Manouchehri House
Kashan, Iran

Kashan is a historic city in the Iranian province of Isfahan. The setting for Shah Abbas I’s famous garden, Bagh-e Fin, it was also renowned for its crafts traditions, including glazed pottery, copperware and textiles – Kashani brocades of silks and velvets were prized in imperial courts throughout Europe and Asia. Bagh-e Fin and all the other works of Abbas I were razed in a devastating earthquake in 1778, which killed half of the city’s inhabitants. But when the time came to rebuild, the merchants made their houses even grander than before, with sophisticated brick masonry and exquisite ornamentation. Mostly closed from the outside, the structures were organised around an internal courtyard, offering a high degree of privacy as well as protection from the desert climate.

These Qajari merchants’ houses, many of them long-neglected, are increasingly being renovated by private individuals with an interest in preserving the city's cultural heritage and fading crafts traditions. The Manouchehri House is one such project, an exemplary restoration and adaptive reuse of a nineteenth-century merchant’s home. Besides drawing attention to Kashan’s architectural heritage, the renovated building raises awareness of its crafts traditions, incorporating a weaving workshop as well as a shop to sell the products of the looms. The house also serves as a small hotel.

The renovation was undertaken by an expert architect and masons with extensive knowledge of local materials and traditional construction techniques. Renderings and finishes include: exterior walls – brickwork and stucco, or mud and hay cob; interior walls and ceilings – mud and stucco (or sometimes fine straw cob); floors in rooms – industrial clay tiles; corridors – brick and cobblestone paving; courtyard and balcony floors – mudbrick tiles; courtyard stairs – Iranian saffron travertine; doors and window frames – maple wood. Mirrorwork was added as decoration in some locations.

And the revitalisation has extended beyond the bounds of the building itself, to take in the immediate surroundings. With its two entrances on the south and north sides, Manouchehri House transforms a formerly austere alleyway into a space for living and sharing.
Manouchehri House, Kashan, Iran

CONSERVATION

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**Manouchehr House, Kashan, Iran**

**Client**  
Saba Manouchehri Kashani, Kashan, Iran

**Conservation Team**  
Abolfazl Ebrahim Shahi, project manager (2007–2014), Kashan, Iran  
Seyyed Akbar Helli, traditional architect (2009–2011), Kashan, Iran  
Shahnaz Nader Esfahani, interior design, Tehran, Iran

**Restoration Consultants**  

**Electrical Engineer**  
Ahmad Seyyedi, Kashan, Iran

**Mechanical Engineer**  
Mohsen Moghaddam, Kashan, Iran

**Contractors**  
Seyyed Akbar Helli, general contractor, Kashan, Iran  
Mohsen Akbarzadeh, electrical contractor, Kashan, Iran  
Mohsen Fellezi, mechanical contractor, Kashan, Iran  
Mohsen Shahi, junior contractor, Kashan, Iran

**Site Managers**  
Akbar Arezegar, site manager, Kashan, Iran  
Ali Adhami, surveyor, Kashan, Iran

**Excavation**  
Habibollah Ahmad, excavation, Kashan, Iran

**Reinforcement**  
Reza Arezooie, Kashan, Iran

**Vault Construction**  
Abbas Goikar, Kashan, Iran

**Brickworks**  
Hassan Shamsia, Ali Rahimi, Reza Bidgoli, Ali Zahedi, Ali Jafari, Kashan, Iran

**Carpenter**  
Hossein Shaftale, Kashan, Iran

**Stucco Works**  
Abbas Salmani, Maryam Shakiba, Mohammad Shagerdi, Kashan, Iran

**Stonework**  
Mohammad Mirzapour, Kashan, Iran

**Tilework**  
Mohammadali Shaban, Kashan, Iran

**Copperwork**  
Mohammad Aghajanzadeh, Kashan, Iran

**Decorative Limework**  
Morteza Boitbolmoghadam, Kashan, Iran

**Restoration and Revitalisation**  
Abolfazl Shahi, manager, advisor and graphic artist, Kashan, Iran

**Revitalisation Team**  
Zainab Esmati, hotel manager, Kashan, Iran  
Ali Roshan, hotel training manager, Kashan, Iran  
Marjan Koochak, textile designer, Kashan, Iran

**Website**  
www.manouchehrhouse.com

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**Saba Manouchehri**  
is an Iranian multidisciplinary artist. She studied jewellery and metalsmithing at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and received her fine arts degree from Tufts University. Her interest in finding value in the neglected and forgotten manifests itself in her works as well as her large-scale urban renewal projects. Recycling and upcycling have been at the heart of her creations. In her jewellery and sculptures, from the abandoned to the ignored, she brings back life to broken and discarded objects by giving them a new assemblage and therefore new spirit and meaning. She collects Iranian art and textiles and is working intensely towards the revival of traditional weaving arts in Kashan.

