

INTERIM DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES AND PROCEDURES FOR THE BUFFER ZONES OF AL AIN OASES

July 2012

Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority (TCA Abu Dhabi)

PREAMBLE

The Interim Development Guidelines for the Buffer Zones of Al Ain Oases (or 'Interim Oasis Guidelines') are prepared to address the increasing and critical need to guide and regulate development projects within surrounding areas, or buffer zones, of the six historic oases of Al Ain. These include Al Ain, Hili, Jimi, Qattara, Mutaredh and Muwaiji Oases, and are included within the Cultural Sites of Al Ain, inscribed as a Serial Property for UNESCO's World Heritage List of sites with Outstanding Universal Value for humankind. Each component of the Cultural Sites of Al Ain is defined together with a Buffer Zone around it, which forms the site's visual setting and contributes to maintaining the site's cultural significance. The Buffer Zones are sensitive areas that warrant special conditions of development to preserve this significance.

As per the Oases Law of 2005, development is prohibited within the boundaries of the Oases. Furthermore, Article I states that "the bordered area and its approaches are considered as the preserved area of the date palm fields in the Oases of Al Ain, Al Qattara, Al Jimmy, Hilly, Al Mutaradh and Al Muwaijei" [sic] and that "the Municipality and the City Planning Office of Al Ain City must facilitate the procedures, regulations, and planning and development criteria that ensure the preservation and protection of the Oases from depreciation and city expansion, and to project the image of Al Ain as a city of Oases, and preserve its special heritage status."

Law 28 of 2005, establishing the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH), authorized ADACH as the official government agency responsible for facilitating and ensuring the protection of the emirate's heritage, including the Oases of Al Ain, in cooperation with Al Ain Municipality and the Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council. Law no. 2 of 2011, establishing the Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority (TCA Abu Dhabi) to replace ADACH and the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority (ADTA), authorizes TCA Abu Dhabi with the same mandate for protection of the oases.

TCA Abu Dhabi administers the Preliminary Cultural Review (PCR), which is the cultural heritage component of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process of Abu Dhabi Emirate, as per the Federal Laws 23 and 24 of 1999. PCR applications, where development in any of the Al Ain Oases buffer zones is in question, are to be reviewed according to the Interim Oasis Guidelines. For more information and guidelines, see <http://www.TCA Abu Dhabi.ae/en/portal/preliminary.cultural.review.aspx>.

The Interim Oasis Guidelines are to serve as official policy document of TCA Abu Dhabi, to be referred to in the interim period until more comprehensive guidelines and regulations are adopted for the Buffer Zones, to protect the Oases' setting from the negative impact of inappropriate development and ensure that development that takes place in these areas is sympathetic to the historic setting of the Oases and the local character of Al Ain. Once these more comprehensive guidelines and regulations are issued, they shall supersede the Interim Oasis Guidelines. For issues that the new guidelines and regulations do not cover, relevant clauses of the Interim Oasis Guidelines shall remain in effect.

The Interim Oasis Guidelines are part of a long-term effort to establish standards and principles of safeguarding the heritage of Al Ain within the urban development process, in accordance with international charters and conventions and best practice.

DESIGN GUIDELINES

The Design Guidelines listed below encompass two types of conditions, both of which will be used to appraise PCR applications:

1. Mandatory conditions required by TCA Abu Dhabi, expressed by 'must';
2. Optional conditions preferred and encouraged by TCA Abu Dhabi, expressed by 'should'.

A. EXISTING CULTURAL HERITAGE RESOURCES

1. **ARCHAEOLOGY:** It is more likely that subterranean archaeological remains are located in close proximity to oases in Al Ain rather than in other parts of Al Ain city, therefore development must be mindful of possible archaeological findings. The presence of in situ archaeological deposits may require amendments or cancellation of proposed developments. In the case of archaeological remains being found, options are encouraged to be explored, in consultation with TCA Abu Dhabi, for the incorporation of the remains of structures into the new development scheme. Any archaeological artifacts found must be reported and submitted to the TCA Abu Dhabi Al Ain office for registration.
2. **HISTORIC BUILDINGS:** There are historic buildings of various periods located in the oasis buffer zones, including both Late Islamic period buildings, which are characterized by traditional building materials like earth, stone and palm-fronds (arish) and date from before the mid-twentieth century, and Post-Oil period buildings, which are characterized by modern building materials like concrete, and date from after the mid-twentieth century or the discovery of oil in the UAE. All of these historic buildings trace the historical and socio-economic developments of the oases; therefore, development must be mindful of these existing structures, in terms of their architectural character, form and scale, their surrounding setting including open spaces and circulation, their land use and their occupancy.

