The Omani Architectural Heritage -Identity and Continuity

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ABSTRACT:
The Omani society is one of the few societies all over the world which is still keen to its national identity. Unprecedented in the gulf region, the contemporary buildings have order lines and respect for traditional heritage. This paper aims to recognize this distinguished experience to maintain sustainability between the Omani heritage & contemporary vernacular architecture. A summary concerning the origins of Omani architecture will be presented. Then the identity as one of the important features of Omani society, culture, and architecture will be clarified. The preservation of Omani heritage as a reference will be demonstrated, followed by an example of a contemporary vernacular architectural project. The results and analysis of a questionnaire concerning the Omani's level of satisfaction of contemporary architecture will be discussed. The research methodology depends on collecting data through references, field studies, a questionnaire and interviews. Data analysis has been conducted.

I THE ORIGINS OF OMANI ARCHITECTURE

The material culture of Oman is too rich and varied to be dealt with in an exhaustive manner. In order to understand a culture; one has to look at the integration between history and art history- including architecture-together.

Omani architecture is a series of complementary elements which have accumulated through the ages to create a coherent and harmonies built environment. Early Omani history and civilization can be seen from the perspective of the ancient history of the Near East and Gulf region. Cuneiform texts from the third millennium B.C. indicate the importance of Oman-Magan, in this time-as a provider of copper, diorite, ivory, precious stones and timber to the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia (Al-Salimi, 2008). The Omani people were merchants, sailors and explorers; their ships sailed not only to the Gulf harbors on both sides and southern Mesopotamia but also sailed as far as the Indus valley (Hawley, 1995) (Fig.1). In this context later on cultural connections and artistic influence became apparent on many levels with Iraq, Yemen, Iran- or Mongol India-South-East Asia and East Africa (Damluji, 2008).

In the 7th century AD, the rulers of Oman converted to Islam and became pioneers of the Islamization of Oman. There is no doubt that Islamic religion is deeply rooted in this part of the Arabian Peninsula. However, it is not always easy to explain what it means that features of art in Oman are tied to the "Islamic" character of the country, considering that the

Figure 1. Ancient Oman's relationships enrich its architecture (Hawley, 1995)
cultural unification of a large part of the world was a major achievement of Islam in history (Al-Salimi, 2008).

In the 16th century, the Portuguese attacked and conquered the major coastal Oman cities after Vasco da Gama’s discovery of the sea route to India. The Portuguese decisively broke the Arab's monopoly of the spice trade which were increasingly sought after in Europe. (Hawley, 1995). In the 18th century, Oman had become a leading sea power harassing the Portuguese and establishing Omani supremacy over Zanzibar (Tanzania) Mombasa (Kenya), Patta (Somalia) and Kilwa (Al-Salmi, 2008), while some of the previous influences are expressed with direct references like the Portuguese fortifications at Muscat (Fig.2) which affected the military architecture. The palace & fort of Jabrin bear the hallmark of Persian builders who work to ed rooms of the lower stories and probably also painted some of the decorations (Figs.3-5). Further, the great minaret of Mutrah's mosque with scalloped arches shows Mongol inspiration (Figs.6-7). Other influences are vaguer. Since the history of Islamic culture as a whole is marked by trade, travel and interaction between different regions of the world, the art and material culture of Oman considered an eminently Islamic phenomenon.

IDENTITY AS ONE OF THE IMPORTANT FEATURES OF OMANI SOCIETY, CULTURE & ARCHITECTURE

From the 7th century till the present, Islam is the official religion of the country. According to 2006 census the population of Oman is 2.577 million of those 1.88 million were Omanis 95% of citizens are Muslims & speak Arabic language (www.omanet.com).

From the art historical point of view, "Islam" and "Islamic" remain important terms to designate a certain cultural entity and one of the richest fields in the history of art. For a chapter of world architecture covering a span of 1400 years, it is clear that huge differences are visible between different periods of Islam. It is obvious that regional divisions appear between the ar-
architecture of different lands and people under Islamic rule. Geographic, climatic and ethnic factors have shaped the architecture in their particular ways.

