



City's authenticity: Examining community participation in rebuilding Buraydah historical gates, Al-Qassim, Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Background: The historical gates of Buraydah are an important heritage site in Al-Qassim, Saudi Arabia. The Gates were built between 1850 and 1901 to protect the city but were demolished later, leaving almost no records or plans behind. The Prince of Al-Qassim has taken on the project to rebuild the Gates to teach future generations about their culture and heritage. The participation of the community becomes essential in this case. **Methods:** This study examines the role of the local community in the rebuilding process by questioning the extent of community participation to ensure the city's authenticity and how to enhance its involvement in the process. To achieve this objective, the study employed qualitative and quantitative methods for collecting primary data through online surveys. It was supported by a literature study as supplementary data, especially to trace the history of the Gates. The aim is to provide a complete picture of the Buraydah Gates, including its history, how they were built and demolished, and their significance to the community in the present times. **Findings:** This project is unlike most other rebuilding projects we see today. It is not a case of looking at and recreating old plans and drawings. It argues that community participation through scouring for rare photographs of the original gate and drawing plans based on the perception of older people recalling the design is the most effective approach to ensure the city's authenticity. **Conclusion:** This project stands out based on what the community remembers and feels about the gates. However, many aspects of this site are undocumented, and it is imperative to record and make notes of the progression to serve our future generations. This study enriches that documentation. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** Buraydah's historical gate research contributes to cultural asset conservation, urban area analysis, and community engagement. It proposes rehabilitating heritage buildings lacking architectural records using communal memory and historical research.

KEYWORDS: buraydah gates; city's authenticity; community participation; historical sites; rebuilding; Saudi Arabia.

1. Introduction

The Buraydah Gates were built around the city of Buraydah, Al-Qassim, Saudi Arabia, from 1850—1901 to protect the city from invasions, observe who was coming in and out, and keep the city safe. It became an important heritage site in Al-Qassim. As the capital of Al Qasim, Buraydah became an administrative and commercial center in the 20th century. The city grew rapidly with the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia, which led to economic development and urbanization. Al Qasim is located in central Saudi Arabia bordering Riyadh

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province to the south and Hail to the north. The area of Al Qassim is about 70,000 square kilometers, which is 3.1% of the total area of the Kingdom. Most of its territory is desert, but it has important agricultural areas due to irrigation. The city supplies the best dates to more than 74 countries. Its merchandise includes vegetables, grains, and dates, making it a special location for trade and agriculture. The city produces more than a million tons of crops annually and celebrates its harvest season with the Buraidah Date Festival. The urban system in the Qassim region is dominated by the city of Buraidah, which has most of the geographical factors that shape its urban location and environmental conditions naturally as a result of the surrounding fertile soil conditions (Abbakar, 2022). Al-Qassim Province located in the Najd Plateau captivates visitors with its beautiful nature and unique cultural heritage. The river's valley of Wadi al-Rumma which is the longest valley in the Arabian Peninsula crosses Al-Qassim from East to West. This area presents an experience of ancient history and magical stories amidst tall palm trees.

The Buraydah gate was an iconic landmark in the city and has become a symbol of Buraydah's heritage as a center of Islamic trade, agriculture, scholars, and cultural exchange for centuries. When the Gates were demolished, they were almost wiped from existence as there was almost no record of plans, sketches, or information on the gates. The gate was demolished as a result of the rapid modernization and urban development taking place in Saudi Arabia, which occurred during the mid-20th century. The Governor of Al-Qassim Region and Chairman of the Supreme Committee for the Revival of Historical Monuments in Buraydah, Prince Dr. Faisal bin Meshal bin Saud bin Abdulaziz picked up this project and stated that it is imperative to have this landmark back in the city and teach future generations about their culture and heritage. In the past, the Buraydah Gate served the purpose of marking the city boundaries, controlling the flow of goods and people, and providing protection. Over time these functions diminished due to a more stable political situation and the advent of modern transportation. The gate became more symbolic than practical and was seen as an archaic structure that did not fit the vision of modern Saudi cities. Urban planners and government authorities at the time prioritized modernity over historical preservation, leading to the decision to remove many old gates and fortifications across the Kingdom. At that time, Najdi's traditional architecture, represented by the Buraydah Gate, was not considered a priority in this new vision of the city.

