

# Architecture as a Tool of Editing History: The Case of Saudi Arabia's King Abdulaziz Historical Center

SUMAYAH AL-SOLAIMAN

The King Abdulaziz Historical Center (KAHC) is a culturally significant project in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in which architecture has been used to rewrite national history. The center partly sits on the site of the historic Murabba' Palace, home to two generations of the Saudi royal family, and its construction reflects two important concerns. On one level it expresses the agency of the client, the Arriyadh Development Authority, which formulated a project brief calling for the removal of all foreign design elements from the palace grounds and a return on the site to a pure vernacular Najdi style. A second level then involved the design and construction of the National Museum and Darat al-Malik Abdulaziz, two major new structures that reinterpret this regional style. This article discusses the design process that created these two buildings, which have taken remarkably different paths in pursuit of the same nation-building agenda.

The King Abdulaziz Historical Center (KAHC) is one of (if not the most) important cultural sites in the city of Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. It was completed in 1999, to mark the centennial of the recapture of the city by the Al-Saud dynasty, and partly sits on a site occupied by al-Murabba' Palace, a historically significant building from which King Abdulaziz — the founder of the modern Saudi state — ruled after moving out of the walled city of Riyadh. As a cultural and historical site of great importance, the design of the KAHC has had to respond to the difficult task of representing a modernizing nation by expressing a contemporary architectural identity that still ties it to a symbolic past. In this quest, the architectural and urban design of KAHC has served as a tool to rewrite national history. As this article will describe, this has involved the work of both the client, the Arriyadh Development Authority, and a disparate team of international architects.

*Sumayah Al-Solaiman is an Assistant Professor and Vice Dean for Quality Development in the College of Design at the University of Dammam, Saudi Arabia*

This case study is not unique in the issue it presents; rather, it is representative of a wider phenomenon characteristic of modernizing nations, with which many other scholars have engaged. For instance, in her study of Curitiba, Brazil, Clara Irazábal described the same phenomenon with regard to what she called “theming vernacular settings” and the representation of invented identities. As she pointed out, the deliberate search for architectural identity falls squarely within the contemporary project of nation-building and carries with it such related issues as the search for identity, questions of authenticity, and the ubiquitous contrast of tradition and modernity.<sup>1</sup>

Through much of the colonial era, the notion of tradition was perceived in negative terms and often equated to premodern, preindustrial, and even primitive practices. Yet with the proliferation of new nation-states beginning in the late nineteenth century, that changed, and tradition emerged “as a source of continuity and identity.”<sup>2</sup> The reevaluation of traditions, however, was for the most part reliant on their reinvention — their *raison d'être* now being related to the creation of a nationalist past. As Nezar AlSayyad has pointed out, “the tangible products of tradition are those processes by which identities are defined and refined,” and this connection explains why the reinvention of traditions became useful for nationalist interests.<sup>3</sup>

Nationalism seeks to create nations in the “authentic” spirit and image of earlier ethnic and religious communities. Of course, these older realities must be transformed to meet modern geopolitical, economic and cultural conditions. As Anthony Smith has pointed out, this typically involves the selection and reinterpretation of earlier myths, symbols, codes, traditions and memories; but this must always take place within the parameters and authentic spirit of existing cultures and communities.<sup>4</sup>

As Ananya Roy has argued, an important factor in the authentication of invented tradition is nostalgia. This is especially true given the political connotations of this activity, which may rely on utopian visions in which “a future is modeled after a mythicized and cleansed past.” This cleansing occurs first through mourning for what has been lost — an integral part of nostalgia, which is essentially “a narrative of loss.” This is then followed by a recovery and celebration of what was lost. As such, “nostalgia makes possible a dwelling in modernity,” and new cultural claims may attain legitimacy through the formalization of tradition as heritage.<sup>5</sup>

Roy's views here correspond to Alan Colquhoun's statement that “as an emblem of ‘pastness,’ modern historical recovery actually resists too accurate a memory of past styles; it is only in this way that it can become an item of cultural consumption.” Colquhoun went so far as to argue that this typically involves a deliberate attempt “to instill [sic] a forgetfulness of history.”<sup>6</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa has likewise commented on practices of selective borrowing from the past, noting that the process of historicism has reduced culture to “an object of

deliberate fabrication.”<sup>7</sup> And, citing Nan Ellin, Irazábal has pointed out that this naturally subjective selection process “highlights and romanticizes parts of the past, while erasing others.”<sup>8</sup> This process of erasure, or active forgetting, may also be used to gain political advantage in the shaping of the nation-state. As this article will discuss, it is within this theoretical framing that the design and construction of the KAHC takes on a political importance, derived from the past, tradition, and selective erasure.

The KAHC is a cultural center in the city of Riyadh that houses conserved palaces of the 1940s, a newly clad and renovated historic mosque, two newly constructed museums whose designs conflict with one another, and several other buildings — all set within a large, landscaped oasis located in an older part of the city. The planners and designers who have worked on the KAHC have included Ali Al-Shuaibi, Rasem Badran, Moriyama and Teshima, and Richard Bödeker.

Much of the KAHC was built on a site that was previously occupied in its entirety by al-Murabba' Palace, a complex that housed King Abdulaziz, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, and for some time his heir, Prince Saud, who later became king. Much of the significance of the project lies in its historical context, since the Murabba' Palace was considered in the 1940s to be the epitome of the regional Najdi style of architecture. The site was, however, also where Prince Saud experimented with architecture inspired by his travels, and the buildings he introduced were at odds with Najdi architecture in material, construction and style — and indeed largely resembled nineteenth-century European architecture.

During the early planning stages for the KAHC the site was purged of all the buildings introduced by Prince Saud; only buildings considered to represent the Najdi vernacular were kept. A clear motivation within the project, therefore, was to purify the site of foreign influences. Interestingly, however, one of the new buildings in the KAHC was partially constructed on the footprint of buildings added by Prince Saud — thus erasing the original and replacing it with a structure more in keeping with the vernacular.

Examination of the KAHC as a whole not only reveals the cultural politics of the client, the Arriyadh Development Authority (ADA), but also the varying interpretations of Najdi style by contemporary architects and planners. Moreover, although the overall design intent was historical purity, even the renovations of existing buildings on the site present a sanitized and imagined view of tradition that raises questions of authenticity. As a representation of a vital part of Saudi history, the KAHC is clearly a site where history has been edited for mass consumption. Yet it is through this consumption of tradition that the ADA hopes to promote a new national identity.

As this article discusses, an official narrative of history has been embedded at all levels of the project: in its planning, architecture and landscaping. This largely occurs through the use of symbolic gestures. The outcome is that the “historical” center, and particularly its National Museum, seek to

establish a connection between the Saudi nation and the larger narrative of Islam. The intent here is clearly to reinforce the central position of the Saudi state in the Islamic world, with Saudi history being presented as a natural continuation of Islamic history.

In order to fully understand the KAHC, it is important to start by introducing both the client (the ADA) and the historical precedent of the KAHC, al-Murabba' Palace.

