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# Journal of Tourism And Archaeology

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## The Universal Value of the Urban Heritage in the Historic Town of Zabid between conservation and current risks

Dr. Yasser Hashem Alhiagi

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**Abstract:** In 1993, The historical city of Zabid in Yemen was inscribed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Its urban heritage is related to the environmental features and the culture of the society. However, it lacks the capabilities necessary for proper conservation and management. In 2000, UNESCO inscribed Zabid on the list of "World Heritage in Danger" to underline the poor urban planning policies that had led to the destruction of the city's traditional houses on the behest of the Yemeni government due to poor upkeep and conservation. This study describes the urban heritage in the Historic Town of Zabid and discusses the major challenges and risks in the town. In other hand this study also explores the preservation requirements to protecting the urban heritage in the city.

**Keywords:** Conservation, Historic Town of Zabid, Universal Value, Urban Heritage

### القيمة العالمية للتراث العمراني في مدينة زبيد التاريخية

### بين الحفاظ والمخاطر الراهنة

د. ياسر هاشم الهياجي

أستاذ مشارك، قسم إدارة موارد التراث والإرشاد السياحي - جامعة الملك سعود

جامعة إب - اليمن

**ملخص البحث:** في عام 1993، تم إدراج مدينة زبيد التاريخية في اليمن من قبل اليونسكو كموقع للتراث العالمي. يرتبط تراثها العمراني بالسمات البيئية وثقافة المجتمع. ومع ذلك، فهي تفتقر إلى القدرات اللازمة للحفاظ والإدارة السليمة. في عام 2000، أدرجت اليونسكو مدينة زبيد على قائمة "التراث العالمي المعرض للخطر"؛ للتأكيد على سوء سياسات التخطيط الحضري التي أدت إلى تدمير المنازل التقليدية في المدينة وذلك بناءً على طلب من الحكومة اليمنية؛ بسبب سوء الصيانة والحفاظ. تصف هذه الدراسة التراث العمراني في مدينة زبيد التاريخية وتناقش التحديات والمخاطر الرئيسية في المدينة. من ناحية أخرى، تستكشف الدراسة أيضًا متطلبات الحفاظ لحماية التراث العمراني في المدينة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الحفاظ، مدينة زبيد التاريخية، القيمة العالمية، التراث العمراني.

## Introduction

Yemen's rich history is linked to its strategic location as a crossroads between Africa and Asia, and its location on the caravan routes in the Arabian Peninsula. It has numerous archaeological sites, structures, urban heritage sites depending on the regions and historic cities that are spread throughout the country. Yemen ratified the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 1980 and listed five UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS)<sup>1</sup> (*Old Walled City of Shibam* 1982, *Old City of Sana'a* 1986, *Historic Town of Zabid* 1993, *Socotra Archipelago* 2008, and *Landmarks of the Ancient Kingdom of Saba, Marib* 2023).

Nine other Yemeni sites are on the "Tentative List"<sup>2</sup> (The Hawf Area, Sharma/Jethmun coastal area, Balhaf/Burum coastal area, Historic City of Saada, Jibla and its surroundings, The Historic City of Thula, Jabal Bura, The Madrasa Amiriya of Rada, Jabal Bura), all of them were nominated in 2002. Moreover, it intends to register additional sites in the future. At the same time, it faces many obstacles and lacks the capabilities necessary for conservation and management.

The historic Town of Zabid was included on the List of World Heritage in Danger at the twenty-fourth session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee held in Cairns (Australia) in 2000, while the Old City of Sana'a and the Old Walled City of Shibam

were included on the List of World Heritage in Danger at the thirty-ninth meeting of the World Heritage Committee, which was held in Bonn (Germany) in 2015. All three sites have also been placed on the list of endangered heritage in the Islamic world in 2019. While the landmarks of the ancient Kingdom of Saba were promptly added to the danger list in 2023.



Figure 1-1. Old Walled City of Shibam-1982



Figure 1-2. Old City of Sana'a- 1986

1 - World Heritage Sites are cultural or natural landmarks of international significance, selected for recognition by the UNESCO. until March 2020, More than 1121 such sites have been recognized in over 167

States, including 869 cultural sites, 213 natural sites, and 39 mixed sites.

2 - A Tentative List is an inventory of those properties which each State Party intends to consider for nomination (<https://whc.unesco.org/>).



