Nested in Modernity

Péter Tamás Nagy



Moments from the History of Doha's Old Palace

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Front cover
Our virtual reconstruction of the Old Palace in the 1920s, from the same perspective as the image on the back cover.

Back cover
Bird's-eye view of the Old Palace embraced by the National Museum of Qatar.

pp. 2–3
Bird's-eye view of the Old Palace and its surroundings in 1959, from the northeast.

pp. 4–9
Our virtual reconstruction of the Old Palace at its largest extant in the 1920s, including its surroundings.

Note on transliteration

This book uses a hybrid system for transliterating Arabic words, by which I hope to compromise between philological accuracy and common spelling. Personal names are written according to the standard system that is used, for instance, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three*. However, I omit diacritics and, since Qatari names conventionally follow the local pronunciation, ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Qāsim here becomes ʿAbd Allah bin Jasim. Toponyms will appear mostly as they do on present-day maps (eg Google Maps), except for leaving out their definite article – *nota bene* the definite article *al-* is distinguished from the noun *Al* ('progeny', 'lineage', 'descendant of').

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Where to begin expressing my gratitude is an easy question: it was Sheikha Amna bint Abdulaziz Al Thani who employed me to conduct research on Qatari heritage architecture, which eventually led to this book project. Thenceforth, I took my first steps in Qatar Museums under the wings of Alexandra Bounia, who has repeatedly and helpfully reviewed earlier versions of my research about the Old Palace. I could not deny having gained most of my (however limited) knowledge about Qatari history, material culture, architecture and gossip from a leading expert in the field, Rob Carter. He has tirelessly answered my plentiful questions and always found the capacity to supervise my work, time and again pulling up unpublished sources that turn out to be crucial for this research.

My appreciation extends to other helpful colleagues who have shared their insight with me on certain questions, including Abdulla Mohammed Al Sulaiti, Faisal Abdulla Al Naimi, Ferhan Sakal, Isabella Rossen, Margaux Montserrat De Pauw and Nada Abdo El Merhebi. They have contributed to whatever is valuable in this book, and I particularly cherish the moments when they patiently listened to my doubts.

Mohammad Al Mulla has kindly allowed me access to the archival materials at the National Museum of Qatar, a valuable resource that has a lot more potential than what I have been able to incorporate into this book.

The virtual 3D reconstruction of the Old Palace emerges from our collaboration with the keen team of Pazirik Co., a Hungarian company with specialised expertise to carry out such a challenging task as this, with stunning results. It has been an honour and joy to work with them, even though I am to be solely blamed for any potential inaccuracy in the results.

I am no less grateful to the Publications Department of Qatar Museums, namely Lisa Gay, Tracy Anne Goulding and Randa Takieddine. Without their constant support from the beginning to the end, these pages would forever be sitting on (or under) my desk.

Foreword

Her Excellency
Sheikha Al Mayassa bint
Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani

Chairperson, Qatar Museums
Board of Trustees

Visitors to the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) begin their experience with wonder and awe at the magnificent building that has been designed by Jean Nouvel. But their journey through the exhibitions culminates in a much different mood – one of fascinated respect – when they at last enter a much older building that has been lovingly incorporated into the NMoQ. This is the historic Old Palace of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah bin Jasim Al Thani, son of the founder of modern Qatar.

During the early years of his long reign, which began in 1913, Sheikh ʿAbd Allah gradually expanded the compound in which he and his immediate family made their residence, so that by the 1920s it had been transformed into a true palace, including impressive portals, separate residences, council halls and a school. Although Sheikh ʿAbd Allah later relocated to other homes and seats of government – one within the present Amiri Diwan, the other in Rayyan – this first palace has continued to hold a special place in the memories and hearts of Qataris.

This was the building that His Highness the Emir Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad, the ruler of Qatar at the time, designated in the 1970s to be renovated and adapted as the first national museum in Qatar, and indeed in any of the Gulf countries. This is the building that our current visitors encounter, beautifully restored and recontextualised, when they come to the heart of the new National Museum of Qatar.

