Voices and Images of Tradition and Modernity

Kamil Khan Mumtaz

While we deliberate on questions of tradition and modernity, we should recognise that implicit in our concern is a certain value system particular to the western educated elite. In the field of architecture, this implies the views and values of the "professional" architect. This should be a grave matter for those of us who are concerned with the quality of architecture in the Muslim world, because much, if not the great majority, of our buildings are not "designed" by "professional" or "legitimate" architects. Yet most of our evaluative processes are "programmed" to reflect only the values and views of the "legitimate" architect. Of course we look at buildings designed by "non-professionals", but we do so with the bias of the educated professional elite.

To better evaluate contemporary architecture in the developing countries we must look for ways in which we can become responsive to the views and criteria of other people who are actively engaged in shaping our environments — traditional craftsmen, bureaucrats, politicians, soldiers, contractors, and the average architect. To hear their views, we need to meet them on their own territory.

It is with this in mind that I have put together the following presentation. The idea was to look at a project with the persons responsible for key design decisions and to record on tape their explanations and reactions to the finished product. Also, to use the same technique to record the reactions of the users and the other participants (such as contractors or craftsmen) in the process or transformation. The questions asked were simple, designed to solicit views indicating perceptions of, and values attached to tradition, modernity and development. My questions to Arabic speaking respondents and their answers to me were translated through interpreters.

Two rural areas were the new settlement of Sharara, outside Amran, near which a large cement factory has recently been established; and Ashmur, where a new road is making an impact on traditional life. In both settlements we were told that the most obvious changes taking place in rural architecture were the result of the desire of nuclear families for separate homes and their new non-agricultural sources of income. The urban projects in Sana'a included the building of the Ministry of Public Works, the Revolution Hospital, the prototypical mosques of the Ministry of Municipalities, the Agricultural Credit Bank, and three projects constructed by the contractors Yicon Limited. Individuals involved with the urban projects cited new sources of income and the Revolution as major factors determining recent development. There was a consensus that Yemeni traditions in architecture should be maintained, though integrated with new techniques and materials.

The persons interviewed included farmers, workers, technicians, architects, engineers, a contractor, a master mason and a *qadi*.

Mohammad Vaqui, soldier, farmer and well digger.

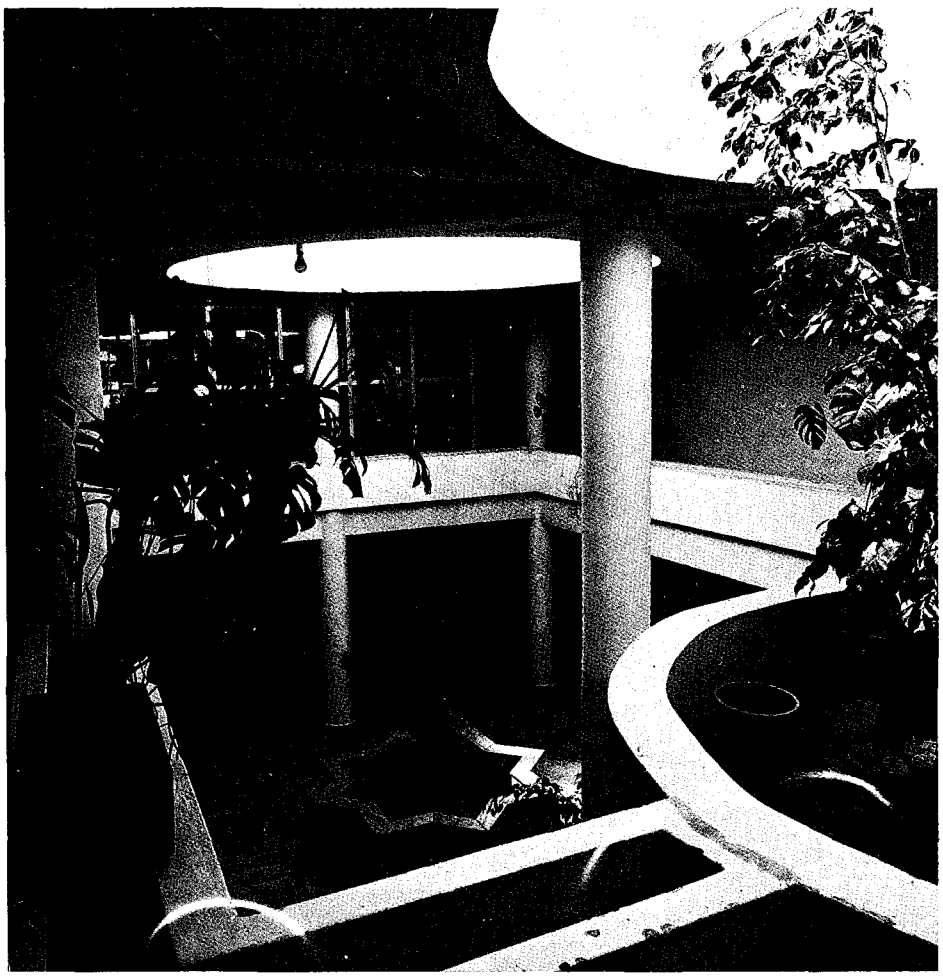
Photo: K.K. Mumtaz.