Figure 1-3. Historic Town of Zabid – 1993



Figure 1-4. Socotra Archipelago – 2008



Figure 1-5. Landmarks of the Ancient Kingdom of Saba, Marib - 2023

Figure 1 (1-1 to 1-5). WHSs in Yemen (Photos by Ministry of Tourism in Yemen)

Zabid is a secondary city in Yemen that has been listed on the World Heritage List, because it meets three of ten selection criteria II, IV and VI. Zabid is of outstanding

archaeological and historical interest for its domestic and military architecture and for its urban plan. Its urban and defensive fabric layout and it is strongly linked with the history of the spread of Islam in the early years of Hijra and the important role that Zabid played in the Arab and Muslim world for many centuries in spreading Islamic knowledge. (whc.unesco.org). Also in 1993, The Historic Town of Zabid was designated as a World Heritage City by the Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC) ([www.ovpm.org](http://www.ovpm.org)).

### Outstanding Universal Value:

The Outstanding Universal Value is the value agreed by the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO as the basis on the World Heritage Protection Convention. This is the reason that the heritage property is considered important to be recognized in the World Heritage List, which goes far beyond the local or national framework to become world heritage sites. Outstanding Universal Value is best shown through a set of ideas or values that are globally likely to be important part of the human race's heritage at a certain time or across time. The list of World Heritage is based on the definition of (OUV) Outstanding Universal Value, and the guidelines for implementing the World Heritage Convention indicate that “the exceptional universal value of a heritage means the superior significance of the heritage property enjoys in cultural and / or natural dimensions, so that its importance goes beyond a national border. Also, it becomes important for the present and future generations of all humanity (UNESCO, 2019).

## The Historic Town of Zabid

Zabid is one of the coastal towns in the Tehama area west of Yemen and one of the most important cities in Yemen. Historically, it has been one of the most famous religious and scientific centers, not only for Yemen but also for the whole Islamic world (UNESCO, 2007, p. 4), known as the City of Science. It has many mosques and Koran schools (Arabtech, 2004, p. 2). Zabid is located southwest of Sana'a at the center of the Tihama plain near the Red Sea (Croken, 1990). It has an elevation of about 110 meters above sea level (Al-Absi, 2007, p.164) and is situated beside the main Hodeidah – Taiz road, 20 km inland from the Red Sea. It is also about 100 km south of Hodeidah City (Alhazmi, 2000, p. 8). Its geographic location is N14 11 43.2 by E43 18 55.9 (whc.unesco.org).

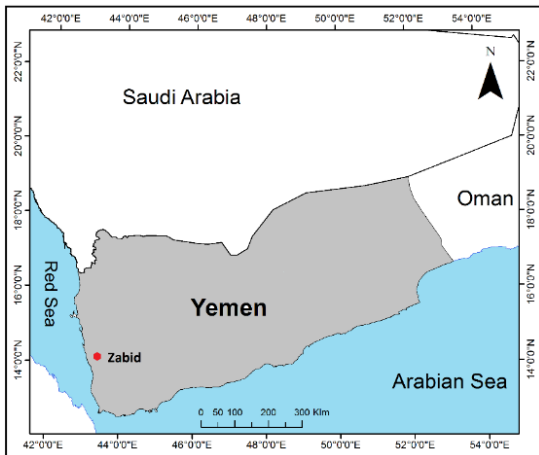


Figure 2. Zabid Site within Yemen (By Mr. Sulaiman Alharby- KSU)

The Old Town is built on a smooth hill consisting of soil and mixed debris of the historical buildings, the diameter of the Old

Town is about 1000 m. The difference in the topographical elevation between the town center and the surrounding landscape is around 15 m. The present population of the Historic Town of Zabid is about 25,000 (AlMarzouki, 2007, p.109). The main income of people is from agriculture and small scale business. There are no large industries in Zabid anymore; the former cotton processing industry closed down years ago. During the years (1980 to 2010), the Historic Town of Zabid suffered from modernization and urbanization combined with the decline of the economic role of the town, thus, severely affecting the "integrity and authenticity" of its urban fabric and architectural heritage (Medina Project, 2011, p. 7).

