

# Western Sudan Community Museum (WSCM) – British Council Cultural Protection Fund, in partnership with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport – the story so far.

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## Introduction

The Western Sudan Community Museum Project (WSCM) developed out of the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) Suakin Project,<sup>1</sup> which was directed by Dr Abdelrahman Ali Mohamed as Director General of NCAM, assisted by Iglal Mohamed Osman el-Malik as Head of Conservation and partnered with the University of Khartoum's Directors Dr Ahmed Hussein and Dr Intisar Soghayroun el-Zein on the archaeological research. Following 15 years of working with the communities in Red Sea and discussing their hopes and ambitions to restore the ruined coral buildings of Suakin, it became apparent that the saving of the culture of Sudan was only possible if the local communities were actively involved in both recording and restoring their heritage, and were enabled to bring their stories and memories of that heritage into the protection, restoration and interpretation processes. The project also aimed to raise the awareness of the local communities to value their cultural heritage. Dr Kate Ashley, and Michael Mallinson from Mallinson Architects assisted NCAM in this process, with Dr Shadia Taha, Dr Jacke Philips and Dr Laurence Smith from Cambridge University's McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research (the McDonald). In 2016, ICCROM approached NCAM to assist in funding the Suakin Project and to help continue the works carried out by NCAM over the previous decade. This resulted in a proposal for restoring 14 buildings, funded through ICCROM and the Government of Sharjah (Figure 1). Due to the changing political situation this was shelved, and the NCAM Suakin project with ICCROM and the McDonald which had supported the Suakin Project since 2005, applied to the British Council Cultural Protection Fund for funding to carry out a smaller restoration project focused on the historic school and some threatened structures, and to develop the museum content working with the local communities. The training for this was to be used to assist NCAM develop a strategy for the heritage of Sudan threatened in the Western Sudan which was not accessible due to intra-community conflict at that time. The application was unsuccessful in this round; one of the main reasons was that there was no direct risk of conflict to the heritage, which was a priority for the fund.

A further application was then made in 2017 for a project focused on Darfur's heritage as this was the most threatened in Sudan, in a combined project with ICCROM to rescue the heritage of Sana'a in Yemen. This was rejected due to the uncertain security situation on going in Darfur. The idea though of working with communities in Western Sudan was appreciated by their local communities as part of the on-going peace process, and they suggested including the Khalifa House Museum in Omdurman as the focal point for training. This would ensure that the training could be done in a place of safety and that the heritage was of relevance to the Western Sudan. The Sheikan Museum in el-Obeid, North Kordofan, was also included as its heritage was shared with Darfur and linked to the Khalifa House, and would provide training for the Darfur region outside of Khartoum (Figure 2). The application was successful because all three communities at Omdurman, el-Obeid and Nyala (where the Darfur Museum was based) agreed that the project would benefit their culture and were prepared to participate in this opportunity and to be involved in restoring their heritage.

In 2018, prior to winning the award from the British Council Cultural Protection Fund, the Prince Claus Fund with ICCROM agreed to fund a pilot project to do emergency works to potentially strengthen a follow-up application to the Cultural Protection Fund. This involved a training workshop in Khartoum on Community Museums, creating an emergency store in the Khalifa House (as the old A. J. Arkell stores were collapsing), making emergency repairs to the roof of the Nyala Darfur Museum, and the emergency propping-up of the el-Obeid Mudeira Gateway – the oldest

<sup>1</sup> See further, <https://www.mallinsonae.com/suakin-project> and <https://maxvanberchem.org/en/scientific-activities/projects/archeology/11-archeologie/57-archaeological-work-at-suakin> and Taha 2013.

