

## **Tradition stereotypes and cultural resistance through building forms: the case of Yemen**

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*Estereótipos da tradição e resistência cultural pela forma dos edifícios: o caso do Yemen<sup>1</sup>*

### **Resumo**

Até Maio de 1990 o que é hoje a República do Yemen dividia-se entre dois estados separados: a República Árabe do Yemen também conhecida como Yemen do Norte e a República Popular Democrática do Yemen, ou Yemen do Sul. A Reunificação implicou uma complexa e delicada distribuição de poderes em que o presidente do Yemen do Norte ficava o presidente do novo país e o presidente do Yemen do Sul o seu vice-presidente. Isto era um acordo difícil de se aguentar e em pouco tempo o vice presidente chefou uma tentativa de secessão que levou a uma curta Guerra civil ganha pelo presidente estabelecido.

A partir daí a intenção óbvia de criar um carácter nacional homogéneo manifestou-se em acções como a transfusão da população do sul para norte e vice-versa. Do ponto de vista específico de uma gramática arquitectónica, um dos aspectos mais evidentes para um visitante agora é a difusão de estereótipos característicos das cidades do norte e que parece estarem a ser muito bem aceites, por muito estranhos que apareçam no tecido consolidado pelas maneiras próprias de construir no sul. Percebe-

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se que se apresentam como uma versão deste tempo de um “Estilo Yemenita” que é suposto sobrepor-se à enorme variedade de tradições regionais de construção, tal como foram documentadas por este autor em publicações anteriores.

Contudo isto não é uma regra geral; e um caso exemplar é o do Hadramaute onde uma sólida tradição de construção em terra ao serviço de uma linguagem arquitectónica com uma forte identidade não perdeu nenhum do seu vigor. Isto pode-se explicar por várias razões mas há uma que é abertamente expressa: o sentido de identidade dos Hadramitas e a resistência que parecem opor a quaisquer influências que ameacem a relativa independência que mantiveram ao longo da sua história.

Este artigo tenta ilustrar o confronto entre os estereótipos do que deseja ser uma representação de “arquitectura nacional” e os sinais identitários de formas e técnicas, umas consolidadas outras em evolução, tal como se observaram numa área significativa do Hadramaute durante o trabalho de campo levado a cabo em 2006.

### **Abstract**

Until May 1990 the present day Yemen Republic was divided into two separate states: the Yemen Arab Republic also known as North Yemen and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, or South Yemen. The Re-unification involved a fairly complex and delicate balance of power where the president of North Yemen became the president of the new country and the president of South Yemen its vice-president. This agreement was hard to maintain and, shortly after, an attempt at secession led by the vice-president ended with the victory of the established president of the country.

From there on, the obvious intention of homogenising a national character took such forms as the transfusion of southern population to the north and vice versa. From the specific point of view of architectural idioms one of the aspects that strikes the visitor in the present is the diffusion of stereotypes that were characteristically northern and urban, to most of the southern half and which seem to have been gladly accepted however alien they might appear in the architectural fabrics consolidated by their own ways of building until then. They tend to be presented as the contemporary version of a “Yemeni Style” which is supposed to overlay the enormous variety of regional traditions of building, as they were documented by this author in previous published surveys.

Yet this is not always the rule; and one case in point is that of the Hadhramawt where a solid tradition of earth construction at the service of an architectural language with a strong identity has not lost any of its vigour. This may be explained by a variety of reasons but one, at least, is openly expressed: the Hadhramis sense of identity and the resistance they seem to oppose to influences that may be a threat to the relative independence they have maintained throughout their history.

This article attempts to illustrate the confrontation between the stereotypes of what appears to be intended as a representation of “national architecture” and the identity traits of forms and techniques, both consolidated and in evolution, as they were observed throughout a significant area of the Hadhramawt during a field survey undertaken in the year 2006.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May of 1990 the Wahida – the Reunification of the former Yemen Arab Republic, or North Yemen, with the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, or South Yemen (Map) - was formalized, after more than 15 years of negotiations full of dramatic episodes.

But Yemen, as a homogeneous cultural identity extending from the Asir (now in Saudi Arabia), into the more diffuse areas bordering Oman, has been there long before Islam. It coincides, in fact, with a fairly autonomous geographic entity, the mountainous L that peaks at the Southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula and retains there the great Arabian Desert, at the Rub’ al Khali, the Empty Quarter. The foothills along the desert sheltered, for more than a millennium, the pre-Islamic kingdoms that flourished with the control of this segment of the incense road from the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean.

