

real architecture. real buildings.

real life.

reality in the domestic
architecture of the
Arab-Islamic world



AMWAJ Resort and Marina, Saudi Arabia

design by NG Architecture & Planning
Beirut, Lebanon

Over the centuries architecture in the Arab-Islamic world has through the resiliency of the cultures living in these traditions maintained fixed values. Architecture as the visible and physical manifestation of the living heritage of these culture has in Arabic-speaking nations maintained specific forms based on social and religious customs. While advances in technology have changed building types and materials, the social and spiritual ethos guiding Arabic-Islamic society has remained enduringly tied to the *abstract* concepts of custom and religion that maintain a significant place in the Arab-Islamic world today. These traditions are involved in everyday life in a practical way but importantly have larger meanings that give man and his architecture a distinct and unique place in the earth and cosmos. Architecture as an index of this ethos is simultaneously a product of these practical concerns and importantly points to a larger spiritual reality.

In looking at the critical issue of Arab-Islamic society and architecture as they move into the modern age, we see a conflicting picture of development. While there has been a successful adaptation of traditional ways of living into large scale public architecture there has been relatively slow development in modern Arab-Islamic domestic architecture. This slow development has as its key problem the demands placed on traditional ways of life in the modern world. So far we can see a balance of needs has not been met, that the social needs of a developing modern society have not been completely adapted into modern building techniques, planning and social requirements. The result is that residential developments in Arab-Islamic countries have not been successful in realizing the present reality in the sense of individuals practical needs and cultural aspirations i.e. to respect traditions yet live in the modern world. Thus today's popular residential developments can be summarized in two categories. Either they are reductivist schemes of concrete buildings in blocks arranged in regular patterns with no heed paid to use or the alternate, over elaborate pastiche decorations of foreign models designed in a cookie-cutter fashion that lack sensitivity to emerging lifestyles or the legacy of tradition. In other words, in contemporary Arab-Islamic societies today we can count many residential developments that look and operate either like car parking lots or fanciful looking theme parks.

The sensitive question of how modern Arab societies should live in their homes and communities is today in need of an answer. That the issue of manifesting not representing the real of living in modern, Arab-Islamic society that could then in parallel generate an architecture that respects this lifestyle is the critical issue. Our goal is to delineate certain strategies and ideas that could be the basis for a modern architecture that remains true to Arabic-Islam's ethos, society's traditions and Modernism's advances. An architecture that is realistically tied to real traditions, the reality of the environment and the reality of changing contemporary social needs.

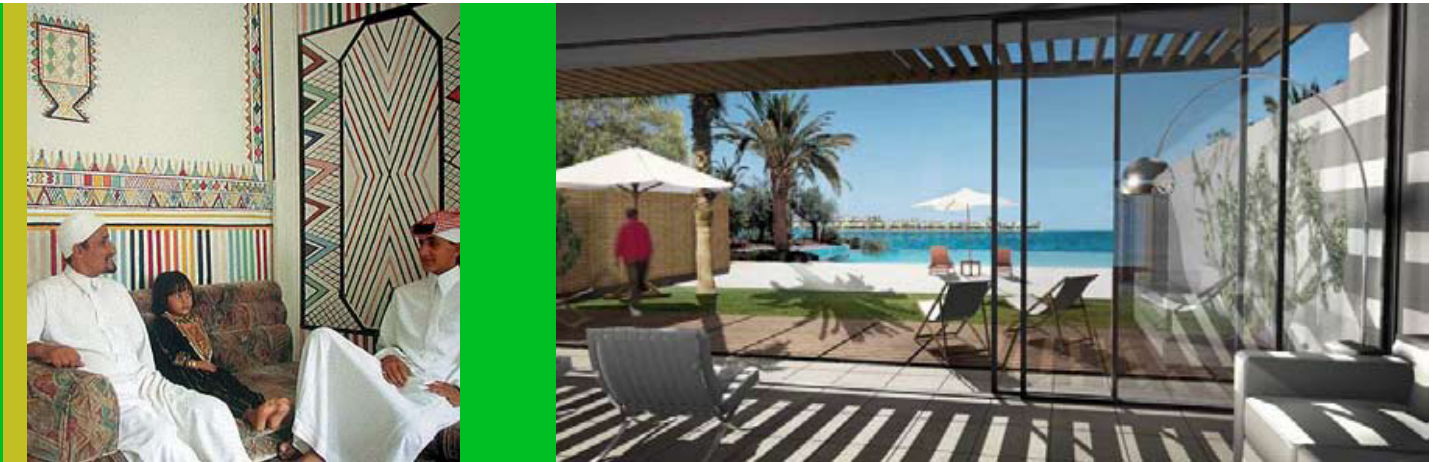


The Real is Manifested not Represented

For us, in the context of the domestic architecture of the Arab-Islamic world, our goal is not re-representation of some long, lost nostalgic ideal of the house and the village, but rather the manifestation of the real in architectural form and plan. Islamic beliefs have philosophically rejected representation in favour of an abstract and spiritual geometric ideal. Our belief is that this ideal can not be achieved through nostalgia and reproduction of styles that this is the vogue now in residential town planning and architecture. This can be seen in the cookie cutter pick-your-flavor of faux vernacular design used in upmarket housing development exclusively as a marketing tool. The end product in this type of suburban housing are a set of codes and planning principals based on a hall-of-mirrors system of popular styles or representations i.e. Tuscan style, English Tudor, Spanish Mediterranean style. These popular architectural styles applied as exterior décor, far removed from their original application, exist in a vacuum that has no beginning and no end. They are ultimately appliqué styles diluted of meaning that also negatively dilute the social structure of the traditional cultures they are placed into.

