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Isa Town and the Modernisation of Bahrain

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Declaration

I, Hesa Khalifa Ahmed Al Khalifa, declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

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Abstract

As a modern phenomenon, the new town spread from the UK to Europe and eventually the rest of the world. New Towns gained widespread attention for their reconfiguration of new social orders and their construction of new spatial domains. They came in all forms and sizes – each was similar enough to be recognised as a new town, and yet each one contained varying iterations and characteristics.

For countries in the Arabian Gulf, new towns were born out of the oil boom and were sustained by a political determination that has capitalised on their value to illustrate new visions of urbanisation, build economies, and mobilise societies living within them. They continue to be a part of political, economic, and social realities, set in narratives of the past as well as urban development plans. Unlike in other countries where they were introduced, such as the UK, their popularity in the Arab world did not wane or diminish. Thus, they remain as relevant today as when they were first introduced there in the second half of the twentieth century.

One of the earliest examples in the Arabian Gulf, Bahrain's Isa Town, which was built in multiple phases between the early 1960s and the early 1980s in Bahrain, illustrates the evolution of a new relationship between social, economic, and political processes in an evolving state. Until now, however, it has largely been absent from the wider and regional literature on new towns. Originally part of a state vision based on modernisation, Isa Town was designed and supervised by the British company George Wimpey, Ltd., and built by a group of up-and-coming local construction firms. The first of its multiple phases occurred between 1963 and 1974, when the Bahraini state oversaw the building of a whole new town with multiple house typologies for low to middle-income Bahraini families. The original town was also designed to include a wide spectrum of social and cultural amenities such as schools, health clinics, a town centre, a stadium, and other mixed-use facilities, transforming them into the centre of political and social attention in Bahrain and beyond.

This thesis aims to bridge the knowledge gap regarding new town examples outside the West, particularly in the Arabian Gulf. It builds on several key local Bahraini and external archives, using multimodal data in the form of photographic images, cinematographic recordings, and oral history interviews, to make up for silences within archives and address power relations within and across them. The project studies Isa Town and examines why it was built and its meaning to its community and the Bahraini society more broadly. Notably, it was through this state-led housing project that the Bahraini government developed and illustrated its new administrative capacity as it was preparing to embrace sovereign independence, simultaneously transforming society from the inside out. Isa Town was the process in which modernisation was mainstreamed to low- and middle-income Bahraini families, and it served social and political aims, in place of

constitutional innovation. More specifically, Isa Town socially transformed Bahraini families and modernised an evolving public administration body while supporting both with extensive contemporary media coverage. This Isa Town study illustrates the transformative nature of the move from older towns and villages for those who came to live there and what the new town represented for the Bahraini state. It also highlights how the new town was a space for both the state and citizens to construct and project their new modern identity, both of which were mediatised through a comprehensive creation and circulation of images to both local and foreign audiences, as seen in photographic images and newsreel creations found within the Bahrain Oil Company archives, their publications and elsewhere.

In short, Bahrain's first new town illustrates the execution of a national modernisation project at a critical time in its modern history. Due to the continuing interest in new towns in the Arab world and elsewhere, studies of their emergence and creation are as relevant today as they were when they were first introduced. The study of Isa Town sheds light on several important social, political, and administrative considerations regarding new towns and their development, offering critical knowledge for the future of these communities.

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For My Mother, Sabika

In Loving Memory of My Father, Khalifa, and My Beloved Sister, Aysha

For His Majesty the King of Bahrain

And for the People of Bahrain

“The Middle East oil wells represent by far the biggest known oil reserve of the world to-day. Oil is wealth, but as yet this great potential wealth has only just begun to affect the territory as a whole. Ancient towns are being completely pulled down and rebuilt, new towns are springing up in the desert and Governments have large ambitious development programmes.”

Raglan Squire, *Architectural Design*, March 1957

Chapter 1 – Isa Town and the modernisation of Bahrain

Introduction

New towns, a late nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomenon, were designed to fulfil multiple social, political, and economic purposes. Arguably, they began in the United Kingdom and, from there, spread worldwide in various iterations, sizes, and forms (Hall, 1988). Wherever they emerged, new towns mobilised societies, offered new social and economic opportunities, and proposed new ways of life and modernistic ideals. In the Arabian Gulf, they accompanied the discovery of oil, housing oil company employees in the first half of the twentieth century. But governments soon adopted them as part of urban expansion and modernisation initiatives, and they remain a significant part of political narratives, proposing social change and defining the interactions of communities within and around them. The words used to define them include the following: comprehensive, model, modern, modernising, new, and megaprojects. Housing and mixed-use buildings enabled new social interactions, but they were also physical spaces for governments to communicate their intentions, plans, and new national identities to the wider public.

Bahrain's Isa Town was such an example. In the Arabian Gulf, it is one of the earliest examples of a town unconnected to the oil industry, but rather a part of government-led new town construction. Its first phase was designed and executed by the British company George Wimpey, Ltd in 1963, and the first inhabitants arrived as early as 1967. More importantly, it illustrated public policy design and implementation and represented Bahrain's most extensive national social housing programme up to that point. Until now, the Isa Town example has been absent from the wider literature on new towns, social housing policies, and policy implementation studies in the region. This study aims to bridge that knowledge gap and shed light on an important example of national policy and its execution at a critical time in Bahrain's and the region's modern history. Isa Town was intricately connected to Bahraini–British relations. This introduction, therefore, will start by providing a background examination of the political and administrative history of modern Bahrain, followed by an overview of Bahraini society at the time Isa Town was introduced. The second part of the chapter will provide a summary of key definitions of new towns and their legacy, which is then followed by an introduction to Isa Town. Since the new town brought with it ideas of modernity, brief conceptions of modernity and modernisation are then discussed along with how they connect to Isa Town. This chapter concludes with the project's key aims and objectives, and an overview of the thesis's structure.

Political and administrative modern history of Bahrain

Isa Town's story is rooted in the modern political history of Bahrain, which was connected to the British presence in the region. For almost a hundred years and through several maritime defence treaties, Britain – first through the East India Company (1600–1858), then the Government of India (1858–1947), and, finally, the Foreign Office in London (1946–1971) – established a presence and assumed responsibility in the Arabian Gulf region. Its claims were enforced by the British Political Agent, who oversaw that the terms of the agreement were maintained, and as of 1821, a Persian Gulf squadron was ordered to protect the waters of the Gulf (Onley, 2010).

What began as a means of preserving British economic interests slowly shifted into political control and hegemony (Onley, 2010). The connection initially involved protecting trade routes that carried British ships and employees to and from the Indian subcontinent in exchange for defence from antagonistic regional powers. However, the relationship between the ruling Arab tribes in the Gulf and officials in Great Britain was more complex than this simple exchange might suggest. Although it controlled Bahrain's ability to conduct foreign relations with other countries, Britain provided protection against acts of violence and aggression, providing stability in the region (Onley, 2010).

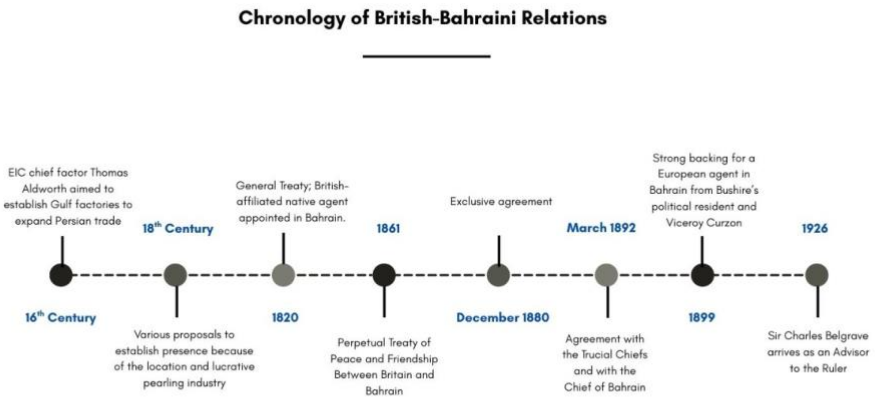

Image 1.1. Chronology of British–Bahraini relations.

The period of Pax Britannica, which started with the signing of the maritime defence treaties with the sheikhdoms of the region, officially made these countries protectorates of the British Empire. Although it might be imagined that these treaties, which established

and cemented British ties in the area, were forced upon the rulers, this was not the case – instead, the support and consent of the shaikhs was the foundation upon which this system was built and effectively maintained (Onley, 2010). Though the treaty with Bahrain was signed in 1861, it seems that the sheikhdom had long hoped to secure an arrangement with Great Britain, such as the ones with the Trucial States (Farah, 1985). Prior to the treaty of 1861, Bahrain actively sought agreements in exchange for British protection against aggressors or other regional powers[1] that would continue to recognise Bahrain as an independent state. Bahrain also expected recognition of its independent rule, a matter the British initially hesitated to support, though they later revised this position when it became necessary to protect the region from regional attacks and aggressions (Farah, 1985; Onley, 2010).

Bahrain has served as the strategic geopolitical centre of several routes between east and west (Al Sulaiti, 2009). The archipelago comprises thirty-three islands in the Arabian Gulf, and the main island, Bahrain Island, is home to the capital, Manama. A capital for key ancient civilisations, such as Dilmun and Tylos, it attracted the attention and interest of influential powers throughout the ages, and from the seventeenth century onwards, that of colonial powers interested in preserving their economic routes and interests in the east. However, it would be an oversimplification to describe Bahrain's relationship with Great Britain as imperial or colonial. Indeed, its sovereignty was contested, with Britain claiming Bahrain was independent despite a number of underlying practices that belied that claim (Onley, 2010).

Bahrain's geographic location and lucrative pearling industry made it vulnerable to attacks and invasions. As in other states of eastern Arabia, rulers often sought British intervention and protection in military, naval, and diplomatic matters (Onley, 2010). What made the relationship between Bahrain and other countries in the Arabian Gulf unique was that states in the region sought these agreements with the British rather than resisting a British presence there (Onley, 2010). Notably, such agreements offered protection and stability, both of which were essential in achieving economic progress, even before oil was found in the first half of the twentieth century. The discovery of oil in the Arabian Gulf region had a noticeable impact on urban development (Alissa, 2012; Wiedmann, 2010). For the Gulf states, oil brought with it a new capacity to organise and build, and post-oil urbanism is widely recognised as a phenomenon that influenced society and helped economic growth through state-led and private initiatives

[1] British protection requests throughout the Gulf were numerous. For example, the government received twenty-one requests from Bahrain alone between 1805–1861, as well as twelve from Oman, one from Kuwait, and sixty-four from the Trucial States (Onley, 2010).

(Wiedmann, 2010). Further, the need to protect economic interests from foreign aggressors took on a new dimension after the discovery of oil.

The security and stability of the region, achieved by the British presence there, are key to understanding why, more than a hundred years later, Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa remained hesitant about the withdrawal of British military forces (Friedman, 2020). In Bahrain, the British were valued for far more than their capacity to protect the region: they influenced the reorganisation and operations of the state, especially after the administrative reforms of the 1920s (Abdulla, 2016; Al Rumaihi, 1973; Al Shehabi, 2019; Al-Tajer, 1986; Onley, 2010). Interestingly, this supported the evolution of the public administrative body further into a modern hierarchy, leading to political and administrative changes in the 1960s. However, the question of who would fill the void left by the British if they were to leave was a concern for both the British and Shaikh Isa.[2] Although the identities of regional aggressors and, indeed, political players had changed dramatically since the period before the Pax Britannica, Bahrain was at the forefront of a new political scene and geopolitical dynamic both externally and internally. For one, the formation of the two regional pillars of Saudi Arabia and Iran caused unease (Friedman, 2020). In a meeting with the British Minister of State, Goronwy Roberts, on 8 January 1968, Shaikh Isa described the situation in the Gulf as 'terrible' and its stability as 'shaky' after he was told that the British were going to withdraw their military forces from the Gulf region by 1971 (Friedman, 2020).

Amid these negotiations, Bahrain was trying to strengthen its position through public administrative reform and substantial investments in infrastructure. Isa Town was, until then, the largest and among the most significant of these examples, having been conceptualised and constructed during a critical sociopolitical period in Bahrain. At the time, the growing population was starting to demand more from the government. This period was also when the government was slowly expanding and organising itself from within to meet public demands and address various political, social, and economic issues for the first time in its history. As some of the earliest initiatives to illustrate the government's plan, housing and new town development were prioritised in Bahrain in the 1960s. Thus, it is important to examine the society in which Isa Town was introduced.

Bahrain and its society

Before the discovery of oil in the early 1930s, the economy in Bahrain depended largely on agriculture, pearl fishing, and commercial trade. However, most professions were not seen as components of the economy but rather as a way of life (Al Rumaihi, 1973). Furthermore, although commerce in Bahrain was not a major employer, it was still deemed significant because it brought income for the state before oil was discovered.

[2] FCO 8/507; FCO 8/511.

For various reasons, however, both the agricultural and pearl industries in Bahrain were diminishing and even dying, a trend sometimes attributed to how these industries were structured and operated from within. Problems arose from a wide range of factors, such as a lack of security in the relationship between farmers and landowners and the growing demand for natural resources like water for agriculture, which ultimately challenged the sustainability of the industry.

As for pearl fishing and trade, dhow owners (*tawash*) and the men who worked for them faced growing financial strains in running pearling expeditions. Another concern in the pearl industry was the lack of a fixed income, and it did not help that the people of Bahrain faced difficulties in trade negotiations that would give them the best possible advantage; they were also unable to organise collectively to negotiate with their employers (Al Rumaihi, 1973). Furthermore, although agriculture, pearl fishing, and trading had persisted for hundreds of years, they remained important because there was no alternative industry until the discovery of oil in 1932 (Al Rumaihi, 1973).

By the 1960s, Bahrain's economy had diversified to include agriculture and fishing, industry, construction, banking, commerce, government, transportation, and several other industries. In 1965, the workforce represented only 21.7% of the Bahraini population, with 6% unemployment (Government of Bahrain, 1965, p. 14), meaning only about 20% of the Bahraini population had an income. However, these numbers shifted as education levels increased and more people were expected to enter the workforce (Government of Bahrain, 1965). In 1965, the majority of the Bahraini workforce was either working for the government or the oil industry, representing 22% and 16.5% of the total Bahraini workforce, respectively (Government of Bahrain, 1965, p. 13). The oil industry slowly grew from being led only by foreign experts to include more Bahrainis. In 1965, 13% of all jobs in Bahrain were in the oil industry, of which 74% were held by Bahrainis (Government of Bahrain, 1965, p. 13).

Before new towns, residents of Bahrain lived in various locations across Bahrain in either main towns or agricultural and coastal villages. But urbanisation, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, began to slowly absorb villages into larger metropolitan areas across Bahrain, including those near Isa Town (Al Najjar, 1993), as shown in an urban morphology study for the villages around the metropolitan areas of Manama and Muharraq (Al-Ghatam, 2023). Thus, Isa Town was introduced into an evolving, modernising yet small society that moved relatively quickly from one associated with the pearl trade, diving, and agriculture to one associated with new, modern heavy industry following the discovery of oil in 1932 (Al Rumaihi, 1973).

As this is ultimately a study of state and citizen through the lens of the new town, it is important to describe the society of Bahrain and its composition in that period. Due to massive economic and political changes in the region, particularly between the First World War and Bahrain's independence in 1971, the country underwent a major social and economic shift, which in turn laid the foundation for political change (Al Rumaihi, 1973). More importantly, in less than twenty-five years (1941–1965), the population in Bahrain almost doubled for Bahrainis over twenty-four years old and increased even more among foreign-born residents. The following section aims to provide a summary of trends in the Bahraini population and the general living conditions at the time, to understand to whom the new town was introduced and how it differed from other towns and villages.

Population growth in Bahrain, 1941–1965

The population of Bahrain has grown steadily since the turn of the century, among both Bahrainis and foreigners. Nevertheless, its demography is still much smaller than that of many new towns around the world.

Population Group	1941	1950	1959	1965
Bahraini Subjects	74,040	91,179	118,734	143,814
Foreigners	15,930	18,471	24,401	38,389
Total Population	89,970	109,650	143,135	182,203
Percentage Increase for the Total Population %	-	21.87%	30.54%	27.4%
Increase in Bahraini Subjects %	-	23.15%	30.22%	22%
Increase in Foreigners %	-	15.95%	32.10%	56%

Table 0.1. Population growth 1941–1965, Source: Third Population Census 1959; Fourth Population Census 1965, Government of Bahrain

Most of the population lived in either the capital, Manama, or the town of Muharraq, with the third largest group living in various villages across Bahrain. In 1941, almost 55% of the population lived in Manama or Muharraq, and almost 44% lived in other towns and

villages. By 1965, 62% of the population lived in Manama and Muharraq, and only 28.5% lived in other towns and villages.[3]

Geographical distribution of the population, 1941–1965

	1941	1950	1959	1965
Manama	27,835	39,648	61,726	79,098
Muharraq	21,439	25,577	27,115	34,430
Muharraq Villages	-	-	5,187	6,713
Hidd	-	-	4440	5,230
Jidhafs	-	-	5,591	7,941
Sitra	-	-	3,926	5,071
Riffa	-	-	6,623	9,403
Awali	1,533	3,846	3,123	2,097
Villages	39,164	40,579	25,404	32,220
Total	89,970	109,650	143,135	182,203

Table 0.2. Geographical distribution of population, Source: Fourth Population Census 1965, Government of Bahrain

Furthermore, the population of Bahrain continued to grow between 1941 and 1965, but Manama and Muharraq grew faster than any other new towns. Manama did not just grow in population but also in housing stock, which increased by 45%. In Muharraq, the population continued to grow, but the housing stock decreased to 19.5% in 1965 from 22.4% in 1941. As the population statistics demonstrate, Manama was the fastest-growing city or town in Bahrain. Between 1941 and 1965, the housing stock in Manama

[3] This calculation includes the population of the villages surrounding Muharraq, other villages, Jidhafs, and Sitra, as outlined in the Fourth Population Census, p. 59.

more than doubled, possibly due to the need to accommodate the growing population, including the influx of foreign residents.

Housing stock according to cities and villages, 1941–1965

	1941		1950		1959		1965	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Manama	4,649	31	5,703	35	9,637	43.7	11,909	45
Muharraq	3,317	22.4	3,720	22.8	4,361	19.8	5,117	19.5
Muharraq Villages	-	-	-	-	748		873	3.3
Hidd	719	4.8	619	3.8	703	3.2	778	3
Jidhafs	-	-	-	-	579	3.4	924	3.5
Sitra	-	-	-	-	542	2.5	695	2.6
Riffa[4]	5,697	38.4	6,232	38.4	1,134	5.1	1,427	5.4
Awali	-	-	-	-	950	4.3	638	2.4
Villages	-	-	-	-	3,276	14.8	3939	15.3
Total	14,382	100	16,274	100	22,030	100	26,300	100

Table 0.3. Housing stock of cities and villages, Source: Bahrain Fourth Population Census 1965, Government of Bahrain

Houses in Bahrain were classified according to their building materials: stone, palm reed (including *arish* and *barasti*), and other materials. Most of the houses in Awali, for example, were initially Nissen huts (Gornall, 1965); later, they were built from imported prefabricated materials. By 1965, most of the houses were made of stone and were

[4] For 1941 and 1950, the housing stock of Riffa included houses in Jidhafs, Sitra, Awali, and other villages, which were later moved to a separate category.

connected to water and electricity; however, 6.4% (1,680 families) of the population lived in palm reed houses, almost 30% of the population was not connected to water, and 20% of households were not connected to electricity. Also, much of the population lived in single-family households, but multiple-family houses were common, some accommodating more than six families.

Types of houses

	1959				1965					
	Stone	Palm Reed	Other	Total	Stone	Palm Reed	Other	Total	Water %	Electricity %
Manama	7,116	2,464	57	9,637	10,776	1,004	129	11,909	88.5	86
Muharraq	3,884	474	3	4,361	4,918	164	35	5,117	95.1	90
Muharraq Villages	574	174	-	748	809	63	1	873	25	79
Hidd	652	51	-	703	736	42	-	778	95	88.5
Jidhafs	527	151	1	679	867	42	15	924	76	88
Sitra	457	85	-	542	585	37	73	695	-	23
Riffa	1,022	58	54	1,134	1,374	2	51	1,427	92.5	92.5
Awali	344	-	606	950	1	-	637	638	97	100
Villages	2,719	520	36	3,276	3,464	326	149	3,939	20	56.5
Total	17,219	3,978	757	22,030	23,530	1,680	1,690	26,300	71.5	80

Table 0.4. Types of houses by area, Source: Bahrain Fourth Population Census 1965, p. 60, Government of Bahrain

Although census reports provide details on the types of houses and the number of families living in them, few resources discuss their condition or age. Apart from the houses in Awali, BAPCO's oil town, it is very difficult to trace the age and condition of

stone, palm reed, or other types of houses to obtain a clear picture of living conditions or even to estimate the space allocated to each individual in a family. As demonstrated by the fourth population census, 25% of houses in Bahrain accommodated more than five individuals in a single room, whether in stone or palm reed structures (Government of Bahrain, 1965, p. 7).

Families per house, 1959–1965

Number of Families	1959		1965	
Per House	Number of Houses	%	Number of Houses	%
One family	20,148	91.4	23,082	87.7
Two families	1,348	6.1	2,292	8.7
Three families	330	1.4	587	2.2
Four families	114	0.5	206	0.7
Five families	49	0.3	74	0.3
Six families	21	0.15	31	0.2
More than six families	20	0.15	28	0.2
Total	22,030	100	26,300	100

Table 0.5. Number of families per housing unit, Source: Bahrain Fourth Population Census 1965, p. 61, Government of Bahrain

As the population grew and the housing stock continued to increase across all towns and villages of Bahrain, it remains unclear whether the new town was intended to address the growing population, designed as a solution to inadequate housing, or had an altogether different purpose. There are many reasons for constructing new towns, and the aim of building a new town in Bahrain could well be similar to those underlying the development of any other new town.

In any case, Isa Town was built for a much smaller population than other new towns in the world (two other famous cases include Brasília, which is now at 2.8 million of the 211 million residents of Brazil[5], and Chandigarh, which is now at 1.26 million of the 1.4 billion people living in India[6]). Isa Town is, therefore, comparable to 'Mark Two' British new towns, i.e. those designed between 1961 and 1966, such as Irvine and Livingston in Scotland and Runcorn and Redditch in England.

New towns, their legacy and prevalence in the Arabian Gulf

Isa Town's construction began more than sixty years ago, during what academics considered to be the golden age of new towns, which began following the Second World War and ended around 1970 (Lock and Ellis, 2020; Peiser and Forsyth, 2021). Bahrain's "New Town of Isa" was certainly not the only or the final example of a new town in the Arabian Gulf. Indeed, new towns in the region remain at the forefront of academic literature on new towns outside the West (Peiser and Forsyth, 2021). Since their inception, new towns have spread throughout the region, both as towns that later expanded and absorbed various settlements around them, as in the case of Isa Town, and as modernistic megaprojects. Recent academic scholarship defines new towns as follows:

> Comprehensively planned, mixed-use, freestanding, implemented new towns rather than new towns-in-town (large urban infill projects), planned extensions to existing developments, or largely residential developments. They may be satellites of an existing city, linked to it economically and via commuting patterns, or independent places, often sites close to natural resources and remote from existing urban areas. They may be developed by the public or private sector, or some combination of the two. (Peiser and Forsyth, 2021, p. 8)

Moreover, new towns were built according to a set of ideals to create a reality far different from anything people were used to. They had to look and feel different and/or offer something completely new:

> New towns were qualitatively different. They were attempts to prefabricate, literally and figuratively, complete urban totalities: they were holistic, whole-cloth, complete places. It was this grand intention that made delineating their definition and features so fundamental, and what made them utopian in form. (Wakeman, 2016, p. 3)

[5] Brasília demographic information: https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/brasil/df/brasilia/panorama
[6] Chandigarh demographic information: http://chandigarh.gov.in

New towns also took different forms, from Ebenezer Howard's original idea for the garden city, intended to be self-sufficient, to Brasília and Chandigarh, constructed as new capital cities. In the Gulf region, earlier examples of new planned communities include company towns, such as Awali in Bahrain, which was affiliated with the Bahrain Oil Company (BAPCO), Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC)'s Al Ahmadi, and Saudi ARAMCO's Residential Camp in Dhahran:

> They range from original models of garden cities to new capitals, company or science towns to military towns. Nevertheless, they share several characteristics such as comprehensively planned and mixed-use, spatial independence from metropolitan centres, sometimes defined by size and finally that they were implemented and were not just planned as ideas on paper. (Peiser and Forsyth, 2021, p. 8)

Despite the existence of other planned towns in the Gulf, I still consider Isa Town to be the first new town and the earliest example of new town developments within the Arabian Gulf for several reasons. First and foremost, Isa Town was not restricted to a certain segment or class of society, as outlined in the Housing and Ownership Project of 1962 (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962). Instead, it was intended to serve 'limited and middle-income families'. Moreover, as a national project, it was open to all segments of Bahraini society. In contrast, oil company towns, such as Awali, were strictly reserved for company employees and, often, only for expatriate employees.

Second, Isa Town offered the benefit of home ownership through multiple categories of housing typologies. Thus, residency within the new town was not conditional on employment status within a company or belonging to a certain class or segment of society. Both points are further supported by the actions of the Government of Bahrain, which introduced the Housing and Ownership Project that established Isa Town. Furthermore, BAPCO introduced its own Housing Ownership Scheme in the early 1960s, which was exclusive to Bahraini employees who were otherwise excluded from Awali.

Third, after its construction, Isa Town was recorded as a separate metropolitan area within the central district in Bahrain in all census reports, and it was included in the Ministry of Housing Reports after 1975. As a town, it continued to grow in acreage, density, and form from its original Wimpey Plan (from 1963 to 1974, when around 1,500 housing units were built) and became comparable to larger and older metropolitan areas. In 1984, it had a higher density than Riffa and was slightly smaller geographically than central Muharraq (see Table 1.6). By 1993, the total number of housing units in Isa Town was 5,650, representing almost 33% of all houses built as part of the national housing

project (Ministry of Housing, 1993, p. 125). The new town of Isa may still not be comparable to larger new towns worldwide, but by 1993, it housed approximately 35,000 citizens, representing 11% of the total Bahraini population (Ministry of Housing, 1993).

Isa Town: A new and modern town for Bahrain

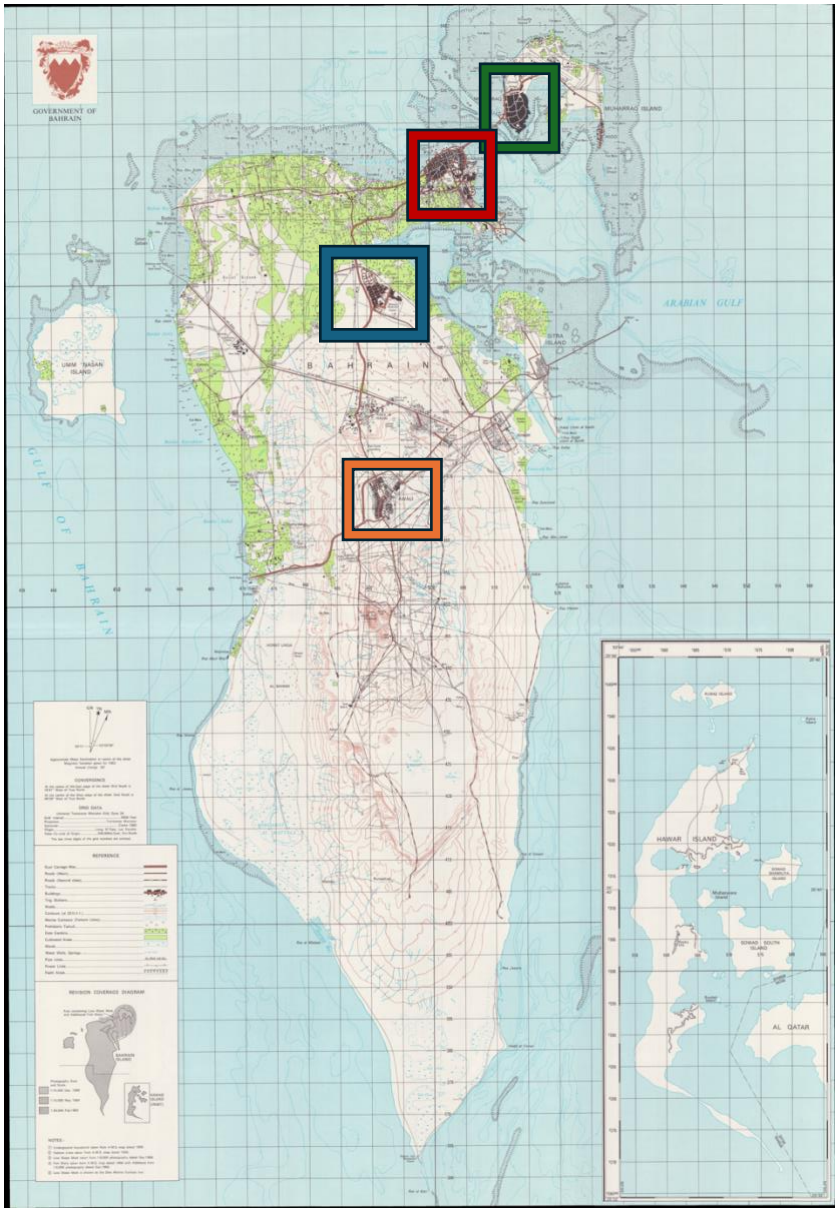

Image 0.2. Map of Bahrain after the establishment of Isa Town, 1968, highlighting the locations of Isa Town (in blue), Awali (orange), Manama (red), and Muharraq (green). Source: Ministry of Works, Bahrain

In Bahrain, Isa Town was one of the earliest and largest urban development projects within the government development programme. Bahrain was on a mission to strengthen itself from within by developing its modern public administration model, especially considering the political confrontations of the late 1950s, where organised civil society groups led a series of protests which disrupted civil life (Abdulla, 2016; Al Shehabi, 2019;

Belgrave, 1960; Khuri, 1980). Therefore, achieving internal stability was key to any progress the government hoped to make. As British influence over local matters expanded greatly in Bahrain in the first half of the twentieth century, the 1950s, in contrast, were a turning point in Bahrain's sociopolitical history. Organised civil society movements pushed the government to take active steps to improve the livelihoods of citizens through a series of government welfare projects and infrastructure investments. The reign of Shaikh Isa (1961–1999) was marked by significant government interventions to develop vital social, urban, and infrastructure projects, driven by a young and energetic ruler. Local leaders were primarily concerned with strengthening their image and contributions among the local population. I argue that this was the period when the political, economic, and social foundations were strengthened to support a politically independent future for Bahrain. Therefore, behind the glossy façade of a new and modern town, the Bahraini state was working relentlessly to build its modern administration and project a new political image. This development stemmed from an existential need to be considered a modern state able to govern its affairs both internally and externally, despite British presence in the region, which had lasted more than one hundred years.

But whose idea was it to build a new town, and why were engineers from George Wimpey, Ltd. hired to design and supervise its construction? The National Archives in Great Britain show that correspondence between British administrators in Bahrain and the Foreign Office in London in the 1960s was mainly concerned with the impending British withdrawal of all military forces from the Arabian Gulf and the political organisation or reorganisation needed to facilitate a smooth exit.[7] British and Bahraini leaders did not always agree on what and how Bahrain, as a state, should design its public administration and define its identity as an independent, sovereign state. Constitutional innovation, as well as the separation of powers from the ruler, were the proposed solutions by the British. The advised solution was similar to what neighbouring Kuwait adopted as it gained its sovereign independence in 1961. But the local leadership in Bahrain felt otherwise and proposed various outreach initiatives for local citizens, which were often met with scepticism by representatives of the British government.[8] Bahrain chose to expand the role of the government in this transitional period rather than adopting new constitutional reforms.

[7] FCO 8/507 and FCO 8/511.
[8] E. P. Wiltshire to Arabian Department, Annual Review of Bahrain 1962, FO 371/168669.

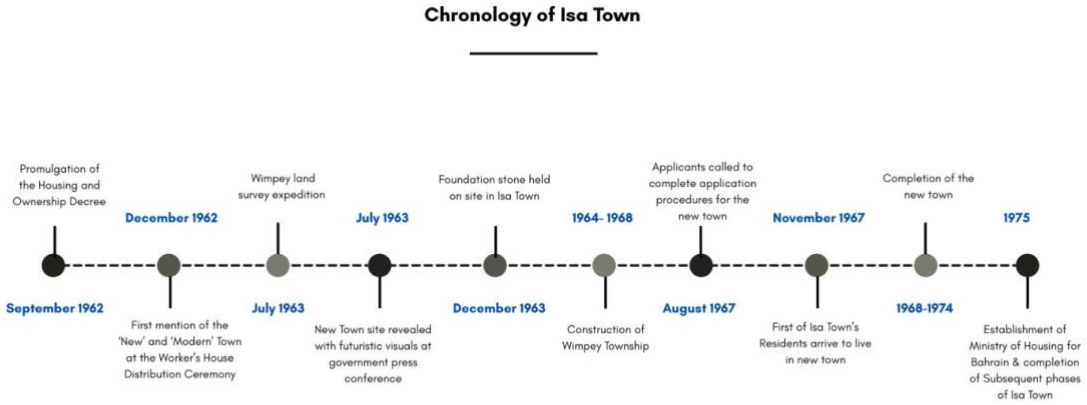

Image 0.3. Chronology of Isa Town development.

Thus, Isa Town and its development also illuminate the story of the modern formation and reorganisation of the state from the inside, as legal and administrative changes within the state facilitated its construction. Notably, it was one of the first, if not the first, national projects of Shaikh Isa bin Salman's reign, announced a little over a year after he acceded to the throne.

Isa Town's location was described as strategically placed between Manama and Awali: a 'desert site to be a new township' with a housing scheme described as the 'biggest we have ever had in Bahrain'.[9] Only eight kilometres southwest of the capital, Manama, and around the same distance north of Awali, Isa Town lies strategically east of Shaikh Salman Highway, the main road which connected Bahrain's north to south in the 1960s. On a map of Bahrain from 1968 (Image 1.2), one could easily identify four metropolitan areas of the time: Manama and Muharraq to the north of the main island, Awali in the centre of Bahrain Island, and Isa Town in between.

In the 1960s, the town's location was seen as a desert site due to the lack of urban development and infrastructure around it. Isa Town's selected site location allowed for expansion into subsequent phases of the new town, originally spanning 2.5 square

[9] *The Islander*, Vol.14, No. 20, 24 July 1963, BAPCO Energies.

kilometres, which grew to 12.36 square kilometres in 1984.[10] Below is a comparison of Isa Town in terms of acreage and density to other towns in Bahrain.

City/ Town	Area (Square Kilometres)	Total Population	Density (P/KM2)
Hidd	3.86	7373	1910.1
Manama	25.06	128893	5143.4
Muharraq	15.19	63694	4193.2
Riffa	288.89	32644	113
Sitra	28.48	26238	921.3
Jidhafs	20	38676	1933.8
Isa Town	12.36	26827	217

Table 0.6. Area, population, and population density of major towns in Bahrain, 1984, Source: Ministry of Housing

The Housing and Ownership Project of 1962 preceded the development of Isa Town, and its terms and conditions both governed the development and determined the distribution of houses to citizens. It may be argued that Isa Town was constructed as part of the Housing and Ownership Project of 1962, which outlines Bahrain's national social housing programme (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962), which is discussed in further detail in Chapter 5. This research is built on the argument that Isa Town was developed for several reasons, but chief among them was to provide the government with a means to embody the 1962 decree and its policies. Thus, the government was not only concerned with providing housing for Bahrainis with limited incomes, but also with designing the new town to accommodate various social, cultural, sporting, educational, and economic facilities used by the government and by society within it.

Therefore, Isa Town was designed since its inception to be a comprehensive mixed-use planned community that included multiple category residential units, religious facilities, a commercial centre and shopping areas, boys' and girls' schools, health clinics, a state-of-the-art sports complex, services, and many other facilities, all of this in an originally small area of 2.5 square kilometres in 1967. In a 1993 publication by the Ministry of Housing, the project development site was recorded as 498 hectares (4.98 square kilometres), of which 202 hectares (2.02 square kilometres) were dedicated to the construction of housing units. Nevertheless, Isa Town continued to grow and was considered the largest town development project to date in Bahrain, built on undeveloped land under a comprehensive master plan. To compare, as of 1971, the

[10] A note on town size: the original size of the 'Wimpey' Township was 2.5 square kilometres. In the early 1990s, the Ministry of Housing recorded it as being both 498 hectares (4.98 square kilometres) in one publication and 12.36 square kilometres in another. The difference is most likely due to urban expansion beyond the original project and the development of the land south and east of the township. The expansion included the land plots, government buildings, and the educational block south and southeast of the original Wimpey township.

recorded area of Muharraq Island was 1,388 hectares (13.88 square kilometres), including the old town of Muharraq and the neighbouring villages of Busaiteen, Arad, Dair, and Samahij (Noor Al-Nabi, 2012, p. 89). Manama, the largest metropolis according to a master plan from the year 1968, would grow to 2,340 hectares (23.40 square kilometres), which included a plan to reclaim 1,100 hectares (11 square kilometres) of land, which together represented seven times the urban centre it was in the 1950s (Noor Al-Nabi, 2012; Wiedmann, 2010). All these numbers are provided to show the scale of Isa Town in relation to the other larger towns of Bahrain at the time, which were also undergoing their own growth under expansive urban development programmes.

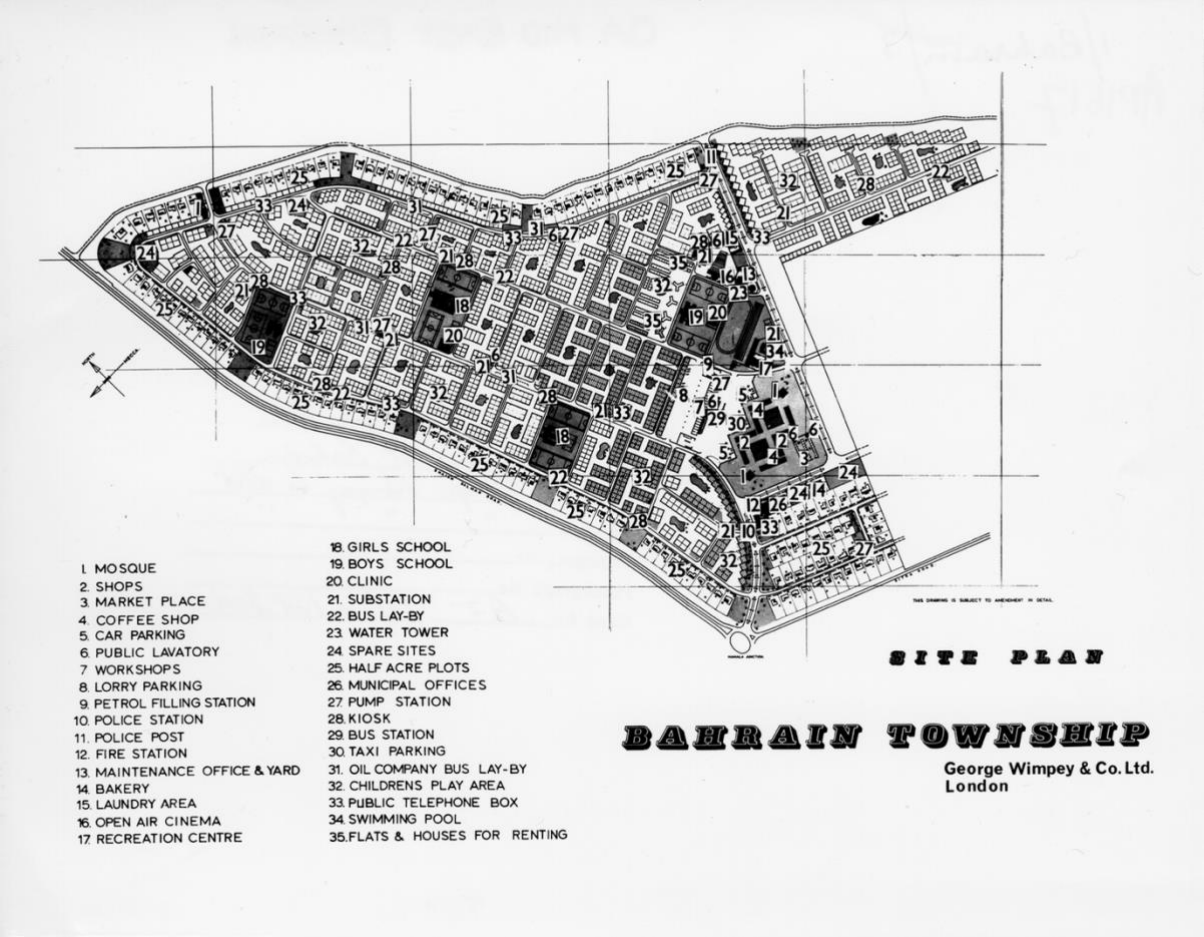

Image 0.4. Isa Town Site Plan, George Wimpey & Co Ltd, 1964, London. Source: Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), London.

Unlike other new towns found around the world, Isa Town was not developed to create new job opportunities within it per se, but rather to connect people to various work opportunities in both the north and south of Bahrain, which were growing due to government expansion and the development of various industries. Therefore, unlike new towns elsewhere, which developed new work opportunities within them, Isa Town was a significant urban development for the whole country. It provided opportunities for Bahraini families to move closer to their workplaces, and it represented an important

node to connect various cities and towns to each other. Further, as it expanded in its subsequent phases, it developed important facilities such as government ministries, a private education complex, and Bahrain's first national university at its outskirts, which benefited far more than its residents.

Despite its small size compared to other new towns around the world, Isa Town remains a project intricately connected to nation-building and state development. Even in comparison to subsequent new towns built in Bahrain after the establishment of the Ministry of Housing in 1975, Isa Town remains clearly distinguished by its connection to the development of Bahrain's 'new' modern identity in the years prior to its political and administrative 'independence'. Hence, Isa Town, as a new town, is comparable to new towns that had a strong connection to nation-building, such as Brasília and Chandigarh in India.

This comparison, however, poses several challenges of scale and context. As it may be argued that neither their geographical nor historical characteristics are comparable, let alone their size. Chandigarh was built to serve as the new capital for Punjab in post-partition India and a symbol of its freedom, with a total area of 114 square kilometres, a population of over one million, and a density of 9,258 people per square kilometre[11]. Brasília, on the other hand, has accommodated a population of an estimated 2.9 million in 2025 over an area of 590 square kilometres, with a population density of approximately 490 people per square kilometre[12]. But this study does not aim to compare Isa Town to any other example; they are only used as a reference. In fact, it is difficult to compare Isa Town to any other Bahraini new town because of the period in which it was built and the unique public administrative structure that brought it into existence, let alone to a non-Bahraini example in which both scale and context would be very different.

[11] http://chandigarh.gov.in
[12] https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/brasil/df/brasilia/panorama

تدعو دائرة الاسكان والتمليك الاشخاص الآتيـــة اسماؤهم أدناه الحضـــور الى دائرة الاســكان والتمليـــك يوم السبت ١٢ أغسطس ١٩٦٧ ، في تمام الساعة الرابعة والنصف وذلك في مقرها الواقع في مبنى السكوتارية لحكومة البحرين . وذلك للنظر في طلباتهم المتعلقة بسكن مدينة عيسى .

من مدينة المحرق وتوابعهـا ومدينة الحـد .

الرقم	الاسم الكامـــل
١	علي يوسف علي الذوادي
٢	عبدالرحمن عبدالله العبيدلي
٣	سالم سلطان المناصر
٤	سلطان ماجد صالح
٥	عبدالعزيز محمد راشد
٦	أحمد عبدالله غريب
٧	محمد سلمان رحمه
٨	عبدالرحمن علي خلف بوحسين
٩	يوسف عبدالله جفيل
١٠	جمعه رمضان خميس العسم
١١	محمد عيسى بوجيري
١٢	عبدالله محمد صالح المسيفر
١٣	سعد فرحان جمعه
١٤	سالم حمد سالم سريع
١٥	عبدالله خميس مبارك
١٦	سلمان سعد بلال بورويح
١٧	محمد راشد جاسم السني
١٨	خليفه أحمد العسمي
١٩	أحمد الشيخ هزيم جاسم البن‌هزيم
٢٠	يوسف أحمد عبدالله الذوادي
٢١	محمد هلال علي العلي
٢٢	عبدالله مبارك عبدالله الاصمخ
٢٣	سلمان محمد راشد بودندون
٢٤	هلال مبارك عبدالله الخيج
٢٥	حمد خليفه عيد بوسعيد

من مدينة المنامة وتوابعها الرفاع وسترة .

الرقم	الاسم الكامـــل
١	أحمد علي يوسف الغرادي
٢	أحمد ابراهيم عيسى
٣	احمد مال الله
٤	آغا علي رضى
٥	اسماعيل حسن جاسم
٦	اسماعيل بن سبيل
٧	السيد عبدالله السيد حسين
٨	السيد ابراهيم السيد علوى
٩	السيد هاشم علوى السيد علي
١٠	السيد جعفر السيد عبدالله
١١	السيد مجيد كاظم السيد محفوظ
١٢	السيد حميد حمزة العلوى
١٣	السيد سعيد العلوى
١٤	السيد عيسى عبدالله الخواجي
١٥	السيد علي السيد هاشم
١٦	السيد سلمان السيد رضى
١٧	السيد مرتضى أحمد العلوى
١٨	السيد محمد السيد هاشم
١٩	السيد محسن السيد أحمد العلوى
٢٠	السيد جعفر علوى العلوى
٢١	علي حسين أحمد
٢٢	محمد جاسم المحرى
٢٣	خليفه سعد الدوسرى
٢٤	منصور عبدالله جمعه
٢٥	محمد ابراهيم خليفه

مدير دائرة الاسكان والتمليك

حرر في ١٩٦٧/٨/٧

Image 0.5. An announcement in the official gazette divided Isa Town's applicants into two columns: Muharraq (and its towns) to the right, and Manama (its neighbouring towns, Riffa, and Sitra) to the left, being called to the Housing and Ownership Department. Source: Official Gazette of Bahrain.

According to a survey conducted in 1975 by Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker & Bor[13] on Isa Town (*Isa Town Social Survey: Working Papers*, 1975), there were 2,400 homeowners in Isa Town in 1975 based on the 10% stratified random sample. Furthermore, 94% of them worked full-time, 2% worked part-time, and around 4% were not working. The monthly salaries of homeowners ranged from 0–500 Bahraini dinars, with the majority (53%) between 0–100 Bahraini dinars and 41% between 101–200 Bahraini dinars.

As for the professions of the heads of households, around 32% were artisans and production process workers, 21% were transport and communication workers, 15% were service, sports, and recreation workers, 15% were clerical workers, and another 10% were professional or technical workers (*Isa Town Social Survey: Working Papers*, 1975).

[13] Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker & Bor is a London based architecture and planning firm established in 1960 by Richard Llewelyn Davies and was commissioned by Bahrain's newly established Ministry of Bahrain in 1975 to review and draft an 'updated' policy for housing.

More specifically, the study claims that one in three heads of households was employed by companies such as BAPCO or ALBA, as artisans or production process workers, south of Isa Town. Furthermore, one in five heads of households was employed as a transportation or communication worker, and one in six as service, sports, or recreation workers, primarily as drivers or peons (*Isa Town Social Survey: Working Papers*, 1975, p. 4). In 1975, no farmers or fishermen were recorded in the stratified sample as residents of Isa Town. This is plausible as fishermen and farmers needed proximity to the shores and agricultural land on which their livelihoods depended (Al-Ghatam, 2023; Al Najjar, 1993).

These figures demonstrate that a significant number of heads of household were working in clerical jobs, which in the 1960s and 1970s most likely were in Manama and some along the new town's periphery, as government offices such as the new ministries of information, education, labour, and social development constructed offices there after the new town was constructed. Thus, new work opportunities were appearing as the town grew. Indeed, all of those who worked in the Housing and Ownership Directorate and the Isa Town Offices interviewed for this research lived in Isa Town. The average monthly income of the head of household in the first category of houses (two-room house) was around 82 Bahraini dinars, 133 Bahraini dinars for the three-room house, and 251 Bahraini dinars for the four-room house. Furthermore, as of 1975, 55% of the Isa Town residents owned one or more cars, 85% owned one or more air conditioners, 100% owned one or more ceiling fans, and 61% of the families owned one or more portable fans.

By acknowledging Isa Town's status as a new town, it is also important to highlight that Isa Town's story is incomplete without a parallel study of the system that created it or the national policy that enabled its implementation. Therefore, this thesis examines the story of Isa Town and its important connection to Bahrain's first national social housing programme, as well as the implementation of the new policy. Moreover, Isa Town was introduced as a 'new' and 'modern' town; it was also a significant pillar in Bahrain's modernisation project. However, what exactly is meant by 'modern' or 'modernisation'? More importantly, how will this thesis develop these ideas regarding the modern new town and the modernisation project? This is discussed further in the following section.

Modern, modernising, and modernisation

The term 'modern' is often associated with new towns because of the distinctive features they include, the modernistic ideals they were designed with, as well as the opportunities for new ways of life these towns encouraged. Since this thesis examines Isa Town, which was introduced to the public as both 'new' and 'modern', it is important to examine this terminology further. News on the new town was publicly announced in the various

decrees related to the Housing and Ownership Project of 1962, the various state celebrations related to housing ownership distributions, the BAPCO newsreels, Arabic and English newspapers, and the government's own broadcasting magazine, *Huna Al Bahrain*.

English news sources, such as BAPCO's *Islander*, used the word 'new town' to refer to Isa Town, but most Arabic sources used the word '*hadeetha'*, the feminine Arabic adjective of the word 'modern' or 'new'. *Hadeetha* comes from the root word '*Haduth'*, which refers to what is new.[14] But besides the literal meaning of the word modern, what does its academic use refer to since it has been a term used to describe a distinct time and space, and what is its significance in relation to Bahrain's new town? For this study, I have relied on the definitions offered by both James Holston (1989) and Timothy Mitchell (2000).

The term 'modern' in this research refers to the quality of being new, as well as in the case of the new town, the object in which this quality is represented. Both reflect a distinct separation of time and space with the specific aim to: 'disrupt imagery of what bourgeois society understood as the real and the natural, to challenge the taken for granted, to defamiliarise, disorient, decode, deconstruct, and de-authenticate the normative, moral aesthetic, and familiar categories of social life' (Holston, 1989, p. 9). But in this case of Brasília, and according to Holston (1989), the defamiliarisation of the old and new is based on Western definitions.

For this study and in Isa Town, on the other hand, the term 'modern' suggests both the quality of being new and the detachment from non-Western characteristics, as well as the mimicry or representation of what were understood as Western ideals in the object created to reflect this. Much of the news on the new town also refers to Isa Town as an important foundation towards 'modernisation' and, therefore, modernisation in the case of Isa Town is both the process and the object of achieving what is 'modern' through a time-space separation. By its nature, this definition also alludes to an intervention rather than a natural form of progress.

> The passage from pre-modern to modern is always understood as a rupture and separation, whether of a rational self from a disenchanted world, of producers from their means of production, or of nature and population from the processes of technological control and social planning. (Mitchell, 2000, p. 18)

This separation of time and space, and the process put in place to achieve it, is referred to as 'modernisation'. The introduction of non-traditional forms of living and community spaces was intended to both signal a 'new' age and facilitate a new way of life within it.

[14] Further detail on the term's definition may be found in the Academy of Arabic Language: https://www.arabicacademy.gov.eg/ar/.

Scholars such as Mitchell (2000) argued that it was a significant part of how modernity and modernisation were presented in non-Western cultures.

Modernism – as well as modernity – was also extensively examined by academics for its use in planning and architecture. Some of its advocates hailed its use and its ability to ameliorate lives within societies (Howard, 1902; Le Corbusier, 1971), while others remained critical of its ability to improve the human condition (Jacobs, 2011; Mumford, 1953, 1945; Scott, 1998). The use of modern ideals in planning and architecture was also seen as a way of controlling space and nature and societies within it (Scott, 1998). Scott (1998) refers to 'high modernism' as 'a particularly sweeping vision of how the benefits of technical and scientific progress might be applied – usually through the state – in every field of human activity' (Scott, 1998, p. 90). Scott (1998) remained widely critical of this view, especially when it was driven by the power of the modern state and applied to societies that could not otherwise counter or make decisions about these initiatives, claiming that this often led to negative consequences for both societies and the newly reordered spaces. Scott (1998) saw that state officials who sought to modernise were removed from the societies they were in charge of governing and that the series of typification and generalisations were not enough to capture the reality of societies and their needs (Scott, 1998, p. 76).

In summary, when it comes to new town planning, especially in a non-Western culture, the construction of 'modern' new towns may be seen as both intending to produce an image of the West and a state intervention to control space, nature, and society with the intention of improving the human condition. By examining the construction and mediatisation of a 'new' town designed to 'modernise' the lives of lower- and middle-class citizens under an all-new government policy on social housing, this thesis reveals how Bahrain was illustrating its new and modern identity. It will further deepen our understanding of how the state used modern ideals to reorder large segments of Bahraini society within a new space designed to reflect a Western image. This thesis will therefore examine what the Government of Bahrain deemed modern and how modernity was experienced and received by Bahraini society in the 1960s.

The research project and key objectives

Given the proximity of the historical period in which Isa Town was built, it is still in people's memory, though little has been written about its history. This status presents a challenge: how is contemporary history reclaimed from the frailties of human memory when official records are inconsistent or unavailable? The aim of this thesis, therefore, is twofold: first, to document the Isa Town story and, second, to contribute to the historiography of writing contemporary history for Bahrain and countries with similar archival situations.

The empirical findings illustrate how Isa Town exemplified the process that the Bahraini state designed and implemented to achieve modernisation and shift society and the

state from the pre-modern to the modern period. This research revealed several pillars and elements upon which the Isa Town story stood; more importantly, these same pillars not only distinguished the transformative process this new town brought with it but also differentiated it from other new towns and housing projects built before or after it. Isa Town was not the first housing or housing-oriented project, but it was the first to follow the inauguration of the Housing and Ownership Project in 1962, which was established by decree and thus had the force of law. Furthermore, Isa Town was designed and built with new town characteristics that had developed elsewhere in the Western world, particularly in Great Britain and Europe, after the Second World War. As Isa Town was built as a state-led initiative prior to the recognition of Bahrain as a sovereign state, a review of state-backed announcements and media coverage adds an interesting spin on what this new town was intended to achieve and how that shaped a larger political narrative.

As significant as this town may have been for its time, there are few adequate resources or documents beyond the most basic details, leading to the need for innovative approaches to select data for this study. One reason there was little documentation on the new town was that many state administrative bureaus were being formalised and reorganised, and much of the public administration and operations were in a state of evolution up until the early to mid-1970s. The period following Bahrain's recognition as a fully sovereign state saw many government agencies take shape with a maturity and clarity that had not occurred during the British administration or the period prior to this full sovereignty.

That is not to say that the Government of Bahrain did not exist before 1971; it did, but its operations were not assigned to specialised agencies as they would be under the administrative structure mentioned in the December 1969 ascension celebrations (Shaikh Isa's seventh ascension anniversary). Further changes were introduced by Decree 1 of 1970 regarding the creation of a State Council and Decree 2 of 1970 regarding the Administrative Reorganisation of the State, in which most modern public bureaus and agencies were outlined. Housing remained a portfolio managed between, first, the Department of Government Finance, and later, the Department of Labour and the Department of Social Affairs, before the establishment of the Ministry of Housing in 1975. Furthermore, since the Ministry of Housing, as a specialised agency, only came into existence as a separate government entity in 1975, the first few years saw the ministry operating from rented offices in a building in the capital, Manama. A purpose-built Ministry of Housing office building was constructed in the late 1970s.

The lack of archival documents on Isa Town presented an opportunity to adopt a visual approach to the study of this project, which both complements and challenges the archival data, leading to an overall narrative of the town's existence. The shortage of written material on Isa Town was compensated by an extensive selection of photographic

images and newsreels taken by Bahrain's Oil Company (BAPCO) throughout the construction process of the new town. Indeed, there was very little that happened in Bahrain that BAPCO did not cover through the photographers, cinematographers, and journalists of their public relations department. These photographic images provide a vivid illumination that is more powerful in many cases than anything that the government could have written. The absence of independent press and newspapers was replaced, to an extent, by the BAPCO weekly Arabic and English newspapers and the government broadcasting magazine, *Huna Al Bahrain*, issued by the government's Department of Information Affairs, the precursor to the Ministry of Information Affairs (and to an extent, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Therefore, after identifying the town and its legal and administrative governance structure and operations, it was equally important to study these alternative information and data channels to understand how they created and shaped the narrative surrounding the first new town in Bahrain and how that ultimately constructed a political narrative of the Bahraini state.

Further, the combination of archival documentation (albeit inconsistent at times), oral history interviews, and visual material provides a shift away from research methods that undermine the local and social experience and overemphasise the state or the Western perspective (in this case, BAPCO's or the British Residency and Agency's records). Instead, sources were mainly produced in Bahrain by Bahrainis. This data is supplemented by oral history interviews with those who not only lived and experienced the new town but also played a role in creating the photos, newsreels, the BAPCO newspapers, and, to an extent, the government broadcasting magazine. Another interview source was those who worked to implement Decree 2 Finance of 1962 regarding the Establishment of the Housing and Ownership Programme at the Directorate of Housing and Ownership, particularly those who worked at the Isa Town Office.

In sum, I argue that we can only understand the magnitude of the role this town played in the transformation of the Bahraini state and society through the study of, first, the town and its experience; second, the legal and administrative structure introduced to govern the relationship between citizen and state on housing and its implementation; and third, the representation of the town in both local and external media. Put differently, Isa Town served Bahraini society as a tool, a product, and a process in which the modernisation of state and society was conceptualised and ultimately realised. The state, therefore, was not only a producer or commissioner of this new town, but Isa Town also helped define the Bahraini state and its processes and operations at the time. Thus, this project portrays how both the state and Isa Town played active roles in producing and defining one another. Its central argument is that Isa Town was designed as a tool for modernisation and transformation for the state and Bahraini society, creating the image of a modern state able to take its place among other sovereign nations.