The participation of the community becomes essential in this case. Although the gate itself no longer exists, it remains a strong part of community memory and historical narrative. The emergence of efforts to preserve its legacy through historical research, communal memory, and restoration of other heritage sites is crucial. While the blueprints and the architectural plans of this gate may have been lost, the memories of the local community remain important knowledge. Residents, especially elders who have lived through the various stages of Buraydah's construction, have memories of the structure, aesthetics, and original purpose of the gate. These community memories are crucial assets for historians, architects, and conservationists in reconstructing an authentic vision of the gate. Elders who remember the gate in its prime can provide detailed descriptions of the features of its materials, its color, its height, and how it integrated with its surroundings. They may recall certain design elements that have faded or been modified over time. This study examines the role of the local community in the rebuilding process by questioning the extent of community participation to ensure the city's authenticity and how to enhance its involvement in the process. Some other important questions were also asked, including what the Buraydah historical gates are, why they are important, why they were demolished, what the reasons are for rebuilding them, how they will be rebuilt, and what approaches are used for rebuilding them. In addition, this study provides an overview of all the aspects of the Buraydah gates. It includes the history of how it was built and demolished, the approach to rebuilding, and its impacts on the community. A deeper understanding allows for a more holistic restoration that honors not only the physical aspects of the gate but also its role in shaping Buraydah's economy and history.

Unlike most rebuilding projects that used the old plans and drawings and recreated them, this project consisted of scouring for rare photographs of the original gate and

drawing plans based on the perception of older people recalling the design. The project stands out because it is based on what the community remembers and feels about the gates. The communal memory provided invaluable insight into the design, materials, and craftsmanship of the gate. Their recollections of the shapes, patterns, and surrounding environment gave the project a sense of authenticity that blueprints could not provide. With the participation of the community, the restoration process was able to display the significance of the gate, relying not only on factual descriptions but also on the emotions and pride that the community felt towards this gate. This study argues that this approach is the most effective approach to ensure the city's authenticity. However, many aspects of this site are undocumented, the specific details of the original construction date and architectural methods are limited, and it is imperative to record and note the progression to serve our future generations.

1.1 City authenticity and community participation

City branding has become a widespread terminology in many disciplines nowadays from urban, development, and economics including tourism studies. The interest in this approach is getting significant, especially in the effort to boost economic development (Nursanty et al., 2023a; Riza, 2015). Successful city branding directly impacts economic development by positioning cities in global markets and attracting resources like capital, labor, and expertise (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009). City branding can also stimulate economic growth patterns over a long period (Klingmann, 2022). The efforts, however, might have consequences for the city itself, in terms of the possibility of losing its authenticity and identity, particularly in this globalization era (Hermawan & Sholihah, 2020). The strategies of city branding often prioritize commercial interest over preserving the authenticity of a place, resulting in cities becoming indistinguishable (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010). Branding efforts can undermine local culture and history simply for a more commercially viable or globally recognized image (Govers, R., & Go, F., 2009). Branding cities for economic gain, especially in tourism, can distort or replace authentic cultural expressions (Evans, 2003). Nursanty et al. (2023a) argue that the identity and authenticity of a place should be balanced and well-maintained to avoid conflict in promoting city branding. One of the strategies to maintain the city's authenticity and identity is by conserving the historical buildings through a community-engagement approach (Amer, 2023; Man, 2023; Nanda, 2019; Yihua, 2023) and by understanding the local identity concept (Awaliyah, 2023; Taha, 2024). This will enhance the pride and sense of belonging of the people as well as strengthen the community's identity at the same time. (Man, 2023; Nursanty et al., 2023b; Yihua, 2023). Involving residents in the preservation process builds a sense of ownership and pride that encourages more effective and long-term preservation of historic buildings (Evans & Shaw, 2004). Community perception and interpretation are important in heritage conservation and preservation (Nursanty et al., 2023b). It might determine the outcomes of the preservation and conservation efforts (Nanda, 2019; Tsintskiladze, 2024).