The Interviews

In Sharara, a new rural settlement outside Amran. This interview is with Mohammad Nagui, a soldier-farmer who is drilling a well. We asked him about the changing pattern of rural settlement. Our interpreter is Zohra, an Algerian engineer working on rural drinking water projects in the area.

This is a ten-year-old settlement. Most of these people come from Amran into their land. It's their land. I mean for centuries it's been their land.

They used to live inside the town, and now they have the tendency to move out all the time and live next to their fields and next to the wells. But one of the main reasons now is to leave the houses where five or six families are living at once. You know, sort of multi-type families. These are nuclear families with a house and wife and kids.



Interior of Agriculture Development Bank.

Photo: K.K. Mumtaz.

It's not an increase in the family size, it's just a desire to live another way — breaking into nuclear families.

The only thing we have changed is the fact that the people are not that much dependent on agriculture as they used to be. Before now the only source of food was local agriculture. So the poor man could come and work with somebody on his land and he would get food. If there were wealthy people, they would have granaries. But if it was a bad drought period they would distribute it to the people, and when agriculture came back, better, they would balance it. That was the basic value, but now it is not practised this way.

For example, this man owns a lorry. I guess he has been working in Saudi Arabia, and he bought a lorry there; now he is transporting petrol between Saudi and here. This other man works with pumps actually, installing pumps, but he believes in this village. And I myself am a soldier and officer. And these people are farmers. But one is the supervisor, foreman, in the chicken factory.

In the mountain area of al-Ashmur. The following remarks were recorded in the house of Mohammad Saleh Nagui. A number of villagers are gathered for a qat session. We ask about the ways in which the area has changed.

The road is the main thing! It has brought projects — schools, health centres, and eventually water projects.

The major difference is that Yemen used to be self-sufficient in agriculture, nothing was imported. Now people have left agriculture and they are going to work outside. When the agriculture is not sufficient, they have to buy food from the suq.