B. NEW BUILDINGS: HEIGHTS AND SETBACKS

1. **GENERAL:** Height limitations and setback distances ensure natural and built heritage features of the oasis to be visually accessible from their surroundings and free from obstruction by new building masses of excessive size and unsympathetic form.
2. **HEIGHTS:** The height of buildings must not exceed the oasis date palm canopy, which is accepted to be 13 m on average. As variations in the ground level at oasis edges may be misleading in identifying the datum, the adjacent street level should be used as reference. Roof height should not exceed 10 m, while tower-like protrusions at intervals along the roof should not exceed 12 m. (Please note that these height measurements are provided indicatively, based on the assumption that the adjacent street has the same level as the oasis farm ground level, and are subject to variations depending on the actual street level in each case.) Sinking part of the building mass underground to gain height is encouraged conditional to due process being followed regarding underground archaeology.

3. **SETBACKS FROM THE OASIS:** The physical and administrative boundaries of the oasis perimeters must be respected. The project boundary of a proposed development must not encroach into the official oasis boundary, as informed by Al Ain Municipality and shown in the maps in Appendix 1. A minimum setback of 5 m must be made from the outside face of the existing farm wall at the oasis edge to the external wall of any proposed new building.
4. **SETBACKS FROM HISTORIC BUILDINGS:** If there are historic buildings dating from the Late Islamic period near a proposed development, a minimum setback of 10 m must be made from the historic building to any proposed new building of one-storey, and a minimum setback of 20 m must be made for two-storey buildings. Within the radius of the 20 m setback, the height of the new building should not exceed the highest point of the historic buildings. (See Appendix 2: Historic buildings in the buffer zones of the oases.) In the case of historic buildings dating from the Post-Oil period, no setback is required.

C. NEW BUILDINGS: ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

1. **GENERAL:** The architectural style of developments should be based on contemporary interpretations of the traditional and vernacular architectural forms and patterns used in Al Ain and the region. The architectural styles should reflect their time of construction, and be distinguishable from older, historic structures. Simple, minimalistic forms are encouraged, while excessive architectural ornamentation should be avoided. The existing practice of using modern interpretations of Arab/Islamic architectural motifs in modern buildings is encouraged to be continued. However, replicas or direct imitations of historic structures and their parts should be avoided. New buildings are encouraged to be designed using traditional principles of construction for their respective functions (eg. new retail structures informed by traditional market/ souk principles; new residential structures/ complexes informed by traditional house/ fort/ palace buildings).
2. **BUILDING FORMS:** Buildings should not have excessively long, massive blocks, but instead should consist of small-scale blocks that support the human scale, broken down modularly if needed. The design of spaces should make best use of natural climatic elements, such as air currents, solar light and heat, based on study of traditional techniques used for this end.
3. **FAÇADES AND ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS:** Architectural elements should not be excessive in style; contemporary interpretations of historic elements are encouraged, keeping the functional and conceptual principles but avoiding replicas or exact imitations of the physical shapes. Facades on the ground floor level should be particularly activated and open to the street, avoiding the obvious placement of utility equipment and avoiding excessively long sections of façade without openings.
4. **BUILDING MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES:** The use of traditional construction materials such as earth, stone, wood and arish (palm fronds) are encouraged wherever possible, particularly in architectural elements. The use of traditional materials should reflect their original properties; materials that are traditionally used for structural purposes should be used in new design for the same purpose, and not merely as surface cladding. New materials should be compatible with the local climate and historic fabric. Heat reflective materials are encouraged, while visually reflective materials should be avoided for major surfaces and facades. Large, continuous glass surfaces must be avoided. Colors and textures used on building facades should be similar to or compatible with those found in the existing Islamic and early post-oil structures of Al Ain. Earth tones, light shades, and heat reflective colors are encouraged.

D. OPEN SPACES, CIRCULATION AND PUBLIC REALM

1. GENERAL: The principles of urban design for open spaces, circulation and the public realm serve to connect the oases to their urban surrounding, increasing their visibility and presence within the cityscape through the appropriate use of open spaces, landscaping and public circulation spaces. Oases and the historic buildings around them should be visually and physical accessible from the surrounding open spaces and streets wherever possible.
2. VIEWS: Development schemes should allow for direct view corridors toward the oases from the surrounding streets by leaving gaps in massing, with green and open spaces and creating a feeling of permeability within the design.
3. OASIS-SIDE OPEN SPACES: The open spaces between the oasis boundaries and the new buildings should be activated. Public pedestrian and bicycle pathways should be created wherever possible, taking advantage of the setback to form promenades and opportunities for recreational use.
4. OASIS-SIDE FACADES: New buildings should not turn their back on the oasis, but should instead have open or semi-open spaces (courts, porticoes, balconies, plazas, etc.) looking onto the oasis.
5. HISTORIC BUILDING VIEWS: In the case that there are historic buildings within the proximity of the development, an active relationship should be established on that side of the development scheme, through the creation of open spaces looking on to the buildings, designed and landscaped to facilitate recreational use and potential future connection with the site of the historic building. (See Appendix 2: Historic buildings in the buffer zones of the oases.)
6. HISTORIC PATHWAYS: Elements of the historic circulation system, such as unpaved and non-linear roads, trails and back-alleys (sikkas), contribute to the natural setting of the oasis and are encouraged to be preserved. Overly designed landscaping or paving should be avoided.
7. NEW PATHWAYS: Public pathways with pedestrian and bicycle access, leading into the oases that may be located adjacent or in close proximity to the development, should be used as a reference in the landscaping and circulation design, whereby pathways of the development should provide connections to the oasis entrances.
8. VEHICULAR TRAFFIC: Vehicular traffic should be downgraded wherever possible through traffic calming measures and the use of distinct paving patterns on the streets adjacent to the development. Shared use streets should also be considered where pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers share the use of the street designed appropriately for low speeds.
9. FARMS: The natural character of farm plots located in the buffer zone should be preserved. Fences around farms must maintain a transparent character, and heavy concrete farm walls must be avoided.
10. PUBLIC OPEN SPACES: Public open spaces should be created wherever possible in the outer edges of the development, in particular on the street side, as well as any possible throughways within the development, to contribute to enhanced pedestrian and bicycle circulation and recreational use within the buffer zones. Special attention should be paid to the use of distinct paving patterns, to enhance the quality of the spaces.
11. LANDSCAPING: Landscaping should be based on indigenous species as much as possible, and on a priority for xeriscaping/ low-maintenance planting schemes. Date palms should be used in patterns differentiated from the oasis, so as to preserve the distinction of the historic oasis fabric from later planting. Landscaping should support the above-mentioned principles of open spaces, view corridors and public recreational areas.

