

5 AWARDED ARCHITECTS, GREAT-BRITAIN, YEMEN, AFGHANISTAN, INDIA, NEDERLANDS, THAILAND, FRANCE, NORWAY



SALMA SAMAR DAMLUJI DAW'AN MUD BRICK ARCHITECTURE FOUNDATION LONDON, U.K – DAW'AN, YEMEN

This year the Global Award recognises renovation work for a second time. The 2011 award to the Peruvian NGO Q'Eswachaka honoured both the renovation of a piece of *world heritage* (the Inca routes of Qhapac Nan) and also the decision to trust the work to local villages and encourage them to manage the resulting flow of tourism for themselves. Q'Eswachaka seeks to reverse the dominating model of the major heritage sites in which, in order to protect them (from whom?), societies are dispossessed and the sense of history is destroyed.

Salma Damluji's work in Yemen also raises the cultural and political stakes. The Iraqi architect created the Daw'an Mud Brick Architecture Foundation in order to renovate the mud built towns of Hadramut, which she has been working for thirty years. "Until the mid 1990s Hadramut was a preserved country, the last reserve and kingdom of mud brick architecture"¹. Since then, society has been ravaged by conflict. The elites have left for the Gulf and the people have abandoned their houses and mansions which were the matrix of their material lives and culture, sculpted by generations of gardeners, builders and hydraulic engineers with immeasurable tacit knowledge.

In Yemen, World Heritage has named several sites, granting them a future as golden as that of Venice. But visitors will see empty fortresses in the midst of a dying civilization. The Daw'an Foundation, on the other hand, acts *in situ*, surveying villages, palaces and houses in order to not only save and transmit knowledges to architects or students but also to the inhabitants, in order that they remain.

"I was the first architect to set my eyes on these sites"

Born in Beirut in 1954, Salma Damluji studied architecture at the AA in London. But she was bored - until she read Hassan Fathy's book about his project at Gourna.² "I suddenly discovered that I had been studying the wrong type of architecture."³ She began to study mud architecture and self-development and, in 1975, left to work with Fathy in Cairo. Qualifying in 1977, she became a lecturer in Islamic Art and Architecture at Beirut University College and the Lebanese University.

Her life changed course in 1980 when she joined the UN Department of "Human Settlements". "And for my first posting I was sent to Yemen, to Hadramut. (...) I was a woman, I was young and I was good looking so it was very difficult to manage my way around there, it was extremely difficult terrain. But I was the first "architect" *per se* to set my eyes on these sites. So I felt I had a very important role, to convey this, study this, institutionalise this and create centres of learning"³.

Salma Damluji then pursued her career as an expert in Islamic architecture (mostly based at the RCA in London) and as a consultant for large projects in Arab countries, while continuing her work on Hadramut. In 1988 she became an advisor to the Governor on the renovation and development of mud brick and stone architecture.

She studied the towns of the Wadi Daw'an, convinced that their tacit knowledge could contribute to the growing international debate on sustainability. "Do you know something? Apart from trying to be philosophical or sounding scientific about the ecology of these buildings, the fact that this architecture has worked so well for hundreds of years for its inhabitants, and can identify as a culture, as a deep, profound culture which is very closely related to the socio-economics of communities that have lived there and that have mastered, and been the masters of, this civilization for so long should, I think, in itself acknowledge its importance - ecologically and otherwise"².

«But all of this is being gently eroded»

But Yemen was mired in conflict and disinterest: «20 and 30 years ago, one wanted to create institutions to change how people thought. And I remember thinking that I could convince the Yemeni officials to come and continue building and adopt this traditional building as part of their housing policies... This was all fine when they didn't have money. But now money is gushing in, because they have a bit of oil, because they get a lot of subsidies from the Gulf, etc. And suddenly, there's so much money, that it has to change hands. And then you see all these buildings that are being constructed in cement and concrete and that are absolute rubbish, next to the original stuff they have. (...) When you've got seven, eight and nine floors constructed in sun-dried mud brick, it's already a huge feat, both engineering and construction-wise. Why, and what has made this so incredible and amazing? It's just that the current commercial professional sector isn't interested, because you don't make money out of mud bricks anymore.»³ In 1995, Salma Damluji stopped visiting the country.