#### THE ARRIYADH DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

The High Commission for the Development of Arriyadh — along with its executive branch, the Arriyadh Development Authority — was established in 1974 by a decree of the Saudi Council of Ministers.<sup>9</sup> Its establishment was proposed in the first master plan for Riyadh, by Doxiadis Associates. This envisioned the ADA as the “brain of the city, the planner of its future development, and the authority that would supervise policy-making, prepare its plans and oversee its important projects.”<sup>10</sup>

Over the years, the ADA's role has expanded, as it has acted as client, consultant and administrator for some of the most significant projects in Riyadh. These have included the development of the Justice Palace District with projects such as the Great Mosque and Justice Palace; the planning of the Diplomatic Quarter, including projects such as Tuwaiq Palace and al-Kindi Plaza; and the King Abdulaziz Historical Center. The majority of projects it oversees are awarded through invited competitions. And it has commissioned designs from such world-renowned architects as Ali Al-Shuaibi, Rasem Badran, Omrania, Frei Otto, Moriyama and Teshima, and Albert Speer Jr. The ADA has a strong presence in Riyadh, and its work is featured in the press and in its own publications, predominantly its quarterly magazine *Tatweer*. Interestingly, though, in the majority of ADA publications, featured projects don't bear the names of their designers.<sup>11</sup>

The ADA's realization that Riyadh lacked a distinct urban identity has fueled much of its work. However, its belief is that Riyadh's identity was never actually lost, but rather that as the city has grown, its physical condition gradually became incompatible with its political, administrative and social character.<sup>12</sup> The ADA thus set about augmenting Riyadh's physical condition through a strategic development plan that has attempted to fashion a new design identity through high-profile architectural and urban projects.

The ADA has also assumed the role of cultural politician. Since it is headed by the governor of Riyadh, it combines a strong claim to authority with relative autonomy from the bureaucratic practices that impede the work of other government agencies. Its work is also highly strategic and integrated into the fabric of the city in a physical and administrative manner. While the ADA has a wide scope of responsibilities, the discussion here only relates to its work as a client for

culturally significant projects. A number of these have won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, arguably one of the world's most prestigious architectural honors. Although the reasons for this successful streak may be numerous, it cannot be denied that there is congruence between the aims and objectives of both institutions. Both the ADA and the Aga Khan Award tap into the legacies of the past in a bid to renew them for the present and future generations.

The ADA's situated agency as a cultural agent and mediator can be seen in the architecture it commissions, which represents the interests of the Saudi elite, and affirms its nationalist tendencies. As a socio-political project, its work is also designed to homogenize and unify the Saudi population. Due to the cultural significance of these buildings, they now collectively imprint an identity on the whole city. Based on an abstracted, reimagined and selective view of the past that resonates with collective memory, the ADA's architectural output has thus helped shape the identity of Riyadh society by imposing an idealized image.

Such agency must ultimately be understood as part of the ADA's vision for Riyadh in the service of its residents. In this sense, understanding the mechanisms and forces that shape its architecture allows it to be read within the socio-political context from which it has arisen. According to Abdulrahman al-Seri, its Director of Urban and Cultural Development, the ADA is now more mature than it was during the construction of its early projects in the 1970s and 1980s. Predominantly, this means it no longer restricts architects stylistically, nor encourages them to pursue a specific design approach. Instead, it simply asks that designs be appropriate for Riyadh.<sup>13</sup> While this may be the case, it is also important to remember that the ADA is part of a wider political system. And what is most relevant here is that the reign of King Abdullah, which started in 2005, has marked a period of change and institutional reform. Indeed, the formal and conceptual changes the ADA has initiated in projects since then are a reflection and continuation of this reform. Yet these changes have not been the result of an explicit directive; they have resulted from a trickle-down effect that has permeated the institution through strategic policies and government investments and initiatives. The resultant visual changes are thus symbolic of organizational change, and underline a break with old ways. In particular, it is not coincidental that an emphasis on qualities such as transparency, lightness and dynamism has marked new buildings such as the extension of the King Fahad National Library, the Criminal Court, and the King Abdullah Financial District. The intent these days is to project an image of change and instill Saudi society with optimism.

In summary, then, the number of completed projects commissioned by the ADA may be insignificant in comparison to the total number of public buildings in Riyadh. But the cultural and political significance associated with the functions they contain and the historically important sites they occupy has ensured that their impact on the city is

profound. They represent the official government-approved version of public architecture in Riyadh, and they reflect an idealized image that reinforces the conservative nature of the strictly religious, dominant faction within Saudi society.

#### AL-MURABBA' PALACE

The central focus of this article is the King Abdulaziz Historical Center. However, because it derives much of its significance from being built on the site of al-Murabba' Palace, it is important to understand its historical predecessor (FIG. 1). Al-Murabba' Palace was a complex built by King Abdulaziz two kilometers north of the walled city of Riyadh. Built in 1936 and occupied in 1938, its area was initially 16 hectares, but it was later expanded to 30. Initially it also housed a royal household of 800, but it later accommodated as many as 2,000.<sup>14</sup> An imposing wall with defensive towers up to 20 meters high enclosed al-Murabba' Palace (FIG. 2).<sup>15</sup> Inside those walls were several palaces and smaller buildings as well as ceremonial reception halls, offices, a power station, a radio station, a mosque, four wells, and a stable. Royal guesthouses and the king's garage were located just outside the wall.<sup>16</sup>

The royal residences inside the complex were all built in the Najdi vernacular style that was common in Riyadh in the

1930s. This meant their walls were made of thick mud-brick, with rooms organized around courtyards. In the Najdi vernacular, a number of two-story houses were clustered to form a contiguous urban fabric, and the small openings to the outside gave away little of their residents' inner life. Courtyards were lined with stone columns, and roofs were constructed of wooden beams covered with palm mats and mud (FIGS. 3, 4). Several features at al-Murabba' differed from those of the houses within the old walled town of Riyadh; most noticeable were the unprecedented scale of construction and the regularity of walls.<sup>17</sup> The character of the buildings was also changed by the liberal use of external-facing windows.