But despite the singular importance of the Old Palace, there has never been a thorough study of this building's history, architectural design and significance until now. Péter Tamás Nagy has now given us a true landmark of cultural scholarship and a beautifully illustrated, endlessly engaging narrative of national development within one remarkable volume. Here readers may discover compelling information and new insights about traditional building methods in Qatar, a clear and concise history of the rise of modern Qatar from the days of Sheikh Jasim and Sheikh ʿAbd Allah and the first detailed reconstruction of the architecture of the Old Palace during its heyday, in the 1920s.

In this book, Nagy has achieved a perfect match for the mission of the NMoQ and its restoration of the Old Palace of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah. He has kept the past alive and made it meaningful, for the enjoyment and instruction of today's generation and tomorrow's. This book, like the Old Palace, will be treasured for generations to come.

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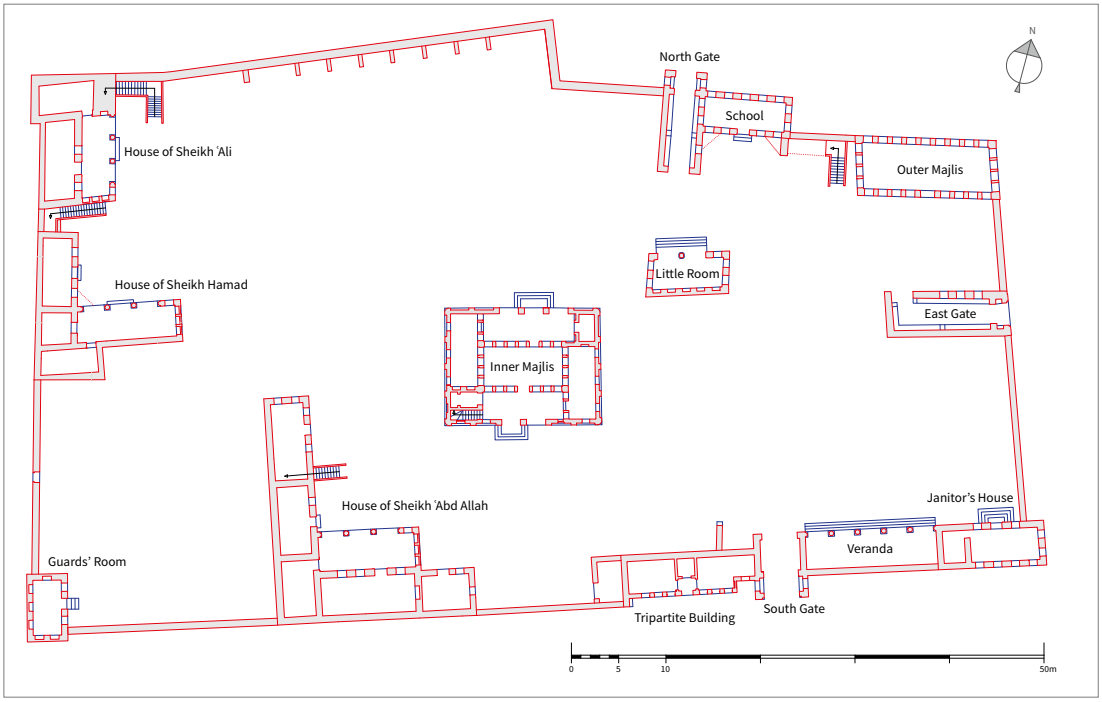
Introduction



0.1. Site plan of the Old Palace, following the restorations completed in 2015.



0.2. Bird's-eye view of the Old Palace, from the northwest.

The metropolis of Doha features astonishing pieces of contemporary architecture, be they skyscrapers or magnified sculpture-like monuments such as the National Museum of Qatar, completed in 2019. Nested among them lies a less ostentatious, yet locally much cherished, group of heritage buildings predating the oil boom. Examples of what this country has inherited from the past can still be experienced when visiting charming stone-built houses and mosques that have somehow defied the previous few decades of urban development. There is hardly any better representative of this older period than the palatial complex once inhabited by the ruler of Qatar, Sheikh ʿAbd Allah bin Jasim Al Thani (r. 1913–1949). Not surprisingly, the country's ruling family – and the national story generally centred around them – endow his memory with an elevated status that extends to his palace. Embraced by the museum on the east end of central Doha, the site is literally embedded in the country's history as narrated in the exhibition galleries.