The three pillars of the Isa Town story were not a chronology of how the housing programme, in which Isa Town played centre stage in the 1960s and 1970s, unfolded in Bahrain's housing history, nor were they exhaustive elements of the new town; rather, they were its defining political and social facets. They are crucial for understanding the political premise on which this town was founded, the society in which it was introduced, and the implications and outcomes of such an endeavour. A helpful coincidence, these three empirical themes began almost simultaneously, and together they weave the story of this new town, providing us with most of what we need to know regarding the role Isa Town played in state and societal transformation and reidentification.

Project overview and structure of the thesis

To study the story of Isa Town is also to understand why and how the town was constructed. As a result, I have highlighted three main aspects that were key to understanding Isa Town: social transformation (chapter 4), administrative development (chapter 5), and the mediatisation of political and administrative processes (chapter 6). As the first comprehensive study of new towns in Bahrain, this research project provides an in-depth understanding of Isa Town and the ideas that underpinned its conceptualisation, design, and implementation. This study drew on methods used by researchers in other disciplines but sought to overcome some of their challenges and shortcomings to add depth and richness to the study.

The use of archival materials in the form of national reports, colonial records, plans, newspaper articles, photos, cinematographic newsreel accounts, and interviews has allowed for a wider study of Bahrain's new town in a way that projected multiple accounts of the new town and included the views of those who lived there and those who were involved in its execution. This project also demonstrates how Isa Town connects to examples of new towns that were part of nation-building projects during times of change, including Brasília (Holston, 1989), and post-colonial projects such as Chandigarh (Chalana and Sprague, 2013; Prakash, 2002; Shaw, 2009; Singh et al., 2019), especially those which were part of wider modernisation projects in which public housing was a key pillar.

Furthermore, Isa Town fits into a discussion of new towns where ideas of modernity were intended to reproduce 'social worlds whose characteristic historical immediacy and spatial extension are generated only through their proliferating forms of representation, that is, through forms of replay, replication, and staging' to appear in a 'homogenous shape of the West' (Mitchell, 2000, p. 23). Today, new towns in the region have expanded from their original 'modernising' roots to take the form of megaprojects; nevertheless, they are still designed to convey the wider concept of economic liberation and illustrate renewed political ideologies (Almqvist, 2024; Boodrookas and Keshavarzian, 2019; Moser et al., 2015; Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021; Peiser and Forsyth, 2021).

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 examines the key literature on new towns and highlights the contributions across different academic disciplines. I show that research on new towns is extensive and that, as a subject, it has been covered across different academic fields. Thus, I look at both older and more recent literature on new towns, though I stress that the Bahrain example has been absent from both the regional and the general literature on new towns. After highlighting this gap in the literature on Bahrain's new towns, I examine studies of modernisation and modernisation projects outside of the Western model, of which Isa Town was a key example.

Chapter 3 illustrates the methodology developed for this project and explains how it helped generate the findings presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. The findings are divided into three separate themes connected to Isa Town: the social transformation (Chapter 4), the administrative evolution into a modern government (Chapter 5), and finally, the modern political process and its symbols, which were developed and enacted through events surrounding the new town (Chapter 6). Together, these elements tell the story of the first Bahraini new town. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses the findings of this thesis and concludes with recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 – Theorising new towns

Introduction

This review links various ideas and approaches related to new towns, public housing programmes and policy implementation. The objective is to explore where the Bahraini model of new town development and public housing programmes fits within the greater body of literature on new towns, especially those that were part of larger national housing programmes and were part of wider state-led nation-building projects. The prior literature on new towns has not included the Bahraini example even though it is one of the earliest models in the Arabian Gulf, and the same criticism applies to the general literature on public housing programmes. This research project explores the meeting point between state-led modernisation projects like the building of new towns and public housing. I examine their importance and significance in a situation where a private market did not exist, as in the case of Bahrain when Isa Town was built, to clarify how state operations were expanded and legitimised through them. Overall, this original contribution discusses the building of a new town – Isa Town – and a public housing project in Bahrain, situating it within the greater body of literature on new towns and public housing.

This chapter, therefore, starts with an overview of the origins and history of the new town movement of the twentieth century, followed by an exploration of the various approaches to new town discourse within the various social science disciplines that have contributed to the academic scholarship on new towns and their various iterations. Also, I review new towns and public housing literature in the Global South as a basis for developing and linking various ideas on approaches to these topics in the academic discourse. I aim to identify the themes around new towns, housing projects and their link to modern state development. That is why it is important to explore the politics around new town literature and further develop ideas on what makes it an integral part of understanding the social science discourse around it. Finally, I examine the crossroads between new towns and public housing as state-led projects, and I identify possible ways to address such an intersection to contribute to the gaps in the literature. I also review related research on Bahrain.

Overview and history of new towns

This section aims to examine what are new towns, and how they evolve in modern history. The term ‘new towns’ has been used to describe towns which were imagined, planned, and developed in their entirety as new social orders, a view that prevailed worldwide during the twentieth century (Freestone, 2021; Howard, 1898; Osborn, 1946; Osborn and Whittick, 1977; Schaffer, 1970; Wakeman, 2016). The new town movement is believed to have begun in Britain and built on the visions of Ebenezer Howard. The original movement stemmed with anti-urban sentiments as a reaction against the overcrowding and pollution of the industrial cities. Indeed, Howard’s (1898) original ideas for developing

garden city not only anarchist in its ideology but also encouraged a move away from overcrowding to include more green spaces within town designs, a combination of both town and country. The movement then reverberated outside of Britain and across the world in various forms, based on a variety of motives and featuring distinct characteristics. New towns, wherever they emerged, featured various iterations of scale, structure, population capacities, design, governance, financial viability, and locations. They were built for different purposes and served diverse objectives, but they can be summarised as falling under either employment-based new towns, new towns built to decongest urban areas, and new towns created as part of expansion and state-building projects (Peiser and Forsyth, 2021).What started based on anarchist foundations for novel designs of garden cities eventually evolved into a grand state-led programme that was further cemented by the New Town Act of 1946 (*New Town Act, 1946*)[15]. Some were built as comprehensive projects, planned in their entirety and built over several decades, while others were built rapidly during times of great urban and demographic growth (Peiser and Forsyth, 2021). New towns were differentiated from the urban forms which preceded them by possessing distinctive qualitative characteristics:

> New towns were qualitatively different. They were attempts to prefabricate, literally and figuratively, complete urban totalities: they were holistic, whole-cloth, complete places. It was this grand intention that made delineating their definition and features so fundamental, and what made them utopian in form. (Wakeman, 2016, p. 3)

The idea of envisioning and building new towns in history has been the subject of a grand philosophical discourse around the imagination of utopian realities. It has also occurred more practically in the production of various forms of urban developments created to address various plights through the imagination of new urban societies and the provision of utopian spaces conceived out of a manipulated urban form, growth, density, and circulation (Freestone, 2021). The idea of new towns has been a topic of contemplation for many philosophers throughout the ages who sought to imagine perfect cities and systems of government while strongly condemning the living conditions of their times (Schaffer, 1970).

The building of new towns throughout history and across the globe is not new or rooted in their creation to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but rather, they may be traced back to the Ancient Romans and even the Phoenicians, when large expansions of towns were built through Europe, a phenomenon that occurred during the Middle Ages as well (Wakeman, 2016). But their more modern iterations can be traced to Sir Ebenezer Howard and his 1898 book *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, later republished in 1902 under the title *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, in which he outlines a vision for a

[15] *New Town Act 1946, c.68*. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/9-10/68/contents/enacted (Accessed: 28 March 2025)

garden city that joins the characteristics of both town and country. Originally founded on an anarchist ideology, Howard's ideas of new towns were conceptualised to be self-governed and regulated, far from any large-scale government influence or intervention (Howard, 1902, 1898). The popularity of the movement was evident in both the number of languages Howard's book was translated into and the number of model cities and towns that were subsequently established across Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Japan(Wakeman, 2016, p. 22). Notably, Howard's goal was not only to provide a solution in his home country but included an ambitious vision to project such towns as a solution for overcrowded cities elsewhere (Howard, 1898)

Many scholars, planners, historians, and academics hailed Howard's innovative ideas and developed them further, including the biggest proponents of the new town movement. For example, Lewis Mumford viewed the significance of Howard's contribution as how it introduced a model for urban innovation, one that could influence urban planning and design for an important modern age to come. As Lewis Mumford noted, 'Howard's ideas have laid the foundation for a new cycle in urban civilisation: one in which the means of life will be subservient to the purpose of living, and in which the pattern needed for biological survival and economic efficiency will likewise lead to social and personal fulfilment' (Mumford, 1945, p. 40).

In 1946, at a time of critical turning point in the new town, public planning, and public housing history, Fredric J. Osborn published a book, *Green-Belt Cities*, in which he reviewed garden cities such as Letchworth and Welwyn as well as providing a proposal for a national policy on how to build new towns. As many new towns started to be built across the UK, the literature about them grew. In one study by Schaffer (1970), thirty new towns in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland were evaluated based on how they were planned and implemented, as well as a review of the homes and facilities within them. More avid proponents of new towns dedicated entire tomes to detail their history, characteristics, policy, evolution, patterns, successes, and failures, such as in Osborn and Whittick (1977), as well as providing encyclopaedic contributions to the critical history of the planning and theory of new town history both in the UK and abroad (Hall, 2002) and their continuing legacies (Hall and Ward, 1998). The early works did not address controversial matters related to the implementation of the new town policy. Therefore, Aldridge (1979) attempts to correct that by looking at not only the chronological or historical aspects of British new towns but also addressing more practical elements of public policy implementation, for example, how 'Mark One' new towns, did not fulfil the hopes of the new legislation and how that evolved into various attempts to learn and redirect the policy towards better implementation. Furthermore, because of the perennial nature of new towns in the UK and abroad, especially in light of the extent to which the British new town policy is believed to have influenced many others around the world, more recent literature addresses what the world can learn today from the British 'experiment' (Forsyth, 2019).

New towns in academic discourse

New towns, wherever they developed, attracted widespread academic attention in a wide range of fields and specialisations, from urban planning, architecture, and design to history, geography, economics, and even political and social sciences, not least in the United Kingdom, where the twentieth-century movement is believed to have started. Their features, characteristics, design models and much of what was attributed to their success and failure were recorded and discussed. Fredrik J. Osborn and Arnold Whittick's new town encyclopaedia was first published in 1963 under the title *The New Towns: The Answer to Megalopolis*. A later text, *New Towns: Their Origins Achievements and Progress*, covers new towns in the UK as well as those which have been known to be planned since the turn of the century with as much detail on their origins, history, governance, policy, legislation, finance, development, and opposition(Osborn and Whittick, 1977). Many other scholars also contributed to the academic discourse on British new towns (Aldridge, 1979; Forsyth, 2019; Hall, 2002; Hall and Ward, 1998; Hardy, 1991; Lock and Ellis, 2020; Meller and Porfyriou, 2016; Mumford et al., 1971; Schaffer, 1970) and the modern public housing built in some of them(Glendinning and Muthesius, 1994). Some of the academic discourse on new towns in the UK addresses the politics of how matters of mass housing were dealt with within its relevant history(Dunleavy, 1981; Manoochehri, 2012, 2009). Others are concerned with how models were established and exported to the British colonies to explore the role of empire and colonialism in the formation of 'third world countries' (Home, 1997). Some examples in the literature show the successes and failures of the British model (Forsyth, 2019; Osborn and Whittick, 1977; Schaffer, 1970) and how to learn from the past for better cities for the future (Peiser and Forsyth, 2021).

But attention to new towns was not just limited to experiences and developments in the UK, focusing on their popularity elsewhere in Europe (Carillo, 2022; Meller and Porfyriou, 2016; Spoormans et al., 2019; Underhill, 1990). As various iterations were exported elsewhere, scholars grew interested in incorporating decolonising methods in the study of new towns beyond their Western parameters and characteristics (Alissa, 2013, 2012; Almqvist, 2024; Ben-Hamouche, 2023; Crinson, 1997; Dieleman, 2011; Hall, 2002; Hall and Ward, 1998; Holston, 1989; Holston and Appadurai, 1996; Kezeiri, 1987; Moser et al., 2015; Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021; Shaw, 2009; Singh et al., 2019; Stewart, 1996; Wakeman, 2016; Ziari, 2006). More recent literature has seen a decolonising approach to the academic discourse on new towns, not only capturing non-Western models and experiences but exploring how non-Western models can influence new towns in the West (Meredith, 2018), challenging historical misconceptions and correcting myths by exploring the role of spatial development in diplomatic relations (Yip, 2022).

Due to the nature of the topic, a number of relevant studies review the spatial elements of government policies and urban planning and design processes (Aravot and Militanu, 2000; Spoormans et al., 2019; Underhill, 1990). Equally interesting is the literature that

explores the various types of approaches to classifying new towns in social science academic literature (Tzfadia, 2005). New towns of the twentieth century have garnered significant attention in various fields of academia over time. Neither new towns as a global phenomenon nor their presence in academic discourse seem to be diminishing, especially as they develop into new forms and models and remain present within government agendas, drawing government funding and driving entrepreneurial and economic initiatives[16] (Almqvist, 2024; Moser et al., 2015; Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021; Peiser and Forsyth, 2021).

Approaches to examining new towns in the social science discourse

From a social science perspective, the new town movement is closely connected to war, colonialism, and power, as the idea of new towns was not only seen to bring highly utopian ideas and visions but was also believed to be rooted in the experience of state expansion, colonialism, war, and military policy (Wakeman, 2016). Beyond those brought by war and/or colonial and post-colonial settings, three approaches to new town discourse are identified: neo-Marxist, colonial, and modernist functional discourse (Tzfadia, 2005). The neo-Marxist approach looks at new towns as projects developed to bridge the gap between new towns and the larger society, addressing the relationship of class within the capitalist framework of production and exploitation (Tzfadia, 2005). The imbalances created in labour-intensive economies and the instability of employment have led Marxists and neo-Marxists to identify a need to bridge the social and economic gaps in society, which they ascribe to capitalism.

The second is the colonial approach, which underlies military or colonial objectives aimed at filling 'empty' land and establishing a presence to reduce any kind of threat. The origins of this approach stem from the development and evolution of colonial settlements to solidify political authority, particularly during times of upheaval (Tzfadia, 2005). The third approach is the modernist functionalist approach, which looks at society as presenting a set of needs that require the provision of adequate solutions which require state-led interventions, or more specifically that 'society should be regarded as a set of requirements and problems that public institutions, and primarily the institutions of the nation-state, are supposed to resolve, while concurrently achieving a public identification with the national agenda' (Tzfadia, 2005). Therefore, regarding the academic discourse on new towns as public challenges or social needs which required nation states to address them as part of their government action plans. These approaches often coexist and may be intertwined; therefore, it is normal for new towns to be classified as one or more of these iterations (Tzfadia, 2005). This is further

[16] Even after the academic discourse in the UK seemed to have lessened, there has been much written and dedicated to this topic via modern media platforms, for example, *The Guardian*'s 'Cities from Scratch' series, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jul/10/should-we-build-cities-from-scratch, accessed: (28th March 2025). As well as RIBA Published *New Towns: The Rise, The Fall and Rebirth* (2020).

confirmed in the study of new towns around the world such as in Libya (Kezeiri, 1987), Chandigarh, India (Prakash, 2024, 2002; Shaw, 2009; Singh et al., 2019), Egypt (Abou-Zeid, 1979; Almqvist, 2024; Elshahed, 2019; Hobson, 1999; Stewart, 1996), Iran (Alaedini and Yeganeh, 2022; Crinson, 1997; Ziari, 2006) and Hong Kong (Yip, 2022).

As Robert Home shows in *Of Planting and Planning* (1997), even in colonial expansion, capitalism served as an ideology that guided new town development. By looking at different cases of British colonial cities and towns, Home (1997) claims that various ideologies within the British overseas expansion can coexist and compete with one another. The first was the political assertion of authority, which necessitated control and expansion around ports and portal towns; then, a capitalist ideology hoped to achieve wealth from trade, production, and extraction; and finally, a utopian ideology saw the development of each settlement as an opportunity to experiment with what colonists could not do at home, such as experimenting with social organisation (Home, 1997).

When states became involved in new town building under the guise of modernisation or modernity, that often meant an expanded role of the state and its understanding of what it needed to do to improve society (Scott, 1998). Moreover, modernist ideals were often seen to be sponsored and were observed during times of dramatic upheaval, such as after wars, following independence from imperial powers, and during economic collapses throughout history (Scott, 1998; Wakeman, 2016).

Global South new towns in the academic literature

The Global South has had its share of new towns, most of which were entrenched in political campaigns and promises, colonial and post-colonial planning, and hope for better futures after calamitous circumstances such as wars and divisions. Key examples include Chandigarh, India (Prakash, 2024; Shaw, 2009; Singh et al., 2019) and Brazil's modernistic capital, Brasília (Holston, 1989). Symbolic and monumental cities such as Chandigarh and Brasília brought with them many new visions and ideologies as well as academic interest and attention. From its early years, Chandigarh attracted much attention towards its modernistic architecture from the West (Correa, 1987; Gast, 2000; Prakash, 2024, 2002), but this attention was seen as limited to the periphery of Chandigarh's highly modernistic capital block and city centre. More recently, an exploration of its cultural heritage has been brought to light (Chalana and Sprague, 2013; Prakash, 2024). Furthermore, some studies attempt to discuss decolonisation in relation to Nehru's intentions for the city through an analysis of his speeches on the new town (Singh et al., 2019). Nevertheless, until very recently, much of the scholarship on Chandigarh as a symbolic/monumental city focused on the political motivations for it and its architectural and design ideals. Although it was conceptualised to be the new capital of Punjab and house many of those who were relocating to new geographical borders as a result of the partition of India and Pakistan, academic interest in it until more

recently continued to revolve around the planning process, the contributions of famous architects, and those who commissioned it (Prakash, 2002).

In contrast, there was little interest in Chandigarh's residential quarters, although it seems that subject is critical to how colonial legacies persist in housing (Glendinning, 2021). Shaw (2009) attempts to correct this oversight by re-examining the making of Chandigarh and questioning the extent to which Western architects exported their ideas and replicated them versus when local requirements were taken into consideration: 'How did the ideas of modernism, the requirements of the nationalist state, and concern for the local shape the built environment? Was a Western urban design simply replicated here or were there modifications to suit locality and culture?' (Shaw, 2009). (Shaw, 2009)Through a decolonial lens, Shaw attempts to highlight the importance of addressing the residential elements of the new town, which may have been politically critical and socially essential considering the impact of the partition (Shaw, 2009). The study shows how, although these towns addressed a very exigent housing need, there is more work to be done to understand their social and political legacies and how they impacted the lives of those who lived in the different categories of housing they provided.

For Brasília, a highly modernistic architectural drawing was made for the town, which Jucelino Kubitscheck promised to build during his presidential election campaign (Hall, 1988, p. 230). Brasília is often seen as the complete Corbusian city, although Le Corbusier had no role in designing it (Hall, 1988). But the modernistic ideal of Brasília, it is often argued, had a radical political and social objective (Hall, 2002). The difference in ideologies between Kubitscheck, who commissioned it, and Niemeyer, who was on the jury that awarded the design of the city to Lúcio Costa, hid the 'plan's hidden agenda' (Holston, 1989) which intended 'to create a totally new build form as a shell for a new society, without reference to history: the past was simply to be abolished' (Hall, 1988, p. 232) in what was seen as a paramount political achievement of the modernist movement. In an ethnographic study of the significant monumental city, James Holston (1989) has addressed many of the shortcomings of former academic literature by looking at both the intent of the architect's modernist design as well as what motivated the government to commission and implement the plan for the city. In *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia* (1989), Holston recognises modernism in planning and architecture as a separation of the forms and norms of bourgeois urban life by proposing an alternative future and means to reach it. Therefore, according to Holston, the modernist ideal 'generates one of the fundaments of modern architecture and planning: a total decontextualisation, in which an imagined future is posited as the critical ground in terms of which to evaluate the present. As it therefore lacks a notion of historical context, the modernist view of history is paradoxically 'dehistoricising' (Holston, 1989, p. 9).

Holston points out that modernism leaves out many of the actors and their intentions, recognising only the intervention of a state figurehead and the architect within the

boundaries of current technology. A key achievement of Holston's study is his decolonising sociological approach and ethnographic methodology to understand the historical spatial project while providing an examination of Brazil's political and social environment, stringing together many of the elements which in the past have been examined separately.

Within the Arab region and the Middle East, there are many examples of new towns that were built to serve varying objectives and fulfil various social and political aims. In Egypt, several studies examine both the need for adequate housing policies to cater to the massive growth in population and the role of new towns in fulfilling these needs. An early study examined the effectiveness of new town development, which aimed to decongest highly populated provinces and repopulate semi-fertile areas through agricultural projects (Abou-Zeid, 1979). In a more recent study of housing programmes in Egypt, an examination is provided of the policy related to workers' and popular housing in the mid-twentieth century, including the political discourse on housing and various early experiments to provide housing for workers (Elshahed, 2019). The study looks at various media, conference proceedings, legislations, house designs, and plans that preceded Nasser's plan to build new towns due to overcrowding in Cairo. It aims to link architecture and planning to understand the failure to produce long-lasting national planning policies for adequate housing to absorb urban growth and expansion.

The subject of planning and the housing crisis invited political visions to build new towns as a solution to improve lives at the highest level of government. In 1969, President Gamal Abdel Nasser introduced the Greater Cairo Region Master Scheme which outlined the government's intent to build four satellite cities in the desert by 1990 (Stewart, 1996). Nasser's death shortly after the completion of the report did not abate the interest in building new towns. In 1974, President Anwar Al Sadat came up with a lengthy paper known as the 'October Working Paper', arguing for spatial expansion far from the Nile Delta, which had been occupied for thousands of years and represents only 3% of Egypt's total land (Stewart, 1996); therefore, the Sadat New Town Planning Program continued Nasser's vision to build a number of cities in the desert to serve the needs of an exponentially growing population, provide improved housing standards, and create sustainable communities (Hobson, 1999; Stewart, 1996). Discussing social justice in the modernist planning project, Hobson (1999) conducts a comparative study between the 6th of October City in Egypt and Milton Keynes, measuring distributive justice (looking at material resources, employment, physical accessibility, and investment of surplus value and profits) and social justice (marginalisation, exploitation, powerlessness, violence, cultural imperialism, etc).

More recently, (Almqvist, 2024) draws on planning documents and studies social and economic conditions to reexamine, from a political science perspective, the Sadat-era new towns, linking them to the development of Egypt's new administrative capital built by the Sisi regime. This study highlights the intentions in building new towns, which he

argues is based on political logic and not development logic, stating this has been the case since the 1970s. Unfortunately, the academic literature only takes into account archival material in the form of plans, which may provide an explanation for the political motivations but fails to address the real viability of these policies and solutions and leaves a wide gap in understanding the social and individual experiences of these towns.

Other countries in the Middle East have had their share of new towns developed in the twentieth century, and the literature on them remains inconsistent in various academic fields. Morocco and Libya have experienced new town developments with varying objectives. Accordingly, studies of them have provided a review of colonial settlements followed by resource towns and then new government-sponsored programmes and towns designed to absorb urban overspill and lessen congestion (Kezeiri, 1987). Kezeiri (1987) looks at various case studies with the aim of extracting social and environmental factors to address future developments. In Jordan, a review of the state policies on housing and new town planning was used through multiple political eras to legitimise the Jordanian state (Abu-Hamdi, 2019). One study examines public housing discourse as a tool of social governance and how the Greater Amman Comprehensive Development Plan envisioned the building of a new satellite city, Abu Nuseir, to be constructed by the National Housing Corporation in 1988. The city was to consist of 3,667 units in apartment blocks in a design meant 'to dismantle established forms of traditional communities and create a more modern and therefore more easily governable society to better ensure and maintain regime security, the autonomy of the state, and, by extension, the king' (Abu-Hamdi, 2019). Notably, the Greater Amman institution was formed by consolidating tribal councils, which altered the 'parochial and self-serving practices of tribes' and established a different institutional connection that 'solidified the state and redefined citizenship in terms of rights and privileges for pronationalists' (Abu-Hamdi, 2019).

Iran's history of town planning connects to political-military standards and the desire to develop industry and house employees and civil servants (Ziari, 2006). Zairi's (2006) study focuses on the urban planning perspective of new town development in Iran, both before and after the 1979 revolution, with the aim of identifying the objectives and functions of the new towns in Iran. Further, academic interest in the Iranian oil town of Abadan took special interest because of its colonial and racially segregated characteristics which resulted in clashes between the British employees and the Iranian population (Crinson, 1997). Mark Crinson (1997) looks at architecture and planning under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), using drawings, maps, and photos to examine the works of James M. Wilson, AIOC's architect, to expand on the academic discourse on the connection of industry and urbanisation in Iran in dealing with the effects of colonial practice and racial segregation. For example, Wilson, the architect hired by the AIOC employed innovative expertise to deal with the physical problems of a racially divided town further challenged by the growth of Abadan in his proposal for the model suburb of Bawarda. Which was imagined by the architect to wield 'miraculous'

influence in solving its large racial troubles. He attempted to absorb the pressure exerted by the British government and the Iranian nationalists by applying model standards in the planning and housing form of the garden suburb of Bawarda to achieve a balance between ethnic and social harmony (Crinson, 1997). Thus, Crinson contributes to the academic literature on how architecture and urban planning have been used as a form of mediation between clashing political views and/or players, connecting that to an industry which played an important role in discreetly absorbing clashes through an act of 'discreet benevolence' at a time of political and colonial evolution. However, Wilson's architectural visions did not achieve what they were designed to do, as Mossadegh's nationalist movement succeeded in nationalising the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which led to the expulsion of British citizens from Bawarda in 1951 (Crinson, 1997). In his book *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire*, Crinson (2003) further explores the influence of architecture in imperial and post-colonial settings in Iran, India, Iraq, Ghana, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, through which he examines the meeting point between modernism and nationalism in newly independent countries.

Not far from Bahrain, in neighbouring Kuwait, Reem Alissa (2013) provides a study on the company town of Ahmadi from an architectural and planning perspective. She examines 'corporate colonialism' and 'urban modernity' in an oil town built to house the oil town's employees (Alissa, 2013, 2012). The study provides an interesting record of an early example of 'spatial expression of oil' of which the Arabian Gulf has several examples: Ahmadi in Kuwait, ARAMCO in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, and BAPCO's Awali in Bahrain (which may have been an original inspiration for Isa Town). This study connects with those of Asseel Al-Ragam, who explores ideas of urban modernity and architectural renaissance and connects them to larger ideas of state development, cultural awareness, and the welfare state, all from the discipline of architecture (Al-Ragam, 2019, 2015a, 2015b, 2013, 2011, 2008). Al-Ragam utilises a combination of archival records of planning reports, architectural drawings and plans, photos, and the coverage of the local press to examine the design discourse on modernity/urban renaissance and cultural awareness to understand the real drivers of the movement. This study examines the urban transformation of Kuwait and how the channelling of oil money into operational systems led by the state during a time of independence and nation-building accommodated rapid urban change. Al-Ragam shows how the suburbs came to be chosen as a sign of modern lifestyles instead of traditional urban living (Al-Ragam, 2008).

The connection between housing policies and nation-building projects is also explored by Rula Sadik (1996), who uses a comparative methodology to evaluate and analyse the housing policies of Kuwait, Lebanon, and Jordan and connects them with nation-building projects (Sadik, 1996); this work further strengthens the argument for the need to examine the connection of housing policies in post-colonial settings of emerging sovereign states. Most of the studies from Kuwait contribute to the academic literature on modernity, housing, and architecture and explore ideas of nation-building in a period

of independence. As such, they represent important contributions to decolonising methods, but none of them aims to capture the sociological experience of the individual experience.

Political narratives of new towns: Tales of success and failure

As political undertakings that required significant public funds and expended large portions of state budgets, new towns have attracted attention in terms of their viability and effectiveness in improving the human condition. One body of literature brought forward narratives which explored their successes and failures. Some of the literature advocated various forms of new towns, both in their earlier years (Howard, 1902, 1898; Mumford, 1945) and later by those who advocated them until they were hallmarked with the power of legislation (Osborn, 1946). Some scholars continued to explore their legacies even as they lost popularity (Aldridge, 1979; Hall, 2002; Hall and Ward, 1998; Osborn and Whittick, 1977; Schaffer, 1970). More recently, one body of literature has confirmed their perennial nature, claiming their rebirth while imparting lessons for new towns elsewhere (Forsyth, 2019; Lock and Ellis, 2020), perhaps implying a rebirth after an idea of their decline.

However, assessing a new town's success or failure is predominantly a Western narrative and perhaps one most likely associated with the studies of the various new towns in the UK or those inspired by them as imported solutions (Yip, 2022). This was especially prevalent in the viewpoints of academics based in the West when looking at examples of the Global South (Almqvist, 2024; Stewart, 1996). As new towns gained attention in the literature, scholars celebrated their successes as well as their failures to meet the grand visions they set out to achieve. Notably, much of the literature which comes from the Global South does not ask the question of whether new towns were successful or not, but rather what they were, where they were found, how they were started, what purpose and whom they served, what challenges they faced, how they could be best understood and improved upon to better address future social needs. In areas of low urbanism and in the context of developing countries, new towns were seen as a sign of modernisation, progress, need, and necessity. Regarding urban expansion in countries with high population growth, such as Egypt, even those who criticise desert cities and their sponsorship by authoritarian regimes recognise that urban development is inevitable in light of the growing population (Almqvist, 2024).

The discourse around new towns in Israel, as another example, portrays a more existential narrative, one which has nothing to do with whether they are seen as successful or not (Aravot and Militanu, 2000; Tzfadia, 2005). Although the Israeli model is considered unusual and unique, the narratives of mass housing projects in Hong Kong and Singapore are similarly projected as defining 'life-and-death situations' (Glendinning, 2021).

In Chandigarh, researchers have acknowledged its success in providing a variety of housing solutions to the population in a short amount of time (Glendinning, 2021; Shaw, 2009); nevertheless, many of these narratives also acknowledge how the project has fallen short of addressing major social issues such as minimising class divisions and dispelling colonial legacies (Glendinning, 2021; Shaw, 2009). In Brasília, for example, the literature highlights how established historical norms and forms were not respected (Holston, 1989), which some have stated was a means to strengthen and reinforce power structures through the adoption of highly utopian ideals of planning and design (Wakeman, 2016). This position suggests a view that such designs are forced upon societies which cannot make decisions for themselves, leading to failures of the urban designs to address society's needs (Scott, 1998). In *Seeing Like a State*, Scott (1998) argues that housing and new town planning resulted from state-initiated engineering, which often ended detrimentally and not in the best interests of the citizens. He argues that the administrative ordering of nature and society combined with a highly modernist ideology and an authoritarian state – or even a colonial administration – that could fully exercise power over society does not necessarily provide for a situation of adequate intervention (Scott, 1998). Many of these visions failed to address the basic needs for functionality and preserving communities (Jacobs, 2011)on the one hand, and on the other hand, did not engage throughout the planning process enough with those who ultimately would inhabit them (Harvey, 2009, 2003; Jacobs, 2011; Scott, 1998).

However, there is a fair amount of literature on new towns in the Global South, which also indicates that no matter how ambitiously they are planned or how innovative/modernistic they are in their designs, new towns fail to be elevated to the level of real cities (Ziari, 2006). They also show how their distance from major services, community facilities, and developed infrastructure planning makes them less attractive to potential residents (Almqvist, 2024; Yip, 2022). Most scholars, including Scott (1998) and Wakeman (2016), argue that utopian and modernistic ideals are not issues for concern in and of themselves, but as Scott notes, their combination with other characteristics such as authoritarian power and a society that cannot make its own choices are what make them a fail those whom they were supposedly designed to serve.

Perhaps part of the challenge is the rhetoric associated with utopian and modernist ideals in town planning: although new towns claimed a better quality of life and sought to achieve harmony, it was not always clear what these terms meant (Wakeman, 2016). Jacobs (1961) takes on the ideals of Le Corbusier and others who have failed to address the failure of their proposed modernistic designs in addressing matters of functionality as well as visibility to create safe communities. On the other hand, Harvey (2009) criticises the failure to include those who stood to benefit from them in the planning process. Scott (1998) critiques the 'forced legibility' and 'confidence' in which the government, through various 'scientifically purported' initiatives, attempted to homogenise society. Looking at the state's role in city and town building, which was

justified by the calamities of wars and colonial rule, it carried various utopian and modernist ideals that were often more concerned with visual aesthetics and regimented appearances from the top. This view is far removed from Jacobs's (2011) argument that order does not necessarily mean functionality and her views encouraged planners to head to the street and to the neighbourhood and the communities that reside within them and not ones that look orderly and neat on maps.

As Scott (1998) argues, maps can either serve or fail to serve their original intentions because they tend to be simplified and summarised, and they do not show the nuances of reality. Furthermore, Harley (2001) makes a case for cartographic silences in maps (Harley, J.B., 2001), and Jacobs (2011) also argues that communities and interactions cannot be appreciated in the aesthetic vernaculars of the new town plans – not of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City nor the high modernist ideal of Le Corbusier's Radiant City. Maps cannot allow for the unexpected or the mundane, nor does it seem to put the community or its functional needs at the line of the vision of this kind of planning. As Jacobs (2011, p.105) states, 'cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody'.

More recently, the recurrence and rebirth of new towns have raised questions about past mistakes that have been learned and should inform any future developments (Almqvist, 2024; Forsyth, 2019; Lock and Ellis, 2020; Peiser and Forsyth, 2021) and whether financially successful towns and cities can be built (Peiser and Chang, 1999). Furthermore, as scholars question their ability to achieve social justice (Hobson, 1999), the expansion of new towns introduced new ways of living that were bound to affect civil society; therefore, decisions about them should be made collectively, engaging communities and fulfilling the most basic human rights (Harvey, 2009, 2003).

Therefore, due to their complex nature and variety, the narrative of their success and failure is but one aspect of new towns. When they happen to be part of existential projects of national policy such as in Singapore, Israel, or Hong Kong, or when they are necessitated by a real need for improving living conditions, expansion, and/or urbanisation, or when they have been brought forward to be symbolic of independence such as Chandigarh, assessing their success or failure is not enough to capture the true nuances of these highly complex developments and how they addressed social and human needs. Every one of the national endeavours that have brought them forward, like almost any policy anywhere, has its own set of characteristics and foundations, and as a perspective, it is important to be able to examine each within their unique context through a decolonised lens or methodology to be able to do them justice.

New towns as state modernisation projects

There are numerous examples of new towns that have served as state modernisation and state or nation-building projects, particularly Brasília and Chandigarh. Both were not only

examples of modernisation projects built on highly utopian and modernistic ideals; they were also conceptualised and implemented by a strong political sponsorship. Put simply, decisions about them were made at the highest political level (Wakeman, 2016). The evolution of new town plans based on modernist ideologies is believed to also have expanded the state's role in improving society (Scott, 1998). But if a new town was seen as a modernisation project, then how can we best study and understand it? We must first acknowledge the connection between political power, nation-building, and the modernisation project:

> New towns were not merely stage sets. They produced and reproduced state power, nation building, and modernisation. The new town was an attempt to transform living conditions and old ways of life – and people – into something new. It was an occasion to display and legitimise, to territorialise the authority and beneficence of the state in a complete package. The residents of new towns were a spunky lot, no matter which new town they happened to live in. There was a sense of verve about them. They were young; many were highly skilled. They were pioneers, willing to shed the past and surge forward as citizens of the future. They were the New Men and Women of the modern age. (Wakeman, 2016)

It must also be noted that modernism and modernisation have not been defined universally in a uniform fashion over time or in different cultural contexts:

> Modernism and modernisation were never truly international. New towns spread across national borders with profound modifications. It is the irony of the modernisation regime that it was implemented within local contexts. New towns were a standardised prescription: they all shared recognisable spatial forms. However, each national new town programme was proclaimed to be different from those elsewhere in the world. (Wakeman, 2016)

Therefore, Holston (1989) proposes to understand the intentions of those who designed the owns as well as those of other main players:

> One important way to do this is to consider that the project generated discourses, statements, texts, plans, models, drawings, and the like, which defined the intentions of those involved. These intentions are fundamental to our study because they make possible and legitimate the tactical interventions that people use to give Brasília's development its particular configuration of forms and forces. (Holston, 1989)

But really, what does modernisation and/or modernity mean in the context of new towns, especially those in non-Western cultures? How can we examine, and study plans and discourses on new towns? If one of the many definitions of modernism or modernisation is in how there was a complete decontextualisation where the future is seen as a means to see and measure the present without any historical context (Holston, 1989), what

exactly is meant by modernism/modernity and what was the objective of employing its highly utopian ideals? Holston (1989) notes how there was a subversive intent to weaken and eliminate the historical context through visions of the future in how planners viewed and experienced the present:

> Their subversive intent: differences notwithstanding, their aim was to disrupt imagery of what bourgeois society understood as the real and the natural, to challenge the taken for granted, to defamiliarise, disorient, decode, deconstruct, and de-authenticate the normative, moral aesthetic, and familiar categories of social life. (Holston, 1989)

But if that was the case of Brasília, how could it be best to apply and view modernity in a non-Western setting? What exactly is deemed worthy of being seen as modern? Academic literature from non-Western or decolonising scholars maintains that there is an argument that views of time and space have also been infiltrated by their proximity or likeliness to the Western world (Mitchell, 2000b). For example, Timothy Mitchell (2000) suggests a fascinating argument on how modernity can be seen and studied in non-Western societies and cultures as a stage of representation and that it is that very replication that defines modernity:

> Modernity, we have said, seems to form a distinctive time-space, appearing in the homogenous shape of the West and characterised by an immediacy of presence that we recognise as the 'now' of history. This time and space are the products of an endlessly replicating system of representation. Modernity's present is not that immediate experience of the real imagined by phenomenology but a present displaced and replayed through the time lag of representation. Its location is not the plenitude of immediate surroundings, but the homogenous, empty coordinates produced in the modern diagramming and programming of space. Capitalist modernity reproduces social worlds whose characteristic historical immediacy and spatial extension are generated only through their proliferating forms of representation, that is, through forms of replay, replication, and staging. (Mitchell, 2000a, p. 23)

Therefore, for a case such as Isa Town, described as a 'modern town', it is essential to examine the socio-political formations underpinning its creation to gain a better understanding of what 'modern' meant to the Government of Bahrain. It may also be worthwhile to examine how the town was represented and how that representation not only aided the image of what was viewed or defined as modern but also how that representation was used to define a modern or modernising image of the emerging state.

New Towns and Social Housing Policy Implementation

This project is a multidisciplinary project which draws inspiration from works related to new towns, national social housing programmes as well as policy implementation

studies. Accordingly, the other two themes this study attempts to bridge is the meeting of new towns with social housing programmes as well as policy implementation studies. The most significant inspiration for this is in Kivanç and Gharipour's (2019) anthology of social housing in the middle east as well as in Miles Glendinning's (2021) book on modernist mass housing. Because Bahrain's Housing and Ownership Project of 1962 came in the form of a national policy it is important to also not only why the policy was brought into existence, but also how was it implemented, by who and what were its main implications. Therefore, in addition to academic literature on new towns and social housing this study will contribute to the literature on policy implementation studies.

Generally, policy implementation studies are seen to fall under one of three theories: top-down, bottom-up and hybrid approaches to study policy implementation (Pülzel and Treib, 2007). As academics noticed implementation failure as policies lagged behind their intentions as well as expectations. This fuelled case studies such as those by Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) and Bardach (1977). The first generation of policy implementation studies and the general sense of pessimism inspired a new wave of academics who put forth analysis frameworks in the form of theoretical frameworks and hypothesis (Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1989a, 1989b; Sabatier, 1999; Smallwood and Nakamura, 1980; Van Meter and Van Horn, 1975; Weible and Sabatier, 2017).

The three approaches to policy implementation, therefore, refer to three generations of policy implementation theories showing how academics assessed and viewed different public policies. The top-down approach examines the policy maker's ability in producing sound policy decisions which serve aims and objectives, key scholars of this approach are Mazmanian and Sabatier (1989b), Bardach (1977) and Pressman and Wildavsky (1984). As roles of players beyond the decision makers began to get noticed a wider examination of actors in the policy implementation process were examined, hence, the bottom-up approach examines how street level bureaucrats and other players influence the implementation of policy and the achievement of stipulated objectives, such as in Lipsky (2010) and in Elmore (1980). Michael Lipsky's (2010) argument that 'the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures effectively *become* the public policies they carry out' (p. xiii). As Lipsky also maintains: 'To the mix of places where policies are made, one must add the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers' (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii). This portrays the role of government offices in the implementation of policy and often alludes to the expansion of government functions in what Lipsky (2010) refers to as 'street-level bureaucracy'.

Finally, the third generation of implementation theories are hybrid theories which were introduced to bridge the gap between the two theories as it became evident that policies are neither entirely determined by those who make them or those who are tasked with implementing them and inspired more scientific approaches to the study of policy

implementation such as in Goggin et al. (1990), Sabatier (1999), Weible and Sabatier (2017) and Winter (1990).

As this project examines the implementation of Bahrain's social housing project it is important, therefore, to understand how this policy was implemented and brought to life. This I believe will provide a more in-depth look at the workings of the Bahraini government during that transitional time in its modern political and administrative history.

Academic literature on towns and urbanisation in Bahrain

The literature on new towns in Bahrain is sporadic and found briefly across several disciplines. So far, there is some mentioning of new town development, but not a single case study was found. Some of the relevant literature addresses the old towns of Manama (Ben-Hamouche, 2018; Fuccaro, 2009), Muharraq (Al Sulaiti, 2009; Yarwood, 1988), and the absorption of the village into the city (Al-Ghatam, 2023). A limited number of studies examine the relationship of oil to urban modernity, using a multidisciplinary approach to examine the influences of the oil industry on the architecture and urban modernity of the early oil days (Fuccaro, 2013a, 2013b, 2009; Wiedmann, 2010). Specific emphasis is paid to the impact of oil to Bahrain's urbanisation in the post-oil era, in which Isa Town is identified as more than a dormitory town highlighting its development in a new urban centre, unlike other new towns which were built later by Bahrain's Ministry of Housing(Wiedmann, 2010). In a master's thesis, Ali Karimi (2016) presents interesting ideas on modernisation/modernity, the nation-building project, and Bahrain's housing policy as a way the state intended to reinvent the modern Bahraini citizen (Karimi, 2016). However, there is little analysis of the city, urban development, or the national housing policy. Furthermore, the thesis essentially aims to examine design progress and evolution and not to present any deep political or social analyses and/or findings of that time in Bahrain's history and its impact on the urban state-building project.

An important social study on Bahrain's social and political transformation since WWI is provided in a doctoral thesis by Mohamed Ghanim Al Rumaihi from Kuwait (Al Rumaihi, 1973). Al Rumaihi (1973) used British archival resources to conduct his study, which at the time had just been made accessible to the public after the end of all protection agreements between Bahrain and Great Britain in 1971. Al Rumaihi (1973) uses Isa Town to explain the demographic decline in cities such as Muharraq in the early 1970s, which he views as a direct result of the migration to Isa Town, but his social and political study does not address the new town's role in social transformation. Isa Town was also mentioned in engineering research to advance the need for the development of a housing system in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Gulf (Kanoo, 1971).

Isa Town is mentioned briefly in Khuri's (1980) anthropological study of tribes and the state in Bahrain. It is noted as a key achievement of the housing department, but not much detail is provided (Khuri, 1980, p. 121). He further claims that it was part of the larger system of 'welfare' gifts, that their granting was based on loyalty and political

favouritism and that ‘to know how these “welfare” gifts are granted is to understand “the politics of the regime”, observed an interview’ (Khuri, 1980, p. 121). He also claims that the housing projects around Manama, along with Isa Town, share a couple of urban characteristics: the high rate of commuters and the absence of neighbourhoods with enduring reciprocal social relationships. He interestingly notes that ‘while Isa Town houses the poor and the rich, the Sunni and the Shia, the housing projects around Manama are mixed religiously, but not economically’ (Khuri, 1980, p. 256).

The extent of the study and Khuri’s methodology in extracting information on Isa Town were not specific to the new town or the housing project. Additionally, none of the examples mentioned examines the role of new towns in the state-building project of Bahrain or the role they played in the social transformation of those living within it, given the politically volatile period in Bahrain’s history. Equally as important is the role of Isa Town in the development of the Bahraini state, which remains unexplored. Therefore, through this project, I aim to bridge the research gap and contribute to the literature on new towns in the Global South, particularly demonstrating how Isa Town was used to stage the modernity of a new age of the independent Bahraini state.

Although Isa Town might be one of the earliest examples of a new town which was not a dormitory town tied to the oil industry, such as Awali in Bahrain, Abadan in Iran (Crinson, 1997; Ziari, 2006), Ahmedi in Kuwait (Alissa, 2012, 2013), the resource towns of Libya (Kezeiri, 1987), and ARAMCO in Saudi Arabia, there is still hardly anything mentioned about it in any academic field. As Wakeman (2016, p.18) notes, ‘there is far more research to be done on towns and cities – new or not – outside the West, particularly in Africa and the Middle East’. Because there is no in-depth examination of the new town or analysis of its experience in almost any academic discipline, Isa Town presents an opportunity to understand new towns in a context outside of the West, especially as a case study. The next chapter explains the methodology used for this research before the analytical findings are illustrated in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Introduction

As highlighted in the previous chapter, this research project aims to bridge the knowledge gap regarding Bahrain's – and, indeed, the Arab world's – first new town, Isa Town, which was first built between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s. It uses the lens of this new town to look at what was happening socially, administratively, and politically in Bahrain as it shifted towards independent sovereignty. Isa Town was viewed by Western specialists as 'the Arab world's most outstanding sociological experiment' (Stanley, 1979, p. 19) Consequently, my aim was to examine this new town example at the time it was commissioned, built, and inhabited in order to understand its historical context, generating new knowledge on the political, administrative, and social transformation of Bahrain through the lens of spatial development. Therefore, this historical research project is a hybrid project which borrows from several disciplines such as sociology, social policy, political science, visual cultures, urban planning, geography, architecture and political economy to name a few. It builds on qualitative methods to provide a descriptive account of the town and what it represented for various stakeholders.

The years between 1961 and 1971 were significant for several reasons: 1971 was the year Bahrain announced its sovereign independence, terminating the Special Treaty Relations between the United Kingdom and the State of Bahrain on 15 August 1971 (Government of Bahrain, 1971). The new relationship was based on the Friendship Treaty (Government of Bahrain, 1971b), ending 150 years of dominating British presence in the region. Equally important, this period served as the first ten years of the rule of Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, who, after ascending to the rule after the death of his father, started a new age of development and modernisation on multiple fronts: administrative, political, economic, and social. While I do not mean to undermine the importance of any period, a study on the period immediately preceding independence may shed light on how important foundations were built for the new emerging state and help illustrate its vision for the future. I believe this period provides critical knowledge for what happened post-1971 because Bahrain, as a nation, had to show its friends, its neighbours, its people, and the world that it was a country able to stand on its own. The decade prior to its independence, therefore, marked a period in which Bahrain was constructing a new modern image for itself as a country that could manage its internal and (potentially) external affairs, increasing its growth and prosperity and maintaining public security and order without the intervention of any external state or power.

Before I explain the dilemma of conducting archival research in Bahrain and how I overcame that in my research design, explaining my methodology, it is important to re-state my research questions:

1. The origins and goals of Isa Town: What were the origins of the Bahraini new town project?

2. Modernisation of Bahrain: What role did the new town of Isa play in the modernisation of Bahrain?

3. New towns of the Global South: What does the Bahraini new town reveal about the colonial/post-colonial interactions within Bahrain's modernisation project?

To fill this knowledge gap, this study of Isa Town examines the social and political dimensions associated with this new town, which was built in the 1960s as a hallmark political project in Bahrain. This chapter discusses the research design and methodology employed to establish the analytical findings in subsequent chapters. It begins with a critical examination of my position within this research project, which, as I explain, was a key stimulus. I also discuss other elements of the methodology.

The view from the inside: A note on positionality

As a researcher in this project, I had a vantage point from within the Bahraini government looking out at the project. From the time I commenced this doctoral research project, I have held an upper management position within the Ministry of Housing in Bahrain (since 2022, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning). Previously, I was the Director of Housing Policies and Strategic Planning (May 2011–March 2023), and since 2023, I have served as the Director of Strategy and Institutional Excellence. Thus, I have been a political appointee of the Prime Minister of Bahrain since May 2011. As part of my role within the ministry, I spearheaded the establishment of a policy research and planning department. The nature of the research we have conducted throughout the years mainly addressed policies relating to organisational and administrative development. On a few occasions, my department led strategic policy projects on the past and future of housing in Bahrain. The department I headed oversaw the production of numerous reports and the establishment of a set of national housing and urban statistics and indicators. Many of the studies we produced were quantitative in nature, and I realised that there was another side that was not being discussed. This qualitative dimension has yet to be explored in the housing and new town story, so I became interested in exploring the potential for what we do as a ministry and a government to tap into the full potential of knowledge.

The idea for this research project, therefore, was born in the corridors and offices of the Ministry of Housing because of my career there. To me, Isa Town stood out among other new towns and housing projects, partly because it was built before the ministry was established and largely because there was little documentation related to its existence. I was fascinated not only by the new town and its environs but also by its conceptualisation and construction, which to me seemed far away and different from

current projects at the ministry. The decision to study Isa Town came well into my first year as a doctoral student when I realised it provided an almost unique example to study the concepts of social and political dimensions of spatial development. Further, it was an opportunity to study the concepts of new towns in a late colonial and post-colonial setting.

In addition to my senior position within the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning in Bahrain, I am a scion of the ruling family, though I am not a direct descendent or directly related to the public figures in this study. The Al Khalifa figures mentioned in this study are distant relations, most of whom I have not met, as I discuss further in the reflexivity section later in the chapter. Here, I would add that my interest in oral history traditions was influenced by my upbringing and the family I came from. My father and his father before him have both had roles within the Royal Court and in documenting oral history, whether in the form of the Al Khalifa family tree or other historical subjects. My late father, Shaikh Khalifa bin Ahmed bin Al Khalifa, had an instrumental role in incorporating the women (wives and daughters of the family members) within the Al Khalifa family tree, which spans more than eleven generations. Oral history traditions were passed to me in the form of storytelling, which was used to share knowledge and various traditions and customs across generations. My father and grandfather were mainly interested in the oral history of Bahrain and the history of the ruling family. In my own research, I built on what was passed down to me to include the oral history of everyday Bahrainis and their relations to a ruling elite, which this project highlights in its analytical findings. Overall, I have sensed that my interview cohort viewed the combination of my position within the ministry as well as my social background as a basis for my credibility in the subject as well as in my research. This is evident in the ease in which I was able to find my interviewees, their acceptance to participate, as well as in their help with referring relevant individuals as I went along the process.

Furthermore, my acquired skills and unique position within the Ministry of Housing and the royal family provided me with insights that would not likely be available to any other researcher. It also meant that there was no prescription for how best to answer the research questions, as I possessed a variety of methodological tools that might be unknown or inaccessible to someone who was not in my position. The ease with which I could access ministry archives and personnel, as well as access to other government personnel and archives, served this project immensely. Furthermore, my experience within the ministry and knowledge of the subject accelerated my progress within and across archives and allowed me to cover extensive repositories within a short period of time. In the following section, I briefly explain the research project. I then elaborate on the archival dilemma that challenges historical research in general and, more specifically, in Bahrain, which I follow with my overall research strategy to overcome these challenges.

The archival dilemma

The archival black box

Archival research poses several challenges (Bsheer, 2020; Dirks, 2002; Klein, 2013; Moore et al., 2017; Richards, 1993; Stanley, 2017), not least in a country like Bahrain (Nakhleh, 1976). Given the relatively recent autonomy of the modern public administrative structure in Bahrain, which only became an independently sovereign state in 1971, conducting historical research on Bahrain's modern history presents several challenges. Questions include which archives should be consulted. Is the material representative? Is the material accurate? Is it adequate? These are questions every historical researcher in Bahrain will have to assess as they embark on their research journey. Those conducting research on Bahrain often have highlighted the limitations of the national and local archives, but I became particularly propelled by a claim of Emile Nakhleh (1976). Nakhleh spent five years in Bahrain in the early 1970s studying the political development of the emerging state, which he called a modernising society. Notably, Nakhleh (1976) claims that historical accuracy was not of great interest in the country, proving a challenge for field research:

> What is more disturbing, in most of these countries history is regarded as one of the banalities of life, and historical accuracy is treated, if it is thought of all, with utter apathy. History is rarely accepted as a reflection of the truth, often altered at whim and always viewed as the property of the ruler. Archives are non-existent, documents frequently disappear, and national public libraries even fail to keep the country's Official Gazette. The result is that in many developing countries, field research becomes a burdensome task in which procedure is as important as substance. (Nakhleh, 1976, pp. 6–7)

Nakhleh (1976) generalises how history is regarded not only in Bahrain or the Arabian Gulf but also in developing countries more broadly. Since my research area covers a time period close to when Nakhleh was in Bahrain, I grew interested in examining if this was indeed the case when developing the methodology for my research project. Also, I wanted to examine if the claim was still relevant for archival research and envision what other methods could be used to generate credible results. At best, archival material in Bahrain may be scattered and inconsistent across repositories; at worst, it can be inaccessible or even lost. As a Government of Bahrain employee, one hears various stories of documents carted in boxes to an unknown destination or to the central government storage located in the city of Sitra.[17] The central government repository is a

[17] The question of the Ministry of Housing archives and any other archives which held duplicates of their documents was something I sought to understand throughout this research journey. I found out quite randomly on the 4th of February 2025 that, indeed, Cabinet Affairs did maintain an archive of all the matters in which decisions were made at the cabinet level. These archives were better maintained than those found at the Ministry of Housing, but their fate was like all ministry documentation. Shortly after the change in

mystery – even to government employees like me. It is akin to a black box everyone speaks of, but no one knows exactly its condition or the potential of its accessibility. Therefore, it is very difficult to find a single national repository for historical documents, especially governmental archival documents. It may yet exist, but I have not found one accessible.

There are several presumptions, which I make, about the state of the archives that I would like to discuss before I explain the research design and methodology for this project. This may help explain the state of the Bahraini archives and, ultimately, some of the silences within its records. Possible explanations of the state of archives in Bahrain may be related to local awareness of the importance of archival practice, the limitations related to documentation and preservation of records, which may be connected to literacy levels,[18] the relative newness of its modern bureaucracy, and the state of development of the government offices.

All of the previous points may be considered to explain why, even to this day, many socio-political history researchers on Bahrain, such as Abdulla (2016), Al Rumaihi (1973), Al Shehabi (2019), Al-Tajer (1986), and Friedman (2020), depend largely on the archives and records of the British authorities who were in Bahrain between the nineteenth and twentieth century, which found at The National Archives in the UK. More recently, researchers have attempted to diversify the sources and extend them to more local records (Abdulla, 2016; Al Shehabi, 2019).

The British National Archives hold indispensable records, as I will note later, but they provide a specific and often singular perspective on local matters in Bahrain. Therefore, it is imperative to explore what kind of archival research can be conducted in Bahrain and what archival records can be found, a question few researchers have answered but indispensable when archives present vast challenges to the researcher (Moore et al., 2017). Furthermore, the associated limitations connected to archival access and collections, which are often out of the researcher's hands, necessitate combining them with other methods (Bowie, 2018; Kroeze and Vervloet, 2019). As a result, I grew interested in not only examining the state of the archive and the records and statements contained within them but also in understanding the type of data which may be used and exploring the most effective methodology to generate a solid foundation for which future historical research may be built on in circumstances similar to those found in Bahrain.

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prime minister (following the death of the first prime minister), a decision was made to transfer documents to the relevant ministries. In the case of the Ministry of Housing, eighty-one boxes of material were immediately transferred to central government storage in Sitra in 2023.

[18] As late as 1971, the general literacy rates were around 47% among the total Bahraini population aged ten or above, and illiteracy was around 53% within the total Bahrainis above ten years of age.

I aimed to examine and study local records in a way that provides a view from the inside and thus decolonise views and methods. I wanted to explore the viability of the local records and examine what findings they can generate today. This goal became even more significant considering the previous claim of Nakhleh (1976), and I felt it would contribute to more recent research in the region, such as that of Bsheer (2020) in Saudi Arabia, on how to navigate politically entrenched historiographies amid times that may be volatile towards the reidentification of ideologies and national identities. More importantly, as this research shows, Bahrain possesses rich archival material locally to be able to conduct successful fieldwork, and more importantly, this material may provide unique insights when telling or retelling a story of the modern history of Bahrain.

Methodology and data collection

The key to archival research, in addition to locating the appropriate repositories and identifying the people who grant access to them, is acknowledging the researcher's main responsibility in making archives work for them. Every archive visited for this project presented challenges as well as opportunities. Understanding the silences within them was an opportunity to delve deeper into the project, as one type of record can fill in for another.

The success of obtaining quality data for this research project may easily be ascribed to the capability to work across resources, archives, time zones, document variety and modality, and methods. The field research for this project was conducted largely in Bahrain and partly in the UK. The time spent in Bahrain allowed for in-person interactions as well as observations within the new town. The main methodology for this project involved connecting data from archives, which included multimodal data in the form of photos, newsreels, and other archival materials, with thirty-five oral history interviews focused on three main categories. In the following section, I discuss the main sources of data as well as the data involved in this research.

Archival research collections

For this research, a total of eleven physical archives or collections were visited or accessed in addition to two digital archives, comprising a combination of official and personal archives in Bahrain and the UK. It is important to highlight that access to them and the possibility of using them collaboratively and collectively have added depth and richness to the project as a whole. For example, I was able to fill, verify, strengthen, validate, and even challenge what was found in any one archive. In addition to BAPCO's material, several personal archives were important in obtaining important documents and data which were otherwise absent from official archives. One such document was

the Isa Town Housing Agreement possessed by Mr Abdul Jalil Ahmed,[19] an avid collector of old documents who runs an Instagram account where he posts many of them.[20]

As a result, I did not limit my search to official government archives, and indeed, my research strategy developed to revolve around people as well as documents. To elaborate, it was an iterative process between people and documents, and the official archives were the repositories where some of the documents were found. This project was built on the data triangulation of archival material in the form of documents, visual material from various sources, and oral history interviews with a diverse cohort of the men and women of Isa Town as well as those related to the Housing or Isa Town development projects. In the following section, I will discuss my methodology while clarifying the iterative process and how I connected various pieces from the archives to construct the puzzle.

Below, I highlight the main archives visited and discuss what I found of interest and relevancy to this research. Notably, I chose to visit the archives in Bahrain first, and then I collected material from a few archives in the UK to complement and fill any gaps.