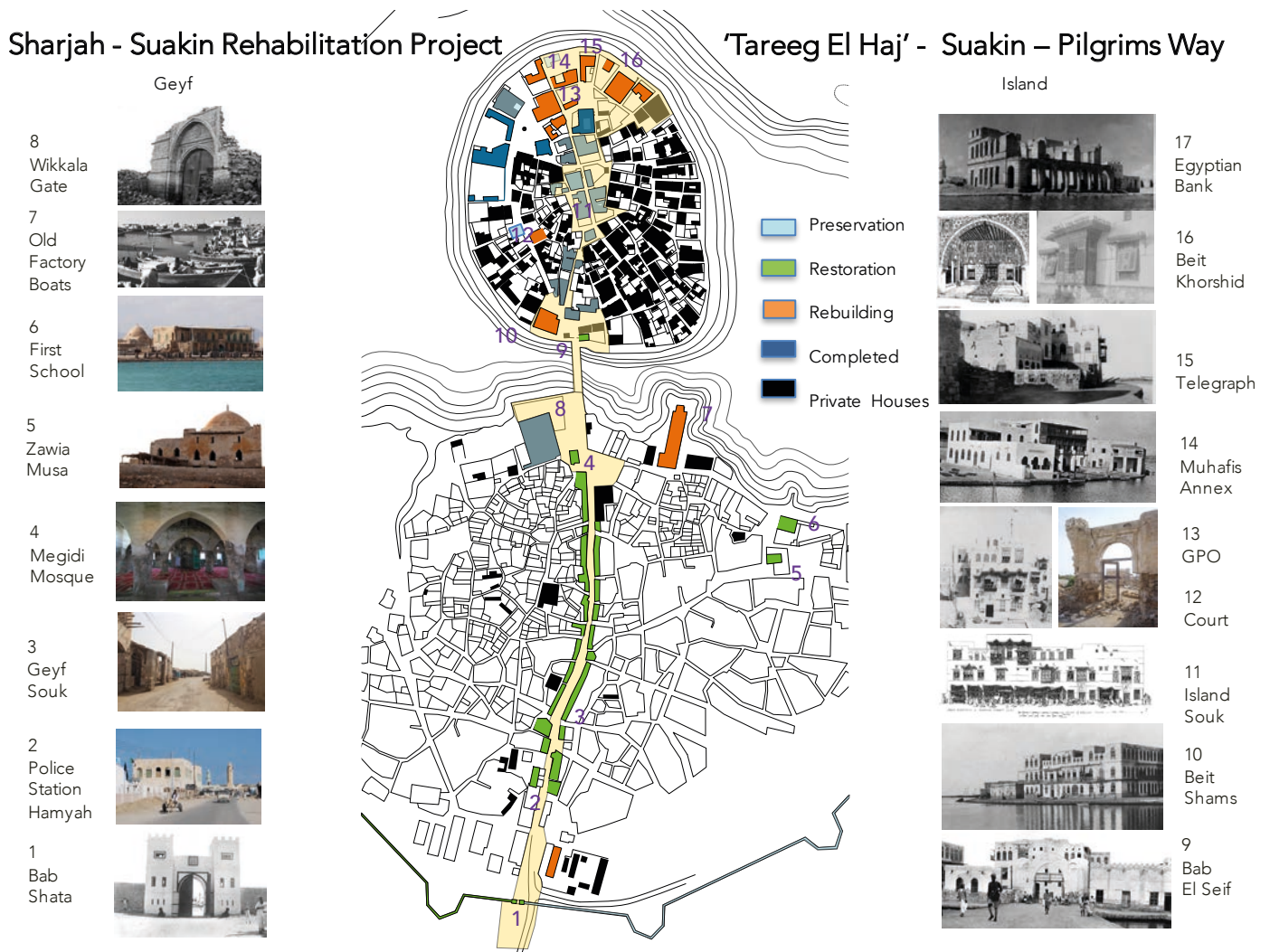


Figure 1. Suakin ICCROM Project 2016.

modern government building in Sudan and also once the headquarters of the Mahdi.

