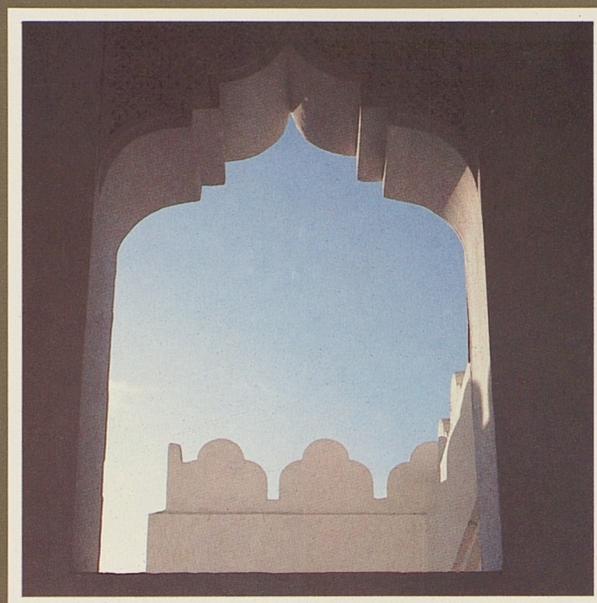


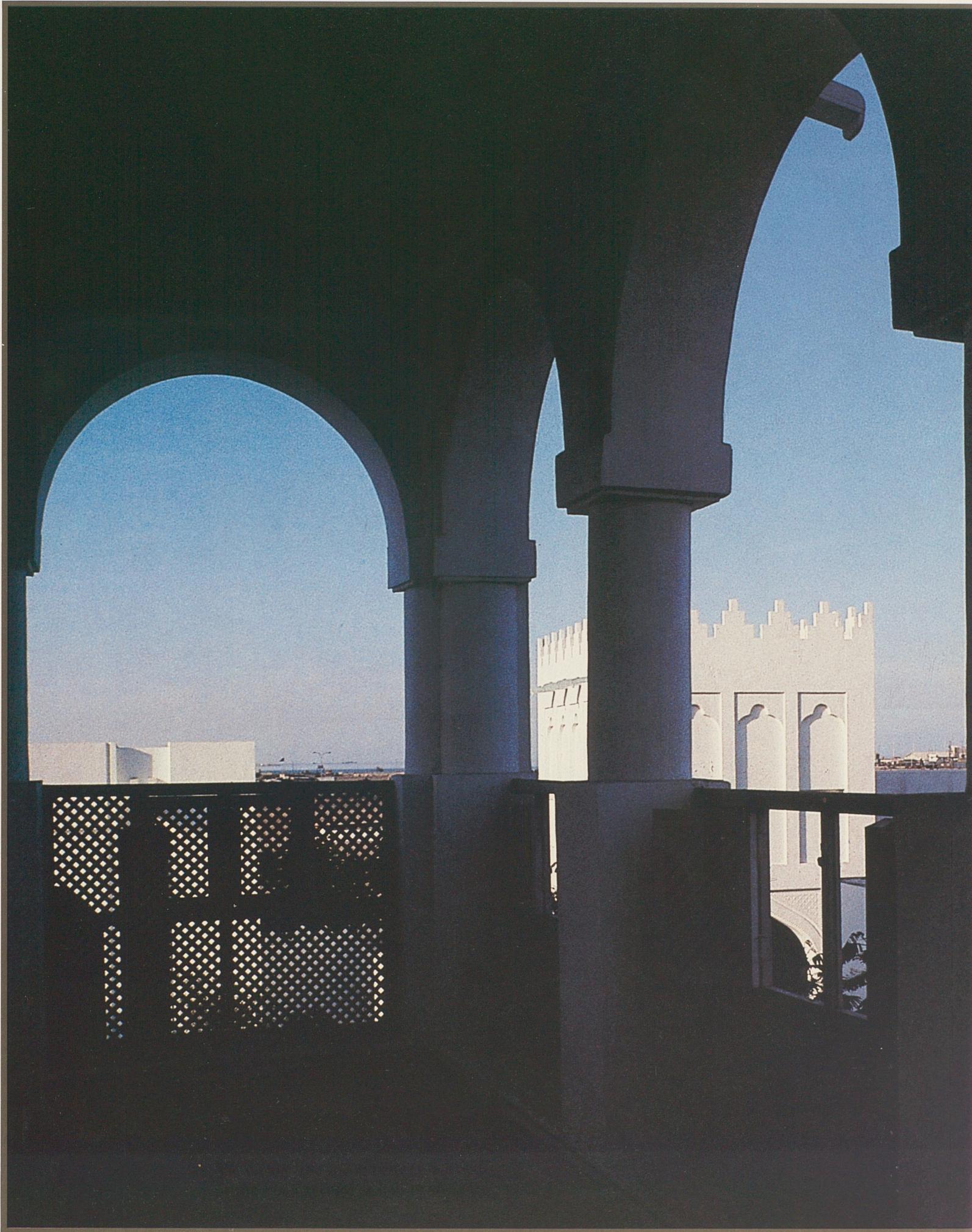
NATIONAL MUSEUM
DOHA, QATAR
PHASE I COMPLETED JUNE 1975







The museum grounds after four years of use. The nucleus of the reception hall is surrounded by exhibition pavilions.



