

THE FIRST TIME I RAN into Shaikha Mai, she was casually immaculate in crisp white T-shirt and jeans: an attractive, slight and youthful figure, with the weary expression of a student sitting her Finals, in need of sleep. With her were four gentlemen, variously dressed in Western suits and flowing dishdashas, standing in the air-conditioned haven of the Shaikh Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Centre for Culture and Research in Muharraq, while the inferno of the Bahraini summer raged outside.

It was Saturday, yet Shaikha Mai was hard at work, showing her guests around what she calls her 'hobby': overseeing the restoration of traditional Bahraini houses and turning them into museums and cultural venues. One had the impression this was not her first, nor her last meeting of the day. My guide was clearly in awe of her, a reaction which, I was to discover, is quite common. 'Interview?' she asked vaguely when, taking my leave, I reminded her of our appointment the following day. 'Oh, yes... Maybe. I haven't looked that far ahead.'

So it was with a measure of relief that I found myself received in her offices at the National Museum of Bahrain the next morning, only 20 minutes late. Sunday being an official working day, the jeans had been exchanged for a business-like white suit, and the weary expression replaced by a faint air of harassment at the conflicting demands of paperwork, telephones, visiting VIPs and journalists. On the wall above her desk hung portraits of Shaikha Mai's cousin, HM King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, his son the Crown Prince, and the Prime Minister, a trio whose features are familiar from posters throughout the country. On the coffee table, piles of books on Islamic and European art and architecture spoke of the breadth of her cultural references and of her passion for her work.

Shaikha Mai bint Mohamed bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, scion of the royal family of Bahrain, named by the Arab League in 2005 as one of the 10 leading women in the Arab world is, in her official capacity, Assistant Undersecretary for Culture and National Heritage. Her title would suggest the existence of an Undersecretary and, indeed, a Secretary – but if such persons exist, they are totally eclipsed by the activities of their subordinate. It is a role she was first offered in May 2002, just after she opened the Shaikh Ebrahim Centre on a plot of land that had been part of her grandfather's house. Built in traditional style, but with an elegantly modern interior where cultural events and lectures are held, this was her first house in what was to become an ongoing project of restoration in Bahrain's old artistic hub of Muharraq. Today, she is generally credited with being the saviour of Bahrain's cultural heritage, a lone voice in the wilderness, fighting against the commercial imperatives of Mammon.

Even disregarding the matter of a woman wielding public influence in an Arab society – a fact she modestly dismisses as 'irrelevant' – this is no small achievement in a country whose coast and skyline are currently undergoing a complete redesign. Bulldozers and dredgers are at work everywhere, reclaiming land for glitzy 'Palm'-style residential properties, while old houses are falling victim to developers. This seems to run counter to Bahrain's professed wish to nurture its classical heritage, rather than morph into a 21st-century paradigm, such as has been the choice of some other countries in the Gulf. For while new foundations are being sunk, altering the face of Bahrain for ever, the historical sites

languish unloved and neglected – piles of stones with no one present to inform the visitor of their import, enclosed by fences, often locked, the guides themselves untutored and indifferent to their heritage.

Mai al-Khalifa sighs as I enumerate my experiences at some sites I have visited. She already has a series of programmes in mind to change all that, she tells me – from educational packages and research on the impact of urban development on archaeological sites, to ambitious new museums and visitor centres. Her aim is to impart a vision for the future to the young, instill a sense of pride in their national heritage, and build bridges between cultures in a spirit of tolerance. Already she has modernised the once-fusty interior and approaches of the Bahrain National Museum, which is currently showcasing her most recent coup, an exhibition on the Pharaohs, on loan from Egypt – the first exhibition of its kind in Bahrain. Looking towards the contemporary arts, she has established an annual, month-long Spring of Culture Festival featuring local, Arab and international artists. Occasionally controversial in content, the festival was born of a partnership she forged between the Shaikh Ebrahim Cultural Centre, the Economic Development Board, and the Culture and National Heritage sector, amongst others. But her achievements, one senses, come at a price.