The success of this workshop helped the NCAM WSCM project win a substantial grant in June 2018. The project started at a moment of extreme political unrest in Sudan and work was carried out during the revolution and subsequent initial phase of the new interim government. This meant that at every stage the project was subject to unexpected changes and delays. The completion and success of the project was possible due to the support of the local communities and the NCAM staff's commitment to the project and active involvement of their curators and conservators. The NCAM project was led by Dr Abdelrahman Ali Mohamed (Director General), Dr Ghalia Gar al-Nabi (Head of Sudan Museums) and Iglal Mohamed Osman el-Malik (Head of Conservation). As there were no architects working for NCAM at the start of the project Michael Mallinson and Dr Kate Ashley of Mallinson Architect's were asked to assist in the application for the project due to their historic involvement in the Suakin project, along with members of the Suakin Project team from Cambridge. They created an office for NCAM with its former conservation architect Khalid Babikir and conservator Hyder Hamid Mukhtar, and a new team of architects Ahmed Bushra, Safaa Hussein, Naguan Omer, and Issamedein Mozmol and Halat Kabir in Kordofan, and Ali Homida as electrical consultant. Conservation training for the museum collections initially was led by Lucy Skinner from the British Museum and the object registration by Dr Laurence Smith, and was continued with Eman Zidan from the Grand Egyptian Museum. The ICCROM director for the project application to the British Council Cultural Protection fund was Dr Zaki Aslan, the Director of the Regional Office in Sharjah, and Anwar Sabik conservation architect, and they appointed Dr Helen Mallinson as their project manager. The McDonald Institute team was headed by Professor Marie Louise Stig Sørensen who advised on Post Conflict Community Identity Building to assist in the community involvement in the project. Building conservation advice was provided by Theo Gayer Anderson (Skillingtons Conservation Workshop), and Dr





a. Darfur Museum, Nyala, South Darfur.

b. Khalifa House, Omdurman, Khartoum



c. Sheikan Museum, El Obeid Kordofan.