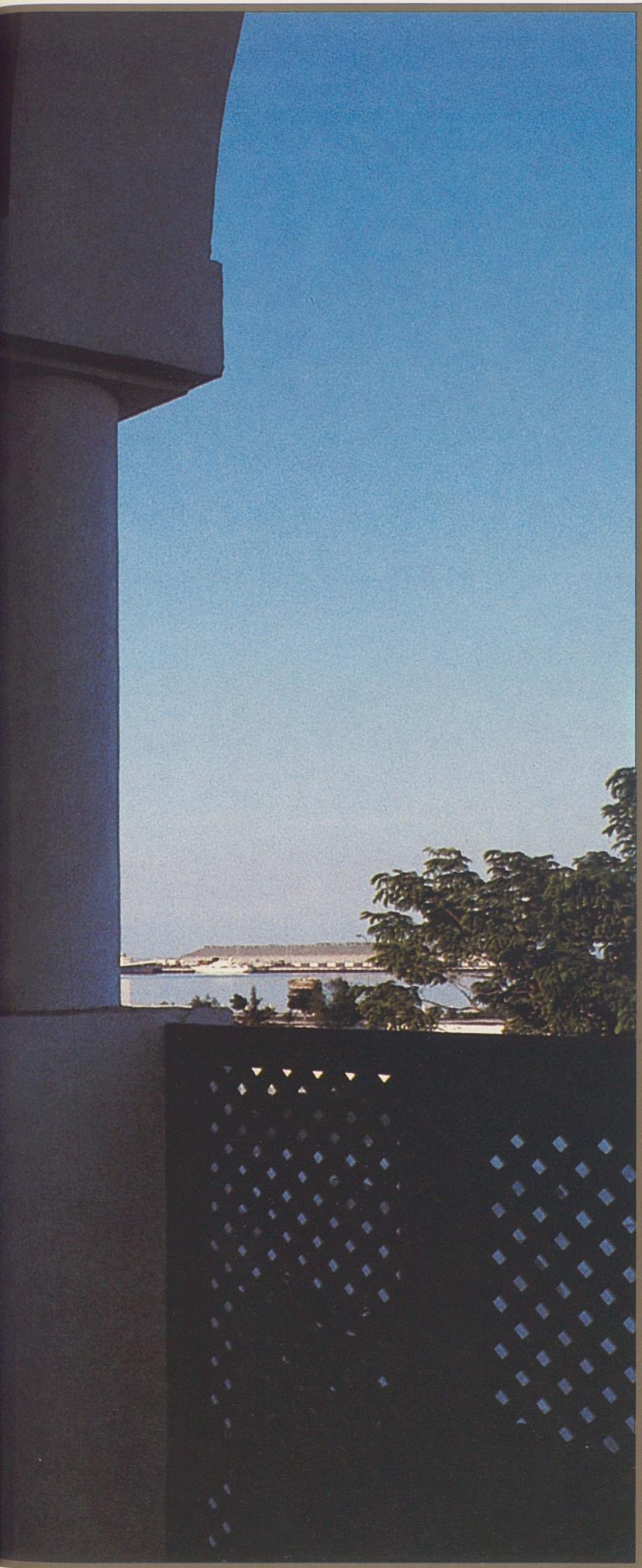
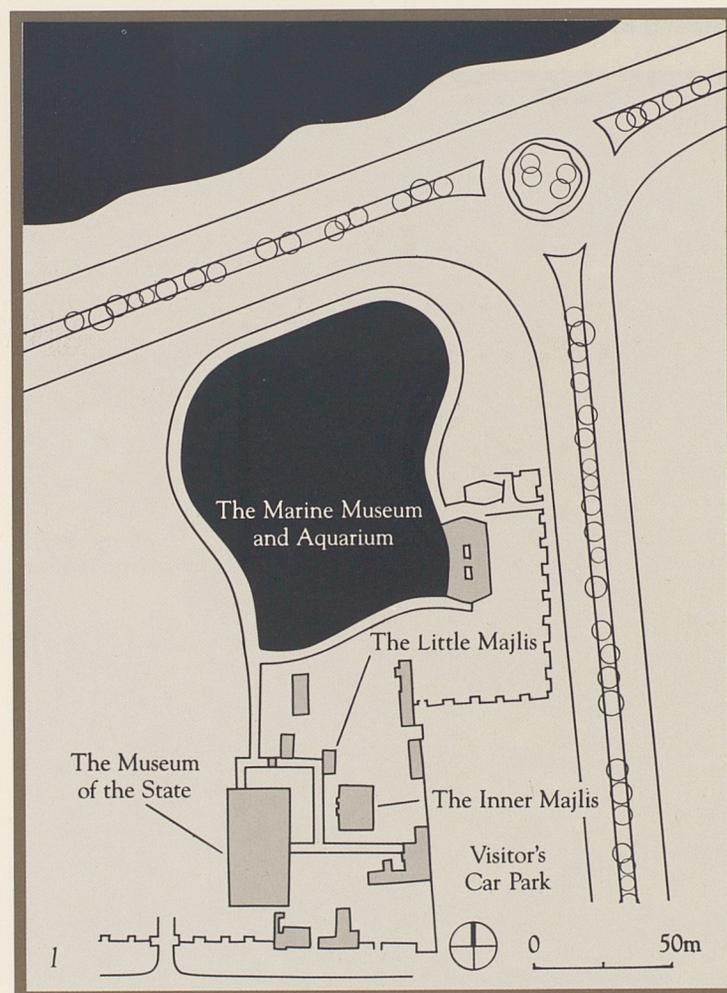
View from the second-storey portico of the main reception hall to the sea.