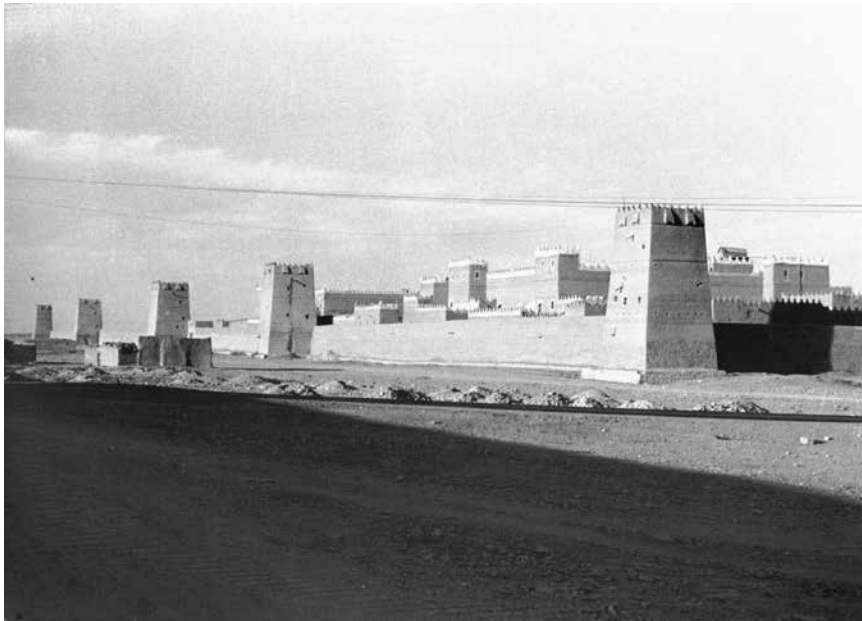
Al-Murabba's location outside the city walls liberated Najdi architecture enough for it to reach its highest level of sophistication, while still conforming to the social laws and conventions that existed inside the town. Changes to the architecture thus resulted from the ready adaptation of the vernacular tradition to a new situation, and reflected a new mindset and outlook. Such qualities were the mark of a new chapter in Saudi Arabian history.<sup>18</sup>

The design and construction of al-Murabba' Palace was conducted under the supervision of a master builder, Ibn Qabba'.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, King Abdulaziz was also personally involved in the building process.<sup>20</sup> In subsequent years, modifications were made as the need arose. For example, in



FIGURE 1. Aerial view of al-Murabba' Palace in 1950. Courtesy of Saudi Aramco.





**FIGURE 2.** View of al-Murabba' Palace in 1950 showing its walls, towers, and the buildings inside. Photograph taken by Müller. Source: Municipality of Ar-Riyadh, Ar-Riyadh: History and Development (*Riyadh: Al-Turath*, 1999), p.165.

response to a request from the king, ARAMCO (the Arabian American Oil Company — established in 1933) sent an expert in 1939 to install electricity, lighting, fans, limited air-conditioning, elevators, a central water supply, and lavatories.<sup>21</sup>

As time went on, other new elements were gradually introduced into the complex, and experimentation became continuous. For example, steel I-beams and ceramic tiles were incorporated into its mud-brick walls.<sup>22</sup> This phase of development was mostly about discovering the capability of new building materials and their fit within traditional Najdi methods. Initially, the ease of handling mud-brick construction was thought to be transferable to them. However, when the



**FIGURE 3.** The courtyard of Diwan al-Murabba', where King Abdulaziz conducted government business. The structure is built in the Najdi vernacular with the exception of the windows lining the first floor. Photo by author.



**FIGURE 4.** A corridor of Diwan al-Murabba' showing the vernacular Najdi building tradition. Photo by author.



**FIGURE 5.** View of Crown Prince Saud's al-Hamra Palace, built within the Murabba' complex. Photograph by T.F. Walters. Courtesy of Saudi Aramco.

trial-and-error mentality of building with adobe was applied to these new materials it was found that different skill-sets were required, because their use in construction was not as flexible.

The grounds of the Murabba' Palace were eventually expanded considerably to the east. And within this expansion, Crown Prince Saud built the Hamra Palace, the first such structure made of reinforced concrete (FIG. 5). Al-Hamra was not only a clear departure from the norm in terms of materials but also in terms of design. Principally, it was not arranged around a courtyard, but was outward facing, with large windows and balconies. Further, its design was symmetrical and featured decorative elements alien to Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, al-Hamra Palace was fused in with the rest of the traditional buildings that had preceded it in the complex.

Rare photographs of the Murabba' complex illustrate further experiments. One taken in 1945, for example, shows several open trusses and pitched roof forms used in the construction of a traditional building. It also shows a portable, pitched-roof structure, similar to the ones used by ARAMCO to house its Western employees in the Eastern Province, in front of the complex's wall (FIG. 6).<sup>23</sup>

It slowly became apparent, as they became more and more popular in the 1940s and 50s, that modern materials were to supersede traditional construction methods throughout the kingdom. And although King Abdulaziz was against foreign architectural imitations when he initially built the Murabba' Palace, this changed toward the end of his life. In fact, he is reported to have "ordered [for himself] the construction of a palace made of reinforced concrete at the northeast corner of the Murabba' complex," possibly for the greater convenience he expected to experience within a modern palace.<sup>24</sup>

It is clear that in a relatively short period of time al-Murabba' Palace experienced major changes and expansions. This included the introduction of new technologies, an experimentation with new materials, and the addition of foreign architectural forms. In fact, the palace complex appears to have continuously evolved to reflect the needs of its users and wider social context.

The importance of al-Murabba' waned in the 1950s with the transition to the reign of King Saud, who transferred the seat of government to al-Naseriyah Palace. There followed a period of neglect before the older palace's renovation and



**FIGURE 6.** View of al-Murabba' Palace from the east, showing the concrete palace inside its walls. Open trusses are visible on the right, and a pitched-roof structure is visible in front of one of the towers on the left. Source: Municipality of Ar-Riyadh, Ar-Riyadh: History and Development, p.144.

reuse under the direction of the KAHC. This period allowed it to be transformed from an active center of government to a preserved site for the passive representation of a projected identity, as will be discussed in the next section.

#### KING ABDULAZIZ HISTORICAL CENTER

The KAHC owes its conception to the celebration of the centennial of the recapturing of Riyadh, the city that provided a nucleus for the expansion of Saudi Arabia. As a historically significant occasion, this was to be marked by the building of a cultural edifice to benefit future generations. This would be the National Museum — a building that had been in the pipeline for some time. As William Facey wrote at the time, “Although in a dilapidated condition, [the structures of the old palace] have been recognised as of major historic significance, and it is planned to retain as many of them as possible in the new National Museum which is planned for the site.”<sup>25</sup>

The committee in charge of the centennial celebration appointed the ADA to implement the project. The ADA in turn interpreted its directive in very general terms and made plans for the whole area. This was to encompass some gardens, the Department of Antiquities and Museums, the restoration of existing mud-brick buildings, and the reuse of the former *diwan* (administrative offices) of the king at al-Murabba' as a museum.<sup>26</sup> To save time, the ADA organized a special competition to address both urban and architectural design in one stage. It commissioned three teams of architects, and instead of awarding prizes at the end, paid them all equally for their work.<sup>27</sup>

At the end of its deliberations, the competition jury found that all three entries had been too focused on architecture, and that their attempts at urban design had been a failure. With the deadline looming, the architects Ali al-Shuaibi

and Rasem Badran, who had been part of the jury, agreed to take on the urban design aspect of the project. They then reviewed only the competition designs for the National Museum building and chose that by the firm of Moriyama and Teshima. Their choice was based on their estimation that it would work best within their proposed urban design scheme, and that its formal attributes made it look like it could work on a cultural and stylistic level.<sup>28</sup>

