Abdel Wahed El-Wakil

A conversation with the prize-winning Egyptian architect working in the Middle East.

Abdel Wahed El Wakil was born in 1943, in Cairo where he spent his childhood. He was first educated at the English school there and went on to Ain Shams University to study architecture at its faculty of engineering. Between 1965 and 1970 he lectured at the department and also studied with Hassan Fathy, the well known proponent of indigenous architecture. El Wakil continued this work when he received a year's grant to look at centres of vernacular architecture in Egypt. In 1971 he went into private practice and eventually established offices both in Egypt and Ashford, Kent in England. In 1979 he became a consultant to UNESCO for the construction of a bedouin village in the historic site of Petra in Jordan and in 1980 won one of the important Aga Khan Awards for Architecture for his building the Halawa House in Agany, Egypt which was completed in 1975.

El Wakil's contemporary use of traditional vocabularies in architecture drew MIMAR's attention to his work and ideas. Brian Taylor met El Wakil in Lahore during the Award ceremonies in October last year and continued the dialogue in Paris earlier this year, to produce both this interview and the subsequent presentation of some of the Egyptian architect's work.

MIMAR: When you were training as an architect, was there any interest at all in local, traditional architecture?

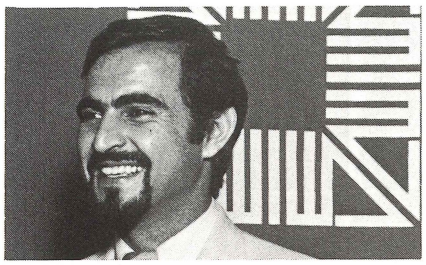
EL WAKIL: No. None at all in the early sixties. And later, after graduation when I was on the teaching staff of Ain Shams University in Cairo, I sent students to do drawings of old buildings in Cairo, it was considered an aberration by other professors. When I wanted to do a masters degree thesis on Hassan Fathy's work, they were very against it. It was said then, that Fathy was a retrograde, taking Egyptians backwards a hundred years.

MIMAR: What were the first commissioned works you had after university?

EL WAKIL: I did three apartment buildings, conventional constructions of four stories with two flats per floor, in the period after graduation until 1968. Then I stopped, because I knew, I felt, I should not do them any more. This was not because of my previous knowledge of Fathy and his work at that time, but for other reasons. Building laws, for example, in Egypt, make for extroverted houses, limiting one's design. And, the client's principal criteria for judging design was based on financial speculation. The resulting buildings are disasters as environments for living. I found little ways of improving details, like circulation, but there is no longer any fundamental meaning in this kind of architecture for the users. Street continuity is also lost by isolating blocks of flats.

MIMAR: How did your relationship with Fathy come about?

EL WAKIL: When I could not find anyone willing to be my thesis supervisor, I gave up, and I decided to do a thesis on structures. From 1965 to 1967, I did almost nothing else but structure studies which helped later on with vault and dome construction. After the 1967 war, there was little work but much discussion, particularly about the need for a national form of architecture. We asked ourselves how, as educated architects, we could contribute to efficient building, especially housing. A friend of mine told me I should go and see Hassan Fathy who had been struggling with the question for over 30 years and nothing had come of it. He was considered marginal at the time, but for me and a few others, he could open a door to doing something for our country.



Abdel Wahed El-Wakil
Photograph: Christopher Little

> "Work is a prayer. It is an act of devotion... You cannot dissociate work from belief. If you take Islam as a way of life, of which Islamic architecture is a part, a man's work is his mission on earth."

MIMAR: How did you make the shift over to the humanistic philosophical concerns of Fathy from your study purely of structures?

EL WAKIL: It's not a shift. I wanted to apply what I learned in a serious way. Architecture is not theorising and sociological analysis as taught in schools today; it is a knowledge of techniques as well. A knowledge of structures enables one to make a dissection of a total, three-dimensional object. This is a very difficult unnatural process. Aladdin, the master mason, does not read a drawing of a building in section and plan; you show him a plan and indicate the location of a dome or vault and he understands the whole as a three-dimensional volume. He cannot understand a plan or an elevation; it is too sophisticated to expect him to comprehend a section. Working with this mason taught me a very important thing that studies in schools alone cannot: that architecture is a collective, not an individual art, and it has its own vocabulary. To discuss a building with someone, it is necessary to have a vocabulary that communicates the image in a meaningful way, otherwise you have chaos in the building process. With Aladdin, I started to learn his language. When talking about making a claustra, he asked me "You want seven-eights?". I said "What's seven-eights?". Well, I soon understood: seven in Arabic is a V and eight is an inverted V, and this corresponded to the way he composed bricks to make a claustra. Every word in the vocabulary is related to a form in his mind. The poverty of modern architecture is in large part due to the fact that architects believe they can do all the detailing without a sound knowledge of techniques and materials. An exception, of course, was someone like Mies van der Rohe, who wanted to create parallels between architecture and industrial design in the United States. But I, and many others are working in areas where craftsmanship stands more of a chance to provide lasting solutions and gain popularity.

MIMAR: So you went to Fathy and said you wanted to do a thesis on his work?

EL WAKIL: No. I told him I wanted to study traditional architecture. He was happy with this initiative and I stayed for five years — from 1968 to 1973.

MIMAR: Was this before the first publication of his book — *Gourna, A Tale Of Two Villages,* in 1969?

EL WAKIL: Yes. His manuscript had been written for some years when in 1969 the Minister of Culture proposed to him that it be published in conjunction with the Millenial anniversary celebrations of Cairo and symposia organised to discuss the city's future. We simply helped put the drawings in order for publishing.

MIMAR: What happened to your thesis?

EL WAKIL: Well, practically living and working with Hassan-Bey, the writing of a thesis became unimportant. I was actually *living* it. Designing.

MIMAR: How did you subsequently move back into practice?

EL WAKIL: It became frustrating after a time, living in an imaginary world of drawings ... which is all right within the framework of ideas. Profession, however, means practice.

MIMAR: How would you describe your commitment to your work?

EL WAKIL: Work is a prayer. It is an act of devotion. In Islam of former times, a workman said his endeavor was for God. Money didn't matter; it was his means for surviving, but in the end, God was the Provider. Work was executed with the utmost care because it was for God. You cannot dissoci-

ate work from belief. If you take Islam as a way of life, of which Islamic architecture is a part, a man's work is his mission on earth.

MIMAR: This attitude you have expressed, did you find it also existed among the craftsmen and masons you worked with in Egypt?