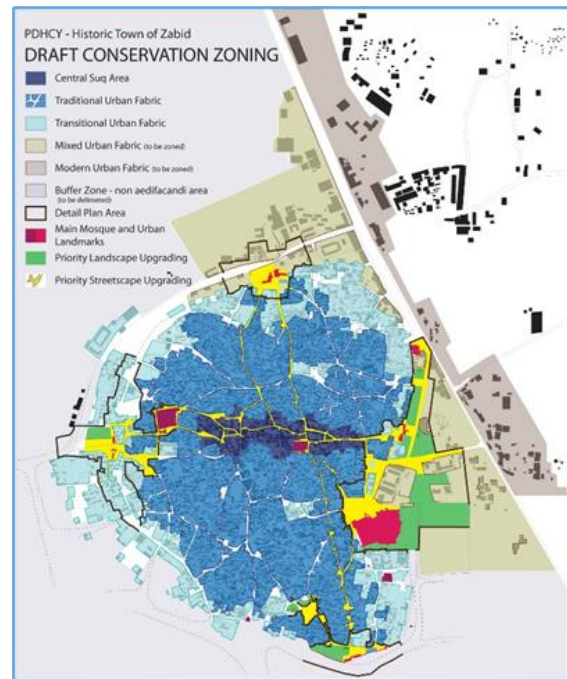


Figure 3. The Historic Town of Zabid location map (PDHCY – Zabid)<sup>1</sup>

1- The Project for the Development of Historic Cities of Yemen (PDHCY) in Zabid

### **The urban fabric of the historic Town of Zabid:**

Zabid includes an integrated urban fabric, and a number of cohesive buildings, which all indicate the originality of the urban heritage in the city, and the content of the Islamic civilization, and adapt to the local environment including homes, mosques, palaces, markets, walls and other urban heritage landmarks. Thus, it made up distinct and unique urban sites,

Zabid is roughly oval-shaped enclosed within fortification wall and covers some 135 ha (Habeeb, 2007, p. 20). It is still as organized as it was in its early planning. The Citadel, the Grand Mosque and the Al Asha'ir Mosque constitute the main focal points of the urban landscape. Baked brick covered with white stucco is the main material of building.



Figure 4. Shows a general view of the southern part of the Historic Town of Zabid.

Houses in Zabid are built with burnt brick, skillfully carved walls, niches, and ceilings. All the buildings open on the inside, and the open yard called (Qubal) goes around the rooms and supplements.

However, buildings vary in size and architectural detail, depending on the economic and social state of the owner.

Houses in Zabid contain Liwan (reception room), Almoraba'a (the central room in the house), Qubal (open yard), Alsofa (living room, and in the aspects of Qubal comes assistance functional elements (bathroom, toilet, kitchen, store, etc.).



Figure 5 (5-1 to 5-3). Traditional Houses of the Historic Town of Zabid (Image: [Wikimedia Commons](#).)

The Souq (Market), where small shops and businesses are concentrated, lies in the middle of the Old Town. From the Souq, the main roads lead radially to the road(s) around the Old Town (Al-Absi, 2007, p. 166). The Zabid Castle is in the east of Town, which was built over a long time (Alhaddad, 2004, p.136).



Figure 6. A general view of the Nasr Palace (Zabid Castle) in the Historic Town of Zabid (photos from [whc.unesco.org](http://whc.unesco.org))

Zabid city has the highest concentration of mosques among the Yemeni cities. It has 86 mosques after Sana'a. (Sadek, 1998, p.239). The two large and old mosques;

Grand Mosque, in the western part of Zabid, and the Al Asha'ir Mosque located near the market (Souq) and town Center. The Al Asha'ir Mosque was established during the era of the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, in the seventh year of migration 629 A.D. (Habeeb, 2007, p. 44).



Figure 7. The Grand Mosque in Zabid (By Alhiagi Yasser)



Figure 8. The Al Asha'ir Mosque in Zabid (By Alhiagi Yasser)

Zabid has an impressive network of streets and alleys bordered by traditional houses that are spread in all districts of the

town and open in small yards except for a major yard in front of the castle. All of the main streets meet in the yard of the castle that reaches the houses in town (WHL, 1991, p. 130). The town is surrounded by high walls and structured around a complex system of water canals.

The actual conditions of the historical buildings differ very much; some of the houses are in bad shape. Three of four town gates are in good condition and give an impression of the original look of the town (Habeeb, 2007, p. 26); the fourth (south) gate (Alqortob Gate) is severely damaged but it was renovated. The old town wall around the Historic Town of Zabid, unfortunately, does not exist anymore, but 12 towers remain (Alhaddad, 2004, p. 173-174).



Figure 9. The South Gate (Alqortob Gate) after renovation (By Alhiagi Yasser).



Figure 10. Shows the guard tower of the historic town of Zabid (By Alhiagi Yasser)

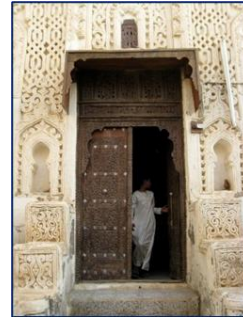




Figure 11 (11-1 to 11-6). Some Decorative Elements on the Facades of Heritage Houses (By Alhiagi Yasser)

### **The risks facing the Historic Town of Zabid:**

This study attempted to assess the threats facing the historic town of Zabid as a world heritage site at risk, by referring to the State of Conservation Reports (SOC) of World Heritage properties over the past years that classified the threats into different categories. Here we can review the factors affecting the Historic Town of Zabid:

- Deliberate destruction of heritage
- Financial resources
- Housing
- Human resources
- Land conversion
- Management systems/ management plan Cultural Heritage

By referring also to the reports of the World Heritage Committee, Threats for which the historic town of Zabid was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger, according to the report of the World Heritage Committee:

- Serious deterioration of the built

heritage (a high percentage of the residential houses being replaced by concrete and multi-storey buildings).

