritage List after further revisions.⁵⁰ By contrast, Diriyah – under the supervision of then-Governor of Riyadh, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud – was nominated in 2009 and successfully inscribed the following year for its Turaif district.

Figure (5): al-Balad



Source: Photos courtesy of Professor Fu Zhiming, Peking University, September 2009.

Consequently, as a necessary step toward tourism development and inscription of *al-Balad* on the World Heritage List, the Saudi government initiated a series of redevelopment efforts including the further development of infrastructure, such as paved roads, water supply, and drainage networks.

The renewed momentum regarding the conservation of *al-Balad* gained relative coherence in the 2010s with Historic Jeddah being inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014, marking only the beginning of a broader initiative to brand the area. In 2018, the Jeddah Historic District Program was established by royal decree under the Ministry of Culture.⁵¹ This was followed in 2021 by Crown Prince Muhammad bin

⁴⁷ This can be observed in the names of government entities. In 2000, the Saudi government established the Supreme Commission of Tourism (SCT), which is primarily responsible for tourism. After King Abdullah ascended to the throne, the Commission was merged with the former Agency of Antiquities and Museums in 2008 and renamed as the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA), which was subsequently renamed the Saudi General Authority for Tourism and National Heritage in 2015. For an account of the regional development, see: C. Michael Hall & Siamak Seyfi (eds.), *Cultural and Heritage Tourism in the Middle East and North Africa: Complexities, Management and Practices* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 14-23.

⁴⁸ Mohammad Abubaker A. Bagader, “The Impacts of UNESCO’s Built Heritage Conservation Policy (2010-2020) on Historic Jeddah Built Environment,” *WTI Transactions on the Built Environment*, vol. 177 (2018), p. 2.

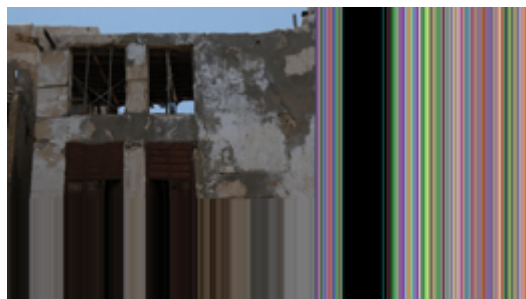
⁴⁹ Bagader, “Evolution,” p. 255.

⁵⁰ Bagader, “Impacts,” p. 2.

⁵¹ “About Us,” *Jeddah Historic District* (2024), accessed on 28/8/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4dYknae>

Salman's announcement of the "Historic Jeddah Revitalization Project".⁵² Currently, land and buildings within *al-Balad* have been expropriated by the Saudi government and entirely entrusted to the Ministry of Culture.

Figure (6): Bayt Nassif



Source: Photo by author, August 2024.

Figure (7): Construction Sites in al-Balad, with the Logo of the Ministry of Culture Visible on the Fences



Source: Photos by author, August 2024.

Judging by the scale of recent high-profile projects and related propaganda, Historic Jeddah appears to be well on its way to becoming a national brand. Nevertheless, beneath this façade lie unresolved questions regarding the symbolic "engineering" underway in *al-Balad* – a process connected to the broader nation-building process, as will be discussed below.

Retroactive Nation-Building: Reinterpreting al-Balad

Despite the turn toward a more secular historical narrative, the sole emphasis on the role of Al Saud in the modern "renaissance" (*nahḍa*) appears insufficient to sustain that narrative's credibility. In the face of growing domestic dissent, changing international perceptions, and the increasing volatility of oil as a revenue source, the nation-building process was initiated.

The new Saudi nationalism positions the image-building of Al Saud at its core, affirming the royal family's role in the unification, self-defence, and modernization of the Saudi nation.⁵³ Additionally, the role of Islam is deliberately downplayed as the new nation-building process draws increasingly upon non-Islamic factors, including the open commemoration of objects and spaces.⁵⁴

Against such a backdrop, *al-Balad* emerged as a focal point in the Kingdom's nation-building process. As argued above, by the end of the 20th century *al-Balad* had been largely emptied of its original residents,

⁵² "Mashrū' Iḥyā' Jiddah al-Tārīkhiyya," *Saudipedia*, accessed on 2/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4g6nlvh>

⁵³ Al-Rasheed, *The Son King*, pp. 164-174.