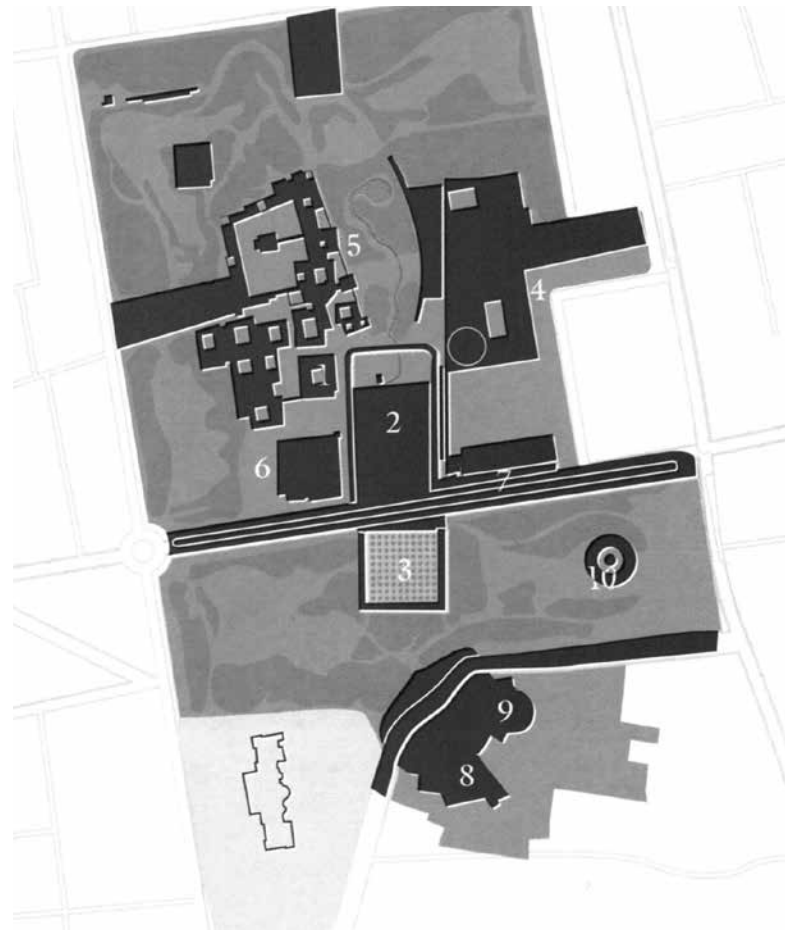
The entire proposed KAHC project area encompassed approximately 360,000 sq.m. It was surrounded by streets on all sides except where the Hamra Palace adjoined it to the south (FIGS. 7, 8). An additional street, running east to west, cut the center in half.<sup>29</sup> A number of buildings were to make up the KAHC besides the National Museum, and responsibility for them was distributed to a number of designers. Badran was charged with designing the Darat al-Malik Abdulaziz, renovating the existing *diwan* at al-Murabba', and renovating and enveloping the existing King Abdulaziz mosque to make it suit the rest of the complex. Al-Shuaibi, who expressed an interest in the restoration of the mud-brick buildings, was put in charge of them. In addition to the National Museum, Moriyama and Teshima were to design the Department of Museums and Antiquities. And a branch of the King Abdulaziz Library and an auditorium were to be designed by Omrania and Associates. All these buildings were to be set within expansive gardens designed by Richard Bödeker of BW+P, a landscape firm with a long history of projects in the city.

The parties involved in the design were given a very tight schedule. Given that the date for the centennial celebration was fixed as January 22, 1999, the period from design to completion was only 26 months. Everything would need to be finished by that time. In addition to the structures noted above, other elements that would need to be accommodated in the project included a central *maidan*, or plaza; a grove of one hundred palm trees symbolizing the centennial; a



**FIGURE 7. (RIGHT)** Master plan of the KAHC. 1) Al-Murabba' Palace (the diwan is to the right and the mud-brick palaces are to the left); 2) Central maidan (plaza); 3) Palm grove; 4) National Museum; 5) Darat al-Malik Abdulaziz; 6) King Abdulaziz Mosque; 7) Department of Antiquities and Museums; 8) King Abdulaziz Public Library; 9) Auditorium; and 10) Riyadh Water Tower. Source: Arriyadh Development Authority, *The King Abdulaziz Historical Centre* (Riyadh: Arriyadh Development Authority, 2000), p.33.

**FIGURE 8. (BELOW)** Aerial view of the KAHC taken from the north, showing the Darat, the mud-brick houses, and the mosque to the right and the National Museum to the left. Source: Municipality of Ar-Riyadh, *Ar-Riyadh: History and Development*, p.201.





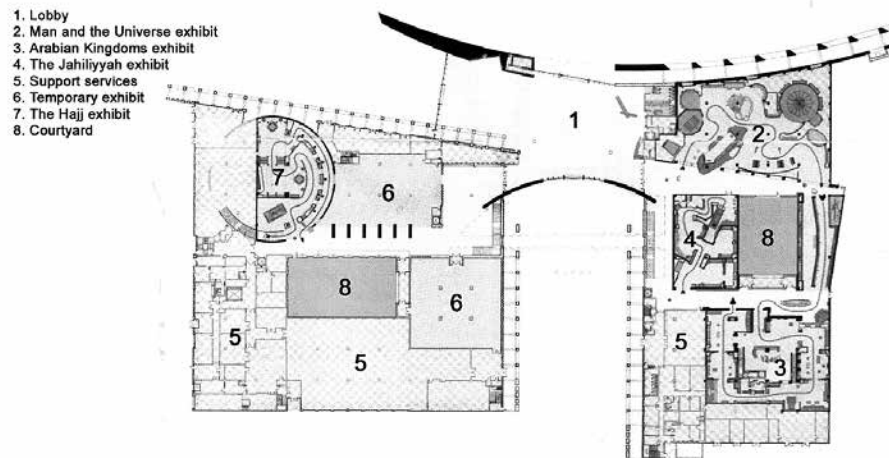
restored old well used as part of the landscaping; the Riyadh Water Tower, which predated the KAHC (completed in 1971); and a restored section of the old wall with a tower.<sup>30</sup>

The discussion that follows will focus on the two principal new buildings in the complex: the National Museum and the Darat al-Malik Abdulaziz. Although part of the same overall project, they took two very different architectural and conceptual approaches to the project brief. They are of interest here particularly because of the manner in which they dealt with tradition and modernity to create symbols of national pride. Similarities, differences and conflicts between the two buildings also reveal some of the design dynamics at play in the KAHC as a whole.

## THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

The National Museum was designed by the Canadian firm Moriyma and Teshima. The museum's most distinctive feature, its curving wall, was inspired by a landform — the dune (FIGS. 9, 10). However, the remainder of the building was in part inspired by traditional Najdi architecture. The structure employs extensive arcades; uses courtyards to cool its interiors; has minimal surface decoration and few openings to the outside; and features massive walls reminiscent of mud-brick architecture. All of these were features found in old Riyadh.<sup>31</sup>

Even so, according to one critic, the National Museum is essentially “no more than a highly serviced two-story box allowing maximum flexibility within.” Interestingly, a service tunnel runs beneath its entire perimeter. This feature, as well



**FIGURE 9. (TOP)** Ground-floor plan of the National Museum. Source: A. al-Thobaiti, “Markaz almalik Abdulaziz attarikhi,” *Umran*, No.20 (1999), p.39.