	Archives In Bahrain	
	Official Archives	**Type of Data**
1	Ministry of Housing Library Room	Ministry reports on housing from 1975 onwards
2	BAPCO Energies	Photos, Newsreels, Reports, Documents, Arabic and English Newspapers
3	Bahrain Cultural Affairs Authority (BACA)	Photos and Isa Town Masterplan
4	Isa Cultural Centre Archives	Official Gazette, laws, decrees, and other government publications
5	Ministry of Information Affairs Archive	*Huna Al Bahrain* monthly magazine, TV reports
	Personal or Individual Archives	
6	Personal Archive of Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan	Bahrain's visual memory and photo archive

[19] Through Mr Abdul Jalil Ahmed, I became acquainted with a number of traders who deal in what to many is seen as scrap. This old material is usually found in people's houses and sold by the box to interested traders, who then sell them in Manama at a weekly market out of their cars and trucks.
[20] Ahmed, A. 2025. @bhr_documents [Instagram]. Date accessed: 14 March 2025. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/bhr_documents/?hl=ar

7	Personal Records of Mr Khalifa Shaheen Khalfan	Bahrain newsreels
8	Personal Archive of Mr Abdul Jalil Ahmed	Original housing contracts

Table 3.1. Archives in Bahrain and summary of data collected

In addition to archives in Bahrain, I visited a few in the UK to affirm what they contained and uncover whether they held data that would be more useful or more elaborate than those found in Bahrain. The table below outlines the archives visited, including the date and data found within them which was used in this research. Overall, the archives in the UK were more extensive and better organised, and in the case of my research, they did complement the data found in Bahrain. I did not, however, find that they were more inclusive of local data. The data found in Bahrain is incomparable to the data found in the UK in that most of what was found in the UK were official archives of the foreign office – not local data. Therefore, data such as laws, decrees, and prints of the Official Gazette are still exclusively found in Bahrain as one would think them to be.

	Archives Visited in the UK	**Date Visited**	**Data**
1	Scottish National Library Map Room	4 November 2021	Old maps of Bahrain
2	Royal Institute of British Architects RIBA Library, London	22 November 2022	Original George Wimpey Masterplan Design Plan of Isa Town
3	The National Archives at Kew Gardens, Richmond	30 November 2023	India Office & Successors Records & Foreign Office Records and Papers

Table 3.2. Archives visited in the UK and summary of data collected

In addition to the archives in Bahrain and the UK, the open-source data within the Qatar Digital Archives and the Arabian Gulf Digital Archives were crucial for accessing important documents and correspondence of the British Residency and Agency and the Foreign Office and, therefore, shortened the time needed to visit The National Archives at Kew.

	Online Digital Libraries	**Data**
1	Qatar Digital Library	Articles and some India Office archival documents
2	Arabian Gulf Digital Archives	British reform suggestions, personal papers, official correspondence, Annual

		Reviews for Bahrain (1950s–1960s)

Table 3.3. Online archives and data collected

Although the archival data came from within and outside of Bahrain, I can affirm my reliance on a significant amount of material found in local archives, which in many ways provided me with a different data set than had I depended on The National Archives in the UK. The dependence on a wide number of local archives and other forms of data has moved the research away from the typical Britain-centric historical view. The archives and the data within them are, unfortunately, far from perfect, complete, or systematic. They required an innovative and open approach; hence, the focus kept shifting between the archival data and oral history interviews. Furthermore, a rigorous cross-checking of the data in oral history interviews and various repositories of archival data was conducted to test its viability and accuracy.

Furthermore, as I elaborate later, in the case of BAPCO and other private archives, I had to work with archivists to determine the contents and identify what might be of value to me and my research. The archivists were not only gatekeepers but also served as my eyes within the archives, as I was not given direct access. Working with archivists presented both a blessing and a challenge. It was a blessing to explore large repositories with the assistance of people who work with the data and are, therefore, knowledgeable on how and where to extract the data in a short period of time. On the other hand, working with archivists also presented a challenge when they were unaware of the contents of their collections or when the metadata was mislabelled or recorded under different titles. I found this to be the case when working with the BAPCO archivists because, in many cases, they had to be guided towards data relevant to my search. In the case of BAPCO, the archivists depended on the dates recorded and metadata. I did not always know the exact dates of events, and they had no other way of searching within their collection. Additionally, the metadata was not always accurate, which meant that I had to request the data repeatedly and use the two BAPCO newspapers as a point of reference to understand the material and learn what was available.

As I progressed further in my data collection, I requested data from the archivist in a very specific manner with accurate dates, events, and chronology using the records of the newspapers as a point of reference. It was important to keep in mind that every collection or repository is stored based on the interest of those maintaining them – they are not necessarily organised to facilitate research. In the case of BAPCO material, it was organised and maintained based on the company's interest in the material, not necessarily according to the order I needed as a researcher. As an example, I asked that all material on Isa Town be provided to me in my initial request to BAPCO on 10 January 2022 (Al Khalifa, 2022), but I continued requesting data until February 2025 (Lever, 2025) in an open and continuous exchange with the principal archivist assigned by the

company to work with me on the project in numerous emails, to request, verify, correct, complete, and fill the gaps and silences.

Redefining documents

Researchers have demonstrated the role of government documents in understanding the work of government (Freeman and Maybin, 2011). Studies have examined documents for their substantive content, their language, and their authorial voice as texts to be analysed for their pattern of thought and identities and as artefacts in connection with other documents or 'as a mark made on things' (Freeman and Maybin, 2011).

Consequently, I have expanded my view of what constitutes a document. For example, I define Instagram posts and videos as documents that guided me to original repositories and collections. Photographic images and newsreels of the 1960s also took the place of government records and reports. Bahrain Oil Company newspapers were important national records, as was the government broadcasting magazine *Huna Al Bahrain*. They often contained details which were not otherwise preserved in other government records. Additionally, artists' sketches and magazine covers were used to communicate and illustrate public sentiment as well as government progress. Maps and aerial photography visualised spatial development and illustrated various details which could not be captured in other reports and were important additions to other forms of written records such as local government documents, correspondence, and foreign archives. To me all the various forms of documentation mentioned above were considered as documents in this research.

Visual material and the journey to the gatekeepers

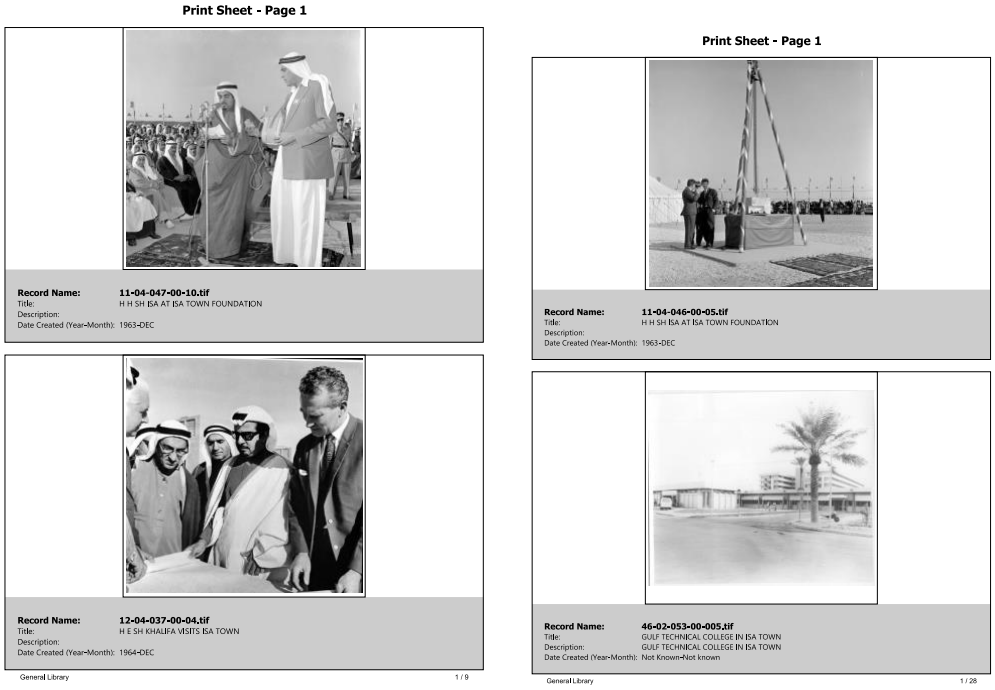
Embarking on this research project meant venturing into the unknown and through unchartered waters. I started my search of archives and archival material in December 2021, almost one full year before the start of my actual fieldwork. It was important to obtain a sense of what was available to be able to make decisions on what methods would be best employed to answer the research questions in this project. However, the story of how I reached these archives and the decisions I made about them highlights the role of individuals and communities in archival research. The pivotal role they played in leading me to these archives has led me to believe that archives are very much about the human beings in and around them.

The use of visual material to research a social/public policy topic may not be the first choice for social or political scientists. That is not to say they are not powerful in their use, as we see in the monumental work of Pierre Bourdieu (1965, 2005, 2014). During the course of my journey, I became aware of the existence of rich visual archives and explored their potential for conducting contemporary historical research. As I began surveying the archives, I started in Bahrain at the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning and the Isa Cultural Centre Archives, where I noticed their limitations. For example, the

Ministry of Housing Archives only went back to 1975, the year the ministry was established, and the Isa Cultural Centre Archives held a collection that was limited and, at times, inconsistent.

At the same time, I noticed the widespread posting of high-quality photographic images and short videos on social media platforms. They were posted on Instagram by the accounts of Mr Nabeel Ajoor (@nabeelajoor),[21] Mr Mohammed Al Nuaimi (@old_isa_town),[22] and Mr Isa Al Mogahwi (@es100sa).[23] Most of these images had a watermark that referenced 'BAPCO Refining B.S.C. (Closed)'. I knew Mr Ajoor personally, and he was my first point of contact. From him, I learned that the Bahrain Oil Company (BAPCO) did indeed keep a public relations archive and that it was, under certain conditions, open to researchers and the public. Mr Ajoor put me in touch with one of the principal archivists at BAPCO, Mr Steve Brian Lever. I contacted BAPCO by email and shared the details of my research project (Al Khalifa, 2022). Subsequently, I was granted guided access to the archives and assigned a principal archivist to work with on my requests. I worked with him during visits to BAPCO's public relations offices in Awali and by requesting data via email. The archivist would examine my requests and reply with an email containing a link to a shared drive containing the requested photos and a summary report, which shared details of the metadata. The metadata was not always accurate or precise, as I highlight later.

[21] Ajoor, N. 2025. @nabeelajoor [Instagram]. Date accessed: 9 March 2025. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/nabeelajoor/?hl=ar.
[22] Al Nuaimi, M. 2025. @old_isa_town [Instagram] Date accessed: 9 March 2025. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/old_isa_town/?hl=ar.
[23] Al Mogahwi, I. 2025. @@es100sa [Instagram]. Date accessed: 9 March 2025. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/es100sa/?hl=ar.



Above: Screenshot of a summary report with metadata. Source: BAPCO Energies

To overcome inaccuracies or inconsistencies in the metadata, I used BAPCO's newspapers as a reference point for all material. BAPCO Energies originally shared with me all available editions of their English newspaper, *The Islander*, and the Arabic edition, *Al Najma Al Osbouiya* (*The Weekly Star*), through a memory stick in January 2022, as follows:

	Name of Publication	Source	Language of Publication	Publication Frequency	Dates in Print	Editions Shared by BAPCO
1	*The Islander*	BAPCO Energies	English	Weekly	March 1952–February 1969	656 out of 656 editions (scanned copies)
2	*Al Najma Al Ousbouiya* '*The Weekly Star*'	BAPCO Energies	Arabic	Weekly	January 1957–May 1981	1,115 out of 1,174 editions (59 editions were missing from the BAPCO archives and therefore not scanned)[24]

Table 3.4. BAPCO newspapers summary table

[24] 'THE BAHRAIN WEEKLY STAR-Detailed Inventory Report as of October 15, 2018', January, 2022, Source: BAPCO Energies.

Through BAPCO's public relations archivists, I was also put in touch with some of the original content creators, such as Mr Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan, a photographer, and Mr Khalifa Shaheen Khalfan, BAPCO's cinematographer. Through them, I was put in contact with Mr Ahmed Abdulla Al Rayyes, the former editor-in-chief of BAPCO's Arabic language newspaper, *The Weekly Star* – in Arabic *Al Najma Al Osbou'iya*. It is important to note that it was through my access to the BAPCO archives that I made the decision to use visual material in addition to other archival material from Bahrain and elsewhere. The photographs were not only authentic and high quality, but they were consistent in their existence and quality, which is certainly true for the period this project covers (1961–1971).

What official records missed or failed to discuss, BAPCO's visual and publication material made up for in abundance. During the years BAPCO's English and Arabic newspapers were published, there was hardly any national event that the ruler or the government undertook that was not recorded and announced by BAPCO through those outlets, especially the Arabic version, *The Weekly Star*. BAPCO's photographers, cinematographers, and news reporters were present at every event,[25] especially in the 1960s, as the Arabic newspaper seems to have taken a new turn from being a company newspaper concerned with publishing news on the company and its employees to a newspaper covering national news and most of what was happening in the country.[26] This is especially notable in the 1960s, which was a particularly prolific time for the publication of national news, possibly because they were the only newspapers in consistent operation.[27]

The access to visual material presented a significant opportunity for this research project, especially considering photography and other visual methods' value in social science research. Photography and other visual modes of data have the potential to illustrate and expose elements of Isa Town as a spatial development with far more clarity and accuracy than other forms of data. Photography and photographs have been used as data as well as a method in the elicitation of knowledge (Bourdieu, 2014, 2005, 1979, 1965; Ferreira and Serpa, 2020; Magwegwe, 2024; Schultheis et al., 2009). Of particular interest and worthy of note is the work of Pierre Bourdieu in Algeria (Bourdieu, 1965, 1979, 2005, 2014), which proposed innovative methodologies for sociological research and confirmed the importance of presenting a visual representation to those who might have never seen a territory they had colonised (Schultheis et al., 2009). More specifically, Bourdieu's work visualised circumstances in colonised Algeria to decision-makers in France who had never set foot there (Schultheis et al., 2009). Bourdieu's and other

[25] Interview with Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan on 26 June, 5 July, and 6 July 2023 (Al Khan, 2023); Interview with Khalifa Shaheen on 10 July 2023 (Shaheen, 2023); Interview with Ahmed Abdulla Al Rayyes on 8 July 2023 (Al Rayyes, 2023).

[26] I have not conducted a discourse or content analysis of BAPCO's Arabic or English newspapers, but it is something that could be considered for future research.

[27] صقر بن عبدالله المعاودة، 'الصحافة البحرينية: تاريخ وعطاء'، ٢٠١٤ مطبعة الإتحاد، مملكة البحرين.

researchers' work shows how photography can be used as an important tool in the examination of not only what is chosen to be represented in a photo but also everything that is happening around it. Therefore, the study becomes not just what is projected but an examination of all the elements that surround the photo, such as taking, circulating, and preserving it. The conditions that made the photo possible and the people behind it become part of its story.

The use of visual material to study the Isa Town example, therefore, presented a significant opportunity to illustrate how people saw, interacted and experienced their new and modern surroundings. The richness of the visual archives on Isa Town, which were kept at BAPCO, and on other national events and projects, confirm that. To elaborate, BAPCO's public relations archive contains more than 500,000 images, both scanned and born-digital, more than 600 film reels amounting to 75 hours of film, and approximately 77 BAPCO newsreel films. Furthermore, there were 656 editions of the English newspaper *The Islander*, published between March 1952 and February 1969, and about 1,174 additions of the Arabic newspaper *The Weekly Star*, published between January 1957 and May 1981.[28] It is important to note that as the government and other independent press started to assume a larger responsibility for mass communication and visuality, the need for mass communications from BAPCO to the public was reduced significantly. Furthermore, BAPCO's very own photographer and cinematographer, Abdulla Al Khan and Khalifa Shaheen, left the company to start their own private production company, which worked directly with the government.[29]

BAPCO's archival records are an invaluable national and local resource which contains the modern visual history of Bahrain, at least from the 1940s until the mid-1970s. More significantly, the photographic and cinematographic records visualise Bahrain's modern history. Therefore, access to these visual and newspaper records was a significant starting point for connecting the dots of various data, as I will explain in the next section. They also provide a great example of a well-preserved and relatively accessible repository found locally in Bahrain. While it is true that BAPCO's materials cannot replace government statements and records, had the government kept and maintained them in an adequate manner, it was hard to ignore them. Indeed, they present an opportunity for the researcher to obtain a new perspective and add a new dimension to the research. They also present an important question of why BAPCO was doing all of this, whether for the government or for itself. This discovery brought forward a new dimension in understanding the power relations between BAPCO and the State of Bahrain. It had the potential to not only explain silences within archives but also to explore power relations within and around these two entities. These ideas might not be illuminated through

[28] Based on an email from Steve Brian Lever, principal archivist at BAPCO Energies, 11 February 2025 (Lever, 2025).
[29] Interview with Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan, 26 June and 5 July 2023 (Al Khan, 2023); Interview with Khalifa Shaheen Khalfan, 10 July 2023 (Shaheen, 2023).

government records alone, even if these records were complete and comprehensive enough to be used on their own.

In addition to the BAPCO newspapers and photographs, I used the government's broadcasting magazine, *Huna Al Bahrain* (1957–2011), as a reference and data source to confirm and cross-check various events and announcements. *Huna Al Bahrain* (*Here is Bahrain*) was a magazine published by the Government of Bahrain's Public Relations Department and the government's broadcasting unit.[30] As a government-published magazine, it provides an archival record of government events, especially during times when no other records or information about the government exist. Initially published on a weekly basis, detailing in written form the government's radio broadcast, it later developed into a bi-weekly newsletter and then a monthly newsletter.

The 1960s marked the beginning of a new era of infrastructure and spatial expansion, which was a continuation of many of the projects instituted during the reign of Shaikh Salman but materialised fully and more lucidly during the reign of his son, Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa. At this time, the articles, the photos, and even some of the artwork published on the front page of the magazine helped tell the story of what was happening in Bahrain. Between December 1962, when the plans to build the new town were announced, and Isa Town's inauguration in November 1968, there were sixteen news reports published on the new town in *Huna Al Bahrain* alone, announcing it to the public, detailing its progress, and providing rich photographic imagery to engage the public's imagination and to disseminate a variety of information on the new town. Articles and photographic subjects ranged from the first announcement[31] to the inauguration,[32] artists' renditions of the state-of-the-art stadium,[33] progress and developments,[34] head-of-government site visits,[35] final housing prices,[36] the model house,[37] and many other practical announcements relating to the new town. Similar and corresponding announcements often appeared in BAPCO's newspapers, albeit with fewer details and clearly intended for a different audience. *Huna Al Bahrain*'s announcements were intended to be the official broadcasting source for various announcements, while BAPCO's newspapers covered the news as any private newspaper would.

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[30] صقر بن عبدالله المعاودة، 'الصحافة البحرينية: تاريخ وعطاء'، ٢٠١٤ مطبعة الإتحاد، مملكة البحرين.
[31] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 132, January 1963, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain
[32] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 144, January 1964, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[33] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 155, December 1964, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[34] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 154, November 1964; Issue 162, July 1965; Issue 167, December 1965; Issue 187, August 1967, and; Issue 189, October 1967, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[35] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 174, July 1966, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[36] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 190, November 1967, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[37] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 195, April 1968, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.

	Name of Publication	Source	Language of Publication	Publication Frequency	Dates in Print	Number of Reports on Isa Town (Shared)
1	*Huna Al Bahrain*	Ministry of Information	Arabic	Mixed frequency	January 1957–2011	56 reports 1964–2007

Table 3.5. *Huna Al Bahrain* reports on Isa Town, Source: Ministry of Information

For the Ministry of Information Archive, I was not granted direct access but worked with their director of media to gain access to the relevant magazine editions. The previous director of media at the Ministry of Information, the late Mr Yousif Mohamed Ismail, was instrumental in granting me access to the editions that announced Isa Town-related material, as summarised in the table above. He provided me with a full digital folder with all news reports on Isa Town in the Government of Bahrain Broadcasting Magazine *Huna Al Bahrain*. Similar to working with an archivist, I found that there were some relevant news reports on Isa Town that were not provided, which I had to request separately later. Most of them appeared with titles that did not include the words 'Isa Town', which meant that I had to search for them and request them separately.

Meeting the pioneers and the creators of original content: Oral history interviews

I combined archival and visual material with the use of oral history. The value of oral history research in Arabian Gulf countries has been well documented, especially in light of the socio-political conditions that prevented the establishment or institutionalisation of early archival recording and preservation. Today, it is seen as a crucial documentation tool for nation-building and upholding cultural heritage (Ahmed, 2018). But in the wider humanities and social science fields, oral history research is seen as an important tool to fill archival gaps (Kroeze and Vervloet, 2019) and challenge archival narratives, making it an important tool to decolonise and address power dynamics within and around the archive (Bowie, 2018).

A snowballing methodology was employed to identify the key people for my cohort. As a technique, referral sampling is believed to add value to archival and media resources by shedding light on topics that otherwise would remain unknown (Bailey, 2019). In the absence of proper records on Isa Town, including its history, operations, and residents, I wanted to examine what a snowball sampling method could generate and what that meant for social science research in Bahrain. Is snowballing effective in generating an adequate cohort for Bahrain, where there are few records?

The cohort was largely divided into four broad categories: the first category was the people of Isa Town; the second category included employees of the Isa Town Office; the third category comprised technocrats or other people of interest associated with the new town and housing in Bahrain; and the fourth category related to the archives – those who

contributed to the production or upkeep of archival data. I identified a few individuals as experts on various themes and topics who may not fall precisely into any of these categories.

	Interview Cohort	Number of Interviews	Number of Sittings	Total Number of Individuals
1	People of Isa Town	14	17	55
2	Former employees of the Isa Town Office (also former and current residents of Isa Town)	3	5	4
3	Technocrats of the Ministry of Housing and other relevant organisations	11	11	11
4	Archival employees	7	7	8
	Total[38]	35[39]	40[40]	78[41]

Table 3.6. Interview cohort summary table

The interviews were a combination of individual, joint, and group interviews. The individual interviews meant that I sat with an individual alone once or in multiple sittings. Joint interviews were when two related individuals engaged in the interview, and group interviews meant more than two related or unrelated individuals were interviewed at the same time.

Total Number of Interviews by Interview Type	Total
Individual interviews	21
Joint interviews	8
Group interviews	6
Total	35

Table 3.7. Total number of interviews by interview type

All forms of interviewing were informative and useful. Individual interviews allowed focus and attention on the interviewee, which was very useful for individuals engaged in a professional capacity or those who came prepared and knew what they wanted to say. Joint interviews were also useful, especially when one interviewee was inhibited or hesitant and might have been encouraged by what another interviewee said. Group interviews were generally challenging to manage and often even more challenging to

[38] Aggregates may differ and due to the multiple categories that applied to some individuals in the cohort. Furthermore, some individuals were interviewed multiple times in their different capacities.
[39] Total interviews minus one group (technocrats who were also former residents of Isa Town) that was counted in the previous category.
[40] Total interviews minus one group (technocrats who were also former residents of Isa Town) that was counted in the previous category.
[41] The total number of people, eliminating any chance of double counting across categories.

transcribe. However, they were very useful to examine how individuals interacted with one another, especially in places such as the men's *majālises*[42]. Consideration and due diligence were observed to develop a diverse cohort, which included an equal representation of male and female interviewees, as well as those with different levels of involvement in the Isa Town project, as shown earlier.

Total Cohort in Number of Individuals by Gender	Total Number
Total male interviewees (in all categories)	55
Total female interviewees (in all categories)	23

Table 3.8. Total cohort in number of individuals by gender

One of the main challenges in creating equal gender representation was that only one female interviewee was found in the categories of archival workers, technocrats, and Isa Town Office employees. Furthermore, two visits to men's *majālis* accounted for a significant increase in the male cohort.

Gender Distribution of Cohort (Excluding Male *Majlis*)	Total Number of Individuals
Total male interviewees (excluding *majlis* cohort)	33
Total female interviewees	23

Table 3.9. Gender distribution of interviewees

I managed to bridge the gap among the 'people of Isa Town' cohort, but there was little to be done in other categories because the organisational bodies (whether government or private) were historically largely male-dominated, especially among top-level and specialised positions. Although there are more women in upper management positions at the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning today,[43] this had not been the case from the 1960s through to the 2010s.

The interviews were conducted mostly on-site in Isa Town or any other place the interviewee chose, as I let individuals select the location for their interviews. Consequently, some were interviewed in public places and others in their homes, which allowed me to view some of the houses in Isa Town and to see how they were adapted over time from the inside as well as the outside. Most interviews were conducted with a semi-structured framework that began with a review of the project and a discussion of

[42] *majālis* (single) or *majālises (plural) are defined by the UNESCO as:* 'Majlis are "sitting places" where community members gather to discuss local events and issues, exchange news, receive guests, socialize and be entertained'. ("Majlis, a cultural and social space," n.d.). The *majālises* are usually gender exclusive, so wither for men or women, although the men's *majālises* are more prevalent than women's as a weekly or daily gathering place (Al-Jassar, 2009).

[43] Ministry of Housing Organisation Chart – Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning Website: https://www.housing.gov.bh/org-chart/ Date accessed: 28th March 2025

the ethics process, describing to the interviewee how the information shared would be recorded, stored, and utilised. Permission to record and use direct quotes was obtained prior to each session, and most interviewees agreed to have their voices recorded and direct quotes used in the research. Dealing with an older interviewee cohort or people who were comfortable in their own homes led to interviews spanning a longer time. Often, interviewees were as curious about me as I was about what they had to say, which meant that it was normal during an interview to allow for some digression from the main topic. Furthermore, at various times, I asked a question more than once to examine if the answer had changed. This technique proved very successful in triggering knowledge from the memories of the interviewees.

For those who did not agree to be recorded, I took detailed notes of the interview and provided a transcription for the interviewee to verify. Respecting the pace and boundaries of the interviewees allowed for more trust in the process; more importantly, it allowed interviewees to express themselves freely and share knowledge of topics that I may not have included in my approach. I feel this approach led the interviewees to be more forthcoming, even including details about their private lives, knowing that they were being recorded. They would tell me to assess what information might need to be withheld or anonymised.

Transcription

It is important to highlight the transcription process adopted in this project, especially in light of some of the challenges connected to the use of transcriptions in qualitative research (Point and Baruch, 2023), where scholars have highlighted the lack of attention paid to transcriptions as a significant flaw. I tried to address these challenges by preparing a transcription for each interview or each group of interviews with the same person or group of people from the original recording. Doing so meant listening to the transcription recording and transcribing the data either by writing it down first by hand or typing it into a document. I used three types of transcriptions. The first group was a verbatim transcription. Then, there was another group of transcriptions where a summary of the interview was provided along with a verbatim transcript accompanied by the translation of key quotes from the audio recording. The last form of interview transcriptions was for those who did not agree to be recorded, where transcriptions were prepared based on the notes taken during the interview.

Type of Transcript	Number
Verbatim	17
Notes from audio recording	16
Transcripts from notes	2
Total number of transcripts	35

Table 3.10. Transcription type summary

The different forms of transcription allowed for a better summarisation of the key knowledge contained within. The interviews were conducted in an informal way, meaning that the conversation often ventured off the main topic, and other members of the family joined the interview. Naturally, I tried to eliminate side conversations without omitting discussions of the main topic. Regardless of which type of transcription was conducted, I tried to capture as much of the interview as possible. The second method allowed me to connect a variety of information in a constructive text without any breaks in the conversation. I was inspired to do this by Tony Parker (2012), who shares the stories of some of the families he interviewed in a UK housing estate (Parker, 2012). In addition to the interview transcriptions, any newsreels or videos used for this research were also transcribed and translated where applicable.

Language and translation

All interview documents were either translated from Arabic into English based on an original transcript in the language of the interview or directly from recording as the transcription was being typed. I conducted most of the translations myself, feeling confident about doing so. The Arabic language used for communication was the informal Bahraini dialect. Having done most of the translation myself, I feel assured that the translation projects the most accurate meaning.

Furthermore, BAPCO's Arabic newsreels were transcribed and then translated into English from Arabic where necessary. Furthermore, various archival records and news entries were also translated from Arabic to English. For some official documents or where the language was more elaborate, I sought an independent translator, but I still verified all the translations myself to eliminate any chances of errors or misinterpretation.

It is important to note that much of the written archival records on Isa Town before 1975, such as Wimpey's plans and maps, existed in English. The various local news publications such as the government's *Huna Al Bahrain* as well as BAPCO's newspapers then published information on them in Arabic and English as in the case of BAPCO's *The Islander*, accordingly. Furthermore, as evident in the event publications of Isa Town's foundation stone ceremony of December 1963, announcement material was often issued in both Arabic and English to make it accessible to the local as well as the foreign attendees of the event. This indicates to both the participation of English-speaking dignitaries in state event, as well as the Bahraini state's interest in making news on the new town accessible to those who otherwise cannot comprehend Arabic. Furthermore, even after the establishment of the Ministry of Housing in 1975, all the technical reports on the new town and consultation documents were produced in English. A key example are the reports produced by Llewelyn-Davies Weeks Forestier & Bor in 1975 for implementing the subsequent phases of Isa Town and the design of a national housing policy for Bahrain. But slowly, as the ministry grew to include a wider representation of Arabic speaking technical staff, much of the ministry's publications were mainly

produced in Arabic or translated into Arabic from English in the cases they were produced by non-Arabic speaking consultants. All reports and presentations presented to the ministerial cabinet, found within the Ministry of Housing library, were in Arabic regardless of the language they were originally published in.

Ethics

Ethics procedures were observed in this research to allow people to understand the research project they participated in while protecting their rights and the intellectual property rights of individuals and institutions.

Following the University of Edinburgh Guidelines on Ethics, an Ethical Review Process was completed and approved to collect and manage data. A research ethics form was submitted to the school and approved in November 2022 prior to starting the interview process with any entity or individual. I outlined my intended cohort and potential risks. The greatest risk was the possible loss of information. A preapproved participant information sheet and ethics consent form were prepared and shared with every interviewee and organisation. Two versions of each of the forms were prepared – one in English and one in Arabic – to ensure accessibility, clarity, and transparency. The documents were shared to gain access from any institution which required clearance to access data, employees, or facilities, including the archives at BAPCO and the Ministry of Housing. Adequate time was given to talk to each and every interviewee or entity visited about the objectives of the research. Furthermore, they were given ample opportunity to ask for clarifications on the interview process and how the data would be stored. Consent to record data was obtained from each participant. Additionally, BAPCO asked me to sign their own consent form on how to manage and use their data.

For interviews, adequate time was taken to go through both the project information sheet and the consent form, either in Arabic or English. All interviewees were given the opportunity to ask questions. Interviewees were asked permission to be recorded and photographed and whether they consented to have direct quotes used in the thesis. Apart from a few interviewees, most were welcoming and agreed to be recorded, photographed, and quoted. All interviewees were adults, and none fell into any category of vulnerability, disability, or impairment. Based on that, the risk was identified as a low-risk cohort.

Generating knowledge through a variety of data

Reading the documents

As my research depended heavily on photographic and other cinematographic imagery, the ability to assess images was the key to generating analytical findings, particularly because most were produced in local historical contexts. As I mentioned earlier, the metadata did not always accurately reference the titles of various events, and the

photographs within the BAPCO archives were stored in both digital and physical files by date as opposed to topic or subject matter. Some were referenced by subject, but as mentioned earlier, I found the metadata to be undependable. Two key resources were the BAPCO newspapers and the government broadcasting magazine, *Huna Al Bahrain*, as together they played a significant role in identifying, determining, verifying, correcting, and understanding the data and confirming the metadata from the various news reports on what the government and BAPCO wanted to announce to the wider public.

Image 3.1. A visit to the BAPCO Archive, January 2022

In addition, BAPCO's original photographer and cinematographer, Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan and Khalifa Shaheen, both of whom were interviewed for this project, were important points of contact to verify some of the information. Both were still able to remember various occasions and events that were captured on film, and they were indispensable to further correct events and provide meaning and the reasoning behind them. In one example, I came to understand why Isa Town's open spaces were photographed on weekends as people were having picnics and gathered there (see Image 3.2 below): Abdulla Al Khan, the photographer, was told to gather photographs to show that Isa Town was populated and thriving.[44] This government desire also explains BAPCO's photographs of Mr Abdulla Al Khatib, Isa Town's first resident, as well as those of Mr Hassan Al Aradi and his children. BAPCO's photographers seized many opportunities to show the new town as a success, which was very important for the government as more and more families started to leave the new town after moving in.

[44] Interviews with Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan, 26 June, 5 July, and 13 July 2023.

Image 3.2. Photos of a 'successfully populated' new town. Source: BAPCO Energies

Isa Town's residents also contributed to reading various visual documents. BAPCO's photographs and newsreels were used during interviews, mostly to initiate conversation and as illustrative tools. They were also used to verify various events and correct details about them. In some cases, as the residents witnessed my interest in visual imagery, they were inspired to share photos they had, some of which were originally BAPCO's images and were not shared with me because they were stored with descriptions that do not indicate that they were photographed in Isa Town.[45] This discrepancy brought to my attention how requesting data from the archivist and expecting it to be complete was not enough – it was critical to repeatedly search and cross-check for clues across data sources, which I then used to request images officially from BAPCO. Reading a visual document requires close examination and cross-checking, but it also requires a participatory approach that inspires participants to share, converse, correct, and discuss.

Diversity and layering: An approach to correct and verify

This project depended on the diversity of data sources found in the numerous repositories used in this research. Furthermore, related data was layered and examined comprehensively to develop the Isa Town story. Being open to the various forms of data and dealing with them as artefacts, analysing them for their content, and assessing who was involved in their production were significant steps in fully understanding the data. Further, the different forms of data allowed for diversity and richness and a great opportunity to cross-examine and verify data. This variety brought with it new

[45] King Hussain of Jordan's visit to Isa Town in February 1967 was one such example. The photo is thought to be displayed at the Rolls Royce showroom and was captured by an Isa Town resident and shared with me by Ahmed Omar Al Ruwaila during the Al Thawadi house interviews, May 2023 (Al Thawadi et al., 2023).

perspectives and dimensions to the Isa Town story and supported other modes of data collection.

An example of how the various forms of data challenged widely accepted truths is perhaps the most important myth: that the people in Isa Town came to live in the new town after its inauguration in November 1968. In truth, Mr Abdulla Al Khatib, the first resident of Isa Town, had come to live in the new town one whole year before the inauguration in November 1967. This clarification is found in a photo found at BAPCO and a cross-examination of the various news sources connected the photo to the news report. An oral history interview with the children of the late Mr Abdulla Al Khatib not only confirmed this but added a new layer of meaning on when, how, and why their family moved to Isa Town before any of the other families. They also explained why the photos were taken at night and what the event meant to them.[46]

Image 3.3. (left) Mr Abdulla Al Khatib moving into his house in November 1967; (right) Mr Abdulla Al Khatib receiving the commemorative Isa Town Key from Shaikh Isa at Isa Town's Inauguration, November 1968. Source: BAPCO Energies

The process used to analyse and connect various modes of data was not uniform, and I compared various modes of data during the research process; there was no linear process to how the data was used to generate knowledge. The Isa Town story was revealed through a process of observation and examination across the various modes of data. Each form of data provided a foundation and was followed by another mode of data, which added layers, dimensions, and meaning to the understanding of the various events around the new town. The Isa Town story and its details were not always available in one archival record, so I often had to confirm them using the various modes of data and the aid of the chronologically organised news material in the BAPCO newspapers as well as

[46] Interview with the family of Abdulla Al Asmi, also known as Abdulla Al Khatib, 17 June 2023 (Al Asmi et al., 2023).

in the government broadcasting magazine, *Huna Al Bahrain*. Further, the photos taken by BAPCO were not always used in the news articles; access to them provided an opportunity for an in-depth examination and comparison with the archival text and the oral history interviews.

The analysis process was, as mentioned earlier, both iterative and interchanging between and across various data. This flexibility was important because the process was not linear and required a rigorous method for verification and confirmation across resources. What this flexibility achieved was how various modes of data could be combined to challenge widely accepted truths and help explain incidents and facts. Furthermore, I found that my data confirmed the right chronology of events and connected various historical details with specific events. Therefore, these data provided new meaning and shed light on those various forms of data. Together, they could fill silences and address gaps in local resources, and they told the story of Isa Town as it has never been told, using predominately local archival material, decolonising approaches, resources, and methodologies. Most importantly, it gave voice to those who may have been overlooked in government and other official records, including those held in the British National Archives: the people of Bahrain and Isa Town who experienced this shift and social transformation.

Throughout the research project, there are many examples of how and where details on the new town were confirmed, corrected, and verified. These details were too great in number to count, and that is partly because the Isa Town story has until now been absent from the new town literature. Inconsistency and ambiguity in the local archives may have intimidated many researchers. What I found was that it required innovative thinking, patience, and the ability to navigate across and between archives quickly. I depended on notetaking and memory to remember items across a wide range of materials. In the end, I have found that archival research is doable if the researcher is willing to break from the traditional idea of the archive as a central repository and follow the definition provided by Foucault (1972, pp. 145–147). Because I have found that the once one used the word archives one immediately assumes a place or a repository of some sort which includes a collection or number of collections. What I have found as an archive, however, was along that line of what Foucault describes as ‘the general system of the formation and transformation of statements’ (Foucault, 1972, pp. 145–147). These statements can take many shapes and forms, and therefore, the search is not for an archive as a place exists but rather where statements in their multiple modes are formed and how are they circulated and transformed.

Reflexivity

When I started, even though it was common knowledge that Isa Town was the first new town and represented the official start of the housing project in Bahrain there was not much interest in Isa Town, since there was a general focus on newer and larger towns

built since Isa Town. As I started my research, I noticed the interest in it increasing as multiple public initiatives were announced with the aim of preserving the history of housing in Bahrain, starting with the first national housing project in Isa Town. I believe this stemmed from the fact that after fifty years of the government building houses and new towns, the state decided to support a private sector–led delivery programme with less direct government involvement. The government was still trying to retain its welfare arm with the citizens, but the supply chain was slowly but suddenly transferred to the private sector.

This shift may, in my opinion, have invited a sudden urge of nostalgia to preserve the old and to commemorate history, as evident in the public and political request to establish a museum for Isa Town in one of the old houses and the decision to preserve three of the original apartment buildings that were to be demolished to make way for newer more spacious buildings. As a result of my research interests and doctoral project, I was asked between November/December 2022 to be a part of the curation team for the Isa Town Museum. The data which was collected for this research from the different archives, although historical in nature, was quite novel as a collection because it came from various sources and included modes of data not only from the Ministry of Housing but across archives both within and from outside of Bahrain.

Because there was little curated or written on Isa Town, anything I found as a doctoral researcher or as a Ministry of Housing director was worthy and of value. Although I managed to identify and access data because of my government position, I did not feel like I was biased by the information already available within the ministry. Also, the data collected came from various sources, and I did not settle for what was easily available. In other words, my position within the ministry allowed me to be close to the data, but it was not the reason I was granted access to it. Furthermore, Isa Town was not technically a project of the Ministry of Housing. Indeed, its perceived success may have been a cause for the establishment of a Ministry of Housing for Bahrain and its people.

It is my position within the ruling family of Bahrain and my relationship with some public figures that was a bit trickier to address. In this project, I argue that it is my understanding of certain norms and values that provides a new understanding of the subject; it may allow for a deeper interpretation and study of the various layers and disciplines within this project. It is also perhaps my understanding of local customs and traditions that may provide a lens into the deeper meaning of rituals and state symbols. Maybe it is my experience within the ministry, my position outside of the technical engineering field, and my multidisciplinary background that allows me to connect information drawn from different fields, provide new interpretations, and allow for the study of various angles of this fascinating subject.

Image 3.4. Al Thawadi house interviews with residents of Isa Town, May 2023

Additionally, I believe my unique position contributed to the success of gaining access to a diverse cohort for the oral history interviews. The skill of communicating with Bahraini people from all walks of life and a love of oral history, which was passed to me from my father and his father before him, allowed for ease in conducting interviews with the cohort. The individuals were identified based on a snowballing methodology, and most were unknown to me before the start of the project. Of all the people I sought out, there were very few whom I did not manage to interview, mainly because of the health conditions of the proposed interviewee. All of those who accepted to be interviewed were happy to join and engaged in interviews even when they were unaware of their role in contributing to the Isa Town story. I did feel that my experience, position within the government, and family position gave me a sense of credibility to the cohort, which may have been somewhat expected.

What came as a surprise to me, however, was the extent to which people wanted to help and were willing to go above and beyond what I was asking for in guiding me towards people and places. I found the cohort genuinely open to my questions and interested in sharing details of their own personal lives and experiences. Even as a woman from a ruling family operating within a conservative environment, I was allowed access to male-dominated domains, such as the *majlis*, which illuminated key insights into the findings of this project. None of the people interviewed, especially those in Isa Town, thought that I might have any reservations about entering their most private domains and the recesses of their lives regardless of gender relations and norms within the Bahraini society. On the other hand, I also found women ready to participate and join. I note the case of the interviewee Moza Al Gobaisi, a current resident of Isa Town, as a useful example. Al Gobaisi, who wears the Islamic *niqab*, had no reservations about joining the Al Thawadi *majlis* interviews (see image 3.4) to participate in this research.

Image 3.5. A visit to the *majlis* of Ahmed Al Aradi (left), January 2024, and the *majlis* of Mubarak Al Maghribi, May 2023 (right).

The success of the oral history interview process led me to reflect on the welcoming nature of the cohort. I did not find it extremely difficult to locate people who would agree to participate. This situation led me to ask whether it was my position within the government or my position as a member of the ruling family in Bahrain which led them to welcome me. I mostly felt that people were happy to be given an opportunity to share their experiences. The people of Isa Town especially seemed keen to know why I was interested in their town and their lives there. I often had to ask myself about how I influenced the research and how 'situated' was my knowledge and findings, especially considering relevant studies that claim that all research is situated (Haraway, 1988). Upon further reflection, I agree with Altorki (1994) that it is my unique position within the family and experience within the Ministry of Housing which may have provided me with the foundation to take this research further and to pose questions that someone else would not know to ask, a matter which Altorki found in her own fieldwork in Saudi Arabia (Altorki, 1994). Furthermore, I believe that it was my position and experience that allowed all the interviewees to take me and the project seriously.

Conclusion

Documents and archives are as much about the people behind them, as well as the circumstances in which they exist and survive, as they are about what they contain. This chapter highlighted my methodological journey, and I addressed how I made various decisions and tackled numerous challenges. This research project shows how archival research can be done even when there are major constraints and challenges. Not having an accessible central government archive does not necessarily mean that there is no archival material. Additionally, the absence of government records on a subject does not exactly translate into a lack of data. Data can be photos, video recordings and newsreels, other forms of written texts from laws, news reports, art, caricatures, and many other forms of statements; they are all evidence and records that are worth exploring and studying even for qualitative and descriptive social science research and can complement as well as challenge oral history interviews.

Chapter 4 – The migration to Isa

Introduction

In the following three chapters, the empirical findings of this thesis will be presented in a triptych display. The central scene of the empirical findings will examine the move to the new township through the analysis of key spatial developments that had the largest impact on society and led to its social transformation. The subsequent chapters will examine the related aspects of how and why the new town was constructed through an examination of the administrative and political processes through which the Bahraini state introduced a Housing and Ownership Project to build a modern new town and what it was trying to achieve through them. The empirical findings are, therefore, presented first through a study of the spatial elements of the new town and its surroundings that contributed to the social transformation of Bahraini society within and beyond it. Then, I highlight the experience of the all-new society that emerged in Isa Town and members of the nearby communities, including details on how it affected them. I note how other key spatial features and visual displays of the new town, which were of political significance for the state, were used to promote a new image of the modern Bahraini state.

In this chapter, I show how the modernisation project was introduced through modern housing and the mainstreaming of modern facilities that not only impacted town residents but also affected communities elsewhere. I begin with an examination of the most personal domain, the housing units, which represent the main and most personal facility offered to citizens. I then move to the wider facilities and amenities, highlighting the role each played for the residents of the new town, the wider Bahraini community, and the modern Bahraini state. The first of the empirical chapters, therefore, addresses essentially how the families migrated to the new town, this transition, and its role in the creation of a new community/society in Isa Town. More importantly, I discuss the role the spatial project played in bringing people of various classes together and allowing them to interact in their most personal spaces, as well as how the new community was closely 'indoctrinated' towards modernisation – creating modern spaces for a new age.

The chapter starts with an overview of the township, followed by a study of the impact of migration on the new town. Modern housing units were a central feature of the new town and had the highest impact on those who moved there. Therefore, I explain the various types of housing units and their socioeconomic impact, showing how families had to be introduced to the organisation of modern living and the development of modern Bahraini society from within these modern dwellings. The houses alone were not the only contributors to this transformation – the creation of new forms of urban spaces within the Isa Town community was equally important in bringing people together. Furthermore, the schools and the road network played an equally significant role in bringing not only the people of the new town together but also played a larger and more significant role to

numerous communities from across Bahrain, people from town and village alike, and hence, I discuss each accordingly.

The township

> It was another world. A totally new world, like how America was a new world, we were a new world for the whole of Bahrain.[47]

To virtually all the families who migrated to the new town in the late 1960s and through the 1970s, the shift was life-changing The move was as much about the new, modern facilities as it was about how the migrating families experienced the new town and the role the spatial design played in interactions with fellow Bahraini citizens of many classes, which was unprecedented in the history of Bahrain. For many of them, it was the first time that they met Bahrainis from towns and villages other than their own. At the time, people across Bahrain were living in towns and villages with a combination of house typologies built from different materials (Gómez-Robles, 2022). Traditionally, towns included different types of dwellings, with the oldest forms of houses called *barastis* (Gómez-Robles, 2022) built from palm reed. The *barastis* were built with a surrounding palm reed fence delineating the plot and with small hut-like rooms to accommodate families within (Gómez-Robles, 2022). In the first half of the nineteenth century, stone masonry houses were being built in Muharraq (Gómez-Robles, 2022) as well as other towns across Bahrain, but they remained accessible to those who could afford them (Gómez-Robles, 2022). It is worth mentioning that one of the key features of a *barasti* house is its easy adaptability and mobility; the walls of the rooms made of palm reeds can be shifted to expand and create new spaces, and its owner can easily dismantle and relocate it elsewhere (Jackson, 2023). *Barasti* structures continued to be a part of the vernacular architecture in Bahrain, some being built separately for their cooling properties in the harsh summer months as well as within stone masonry houses. However, because they were not ideal in the cooler months, they became a concern for families who could not access any other form of housing. As can be seen in the photos of Um Al Hassam and East Riffa in the 1950s and 1960s (below), and especially that of East Riffa (below), stone masonry houses were usually found on the higher grounds denoting their significance surrounded by varying forms and sizes of dwellings spread from it, with *barasti* houses found farther from the elevated central milieu.

[47] Isa Al Muqahwi, Al Thawadi House Series Interviews, 2nd May 2023, 27th May 2023 (Al Thawadi et al., 2023).

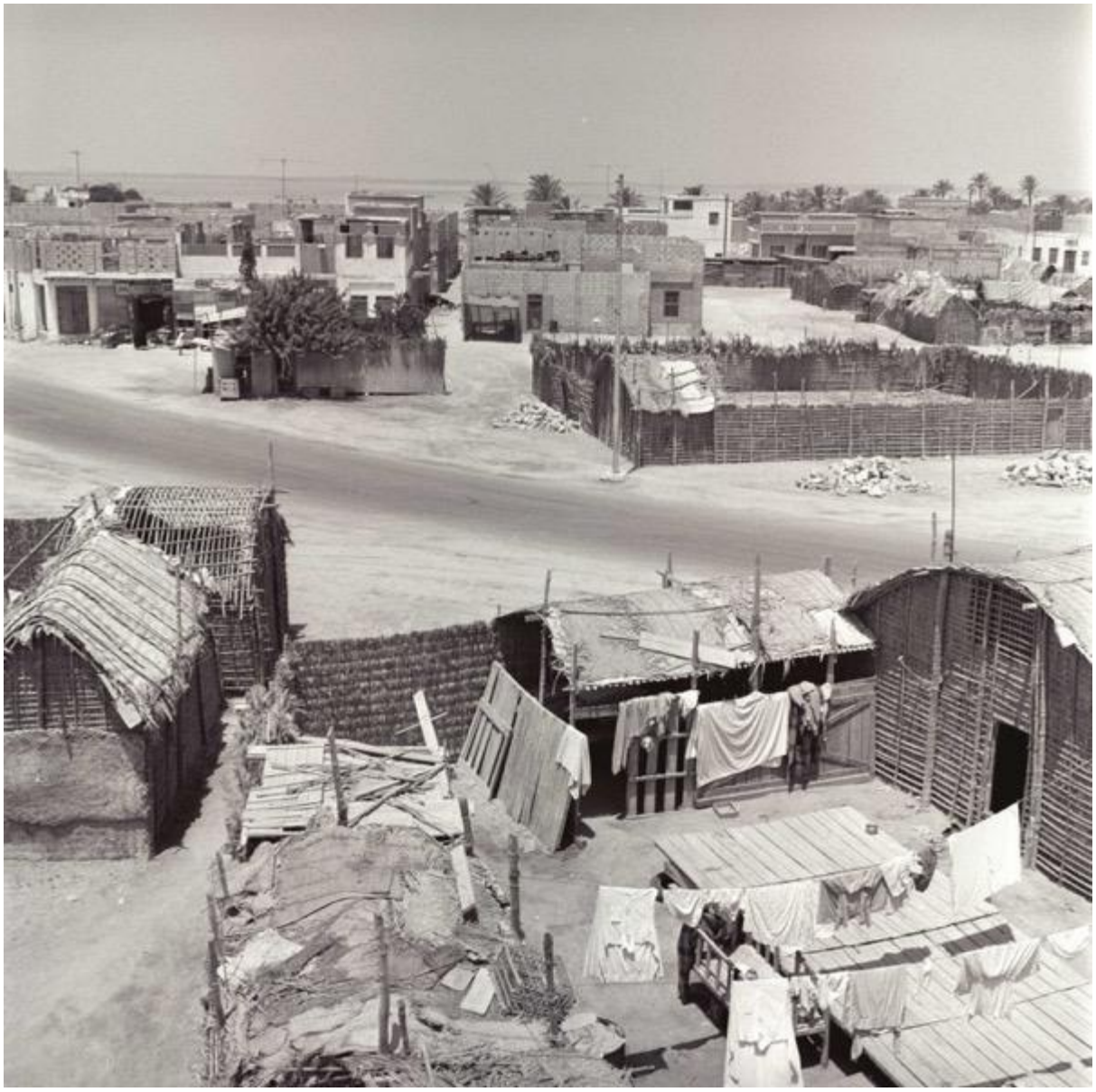

Image 4.1. Before the new town: *barasti* houses made of palm reeds in Um Al Hasam, circa 1960s. Source: Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan.

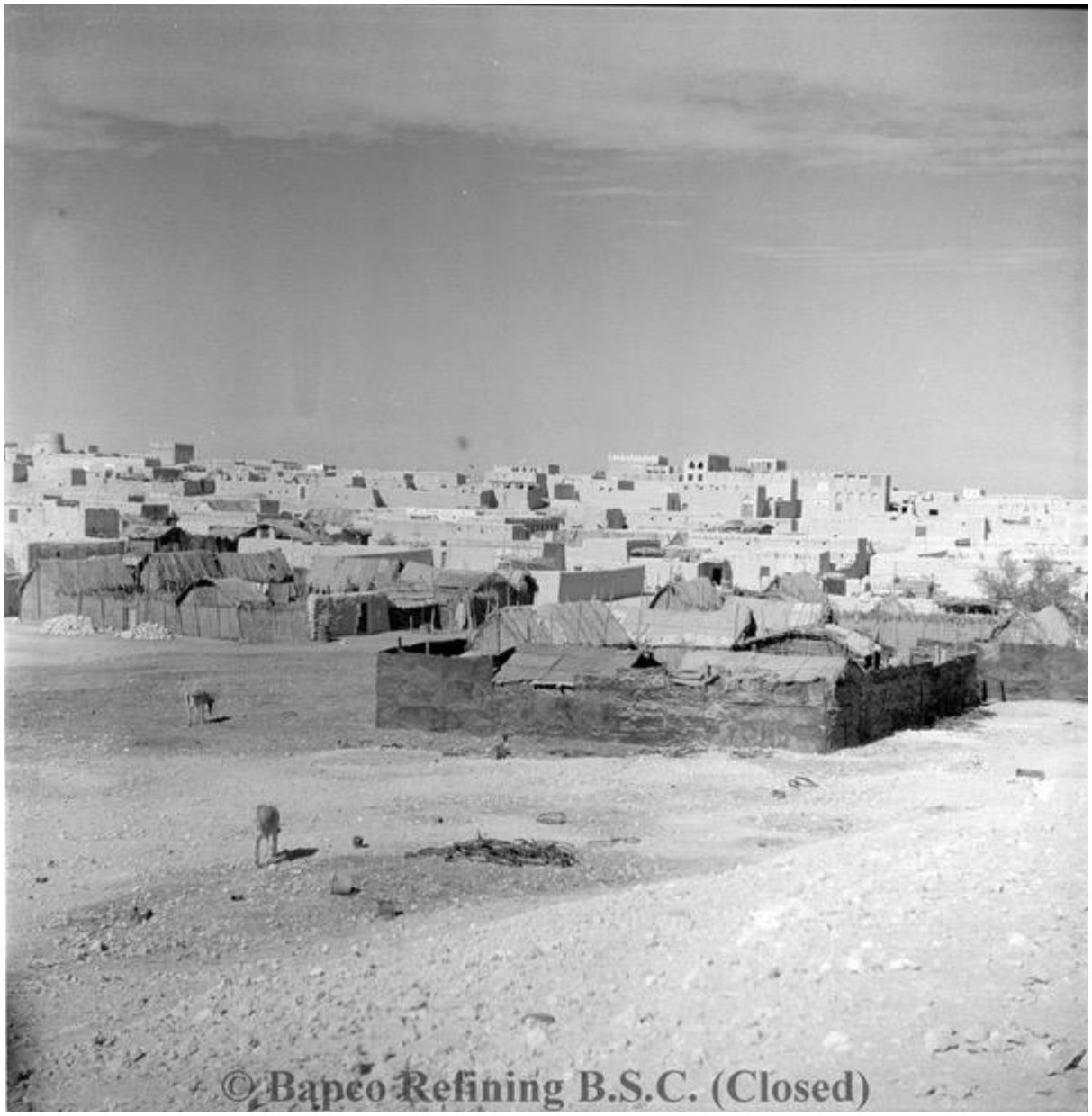

Image 4.2. Before the new town: East Riffa, January 1953. Source: BAPCO archives.

The spatial setup and offerings of the new town also aided in this interaction in various ways and on multiple levels. An examination of the various facilities that held social significance revealed that many aspects of the town contributed to the development of a modern image for Bahrain to be seen regionally and globally as a modern sovereign state. The tabula rasa of the area on which the new town was built provided ample opportunity to conceptualise a new town, unlike any other town across Bahrain, along with a variety of social facilities and amenities otherwise not found anywhere else in Bahrain.

As a new town, Isa Town offered numerous modern facilities such as multiple categories of housing units, as well as a more spacious urban layout and open spaces; there were also the wide dual carriageway streets, a town commercial centre, an Olympic stadium and other sports facilities, an equestrian club, a cinema, mosques, modern health

centres, schools, connections to major street networks, and new possibilities for expanded infrastructure and other social facilities. Additionally, social clubs such as the Isa Town Club were soon formed to support sports and cultural activities. The town slowly transformed into a thriving young place with an active society and community.

> Isa Town was built in an integrated way from its start: schools, health clinics, a police station, a library, a municipality, a stadium! Let us not forget the stadium, as the inauguration of Isa Town was in its stadium. Mosques – the person who planned Isa Town from that time had put in a Sunni Mosque and a Shia Mosque. They were (built) there at the same time and in exactly the same design.[48]

The township brought with it far more than just modern dwellings. As such, the town played an important role for communities across Bahrain in how it presented a stage for the state, which brought people from across Bahrain closer to one another and closer to the state. I examine the new town from the perspective of those who moved there to mark the nature of their experience and how modern living was mainstreamed to lower and middle-income Bahrainis, including inhabitants as well as those who used the facilities of the new town.

The migration to the new township and the 'shock of the new'[49]

The experience of migration to the new town by its first residents and what that meant for them to move into a modern housing unit is an integral part of the Isa Town story. Who were the families who moved, why did they choose to move, and more importantly, where did they come from, how did they acclimatise to their new surroundings, and how did they take it all in? Addressing the move to the new town is important to understand not only why and where the families moved but also what benefits or hardships, they faced with the decision to move to a new place. For example, most of the families who moved did not have any other alternative, and most of them lived crammed in one room in extended family homes. Nevertheless, they did not always welcome the transition from their hometowns.

The first settlers began to arrive in Isa Town as early as November 1967,[50] one whole year before its inauguration. It happened gradually: the first applicants started to be called by the Housing and Ownership Directorate as early as the 7th of August 1967,[51] which was announced in the Official Gazette. Fifty families who were selected were divided clearly into two columns according to where they came from: Muharraq, its surrounding towns, and Hidd in one column, and Manama and its surrounding towns and villages, including

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[48] Essam Abdulla Khalaf interview, 15th February 2023 (Khalaf, 2023).
[49] The title is borrowed from the title of Australian art critic Robert Hughes's book and BBC documentary which addressed the development of modern art.
[50] *The Islander*, Volume 28, No. 14, 8th November 1967; *Weekly Star*, Issue 45, Year 11, 8th November 1967, BAPCO Energies.
[51] 'Housing and Ownership Announcement', Official Gazette, 7th August 1967, State of Bahrain.

Sitra and Riffa, in the other column. However, the first settler was reported to be Abdulla Al Khatib of Muharraq. Mr Abdulla Al Khatib, also known as Abdulla Al Asam, arrived with his wife and young children. They resettled from the old northern town of Muharraq to have a new house all to themselves in Isa Town, which was built in the heart of Bahrain. All their belongings were put in a Morris Minor pickup truck, including a few old suitcases and various household usually found in old homes in Bahrain.

