Perched on top of a dramatic rocky outcrop, the earliest remains of Thula Fort date back 3000 years. It stands high above the well-preserved walled historic town of Thula, clinging vertically to the steep slopes below, some 50 kilometres from the capital Sana’a. Thula was probably a Sabean religious site for the worship of a water god, since its location near the Western Highlands guarantees a certain amount of rain per year. This, coupled with the site’s defensive value, led to the development of the Fort and fortified town around the natural rainwater channels that were subsequently incorporated into cisterns and an intricate system of waterworks leading down the hillside to the town and its agricultural land, which permitted its occupation for thousands of years.

A new road to Thula in the 1990s opened up the isolated town but brought with it unplanned urban development that started to compromise the architectural and historic integrity of the Fort. Alarmed, the town council sought funding to undertake restoration work. A detailed needs assessment was carried out and, after the discovery of a significant Sabean-period monumental gateway (1st century BC) among other things, the project broadened in scope to become a multi-phase joint conservation-archaeology initiative.

The walls and gates of the town – typifying Yemeni architecture and characterised by multi-storey residential units built of local stone – were restored first, together with the winding trails and steep steps leading up to the Fort, which covers an area of 8754 square metres, mainly of walled open areas. Inside the Fort, missing parts were integrated and sensitive restoration was carried out on its curtain walls, towers and gates, the stepped paths leading up to the higher levels, the agricultural terraces within its walls, and its elaborate rainwater collection system of channels and pools, the latter especially benefiting local households and agriculture.

Traditional materials – stone, wood, mud plaster – were salvaged or sourced locally, technology specific to the region was employed and almost all the labour force came from Thula old town.

The Fort, with its stunning views, is now a popular visitor attraction – for locals and foreigners alike. Future plans include ongoing conservation around the Fort, providing interpretation of it, and further developing it as a tourist/leisure venue.
RESTORATION OF THULA FORT
RESTORATION OF THULA FORT
Thula, Yemen

CLIENTS
Social Fund for Development, Sana’a, Yemen: Abdul Kareem al-Arhabi, former executive director
Abdullah al-Dailami, head of Cultural Heritage Unit
Hafaz al-Dhrahani, head of Amran Branch
Ali Al-Kamili, project officer, Amran Branch

Thula Local Council, Yemen:
Foad al-Ansi, director of Thula district
Adel al-Najar, president of the local council
Abdul Kareem al-Akawa, coordinator and project director
Khalid al-Zuhari, director of the Fort area

ARCHITECT
Abdullah al-Hadhrami, Sana’a, Yemen

SITE TEAM
Old Town of Thula, Amran Governorate, Yemen:
Harbia al-Himiary, civil engineer
Hamid al-Boni, contractor
Mohamed al-Hakeemi, former site supervisor
Waleed al-Selwi, accountant for the project
Mohamed Ghab, assistant site supervisor
Abdul Hakim Othman, former site supervisor
Muneeb al-Rajehi, site supervisor
Basam Qadri, accountant
Adel Mansar, assistant site supervisor

CONSULTANT
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ARCHAEOLOGICAL TEAMS
University of Sana’a, Yemen:
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General Organisation of Antiquities, Museums and Manuscripts, Sana’a, Yemen:
Khalid Al-Haj, archaeologist and field supervisor
Abdulrahman Ismaiel, archaeologist
Azziz al-Ghouri, archaeologist
Saleh Mohsen Mohamed, excavation technician
Abdo Qaid al-Beel, excavation technician
Salah al-Mansouri, archaeologist
Saleh Awdeen, excavation technician

Old Town of Thula, Amran Governorate, Yemen:
Mahr Al-Wajeeh, archaeologist
Ali Mohamed al-Sedig, trainer and excavation technician
Ghamm Mohamed Rafee, trainer and excavation technician
Abdul Nasar al-Shighmimi, architect, documentation specialist
Amin Mihlaj, trainee archaeologist

MASTER MASONs
Old Town of Thula, Amran Governorate, Yemen:
Ali Abdo, mason
Nabil al-Habib, Ali Ahamad al-Madhub, Khalid al-Qata’, master masons
Ahamed al-Arsi, Ahamed Ateeq, Abdo Sa’ad, Adel al-Arj, Ahmed Salamah, Yahy Dahabab, Yahay Omadi, lime masons
Marzuq Dahabab, Hamid al-Ghobari, Ibrahim al-Ghobari, Miutahar Madhub, stone mason works
Saleh Hani, mud plastering
Hussein al-Nomeili, Mohamed al-Nomeili, rock cutting
Ahmed el-Tawil, carpenter
Araf al-Sanaw, Ali al-Maqahafieh, electricity and sanitation
Sami al-Zaib, guard

PROJECT DATA
Site area: 8794 m²
Cost: 620,000 USD
Commission: February 2003
Design: March 2004–December 2004
Construction: October 2005–February 2011
Completion: February 2011

ABDULLAH AL-HADHRAMI
Abdullah al-Hadhrami is a Yemeni architect specialised in the conservation and reuse of historic buildings, with extensive experience in the management and coordination of international donors’ projects. He has worked as an architect for the private sector, for government agencies and for the Social Fund for Development and Cultural Heritage Protection, with particular reference to interventions in three World Heritage listed sites. He has participated in a number of international conservation and archaeology workshops and was a visiting scholar at the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT. He has also acted as a cultural heritage expert with UNESCO and the World Bank.