

RECLAIMING HISTORIES AND THE VIRTUAL MUSEUM: A PROPOSAL TO PRESERVE AL JAZEERA AL HAMRA

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Abstract: *Al Jazeera Al Hamra, a former coastal village in southern Ras Al Khaimah, which was abandoned at the time of the formation of the United Arab Emirates in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is considered one of the last traditional towns in the country. Once an active fishing and pearl diving community, Al Jazeera Al Hamra consists of a fort (hisn), several mosques, a market (souq) and over a 100 houses including a wind tower home—many of which are constructed of coral and gypsum. As the buildings continue to decay due to a dire lack of attention, not only does the architecture need to be documented and mapped, but also the stories and traditions of the people who once lived there needs to be recorded.*

Creating a Web-based virtual museum, which documents both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Al Jazeera Al Hamra can provide a cohesive physical and social record of a traditional fishing and pearling village for future generations after the buildings and the people who had inhabited the town are gone. This paper examines the notion of the virtual museum in relation to the preservation of Al Jazeera Al Hamra's cultural heritage..

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past four decades the United Arab Emirates has embarked on a transformation that has substantially changed its cultural landscape. From a predominately Bedouin culture in which people lived in both ephemeral structures as well as more modest permanent ones, to a post-oil boom landscape of skyscrapers and grand buildings, the United Arab Emirates' investment in its new infrastructure reconfirms its ambitious plans for itself. This transformation has placed an emphasis on the preservation of past material culture and the creation of a new identity for the United Arab Emirates through its endeavor to acquire a global contemporary architecture, which is especially evident in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. However, the predominate wealth of its culture does not necessarily reside in its material artifacts, but rather lies in its rich intangible cultural heritage such as storytelling, dance, poetry and rituals, which also need to be preserved.

Al Jazeera Al Hamra, a former coastal village in southern Ras Al Khaimah, which was abandoned at the time of the formation of the United Arab Emirates in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is considered one of the last traditional towns in the country. Once an active fishing and pearl diving community, Al Jazeera Al Hamra consists of a fort (*hisn*), several mosques, a market (*souq*) and over 100 houses including a wind tower home—some of which are constructed of coral and gypsum. As the buildings continue to decay due to a dire lack of attention, not only does the architecture need to be documented and mapped, but also the stories and traditions of the people who once lived there need to be recorded.

Creating a virtual museum that documents both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Al Jazeera Al Hamra would provide a cohesive physical and social record of a traditional fishing and pearling village for future generations after the buildings and the people who inhabited the town are gone. In addition, by using digital media and, more specifically, Web 2.0 technologies, a museum may not only enhance its ability to act as a mediator between “artifacts” and audience—allowing for visitors or users to learn, question and engage in ways that have not been possible before—it can also potentially change the notion of the museum from an authoritative power to an inclusive voice—where memory may no longer be singular but rather collective,

allowing for a range of stories and traditions to be told and remembered. In this paper, the notion of the virtual museum in relation to the preservation of Al Jazeera Al Hamra's cultural heritage will be examined.

2. THE NOTION OF THE VIRTUAL MUSEUM

Over the last century, the notion of the museum has shifted and expanded from that of a storehouse or temple of objects to that of a visitor-centered educational repository of objects and information (Schweibenz, 1998). This paradigm shift is evident in such books as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* and Gail Anderson's *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*. It should be noted that this swing was not an overnight revelation, but rather a long, thoughtful process that took place over the 20th century and has led to new ideas for museums in the 21st century (Anderson, 2004). While many of the essays in Anderson's book exhibit the shift from the museum being a collection-driven institution to a visitor-centered one, it is Hooper-Greenhill's book that leads to ideas for the future of the museum, especially when it entails the use of computer technology in order for the museum to "play the role of partner, colleague, learner (itself), and service provider" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). In her book, she proclaims that, "Where the modernist museum was (and is) imagined as a building, the museum in the future may be imagined as a process or an experience." (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

