

# INVESTIGATING SPECIFICITY

ETH Studio Basel has been working for five years on urban portraits of international metropolises. This research was part of a joint program dealing with “specificity”: Our aim was to show why cities that are drawn into the undertow of global developments do not, as might be expected, become immersed in placeless uniformity, but develop new differentiations. In the most general sense, this research raised the question of which role “identity” will play in a world that tends to set off similar mechanisms of urban development across the globe. In brief, the results can be summarized as follows: The differences and specificities that these metropolises develop are different from the traditional hallmarks of identity in organically evolved cities. But they have retained the dual – and ambiguous – character that has always distinguished the special traits of cities. The new qualities, of course, also exhibit the characteristics of a “culture of difference”; they showcase the determination of an urban society to establish non-exchangeability, i.e., identity, under the new conditions. But urban differentiation is by no means only a matter of agenda. Differences that are not the result of intentional action are evidence of the fact that globalization is inevitably subject to the physical nature of the location and the anthropological conditions. Globalization can neither overcome topography or the climate, nor can it exceed the limitations of resources or the local exposure to the forces of nature. “Specificity”, one might say, is also the doomed attempt of mankind to shed the bonds of discrete, conditional existence completely in favor of a global promise.

During the past several years we have learnt a lot about the transformation processes of contemporary cities under globalization pressures. But what is the impact of these forces on territories, beyond the clear gravitational fields of metropolitan centers? In order to find answers we have ventured this year to the territory of Oman, or more precisely the Muscat area where a stunning modernization and urbanization has, in a most vigorous way, changed the landscape in the wake of oil extraction. This project continues ETH Studio Basel’s territorial researches in Switzerland (1999-2005), the Nile Valley (2009), Rome - The Adriatic (2010), Florida (2011), and Vietnam (2012), which clearly show ways in which densely populated environments invent new types of space: traditional natural or rural areas turn into urbanized territories characterized by a multilayered occupation of landscape, overlapping structures and meanings.

The Gulf economies evolving from the region’s oil and gas industry have created new types of urban environments with new meanings, reasons and goals. In this context Oman seemed to offer a unique chance to investigate such a recent and expeditious urban growth. Understanding how hostile uninhabitable landscapes transform into sprawling, connected urban areas and territories, and identifying the forces, powers and means with which this is done feeds back into our own broader interest in territorial research. An extreme geography, and a unique case study to round off our previous investigations.

**DRAFT**  
© ETH Studio Basel

# MUSCAT AND OMAN UNFOLDING

The landscape of Oman constitutes a trinity; the coast, the desert and the mountains - the beauty of Oman. The power structure on the other hand has always been two fold, with the only separation being the fluent transition between the different natural environments.

Muscat functioned as an entity of its own for longer periods of times. Like the city-states of Venice or Genoa Muscat was a center of trade, a maritime power at times encompassing not only the coasts of Oman but parts of South West Asia and West Africa. Muscat's traditional hinterland, its source of wealth, was historically never the physical land surrounding it. Although the fruitful land on the Batinah plain along the Northeastern coast was an important producer of food that fed the fleet's vessels.

Oman, without its coast and without Muscat, holds the barren stone plains, the desert and the mountains with their tranquil oases. The counterpart of maritime Muscat evolved around the religious center of Nizwa in the interior and was constituted by a network of different tribal powers. The clear, nonnegotiable conditions of nature dictated life here. The permanent settlements were directed around water springs and wadis, the spatial occupation of the land can therefore be derived from the water availability and the age-old knowledge of water management manifested in the irrigation system of the aflaj channels. As a consequence the arid land was kept free from structures while the surrounding hills hosted the settlements of the oasis.

Affectively Oman and Muscat have worked as singular powers with limited interrelations or dependencies. Landscapes, or environments have been utilized and appropriated for different actions and actors. With the introduction of a third 'power', namely the drive coming from the exploitation of oil, unity was quickly achieved, and is now creating interconnectivity, overlap and new structures. The naval center is now bound to its land in the emergence of an interesting new territory, one under constant physical transformation, starting from the immense road network, one of the first visible welfare acts of Sultan Qaboos, a mechanic that opened up new mechanics in the desert.



# TRANSITION FROM A BOUND CONDITION

Starting from nominal conditions impelled by the influx of recent oil revenues, a specific urban form is coming into being in Oman today. Overwriting the articulated and restraining landscape is a vivid urbanization materializing a leap into new living conditions. The speed of urban transformation, so characteristic for the Gulf region of today, is in itself reason enough to be curious. With our research interest circling around the territory and its relation(s) to its center(s) we saw Oman and more precisely Muscat as a highly relevant place to research and understand within the context of the Gulf region and its driven urbanization.

The oil extractions and the change of rule, drastically altered the forecast for Oman as a country. The sultanate had since the late 19th century come to a stop, hardly changing its moods of living and with the late Sultan Said ibn Taimur even fighting development. With the out-set to modernize the country his son took to power in 1970 and embarked on a journey of modernization that would accelerate to the rapid urbanization we see today. Muscat being the only large city in the region, with 730 000 people, concentrates a lot of the urban production of infrastructure, housing, economical centers and production sites. But with the outspoken will and aim to spread the development, share the wealth and diversify the economy, a comparably even diffusion of investments in infrastructure can be accounted for all throughout the country. Also the effects of the specific housing strategy, the Land-Allotment Decree, are also present around most other smaller settlements.

In a culture where life was so tightly tied and dictated by the access and availability of water, we now see a society of seeming abundance, made possible by the oil extraction and tied to its capacity to subsidize the distribution of bare necessities. The tendency to diversify the economical dependency on oil and create a shift towards a multilayered economical base has directed a lot of the country's investments in infrastructure facilitating not only the housing sector and the industrial production but also the forming tourism branch. Like the dream of a better life, of change, always has been a co-driving force in the development and enhancement of most urban conditions, as we know them, it seem to be taking a front row position in Oman and it does not necessarily correlate with the actual means or even needs. So we see the plenteous land-allotment houses on the one hand filling a need of housing but simultaneously insinuating an incautious use of resources and infrastructure such as water (portable and wastewater), electricity and roads, all directly or indirectly dependent on the oil industry.

Prevalent indicators of the development in Oman are the change of pace, and the global presence in the country. Within a time period of only 40 years Oman has gone from a country with an underdeveloped urban milieu to a country under constant enhancement stimulated by new global connections and dependencies. As seen in the case of the Nile Valley (2009) the traditional agricultural sector works as a balancing, ponderous counter part to these quick transformations, but at the same time it here allows for more internal movements and shifts, and as in all other segments of society, and of the economy, it is dependent on immigrant workforce - a situation immensely different from only 30 years ago.



# RESEARCH TOPICS

Each research topic was developed by an individual team of student-researchers and tested through case studies. Each case study relates to one or more specific physical location, in which the recent tendencies are best visible. During the course of the semester the work led us to re-formulate and shift focus for some of the groups. At the same time the two ‘universal’ topics treated by this semesters master thesis students as a part of their preparatory work, are in this final representation presented in one chapter. On the following pages the topic briefs are presented as they where written at the start of our research.

## I. City Between Corniche and Hill

Natural and Artificial

## II. Agriculture

Interwoven Dependencies

## III. Tourism and Nature

Utilizing the Geography

## IV. Production and Distrubation

Transportation, Mobility and Resources

## V. Settling Oman’s Territory

Land Allotment

## VI. Structuring Oman’s Terrirtory

Infrastructure and planning