⁵⁴ Bsheer, p. 13.

resulting in the erosion of much of its symbolic vitality, largely becoming a “static” heritage site. Its important role in the Hajj was reduced merely to economic functions such as resupply and transportation, while the cultural connection between Jeddah and Mecca was marginalized. Nevertheless, architectural features, handicrafts, and artistic workshops allowed the old city core to retain some of its “Jeddawi” peculiarity. These features – now safely embedded within official narratives – have been branded as markers of the Kingdom’s diversity.⁵⁵

A specific case of this may be the extensive propagation of the *rawshan*, which has been held up in the official narrative – often in collaboration with local actors – as the epitome of the Hijazi architecture. In *al-Balad*, workshops now showcase the craftsmanship involved in producing the *rawshan*’s intricate wooden components. Additionally, Hijazi families are celebrated for their support of King Abdulaziz and for their homes, such as Bayt Nassif.⁵⁶

Figure (8): A DIY Workshop Showcasing the Basic Components of Rawshan and the Tools Needed



Source: Photo by author, August 2024.

This controlled expression of diversity forms a vivid contrast to Diriyah, the birthplace of the First Saudi State founded in 1727. The restored built environment, along with the museum introducing the history of Al Saud and their military campaigns, revolves exclusively around the official historical narrative.

Figure (9): A Sandbox Model of Diriyah (left); The Family Tree of Al Saud, with King Salman at Centre (Right)



Source: Photo by author, August 2024.

⁵⁵ The approach offered by Steffen Wippel may help in clarifying the matter, see: Steffen Wippel (ed.), *Branding the Middle East: Communication Strategies and Image Building from Qom to Casablanca* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), pp. 100-103.

⁵⁶ For example: “Nassif House,” *Saudipedia*, accessed on 19/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3UeiXRw>

In this regard, *al-Balad* has been recast as a “donor” of cultural symbols within the nation-building discourse, contributing to the reinforcement of regime legitimacy. It has been “revitalized” as part of Saudi cultural heritage, but because this revitalization is also a process of selective interpretation, material artefacts can be used for branding whilst downplaying cultural or intellectual particularities.

Conclusion

In her analysis of cultural politics in modern Saudi Arabia, Rosie Bsheer notes that the belated turn to material history “was also anchored in the erasure of sites that recalled or made possible alternative social imaginaries antagonistic to the regime’s legitimating mythos”.⁵⁷ Nelida Fuccaro argues that “all over the Gulf, heritage sites and buildings have been transformed into symbols of national character”.⁵⁸ Both remarks offer valuable insights, and their arguments find strong resonance in the case of Jeddah’s *al-Balad*. Nevertheless, the district was not erased or “bulldozed” entirely: its deprivation of its original dwellers paved the way for its “controllable” role in the nation-building process.

The urban transformation of *al-Balad* was a testament to the desynchrony between state-building and nation-building processes in rentier states such as Saudi Arabia. It is precisely the state-building process – in which *al-Balad* bore the brunt of socio-economic changes – that caused the partial diminishment of symbolic values with which the built environment was endowed. In turn, this loss rendered *al-Balad* increasingly susceptible to top-down interpretation in the belated nation-building process. This diachronic study of *al-Balad*’s urban transformation has thus illuminated the evolving interplay between state-building and nation-building processes in Saudi Arabia.

By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this article has moved beyond the relatively abundant scholarly debate on the architectural heritage and conservation, seeking to grasp the process of urban transformation within the broader context of nation and state building.

