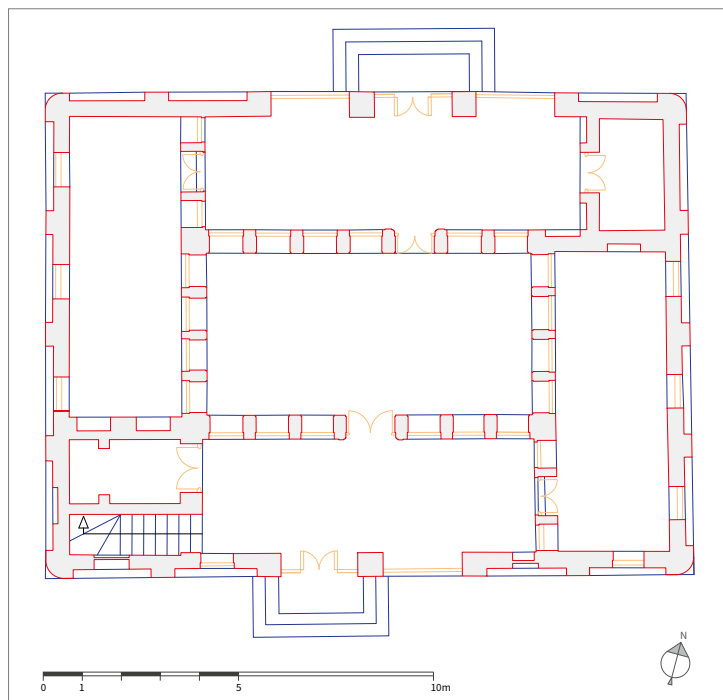


Encountering the Inner Majlis



8.1. Our virtual reconstruction of the Inner Majlis, Old Palace, 1920s, view from the northeast.



8.2. Site plan of the Inner Majlis, Old Palace, following the restorations completed in 2015.

The visitors who once set foot in the Main Courtyard of the Old Palace were presumably privileged enough to be invited by the ruler of Qatar. The occasion could be manifold: perhaps a business dealing, a literary session, a discussion of state affairs or simply a social gathering. If it was their first time, they would have been impressed by the two-storey Inner Majlis, the venue for those events, standing at the heart of the palace, midway between the House of Sheikh ‘Abd Allah and the Little Room, which served as the public entrance to the Main Courtyard. There were very few structures of this size in Qatar at that time, and probably none of such complexity. The building’s position within the same courtyard as the ruler’s house indicates it was in a restricted area. Such an arrangement of different spatial units, although not dissimilar to other wealthy family homes, finds analogies in Islamic palaces both inside and outside the Arabian Gulf: separate courtyards with different levels of security (and privacy) were commonplace. This chapter mentions a couple of examples, though the primary focus is on the architectural details and functional purposes of the Inner Majlis.

At first glance, the Inner Majlis appears to tower above all other buildings in the Old Palace (fig. 8.1). One of its prominent features is the extensive use of semi-circular arches. Most on the ground floor are filled with curtain walls, while others provide access to the two verandas on the north and south sides (fig. 8.2). A gallery with semi-circular arches dominates the upper floor. It is worth mentioning that this shape was uncommon in Qatari houses, with the exception of *majlises*. Even in the Old Palace, all buildings apart from the two *majlises* had rectangular openings or four-centred arches. Choosing this form for arches and windows may not have been incidental; they could indicate the building’s function. As noted in Chapter 7, the location of the exterior windows in a regular house guided visitors towards its *majlis*, and the semi-circular arch is likely to have served the same purpose. The arches and windows of the two *majlises* in the Old Palace stood out due to their rounded shape, and thus the visitors could immediately know where to proceed.