Under the Islamic rule, the Omanis were successful in keeping a high degree of self rule. Oman-and particularly its inland region shows a resilience of forms and customs which have defied foreign influence over long periods. The majority of historical buildings and objects preserved in Oman-as a reference to its contemporary vernacular architecture come from the last four centuries. In this period, Islamic architecture showed a high degree of regionalization, in which the different characters of Arab, Indian, Persian and Turkish art had become much more clear-cut than before. In Oman, different elements from different cultural spheres were combined and altered according to the taste of the Omani people. For example, it seems that the connection of the minaret as a symbolic of ruler ship in some Islamic societies made it desirable for many Omani patrons to dispense with this architectural form, and to avoid mosque towers for long periods in the central area of the country (Fig.7). (Al. Salmi, 2008). The Omani people's pride in their traditional way of life is very remarkable and takes many forms, one of which is that, their daily dress is their national dress which is called the dishdasha” (Fig.8). This Omani pride of their traditional life is the main guarantee of continuity in the urban context (Damluji, 2008).

3 OMANI HERITAGE AS A REFERENCE FOR CONTEMPORARY OMANI ARCHITECTURE

Traditional Omani architecture has a wonderfully sensitive appreciation of the materials and colors of the natural environment, with restricted height of a maximum of three stories (Fig.9). As a military style, the buildings have contrast of expressive details and decoration against massive walls (Fig.10). The human scale buildings have also some of the most distinctive architectural features like carved wooden doors with chiseled geometric or floral patterns, carved window screens, carved mud, lime plaster and stucco work. (figs.11,12)

3.1 Controlling contemporary buildings designs to express Omani heritage

Until 1970, Muscat and other towns in the sultanate consisted of separate clusters. With his accession to power in 1970 his Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id was able to establish hegemony

Figure 7. Nizwa, Great mosque without a minaret as the prevailed from according to the taste of the Omani. (Al-Salmi, 2008)

Figure 8. The Omani's pride of their traditional way of life. Their daily dress is their national dress, “the dishdasha” (Stevens, 1990)

Figure 9. Ibra, View of the main street a sensitive appreciation of the natural environment (Al-Salmi, 2008)

Figure 10. Muscat, old French consulate (1840) a contrast between decoration against massive walls (author's photo)

Figure 11. Muslimat, A carved door (Damluji, 2008)

Figure 12. Mutrah, old houses with stucco work (Stevens, 1990)
over the country and embarked also immediately on an integral development plan with the aim of achieving development throughout the country. He has also embarked on preserving the architectural heritage of the sultanate. In 1973, one of the pioneers of sustainable Architecture, the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy was asked to visit the Sultanate and worked on integrating new architectural design with the vernacular architecture of the prominent cities.

On the suggestion of Hussan Fathy, a team from the Architectural Association School of architecture, its members were Omar el Farouk, Allan Cain, Farokh Afshar and John Norton. They carried out a field research which took 3 years. The material which they gathered provides a valuable reference point.

The most successful trail to control the buildings design was in 1987 when "Elevational Guidelines for shati' al Qurum Area" were produced by the Diwan of the Royal Court (Fig.13).

The objective of this document was to ensure the high quality of architectural design in the modern and unique Arab-Omani and Islamic architectural style, while using modern and traditional building materials; and to establish the origins of cultural values. The accompanying illustrations were restrictive. Sets of drawings specified the form and style of boundary walls and gates, main entry doors & windows giving options for arched or flat lintels, raling and motifs in solid wood and perforated wall panels. Roof parapets using screens and perforated panels in and wood screens and enclosures to create privacy and conceal modern installations such as air conditioning units, and balconies with instructions for screening where they face neighbors. A sheet on the appropriate method of construction includes ten types of pointed, segmental and one semicircular arch. A section on windows detailing -which employs aluminum framed glass windows- suggests ornamental relief panels emulating stucco-work in decorative wooden mashrabiyyah "or" arabesque" patterns. Finally, elevations of four different villas are used to illustrate exterior wall treatment indicating the types of masonry to be used; concrete blockwork or Omani calcium silicate bricks, with very limited use of stone, granite and marble. The type of paint specified, and more importantly the colors to be used for exterior walls: white light buff and silver grey (Figs.14:1-3)

![Figure 13. Controlling the buildings design in Oman by the Diwan Court Affairs (The publications of Royal Court -edition 2003)](image13.png)

![Figure 14.1-3. Some of the illustrations which are included in the Elevational Guide lines for Buildings in Oman (the publications of the Diwan Royal court affairs 2003)](image141-3.png)
Despite the shortcomings of its creative standards, the manual succeeded in controlling the chaotic development that occurs in a very rapidly developing country. Later on, the guidelines were implemented in all the new buildings in Muscat (Damluji, 2008) (Fig.15-17).

