



Arab Contemporary Architecture, culture and identity

31 January – 4 May 2014

In 1992, in connection with an expansion of the Holy Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, the German firm SL Rasch created a mechanical parasol construction that ensures shade and climate control over a 2000 sq. m. courtyard. The parasols are furled at night, so the courtyard is cooled down. By day they are unfurled to hold back the cool air and give shade from the strong sun.

Humblebæk, 15 January 2014

PRESS OPENING THURSDAY 30 JANUARY 2014 AT 10:00.

On Thursday 30 January 2014 Louisiana Museum of Modern Art opens the exhibition *Arab Contemporary – Architecture, culture and identity* to the press. Louisiana's Director, Poul Erik Tøjner, will welcome the press, after which curator Kjeld Kjeldsen will introduce the exhibition. At 12 noon Louisiana invites the press to lunch in Louisiana Café. Registration for the press lunch is necessary by e-mail to press@louisiana.dk, no later than by Tuesday 28 January!

Arab Contemporary is the second exhibition in the series "Architecture, culture and identity" – and is a successor to the exhibition *New Nordic*, which Louisiana showed in 2012. The series is about how architecture is a bearer of identity and helps to shape the cultural distinctiveness of a country or a region. The exhibition features architecture and art as well as documentary film and photography.

The Arab world is first and foremost united by language, but there are other shared features that point both to a particular understanding of space and to a visual culture that can be traced from calligraphy through simple construction elements to architecture on the truly grand scale. The exhibition *Arab Contemporary* presents several of these common features for consideration with the wish that an image of 'the Arab' will emerge in stories from places where significant development is taking place: from the Mashreq, which means 'the East' or 'where the sun rises' (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Israel, Palestine and to some extent Egypt and the Sudan) and from the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain) to the Maghreb, 'the West' or 'where the sun sets' (Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania).

The exhibition spotlights among other things new cities such as Dubai, old Yemenitic civilizations and new architectural projects that relate to the desert as 'place'. It shows how studios like *Ateliers Jean Nouvel*, Paris, *X-Architects*, Dubai, and *Henning Larsen Architects*, Copenhagen, intervene in the region with new interpretations. A topical focal point for the exhibition is the relationship between private and public space, which in recent years has been undergoing constant transformation socially, politically and architecturally.

The Arab world consists of 22 countries with the only common feature that the principal language is Arabic. There are other languages than Arabic, other religions than Islam are practiced, the landscape varies – and this also influences lifestyle and architecture. It is not possible to speak of Arab culture in the singular. But the exhibition paints a broad picture and draws certain lines by pinpointing particular areas and deals with a number of themes which together shed light on the development of meaning-bearing elements in the culture of this part of the world.

What is Arab identity to you?

There are many factors that help to invalidate the exotic dream-image of the Orient and the related counter-images. In the exhibition a number of cultural personalities give varied answers to the question "What is Arab identity to you?", creating a heterogeneous picture of a region undergoing great changes: *The Arabian Nights* and *The Arab Spring* – great contrasts appear when one attempts to point to common lines and narratives in such a large region.

The majlis – the semi-private reception room

Another common feature in Arab culture is the interconnectedness that pertains in the use of ornamentation – from the imagery of Arab carpets, which traditionally frame any indoor space, to ornamented tiling in the courtyards; from the curving characters of the calligraphy to the architecture, where whole walls and facades are formed with complex patterns that arise both as part of the construction of the building and as interiors in the form of semi-transparent room-partitioning screens called *mashrabiya*.

Another shared feature is the spatial organization of everyday life which seems to take form irrespective of the many differences from country to country. In contrast with the open and fluid spaces that one often sees in Nordic architecture, Arab architecture and culture are based on a strict separation of private and public space and the social functions within the *many* walls of the home. The home is divided into smaller, functionally specific spaces: the women's space, the

men's space, the host's space and the guest's space. The traditional semi-private reception room, the *majlis*, where the host meets his guest, is – especially for the western observer – a characteristic image of the way private space is managed. Although the *majlis* is no longer a permanent element in modern Arab architecture, the phenomenon shows how the organization of rituals and habits is associated with a physical setting, and how privacy is one of the cornerstones of Arab culture.

My father's house – private space

The installation *My father's house* – the exhibition's Arab house – invites visitors to follow narratives about the people who live there, and shows a number of architectural elements, each of which is in its own way a key to the understanding of traditional Arab culture. Traditions change in the encounter with other cultures. The *mashrabiya* walls, which are an important element in Arab architecture, change with modern construction techniques. Today we see a tendency for several Arab architects to return to the old virtues and build further on a strong culture that apparently will not simply permit itself to be changed by the encounter with the globalized world and its main architectural currents.