After Islam, the history of Yemen is made of periods of political hegemony for the whole region and

fragmentations dictated by tribal differences and, to a minor extent, by confessional preferences - Shiites predominate in the north, Sunnites in the south - which could be overcome to fight a common enemy, as it was the case with the Turks in the 16<sup>th</sup> and again in the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The borders of North and South Yemen, as they existed in 1990, were defined in 1934, by whatever territory the ruler of North Yemen could secure through his tenacious fight, first against the Turks and then against the alliance between the Saudis from the north and the British from the south, who had gone as far north as they could after they had taken Aden in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The erosion of the revolutionary Marxist principles that had made the South independent from the British in 1968, had, 20 years later, provoked a climate of political and social dissatisfaction, noticeable also by the number of South Yemenis escaping to the North. Finally, at the same time the Berlin Wall collapsed, and for the same reasons, reunification became viable.

The political arrangement found in 1990 placed the president of North Yemen as the president of the new Republic of Yemen, the president of South Yemen as the vice-president, and a balanced distribution of ministers from north and south. Sana'a became the administrative capital but Aden would increase its importance as the main harbor and economic pole.



Map. Yemen before May 1990, showing the areas taken by the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY).

Less than three months later, Iraq invaded Kuwait and the Gulf War followed. Iraq was one of Yemen's partners in an economic confederation (which included also Egypt and Jordan), and the most evident supporter of the Reunification. Understandably, and contrarily to Egypt and Jordan, Yemen did not change sides; as such, it was heavily penalized, among other ways, by suffering the expulsion of all the Yemeni immigrants in Saudi Arabia, with significant consequences in revenue loss and reintegration. On the other hand the former president of South Yemen resented his secondary role after the Wahida. The unstable social and economic situation of the country appeared like fertile ground to proclaim secession and, in 1994, another brief civil war followed, which was won by the faction favorable to reunification, led by the northern President. From then on, and in spite of the adverse forces consequent to the Gulf War and the September 11<sup>th</sup>, the consolidation of the unified country proceeded steadily. Still, in a context too complex to explain in few words, other forces now woke to what one might call "claims to autonomous identity", based on a strong and long-lasting tribal structure and isolation from State representations. This was a delicate ingredient,

which involved demands and concessions in areas holding such new vital resources as oil.

### **INDIGENOUS HOUSE TYPES AND BUILDING MATERIALS**

The diversity and quality of Yemen's built space is now well divulged and has become one of the country's main cultural assets. In former surveys, confined to North Yemen, I distinguished constructive groups based on material for the walls – straw, raw or baked earth and stone – and generally coinciding with natural and cultural regions. Within these groups there were variations, concerning decorations, fenestration, and so forth. Now, in the present unified political entity, there could be reason to, in turn, agglomerate major constructive groups into “western” and “eastern” corresponding to diverse geographies and cultural backgrounds.

Thus, in the Red Sea coastal strip (the Tihama) compounds of thatch houses predominate in the northern half (Al Zuhra being the best known example) whereas compounds of baked brick buildings predominate in the south, with Zabid as the reference. Towards the Gulf of Aden, similar compounds appear in simpler raw earth blocks. Urban coastal typologies, multi-storey buildings in stone and baked brick, reflect the influences of political or cultural occupations: the Turks along the Red Sea, the British in Aden and, in general, the presence of Indian settlers, merchants and craftsmen.

The western and southwestern mountains are the realms of stone construction. Elementary single and two storey types appear, but the most widespread typology, as emblematic as the peaks in which the

houses are sited and the terraced slopes they overlook, is the multi-storey “tower house”, with a space organization that varies little from north to south: nuclear family units, with the ground floor for animals, the floor above for reception and the top floors for family rooms (Fig.1).



Fig1. Al Radma. Although contaminations from the 1970s on are evident, this settlement is representative of the prevalence of the architectural forms of the western mountains

Formal homogeneity is revealed in the way the stone is hewn and in the persistence of fanlights based on arched openings with alabaster (*qamaryia*) or colour glass in a stucco tracery (*takhrim*). Towards the south, however, with a few cases still found in Taiz (but abundantly in the towns of the southern coast), this tracery may be made in wood. Wall decorations, as inlays based on quadrangular elements aligned and combined in friezes, wall panels and around openings, may identify areas of influence; as may entrance doors, surmounted by a perforated arched tympanum especially in the urban or proto-urban context. In general the profile of these houses is rectangular or only

slightly tapered, sometimes with crenellated roof parapets with raised corners.