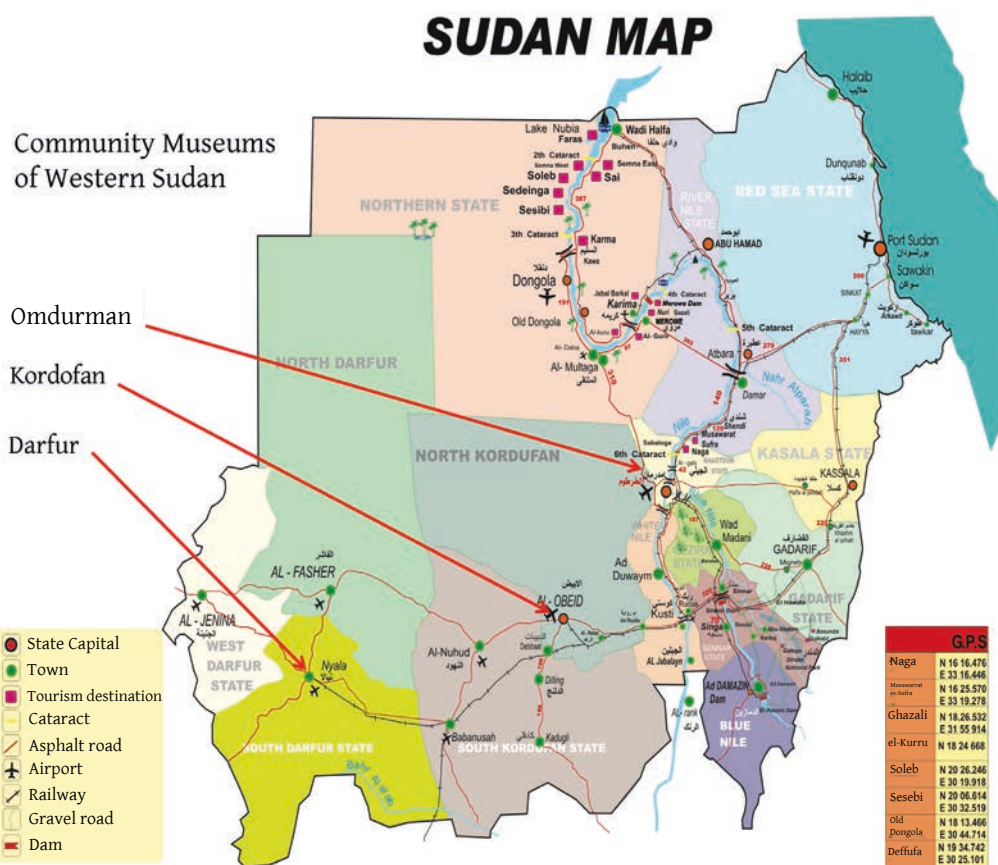


Figure 2. Western Sudan Community Museum Project Illustrations: the 3 Museums.



Timothy Reynolds (Royal Holloway) provided training in prehistoric collections, which were an essential part in the rescue of the collections made by A. J. Arkell and held in the stores in Khalifa House, but was also relevant as many of the materials in the other museums in Darfur and Kordofan are prehistoric. The Directors of NCAM, Dr Abdelrahman Ali, Iglal Mohamed Osman el-Malik, and Ghalia Gar al-Nabi together with Hassan Hussein Idris, who acted as Community Liason Consultant, all went on visits to see the Governors of South Darfur and North Kordofan and to organise the successful local participation and events with relevant local government bodies and many different community groups.

## Project Elements

The project was divided into three interconnected elements:

### Community Participation and Education

This was key and involved local communities answering the question ‘What do you want to do in your Museum?’ The project used techniques developed in Suakin to discuss this aspect of the project with local community leaders and representatives and evolve a programme of activities that the museum could respond to as it was developed. This involved training not only local people but also NCAM staff in this new approach, and has evolved over the year into a new programme called ‘Making a Museum’ which directly involves these teams in participating in the new techniques of museum building as part of a living community (Figures 3 and 4). Community participation is being developed not only through visiting the museums, but also appropriately for this post-covid world, on-line through the museum websites and social media posts. NCAM appointed local curators to assist in community involvement as museum directors. These are Niamat Mohamed in Khalifa House and Amani Bashir in Kordofan, while local Nyala Government curators Ibrahim and Hamdab assisted Ahmed el-Arabi in the complex communities of Darfur. Hassan

Hussein Idris acted as community champion as he had extensive past experience in setting up the Darfur Museum originally in Nyala, and of working with the communities who donated part of the collection.

This community participation was developed in conjunction with education training in the museums as this was seen as a major way of drawing in the communities, particularly as the majority of the visitors to the museums are children. The education workshop was coordinated by Dr Ikhlas Abdellatif and attended by curators and teachers from nearly all of NCAM’s museums (Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8). The success of this approach has led to the development of major programmes of education exhibitions in the museums. With the new grant won in 2020, education rooms are being developed to become a major part of the



Figure 3. Community Exhibition Design in Kordofan Sheikan Museum.



Figure 4. Community feedback at Omdurman Khalifa House.

museums' facilities. The community participates in creating the education programmes and the output of the hands-on-learning aspect will be displayed in the education exhibitions and the on-line learning of the museums through websites. The education training was led by Dr Fatma Mostafa Education Director and Dr Osama Abdelmeguid, Director of the Cairo Children Museum, who brought their experience of hands-on-learning to NCAM and local community leaders in an amazing festival of education training in March 2019.

### Heritage Recording and Display

This was key to understanding what the three museums actually contained and in training the NCAM curators in both recording and understanding their collections (Figures 9 and 10). This was a major undertaking, as the museums were both uncatalogued and also lacked the resources to address this. The training was led initially by Dr Laurence Smith and Dr Tim Reynolds who demonstrated the process of recording objects, including those that were difficult to identify. The idea of the project was to involve the local communities in their own heritage recording. As part of this process, they were invited to bring their heritage into the museums. Mark Whatmore was employed to train them in making films about their living heritage and the use of objects displayed in what was referred to in NCAM as the "Folklore" part of these museums, and to participate in transforming it into living heritage displays. This proved to be one of the most successful aspects of the heritage recording, leading to 52 short films on different aspects of local heritage being made, in Omdurman, el-Obeid and Nyala, involving different aspects of the diverse



Figure 5. Community open space workshop – 'What do you want to do in your Museum?'.