**FIGURE 10. (BOTTOM)** The curving wall of the National Museum from the south. Photo by author.

as the use of local materials whenever possible, contributed greatly to meeting the tight schedule.<sup>32</sup> The time constraint also meant that the building and its exhibits needed to be designed simultaneously. Key decisions needed to be prioritized, and this narrowed design options at every later stage, resulting in a clear and focused architectural statement. The simplicity of the form in comparison with the Darat helps create a potent visual image that is monolithic, strong and unified.<sup>33</sup>

From the outside, the National Museum presents two distinct architectural faces. While its front makes a grand gesture that veils the contents beyond it and intrigues the visitor, its rear largely consists of rectilinear forms out of which a courtyard is subtracted, leading into it from the east. As it transpired, the back was designed as a contextual response to nearby buildings that were eventually demolished.<sup>34</sup>

The National Museum has, apart from its curving front wall, two additional noteworthy features in terms of the relation between its external form and the expression of the exhibits it holds inside. These are a cylindrical drum, which symbolizes the unification of Saudi Arabia (and is reminiscent of turrets and towers of old Riyadh), and a floating bridge, which symbolizes the migration of the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) from Makkah to Madinah.

Museums are by their very nature narrative spaces, and in the case of the National Museum the exhibits inside tell the history of mankind based on “the teachings of Islam regarding the Creation and man’s role as God’s (Allah’s) trustee for this planet.”<sup>35</sup> The eight exhibits, ordered chronologically from the time of creation until the present, are “Man and the Universe,” “The Arabian Kingdoms,” “The Jahiliyyah,” “The Prophet’s Mission,” “Islam and the Arabian Peninsula,” “The First and Second Saudi States,” “The Unification of the Kingdom,” and “The Hajj.”<sup>36</sup>

What is interesting here is that, even though the museum is the “National” Museum, it contextualizes the country’s history within the larger frame of Islam, thus inextricably linking the concept of the nation to its religion. This of course is a reflection both of the central role played by Islam in the creation of Saudi Arabia as a political entity and the defining role of Islam in Saudi society. Even so, the encompassing of Saudi history within the more authoritative narrative of Islam, rather than just emphasizing the importance of religion to the nation, marks a significant choice. In fact, the presentation of Saudi history as a natural extension of the history of Islam is instrumental in affirming the kingdom’s legitimate and stable position as guardian of the faith.

In addition to consolidating the nation by providing it with a cultural icon, the museum may be read as having an even more specific connotation, however. The fact that it adheres only to stylistic references from the Najd region might be rationalized as a contextual response to the surrounding historic buildings. But the choice also presents a clear signal of the cultural dominance of Najdi tradition. Moreover, the formal use of Najdi style does not diminish the distinct “Is-

lamic” framing of the museum’s contents. On the contrary, it serves to frame the “Islamic” in a particular manner, one which downplays the importance of the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah as the sole centers of Islam. Instead, it accentuates the position of Riyadh as a hub of Islamic teachings — in particular, those of the Islamic reformist Mohammed bin Abdulwahab, whose alliance with the Saud family made Saudi Arabia what it is today.

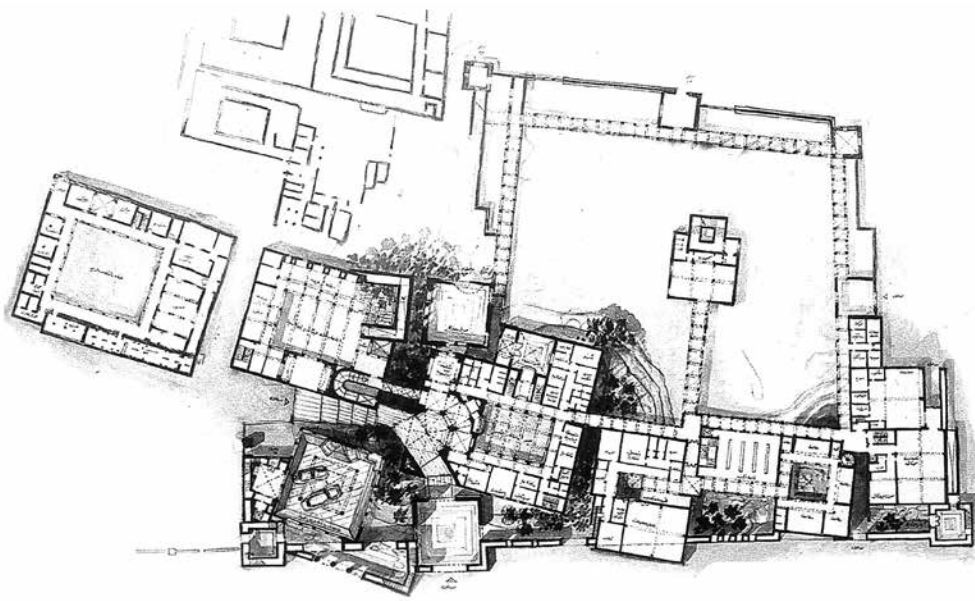
#### DARAT AL-MALIK ABDULAZIZ

The other principal component of the KAHC, the Darat al-Malik Abdulaziz, was designed by the Jordanian architect Rasem Badran. Badran received his architectural education in Germany, but his architecture is known for a tradition-based approach that takes formal inspiration from local vernacular precedent. The Darat houses several functional components: the King Abdulaziz Center for Information and Research, the offices of the journal of the Darat (*Al-Darah*), the King Abdulaziz Memorial Hall, a car exhibition, the personal library of King Abdulaziz, administrative offices, and an art gallery. The grounds of the Darat also include several gardens, viewing towers, and an elevated discovery walkway (FIG. 11).<sup>37</sup>

The Darat is made up of a cluster of individual courtyard buildings that are intended to emulate the traditional urban environment of Riyadh (FIG. 12). These buildings are either fused to make a monolithic whole with internal connecting corridors (as in its northern part) or they are slightly dispersed with shifting design axes, which creates a system of external walkways and paths between the buildings at ground level and bridges connecting them overhead.

The Darat attempts to re-create the traditional urban environment of Riyadh; and given that it occupies the site of the original Murabba’ Palace, its design is strongly affected by its historical predecessor. In places, the Darat even traces the footprint of original palace buildings, placing new functions in the former layout. This strategy, however, is only pursued selectively, and not always accurately, as Badran could not resist shifting axis lines in his customary manner of morphological manipulation. Moreover, while this approach may have served his design purpose, it is not a quality that casual visitors are made aware of or are generally able to appreciate.