The Old Palace forms a rectangular compound about 58 × 106 metres and is surrounded by a perimeter wall (fig. 0.1). As a visitor, you are most likely to arrive through the North Gate since this is where the museum's exhibition galleries culminate. You first walk through a corridor aligned with benches until you approach a small building, here called the Little Room, right in front. Turning to your left, you can explore the School Building and the Outer Majlis (a gathering or reception room), both standing nearby within the area marked by the East Gate. To the south, three buildings appear next to each other: the so-called Janitor's House (supposedly once belonging to the caretaker of a mosque that no longer exists), the Veranda with its five decorative arches and the South Gate. If you leave through that gate, you will find the henceforth named Tripartite Building on your right-hand side, accessible from the outside. Back in the compound's centre stands the tallest and most impressive building, the Inner Majlis. Here you may climb up to its rooftop, from where you can admire the view and observe the three houses: one belonging to Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, and two others belonging to his elder sons, Sheikh ʿAli and Sheikh Hamad, further to the west. Lastly, the southwest corner is occupied by a small building commonly known as the Guards' Room.

Although the buildings appear well preserved today (fig. 0.2), they experienced a less prosperous period around the mid-20th century, when they were abandoned and began to dilapidate. The situation changed only after Qatar gained its independence in 1971. The now re-evaluated Old Palace underwent its first restorations and became home to the first Qatar National Museum, which opened in 1975. The commissioners and curators even arranged for a scholarly investigation into the heritage site by the Australian

archaeologist George Wright (1924–2014), who published a thin volume presenting its first historical and architectural study.[1] The general project appeared in headlines all around the world; many people began to learn about this newly independent country which had now established its own national museum. As an international acknowledgement of this pioneering work, the museum received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1980, which also introduced the Old Palace into the discourse on Islamic architecture.[2]

Several more recent studies have enriched our knowledge about the site's history, even though some readers of those publications may find it puzzling how little information seems to emerge from positive evidence.[3] Documentary sources are nearly nonexistent from the period of its creation – at least none that can be directly associated with the site – while textual or pictorial materials are equally slim. Consequently, much of the extant scholarship has resorted to oral traditions essentially based on inherited assumptions, family stories, personal understanding or hearsay. In general, when reading about Qatari history, one occasionally feels as though the personal knowledge of reputable scholars is indistinguishable from – and indeed conflated with – positive evidence. Valuable as such studies are, they tend to fail the researcher when hoping to establish a historical narrative based on provable facts. Many commonly held assumptions about the Old Palace thus remain uncertain or contradictory.

While this book aspires to take a more academic approach, this is by no means to contest the merit of oral traditions. The Dutch archaeologist Bert de Vries (1939–2021) has argued compellingly how local knowledge and interpretations – including oral history, traditions, assumptions or even legends – are crucial for studying and presenting historical monuments or archaeological sites.[4] And this is particularly true for the Old Palace. Since it stands within the national museum, ripping it away from its interpretations by the local community would be imprudent, if not outright impossible. Thus, my method entails sieving through primary sources (whether textual, pictorial or material) and filling the numerous gaps with oral traditions, critically assessing what may best fit the general picture. If I were to write only about what I can sufficiently and forensically prove, this book would be barely half its length.

Perhaps the best illustration of the significance of local knowledge is an archival document that lies somewhere between the categories of oral history and oral tradition (the former is typically a recorded interview about a person's lived experience, while the latter is any communal knowledge inherited from the past). Written in 1973, the document transmits the recollection of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru (c. 1900–1992), who used to visit the site regularly during his

1. Wright, *The Old Amiri Palace*.

2. 'National Museum of Doha', pp. 163–171; see also Rice, 'National Museum of Qatar'.