Some aspects of the Inner Majlis further distinguish it from other buildings, suggesting the participation of a skilful architect in its construction. It is not only larger – wider and taller – than most contemporary structures but also more complex in layout. Its footprint measures about 200 square metres and incorporates a staircase in its southwest corner (fig. 8.2). Housing two council halls, one above the other, it has an outer shell that forms rooms and verandas on the ground floor and a continuous gallery on the upper floor. The walls of the two halls feature numerous windows that, thanks to the building’s outer shell, are always shaded (figs. 8.3–8.4). Contrary to appearance, none of the arches are load bearing;



8.3. South façade of the Inner Majlis, Old Palace.

they are merely decorative.¹ The walls conceal a continuous ring of *danchal* beams within their masonry directly above the openings, and thus the timber holds most of the burden. Yet the most unique feature is the upper-floor council hall's painted ceiling made of wooden planks (fig. 8.5). Although the current ceiling was replaced in the 1970s (as was the one in the lower-floor council hall), the upper-floor hall certainly had a similar one from the time of Sheikh 'Abd Allah, according to a photo predating the first restorations (fig. 8.6). These features make the building apparently unique among its contemporaries within the palace or elsewhere in Qatar.

Oral tradition, as well as modern scholarship, asserts that the architect of the Inner Majlis was a certain Bahraini master-builder named 'Abd Allah al-Mayl, who is also mentioned by Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru in his recollections.² Although little is known about him or his work,³ perhaps an indirect confirmation of his contribution to the Inner Majlis emerges from the building's architectural features. As noted in Chapter 2, such construction and decorative techniques were typical around the Gulf, with particularly little to differentiate between Qatari and Bahraini houses at

1. See Al-Kholaifi, *Architecture of the Old Palace*, p. 24.

2. See Appendix; Abdulla, *al-Zakhrifa al-jibsiyya*, pp. 69–70; Wright, *The Old Amiri Palace*, n.p.; al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh 'Abd Allah*, p. 152.