12. LIGHTING: Outdoor lighting should be soft to reduce light pollution, with lower lux levels and warm colors preferred.
13. SIGNAGE: Outdoor signage should be designed with consideration for the historic setting, avoiding decorations that are excessive or direct imitations of historic features.
14. SHADING: Shading elements should be used whenever needed to facilitate outdoor uses in the buffer zones, but should be designed and placed with consideration for their impact on the architectural setting and view corridors into the oases.
15. HELIPADS: Helipads must not be located within the buffer zones.

DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCEDURES

The Design and Implementation Procedures, as with the Design Guidelines, encompass two types of conditions, requested by TCA Abu Dhabi to be followed by developers, either

1. Mandatory conditions required by TCA Abu Dhabi, expressed by 'must';
2. Optional conditions preferred and encouraged by TCA Abu Dhabi, usually expressed by 'should'.

The quality of development in the Al Ain oases buffer zones, in terms of preserving the oases' historic significance, can best be ensured through early, continuous and coordinated consultation with TCA Abu Dhabi.

The process of Preliminary Cultural Review is administered in the form of an application to TCA Abu Dhabi, usually shortly before acquiring building permit from the Municipality. The PCR is also featured within the new Development Review process of the Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council, as part of External Agency Review, placed at Concept Application stage. However, it is strongly recommended that developers begin liaising with TCA Abu Dhabi at the outset, to make sure that the fundamental design concept is developed in the appropriate way and to avoid problems such as objections and abortive work later in the process. This would be at Pre-Concept Stage of the UPC process.

A. DESIGN PHASE

1. INCEPTION STAGE: An initial meeting should be held between TCA Abu Dhabi and the design consultants to discuss the fundamental design approach. Information resources on the local cultural context that can help inform and add value to the design approach can be provided by TCA Abu Dhabi at this stage.
2. CONCEPT DESIGN STAGE: A formal submission must be made at the concept design stage, as part of an official PCR application, including a site plan showing the site's relationship to all surrounding urban elements, all proposed floor plans and elevations and a program of use for spaces (number of units, area in m² of closed and open spaces, etc.). These must be scale drawings marked with scale bars, with all major distances and measurements annotated. A meeting should be held with TCA Abu Dhabi, whereby the design consultant presents the design concept and any necessary mitigation measures are discussed, after which a revised submission may be requested. The PCR report may be issued at this stage by TCA Abu Dhabi, or an interim written assessment may be communicated to the developer until the full PCR report is issued at detail design stage.

3. **DETAIL DESIGN STAGE:** A follow-up submission must be made of the detail design, to ensure that the requested conditions are met through to the final the design stage. The PCR report will be issued by TCA Abu Dhabi no later than this stage.

B. CONSTRUCTION PHASE

1. A schedule must be submitted to TCA Abu Dhabi, before construction begins, which shows the phasing of construction works, in order for TCA Abu Dhabi to schedule the necessary archaeological supervision during the works.
2. An archaeological survey must be conducted, as an additional component to the mandatory geotechnical investigations and the geophysical survey/GPR survey requested by the Municipality, whereby TCA Abu Dhabi-approved archaeologists are present to supervise the surveys.
3. Any archaeological remains found during any stage of the project must be reported and submitted, preferably through the archaeologists supervising the site works, to the TCA Abu Dhabi Historic Environment Department in Al Ain for recording, inventorying and analysis. A subsequent proposal may be requested by TCA Abu Dhabi for the retention *in situ* of features and their incorporation into the proposed development scheme.
4. Measures must be taken to mitigate the potential impact of site works such as drilling, or the use of heavy machinery, which may affect historic structures around the oasis.
5. For TCA Abu Dhabi records and for future reference, as built drawings must be submitted to TCA Abu Dhabi upon completion of the site work.