NATIONAL MUSEUM. Client: H.H. Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamed Al-Thani; H.E. Mr. Isa Ghanim Al-Kawari, Minister of Information; Department of Antiquities and Tourism; Planners/Designers: Michael Rice and Company; Design Construction Group, Anthony Irving; Restoration: Qatar Department of Public Works, Ahmad Assad Al-Ansari.¹

The advent of oil prosperity has greatly affected the society and culture of Qatar, as it has all the oil-producing states of North Africa and the Middle East. Among the results of prosperity has come the inevitable alteration in traditional life styles, values, and sense of heritage. In the face of rapid economic, social, and cultural change, the Qatar National Museum was founded to preserve for posterity essential physical artifacts, mental images, and historical facts and ideas. Qataris (and foreign visitors) of all ages can use the museum to learn about the past, gaining insights into their own history and identity. As one of the first such museums in the Gulf region it is particularly important as an example for other institutions and as a resource for scholars both in the region and around the world.

Preparations for the museum began soon after Sheikh Khalifa assumed power in February 1972. A team of specialists

1. The grounds of the museum, built to include the old Amiri Palace, lies on the seaboard and includes a series of old and new constructions: the rebuilt structure of the old palace, a new museum wing, marina, parking facilities, and a new aquarium.



was brought together in order to develop a comprehensive plan. Included among the specialists were the museum consultants, Michael Rice and Company; the Design Construction Group (architects for the grounds and the Museum of the State); the restoration supervisor, Ahmad Assad Al-Ansari, head of the Maintenance Section, Engineering Services Department of the Ministry of Public Works, State of Qatar; a committee of distinguished Qataris was also established by Sheikh Khalifa to advise on the collections of the museum. Many scholars assisted in the research needed to produce the body of information from which the exhibits were drawn. (This research in many instances unearthed significant new information on the ethnology, archaeology, ecology, and history of the country and region.) By December 1972 the initial museum planning and building design were completed. The exhibits were assembled and designed simultaneously with construction, from 1973 through June 1975. A second phase of work included the Marine Museum and Aquarium which was completed and opened by October 1977.