3. Al-Othman, *With Their Bare Hands*, p. 84.



8.4. Our virtual reconstruction of the Inner Majlis, Old Palace, 1920s, view from the southwest.

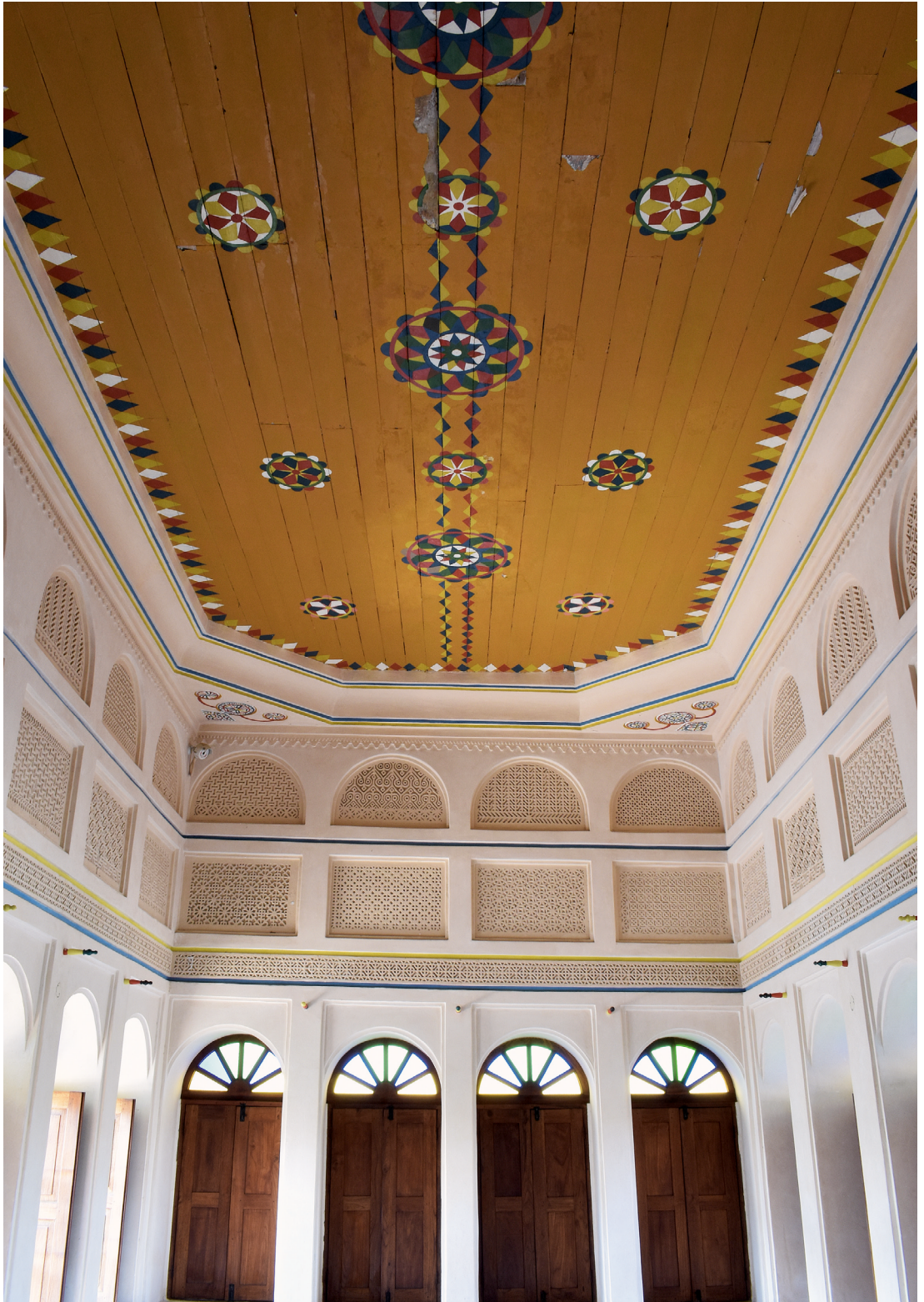
the time. The surviving traditional houses in the Bahraini city of Muharraq present several parallels with the Old Palace. Many of the shared elements belong to the generic architectural tradition of the region. In contrast, the painted ceiling made of wooden planks in the upper-floor council hall was virtually unknown in Qatar but existed in Muharraq, for instance, in the houses of Yusuf 'Abd al-Rahman Fakhru and Salman Matar.⁴ This material parallel goes beyond generic similarities and agrees with the supposed origin of the Inner Majlis's architect.

During the Old Palace's restorations in 2012, workers uncovered three underground chambers beneath the Inner Majlis: two below the west end of the council hall and one below the room to the west. Their depth is barely more than a metre, which makes it clear that they were storage spaces;⁵ the hidden position of these chambers indicates depositories of valuables such as money, pearls or weapons. Since we know that Sheikh 'Abd Allah traded pearls and arms, it is most likely that those business negotiations occurred in this hall.⁶ Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru recalls that the building had 'a subterranean armoury and strong room', and goes on to

4. Yarwood, *Al-Muharraq*, pp. 106–125.

5. Sorupia and Bulosan, 'Emergency Conservation Design Work', p. 18.

6. On some of his weapons, see al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh 'Abd Allah*, pp. 188–197. Sheikh 'Abd Allah's interest in arms-dealing was a concern for the British while negotiating the 1916 Anglo-Qatari Treaty, see 'Arms Traffic in the Persian Gulf'; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 185, 194, 211–226.



8.5. Interior of the upper-floor council hall of the Inner Majlis, Old Palace.



8.6. Interior of the upper-floor council hall of the Inner Majlis, Old Palace, 1959.

describe another room with a peculiar function:

[There] was probably a small armoury on the ground floor underneath the stairway, and it is believed that a small circular hole in the external wall of this room was used for the passage of arms. This could possibly have been used as a repository for the arms of visitors.⁷

What makes this hesitant note credible is that a circular hole indeed exists on the building's west wall, through which one could hand over weapons to a servant in the room below the staircase (fig. 8.4).