Public space in new interpretations

Public space and the public sphere are perhaps the most important theme of discussion at present for many Arab citizens. The Arab art scene is in full flower and occupied streets and squares during The Arab Spring in 2011, and the Tahrir Square functioned as a meeting place for citizens and artists. In the social media like Facebook and Twitter, too, a new Arab public sphere has seen the light of day. But architecture and architects are dependent on economics and the will to build anew, and we are still only seeing very few examples of Arab architectural projects that produce new potential social life in public space.

Three drawing studios

There is a long-standing tradition of foreign architecture in the Arab world. In the 1930s the Iraqi Government invited several modernist architects to build in Baghdad. Le Corbusier was inspired by the traditional Arab architecture, just as Jean Nouvel and many others are today. Danish architects like Jørn Utzon, Vilhelm Wohlert, Henning Larsen and Knud Holscher have also created important works in the Arab world which are today considered some of the best examples of architectural cultural encounters.

Architecture can be seen as a language that speaks of the place where it stands and the thoughts that lie behind it. In the meeting between the foreign architect and the Arab context a new language or a new dialect perhaps arises. In the exhibition, each of three studios – Henning Larsen, Ateliers Jean Nouvel and X-Architects – offers a proposal for an architectural transformation of Arab culture, with special emphasis on new public spaces.

From *Genius loci* to *Genius logo*

The desert covers about 80 percent of the Arab world. This harsh, impassable landscape is one of the fundamental premises of Arab culture and architecture. The tents and simple caravanserais of the nomads are the prevalent architectural form. In this fluid landscape life relates to the most permanent features, the *wadis*, periodically arising watercourses and oases. Settlement takes place at the *edge* of the desert, not *in* it. Thus the mud-brick city *Shibam*, also called the *Manhattan of the Desert*, lies at the edge of the Yemeni desert. Shibam was built in the sixteenth century and is one of the finest examples of Arab desert architecture. The almost magical beauty of the city and its simple but impressive construction technology are today inspiring architects and urban planners all over the world, and thus can be experienced at the exhibition, with architects who work with the desert as context and with the *Genius loci* – the spirit of the place – as their guiding principle.

At the opposite extreme, especially in the Arabian Peninsula, we see a building boom that is to a great extent driven by property speculation and 'branding'. The many skyscraper projects that are mushrooming are an expression of a global market logic that totally ignores the local climatic conditions. *Genius loci* has become *Genius logo* – where the architecture is touted as an icon for the global spirit of marketing. In Dubai architects are creating so-called 'Google Earth architecture' with among other things the construction of artificial landscapes, and Mecca, the holy city of the Muslims, is changing as new luxury hotels take over the best vantage points. These opposing scenarios, too, are part of the exhibition's focus on the *Arab Contemporary*.

Participants in the exhibition include the architects *Aziza Chaouni*, *Sahel Al Hiyari*, *Jean Nouvel*, *X-Architects* and *Henning Larsen Architects*, the Egyptian visual artist *Mounir Fatmi*, the Saudi visual artist *Ahmed Mater*, the art

historian and graphic artist *Bahia Shehab* and the Tuareg author *Ibrahim al-Koni* (whom visitors may remember from his appearance in *Louisiana Literature* in 2012).

Exhibition catalogue and *Louisiana Magasin*

For the exhibition a catalogue is being published in English and Danish with contributions by William J.R. Curtis, Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, Ala al-Hamarneh, Boris Brorman Jensen, Mette Marie Kallehauge, Jacob Skovgaard and Hanna Ziadeh, as well as statements from among others Jean Nouvel, X-Architects, Henning Larsen and Bahia Shehab. In addition the latest issue of *Louisiana Magasin*, no. 39, features an article by Mette Marie Kallehauge (only in Danish).

Louisiana Lectures

A number of Louisiana Lectures will be held in connection with the exhibition. The programme can be seen in the Calendar at www.louisiana.dk (English).

Curators of the exhibition: Kjeld Kjeldsen and Mette Marie Kallehauge. Exhibition architect: Luise Hooge Lorenc.

The exhibition has been realized with support from Realdania, sponsor of Louisiana's architecture exhibitions. The C.L. David Foundation and Collection has provided support for the exhibition catalogue.

Further information about the exhibition *Arab Contemporary* is available from the curators Kjeld Kjeldsen, e-mail kk@louisiana.dk, and Mette Marie Kallehauge, e-mail mmk@louisiana.dk, or the undersigned.

Press photos can be downloaded from www.louisiana.dk. A **log-in** can be ordered from the undersigned either from e-mail press@louisiana.dk or from M: +45 2858 5052.

Museum opening hours: Tuesday - Friday 11:00-22:00. Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays 11:00-18:00.

www.louisiana.dk. **Louisiana Channel:** www.louisiana.dk/channel.

Yours sincerely,
Susanne Hartz
Head of Press

The illustration on the front cover:
SL Rasch GMBH Special and Lightweight Structures (Germany).
On the square in front of the Al-Masjid An-Nabawi Mosque, Saudi Arabia, 2011.