1.2 City of Buraydah, Al-Qassim Region, Saudi Arabia

Buraydah is located in the north-central part of Saudi Arabia, 609 meters above sea level (Alaboodi, 2020). It is the capital of the Al-Qassim Region in the heart of Saudi Arabia, one of the largest administrative regions in the Kingdom, covering a total area of around 1300 square kilometers with low humidity as a typical desert climate (MOMRA, 2019). Buraydah is centrally located, east of Al Qassim Region, about 330 kilometers northwest of Riyadh, about 700 kilometers northeast of Makkah, and about 500 kilometers east of Madinah. The average annual temperature of the city is 32°C (High), and 17°C (Low), and the average annual rainfall is 146mm¹ (Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and UNHABITAT, 2019a). Its population is more than (678,000) people, constituting 52% of the population of the Qassim region (Chamber, 2024). The city was founded in the 9th Hijrah century and is surrounded by several towns such as Unayzah, Al-Bukhayriyah, Al-Butayn, Al-Asyah, Al-Rubaiah, and Al-Tarafiyah (MOMRA, 2019). This city is located almost in the

middle of the Arabian Peninsula. It was named Buraydah because of the abundance and coolness of its water (Chamber, 2024). Another source is that it was named after one of the Companions of the Prophet Buraidah ibn Al-Haseeb. Although considered a new city, Buraydah has played a pivotal role in the region's history. It is known for its rich heritage, and culture, especially for its strategic location at the junction of pilgrims and major trade routes between the Kingdom's capital city, Riyadh, and the Muslim Holy Cities: Madinah and Makkah (MOMRA, 2019). Being on one of the old pilgrim routes coming from Iraq via the Zubaidah Pass, the city of Buraydah has played an important role in the distribution of population, which has influenced the formation of urban centers. The two main elements that influenced the growth pattern of Buraydah City are agriculture and the wadi network. Agricultural land extends from the Western edge of the city to the Northwest. The network of wadi networks to the South of the city had municipal and regional implications. The network of rivers makes Buraydah and its region suitable for agriculture. Buraydah serves as the agricultural bowl of the Al Qassim Region and the Kingdom (Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and UNHABITAT, 2019b). Four main sectors that support economic activities in Buraydah: public, services, management; and commercial. Buraydah is one of the most important commercial centers in the Kingdom due to its strategic location. In the commercial sector, the city represents about 6.6 percent of the total commercial enterprises in the kingdom. While in the agricultural sector, Buraydah produces the highest proportion of wheat in the Kingdom and has the largest date market in the world. Buraydah is known as the city of dates, which has the largest date and Carmel market in the world and exports to more than 20 countries. Buraydah is situated among the main cities and continues to grow due to its location at the crossroads of major trade routes in the Saudi Kingdom. Today, Buraydah City's multi-modality provides direct access to major highways, rail systems, and airports and is a high-quality link to other regions. The people of the city have witnessed many historical events stretching from Iraq in the north to Makkah al-Mukaromah. The growth and development of the city was due to its agricultural produce especially dates and its wealth of livestock and continues to this day as a significant contributor to its economy. This makes Buraydah rich in diversity of cultures and traditions, which is reflected in its architecture, cuisine, and customs.

One of the most striking historical features of Buraydah is its ancient gates. The gate, which used to be the main entrance to the city, was built using traditional Najdi construction techniques with mud bricks and local stones and is a typical architectural piece of central Saudi Arabia, with the use of local materials and designs that reflect the lifestyle of the people at the time. These gates, built between 1850 and 1901, were more than just architectural landmarks; they were symbols of protection, culture, and community. Strategically constructed to guard the city against invasions during hard times, they promised safety and security for the residents. The gates not only served a defensive purpose but also played a significant role in shaping the social and economic dynamics of the city. They were points of trade, social interaction, and cultural exchange, making them central to the life of the city and its people.