EL WAKIL: Yes, for instance, Mustafa Aladdin, the master mason and most of the older workmen have this concept and they are qualitatively better craftsmen than younger ones, who may technically be superior in building a dome, for instance, but there is something missing when you look at the result. The older men have an attachment to the product, to every brick put in place. A tenet of modernist architecture was that it should be devoid of all else excepting its functional aspects. Fanaticism of the modern movement pushed this to the extreme. On the other hand, you have Ruskin who said that architecture devoid of all ornamentation can no longer be called architecture. Ruskin has been of enormous influence on me, and his notion of embellishment ties in with the Moslem craftsman's attitude towards his work. Men of culture always embellish.

MIMAR: The Sulaiman house has been criticised by some as being symptomatic of a kind of schizophrenia on the architect's part — using traditional construction methods and materials, revived by Hassan Fathy for economical building, in order to build expensive palaces. What is your response?

EL WAKIL: It's a legitimate criticism: Why build palaces when there is such a need for low-cost mass housing? However, people should look at the higher function of a palace and should see it as being like a flower. It creates a standard of quality. This qualitative aspect, whether it is obtained through craftsmen who execute a monumental type of building, or through the architect, or finally through people who see the monumental edifice as an ideal image of a dwelling type. In the past, there were two versions of the ideal abode, the spiritual in the form of a mosque (or mausoleums) and the secular, in the form of the rich man's palace. Every great culture has had its architecture of palaces and of mosques.

MIMAR: But is it needed today?

EL WAKIL: Yes. It was the basis of cultural production. Modern technology today has its exploits, sending people to the moon or producing Rolls Royces. There are great moments of research needed in order to produce ultimately more widely accessible objects of quality. They set the standards of what is possible.

MIMAR: In what ways can the Sulaiman house, or your other works, be considered a laboratory for research?

EL WAKIL: First of all, a man who builds a house is going to want to define his *self-image*. Designing with the client is a matter of image-making. The house is not simply utilitarian shelter, but in many ways is the flower on a tree Tagore spoke about. The form taken by this house, any house, reflects its meaning for those who commission and use it.

MIMAR: Are you saying then that it is a laboratory for taste-making?

EL WAKIL: Many of the problems today with mass housing have to do with a lack of understanding of the house as a social-status symbol. People don't want dwellings that remind them of what is old or provincial, in time or space; what is referred to as "local" or "vulgar", belonging to common people. In this sense, the Sulaiman house has helped: people from the lower or middle-classes who work with the Sheikh now see and want Arab houses; before they did not want them.

MIMAR: What is the relationship between this palace and poorer housing?

EL WAKIL: Well, Hassan Fathy, of whom I am considered a disciple, could make the houses he did for the poor because he could also design palaces. He could make qualitatively good architecture.

MIMAR: What, then, is the significance or meaning of these specific forms, the domes, vaults, lanterns, etc. from Egyptian architecture, as found in the Sulaiman house in Saudi Arabia?

EL WAKIL: In prior periods, the mosque and the house were related, just as were the early churches and the houses of the time. Today, there is a discrepancy: the mosque is apparently no longer related to the house. Should the mosques or houses be related to modern architecture, and be done like garages or hangars in concrete, or should houses be inspired and bring the relationship back into being? This is the significance of all those forms, patterns and language in the Sulaiman house. They are contemporary in a sense while related to the old architecture. It is not an imitation of the old.

MIMAR: How do you defend the contemporary use of certain architectural elements, such as the *musharibiya,* from traditional building?

EL WAKIL: When many people see a *musharibiya* being used, they are against it because it represented a sort of "prison" for women, to conceal them. They do not realise that it is in fact one of the best ways of diffusing intense light into a space. Today, instead of using *'musharibiyas'* people hang curtains in front of open windows hoping to achieve the same desired effects.

MIMAR: To what degree was the construction traditional or modern in the Sulaiman house?

EL WAKIL: There were no cranes used. Only wheelbarrows and manpower. Bricks were even manufactured on site when local kilns could not supply us in sufficient quantity. Cement bricks were for walls when red bricks were in short supply; the red bricks were utilised for domes and vaults because of their superior thermal properties. While I wanted to use wood for the flat roofs, the client was against it, for fear of termites; so we used concreate (but the client has subsequently felt the difference after comparing temperatures with his summer house, where we did use wood).

MIMAR: And the skilled labour?

EL WAKIL: The house proved to be a training experience. The carpenter is the son of a famous Egyptian carpenter whose traditional knowledge is dying out. The amount of work in the Sulaiman house provided the opportunity to preserve and develop his inherited skills. However, without a market demand of this sort, such skills will inevitably be lost forever (It should be mentioned that after the Sulaiman house was completed, the Mayor of Jeddah decreed that future houses in that area should all be whitewashed and have *musharibiyas!*).

MIMAR: How do you bring craftsmen back to an appreciation of former tradition? For example, when *you* are inspired, by master-pieces of the past and search for ways of transposing quality into a modern idiom, how do you communicate this to the craftsman?

EL WAKIL: Like all human beings they have the potential for creativity. For instance, the carpenter I worked with eventually innovated on his own from the models I had given him. He would suggest improvements from time to time which were absolutely ingenious.

MIMAR: What kind of intellectual gymnastics did you go through in the first place to create the models?

EL WAKIL: I tried to be receptive to the most fundamental principles of any art. For example, in designing the *musharibiyas* of my first houses, I was dissatisfied with a certain curve. It was extremely difficult to resolve, and it was never as beautiful as the old ones. But I found a relationship between designing and calligraphy, which I was trying to learn at the time. In calligraphy, every line, every letter, is like a musical composition: it has spaces. The module is the thickness of the pen. There are multiples of this dimension, inclination, etc; basically, these are the principles and norms which have evolved over time into tradition. I realised, in this respect, stylisation has a particular meaning and norms of beauty are extremely difficult to alter. An individual alone cannot attain these, let alone alter them; these will evolve as a collective endeavour, hence my close collaboration with those actually executing the work.

Al Sulaiman Palace, Jeddah

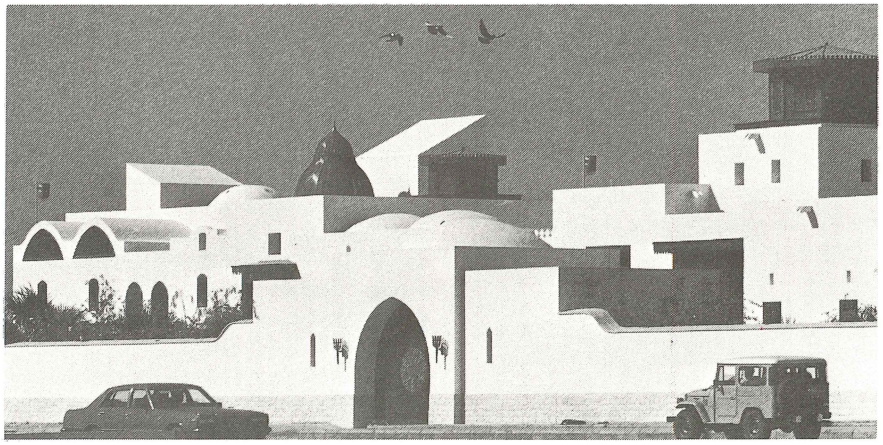
The Al Sulaiman Palace, prestigiously located in the Al-Hamra district on the seashore of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, has been much admired. The building is owned by one of the most influential families of Saudi Arabia.