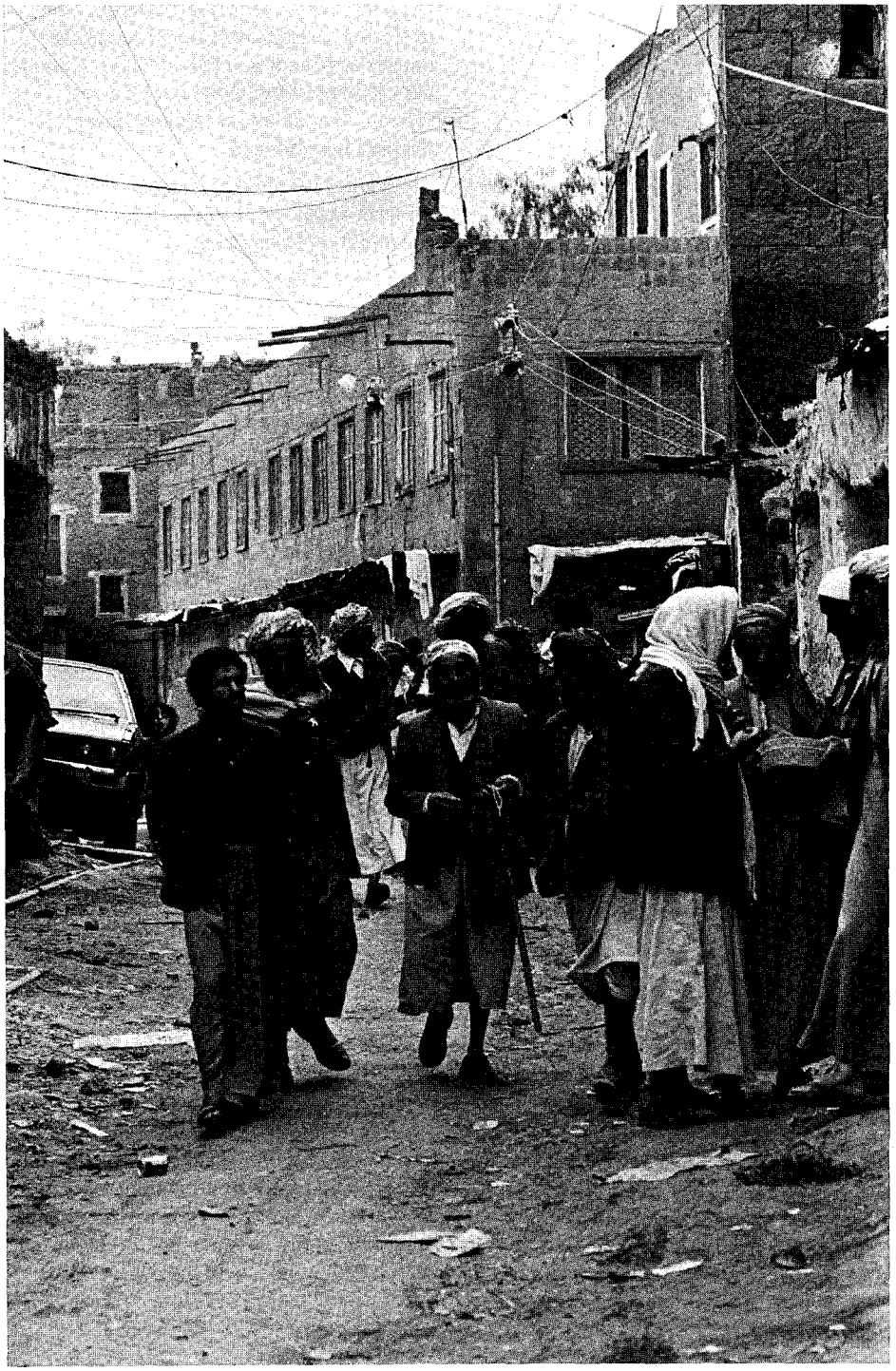
Life now is better. Especially the old man says that before they used to starve at times. But now everybody has got enouugh food.

One thing is that we can buy more. People have cars... The other man says that before they were also packed all in one house. And now they have sufficient money to be able to build their own houses and live as nuclear families.

The main development and improvement in construction is from the income from outside the village. People going to work — even for the government as soldiers, or going to work in the Gulf countries — they can afford to build houses that the people who live only from agriculture cannot afford. They have still to stick to the old traditional ways. The owner of the house decides where he wants to have his kitchen, where he wants to have his room, and the size and things like that. And the mason, he just has to execute.

Ministry of Public Works Building, Sana'a. A meeting has been arranged with Usta al-Haj Ali Muja'd, an old master mason; Qadi Abdul Malik Sa'ad Jisr; and an intellectual whose name was not recorded. We asked about the factors responsible for recent developments in Sana'a and their views on the nature of future developments in the city. The official in whose room we are meeting acts as interpreter.

There are different factors that called for expansion outside the previous city walls. Among these factors are the migration of



The suq, *Sana'a.*

Photo: C. Little/Aga Khan Awards.

people from different parts of the country; the increase of the families and their need for space; and the income that people started to acquire more than they used to have in the past. This has encouraged the idea of going outside the city walls.

The Revolution! The Revolution has affected all phases of our lives, giving opportunities to everybody. There is no more tyranny. The Revolution started to encourage local investment, trade started to flourish with direct contacts with the outside, and education started to push through. There were no schools outside the main town, so villagers started to look to the city as the source of education, People started to go from the old town to the outskirts, to the suburban area of Sana'a. So the Revolution has played the major role in the extension of the city.

Because of the limited income of the outsider, if he comes he may find it a bit difficult to live in town: no jobs available either with the government or with the private sector. So he is much better off staying where he is rather than coming here.

With the limited income and the availability of cash in the past, people used to extend very little. Where they are, they may add one room here, one additional bathroom because a son is getting married.

If there is any future urban extension to be made, we prefer this extension be made taking into consideration the Yemeni architecture.

However, the whole planning, the plans of the city, will have to be changed. It shouldn't be the same as it is. You have to have new streets. I mean different streets from what we used to have in the past, because in the past these streets were made for walking, for mules, for camels, for donkeys — not for cars. Now the new city needs wide streets because now we have about 100,000 cars inside the city. We need more streets, wide streets.