In 2008, inspired to revive the potential beauty of a neglected and near-ruined traditional house and neighbourhood, the restoration and revitalisation of Manouchehri House became her passion, ably assisted in this task by an expert group of restoration consultants and conservation managers.

Manouchehri has received the JOSTAR Prize, the first national prize for quality in urban renewal participation from the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. In 2015 she also received the National Heritage Award for Reviving the Art of Brocade from the Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization.

**Abolfazl Ebrahim Shahi**  
is an Iranian artist. After obtaining his undergraduate degree in graphic design, he completed a master's degree in theology from the Islamic Azad University of Tehran. His work in reviving traditional Persian arts and crafts has been inspired by the aesthetics of the Saqqakhaneh school of art.

**Seyyed Akbar Helli**  
is an Iranian self-taught traditional architect. He started working as a mason from the age of 13 and learnt from notable Kashani traditional architects before becoming an independent master himself. Helli has worked on numerous restoration projects with the Kashan Municipality and Isfahan Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization, and taught architecture at the Kashan University of Art and Architecture from 1996–2008.

**Shahnaz Nader**  
is an Iranian interior designer. She holds an interior design degree from the New York School of Interior Design and has worked on various interior design projects since the 1970s. She has dedicated herself to making handicrafts and furniture using Iranian traditional techniques while modifying those designs and patterns in unique and innovative ways.

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**Project Data**  
Site area: 1,370 m²  
Total floor area: 1,495 m²  
Total cost: 1,056,000 USD  
Commission: February 2008  
Design: March 2008–February 2011  
Construction: March 2008–February 2011  
Completion: March 2011
Nasrid Tower Restoration

Huercal-Overa, Spain

The Nasrid Tower has stood for centuries on a forbidding hilltop in eastern Andalusia. Visible from a great distance, its defensive function is immediately clear: 700 years ago, this was a marker of the Muslim frontier, a beacon warning local inhabitants of approaching raids. In restoring the structure and making it accessible, the architects have sought to contrast the tower’s sense of permanence with the ephemerality of their own interventions – an approach that recalls the ‘intentional flaws’ of Islamic art. In their words: ‘The project explores the dichotomy between the solid, ageless construction of the existing Nasrid Tower, made by anonymous craftsmen, and the provisional, light, degradable nature of the contemporary. The additions to the original building are conceived as future ruins: removable, temporary objects with a short lifespan, which will deteriorate and eventually be replaced.’

While the restoration of the tower itself meticulously replaces like for like (lime mortar and rammed earth), the interventions are visibly modern. Two structures made of weathering steel provide the necessary new facilities. One, resembling a shipping container, holds an office and visitor toilets. The other, shaped like a barrel or drum, wraps around the spiral staircase that reinstates the original access point to the tower. The drum is semi-open, and the platform at the top recalls the tower’s primary role as a lookout. But where the old tower is rectilinear and massive, the new stair tower is cylindrical and hollow; where the old structure is light and eye-catching, the new one is dark and sober. The complementarity of geometry, form and material has been carefully considered throughout.

An imposing flight of steps leading up to the tower (a legacy of the previous owner) was replaced with an approach more in harmony with the landscape – a meandering path dotted with seating areas for visitors to enjoy the views. Concrete and mortar was used for both the exterior paving and the benches, while the discreet fencing is made of pre-rusted steel, in keeping with many of the other interventions.
Client
Municipality of Huercal-Overa, Spain:
Domingo Fernandez Zurano, mayor
Jose Maria Soler Carmona, deputy head
Elena Sanchez Castellon, historian, site cultural management

Junta de Andalucia, Department of Cultural Affairs, Almeria, Spain:
Rosa Aguilar Rivero, minister of culture
Alfredo Valdivia Ayala, representative of the department of culture
Juan Dominguez Carreno, head of the restoration department

Architects
Castillo Miras Arquitectos, Madrid/Almeria, Spain:
Luis Castillo Villegas, Mercedes Miras Varela, partners