The historical gates of Buraydah, encapsulated within the ancient walls, symbolize the city's rich heritage and its developmental trajectory. These gates, located strategically along the walls, have witnessed the city's transformation and growth over centuries. The Hassan Al-Muhanna Wall is a critical structure in the city's fortification, significantly impacting the overall Buraydah urban landscape. The perimeter of the Hassan Al-Muhanna Wall extends over 2,300 meters, enclosing a significant portion of the city. Its Southeastern corner, near King Abdul Aziz Street, represents the furthest point from the city center. The wall's layout, with its Northern and Eastern sections running straight for 500 meters before turning westward and then northward, encapsulates the strategic planning of the era.

The Western wall, the longest at 875 meters, indicates the city's extensive expansion northwestward during this period. This expansion resulted in the city's asymmetrical growth, with the western side larger than the eastern side. Each corner of the wall featured a watchtower or a small castle, known as a *Maqsora*, which was predominantly circular (Fig. 1). These structures were not only defensive but also served as vantage points overseeing

the city and its surroundings. The wall had four main gates, each symbolically and symmetrically placed: Al-Sabah Gate in the South. Al-Jarda Gate, also known as the Palace Gate, is to the Southeast of the Palace. The North Gate (Fig. 2) on Al-Sinaa Street and Al-Qibli Gate or Al-Bouta in the West (Fig. 3). These gates were crucial for the city's connectivity and acted as conduits for trade, cultural exchange, and the movement of people.



Fig. 1. Mergab al Sangar (Sangar Watch tower), rebuilt gate, Buraydah, Al Qassim



Fig. 2. North Gate, Buraydah, Al Qassim



Fig. 3. West Gate, Buraydah, Al Qassim

The historical gates of Buraydah, a significant element of Saudi Arabia's urban heritage, have been a subject of interest in the broader discourse on the conservation of built heritage in the Arab world. Some studies related to the ancient and historical walled structures in Arab cities have been conducted; one of them was done by Mohareb & Kronenburg (2012), who investigated the peripheral patterns in historic Arab cities. This study provides insights into the strategic and social functions of such walls and gates, offering a comparative perspective that enriches the understanding of Buraydah's gates within the broader context of Arab urban history (Mohareb & Kronenburg, 2012). Another related study was conducted by Mikaeili (2015). He explores the role of walled cities in the development of civilization and provides a spatial analysis of urban edges in historic walled cities, respectively. Furthermore, The UNESCO World Heritage Centre and Hidden Architecture (UNESCO, n.d.) also provide examples of other historic walled cities, like Shibam, which serve as valuable comparative studies for understanding the architectural and urban significance of walled structures in shaping cities.

However, although considered a small city, Buraydah has been rapidly developing which brings a significant transformation to its urban landscape, especially due to the demolition of its historical sites (Al-Ansi et al., 2022). This also affected the Buraydah Gates which were gradually demolished due to city expansion and population growth, with little documentation left behind but only the memory. Their loss was not just physical, but it represented a fading link to the city's historical identity and heritage (Al-Ansi et al., 2022). Incorporating development with conservation is always challenging become a common crucial issue in many cities including Saudi Arabia (Khademizadeh et al., 2024). Furthermore, Khademizadeh et al. (2024) identify this is mainly due to lack of community involvement. Fortunately, recent strategies proposed under Saudi Vision 2030 highlighted this issue very well. It was stated that the community is part of the Saudi heritage and their involvement is critical to enhance and strengthen the local identity (Saudi Vision 2023). To support this strategy, community education and awareness need to be promoted at the same time (Das, 2015). Saudi Vision 2030 emphasizes the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage as a core component in strengthening local identity. It envisions developing arts and culture throughout Saudi Arabia to enrich the lives of the population and national identity, as well as building and strengthening understanding among communities thereby encouraging economic growth and tourism. The Ministry of Culture

Saudi Arabia undertakes various strategies to preserve historical sites and cultural traditions and ensure that they play a role in national development (Harbi, 2019).

On the other hand, Alghamdi et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of documenting modern heritage, highlighting a methodological approach that could apply to the gates of Buraydah. Their focus on integrating historical documentation with contemporary methods (Alghamdi et al., 2023) is particularly relevant to the reconstruction efforts of Buraydah's gates, where historical records are scarce. Moreover, Bagader (2013) discusses the evolution of Saudi's built heritage conservation, tracing its development since the 1970s. This historical context is crucial for understanding the significance of conserving structures like the gates of Buraydah, which are pivotal to the architectural and cultural narrative of Saudi cities. Specifically, for Buraydah City, Alrabadi (1987) delves into the urban growth and regional relations of Buraydah, offering an in-depth look at the city's development. His work is significant for contextualizing the gates within the city's urban evolution and their role in shaping its regional identity.