The new plans should not follow the old type of design, but the Yemeni styles of architecture will have to remain. We do not want to lose that. We may use some mate-

rials, we may introduce some materials — for example, concrete ceiling, beams and so on, and we may tie up stones together with concrete; but we can't afford to lose the basic Yemeni styles. We are proud of the Yemeni styles and we would like to keep them.

Ministry of Public Works, Sana'a. We interview Abdullah al-Shardfi, head of the building department. We ask about the changes that have taken place in Sana'a, and about the Ministry of Public Works Building itself where we are sitting. The interpreter is a young officer of the Department.

Extension of buildings — this is the first. Roads, major roads, paved and asphalt roads; also the extension of services to local people — social services, including transportation, health centres, educational services, and so on.

For example, there was only one hospital, and now there are more than five hospitals. And also the schools — now we have more than one hundred schools, I think, in Sana'a, as well as exhibitions and markets.

The most important thing that happened during the last five years: the government buildings. Before that, most of the government officials had no offices to work with, and in this period the government created many buildings for the officials. Also for the tourist, many hotels were created during this period, for example, the Sheraton Hotel and the Taj Sheba Hotel. These are the main criteria of development.

The worst thing was the absence of planning, for roads and for buildings. The greatest difficulty that all planners face here is that there is no cooperation between the citizens and the planning team. Sometimes the people cannot accept planning. This is because of the ignorance and the rapid development of the capital. For example, the Ministry of Municipalities determined some areas for planning, and the areas are to be for commercial centres, recreational area centres or shopping centres. But the people of that area began to make new things, not in accordance with the plan.

A new construction in Sana'a using precast floor height panels.

Photo: K.K. Mumtaz.

Children in Sana'a.

Photo: C. Little/Aga Khan Awards.

In the past there was no coordination between the citizens and the municipality. For that reason, the people did not agree with the plans of the municipality. But now, I think, the municipality made some regulations and some plans, and the people coordinate or are obliged to follow these regulations. Sometimes there was no coordination because there were too many organisations. Sometimes the municipality did not coordinate with the YGEC Corporation for electricity and for communications. For that reason, somebody made roads, and after that the others come to make telephone cables, or something like this. Now, I think this is prohibited, and all the organisations work together to prevent this from happening after the roads have been paved or asphalted.

All the plans for the Ministry of Public Works Building were prepared by our department, by Mr. Abdullah and other engineers who worked together. In that period there were only three engineers. When we designed this building we designed it as a modern building, so we made it a framed structure. From the aesthetic point of view, we wanted the facade to be made of masonry in the local traditional way of building. For that reason all the outer walls are only just covering, not bearing walls. They look like bearing walls, but the main building is a frame structure — column, beams, slabs structure. And the internal partitions are from the local brick, mud burnt brick. In this way we combined the modern type of buildings and the traditional way of buildings.

The elevations were prepared by engineers, and, at the same time, they made use of the local masons who have experience in the traditional way of building. So it is a mixture between the engineers' design for the elevations and also the ingenuity of the masons to create this.

Look at the modern buildings here in Sana'a. For example, the Yemen Airways building needs maintenance, and at the same time it costs more than these traditional ways. But these traditional buildings do not need maintenance. Sometimes the rain will wash them and make them look better.

The traditional buildings are more durable than the modern types. For example, the Friday Mosque here in Sana'a is nine hundred years old, and most of the traditional buildings here in Sana'a are more than two hundred years old. They are still alive up to now and they are strong. But the durability of any modern building here will not exceed thirty years.

These traditional types of buildings are designed here in our department. This is one reason. And the other reason, all the local people like these type of buildings, it's accepted. When they see a new building they will not accept it.

Ministry of Public Works. The Design Office. Mr. Hatim, the young architect explains why an Indian architect's design for a monument was not accepted.

I think the Yemeni architect can appreciate what is the history behind it, what is the idea of it. Also, he can clarify the idea more than any foreign architect.

The Revolution Hospital. We are looking at the new residential block, designed by a German architect. We talk to some steel fabrication workers about the new architecture. Jon Björnssen interprets.

This is the Revolution Hospital. We don't really want any of this. This isn't going to work. We have better materials; we have the stone. These are factory-made bricks, burnt. I don't trust the material. Within thirty years the material will give. We know local brick, whereas this one, it's new. We don't know what it's worth.