3. Among others, Al-Kholaifi, *Architecture of the Old Palace*; Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, pp. 125–132; al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh 'Abd Allah*, vol. 1: pp. 289–295; Ghanim, *al-Shaykh 'Abd Allah*, pp. 138–158; Jodidio, *National Museum of Qatar*, pp. 27–60.

4. De Vries, 'Thematic Introduction Beyond the "Academy"'.

early life. Although unfortunately not a verbatim record of his words, the text is uniquely detailed in its description of the original layout and functions of the buildings in the Old Palace, and many of its points can be corroborated by independent evidence. Some of its other remarks also sound plausible. Therefore, I have included the entire document in the Appendix and cited it in almost every chapter.

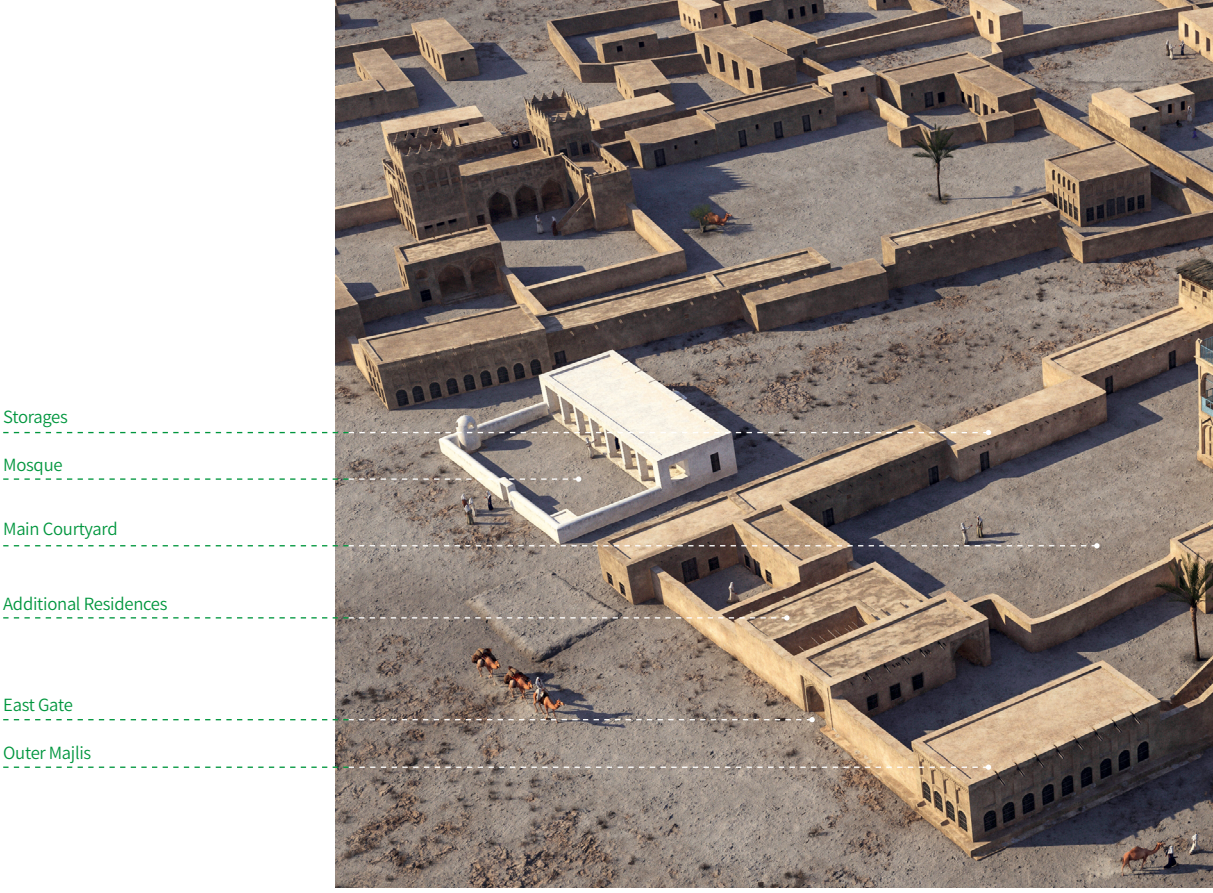
Nonetheless, the surviving buildings constitute the most important group of sources for this book. In their current form, they have undergone two main phases of restoration, first in the 1970s and then in the 2010s. In the first phase, many of the structures had to be rebuilt. It is thus inevitable to question their present-day authenticity.