With the introduction of digital media and the Internet in the early 1990s into the mainstream cultural landscape, museums began to consider new opportunities for re-presenting, managing and disseminating cultural heritage content—both the tangible and intangible. With current digital media technologies, one can create cultural content using imaging, modeling and archiving methodologies in conjunction with database management tools to examine cultural heritage content in a number of different ways (i.e., chronologically or thematically) (Kalay, 2008). In *Virtual Heritage: Media Space, Time and Perspectives*, Bharat Dave writes, "[V]irtual heritage projects incorporate interactivity and media rich representations to offer passages through time and space that are qualitatively different from what may be possible using traditional media and narratives... These links to 'treasured past' provide a window on memories of another time and place, a different way of life rooted in rituals different from today" (Dhave, 2008).

As United Arab Emirates' museum professionals and researchers grapple with how they may document, collect and disseminate intangible cultural heritage, which the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage recognizes as "oral literature, folklore, customs and beliefs, traditional handicrafts, games and sports, as well as performing arts" (Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, n.d.), a reexamination of how heritage and cultural artifacts are cataloged, represented and interpreted within a museum context needs to be carefully considered. A virtual environment may be the most appropriate place to preserve and disseminate these cultural artifacts.

The internet is one of the most promising of the digital media tools for cultural heritage dissemination as it is an information-broadcasting tool that enables collaboration and interaction between individuals across and within a global community. Using a museum's digital assets, such as images, video, audio and text, museum media design that employs Web 2.0 and social media technologies—while still being invested in the more authoritative Web 1.0 model as "publisher"—potentially allows the museum to assume multiple roles as authority, partner and learner in regard to the assembling, dissemination and interpretation of knowledge.

For example, the "Make History" Web project, an initiative of the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum, is a model case of how individuals may create a collective memory of a time, place or event using Web 2.0 technologies. Users of the site have the ability to upload images, videos and personal stories to the site as well as search for different media, locations and topics through its database. This online exhibition is in a sense a *majlis* or meeting place where people can share, learn and remember—creating an environment that enables inclusivity and participation, which are key components found within contemporary museum theory.

3. ABOUT AL JAZEERA AL HAMRA

Al Jazeera Al Hamra ("Red Island") is considered the last traditional fishing and pearling village in the United Arab Emirates (Government of Ras Al Khaimah, n.d.). Originally thought to be inhabited by only the

Al Za'ab tribe, this heterogeneous community consisted of a number of different tribes who referred to themselves as *hadhr* (coastal citizens), who had various skills and professions (Hawker, 2006). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the residents of Al Jazeera Al Hamra left the three-kilometer island for either nearby residence in Ras Al Khaimah or the emirate of Abu Dhabi, which all offered more modern amenities. Due to the wishes of the families who once lived there, the buildings have not been demolished and remain relatively intact. Consequently, Al Jazeera Al Hamra provides a snapshot of an Emirati coastal town that has been fairly unspoiled since its original inhabitants abandoned it (Hawker, 2006). It should be noted that the site is slowly being re-inhabited by expatriate laborers.

While remnants of the introduction of electricity, automobiles and various building materials used over the late 19th and through the 20th-century—such as coral, gypsum and concrete block—remain, this unique setting offers insight into how coastal village life with courtyard homes, mosques and a *souq* were mainstays of the urban tissue before UAE citizens transitioned to inhabiting air conditioned villas and shopping malls. According to oral traditions, the original structures on the island were *areesh*, a shelter or home made of date palm leaf and branch material (Hawker, 2006). In general and as the wealth of the community grew, the people of higher economic status built more permanent structures and those who had less money inhabited the *areesh* structures (Hawker, 2006). Unfortunately, no *areesh* structures built prior to the abandonment of Al Jazeera Al Hamra still exist.