We ask what foreign architects like us should do.

Give us what you like to do in your own home. (But another person has a different opinion he wants Yemeni-style construction.)

Ministry of Municipalities. Mr. Casida from the Philippines, is chief architect. We ask him about his design for a mosque.

Yes, I designed this mosque. If you slowly analyse some elements of design in here, and Yemeni architecture, you can extract something from it, especially from the chimneys of rural houses. That's why this structure is shaped like this. Even this stone ornamentation. And this gamaria *is part of Yemeni architecture. I think because we have good structural engineers, we found no problems, especially on structural design, long spans, and columns. This column spans about seven metres.*

First I have to make the preliminary designs, then they have to review the plans and approve them. But most of the time they give me the freedom to design.

Actually, I've never heard any comments on the design. As a matter of fact, they tried to admire the design because I'm trying to modernise these simple arches and designs from Yemeni architecture. Maybe we can try to break the monotony of these ordinary arches; you can derive other arches out from this form. That's my concept.

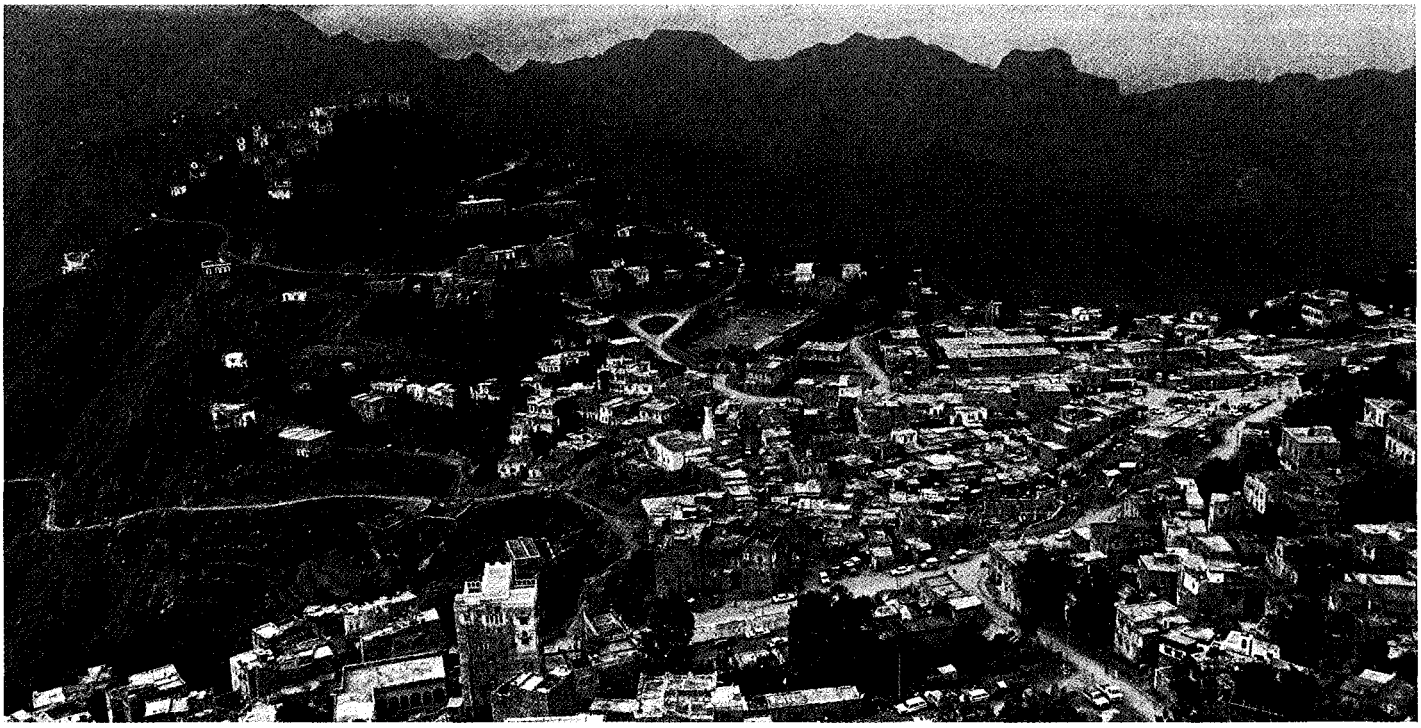
This was the first time I designed a mosque. So I tried to do some research about Islamic architecture and design of the mosque and make some inspections of existing mosques. I also came up with this design, which reflects really Muslim architecture — Islamic architecture, with arabesques.