Throughout the central plateaus in the spine of this mountainous chain, raw earth in blocks is the predominant material, with strong affirmations north of Sana'a, in Amran, for instance, and, towards the southeast, with the best examples in Rada', where the fanlights in large single or dual alabaster panes are a distinctive feature. In bulk and space organization, earth block buildings are similar to those in stone and may permeate areas where the latter predominate; and combinations of both materials are common.

Baked bricks in the mountains appear as an urban material, found in and around Sana'a, where the showiest manifestations exist, enhanced by white plaster, Dhamar, more subdued but with an equivalent quality of craftsmanship, and Rada', where combinations with raw earth blocks are a characteristic feature.

In the very north and northeastern plateaus, the technique of earth construction takes a different form: coursed clay (*zabur*), in tapered towers, with Sa'da near the Saudi border, and Barat, closer to the desert, displaying the most elaborate examples. A variation of this technique is found in Najran and Asir, conquered by Saudi Arabia in 1934.

It is in the southeast that built form appears very distinctive from what is found in the west and southwest and with a stronger parenthood with the architecture that developed in the desert fringes all the way into Saudi Arabia.

Extending from the desolate landscape south of Rada' through Al Baydha and into the mountain peaks of Yafi', where the most splendid examples are found, tower houses are built mostly in schist, tall, severe and



with an accentuated tapered profile that the raised corners on the roof enhance. They have also a different type of fenestration, with quadrangular fanlights and, often, elaborate woodwork and wall decorations, exploring the possibilities of shale, or with simple geometric and floral motifs applied to the whole walls in lime plaster (*nurah*). An apparent variation of this model, occurring in the same areas, appears with a stockier volume, but is similar to it in all other aspects. Wood carved or painted windows and doors are current, contrarily to what happens northwards, where, traditionally, the wood was merely treated with mustard seed oil.

Construction in earth blocks, dominant in the desert fringes from Marib to the Hadhramawt, but also co-existing with areas of stone predominance, takes a similar bulk (Fig2), but the most current wall decorations consist of discreet relieves in friezes or bordering a larger triangle above the entrance doors.



Fig 2. Haban. Characteristic tower house along the desert fringes

## **THE IMPACT OF NEW TYPES AND MATERIALS**

This was basically the situation as it prevailed till the early seventies.

The introduction of industrial materials, such as concrete frame structures with concrete block walls, is more clearly land-marked in the North by the Egyptian contribution in support of the Republican side, during and after the Civil War (1962/ 1968) that marked the end of the millenary imamate rule. In the early nineteen seventies, the new centers of North Yemen's main cities – Sana'a, Taiz and Hodeida - displayed buildings of flats, made of concrete, rendered and painted and, in general, of a quality that horrified those fascinated by the indigenous architecture of the country.

It is possible that the effort, made by well meaning foreign experts, to rehabilitate the quality of traditional models, has somehow influenced the course of events from the mid 1970s on. At any rate, the erection of public buildings in stone, interpreting traditional languages with a modern touch, may have set a pattern; and stone, as a representative of the qualities of North Yemeni urban architecture, was soon widely accepted.

But the same did not happen with earth construction.

Raw earth blocks were associated to rusticity and underdevelopment by the classes that emerged after the Republican Revolution in 1968; and the prototypes built in Sana'a, for the living quarters of qualified professionals, to convince the authorities and the population in general that this was a sound and aesthetically capable material, were not eloquent enough. Thus, in less than a decade, concrete blocks for cheaper construction replaced raw earth block,

occasionally maintaining the forms of earlier models (as it happened consistently in the Rada' area); but, more generally, new forms, however influenced by the revival of a traditional formulary, followed new materials.

Coursed clay was still active in the north and northeast, by the mid 1980s, but its cost in Sa'da was higher than that of stone, which was already well infiltrated in the new townscape.

Baked brick, on the other hand, lost favor, apart from isolated cases betraying the classicist tastes of the house owners, some minarets and a few oddities attempting to adapt to a contemporary taste. Thus, it was understandable to predict that earth, as a building material, in whatever form it took, was soon to disappear in North Yemen.