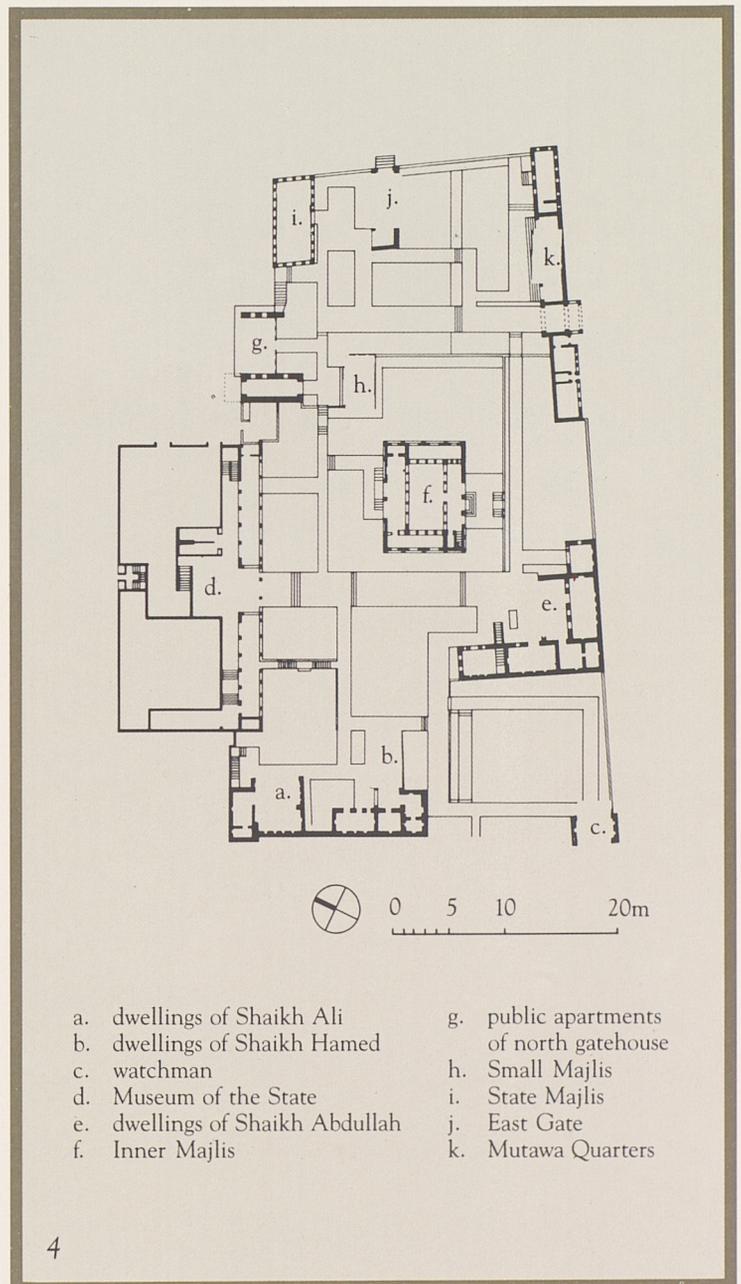
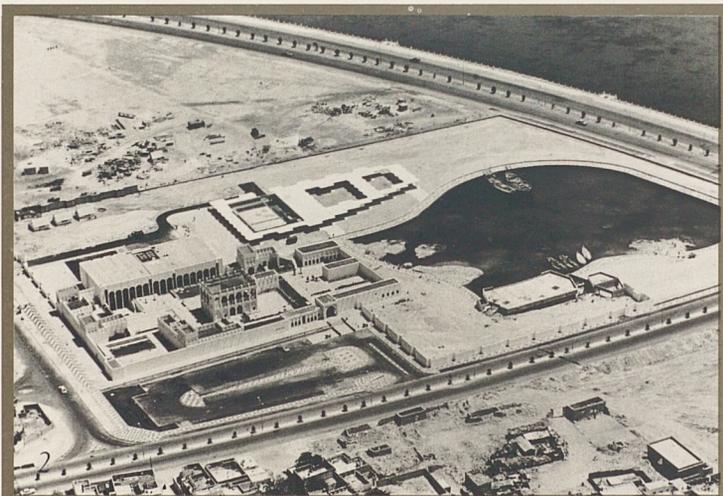
The Qatar National Museum is housed in a distinctive group of structures centred around the prominently situated Amiri Palace, former ruling seat of the Al-Thani family. Adding modern structures to the palace, including extensive landscaping, required sensitive architectural solutions to ensure compatibility with the old buildings.

The Old Amiri Palace—a History. During the period of Ottoman influence in the nineteenth century, Sheikh Abdullah bin Qasim Al-Thani, head of Doha's ruling family, felt the need to establish a seat of power removed from the Turkish garrison in the central part of Doha. He therefore ordered the

construction of a government complex on the seashore. There, at a discreet distance from the seat of foreign authority, Sheikh Abdullah carried out his duties as governor of Doha, overseer of waterfront activity, and liaison officer with the Turks. By the end of the nineteenth century construction of his own family residence at the complex began. After the forced withdrawal of the Turks in 1916 the increased responsibilities of the sheikh required that he enlarge the facilities. By 1923, however, the seat of government had moved back to the central part of Doha, and the family of the sheikh moved with it. Although the palace complex remained inhabited for some fifteen years it was later abandoned altogether, and by the 1970s was in ruinous condition.