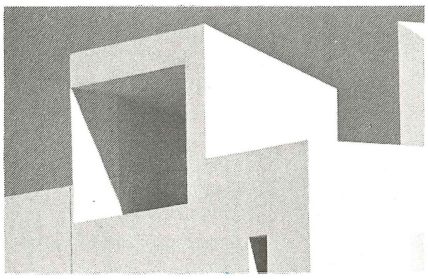
"The timber merchant may think that flowers and foliage are only frivolous decorations for a tree, but he will know to his cost that if they are eliminated, the timber follows them".

— Rabindranath Tagore

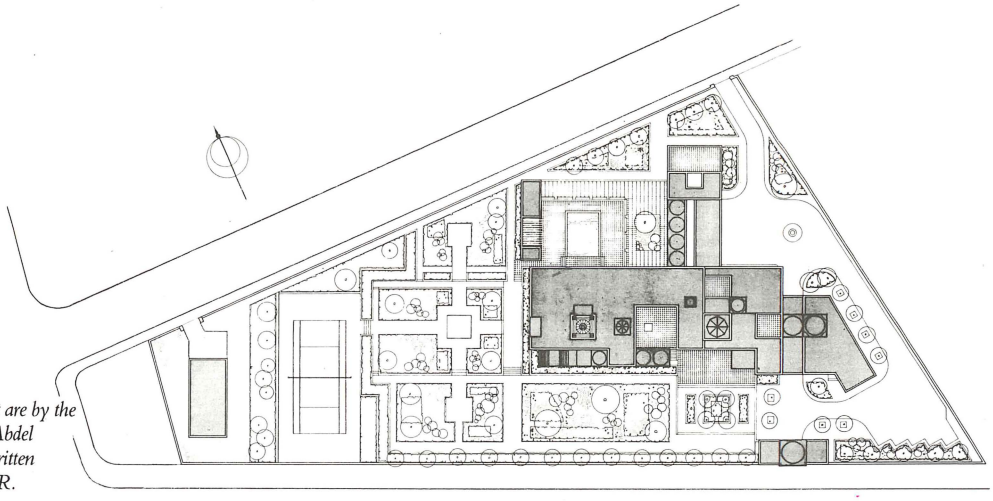
This quotation by Tagore carries an essential truth to the propagators of material functionalism. Functionalism whose influence on modern architecture is apparent has defined utilitarian building as its most significant objective. The dull environment existing around us in cities and towns today is the result of this utilitarian approach. It is true that buildings must fulfil their immediate functions but it is imperative to recall the higher function of architecture, which is to give concrete objective expression to man's metaphysical aspirations. "Architecture is the myth of a culture, carved in stone". Its monumental buildings have provided this highest form of art.

The Sulaiman Palace was built with the intention of expressing such an ideal. If it nourishes any grandeur, it is not by means of an excessive display of wealth and pomp, but by means of arduous effort in design and craftsmanship. The Palace will have served its purpose well if it can inspire and influence the more utilitarian building-types.