The deserted village's densely knit courtyard homes stand close together separated by vein-like narrow pathways called *sikkas* that run throughout the town, providing shade and at times a gentle breeze for the inhabitants as they conducted their day-to-day activities. Mosques were conveniently situated throughout the community for worship and prayer. On the northern part of the former island are remnants of a market or *souq* that stood along the original coastline. The island is now part of the mainland, as reclaimed land has filled in the gap between Ras Al Khaimah's shoreline and the isle. An aerial view allows one to see the "red island" amongst the sea of white infill sand that now surrounds Al Jazeera Al Hamra.

4. THE JAZEERA AL HAMRA VIRTUAL MUSEUM PROJECT

Using a site map and documentation of the current site—a metaphor and reminder that if the history is not preserved, it can be easily lost—the Jazeera Al Hamra Virtual Museum Project attempts to provide a look at Emirati life before the oil boom by using the last remaining fishing and pearling village in the United Arab Emirates as a point of discovery. Utilizing an interactive interface, this project will be a portal and database of photos, 360-degree VR panoramas, video, text and sound presenting the history, traditions and stories behind both the material and social culture of Al Jazeera Al Hamra. Using an interactive environment can strengthen the social dimension of Al Jazeera Al Hamra's history by linking individuals' stories and histories to that of a larger context of place and time. Not only can it represent pieces or fragments of information within a context, it creates a platform for a virtual community to share memories and information, collaboratively writing a history of Al Jazeera Al Hamra. As Sara Roegiers and Frederik Truyen point out, "Computer-driven historical representation can juxtapose different witnesses, different time frames and spaces, allow for digression or even 'forks' from one narrative flow, and allow switching between micro and macro narratives, and long-term and short-term perspectives" (Roegiers and Truyen, 2008).

Creating a database of images, stories and recollections will provide a platform for others to submit photographs, videos and stories, which will be curated for suitability to the project. If possible, accepted submissions will also be mapped according to locations. As new information is acquired, the Jazeera Al Hamra virtual museum project will continue to grow richer.

In this first iteration, selected components of the village are in the process of being documented and mapped by this author such as the homes, mosques and the souq. Oral histories are also in the process of being recorded and will be mapped to appropriate locations. Traditions will also be further researched and investigated such as oral literature, folklore, customs, beliefs, handicrafts, games, and sports, as well as fishing and pearl diving activities and tools that are specific to Al Jazeera Al Hamra.

While there have been ideas for the physical preservation of Al Jazeera Al Hamra, including adaptive reuse of the village, there has been no plan implemented to date. The site is slowly deteriorating due to the passing of time, severe weather conditions and vandalism. As a result, a virtual museum may be the most appropriate venue for the preservation of this village as the digital domain offers a potentially ideal environment for an amalgamation between the tangible and intangible that is not easily offered within a traditional museum setting. It should also be noted that while conservation may prolong the longevity of cultural heritage, digital preservation and representation of cultural heritage may potentially extend its life indefinitely.

Nevertheless, preserving cultural heritage digitally still presents many roadblocks as file formats, hardware and software are constantly evolving. What is considered industry standard today may be obsolete tomorrow. In order to insure the longevity of the project's digital assets, sustainability issues need to be addressed, in order to ensure its longevity, especially in regard to migrating files to future storage and access systems so that digital objects retain their integrity.

In addition, a unified vocabulary needs to be established in describing the digital assets so that there is a consistency throughout the project's digital assets metadata. As a result, both the descriptive and technical metadata, which provides information about a digital object, needs to be carefully considered. Using a controlled vocabulary and thesauri, suggested by *Cataloging Cultural Objects: A Guide to Describing Cultural Works and Their Images* (<http://cco.vrafoundation.org>), which is a data content standard for the cultural heritage community, would enable the project to potentially: (1) improve the discovery and access of the project's assets; (2) allow for better migration to future storage and access systems; and (3) create sharable metadata among other institutions by engaging in a "best practice" currently accepted by other institutions (Baca, Coburn and Hubbard, 2007).