The layout of the palace complex was the result of the

2. The museum grounds immediately after completion. The basin for the marina exhibit was developed to re-create the original coastline which has now been moved out to allow for a corniche road.
- 3, 4. The site of the Amiri Palace became a ruin after the seat of government left in 1923. The grounds proved adequate for a new use: a museum of the environment, history, and culture of Qatar.



series of building campaigns that culminated in the construction of the Inner Majlis in 1918.² The original complex was formed around five walled courtyards. The four western courtyards made up the domestic half of the complex, comprising a communal private entrance court and then the three residential courts of Sheikh Abdullah and his two sons. The eastern

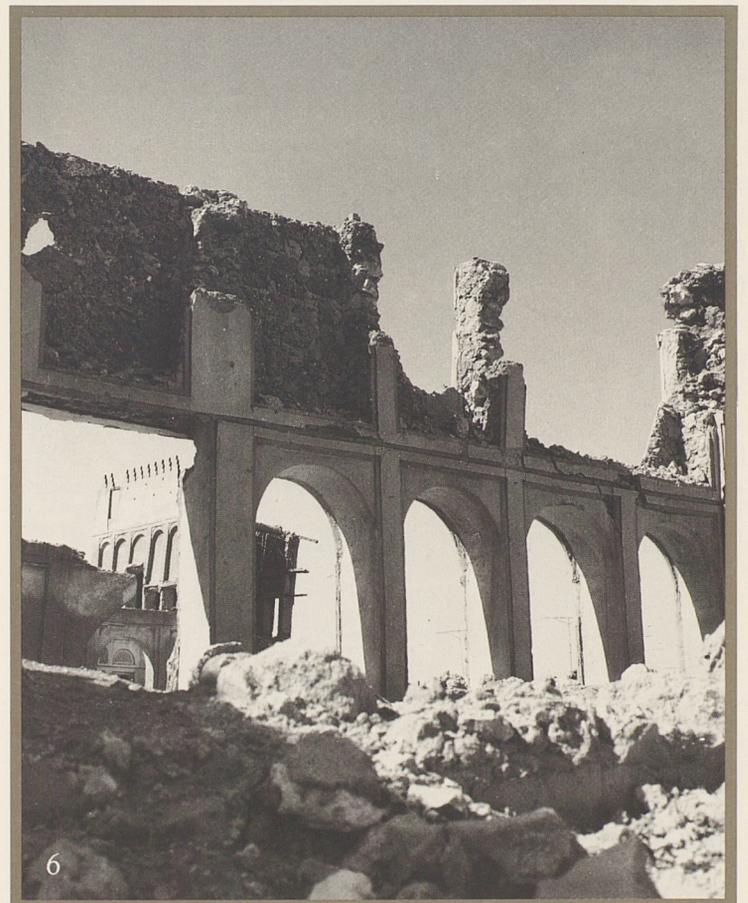
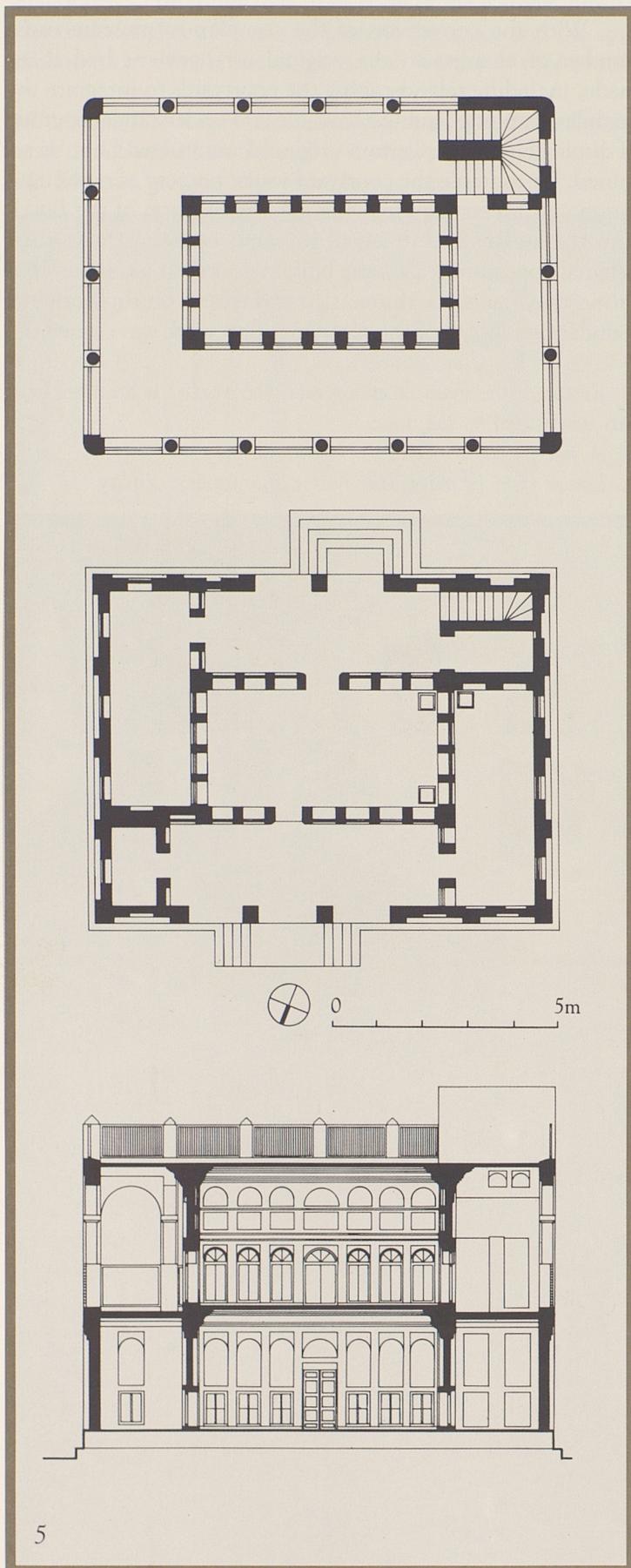
courtyard functioned as the reception area where public activities took place. To the north, in the area now occupied by the Museum of the State, were extensive kitchens and storage areas.