In 2010, The Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage published reports on initiatives to conserve Saudi heritage, reflecting the growing awareness and efforts towards preserving historical structures, including the gates of Buraydah (SCTA, 2010). The Ministry supports efforts to preserve Saudi culture and heritage by documenting the past and present so that future generations can understand cultural heritage consciously and deeply (Harbi, 2019). The initiative in rebuilding these gates is more than a restoration project; it is a reclamation of history, a rekindling of cultural pride, and a bridge connecting the past with the present and future. It symbolizes a commitment to preserving the cultural and historical soul of Buraydah, ensuring that its legacy is passed down to future generations.

2. Methods

To achieve the objective of this study, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was employed. The primary data was collected through online surveys, supported by a literature study for the secondary data, especially related to the history tracing of the Gates. The surveys consisted of direct questions for the quantitative data and open-ended questions for the qualitative data set. They were sent out to the general public to gather information about their knowledge, perceptions, and opinions about the Gates and how it could benefit the community. The survey targeted diverse groups of respondents from Al-Qassim and Riyadh, the nearby city with primary access to the Kingdom's main State highways.

A total of 100 respondents were collected for this study, which is sufficient to provide a representative sample of the community's views and a good glimpse into the community's knowledge of the topic. As previously mentioned, most of the information on the Gates was collected from the community itself since it was not easily found online. Therefore, surveying is extremely important as the foundation for this study. This survey will gather information on the gates, which is particularly crucial given the scarcity of documented historical data. To reach a high number of respondents, the questionnaire was developed in English and Arabic to ensure broad participation from diverse demographic groups in Al-Qassim and Riyadh. The Arabic results were translated into English later on for the analysis.

Alongside the survey, the study also involved extensive research into published books and historical records. It was aimed to gather factual information about the gates, cross-referencing community responses with historical evidence. Special attention will be given to locating rare photographs and other archival materials that can aid in accurately reconstructing the gates.

This combined method is unique in its community-centric approach, differing from typical reconstruction projects that rely heavily on existing architectural plans. By integrating community input with historical research, the study aims to ensure that the reconstructed gates resonate with the community's collective memory, cultural identity,

and the city’s authenticity. This method also provides a comprehensive overview of the Buraydah Gates, including its history, how they were built and demolished, and their significance to the community in the present times. It is hoped that with this method Buraydah City can find a way to maintain its identity while meeting its need for modernity, offering a space where history and modernity coexist harmoniously.