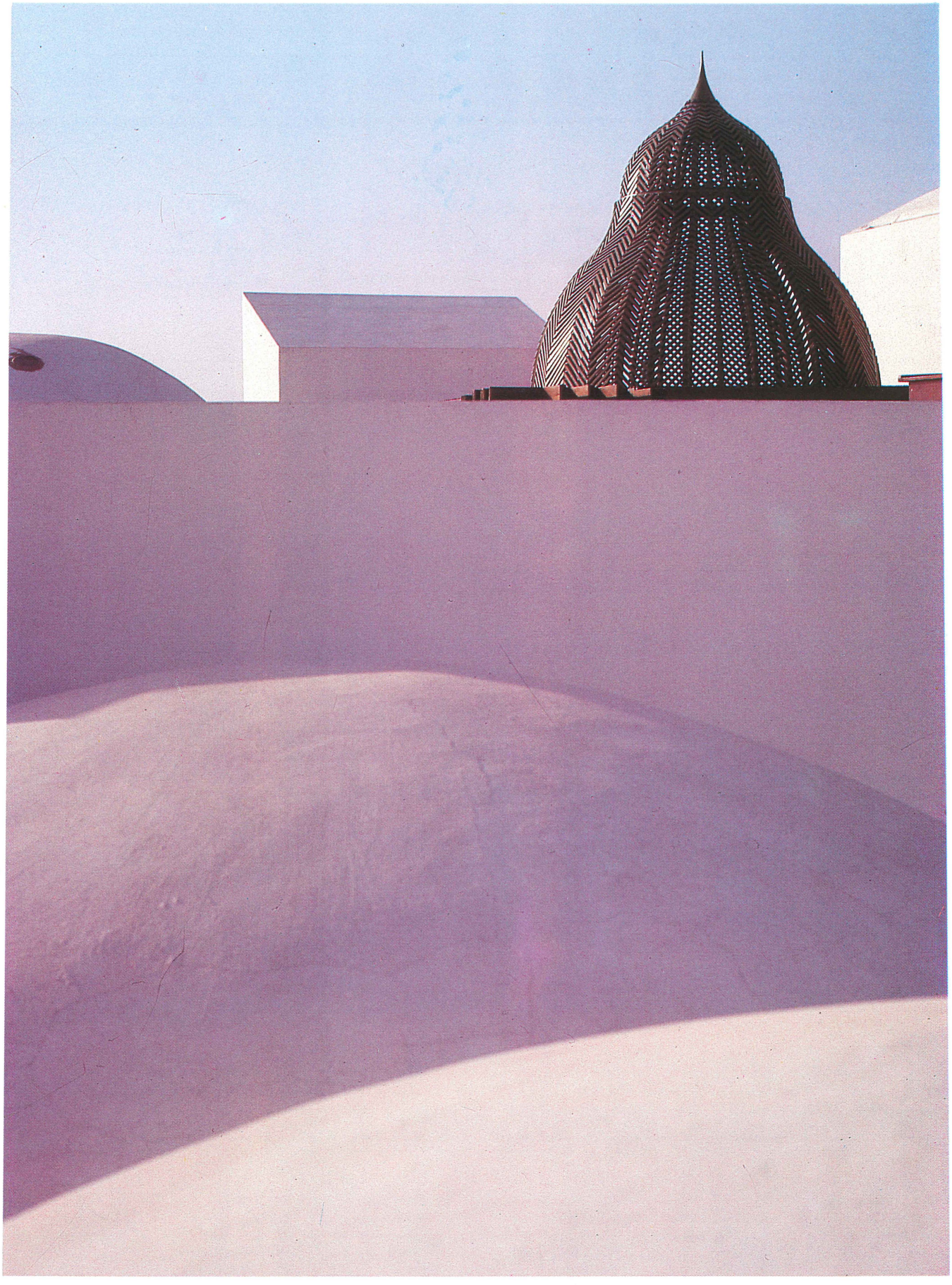


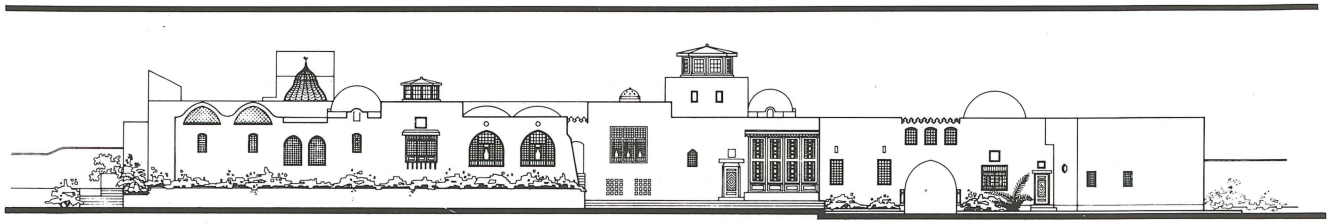


Above: Al Sulaiman Palace, entrance gate and south facade.
Left: Wind catcher on the west facade, bold sculptural form-making.
Below: Site Plan.
Opposite: Sensuous roof forms imitate desert sand dunes.



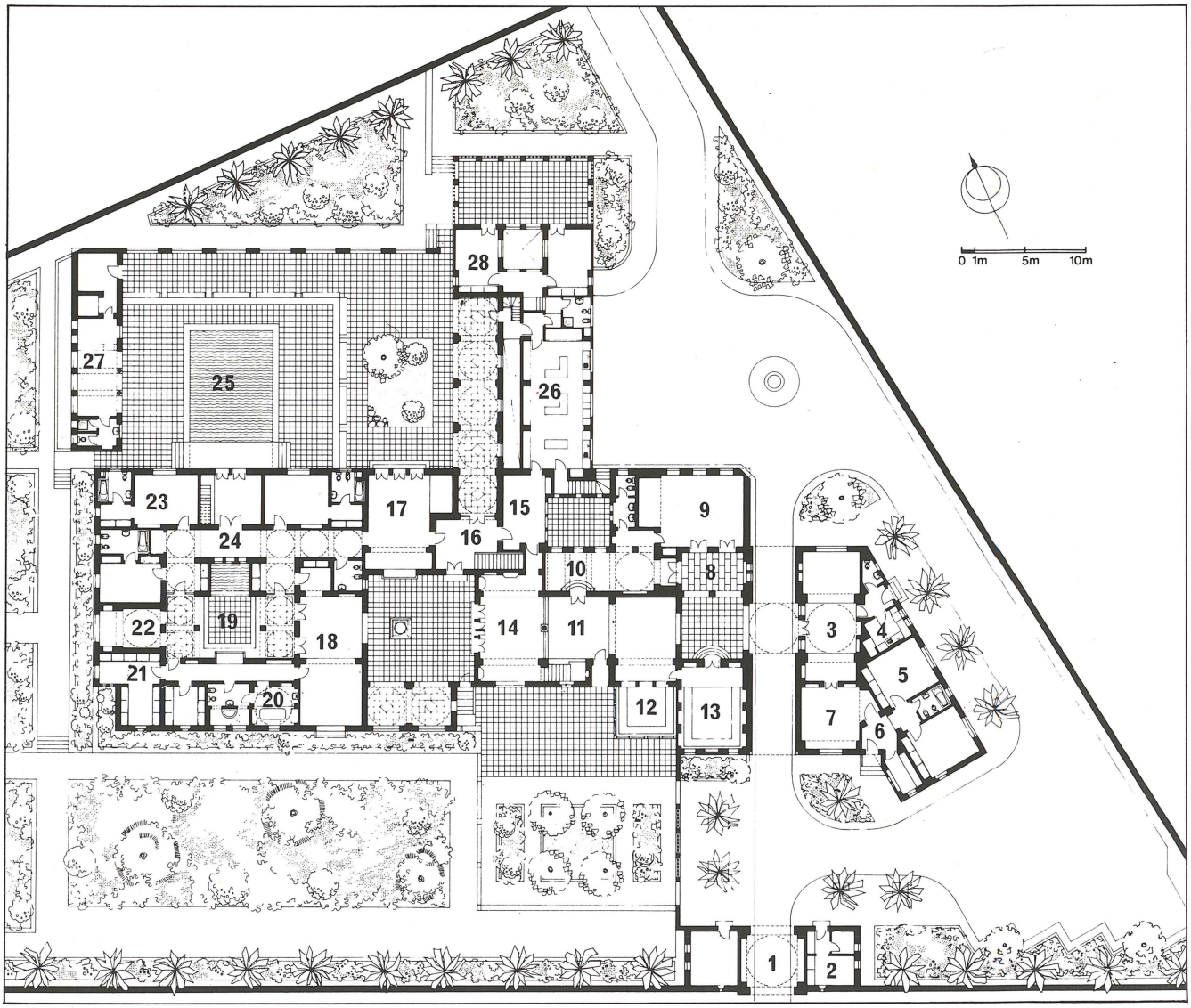
Photographs and text are by the building's architect, Abdel Wahed El-Wakil: written specially for MIMAR.