During its history, the former Murabba’ Palace complex underwent several drastic changes, including the construction of Prince Saud’s concrete palace, which drastically changed its character from the east. This structure, the aforementioned al-Hamra Palace, survived until the site was largely cleared to make way for new construction. Since it represented a drastic break with the vernacular tradition, its demolition erased an uncomfortable image. It is not clear whether it was the ADA or Badran that was primarily responsible for the reversion to a more historically pure style of Najdi architecture in the new structures of the Darat. Yet,



**FIGURE 11.** Ground-floor plan of the Darat al-Malik Abdulaziz. Source: al-Thobaiti, "Markaz almalik Abdulaziz attarikhi," p.43.

even so, Badran retained several aspects of the old palace in his design. These included restoring a stone building that projected into the courtyard and retaining certain aspects of the spatial configuration of Prince Saud's palace.

According to Badran, "invention within the framework of valid precedents is the essence of being contemporary."<sup>38</sup> But this statement masks the criteria used to decide what may be considered valid. Who decides this, and in what context? In this project, the precedents he is referring to must be formal ones, since the functions it accommodates did not previously exist on the site. Yet, in determining that form would be the principal consideration in shaping the Darat, Badran also stripped the traditional forms he used of their utilitarian characteristics, to deploy them as essentially empty shells. This is nowhere more evident than with regard to the towers he placed throughout his design. The Darat's towers serve as clues indicating the location of entryways, but they are predominantly redundant in any other sense. Indeed, while they help Badran artificially inflate the building form to create the appearance of a mini-town, they are either open-to-the-sky, double-height structures that act as transition spaces, or they contain inaccessible viewing platforms.

By using traditional forms in this way the architect has stripped them of their meaning and asserted that they have no function beyond visual association. Within the context of architecture that is classified as "traditional," this is the equivalent of a conceptual dead end, as any progression will solely build on the decorative use of traditional elements. Assuming that societal values are mirrored in its architecture, what values does the Darat represent? Badran's selective use of forms may be seen as a kind of architectural forgetting that primarily aids his reinterpretation of forms and the creation of a new architectural identity — one that is familiar enough to connect with, yet very different from what came before.



**FIGURE 12.** The Darat al-Malik Abdulaziz uses towers to re-create the character of a traditional town. Photo by author.



Badran's obsession with the Arab/Islamic town and the treatment of architectural problems as urban ones similarly results in confusion — especially for first-time visitors. For example, entrances are difficult to find because they are tucked away toward the middle of the Darat. And even though most paths inside the grounds lead in the general direction of the main entrance, the fact that there are two levels makes it easy to miss.

Furthermore, the urban clustering of the Darat consists of regular buildings with irregular spaces between them. These exterior spaces comprise both paths and landscaped leftover space. Yet, although the intention is to re-create a traditional urban environment, the design actually contradicts the purposefulness of urban spaces found in traditional towns. A number of these leftover spaces are particularly awkward, and some even feel unsafe. There is also ambiguity about whether certain spaces are intended primarily to be used by the public visiting the King Abdulaziz Memorial Hall or by researchers using the research facilities. From the outside, it is also difficult to discern where one building starts and another ends.

Overall, in comparison with traditional urban form, the Darat lacks hierarchical clarity and direction. And in comparison to contemporary urban space, it can be seen to communicate contradicting messages and employ unfamiliar spatial indicators. It therefore falls short of spatial expectations.

Meanwhile, the architectural language of the Darat draws heavily on the vernacular architecture of Riyadh. In doing so, it complements the adjacent mud-brick buildings, but it is still evidently a new addition. Ironically, the restored mud-brick buildings, which were supposedly of a time when buildings were not as ordered or geometric as today, exude an air of clarity and calm, and aptly meet spatial expectations. The Darat, on the other hand, lacks such clarity. Its image is more that of an attention-seeking hyper-building designed to intentionally confuse visitors. This impression is accentuated when comparing the Darat to the clean lines of the National Museum.

The architectural language of the Darat is also incoherent and patchy within itself. On the exterior of the complex, the buildings predominantly emulate a stern Najdi style, even if their scale and massing are at odds with such a precedent. However, on the inside and between some of the component buildings, there are various shapes that attempt to free the Darat from this severe, formal grip. Particularly jarring are the few flimsy, orphan metallic elements that stick out randomly from large expanses of limestone-clad and rendered walls. Their attempt at an uncharacteristic playfulness conflicts with the stern exterior.

Badran's design philosophy focuses on the relationship of man to place, a relationship he understands as ever changing but nevertheless important to achieve a sense of belonging and ownership. Everyday rituals of people inhabiting a place become essential determinants of his designs. The

manner in which he presents this philosophy suggests that he prioritizes the interests of users according to a bottom-up perspective, and that he generates designs uniquely appropriate to their needs. That is not evident in the Darat. Although place is emphasized through stylistic ties to Najd, Badran's commitment to the people is not as evident as in his other projects, mostly because the specific circumstances here did not allow it.<sup>39</sup> For one thing, the willful position of the ADA as client and the specific cultural and political purpose of the building imposed an idealized and homogenous view of the Darat's users in a top-down manner. While this was necessary to project a unified and consolidated national identity, it forced Badran to cater to the place rather than to the people, whose historical progression and cultural pluralism were flattened. And while that may have represented a valid architectural response, it did not accord with his stated ideals.

#### PRECEDENTS AND MODERNISM

Even though the National Museum and the Darat share a source of formal inspiration — vernacular Najdi architecture — the two buildings are very different in terms of form and character. In the case of the Darat, formal precedent determined both the urban configuration and the architecture in an attempt to re-create a traditional urban setting. It thus reflects a literal interpretation of Najdi style, tempered by the addition of a number of clashing metallic elements that leave it in an unbalanced state.

Indeed, the Darat can be read as evidence of a profound struggle which has marked Badran's entire career. Formally and conceptually, he favors a morphological approach that is based on the vernacular, and his work actively attempts to resist modernist design. In this regard he is categorized as a traditionalist and sometimes presented as a successor to Hassan Fathy. Yet his method is very different, and his use of modern materials and construction methods does not allow him to escape modernity. As James Steele has written:

*Rasem Badran may be seen here to be a complex mixture of both positions, of the rational and the intuitive, a pragmatist as well as an idealist, genuinely searching for a different, more culturally appropriate way to make architecture socially relevant.<sup>40</sup>*

In other words, Badran intentionally resists modernist influences and favors the traditional; however, his pragmatic modernist training does not allow him to distance himself far enough. The struggle he experiences as a result can be traced throughout his work, because the differences in approach between the two forms of design are not easily reconciled. Consequently, the Darat can equally be recognized as postmodern, neotraditional, regionalist and historicist.

The National Museum, on the other hand, is unapologetically the product of a modernist tradition, even though it takes inspiration from the local vernacular in a subtle and abstracted manner, applying it where appropriate. In this way, lessons from the vernacular are interpreted and are made to serve the modern building, rather than, as in the Darat's case, the building being made to serve the vernacular.