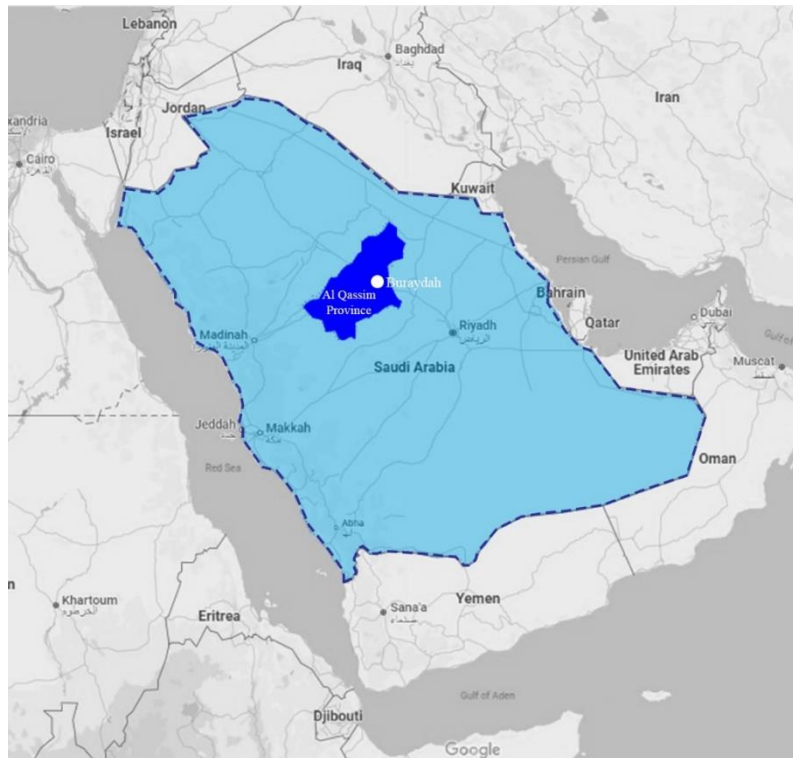


Fig. 4. Maps of Saudi Arabia
(Developed by authors adopted from Google Map)

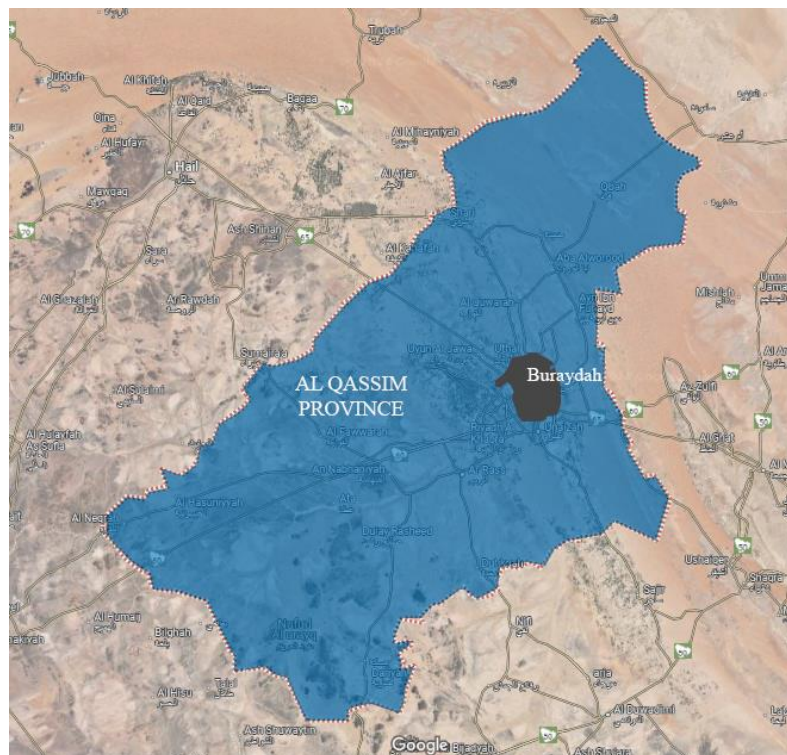


Fig 5. Maps of Al Qassim Province
(Developed by authors adopted from Google Map)