In addition to the previous manual, the ministry of regional Municipalities, Environment and Water Recourses released a decision in the year 2000 No.2000/4, article 23, second chapter, titled "Architectural and artistic conditions of the buildings" states that: "Architectural designs of all buildings should be according to Arab and Islamic Architecture style (Building specifications, Barka Municipality).

No one can get a building license from the municipality without checking both previous mentioned specifications. Unprecedented in the Gulf region, the contemporary Omani architecture is very distinguished with its order lines and respect for tradition.

3.2 Omani heritage reservation as a sustainability issue

The importance of establishing references for each style through the styles themselves are ultimately specific to Oman. During the first phase of comprehensive urban development of the Sultanate, which began in 1970 two consulting firms, John R. Harris, Architects, Design & planning consultants, and Makiya Associates, were each commissioned to prepare a planning proposal for the development and extension of Muscat, the capital, and neighboring Mutrah. The two reports had similar outcomes one of them is to preserve the walls and traditional buildings of the old city. Makiya defined Muscat as a cul-de-sac city, an enclave of historic building that should be kept intact. Their reports emphasized the tremendous national value of Muscat which should be enriched by maintenance and renovation. In addition, both practices were responsible for the re-construction or renovation of a number of important buildings.

Later on, the Ministry of National Heritage had been responsible for conserving the sultanate wealth of Heritage (Damluji, 2008). Oman’s forts are one of its most dramatic architectural features, dominating many of the towns and villages of the interior regions and northern coast (Fig.18) (Shelton, 1995), the forts have remained a focal point for visitors to the country and a basic historic reference for the surrounding fabric of adjacent towns. The forts and towers have been restored through an ongoing national campaign that has been in effect for the last two decades (Damluji, 2008) the large number of fortifications which has been preserved (Figs.19, 1-2) testify to the will of the population and the rulers to defend their heritage & identity
The sultanate has a wealth of mosque architecture too, especially in the interior and eastern regions. The carved stucco mihrabs of Oman’s historical mosques constitute an important corpus for the study of the stucco tradition beyond the normal focus on Seljuk Iran or Fatimid and Mamluk Egypt. This group includes twenty-nine mihrabs dating between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries (Fig. 20, 1-2). (Al-Salmi, 2008).

Many of the most interesting settlements that survived are widely scattered. A large number of the examples of traditional domestic architecture in Oman in a dilapidated state, their owners having deserted the old quarters in favor of the newly developed and more prestigious modern parts of towns and cities (Fig. 21).

There are some distinguished houses in Oman which have been maintained through continual habitations or for reusing purposes (Fig. 22).

The author has conducted an interview with Mr. Ahmed El-Maauli, the assistant of the general director of the Department of Castles and Forts at the Ministry of on 23.1.2010. He stated that 1600 historical buildings need to be renovated and there is a conservation process going on right now for a neighborhood of 100 historical houses in Wilayt Adam. This neighborhood has been planned to be a tourist destination.
Sultan Qaboos University was originally seen as "an Oxford in Oman". In 1986 the buildings were completed and the first students admitted (Hawley, 1995). It was designed by YRM, a large British practice. The architects have attempted to incorporate within their modern scheme the formal and sophisticated architectural language of traditional Islamic schools.

The main design concept was inspired by the traditional university in Islamic cities which was very closely connected with the mosque. The earliest and some of the most famous universities were housed within the precincts of mosques. Even when the mosque began to be superseded by the madrasah - the school-, a purpose-built institution of higher education providing both teaching and residential facilities, the madrasah remained located within or immediately beside the mosque, maintaining the close connection between worship, scholarship and learning. YRM's scheme for this project focuses on a mosque. One of the essential elements of the complex - specified in line with the original tradition of teaching in Islamic countries (Fig.23).

The mosque is situated at the western tip of the central academic building which houses the five colleges of Medicine, Engineering, science, Agriculture and Education; the library, administrative offices, conference rooms; and common areas. The mosque is linked to the academic area by paved footpath. This re-articulation of the relationship between the educational buildings and the mosque can be regarded as emphasizing the mosque's role. The site is divided into a nine square grid, the center of each square is occupied by buildings while the peripheral spaces form a series of open planted areas and long avenues that allow vehicular circulation around the complex (Fig.24). Thus the plan represents a curious inversion of the traditional Islamic architectural hierarchy, embodied in the arcaded courtyard. It is considered that the most significant feature of the mosque as a building type is the wide open space at its heart, concealed and protected from the world outside by solid boundary wall in addition to protection from both heat & glare. Architects refer in their documentation to the model of the traditional Omani hill town built inside defensive walls with concealed gardens. The exterior finishes of painted concrete, ceramic tiles and sand stone as local and
traditional materials. Screens of cement blocks are part of the decorative scheme, which is clearly inspired by traditional Islamic abstract and geometric decoration.