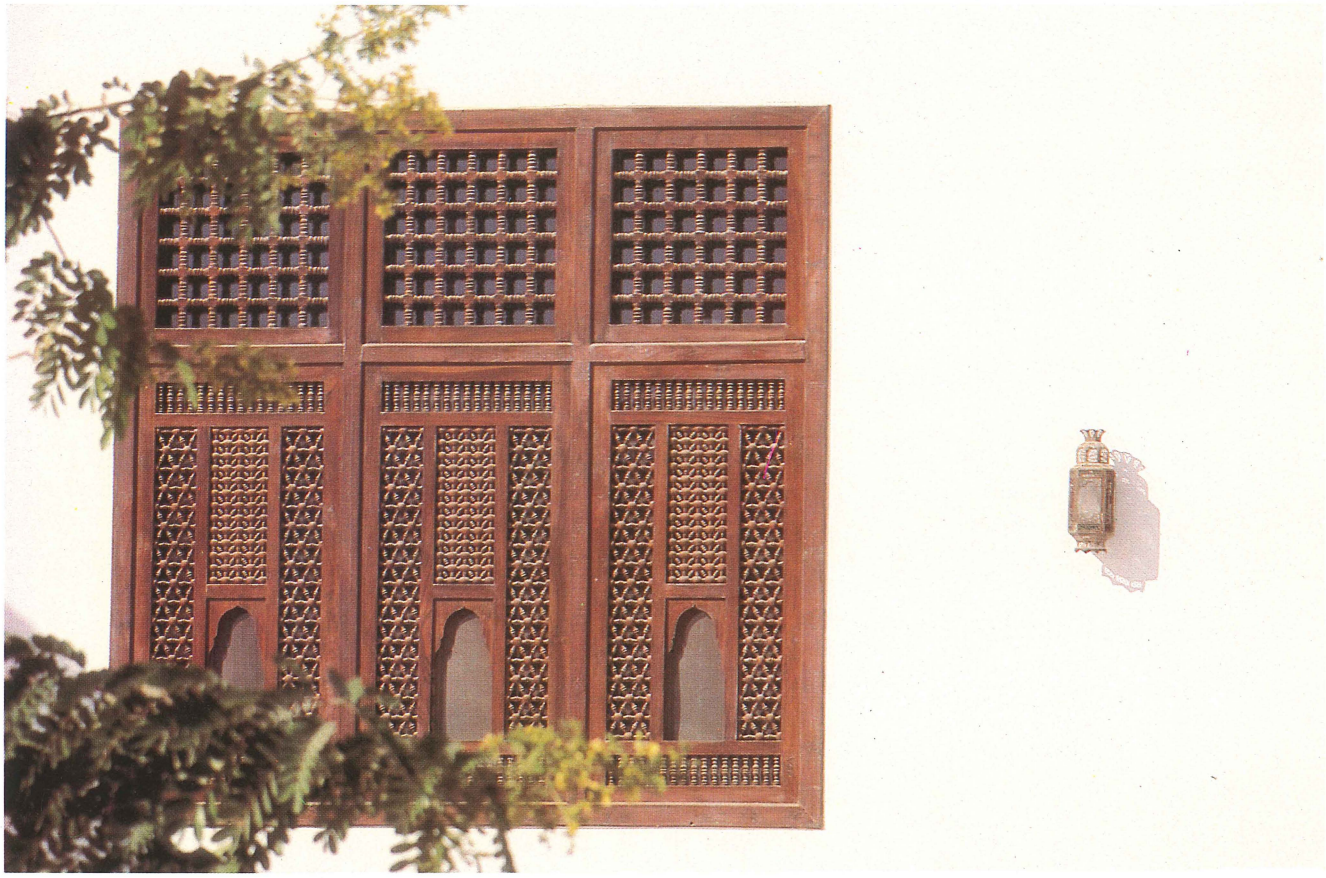
South Elevation

Longitudinal Section



Ground Floor Plan

1. *Entrance portico*
2. *Doorman*
3. *Majlis*
4. *Kitchen*
5. *Bedroom*
6. *Entry*
7. *Living room*
8. *Main Entrance*
9. *Library*
10. *Gallery*
11. *Q'aa*
12. *Roshan*
13. *Salamlik*
14. *Dining room*
15. *Pantry*
16. *Lobby*
17. *Family room*
18. *Master bedroom*
19. *Atrium*
20. *Bath*
21. *Dressing*
22. *Pergola*
23. *Bedroom*
24. *Bridge/Gallery*
25. *Swimming pool*
26. *Kitchen*
27. *Pergola*
28. *Servants' quarters*



The philosophy of design for the Sulaiman Palace was based on the following ideas which I believe to be important for the creation of a contemporary Arab architecture.

The first idea was to reinforce the local building tradition by creating designs that reintegrate existing traditional building trades and crafts in Saudi Arabia.

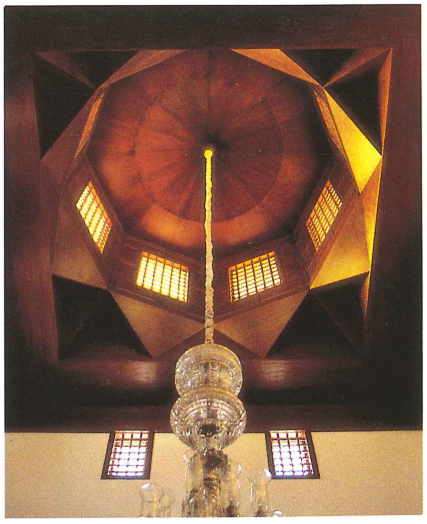
The idea of richness was based not on the assumption of using costly materials but of using ordinary materials and attaining richness through design and execution by craftsmen.

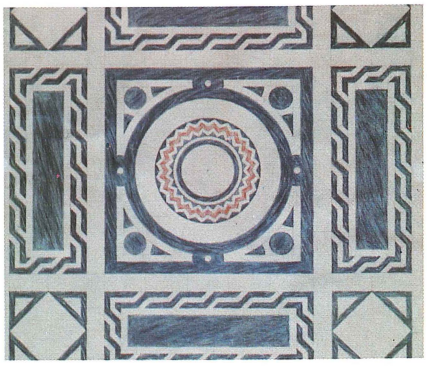
I wished to make explicit a philosophy of design for the traditional Arab house. An architecture that serves society is dynamic and is prone to change. The challenge of architecture is to maintain continuity within the change that occurs by referring to the constants and reinterpreting them within the new context. This interaction between what is constant and what is change, brought on by newly arising situations, results in new formal entities.

Many Arab houses and palaces in the older towns were built on several floors where the spaces were usually arranged vertically in three main divisions. The main floor was reserved for service rooms, storage rooms, stables and often rooms for receiving official guests. The second and third floors were used for family living which included the bedrooms. As streets were narrow and used for pedestrian circulation, the internal courtyards were an essential design element, providing a multifunctional private external outside space of the house.