Pre-restoration photos dating from the 1940s–1970s are tremendously helpful in that regard, and thanks to the archives of Qatar Museums, I had the opportunity to analyse hundreds of old depictions, many more than could be reproduced as illustrations in this book. The systematic aerials and maps of Doha from the period are of such quality that they allow us to trace the changes in individual buildings, revealing a plethora of information that would otherwise be lost.[5] I repeatedly excurse to each building's original appearance, especially in the second half of this book. However, I try to keep technical discussions to a minimum and focus more on the chapter's general narrative. Some things are better illustrated than described (fig. 0.3).

My theoretical visualisation of the site would not have manifested as book illustrations were it not for the contribution of Pazirik Co., a 3D graphic design company specialised in the virtual reconstruction of historical monuments. Together, we reviewed the current state of each building, comparing it with the abovementioned archival materials. We did our best to recreate the buildings' original forms, which almost never coincide with the present-day situation, at least in their details. Needless to say, there is some degree of conjecture in any such process. In cases where certain elements or even complete structures disappeared without pictorial evidence, we made use of analogies from sites in Doha from the same period. Our research has also concerned the period's natural landscape, built environment and inhabitants. As a result, the Old Palace appears in a more complete form here than ever before in the past nine decades since the buildings began to deteriorate or even crumble. For the sake of clarity, I refer to these images as 'our virtual reconstruction' throughout the book.

This book has two prime goals and hence is divided into two parts. Part I focuses on the history of the Old Palace. It reaches back to the emergence of the ruling family in Chapter 1, presenting a narrative that may already be familiar to readers knowledgeable in Qatari history. Chapter 2 sets the

5. See Fletcher, Carter and Nesta, 'Use of Archival Aerial Photographs'.



0.3. Our virtual reconstruction of the Old Palace, 1920s, view from the northeast, with the main buildings identified.

scene by describing the period's traditional architectural and decorative techniques, acquainting us with the material aspects relevant to the site. The following three chapters then trace the development of the Old Palace over time. Chapter 3 outlines the period when it served as a royal residence during the life of Sheikh ʻAbd Allah. Chapter 4 moves into the 1970s when the old Qatar National Museum was established within its walls. Lastly, Chapter 5 discusses the changes that occurred since the 2010s when the National Museum of Qatar arose around it. In short, the goal of Part I is to present a chronological narrative.