We also know that scholarly and literary sessions were among the regular events held at the Old Palace. The sources unanimously highlight Sheikh 'Abd Allah's love for sciences and poetry, and many of the period's poets wrote lengthy panegyrics about him. The court employed professional readers who held recitations from books such as the history of Ibn al-Athir (d. 1233) and the Qur'an commentary of Ibn Kathir (d. 1373).⁸ In the words of Salih bin Sulayman al-Mani' (c. 1902–1968), a poet and court officer of Sheikh 'Abd Allah:

[The ruler] has a momentous interest in the science[s] and plentiful generosity towards the poets, and therefore, when you see his majlis attended by the people of science[s], literature and poetry, you can imagine it as Suq 'Ukaz.⁹

This metaphorical reference is to the pre-Islamic tradition of holding annual markets at a place called Suq 'Ukaz in Arabia, not far from Mecca, which used to attract masses of people. In line with this vivid note, it is easy to imagine Sheikh 'Abd Allah attending literary gatherings, listening to the recitation of poems or prose in the circle of his associates while seated on carpets in one of the council halls of the Inner Majlis.

Additionally, the state administration required regular discussions between Sheikh 'Abd Allah and his advisors, reminiscent of today's government meetings. Since those events presumably happened in the Inner Majlis, the building can be described as the heart of state politics. Among the most important attendees would have been the ruler's secretary and head of the administration, Salih bin Sulayman al-Mani'.¹⁰ The teacher of the Athariyya School, Muhammad bin Mani' (1883–1965), was closely linked with the state administration, and so was the renowned poet (and graduate of the same school) Ahmad bin Yusuf al-Jabir (c. 1903–1991),¹¹ one of the official readers at the literary sessions. Members of the Thani family, including the ruler's two elder sons, Sheikh Hamad and Sheikh 'Ali, took their share of responsibilities. It seems likely that Sheikh 'Abd Allah and his courtly associates regularly met in the Inner Majlis and may also have received tribal leaders and foreign agents here. In short, the building's main functions would have included state representation for both domestic and international audiences.

7. See Appendix.

8. Bin Mani', *Qatar fi mudhakkirat*, p. 74; al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh 'Abd Allah*, vol. 2: pp. 30–33, 40–46, 87–177; al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh 'Abd Allah*, pp. 121–129; and also Kafud, *al-Adab al-Qatari al-hadith*.

9. Quoted in al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh 'Abd Allah*, vol. 2: p. 30.

10. See al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh 'Abd Allah*, vol. 2: pp. 40–41. Salih al-Mani' is not to be confused with Muhammad bin Mani'.

11. Kafud, *al-Adab al-Qatari al-hadith*, pp. 358–360. On his life, see al-Qibti, *al-Madrasa al-athariyya*, pp. 83–84.



8.7. View from the rooftop of the Inner Majlis, Old Palace, facing southeast.



The two *majlises* of the Old Palace – namely the Outer Majlis in the Northeast Courtyard and the Inner Majlis in the Main Courtyard – are comparable with the ‘public’ and ‘private’ reception halls usually situated in different courtyards in royal palaces across the Islamic world. It was a standard arrangement. Indeed, many analogies could be mentioned; here, it will suffice to highlight two of the best-known examples: the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul and the Red Fort in Delhi. The Ottoman palatial complex, founded by Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1451–1481) and redeveloped by Suleyman I (r. 1520–1566), had strict security protocols controlling who could enter which areas. The second courtyard included the Council Hall, serving as the gathering place for the state administration, the reception room for foreign envoys, and the court of justice. Standing in the next courtyard, right behind its gate, the Audience Hall (or Chamber of Petitions) housed the sultan’s throne and was where he received visitors.¹² The Mughal palaces generally included a *diwan-i ‘am* (‘public audience hall’) and a *diwan-i khas* (‘private audience hall’). The Red Fort, established by Emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658) in Delhi, was no exception: the *diwan-i ‘am* was a multi-columned hall facing the second courtyard of the palace complex, and the *diwan-i khas* was a lavishly decorated pavilion in a more secluded, inner courtyard. Although the Ottoman and Mughal examples differed in function, they certainly had comparable policies of ‘framing the gaze’ – that is, controlling what the visitor could see and, in particular, how they encountered the ruler.¹³