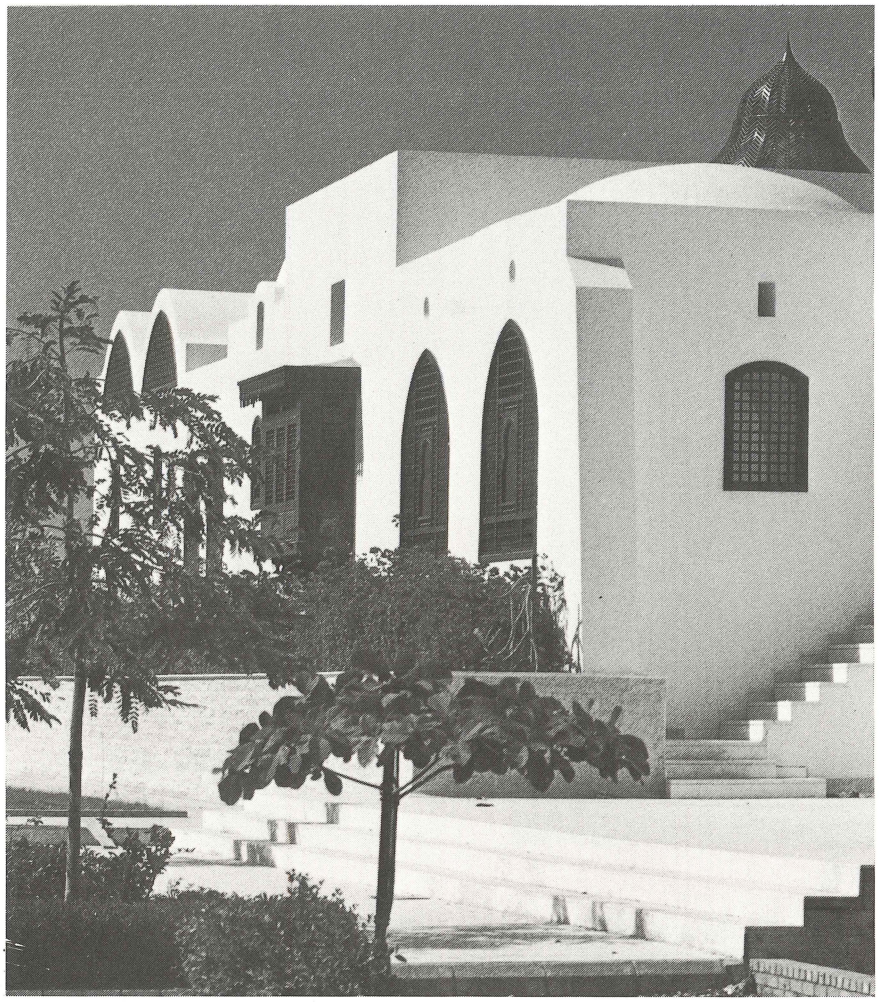
The Sulaiman Palace is located in new Jeddah, which is reclaimed desert area to the North of the older city and is mainly for housing. There are no narrow streets and plots are isolated by wide avenues to provide for modern traffic. The Palace differs therefore from older houses in that it is on an individual isolated plot.

Planning constraints have included: an imposed setback (thereby excluding the traditional street overhang) and the client's preference for horizontal rather than vertical organisation of spaces made me rethink the traditional house. Moreover, a traditional constraint, namely the problem of water shortage, has been resolved through desalination plants. Whereas in the old days you could count the number of trees in Jeddah on the tips of your fingers, it is now possible to surround the house with landscaped gardens.





Top: Window with mushrabiya.
Right, top: Detail, wooden cupola over Q'aa.
Right: Painting by El-Wakil of the design for a marble floor in the durġaa.



The Palace is clearly visually defined by its different functions: the public area, the semi-public and totally private sleeping quarters and service wing. The building extends on the South elevation to over 70 metres in length. This elongation was imposed by the site, an extended triangular shape, and the desire to obtain a maximum view of the Red Sea.

A standard square module of 180 cm or 6 feet was used throughout the design for dimensioning spaces. Planning on a module helped to bring order in what would be a confusing disposition of walls and a variety of dimensions that would be burdensome in executing an edifice as large as this one. Also, the use of a dominant axis was adopted to give order to the massing of the plan.

Vehicle circulation was confined to the east side of the plot to segregate it from the garden areas. A vaulted driveway separates the main house from the guest wing.

The guest wing was planned at a later stage during the construction of the Palace. It comprises two guest bedrooms with a guest living area and a large reception hall, called the *Majlis*. The *Majlis* was designed for the exclusive reception of male guests providing for reunions (tribesmen coming

Left: South view from the garden, the availability of water in the city gradually changes the outside spaces. Below: The Salamlik or men's lounge recalls the splendour of tradition.

from nearby villages to visit the Sheikh) which are still a traditional aspect of Saudi culture. This hall can be integrated to the guest living room to form a larger reception space. The guest house has a separate kitchenette and can be totally independent from the main house, and can be used as separate accommodation for the younger generation of the household.

As the space for this added wing was confined within the existing internal vehicle driveways, use was made of an old design technique: aligning the elevation walls with the streets and disposing of the rooms inside accordingly, filling in spaces where necessary. This solution was often used in the old irregular street patterns and especially in Mosques where the buildings were aligned with the street whilst the prayer space was directed towards Mecca, creating interesting solutions through the reconciliation of such irregularities.

The bent entrance was a typical design characteristic in the old Arab-Islamic house by which the outside was cut off from the inside. This type of approach into the house is in complete opposition to the classical western design solution of having a direct axial entrance.

The approach by car from the covered driveway leads into an entrance courtyard which is flanked on the right by an *Iwan* (arcaded loggia) leading to the main entrance hall of the Palace. The courtyard itself provides three different entrances: the main one to the house, the second directly to the *Salamlik* (Men's Lounge) and the third, which gives direct access to the client's office and library. This offers the flexibility of using the *Salamlik* and the owner's office together with the *Majlis* without disturbing the privacy of the house; and it also allows the former rooms to be used directly from within the house.

One of my basic design principles in architecture is always to try to have access to a building in a central position. In the Sulaiman Palace this rule was broken because of the need to keep vehicle access on one side of the building: entering from the narrow east side of the building caused several problems. One of these was to articulate and break the extended longitudinal procession gallery. This was done by subdividing the entrance hall vertically by the use of different ceiling heights and floor treatments. The entrance hall is covered by a dome followed by a series of three vaults giving visual direction towards the main reception area on one side and to a small landscaped patio on the other, from which light filters through coloured glass windows above. The ceiling height drops to mere door height to allow a bridge between the kitchen and dining room — thereby avoiding the crossing of circulation between the two, to cut through the main procession gallery. Access from the garage to the main entrance hall is possible through the small patio leading to an entrance under the bridge. Directly below that bridge, or connecting passage, ascending stairs lead to the central lobby separating the private areas of the house from the public areas.