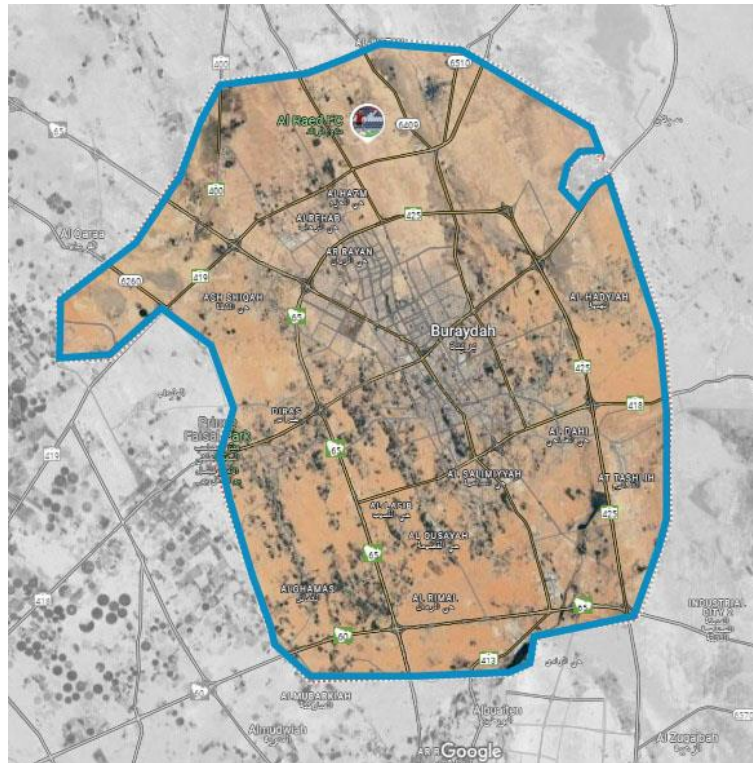


Fig. 6. Maps of Buraydah
(Developed by authors adopted from Google Map)

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Development and environmental challenges

The responses to the survey on the historical gates of Buraydah provide insights into the community's awareness and perception of the gates' history and significance. Respondents from Al-Qassin, Riyadh, Jeddah, and other areas have participated in this study. This indicates a broader interest in the project beyond just the residents of Buraydah. The age range of the respondents predominantly falls between 18—25 years, suggesting that the survey primarily reached a younger demographic. In terms of the familiarity of the respondents with the Gates, most respondents (66%) are unaware that Buraydah had historical gates. This indicates a general lack of awareness of the city's heritage and history. When the respondents were asked about the purpose of the Buraydah's Gates in the past, the responses varied, with some common themes being protection, monitoring movements of traders, and city expansion, as shown in Figure 7 below. This suggests an understanding that the gates served multiple purposes, including defensive, economic, and urban planning roles.

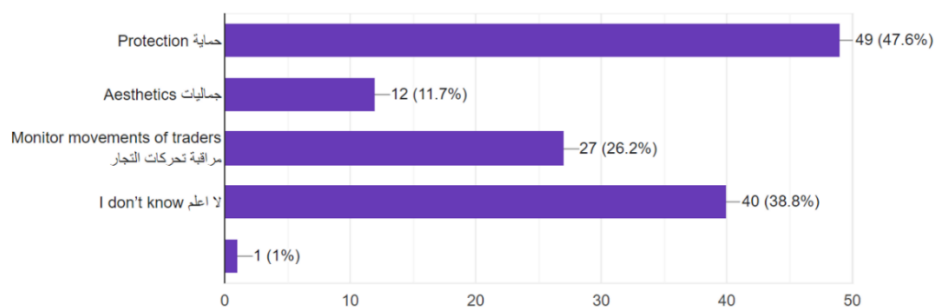


Fig. 7. Responses related to the knowledge of the purpose of Old Buraydah's Gate

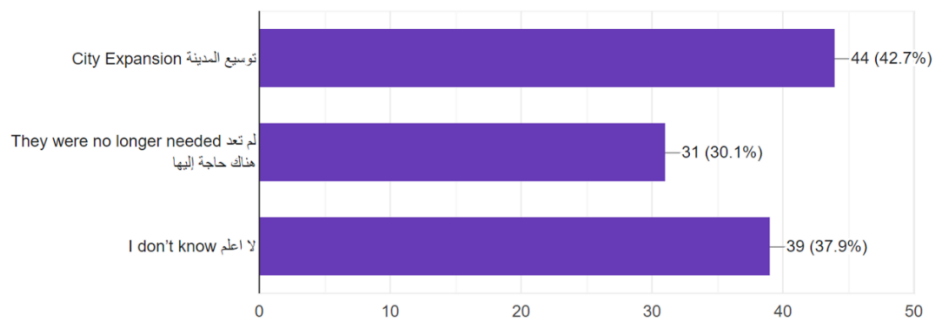


Fig. 8. Responses related to knowledge about the purpose of demolishing the Old Buraydah Gate

Furthermore, Figure 8 above shows that most of the respondents (44%) believe the Gates were demolished because they were no longer needed, which could reflect a view that the Gates became obsolete as the city modernized. Others did not know why the gates were demolished (39%), indicating a gap in historical knowledge among the community. Moreover, a significant portion of the respondents (79,6%) are not aware that the gates are currently being rebuilt, and awareness is crucial for fostering community involvement in the rebuilding process. On the other hand, this study found a strong community interest in cultural preservation and education where the majority of responses were primarily focused on preserving culture and heritage, educating future generations about Buraydah's history, and enhancing the city's aesthetics when they were asked about the significance of initiative of rebuilding the Buraydah's Gates as shown in Figure 9 below.