I think the most important element of mosque design here is the dome. And then these are the qamarias and these coloured stone patterns. I could have designed other shapes for this one, but structurally, perhaps, it would be impossible.

Jom Björnssen, a young Norwegian architect, takes us through one of his projects.

It's traditional, but it's too low. I used European three-sixty in my ceiling heights, and that's way too low.

What I wanted to do here (in the central space) was to create an internal garden, and I wanted this ceiling to be open. I didn't want it to be covered. And I also wanted to have on stone walls with the terrace motif repeated at the ground level — twice, in steps, and with room for plants and a fountain between the two columns, with a walkway around and gravel in the middle because of the rain. But that was all changed



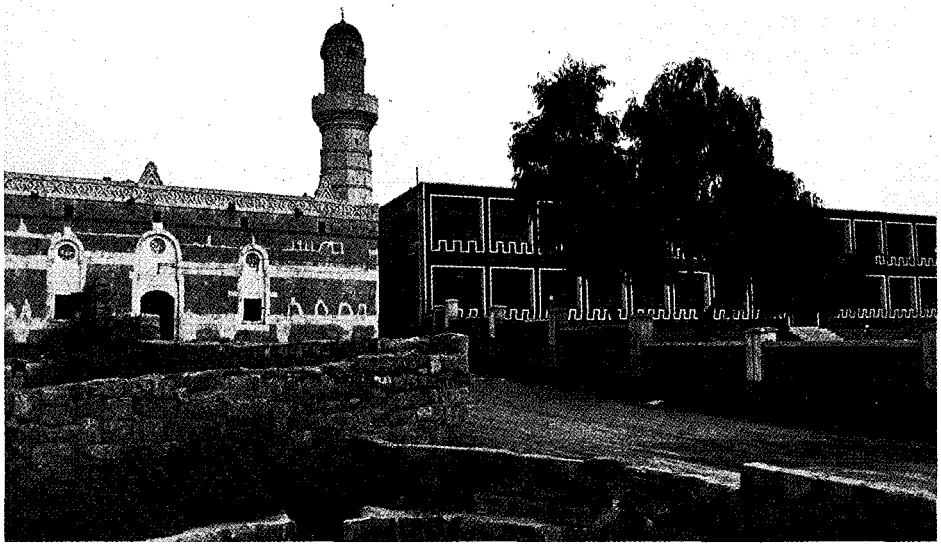
Hajjah is an example of a town undergoing rapid change due, in part, to improved roads and a new construction industry.

Photo: C. Little/Aga Khan Awards.

by the client because he didn't want the building to be open. I wanted all partitions actually to be wood. It's probably much more practical to have it aluminium.

Thinking it over, this may have been a little optimistic because it gets very hot. You will want to have a lot of plants grow out there. The Bank specifically asked to have loose partitions, more like office landscape, and during the actual implementation the building got closed up.

There wasn't any other way to go (other than the traditional facade), and I was very happy about that. The only traditional thing I regret are the "lintels". The windows should have been pulled in like boxes, more like large holes. The lintels should sit one course lower down. That's the first thing. But I didn't want that at all, I wanted no lintel, and just that box behind, and the flowers.



Hajjah. An old mosque and a new school.

Photo: C. Little/Aga Khan Awards.

Mr. Mezzedini, an Italian contractor talks about new construction techniques.

We have thought sometimes about making some project, some initiative. We have thought about making some little quarters with multi-storeys and some aesthetical parameters in the old Yemeni style, but using the new technology, like the "tunnel" system, for economic reasons. The "tunnel" system has precast panels, and so on, and the complete room is precast insitu, like a tube. We have finished now one work, near the Sheraton, with the system. We have completed the first lot that was started by a Spanish company but afterwards went bankrupt. So we completed these 496 units in one year. This idea is from the architect of this company.

The reason is economic. The first project is for 2,000 apartments, so we need some industrial method of construction. It saves money and time.

The problem, I think, is that it is possible to use the new techniques only in the bigger projects, where it is possible to make amortisation of equipment and so on. So we speak about big buildings and about government projects. But for private projects, I think the only way is the adoption of certain techniques by small contractors.

In our housing complex we used a new method of fixing stone with apoxy glue. When it is finished you have the same aesthetic result — very big psychological problem with friends. Also with our partners in the company. They don't like this type of job: cladding instead of traditional walling in stone.