

Tarim: Earthen Heritage on the Verge...



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ABSTRACT

Much of Yemen's urban heritage faces tremendous change—its earthen architecture is no exception. For the past five years, a group of conservators, students, and community activists have been documenting the earthen heritage of Tarim with the objective of ensuring a role for the city's historic fabric in its future. Now we are at a seminal moment of presenting a plan to utilize Tarim's historical assets in shaping its future. This paper will explore Tarim's significance as well as the ideas for conserving this exceptional earthen city.

Tarim, like much of the Hadhramaut Valley of Yemen, has been linked to the Indian Ocean basin for most of its history through dense social and economic networks. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Yemeni movements between South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Africa, and the rest of the Middle East intensified with this first wave of globalization. Some Hadhramis abroad were simple laborers, others traveled to academic centers in pursuit of knowledge and would later serve as judges and educators for Yemeni expatriate communities. Particular families became extremely wealthy through their land holdings abroad and international trading companies. A cosmopolitanism arose from these interactions, mixing the modern and traditional across every avenue of cultural life.

One may trace this transnational culture through the hybrid styles of the earthen architecture in cities like Tarim. Hadhrami masons and plaster craftsmen incorporated the stylistic languages of Neoclassicism, Rococo, Mughal, Art Nouveau and Art Deco into their tradition of earthen construction. In this way the architecture of Tarim, like its broader history, represents a dialogue between cultures both within and outside of contemporary Yemen. The local is really an entry point into a cosmopolitan society that has engaged the larger world in its own terms.

This tradition lives on today, although the earthen architecture of the Valley faces the challenges of the changing urban realities of contemporary Yemen. The cultural sphere that defined the significance of Tarim has changed dramatically since the inception of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) in 1969. As the nations of the Indian Ocean region gained their independence, the open flow of people and money through this area slowed dramatically. The communist regime in

South Yemen did not help matters: in many cases they appropriated the land and assets of the affluent driving them from the country.

Since the unification of North and South Yemen, the Valley faces the demographic pressures associated with many developing countries—population growth, unplanned urban and regional expansion, an absence of zoning laws, and little interest in public capacity building. Tarim is very much a city on the verge. In facing these changes, we are exploring a range of options with our Yemeni partners. Some individual buildings, like the Qasr al-Ishshah, are being redefined under the initiative of grassroots activism as historic monuments focused on community service. But there are many more individual buildings and a broader urban context to safeguard. A combination of different conservation strategies is then needed to ensure the ongoing role of earthen heritage in the city's future. We are inviting conference participants to engage our ideas and offer their own in support of Tarim and its citizens.

KEY WORDS :

Maintenance, conservation, renewal