The subtlety and simplicity of the National Museum has potent visual impact. It is a thoroughly contemporary building in keeping with our time, and it is this general interpretation that gives it a perpetual quality. The National Museum's curving wall is inspired by a dune, a landform firmly connected with the place. The dune implies a deep historical belonging, and it is an element that a large number of people can identify with because it does not represent one group stylistically. It could even be seen as binding different regions together. The remainder of the National Museum is the result of an accretion of design decisions, which were restricted by time, and by the need to cooperate with a number of consultants simultaneously.

Whatever stylistic differences exist between the National Museum and the Darat, they are amplified by the buildings' juxtaposition. They represent two sides of one coin, and interestingly accentuate each other's effect (literally, in the case of the Darat's complex shadows, which are projected onto the smooth, curving wall of the museum). In this way the two structures are not isolated interpretations, but create a dialogue (or silent conflict) that is only softened by the landscaping between them.

#### NATION-BUILDING AND IDENTITY

The significance of identity in the conceptualization of the Darat is affected by the historically charged site it occupies. In that respect, Badran tried to connect the Darat to some of the palace buildings that preceded it by tracing their footprint in the new design. And while the functions of those buildings are no longer entirely known (many of them may have been quite mundane), the act may seem to lend a historic legitimacy to the Darat that implies cultural continuity.

The central role that the expression of identity plays in the designs of the National Museum and the Darat, of course, did not emerge by coincidence; it resulted from an explicit formulation in the project brief. This expression encapsulated the cultural politics of the ADA, which involves the imagination of an idealized amalgamation of existing Saudi identities. By seemingly reaffirming a consolidated national identity, the KAHC seeks to establish a single identity with which a new generation can identify. The hope is that by combining a culturally infused setting with an imposed but recognizable identity, the project will in time aid in the creation of a new legacy born from the old.

As a source of national pride, the KAHC is on the itinerary of diplomats and dignitaries visiting Saudi Arabia. It presents a clean, crisp image of what modern Saudi Arabia would like to be seen as. It is rooted in history, informed by values, surrounded by lush greenery, and is of the highest design standards — an easy pill to swallow.

Nevertheless, the success of the KAHC cannot be attributed to the architecture alone. On a popular level, it is the landscaping, which occupies the majority of the area, that is the real winner. It draws people to the KAHC as part of their daily lives and exposes them to its vision of Saudi cultural heritage without the need to even enter the buildings. This is a significant outcome, considering that visiting museums is not the norm for most Saudis. The KAHC has indeed become just what its landscape architect, Richard Bodeker, considered it to be all along: a central park that happens to contain a national museum.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the KAHC as a whole can be understood as a metaphor of the old town of Riyadh. Just as in the past the core of houses within the walls of Riyadh was surrounded by palm groves and greenery, now the KAHC emulates this effect within the city.

That said, the differences in design methodology evident in the National Museum and the Darat epitomize the differences of orientation between architects practicing to Western standards and architects who adopt a more tradition-based approach. In fact, the architects of the National Museum and the Darat did not agree on many occasions. And although we do not know exactly what their difficulties were, a comment by Badran presents this view of their interaction:

*The dynamics generated during the planning and organizing process reflected the differences in Western and Eastern attitudes. The Arab architect of the Darat argued continually with the Western architect who designed the adjacent Human History Museum [National Museum]. The Darat and the Human History Museum shared a public space, but the Western architect was unable to relate his architectural solutions to the Darat. He limited himself to his own perception of the master plan for the museum that the architect Ali al-Shuaibi and I had proposed to the Riyadh Development Authority as a guideline for the overall master plan. This forced us, the Arab architects, to adopt the concept of flexibility and fluidity in our proposal. The outcome was fragmented geometry that evokes the memory of an inherited Arab Islamic urban tissue.<sup>42</sup>*

Badran makes a marked distinction between the "Arab" and the "Western" on two occasions here. And he reduces the problem between them to one of geography and cultural difference, while feeding the stereotypes surrounding the supposedly irreconcilable differences between architects from the East and West. He also positions himself as a victim of West-

ern practices, who managed to rise to the challenge. In the end, it seems, the conflict came down to “us” versus “them.” The word “Arab” is thus used to evoke solidarity with fellow Arabs and to play on their sentimental side, while giving the problem a political spin that oversimplifies the issue at hand. By Western practice, Badran also means to criticize a functional, rational approach that displays little cultural sensitivity. The Arab or Eastern approach, by contrast, is understood to be burdened with ethical responsibility not only to counter Western influences but to provide a culturally sensitive alternative from within the culture that carries a sense of resistance.

Moriyama and Teshima have also sought to explain their design intent. On their website they write of the KAHC’s buildings, arguing that the “National Museum’s contemporary vocabulary of limestone walls and granite detailing sets it apart from its neighbors.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, although the two buildings share a common regional inspiration and employ the same predominant cladding material, it is the museum’s contemporaneity that to them sets it apart from the Darat.

The KAHC provides a further rich and unique case study when it comes to examining how media representations have subsequently sought to define it. This highlights the participation in the project of parties of varying nationalities, cultural backgrounds, and design approaches. Indeed, an examination of media constructions allows a reading of the same project from the differing perspectives of the various and somewhat equal parties. Although the facts are — more or less — constant in these accounts, different items are accentuated or given center stage because they are either judged to be more pertinent or expected to appeal to a particular readership. The framing of information also always occurs in relation to prevailing discourse in the designer’s home country.

Various publications have taken up the topic of the KAHC. The Canadian architects’ work has been reviewed in Canadian publications, the German landscapers in theirs, and the Jordanian’s account in a monograph dedicated to his work. However, the work of the Saudi architects (notably Ali al-Shuaibi of Beeah) was not published, and the ominous silence surrounding their work is a sad reflection of the reticent quality of architectural discourse in the kingdom today. They may have been named within some of the accounts mentioned above, but their contributions have received little scrutiny. Indeed, these accounts are primarily descriptive and hardly critical enough to provide a sense for its reception within the architectural community. Given the expected importance of the KAHC to Saudi national identity, it comes as a surprise that more has not been written on this subject.<sup>44</sup>

The ADA, on the other hand, has made it a policy not to acknowledge the designing architects. As the project was commissioned and managed by them, they proudly proclaim in their 152-page official publication, solely dedicated to the documentation of the KAHC, that

*The Arriyadh Development Authority (ADA) was given the task of masterminding and executing the project. After outlining the concept and drawing up the basic plans, the ADA moved on to the design stage and then on to the various phases of work on the site itself.<sup>45</sup>*

#### AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The KAHC offers a rich case study that reveals the dynamics of tradition when used to further a national cause. But the problem of representing a modernizing nation has taken on even more complexity in this case because of the historical importance of the site. Here, the innovations and gradual modifications that transformed the original Murabba’ Palace from the Najdi vernacular into a transitional hybrid had to first be reversed to achieve an imagined, pure state. However, the ADA’s rewinding of the site’s adaptation to changing times effectively erased part of its actual history in the name of tradition and the production of identity. It thus chose permanence of style over continuity of historical narrative.