The three residential areas of the compound were similar in design to other surviving traditional houses in Qatar. The plan basic to all consisted of two rooms opening off an arcaded porch, with one of the rooms divided by a partition that stopped below the ceiling. When expanded, these houses often took an L-shaped form. The Inner Majlis was built for public functions and as the principal residence of the Sheikh. The plan of this structure was dominated by a central room on each floor, a strictly organised design considerably removed from the traditional planning of the other buildings of the complex. The Inner Majlis was, in fact, constructed by an outsider, the famous Bahraini builder Abdullah bin Ali al-Ma'il. He is said to have based the form of the building on a type then used for important buildings in Bahrain.³ Of special interest was the fully arcaded gallery around the central room on the upper level of the building.

At the corner of Sheikh Abdullah's enclosure was the guest reception room, also called the coffee hall or Little Majlis. It opened onto the eastern courtyard and was directly opposite the north entrance gate. The north gatehouse also had public reception areas, as did the east gatehouse. Situated between the two gatehouses, in the northeast corner of the courtyard, was the assembly room, a distinctive arcaded struc-

5. Upper and lower-storey plans and elevation of palace's main reception hall.

6. Restoration of the old Amiri Palace required extensive reconstruction.



ture which was the most formal of the public apartments. The eastern courtyard was completed by residential quarters for the *khadim* (custodian) of the now destroyed mosque which stood immediately to the south.

The construction methods and decoration of these original buildings form a fascinating field for study.⁴ While many arches were used in a decorative manner on the buildings, the actual structure was of post-and-lintel type. The posts were rubble-stone piers, which supported beams of mangrove poles supporting a bed of small rubble stones, all cemented together with the local gypsum plaster, known as *juss*. The stones were in large part coral rock taken from the seabed. The whole structure was neatly finished in *juss* and then the openings left were filled with ornamental plaster work, with solid panels forming storage recesses, or with casement windows. Generally these infill types were arranged with the ornamental screens at top, followed by the solid panels in the middle, and with the windows on the bottom level. In some instances the ornamental screens were fitted with slots at the bottom of the panel, to direct the wind inside, providing natural ventilation to the space. The infill panels often had arched heads giving a lively rhythm and grace to the building's appearance. As noted, the arches did not act structurally, but were used purely as a decorative device. The roofs of the buildings were built of wood poles, generally tamarisk or mangrove, covered by a lattice of palm fronds supporting matting. On top of this structure was laid the finish coat of mud and pebbles. The buildings were all finished with relatively simple decorative plaster-work, including the screens mentioned above, cornices, door surrounds, and minor surface embellishments. A final touch was added by the fine carved woodwork found

