

# Arabian Peninsula

## A Century of Architecture in the Arabian Peninsula Evolving Isms and Multiple Architectural Identities in a Growing Region

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This article presents a positional interpretation and highlights the issues of identity, tradition, and modernity by critically outlining a number of voices that represent selected architectural interventions in the Arabian Peninsula. Through a reading of projects that emerged over a century from 1914 to 2014, an articulation is made to place such a reading into focus by classifying different trends under three economic eras: pre-oil, oil, and post-oil. The analysis manifests a continuous struggle to absorb modernity and construct identity and concludes with a number of questions regarding challenges facing architecture and future developments in the region.

### FrameWORKS for Understanding Architectural ISMS

Several approaches can be adopted to interrogate the evolution of architectural isms on the Peninsula. One approach is to portray its architecture within the context of geo-cultural politics, and the amalgam of influences it enjoys, including 'Mediterraneanism,' 'Middle Easternism,' 'Pan-Arabism,' and 'Islamism.' Despite these isms being constructs that serve political and ideological ends, they are also of important heuristic value, bringing into focus questions regarding identity and the sharing of deeper cultural and existential meanings. The unique cultural and geo-political position of the Arabian Peninsula, coupled with the contemporary global condition, creates a fertile environment for architectural experimentation; a considerable number of voices in search of identity and meaning have emerged over several decades. Another approach is to trace socio-political and socio-economic events, and examine their impact on the evolving architecture of this evolving region while mapping the relevance of these events on examples of projects and the expressions they convey. A third approach could be the examination of the impact of the evolving global condition and the rise of a connected global society, and explore the impact of this on architecture and place typologies in selected cities.

Since this is a linear exploration spanning the century from 1914 to 2014, I adopt a fourth approach, namely one which integrates the previous three and better exemplifies this region's architecture. It anatomizes architecture within the framework of pre-oil emergence, the resulting impact of oil production on architecture, and the predicted decline in the oil and natural gas reserves. The latter is coupled with less reliance on energy sources generated from oil and gas, which is a matter of rising concern and is having profound repercussions on the economies and societies of the region. While such an approach is less pertinent to the case of Oman and Yemen, it is highly relevant to Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates.

### Pre-Oil Architecture: Desert and Tribal Tradition From 1914 to the 1930s

I argue that the desert climate and tribal tradition are the most prominent constituents for articulating a discussion about architecture and its context in the pre-oil era. Yet, there were also significant geo-political events which had an impact on architecture and the shaping of settlements. These can be exemplified by the 1914 British and French agreement to establish a united and independent Arabian Peninsula, in the case of a successful defeat of the Ottoman Empire. The national awareness that subsequently emerged, had long-term repercussions on urbanism in the Peninsula. In 1918, the end of Ottoman reign in the Peninsula led to the introduction of new municipal structures in cities such as Jeddah, which had a significant impact on urban development. This was coupled with the development of global trade in cultured pearls from Japan in 1921, which led to the end of the pearl diving industry along the Gulf coast. The subsequent economic collapse led to new socio-economic structures and the relocation of many merchant families from India and Persia who had been living in the Peninsula. Their relocation resulted in the loss of certain construction techniques and the shrinking of settlements during the 1930s. Nevertheless, the first electricity network in the Peninsula was introduced in Kuwait in 1923, and supplied electricity for the Seif Palace and other settlements.

The particularly inhospitable environmental circumstances of the Arabian Peninsula have made it one of the least populated regions in the world. Tribal affiliation and family structure have, at all times been the key element in survival. Strong social networks and kinship groups helped weaker members to survive, and the clear hierarchy beneath tribal leaders or sheikhs, made for an effective organizational structure that advocated for and defended common interests. The size and wealth of a tribe determined the amount of land under its control and jurisdiction. As a result of the constant struggle for survival in the harsh environment, many tribal conflicts occurred in the history of the Arabian Peninsula; the need for protection and support led to the establishment of tribal alliances with a strong clan and kinship identity.

From generation to generation, tribes passed on the knowledge they gained on how to build settlements and houses, well-suited to environmental constraints. One example of this is the construction of wind towers, a traditional and practical architectural feature designed to keep dwellings comfortably cool, introduced by Persian merchants, builders, and craftsmen who settled in various harbors and hamlets along the Gulf coast.

Islamic traditions regarding male and female privacy prescribed stringent building rules. Privacy was ensured by following certain building practices such as a designated minimum building height, or constructing curved entrances, making it impossible for passers-by to look inside a dwelling. In such communities, the Friday mosque, besides functioning as a religious center, was also the most important public arena for the inhabitants of the area. It was often used as a courthouse to arbitrate disputes or dispense justice, or as a religious school, particularly in smaller settlements. The mosque's simple cubic form included an internal courtyard and was adjacent to an additional square. In fact, the size of the Friday mosque and its courtyard was often an expression of the number of inhabitants of an oasis town or coastal settlement.

The typical pre-oil settlement was characterized by a core that constituted an ensemble of the Friday mosque, the courthouse, and the ruler's house. Along the roads leading to the core, which had to have the width of at least two packed camels, the *souq* or the traditional marketplace extended in a linear fashion, often sheltered and shaded by adjoining roofs. A settlement was characterized by the strong segregation of public and private life. Private housing and shelter occupied the most land. Smaller alleys led from the main roads to the private homes of the oasis settlers. These narrow labyrinthine streets usually were obliged to be the width of one packed camel while the height of the camel dictated how low the boundaries of courtyards or *finas* could be constructed. The narrowness of the streets and the tight spaces between buildings served two major purposes; on the one hand, so as to maximize land use within the settlement and, on the other, to provide cooling and shade for passageways and the houses that lined them. Apart from these functional purposes, the network of narrow side roads and cul-de-sacs or dead-end alleys served to reinforce the private character of neighborhoods, known as *fareej*. These neighborhood can be regarded as urban cells: they were developed on a system of branching side streets, which ended in a cellular arrangement of houses of related clans and kinsfolk. Thus, traditional settlements were strongly segregated according to tribal or kinship affiliations. The *majlis*, or reception hall, was used by families to meet for religious debates or social gatherings and to discuss issues concerning the community.

The application of the same building rules and the use of the same materials and construction techniques resulted in similar settlement typologies, with some minor variations. Differences in typologies were based on the unique particularities of a locality. In addition to the traditional courtyard house, which formed the most common housing typology, simple cubic buildings were often constructed in rural settlements. The height of houses was standardized and often limited to two floors. The Bedouin would construct temporary one-story houses on plots, which were surrounded by fences or walls, at the outskirts of settlements. Flat-roofed courtyard houses provided not only a protected open space for private family life but also a better supply of ventilation and light in the narrowly built settlements. The flat rooftops were important open-air spaces that the family could use for cooking or sleeping in the hot summer months. The ground floor, which normally had very few windows or openings so