- The remaining houses in the city are rapidly deteriorating, due to the prevailing low income of the inhabitants.
- Large sections of the city's open spaces have been privatized, either illegally or informally and more than 30% of these built-up.
- Since the souq (Market) activities have been transferred outside the city, the ancient souq is almost empty and free from any type of activity and the shops are falling apart.
- The traditional economic role of the city has vanished.
- The city in general, is lacking any conservation and rehabilitation strategies.
- Threats arising from the armed conflict in Yemen.
- Reduction in support and resources arising from political and socio-economic disturbances (whc.unesco.org).

### **The current status of the urban heritage in the Historic Town of Zabid:**

The Historic Town of Zabid suffers from a serious deterioration of its urban heritage, which is being replaced by traditional residential buildings with concrete and multi-story buildings. Moreover, the local population suffers from low income, which leads to deteriorations in the town because the old market in the town has closed down and activities have been transferred outside the town. This has led to the disappearance of the traditional economic role of Zabid. On

the other hand, the city lacks any strategies for conservation and rehabilitation. Moreover, the recent damage caused to the cultural heritage of Yemen as a result of the escalating armed conflict since 2015 has compounded the challenges of preserving the heritage of Zabid and the current precarious economic situation. In addition, international security controls have choked tourist access. The Historic Town of Zabid continues to be subjected to significant threats from the ongoing lack of organizational support and material resources for physical conservation projects (World Heritage Committee, 2016).

One of the biggest conservation challenges that have been echoed by independent national conservators as well as national and local officials is the need for effective management (Mehta, 2009, p.11) that Zabid city suffers. For example, the \$20 million that has been spent on the conservation of Zabid over the past 20 years is gone now. At present, as more than 80 percent of the town is destroyed through abandonment and unplanned construction of concrete structures, an effort led by UNESCO and agencies such as Yemen's SFD and the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) are at work trying to recoup losses there (Mehta, 2009, p.12).

However, these attempts have not addressed the actual causes of decline and they couldn't conserve its remaining cultural assets.

The results of the field study in the Historic Town of Zabid have shown that the heritage sites and monuments have undergone a series of continuous processes

of change and consistent with the requirements of society. However, this feature of renewal was taking place within a context linked to social values, customs and traditions, and in random ways, away from the recognized foundations of development and preservation, that make heritage as an element of social and cultural development.

Despite the availability of many elements of the urban and architectural heritage in the Historic Town of Zabid, these monuments and heritage sites have been exposed to many risks and threats due to human and natural activities. Which are the following:

- Lack of coordination between the concerned authorities in developing a unified and integrated policy to preserve the urban heritage in the city.
- Lack of implementing any plan or strategy from the competent authorities to develop the city and preserve it from tampering and distortion, or planning a new city to accommodate expansion and growing population; to address the problem of overcrowding in the historic city. Also, traditional building materials were not provided for the maintenance and restoration of the old traditional buildings, so concrete and cement were the ready alternative.
- Randomness of restoration and renovation work, that don't conform to the heritage specifications, nor with the unique and distinctive architectural style in the city.
- Building some government departments such as the transportation building, the post office, schools, clinic, security Department and other

government buildings with specifications contrary to traditional construction.

- Falling lots of buildings in the city and some are worn out and ramshackle, because of the inability of the owners to maintain them, and migrated them to other cities.
- Removing old buildings and replacing them by new and modern buildings.
- Modification within the heritage housings, by creating additional rooms that violate traditional style and it distorts the image of the city and architectural heritage.
- Inefficiency sewage and water networks, which adversely affect the buildings and it makes them vulnerable.
- Random spread for electrical, telephone and lighting poles, which create some risks for citizens and deformation of the city view.
- Poor infrastructure; such as communications, the Internet, and other services.
- Entering cars to the alleys and roads of the city that is intended for pedestrians only, not for vehicles.
- Adding prominent protrusions for new buildings on streets and lanes that affects the safety of pedestrians and reduce visibility inside the city.
- Proliferation of hawkers leads to obstruction of traffic, and noise pollution.
- Writing slogans on the walls and posting pictures that lead to serious damage to the heritage buildings.
- The retreat of handicrafts and the migration of craftsmen from the city.
- Poor level of hygiene in the city, and spreading of waste and the remnants of

random restoration.