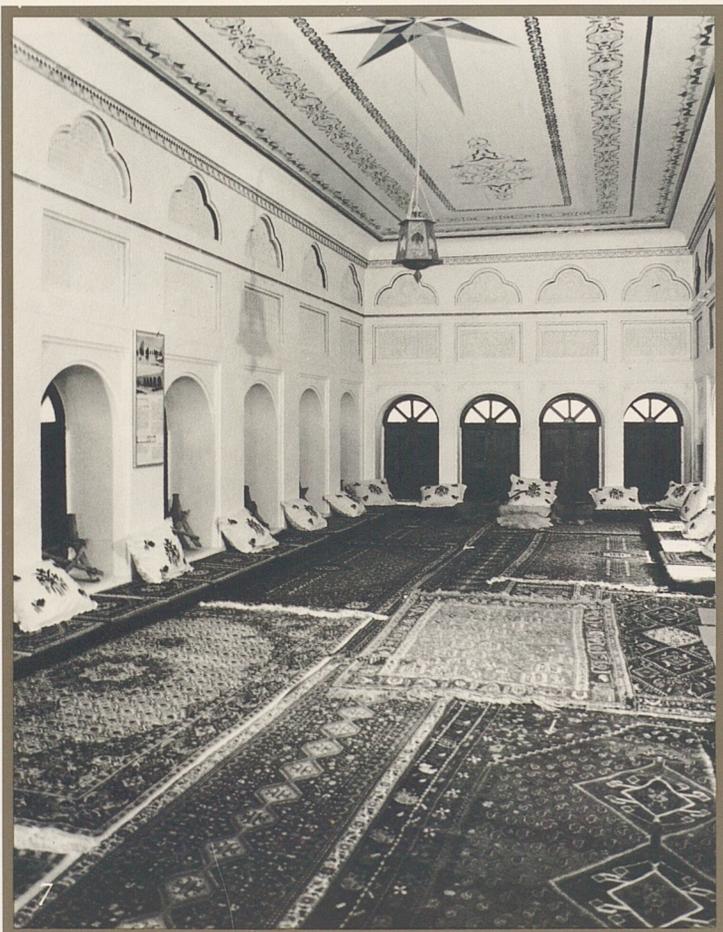
primarily in the doors and door frames. The buildings were white, a result of the gypsum plaster coating, and the only color used was found on some exposed woodwork, particularly the pole-and-lattice ceilings. The construction techniques and basic forms of the buildings were typical of the building style to be found along the entire east Arabian coast, from Kuwait south to Muscat.

With the conversion of the complex to museum use a number of changes in the original arrangement had to be made, including relandscaping the courtyards to integrate the complex into one readily accessible and understandable group of display buildings. Certain original features could not be retained, for example the courtyard walls, because of new circulation and access requirements. The restoration of the buildings themselves has diverged in some instances from their original appearance. Because buildings were in a ruinous condition they had to be dismantled and rebuilt on their original foundations. Some of the reconstruction work was carried out

7. Restored, the main reception hall, the *Majlis*, is arranged as it was when used by the amir.

8. A side pavilion is used for historic display.

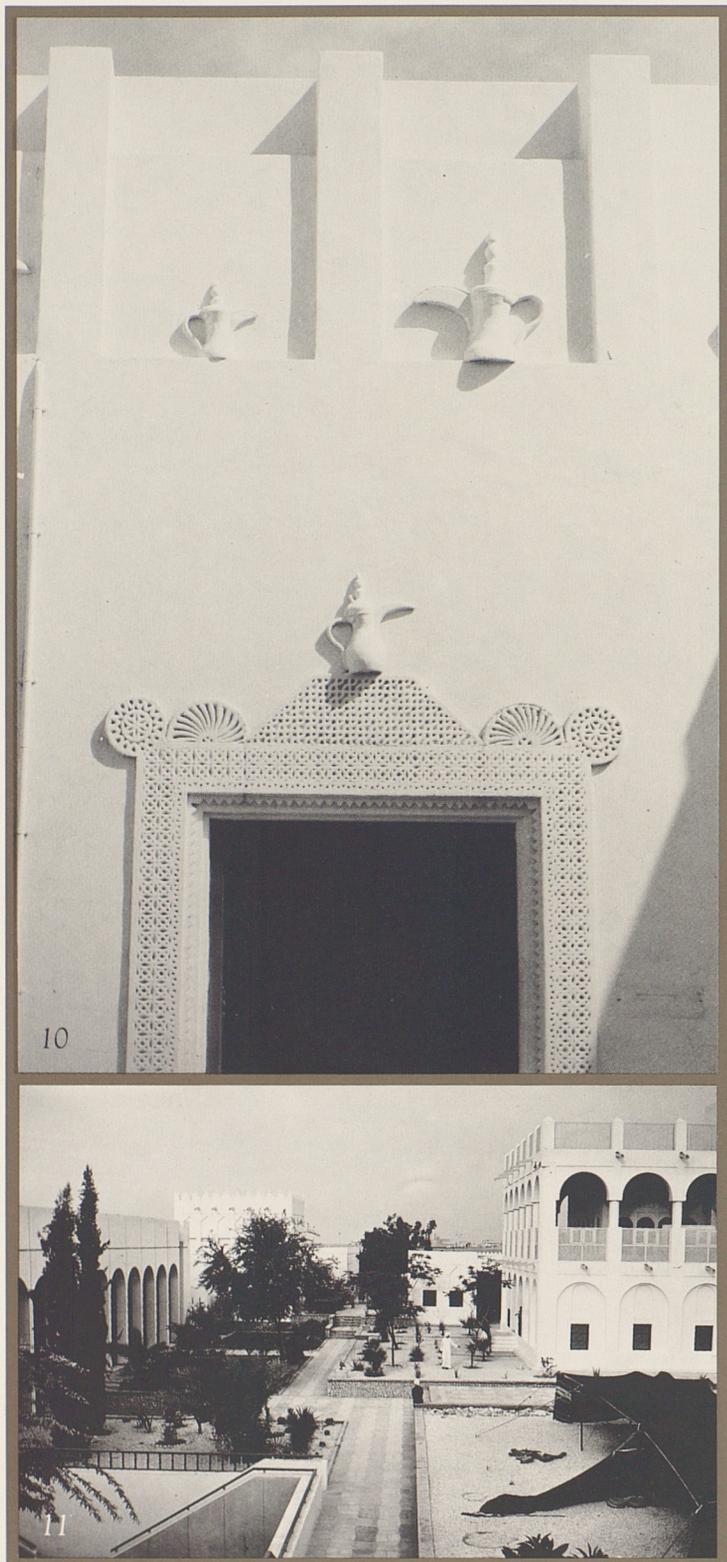
9. Lower floor of main hall, now a numismatic display.