Contractor
Construcciones Jose Lorenzo, Almeria, Spain:
Jose Luis Lorenzo Jimenez, construction and conservation manager

Site Supervisor
Luis Hervas Lopez, Almeria, Spain

Structural Engineer
Satec Ingenieros, Almeria, Spain:
Manuel Lopez Romero

Project Data
Site area: 3,500 m²
Ground floor area: 223 m²
Cost: 790,000 USD
Commission: January 2005
Design: November 2005–February 2006
Construction: January 2009–December 2009
Occupancy: March 2010

Castillo Miras Arquitectos
Castillo Miras Arquitectos is an architectural office based in Almeria, a coastal town in the Spanish region of Andalusia. Mercedes Miras studied architecture at Escuela Tecnica Superior de Arquitectura de Sevilla (ETSAS), completing her diploma in 1997. Her work has been concerned mainly with restoration and preservation of historical buildings, including the renovation to house the Andalusian Photography Museum. Luis Castillo studied architecture at the Escuela Tecnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid (ETSAM) and the Architectural Association (AA), completing his diploma in 1995 and afterwards working in several practices in Spain and the Netherlands.

Their practice deals with concepts such as recycling, reusing the obsolete and reclaiming degraded structures, spaces and landscapes. They are part of a new architectural sensibility that take these strategies as a starting point, rejecting the ‘artistification’ of architecture as well as its transmutation into a commodity for mass consumption.

Their work and essays have been featured in prestigious publications such as Casabella, Arquitectura Viva, Detail and OASE.

Website
www.castillomiras.es
A Sensitive Boldness in Conservation
Seif El Rashidi

Among the aims of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture is to recognise outstanding projects which enhance the built environment in places with links to Islamic civilisation, past or present. In doing so, it draws attention to exemplary approaches to architecture, inspiring others further afield. The restoration of a Nasrid Tower near Almería in Andalusia, and the construction of a new library over the archaeological remains of a medieval Muslim settlement in Ceuta, a Spanish enclave in North Africa, both finalists in this cycle, present masterful solutions to a series of difficult conservation and design challenges faced by architects and local governments the world over.

In the case of the project in Andalusia, a key challenge was what to do with a derelict medieval building for which there was no obvious use – a tower with very limited floor space on a rocky outcrop at some distance from the small town of Huercal-Overa. The architects’ response was both pragmatic and imaginative, seeking to reinstate the romantic allure of the dramatic yet simple building and to restore its rugged landscape evoking the trials and tribulations of the Arabs in fourteenth-century Spain. The tower’s dual role as a lookout and a beacon (to warn neighbouring townspeople of imminent threat) was a driving idea behind the work of Mercedes Miras and Luis Castillo. Their intervention has enabled the building to become an important feature of Huercal-Overa’s identity and a venue for community events without destroying the sense of adventure attained on finally reaching the imposing edifice perched on its hilltop.

In more practical terms, the architectural intervention required thinking critically about which of the later changes to the medieval tower to strip away, and which to retain as a record of its long history. The architects’ approach was to keep any modifications that continued to use and celebrate the tower’s original defensive function – namely, gun slits and hideouts added during a more recent divisive conflict, the Spanish Civil War – but to remove the assortment of later decorative elements added by a local grandee, which were out of keeping with the building’s original function and its economy of line and material.

Most remarkable, from the design point of view, is the balance attained between the preservation of the historic fabric and the modern interventions enabling public access and use. Castillo and Miras’ philosophy was that, in the grand scheme of things, their intervention would be a fleeting episode in the long and venerable history of the medieval building. As such, they conceived their additions to just lightly touch both the landscape and the original structure, to contrast in form, material, colour, to pay homage to the bold geometry of the tower and, perhaps most poignantly, by choosing a finish of prerusted steel, to embody the idea of their modern intervention as being ephemeral – and already in the process of decay. Their key physical interventions – a barrel-like staircase tower, and a container housing offices and toilet facilities – are described by the couple as being like objets trouvés – things that serve a purpose for a brief period and then are cast aside.

Some may ask: ‘So what, how is this different from any other scheme?’ The answer, really, is in the quality and thoughtfulness of their work: in the way, for example, the patina and pockmarks of history have been preserved even while the original lime mortar has been cleaned to give the tower a moonlit sheen; or in the way the restored sections are distinct, but neither garish nor harsh, while the concrete paths and seating cubes are the perfect shade of honeyish grey. ‘How?, one must ask. ‘Many, many site trials’, Castillo and Miras respond.