Figure 6. Education workshop – 'Design and Ideas for learning'.



Figure 7. Making examples of learning tools.



Figure 8. Education exhibit and real object design integration.



cultures of Sudan (Figure 11). The heritage recorded will be displayed in the new exhibitions in the museums, and also through the sister project Sudan Memory (undertaken by King's College London and funded by the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund),<sup>2</sup> which digitises and makes available online the written and photographic heritage of Sudan, to improve understanding about the rich variety of Sudanese culture both locally and internationally. The success of this has led to the development of new programmes of heritage recording in the different regions, and a training programme with the University of Khartoum and Nyala to develop a map of the heritage of Darfur, and cultural recording of the intangible and tangible heritage of the region. This will be linked to a new Open Access database on the archaeology and endangered heritage of sub-Saharan Africa being created under the auspices of the new MAEASaM project, hosted by the Department of Archaeology and Cambridge Heritage Centre, University of Cambridge, coordinated by their recently appointed Professor of the Deep History and Archaeology of Africa, Paul Lane.

The display aspect of this part of the project was led by the NCAM curatorial teams and the training in conjunction with ICCROM experts; they employed Lucy Clark, a modern museum exhibit designer who has worked on major exhibitions for the the Victoria and Albert Museum, to assist with the training, and Hanan Kurdi, a museum planner from Jordan, to help design the new exhibits (Figure 12). The workshops developed a unique process of asking the participants to focus on specific objects and develop educational themes that would engage communities in the museums, as well as developing a better understanding of how the culture of Sudan developed from their lifestyles, environments and diverse historic and cultural origins. The exhibition historic content was developed by the NCAM scientific committee to ensure it represented a balanced presentation of the creation of modern Sudan and avoid past mistakes and perspectives that might alienate Sudanese students and visitors. This committee, chaired by the now Minister of Higher Education Professor Intisar Soghayroun el-Zein and Head of Archaeology Dr Ahmed Hussein Adam, with Dr Dagwood and Dr Omer, has produced the historic narratives for the development of modern Sudan which provides a focal point for the community museums within their own regional perspectives. These have been built from the local curators' knowledge of their exhibits, with the input of the local communities for the exhibitions on their own traditional heritage. The completion of these studies has been funded by the further support from the British Council in 2020-2021 and the Aliph fund, who are paying for all of the displays to be made secure and environmentally safe.



Figure 9. Object cataloguing and photography, jibbah of Mahdist soldiers.



Figure 10. Object cataloguing and photography, writing board.

<sup>2</sup> See further Deegan 2019.



Figure 11. Films by Mark Whatmore and the Sudanese film training workshop.

### Heritage Conservation

This element of the work extended to conserving the collections which were in a terrible state of neglect; after 100 years of abandonment in the Khalifa storerooms exposed to termites, attack from floods and revolutions in Darfur, and extreme climates in Kordofan, the collections were much the worse for wear. The development of a functioning conservation laboratory in NCAM, which had not existed in a museum since 1972, was a major challenge, as the neglect of NCAM by previous governments had rendered this part of the museum without materials or facilities. Hence creating conservation labs was an essential part of the project as well as bringing in new curators (Figures 13, 14 and 15). The success of this effort can not be exaggerated. Lucy Skinner and Eman Hanafi were followed by Miriam Orsini, from the Ashmolean Museum, and between them they created a scientific workshop in the restored Bramble House. The Khalifa House collection is now receiving the tender care it has never had. This has revealed also all kinds of information about the collections, which has now been recorded on digitised heritage records, about materials, provenance and condition.