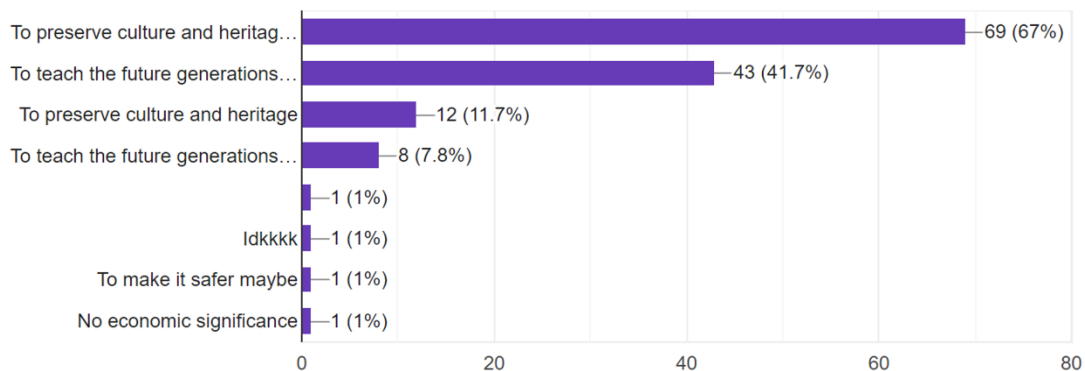


Fig. 9. Responses related to the community interest of the purpose of Old Buraydah's Gate

4. Conclusions

The findings from this study reveal a general awareness and positive attitude towards the historical gates and their reconstruction. However, there are gaps in detailed historical knowledge among the community. The focus on cultural preservation and education in the responses highlights a collective desire to reconnect with the city's past. The involvement of a younger demographic suggests potential for long-term engagement with the city's heritage. Overall, the survey data underscores the importance of the historical gates to the community's cultural identity and the need for educational initiatives to enhance historical understanding. The rebuilding project presents an opportunity to not only restore a physical structure but also to strengthen the community's connection to its heritage. Another significant finding from this study is that the approach used for rebuilding is unique because it does not just rely on old plans or drawings. Instead, it involves searching for rare photographs and drawing plans based on these images and memories from older people who remember the gates. This approach combines visual and oral histories, which is crucial for accurate heritage conservation, especially when original architectural drawings or detailed records are not available. This study concludes that Buraydah's community played

the most important role in conserving and maintaining its heritage for years. Their participation through scouring for rare photographs of the original gate and drawing plans based on the perception of the elderly recalling the design is the most effective approach to ensure the city's authenticity. The Buraydah community's involvement reflects a deep commitment to the preservation of cultural heritage. This is crucial in maintaining the authenticity of the city amidst modernization efforts.

The research on the historical gates of Buraydah makes significant contributions to cultural heritage conservation, urban studies, and community engagement. It introduces an innovative approach to restoring heritage sites without traditional architectural documentation, leveraging community memories and historical research. This method enriches the field of heritage conservation by demonstrating how participatory approaches can effectively reconstruct and preserve cultural sites. In addition, this study enhances the understanding of urban evolution in Saudi Arabian cities, particularly in the context of Buraydah's growth and historical significance. The research methodology, combining community surveys with historical analysis, serves as a valuable model for similar projects, highlighting the importance of integrating community input in heritage conservation.

Further research could explore the long-term impacts of the Gates' reconstruction on the community, conduct comparative studies with other heritage projects, investigate the use of modern technologies in conservation, and assess the social and economic impacts on the local community. This study not only benefits the field of heritage conservation but also serves as a model for similar projects globally, highlighting the importance of community involvement in preserving historical landmarks and enriching the documentation of the historical Buraydah's Gates, which is rarely found. Moreover, it contributes to academic knowledge and has practical implications for urban planning, cultural education, and policy-making in heritage conservation.

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