

EARTHEN ARCHITECTURE

Yemeni Mudbrick at Risk

Wadi Hadhramaut in the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) is recognized internationally for its spectacular mudbrick tower houses. The walled city of Shibam, with its densely packed ten-story un-reinforced mudbrick high-rises, was designated a World Heritage site in 1982. Seyoun (the regional capital) is dominated by the Kathiri sultan's palace, now the Museum of the Hadhramaut, whereas Tarim is characterized by its eclectic complex of mudbrick mansions. The mansions, the product of a wealthy merchant class, date from the 1870s to the 1930s and interpret imported colonial styles (Neo-Classical, Baroque, Rococo, Mughal, Art Nouveau and Art Deco) in the local construction technology of load-bearing mudbrick and lime plaster. The significance of the Tarimi mansions lies in their collective representation of a period of time when there was extensive interaction with the Indian Ocean trade routes and Southeast Asia.

In the early 1970s, the then Marxist government expropriated twelve of the Tarimi mansions. These were mostly reused as housing for the poor. Two decades later, when the civil war united North and South Yemen, the mansions were returned to their rightful owners. By this time, however, the mansions had suffered from lack of maintenance and the families were not compensated for the damage. As a consequence, the owners did not feel responsible for the needed repairs. In addition, each mansion is owned by literally dozens of inheritors, many of who no longer live in Tarim. The result has been abandonment and 'demolition by neglect'.

Since 2000, the Tarimi mansions preservation project has been working to reverse the tide for this collection of buildings. Initially, a feasibility study was performed by the co-directors, Pamela Jerome¹ and Dr Selma al-Radi.² The feasibility study identified significant structures and their ownership context, as well as evalu-

ating their condition and adaptive reuse potential. It also recommended that a documentation training program be instituted to record the structures. The initial feasibility study was funded by the New York City-based Samuel H Kress Foundation. This study was updated at the request of UNESCO in March 2004, identifying a total of fifty mansions.

The next step was to get the buildings listed on the World Monuments Fund (WMF) 100 Most Endangered Sites list (the Watch List) where they stayed for two consecutive two-year cycles from 2000–2004. Simultaneously, additional international exposure was accomplished by presenting the project at several conferences, as well as developing a website (www.learn.columbia.edu/tarim). Through interaction with stakeholders, local interest has also been stimulated.

Since 2002, the Tarimi mansions preservation project has begun documenting the most significant of the buildings using both conventional and digital media. This work is being funded by the American Institute for Yemeni Studies (AIYS) through grants provided by the US State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, and the Samuel H Kress Foundation. The project trains Columbia University graduate students and personnel from Yemen's General Organization of Antiquities and Museums (GOAM), who work side by side with American conservators. Measured CADD drawings are produced along with digital photographs, 35 mm slides and condition assessments.

The assessments have led to emergency stabilization efforts funded by the US State Department's Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation and the Yemeni organization, the Social Fund for Development (SFD). The 'Ishshah palace, documented during the December 2002-January 2003 season, has had several col-



The main building of the 'Ishshah palace, Yemen, designed by Sayid Alawi Abu Bakr al-Kaf

lapsed areas reconstructed under the administration of the Tarimi mansions preservation project. This included the reconstruction of a large area of the west elevation, the northwest kitchen wing and the northeast wing of Dar Dawil, the oldest building of the 'Ishshah complex. The 'Ishshah is probably the most significant of the Tarimi mansions; it was the seat of family patriarch 'Umar bin Shaikh al-Kaf who amassed his fortune in Singapore and built several of the mansions. The 'Ishshah is currently on long-term lease to the Tarim branch of the Yemeni Society for History and Heritage Protection which presents it to the public as a house museum, the only one in the valley.

Dar al-Salam, an Art Deco masterpiece designed by 'Umar's cousin and gentleman architect, Sayid Alawi Abu Bakr al-Kaf, has been proposed for reuse as the headquarters of the future Association of Mud Masons. In January 2004, a ribbon cutting ceremony was held at Dar al-Salam as part of the Günter Grass ceremony. Nobel Prize winner Günter Grass donated a portion of his prize towards the establishment of the Association of Mud Masons. Training programs are planned in cost estimating, reading of architectural plans and apprenticeship to permit the masons to compete against concrete contractors for government bids, as well as produce the next generation of craftsmen. While Dar al-Salam was documented during the December 2003-January 2004 season,

a hole in one of the roofs was repaired and electricity and plumbing introduced with funds from the SFD.

In addition, the undermined entrance portico of the adjacent Hamtut mansion was stabilized and the front yard cleaned and leveled in preparation for the Günter Grass event, which was held in the Hamtut's courtyard. The Hamtut will be the subject of the upcoming season's documentation and is proposed for reuse as the Center for Visiting Scholars.

The Tarimi mansions preservation project was removed from the WMF's Watch List and awarded a Certificate of Outstanding Achievement. The award ceremony was held in January 2004 in the rebuilt western section of the 'Ishshah mansion. Both events were attended by government officials, representatives of the municipality, and stakeholders and received extensive press coverage.

As a result of the attention shed on the mansions by our project, the Yemeni government is considering purchasing some of the most significant abandoned mansions. We are also encouraging the government to draft legislation that would protect the historic city of Tarim while controlling the aesthetics of new concrete construction. Although a good start has been made, much remains to be done in order to ensure the future of the Tarimi mansions.

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