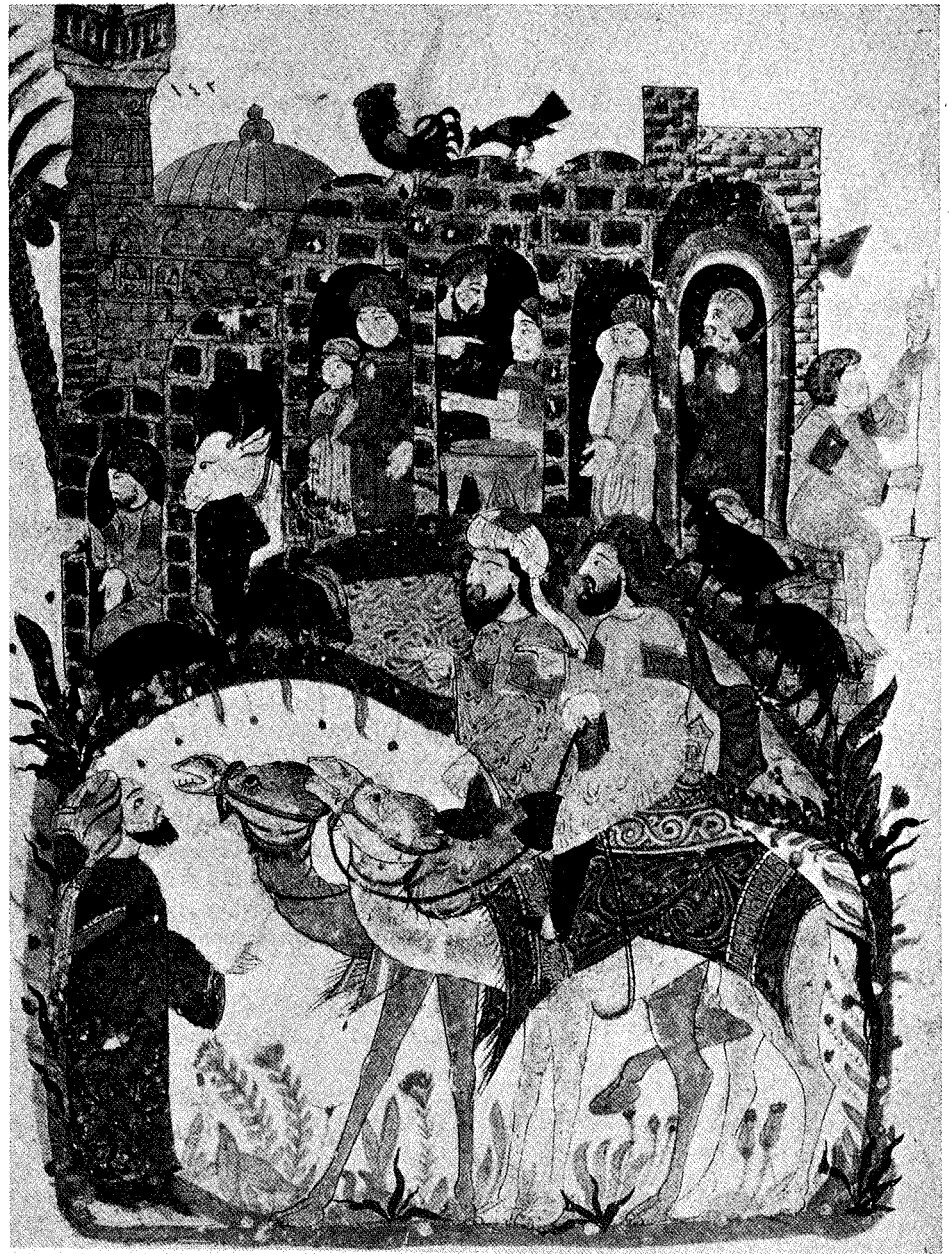


*Mohammad Makiya*

The following discussion is based on observations made during forty years of practice in the Arab environment, particularly in Iraq and the Gulf region. These observations have led me to conclude that it is essential to preserve the Arab-Islamic heritage, to obtain conditions favourable to the future development of the area, to achieve the highest possible standards in the forthcoming stage of its contemporaneity, and to create a built environment suitable to the way in which its civilisation will take shape.