Without attempting to portray the Ottoman and Mughal examples as direct models for the Old Palace, it is safe to assume that similar requirements led to similar solutions. Another (and much closer) example of the multi-courtyard arrangement of a royal palace was in Riyadh, which served as the centre of the Saudi government after ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin ‘Abd al-Rahman Al Sa‘ud (r. 1902–1953) conquered the city and made it his capital in 1902. Unfortunately, the palace complex no longer survives. However, according to a description by the British traveller St John Philby (1885–1960), who stayed there in 1917–1918, the complex had public, private, servant and guest quarters. Among its reception rooms was the one named Daftar, as well as several other audience chambers near the ruler’s sleeping room. And even those were not enough: ‘‘Abd al-‘Aziz decided to add two spacious council halls, one above the other, to be used respectively by him and by one of his sons’.¹⁴ To what extent the analogy for the *majlises* in the Old Palace stands is, admittedly, an open question. In the absence of detailed records, all that can be established with certainty is that the two *majlises* were under different levels of security and, accordingly, received people of different social standing and proximity to the ruler.

12. Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power*, pp. 56–69, 79–84, 96–110.

13. Necipoğlu, ‘Framing the Gaze’.

14. Philby, *The Heart of Arabia*, vol. 1: pp. 63–64, 74–76, 364; Facey, *Riyadh: The Old City*, pp. 234–236. Unfortunately, nothing survives from this Saudi palace, even though – given the cordial relations between ‘Abd Allah and ‘Abd al-‘Aziz – there might have been a direct link between the two. On the diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Doha in this period, see al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ‘Abd Allah*, vol. 1: pp. 380–388.



8.8. Exhibition in the upper-floor council hall of the Inner Majlis, Old Palace, after the opening of Qatar National Museum in 1975.

The Inner Majlis survived in a nearly complete form into the 1970s. Only a few of the upper-floor arches required concrete replacements during the first restorations. The staircase from the upper-floor gallery to the roof terrace was a new addition: a ladder had previously served that purpose. This was surely to facilitate easy access to the rooftop for visitors to enjoy the view (fig. 8.7). It is less obvious why the restorers decided to remove a complete room originally occupying the opposite (northeast) corner of the upper-floor gallery, as visible in old photos and, therefore, in our reconstruction (fig. 8.1). In any case, the wooden plank ceilings in the two council rooms were made anew; originally, only the one on the upper floor seems to have existed, and even that with a different design. Since many of the gypsum panels had fallen victim to vandalism,¹⁵ they needed to be recarved, as demonstrated in a video documenting the creation of Qatar National Museum.¹⁶ In addition, the two council rooms became exhibition spaces. The lower floor room had wooden cabinets in the recesses above the windows showcasing jewellery,¹⁷ while the one above had display cases with historical coins at its centre (fig. 8.8).

A hitherto overlooked aspect of the Inner Majlis is how it seems to have provided inspiration for the Museum of the State, the modern exhibition space designed by the British architect Anthony Irving and completed in 1975. As discussed in Chapter 4, Michael Rice and his colleagues thoroughly studied the Old Palace to ensure that the new museum would harmonise with the heritage site. Though clearly modern in style, the conspicuous arches running across its façade appear to reflect or communicate with those of the Inner Majlis (fig. 8.9). It even had waterspouts reminiscent of those on many of the old rooftops (fig. 4.8). One may, thus, suggest that Irving sought to design the building by taking inspiration from the most impressive part of the Old Palace, translating its visual language into a modernised form and function.

15. Lockerbie, 'Old Qatar 02'.

16. *Qissat bina' Mathaf Qatar al-Watani*.

17. Sorupia and Bulosan, 'Emergency Conservation Design Work', p. 17.



8.9. Inner Majlis and Museum of the State (in the background), after the opening of Qatar National Museum in 1975, as seen from the House of Sheikh 'Abd Allah.