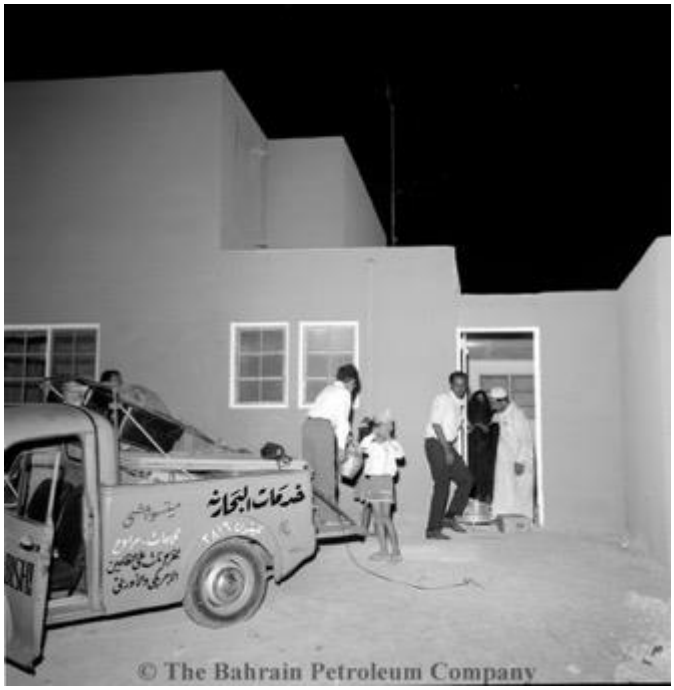

Image 4.3. The first family arrives: The family of Abdulla Al Khatib arrives in Isa Town, 1967. Source: BAPCO Energies.

A series of photos shot by the Bahrain Oil Company's (BAPCO) Public Relations Department, marking that moment, shows Mr Abdulla Al Khatib unloading various household items and belongings while his wife, covered in a black *abaya*, is standing inside the door. His young children, both boys and girls, were either watching or helping their father move their humble belongings into the house. Mr Abdulla Al Khatib was not the first to receive a house, but he is recorded as the first to arrive in the new town.[52] The first two months following their move, it is said that Mr Al Khatib and his family were without electricity, which was the reason many of the residents believed made him eligible to be recognised as the first resident at the inauguration of Isa Town, where he was given a golden commemorative key by the ruler, Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa.

In another photo taken by the BAPCO Public Relations Department as part of a series, Mr Al Khatib, now more formally dressed in his traditional *thobe* and *ghutra* (men's dress and headdress), sits on the floor reading a newspaper along with his children, some of whom also hold a notebook or a newspaper in their hands. The photo was taken for an

[52] From the Al Thawadi House Series Interviews, 2nd May 2023, 27th May 2023 (Al Thawadi et al., 2023).

announcement that was made that week in BAPCO's Arabic newspaper, announcing the start of the arrival of the first residents of the new town.

Image 4.4. Mr Al Khatib in the living room of his new house in Isa Town, 1967. Source: BAPCO Energies.

The following month, BAPCO engineer Hassan Al Aradi and his young children, Khadija, Amal, Salman, and Ahmed, were also featured in the newspaper, announcing his decision to live in Isa Town and move away from their original town of Ras Ruman (near the capital of Manama) to be close to his work at the BAPCO refinery in Sakhir.[53] A series of photos were also taken of Mr Al Aradi and his children outside his home planting, and another of the children playing on a see-saw, marking this occasion.

[53] *Weekly Star*, Issue 50, Year 11, 13th December 1967, BAPCO Energies.

Image 4.5. Mr Hassan Al Aradi in front of his new house in Isa Town, 1967. Source: BAPCO Energies.

The collection of photos taken of Mr Al Khatib and his family[54] and then of Mr Hassan Al Aradi and his family,[55] as well as the newspaper coverage of both,[56] confirms this important moment in Bahrain's history. The move not only marked the beginning of a new era for state-led housing initiatives but also the early development of new modern towns. To many Isa Town families, as confirmed by the children of both Mr Abdulla Al Khatib and Mr Hassan Al Aradi, who were part of my interview cohort,[57] it was not just a move into a much-announced, highly anticipated, long-awaited, and unprecedented new town – this was also a migration from the old to the new and modern. It was a migration out of crowded living conditions and an introduction to a new modern lifestyle, towards access to modern plumbing and electricity and an enclosed garden, the possibility of new opportunities and a chance to own a house for those who never had the opportunity, living independently as a nuclear family.

The new town allowed a man to have full authority over his house; his wife had full control of the house to live in it and invite in it whoever she pleased; the children would have their own space to play both within the house or in their garden, which they no longer had to share with cousins and extended family members. It did not matter if the house had two rooms (a living room and a bedroom), three rooms (a living room and two bedrooms), or four rooms (a living room and three bedrooms). It was all theirs; it was their very own house. Furthermore, the fact that all the houses were designed with the possibility for enlargement and expansion was something that brought hope and possibilities for the future of these families.

> In Manama, houses were very inconvenient. Two or three families crammed in one house. How do they live? I mean, Isa Town offered space, a kind of space for families to expand. While it is true the rent instalments were at times high for some people, people managed for space.[58]

According to the 1962 decree regarding the establishment of the Housing and Ownership Project and the following announcements for the new town, the new project introduced a new modality – either ownership of government-built housing to those who met the eligibility criteria or rented housing to those who did not meet the criteria (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962). Therefore, the project was designed with the promise of ownership and homes to be transferred to ownership once

[54] *Weekly Star*, Issue 45, Year 11, 8th November 1967, BAPCO Energies.
[55] *Weekly Star*, Issue 50, Year 11, 13th December 1967, BAPCO Energies.
[56] *Weekly Star*, Issue 45, Year 11, 8th November 1967; Weekly Star, Issue 50, Year 11, 13th December 1967, BAPCO Energies.
[57] Interview with the family of Abdulla Al Khatib, 17th June 2023 (Al Asmi et al., 2023); Interview with Ahmed Hassan Al Aradi, Asma the Seamstress House Interview Series, 20th and 21st January 2024 (Al Aradi et al., 2024).
[58] Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi interview, 17th and 24th December 2023 (Baqer Bin Radhi, 2023).

the beneficiary paid the cost of house construction but not the cost of land, which was considered a gift from the ruler of Bahrain. There was more than one option to make this payment: either to pay it outright (without interest) or via monthly instalments (called rent) over a period of twenty years, incurring a 3.5% interest rate on the cost of the house construction.[59] Furthermore, if the family chose to abandon the house at any point before they fully owned it, i.e. before completing the full payment of the cost of construction, whatever they paid would be considered a rent payment.[60]

However, the ownership beneficiary would also own the land unless a national treasure such as oil or antiquities were found there, just not the rights to what was found below it. Ownership was a significant incentive for many of the families who had never owned a house and stood to do so now by virtue of this project. Mr Essam Abdulla Khalaf, a former resident of the town, explains:

> No, we were in a rented house in the Al Hamam neighbourhood of Manama; that is why we moved. The big incentive was the possibility of owning our own home because it was like a rent-to-own scheme, even if the rent was very little at that time.[61]

Mr Khalaf's father came to live in the new town along with his Iraqi wife and children because they did not previously own a house, seeing this as a lucrative opportunity:

> Isa Town was the first place where the right to ownership was implemented for a housing project in Bahrain. And Isa Town was not only the first housing project, but it was the first social housing project. What I know is that there were a few houses built in Muharraq and Manama, but there had been nothing of this scale.[62]

In the early years, the application and move to Isa Town was easy; anyone who applied obtained a house quickly, given that he met the conditions stipulated in Decree 2 Finance Regarding the Establishment of the Housing and Ownership Project.[63]

> But when we first went there every day, there was a new family from somewhere coming to live in a new house. Every day, there were new people coming in. When my dad went, they told him to choose any house he wanted, and whichever house he liked, he could choose. There was nothing like what is happening now. There was nothing which would prevent families from choosing the specific house they wanted.[64]

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[59] *Weekly Star*, Issue 45, Year 11, 8th November 1967, BAPCO Energies.
[60] *Weekly Star*, Issue 45, Year 11, 8th November 1967, BAPCO Energies; Ownership Agreement: Explanatory Note, Department of Housing and Ownership, October 1967 (Government of Bahrain, 1967).
[61] Essam Abdulla Khalaf interview, 15th February 2023 (Khalaf, 2023).
[62] Essam Abdulla Khalaf interview, 15th February 2023 (Khalaf, 2023).
[63] Bibi Baqer bin Radhi, From Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi interview, 17th & 24th December 2023 (Bin Radhi, 2023).
[64] Essam Abdulla Khalaf interview, 15th February 2023 (Khalaf, 2023).

Slowly, more and more families came to live in the new town with all of its benefits, new rights, and amenities, which some found appealing, while others found it more challenging. Some families enjoyed their new life in a completely new environment, but others found it difficult to adjust to this 'new world' with its new sounds, new rules, and new conditions.[65] This 'new world', as some described, also became the best example of coexistence and a resilient community within a growing nation. Included in a description of the township and its amenities was the idea that the freedom to choose meant that people were 'spoiled' relative to how things are run today, almost sixty years later. It also indicates how the perception of government-led housing has changed over the years. At times, it did not matter that five or six families were living in crowded conditions in Muharraq and Manama or even in unsanitary conditions in the villages. It was difficult to convince people to move to Isa Town for many reasons. Though they may gain the chance of owning a house for single-family occupancy, they were also giving up a way of life which they were used to, including proximity to the workplace, family and kin, the wider social network and even access to shops and markets for the most basic daily household consumables:

> In the beginning, there was an aversion to living in Isa Town, and people were leaving, and they would take away all their belongings and leave the town, especially since people's financial circumstances at the time were difficult, very difficult. When you look at the Asbestos houses at 6.2 Bahraini Dinar (BD), families were unable to even pay for them. We used to struggle to make them pay that, and they were excused because there was no great industry, jobs were scarce, and life was difficult in those days in the 1960s it was very difficult.[66]

Although Isa Town was built near a main and important highway, the Shaikh Salman highway, which connected Manama to the Riffa and the refinery, the road network was yet to be developed into what it would eventually become. Most of those who moved in the late 1960s and early 1970s were families with limited incomes; therefore, not every family had a car. This made transportation in the early years challenging for the inhabitants of the new town and a deterrent to individuals whose jobs were in Muharraq and Manama and who may have had some access to housing in the main cities. In an interview with former Isa Town resident and Isa Town Office head of department, Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi describes the first residents of Isa Towns as 'martyrs' for what they had to give up to own a house in Isa Town even though the living conditions in Manama were not comfortable with more than four or families to a large house:

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[65] Isa Al Moqahwi, From the Al Thawadi House Series Interviews, 2nd May 2023, 27th May 2023 (Al Thawadi et al., 2023).

[66] Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi interview, 17th & 24th December 2023 (Baqer Bin Radhi, 2023).

> There were very inconvenient living conditions; what were we to do? So, we came here. I mean, let me tell you a painful story. When my father left Manama to come here, for someone to go to his work in Manama, he had to take a car and reach Manama from Isa Town; it took us maybe 4–5 hours, and there was no one to take you back and forth. At the end of the day, we used to stand near Hotat Abul (the Land of Abul) and signal for passing cars to take us back home to Isa Town.[67]

However, the hardships of living in the new town, which drove some people away, were also the only option for the most desperate families who otherwise had nowhere to go. Tales of *jinns* and ghosts circulated widely, and people confirmed hearing new and unfamiliar sounds at various times of the day. As a young mother and wife, Fawzia Al Shino even recalls that she believed these stories to be true when she could not find her husband in the house, although his shoes, wallet, and clothes were still there. She was convinced that her husband was taken by ghosts, raising the alarm in her neighbourhood and starting a search party, asking the *jinns* to bring back her husband. However, her husband was only taking a nap on the breezy roof, which was also used for sleeping.[68] As the search team gathered around his sleeping form on the roof, she realised that she made up a story from the gossip on *jinns* circulating around the new town.

The stories of ghosts were shared both by residents and family members who wanted to discourage their kin from migrating to the new town. Some truly believed the rumours and abandoned the new houses, but many others argued that it was the sound of open spaces and wind on new construction materials such as glass, galvanised metal, and simply a newer design of houses closer to the street.[69] Also, families were not used to the ample space the new units provided. After having left homes that were restricted to single rooms, the variety of new spaces was both a luxury and an adjustment.[70]

The housing units

What exactly were the houses provided in the project, and on what basis were they distributed to families who came to live in the new town of Isa? In the following section, I discuss the first three models, providing a general description of the dwelling units in terms of their categories and sizes. I follow that with firsthand accounts from those who lived in them on how families moved and adapted to their new space. I show what it meant to many of these families to obtain a house in Isa Town, regardless of its size.

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[67] Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi interview, 17th & 24th December 2023 (Baqer Bin Radhi, 2023).
[68] Fawzia Mohamed Isa Al Shino & Mahmood Khalifa Al bin Khalil interview, 30th May 2023 (Al Shino and Al Bin Khalil, 2023).
[69] Mohammed Al Thawadi, in Interview with Waleed Al Thawadi, Mohammed Al Thawadi, Moza Al Gobaisi, Ahmed Al Ruwaila and Isa Al Mugahwi, 2nd May, 2023 & 27th May 2023 (Al Thawadi et al., 2023).
[70] Interview with Samira Yousif Al Mehzaa, 22nd June 2023 (Al Mehzaa, 2023), Fawzia Mohamed Isa Al Shino & Mahmood Khalifa Al bin Khalil interview, 30th May 2023 (Rasheed, 2023).

Isa Town, in its first phases as per the designs provided by British construction firm George Wimpey, Ltd., offered three main house categories with a total of five types. The house categories were defined by room numbers as follows[71]:

- First Category: Allocated to families with limited income and had two rooms (One Bedroom and a Main Room)
- Second Category: Allocated to middle-income families and had three rooms (Two Bedrooms and one Main Room)
- Third Category: Allocate to above middle-income families and had four rooms (Three Bedrooms and one Main Room)[72]

The biggest differentiating factor among the various typologies, apart from construction cost and, subsequently, cost to citizens, was the size of the built area of the various dwellings.

	Land Size	Total Building area	Number of Floors	First Floor Built Area	Second Floor Built Area
First Category	187.9 m^2	92 m^2	1	92 m^2	-
Second Category	214 m^2	236 m^2	2	187 m^2	47 m^2
Third Category	325 m^2	237 m^2	2	114 m^2	93 m^2

Table 4.1. Housing Unit Size Comparison Chart[73]Source: Ministry of Housing Publication *وزارة الإسكان مسيرة الإنجاز و العطاء*, December 1993, Ministry of Housing (Ministry of Housing, 1993).

All housing units were designed with space for expansion. The construction costs of the houses ranged from 2400 BD to BD 5280[74] (between 1800 to 4000 GBP Pounds and 5000 to 11,000 USD in 1967 exchange rates), not accounting for the price of the land on which the housing unit is built, which is a gift[75] from the Amir, Shaikh Isa.[76] Within those categories, there were two types of homes for the first two categories (A) and (B). This is

[71] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 190, November 1967, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[72] There was a fourth category of houses that were built later in a limited number and had five rooms (four bedrooms and one main room), but since these were only built in a very limited number and as a special category they were not mentioned in the announcements. They were mentioned in an interview with Ahmed Abdulaziz Al Khayyat, 9th April 2023 (Al Khayyat, 2023).
[73] Ministry of Housing, 'وزارة الإسكان مسيرة الإنجاز و العطاء', December 1993, Ministry of Housing.
[74] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 202, November 1968, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[75] Claims of ownership through 'gift declarations' or *hiba* by the ruler are customs inherited from the 'feudal-tribal estate system' in which land which was 'confiscated' or 'transferred' to the ruler was then used to grant them to those who supported them (Khuri, 1980, pp. 41–43) and (Khuri, 1980, pp. 51–53). The feudal-tribal estate practices were abolished through what was called as 'colonial intervention' in favour of modern bureaucratic practices, for more see Khuri (1980) pp. 85–108.
[76] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 155, December 1964, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.

indicated by a difference in the construction cost of the housing unit and is reflected in the monthly rent amount. In November 1967, the month the first residents started to arrive in the new town, the final pricing and rent costs for all the houses[77] were announced in *Huna Al Bahrain*, Bahrain's first government-issued monthly magazine,[78] as follows[79]:

- First category houses (low-income families): Type (A) construction cost at 2400 BD and monthly rent of 10 BD for 15–20 years, Type (B) construction cost at 2640 BD and monthly rent of 11 BD.
- Second category houses (middle-income families): Type (A) construction cost at 3720 BD and a monthly rent of 15.5 BD for 15– 20 years, Type (B) construction cost at 3960 BD and a monthly rent of 16.5 BD.
- Third category houses (higher-income families): construction cost at 5280 and a monthly rent of 22 BD (it is unclear if this housing category had a second type).

This indicates that the housing categories were designed to be distributed according to monthly income and not necessarily family size. Mr Essam Khalaf, who recalls the rent of their second category three-bedroom home in Isa Town to be at 12.7BD, recalls:

> We were four girls and four boys, and my mother and father – so we were ten in total. And we wanted the bigger house with four bedrooms, but they allocated a three-bedroom house which was smaller than our need. I mean, compared to the rented house we had in Manama, the three-bedroom was better and more spacious, but still, my dad thought he wanted the bigger house with four bedrooms because there were two bedrooms, three bedrooms, and four bedrooms in the first phase. So, the four-bedroom was the highest category. My father, may Allah rest his soul, went to them at the Isa Town Office and requested the four-bedroom house, but they said no. He asked why, and they said it was because his salary was not enough. The rent for the bigger houses was 16.5 Bahraini Dinar. My father was a clerk at Mina Salman (Salman Port).[80]

Mr Khalaf recalls his father's salary at the time to be around 37 Bahraini Dinars per month, and the basic calculation was that the rent amount should not exceed one-third of a person's monthly salary.[81] The transparency of the construction costs and the

[77] There were variations in the construction costs and the monthly rent prices between the various magazine editions and between what was published in the government-issued magazine and what various interviewees mentioned. This project uses the later announcement and published figures in *Huna Al Bahrain*, assessing them as the most accurate. There is a possibility that the numbers listed in the first editions might be correct, but they were later revised to reflect actual costs. Furthermore, there might be some truth to what was shared in the oral history interviews because, without an actual record of the agreements, it is difficult to ascertain the numbers beyond what was officially announced and published.
[78] *Huna Al Bahrain* was a monthly magazine issued by Bahrain's Department of Information Affairs Between the years 1957 and 2011.
[79] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 190, November 1967, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[80] Essam Abdulla Khalaf interview, 15th February 2023, Bahrain (Khalaf, 2023).
[81] Essam Abdulla Khalaf interview, 15th February 2023, Bahrain (Khalaf, 2023).

appropriate monthly rent led to a more realistic expectation and demand for the houses, even for those who may have had access to them as employees in the Isa Town Office. In an interview that included a husband-and-wife[82] duo, the wife stressed that as an employee at the Isa Town Office, her husband knew which houses were available, but he still did not choose a bigger house:

> I told him to let us take a bigger house – maybe in the future you can build a *majlis*, the children would grow, and they would want to expand. … No, he said, only this house. But why this? I do not know; they tried and then gave up on him. Abdul Hai did not do anything less; he spoke to Mubarak and told him many times to change the house, but Mubarak refused because he had built an extra room. Because since we moved into the house, Mubarak built an extra room upstairs.[83]

While Mubarak was not as forthcoming about his reasons for not choosing the bigger house beyond saying that he had already invested in building an extra room, given his job and his role within the office, the reason may have been linked to his monthly income. Nevertheless, there were those who were able, under certain rules, to obtain one of the larger houses despite their income, such as Mr Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed, Head of Distributions at the Isa Town Office:

> When I went to Yousif Al Shirawi, they had allocated a house with three rooms for me because my salary was low. And I went to Yousif Al Shirawi, and I explained my case to him. He exclaimed that they could not give me the bigger house. I told him I needed it because I would bring my mother, father, my children, and my unmarried sisters to come and live with me and my wife. Otherwise, where will they live? Because of that, he gave me a bigger house opposite the petrol station.[84]

Mr Abdul Hai further explains that although almost half of his salary went to rent, his father helped him:

> More than half of it (my salary) goes to the house. But my father, may Allah rest his soul in mercy – he used to tell me you do not need to worry about household shopping and living expenses. Just pay the rent and electricity, and I will pay the rest. If I were on my own, I would not be able to have afforded the house myself.[85]

This statement indicates that there may have been some kind of special consideration observed for families beyond the conditions stipulated in Decree 2 Finance of 1962 regarding the establishment of the Housing and Ownership Project. At the town's inception, the manner in which people were allowed to choose their homes within the

[82] Mubarak Abdulla Al Maghribi interview, 20th December 2023, Bahrain (Al Maghribi, 2023).
[83] Fatima Khalil, wife of Mubarak Al Maghribi, from Mubarak Abdulla Al Maghribi interview, 20th December 2023(b), Bahrain (Al Maghribi, 2023).
[84] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, 22nd January 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).
[85] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, 22nd January 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).

categories is also worth noting. People were given a choice between a few houses, and they would choose the one they liked the most. Furthermore, if they had friends or family members whom they would like to reside next to, considerations were made for that.[86]

> I had a board with all the keys to the housing units hanging along with the house number. In the past, they would give the person the key to see and choose the house he wants. We did not have a lottery numbering system for the housing allocation. There was no such thing. You give him a box with all the keys accompanied by the office boy, and you would tell him to choose the house he wants. He would come back and say this is the house I want; this is its number. Are you sure we would say? Go and see it and come back. We would send the office boy with him with a box full of house keys, let him go and see which house he wants. Whichever house he wants, let him choose it. He would see three to four houses with the office boy, and they would go around the area with the appropriate house.[87]

This choice and freedom to choose your neighbours if necessary was an important feature in Isa Town, especially to those who did have friends and family they wanted to live nearby:

> When people came with their family, their brothers, uncles, etc, and want to live next to each other, those people – we would help them. He and his son and his cousin – we allow them to stay next to each other.[88]

This approach, more than anything, allowed for a close-knit community among relatives and a sense of camaraderie and acceptance for those who were not related. The freedom to choose their house, even though it may have been the smaller unit and within a defined category, is something that was highlighted throughout our interviews, whether they were with the former Isa Town Office staff or the residents of the town.

> People were really spoiled in those days; whichever one he liked of the ten houses, he would take and return the rest of the keys back. Sometimes, they would even return all ten keys, saying that they did not like any of them. The madam (wife) has advised that we are not leaving Muharraq or Manama, and then they will change their minds.[89]

In the following section, I discuss how the new housing units were not only introduced to the society, which was standing to live in them, but they also sought through various initiatives to teach residents how to use and redefine the new living space for themselves

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[86] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, 22nd January 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024), Mubarak Abdulla Al Maghribi interview, 20th December 2023 (Al Maghribi, 2023), Bahrain & Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi interview, 17th & 24th December 2023 (Baqer Bin Radhi, 2023).
[87] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, 22nd January 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).
[88] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, 22nd January 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).
[89] Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi interview, 17th & 24th December 2023 (Baqer Bin Radhi, 2023).

and their families. I also show how this new space provided a view of a 'modern' Bahraini family.

The model house of Isa

Image 4.6. The official tour of the model house, April 1968. Source: BAPCO Energies.

In April 1968, a few months after the first families moved to their new homes in Isa Town, the Government of Bahrain's magazine, *Huna Al Bahrain*, published a news item titled: 'The Model House in Isa Town'.[90] The event, which showcases a model house staged with modern furniture to host a tea party for the women of Isa Town, was attended by the highest government authority and the authority in charge of the development of Isa Town, the President of the Government of Bahrain's Administrative Council and Chief of Government Finance. Through additional photos taken for the occasion by BAPCO's photographers, he is seen touring the house guided by Mrs Salwa Al Umran, the Deputy President and Secretary of the Women's Association. The model house was prepared to teach the ladies of Isa Town how to arrange, organise, and maintain their new house.[91] The date was 14th March 1968, only four months after the first residents of Isa Town began to arrive. Many more would come over the next months and, indeed, the following years to this entirely new place, the announcement read:

> The Women's Association also held a tea party on the afternoon of 16th March, inviting the women of Isa Town to learn more about how to organise a model home.[92]

[90] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 195, April 1968, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[91] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 195, April 1968, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[92] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 195, April 1968, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.

This curiously should have come as no surprise to the residents of Isa Town, as the homeowners were all given a memo along with the contract they signed to accept their new residences. It ended with a statement reminding the future residents that they were going to be some of the first to reside in this new town, encouraging them to be pioneers in preserving order, which was identified as an important characteristic of a good and honest citizen:

> You will be one of the first to live in the town, so be a pioneer in the maintenance of order, the most important quality of an honest citizen.[93]

Therefore, the event organised by the Women's Association was designed to strengthen the argument of the nature of government intention and involvement towards a gradual move from the old to the new. In inspiring families to create model homes, the government encouraged them to leave far behind the bursting messes and unsanitary conditions of the often old, overcrowded houses they left behind. However, the government's support of the Women's Association in organising such an event and making available a house for display purposes also shows the extent of its involvement in the redesign of citizens' private spaces. That is not to say that families were in any way forced to adopt similar arrangements, but since these homes were fundamentally and typologically different from traditionally built homes, families had to learn how to adapt to this new space and be able to live in it.

[93] مذكرة عقد الإسكان، دائرة الإسكان والتمليك، حكومة البحرين.
((Government of Bahrain, 1967)

Image 4.7. The official tour of the model house, April 1968. Source: BAPCO Energies.

A series of photos found in the BAPCO archives show how the model house was arranged: modern furniture and a mix of both modern and traditional household items are installed in the various rooms according to their use and function. On display in the different rooms, along with the modern household items, is a fully equipped kitchen 'arranged' with pots and pans: a little of the old and a lot of the new to show how the small space could be organised with the use of shelves. Above one of the photos chosen for *Huna Al Bahrain*, the magazine features text that says: 'The kitchen has been beautifully arranged'.[94] The creation of modern images of the spaces within the Isa Town house and advice on how to arrange them were important. The Bahraini families who moved to Isa Town were previously allocated much smaller spaces (often limited to single rooms) within larger households and were generally familiar with different arrangements of communal living spaces (Al Mehzaa, 2023; Baqer Bin Radhi, 2023; Rajab, 2023).

In another set of BAPCO photos taken for the occasion, other rooms are seen to be furnished with modern baby bassinettes along with a portable basin for the baby's bath displayed with large placards carrying advice for the mothers on how to care for their babies and the ideal bath times. The placards, which were published by the Government of Bahrain's Directorate of Public Health, were placed around the bath with very specific

[94] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 195, April 1968, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain

instructions on ideal bath times between 10 am and noon and before his feeding, not after. Below is an artist's rendition of a woman immersing her elbow in the water basin. It says to make sure that the water is close to body temperature before putting the baby in and to keep the baby's clothes, which should be weather-appropriate and big enough to not hinder the baby's movement, within close reach. Finally, the Isa Town mother is taught how to dry her baby well and apply powder to avoid overheating and infections with a powder bottle and some modern toiletries in a clear display above the placard. In the bedroom and above a mosquito-net-covered bassinet, another poster warns mothers to protect their babies from diseases carried by insects by always covering their cribs with a mosquito net. Other rooms and bedrooms are arranged with double spring beds, sofa chairs, and a small dining table with a single chair in front of the garden.

Image 4.8. Scenes from the kitchen and dining table of the model house, April 1968. Source: BAPCO Energies.

Image 4.9. Instructions for the housewife from the model house event. April 1968. Source: BAPCO Energies.

A few days following the official visit, an afternoon tea party was organised by the Women's Association, inviting the ladies of Isa Town to view the means by which a model house may be organised.[95] All of this reveals how homes in Isa Town were not just seen as a housing solution for those leaving overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions; they were also meant to introduce modern and sanitary living conditions. Various organisations were involved in defining how this modern space should be organised and best used, as opposed to this being determined by personal choice or with respect to local customs. Although families were given a set of keys to housing units of a predetermined housing category to choose from,[96] therefore implicating a sense of choice, not much about the design of the house addressed the personal needs of families, nor was it a reflection of the much-revered local design and typology of Bahraini architecture seen in the old towns and cities of Muharraq, Manama, Riffa, and elsewhere, and which evolved over decades and generations. All of this is significant not only in the way it changed established typologies and design aesthetics but in how, through government intervention in the type of family living arrangements, it was made possible for families to become slowly independent of their previous extended living arrangements. Therefore, organised tea parties were a comforting and reassuring necessity for previously dependent wives and young mothers who were now going to become independent homeowners who would no longer have their mothers within easy reach to advise them on how best to care for their homes and children. However, the Women's Society stepped in not so much to teach the women of Isa Town a bit of the old and true but to bring forward to them a completely new way of life they had not seen or experienced before to present them with a new face for modernity, in their elegant Western-inspired two-piece skirt suits, Bahraini women depicted an image of modernity and how to bring it to their own homes and to their own families.

Through this, we see how a house in the new town, Isa Town, regardless of size and the social class of its inhabitants, is also introduced as an aspect of social mobility and transformation – even at the most individual, intimate, and personal levels:

> We were happy because we felt independent and we got a spacious place; we had our freedom, and we could live with our mother and father without any control, without any interference from the grandfather or grandmother or uncles. It was as if we were in a constricted place that expanded, and we felt better and freer. You know, my father's house was not that old, but it was a two-story house with my grandparents and my uncles upstairs, and each son's wife had a room, and we had a shared kitchen and bathroom. But the new house was different, we felt it was

[95] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 195, April 1968, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[96] Interview with Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed, 22nd January 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).

> bigger, we were more comfortable – I mean there were no restrictions, there was no do not do this or that. We felt more independent and autonomous.[97]

In addition to showcasing a model house, there was also a need to orient families towards a different life than the ones they came from. This more independent way of life became necessary as families needed to find a balance between the offerings of the emerging new state, in the form of a vision for better living conditions, as portrayed in a new housing project, the new industries created by that state to ameliorate livelihoods and increase standards of living, and their own need and sense of mobility. Houses, despite their multiple categories, were described as modern and fully equipped with the necessities of modern life.[98] The terminology was not only published in printed material such as *Huna Al Bahrain* and the newspapers of BAPCO, which echoed the tone, but was first used in the speeches at inaugurations[99] and ownership distribution celebrations, which were prominent during the first years of Shaikh Isa's reign.

New Bahraini society and the modern house

The idea of the model town, the model house, and – ultimately – a model society was being spun through concrete, spatial development and a centrally dominated political narrative considering the scarcity and inconsistency of any other form of private or independent press. The fascination with the new town was not lessened in any way in its early years, as indicated by the scale and magnitude of the BAPCO photos and the related newspaper coverage. Each milestone regarding the houses and the new town was captured and recorded, which leaves us with photographic images of life in the early years of Isa Town, although all of them seem to be staged. Furthermore, certain regional and international magazines seem to have picked a similar narrative where images of real life in the new town are depicted, and residents are interviewed about their lives in these new spaces. These images are often embellished and staged to represent an imagined idea of a 'model', 'new', or 'modern' family. Therefore, a taxi driver, Mr Abdulla Al Khatib, is seen reading a paper surrounded by his children while sitting on the floor. Mr Salman Majid Al Dallal, a schoolteacher, principal, and an active member of Isa Town's Theatre Group, is photographed with his wife, Aziza, and three boys in a staged living room scene with Salman reading a book, the wife knitting/sewing, and their three boys playing chess.[100] Beside the photo, a caption reads:

> A new society has started forming in Isa Town. It is a society which lives in a modernly planned town four and a half miles from the crowded capital of

[97] Interview with Samira Yousif Al Mehzaa, 22nd June 2023 (Al Mehzaa, 2023).
[98] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 144, January 1964, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[99] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 144, January 1964, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[100] *Al Arabi Magazine*, Volume 141, August 1970, Kuwait. https://archive.alsharekh.org/, accessed: July 4th 2025

Manama. The population of Isa Town reached 9,000 residents living in 1150 houses.[101]

In the magazine report of *Al Arabi Magazine* of August 1970, titled: 'Bahrain: In the Shadow of Independence and Freedom', multiple facets of Bahrain's modern development include the newly acknowledged independence of Bahrain and its full sovereignty from Iran.

Aziza 'Um Osama', wife of Mr Salman Majid Al Dallal, recalls how they did not really have much in terms of modern or fancy furniture. The creative magazine crew amassed what they had in belongings: a couple of armchairs, some side tables, a Persian carpet, a vase, a hookah, a television set, and a chess game and organised the family around these belongings in their Isa Town home to construct the image of the modern Bahraini family in light of freedom from the foreign neighbouring threat represented by Iran.[102]

Image 4.10. The Al Dallal Family staging a living room scene in Isa Town for *Al Arabi Magazine*, August 1970. Source: *Al Arabi Magazine*.

[101] *Al Arabi Magazine*, Volume 141, August 1970, Kuwait. https://archive.alsharekh.org/, accessed: July 4th 2025

[102] Interview with the family of Salman Majid Al Dalal, 25th June 2023 (Al Dallal et al., 2023).

Image 4.11. Gas for Isa Town: An Isa Town resident stands in front of a stove tasting the food after the town has received gas, January 1968. Source: BAPCO Energies.

Social progression and modernity were expressed not only through visual glimpses into the lives of those marking events in history, but they were also captured through the instalments of modern conveniences such as connection to electrical grids, as shown by the televisions in the houses and marking the arrival of natural gas into the new homes:

> We moved, and as you say, our financial life was poor – we went without anything to take with us. I had a brother from my mother; he graduated from high school and worked at Al Zayani company, and slowly by slowly, at one time, he got us a television, then he bought us a refrigerator, and the next time, he bought something else, you know the simple poor life, where we were on the mat, and we slept on the roof there were no air conditioners. We would sleep on the roof.[103]

Although photos of women in private settings may not have been common, BAPCO, as an oil and gas company, provides us with various staged glimpses into what those houses offered in modern conveniences, which made them no less significant. For the first time, single families had ample space to call their own – a space which could potentially accommodate the modern conveniences and needs of modern life, such as sanitary

[103] Interview with Samira Yousif Al Mehzaa, 22nd June 2023 (Al Mehzaa, 2023).

facilities connected to water, gas and electricity – conveniences of modern life which were otherwise inconsistently found in other areas and accessible to those who were able to afford their installation in old and new dwellings. The installation of these conveniences was clearly recorded and announced. In photos from BAPCO, dated to January 1968, a housewife stands smiling before the camera in a printed Western-inspired shift dress in front of a modern stove and oven in an otherwise sparsely furnished kitchen. BAPCO's records title the photo 'Cooking Gas for Isa Town Houses'. While this is now a common feature in all households, the first families who moved to Isa Town were said to have had to live with no electricity in the first few months of their move.[104] Thus, the photos indicated the momentous event in the lives of those who went to the new town and were previously used to other external gas and heating appliances. The focus of attention in the photo is the clean modern kitchen units, the oil stain on the concrete floor did not matter as much; the families were connected to something that clearly signified a modern lifestyle.

Families in Isa Town were happy to participate in the creation of this image of the modern Bahraini family, adding their own interpretations of what constituted modernity. As seen in another photo, which shows the whole family inside an Isa Town house, including the women, we are shown a scene of a family in what as if they are caught mid-action, setting a scene of a modern Bahraini family. A family of eleven people, including an older woman, a younger woman sewing on a sewing machine, a television in the background, modern furnishings, a Persian carpet, a new tea set in front of a little girl, and eight other children caught in various modes of activity, some holding books behind them, all of this signifying the important time in Bahrain's history where access to education and healthcare services meant bigger families and more educated members in a functional society.

[104] Interview with the Family of Abdulla Al Khatib, 17th June 2023 (Al Asmi et al., 2023), AlThawadi House Interviews, 2nd May 2023, 27th Many 2023 (Al Thawadi et al., 2023).

Image 4.12. A newly 'settled' family in Isa Town, January 1968. Source: BAPCO Energies.

A model house in the new town meant many things to different people. The idea of the ownership of the whole house remains the most prominent of the ideas associated with a model house, but many also associated them with projecting a certain family image, the combination of both fine bone china still fresh out of a box, next to traditional glass, '*istikana*' on a Persian carpet and all the young children dressed in their best Western clothes, three of them holding books while one of them drinks red tea, a little boy in the front with a cheeky smile lays a cat across his lap. The grandmother is trying to stand, and the father is trying to fix the fabric, while the mother is trying to stitch it through with her sewing machine. Between what the woman's associations were trying to project within these new living units and the staged photographs of families adjusting to their newly acquired living quarters, we obtain a sense of how the families of Isa Town were not only offered a vision of how life should be but also how they themselves contributed to the imagery and imagined a new life far from the one they came from. All of these were important elements in the development of the image of a new Bahraini society, which they not only adapted to but eventually embodied.

Through these various images, the publications, those who are in charge of publishing them, and the families of Isa Town are all trying to project images of a model house and a model family, with the wife knitting or sewing, the husband reading, the obedient children in Western dress either playing a game of chess or being model students while enjoying a cup of red tea. Such visuals contributed to the image that Isa Town was not just another

town in Bahrain – it was new and modern, even non-traditional and perhaps as Western as it could ever be. Therefore, even if it was small and, at times, cramped for some of the larger families who could not afford the larger houses, people wanted them. In addition to the incentive of ownership, they did provide an idea of a modern and model life.

In a *Concrete Magazine* article titled: 'Bahrain's Changing Face', dated April 1979, Christopher Stanley, lecturer at the Cement and Concrete Association Training Centre, notes on Isa Town:

> Isa Town is about 8 km south of Manama. This is a new town and one of the Arab world's most outstanding sociological experiments. It is intended to alleviate the shortage of good quality, low-priced housing and will eventually provide accommodation for 35,000 people.[105]

The question here is to what extent the 'sociological experiment' was about social class integration as it was about a nation taught to live in 'modern' and 'model' ways and, if so, to what extent was it all a show for the country and the world to see? What did these approaches accomplish? In the following section, I discuss how families went from living in multiple-family and multiple-generational households to mostly single-family households. I look at an important spatial element that brings families within a neighbourhood together: the outer open space between houses. In these spaces, those who left their family homes started new connections with unrelated families, a significant step considering the claims of social experimentation.

Spaces of community building

Image 4.13. Scenes from a 'populated' new town, 1967. Source: BAPCO Energies.

In the initial plan and design for Isa Town, the houses were either on a grid or front-facing and surrounded by a central open public space between them. This open space was

[105] 'Bahrain's Changing Face', *Concrete Magazine*, Volume 13, No. 4, April 1979 (Stanley, 1979).

important in how the new residents of Isa Town interacted with one another, even before the residents moved in.[106] These spaces proved vital to community building and social networks within the new town for people who would otherwise not have known each other or found it hard to interact.

> These courtyards were a main factor in integrating people of the same community together because they were a play area and an area for celebrations. So, if on a Friday, we were to go on a trip to the desert, you would find that all the families in the courtyard would contribute to this trip for the camp where we would go. So, there is no one saying this is from this sect – let them go alone, and this group will go alone – we were a fascinating mix. We still sustain relations and friendships between the families who were living in those neighbourhoods. You will notice that most of these families I am speaking of have long moved from Isa Town, but they are still connected and closely knit until now, and we always see each other and remember the beautiful days of Isa Town.[107]

These open spaces provided much more than a spacious urban design. It was a place where people saw each other and, therefore, met other members of the community. They projected a sense of visibility and interaction to the various members within the neighbourhood, even among those who had come from very different areas in Bahrain and had different backgrounds:

> In Isa Town, the idea that we belong to one neighbourhood was strongly rooted, and because we came at a relatively young age, the diversity and the change/difference in the social fabric were not very clear to us to the extent that we developed an accent, specially attributed to those who live in Isa Town.[108] Have you never noticed that our accent is special to Isa Town and not the heavy accent of Manama?[109]

Many of those who lived in Isa Town in their youth attribute this central courtyard to how they got to know people within their community, but this also afforded families visibility of the playing spaces, leading to a sense of safety among residents who initially did not know one another. This central courtyard in the Bahraini model of town planning, which started formally with Isa Town as something which was designed and allocated before the town was settled, is something which has not been previously studied with regards to the role it played in bringing people of various genders and age groups together. Furthermore, this courtyard seemed to serve various purposes for various members of

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[106] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 189, October 1967, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[107] Interview with Sami Mandeel and Adel Rajab, 26th January 2023 (Rajab and Mandeel, 2023).
[108] For more on accents in Bahrain and their social significance see: Clive D. Holes (2011) Language and Identity in the Arabian Gulf, Journal of Arabian Studies, 1:2, 129-145, DOI: 10.1080/21534764.2011.628492 (Holes, 2011).
[109] Interview with Sami Mandeel and Adel Rajab, 26th January 2023 (Rajab and Mandeel, 2023).

the family. It was a playing ground for the children, especially the boys[110]; it was a place of gathering for the adults; it was a place where mothers allowed one another to watch over their children at all times without having to be with them[111]; it was a space to park cars, and it was a space for the whole community to celebrate.

Many former and current residents remember the central courtyard space well, and they attribute this area to the successful and harmonious collocation of the various groups living in Isa Town and the allocation of recreational and sports facilities. Nevertheless, this idea of the central neighbourhood may be seen as an extension of the traditional Bahraini house, which features a central courtyard around which multiple families live. Naturally, some of the families who moved to Isa Town were living in such households before they moved to the new town and their single-family housing unit:

> HK: And what about the neighbourhood? Did you only interact within your courtyard, or did you also move around further to other blocks and communities?
>
> AR: No, I mean the courtyard because we were associated with my aunt's house in the area (Sami's mother), and we were related. We interacted in courtyards. I mean, as boys, we played together, and we used to get to know them all the time; they used to come over, or we would go there.
>
> HK: Do you think the idea of the open courtyard came from the idea of the central courtyard in the traditional houses of Bahrain, where the courtyard was the central place that joined multiple generations and extended families?
>
> AR: This may be true (thinking). I lived in both; I mean, our house in Salmaniya was a traditional house with a central courtyard, and my grandfather, grandmother, father, and family lived in the same house. My paternal aunts also lived there with us until my grandfather bequeathed land close to the family house, and they built on them and lived in them. After that, my father's family and my grandparents lived in that house with the courtyard. In that house, my mother and other women used to make breakfast, and they would gather and have breakfast in the central courtyard every morning. They would sit there and socialise over breakfast.
>
> HK: This was in Salmaniya?
>
> AR: Yes, in Salmaniya, so when we went to Isa Town, this tradition did not continue in the beginning, but slowly, it resumed in a smaller way. I mean, my mother and my aunt, who lived in the same area, would gather with the neighbourhood women, and they would have breakfast in the morning together.
>
> HK: Do you mean women who are in the same courtyard?

[110] Interview with Adel Rajab, 7th February 2023 (Rajab, 2023).
[111] Interviews with Mohammed Al Thawadi, Isa Al Mugahwi, Waleed Al Thawadi (Al Thawadi et al., 2023).

AR: Yes, women of the same courtyard; I mean, they were close to each other.[112]

Consequently, these courtyards played an important role in bringing the people of Isa Town together in the same way an inner courtyard in a traditional house brought members of an extended family together. While the homes and houses progressed in design beyond the initial phases of Isa Town, it seems that not much attention was given to the value of open spaces in neighbourhoods and the role they played in creating a community space. Therefore, overseeing the role of these central open spaces in building communities and strengthening the social fabric later in other housing communities, Adel Rajab, former Isa Town resident and current Ministry of Housing career engineer, notes:

> The idea of the courtyard is still a part of the town and city planning, which we design in the ministry (of housing), so we allocate central open courtyards and open spaces. In Isa Town, I presume the concept was intentionally integrated. But if you look at the cities we built later, this concept was reduced until it disappeared. In some places, there is no open courtyard, or if it is, it is very small and is not even called an open courtyard. They call it an open space. The open space became even smaller than the space of a single housing unit. Before, the open space used to be big enough for 10–20 housing units; therefore, the area was a space that joined together the whole area, and everyone knew one another. Now, who knows anyone?! It is good if you know your direct neighbour; you would not know the rest.[113]

Schools for all

Another important group of facilities which had a significant role in bringing people closer to one another in Isa Town and which was not exclusive to residents of the new towns was the public schools, which were provided to cater to the Isa Town community as well as accepting pupils from nearby towns and villages which did not at the time have a secondary school. The schools in Isa Town, therefore, played an important role in bringing pupils from various nearby towns and villages, both boys and girls, close together. This situation created a new social order whereby pupils from all classes of society of not only Isa Town, but all of its neighbouring villages and towns were taught within a single education system. This allowed, for the first time, both boys and girls from various classes and from all over Bahrain to interact. Similarly, the first boys' high school in Manama made it possible for boys from all over Bahrain wishing to continue their high schooling and not only those from Manama to board at the school. However, due to the conservative nature of Bahrain, it was not always easy to create a similar facility for girls outside of the main towns.

[112] Interview with Adel Rajab, 7th February 2023 (Rajab, 2023).
[113] Interview with Adel Rajab, 7th February 2023 (Rajab, 2023).

The first public school was established in Bahrain in 1919: Al Hidaya Al Khalifia in Muharraq, a public school for boys (Noor Al-Nabi, 2012). In the following decades, public schools for girls grew in all areas of Bahrain. By 1971, there were sixty-four schools for boys and forty-seven schools for girls, educating 28,765 male pupils and 21,303 female pupils, respectively (Noor Al-Nabi, 2012). However, the 1960s marked a period of growth as schools were established under a central department (Al Rumaihi, 1973). Therefore, opportunities for both genders in primary and secondary education were on the rise and were further assisted by an amalgamation of the boys' and girls' divisions of education under a central Education Department (Al Rumaihi, 1973). Most of those schools were established in the main cities and villages and progressed accordingly to meet the needs of the population. As primary schools were established, secondary schools gradually followed. The schools in Isa Town were different in how they were designed and included in the original master plan and in how they naturally catered to the pupils of the neighbouring villages and nearby towns. They bridged a wide gap for secondary school students and pupils of areas near the new town who would have otherwise had to commute to or board at a school in Manama to complete their secondary education. The schools of Isa Town played a large role in making secondary education more accessible to people of nearby towns and villages, such as Jau, Riffa, Askar, and Zallaq, to name a few. It was especially transformative for those who did not have access to transportation and thus could not send their children to the high schools in Manama. This shift expanded educational opportunities for both boys and girls across socioeconomic classes, especially girls whose conservative families would not allow them to attend boarding schools.

The initial plans for the new township had four schools for boys and for girls: a primary and secondary school for each gender was included.[114] The significance of the Isa Town schools was not only that they enriched the town with educational facilities for residents. The provision of secondary high schools closer to villages and towns that did not have one meant that pupils from neighbouring towns and villages did not have to travel as far as Manama to complete their secondary education. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, it allowed young children from different towns to interact with one another. The schools in Isa Town, therefore, were significant premises which brought young boys and girls together from various towns in Bahrain in one place regardless of social class:

> They did not have secondary schools, and so instead of having to go to Manama and stay at the dormitory there, it was closer to them to come to Isa Town High School because the first high school out of Manama and Muharraq was Isa Town High School.[115]

[114] *Weekly Star*, Issue 23, Year 7, 24th July 1963, BAPCO Energies.
[115] Interview with Essam Khalaf, 15th February 2023 (Khalaf, 2023).

This is especially true because the education system, which started slowly at the turn of the twenty-first century with a number of community initiatives and was slowly giving way to a more universal public and widespread system for the education of boys and girls, had yet to offer more options in private education. By the 1960s, there were a limited number of schools, including the Acorn school, started by Amy Zwemer, wife of an American Missionary in 1899. It began as a girls-only school and then expanded to include boys in the 1930s.[116]

> When we moved, Isa Town schools became centrally located in the neighbouring cities and villages, especially those that did not have a secondary school. So, the Ministry of Education would transfer them to Isa Town schools, and, at the time, it is unclear if this was done to purposefully bring the people of Bahrain together through schools and living in Isa Town. It is unclear if there was an objective to melt the different components of society together, but harmonisation occurred.[117]

A 1968 newsreel produced by BAPCO, clearly stating in the beginning that it was produced by BAPCO's Film Unit for the people of Bahrain, was titled: 'Isa Town Opening Celebrations'. It provides some imagery of uniformed girls in the school courtyard engaging in various activities, followed by a more regimented scene of young boys in white sportswear engaged in a display of organised exercise movements, followed by a scene of them marching into the school courtyard. According to the film commentary:

> This is a model school for girls, whose design featured modern architecture, as it is characterised by the spaciousness of the study rooms to face the increasing number of female students who spread out in the inner courtyard, while some of them were engaged in some activities. These two girls were engaged in drawing an artistic map of the Arabian Peninsula and the Arabian Gulf. There is also another boys' school where we see students in a class doing Swedish exercises, working according to the proverb that states: 'a healthy mind in a healthy body'.[118]

However, the schools in Isa Town included important facilities, such as open spaces and theatres with stages that were used by the school for its activities and to host state functions, Ministry of Education events and celebrations, and even, at times, plays. The Isa Town schools were still under construction when the new residents started to arrive in 1967. As a result, the state provided a solution to assign primary school children to the primary schools in Riffa for two years before the schools were ready.[119] Secondary school

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[116] Larsen, Warren, A Lasting Legacy of Samuel and Amy Zwemer in Bahrain. https://www.zwemercenter.com/a-lasting-legacy-of-samuel-and-amy-zwemer-in-bahrain/ Accessed: 4th March 2024.
[117] Interview of Sami Mandeel and Adel Rajab, 26th January 2023 (Rajab and Mandeel, 2023).
[118] 'Isa Town Opening Celebration',1968, Newsreel, BAPCO Film Unit, Public Relations Department, BAPCO Energies.
[119] Mohammed Al Thawadi, from Al Thawadi Interview Series, 2nd May and 27th May, 2023 (Al Thawadi et al., 2023).

students and those who had originally come from Manama were first enrolled at Manama High School. Then, secondary school classes were opened incrementally until the first graduating class graduated from Isa Town in 1973, of which Mr Essam Khalaf was one:

> (The school) It opened in September 1969, and when it first opened, it was a primary and middle school, so I was in the second class in middle school, and it was the highest class and then every year, an upper class would open with my class, and we would move up. My siblings, who were older, went to the school in Hoora. As we went along, naturally, I was the first batch to graduate from Isa Town High School. [120]

The assistance the state provided through the Education Department for pupils of the families who moved to Isa Town shows how it was larger than a single organisation initiative and project. Multiple agencies within the existing governance structure, both public and private, played a role in making this project a success. Further, Bahrain had multiple agencies working on a public initiative, which, at the time in the 1960s, was led and held together by the Finance Department, where Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa was chief.

This allowed for a few significant events, and it allowed for social openness for all social classes to interact with one another in a way that was not defined by their geographical origins. It also supported the government's agenda for education across all levels and genders. Thus, the social experience in Isa Town may be identified as one which was not based on the identification of social, religious, or economic class and far away from deeply rooted prejudices and pre-set notions which may be found in the old towns because of their social, economic, or political characteristics:

> If we speak transparently, we were not open to differences; all we knew was our own environment, which was in Manama; we did not know the people of Muharraq, nor the people of Riffa, nor those of the villages, etc. This was all new to us, I mean. One of the things, I mean, 12 or 13 years old meant we were kids, you know. So, when new people came, we got together, we wanted to make a football team, we wanted to play and naturally the first question was:
>
> 'Where are you from? ؟إنتوا من وين'
>
> From my memory, and you might even laugh at this – my consolation in all of this is that I was a child (ignorant) ياهل. And in our neighbourhood, there were a lot of people from Muharraq, so they would ask us where we were from and tell us that they were Arab. We would go to our father and tell him some new people came, and they said they were Arabs. My father would be surprised and say:

[120] Interview with Essam Khalaf, 15th February 2023 (Khalaf, 2023).

’يعني شلون عرب، كِيفه يعني إحنا مو عرب؟!‘

‘What do you mean they are Arabs, then what are we? Not Arabs?!’ (laughs)

But when we grew up and we knew more, then we knew what that meant. But the beautiful thing, to be honest, at that time was the integration which happened in Isa Town. Those who bordered our house to the south were from Riffa, to the north, my father’s cousins from Manama. Behind us, most of the households were originally from Muharraq.[121]

What further strengthened this bridge among various social classes was that the town, unlike BAPCO’s company town, Awali, was not a closed enclave accessed and enjoyed only by its residents. Isa Town’s facilities and services were open to all, especially to those in the neighbouring towns and villages. Thus, its residents could mix and interact with those from the neighbouring towns and villages, especially in public facilities and in the schools which were built for the town, all of which were made possible and accessible by an adequate road network and a limited provision of transportation both personal and otherwise. The opening of the Isa Town schools, especially the secondary schools, brought together students of both genders from neighbouring towns and villages:

The government provided transportation and buses for the students to come from Riffa and Zallaq and from the western areas of Damistan, Karzakan, Al Malakiya, Dar Kulaib, Shahrakan, Saddad, etc. And even the people of Sitra. You know, it is from this school that we were together with everyone and with the people of Bahrain. His Highness, the late Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohamed bin Salman (nephew of the late Amir Shaikh Isa and first cousin to His Majesty the King) was with me in the same class; his brother Shaikh Hamad came the year after. His Highness the late Shaikh Rashid bin Isa, the brother of His Majesty the King, was also with us at the Isa Town school; also, Khalid bin Khalifa bin Hamad was with me in a class – he was the brother of the previous Minister of Interior, Shaikh Mohamed bin Khalifa bin Hamad. Also, Shaikh Duaij, the father of the young Shaikh in the Civil Service Bureau. It (the school) introduced me to the people of the royal family as well as the people of the villages, with whom we would not have any relationship if it were not for the school.[122]

The road network and infrastructure

The location of the new town was carefully selected to be in the centre of Bahrain, almost equidistant from Manama and the Sakhir oil camp near Awali. At a government press conference held at the new town on 24th July 1963, only a few months after the announcement and five months before the setting of its foundation stone, the town’s

[121] Essam Khalaf interview, 15th February 2023 (Khalaf, 2023).
[122] Essam Khalaf interview, 15th February 2023 (Khalaf, 2023).

location was revealed. The new town was to be built in the central location of the main island, the Al Marageeb area of Bahrain, precisely on the eastern edge of the Shaikh Salman highway between Manama and Awali.[123] The announcement further explains that the reason for the location of the new town is because it is in a relatively high area, which would allow for the ease of extending drainage of its sewerage into the sea and noting that it is one of the best areas in the summer because the weather is cool and refreshing at night.[124] The announcement also mentions that the site chosen for the new town is in close proximity to Manama and Awali, the southern town of Riffa, and some of the other nearby villages. The location may indicate that decision-makers were not just looking to choose among available sites – at that time, there were certainly many – but that they were trying to achieve something else by connecting various towns, cities, and villages in Bahrain not only to each other but to various industries that had started to grow only a few years prior.

BAPCO built Awali, Bahrain's first modern planned town, for its employees, which is why it is near the oil wells in Sakhir. Oil was found in Bahrain in 1932, and Awali was built around 1934; before that, oil workers lived in Nissen huts near the Jabal worksite.[125] Work on the oil refinery started as early as 1935 near Jabal Al Dukhan in the southern heart of Bahrain but away from the main northern towns. In 1965, John Gornall, a former BAPCO employee and Awali resident, provided a description of roads in the early 1930s:

> Bahrain thirty-four years ago was quite a different place from what it is today. Oiled or paved roads did not exist, and the villages were joined together by desert tracks or by trodden ways through the date gardens.[126]

He further describes the route from Manama to Sakhir camp, one which changed greatly with the arrival of highways such as the Shaikh Salman highway:

> From Manama, a track curved through the date gardens, past the Mosque at Khamis, to Kawari along, much the same line as the road follows today. From Kawari, later known as Wiggly Bridge after the company had built a culvert there, the track wound up the desert slope to West Rifa'a, a much smaller place than now, descended the rim rock to Safrah and continued on to the ruler's Palace at Sakhir and on again to the hunting lodges further south. This was the track which approached closest to the site of the new well and along it all the material was moved.[127]

[123] Weekly Star, Issue 23, Year 7, 24th July 1963, BAPCO Energies, Bahrain, p. 1-3.
[124] Weekly Star, Issue 23, Year 7, 24th July 1963, BAPCO Energies, Bahrain, p. 3.
[125] John Gornall, Memories of BAPCO, 1965, (Gornall, 1965, p. 6).
[126] John Gornall, Memories of BAPCO, 1965, (Gornall, 1965, p. 5).
[127] John Gornall, Memories of BAPCO, 1965, (Gornall, 1965, p. 5).

BAPCO had a direct role in the building and paving of service roads before the government's road improvement scheme was announced in August 1958,[128] and in fact, the first surfaced road built in Bahrain was built in 1926 between Awali and the Jabal Al Dukhan camp (Noor Al-Nabi, 2012, p. 24). Road developments continued, but on a small scale around Manama, and in 1930, the Shaikh Hamad causeway was built to link the island of Muharraq and the mainland of Manama (Noor Al-Nabi, 2012, p. 24). The Shaikh Salman highway was eventually completed in the early 1960s out of a need to improve the link between the northern towns of Manama, Muharraq, and even Awali to essential facilities such as the new airport terminal (Noor Al-Nabi, 2012, p. 24) inaugurated on 21st December 1961, less than two months into Shaikh Isa's reign.[129] The Shaikh Salman highway was part of an expanding government initiative to improve the road network, which was announced in 1958.[130] These new roads and highways were not only important links between north and south of Bahrain, but they were important in understanding the rationale behind the chosen location for the new town, Al Marageeb, to be viewed as an 'ideal' selection of Isa Town despite the challenge in paving the new roads. Reviewing relevant newsreels and photos, one gets a sense of not only the scale of what was being accomplished but also the challenging nature of the physical ground, which required modern heavy machinery to be able to construct in a timely manner and at a totally unprecedented scale:

> Ground preparation includes site levelling for the blocks of houses and the construction of roads, many of which will be wide dual carriageways. These will link Isa Town to Shaikh Salman Road and speed access northwards to Manama and south to Riffa or to BAPCO's installations.[131]

Although the development of the road network facilitated the connection to and from the new town, this was not necessarily the experience of the new future of Isa Town because although there were six thousand registered vehicles in Bahrain as of 1961 (Noor Al-Nabi, 2012, p. 24), many of the families who came did not own cars due to their limited income.[132] Nevertheless, similarly to how the development of the road network made the location for the new town plausible, the creation of the new town further contributed to the development of the infrastructure around it and to its improvement by connecting the neighbouring villages of Jurdab, Tubli, Aali, Buri, Salmabad, and the southern town of Riffa, to name a few. The development of this new town meant that these otherwise

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[128] *Weekly Star*, Issue 30, Year 2, 20th August 1958; *The Islander*, Volume 5, No. 14, 21st August 1958, BAPCO Energies.
[129] *Weekly Star*, Issue 1, Year 6, 3rd January 1962, BAPCO, Energies.
[130] *Weekly Star*, Issue 30, Year 2, 20th August 1958; Issue 11, Year 3, 18th March 1959; Issue 25, Year 7, 7th August 1963, BAPCO Energies.
[131] 'Progress at Isa Town', Newsreel, 1964, BAPCO Film Unit, Public Relations Department, BAPCO Energies.
[132] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, 22nd January 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024), and Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi Interview 17th and 24th December 2023 (Baqer Bin Radhi, 2023).

remote villages and towns were no longer isolated from major infrastructural development and the connection to vital services such as schools, hospitals, and other important services for modern life. In Bahrain, this had a significant impact on bridging the various social groups with one another, and Isa Town played no small role.

