



**Living under the Crescent Moon: Domestic Cultures in the Arab World** is an exhibition (sponsored by HSBC Private Bank/Akwa Group/Maisons du Maroc) that was held at the Ex-Cathedrale Sacre Coeur, Casablanca last month. It goes on show at the Vitra design museum, Germany from 23 February to 31 August 2008

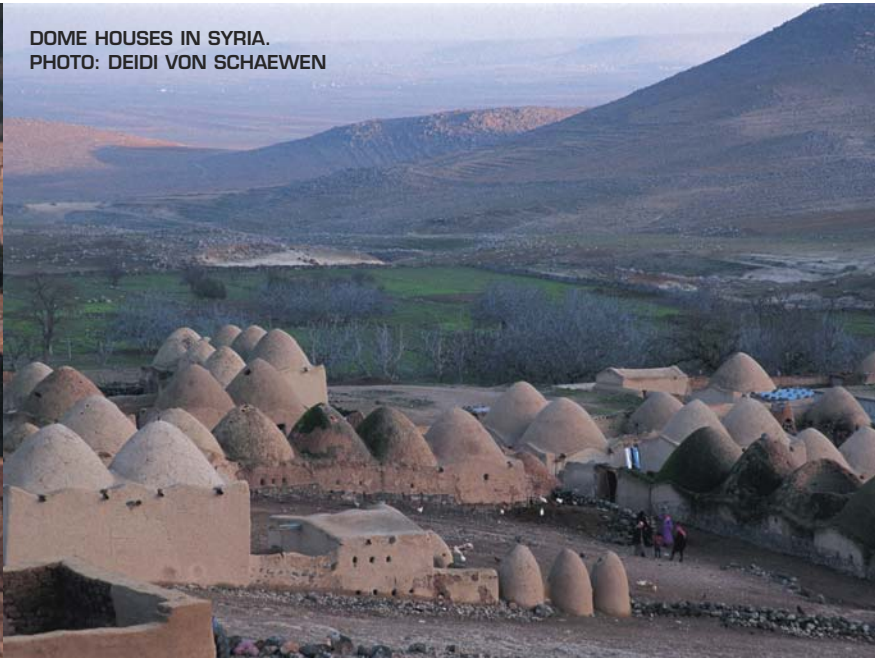
LE PLATEAU HOUSING COMPLEX BY GASTON JAUBERT & PIERRE COLDEFY ARCHITECTS. CASABLANCA, MOROCCO, 1957

At home:

Arabic **عربي**



CITY OF SANA'A, YEMEN.  
PHOTO: MARECHAUX



DOMES HOUSES IN SYRIA.  
PHOTO: DEIDI VON SCHAEWEN

INTERIOR IN OUALATA, MAURITANIA.  
PHOTO: DEIDI VON SCHAEWEN

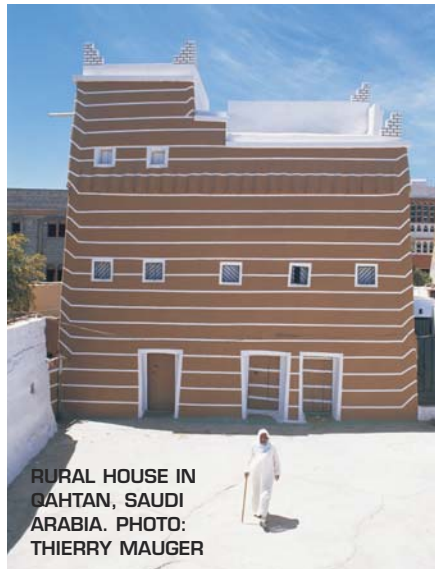
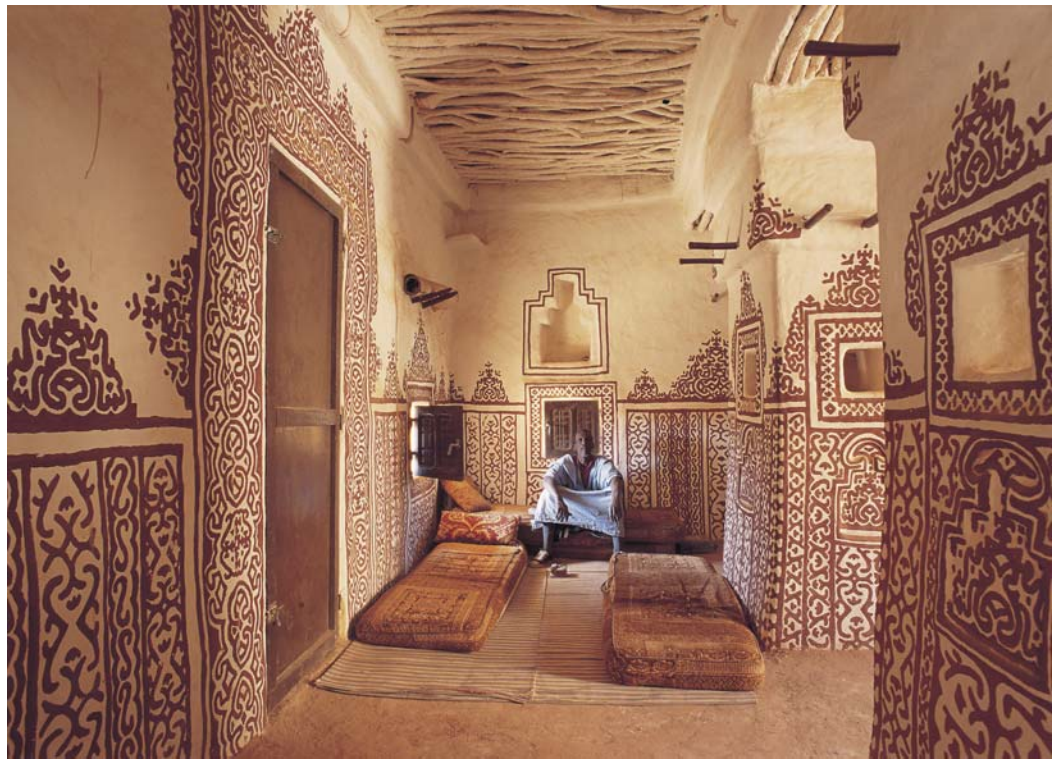
**T**HE rich heritage of Arabian domestic architecture reveals an astonishing modernity – in the multi-functional uses of rooms and objects, the systems to regulate indoor temperatures, and the efficient use of water. Architects such as Hassan Fathy from Egypt or Moroccan Elie Mouyal have utilised many of these solutions in their buildings, marrying them with elements of modern architecture.