using the traditional materials coral block and *juss*, but some modern materials, such as reinforced concrete, were also used. The use of concrete has necessitated a regular program of painting to keep all the structures uniformly white, a surface treatment previously achieved with a gypsum-plaster finish. Some decorative features were simplified while others were elaborated. The intent has been to preserve the ambience of the traditional setting and to present the space and the spirit embodied in the old buildings as ones worthy of preservation

10. Attempts to restore and include examples of traditional plaster work are illustrated on the wall of a small service pavilion.

11. Museum grounds after four years of use.



and of consideration for contemporary applications.

The museum collection and planned exhibits could not be accommodated in the buildings of the palace alone, and therefore two additional structures were constructed—the Museum of the State and the Marine Museum and Aquarium. The Museum of the State required a three-storey structure, thus presenting the problem of integrating a building of that scale into the context of the existing complex. This problem was met with a sensitive solution. The height of the building was reduced by sinking one floor below ground. This device allows the Inner Majlis, directly across from the new building, to dominate the complex as before, since it remains the tallest and most architecturally expressive structure. Reflecting traditional forms, the arcaded front facade of the Museum of the State harmonises with the arcades of the inner majlis. The other facades of the new structure are simply treated so as not to overpower their surroundings. The building is of reinforced concrete construction with exterior walls finished with a white gypsum-cement rendering.

A second major new building, the Marine Museum and Aquarium, is located on the edge of a new lagoon, outside the walls of the palace complex. The position of the lagoon repeats the former relationship of the palace to the seafront (the shoreline has recently been moved out to allow construction of a corniche road). The building itself is lower in height than the complex walls so as not to compete with the palace buildings. Although the structure is modern in style, the same white rendering on its exterior contributes to the continuity of the entire complex.

The Museum. The museum's objective is to inform visitors of the history and traditions of Qatari life. In addition to static displays, extensive use has been made of modern communications techniques, including films. The exhibits' subject matter begins with the earth—the physical reality of the Qatari peninsula. Geological, geographical, and ecological aspects are presented in the museum's entrance area, creating the background for the study of man's presence on the peninsula. The history and traditions of Qataris from the Stone Age to the recent past are then explored in depth, always keeping in mind the duality of desert and sea, and the great influence of Islam on the people. Archaeological, historical, and ethnographical materials are exhibited and interpreted, including major displays concerning all aspects of bedouin life. The other side of Qatari life, the sea, is well represented by the displays of the Marine Museum exhibiting traditional fishing and pearling craft, and by the collection of Gulf sailing craft moored in the lagoon. It is believed that the materials held by the Qatar National Museum represent the most complete extant collection of information and artifacts concerning life in eastern Arabia.⁵

The buildings of the old palace complex serve as ideal environments in which the recent history of Qatar, the traditions of town life, and the characteristics of traditional Qatari architecture are interpreted. These buildings have a special meaning within the museum complex. By their preservation they stand as artifacts of the past. But they also provide an appropriate milieu in which to display and explain the objects associated with traditional life.