In 2005, she accepted an invitation from the University of Sanaa and met a descendant of a Daw'an family from the Incense Route, Abdullah Bugshan, who had been familiar with her work for 15 years. He organised her return to Daw'an and that is when she visited the site of Masna'ah, a fortified town at the foot of the mountain. Upon returning, Salma Damluji told him of her ideas about renovation and the transmission of knowledge – and the Daw'an Foundation was launched. Its preamble is clear: “Wadi Daw'an in Yemen is one of the most attractive locations not on the World Heritage List.(...) The landscape of the Wadi however is changing rapidly, threatened by commercial contractors, and its coherent ecological structure and identity is being eroded. As a result, the integrity and sustainability of its settlements and landscape is already at risk. Natural resources, skills and agricultural wealth are declining, with a detrimental effect on the economic and historical heritage and future of the region.

The Foundation is dedicated to consolidating the urban and cultural wealth of Hadramut and Wadi Daw'an and to sustaining the natural and built environment. We set up projects in order to preserve and develop the architecture, urban culture and extraordinary heritage so that it may continue to flourish in the future”⁴

The co-founders are concentrating on the renovation of Masna'ah to make it ready to host an Institute for Mud Brick Architecture, a hotel, a visitors' centre etc.: a site as laboratory. For Salma Damluji, Chief Architect of the Foundation, there is much to do: diagnosing buildings, creating workshops for the young and defending her vision of *restoration*: “To be successful, any architectural, cultural and artistic mission has to engage with the community it is interacting with and serving, the town and future urban and rural development. It deals with the infrastructure, agriculture, water systems and the points you mention above. Therefore the aims are socially committed and economically viable from the livelihood of the community and larger context to the quality of the environment.”¹

Has the battle been won? «We're running out of time. I often come back from Yemen and say to myself, «That's it, I can't go back anymore.» I've done that on a couple of occasions. I've stayed away for five or six years at a go, and then I tend to go back. But the clock is ticking. And I think it's time, I've done my bit... Truth is, having invested my life there, I must return, and race time. I owe it to the land and to the architecture”.¹

M.H. Contal

The Iraqi architect Salma Samar Damluji was born in Beirut in 1954 and studied in London: firstly at the AA (Diploma 1977) and then at the RCA (PhD 1987), where she then taught until 1996. She teaches and researches into mud brick architecture – and Islamic architecture across the globe. She led the Technical Office of the Chairman of the Works Department of Abu Dhabi from 2002 to 2004 and has been working since 2005 as the architect for rebuilding the site of Masna'at Daw'an, in the Hadramut in Yemen. In 2007 she co-founded the Daw'an Mud Brick Architecture Foundation of which she is the Chief Architect with responsibility for managing the foundation's renovation and revitalisation works. Main areas of involvement: North Africa, Middle East, Arabia (Yemen, Oman, Qatar and the Emirates), Bangladesh and India.

Amongst her works: A Yemen Reality; Architecture Sculptured in Mud and Stone, Reading 1991; The Architecture of Oman, Reading 1998; The Architecture of the UAE, Reading 2006; The Architecture of Yemen from Yafi' to Hadramut, London 2007.

To appear: Hassan Fathy, the Unpublished Works



1. Interview of S.S.Damluji by M.H. Contal 01-03-2012
2. Hassan Fathy, *Gourna, a tale of two villages* (first edition 1969)
3. Interview of S.S. Damluji by David Sheen, *First Earth Review*, 05-03-2012
4. in *Daw'an Mud Brick Architecture Foundation*