This conservation approach was also developed for the Museum's buildings and architectural heritage in the regions. NCAM had no conservation architects for ten years due to neglect by previous governments and the Turkish take-over of the restoration of their buildings in 2010. The creation of a new team was a key focus of the project and the remarkable restoration work they achieved showed how capable the Sudanese are at looking after Sudan's built heritage using modern scientific conservation techniques. Whereas the Turkish projects systematically destroyed and rebuilt replicas of the buildings in Suakin, the Khalifa House and Bramble House (the first British

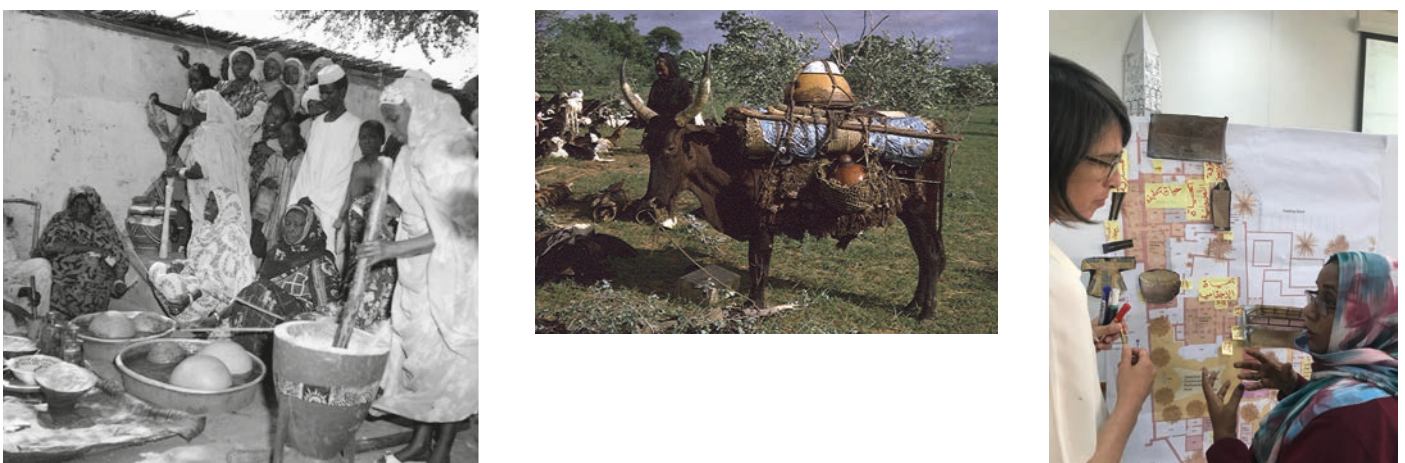


Figure 12. Exhibition Design development for Museums. From left: a. Women's Museum, Darfur; b. Ethnographic collections (courtesy of Randi and Gunaar Haaland); c. Victoria and Albert designer leading design workshop.





Figure 13. Conservation training, recording.

and handicraft centre, with the ground floor restored as a conservation base for the entire project.

In the case of el-Obeid, there was not enough space available for community exhibitions, so a new building was created in place of the old entrance. This was envisaged as a symbolic community gateway, based on the historic Mudeira Gate, which was part of the restoration programme of the project. It provides a community café, handicraft centre and display area whilst creating a private courtyard garden from which the other galleries can be entered.

In the Darfur Museum the buildings were relatively new. The museum opened in 2006 but was quickly abandoned following renewed conflict. The roof leaked due to poor design and maintenance, the museum had been damaged by floods and the theft of fittings and services. The programme for their restoration, with support from the Prince Claus Fund, allowed for the museum to be re-opened in November 2018 – in time for the Children’s Festival attended by 5,000 children from across Sudan. It re-established the museum as a cultural focus in Darfur. This initiative will support the cooperation with the newly opened Nyala University and further the next stage of heritage recording and displays.

