

THE OTHER ARCHITECTURE

Working in the lengthening shadow of the region's construction boom, architect and author Salma Samar Damluji has been instrumental in the preservation of traditional buildings. Hanan Nasser meets her.

'MY WORK WITH [Islamic architecture] is like a love affair,' confesses Iraqi-born architect Salma Samar Damluji, who has been instrumental in restoring, researching and protecting Islamic and mud-brick architecture in the face of expansionism and commercialism in the Arab world. Also a prolific author – and a technical reviewer and nominator for the prestigious Aga Khan Architectural Award to boot – Damluji has spent more than 20 years spearheading a campaign to rehabilitate traditional architecture in Yemen, Bahrain, Oman, Morocco and elsewhere. She describes this work as 'the "other architecture": an architecture that engages in design, research, thought and social process governed by economic and cultural restraints.' It is, she says, neither corporate, nor commercial, and certainly not mediocre.

The Middle East, and especially the Gulf, is witnessing a construction

boom, attracting development projects worth billions of dollars. Between 2000 and 2005 the number of residential buildings in Dubai grew by more than 42 per cent to 79,000, according to the 2007 UAE Yearbook. But Damluji is a harsh critic of Arab governments for their preoccupation with 'expensive brands' and 'signature names', rather than establishing efficient institutions to manage what is being created.

'Architecture is politics,' says Damluji. 'Building cities is a political decision; creating legislation for preserving, for safeguarding, cultural heritage is a political decision. At the end of the day, nobody cares if Dubai, or Abu Dhabi or Doha has a cultural reference or a core. Because its cultural reference is going to be the future.' And in the meantime, she laments, 'layers and layers of cultural heritage and fabric architecture' are being destroyed.



Left: Al Hajarayan, at the mouth of Wadi Daw'an. Above: Salma Samar Damluji with Abdullah Ahmad Said Bugshan at the new Ras Furdum Resort site. Opposite: Nazwa Fort.

Not all is negative, however: Amman has just won the World Leadership Award in town planning, while Yemen won the 2007 Aga Khan Architecture Award for the rehabilitation of the city of Shibam. Meanwhile, Dubai Municipality, through a committee created in 1995, is funding projects for the preservation and documentation of architectural heritage in the emirate. Since then, the body has undertaken several projects including the rehabilitation of two of Dubai's important quarters: al Bastakiyyah and al Shandaghah.

PHOTOGRAPHER: SS DAMLUJI, THE ARCHITECTURE OF YEMEN / FAYSAL BIBI / SS DAMLUJI, THE ARCHITECTURE OF OMAN



Al Bastakiyyah, which dates back to the early 20th century, contains Dubai's largest concentration of traditional buildings, including what is believed to be its oldest, the Fahidi Fort. The plan is to rehabilitate some 50 houses and turn the area into a 'tourist village' with a museum, a cultural centre, restaurants and an art gallery. The municipality is also planning to reconstruct 140 houses in al Shandaghah quarter, which was completely demolished some five years ago, except for the house of Dubai ruler Shaikh Sa'id bin Maktoum. The house, also from the early 20th century, has been turned into a museum.

Damluji cites Jordan and Lebanon as examples of Arab countries which have institutions for town planning and architecture. 'There is a movement of architects in Jordan that I think are working toward a different kind of architecture – as in Lebanon, which has some very tal-

'Nobody cares if Dubai or Abu Dhabi has a cultural core. Because the cultural reference is the future.'

ented and good architects, and landscape architects and designers who are working on private projects.'

She describes the reconstruction of downtown Beirut as the only successful project in the Middle East for many years. One key ingredient to the project, she believes, was its financing by a private developer: the late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, whose company Solidere bought up parcels of land in the area in the early 1990s and reconstructed the town. (However, the Solidere project has been criticised on many levels by a number of Lebanese involved in urban planning, notably Bernard Khoury.)

Right: Masna'at Ba Surrah, Daw'an, Hadramut Province. Below: Entrance to the house of Ahmad Ba Surrah, Masna'at Daw'an. Opposite: Facade of the Jabrin Palace, Oman. Far right: The house of Muqaddam Ahmad Omar Ba Surrah, Masna'at Daw'an.



Damluji discovered her passion for Islamic and mud-brick architecture when she worked with the prominent Egyptian architect Hassan Fathi in the 1970s and 1980s in Cairo and Upper Egypt. Fathi is renowned for his contribution to Egypt's modern architecture with his rediscovery of traditional methods of mud-brick construction. His buildings, which include schools, mosques and theatres, are made exclusively of clay.

During her first experience in Yemen, between 1981 and 1989, Damluji was instrumental in setting up architectural records of mud-brick construction and in working with master builders on the architectural art of southern Yemen. She documented the principles of design and town planning in Shibam and Tarim in her book *The Valley of Mud Brick Architecture, Shibam & Tarim in Wadi Hadramut*. (She returns to the subject of Yemen in her latest book, *The Architecture of Yemen from Yafi' to Hadramut*, launched last November at London's 'Arabia Felix: the Architecture of Yemen', an exhibition shedding light on the country's cultural and architectural heritage.)



Next, she turned her attention to Morocco, working between 1990 and 1996 with the craftsmen of Zillij in Fez, Marrakech and elsewhere. After finishing her book *The Architecture of Oman* in late 1998, she then spent an entire year on a rehabilitation project for a town called Adm, in the interior of Oman. She chose Adm 'because it has a beautiful old town and because the Sultan and his

PHOTOGRAPHER: SS DAMLUJI, THE ARCHITECTURE OF YEMEN (3) / SS DAMLUJI, THE ARCHITECTURE OF OMAN



family originally came from this town'. Damluji had planned to tie Adm to coastal towns providing a commercial route for craftspeople whose creations included metal, silver and gold work, jewellery, weaving, pottery and woodwork. But the project collapsed in 2000 when the Diwan of the Sultan's Court did not finance the plan. Now Damluji is about to start work on a new project

in the Yemeni city of Daw'an. It is an excellent example of how the private rather than the public sector can have a role in financing the rehabilitation of traditional towns.

The site, which belongs to the Basurrah family, consists of 12 mud-brick houses dating to the early part of the 20th century and will be converted into a boutique hotel. The project is being funded by a private



developer and will be leased by the owners for ten years. Work should now have just begun and is expected to be finished in 2009 at a cost of some \$300 million.

Damluji sees a dire need for governments in the Gulf to invest more in restoring the culture of communities in Yemen, where many of their tribes came from. Her concern for Yemen, she explains, stems from the fact that the country is a 'living fabric'. Qatar, she says, is an example of a government in the Gulf that has come to realise the importance of protecting the heritage in the Arabian Peninsula. 'The Qataris are investing millions of dollars in sustaining and bringing out to the world the culture of Saba, Tamnaa and Baraqish, in terms of archaeology.'

Damluji is keeping mum about another project she is negotiating with her publishers and other parties. Somewhat mysteriously, and with a playful smile, she says the work will involve 'a big region which runs across from Spain to China, and there is a common denominator like a thread in between, and it has to do with architecture'. Watch this space. — END