Le Corbusier expressed his great admiration for the architecture of the Orient: “The casbah of Algiers has everything: all the elements of an architecture that shows immeasurable sensitivity to human needs and desires.” Following in his footsteps many of today’s architects and designers draw inspiration from the Arab world. Yet due to the present political situation, the west’s knowledge of these countries is generally limited to news reports on politics and social issues.

This exhibition explores the myths and realities of the Arab world, offering a comprehensive and fascinating survey of Arab domestic cultures. The elaborate spatial installation conveys the refined sensuality of life in Arab countries. It demonstrates the diversity of domestic lifestyles between Morocco, Syria and the Arabian peninsula – from nomadic tents of the Tuareg and Bedouins to Moroccan casbahs; from grand courtyard houses in cities such as Cairo, Marrakech and Damascus to buildings by 20th-century architects like Hassan Fathy, Elie Mouyal and Abdelwahed El-Wakil.

Models and reconstructed rooms enable visitors to experience different building types, while domestic objects such as ceramics, textiles, tools and architectural elements provide impressions of everyday rituals. Photographs and films show the interiors of private homes, offering insights into a virtually unknown realm of the Arab world, as the private sphere is traditionally protected from outsiders.

The exhibition makes it possible to compare one’s living situation



with life in the Arab world. It also becomes evident that design challenges remain the same – solutions for life’s routines – sleeping, eating, housekeeping, etc. How decoration, form and function relate to one another in buildings and objects, and how ornaments, symbols and colours express cultural identity, even today.


The influence of modernism was considerably advanced by such architects as Jean-Francois Zévaco, Edmond Brion, Wolfgang Ewerth, Michel Ecochard, Frei Otto and others. From the 1930s, they used Arab countries as important fields of experimentation and continued to develop the International Style there.

The importance that the Arab world has since acquired with respect to international architecture is clear – given such projects by

Arata Isozaki and Studio 65 for residential villas on the Arabian peninsula, and Jean Nouvel’s Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris.

*Living Under the Crescent Moon* also shows negative aspects of the radical modernisation of Arabian architecture, such as the decay of historic city centres, the population shift from rural to urban areas and the emergence of uniformly drab satellite towns.

Thus many of the traditional forms of living presented in this show could be documented for the last time. Organisations like the Aga Khan Trust for Culture are committed to bringing these problems to the attention of today’s architects.

Arab countries can draw upon a vast repertoire of solutions within their own traditions with regard to the sensible and sustainable modernisation of indigenous architecture and modes of living. What can westerners learn from the Orient? That hospitality is and remains the highest virtue in any household. 

An accompanying catalogue, *Living Under the Crescent Moon: Domestic Cultures in the Arab World* features a series of essays and evocative pictures showing fascinating examples of residential architecture alongside solutions for daily tasks and everyday objects. ISBN 9783931936414. \$90 approx. [www.design-museum.de](http://www.design-museum.de)