The fabrication of identity continued with the design of both the National Museum and the Darat al-Malik Abdulaziz. Both buildings try to evoke a distinct national identity through the use of regional Najdi influences to varying degrees. Yet, while on the surface they appear to employ very different design methodologies, they are both representations of globalized practice. They cannot escape their time, circumstances or technologies — or, above all, the brief to which they had to respond.

Both are thus products of their time and political and cultural milieu. And just as Prince Saud’s reinforced concrete palace was considered inauthentic at the time of its demolition, it remains to be seen how the consumption of tradition, or a dwelling in modernity, will allow the KAHC to develop an identity that will be embraced by the Saudi public. It may have come out of the old, but it may eventually develop into something that can stand on its own. Only then will its novelties be considered authentic.



## REFERENCE NOTES

The author would like to thank Saudi Aramco for funding the research reported on in this paper under the "Saudi Aramco Ibn Khaldun Fellowship for Saudi Women," in partnership with the Center for Clean Water and Clean Energy at MIT.

1. C. Irazábal, "Architecture and the Production of Postcard Images: Invocations of Tradition Versus Critical Transnationalism in Curitiba," in N. AlSayyad, ed., *The End of Tradition?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p.144.
2. N. Graburn, as quoted in C.G. Crysler, *Writing Spaces: Discourses of Architecture, Urbanism and the Built Environment, 1960–2000* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p.88.
3. N. AlSayyad, "The End of Tradition, or the Tradition of Endings?" in AlSayyad, ed., *The End of Tradition?*, pp.6–7.
4. A.D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p.133.
5. A. Roy, "Nostalgias of the Modern," in AlSayyad, ed., *The End of Tradition?*, pp.63–86.
6. A. Colquhoun, "Three Kinds of Historicism," in K. Nesbitt, ed., *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965–1995* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), pp.202–9.
7. J. Pallasmaa, "Tradition and Modernity: The Feasibility of Regional Architecture in Post-Modern Society," in V.B. Canizaro, ed., *Architectural Regionalism: Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity and Tradition* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), p.133.
8. Irazábal, "Architecture and the Production of Postcard Images," p.145. The reference is to N. Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).
9. Arab Urban Development Institute, *Arriyadh: 'Hadarah 'areeqah wa 'hadhir zahir* (Riyadh: Arab Urban Development Institute, 1993, in Arabic), p.35.
10. Arab Urban Development Institute, *Arriyadh: Madinat almustaqbal* (Riyadh: King Saud University Press, 1987, in Arabic), p.77.
11. When a high official at the ADA was asked why architects and planners were not named in their publications, his first reaction was surprise, suggesting that he was not aware of it. This could be a matter of bureaucratic oversight. However, the ADA's publications are also framed in a manner to show the homogeneity of work it oversees, and it may not be in its interest to promote individual architects, who it sees as mere service providers. Instead of highlighting the prestige that is often attached to buildings through the involvement of star architects, a more toned-down approach is taken.
12. I. Aba al-Khail, "Arriyadh . . . tajrubbat altatawur al'hadhari," *Al-Benaa*, Vol.15 No.89 (1996), p.38 (in Arabic).
13. Interview with Abdulrahman al-Seri, Director of Urban and Cultural Development at the ADA, Riyadh, 2006.
14. G. De Gaury, *Arabia Phoenix* (London: George G. Harrap and Company, Ltd., 1946), p.88; W. Facey, *Riyadh: The Old City: From Its origins until the 1950s* (London: Immel Publishing, 1992), p.311; S. al-Hathloul, *The Arab-Muslim City: Tradition, Continuity and Change in the Physical Environment* (Riyadh: Dar al-Sahan, 1996), p.158; and HCTDA, *Suwar min tarikh almurabba'* (Riyadh: HCTDA, 2002, in Arabic), p.8.
15. M. Mochi, *A Journey of an Italian Diplomat across Saudi Arabia in 1941*, Angelo Pesce and Pier Giovanni Donini, trans. and eds. (Riyadh: al-Turath, 2003), p.58.
16. HCTDA, *Suwar min tarikh almurabba'*, pp.8–9.
17. Al-Hathloul, *The Arab-Muslim City*, pp.158–60; and Facey, *Riyadh*, pp.311–12.
18. Construction outside the city walls was a mark of a newfound security that only came about a few years after the unification of Saudi Arabia in 1932.
19. W. Facey, *Back to Earth: Adobe Building in Saudi Arabia* (Riyadh: al-Turath, 1997), p.108.
20. G. De Gaury, *Arabian Journey and Other Desert Travels* (London: George G. Harrap and Company, Ltd., 1950), pp.44–45.
21. HCTDA, *Suwar min tarikh almurabba'*, pp.2,12–13,15–16.
22. Interview with Farhat Tashkandi, Riyadh, 2006.
23. Municipality of Ar-Riyadh, *Ar-Riyadh: History and Development* (Riyadh: al-Turath, 1999), p.144.
24. Mochi, *Journey of an Italian Diplomat*, p.57; and W.A. Rugh, *Riyadh: History and Guide* (Dammam, Saudi Arabia: al-Mutawa Press, 1969), p.42.
25. Facey, *Riyadh*, p.314.
26. Interview with Abdulrahman al-Seri.
27. Ibid.
28. Interviews with Ali al-Shuaibi, Riyadh, 2006, and Abdulrahman al-Seri.
29. R. Bödeker, "King Abdulaziz Historical Center," *Garten + Landschaft*, No.10, (2000, in German), p.23.
30. U. Kultermann, *Contemporary Architecture in the Arab States: Renaissance of a Region* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999), p.156.
31. T. Boddy, "Critique: Nation Building," *Canadian Architect*, April 1999, pp.27–33; and Moriyma & Teshima Architects website, accessed 2008.
32. D. Parker, "Opening up of Green Centre for Riyadh," *The Architects' Journal*, September 2, 1999, pp.6–7.
33. Ibid., p.6.
34. Boddy, "Critique: Nation Building," p.31.
35. Arriyadh Development Authority (ADA), *The King Abdulaziz Historical Centre* (Riyadh: Arriyadh Development Authority, 2000), p.58.
36. Ibid., p.56.
37. J. Steele, *The Architecture of Rasem Badran: Narratives on People and Place* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), p.161; and ADA, *The King Abdulaziz Historical Centre*, p.116.
38. J. Steele, "The Cosmic Connection," *World Architecture*, March 1996, pp.52–53.
39. Steele, *The Architecture of Rasem Badran*, pp.20,174.
40. Ibid., p.13.
41. Bödeker, "King Abdulaziz Historical Center," p.19.
42. R. Badran, "On the Poetics of Place: The Communicability of an Architectural Image," in A. Petruccioli and K.K. Pirani, eds., *Understanding Islamic Architecture* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), pp.105–10.
43. Moriyma & Teshima Architects website, accessed 2008.
44. Boddy, "Critique: Nation Building"; Bödeker, "King Abdulaziz Historical Center"; Steele, *The Architecture of Rasem Badran*; and Parker, "Opening up of Green Centre for Riyadh."
45. ADA, *The King Abdulaziz Historical Centre*, p.31.