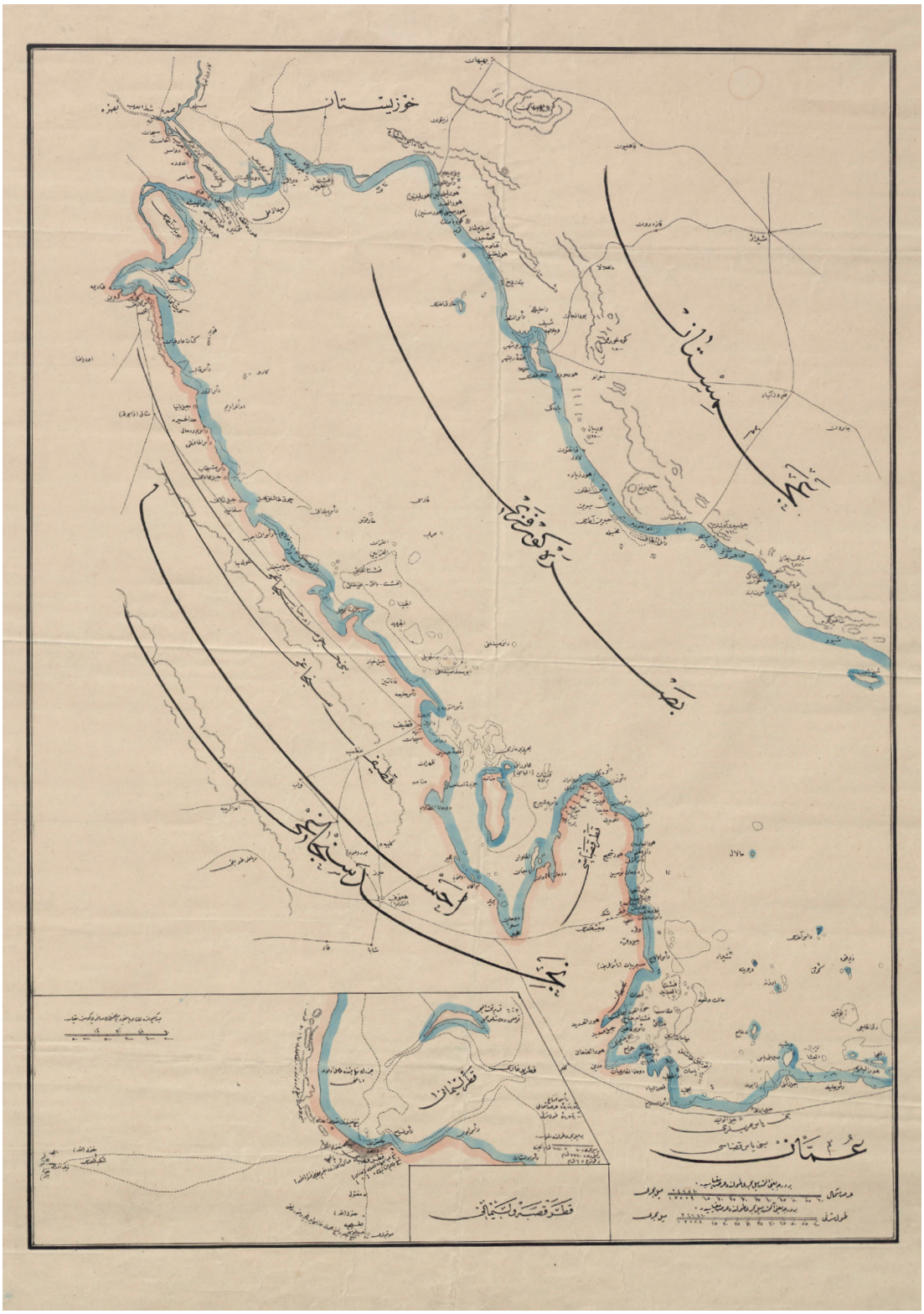
Part II proceeds spatially, moving across the Old Palace from outside-in and east to west. Chapter 6 begins with the site's location in Doha and discusses chiefly the four gates and their prime functions in each period. Chapter 7 focuses on the most public area within the palace, the Northeast Courtyard, and its buildings. Chapter 8 is a study of the Inner Majlis, relating some of the activities that once occurred there during its heyday. Chapter 9 surveys the House of Sheikh ʻAbd Allah and his family. Lastly, Chapter 10 moves into the west area of the palace, where the Houses of Sheikh ʻAli and Sheikh Hamad are situated. The main goal of Part II is to understand the site's



operation, including how each space originally functioned, while also taking their subsequent changes in form and function into account.

The story narrated in the following chapters is not simply about stone and wood. It also aims to inform the reader about how traditional constructions operated, how they became valued in the subsequent decades and how they matter today. By studying the buildings, we gain insight into the living standards and social interactions of the people who once inhabited or visited this palace. The different courtyards and buildings had their individual functions, each characteristic of the period and worthy of discussion and reconstruction. Thus, this book proposes that the Old Palace reveals several aspects of Qatari culture that one could otherwise hardly appreciate today.