The progress on road-building and infrastructure and the applicable transportation or the lack thereof was not only a decisive factor in bringing people to the new town as residents and non-residents who benefited from the town's facilities, but it was also an important catalyst in the depopulation of northern villages and towns who moved to Isa Town to be closer to their workplaces (Noor Al-Nabi, 2012, p. 26). The provision of transportation by the government and even private companies such as BAPCO is thought to be a factor that, to an extent, lessened the degree of depopulation in remote villages and towns throughout Bahrain (Noor Al-Nabi, 2012, p. 26). Nevertheless, due to its central proximity, Isa Town did provide a new option for those who lived far from their work sites across Bahrain, especially for those in Hidd, Muharraq, and Manama, allowing them better access to Sakhir and Awali. Vice versa, it made it possible for the people of Riffa, Jau, and Asker to be closer to Manama and Muharraq. Even with some provisions for transportation, the lack of a public transportation system meant there were many who chose to move to the new town despite their own personal lack of means or access to transportation, making life somewhat difficult in the beginning and explaining what many families had to give up to come and live in the new town.[133]

However, road paving and surfacing within and outside of the new town was not an easy feat at the time. Furthermore, the accompanying underground work was made even more challenging by the nature of the land:

> So far, sixteen miles of roads have been laid out, and this figure will probably reach over 30 by the time the project is finished. The town is divided by a broad dual carriageway leading off the main highway from Manama to Riffa. One of the hardest jobs of all is digging trenches for the main services because the land in the area is solid rock, which has to be laboriously broken down with pneumatic drills.[134]

The decisions about the road and the expansion of the infrastructure made it possible to locate the new town in the intended location, and it facilitated the bridging of various groups in Bahraini society, but it is very important to highlight that it was not necessarily an announced goal of the early development of the new town. The improvement of the road network, it may be argued, was driven by a necessity to link important infrastructure developments such as the new airport terminal in Muharraq, Mina Salman (Main Port) in Manama, and the dry dock in Hidd, all of which are located in the northern part of the

[133] Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi Interview 17th &24th December 2023 (Baqer Bin Radhi, 2023).
[134] 'Isa Town is One Year Old', 1964, Newsreel, BAPCO Film Unit, BAPCO Public Relations Department, BAPCO Energies.

main island to the south of Bahrain, where the oil refinery and BAPCO's headquarters are found. Nevertheless, it is safe to also surmise that the development of Isa Town, in its early and later stages, contributed greatly to the expansion of the infrastructure and road network beyond it, further developing and linking various parts and bringing the people of Bahrain closer to each other.

Conclusion

The move was transformative for all the families who moved to Isa Town. For many, this was the first time they owned a house in its entirety, where all the living spaces within it belonged to the family. As such, families had to learn how to adapt to the new space they were given and make the most of its provisions. Outside the house, the neighbourhood design encouraged new community interactions, which allowed members of Bahraini society to engage with one another. In addition to that, the modern facilities, such as schools and stadiums, fostered new cultural and sporting events. This chapter examined the migration of the new society, as well as their interaction with the town's spatial elements, focusing on those which had a social impact on the residents as well as neighbouring communities. The migration to the new town was organised by the Bahraini state. The experience of moving there, and indeed into the modern housing units, marked access to what was deemed modern by the state. This change was not always easy on the families, who had to adjust to all the requirements of moving to a new, albeit remote, town. Some even found it unbearable and went back to their original towns. Life in Isa Town in the early years required adjustment and acclimatisation as well as instructions on how to take it all in. The Isa Town society slowly learned to adapt to what was provided by the state in what the state considered the basis of a modernising society. Once individuals and families adjusted to their environs and created new communities, a new interaction unfolded, creating a new society which interacted in a new way within the modern spaces designed for them.

I have shown how open spaces, schools, and the road network worked together to bring people who might otherwise never have met a new experience of closeness, camaraderie, and community. As new social relations formed and developed, so did the relationship between the state and citizens in the new town. The next chapter looks at the administrative process of the state that created Isa Town. Following that is an examination of the political process and the various facilities which were put in place as part of the new town but were also used for greater political purposes. Overall, I show how the administrative structure and processes which were put in place, along with all the new facilities, including the ones discussed in this chapter, aided the state in projecting a new modern image of itself, not only to its people but also regionally and globally. I show how they were designed with the intention of confirming Bahrain's position among modern sovereign states and redefining its practices and state identity.

Chapter 5 – Constructing Sovereignty

Introduction

The full story and significance of Isa Town can only be fully understood through a parallel examination of the administrative and political processes through which the new town was created. Isa Town is important not just because it was the first new town in Bahrain – and in the wider region – but also because it illustrates the relationship between the state modernisation project and the evolution of a highly interventionist government. In the previous chapter, I illustrated the social transformation amongst the Bahraini population that migrated to the new town. I explained how this was a significant moment in Bahrain's social history, as modern housing facilities were built to accommodate the lower and middle classes as part of a broader state modernisation project. Through a study of key spatial developments within and around the new town, I discussed their impact not just on the newly formed society of Isa Town but across other communities within Bahrain. This chapter presents the administrative process under which the town was conceptualised and constructed. I also examined the government administrative structure, and the main tools developed to facilitate the implementation of the Housing and Ownership Project of 1962, which helped transform the government and remained the guiding foundation of a longstanding national housing programme. The project is also seen as the basis for the development of the first new town in Bahrain, which inspired many other new towns built after the establishment of the Ministry of Housing in 1975.

This chapter discusses the role spatial developments, specifically new town development, played in the evolution and reorganisation of the Government of Bahrain. I examine the tools developed and the government bodies established to undertake such a project and answer how they became part of a larger state modernisation process. The chapter starts with a study of the state of government at the time and why change was needed. I then reach back to the period when the government undertook housing as an initiative and how it developed it into a full-fledged national programme, the administrative centre that led to the creation of Isa Town and the whole housing portfolio.

I also discuss the role of the Department of Government Finance in the Housing and Ownership Project of 1962. Isa Town is then further examined through several of the tools employed by the government in the 1960s, particularly the Housing and Ownership Project Decree and its ensuing legislation. I elaborate on the legal framework, the organisational structures developed from it, and the new government practice it brought with it, highlighting how it was implemented.

Changes within the government

In his socio-political study of Bahrain in 1974–1975, Lebanese anthropologist Fuad Khuri (1980) identified three periods of Bahrani bureaucratic development of the twentieth century: the transaction-oriented period, the civil and development-oriented period, and finally, the state-oriented bureaucracy period (Khuri, 1980).

The first period covered the 1920s until the mid-1950s, when the public administrative structure of the Bahraini government developed into a set of core departments, as they were called, following the administrative reforms of the 1920s (Khuri, 1980, p. 99). Initially, all the departments reported to the ruler, first through his British adviser, Sir Charles Belgrave (1926–1957), and later through the Government Secretary (from 1957 until the establishment of the Government State Council in 1970),[135] who presided over a government body tasked with oversight, which was called the Secretariat.[136] During this period, public education was formally introduced, and some government offices opened in Manama, which saw the development of a limited number of initiatives and the processing of a few public services such as law enforcement, the collection of state revenue, installation of electricity and public telephone lines in Manama and Muharraq, the opening of a government public health office, and several other developments that expanded public services but remained 'transactional', i.e. concerned with establishing basic public services but not necessarily the public institutionalisation of major social or economic needs (Khuri, 1980, p. 118). The period was classified as one in which formalised law was enforced, but the government remained unreceptive to growing social demands (Khuri, 1980, pp. 117–118). The administrative reforms of the 1920s were seen to have laid the foundations for a modern bureaucracy but not a modern political system; for example, issues relating to legitimacy, public participation, and other forms of public consent were not raised until the 1950s and even the 1970s.

The second, or the 'civil and developmental' period, took place during the civic action and uprisings from the mid-1950s to around 1968, when the British announced their intent to withdraw from Bahrain, leading to the country's independence in 1971 (Khuri, 1980, p. 117). During this second period, the government was seen to respond to rising social demands to address social issues and strengthen the government against weaknesses, some of which had been revealed through the uprisings (Khuri, 1980, p. 118). This second period saw the expansion of government offices designed to address the growing demands of an increasingly aware society. The civil and development period, therefore, saw the establishment of a new kind of bureaucracy: it was civil in that it regulated civil needs such as improving employment and working conditions, and it was also developmental in that it led to the development of new government departments

[135] The Government Secretary was also British.

[136] 'Al Khalifa and the Government of Bahrain' in Administrative Reform, 1967-1968 in found in FCO 8/511: https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/511. (accessed: 3 April 2025)

concerned with agriculture, social welfare, government broadcasting, public housing, and water supply, as well as the expansion of other public services such as electricity, schools, roads, and a variety of public works across Bahrain (Khuri, 1980, pp. 118–123).

The third period identified by Khuri (1980) was the 'state-oriented' period that started around 1968, after Britain's formal declaration to withdraw from Bahrain and the achievement of its independence in 1971 (Khuri, 1980, p. 117). The state-oriented period was marked by a proliferation of government bodies and personnel, which further expanded the government's role and function (Khuri, 1980, p. 117) as was necessary for a soon-to-be independent state. All three of these periods represented not only a level of administration, but each captured the transformative nature of administrative processes and the state of the government structure. It is important to note that the three periods were not seen as mutually exclusive and often overlapped and intertwined (Khuri, 1980).

Thus, the period between the late 1950s andch the early 1960s was a time of change and development because of an increasingly aware and educated Bahraini society (Al Rumaihi, 1973; Al Shehabi, 2019; Khuri, 1980). On the one hand, the growing awareness of Bahraini society's needs was sometimes expressed in a volatile manner by members of civil society, especially when they were not adequately addressed by a government body which was at times unable to appropriately respond to its own society's growing needs (Abdulla, 2016; Al Shehabi, 2019; Belgrave, 1960; Khuri, 1980). On the other hand, the social uprising revealed the ineffectiveness of existing government departments over basic order and operations, which further highlighted the need for immediate government reforms (Khuri, 1980):

> Not only did the popular uprising of the mid-fifties produce official concern with political mobilisation and the formation of public opinion, it also generated the need for administrative coordination and centralisation of authority. In 1956, an administrative council was formed; it was composed of top civil servants, Al-Khalifa shaikhs, and the adviser (Sir Charles Belgrave), who was replaced after his retirement in 1957 by the secretary to the government, G.W.R. Smith [.....]. The uprising of the mid-fifties alerted the government to the inefficiency of the existing security forces. (Khuri, 1980, p. 122)

These uprisings led to a series of amelioration schemes and the establishment of vital public service departments, of which public housing was part (Khuri, 1980, pp. 119–121). However, this did not seem to be moving at a pace or in a way viewed as adequate, especially by British administrators. In 1960, Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, the ruler of Bahrain (1942–1961), was viewed by British administrators as an 'ageing and conservative ruler'[137] whose government was unable to recover from a void left by the

[137] Despatch No. 46, from British Resident in Persian Gulf to The Rt. Hon. Selwyn Lloyd, 17th May1960, in FO 371/148909.

departure of his longtime British adviser, Sir Charles Belgrave, because the latter failed to train a successor.[138] Consequently, by Shaikh Salman bin Hamad's final year as ruler, there was a great deal of involvement by the British administrators, who, by their own admission, had 'no scruples about intervening in Bahraini internal affairs based merely upon our lack of right to do so'.[139]

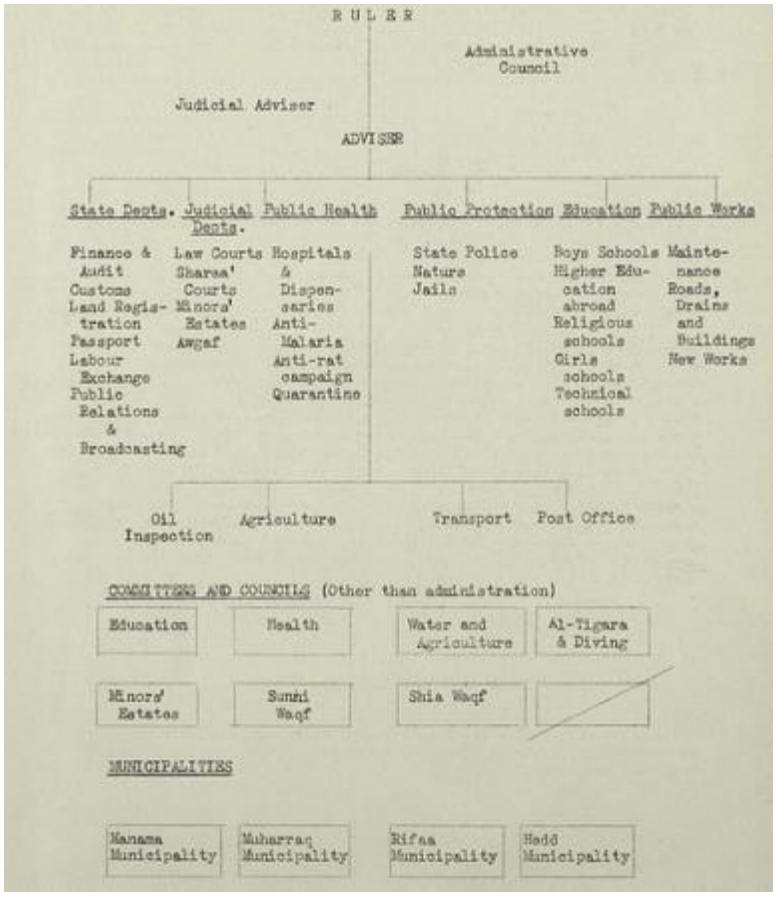

Image 5.1. Government structure prior to the sudden departure of Sir Charles Belgrave, found in Report of an Inquiry into the Working System of Government in Bahrain and the Structure of Bahrain Civil Service, by John W. Cummins (1957) Source: FO 371/126896, National Archives, Great Britain.

This situation and the gap left by Belgrave's sudden departure in 1957 started a wider debate on who would fill the role, including how to fill it. More importantly, serious discussions occurred between the British and the rulers of Bahrain regarding its future as a sovereign state. British recommendations were introduced in the form of a series of reports, some commissioned by Bahraini rulers. Though each had a different purpose, they generally all recommended widespread administrative reforms impacting government bodies and institutions, replacing deadwood and the proliferation of 'non-shaikhly' appointments in various government institutions, separation of powers and

[138] Despatch No. 46, from British Resident in Persian Gulf to The Rt. Hon. Selwyn Lloyd, 17th May 1960, in FO 371/148909.
[139] FO 371/148909: BA 1016/2, Minutes of A.R. Walmsley on E.P. Wiltshire's despatch 'Bahrain Internal: Political Agent's Review of the situation at the End of One Year Service in Bahrain' to Sir George Middleton, Her Majesty's Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 10th June 1960.

distancing the ruler from the direct implementation of policy as well as expanded public participation in decision-making.[140] Incidentally, the reports also documented the shape and structure of the government while highlighting the gaps and challenges within its administrative processes, though none of these documents provide a Bahraini perspective. Instead, they illustrate the tone of the British discourse on administrative reforms in Bahrain while shedding some light on the Bahraini counter-narrative. The reports I refer to include the Report of an Inquiry into the Working of the System of Government in Bahrain and the Structure of the Bahrain Civil Service of 1957,[141] Proposals for a System of Government and Administration in Bahrain, by C.A.G. Wallis of the Ministry of Overseas Development,[142] February 1965, upon which a draft decree for administrative reform was drafted based on its study of the decision-making process,[143] a report by the HMG's Political Resident in Bahrain, entitled the 'Future of Bahrain', in May of 1967,[144] and his September 1968 report, 'Al Khalifah and the Government of Bahrain'.[145]

The first of these reports was commissioned by the ruler, Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa in 1956, after the period of unrest, to examine how the system of government in Bahrain was working: 'To inquire into the working of the system of government in Bahrain and make recommendations for increased efficiency in organisation and methods'[146] and 'To advise as to whether and to what extent it is desirable that the present structure of the Bahrain Civil Service and the terms and conditions of service of government officials and employees should be modified to meet the progressive needs of the Administration'.[147] The resulting 1957 Report of an Inquiry into the Working of the System of Government in Bahrain and the Structure of the Bahrain Civil Service highlighted some of the challenges associated with addressing public needs and the ability of government agencies to do so. It recommended expanding public representation in the decision-making process in a way that would achieve peace and security and allow for prosperity.[148]

Although the report was commissioned by the ruler with an interest in administrative reforms, that did not necessarily lead to the immediate implementation of its recommendations. While there was a general agreement between the British and the Bahraini rulers on the need for change,[149] the means and mechanisms of how to

[140] FO 371/126897 & FCO 8/511.
[141] FO 371/126897.
[142] FCO 8/511.
[143] FCO 8/511.
[144] FCO 8/507.
[145] FCO 8/511.
[146] FO 371/126897.
[147] FO 371/126897.
[148] FO 371/126897.
[149] FO 371/126897.

modernise the ruling model became a source of constant discord.[150] The rulers of Bahrain were happy with what was often judged by the British as conservative adjustments to existing administrative bodies and the introduction of various social improvement schemes.[151] In contrast, the British called for more holistic administrative reforms in their reports, intending to change the political structure in which decisions and policies were made in Bahrain to allow for wider representation.[152] The British, who already had plans to withdraw from the Gulf and were inspired by political developments in neighbouring Kuwait, pushed for a similar arrangement in Bahrain.[153] They supported constitutional changes to prepare for Bahrain's independence and strengthen its legitimacy in the face of geopolitical threats.[154] However, Bahraini rulers remained sceptical of a system that allowed for greater public representation, especially Shaikh Isa, who refused to consider any reform that would distance him from the public and might displace any person he trusted.[155] This was especially the case after Britain's sudden announcement that it would withdraw from Bahrain in 1967 when an administrator noted the following: 'Equally our prestige is so low and our motives so suspect that it would be a mistake for us to try to talk the ruler into adopting any measures of administrative reform'.[156]

Subsequently, the British reevaluated many of the recommendations proposed in their reports between 1956 and the late 1960s. Despite the lack of progress on the signing of the Administrative Reform Decree,[157] which would allow for a widening of the political base, there were nevertheless numerous civil and developmental initiatives that established new government departments, schemes, and laws aimed at improving public services in direct response to social demands (Khuri, 1980).

[150] FCO 8/507 & FCO 8/511.
[151] FO 371/168669.
[152] FO 371/126897 & FCO 8/507 & FCO 8/511.
[153] FCO 8/511.
[154] FCO 8/511& FCO 8/507.
[155] FCO 8/511.
[156]FCO 8/511, Letter from Political Agent in Bahrain to Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 24th January 1968.
[157] FCO 8/511.

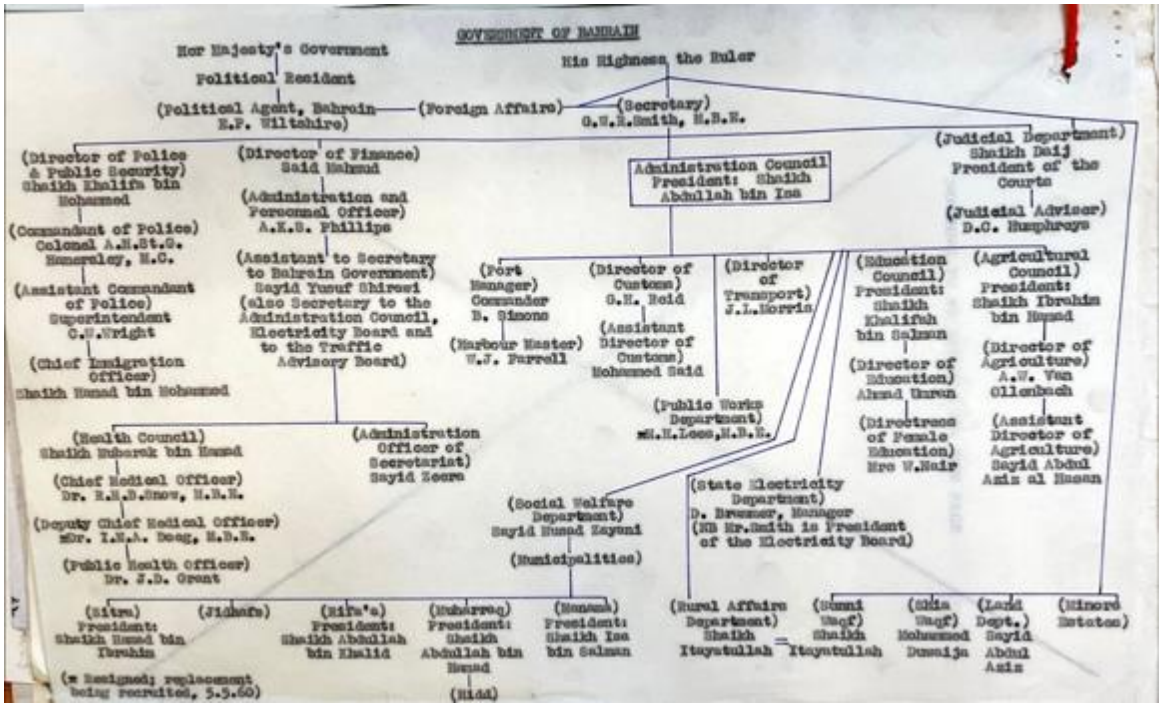

Image 5.2. Structure of government in 1960. Source: BA 1016/1, FCO 148909, 7th May 1960, The National Archives, Kew Gardens.

The newly developed departments emerged to institutionalise and regulate important portfolios such as labour and agriculture in 1955. They also established the Government Pension Scheme in 1955, and the social welfare and rural affairs departments were established in 1957, followed by water supply in 1960 and housing in 1963 (Khuri, 1980, p. 117). The administrative formations achieved some – if not overly progressive – changes in government, which in turn produced new public schemes and services for the Bahraini public. This action led the British to reassess the internal situation in Bahrain.[158] In 1967, HMG's Political Resident in Bahrain proposed alternative views with a bit more optimism and faith in the local system and questioned whether constitutional development was an essential step for the British before withdrawal or if it was useful at all in Bahrain:

> The al Khalifah will never agree to popular representation, and, in the circumstances of Bahrain, I believe them to be right. The country is too small and the population too disparate (Shia/Sunni, merchant/shaikh, town/village) to support genuine democracy: the bogus substitute which is all that would come about here would be a permanent source of instability. Kuwait is no comparison: anomalies, mistakes, jealousies etc. can there be buried under mountains of money. Assuming that, in the years to come, the Government of Bahrain develops into an adequately competent and benevolent shaikhly regime (it is already the latter, and it is on the way to becoming the former) is there any reason to assume

[158] Anthony D. Parsons, Future of Bahrain Report, 3rd May 1967, in FCO 8/507.

> that it is bound to collapse for political reasons once our protection is withdrawn? I do not think so. The al Khalifah may be laughed at, criticised and despised by the educated urban population; but they are not hated like the Hashemites were in Iraq when I was there (early 1950s) or like King Hussein was by the Palestinians when I was in Amman (late 1950s). The ruler has kept in touch with all strata of society through the daily *majlis* system (he sits 365 days a year) and it is not rare to see ardent nationalists sitting by him deep in conversation probably touching him for an air ticket to Bombay and a few hundred dinars for a holiday.[159]

Moving beyond British narratives on reform and considering Khuri's (1980) identification of the Bahraini bureaucratic evolution, what exactly was happening at the departmental level, and how does that explain a different or new administrative process? In the following section, I explain how housing became a government initiative [160] in Bahrain, and I then discuss how and why housing was formally initiated through a scheme born out of another government department – the Finance Department. This connection is key to understanding the importance of the Housing and Ownership Project to Bahrain and the role it played in administrative and political development, which I will discuss further in the following chapter.

Housing as a government initiative

In this section, I explain briefly how housing became something that the Bahraini government does. This is essential in understanding the government's involvement in housing and the nature of its intervention, which eventually led to the institutionalisation of the Housing and Ownership Project, the development of the first new town, Isa Town, and the eventual development of the Ministry of Housing which led to developed many other housing and new town projects for Bahrain. To understand the significance of the tools developed in the early 1960s to regulate the government housing programme, it is important first to examine the roots of the government housing initiatives, which go back to the 1950s (Belgrave, 1960). In the following chapter, I explain the connection between housing in Bahrain and the political process, i.e. between the ruler or the Amir and the people. It is equally important to explain how and when housing developed into something that the government does, i.e. the connection of housing (and eventually new towns) to government processes and operations. The various housing initiatives highlighted in the 1950s and 1960s in Bahrain were made possible by increased oil revenues.[161] The schemes and programmes aimed to improve lives and living conditions and were introduced by the Government of Bahrain in the form of the distribution of land, the build and loan scheme for government employees, and the workers' homes

[159] Anthony D. Parsons, Future of Bahrain Report, 3rd May 1967, in FO 8/507.
[160] By housing initiatives, I mean those that were part of the government improvement projects that either provided housing units, which were built by the government and made available to citizens, or land and loan schemes for government employees, which were also introduced in the 1950s (Belgrave, 1960).
[161] Annual Report of the Government of Bahrain, 1964, Oriental Press, Bahrain.

programmes of Manama and Muharraq which were intended for large families who previously lived in unsanitary conditions (Belgrave, 1960).

The workers' homes project was the successor to land gifting initiatives[162] and a predecessor to the idea of village development, such as Shaikh Isa's grant to build houses in the villages of Jau and Askar and, more importantly, a predecessor to new town building, such as Isa Town. It remains significant in how it presented complete dwelling units built by the government that were ready for use for Bahraini families most in need.

The workers' homes, which were built in the 1950s and were the first houses that the government built before Isa Town, were distributed on a low-rent scheme and had connections to water and electricity (Belgrave, 1960). The introduction of the workers' homes project happened around the time tensions were brewing between the government and the country's largest nationalist movement, the Committee of National Union (CNU, formerly the Higher Executive Council). The CNU demanded the immediate dismissal of Sir Charles Belgrave as an adviser to the ruler, transparency in public security and tribunal procedures, and inclusive political public representation in the administrative council.[163] The ruler, Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, insisted that the administrative council would remain as it was and continue to complete beneficial projects for the country.[164] This illustrates the differences in views of public needs versus what the public demanded from the government, revealing the ruler's doubts about the CNU's ability to deliver government projects to the wider public. There was a difference between goals and reality, and housing was introduced as one of several vital projects (such as agriculture, social welfare, and water supply; Khuri, 1980).[165]

Out of all projects, housing provided ample space for the government to introduce amelioration and modernising ideas to be felt rapidly by a public which may not have had the means to do so for themselves in an organised or collective manner. Housing and housing units were a way to show the public the concrete actions of the government in a way that was not only real but physically tangible and felt in a family's most private domain. Consequently, introducing new houses with modern facilities had the most considerable impact on constructing and reconstructing the identity of Bahraini families and fortifying a modern Bahraini society, as I show in this thesis. Government legitimacy was not sought through public representation but rather through the promulgation of public welfare schemes, which were to be seen and experienced by Bahrainis in their most private sphere through access to one of their most basic needs.

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[162] For more on land gifting see, 'Public Rights and Private Properties' in Khuri (1980, pp. 101–107).

[163] Based on letters between the CNU to the ruler, 14th July 1956, and from the Ruler of Bahrain to CNU, 22nd July 1956.

[164] Letters from the Ruler of Bahrain to CNU, 22nd July 1956.

[165] Khuri (1980) mentions the institutionalisation of these vital services within government bureaucracies, where areas I mark their start as projects. This clarification is important because, as we see in the case of housing, the project started well before its bureaucratic institutionalisation.

The start of government housing initiatives began in the 1950s with the workers' homes and evolved into a national programme, leading to the construction of the first new towns. Many more new towns and housing projects would follow, especially after the creation of the Ministry of Housing in 1975. The workers' homes project was relatively limited in its scope and design and consisted of homes built in multiple infill developments across the major towns of Muharraq and Manama designed to house families most in need[166]:

- East of the Sunni Cemetery in Manama: 26 houses
- North of Al Ahli Club in Manama: 36 houses
- Al Gudaibiya District: 58 houses
- West of Salmaniya Hospital in Manama: 72 houses
- East of the Christian Cemetery in Manama: 50 houses
- Al Khamis District: 2 Houses
- Northern District of Muharraq: 41 houses

In addition to the workers' homes in Manama and Muharraq, the government introduced land purchase-and-build loan schemes for government employees (Belgrave, 1960). Some of the housing initiatives in the 1950s aimed at improving lives were a success (such as the workers' homes), while others were not (such as the land and building loans for government employees). More specifically, in the case of the loan system, people would take the loans, build the houses, and then rent them out – usually to foreigners, choosing to remain in their overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions to capitalise on this novel opportunity (Belgrave, 1960, p. 181).

These were nevertheless important endeavours for Bahrain and a turning point in the institutionalisation of housing as a public and government-sponsored initiative. The success of the workers' housing project and the distribution of homes to Bahraini families in grand ceremonies[167] only further encouraged the government to envision projects of a larger scale and ones with a more holistic approach in terms of their design, execution, and impact. However, questions remain. For example, based on the original housing schemes, how did housing as a public initiative develop into a national programme and lead to the construction of a new town in Bahrain? I will also discuss the connection of the Government Finance Department to Bahrain's housing project.

[166] Annual Report of the Government of Bahrain, 1964, Oriental Press, Bahrain.
[167] *Weekly Star*, Issue 49, Year 6, 2nd January 1963, BAPCO Energies, Bahrain.

The development and institutionalisation of the housing programme in Bahrain

The divided rule between Britain's political administrators and the monarchs in Bahrain allowed for a measure of local sovereignty and government organisation (Al Shehabi, 2019). However, the nature of governmental decision-making and coordination changed in Bahrain after 1957. Charles Belgrave, who played an important role in connecting a dual system of rule between the British and the Bahraini government, had left, never to return, and his absence affected government coordination profoundly, creating a void that had to be filled. Public political pressure also led to a change, which came in the form of decentralisation; however, initially, there was no effective body to connect departments. G.W.R. Smith, who held the role of Government Secretary after Belgrave's departure, did not exactly replace him.[168] The absence of a central government body for planning and decision-making led the Department of Finance to play a role greater than that of a regulator or determinant of public government policy:

> The departments have withdrawn into isolation from one another. The joke is oft repeated (and not only in Bahrain) that one department repairs a road one day only to see it dug up the next day by another department. This is only an illustration of what happens in several spheres, and it happens because the concept of coordination does not exist in the Arab system. This leaves finance as the only effective means of controlling what is or is not done by departments.[169]

Previously, I explained how housing grew in importance for the Government of Bahrain, especially when many internal government decisions were contested and questioned. However, how did housing as a public initiative develop within the government, and how was it institutionalised? More importantly, what tools and mechanisms were put in place to deliver on such an ambitious project for its time?

Only two years after his appointment as Chief of Government Finance, Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa and the Finance Department started to assume a wider scope than just designing and administrating the agenda for government finance. The department not only played an important role in having an overarching jurisdiction over government work and practice, but it was also the nucleus of an oversight body that presided above the modern government, which took form in 1970.[170] This situation is revealed by the role the Finance Department played as the main driver of the government agenda, headed by Shaikh Khalifa, who later assumed the role of Chief of Government State Council in

[168] FCO 8/511, C.A.G. Wallis, 'Proposal for Systems of Government and Administration in Bahrain', 10th February 1965, in FCO 8/511.
[169] FCO 8/511, C.A.G. Wallis, 'Proposal for Systems of Government and Administration in Bahrain', 10th February 1965, in FCO 8/511.
[170] Decree (1) & (2) 1970, regarding the establishment of State Council and Administrative Reorganisation of the State (Government of Bahrain, 1970).

1970[171] and served as Bahrain's first Prime Minister from 1971 until his death in November 2020. Shaikh Khalifa established a team under him; compared to other government bodies in the region, it was seen as modern and growing in capacity and capability.[172] This characterisation, to an extent, neutralised the discussion of administrative reforms that had been encouraged by the British Agency and Residency in the first years of Shaikh Isa's reign:

> Shaikh Khalifah and his team (Sayed Mahmood, Yusuf Shirawi, Jassim Muttawa, Habib Qassim, Barstowe, etc.) have grown immensely in stature during the past two years and now from a reasonably effective, if overstrained, central administrative machine. The corollary of this is that the useless Secretariat of Smith and Said Zeera has been neutralised. Its main nuisance value now is that it represents a bad public image to the outside world.[173]

The administrative shape and processes of government, which evolved from the start of the reign of Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, were distinguishable from those of his father. More specifically, they were characterised by a clear intention to construct and modernise the administrative structure, grounding its processes in strong legal foundations. The period was also characterised by the building of national capacity within the government administration, which allowed for the gradual transfer of authority to competent Bahraini staff and not British administrators. Moreover, among the main outputs of that period was investment in expanding vital infrastructure and the general proliferation of spatial developments, such as the opening of the municipal government offices in 1962,[174] expansion of the airport terminal,[175] diversification of industry,[176] and the building of the new town,[177] to name a few.

All of this was a move from an interventionist colonial administration prevalent since the 1920s, which in the late 1950s was criticised by the British, through an admission by them that 'the whole aspect of Bahrain is too colonial in the sense that the British are too obtrusive and occupy executive posts too openly. The only way of altering this is by the process of time'.[178] Learning from previous experiences and embarking on a new vision for the country, the Government of Bahrain, led by the Department of Government

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[171] Decree 3, State Administration Organisation, 19th January 1970 (Government of Bahrain, 1971).
[172] Letter from British Political Agent to British Political Resident, 'Administrative Reform', 13th November 1967, in FCO 8/511
[173] Letter from British Political Agent to British Political Resident, 'Administrative Reform', 13th November 1967, in FCO 8/511
[174] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 132, January 1963, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[175] *Weekly Star*, Issue 45, Year 14, 9th December 1970, BAPCO Energies, Bahrain.
[176] *Weekly Star*, Issue 51, Year 12, 31st December 1968 & Issue 5, Year 13, 5th February 1969, BAPCO Energies, Bahrain.
[177] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 144, January 1964; Issue, 154, November 1964; and, Issue 155, December 1964, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[178] D.M.H. Riches, 'Mr. Cummins Report', 17th June 1957, in FO 371/126897.

Finance, promulgated the innovative housing legislation, which was endorsed by Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa in his first year of rule.

That is how the Finance Department assumed various roles within the government joining between executive, regulatory as well as legislating various decrees for government wide initiatives of which the Housing and Ownership legislation was a prime example. Decree 2 Finance of 1962, 'Regarding the Establishment of the Housing and Ownership Project, its Department and its Competent Committees with its Executive Regulations and its Explanatory Note' (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962), was the central piece of legislation which governed the housing portfolio and regulated the relationship between the state and citizens on housing. This project was introduced with a combination of legal tools, administrative structural developments and adjustments, and the development of a new state practice. In the following sections, I examine how law, structure, and practice were put in place to achieve institutional and civil development and how this led to a new relationship between state and citizen, one which was unprecedentedly contractual. This highlights the far-reaching aims of the housing programme, which aided in the increased visibility and accessibility of government processes to the local polity, illustrating the country's ability to govern its internal affairs and maintain law and order.

Isa Town, the administrative process, and the construction of sovereignty

Isa Town developed out of an evolving administrative process and contributed to its development by introducing new tools for government practice. In this section, I show how the national housing project, which stemmed from legal innovation in the Finance Department, evolved into an entirely new administrative structure. I follow that by looking at how it was all put into practice, showing how Isa Town was not just a product of the government at the time. It was also the process through which modernisation was achieved on multiple fronts – societal, administrative, and political – and presented to an otherwise unengaged public. Furthermore, it was how law and authority were acknowledged over a Bahraini polity. I argue that the development of Isa Town in the 1960s was directly linked to state identity and the construction of domestic sovereignty. By sovereignty, I refer to the definition outlined by Krasner (1999), which entails a political authority's ability to exercise control within a territorial border over their nation or, more specifically: 'the formal organisation of political authority within the state and the ability of public authorities to exercise effective control within the borders of their own polity' (Krasner, 1999, p. 4).

In short, I show how domestic sovereignty was developed through the construction of the modern Bahraini state. State modernisation in Bahrain in the twentieth century was largely seen through several periods and reforms in which questions of authority, power,

dominance, and legitimacy were raised (Khuri, 1980, p. 218). The first period saw the reforms of the 1920s, which developed a bureaucratic structure, created a public hierarchy and a centralised authority and, therefore, abolished the existing feudal-tribal estate system (Khuri, 1980, p. 99). This shift gradually altered the dynamics of tribal councils and religious courts by incorporating them into a central system of government (Khuri, 1980). Nevertheless, the issue of public delegation and consent remained unchallenged; therefore, the reforms of the 1920s introduced modern bureaucracy without establishing a modern political system (Khuri, 1980, p. 99). On the other hand, the reforms of the 1950s and the 1970s were 'somewhat political' in how they came as a response to public uprisings and demands.

More specifically, local sovereignty and legitimacy emerged from two sources: the laws, decrees, and announcements developed and enacted by the government and a system of representation in municipal councils and health and education committees (Khuri, 1980, p. 218). This ongoing reorganisation and development of the state brought with it the creation and implementation of new tools for government practice. These tools also aided in the expansion of government and the proliferation of vital spatial developments, the Housing and Ownership Project of 1962 and the ensuing new town, Isa Town, being prime examples. Of all the other state projects, the Housing and Ownership Project and Isa Town were directly targeted at Bahraini society and aimed to modernise and organise society in the most intimate spaces. Therefore, it was not just the construction of Isa Town that transformed the lives of middle- and lower-income Bahraini families; it was also an assertion of government control over Bahraini society through the development of the law that the state made and enacted. Isa Town and its development necessitated the construction of legal tools and structures and the development of modern state practice, which defined new parameters in state practice and authority. As such, it was one step in the process of constructing domestic sovereignty.

Three pillars made up the administrative process at the time: legal, structural development, and administrative practice. Together, they gave legitimacy and strength to the modern administration and were the basis for administrative development after Bahrain's independence in 1971. A study through this lens portrays how Isa Town developed out of an evolving administrative process and highlights the new town's role in defining and strengthening a new modern administrative government. In the following section, I discuss each of the administrative tools.

Laws and decrees as legitimacy tools for the Government of Bahrain

Shaikh Isa, through the Finance Department, issued legal decrees aimed at the expansion of public amelioration schemes such as housing; at the same time, the British were lobbying to enforce an Administrative Reform Decree that would ultimately

distance the ruler from the public and reduce his policy-making authority.[179] At that point in Bahrain's history, there was no national constitution, and the highest forms of laws came in the form of decrees or decisions signed by the ruler of Bahrain. These decrees were announced, circulated in an Official Gazette, and mass-communicated across various media platforms. A decree was a legal order from the ruler and had the force of law.[180] Executive Regulations were issued, usually with further details on how the law would be enacted, and more detailed regulations were issued, sometimes by the ruler but more often by someone assigned by the ruler and named in the decree. Executive Regulations have the power of law but cannot override a decree, making decrees legally superior to any accompanying Explanatory Note.

Nevertheless, an Explanatory Note, which usually accompanies a decree or an Executive Regulation, is an equally important document that explains and describes its purpose and aims. Therefore, Decree 2 Finance of 1962 of the Housing and Ownership Project and all its related legal documents were unprecedented legal innovations that explained how and why the government was undertaking housing as a government initiative. Furthermore, with this decree came not only the induction of a legal framework which regulated the relationship between the state and housing, it was holistic in how it also created and defined both an institutional and operational framework for implementing the law (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962). It also vested powers in a government organisation over other actors in the implementation of housing (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962). In the following section, I examine the first housing decree and the ensuing legal documents that defined and regulated the spatial and legal boundaries of new relationships between the state and its citizens, such as the Ownership Agreement of 1967, the Isa Town Decree 1 of 1968, and the housing contract between those who benefited from subsequent Housing and Ownership projects such as Isa Town. I discuss each in the order of their issuance or effect and follow that with a study of their significance.

Decree 2 Finance 1962: The Housing and Ownership Project

The decree of 1962 and its accompanying documents' importance lies in the fact that it was the foundation of other important legal documents relating to land and housing ownership, administrative development, organising and reorganising new towns and defining spatial boundaries. The decree comprised a few important components and was signed by the ruler, Shaikh Isa, on 11th September 1962. An Executive Regulation relating to Decree 2 Finance 1962 was further introduced by the Chief of Government Finance, Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman, promulgated by the powers vested to him in Decree 2 Finance 1962 by the ruler (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*,

[179] FCO 8/511.
[180] https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/decree.

1962, p. 4). The Explanatory Note by the Chief of Government Finance explained the rationale and general aims and guidelines of the Housing and Ownership Project at large, connecting it to overarching government objectives and the more practical details of the financial allocations and divisions between the various sections of beneficiaries (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 7).

As the foundation of regulations on housing, it attains its power from the name of the ruler, the highest local authority, as follows:

> We, Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, ruler of Bahrain and its dependencies, desiring to facilitate a better life for middle and low-income people from our dear people, and based on what was presented to us by the Director of Finance, have decided to issue the following decree… (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 3)

The decree comprises five articles that clearly outline the administrative responsibilities and organisations necessary to enact such a critical agenda, defining and regulating the relationship between the state and citizens regarding housing. The decree featured several important aspects (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 4): first, it identified the Director of Government Finance (Shaikh Khalifa) as the person responsible for allocating available land and creating the budget to implement this programme. Second, it bound all government officials to implement the decisions of the Director of Finance within their respective departments. Third, it created an administrative body, the Housing and Ownership Department, within the Department of Finance to supervise, manage, and administer the operations and report back to the Director of Finance. And finally, it announced the establishment of the Housing and Ownership Advisory Committee to advise and propose the implementation of the project through supervision and proposals to the government for implementing the Housing and Ownership Project.

On the one hand, this decree announced the Housing and Ownership Project as a government project; on the other, it officially gave the Director of Finance control over a project that would subjugate other government agencies to the Finance Department and, indeed, the Director of Finance. In its design, the decree clearly states in its introduction that it is aimed at improving the lives of middle- and low-income citizens (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 4). The decree introduced several key actors and beneficiaries, as follows (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, pp. 3–4):

- *The Ruler of Bahrain:* Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, who endorsed the decree on 11th of September 1962, less than a year after his accession following the death of his father on 2nd of November 1961, based on his

directives and the proposal submitted by the Chief of Government Finance. (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 3)

- *The Chief of Government Finance:* Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, who had various prior roles within the government, was appointed Director of Finance by his father on 16th November 1960. The decree named him as the person in charge of implementing the Housing and Ownership Project, with the Department of Finance as the responsible administrative agency and appointed him Chief of the Advisory Committee. In the decree, the Director of Finance is also named as the person in charge, tasking them to 'prepare the lands and allocate the necessary funds for the implementation of the project'. (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 3)

- *The Government Finance Department:* This department was charged with the general oversight of implementing the Housing and Ownership Project. One could view it as the 'mother' department in charge of the project, especially vis-à-vis other departments. (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, pp. 3–4)

- *The Housing and Ownership Department:* This was a newly established administrative body placed within the hierarchy of a previously established government agency. Its primary role, as stated in the decree, is to manage the implementation of the project and directly report to the Director of Finance. (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 4)

- *The Advisory Committee on Housing and Ownership, headed by the Director of Finance:* This committee was established to advise the Housing and Ownership Department and provide adequate proposals and the means to achieve the goals and targets of this project. More importantly, as I will discuss in the following sections, the Advisory Committee was comprised of a mix of government officials and local businessmen, and it had the jurisdiction in decisions related to housing eligibility and the type of housing unit. (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 4)

- *All other relevant government officials or departments:* This broader group would implement the decisions made by the Director of Finance, positioning the Department of Finance higher than other government departments when it comes to implementing this cross-administrative project. (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 3)

- *The 'middle to low-income' citizens who will benefit from this project (Executive Regulations of Decree 2 Finance 1962):* The broader citizenry for whom this project is intended and addressed with the 'desire' of Shaikh Isa 'to facilitate a better life' for them and as a continuation of the policy put forward

> by their father, Shaikh Salman bin Hamad, towards 'constructive work for the good and happiness of this dear country and its sons, and in compliance with His Majesty's solemn order to highlight the Housing and Ownership Project'. (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 4)

The Executive Regulations of Decree 2 Finance 1962 Regarding the Establishment of the Housing and Ownership Project

In the Executive Regulations section of the decree, which was endorsed by the Director of Finance and Chief of the Housing and Ownership Committee, further functional and regulatory details on how the project was going to span out were explained (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, pp. 4–7). Through the Housing and Ownership Project, the government set out to deliver three main housing products to citizens according to a predefined set of criteria. They fall mainly into three main divisions or types of housing products: the Ownership Section, the Leasing Section, and the Loans Section (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 4), and are discussed as follows:

First, the Ownership Section was in charge of the houses which were to be distributed for ownership to those who were eligible as outlined in the decree (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 5). Second, the Leasing Section was in charge of distributing houses under leasing arrangements for those who were not otherwise eligible for ownership (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 6). Third, the Loans Section catered to families who owned land but did not possess the financial means to build a house on it. The loan amount will be determined individually, case by case, by the department based on an assessment of the person's capability to repay the loan amount with interest over a period not exceeding 15 years. Furthermore, the department must approve the design of the dwelling unit before approving the loan (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, pp. 6–7).

Who was 'excluded' by the Housing and Ownership Regulation?

The Housing and Ownership Regulation was designed to benefit Bahraini families from lower- and middle-income groups; nevertheless, it was not accessible to all strata of these groups. These further stress that the project was not necessarily intended for the most impoverished in society but targeted those who were bankable and indeed able to fulfil contractual commitments. The general conditions for ownership of houses built by the promising government projects meant a fulfilment of the following criteria that the Executive Regulations clearly outlined[181]:

[181] Decree 2 Finance 1962, Executive Regulations, p. 5.

1. A Bahraini national whose father and grandfather are Bahraini.
2. To be at least 25 years old and not more than 45 years old. In some exceptional cases, persons between the age of 45 and 50 years old may be considered eligible.
3. To undergo a medical examination by the government hospital.
4. To be married or to be the head of a family that has no breadwinner except him.
5. Not to be a sole owner of a property or plot of land.

The conditions for housing ownership in this project exclude or fail to allow certain strata of Bahraini society to own a house through the project. However, as I show in the following sections, adjustments were made by the Advisory Committee in consideration of humanitarian circumstances. Overall, the Housing and Ownership Project requires, as a main criterion to benefit from the project, that the person is in a married relationship in order to apply for the ownership of a house and not otherwise solely be the owner of a house or property. Based on its regulations, it may be inferred that it excludes the following segments from owning a house:

- *Women Heads of Households:* At that point in Bahrain's history, heads of households were defined exclusively as married men or a man who was the head of a family where he was the sole breadwinner unless he left a widow and other dependents – then the family may be recognised as a household. Therefore, to be eligible for ownership of a house under the project, the person had to be male, married, and descended from a Bahraini father and grandfather. The exclusion of women as heads of households was not seen as something extraordinary or discriminatory at the time. It was expected that a separated woman, even one with children, would go live in her father's house or the house of another relative with patriarchal responsibilities over her after a divorce or the death of a husband.[182] According to the census of 1959, almost 91% of Bahraini families lived in single-family households, but there were still around 9% of the population living together in multiple households (Government of Bahrain, 1959, p. 16). This law did not explicitly recognise women as heads of households or sole breadwinners, perhaps because the number of women in the workforce in 1962 was still low – the percentage of females in the workforce did not exceed 4% of the total workforce in 1969 (Government of Bahrain, 1965, p. 29). Furthermore, both the previous general occurrence of multiple household living combined with a conservative nature conflicted with the lack of adequate space in the shift between old versus modern houses. This probably made it more acceptable for some – but not all – women to want to remain in an independent household in the case of divorce or widowhood, especially those who had children, for which a

[182] Interview with Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed, January 22nd, 2024, (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).

project such as the Housing and Ownership scheme eventually aided. Even though it was not envisioned from the start to consider women as heads of households, it did recognise them as such after the death of the primary male beneficiary.

- *Men under age 25 and over age 50:* The project clearly defined an age bracket for the ownership division – between the ages of 25 and 45, and in some exceptional cases, the bracket could be increased to the age of 50:

  > To be at least 25 years old and not more than 45 years old. In some exceptional cases, persons between the age of 45 and 50 years old may be considered eligible. (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 5).

  This meant the older heads of households were excluded from this modern and new project, though it most likely had less to do with age than bankability. Although the government funded the project, it built the programme in a way that allowed for a return on its investment. Whether or not it did so is another matter altogether (especially considering the continued heavy discounts[183] and gifting which happened around the independence of Bahrain from the Ruler of Bahrain for Isa Town residents).

- *Men deemed unfit or sickly:* To be eligible for the ownership of a house under the project, requiring an examination by a government hospital is interesting. This criterion, which is no longer in practice, further proves that some of these conditions were put in place with the explicit intention of returning the cost of building the house, not the land, as the lands under the ownership division of the project were all considered to be a generous gift from the ruler of Bahrain to those of his people who did not solely own a property or house (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962).

- *Men who were not Bahraini and whose fathers and grandfathers did not hold Bahraini nationality:* The Ownership and Loan divisions of the project explicitly excluded not only Bahraini nationals but also nationals whose fathers and grandfathers were not Bahraini. This clearly indicates a clear priority for ownership for Bahrainis with Bahraini fathers and grandfathers, alluding to the strong nationalistic elements of the project (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962).

[183] In (Khuri, 1980) & Interview with Mubarak Abdulla Al Maghribi at Mubarak Al Maghribi Weekly Majlis, 30th May 2023 (Al Maghribi, 2023; Al Maghribi, 2023a).

According to the regulations of the Housing and Ownership Project (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962), those who fall short in the above conditions for ownership could still apply for a similar house under the rent division of the programme and expect to obtain a house similar to those distributed for ownership, but they were not eligible to own the house (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962). Furthermore, those Bahrainis whose fathers and grandfathers were Bahraini, and owned land could apply for a loan to build a house there through a regulated loan in the Loan division of the project. However, as I have noted through the oral history interviews, considerations and exceptions were made after a study and a decision by the Housing and Ownership Advisory Committee.[184] Therefore, women heads of households, as well as other exceptions, were made for humanitarian reasons and given other criteria.[185]

Explanatory Note for the decree establishing the Housing and Ownership Project

The stated aim of creating a close-knit society around the ruler and his developing government as an objective is worth further exploration to understand the relationship between those parties identified in Decree 2 and, most especially, between the ruler, the emerging modern government, and the people of Bahrain (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, pp. 7–8). The note begins by stating that the project is not only for the betterment of the people, citizens, or society but also aims to position Bahrain and showcase it along with more progressive and developed nations. Therefore, alluding to an expanded role of government (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 7). The note clearly places government responsibility at the core of bettering the lives of citizens, advancing the nation, and measuring progress vis-à-vis other advanced nations. Furthermore, the government aims to foster this spirit of love, brotherhood, and appreciation, but only through a study of how this ordinance was implemented can we see how it functioned.

> Whereas the progress measures of nations, the advancement of peoples, and the integrity of governments are the standard of living, health, and culture attained by these nations and peoples and the vital and beneficial projects established by those governments that guarantee the family and individual citizens a decent and dignified life in a society in which the spirit of love, brotherhood, and appreciation

[184] Interview with Abdulhai Al Sayed Ahmed, 22nd January 2024 & Interview with Ahmed Hassan Al Aradi 'Bait Asma Al Khayyata', 20th & 21st January 2024 (Al Aradi et al., 2024; Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).
[185] Interview with Abdulhai Al Sayed Ahmed, 22nd January 2024, Interview with Mubarak Abdulla Al Maghribi, 20th December 2023, Interview with Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, 17th & 24th December 2023, Interview with Ahmed Hassan Al Aradi 'Bait Asma Al Khayyata', 20th & 21st January 2024 (Al Aradi et al., 2024; Al Maghribi, 2023b; Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024; Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).

> prevails. (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, pp. 7–8)

The first paragraph of the Explanatory Note above outlines the stated purpose and visions of such an important project according to those who designed it (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, pp. 7–8). This Explanatory Note is no less important – it goes on to explain both the purpose of the policy and describe important high-level policy stipulations and criteria. These were important elements in the design and implementation of the Housing and Ownership Project: the per-unit building costs of each dwelling, the percentages allocated to low and middle-income beneficiaries of the programme, and details pertaining to the preparation of land, including the availability of government lands (in Manama), the shortage of land (in Muharraq), and the subsequent possibility of building on reclaiming marine lands (Arad Bay is specifically mentioned) (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, pp. 7–8). The Explanatory Note also further explains who will bear the cost of the infrastructure that supplies the dwellings other than water and electricity, which will be borne by the state alone (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, pp. 7–8). This meant that the citizen would not contribute to any costs apart from the construction of the housing unit, as it is clearly stated in Article 8 Section 3 of the previous Executive Regulation document of the decree:

> The value of the plot of land on which the building was constructed, whether located in open lands or marine lands buried by the government, shall not be included in the capital, as the land is considered a generous gift from His Majesty the Ruler of Bahrain to the citizen covered by the provisions of Article 7 of this Resolution. (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 5)

The significance of Decree 2 Finance of 1962 and its accompanying documents

This decree is a legal innovation and development at the time in Bahrain that falls in the division of administrative law, or the law of the executive branch of government. Administrative law is known as the division of law which governs the activities of the executive branch of government.[186] Therefore, it is the branch of law which regulates the relationship between the government and those governed. So, when the state, through its government body, is involved in a relationship with citizens and the power positions within that relationship are not equal, one of the parties (in this case, the government) is in a higher position of power than the other (in the case of the citizen). The decree seems to have been designed to bring forth a clear set of guidelines not only on housing and the state but also on developing the entire administrative and institutional body that was

[186] https://www.britannica.com/topic/administrative-law.

mandated to govern public housing in Bahrain (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962). While housing and – particularly – ownership was established during the preceding reign of Shaikh Isa and Shaikh Isa's father before him (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962, p. 7), it was not formalised or institutionalised with any formal administrative structure until that moment. Hence, the relationship between the state and citizens on housing was not formalised legally and institutionally until the introduction of the Housing and Ownership Decree (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962). Furthermore, it was introduced in the form of legal documents that were circulated in the Official Gazette and announced in government public relations publications as well as BAPCO newspapers. Therefore, it defined a new foundation for a national policy on housing.

The legislation became an important prologue to several related key articles of legislation and legal documents on housing, such as the Ownership Agreement and its Explanatory Note of 1967. These were produced by the Department of Housing and Ownership within the Finance Department to explain the boundaries of the agreement or the contract between the state and citizens on the ownership of housing, all of which were promulgated and published to the public (Government of Bahrain, 1967). This became important as the new contractual state–citizen relationship took a new shape and form. It explained the stipulations of the contractual agreement of the housing contract, or the Ownership Agreement, between the state and the citizens benefiting from the Housing and Ownership Project. Also related was the ordinance which named the new town, defined its spatial boundary, and established a new administrative body, the Isa Town Board, to oversee appropriate and required municipal duties for the new town of Isa through the Isa Town Decree of 1968 (*The Isa Town (No. 1) Decree*, 1968). In the following section, I will discuss each of these matters.

The Ownership Agreement: Explanatory Note 1967

The nature of the contractual relationship on housing between the state and citizens was novel and unprecedented. As such, it had to be explained and clarified to citizens partaking in this project. Therefore, before citizens signed the housing agreement, which is discussed in the following section, an important piece of legislation was released to explain the conditions of the agreement: The Ownership Agreement Explanatory Note of 1967 (Government of Bahrain, 1967). Citizens who were used to accessing services in a much less formal way with far fewer regulations had to comprehend the nature of the agreement they were going to embark on with the government. Therefore, following the Housing and Ownership Decree of 1962, which identified and defined the roles and named the services that would deliver the project, a booklet was published by the Finance Department in October 1967, ahead of the distribution of houses to Isa Town's first residents (Government of Bahrain, 1967). The booklet explained in detail the various elements of the Ownership Agreement, the contract between those benefiting from the

ownership scheme in Isa Town. It states that it is intended to help residents of Isa Town understand their rights and privileges and any liabilities ensuing within the binding rules of the Ownership Agreement or the Isa Town agreement. Notably, this was a legal document, which begs the question of why it had to be prepared as a legal document and not just a leaflet or other form of printed material or publication. The first paragraph states the reason as follows:

> It was natural that such a document should be prepared in legal form in order to preserve their rights now and in the future. (Government of Bahrain, 1967)

The Finance Department felt the need to clearly state that although a legal agreement bound the conditions of obtaining a house in Isa Town, the interests of the individual would be preserved in a way where the government would bear the greater responsibility between the two:

> It should be noted here that the agreement was prepared and written so that the advantages and benefits are in the interest of the individual, while the government will bear the greatest responsibility. (Government of Bahrain, 1967)

This declaration served as the first instance in which the Government of Bahrain was entering into an administrative contract with individual citizens. It was no ordinary contract, as the power relations between the two parties were clearly not equal, hence the need for extra clarifications to ordinary citizens in the form of a legal document with short questions and answers to define basic terms such as ownership, house construction costs, and payment schemes (Government of Bahrain, 1967, p. 5). The novelty of these circumstances between citizens and the government called for special assurances and further pledges to remain available for any enquiries or clarifications, and the Department of Finance clearly expressed its readiness to do so in the words of the director, Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman (Government of Bahrain, 1967, p. 4):

> To clarify, the Isa Town administration is fully prepared to answer any question or inquiry that comes to the mind of the resident and is related to the agreement; therefore, please review them in case of ambiguity and confusion. (Government of Bahrain, 1967, p. 4)

The note explains clearly and explicitly what is meant by ownership, housing costs, and the arrangement between the government and the individual in repaying the costs of the house. Also, the note defines the concept of interest, why it was important to have one, and the basis upon which interest was calculated for the repayment of the housing cost (Government of Bahrain, 1967, p. 6). The idea of interest, as defined in Western financing schemes, is often a controversial subject in the Islamic world. Interest, or *riba*, is strictly prohibited in the *Holy Quran*. Surah Al-Imran of the Holy Quran, verses 130–132, states: 'O believers, take not doubled and redoubled interest, and fear God so that you may prosper' (*The Holy Quran*, Al-Imran, 2:130–132).