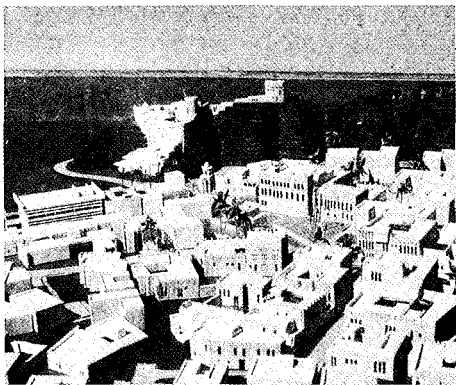
It is not intended to argue on an abstract plane the defence of the distinctive identity of a region. Rather, it is the issue of *tradition* versus *modernity* that will be discussed in terms of architectural practice, and the focus will be on the role of the *heritage*. Through the visual materials, it is also hoped to bring into sharper focus the practical aspects of architecture and planning in the Arab environment.

Before turning to the question of what heritage means and why it is essential for a healthy development of the future environment, two further questions must be posed: 1) What is *contemporaneity*? 2) How can it relate to the Arab-Islamic heritage without displacing it. *Contemporaneity* refers to all aspects of modern architectural practice and new approaches to planning in the international arena. The evolution of a new built environment, directed by today's design and planning approaches yet not devoid of an awareness of the tradition, can be summed up with the expression, *urbanism*. Urbanism is not only connected with contemporaneity, but is informed by the presence of the *heritage*. The latter term is hard to define, for it admits of abstract civilisational and spiritual values as well as functional considerations; it is shaped according to human criteria; and is an appurtenance of the entire civilisation. But functional needs of collectivities — be they towns, cities, regions or entire civilisations — change over time. By virtue of being informed both by intrinsic values and by functional needs, urbanism can now anticipate a new stage of contemporaneity, and will be able



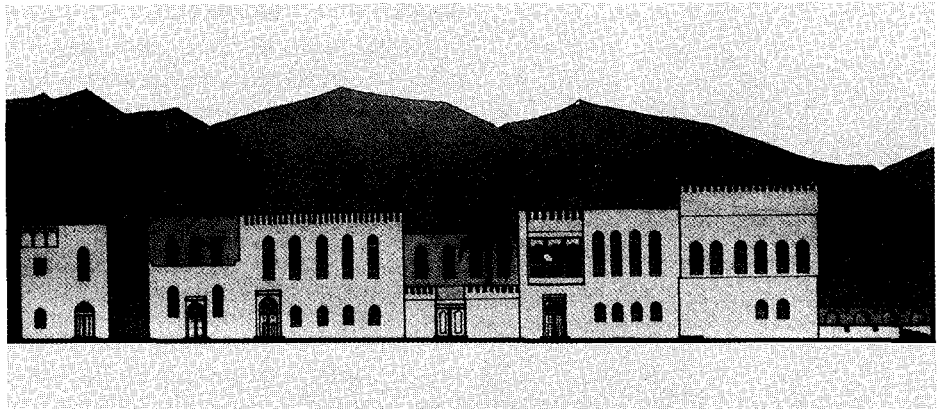
*Elements of the Islamic built environment — dome, minaret and arches — as depicted on a page of the Magamat al-Hariri by al-Wasiti.*

*Photo: M. Makiya.*



Muscat, Oman. Public space is manipulated as complex, organic and unified by a consistent urban tissue.

Photo: M. Makiya.



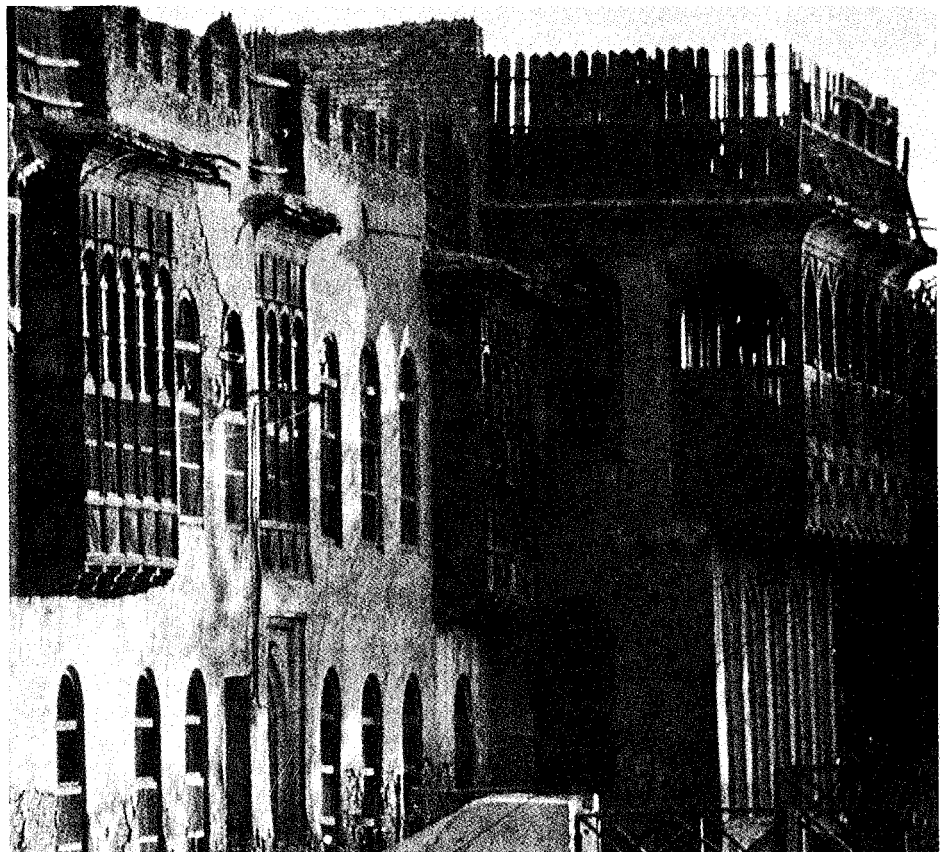
Infill house for Muscat, Oman. The house on the right was designed as an harmonious extension to the existing housing cluster.