The 'majlis' or reception hall with its traditional layout and differentiation of levels is still used in the same way as it was in the past.

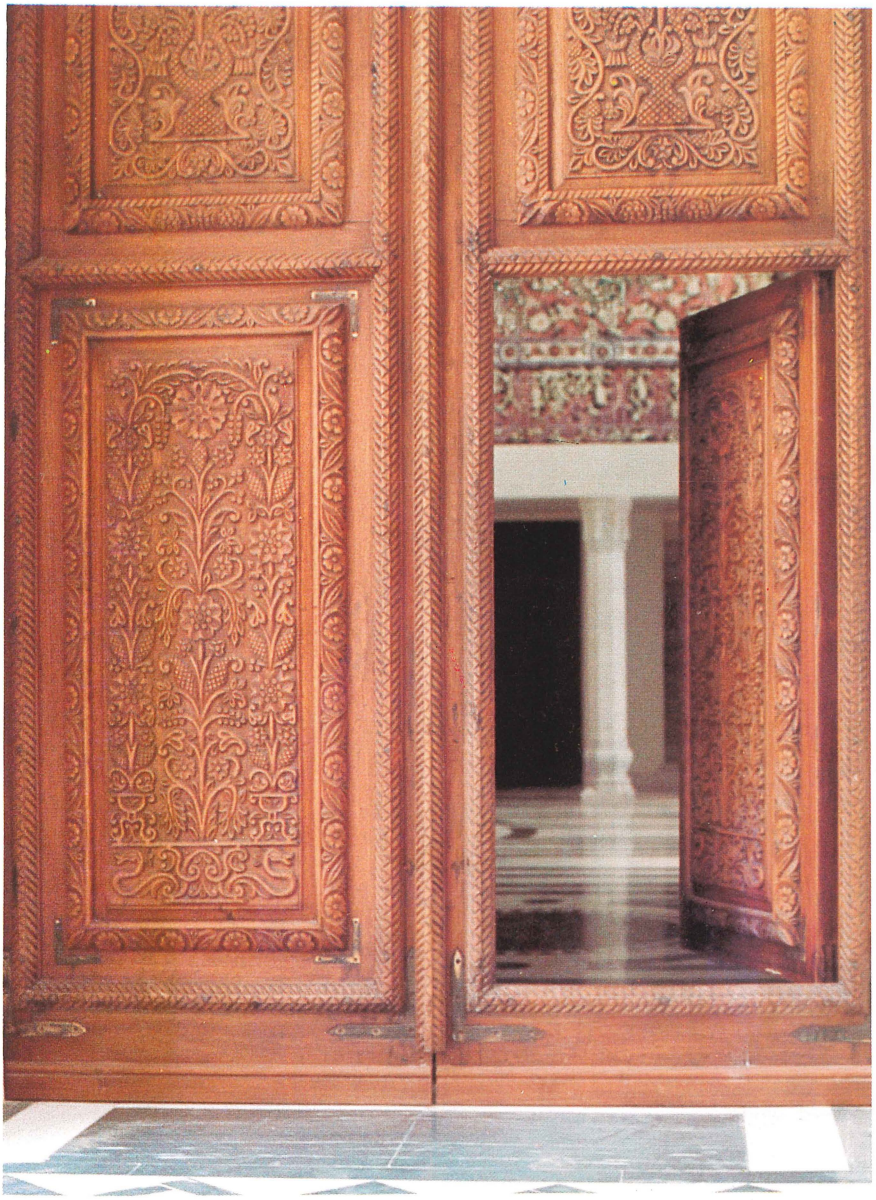
The kitchen is above the car parks and is central to all areas including the main dining lounge, the family room for informal dining, the main courtyard, and the swimming pool courtyard.

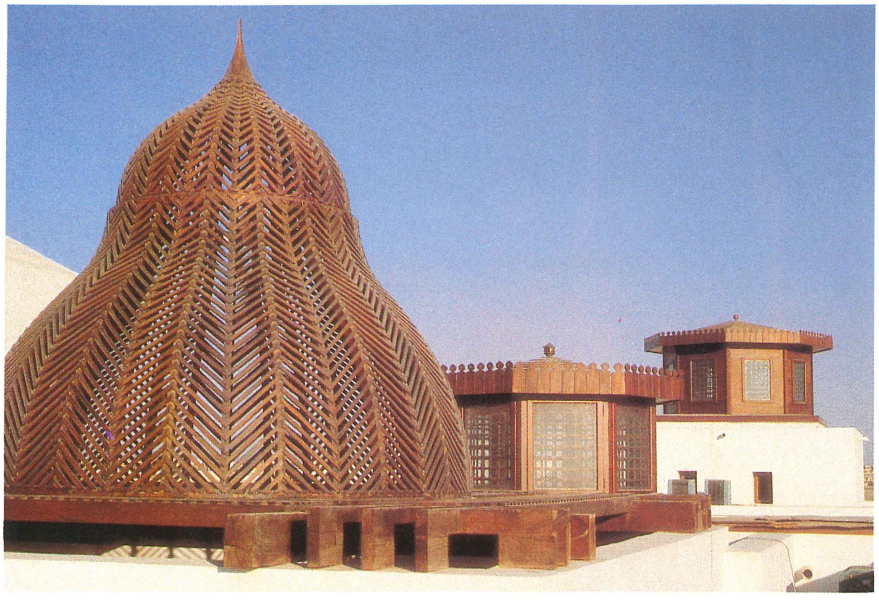
The bedrooms, in the private quarters, are reached through the family room which overlooks both courtyards and is basically the meeting area of the house.

There is an open atrium in the centre of the private areas which has one loggia overlooking the garden and another leading to a small pool that connects to the swimming pool by means of a waterway. The inhabitants can go directly from their bedrooms to the atrium and swim through to the swimming pool outside the house. The atrium is shaded by means of a trellised wood-domed structure which has two wind catchers in the direction of the prevailing winds providing thermal comfort by natural means of ventilation.

The traditional use of *Mashrabiyas* (wood screens) was applied to fenestration in order to provide the functional aspects of shading and at the same time incorporating aesthetic aspects of ornamental design and craftsmanship.

Wooden lanterns, or raised domes which allow in light, another traditional element, were used in the main reception hall and master bedroom to give proper diffusion of light. The lanterns also had the further function of providing natural ventilation. Fine craftsmen fashioned doors which were panelled with geometric patterns. Many of the interior elements such as doors, niches and ceramics were restored antiques. This was intentional; its purpose was to give the place a sense of time; a dimension which is lacking in newly-made objects. Ceramics were also designed to enhance certain walls. The marble floors introduced a further dimension to design. The pattern used for the flooring was inspired from the traditional Islamic houses in Egypt.