An architecture that manifests not represents reality calls for an elimination of the pastiche, the superficial, the appliqué in favour of those elements of space creation that provide a ground for the communal social life to occur. The requirement for the communal focuses not on the village or any other ideal prototype but instead is concerned with age-old patterns and ways of living where inhabitants are connected to their environment and to the use of space as conditioned by tradition and ethos. To an environment which is a catalyst or better an incubator of these social traditions.

An architecture that manifests the real respects the social, physical and mental aspects of space, providing a neutral, background of spatial geometries that can be created by different ways of use – the hallmark of Arab-Islamic living since the nomadic times. In its application of architectural décor and aesthetics instead of representing the past, this strategy helps in realizing the present through abstract patterns in plan, modulation of indoor and outdoor spaces and sections, movable walls and screens, that channel behaviour at the will of the individual and the family. Plan and program, manifest in different ways of using space, are not firmly encoded into space but rather occur as a consequence of use especially in communal areas of living.



The Real of the Environment

In contemporary architecture, it has often been easy to ignore environmental reality through the application of technologies that allow buildings to become whatever they want. Apply enough technology; a hot space will turn cold, a light space dark, and a dry space humid. With power of modern technology anything is possible, anything can be created. We question this approach by being aware of the efficiencies inherent in traditional building that for generations have used limited resources for maximum gain.

In the arid and sunny climates of the Arab-Islamic world, the reality of the environment in architectural terms requires efficient use of architectural elements to support nature's positive effect on living. In architectural terms this would mean ways to block and guide sun and air and frame the relationship to the environment in a beneficial way. Whether they be channels to focus wind into living space, deeply incised windows to reduce entry of direct sunlight, grids to dissipate sunlight, or temporary awnings, these elements are critical to the efficient operation of domestic architecture.

In terms of plan we see furthermore that courtyards, patios and areas for plants and vegetation are especially important program elements. Courtyards are areas for relaxation and work, flexible indoor, outdoor rooms that have always been an important aspect of Mediterranean architecture. The patio as an outgrowth of interior living areas also found in Mediterranean architecture is another useful element in the sunny climates of the Arab-Islamic geography allowing flexible movements between exterior and interior spaces. Framing views off of these courtyards and patios via outdoor windows and the geometries of screens enhances the relationship to the exterior environment, making it a meaningful part of the move from the micro level of the domestic to the macro of the geography and natural environment.

In overall planning, patios and courtyards aligned towards views, sunlight and use, articulate each dwelling with the given of the particular place that it is located. When houses are either grouped or planned in this way, a variety of housing types are created that break from monotonous grids and parallel the way clusters of traditional dwellings occur. Using this type of variety in unity also means that not one dwelling matches another. Each is a unique exponent of its place, each with groupings of outdoor spaces and views unique to its location.



Architecture working with every given situation

The experience of space as a social phenomenon exists in many scales in Arab-Islamic domestic architecture. From the focus on the micro, on the flexible nature of furniture as architecture, to the macro, the ability to use any part of the house for living and work, in for example the living room or the courtyard. Design throughout this process is intricately linked to larger spiritual connections, pointing towards this other reality of religion and heritage if required or desired. Thus this situational aspect of architecture, the real of the given situation in architecture and domestic house planning, requires strategies that make spaces changeable in time from individual moments to years. Whether this in on a small scale with sliding or moving walls and screens or larger changes based on seasonal use, we see that when dictated by a given set of social or physical circumstances architecture must be open to situational change.

For example, an architecture of the given situation allows nomadism within the individual spaces of the house itself to occur, where residents can move around a house based on seasonal needs. A rooftop terrace can be taken over for a living space in winter, left open when it is to hot in summer. A courtyard can be opened up into the living space for family activities, closed when guests are present. A kitchen can be used as a living space. An architecture of the given can be fully realized in the multitude of shapes and forms required of a central courtyard, a key element of traditional Arab-Islamic house. The courtyard whether it has water and trees for a cool midday retreat, or an area of communal gathering, has always been open to adaptation of any given situation.

Conclusion

At the same time, we have a spiritual and practical dimension, where our goal for our present Reality is a wisdom that goes beyond economic and aesthetic considerations and touches the far tougher problem of how to live and let live, of how to keep peace with one's neighbors in the parochial sense and in the universal one as well. By focusing on the reality of manifestation, environment and the given situation, it is possible to a create a Modern Arab-Islamic domestic architecture that allows people to live comfortably in their communities inside of their traditional ethos while being linked to the development of the larger Modern world around them.

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