Design and source: M. Makiya.

to create in the next stage an appropriate environment for the future form of the Arab-Islamic civilisation.

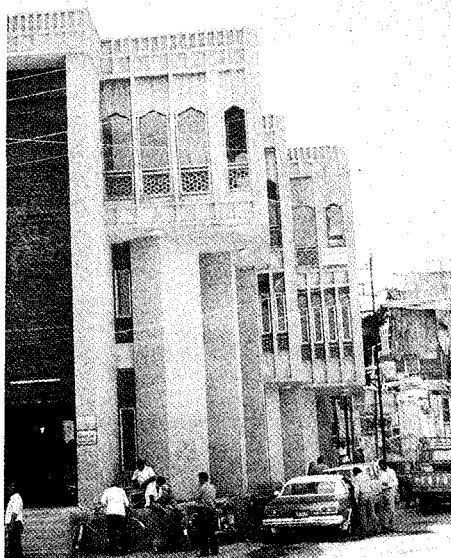
Modernism alone, without taking into account regional and cultural distinctions, cannot make for successful practice. The philosophy underlying modern architecture is distinctly Western and derived from Greek and Roman sources. While Western art and architecture, in all of their forms, have evolved in a direction quite different from Islamic art and architecture, an approach to architectural practice consisting only of introducing Western forms into the Islamic environment cannot be considered suitable or desirable.

This, however, is precisely what has happened, in far too many instances. Modernism has become a major influence on designers working in the Arab-Islamic environment; but, judging from the way in which it has been practised, it would appear that it has neither been properly taught or understood nor practised as it ought to have been. New design implementations reflect chiefly the technological advances that have made them possible; but the technological processes, conceived and developed in an alien environment, fail to make a proper impact on the civilisational and physical development in the



Window treatment of a traditional building in Basra.

Photo: M. Makiya.



*New Bank, Basra. Traditional architectural elements have been interpreted with contemporary technology.*

*Photo and design: M. Makiya.*



*Ameriyya Mosque in Reda'a, Yemen Arab Republic. The gateway is an important element in Islamic urban design.*

*Photo: C. Little/Aga Khan Awards.*

Arab-Islamic environment.

The same can be said about urban planning. Its unfortunate consequences stemmed from implementations that largely ignored the heritage. Most of those who were involved in the planning activities of the region were engineers and people with technical expertise. The narrow vision of the specialist took precedence over and excluded cultural, historical and regional considerations. Owing to the limitations of planning theories and to a lack of well-articulated principles of planning, specialized agencies and international bodies have not been able to bridge the gap between purely economic considerations on the one hand, and aesthetic and cultural considerations on the other. For example, one unfortunate consequence of modern urban planning in the region was that no balance was achieved between the requirements of mechanical transport and the people's right to open space.

In this respect *modernism* stands in opposition to *inheritedness*. Whereas the former is informed only by scientific and technological concerns, the latter includes both the aesthetic and functional, two inseparable attributes of urbanism in Islamic thought.

But contemporaneity as a concept is not devoid of positive aspects. Despite the fact that its origins lie in Western thought and practice, it has been gradually extended to incorporate theories and approaches from other environments. Although the Arab-Islamic environment has so far been of marginal influence on modernism or contemporaneity, the latter, in the extended and receptive form, can be of use to the practitioners in the Islamic world by fostering a feeling for architectural and technological elaborateness, for a more refined visual appearance, for functional use of new materials, and for greater proficiency in practice. With its tenets thus modified, contemporaneity ceased to be divorced from the valuable elements of heritage; it evolved and came to its own through practice and experimentation.