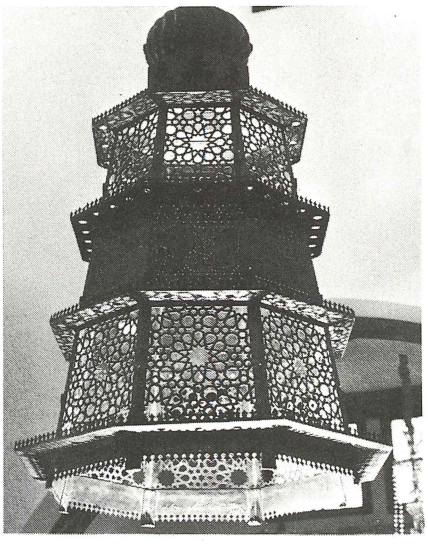
The client

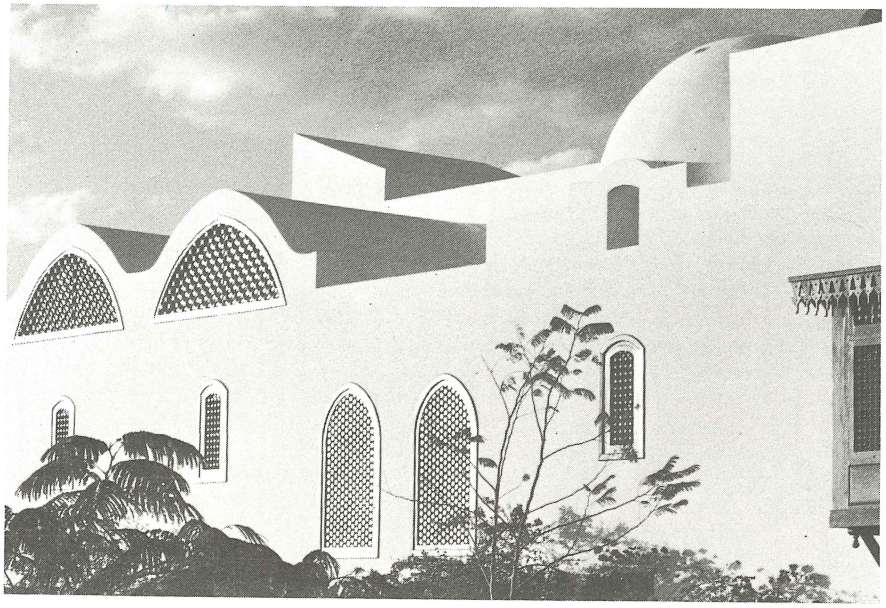
The client, Sheikh Ahmed Al Abdullah Al Sulaiman was born in the late 1930s, and married at the early age of 19, whilst studying Business Management at a Californian University in U.S.A.

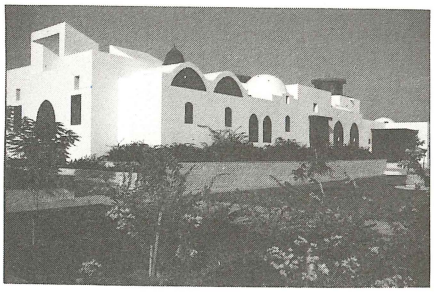
He was born of a generation that experienced the passing of the Bedouin culture and life, which in the last two decades was being increasingly influenced by the impact of modern technology. This overwhelming process of change disrupted many aspects of traditional social life and of the physical environment. The inborn 'Sense of Place' was fading beyond recognition. Ahmed Sulaiman, son of the late Prime Minister Sheikh Abdullah Al Sulaiman, who was one of the founders of Saudi Arabia, looked back with nostalgia at the environment of his childhood which was turning from reality to memory.

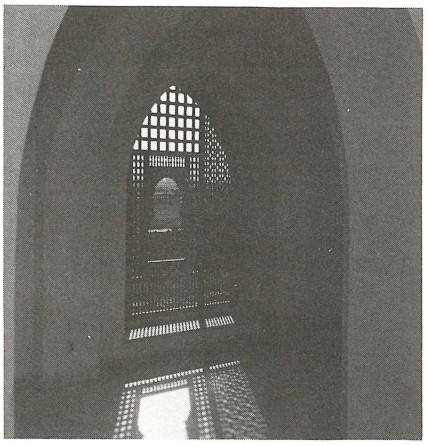
In 1972, he decided to build for himself, his wife and two children a house on a plot of land he had acquired in new Jeddah. He had obtained a design whilst in California several years earlier. He approached me with his Californian design and asked me to give it a 'touch of Arabesque'; something to make it look Moorish. I refused and so we began over again from scratch, with a different design philosophy.

Left: Door to the main entrance hall. The door typically from old Jeddah has been restored.
Bottom, left: Detail, wooden cupola.
Below: Replica of an old Islamic lamp from the Cairo Museum. The lamp is 2.5 metres high and hangs in the majlis.









Top: The south facade at sunset. Changing light and shadows accentuate different forms throughout the day.
Above: West and south facades, with garden in the foreground.
Right: Loggia between dining and master bedroom with "mushrabiya" onto garden.

on the Al Sulaiman Palace:
" ... architectural intrigue".

This attractive mansion is often admired and praised by most laymen. The architect of the mansion shows here his appreciation of, and sentimentality with, the traditional architecture of the Islamic world. For example, the extreme whiteness of the external wall surfaces reflects the traditional colour of all residential and public buildings of old Jeddah. Similarly, the extensive use of the wooden balconies and latticework *mashrabiyas* is borrowed directly from the traditional Jeddah Architecture. Those two features however can be found in areas throughout the Islamic world.

The architect did not confine himself to one or two schools of architecture. When viewing the building, one discovers that there is a disparate amalgamation of bits and pieces of architectural features from various Islamic Schools, Egyptian Mamlūk, Andalusian, Indian and Hijazi; yet interestingly arranged.

But because of the disparity of such architectonic features, one feels that the architect was consciously and forcibly infusing elements in order to achieve architectural expression and intrigue. The inevitable result is the subtle loss of control on architectural order in the appearance of the mansion, so that the informed critic cannot help but wonder whether he is observing a dignified residence or a playful palace in fairy-tale!

One thing has to be said however; the architect's imagination has helped him to design a building worthy of interest and study; a mansion about which many people talk and debate.

Dr. Abdulla Y. Bokhari
Jeddah, March 1981