- Deterioration of squares, roads, and corridors, most of them at risk.



Figure 12. Tampering and distortion in the Historic Town of Zabid and random of electrical wiring (By Alhiagi Yasser)



Figure 13. New buildings that violate specifications of traditional building (By Alhiagi Yasser)



Figure 14. Building by concrete (By Alhiagi Yasser)



Figure 15. The bad condition of the heritage buildings in Zabid (By Alhiagi Yasser)



Figure 16. The spread of waste in Zabid (By Alhiagi Yasser)

### **Preservation and protection requirements**

Since the inclusion of the Historic Town of Zabid on the World Heritage List in 1993, Zabid was protecting by the Antiquities Law of 1973. In 2004 a Master Plan for the entire

city has been approved before an Urban Conservation Plan is preparation, and before prepared The Law for the Preservation of Historic Cities.

The authority responsible for the protection of the heritage cities in Yemen is the GOPHCY (General Organization for the Preservation of Historic Cities in Yemen), established in 1990 to manage and protect the historic cities of Yemen including the Historic Town of Zabid (GOPHCY, 2010: 39).

When the OWHC inscribed Zabid on the World Heritage List in December 1993. The inscription was accompanied by a recommendation to strengthen the conservation effort and management of the site. In October 1993, ICOMOS stated that "the lack of proper conservation and management programs for Zabid is a cause of alarm since the town is clearly menaced severely at the present time." For those same reasons, Zabid has been transferred to the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2000 until now (Medina Project, 2011).

In December 2006, the Yemeni Prime Minister has issued a decree to stop the decline of Zabid and the deterioration of its heritage values.

In 2007, the GOPHCY opened a branch in Zabid, which was supported and managed by the German Technical Assistance (GTZ) to address the city's severe decline and improve the physical, social and overall economic conditions in the town. This was to be achieved through running a housing rehabilitation project to improve the infrastructure in the town and fulfill all long-term preservation requirements to sustain the

heritage site's distinct identity as well as provide technical and financial assistance to address the negative aspects (GOPHCY, 2010, p.39).

In July 2009, the OWHC reiterated its concern about the completion of an Urban Conservation Plan for Zabid and the issuance of the Historic Cities law (Medina Project, 2011).

Accordingly, it was decided in January 2010 by the High Committee for Zabid and the GIZ Project to finalize the Conservation plan of Zabid.

In 2011, the Master Plan had been finished in cooperation with the GIZ project and the GOPHCY.

According to the recommendations of the World Heritage Centre, adopts the following desired state of conservation for the removal of the property from the World Heritage List in Danger:

- Finalisation of the Management Plan.
- Effective implementation of the Conservation Plan, encompassing the legal rules and technical regulations for the preservation of the cultural heritage and landscape of the property and its setting.
- Adoption of the new Conservation Law.
- Adoption of regulations for new construction and infrastructure within the Town and its buffer zone.
- Improvement in brick manufacturing technology through a programme of consultation, research and experimentation.
- State of conservation of traditional

buildings and their architectural features stabilised and necessary maintenance implemented.

- Effective regulations, accepted by the community, put in place to halt violations.
- Protection and enhancement of public spaces and of green private and public areas.
- Professional staff and contractors having adequate capacities to carry out their work.
- Risk management strategy in place.

In order to achieve the preservation of the urban heritage in the city, the following recommendations can be proposed:

- Cooperation and coordination between all partners from government authorities, private sector and international organizations.
- Establishing a multi-partner fund to support projects of heritage restoration in the city.
- Developing the infrastructure projects in the city and rehabilitation with high-quality specifications.
- Paving streets, alleys, and rehabilitation the markets.
- Establishing a new city outside the walls of the historic city; to accommodate the population density.
- Developing and marketing the handicrafts and traditional industries in the city.
- Active the role of non-governmental organization (NGOs), community participation, and establishing Association of Zabid City Friends.
- Limit the random interventions, and preserving the architectural heritage in

the city.

## Conclusion

The Historic Town of Zabid is very rich in terms of heritage that varies from walls, towers, gates, streets, and mosques. Unfortunately, due to the process of development, most of this ancient heritage infrastructure has been destroyed. The foregoing discussion proved there are a lot of risks that threatens the loss of the city universal value. To avoid such destruction and damage to the heritage infrastructure of the Historic Town of Zabid, Government authorities and local and international partners should implement the preservation requirements to protecting the urban heritage and the Outstanding Universal Value in the city.

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