The NCAM architectural studies of the museums and their localities, assisted by local architects Zainab Gafer and film makers Snoop Ibrahim and Montasir Kher, have allowed the recording to continue of the regions around the museum, providing maps of their situation. A new history of the Khalifa house and its development within the creation of Omdurman has shown how integrated it was to the history of the period (Figure 18). The teams’ studies and films of Omdurman and the Mulid of Mohamed have created a portrait of the city, which has informed the exhibitions of the new museums. This approach will be continued in Nyala and el-Obeid as the security permits, but already better understanding of the development of these cities through the museum architect teams has revealed the potential of the museums to act as civic spaces in the new democratic Sudan, which is slowly evolving following the remarkable changes that the last years have seen.

## The future

Thanks to the ongoing support of new Director of NCAM Dr Hatim Elnur and the Head of the National Media and Culture Council Faisal Salih, as well as the involvement of NCAM’s staff and the local communities in this project, and its successful completion even during the year of revolutions and Covid19 disruptions, the project has been recognised for its resilience and relevance in the new Sudan. The result of this has been the granting of a Rollover grant from the British Council and the major grant won from the new Aliph fund this year shows the interest the project has generated in the heritage community. This success has been due to NCAM’s development of management skills in museums which had been previously neglected due to the old regime’s lack of funding, and also the desire of local communities to be involved with their heritage institutions. This is not just in the Western Sudan; with the changing climate Sudanese are demanding this for other regional museums. The need to provide the training for the NCAM staff to achieve this has led to the expansion of these training programmes with the University of Khartoum

Government building in Sudan built in the grounds of the Khalifa house in 1898) were both lovingly restored by the building teams of Abdelrahman Al Mahdi and Professor Assad Babikir of Khartoum’s Future University, supervised by the NCAM’s new architects, and using traditional materials. The relatively small budgets were stretched by the terrible condition of these historic buildings and their restoration eventually led to the majority of the roofs being reinstated and the historic walls repointed and repaired (Figures 16 and 17). Part of the restoration project was to create new functionality within the museums, and so considerable attention was given to identifying future community uses for the existing buildings. In the Khalifa House, the Bramble House and gardens became community exhibition rooms, and a café





Figure 14. Conservation training, new conservation labs.



Figure 15. New conservation equipment.

and Nyala, and hopefully other regional museums. The optimism in Sudan to overcome material difficulties is all that makes this project imaginable; the difficulties of bringing funding, finding staff willing to come to difficult places and do difficult things are driven by this alone. The coming year's uncertainties have already been risen to through the creation of the proposed online *Make a Museum* programme which will help make the learning of the past year available to curators and communities through social media. A Sudan staffed project office through the assistance of the British Council will also address the new challenges. In the coming year, a festival of culture could be held in the regional museums and online, and the community museum could become a community of African community museums as part of the ICCROM African Youth Programme to create cultural hubs in the region. The aim is to bring the experience of new museum-making in Africa together to share the challenges and hopes of making museums in the community accessible, so as to cherish and share the wonderful heritage and history of this young and optimistic part of the world.

## References

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Figure 16. Khalifa House: Restored Shura Court and entrance. Building elements - restored roofs, wall repointing, and the removal of modern insertions. The result is the restoration of the Shura Court, the rediscovery of the historic veranda where the Khalifa held court.



Figure 17. Khalifa House – History developed from literature and archaeological evidence of construction. Restoration of the buildings revealed the history of construction: Mahdist Mosque wall – 1865; Khalifa First House – 1885; Khalifa fortifications to protect against internal revolt - 1892; British occupation and the creation of the first Governor’s house and administration centre – 1898. Later British activity, creation of the Museum and Archaeology Department and the surrounding Department of Education buildings. 1920 – 1950.



Figure 18. Heritage Mapping by Drone - Archaeology Mapping and Urban Sites around Omdurman.