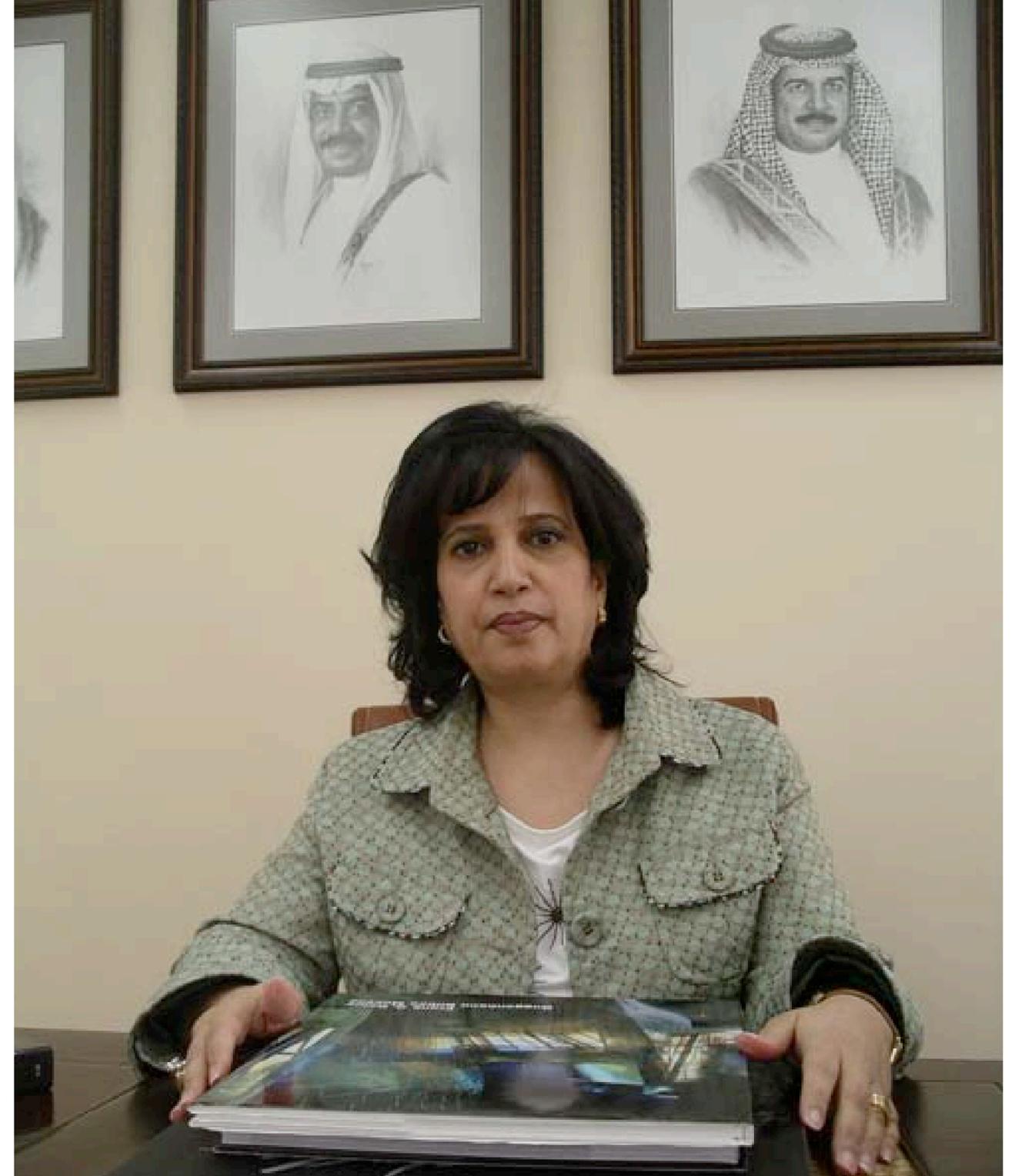
'Bureaucracy here is terrible!' she fumes, impassioned indiscretion bursting momentarily and endearingly through her perfectly polished

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demeanour. 'I hate procedures. Can you believe that Culture and Heritage is considered a "sector" under the Ministry of Information?' What about the Ministry of Tourism, I ask, do they work together, since the success of one reflects upon the other? 'No!' she retorts. 'Tourism's concerns are purely commercial. But of course they should help us.'

Bureaucracy and 'ignorance' led her to resign in early 2004, after only 20 months in the post. Shaikha Mai does not suffer fools gladly nor, one suspects, at all. 'I left because someone in the Ministry blocked my Bahrain Fort Site project. Unbelievable!' she exclaims. 'Now he's gone, so I came back, in 2005. It's the same position, yes – but I have greater authority now.'