Further, usury is strictly prohibited in Islam (*The Holy Quran*, Al-Baqarah, 1:275–278). However, the Government of Bahrain enforced it under a more altruistic justification, stating its necessity to cover the cost of the housing unit in the case of the death of the head of the household if other family members were short of the necessary funds. Another reason was to generate more funds 'to build more homes in Isa Town for your brothers, friends, and children in the future' (Government of Bahrain, 1967, p. 6), invoking a sense of social solidarity. Homes in Isa Town were distributed under two methods of repayment (Government of Bahrain, 1967, pp. 6–7). The first was if the person chose to pay upfront for the full cost of the housing unit, then they would only have to pay the amount corresponding to the cost of the construction of the house (Government of Bahrain, 1967, p. 5). However, if the person was unable to do so or chose not to pay according to the instalment scheme, then they were liable to pay the cost of building the house and an interest of 3.5% over a period of twenty years (Government of Bahrain, 1967, p. 5). Therefore, if one could not afford to cover the amount as a lump sum payment upfront, they had no choice but to pay the 3.5% interest over the cost of building the house.

The note explains that the title deed of the house would not be handed over until full repayment of the total amount of either of the repayment schemes above was made. Furthermore, full repayment means full ownership of the house and the freedom to rent or sell the house, 'just like everyone who owns land or a house in the country' (Government of Bahrain, 1967, p. 10). It explains clearly that the right to the house in Isa Town will be forfeited in two cases: if the person abandons the house before completing the full payment, what they paid would be considered rent (Government of Bahrain, 1967, p. 11). The second situation, where the right to the house will be forfeited, is if the person fails to pay the instalments on time (Government of Bahrain, 1967, p. 11). However, there is a clause explaining that if the head of household dies or falls ill and neither he nor his heirs can pay the remaining balance, then this will be an issue which will be considered by the Housing and Ownership Committee. Depending on the case, they may consider dropping the remaining amount if he or his heirs cannot pay the balance (Government of Bahrain, 1967, pp. 10–11).

The housing contract ('the Ownership Agreement')

> You will be one of the first to inhabit the town, so be a pioneer in maintaining order, the most important quality of an honest citizen. (Government of Bahrain, 1968)

The housing contract, which regulated the relationship between the state and citizens on housing, is perhaps the most unique and the first of its kind in Bahrain's history. This is one of the many reasons why it had to be preceded by several other legislative documents to explain the purpose and meaning behind a few important new concepts, such as what is meant by ownership, interests, and instalments and how they may be understood within this contractual arrangement between the state and the citizen who is benefiting

from the houses of Isa Town (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962; Government of Bahrain, 1968, 1967). Those who came to live in Isa Town were pioneers of the new town, and they were also pioneers in this unique relationship between the state and the city. That is why the government had to explain 'their duties' as a resident of the new town. Isa Town residents became an extension of the government and were expected to maintain order within the newly formed community, calling it a 'national duty' (Government of Bahrain, 1968). Therefore, the society that formed in Isa Town was told that they had to serve as model citizens to live in the new town and obtain a modern house (Government of Bahrain, 1968).

The contract is a simple two-page document which may be divided into three parts: the notice of acceptance of the application, the agreement of the individual to live in Isa Town according to the Housing and Ownership law and its related ordinances, and a memo explaining practical messages and engaging messages. In reading the two-page document, one can deduce important points of communication between the state and individuals regarding the benefits of the Isa Town housing project.

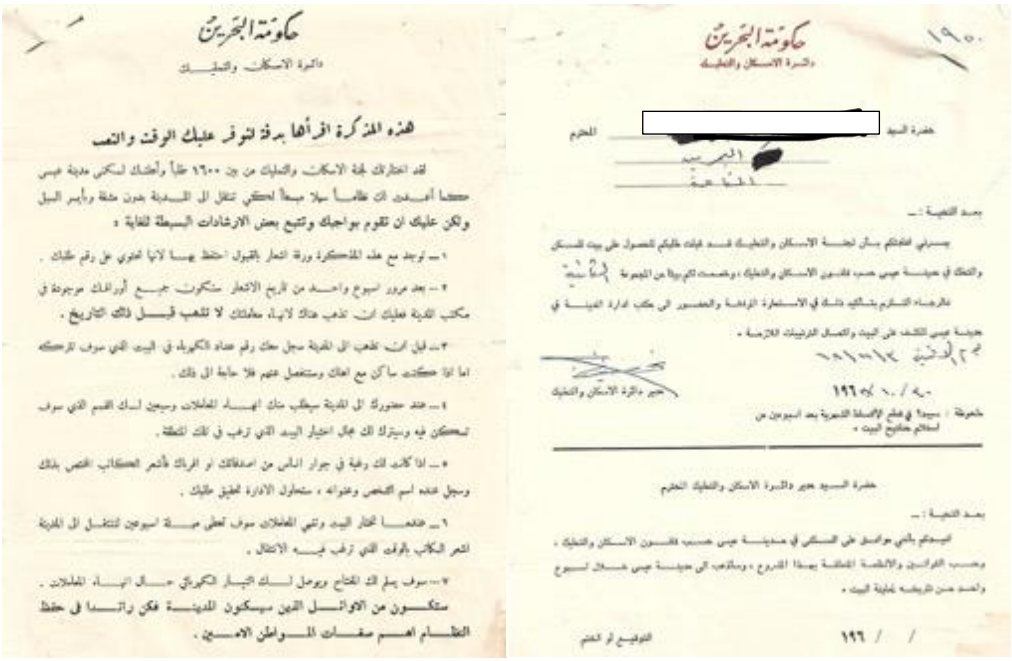


Image 5.3. Sample of the ownership acceptance memo, Source: Personal archive of Mr Abdul Jalil Ahmed

The memo informs citizens of their selection based on an application among 1,600 other citizens to live in Isa Town, followed by a set of more practical guidelines on how to facilitate the move to Isa Town with regard to time and deadlines. The memo promises that the individual will be allocated an area of the town and allowed to choose the house they want to live in within that area, allowing them also to let the clerk know of any wish to reside next to a friend or kin (Government of Bahrain, 1967).

The Isa Town Decree 1 of 1968

When Isa Town was built, it was founded on undeveloped land four and a half miles from the capital of Manama.[187] As such, it did not belong to any of the existing towns or villages, and it was unknown to much of Bahraini society. As a completely new construct, a town built suddenly in the middle of nowhere, its boundaries had to be delineated because of the inorganic nature of its development. More importantly, its municipal jurisdiction had to be assigned. On the 27th of June 1968, almost seven months after the first residents started to arrive in Isa Town and less than five months before the official inauguration of the new town, a curious legal decree was passed: Isa Town No. 1 Decree 1968 (*Isa Town (No. 1) Decree 1968*, 1968). Again, the decree is meant to be read in conjunction with Decree 2 Finance of 1962 regarding the establishment of the Housing and Ownership Project (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962).

The Isa Town Decree begins by defining the physical boundary of the new town and delineating its borders vis-à-vis the neighbouring towns and villages, which further shows how the town had to be constructed not just physically but administratively and indeed by the power of law. The decree assigned the municipal body in charge of the new town; this indicates the active local governance structure of municipalities in Bahrain, which oversaw public services between the state and citizens regarding daily public services (*Isa Town (No. 1) Decree 1968*, 1968). This move was important in that it strengthened the governance and jurisdiction of municipal councils, serving as a separation from the feudal estate system and further confirming the town's connection to the state.

[187] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 202, November 1968, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain

Image 5.4. Royal Air Force satellite map of Al Maraqeeb, where Isa Town was built, December 1961. Source: Ministry of Housing, Bahrain.

The decree then introduces a new administrative and institutional body for the management of Isa Town: the Isa Town Management Board (*Isa Town (No. 1) Decree 1968*, 1968). The board is assigned the tasks of any other municipality in Bahrain. It was constituted by a chairman and not more than six members, who were appointed by the ruler and announced in the Official Gazette. The board would assume its role from the day of appointment and publication of its members in the Official Gazette by the ruler and until the day of the delegation of the management of the new town to a local municipality (*Isa Town (No. 1) Decree 1968*, 1968). The period between the two dates would not be more than five years unless extended by the ruler (*Isa Town (No. 1) Decree 1968*, 1968).

The decree also identifies that any 'house taxes' and any 'other municipal dues' for Isa Town should be payable to the board, giving it the authority to hire managers and staff as needed and the authority to manage its operations to achieve its set-out objectives. But ensuring that there is no doubt, it clearly states that this decree does not in any way diminish, override, or derogate from the powers and responsibilities of the Housing and Ownership Department in the building, mortgaging, selling, leasing, or financing of any of the buildings in Isa Town. Furthermore, any contractual requirements needed for the board to do its job would require the signatures of at least two members of the Housing and Ownership Department. The board of Isa Town, by virtue of this decree, was a newly

established administrative body external to the Finance Department even though it would still be at a jurisdictional standing lower than the Housing (and Ownership) Department within it when entering contractual agreements and other hierarchal matters (*Isa Town (No. 1) Decree 1968*, 1968).

Image 5.5. RAF Aerial Photo of Isa Town in 1966, Source: Ministry of Housing, Bahrain.

What the housing laws signified

The legal documents together present a fascinating blueprint of government practice and an important tool in the communication between the government and citizens on housing. More interestingly, as legal innovations, they not only portrayed government in practice and a measure of its capacity, but they also announced a national vision on housing. The decrees and how they were announced showed a new way for the government to communicate with citizens on this ambitious national project. All of these provide important statements worthy of study in the absence of a more thorough and complete government archive, which may help us understand the motives behind such an unprecedented project. Mainly, it defines a set framework structure for state–citizen relations in housing. It also provides an insightful view of the future of both state and nation, illustrates a certain level of transparency in government practice, as all these were regulations which were published in the country's Official Gazette, and promises a sense of universality for the operations and administration of housing projects, for which Isa Town was to be the start of many more to come. Furthermore, these laws provide a clear administrative, institutional, and operational framework, showing the government's commitment to implementing the housing project. Altogether, the legal framework introduced to govern public housing in Bahrain marks a significant evolution in

government operations. If housing is an example of what was happening in the 1960s Bahrain, the legal developments embodied the new and modernising government through the introduction of a new framework for state–citizen relationships, insight into how the state was developing and its vision for the future, transparency in its operations, the universality of its legal framework, and the operationalisation and institutionalisation of housing as a state-led initiative.

These decrees and regulations are important not only in understanding the state–citizen relationship but also in understanding how the state chose to communicate with its citizens in the early stages of its modern administrative structure. A thorough reading provides us with a clear state vision, its relationship to its citizens, and how it communicates with them. Furthermore, these legal documents portray a clear picture of state structure and how it would develop in the future. Therefore, it outlines a framework and insight into the development of the state. Giving precedence to the Finance Department on housing over other departments not only shows us the significance of housing for Bahrain but also begins to show the slow ascension of finance over other government departments.

The new legal framework also communicated a vision for the future of government operations. They outline a state vision for housing, announcing that something grand was on its way. For example, the first of these legal documents was issued in September 1962, a few months before the new town was announced at Shaikh Isa's first accession celebrations. This was followed by a ceremony where 285 homes were gifted for ownership according to the stipulations of the decree, and the new town was announced.

The first decree was passed more than a year before the foundation stone was laid for the new town. The legislation on housing was not only concerned with the regulation of public housing, but it also announced and presented the state vision. Until that point, the concept of ownership under this project had to be explained. People had to understand that this was not entirely a philanthropic project and that they were not going to get the houses free of cost. Also, the government started to explain important concepts to the individuals and justified them.

Furthermore, the way in which these regulations were promulgated shows the government's intent to maintain transparency. Apart from Housing and Ownership Project Decree of 1962, all the related decrees, Executive Regulations, Explanatory Notes, and their accompanying documents were published in the Official Gazette or circulated, such as the Ownership Agreement Explanatory Note of 1967. They were legal documents that were widely announced, circulated, officialised, and enforced with related documents. This process was a significant evolution in how the Government of Bahrain operated. The state was announcing itself and its operations for the Bahraini polity to know who was doing what and for what purpose. To the government, this meant

communicating a new way of how it intended to conduct its operations and define the parameters of its authority over its polity.

These laws, especially Decree 2 Finance of 1962, ensured universality in the implementation and administration of the housing project. As a government policy, this meant that the general terms and regulations were similar regardless of the project. Until that point in time, unless otherwise stated, every housing initiative operated according to rules and regulations specific to the project. This feature is significant, especially in light of what was expressed in other housing programmes, such as in Khuri (1980), regarding the clarity of the criteria for accessing public housing among the general public.

Finally, these laws marked the operationalisation and institutionalisation of public housing in Bahrain. In other words, they not only marked the institutionalisation of public housing and defined it as something the government does, but they also began to show us how it was operationalised and brought to life. By developing these laws as well as developing and defining their institutional capacities both within and across new and existing administrative structures, the state is clearly showing that these innovative legal tools are not only meant as protection measures but that they will very much be a define state operations and institutional development when it comes to housing. The development of adequately mandated institutional structures with specific jobs and targets indicates the start of what will be a modern government structure with clearly defined goals and objectives in the years to come. Concisely, the state will not hesitate to act in ways it deems necessary to fulfil its stated and unstated objectives.

Therefore, these legal documents, especially the first piece of legislation, Decree 2 Finance of 1962, played an important role in developing the related legal documents. By having the power of legal enforcement in the design of the Housing and Ownership Project and presenting its implementation structure, we are presented with a new way for Bahraini state practice, which was altogether, new, modern, universal and relatively transparent. Previous practice was that of outright gifting, where these laws defined a set of clear and, at times, precise criteria on the eligibility criteria under each of the three divisions in the project/programme (ownership, rent, and loans).

To summarise, the main idea directly linked to these laws was the inauguration of the National Project on Housing. This also marked the start of the idea for new towns as some decrees, regulations, and Explanatory Notes were specifically released for Isa Town, which naturally provided legal precedent for how new towns would be considered and operated within the national framework. Also, they provided and defined clear eligibility criteria. Decree 2 Finance 1962 clearly defined the three divisions of the project and the criteria for eligibility, clarifying what at that time was defined as a household and a family, though excluding some while providing an alternative for others within the project (such as between the ownership and rent schemes). Finally, the laws introduced an institutional, operational, and contractual structure for the implementation of the

project. Together, the housing legislations clearly illustrate the cogs, engines, and parts of the housing implementation machine, how it was meant to operate, and why it is important. Even today, they portray not just how the housing project was introduced but also how it was institutionalised and operationalised in practice and how that defined the Bahraini statecraft at the time.

Housing implementation in action

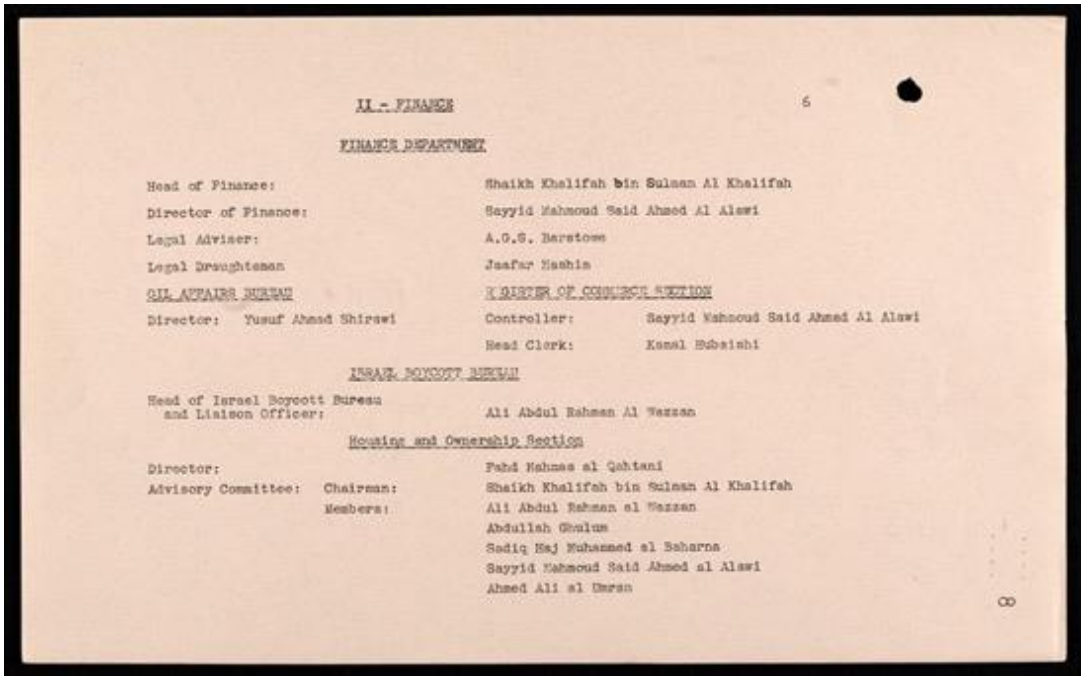
As I show in the previous section, Decree 2 Finance of 1962 announced the immediate establishment of two key administrative and advisory bodies, which were the Housing and Ownership Department and the Housing and Ownership Advisory Committee (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962). These two bodies were instrumental in implementing the legal framework and tools outlined in the earlier part of this chapter. Furthermore, together, they guided the work of the Isa Town Office, which was established under the Housing and Ownership Department. It was situated in the new town to run its operations; in turn, it was the immediate link between the state and the citizens who came to live in the new town. A study of the implementation body is significant in understanding not only state operations or state–citizen relations but also how this important policy was implemented. In conclusion, we will look at how the latter was the nucleus for the Ministry of Housing, which, as an organisation, was formally developed in 1975 and is still in charge of the implementation of the Bahraini housing policy today.

The Housing and Ownership Advisory Committee

The Housing and Ownership Advisory Committee was tasked with assisting the Housing and Ownership Department in achieving its mandate through the provision of advice and recommendations. The semi-independent committee included members of Bahraini Statesmen as well as businessmen; they were chaired by Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa and included Syaed Mahmood Al Alawi, Ali Abdul Rahman Al Wazzan, Ahmed Al Umran, Saddiq Al Baharna and Abdulla Ghuloom.[188] As per Decree 2 Finance, the committee's role was to support the administrative body by studying various means to achieve the project and offer advice and recommendations to the Housing and Ownership administrative body. The committee seemed to have been tasked with the role of studying and deciding which of the various categories of houses a family was entitled to which was based on several factors, but most importantly the family's income (Al Maghribi, 2023b; Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024; Baqer bin Radhi, 2023). The Housing and Ownership Advisory Committee was active and accompanied Shaikh Khalifa on all his visits to the new town. The committee members were all businessmen, in the case of Ali Al Wazzan, Abdulla Ghuloom, and Saddiq Al Bahrana, or public officials, such as in the case of Ahmed Al Umran and Sayed Mahmood Al Alawi. They oversaw the administrative

[188] https://www.housing.gov.bh/achievements/details/20 Date accessed: 14th February 2024.

body of the Housing and Ownership Directorate, which was headed by Fahad Mehmas Al Qahtani. The division of roles in implementing the Housing and Ownership Project between a higher advisory arm and an administrative arm is an interesting way the government divided and separated the roles between an advisory independent body and an executive arm. This highlights a well-thought-out setup that would increase efficiency and effectiveness compared to any previous practice.



II - FINANCE

6

FINANCE DEPARTMENT

Head of Finance:	Shaikh Khalifah bin Sulman Al Khalifah
Director of Finance:	Sayyid Mahmoud Said Ahmed Al Alawi
Legal Adviser:	A.G.G. Barstowe
Legal Draughtsman	Jaafar Mashin
OIL AFFAIRS BUREAU	ACCOUNTS CONTROL SECTION
Director: Yusuf Ahmed Shirawi	Controller: Sayyid Mahmoud Said Ahmed Al Alawi
	Head Clerk: Kamal Hubaishi

ISRAEL BOYCOTT BUREAU

Head of Israel Boycott Bureau and Liaison Officer:	Ali Abdul Rahman Al Wazzan

Housing and Ownership Section

Director:		Fahd Mahmas al Qahtani
Advisory Committee:	Chairman:	Shaikh Khalifah bin Sulman Al Khalifah
	Members:	Ali Abdul Rahman al Wazzan
		Abdullah Ghulum
		Sadiq Haj Muhammed al Baharna
		Sayyid Mahmoud Said Ahmed al Alawi
		Ahmed Ali al Umran

Image 5.6. The Structure of Government Finance Department, 1968, 'Al Khalifa and the Government of Bahrain', British Political Agency Bahrain, 1968 in FCO 8/511.

Image 5.7. Shaikh Khalifa in Isa Town with CJ Briggs and Tom Flatley, Wimpey Site Engineers, in the photo is also Sayed Mahmood and in the far back is Fahad Mehmas Al Qahtani. Source: BAPCO Energies.

The Housing and Ownership Department

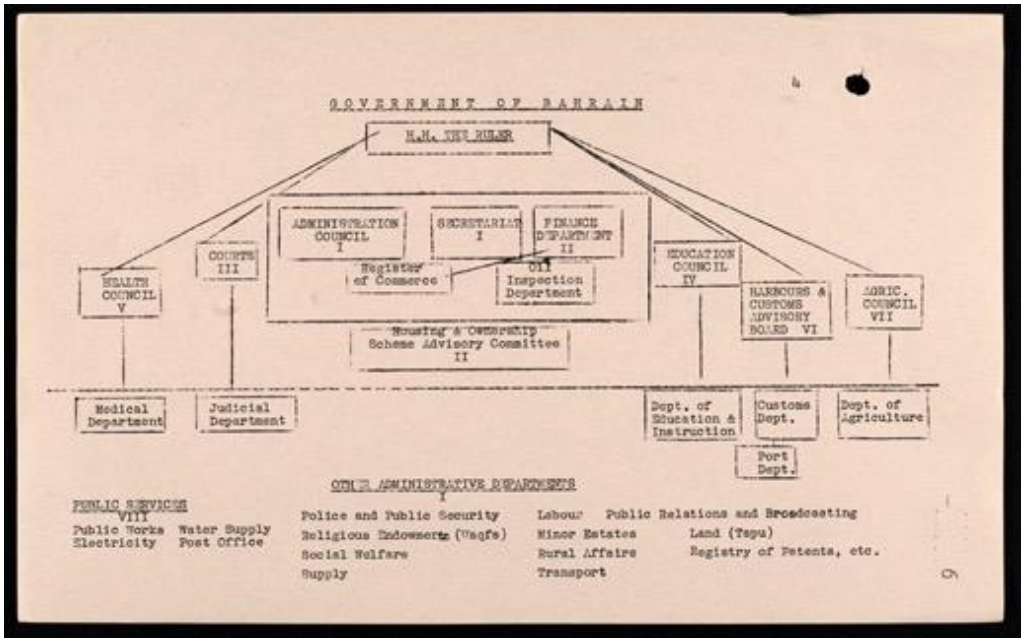


Image 5.8. The structure of the Government of Bahrain in 1968. Source: 'Al Khalifa and the Government of Bahrain', British Political Agency Bahrain, FCO 8/511.

The Housing and Ownership Department was established within the Department of Finance to foresee the implementation of the housing project and fell under the supervision of the Chief of Government Finance, Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962). This body was charged with preparing the administrative and implementation requirements of the project. The Director of Housing and Ownership, Fahad Mehmas Al Qahtani, was under the supervision of the President/Chief of Government Finance until 1971 (Government of Bahrain, 1971). In 1975, the department was relocated under the Department of Labour and Social Affairs before it was finally shifted under the Ministry of Housing in 1975 (*Decree 18 1975: The Administrative Reorganisation of the State*, 1975) with a new director (Government of Bahrain, 1975) who was also the director of the Isa Town Office, Mr Isa Sultan Al Thawadi. Housing was relocated a few times to different government organisations, but its role would stay relatively similar. Its main task was to link the state and citizens on the implementation of the housing policy.

Isa Town Office

> We were all one group; did you see the rent collectors which you wrote down? We were all one group, like one family in a house – like the brothers who come to my *majlis*. We considered ourselves one family.[189]

[189] Mubarak Abdulla Al Magribi interview, 20th December 2023 (Al Maghribi, 2023b).

The Isa Town Office was a novel construct within the government and an extension of the Housing and Ownership Department. It was located within the new town to bring the Housing and Ownership Department closer to the Isa Town residents. The office oversaw various roles and operations towards implementing Decree 2 Finance of the Housing and Ownership Project. Except for a British General Manager in the first few years of its operations, it included an all-Bahraini staff, men and women, that expanded the role of government in the implementation of the Housing and Ownership Project. As such, the office aided decision-makers within the office and even the Advisory Committee of the Housing and Ownership Project in deciding to whom the houses should be allocated.[190] The office included members of all strata of society, most of whom also lived within the town. The Isa Town Office was an interesting finding during this research, as unlike the Housing and Ownership Department, it was not announced explicitly in any of the laws or decrees. It was only when I interviewed an Isa Town resident who informed me that he had been a rent collector in the office[191] that I came to know about this organisational structure. I went in search of people who worked in the office and found several key staff. Through oral history interviews, I was able to record the story of the Isa Town Office hierarchy and operations, documenting the earliest street-level bureaucratic offices of the Housing and Ownership Project and providing illuminations on how state–citizen relations were conducted at the first point of contact.

In the next section, this study explores the functions of the office and how it operates within the government structure while highlighting the significance of the office not only in its design but also in the innovative nature of its administrative establishment and organisation. By explaining the origins of the office, I also highlight the fluid nature of the public administrative structure at the time. The origins of the Isa Town Office were closely intertwined with both the Department of Government Finance, which introduced the Housing and Ownership Project and the Department of Labour and Social Affairs,[192] which supervised the Housing directorate where those recruited for the project worked before; they were moved to Isa Town Office.

[190] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, January 22nd, 2024 & Mohammed Hassan & Bibi Baqer bin Radhi interview, 17th & 24th December 2023, & Mubarak Abdulla Al Magribi interview, 20th December 2023 (Al Maghribi, 2023b; Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024; Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).
[191] Mubarak Abdulla Al Magribi interview, 20th December 2023 (Al Maghribi, 2023b).
[192] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, January 22nd, 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).

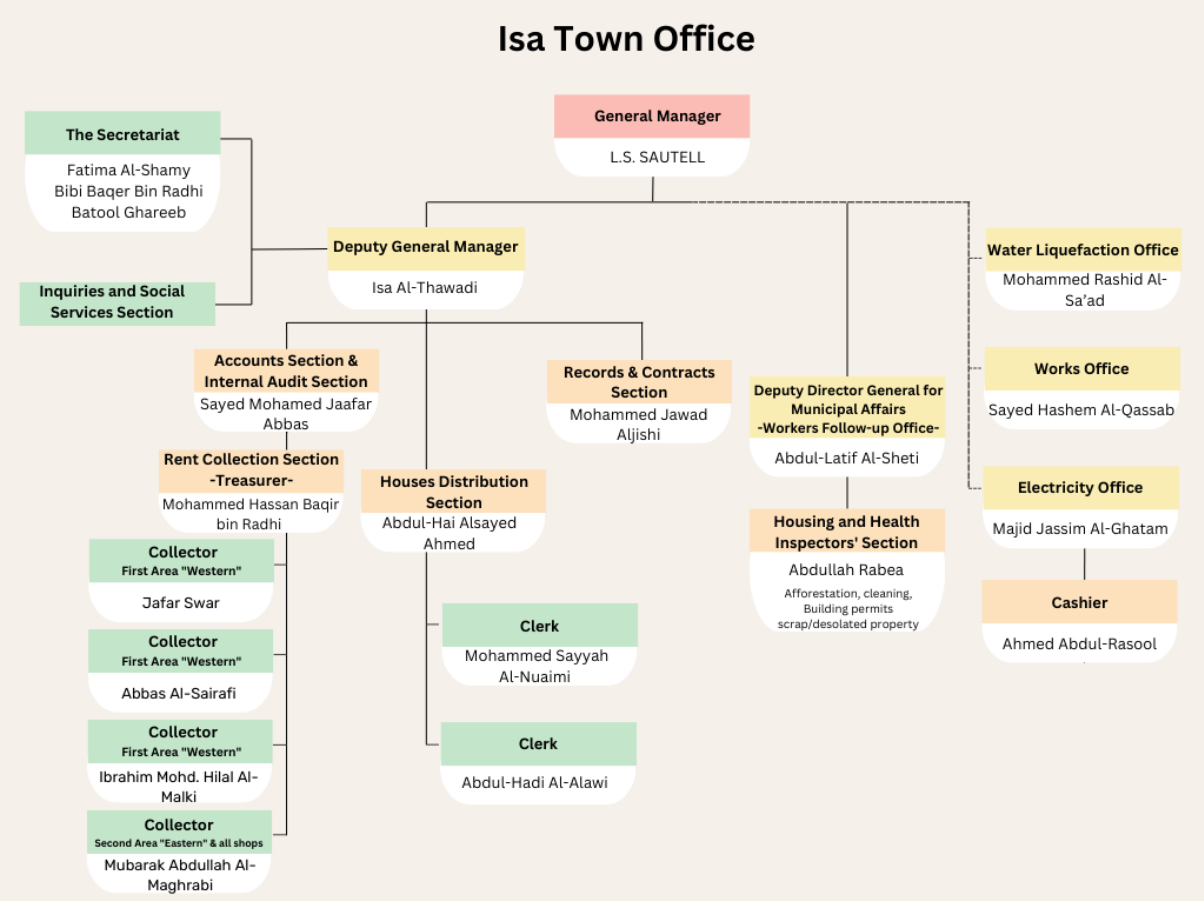


Image 5.9. Isa Town Organisation Chart as drawn from Interviews with Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi and verified by Mubarak Abdulla Al Maghribi and Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed.

The establishment and design of the Isa Town Office were created in a way that brought together everything an Isa Town beneficiary would need to facilitate their move to the new town. It was divided into two major sections, Housing and Municipalities, with representatives of the Electricity, Water, and Works Departments. The Housing Section was the core of the office and was the frontline between the state and the citizens. They handled everything relating to facilitating the choice of housing units, preparing the agreement, and collecting the monthly rent. Accordingly, they were headed by L.S. Sautell, a Brit who was there for a few years before Isa Al Thawadi took over. What stands out about the Isa Town Office is that it housed multiple government departments under one roof to serve the new town residents. Furthermore, it was designed to include all the services a family would need to move and live in the new town, the administrative, financial, legal, as well as municipal. An Isa Town resident would not need to travel beyond the new town, or farther than the Isa Town Office, to access public utilities or municipal services.

Image 5.10. Isa Town Houses in their various stages, with the foundations ready for inspection. Source: BAPCO Energies.

The Housing Section was divided into three core functions: Distribution, Treasury, and Records and Contracts, with a Secretariat which oversaw the smooth operations of the office. The other important function was the municipality, which was headed by Abdul Latif Al Shetty. Abdul Latif was put in charge of the municipal functions of the new town, organising things relating to cleaning, greenery, building permits, and the physical organisation and management of the new town.

Image 5.11. Shaikh Khalifa touring the newly opened Isa Town Office accompanied by Shaikh Mohammed bin Mubarak, Sayed Mahmood Al Alawi. Also in the Picture to the left is CJ Briggs, Wimpey Site Engineer and behind Shaikh Khalifa is, Isa Town Office's first General Manager, L.S. Sautell. Source: Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan Photo Archive.

Distributions Section

This section oversaw distributing the houses after a decision or an order was made towards their entitlement to a house and according to which category by the Housing Advisory Committee, based on how much he earned,[193] a decision was made on which category of housing he could afford. The houses were allocated based on a person's salary,[194] making sure that the house rent would not exceed a third[195] and, under certain exceptions, half of a person's salary.[196] A decision would be made by the committee, and an order would be made to give the family a house in the appropriate category. It would come to the Head of Distributions to execute, where he would allow future residents to choose from several houses within the same category.

Speaking with the Head of Distributions at the Isa Town Office, Mr Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed, about his career in housing, which started around the time Isa Town was being built, he clearly indicates the evolving nature of his role within the Housing and

[193] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, January 22nd, 2024 and Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi interview, 17th & 24th December 2023 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024; Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).
[194] Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radi interview, 17th and 24th December 2023, Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed 22nd January 2024 and Essam Khalaf interview, 15th February 2023 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024; Baqer bin Radhi, 2023; Khalaf, 2023).
[195] Essam Khalaf interview, 15th February 2023 (Khalaf, 2023).
[196] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, January 22nd, 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).

Ownership Department.[197] Mr Abdul Hai, who went on to become the Head of Distributions at the office, was first recruited around 1963. He was hired for his typing skills, but he was also involved with facilitating the work of the George Wimpey Site engineers on-site. The early staff of the Housing and Ownership Department were involved in all elements of the project, such as working in the offices as well as with site engineers regardless of their specialisations; as such, they acquired extensive knowledge of the project and all manner of details related to the new town.[198] Through his work on the site, Mr Abdul Hai gained insight into the spatial elements of the town, the houses, their divisions and types, their locations, and their features. His work with the site engineers taught him about foundations and structures. His knowledge of the homes put him in the way of being the best candidate to communicate with the public on the housing features, and that is how he was appointed as Head of Distributions, as his role necessitated a knowledge of houses, typologies and locations:

> After the construction of the house is completed, they would distribute the houses. They chose me to collect the keys from the company and keep them with me. I had a board with all the keys to the housing units hanging along with the house number. In the past, they would give the person the key to see and choose the house he wants. We did not have a lottery numbering system for the housing allocation. … Whatever recommendation we get from the committee, especially since there were first-category, second-category, and third-category houses.[199]

[197] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, January 22nd, 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).
[198] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, January 22nd, 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).
[199] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, January 22nd, 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).

Image 5.12. Mr. Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed, Head of Distribution at his Isa Town Office, with the House Keys on a Board behind him. Source: Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed Collection.

The grouping and naming of the housing categories were made in such a way that the first category was the lowest and the third category was the highest:

> The first category means two-room houses, the second category was three-room houses, and the third category houses was four-room houses, with a *majlis* (formal receiving room) and a room next to it and two rooms up the stairs. First category: a *majlis* and a bedroom and a corridor inside and a small outdoor courtyard. Second category: three rooms, with a *majlis* and a room downstairs and a room upstairs. Third category: four rooms, with a *majlis* and a room downstairs with a covered terrace; there was an open but covered courtyard and two bedrooms upstairs.[200]

Neither the Head of the Distributions nor the General Manager had a say in which category was allocated to the incoming family; only a recommendation from the Advisory Committee could do that. Mr Abdul Hai, therefore, was an executive whose job was to process the allocation of housing to the incoming Isa Town society. This is how the

[200] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, January 22nd, 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).

Housing and Ownership administrative body observed a measure of separation of duties and powers to eliminate any chances of administrative transgression.

As evident in the conditions defined in the housing laws (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962; Government of Bahrain, 1968, 1967) and as explained by the Head of the Distributions section,[201] the state began to engage with families as single families and not as extended families. The houses in Isa Town were, therefore, assumed to be for nuclear families and were envisaged to house single families. This was a move away from how people were living in older towns, as it presented an opportunity for Bahraini families to own homes independent of their extended families. For most of the families who moved to Isa Town, the freedom to own their houses also, in many cases, led to a reconstruction of the family, where the nuclear family separated from its extension. This was a big change for all members of the families as wives and husbands no longer had to live with their in-laws, children no longer grew up with grandparents and family members, and they had to develop new relations with non-family members.

[201] Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, January 22nd, 2024 (Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).

Treasury

Image 5.13. Mohammed Hassan Baqer Bin Radhi, a visiting citizen and the staff. Khalifa Shaheen, the Cinematographer in the Back. Source: Mohammed Hassan Baqer Bin Radhi.

The Treasury Division of the Isa Town Office oversaw collecting rent from the residents of Isa Town and shopkeepers on a monthly basis. They employed four rent collectors or *jabi*[202]: Mubarak Abdulla Al Maghribi, Jaffar Jabor Swar, Abbas Al Sairafi, and Ebrahim Hilal Mohamed Al Maliki.[203] Each collector carried an identity card to facilitate his movement and his job in collecting rent between the various neighbourhoods.

[202] *Jabi* is a classic Arabic word for a tax or rent collector.

[203] As recorded from Mohammed Hassan bin Radhi Interview 17 &24 December, 2023 (Baqer bin Radhi, 2023)and verified by Mubarak Abdulla Al Maghribi, 20th December, 2023 Interview and Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, 22nd January 2024 (Al Maghribi, 2023b; Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024).

> They divided the rent collectors (*jabi*) into two groups, the first and the second, in reference to the eastern and western neighbourhoods accordingly. This section, the one we are in, is the northern section. It was divided – divided over 2 or 3 sections. They gave me the whole of the eastern section of the town, from this road to just before Jurdab and before those areas.[204]

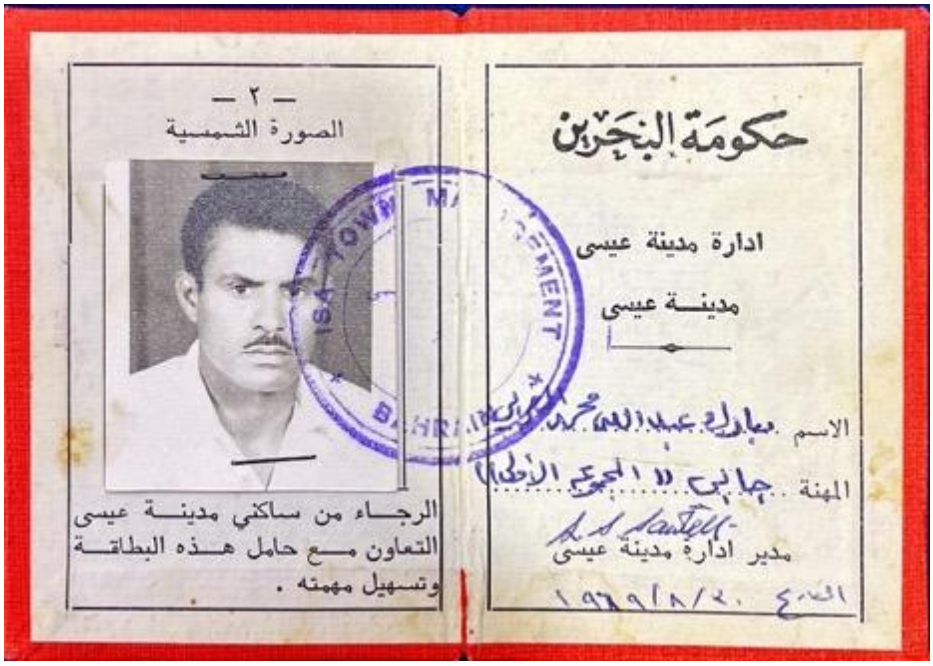


Image 5.14. The Isa Town Identity Card of Mubarak Abdulla Al Maghribi Signed by L.S. Sautell.
Source: Mubarak Abdulla Al Maghribi.

The role of the rent collectors was to collect rent and bring it to their chief, Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, who would count and issue a receipt with the collections to each collector and then deposit the amounts into the bank the following day.[205]

> When I first started working, there were a lot of arrears because many people moved to Isa Town, and no one was paying anything in rent. It was a mess, a mess. So, we drafted letters to the people with their arrears, kindly come to pay, and they would come and shout and tell us off even though the amounts were not more than 6.2 BD. Per month![206]

The Isa Town Office was envisioned to be a complete office, complete with all the equipment needed to run such an important office, which had the responsibility of handling government records, citizen information, and financial and monetary assets. The Isa Town Office was installed with a large room-sized safe to store money and other valuable records:

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[204] Mubarak Abdulla Al Magribi interview, 20th December, 2023 (Al Maghribi, 2023b).
[205] Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, December 17& 24, 2023 (Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).
[206] Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, December 17& 24, 2023 (Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).

> The office had a very large safe, but I do not think there was another one like it in any other department or directorate. I even remember it once locked in one of the staff members inside, which created a frenzy, and then someone opened it. I still remember the safe; I wonder if it is still there or not.[207]

Image 5.15. Shaikh Khalifa Bin Salman Al Khalifa walking through the Isa Town office with L.S. Sautell behind him to the right. The door of the room-sized safe may be seen to the right. Source: Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan Photo Archive.

Mubarak Al Maghribi, a *jabi* (rent collector), would recall fond memories of his rounds to the houses in the eastern section of Isa Town:

[207] Mubarak Abdulla Al Magribi interview, 20th December, 2023 (Al Maghribi, 2023b).

> They knew that I had come to collect the rent, and they recognised my face, so they would call me in and give me *qahwa* (coffee) and water, and they would give me everything.[208]

On how he would collect rent and what he would say to the families, he continues:

> I would tell them the rent. I do not force them to pay. If they do not pay, then that is it. I would write a report after three months have passed and the person has not paid; I would write a report and give it to the management.[209]

He claims that some families would face difficulties in meeting the rent; in this case, after three months of not paying, he would submit a report to the management to take action:

> What I faced was that, at times, people would not pay because of their circumstances, but for those who worked for the government, the rent was deducted directly. But those who did not work but he was responsible for a family, such as a taxi driver who would work for one day and not work the next day, we would go and ask them for the rent, so she would say, my husband does not have this month, so he accumulates arrears.[210]

When asked what would happen if someone did not pay and anyone was ever evicted out of town, no one heard of anyone being evicted from a house for not paying. However, because the town was initially not very popular, the physical distance of the town from the main cities where most of the jobs are teamed with a lack of personal and public transport, along with a widespread circulation of gossip around ghosts and jinns have led to many of the first residents leave and return to their original crammed family homes.[211]

> As I told you, I had the whole eastern part of the town. When people left (the town) and said the water was salty and there were *jinns* in the town and whatnot, some families left their homes in the eastern part, and there were people who came and removed (stuff from the houses) and broke in. May Allah Rest the Soul of Isa Al Thawadi; he put me in charge and told me: 'Mubarak, you take the whole of the eastern block and give me a full report of how many houses were abandoned'. After all of that, the whole world wanted to return after Shaikh Isa, may Allah rest his soul in mercy, announced a discount of 2,000 Bahraini Dinars on the housing unit. So, for those who have paid something, there was very little from the cost of the house remaining. I, for example, had very little to pay after the announcement.[212]

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[208] Mubarak Abdulla Al Magribi interview, 20th December, 2023 (Al Maghribi, 2023b).
[209] Mubarak Abdulla Al Magribi interview, 20th December, 2023 (Al Maghribi, 2023b).
[210] Mubarak Abdulla Al Magribi interview, 20th December, 2023 (Al Maghribi, 2023b).
[211] Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, December 17& 24, 2023 (Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).
[212] Mubarak Abdulla Al Magribi interview, 20th December, 2023 (Al Maghribi, 2023b).

Image 5.16. At the Isa Town Office: (from left) Abbas Al Sairafi, Mohammed Hassan Baqer Bin Radhi, Mohammed Jaffar Abbas, Mohammed Jawad Al Jishi, Mubarak Abdulla Al Maghribi, Redha Al Fardan. Source: Mohammed Hassan Baqer Bin Radhi.

Records and Contracts

Like the other divisions, this section was designed with a specific role – to keep records and contracts for the office. This division's relationship with the public only after he/she benefited from a housing unit. Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi further defines the role of this department:

> The section which kept records of the individual after he received the house. That meant that the person's relationship after receiving the housing unit is primarily with the Records and Contract Department because his relationship with Isa Al Thawadi is over, with Abdul Hai is over, and with Abdul Latif Al Shetty; he has finished with all of them now if he has any reason to follow up he goes to Mohammed Jawad, and he follows up with him.[213]

This was less of an archive and more like a legal department, thought to follow up on any obligatory matter, whether it was between the state and the citizen or the state and another third party on any contractual agreement with the office. On matters relating to the relationship between the citizen and the state, in the case the Isa Town house

[213] Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, December 17& 24, 2023 (Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).

beneficiary failed to pay his rent, it was quite clear that the chances of evacuation were almost unheard of.[214]

Secretariat

> In the Secretariat, we received letters, and we would follow up and type letters; we reported directly to Isa Al Thawadi, the General Manager of the Office.[215]

The Secretariat included a few secretaries and administrative staff who were responsible for office management and the smooth running of the office. They reported to Manager Isa Al Thawadi. They included Bibi Baqer bin Radhi, Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi's younger sister, who were both residents of the town. Among the administrative staff were Batool Ghareeb, who later married Mohammed Jawad Al Jishi (Head of the Records and Contracts Division), and an Egyptian, Fatima Al Shami, who was married to a Bahraini. Over time, Fatima Al Shammi became arguably the senior secretary to Isa Al Thawadi.

Image 5.17. Faces from the Secretariat: (from left sitting) Batool Ghareeb, Bibi Baqer Bin Radhi, Fatima Al Shammi, also in the photo fifth sitting is Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed and in the far end is Mubarak Al Maghribi, Source: Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed.

[214] Mubarak Abdulla Al Magribi interview, 20th December 2023, Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, December 17& 24, 2023, Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed interview, 22nd January 2024 (Al Maghribi, 2023b; Al Sayed Ahmed, 2024; Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).

[215] Bibi bin Radhi in Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, December 17& 24, 2023 (Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).

This group of secretaries assisted all other departments, such as the Distribution Department, when there were distributions for the houses. Before there was an official social research department, they also assisted the social researchers who were trying to prioritise distribution to the most in need:

> When there was a load, when they needed to do a stocktaking of all the requests for houses when we approach the distribution of houses, so they needed to do this in a limited time frame, so we would go to help, myself, Batool Ghareeb, Fatima Al Shami, Latifa Al Najjar and Badriya, the wife of Ebrahim Al Shahabi.[216]

When asked what exactly the role of the social investigation was, Bibi Baqer bin Radhi[217] reflects that it was an important pretext for the distribution of houses; as the houses were becoming popular, it was important to submit a report on the living conditions of the families applying for a house. It was an important step in assessing and understanding the applicant family's level of need for the house. The families would have come from Muharraq, Manama, Riffa or one of the remote villages scattered around Bahrain.

> They would give you a form for social research for the house you are to visit. You would visit the head of the house, and you are asked to assess the number of rooms, living conditions, number of people living, and construction conditions. We would write all our observations and remarks. They will ask you if you find him eligible or not, and if you believe he is, you will write it down. If the house is okay, I will not write that he does not deserve it; I just will not remark on it. But most of those we visited were living in deplorable conditions, especially in the villages.[218]

Therefore, the role of the Advisory Committee and the social investigation is clear. Based on income and other conditions, the Advisory Committee would decide who is eligible for a house and in which category, according to the different sizes and the various building costs of the house. The social investigation would help in deciding who to prioritise:

> The committee comes first; the social investigation would come later (when they are ready to distribute).[219]

The distinction between the two roles between the committee and the office is also an interesting separation of power and authority in some ways away from the office. In this way, the office is truly the operational and execution arm for housing, while the decision-making for the office is done outside. A matter which may be thought to reduce the chances of corruption in the office was highlighted as a possibility when the worker's homes were distributed in the late 1950s (Khuri, 1980, p. 121). More importantly, the social investigation, which was done to prioritise distribution, further shows the widening

[216] Bibi bin Radhi in Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, December 17& 24, 2023 (Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).
[217] Bibi bin Radhi in Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, December 17& 24, 2023 (Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).
[218] Bibi bin Radhi in Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, December 17& 24, 2023 (Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).
[219] Bibi bin Radhi in Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, December 17& 24, 2023 (Baqer bin Radhi, 2023).

role of government operations, which were proactive and widening their outreach to the public and not just reacting to demands and the processing of day-to-day services.

Image 5.18. A Farewell Party at the Office: Employees of Different Levels at the Isa Town Office gather around a table for a farewell party of Mr Mohammed Jaffar Abbas, who was leaving for a new job at Aluminum Bahrain (ALBA). In the Photo is Fatima Al Shammi, Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed, Mubarak Al Maghribi, Isa A Thawadi and Mohammed Jawad Al Jishi and others. Source: Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed.

Significance of the Isa Town Office

After a thorough study of the legal text and tools which governed Bahrain's Housing and Ownership Project and an outline of the execution arm of the government in the implementation of this project, we get a sense of not only the significance of the project but also how the Government of Bahrain reorganised itself to implement an ambitious project to the Bahraini society. Also, the Isa Town Office, as an administrative branch of the Housing and Ownership Directorate at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, was the face of the state with regard to the citizen and his first and last point of contact with regard to Isa Town housing. It cumulated within its organisation representatives from all the key and vital organisations to anyone who was going to move or live in the new town. Although the Office shifted to a much larger organisation with the establishment of the Ministry of Housing, it did not capture the availability and accessibility to all the basic services needed in housing, such as municipalities, water, electricity, and works.

Furthermore, the absence of any real documentation on the office until now, and it only resides in the memories of those who knew it well by working in it, such as Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, Abdul Hai Al Sayed Ahmed, Bibi Baqer bin Radhi, and Mubarak Abdulla Al Maghribi raises an important question: Why was the institutional memory of the Isa Town administration obliterated and why was something which was an effective part of a such a highly publicised project almost non-existent in any documentation or report?

> The most important outcome of the Isa Town project is the great experience that Bahrain has been able to base its work on within the social housing sector. Isa Town was the first housing town in Bahrain, and the human, engineering, and technical expertise from building on what was achieved in this project contributed to the implementation of other projects in the form of separate towns and cities in various governorates of the Kingdom. Isa Town has become, as we have mentioned, a model to be followed to unify efforts between the relevant ministries and government agencies to provide a residential town/city with integrated facilities and services.[220]

Bahrain's Deputy Prime Minister of Bahrain, Shaikh Khalid bin Abdulla Al Khalifa, who also was the first Minister of Housing in Bahrain (1975–2002), acknowledges the innovative practices which the Isa Town housing project introduced at the administrative level on a human and technical level and that it was a basis for the following operations and achievements of housing and town planning in Bahrain. Although the collaborated efforts of ministries are highlighted, not much is remembered about the administrative organisation of the Housing and Ownership Project, neither the directorate nor the Isa Town Office. The only thing that remains to be said of this innovative administration is that it was, as the saying goes in Arabic: 'A grain of salt which melted', which remains, to this day, a beacon for administrative development and innovation.

A state in action: What did the administrative process signify?

This chapter examined the administrative process in which the Housing and Ownership Project was conceived and executed. Therefore, it provides an understanding of how such a project was established and implemented while highlighting its significance. The new government practice of the late 1950s and the 1960s in Bahrain was rooted in legal, if not constitutional, innovation. This was important because the laws, decrees and announcements that the Bahraini government made and enacted were seen as fundamental sources of legitimacy of its authority over its own polity (Khuri, 1980, p. 218). More importantly, during that period, it was imperative that the Bahraini state illustrate its ability to take charge of its internal affairs and prove its ability to maintain its state of

[220] Deputy Prime Minister of Bahrain (Shaikh Khalid bin Abdulla Al Khalifa) interview, 6th July 2023, (Al Khalifa, 2023).

internal security to legitimise its claims on its own sovereignty and, therefore, ensure its independence.[221] The Housing and Ownership Project and the ensuing new town construction were two sides of a similar coin and were examples of a vital project which was introduced to exemplify that ability. As I examine the various elements of the legal and bureaucratic framework that were created to govern and develop public housing, I have also shown how the Bahraini state defined statesmanship and what it means to be Bahraini. It was announcing its own authority and introducing the conditions of the new relationship between state and citizens over housing (*Decree 2 Finance of 1962: Housing and Ownership Project*, 1962) far from any prior feudal 'tribal' estate system (Khuri, 1980, p. 100). The relationship was novel and unique in that it put housing beneficiaries in direct contractual relationships with the state through either its new departments or the municipal councils. At times, it even put housing beneficiaries in direct contact with the ruler of Bahrain himself.[222] This was how the Bahraini state abolished old systems and constructed a new one in which authority was centralised and legitimised by laws, decrees and contractual agreements, which enforced its control and power over its own polity. The Housing and Ownership Project and its related decrees were, therefore, a prime example of Isa Town, where it was first enacted.

Housing in Bahrain, as a government practice, may be traced back to the mid to late 1950s with the building of workers houses in Manama and Muharraq, formalised by a set of legal tools developed in the 1960s discussed in this chapter, all of which happened almost 13 years before the establishment Ministry of Housing in 1975. The legal documents which start with the original Decree 2 Finance of 1962 and its accompanying Executive Regulations and Explanatory Note and the ensuing legal documents of the Explanatory Note of the Ownership Agreement of 1967, the Isa Town Decree of 1968, and the housing agreement each represent important legal documents which helped shape and define the Housing and Ownership Project. Together, these legal documents and tools highlight new government practices, aspirations, and a vision for the future. Based on that argument, it was made to further strengthen the narrative on housing and the state and housing as a government practice in Bahrain, as a practice of state–citizen relationships, and, more importantly, as the blueprint for future government operational and institutional development. The administrative process was developed and mass-communicated through a combination of tools, as I show in the following chapter. There was a general need to develop new tools and mass communication with the public so that administrative and political authority could be known to Bahraini society. As the Wallis Report of 1965 highlights, there was a time in Bahrain's administrative history of

[221] FCO 8/507 & FCO 8/511.

[222] This was highlighted in most, if not all, interviews. All Isa Town residents spoke of the new town as Shaikh Isa's Town and many had vivid memories of Shaikh Isa, some even highlighted that this was the reason it was named, 'city of the great', as 'Isa Al Atheem 'or 'Isa The Great' was an epithet which was used to refer to Shaikh Isa in mass communication articles when talking about his 'immortal' town, such as in *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 144, January 1964, p. 4.

disintegration in the central authority. This resulted in a general sense among government employees as well as the public of not knowing who was doing what, for whom and to what purpose:

> Criticism is therefore directed at the mythical 'they', albeit with a sense of guilt because of their inborn feeling that power is indivisible. (This sense of guilt has nothing to do with being afraid, in the normal sense, to speak their minds). For the moment most people seem to be able to keep this affection for the ruler and the criticism of some of the methods and practices in separate compartments of their minds, but there is the obvious danger that the boundary between them will break down and criticism of practices will become criticism of the person of the ruler. This is what nobody wants. What is desired is that 'they' should stand up and be known and become henceforth the government (for all workaday purposes) of Bahrain. At present, as someone remarked, 'What we have is a secret society which plots to do us good'.[223]

The mass announcement, publication of legal decrees, and the formation and strengthening of government structures from the inside clearly defined state–citizen relations as well as channels of accountability and transparency. They brought with them a modern government practice. The general policy of mass communication, which I discuss in detail in the following chapter, was important to both the political and administrative process because the Bahraini state had to define and announce itself so that people knew what it was doing and to engage the public in the administrative and political process, all of which were important elements in building state legitimacy.

Moreover, the mass-communicated political agenda was put in place to share the actions and intentions of the political and administrative processes with the public. The Housing and Ownership Project, as well as the construction of the new town, were among the most prominent public gestures the government undertook in the 1960s. The project, with all its tools of organisation and mass communication, as I illustrate in this chapter and elaborate further on in the next chapter, is to show who the 'they' were – eventually defined as the state of Bahrain. The construction of the new town in 1960s Bahrain was also the construction of the administrative body. It was designed with multiple purposes, not least to publicise and legitimise its authority. As such, it was a project that aided in the construction of domestic sovereignty and also the recognition of the state as a capable and independent entity able to manage its affairs.

[223] FCO 8/511, C.A.G. Wallis, 'Proposal for Systems of Government and Administration in Bahrain, February 10th, 1965, in P.10 &11.

Chapter 6 – This is Bahrain: Isa Town and the Images of Modern Bahrain

Introduction

> 'It's official! His Highness the ruler opens Isa Town to the World'.[224]

During the formative years of Isa Town, the various modes of images created on it and their use in mediatising its related events were integral parts in the development of the new town and a part of its story. As Bahrain's new town was ready to be presented to the world, the political body which created it was fully aware of the value of its visual representation. Certain spatial developments within it played a major role in the symbolic imagery for Bahrain and its government. They were circulated to promote new images for Bahrain, its ruler and its forming government, and it often did so through the mediatisation of state engagements with the new town. Inasmuch as the new town provided new opportunities for the Bahraini society, it played an equally significant role in illustrating the images of its modernising society and its evolving political leadership, to its citizens, to its allies, to the world and, indeed, to its new self. The new town and its modern facilities, I argue, were transformative grounds for society as well as the Bahraini political leadership, and the imagery associated with it portrayed objectives and meanings which were mass communicated to the public. They were put in circulation using new communication platforms to serve various aims and purposes, and in this chapter, I illustrate how.

In the previous two chapters, I discussed the elements of the new town that aided in the social transformation and how it was a significant moment in history for the lower and middle classes of Bahrain. This served to illustrate how the move to the new town and the use of its modern spatial provisions aided in the social transformation. Following that, I examined the administrative and legal processes in which this move was organised while highlighting the new relationship that materialised between the state and citizens on housing, all the while portraying how it was the start of something which has had an enduring legacy to this day. In addition to these two dimensions, this chapter brings forth a study of the various modes of images which were circulated and communicated through highly controlled mass media channels for the new town, through which the Bahraini state was portraying its new political identity. Furthermore, this chapter examines the messages of mass media to show how they contributed to the weaving of a new political narrative for Bahrain, both locally and externally and how together they were meant to construct an image of the new political process and the leadership behind it.

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[224] *The Islander*, Vol. 30, No. 14, 20th November 1968, BAPCO Energies.

The images for Isa Town can largely be examined through the images themselves and the mediums through which they were put in circulation. Also, they may be examined through what they represented as well as their promotion of architectural symbols, and, finally, through the images of the events and celebrations of the new town. Therefore, the study of images is divided into three modes of representation, accordingly: first, the different types of images which were constructed for the new town, which includes both visual mediums such as photographic and cinematographic images, images for magazine covers and the written text as published in a limited number of newspapers and government publications; second, I examine images of key architectural symbols which were created for the new town and how they, too, were created to visualise and mass communicate various messages, and; third, I study the images associate with various events which were developed by the political authority and how the use of spectacle aided in the creation of a new visual illustration for the new modern state. In this study, I have found that together they represented a rich opportunity to examine what the state was doing and explore some of its key motives. I show how Isa Town and some of its iconic amenities, other than those discussed in the previous chapters, aided in the construction of a modern image of Bahrain to prove their capability. All of which highlight how the political body was trying through grand visualisation to project what Clifford Geertz described as: 'the power of grandeur to organise the world' (Geertz, 1980, p. 102).