References

- Abu Ghazze, Tawfiq M. “Built Form and Religion: Underlying Structures of Jeddah Al-Qademah.” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*. vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring 1994).
- al-Anṣari, Abdulquddus. *Mawsū‘at Tārīkh Madīnat Jiddah*. 4th ed. Jeddah: Dar al-Manhal li-l-Sahafa wa-l-Nashr al-Mahduda, 2018.
- Al-Harbi, Hanadi Eid & Samirah Saad Al-Saleh. “al-Āthār al-Siyyāhiyya lil-Muqawwimāt al-Tārīkhiyya fī Madīnat Jiddah.” *Majallah al-‘Ulum al-Insaniyyah wa-l-Ijtima‘iyyah*. vol. 5, no. 15 (December 2021).
- Al-Lyaly, Sameer Mahmoud Z. “The Traditional House of Jeddah: A Study of the Interaction between Climate, Form and Living Patterns.” PhD Thesis. Edinburgh University. Edinburgh. 1990.
- Aloshan, Mohammed, et al. “Strategies for the Preservation of Historic Areas within Existing Middle Eastern Cities: The Case of Historic Jeddah.” *Buildings*. vol. 14, no. 3 (March 2024).
- Al-Rasheed, Madawi. *A History of Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- _____. *The Son King: Reform and Repression in Saudi Arabia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Axon, Anthony & Susan Hewitt. *Contemporary Archive of the Islamic World, vol.5: Saudi Arabia, 1975-2020*. Leiden: Brill, 2022.

⁵⁷ Bsheer, p. 23.

⁵⁸ Fuccaro, p. 181.

- Bagader, Mohammad Abubaker A. "The Impacts of UNESCO's Built Heritage Conservation Policy (2010-2020) on Historic Jeddah Built Environment." *WTI Transactions on the Built Environment*. vol. 177 (2018).
- _____. "The Evolution of Built Heritage Conservation Policies in Saudi Arabia between 1970 and 2015: The Case of Historic Jeddah." PhD Thesis. University of Manchester. Manchester. 2016.
- Bsheer, Rosie. *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020.
- Burckhardt, John Lewis. *Travels in Arabia*. Abingdon: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968.
- Determann, Jörg Matthias. *Historiography in Saudi Arabia: Globalization and the State*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014.
- Elfadaly, Abdelaziz. "Cultural Heritage Management Using Remote Sensing Data and GIS Techniques around the Archaeological Area of Ancient Jeddah in Jeddah City, Saudi Arabia." *Sustainability*. vol. 12 (2020).
- Fadil, Rihab Abdulrahman Ahmad. "Madīnat Jiddah: Dirāsa Tārīkhīyya Taḥlīliyya." *Majjalat al-Qulzum li-l-Dirasat al-Tarikhiyya wa-l-Hadariyya*. no. 14 (March 2022).
- Freitag, Ulrike. *A History of Jeddah: The Gate to Mecca in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Fuccaro, Nelida. "Visions of the City: Urban Studies on the Gulf." *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*. vol. 35, no. 2 (Winter 2001).
- Hall, C. Michael & Siamak Seyfi (eds.). *Cultural and Heritage Tourism in the Middle East and North Africa: Complexities, Management and Practices*. London/ New York: Routledge, 2021.
- Hertog, Steffen. *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010.
- Keane, John. *Six months in the Hejaz: Journeys to Makkah and Madinah 1877–1878*. Manchester/ Beirut: Barzan Publishing, 2006.
- Maneval, Stefan. *New Islamic Urbanism: The Architecture of Public and Private Space in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia*. London: UCL Press, 2019.
- Ministry of Culture. *Report on the State of Culture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2019: Facts and Figures*. Riyadh, 2020.
- _____. *Taqrīr al-Ḥāla al-Thaqāfiyya fī al-Mamlaka al-‘Arabiyya al-Su‘ūdiyya 2020: Raqmanat al-Thaqāfa*. Riyadh, 2021.
- Niblock, Tim & Monica Malik. *The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia*. London/ New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Niblock, Tim. *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival*. London/ New York: Routledge, 2006.
- _____. *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982.
- Orr Duncan, George. "The Planning and Development of the City of Jeddah: 1970-1984." PhD Thesis. Durham University. Durham. 1987.
- Wippel, Steffen (ed.). *Branding the Middle East: Communication Strategies and Image Building from Qom to Casablanca*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023.
- Yamani, Mai. *Cradle of Islam: Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.