The Bahrain Fort Site is one of four museums Shaikha Mai is currently working on in her Government role. Qal'at al-Bahrain [Bahrain Fort] is considered one of the most important archaeological sites in the country, as excavations have revealed artefacts and layers of masonry from various civilisations in Bahrain's history, dating from the ancient 3rd Millennium BC capital of Dilmun – when Bahrain served as an important trading post between Mesopotamia and the Indus valley – to Greek-influenced Tylos, through the Islamic period, to the current 16th-century Portuguese structure now standing. 'With the help of French archaeologists, we are going to reconstruct a historical wall tracing these civilisations in the Museum,' says Shaikha



Desert dynamo

Bahrain's patriarchal society seems an unlikely place for a woman intent on saving her country's cultural heritage from being swallowed up in a westernised redesign. But the awesome Shaikha Mai is no ordinary woman, as Teresa Levonian Cole discovered



Clockwise from left: Shaikh Isa bin Ali house, Muharraq; Seyadi house and mosque; Riffa Fort; the hugely significant archaeological site of Qal'at al-Bahrain

PHOTOGRAPHS: TERESA LEONIAN COLE

Mai excitedly, piling plans and designs in front of me. Now safely back on track, the huge museum, which sits on the island's northern shores in sight of the fort, is due to open in February 2008, to the design of Danish architect Claus Wohlert.

This 'Grand Project' comes under the Department's wide-reaching Investing in Culture programme. Smaller projects under the same umbrella, however, call on no less illustrious international talents, sourced by Mai al-Khalifa. A visitor centre at the famous Saar burial mounds (there are some 85,000 such mounds throughout the country, leading early archaeologists to believe Bahrain was a necropolis island) enlists the services of Japanese architect Tadao Ando. Wohlert himself is to embark on a similar assignment for the A'ali burial mounds, currently a wasteland pocked by what look like giant molehills, while Zaha Hadid is at the drawing-board for a planned Museum of Modern Art. The ruined 8th-century Al Khamis mosque, one of the oldest in the region, is also due for attention, as is Barbar Temple, where the bronze head of a bull (now Bahrain's national emblem) was discovered. Go there today, however, and you are more likely to find the debris of an *al fresco* wedding feast littering the compound.

Projects of this scale require lavish budgets, and the decisive action required does not sit well with bureaucracy. This is where Shaikha Mai's determination finds its greatest challenge and expression. 'I decided the only way to get things done was simply to go ahead and do them myself, without waiting for Government money,' she says. 'And I recently invited the Crown Prince to see what we have achieved here, without the help of Government funding.'

Her restoration projects in Muharraq were accomplished through her ability to persuade both friends and businesses to invest in, and sponsor, her vision. She has simply applied the same technique to her 'official' role, racking up big-hitting sponsors such as investment firms, banks, petroleum and telecom companies – Arcapita (who are funding the Bahrain Fort Site Museum), Bapco, Batelco and the National Bank of Bahrain, among them. 'These companies like to work with me because my dealings are completely transparent,' she says. 'There are no hidden surcharges, and I rake off nothing for myself. And, of course, it

is prestigious for companies to be sponsoring such projects. It is right that the private sector should participate in cultural undertakings – as they do in America.'

The phone rings, for the nth time during our conversation, and she excuses herself to answer it, speaking in rapid Arabic. Her English is so good, that I am surprised to learn that Shaikha Mai completed all her studies in Bahrain, taking an MA in History from Sheffield University by correspondence course; and that she had, by this time, already written several books on Bahrain in Arabic. She has been described as an intellectual who makes things happen. She comes off the phone and picks up again without pause or prelude – only now it is about a completely different subject: we are back to a house in Muharraq, one of five currently being restored. It is hard to keep up, as she flits from one project to the next. Our allotted time, alas, is coming to an end. I ask about her much-publicised efforts to save a historic souk in Muharraq from the bulldozers. She rolls her eyes: 'Ah, that is the story of my life... Excuse me...' The phone is ringing again, and the story has no chance to unfold. 'I am so sorry,' she says some moments later, 'but I have to see someone about an important press conference tomorrow.'

Perhaps Shaikha Mai's most public expression of intent and commitment to culture lies in what was about to be announced: Bahrain's bid for a place on the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. The election will take place in late October and, if chosen for one of the eight vacant seats, Bahrain is set to be catapulted onto the international stage, assuming the mantle of cultural expertise in the region. Not surprisingly, Shaikha Mai has the admiration of colleagues and artists whose work she so enthusiastically supports. 'All these initiatives to focus international attention on Bahrain's culture and promote the protection of Bahrain's heritage are the results of her efforts,' says Karim Hendili, lured from the UNESCO World Heritage Centre in Paris to be Adviser for World Heritage in Bahrain. Deyana Ahmadi, a leading photographer who has worked with Shaikha Mai on the UNESCO bid, puts it more succinctly: 'An incredible woman!' Whether or not the UNESCO bid is successful, the dynamo that is Shaikha Mai al-Khalifa shows no signs of slowing down. ■