To understand the various modes of images created for Isa Town, it is important to first understand where, when and how they were publicised. More specifically, what was the connection of the housing celebrations to the ruler's accession ceremonies, because that is largely how and where housing and new town development were politically instrumentalised by the political leadership. The accession ceremonies were generally state celebrations in which the anniversary of the ruler's accession to the throne was celebrated, and for the Bahraini state, they were also an opportunity to announce and promote state achievements. Since the start of Shaikh Isa's reign, there had been a surge in both the development of vital infrastructure projects and the state events to celebrate their initiation and completion. The accession ceremonies were not new to Shaikh Isa's reign, but within it, they did evolve into large events of state spectacle. State ceremonies or 'spectacle', which are discussed in further detail later in the chapter, were designed to send a message and further fortify the political domain and illustrate its process. These events were well attended by the ruler, government officials, as well as a wide presence from the public.

The rise in state celebrations during Shaikh Isa's reign might have made him more visible and brought him closer to his subjects, which to him seemed to fulfil a purpose similar, if not better, to what the British administrators were advising with constitutional innovations, but through an altogether different medium. This is clearly portrayed in his presence in the extensive images of spatial developments which illustrated the construction of vital infrastructure projects such as the building of model towns and

villages with modern dwelling units, expansion of infrastructure, facilities, roads, and schools, as well as the creation of alternative industries to expand and diverse the local economy and increase job opportunities for Bahrainis. In this section, I highlight how the delivery of the housing portfolio started to develop strong links to the annual accession ceremonies. As with other key government projects, announcements on housing and eventually the new town orbited around the Shaikh Isa's accession ceremonies. It is, thus, highly notable how news on the new town was strategically announced around Shaikh Isa's accession ceremonies, which provided grand images, illustrations, and news about housing and new town achievements.[225]

Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa's first accession ceremony, 'Eid Al Julous',[226] was held on the 16th of December 1962[227], after the customary forty-day mourning period after the death of his father. The first accession anniversary included the celebrations of several government achievements, and housing was one of them. It was around that first accession ceremony that housing ownership distributions took place as per the stipulations of the Housing and Ownership Decree of 1962. As a result, 285 Bahraini families were granted houses for ownership[228] in Manama and Muharraq. Furthermore, it was in that very same ceremony, on the 20th of December 1962, that the Chief of Government Finance announced the government's intention to build a modern new town. These ceremonies were not only interesting in and of their own but also in how they came to be connected to housing/new town announcements and how they were also extensively mediatised, which will be discussed further later in the chapter. As crowd-amassing events, the accession ceremonies were extensively visualised in various publications to illustrate the ruler's popularity. The following table connects accession ceremonies and news on housing or new town development, to further prove how they were used strategically to promote the ruler and the government's achievements:

[225] That is not to say that news on the new town and housing was only announced around the accession ceremonies, but in the first ten years of Shaikh Isa's rule, there was always a housing or new town related announcement around the time of the ceremony which further strengthen the link between housing and the ruler's political vision/programme.

[226] The accession ceremony may be compared with the coronation ceremonies. Unlike coronation ceremonies, which entail a bestowal of a crown or the investiture of a monarch with regal powers through an outward sign, Shaikh Isa's accession ceremonies comprised of a symbolic pledge of allegiance which were often illustrated by the gathering of a crowd outside or within a palace or otherwise in a formally held state ceremony.

[227] The year 1962 was the first year December 16th was celebrated as an accession day, and it is linked to Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa. The national day celebrations of Bahrain are now celebrated on the 16th of December of every year; it is interesting to note that the day is connected specifically Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa. It is the date which was marked following a forty-day mourning period after the death of his father on November 2nd, 1961.

[228] The houses were a combination of new and old houses, which were by the government built from the late 1950s onwards and were commonly known in Bahrain as the workers' houses.

Event	Date	Occasion
Shaikh Isa's Accession Ceremony	16th December 1961	Celebration of Shaikh Isa's rule
Promulgation of Decree 2 Finance of 1962 regarding the establishment of the Housing and Ownership Project	11th September 1962	
Shaikh Isa's First Accession Ceremony	20th December 1962	• Distribution of 285 Houses for Ownership under the New Housing and Ownership Decree in Manama and Muharraq • Announcement of government intent to build a new modern town
Shaikh Isa's Second Accession Ceremony	16th December 1963	Setting of the Foundation Stone Ceremony of Isa Town
Shaikh Isa's Third Accession Ceremony	7th December 1964 24th December 1964	• The visit of the Chief of Government Finance to Isa Town with the model Houses in the Background • The setting of the Foundation stone for two model Villages of Jau and Askar

Shaikh Isa's Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Accession Ceremonies	December 1965 December 1966 December 1976	• News reports and publications showing progress on the new town in *Huna Al Bahrain*[229] *& the* Weekly *Star* • Photos of the Shaikh Published with Isa Town in Background
Shaikh Isa's Seventh Accession Celebration	November 1968 (The event was held before the exact date of the accession ceremony because, on the 16th of December 1968, the holy month of Ramadan was observed)	• The Inauguration of Isa Town

Table 6.1. Housing/new town announcements and the accession ceremonies

Promoting public housing in Shaikh Isa's accession celebrations communicated the Shaikh's commitment to a social contract with his citizens. Housing and new town development were part of a wider group of public projects and initiatives which were targeted at bettering the lives of citizens. The consistency with which they were celebrated annually, and the timing of their celebrations exemplified their importance to the government programme. They were a significant part of the political process and were at the heart of the state modernisation project, which eventually contributed to the social transformation of Bahrain. This took the place of constitutional innovation and a more representative government, which the British administrators in Bahrain seemed to support. Later, they acknowledged its futility in a place that was too small, too disparate, and not big enough to achieve real democratic representation.[230] And therefore, Shaikh Isa's endorsement of the housing programme and the celebrations associated with it provided an illustration of a different kind of political process from what was considered typical by Western standards.

Housing, through its connection to state accession ceremonies, therefore, marked an important annual meeting between the Shaikh and his citizens. Shaikh Isa capitalised on them to disseminate important messages to his citizens through the creation and dissemination of images, both within and outside state events. Through various visual

[229] Here is Bahrain is a literal translation from Arabic to English of the title of the government-published broadcasting magazine (1956–2011). What originally started as a print of the radio Broadcast Programme developed into a full government publication and today, along with the BAPCO newspapers, are important records in the absence of other independent news publications and even archives.
[230] FCO 8/507 & FCO 8/511.

tools, images of the new town, its architecture hallmarks and its events were mobilised to portray the ruler and citizens in ceremonial events, which were designed to strengthen the image of the ruler, gain allegiance and fortify public faith in his political process. In the following parts, I will examine each and highlight some of the most significant in each mode.

Part one: Images - the new town and the representation of modern Bahrain

As Bahrain's first modern new town, the government – with the help of BAPCO – extensively photographed the new town in various phases before, during, and after its construction and inhabitation. Various forms of visualisation played a key role in the political instrumentalization of the new town. This is especially the case since the photographic images of state events found at BAPCO were ultimately connected to Bahrain's need to promote a new image for itself and presented an illustration of the state to the public. Both of which were a result of the state of local politics in the late 1950s when the state of internal situation was disrupted and heightened by the growing tensions between the government and the Committee of National Union (CNU), Bahrain's largest nationalist political movement of the twentieth century. The CNU was formed in Bahrain in 1953 and was ultimately dissolved in 1956 with the arrest, trial, and exile of three of its most prominent members to the remote island of St. Helena (Al Shehabi, 2019). The demands of the CNU, which started slowly with demands of the establishment of a trade union and being a general messenger of grievances (Abdulla, 2016), stemmed from some of the most pressing and valid public concerns but slowly grew into wider demands and violent escalations and threats by the CNU to the ruler.[231]

As a result of growing tensions, any local newspaper or movement which was seen to promote Arab nationalism and or criticise British Imperialism in the region was prevented from publication. The confrontation was not just between the CNU and their supporters and the government; both the British administration and foreign firms (such as Gray McKenzie) were also under attack (Khuri, 1980).[232] January 1957, shortly after the dissolution of the CNU, saw the birth of two important weekly publications. On 9th January 1957, BAPCO's Arabic Newspaper published its first newspaper, almost five years after the first publication of BAPCO'S weekly English company paper, *The Islander*. Furthermore, on the 31st of January 1957, the government's Department of Information Affairs issued a printed weekly magazine of the radio broadcast programme *Huna Al*

[231] Based on letters between the CNU to the Ruler, 14th July 1956 and from the Ruler to CNU, 22 July 1956 both published to the public on 22nd of July 1956.
[232] For more on CNU, see Fuad I. Khuri (1980) *Tribe and State in Bahrain: The Transformation of Social and Political Authority in an Arab State and* Hamad E. Abdulla (2016) *Sir Charles Belgrave and the Rise and Fall of Bahrain's National Union Committee: January 1953 to April 1957*.

Bahrain.[233] All of these publications were intended to mass communicate messages for or on behalf of the government to the public.

BAPCO's PR initiatives, which included the establishment of an Arabic newspaper, *The Weekly Star*, to accompany the company's English newspaper, *The Islander*, were intended to act as olive branches between BAPCO, the ruler and the people of Bahrain to show that the company cared and was concerned with the advancement of all of Bahrain and its people.[234] Also, the company invested heavily in developing its ability to photograph and cinematise local events, which were also used by the government's Department of Information Affairs for *Huna Al Bahrain*. In addition to reports in *Huna Al Bahrain*[235], *The Weekly Star*, and *The Islander*, and all the photographic images[236] which were produced for them, BAPCO's newsreels, produced in English or Arabic, sometimes both, also provided new channels to represent Bahrain as an emerging state and the actions of its ruler. The announcements, photos, and newsreels are aimed at projecting a sense of accomplishment, achievement, and transformation to the widest possible reader and viewer base. The newsreels would be shown in a monthly news roundup at movie theatres and as well as in film caravans by BAPCO's Public Relations Film Unit, which would travel to remote villages and towns in the evenings to show their newsreels. Therefore, this ensured a wider audience base, especially for those who do not read or those who may not be able to access any editions of *Huna Al Bahrain* or the BAPCO Newspapers. Newsreels produced by BAPCO played an important role for the Government of Bahrain before the country established its television broadcasting channel in 1972. Newsreels were, therefore, not only an important tool, but they were the equivalent of the government newscast.[237]

These news publications coincided well in the early 1960s with the beginning of the new era of infrastructure and spatial expansion, which was a continuation of many of the foundations which were put in place during the reign of Shaikh Salman but materialised rapidly and more concretely during the reign of his son, Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa. This presented an opportunity for Shaikh Isa to create a new image for himself as the new ruler and construct, through a series of images, symbols, and state ceremonies, a new image for himself as well as to construct a new identity for the new state, which was experiencing significant social transformation. This was done through limited and controlled publications as well as other imaging of symbols and events.

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[233] صقر بن عبدالله المعاودة، 'الصحافة البحرينية: تاريخ وعطاء'، ٢٠١٤ مطبعة الإتحاد، مملكة البحرين

[234] Interview with Mr Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan, 26th June & 5th July, 2023 (Al Khan, 2023).

[235]There was an agreement between BAPCO and the Bahrain Government on the use of BAPCO's images for *Huna Al Bahrain*. Therefore, it was BAPCO's photographers who were taking the photos for *Huna Al Bahrain* and not the Government Broadcasting Department

[236] It is important to highlight that BAPCO's PR department supplied *Huna Al Bahrain* with photographic images to use in its publications. Especially in the early years of *Huna Al Bahrain*'s publication, until around the early 1970s.

[237] Interview with Khalifa Shaheen, 10th July 2023 (Shaheen, 2023).

BAPCO made it possible for the government to use the latest technology to promote its image and represent itself to the public, which became the basis for a longstanding mass communication policy, especially one which is organised as well as comprehensive. Khalifa Shaheen, BAPCO's cinematographer, explains:

> BAPCO was speaking to the people and to the Amir and the government. So it produced items about almost anything, and if there is anything that has to do with the Amir, it comes first; some of the things I made the whole items of usually contained five, four or five, or six items each of two minutes but sometimes there is one item only and that's when the Amir goes out visiting other states in the Gulf or in the world that will take a complete one newsreel which contains all his visits into these countries which would be about 20 minutes or 25 minutes. It makes sense, you know, that BAPCO was producing all this and spending all this money to please the Amir and the government. Even the head of the government is followed by BAPCO cameramen and photographers.[238]

On how the newsreels started, Mr Shaheen continues:

> BAPCO started it very early, before I came to the film unit. BAPCO used to engage Americans and English to come and make documentary films about Bahrain. That gave them the idea that they must do something because there was no information about the area. There was no information about the whole Gulf! There was nothing! Nothing! UAE, Saudi Arabia, there was nothing, except Saudi had ARAMCO; they televised in black and white, and it was only wrestling or cowboy films in black and white, but BAPCO engaged other film-makers to come and do one aspect, or one film, or one job and go such as one called John Underwood, he came and made a long film titled: 'Land of the Living'. And it was something about what is here, about Dilmun and that era. BAPCO spent the money on this film. Then they saw there was a potential benefit or something that would be good for Bahrain to continue this work, but to continue this, we must prepare ourselves with equipment and staff. So, they started at the beginning with something called a news magazine, which only went on for a short time, like six months or one year. Then the idea came, meeting all together to change it into a Bahrain newsreel.[239]

Mr Shaheen claims that BAPCO, through financial investment in developing its technical and human capacity, played the role of the Ministry of Information, and it was through this foundation that the Ministry of Information and Bahrain TV were later developed and that what they started was a continuation of what BAPCO started almost two decades before that.[240] These newsreels were the early forms of news broadcasting produced in Bahrain before the national TV's daily news broadcast, which was introduced by Bahrain

[238] Interview with Khalifa Shaheen, 10th July 2023 (Shaheen, 2023).
[239] Interview with Khalifa Shaheen, 10th July 2023 (Shaheen, 2023).
[240] Interview with Khalifa Shaheen, 10th July 2023 (Shaheen, 2023).

TV in 1972. It is through these newsreels that we can view cinematic representations of Bahrain during its modern history. They provide interesting details which allow us to visualise people and what they are doing. It is through the newsreels on Isa Town that we learn the names of some of the George Wimpey site engineers, but we are able to know what they looked like, which in itself is an important record in recognising people in some of BAPCO's Videos and, also, being able to connect and confirm some of the vital data around the new town.

This made BAPCO's Public Relations Department not only a partner to the government in how it contributed through the broadcasting of its publications but, more importantly, through the production and supply of photographic images. It played a major role in the construction of a new foundation for mass communication, which translated into the development of a state communication policy first through the government's Department of Information Affairs and later through the Ministry of Information. BAPCO, therefore, was a major illustrator of state representation through the creation and dissimilation of visual images of the modern Bahraini state.[241] This is especially the case since all the photos which were used in both BAPCO's newspapers as well as the government broadcasting magazine, *Huna Al Bahrain*, were taken by BAPCO. In the following section I discuss how the government used these photographic images in its magazine to promote a modern image for Bahrain.

[241] Interview with Mr Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan, 26th June & 5th July, 2023 (Al Khan, 2023). It was Mr. Abdulla Al Khan, former BAPCO Public Relations Photographer, who explained this important puzzle in why BAPCO invested in the Public Relations Department, and it was through these series of interviews with him that I have obtained a direct connection between what happened in Abadan with the nationalisation of AIOC in 1951 and the expulsion of British staff of which many came to work in oil companies in the region including BAPCO. I came to understand that the negotiations between Mosaddegh's Government and the British Petroleum Company and the reluctant involvement of the United States Government in these negotiations (who needed British support for the Korean War) seemed to have taught the Standard Oil Company of California, BAPCO's founding company, a lesson.

Huna Al Bahrain and the illustration of the modern Bahraini state

Image 6.1. (left) *Huna Al Bahrain* publishes a photo of the proposed township as envisioned by George Wimpey, July 1963, Source: BACA Archives; (right) *The Weekly Star* publishes the same photo, 24th July 1963.

In the previous section, I discussed the various modes of communication through which the images were circulated. The various news platforms were created to represent the state visually as well as through written text. In this section, I look specifically at how the various publications, whether the government's *Huna Al Bahrain* or BAPCO's newspapers and newsreels, were developed to help the government to communicate with the public, which further aided in the illustration of a modern image for the state and its ruler. In this section, I focus specifically on *Huna Al Bahrain* since both of BAPCO's publications and their newsreels only served to echo the government announcements published in the government's magazine.[242] Between December 1962 and January 1969 (shortly after the inauguration), there were more than sixteen news announcements made on Isa Town in *Huna Al Bahrain* Magazine alone. The announcements varied between news reports on events around the new town, state and public officials' visits to the construction site, an outline and visual sketches of the new town, specifications and technical details on the new town, various housing-related reports written by officials seeming to highlight the achievement of Isa Town, to the more practical announcements related to housing types and prices. Many of these announcements happened around Shaikh Isa's accession anniversary, around the 16th of December, alluding again to the socio-political nature of

[242] This is something which I inferred when comparing various news reports across the various news reports I focused on for this study, but it requires further investigation. It would be interesting to investigate this further in another study and looking across a wider representation of national news reports in *Huna Al Bahrain* and the BAPCO newspapers, especially since I have found the reporting style to be different even when the content was largely similar.

the Housing and Ownership Project, confirming its strong political roots for Bahrain. All of which explains the large amount of publicity given to the project, not just in words but also in visual imagery within the reports.

Huna Al Bahrain started to publish aerial photos of the new town as early as July 1963; at the time, the whole construction site was nothing but a flat desert site. The aerial photos themselves tell the story of not only the progress of the new town but of the age of aeroplanes or the 'age of flying',[243] which was made possible by the recent opening of the new airport terminal on the 21st of December 1961. Therefore, the aerial photo was intended not just to show progress but rather to show the modernity of the whole project through a new angle, which would not have been possible before that age. It was intended not only to show achievement but rather to impress the viewer with the capacity and aptitude of modernity that the government was able to achieve. Ensuring to any spectator, whether local or foreign, the Bahraini government's ability to accomplish and produce a matter of great importance to any emerging state, trying to gain the trust of its people its ability to move with modern times and technology.

Image 6.2. *Huna Al Bahrain* news reports on Isa Town left: November 1964; right: December 1964, *Huna Al Bahrain*, Bahrain Department of Information Affairs.

Since the town was aimed to provide not just modern housing facilities for low to middle-income families, it was visualised to include a wide range of facilities such as those

[243] *Weekly Star*, Issue 1, Year 6, 3rd January 1962, BAPCO Energies.

Bahrain has not seen elsewhere, dual carriageways, a town centre for shopping, a stadium, maternity wards, schools and so on. But the way in which these were presented to the public via artists' sketches provided by the town's construction firm, George Wimpey, Ltd., as well as BAPCO's photos of what was seen as new, seems to show them as transformative elements to be brought forward in the new designs and facilities. The joining of photographic images of the houses in the new town, and where there was no progress, supplemented these photos with artists' renditions of the central square, the stadium, the maternity ward, and the schools, all drawn in black and white to fill people's imagination of the new town. The combination of the two images was intended to provide an image of the promise as well as confirm achievement, marking the government's capacity to deliver on these promises.

More importantly, these images aim to construct a new narrative around modernity and an ideal new world. A study of these artists' renderings of Isa Town was later published in the government magazine and the BAPCO newspaper. There is a stark difference between the drawing and the reality of Bahrain, especially when we look at the dress of the people. The artist, presumably employed by Wimpey, drew it for men in Panama hats and suits and women in short-shift dresses in a far-removed scene of any reality within the thriving souks of Muharraq and Manama. Even some of the shop names were written in English. The hexagonal shaded ornamental pergolas, whose shape was to become a symbol for Isa Town in the early publications and before the creation of the gate, were also seen to have branches falling through them and people borrowing shade below them in an idealistic scene which defies the reality of Isa Town's desert surroundings.

Image 6.3. A George Wimpey perspective drawing of the proposed Town Centre, Source: BAPCO Energies.

Huna Al Bahrain, along with BAPCO's newspapers, engaged the public's imagination on the new town with a combination of the artist's perspective as well as photos, until it started to show them the reality of it with real-life images. It wove the story of Isa Town from the imaginative to its reality. It is also through these photos that we are shown notable Isa Town residents, important milestones and events, and the government in action. All these visual depictions slowly introduced us to important characters both in Isa Town and the government- people who were important to the development of the new town, and through them, we get a sense of the importance and placement of the new town in the government's priority agenda. Bahrain as a state was showing its proactive steps towards modernity, especially vis-à-vis its neighbouring countries:

> Bahrain is one of the very few countries that has thought about reviving a new residential city that will ease residential pressure on the main cities and provide its residents with a wide opportunity for comfortable living and a happy life.[244]

But as other news reports are published, other aims and objectives highlight Bahrain's intent in attracting foreign attention and recognition; the state was viewing itself as a pioneer of some sort in relation to other states and clearly showing the ruler's vision in such an undertaking:

> The project has had a great echo and impact in international circles, as the establishment of new, self-contained residential cities is something that some other countries have recently turned to with the aim of dispersing overcrowded populations from the main cities, which leaves no room for any development or a chance to benefit from empty spaces on any side or another. Internally, comfortable homes and a healthy family atmosphere are prepared for the country's people, which will (ultimately) encourage life along the paths of comprehensive progress which nations undertake.[245]

Since this was a government-led initiative and one of the biggest projects yet to be commanded by the new 'Amir', or ruler,[246] the government closely monitored the progress at the new town, and these visits too were not only recorded but publicised further to project the reality of the new town into existence and to the public. *Huna Al Bahrain*, as well as the BAPCO newspapers, recorded and announced visits of the Head of the Government Council and Chief of Government Finance, as well as other members of the Housing and Ownership Advisory Committee, highlighting their active monitoring. These were not visits by government representatives to the construction site; they were visits by the highest level of government to monitor the construction site's progress. Therefore, it

[244] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 154, November 1964, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[245] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 155, December 1964, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[246] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 154, November 1964, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.

showed what the government was doing and how it was doing so, not from behind a desk but in constant motion.

What stresses the importance of these visits further was that BAPCO produced more than one newsreel as well as photographic images of these visits, which both BAPCO and the government used in their publications to show the government's engagement with the new town. Therefore, the success of the project or the programme was not only seen through its completion or achievement, but it was very important to publicise and engage the public with visual imagery which portrayed the manner and process in which the government was constructing this new town and bringing it to fruition. It provided a clear visual of the government in its close operations, out in the field, inspecting and monitoring by the Head of the Government Council and Chief of the Housing and Ownership Committee himself and his team members.

Image 6.4. Visit of Advisory Committee to Isa Town, 1964. Source: BAPCO Archive.

The art covers of *Huna Al Bahrain*: Art and the sketch of public sentiment

The creation of images was not just limited to the production of photographic or cinematographic content, which showed the government in action, but also included other forms of visual imagery, such as art and the design of magazine covers. These sketches provide a different view of what was happening. Some, which were artist's sketches, were more artistic and designed to emit deeper messages and multilevel

interpretations of the subject. Unlike photographic images, artists' drawings and magazine covers were not a 'staging' of real-life images but were rather 'constructed' to illustrate specific messages.

On the cover of *Huna Al Bahrain*'s edition of January 1964, the government's Department of Information Affairs weekly magazine, an artist's sketch of Shaikh Isa laying the foundation stone of the new town is shown. In the drawing, Shaikh Isa is dressed in all his finery as a crowd of onlookers witness this historic event as a chain pulley lifts a grey stone under which Shaikh Isa is seen cementing the monument marking the start of construction for the new town in an expansive ceremony on a day which was described as a 'National' Eid and celebration. The sketches were capable of portraying new dimensions in the interpretation of the image. That which the artist was trying to convey of public sentiment. By looking at the sketch of Shaikh Isa laying the stone in Isa Town, there is something sombre about the gazes of the onlookers as drawn by the artist. As celebratory as the event must have been, there is something somewhat mysterious and uncertain in how the onlookers with various styles of dress watch Shaikh Isa devoid of expression as a smiling Shaikh Isa is fast in action. What the art may be expressing is the uncertainty in which such a project was met by the public, especially by citizens who did not ask for it. Alluding to the absence of society from the public decision-making process and hence did not know what to expect from a new town initiative. Also, there is something ominous in the sketch: the pulley chain, which is holding the stone from falling on Shaikh Isa's hand. It was almost as if the artist was trying to illustrate the uncertainty of the new undertaking and that the ruler was being watched and assessed by the public eyes.

The artist was Abdulla Al Muharraqi,[247] a renowned artist and cartoonist, who also worked for the government's Department of Information Affairs, later the Ministry of Information. He contributed to several *Huna Al Bahrain* covers.[248] That had been his first sketch for the magazine, and his tone gradually evolved to portray the ruler in a different light. Some following *Huna Al Bahrain* covers depict Shaikh Isa surrounded by renditions of his contributions to spatial development. Within each of these editions is a report on the latest inauguration, the laying of the foundation stone, the cutting of ribbons, and so on. In vivid colours, Shaikh Isa is portrayed as the main protagonist in every elaborate state ceremony. These depictions were not only exclusive to an artist's drawing, in this case, Al

[247] Al Muharraqi's career is an interesting story which connects and exemplifies much of the transformative change which was happening politically and socially.[247] His family was originally from Muharraq but he among his siblings was born and raised in Manama. His art talent was discovered early when he was still in school. During a visit of BAPCO's PR staff to his secondary school (probably to look for suitable company recruits) his work caught the eyes of Yanni Bashai, *The Weekly Star* editor, who introduced to Mr Barnet, the PR Manager. They commissioned him to paint a few paintings of BAPCO's Refinery, the Sitra Wharf and Awali for 125 Rupees each, which was a large sum for a high school student and significant as he prepared to go and study in Egypt.

[248] الفنان عبدالله المحرقي: إبداع متميز. إعداد: محمد حسن كمال الدين، المؤسسة العربية للطباعة والنشر، مارس ٢٠٠٨

Muharraqi's, but with the introduction of modern photographic equipment, the magazine and BAPCO's newspaper started to include photographic images of the various events.

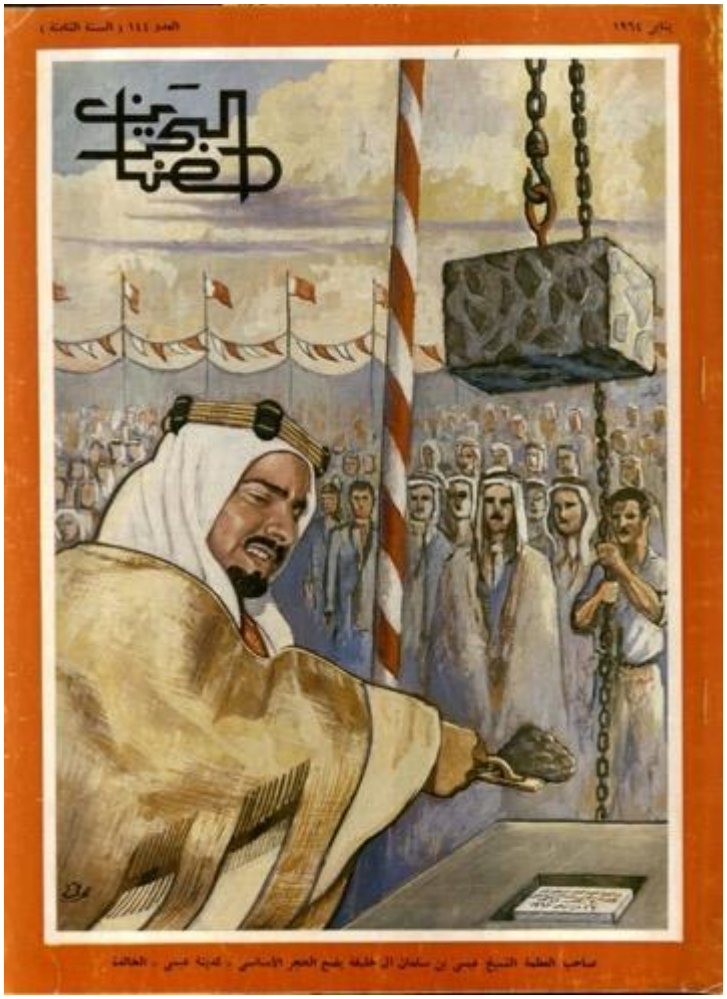

Image 6.5. Al Muharraqi's sketch for the January 1964 cover of *Huna Al Bahrain*. Source: Ministry of Information Affairs, Bahrain.

I highlight Al Muharraqi's covers for *Huna Al Bahrain* because the artist's sketches were an additional medium which further communicated other dimensions of a socio-political narrative. The 1960s for Bahrain not only marked the early reign of Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, but they were also arguably the foundation years of modern public administrative and spatial development. The independence and recognition of Bahrain as a fully sovereign state first required an image to support that recognition. Therefore, the 1960s as a decade in Bahrain may be viewed as a continuation of the change which began in the 1950s because of confrontations and engagement between the state and a rising civil society and the preparatory years for the emerging independent state of Bahrain. Vital public administrative departments were formed and developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and they became the nucleus of bigger administrative bodies in the form of ministries that were formed after 1971. This alludes to the fact that the development of the emerging state did not develop from scratch post-independence, which Al Muharraqi and other artists actively illustrated on the government's magazine

covers. Indeed, the emerging state of Bahrain depended largely on the foundations that had been put in place at least a decade before that and, for some other public topics, even more than that. The 1970s as a decade came to formalise and strengthen this public administrative structure and for Bahrain to take its place among nations as many of the published material, especially as many of *Huna Al Bahrain*'s covers as well as news reports of the 1960s suggest and visualise.

Huna Al Bahrain's cover for the month of December 1968, which was a special edition marking the ascension anniversary of Shaikh Isa, represent the government's achievements and especially Shaikh Isa's capability to deliver on the promise of a new town. The drawing, sketched by Al Muharraqi again, illustrates the story of the November 1968 inauguration celebrations of Isa Town. The minaret of the identical two mosques, the fireworks, the cavalry, the school girls' display, the torch held by the runner who ran from Muharraq/Manama to Isa Town in an Olympic-like start to the celebrations and at the centre of the drawing is Shaikh Isa tearing the background proudly and looks down in grandeur and triumph below a cross of the Isa Town key which was given the first resident of Isa Town, Mr Abdulla Al Khatib. This will alleviate any doubt, celebrate a new milestone, and illustrate to all what the Government of Bahrain was doing and that it was able to deliver on this promise, bringing to life all it provided previously in words and imagination. And according to this research's interviewees, this brought Shaikh Isa closer to the public and made him a household name throughout the ages.[249] Similar covers were produced in subsequent magazine covers celebrating the accession ceremonies, all with similar depictions of national achievements.

[249] Interview with the Al Asmi family, 17th June 2023; Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan, 26th June & 5th July 2023; Al Thawadi Series Interviews, 2nd May & 27th May 2023; Interview with Mohammed Baqer bin Radhi, 17th & 24th December 2023; Interview with Bin Radhi sisters, 7th May 2023; Interview with Abdul Latif Kanoo, 8th May, 2023; and Interview with Khalifa Shaheen, 10th July 2023.

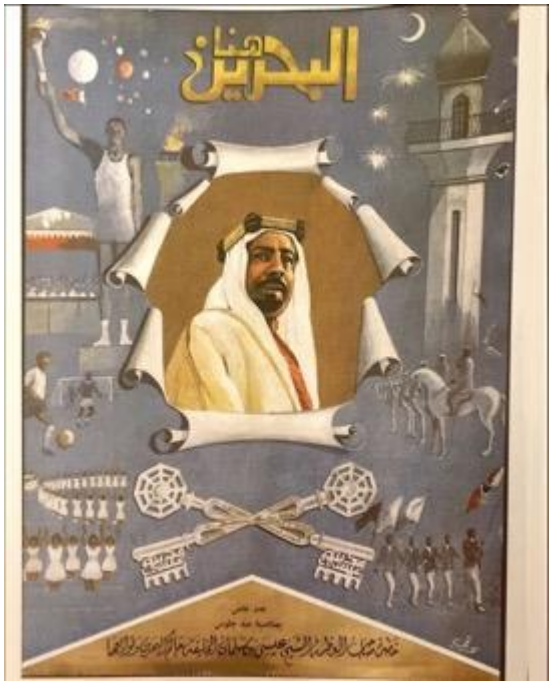

Image 6.6. *Huna Al Bahrain* cover for the inauguration of Isa Town, December 1968. Source: Ministry of Information Affairs.

Image 6.7. Covers of *Huna Al Bahrain* Special Editions, which coincide with the Accession Anniversaries, December 1969 (left) and December 1970 (Right). Source: Ministry of Information Affairs, Bahrain.

In a familiar manner they portrayed the ruler, Shaikh Isa, in the centre of a development-themed backdrop, were produced by artists working for the government's Department of Information Affairs, such as Abdulla Al Muharraqi, who produced interesting art for *Huna*

Al Bahrain as well as BAPCO's newspapers. From Al Muharraqi's first magazine cover for *Huna Al Bahrain* regarding the laying of the foundation stone of Isa Town (January 1964 edition of *Huna Al Bahrain*), he continued to influence the following special editions, as is the case in the two covers shown above. Highlighting symbols and drawings of various achievements appear behind a smiling Shaikh Isa.

It is through these government magazines that Bahrain was again trying to place itself and its sovereign on a map of some sort. Comparing some of Shaikh Isa's Inauguration covers with those of other leaders who have left their urban as well as political mark, as found in *Time Magazine*, is also telling. If Shaikh Isa were not going to be on the cover of *Time Magazine*, then he would, nevertheless, be put on a pedestal of the government's own making and given recognition for such foundational endeavours.

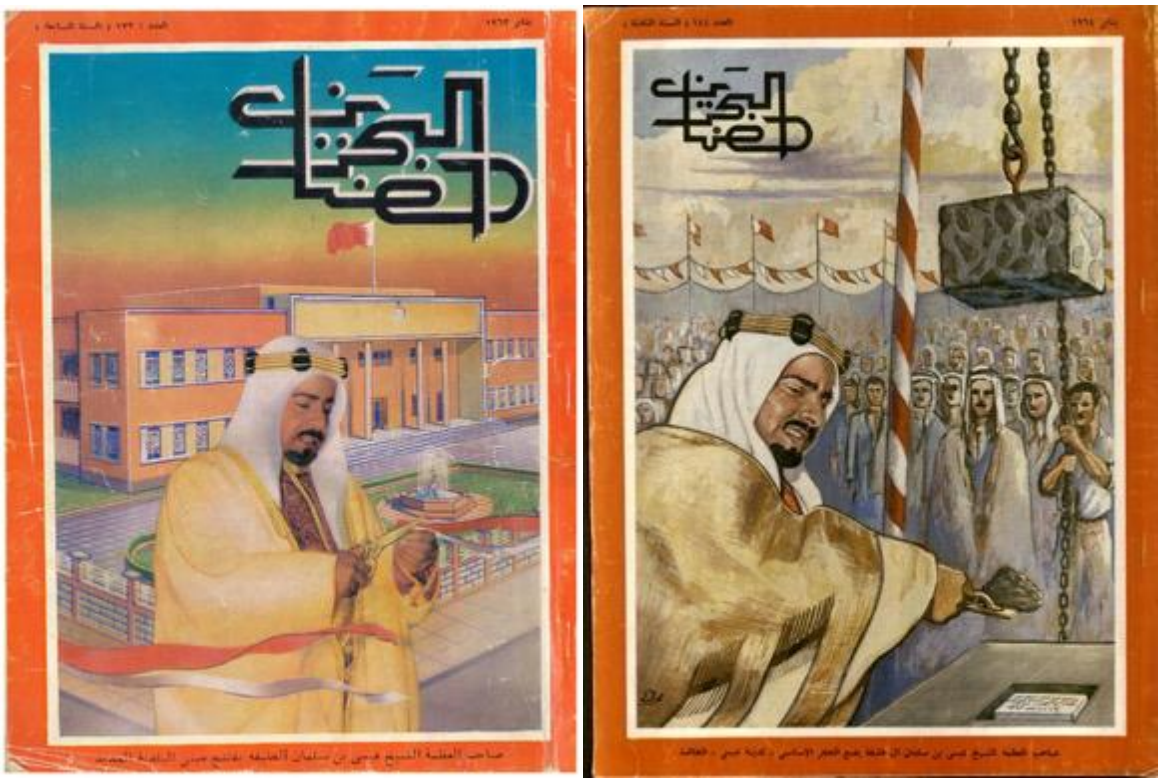

Image 6.8. *Huna Al Bahrain* magazine covers (left) Shaikh Isa at the Opening of the New Municipality Secretariat, January 1963, *Huna Al Bahrain*. Above right: Shaikh Isa at the Isa Town Foundation Stone Ceremony, January 1964, *Huna Al Bahrain*.

Image 6.9. *Time Magazine* Covers of Kwame Nkrumah, February 9, 1953,[250] and Juscelino Kubitschek, February 13, 1956,[251] Source: *Time Magazine*.

In 1960s Bahrain, these magazine covers became iconic in illustrating the national (accession) day celebrations and the nation's achievements. However, well beyond Shaikh Isa's reign, many announcements of government projects that are meant to improve the lives of citizens are still announced on the accession ceremony celebrations of the 16th of December.

From Isa Town to the world: Image circulation

The construction and creation of images were not intended just for citizens and the local public, but news and images of Isa Town and, indeed, of the mastermind behind it were intended to reach the largest amount of audience possible. *Huna Al Bahrain*'s covers projected Shaikh Isa with sketches of various urban and administrative developments he was overseeing. It was intended to show the rapid urbanisation of Bahrain, which was driven by its political leadership. The circulation was not limited to the published press or the newsreels, both local and external, but commemorative stamps were also issued to mark the inauguration of the new town. The stamps showed various glimpses and facilities of the new town, such as the commercial shopping centre, the houses, the mosque, and the Olympic stadium, as well as a photo of Shaikh Isa in the top left corner of each stamp. The lowest denomination showed the various house types of Isa Town with their different colours, which were said to have been mixed, especially for the project at the labs in London for George Wimpey, and the highest showed the mosque. These stamps highlight once again the images and symbolic messages of what the Government

[250] https://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19530209,00.html Accessed: 17th November 2024.
[251] https://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19560213,00.html, Accessed: 17th November 2024.

of Bahrain was trying to tell its citizens and the world. It was an announcement of its progress as well as its achievements and the person behind these steps and endeavours.

The various elements of the new town are put on the stamps to reference the country's political and social progress symbolically. The stamps, therefore, show and highlight what the political leadership in Bahrain deemed as important for the public to see and are, therefore, one of the images in the larger constellation of state image construction, as well as providing a definition of state identity in what it does. Reid (1984) examines how stamps are important to history and the historian in three ways. First, they are physical objects; second, they imply the existence of a modern postal system in the country; and third, stamps carry symbols and the meaning of a larger system of communication (Reid, 1984). This makes the study of stamps, or philately, significant not only in the reading of history but in the study of the symbols the issuing governments or states are trying to impart in their wider system of mass communication, and it becomes a part of the visual display of history (Brunn, 2011).

But scholarly research shows us not just the political influence of the stamp-issuing process but highlights the importance of examining the production of this state-led imagery during times of transitions, implying that they also carry meanings and are meant to promote a wide array of public messages (Brunn, 2011, 2002, 2001). Furthermore, research has looked at how nations choose to represent themselves through a study of stamps (Kevane, 2008).

Image 6.10. The commemorative stamps show various glimpses into the new town, including the Olympic Stadium, which went into circulation on the day of Isa Town's Inauguration, 13th November 1968. Source: *Bahrain Post*.

For Bahrain, these stamps also held a high significance because, in addition to being historical evidence like photographic images, newsreels, and newspapers, they also show the development of a postal service in operation and existence. Furthermore, the choice of the images further alludes to their social and political meanings and messages. Bahrain boasted of modernisation and transformation, a move from the old to the modern, highlighting its Olympic stadium, new mosques, modern commercial centre, and modern dwellings for its citizens. The projection of housing-related depictions in stamps continued well after the first celebration of Isa Town, with Isa Town and its amenities being the poster child for modernisation and socio-political advancement in Bahrain. This highlights once again the importance of the Housing and Ownership Project as well as further strengthening the political dimension of the housing project in Bahrain, especially for its leaders, and it has continued to do so well beyond Shaikh Isa's reign and into that of his son, the current monarch.

Image 6.11. Issue of stamps depicting images of Isa Town and celebrating the establishment of the Ministry of Housing, 1976. Source: *Bahrain Post*.

Image 6.12. Celebrating the Silver Jubilee of the Establishment of the Ministry of Housing, 2001. Source: *Bahrain Post*.

Part two: Symbols

In addition to various forms of images that were constructed to develop an image for modern Bahrain, Isa Town saw the visualisation of symbols. Symbols come in many forms, but in Isa Town, they were constructed through architecture. In the previous section, we looked at how these symbols were visualised and circulated through images of the new town on commemorative stamps, but they were certainly not limited to them. In this section, I examine three of the most prominent architectural symbols which were used as part of the mediatisation and branding of the new town. Each one of the identified symbols carried their own social and political meanings; furthermore, they became symbols of being identified not only as hallmarks of the new town but also as icons of the country's progress and achievement and proof of its advancement. In this section, I look at three of the highest published and visualised architectural symbols of the new town and examine what they meant to portray in social or political meanings: the Isa Town Gate, the religious houses of worship and the Isa Town Stadium.

Gateway to Isa Town and the future

> The Isa Town gate is the entrance to the whole house. It is the entrance to the old house (*beit al oud*). Wherever I am coming from, when I come through it, I feel as if I have entered my house. When I exit through it, I feel like I am exiting my house.[252]

The new town's location on Shaikh Salman highway was marked first by a makeshift gate, which was later formalised into a modern-looking open two-way gate that became an icon of Isa Town and an iconic symbol. The gate was designed by Iraqi architect Mohamed Makiya.[253] The use of austere self-finished white concrete blocks with no rendering was a first in Bahrain at the time, and it was mixed by Al Manaratain Concrete Company.[254] The tall structure was designed with sandwich panels supported by a middle column and topped with an arch. Between the various panels, there was a discreet design motif of the Dilmun seals in reference to the Dilmun, the ancient civilisation to which the land of modern Bahrain belonged.

Image 6.13. The Isa Town Gate Oblique View. Source: Makiya Archive, Aga Khan Trust for Culture. https://www.archnet.org/sites/454?media_content_id=100301.

A gate was important in marking the new town's entrance to identify this new town, which was built on a vacant site with minimal adjacent development. More importantly, the gate, which was built with a combination of concrete slabs and hidden gypsum panels,

[252] Interview with Fathiya Ajlan, 14th February 2023 (Ajlan, 2023).
[253] Interview with Yousif Dawood Al Sayegh, 31 October 2022 (Al Sayegh, 2022).
[254] Interview with Yousif Dawood Al Sayegh, 31 October 2022 (Al Sayegh, 2022).

was entirely a Bahraini monument that was built and produced out of material in Bahrain.[255] The gate became a symbol of the town and, indeed, of Bahrain and its modernisation project. It was accessible to anyone who was visiting, with the town's name clearly written on it in both Arabic and English, divided by the red and white emblem of Bahrain, the gate clearly marked the entrance to and exit from the new town clearly separating them as if to mark the territory between the old and the modern. The structure separated pedestrian entrances to the town from those allocated to vehicles. With a taller central, five arches flanked on each side by three arches wide enough for cars and then further by nine consecutive arches on the far end of either side of the structure for pedestrians.

At the time, there were two other public 'gates' in Bahrain; the first was Bab Al Bahrain (Doorway of Bahrain) in Manama and the Awali Township Gate, and both served different purposes. The first faced the port of Manama and housed the Administrative Offices of the Government of Bahrain, and the second was the entrance to the Oil Company's township, which housed expatriate employees of the company and barred anyone else from entry. Unlike Awali, Isa Town was not a gated community, but like Awali, it had an entryway. Unlike Awali, the gate's purpose was not meant to grant or deny access or to be used as a checkpoint upon which residents are allowed entry and non-residents are barred. The concrete arches were open to all those entering and exiting the township in a way that separated those entering from those entering the new town completely.

The gate was an important guide for the new town, as its existence preceded the Makiya-designed monument, with a makeshift wooden structure marking the entry to the construction site and later the entry to the new town. It was often decorated with lights on public occasions and celebrations. However, this was not just a gate marking the entrance or a hallmark of the new town; it was, with its tree-lined surroundings and fountains, a civic monument. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture describes the monument as follows:[256]

> The aim of the project was to create a civic monument in the form of a gateway for the recently constructed Isa Town development. The design of the gateway is inspired by gateways of the Arab-Islamic tradition. The gateway is composed of five arched galleries: two identical lateral ones for pedestrian circulation and two larger central ones for vehicular circulation, the latter connected by a higher but narrower central arcade. The abstraction of the traditionally vaulted gate is expressed by a series of parallel arched fins, which, through their rhythmic repetition, create the volumes of the gateway.[257]

[255] Interview with Yousif Dawood Al Sayegh, 31 October 2022 (Al Sayegh, 2022).
[256] https://www.archnet.org/sites/454 Date accessed: 10th March 2024.
[257] https://www.archnet.org/sites/454 Date Accessed: 11th March 2024.

The gate was a tribute to both the Islamic city and the modern town, described as the 'Gateway to Isa Town'[258] Therefore, despite its Iraqi architect's design, one could argue that it is the first true Bahraini civic monument and that it is more indigenous to Bahrain in its materials and construction than even the homes of Isa Town were. More significantly, it carried a symbolic meaning for Bahrain's modernisation and urbanisation project while still rooted in its Islamic and Arabic traditions. The gate's image was photographed and used as part of the symbolic imagery on the new town. As a civic monument it was also meant to visualise modernity and a separation between the old and the new through its multiple austere concreate arches. It was also designed to represent the transformative process of modernity with its multiple passages and both pedestrian and motor archways.

Image 6.14. The Isa Town Gate. Source: BAPCO Energies

[258] https://www.archnet.org/sites/454 Date Accessed: 11th March 2024.

The mosques

Image 6.15. One of the two identical Isa Town Mosques in Construction, Source: BAPCO Energies.

The second form of architectural symbols which were photographed and circulated were the mosques built for Isa Town. They were intended to communicate the country's root to Islamic traditions. As a Muslim country equally proud of its acceptance and freedom of practice of multiple faiths, there are several historically notable places of worship, such as mosques, churches, a synagogue and a Hindu temple. Since much of the Bahraini population falls within the Muslim faith and as proud bearers of their Muslim heritage, Isa Town was designed from its first phase with two mosques not very far from one another. They were exact replicas in design and size; one was designed for the Sunni community of the town, and the other was for the Shia community. This, again, was a political statement and was intended to be a symbol of acceptance and tolerance, which were eventually felt by members of either sect who moved into the new town. This is evident in how the mosques were portrayed in various images and cinematographic visualisations, including the one by the British Pathé (*Bahrain-New Town*, 1968). The Isa Town mosques with their green onion-shaped domes, like the gate, the stadium and the town centre, become visual icons of the new towns, which were photographed and visualised for multiple occasions, but the message intended with the mosques was towards the modern Bahraini community, although still rooted in its customs and Islamic traditions it was nevertheless accepting and tolerant of one another.

Image 6.16. The commemorative stamp issued on the inauguration of Isa Town and the mosque, one of the integral facets of the new towns, 1968. Source: *Bahrain Post*.

The 'funeral house' or *maatam*[259] in Isa Town came almost as an afterthought after members of the Isa Town Shia community went to Shaikh Isa to request one to be built for those who do not otherwise have social connections in the old towns of Muharraq and Manama.[260] It was nevertheless a request which was granted, first by the allocation of two housing units in the new town to be built until one was finally purpose-built and inaugurated with a celebration attended by Shaikh Isa and some of the most notable Shia clerics on 5th of March 1970, 26 Dhu Al Hijjah 1389, just in time for the Muharram rituals of the commemoration of Hussain bin Ali's Martyrdom; a major Shia religious celebration. In Isa Town, the building of the *maatam* further strengthened the narrative on coexistence within the Bahraini society and its leadership because of the state's role in building it. The promotion of images of houses of worship and Shaikh Isa attending a Shia celebration in the *maatam* again were highly symbolic of Bahrain's Islamic traditions but openness and acceptance of multiple faiths and freedom to worship, a message which has distinguished Bahrain among its neighbours. The image of Shaikh Isa attending the opening of the 'maatam' was in a similar manner intended with the purpose of circulating a message to the wider community on Bahrain's and indeed Shaikh Isa's openness to all faiths and his benevolence as a leader towards all faiths.

[259] The *maatam*, or a 'funeral house' is an important institution for the Shia community, used mainly for missionary endeavours, teaching Shia traditions, and proselyting (Khuri, 1980), was not included in the new town until later.

[260] Interviews of Mohammed Hassan Baqer bin Radhi, Bibi Baqer bin Radhi, 17th & 24th December 2023 (Baqer Bin Radhi, 2023), Fatima Baqer bin Radhi, 3rd May 2023 (Bin Radhi and Ahmed, 2023).

حضرة صاحب العظمة يفتتح مأتم مدينة عيسى

افتتح حضرة صاحب العظمة الشيخ عيسى بن سلمان آل خليفة حاكم البحرين وتوابعها المعظم مأتم مدينة عيسى . وقد وصل عظمته في تمام الساعة الثانية من مساء يوم الخميس ٥ مارس الماضي فقطع الشريط بيده الكريمة ثم دخل القاعة الرئيسية .

والقى السيد صادق البحارنه كلمة حيا فيها حضرة صاحب العظمة وذكر ما لعظمته من ايادٍ بيضاء في رعاية وبناء المساجد والاماكن الدينية في جميع انحاء البلاد .

Image 6.17. Shaikh Isa inaugurating the Isa Town Maatam 'Funeral House', 5th March 1970, 26th Dhu Al Hijjah, 1389. Source: Ministry of Information Affairs.

The stadium and other sports facilities

Image 6.18. Isa Town Stadium Under Construction, May 1968, (Left) Sketch of Stadium, 1964, Source: BAPCO Energies.

The sports facilities provided in Isa Town were not only integral features of the modern town, but they were also central to the formal development of fields and sports in Bahrain for the country and its people. The stadium, the sports grounds, and the swimming pool were all modern facilities which served the Isa Town community and hosted visiting athletic clubs and events. The facilities were important for the development of all major sports in Bahrain and all other sports associations in Bahrain until today, such as the swimming association. The seven-gated stadium was built on a grand scale. It spanned

20,000 square feet in size, requiring 35,000 cubic yards of reinforced concrete. It was initially said to be designed for a total capacity of 11,000 spectators between the shaded and unshaded stands[261]; the news of its inauguration mentions an attendance of more than twenty thousand spectators.[262] The stadium included the main football pitch, a four-lane running track (a mile in distance to four loops), and facilities for other Olympic track and field sports. The stadium lights are an important feature in lighting not only the stadium but also for visibility in the distant new town. The new facility was also fully featured with a locker room, showers, concession and ticket stands, meeting rooms and a one thousand-car park space.[263]

More importantly, it aided the development of national teams and the recruitment of local sports talent as Bahrain suddenly had world-class facilities to train and compete in; this was felt very significantly by those who had come from overcrowded towns such as Manama and Muharraq, Adel Rajab, a Ministry of Housing career engineer compares the spaces in Manama and Isa Town:

> The open spaces were only near the *maatams* or if there were undeveloped spaces. There were no designated sports facilities in those areas. The only place we trained was in Isa Town. In Salmaniya, there were open spaces but not courts and stadiums. They were unofficially organised by the boys.[264]

The stadium played an important role in amassing crowds in an organised manner, something which became important for large state ceremonies and functions as well as hosting international sporting events, as I will discuss later. Therefore, the stadium served a function that was much more symbolic: it provided a stage for the state to amass a crowd and, in doing so, instantiate the collective. Equally as important was how the state capitalised on the various events held within the stadium to portray its place among modern nations. Following this, I will discuss how the development of international relations took place, and I will examine later in the following section how the state developed and instantiated large congregations to portray its new public identity as a modern state.

The role of the stadium in placing Bahrain on the international map of sports

In addition to hosting the grand inauguration of Isa Town, the stadium played an important role in placing Bahrain on the global map of sports and earning international recognition for a nascent Arab state aiming for world recognition of its independence and sovereignty, even before Bahrain's full acceptance as a fully sovereign member state into the United Nations in 1971. Bahrain's football association was established in 1957. It has been a provisional member of the Federation International de Football Association since 1966

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[261] *Weekly Star*, Issue 14, Year 12, 10th April 1968, BAPCO Energies.
[262] *Weekly Star*, Issue 46, Year 12, 20th November 1968, BAPCO Energies.
[263] *Weekly Star*, Issue 14, Year 12, 10th April 1968, BAPCO Energies.
[264] Interview with Adel Rajab, 7th February 2023.

and a full member since 1968.[265] The official date of Bahrain's full acceptance into the Federation of International Football Association (FIFA) came on October 9th, 1968, a little over a month before the inauguration of Isa Town. A Bahraini delegation, headed by Shaikh Mohammed bin Khalifa, president of the Bahrain Sports Association, travelled to Mexico to attend the biennial of the Congress of the Federation of International Football Association between October 9-12, 1968.[266]

The first match in the stadium was to be an international one; a friendly match was held between Bahrain's Team and England's International Amateur Eleven. Described in *The Islander* as Bahrain's biggest sports event and organised as part of the town's inauguration festivities the day following the inauguration on November 14th, 1968, at 4 pm.[267] The event, which was jointly organised by BAPCO's Public Relations Department and the Bahrain Sports Association, was well publicised, portraying Bahrain's intent to establish a qualified team that would be able to compete in the international sports scene.

A mere three months after the inauguration of Isa Town and four months after Bahrain's full membership into the Federation, Sir Stanley Rous, 6th President of FIFA, arrived in Bahrain on the 16th of February 1969.[268] He was invited by the President of the Sports Association, Shaikh Mohammed bin Khalifa, to explore the possibility of establishing a soccer cup for the Gulf states.[269] During his five-day visit to Bahrain as part of his two-and-a-half-week tour of the Gulf, Sir Stanley toured the new stadium, met with referees, gave a lecture on football to the Rotary Club in Manama, visited schools to watch the youth play and was generally 'impressed' by the sporting scene.[270] Sir Rous was also invited to dine with Shaikh Isa, the Ruler of Bahrain and Sir Stewart Crawford, Britain's Political Resident in the Gulf.[271]

[265] *The Islander*, Vol. 30, No. 6, 18th September 1968, BAPCO Energies.
[266] *The Islander*, Vol. 30, No. 6, 18th September 1968, BAPCO Energies.
[267] *The Islander*, Vol. 30, No. 6, 18th September 1968, BAPCO Energies.
[268] *The Islander*, Vol. 30, No. 25,12th February 1969, BAPCO Energies.
[269] *The Islander*, Vol. 30, No. 27, 19th February 1969, BAPCO Energies.
[270] *The Islander*, Vol. 30, No. 27, 19th February 1969, BAPCO Energies.
[271] *The Islander*, Vol. 30, No. 27, 19th February 1969, BAPCO Energies.

Image 6.19. Sir Stanley Rous accompanied by President of the Sports Association, Shaikh Mohammed bin Khalifa, visiting the Isa Town Stadium, February 1969, Source: BAPCO Energies.

This fostered international relations through the promotion of sports and vice versa. Shaikh Isa again hosted the first Gulf Cup, which took place between 27th March and 3rd April 1970, in Bahrain at the Isa Town Stadium. The Weekly Star, BAPCO's Arabic Newspaper, covered in elaborate detail the new and unprecedented regional sports event and provided a vivid image of Shaikh Isa's arrival at the stadium at quarter past four in the afternoon, after which the national anthem was played, followed by the entrance of a procession of the national teams of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait, the first countries to join the cup.[272]

The World Cup tournament was one of the first events which joined countries of the Arabian Gulf in an event of this scale and magnitude, and it became an important and expanding league to later join other countries in the Gulf, such as the UAE, Oman and Iraq. Following a politicised speech by the president of the Sports Union of Bahrain calling for unity of the Arab Nation,[273] Shaikh Isa himself also welcomed the visiting teams in a speech highlighting Bahrain's welcome to the visiting teams, the role of sports in the advancement and modernisation of societies and more importantly the role of sports in facilitate understanding between conflicting nations, noting that 'the sublime moral values that sports work can help instil in souls for a cooperative and virtuous society'.[274]

[272] *Weekly Star*, Issue 11, Year 14, 1st April 1970, BAPCO Energies.
[273] *Weekly Star*, Issue 11, Year 14, 1st April 1970, BAPCO Energies.
[274] *Weekly Star*, Issue 12, Year 14, 8th April 1970, BAPCO Energies.

Shaikh Isa continued his speech, highlighting the sport's role in bringing neighbouring countries closer to each other, bringing once again highly political messages and aspirations and disseminating them in the stadium and through what is otherwise a sports event.[275] The political significance of the event and the political nature of the speeches are further highlighted by what was happening against the backdrop. Around the same time, the first Gulf Cup was held in Bahrain, an event that succeeded in placing Bahrain as a country on the global map of sports. Another visit took place, one which was much more fateful for Bahrain and its people. On the 30th of March 1970, Shaikh Isa received Vittorio Winspeare-Guicciardi, Head of the United Nations Geneva Office and Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General. His mission was clear and specific: to investigate the Bahraini public's wishes regarding the 'Iranian matter',[276] which pertains to the Iranian claims over Bahrain. This sheds new light on the speeches at the Gulf Cup ceremony because, again, through this stadium, a message was being sent to Bahrain and its allies. This time, the President of the Sports Association also conveyed that Bahrain was an independent Arab state, independent of Iran's claims. He was also inviting neighbouring countries in the same spirit of sports to cooperate and unite, a matter which is interesting in further cementing dreams and visions of a united Gulf.[277]

Image 6.20. The Flags of Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait in a procession at the inauguration of the First Gulf Cup Tournament, March 1970. Source: BAPCO Energies.

[275] *Weekly Star*, Issue 12, Year 14, 8th April 1970, BAPCO Archive.
[276] *Weekly Star*, Issue 11, Year 14, 1st April 1970, BAPCO Archive.
[277] The Gulf Cooperation Council was not founded for another eleven years. It was established with a charter that was signed in Abu Dhabi in May 1981.

The stadium and its accompanying sports facilities, therefore, continued to play an important role in providing a platform to represent Bahrain as well as in connecting it to the world in the world of sports by hosting numerous local, regional, and international competitions and matches. Pelé and Diego Maradona, both football legends, were to play and were photographed in this stadium. All this further supports the argument that investment in sports and their related infrastructure played a significant role in the achievement of greater political objectives, as well as how the sports structure in Isa Town connected Bahrain to a new and modern world. The stadium, therefore, was not just a sports facility for the country but one that had much more far-reaching objectives. Furthermore, this international standards stadium was not only instrumental in placing Bahrain on the sports map, but it also further strengthened Isa Town's position as a capital and spatial custodian of the sports movement in Bahrain, which in turn aided its community towards its own advancement and progression in discovering sports talents and making it possible for them on to compete in the international sports arena. The stadium was also an architectural symbol which had a role in the political process by hosting significant state ceremonies, which I discuss in the following section when I examine the first event held in the stadium and the grandest of all state ceremonies, which is the inauguration of Isa Town.