While some may argue that the United Arab Emirates is not ready for museum-based Internet initiatives, this author's research reveals differently. In 2009 this author worked with the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization to develop a survey to investigate visitor behaviors, needs and expectations in regard to the museum's website and Internet potential as well as to gain a broader understanding of the potential for future virtual museum initiatives within the United Arab Emirates. The fact that 98.5% of the respondents use the Internet coupled with the fact that 58.8% percent of general museum visitors stated that their primary purpose for visiting a museum's website is to "gain knowledge about a museum's collection" indicates the potential of the Internet as tool for museum curatorial project and education initiatives.

In her essay, *Curating Collections Knowledge*, Jennifer Trant writes, "As part of a cyberinfrastructure,... museums can become the site of research carried on by others, and the repository of results that relate to works in their collection. Re-use and re-interpretation are essential by-products of the public distribution of collections information. Museums can both encourage the creation of new knowledge about their collections and play an active role in recording it" (Trant, 2008).

By creating a networked vehicle for information collection, dissemination and re-interpretation that enables the digital artifacts to live side by side with interrelated information, the virtual museum will provide a framework for the contextual construction of knowledge for the understanding and preservation of Al Jazeera Al Hamra. With a collective approach to knowledge acquisition, a scholar, former inhabitant or relative, and/or visitor to Al Jazeera Al Hamra can contribute to a greater understanding of the place by sharing images, stories and research.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

By using digital technologies to document and create records of Al Jazeera Al Hamra's intangible and tangible cultural heritage assets as well as related contextual information, the Jazeera Al Hamra Virtual Museum project would not only preserve an important historical site, but it would also be a long-term working experiment in preserving heritage digitally—both the tangible and intangible—experimenting with new technologies and ideas that better tell the collective histories of Al Jazeera Al Hamra through research, oral histories and photographs in tandem with the documented remnants of its material culture. Nevertheless, the following questions need to be considered in regard to this initiative: (1) What are the

attributes that would encourage online museum visitors to actively engage with a museum website's content? (2) How may the project employ questioning and gaming strategies to further engage the virtual museum visitor? (3) How can these types of initiatives use Internet technologies to create more visceral experiences?

With the acknowledgement that the wealth of cultural heritage within the Arabian Gulf region primarily resides in the intangible, the virtual museum model presented in this paper can reside in a number of different initiatives from a virtual museum about the building of a 21st century city where nationals, expatriates and visitors can contribute their memories and images, to the preservation of a town such as Al Jazeera Al Hamra—allowing for a collective and collaborative history to be built and remembered. The notion of this type of virtual museum begins with a structure and common ground from which a collective memory can be built. As Maxwell Anderson, Director and CEO of the United States-based Indianapolis Museum of Art, reminds us, “Instead of using technology to make museums more efficient imitators of for-profit attractions, we should devote our energies to making museums more responsive to the perspectives of others, while arguing forcefully for the legitimacy of scholarly innovation. This approach will underscore museums’ educational benefits and encourage their vitality as a public resource” (Anderson, 2008).

Preserving Al Jazeera Al Hamra is important because it is the last intact fishing and pearling village in the United Arab Emirates, which provides a window into coastal Emirati life before the oil boom. As Sheik Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, who was instrumental in the unification of the United Arab Emirates and its first president, had said, "He who does not know his past cannot make the best of his present and future, for it is from the past that we learn" (UAEInteract, n.d.) The virtual museum project enables a collaborative learning environment to better understand Al Jazeera Al Hamra's culture, values and traditions so that future generations may learn about the past.

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Bird's eye view of Al Jazeera Al Hamra. Photograph by the author.



Mosque with conical minaret. Photograph by the author.



Pearl Merchant's Home. Photograph by the author.



360-degree panorama of a courtyard home. Photograph by the author.



Windtower. Photograph by the author.



Hisn. Photograph by the author.