

Introduction



Molding bricks, Khoreibah, Wadi Do'an

In the face of internal and regional transformation, the extraordinary architectural heritage of the Hadhramaut Valley is in danger of abandonment. Following the Gulf War and unification of North and South Yemen in 1990-92, returning Yemeni nationals injected capital into the region. Their return sparked a construction boom while also changing people's expectations of building styles and construction processes. To paraphrase Said Yislam Ba-Sweitin, a master mason from

Shibam, people now have different tastes, anticipations and lifestyles and are turning away from earthen architecture. The problem not only lies in preserving significant structures, but also in articulating the value of traditional craftsmen and their work in this rapidly changing social setting.

It is apparent that a traditional architectural conservation program will not suffice in managing change in this dynamic social milieu. A pilot program to conserve several significant buildings is needed. At the same time, our objective is to reassert the role of mud masons and plaster craftsmen and expand their community to include young professionals. Over the next three years, we will open lines of dialogue between master masons like Said Yislam, western-trained Yemeni architects and students, and conservators, and Yemeni cultural resource managers through the conservation and restoration of several of the merchant palaces of the historic city of Tarim. Community organizing as well as traditional conservation fieldwork will therefore comprise the foundation of the project, but it is also essential that we narrate this process for the public as well as the professionals responsible for making planning and conservation decisions in the region. Presenting this process of community building through new media and cultural institutions will give the program a legitimacy and connection to modernization in the eyes of the public and further solidify this community. We can restore buildings and conduct ethnographic documentation of traditional industries, but a vibrant community will last long after the conservators have left.

The mud brick architecture of the Hadhramaut Valley ingeniously uses materials and forms appropriate to local needs and has demonstrated a tremendous flexibility in incorporating stylistic changes and other innovations. For these reasons, the tradition and its artisans have a substantive worth in addition to the more intangible value of cultural heritage. We will focus on the legacy of people like Obaid Salem Ba-Sa'idah, a master mason for over sixty years now passed away, and the work of younger masters such as Ali Yislam Madudi, Ahmed Said Ahmed Ba-Mu'min, Omar Mahfouz Omar bin Zayid and others. Young Yemeni architects like Maha al-Hebshi and Abdullah al-Saqqaf wish to incorporate the

Hadrami tradition into their work, but do not have access to these individuals and their knowledge. Celebrating this craft by telling their stories is not a question of documenting a tradition slowly passing away. It is a way of giving this community a medium by which they may take part in the processes of transformation in Yemeni society.