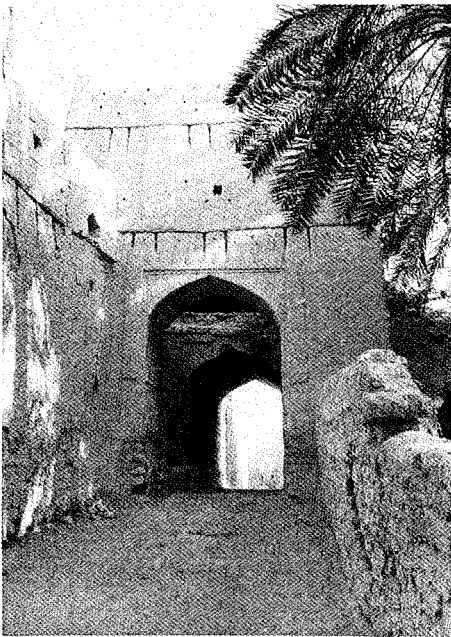
Still, by the time it had grown capable of offering fresh formal attractiveness, the costs had been staggering and results disappointing. In retrospect, it could be said that heretofore practitioners have relied solely on experiments to produce shapes and designs rather than taking into consideration the relationship between the built environment and civilisation.

Now that the high costs of experimentation have been paid for, contemporaneity is on the threshold of a new stage of historical development. It has been confirmed that the heritage has been preserved within the new set of values introduced by contemporaneity in the environment as a whole, but not where the distinctive character of individual structures is concerned. Experiments carried out in the Arab environment by international consultants have helped the latter to gain a broader vision and abandon their narrow focus.

One of the major tasks in the new stage will be to stress the importance of stylistic refinement in architecture. A few experiments already underway have begun offering specific elements of stylistic refinement. This is a result of the fact that not only the international consultants have been influenced by the heritage of the areas in which they practised, but they themselves have been able to influence the emerging set of values in the region. Heritage and contemporaneity, therefore, no longer remain as opposites.

To reinforce the point made earlier, *heritage* as an entity and a concept is both normative and functional in respect of human life. It is, in a sense, a "remoteness in time"; but, as "the fourth dimension," as it has often been called, it influences artistic production both functionally and aesthetically. This, in fact, constitutes a parallel to the Islamic view of human existence. Islamic thought, after all, is not unique among doctrines merely because it considers the spiritual and the material aspects of existence as being inseparable.

Architectural criteria are ultimately derived from practice. But the architect needs to be aware of the civilisation and



City gateway in an Omani town.

Photo: M. Makiya.

the heritage of the area in which he practises in order to be able to understand what lies behind externalities and formal appearances. He also should not neglect human needs, for he has to make his creative endeavour meaningful in the face of changing circumstances.

Rationalism alone cannot fulfill all the requirements of aesthetics; and aesthetics, in turn, are not merely an "additional element," or a "third dimension," but are closely connected with function. It is the heritage that shows us best the interconnections between the form and the functions. In this respect, heritage is not restricted to its historical features or to movements whether they have survived or not; but it is a source in which to discover the harmony of aesthetic and functional values.

The setting in which an architect practises is a human society that combines the past, present and the future. It is, moreover, a specific geographical location whose

characteristics are determined by nature. The geographical setting also helps shape the values of a civilisation, which thus acquires distinctive features that become a part of the heritage.

If geographical features are disregarded, and modernism has been losing sight of specific local features, then that is tantamount to denying the heritage and civilisation. The result has been designs that are totally out of place yet emerge as much-discussed and influential models because they are published by the international architectural press. For the sake of profitability, architects are forced to reduce time and effort spent in practice. The application of set models leaves little room for the expression of individual talent, partly because of exclusive emphasis placed on details at the expense of the structure as a whole. Yet only with practice can one experience the difficulty of implementing a set of models. The course of architecture cannot be determined by theoretical speculation or by perpetuating models through critical discussion of the models published. Art criticism usually begins with conclusions drawn from earlier ideas and criteria and proceeds to coin expressions and generate terminology that are transmitted to newcomers not without creating a certain amount of confusion.

Before turning to specific problems requiring planning and design solutions, two points should be stressed:

- 1) Authenticity and renewal can accommodate a form of preservation capable of coping with change within the limits imposed by human needs.
- 2) Contemporaneity and studies related to it should be taken as an important experimental phase in the evolution of a new stage in urbanism and its effects on people.



A modern version of the gateway. Central University library in Abu-Dhabi.

Source: M. Makiya.