The flattened arch provides a unifying theme throughout the complex (Fig.25). Windows are small and set only on the north and south elevations in order to prevent glare and direct sunlight while maximizing the benefit of prevailing winds. Geometric arabesque patterns also appear on the paving areas, steps, flower beds and hedges, imprinting the surface throughout. The design, which is primarily informed by the functional criteria of modern construction, remains eclectic in its approach, diverted, from the aesthetic and creative spatial qualities inherent in Islamic architecture which it set out to interpret or emulate.

Figure25. The shaded arcades connecting the buildings at two levels, with screens of cement blocks (Damluji, 2008).

5. OMANIS’ LEVEL OF SATISFACTION OF CONTEMPORARY VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

5.1 Questionnaire objectives and constraints

It may be the first time, to the best of the writer’s knowledge, that an investigation of people’s opinion concerning architectural style was conducted in Oman. A questionnaire was distributed to an arbitrary sample of students, and their families, in the interior design department in the scientific college of Design for the said purpose. Different age and educational levels are represented.

Research objective is to know the level of satisfaction of Contemporary Vernacular Architecture (CVA) among the sample representing the Omani society. Also, the relationship between level of satisfaction, age and education of the respondents. Many features of Omani CVA were mentioned in the questionnaire with illustrations.

Each respondent had to indicate on both scales, satisfaction or dissatisfaction, of the most appealing or displeasing features. One hundred and twenty questionnaire forms were distributed and eighty four forms were retrieved with a percentage of 70%.
5.2 Questionnaire results and analysis

1. 77.4% of the respondents are satisfied with Contemporary Vernacular Architecture which is indicative of a strong sense of identity (Chart1).

2. The two most appealing features are stucco-work with arabesque patterns, and wooden screen windows with 92.5% and 91.6% respectively. Both are strongly related to Islamic art and culture which bears witness to its influence on the people of Oman (Chart 2)

![Chart 1](image1.png)

Chart 1. The level of satisfaction of contemporary vernacular Architecture style between the Omani people

![Chart 2](image2.png)

Chart 2. Preference rate of vernacular features
3. Approximately 66.9% of the respondents were displeased with skyline castellation inspired by Omani Forts as the focal point of Omani heritage. This may be ascribed to their displeasure to use a defense symbol in their homes as if they were constantly threatened. However, this point needs to be further investigated in future research.

4. Approximately 70% of the respondents expressed their displeasure regarding the use of gypsum screen on windows. This is a logical result since the use of mirror glass provides the same level of needed privacy.

5. The largest percentage of dissatisfied respondents is those under 25 years of age, approximately 53%. This may be attributed to young people's fascination with western style and culture (Chart 3).

6. The largest percentage of satisfied respondents are those between 26-40 years of age, which is indicative of more awareness of identity issues (Chart 3).

7. Dissatisfaction was highest among the respondents with lower educational levels. (Chart 4)

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**Chart 3.** Comparison between age range between satisfied and dissatisfied respondents.

**Chart 4.** Comparison between the Educational level of the satisfied and dissatisfied respondents.
7CONCLUSION

1. Oman as an ancient sea coast country has a rich heritage consisting of a series of historical influences of many countries, but molded in a coherent built environment. It was then altered and shaped according to the taste of Omani people.
2. Islam is the major factor which influences people's culture, taste, and attitudes.
3. Oman has succeeded in having a Contemporary Vernacular Architecture (CVA) through guidelines governing new buildings design. In addition to a conservation process of all old buildings for the purpose of sustainability.
4. Omani traditional architecture has may distinguishing characteristics applied to many contemporary residential, governmental, and public buildings.
5. Although the building design guidelines achieved success in the sustainability of Omani heritage, a revision of some traditional items is called for. An example of which is gypsum screen which is replaced by mirror glass and ensuring the same level of privacy.
6. New Omani generations have expressed dissatisfaction with some aspects of Omani CVA. This is attributed to the fact that they have been subjected to excessive western cultural impacts.
7. An enlightenment of the virtues of heritage and authenticity is called for.
8. Conservation of old buildings has a long way to go as there are about 1600 ones due for renovations.

REFERENCES

8. www.omanet.om