As an architectural statement there is another mastery – that the strong form of their own tower is the perfect complement to the Nasrid building; that it is impressive, but from a distance, subservient, and that it too is a lookout, an atalaya.

Facebook gives an indication of the tower’s popularity, even as a setting for weddings, where silky chairs and gauzy blue ribbons are in order. What? Yes, indeed. Though many of the users may find it hard to pinpoint what it is that makes the scheme work, they know that they like it – and the local council has found a tour guide/animator to give the place another kind of soul, telling its story, mainly to locals.

Can it serve as a model? Certainly. Anyone could, in theory, achieve what Castillo and Miras have done here. But it would take diligence, dedication, the honing of skills, confidence, and yet great subtlety to attain the right balance. This project, then, is also a beacon, a lighthouse, of what can occasionally be achieved.

The second project, Ceuta Public Library, exists in the most curious of places – a multicultural (Moroccan-Spanish) border region of Spain, actually in mainland North Africa. Excavations on a site earmarked for mixed-use development revealed unexpectedly important archaeological remains of a wealthy Muslim community that had fled the Spanish
mainland in the fourteenth century. The archaeologist’s persistence, coupled with the visionary support of municipal representatives, enabled a change in direction: the decision to use the site for cultural purposes, in order to preserve the archaeology, making a feature out of it. This achievement merits a pause for reflection: in most places of the world, archaeological value pales against urban development’s financial lure.

A public competition attracted national interest, with the winning scheme chosen because it was energised by the very challenges posed by the site. The library constructed over the ruins by Angela de Paredes and Ignacio Pedrosa does more, though, than integrate the now-preserved remains of a Muslim city into a slick modern building. It overcomes a challenging topography, creating a sculptural, clean-lined edifice whose texture and magnificent form hint at the city’s medieval defences – a refreshing response in a place where there are no apparent links between architecture past and present, and where, overall, the building stock is pretty ordinary. The interior is light, legible, logical; a space conducive to labour and leisure alike. To counteract the blinding glare of the Mediterranean sun, Pedrosa and de Paredes resort to an age-old solution engrained in the architectural DNA of the Islamic world: screening. And their design is perfectly practical and utilitarian – straightforward prefabricated perforated sheets, accessible to clean and easily replaceable. These last details speak of an architectural practice as committed to the building’s function as to its aesthetic quality. Pedrosa and de Paredes know full well the challenges of maintaining public buildings beyond the availability of an initial pot of funding: they build for robustness, for the future. ‘Remember that we have no current government’, they say.

The outcome is best conveyed by the spirit of the public library, a well-used social space where the residents of Ceuta want to come, not just because of its resources but, critically, because it is an environment where they feel comfortable and creative; where they can delve in solitude into their own personal quests – a new CV, a law exam – or work as a group, or think and daydream as they peer beyond the uplifting white book-filled spaces through the screens to horizons blue.

Where this library really wins is in answer to the questions of how and whom it serves – which is everyone, from head-scarved youths reading Spanish literature, to researchers in need of a microfilm collection, conference-going archaeologists, local art groups, musical prodigies and older residents of the city-region delighted with a space where they can experience the creative energy of Ceuta’s youth. It speaks of multifaceted identities and comfortable diversity. ‘It has brought life to the area’, a neighbour says. Scurrying to move furniture to turn the entrance space by the archaeological site into a venue for an evening recital, the director and his team are beaming. (The number of pages in their logbook of cultural events already far exceeds the number of days.) The project archaeologist and the municipal director of cultural affairs, not to mention the two architects, stand proud.

In some respects the library, as both a great building and a community space, has eclipsed the archaeological site at its core. Some would argue that, fairly or unfairly, this may have cost it an Aga Khan Award, just as the Nasrid Tower project’s seeming effortlessness may have diminished the sense of what it achieves. Commiserations aside, both of these projects have great lessons to share. To a world stumped by the challenges of hard-to-use built heritage, they show just what can effectively be achieved. ‘Building around the archaeological site was technically easy’, Ignacio Pedrosa shrugs, when asked. There is an answer here powerful enough to keep at bay the illicit bulldozers and the archaeological cordons. And on the forbidding hilltop in Huercal-Overa is a confirmation of how everyday, normal communities can connect with their heritage: allow them to use it, to enjoy it, and allow yourselves to be inspired. The message of these two government-sponsored projects in a resource- and idea-strapped age is clear: learn!