Stonewalls, thus, mostly combined with concrete frames, were definitely assumed as the prestige material, both for housing and for commercial and institutional buildings. New decorative options developed, brought in by the convergence of languages of different origins, based on juxtaposition of different colors of stone (Fig.3) and on the stylization of traditional motifs in inlays; mechanically cut stone, introduced in the mid 1980s, facilitated decorative exploits.

The fanlights made of color glass on stucco became more popular than ever; and new patterns and even overall shapes were multiplied for a wide range of applications.

By the end of the nineteen eighties, it was clear that the "international style" would be aberrant in the country's context and few were the examples that strictly adhered to it. Instead the adoption of a formulary developed in

the main towns – Taiz and Sana'a – appeared like the emergence of a national style,



Fig 3. Damt. The exuberance of color stone combinations, in the beginning of the 21st century in a former formally severe settlement

enriched with local, however naïve, interpretations, and the more erudite contributions made by an increasing number of Yemeni or foreign architectural designers working on a context that was no longer the exclusive realm of traditional master masons (Fig 4).



Fig 4. Sana'a. Architects at work on interpretations of traditional models for institutional buildings

## **NATIONAL AND REGIONAL MANIFESTATIONS OF STYLE**

In the beginning of 2006, I had my first opportunity of doing some extensive traveling throughout the South. I could then confirm how former political borders were, in fact, artificial in relation to building typologies and how, as it was pointed before, if there were reasons to trace a line dividing distinct building personalities, this would rather be to differentiate coastal, western, northern and eastern groups. I could also see how the formulary developed in the main cities was now creeping around what were once the isolated manifestations of local expressions and filling in spaces which once were not considered fit for permanent occupation.

On the other hand I was satisfied to see that some of my pessimistic forecasts were not fulfilled, especially those regarding earth construction in any form. It is true that, in former North Yemen, raw earth construction, both in blocks and coursed clay, was a thing of the past and its recovery would not depend on the population's attitudes. But, at the time, I had no direct knowledge of the vitality of earth block construction in the South, namely in the Hadhramawt's whole area of influence, which, contrarily to what happened in the western mountains, was now as active as ever (Fig 5).

Then, I was surprised by the literal resurrection of baked brick as a fashionable material, in Sana'a and elsewhere, because, lighter and cheaper than stone, it offered the possibility of going to extraordinary decorative extremes (Fig 6).



Fig 5. Near Sayun, Hadhramawt. Raw earth block construction here is as active as ever before

Interestingly enough, the craftsmen I met in Sana'a came mostly from Yarim – which had no previous tradition of construction in fired bricks. Also, industrial hollow ceramic bricks were now competing with concrete blocks in the north and more so in the south where the technique was known before.



Fig 6. Sana'a. Baked brick as a means of flamboyance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the foreground, the roofline of an older and more subdued option

This was part of the formal syncretism now in display in the main towns, set by Sana'a, the capital, and Taiz, the largest exporter of certain types of stone hewing and combinations of pattern and color. Most of it stuck to the conventions that had been well defined 20 years before, the main ingredients of which were the affirmation of the decorative capabilities of stone combined with *takhrim* fanlights and plaster carving in interiors (Fig7).

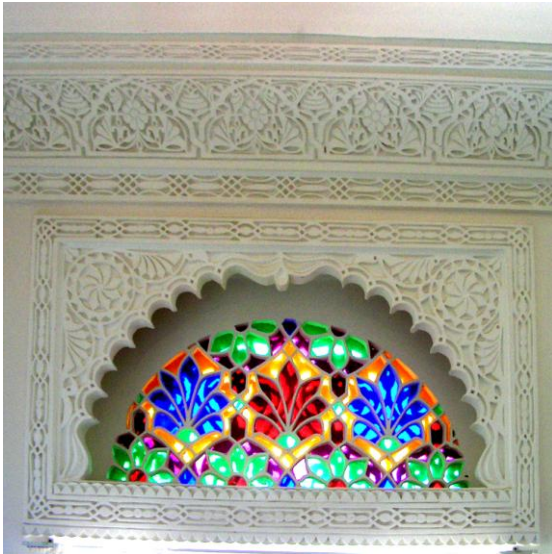


Fig 7. Sana'a suburbs. Contemporary plaster carving and color glass fanlights following strict classic models

And even when buildings were entirely made in concrete or ceramic block, as it progressively happened later for more standard construction, stylistic affectations were basically maintained (Fig 8).