Image 6.21. Santos Club player, Pelé, in Isa Town Stadium tackling a ball across Bahrain's goalkeeper, Samir Elyas, in a friendly match with Bahrain Ahli Team, February 1973. Source: Personal Archive of Samir Elyas.

Part three: Events

Inaugurations as state spectacles

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the formalisation of the national housing programme was connected to the accession celebrations from its start, and the accession ceremonies developed links to housing since the start of Shaikh Isa's rule. In this section, I would like to highlight the specifically the inaugurations of housing distributions as well as that of the new town as crowd-amassing state spectacles because of what they portrayed of the state how housing and new towns were being instrumentalised politically. Of all the state-organised inauguration celebrations, perhaps three stand out as seen in how they were emphasised in the images, newsreels and publications. The first was the inauguration of the Housing and Ownership Project of 1962, in which the government, for the first time in its history, granted ownership of built houses in Manama and Muharraq to 285 Bahraini families in December 1962; the second was the laying of the foundation stone of Isa Town in December 1963 and, finally, the grandest and biggest of them all to that date was the Inauguration of Isa Town in November 1968. Each of these ceremonies amassed a large crowd of leadership figures, citizens, dignitaries and onlookers from the public. The amassing of crowds was not uncommon as the public had direct access to the Shaikh through his daily *majlis* but were also known to gather outside the palace gates for Eid and other celebrations. The inauguration ceremonies, though, all had one thing in common: they promoted the Shaikh's reign and projected both explicitly and illicitly the Shaikh's vision and public achievements. They were meant to show Shaikh Isa's reign as a modern and transformative one, a reign which evolved from the roots planted by his father but one which was ready to go farther and faster than any legacy before his. In the following section, I will show to what extent they became so and what their implications were by an examination of three connected inauguration ceremonies of the state as a new type of congregation started by the state and involved large masses of the Bahraini public as well as its political leadership. I end with the inauguration of Isa Town and show its significance to the state, the leadership, the citizens and the new town.

The first accession ceremony (1962): Distribution of 285 workers' homes

Although this ceremony was not related to Isa Town, it was the first accession celebration in which houses were distributed for ownership according to the stipulations of Decree 2 Finance of 1962. More significantly, it was at this ceremony that the intention for the new town was first announced. Also, this celebration was the first housing celebration held under Shaikh Isa and may be seen as the basis upon which all other celebrations may be compared. The distribution of the 285 workers' homes ceremony was held on-site in Muharraq near the houses which were distributed to their owners. The Shaikh attended and distributed ownership certificates of the houses to the benefiting families. Housing took a special meaning to the Bahraini leadership and its evolving government. However, there seemed to be a very special relationship between housing and the state, which took

the place of constitutional developments and more formal structures of political representation.

Upon a study of photos of such gatherings, I found that this ceremony was not different from any other crowd-gathering ceremony, but they were held to illustrate accessibility to the ruler, who was proud of his *majlis* system. Several Persian rugs were laid out on an open space of land, which lined sofas for the Shaikh and his guests, as well as folding chairs for the invited public. The space was usually adorned with some decorations, all facing a central stage where, after a few recitals and speeches, the Shaikh would ascend to distribute the certificates. A large crowd would amass to greet the Shaikh and his motor cavalcade outside of the central celebration area. This was an example of the simplicity of these celebrations and was widely seen in photographic images of state-organised celebrations. There was not much ceremony, and the Shaikh would easily enter and leave such ceremonies not very far from citizens and the public. The illustrative images were meant to show the Shaikh's informality, proximity to his subjects, and popularity.

Image 6.22. (left) Shaikh Isa Distributing the Ownership Certificates, December 1962, (right): The Crowd outside the central celebration, December 1962, Source: BAPCO Energies.

The second accession ceremony (1963): Setting the foundation stone of Isa Town

Image 6.23. (left): Shaikh Isa at the Foundation Ceremony, (right): The crowds of cars near the area of Celebration, 16th December 1963. Source: BAPCO Energies.

> Immortal Days in the History of Bahrain
>
> His Majesty Lays the Foundation Stone for Isa Town,
>
> The Gulf's most modern Town.
>
> The opening of the Largest Joint Stock Company in Bahrain,
>
> delivering electricity to seven villages.[278]

BAPCO's *Weekly Star* newspaper referred to it in more direct terms as the start of 'the battle of building and work'.[279] However, between the beginning of a spatial development 'battle' and the 'immortal days', the foundation stone ceremony, according to *Huna Al Bahrain*, was attended by more than ten thousand Bahrainis.[280] The *Weekly Star* stated that more than five thousand Bahrainis attended[281] the ceremony, which was held on the empty open land where the new town was to be built. In his speech at the ceremony, addressing Shaikh Isa, the President of the Housing and Ownership Committee and Chief of Government Finance, Shaikh Khalifa, mentions:

> The Housing and Ownership Project that you, my lord, ordered to be established and implemented as soon as you assumed leadership responsibility in this dear part of the great Arab world and allocated its achievement the necessary funds will undoubtedly provide the people of the country with a dear and dignified life and secure for them a bright future with happiness, prosperity and general good.

[278] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 144, Year 8, January 1964, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[279] *Weekly Star*, Issue 44, Year 7, 18th December 1963, BAPCO Energies.
[280] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 144, Year 8, January 1964, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[281] *Weekly Star*, Issue 44, Year 7, 18th December 1963, BAPCO Energies.

> God willing, the new town project will be implemented in several stages, and today we are pleased to announce the start of work on the first stage, which will provide, within five years, a completely modern city on an area of two-and-a-half square miles, containing 2,500 modern homes equipped with all the facilities and necessities of modern life.[282]

But any speech of what would be built on this empty site where the celebration was held and the new town was to be built, required an active visualisation of what the future town would look like to public. The numbers announced were not only big, but in comparison to any other government project housing or otherwise, they were unprecedently exorbitant. Most of those who came to witness the event had most likely arrived from congested towns and cities or villages where most of the development happened not only on a private level but also on a much smaller scale. Therefore, to imagine a completely modern development such as never seen or realised required more than imparting with words, which is why models of the new town were presented to the public of how the new towns would look like as well as numerous images published in *Huna Al Bahrain* and the BAPCO newspapers.

Image 6.24. Attendants looking at the model of the new town at the laying of the stone ceremony, December 1963. Source: BAPCO Archive.

[282] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 144, Year 8, January 1964, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.

The seventh accession ceremony (1968): The inauguration of Isa Town

Image 6.25. The schoolgirls display at the Isa Town Stadium with onlookers filling the surrounding bleachers of the stadium, November 1968. Source: Photo Archives of Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan.

Nothing before the inauguration of Isa Town, which took place on the 13th of November 1968, was larger and grander than celebration which marked the official opening of the new town.[283] The inauguration of Isa Town was held at the all-new Isa Town Stadium. This was the first event to ever be held in the new stadium, and the most interesting thing about it was that it was not a sporting event but rather a grand political one. The event which marked the celebration of the new town happened one full year after the arrival of its first residents.[284] It alludes to the symbolic nature of the event and how it was designed for objectives other than just celebrating the significant event. A well-attended spectacle which was further covered in elaborate detail by various local as well as foreign news publications, such as the BAPCO *Weekly Star* and *The Islander*, as well as the

[283] *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 190, November 1968, Bahrain Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain.
[284] *Weekly Star*, Issue 45, Year 11, 8th November 1967, *Weekly Star*, Issue 45, Year 12, 13th November 1968, BAPCO Energies.

government's broadcasting magazine, *Huna Al Bahrain*, it was even recorded in cinematographic publications of BAPCO's as well as the British Pathé's newsreels, which highlighted a perspective of the celebrations:

> The popularity of His Highness as the ruler was undoubtedly apparent as he arrived at the new Olympic standard stadium for the inauguration ceremony. The man who had made it all possible presented a commemorative key to the first resident of Isa Town. Formal Arab custom still had its place in the twentieth century setting before the celebrations began. In the arena, two thousand (2,000) schoolchildren, including Shaikh's daughter, gave an impressive display.[285]

The details covered both before and after the event highlight the significance of the event for Bahrain. Furthermore, the benevolence of the ruler was highlighted throughout local and foreign publications, which seemed to be a major objective of housing and highlighted throughout the accession ceremonies. The local and foreign dignitaries who were in Bahrain specifically to witness this event and this moment in Bahrain's history were also named and highlighted to show the significance of the event.[286] In the stadium's main stand was the Shaikh, all his guests and well over twenty thousand local spectators.[287] To further represent a new modern image of the Bahraini state, the guestlist included high officials from the Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, the Arab League of Nations, and representatives of the governments of the United Kingdom and the USA. As well as UK Political Resident in Bahrain, Sir Robert Stewart Crawford, as well as the UK Political Agent, Mister (later Sir) Anthony Parsons and BAPCO's chief executive, Mr Josephson.

The event was said to have been attended by over 20,000 individuals, which was the full capacity of the stadium.[288] It was announced to the public that this was officially the largest congregation in which the ruler, his citizens and foreign dignitaries were present in one place. The president of the Government Administrative Council and chief of the Housing and Ownership Committee started his speech by outlining the symbolic nature of this event as well as this new town in providing modern convenience to catch up with the modern world:

> It gives me great pleasure to welcome you on this occasion that symbolises or symbolises the determination of Bahrain, this emerging country, which is seeking growth and development to catch up with the procession of progress to meet the

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[285] British Pathé (*Bahrain-New Town*, 1968).
[286] *Weekly Star*, Issue 44, Year 12, 6th November 1968; Issue 45, Year 12, 13th November 1968; Issue 46, Year 12, 20th November 1968, BAPCO Energies. *Huna Al Bahrain*, Issue 202, November 1968; Issue 203, December 1968 & Issue, 204, January 1969, Department of Information Affairs, State of Bahrain. British Pathé (*Bahrain-New Town*, 1968).
[287] *Weekly Star*, Issue 46, Year 12, 20th November 1968, BAPCO Energies.
[288] *Weekly Star*, Issue 46, Year 12, 20th November 1968, BAPCO Energies.

requirements of modern life, including public services, modern facilities and decent housing.[289]

With that quote, the president of the Government Administrative Council and chief of the Housing and Ownership Committee started his speech by outlining the symbolic nature of this event as well as this new town's provision of modern convenience to catch up with the modern world. An examination of the inauguration of Isa Town, which took place on the 13th of November 1968, portrays how the event through the lens of the new town was a display designed to send a message to the world.

Image 6.26. Shaikh Isa in the Central Pitch, November 1968 Source: Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan.

[289] *Weekly Star*, Issue 46, Year 12, 20th November 1968, BAPCO Energies.

This was a state on full display. It managed to amass for the first time the largest congregation to date of local and foreign dignitaries as well as members of the Bahraini society all in one place in an organised way, and it was the stadium that made such a congregation possible. It was an instantiation of the collective and the place where, for the first time, the ruler, his guests and the citizens became visible to themselves on the stage of the stadium. Bahrain and its citizens were presented with a view of their collective self. Through its examination, we see how the portrayal of the event is as significant as the new town itself and, indeed, the stadium, which made such a mass gathering possible. Within it was a display designed to send a message to the public at large and the world. The event carried a message about Bahrain, its ruler, its people, its transformative state, and its steps towards modernisation. Bahrain as a state was ready to show the world who it was, what it could do and how it planned to do it. More importantly, it was ready to display a new take on the socio-political relations between the ruler and his subjects and the steps the former has taken to bring people closer and gain their favour and popularity. The ruler's descent down to the main pitch for the national anthem and greeting each of the football players of both teams by hand was another message about his willingness and ability to mix freely with his citizens. It stands to represent not only his humbleness but also his ability to move within public crowds without excessive security procedures. The message is meant to counteract much of what happened in the 1950s, which naturally led both foreign and local dignitaries to fear for their persons (Belgrave, 1960; Khuri, 1980). Furthermore, the event further aided in the illustration of a new 'untroubled' image with an impressive display, which included the contribution of multiple government agencies, as if to send a message to some of its 'troubled' neighbours. Bahrain showed how modernisation can lead to progress and gain public consensus in a quick turnaround manner. Bahrain was celebrating and announcing this as a sign of progress as well as a sign of social and political achievement, and it was doing all of that from the stage of this little town and through its various facilities.

Image 6.27. The central gallery of the stadium, November 1968. Source: Photo Archives of Abdulla Mohammed Al Khan.

Conclusion

Isa Town was not just meant to be seen as a social housing project or the first new town but was meant to be seen as both an image of modern Bahrain and an ongoing spectacle of state progress. It was part of a grand modernisation project which saw the establishment of several important infrastructure developments as well as the creation of alternative industries. All of these were vital for the social, economic, and political transformation of Bahrain and its people. Isa Town catered to some of those most in need of housing, but it did so in through a transformative process. A process which was meant to modernise, mobilise and transform from the old to the new and modern. It presented a great opportunity to mobilise those who had no other means of accessing modern, adequate housing. And even with all of that, there was still much more which was

intended with this new town in Bahrain than just the offer of new and modern facilities for its residents and the communities surrounding it. The new spatial development and its facilities played a major role in the promotion of Bahrain, its ruler and its forming government, through a system of organised image creation and circulation. These images were meant to communicate and engage the public and their imagination on progress, achievement and a new and modern life. As grand as the endeavours Bahrain was undertaking were the social and political transformations which were creating new realities in a new world with a new world order for a rapidly modernising nation, and Isa Town was the place where modernisation was mainstreamed from the low- and middle-income groups of Bahrain. Modernisation and modern conveniences were now not only accessible to those who could afford them, but through this new town, they became accessible to a wider socioeconomic class. Isa Town was, in many ways, both the product and the process towards modernisation and socio-political transformation, with all its spectacle and modern conveniences. Images, symbols, and state events were created to visualise the spectacle of the modernisation project further, and its processes have always been as important as the modernisation project itself, of which Isa Town was a part. For the Bahraini state to be believed, it had to be seen through textual and visual illustrations, something which has had an enduring legacy in its policy of mass communication to this day.

The images of the new town, its iconic architecture as well as the housing celebrations were mobilised to illustrate the transformation of the political process and fortify faith in the ruler and the future of the country. Therefore, through the study of these images and how and why they were created, the images of key architectural symbols which were constructed as well as the state spectacle that we gain a true insight into what the Bahraini perspective was of its own political process before achieving its full state of sovereignty and 'independence' in 1971. Furthermore, understanding state ceremonies, such as formal events which join state leaders with members of society, is also important because they are known to be a significant part of understanding political life (Kertzer, 1988). Through them, we get a sense of what the 1960s was like for Bahrain, its leadership, and its people, especially in how it portrays a representation to the public of modern developments and an indoctrination out of the old and into the new and modern to introduce these developments to the public. All of which provide an insight into what was seen as modern and what needed to be done to be considered as a developing nation. Furthermore, even today and more than sixty years later, in all of the interviews conducted for this research, especially among the residents of Isa Town, Shaikh Isa's name and memory remain vivid and alive, and it did not matter what age group the interviewee was from or what background or gender. Everyone had a story and a memory of Shaikh Isa, signifying his proximity to various strata of society, which was one of his aims in building the new town. The bin Radhi sisters recall their father's request to Shaikh Isa to provide a *maatam* for the Shia community of Isa Town and how it was not only

granted, but their father was so happy that he asked their mother to prepare her famous dish for Shaikh Isa.[290] Isa Al Mugahwi and many of his contemporaries claimed to see Shaikh Isa every day, as they stood every afternoon at the edge of Shaikh Salman highway to wave at Shaikh Isa's motor barricade on his way home from his offices in Manama.[291] Shaikh Isa remains alive in the memories of those who believe that the name 'town/city of the great' is because of his pride in the new town and his frequent showcasing of the town to foreign dignitaries.[292] Queen Elizabeth II, King Hussain of Jordan, and all the rulers of countries in the Arabian Gulf were all guests of Shaikh Isa and the citizens of the new town. Moza Al Gobaisi recalls fondly the song she sang as a young girl as part of a school performance for Shaikh Isa and his state guest, Valerie Giscard d'Estaing, at Al Khansa'a Girls School.[293] It did not matter who the dignitary was that was visiting; the residents of the town knew that something important was going to happen as they saw their streets adorned with flags, so they went out to greet Shaikh Isa and his guest and became a part of those state visits.[294] The spectacle which the Bahraini state designed to represent it intended to fortify faith in it until it became the actual, and in the words of Clifford Geertz, organised the world with their illustrations of grandeur (Geertz, 1980, p. 102) and perhaps that was 'what there was' (Geertz, 1980, p. 136).[295]

[290] Bin Radhi Sisters interview, 7th May 2023 (Bin Radhi et al., 2023), Fatima bin Radhi interview, 3rd May 2023 (Bin Radhi and Ahmed, 2023).
[291] Isa Al Mugahwi and Moza Al Gobaisi, Al Thawadi House Interviews, 2nd May 2023 and 27th of May 2023 (Al Thawadi et al., 2023).
[292] Al Thawadi House Interviews, 2nd May 2023 and 27th of May 2023 (Al Thawadi et al., 2023).
[293] Moza Al Gobaisi, Al Thawadi House Interviews, 2nd May 2023 and 27th of May 2023 (Al Thawadi et al., 2023).
[294] Al Thawadi House Interviews, 2nd May 2023 and 27th of May 2023 (Al Thawadi et al., 2023), and Al Aradi Majlis Interviews, 20 &21 January 2024 (Al Aradi et al., 2024).
[295] See Geertz, Clifford (1980) Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, P. 102-104 & P. 136.

Image 6.28. A photo of the Bahraini flag and Shaikh Isa atop a house in Isa Town in celebration of the inauguration, November 1968. Source: BAPCO Energies.

Chapter 7 – Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

This study of Isa Town has also proved to be an exercise in gathering the scattered contemporary history of modern Bahrain. As such, it contributes to our understanding of emerging state development projects and provides key insights into the development of new towns outside of the Western model.

In Bahrain, the construction of a new town became the process through which social transformation and public administrative modernisation were achieved. This process was expressed visually through the systematic creation, publication, and circulation of images. Notably, images and their production were part of a greater political process designed to demonstrate modernisation and state progress. The process I refer to is the one that made the ruler of Bahrain, or Shaikh Isa, easily accessible, widely present and extensively visible to his subjects. This thesis started with questions on the origins of the new town project in Bahrain, featuring Isa Town – Bahrain and the Arab world's first new town – and asking what role it played, if at all, in the modernisation of Bahrain. Another focal point interrogated the influences of colonial and post-colonial interactions within the design and implementation of the new town project.

In this chapter, I discuss what the Bahrain example contributes to the general study of new towns, focusing on colonial and post-colonial interactions, the social change it introduced, what it has signified for Bahrain and its people as a modernisation project, how it was used as a representation of the local political authority through an extensive production of images of the modern state, and finally, the implications of introducing and implementing a national housing programme.

Bahrain's new town example

Until now, the Bahraini example of new towns has been absent from the wider literature on the subject. However, like many other examples, it offers several valuable insights. Isa Town encapsulates a rich historical context, highlights social transformation, and signifies the connection of new town development to political and administrative nation-building projects. This role is especially significant as new towns continue to be a significant part of public agendas with consequential effects on the societies that build and inhabit them. As this research showed, Isa Town contributed to social change within Bahraini society by mixing different classes of society with one another in a relatively harmonious way, which allowed for their integration.

Furthermore, the government expanded its societal role through the introduction and implementation of a national housing programme, contributing to the design and construction of the new town and the distribution of houses within it and ensuring the town's success by encouraging citizens to move there. By facilitating the move, the

government accepted responsibility for addressing the needs of the Bahraini society, establishing new state–citizen interactions that were often addressed through the local office in the new town.

As this research has shown, Isa Town was constructed as part of an ambitious public housing programme, the Housing and Ownership Project of 1962, which was announced within the first ten months of the reign of Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa. Isa Town made the state's action visible and tangible through a new legal framework and organisational hierarchies that regulated the relationship between the state and citizens in the realm of housing. Consequently, the town and the interactions within it were illustrated through the publication of its photos, maps, and newsreels. This media was developed to show a new and modern nation through the delivery of a political promise, a process that emerged in many other examples of new towns from Brasília (Holston, 1989) as well as in Chandigarh (Prakash, 2002).

Most of the academic literature discusses new towns either as complete projects that helped fulfil objectives or as projects that led to unforeseen circumstances or unaccounted outcomes. Recent academic literature has invited an extended discourse on the value of new towns today, how to preserve their heritage (Chalana and Sprague, 2013; Prakash, 2024), and possible lessons from British new towns to inform future building projects (Forsyth, 2019). However, few look at the smaller towns outside of the West despite their significant modernisation ambitions and their role in social reforms and political transformations, all of which are critical elements in the findings of this project. More recently, attention has returned to the new cities built in the Arabian Gulf as they expand from their original 'modernising' roots – they were designed to convey wider concepts of economic liberation and illustrate renewed political ideologies despite their current status as mega projects (Almqvist, 2024; Boodrookas and Keshavarzian, 2019; Moser et al., 2015; Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021; Peiser and Forsyth, 2021).

Notably, Isa Town's legacy is connected to its role in political development and the evolution of the relationship between Bahrain's social and political classes. The interactions between the political leadership and new town residents, as well as the integration of various social classes, made Isa Town different. The town offered mixed typologies of housing units, which attracted wider class representation and integrated them in an almost imperceptible manner in schools as well as other facilities. Therefore, it was not just the provision of housing that was important but the provision of mixed-use facilities and the increase in inter-class interactions, which were encouraged by political leaders. Therefore, this study has shown how a new town can be built as part of a larger project on social change and political development, signifying Bahrain as a modern state and using the images of the new town to validate and support state policies. I discuss each accordingly in the following sections, but before I do so, I highlight the centrality of Isa Town within the colonial and post-colonial interactions of the emerging Bahraini state.

British relations, coloniality, and post-coloniality

British–Bahraini relations had a significant role in the development of Isa Town. The special relationship between the Bahraini leadership and Great Britain inspired the adoption of the new town model in Bahrain. In other words, Isa Town would not have developed in the way it did without the long history of the British–Bahraini relationship. This influence is confirmed by the choice of construction firm – George Wimpey, Ltd. – and the consortium of British companies that worked with Wimpey to build the new town (*Bahrain-New Town*, 1968). It was not just the new town idea that was influenced by the British–Bahraini relationship – much of the public administration in Bahrain in the latter part of the twentieth century was influenced by British presence. The role of the British emerged in various organisational hierarchies, the institutionalisation of a municipal system in 1919, as well as the production of various national and periodic reports that were shared with the Foreign Office in London as well as the corresponding advisory reports prepared by British experts commissioned by Bahraini government officials (of which key examples were discussed in chapter 5). Therefore, Isa Town demonstrates its influence on the importation of a new town as well as on the administration that oversaw its construction.

To elaborate further, the new town was built at a critical time in Bahrain's modern history: the first phase was completed in the ten years before the British military withdrawal from Bahrain. Following what has previously been discussed in the findings, Isa Town may be considered one of Bahrain's earliest and largest post-colonial projects. By that, I mean that as the Bahraini leadership was defining its new role as a modern state, housing and new town development were key pillars in defining the role of the modern government in the country's independent future. Although genuine autonomy was still years from being realised at the time of Isa Town's construction, it was nevertheless a decision for the Bahraini state that was made with no direct influence from any foreign political representatives in Bahrain – indeed, it flew in the face of their advice.

In other words, Isa Town cannot be classified as a colonial project that resulted from a direct British decision or was enforced upon Bahrain, such as some of the colonial towns in former colonies (Home, 1997; Kezeiri, 1987) or those with a colonial influence (Tzfadia, 2005). Nevertheless, even though the decision for the new town was made locally, British influence is evident in the various nuances of the project, from the choice of the company in charge of building it to the design of the new town and the houses within it. This process confirms Rosemary Wakeman's view on how modernisation is a goal in the construction of new towns, regardless of their size, as a new way of 'colonial urbanism' (2016, p. 103).

More importantly, British–Bahraini relations are evident not only in the choice of adopting the new town model or the selection of a construction company but also in the state and operations of public administration, as mentioned earlier. From the first half of the twentieth century, British involvement in Bahrain's internal affairs grew significantly with

the administrative reforms of the 1920s, which saw the dethroning of Shaikh Isa bin Ali Al Khalifa in favour of his son, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, and a series of reforms in multiple state departments (Al Rumaihi, 1973; Al Shehabi, 2019; Onley, 2010). These administrative reforms also contributed directly to instilling order in several vital public realms: land reforms, police, customs, and the judiciary, as well as the long-suffering pearl diving industry (Khuri, 1980; Onley, 2010). The reforms also entailed the appointment of a British-approved government advisor to the Shaikh (Abdulla, 2016; Belgrave, 1960). The public often criticised this role, which was not always clearly understood, suggesting that the British advisor had wide jurisdiction and authority over the government instead of serving as an intermediary between envoys of Great Britain and the Bahraini government (Abdulla, 2016).

Nevertheless, the acceptance of these arrangements by successive Bahraini sheikhs led directly and indirectly to more extensive British involvement within the government, including initiatives to understand and improve government operations. This role emerges in the different reports produced by the British and proposed to the Bahraini sheikhs in different decades, such as the Report of an Inquiry into the Working of the System of Government in Bahrain and the Structure of the Bahrain Civil Service of 1957[296] and Proposals for a System of Government and Administration in Bahrain, by C. A. G. Wallis of the Ministry of Overseas Development,[297] issued in February 1965, both which were discussed in chapter 5. Incidentally, these reports – as well as those which were produced periodically, such as the Annual Report, which was produced by the government and shared with British administrators (political residents and agents) – provide a significant record of the Bahraini public administration as well as the state of its public operations.

When it came to solutions adopted for improving the living conditions of the Bahraini people, policy decisions were designed locally. When it came to housing, the British expressed a general sense of scepticism in the introduction of housing schemes in place of true constitutional innovation and civic representation. They saw housing as generous, well-publicised gifts,[298] but Charles Belgrave spoke of their importance in his memoir as an essential step in improving lives of Bahraini citizens that he oversaw as an advisor to the Government of Bahrain (Belgrave, 1960). British involvement meant the presence of British persons, government personnel, and companies in Bahrain, which further aided the importation of British models in the development of the new town.

In addition to Her Majesty's British administrators, there was no shortage of British government personnel within the Bahraini government in the 1960s, some of whom were

[296] FO 371/126897.
[297] FCO 8/511.
[298] E. P. Wiltshire to Arabian Department, Annual Review of Bahrain 1962, FO 371/168669.

meant to be seen as part of the local civil service.[299] Indeed, they had an active role within the organisational hierarchies of government and were recruited to establish, advise, and oversee the growing government body. The British presence in Bahrain contributed to the way Isa Town was developed as a government project because, as this research has shown, it was not a simple development but led to the enduring legacy of the new town movement. Consequently, the lines between colonial and post-colonial interactions intertwined and interconnected at different moments in the construction of the new town. Who was making decisions, and their source of inspiration was not always clear, nor was the expanding role of government, which, when necessary, was willing to expend great efforts to see its planning succeed.

On the one hand, the new town in Bahrain was closely connected to the prior Housing and Ownership Project, issued by Decree 2 Finance of 1962, which established the legal and administrative framework for public housing in Bahrain. The national housing programme was brought to life through a predefined legal and administrative framework designed to define the rules and regulations as well as establish the required bureaucratic setup that would oversee its implementation. However, on what basis was this programme designed, and where did the influence for such a legally defined programme come from? Answering this question is especially pertinent since the lines between Bahrain and Britain remained indistinct within the government in the 1950s and 1960s. Therefore, the Housing and Ownership Decree was most likely created under the purview of the legal advisor at the Department of Government Finance, A. G. S. Barstowe,[300] a British official who worked closely with the Chief of Government Finance. The presence of British administrators and advisors in the Department of Government Finance and, later, within the Housing and Ownership Department and the Isa Town Office should come as no surprise – even in a post-colonial project, traces of the colonial administration within the local government remained. This relationship lasted for a long time after sovereign independence, which illustrates the fine lines between what was seen as an extension of the friendly relations between Bahrain and Britain by the political elite and what may otherwise be interpreted as colonial presence and practice.

On the other hand, the idea for a new town was inspired by British examples and defined by the British company that oversaw its design and construction. Therefore, the design of the new town, as well as the amenities which were put in it, were greatly influenced by new town examples elsewhere. Thus, those who would live in them had little influence over their design or definition according to their lifestyle needs. This discrepancy is often identified by academics as a typical characteristic of new towns (Wakeman, 2016), and some have noted this feature as a reason why government planning fails to address or improve social conditions (Scott, 1998). In the case of Isa Town, the government, and

[299] FCO 8/511
[300] FCO 8/511

indeed, the political leadership's determination to make the new town a success despite its challenges, invited wider communication and response from the government to address the reasons why people were leaving and re-incentivise them to stay through house price discounts, and the rapid inclusion of various social and economic needs.

Isa Town and social change

Isa Town was designed from its start as a social reform project to encourage different classes of Bahraini society to adopt a modern, contemporary lifestyle. The brochure produced for the ceremony of laying the foundation stone of Isa Town went as far as claiming that the project, introduced through the Housing and Ownership Project of 1962, would 'constitute one of the most important social reforms ever introduced in Bahrain, having a direct influence on the life of every Bahraini citizen'.[301] The element of social formation and transformation was recognised by the government as one of the key aims and attracted wider regional attention as the 'new society' formed (Zabal, 1970). It also drew some Western attention, which identified it as the 'Arab world's most outstanding sociological experiments' (Stanley, 1979).

The houses and facilities of Isa Town were installed with all the requirements to achieve what was seen as modern and to serve as spaces for social interaction. The town and its environs provided designated space to integrate modern appliances and other features of life into residents' personal lives as well as impacting their social connections. The town was, therefore, designed with all the amenities for a modern life from the innermost corners of their living spaces. This design was consciously adopted by the Housing and Ownership 'Technical' Advisory Committee, which included members of the local business community who were themselves agents and suppliers of modern facilities and appliances.[302]

Most of the families who moved to Isa Town in the early years did not move from spaces that were purposely built to accommodate a modern lifestyle, neither in the home nor outside. They were not used to modern appliances, nor did most of them own cars, and yet each of the housing units was fully equipped and contained a designated garage for one or two cars regardless of the house category. The houses were purposely fitted with electricity that eventually was connected to modern appliances in the kitchen, living rooms, and even bedrooms. The BAPCO images of a woman inside an Isa Town house

[301] Government of Bahrain, 1963, Ceremony to Lay the Foundation Stone of Isa Town Brochure, Bahrain.
[302] The Housing and Ownership Advisory Committee was headed by the Chief of Government Finance, Shaikh Khalifa Bin Salman, and included four other prominent members of the public and business community: Ahmed Al Omran, director of education, and three businessmen, partners Ali Abdul Rahman Al Wazzan and Sadeq Mohammed Al Baharna, as well as Abdulla Ghuloom. At the time, Al Baharna and Al Wazzan were the joint founders of Intercol, a telecommunication company. Al Wazzan was also the president of the Chamber of Commerce and Sadeq Al Baharna owned another trading company with his brother that supplied home appliances, including air conditioners, ovens, and refrigerators. Abdulla Ghuloom owned several businesses that supplied food and household goods.

tasting food and cooking on a gas stove with multiple burners marked a significant moment in modern lifestyle for families who previously could only cook on a single portable gas burner outside of the house. The same could be said of every new technology and space that made the connection of that technology possible, whether it was a garage to house a car, a living room to connect a television, or a kitchen that could accommodate multiple refrigeration or heating appliances.

Furthermore, although the families faced challenges moving from and to the new town in the early years, its location was carefully selected for a future vision of bringing the people of Bahrain closer to each other and integrating villagers and town residents. There was no distinction between the two in Isa Town, even though traditionally, villagers were connected to the agriculture and fishing industries, and town residents were typically associated with the emerging oil industry as well as other administrative and commercial activities. However, a new and modern Bahrain diffused these clear distinctions between space and economy. The new town was built with the intention of connecting Bahrain and its people to its future industries, which resulted in new opportunities and connections for Bahrainis wherever they were, especially those living in the new town.

Isa Town and Bahrain's modernisation project

An important question to consider when discussing Isa Town as a modernising project is why the Bahraini government planned a modern new town and what it was aiming to achieve through the introduction of what it defined as modern. In other words, what did the use of modernisation achieve in Isa Town for Bahrain, and how did it contribute to the government and society as a whole? Equally as important, how was modernisation used, if at all, as a concept to define Isa Town? This view is especially critical considering what some of the acknowledged aims of modernism were in relation to societal perception:

> Their aim was to disrupt imagery of what bourgeois society understood as the real and the natural, to challenge the taken for granted, to defamiliarize, disorient, decode, deconstruct, and de-authenticate the normative, moral aesthetic, and familiar categories of social life. (Holston, 1989, p. 6)

In Isa Town, the concepts of modernity were applied similarly to their use elsewhere – the intent was to 'defamiliarize' (Holston, 1989) and represent a future with little historical context. However, equally as important, the concepts of modernisation were applied to define and expand the state's role in providing solutions for a society that did not have the power or real opportunity to decide such matters for itself. In Isa Town, it was important that the town embodied a modern lifestyle as defined by the state – both its role as well as what it provided to citizens. To be seen as modern, it had to be aesthetically different from the traditional and familiar. Urban modernisation was applied to the new town and its facilities, the development of new government processes, as well as the channels of mass communication and illustration. News on the new town was staged to represent a

new and ‘modern’ age. More importantly, it also highlighted the distinction between representation and reality in a ‘staging of differences’ (Mitchell, 2000a, p. 26) between the old and new, the traditional and the modern, which also led to a number of discrepancies between what was designed versus how it was experienced, and thus it created new realities as well as new spaces for representation:

> The performance of modernity also stages the difference between what is staged and what is real, between representation and reality. The effect of this staging is to generate a new world of multiple significations and simulations. (Mitchell, 2000a, p. 26)

Modernisation in Isa Town was applied as both a type of social change – embodied in its immersive experience – and a material change. Concepts of modernity were developed over a tableau that highlighted differences between the old and the modern by visualising them through the extensive use of visual illustrations directed through media organisations to the public. These images proved to be powerful elements to shift Bahraini societal attitudes towards what was seen as new and modern and ultimately towards government planning, as highlighted by Rosemary Wakeman (2016) in *Practising Utopia*. In Bahrain, and in Isa Town more specifically, modernisation was not seen as a stage in history but rather the staging of a time and place ‘appearing in the homogeneous shape of the West’ (Mitchell, 2000b, p. 23) to facilitate the expansion of government intervention in interpreting challenges as well as proposing solutions to Bahraini society with little civic engagement in the decision-making process.

On the other hand, the construction of Isa Town contributed to the development of the modern Bahraini administration. Isa Town was not built to relocate or replace an existing capital like the monumental cities of Brasília or Chandigarh, and indeed, Manama was never threatened with the loss of its role as a cosmopolitan centre. Nevertheless, Isa Town was undoubtedly connected to the modernisation of state operations, though on a much smaller scale in comparison to more monumental new town examples. It was built to serve as a centre stage to portray a modernising society, a modern state able to address the needs of a growing economy and illustrate the state’s capacity for modernisation. It established certain parts of the public administration and contributed to economic growth through the development of vital sectors.

Isa Town was imagined as a vehicle to mobilise public administration and create a ‘new’ Bahraini society that would be a part of its future workforce. This goal was especially emphasised with the development of government offices and the opening of the first college on the outskirts of the new town, as well as the development of Bahrain’s first aluminium smelter, ALBA, in the south of Bahrain east of Awali. State declarations on Isa Town through its broadcasting magazine, *Huna Al Bahrain*, discussed it as a necessity in the modernisation journey of the state. It was not seen just as an image of modernity but

as fulfilling a modernising function. Ebrahim Abdul Karim, economist and later minister of finance and national economy, wrote in 1969:

> Bahrain is currently going through an economic boom similar to the one it witnessed with the discovery of oil and the construction of the refinery. The construction industry will play a prominent role in this phase. Therefore, it was sound to think about a modern housing sector that is appropriate for this phase, as it is not important how much the national income will increase, but rather how much the people of the country will benefit from this increase. With the construction of Isa Town as an extension to several beneficial projects, we can envision the society we aspire to, with all the necessities of modern life available, from education, healthcare, employment opportunities and, finally, suitable housing. (Abdul Karim, 1969)

Isa Town, and indeed modern housing, was thus seen as an important building block in the development of Bahrain and its image as a modern nation. Oil and other industries needed adequate public services, which also led to the development of local industry. As the demand for housing kept growing, so did the construction sector, including the trade and demand for construction materials. Therefore, investments in the construction of Isa Town and public housing eventually contributed to the development of other local industries such as concrete, steel, and other activities to fit modern houses with modern amenities. The new town and later housing projects were important cogs in the economic development machine – they provided adequate housing for a modern workforce and brought them closer to their worksites. Further, they contribute to the growth of the economy through the increase in construction and the trading activities associated with it. Nevertheless, the question remains: what administrative or political process decided on housing and the development of a new town, and what was it trying to achieve?

If the modernising state was defining itself through not only the construction of Isa Town and its extensive publicity campaign, but it was also doing so through the development of legal frameworks, the establishment of administrative bodies, and the general implementation of new state practices. Therefore, if Isa Town was the most significant social reform introduced by Bahrain, the related processes and new establishments were only the beginning of a larger state vision based on modernisation, development, and sovereign independence.

Through the lens of Isa Town, the modern Bahraini state was built on a foundation defined by legal frameworks that regulated relations between various groups of society and the government. Furthermore, its organisation brought with it a type of statecraft which was intended to legitimise the existing political system while further expanding the state's authority. The difference between statecraft and state formation is discussed by Davies (1991, p. 12), who refers to statecraft as the 'processes or mechanisms whereby a state enhances its power and authority', noting that 'statecraft entails the skills whereby

political elites or ruling class promote state formation'. However, the key question, according to Davies (1991), is how the political elite or those that control the state are able to increase the strength of their authority, which is often done through formal institutions and the passing of legislation, a matter which is portrayed in the administrative state development and is seen through the Housing and Ownership Project of 1962 and, ultimately, through Isa Town. As this study shows, Isa Town also illustrates the political system of government and the ruler's engagement within it, in what they defined as important. On the one hand, the passage of the Housing and Ownership Decree of 1962 and the ensuing construction of Isa Town fortified the state and the ruler's authority. On the other hand, Shaikh Isa further made himself accessible, present, and altogether visible to his society. This was an exemplification of a larger process in which Shaikh Isa responded in policy design and decisions by expanding his relations with society through a daily *majlis*[303] in which he sat every day of the year, and virtually anyone could reach him:

> The ruler's open council, the *majlis*, embodies the shaikhly system of government. We have always regarded the *majlis* as a partial substitute for representative institutions of government on the Western model. The existence of the *majlis* makes the ruler directly accessible to his people at all levels and thus acts as a safety valve; it also provides the ruler with an effective means of communication with his people in both directions and enables him to keep abreast of public opinion and to formulate his decisions accordingly.[304]

In addition to the *majlis*, in which Shaikh Isa met and communicated with all strata of society, major policy decisions were made in a bi-weekly meeting between him and his two brothers, and where consultations with those concerned were made before a decision was made.[305] He did not see a need for a representative government or a radical administrative reform, because after HMG's decision of withdrawal from the Gulf, Shaikh Isa remained sceptical of any change which would distance him from anyone he trusts,[306] or more broadly from the Bahraini society,[307] and was therefore keen on making the

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[303] The *majlis* was not unique to Shaikh Isa, and, indeed, his predecessors hosted a similar setting for consulting with the public. The difference is in the frequency of such meetings, as Shaikh Isa was known to sit in his almost every day and sometimes even twice a day. This decision brought Shaikh Isa closer to the public but was often criticised by the British, as discussed in the Letter from Political Agent in Bahrain A. D. Parsons to H.M. Political Resident, 24th June 1968, Despatch 1/7 in FCO 8/511.

[304] Letter from Political Agent in Bahrain A. D. Parsons to H.M. Political Resident, 24th June 1968, Despatch 1/7, FCO 8/511.

[305] A.D. Parsons, 'Future of Bahrain', 3rd May 1967, FCO 8/507.

[306] Letter from Political Agent in Bahrain A. D. Parsons to H.M. Political Resident, 24th January 1968, FCO 8/511.

[307] Letter from Political Agent in Bahrain A. D. Parsons to H.M. Political Resident, 24th June 1968, Despatch 1/7, FCO 8/511.

existing system work administratively as well as politically.[308] To the Shaikh, his accessibility also meant his widespread presence and his visibility to Bahraini society. The Shaikh's visibility was achieved through both access to his person in the *majlis* as well as his participation and presence in national events. He was seen both in person and through the various images circulated of his participation in state events. The British often questioned the value of the *majlis* system over a more formal representative political system because of its lack of structure, the Shaikh's over-accessibility, as well as the presence of foreigners, which prevented some of the conservative Arabs from speaking in such a setting.[309] But even the British could not deny that the *majlis* provided the Shaikh with the invaluable ability to 'keep his finger on the emotional pulse of the country.'[310]

As a national programme for housing, the Housing and Ownership Project of 1962 and the resulting new town, therefore, stemmed from the existing political system, which aimed to bring the Shaikh closer to his subjects. Additionally, multiple media channels further illustrated the Shaikh's decisions and the work of the administrative system to the Bahraini public. The aim of all of this was not to herald a new political process, but to legitimise the existing one. In developing the urban environment, the political elite in Bahrain capitalised on social and administrative modernisation instead of political modernisation to gain legitimacy. Isa Town, hence, illustrates this route to modernisation, in which the modern is used through urban development to legitimise the state and its actions to the public. It is important to note that while this route to modernisation might have been particular to Bahrain, and maybe even to other Gulf countries, it is most likely not unique to it.

Visualising the modern state

As much as Isa Town was a stage for modernisation and a place to develop and implement certain state operations, it was also important as a visual signifier. By illustrating modernity through the town layout and its modern housing, the state used Isa Town to communicate the status of Bahrain among sovereign nations to different audiences. To the regional and international communities, it was displaying its ability to modernise – to be seen as a nation able to plan and govern itself. To its local polity, the government aimed to show that the Bahraini state was able to deliver on a transformation of local livelihoods by improving living conditions and ensuring that the citizens' share of the increases in gross national wealth was felt and seen by them. Through all of this, it

[308] Letter from Political Agent in Bahrain A. D. Parsons to H.M. Political Resident, 24th June 1968, Despatch 1/7 in FCO 8/511.
[309] Letter from Political Agent in Bahrain A. D. Parsons to H.M. Political Resident, 24th June 1968, Despatch 1/7 in FCO 8/511.
[310] Letter from Political Agent in Bahrain A. D. Parsons to H.M. Political Resident, 24th June 1968, Despatch 1/7 in FCO 8/511.

was developing its state autonomy, but without a separation of powers. What state autonomy meant, therefore, was the autonomy to make decisions locally, but not necessarily independent of the head of state.

The new town was comprehensively visualised from its start to portray various images as well as represent a process for signification. In providing a stage for the state and its spectacles, it was also conveying messages to the public about a modern age, a new reign, and a new level of state operations. The new wave of state ceremonies, which were attended by Shaikh Isa and his dignitaries as well as members of the Bahraini public, were extensively photographed and filmed for representation in news publications through images and cinematographic reels that were supplemented with detailed news reports. Together, they engaged the public and instantiated the collective where, for the first time, Bahraini society was able to see itself as well as key political figures in an open display intended to instil a sense of awe and grandeur.

Even the idea of modernity was applied not only with the intention to transform but also to signify the new age and to legitimise the modern state. The new town was an objective of the new state, but equally as important, it was the process in which the government defined its new identity and reoriented its customs and operations. Consequently, the start of Shaikh Isa's reign can be defined as the start of the modern administration in Bahrain through the issuance of organisational decrees, the development of new bureaucracies, and the introduction of new state ceremonies and customs. These shifts signalled the start of a new age of modern public administration. These ceremonies announced and visualised illustrations of new government policies to the public and included various members of society who were not previously engaged in any state developments. Notably, however, they were brought in to be shown what the government was doing and not necessarily to have a part in the decision-making process.

The intricate details of daily life in Isa Town were extensively recorded, creating an important historical record where little else has survived. At the time of their production, though, the pictures and cinematographic recordings were used to announce the political vision and government commitment to the future of Bahrain. The use of multiple forms of media in state and private publications was designed to raise the public's confidence in the Bahraini government's ability to cater to the needs of a new age. More importantly, however, they were produced with the intention of instilling faith in the political leadership's ability to deliver on such promises. Furthermore, the photos of Isa Town were also produced with the intention of presenting Bahrain to the world and illustrating modern images of its evolving society. Therefore, images of a modernising Bahraini society are not just about illustrating a modern Bahraini family within their modern home but also communicating the government's progress in various public services such as health, education, and the economy. All of these aspects are clearly

illustrated and captured in an image forever suspended in time, depicting what was deemed as modern.

The Bahrain Oil Company (BAPCO), which aided the Bahraini government in the taking and circulation of images through their collective publications, was also an active partner of the government in its modernisation project. Even today, BAPCO maintains the largest historical visual archive in Bahrain, which includes images, records, and cinematographic newsreels from the 1940s until around the 1970s. BAPCO helped Bahrain establish a modern image for itself and communicate it to the public. According to BAPCO's former photographers and cinematographers, the company was trying to extend an olive branch and improve its standing with the people of Bahrain as well as its political leadership (Al Khan, 2023; Shaheen, 2023). Like many other events and projects, these images visualise the history of Bahrain and fill archival gaps. Equally as significant was how they aided the government in promoting through imagery all that was new and modern in Isa Town, as well as illustrating the modern vision for the future of Bahrain.

The implementation of a national housing policy

As this thesis has shown in previous chapters, the Housing and Ownership Decree of 1962 was a significant piece of legislation towards the introduction of a national housing policy for Bahrain. It may also be argued that, for over sixty years, it has served as the foundation upon which national policies on public housing were built. It was also the start of the public housing administration. This thesis provided a study of the new town and the decree upon which it was founded. The legislation outlined the conditions of the first public housing programme in Bahrain, establishing the administrative hierarchy which would oversee its execution. In subsequent decades, it has been amended and revised several times, particularly with the establishment of a housing ministry in 1975. Nevertheless, it remains the conceptual nucleus of the Bahraini public housing programme, housing policy, as well as housing administration.

The decree and the administrative bodies it established were examined in Chapter 5. The housing and ownership administration included an Advisory Committee that made all major decisions about the new town, including who was to live in it and which housing category they were to receive. Further, it included an administration in charge of receiving and processing housing requests, distribution, real estate management, and the repayment of housing costs by citizens. This administration, named the Housing and Ownership Directorate, included a local office in the new town, the Isa Town Office.

Public housing in Bahrain was conceptualised and operated by a government which was defining and expanding its role in the public arena. The government had designed the policy, promulgated it by establishing new administrative bodies, and commissioned the construction of a new town in which the policy was executed. The rules government officials followed were those they deemed important, not necessarily by what Bahraini

society demanded or even expected. The new town and its accompanying housing legislation were seen as solutions to address population density in larger dilapidated towns, announcing the modern age and publicising the government and its capacity, intentions, and operations to the citizenry. This study shows how a particular public policy was implemented at a critical time in Bahrain's political and administrative history, using a top-down approach.

This study drew upon archival records to study how decision-makers attempted to engage in sound policy decisions and uncover whether they achieved their objectives. Methodologically, it aligns with case studies on top-down approaches to policy implementation, such as Bardach (1977), Mazmanian and Sabatier (1989), and Pressman and Wildavsky (1984). It has also offered an example of a solution introduced by the government without the public actively participating in decision-making. This issue is highlighted by Scott's (1998) work on how planning and urban development were used under the guise of modernity to control and plan communities in ways they were unable to do themselves. As this study has shown, the town was not immediately popular. Its distance from the capital, lack of transportation links, and the absence of basic services in the new town were reasons families left these modern houses to return to their old neighbourhoods. As more families chose to leave the new town, political leaders intervened to incentivise people to stay by offering a 2,000 Bahraini dinar discount per house. This decision retained the remaining Isa Town community.

In addition to archival resources, oral history interviews with key staff within the Housing and Ownership Directorate, specifically the Isa Town Office, were used to show how the housing policy was implemented. Furthermore, this study also illustrates how the Bahraini public received it and whether the new town and its accompanying policies achieve their set objectives.

By interviewing staff from the Isa Town Office, especially those who were in charge of implementing the housing policy, a clearer picture emerged of the role they played in the programme. The role of street-level bureaucrats is crucial in understanding how the policy was brought to life. This view aligns with Michael Lipsky's (2010) argument that 'the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures effectively *become* the public policies they carry out' (p. xiii). Therefore, this section introduces each of the bodies developed to implement the housing project and notes how they led to the development of the Isa Town Office, also following Lipsky: 'To the mix of places where policies are made, one must add the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers' (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii).

Conclusively, this study shows that the proposed solutions in the new towns helped build a new community, but this often came at the cost of moving people away from older communities and neighbourhoods without a parallel policy on urban regeneration.

Therefore, more studies are needed to understand the effects of new towns on the urban communities they were, at least in part, built to replace. It might also be useful to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, where possible, to examine the effects of policy implementation of new town development. Doing so might illuminate the full implications of the urban phenomena and urbanisation associated with new town development, especially as these communities continue to transform.

Considerations for future research

This research has provided a context for Isa Town, Bahrain and the Arab world's first new town. The historical context and the trajectory of this new town, insightful as it is, are unique to this example, and there is much that remains to be studied and understood about the social, political, and administrative elements of other new towns outside of the Western context. Each new town was created in a different historical and political context and was introduced to a different society, resulting in varied implications for the relevant communities who lived there. Research shows that although new towns shared many similarities, they all had elements which were unique to their development. Even in Bahrain, numerous new towns and housing projects followed the construction of Isa Town, and very little knowledge is available about their history. This study looked at the first new town, which I have reason to believe is unique if only for the fact that it was the only new town built prior to the establishment of the Ministry of Housing in Bahrain.

Consequently, there is ample opportunity to study other new towns in Bahrain using the methods employed in this research project. For example, I sensed a strong tendency among my interviewees to compare Isa Town to subsequent new towns in Bahrain, which indicates that a comparative study of new towns could provide further knowledge on the new town experience for Bahrain. I agree with Rosemary Wakeman's (2016) observation on the ample opportunity for further research on new towns in the Middle East and North Africa, as there is much knowledge that they could generate for the future of new towns in parts of the world where they continue to develop in different forms and iterations. This study of Isa Town looked at its historical development, but it might also be useful to look at the legacy of Isa Town and where it stands in the demographic and urban landscape of Bahrain to understand some of its social challenges.

On another note, this research has highlighted some of the challenges in working with archival material in Bahrain, suggesting approaches to overcome the silences within them and circumvent power relations around them. Nonetheless, there remains significant potential in the organisation of local archives and making them accessible to the public. This project has revealed that a great deal of government archival data and documents, many of which have been carted in large numbers of boxes to the central government store in Sitra, remain unknown or inaccessible. Therefore, a national project to create a national archive that would include all government-related documents for each of the government agencies is needed. As part of this task, government agencies

can identify the relevant documents and records, collect them, archive them according to topic, and make them accessible in part or as a whole to the public, including for research purposes.

Historical editions of newspapers, whether those of independent news organisations or BAPCO, should be made available to the public as they remain important records in Bahrain. Editions of BAPCO newspapers remain the most accessible, as the company keeps a digital record of all its editions. Other magazines, such as *Huna Al Bahrain*, are accessible but are not available in full and can be challenging to locate and obtain. Other news records or editions remain relatively accessible, some none at all, and others may be found sporadically and incidentally at the homes of private collectors. There are numerous examples of initiatives to collect public records and make them accessible, but doing so requires education, training, raising awareness and, most importantly, initiative. Non-profit organisations such as the Shaikh Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Centre for Culture and Research, for example, printed all editions of *Jareedat Al Bahrain*, or *Al Bahrain Newspaper*, in a limited number of four-volume sets that were sold to the public but never republished. The only copy at the centre was locked and was inaccessible as I was doing this research.[311]

There are many examples of other newspapers and public and private archival records which have been preserved in physical and digital archives and are accessible. One helpful example in the region is the Al Sharekh Organisation Archives,[312] a digital archive based in Kuwait that includes the archives of 274 literary and cultural magazines from twenty-three countries around the world. This repository is where I found Arabic articles on Bahrain and Isa Town in *Al Arabi* Magazine. A similar initiative could occur in Bahrain and include local magazines and newspapers. More ambitiously, a similar digitalisation initiative could be implemented for government publications and records, locating documents of national interest in one place. A less complex option would be for each public organisation to organise its own public records.

Conclusion

As much as Isa Town was built by the state to modernise the lives of Bahraini citizens, it was equally a town built by the state for the state. This research concerned itself with the history and the construction of Bahrain's first new town and the conditions of the Housing and Ownership Project of 1962. Sixty years after the birth of the Bahraini public housing project and the construction of its first new town, Bahrain's political commitment to housing and new town construction remains as strong as it was when it first started. Urban development, particularly new town development by the government, is deeply

[311] I contacted the centre and was informed that there were no more editions for sale, and the centre's copy is currently inaccessible to the public.
[312] https://archive.alsharekh.org/ accessed 24 February 2024.

rooted in political and public administrative processes, and as such, they have been continuously prioritised within the government agenda.

Following the creation of Isa Town, the Bahraini government – through the Ministry of Housing, which was established in 1975 – has built five other new towns, some of which are still under construction. These towns include Hamad Town, inaugurated in 1984; Zayed Town, established in 2001; Madinat Khalifa, built by the King's Foundation (previously the Prince's Foundation) in 2016; Madinat Salman, inaugurated in 2018; East Hidd and East Sitra in which the foundation stones were placed in 2013 and 2015, respectively, and are continuing to development until this day. The newer towns of Bahrain have been built on a larger scale than the original new town of Isa, but Isa Town remains significant in that it was the inspiration for all other new towns. Also, even as the size of the new towns has grown, Isa Town remained unmatched in what it offered its citizens and other members of Bahraini society.

It is important to note that the housing aspect of new towns remains an important element in the negotiations between leadership and the Bahraini people. Concepts of citizenship, loyalty, and statehood are strengthened through the provision of housing services and modern facilities in the new towns, representing 'the pot of gold at the end of every rainbow' (Wakeman, 2016, p. 297), which have been used strategically in times of reidentification as well as moments political or economic uncertainty. During the holy month of Ramadan and on 19 March 2025, at a gathering at Sakhir Palace, HM King Hamad addressed the heads of Bahrain Governorates and prominent members of civil society, highlighting several key national achievements and a vision for the future, which included the accelerated delivery of 50,000 new housing units and improving public services to address citizen's needs.[313] When completed, this will represent almost one-third of all housing delivered to citizens since the late 1950s (Ministry of Housing, 2018, 1993). But why this directive, and why now, after decades of a well-established public housing administration? If one looks closely, this directive was designed as it always has been to quell dissent, pacify the population, and bring people closer to the monarch. In the background, heated negotiations between the government and the parliament to raise taxes to reduce budget deficits were raising public concerns, and the news on housing was designed to assuage public sentiment. Therefore, new town development and housing continue to be used by the Bahraini government to build a rapport with the Bahraini civil society.

Even now, more than sixty years after the construction of Bahrain's first new town, the Bahrain government remains engaged in state-driven promises of new urban realities that include new towns, where public housing is a key deliverable within public schemes.

[313] 'HM King receives well-wishers for Ramadan', 19 March 2025, Bahrain News Agency, https://www.bna.bh/en/HMKingreceiveswellwishersforRamadan.aspx?cms=q8FmFJgiscL2fwIzON1%2bDt531E5EhO6S9tSyuZs5Ovg%3d (accessed 21 April 2025).

Government-led construction of new towns and the housing within them are still an integral part of the government programme and consume a fair share of its public budget.[314] All of this shows how, for Bahrain, housing and the development of new urban spaces continue to serve as part of its political narrative. The administrative, legal, political, and social foundations of new town development in Bahrain, which is linked to the public housing project, were put in place more than sixty years ago and evolved to include wider family categories and various income categories. However, the underlying message from the highest political authority remains the same: housing and the construction of new urban towns for citizens are part of the social contract between the state and its citizens and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

New towns in Bahrain did not just represent a social need to build housing – they also signified a political need. More specifically, political officials needed to communicate their visions, goals, and objectives in a tangible and visually striking way to the broader populace. Isa Town was not built to be architecturally modern, but it was imagined to introduce modern living for Bahraini families. Therefore, modernity in new town developments was intended to separate the past from the present and 'de-familiarise' what the public was used to (Holston, 1989) to facilitate broader societal change while making the government's role in it perfectly visible.

In conclusion, this study of Isa Town is important for its contribution to the study of new towns outside of the West. This thesis incorporated alternative approaches to improve the methodology relevant to the study of new towns, particularly the use of visual materials in the discussion of their historical context, where little has been done academically. In documenting the story of Isa Town, I relayed the story of Bahrain as a modernising emerging state and the society it hoped to build. I showed how the new town and the state and society that developed within it were all important elements in the formation and depiction of the modern Bahraini state. Isa Town was constructed by the Bahraini state but also it illustrated its evolution.

Today, however, very few traces of its original glory remain in Isa Town; in fact, even my visits to the town were met with much surprise and curiosity. The people of Isa Town were as intrigued about my interest in their town as I was by them and their new town story. They often questioned me on why someone from my background, and not having any association with the place, would be interested in their town. Nevertheless, everyone I met was very helpful and aided me in my research. As I reflect, I think that one of the most delightful outcomes of this journey was how happy and proud the people of Isa Town were of my interest in their town. I was able to meet residents and move freely and with no restrictions – from within the recesses of their private homes, the men and women of Isa

[314] 'Housing minister highlights royal directive to expedite housing projects', 20 March 2025, Bahrain News Agency,https://www.bna.bh/en/news?cms=q8FmFJgiscL2fwIzON1%2BDr0FG%2BogjQMkEJhOYqRnECQ%3D (accessed 21 April 2025)

Town opened their hearts and their doors to me, a matter for which I remain eternally grateful, and which also confirms the true Bahraini spirit of openness and acceptance of class, nationality, and gender.

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