Openings, increasingly offered a fertile ground for exploration, with new materials (such as aluminum for window frames and for the fanlights) and new shapes (Fig 9), often bringing in a vocabulary of exogenous “conventional Islamic” architecture, such as peaked and horseshoe arches.



Fig 8. Al Habilayin. Mechanically cut stone making the façade of conventional concrete structures

Typological changes were also in course; if the nuclear family house still prevailed (the single storey villas which mushroomed in the late 1970s, grew in height to look like modern versions of pre-existing suburban tower houses), buildings of flats, still so unpopular in the late 1970s, proliferated, one of the reasons being the accommodation of the migratory flows that converged in the main towns of North Yemen, about and after the Reunification and the Gulf War.





Fig 9. Sana'a suburbs. A rich man's villa

Population transfusions between North and South were encouraged as part of the political consolidation of the state. At the beginning of this century, it was clear that the government's effort to guarantee cohesion in the whole country and secure stability in sensitive areas (which had always been reluctant to accept central control, be it from Sana'a or Aden), brought with it a significant degree of migration from the North. This also meant the exportation of building conventions that, however adapted to local imagination and the dissemination of industrial materials, revealed their affiliation to the stereotypes developed in the axis San'a/ Taiz. To this, one should add the re-location of the large number of returned emigrants, in consequence of the Gulf War, who found quarters in the countryside and built along those models.

The exposure by the South, after a long period of isolation (and, to some, stagnation) to the models and craftsmen from the North, created interesting variations, reflecting an even stronger taste for decoration.

For example, *takhrim* for fanlights, became a pretext for plaster carving, the nervures being thicker than the delicate tracery seen in older buildings of Sana'a (Fig 10).



Fig 10. Al Habilayin. The tracery of fanlights used as a pretext for carving and coloring

It also could be painted. The amount of glass was, in this way, much reduced and this became an element to be seen from the outside rather than the support of light filtered by color glass in the interior. Then, golden aluminum for the tracery was definitely a choice of the south, already felt in Ibb much before the Wahida was a fact. Metal doors, which in the north had reverted to relatively plain and standard models, in spite of the imaginative debuts of the early seventies, here offered now elaborate examples of iron smithy, with abundance of forms and color and narrative panels. Finally, industrial color applied directly on the walls exuberantly expressed a taste that was often latent in older constructions.

In the once homogeneous built landscape of the Southeast, this often appears like an impertinent intromission (Fig 11).



Fig 11. Near Al Baydha. A new house and a pre-existing settlement

Yet, and once again, outside the main centers, into the mountains and towards the east, contrarily to what happened in the north where most of the rural landscape was contaminated by this, local models and, more often than not, local materials vigorously prevail in new constructions (Fig 12). It is true that adaptations to the offers and techniques of the present can be recognizable; but houses in schist or earth blocks, however adapted to contemporary schemes, were being built in the same way as their forefathers.

The architectural identity of the region, then, appears sufficiently strong to compete with the models generated in an alien, urbanized, context, no matter how ubiquitous these are. And this is the more remarkable when considering the vitality of architecture in earth blocks, contradicting a tendency as clearly set in the rest



Fig12. Al Laba'aus, Yafi'. A modern version of a an old model

of the country as, in fact, most of the world. Perhaps one of the reasons is the relative isolation of the area, intentional or not; and it may be a question of time for industrial materials to wipe out the virtues of traditional construction. Nevertheless, some observers feel that this means that Hadhramis are as proud of the quality of their architecture as they are conscious that maintaining the difference and refusing the vocabulary of a "national style" underlines political autonomy.

In this respect one may speculate on the importance of the recognition from the outside world of the value of Yemen's patrimony. Both Sana'a and Shibam entered UNESCO's architectural heritage list; this, in turn, brought in foreign aid for their conservation and the government's deep involvement; and both won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture for the quality of the ensemble and of the rehabilitation work done there. In consequence, they may become permanent references for an architecture that, no matter how deviated, still sees itself mirrored in them. And if Sana'a was a paradigm for the architecture of the mountains,

Shibam is in the position of taking a similar role in the southeast (Fig 13).



Fig 13. Shibam, chosen by the UNESCO and by the Aga Khan Award of Architecture as a model of what was and should be.

## READING LIST

This paper being based only on direct observation, erudite references are out of order. However the list below provides an elemental framework for the understanding of the country's geography and culture.

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