A Historical Backdrop



1.1. Ottoman map of the Arabian Gulf, early 20th century, inset: Doha Bay (cf. fig. 3.3).

Around the shores of the Qatari peninsula lie many archaeological sites, some with standing buildings often labelled as abandoned villages or ghost towns. Their stories bear witness to an epoch when local families inhabited those houses before moving to the rapidly developing capital. For instance, the ruins of the city of Fuwayrit are scattered over an extensive area not far from the northernmost tip of Qatar, presenting a variety of historical layers. Part of the settlement uncovered by recent excavations dates to the 19th century. Although there are no obvious signs to indicate it, this was where the country's ruling family, the Al Thani branch of the Maʿadid Arab tribe, emerged onto the political scene. The following pages will discuss how this family came to power and managed to unify Qatar as a country, focusing on the life of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah bin Jasim Al Thani (r. 1913–1949), the patron of the Old Palace.

The story begins with Sheikh Muhammad bin Thani (r. 1847–1878). When moving from Fuwayrit to Doha in the mid-19th century, he was little more than one of the influential tribal chiefs, until he gradually managed to expand his influence over the neighbouring tribes and settlements. He was also known to be successful in the pearling business, administering several ships to harvest oysters and selling their valuable pearls on the international market.[1] However, the Bahrainis repeatedly attempted to compromise – or, at least, to counterbalance – his growing power. The inevitable war between them culminated in the nearly complete destruction of Bidda and Doha in 1867; nonetheless, Sheikh Muhammad kept his head above water. With the Saudi emir's military support, he managed to push back the Bahrainis.

This was the point when the British government – by then the foremost imperial power in the region – felt it timely to intervene, notably to maintain their empire's trading privileges in the Arabian Gulf. They declared British protection for Sheikh Muhammad and his territories on 11 September 1868. In return, Sheikh Muhammad stated the next day: 'I promise to return to Dowha (Doha) and reside peacefully in that port', meaning that hostilities in the region would cease on his part.[2] This so-called Anglo-Qatari treaty was the first official document to recognise Qatar as an independent country under Al Thani rule and Doha as its capital. Controversial as it might be to define the 'foundation' of Qatar through the lens of an outside power, British support undeniably favoured the Al Thani family in their growing authority.

The Ottomans' landing in Qatar in late 1871 further complicated the political landscape. By then, their empire had stretched from Tunisia to Iraq to Bosnia, and they had also ruled over parts of the Arabian Peninsula for centuries. Qatar came to their notice only when it started to develop its own political system, the seeds of the present-day nation state.

1. Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey*, vol. 2: pp. 231–234; see also Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 61–62; Carter, *Sea of Pearls*, p. 164.

2. 'Letter No. 111 of 1868', Tuson, *Records of Qatar*, vol. 2: pp. 124–125; al-Shilaq, *Fusul min tarikh Qatar*, pp. 233–234; see also Crystal, *Oil and Politics*, pp. 28–31; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 75–79; Fromherz, *Qatar*, pp. 54–57.

The Ottoman governor of Baghdad, Ahmet Şefik Midhat Pasha (1822–1883), sought to restore control over Eastern Arabia and establish a new administrative unit, the Najd *sanjak* ('district'). He sent a small army to the Ahsa' Oasis (in eastern Saudi Arabia), and its leader decided to make a move for Qatar too. The occupation was quick and nearly painless. Playing on a disagreement between the ageing Sheikh Muhammad and his son, Sheikh Jasim bin Muhammad (r. 1878–1913), the Ottomans favoured the latter and appointed him as *kaymakam* ('lieutenant') in Doha.[3] Qatar was designated as a *kaza* ('sub-district') within the Najd *sanjak*, even while enjoying relative autonomy within the empire (fig. 1.1). The fact that the Ottomans made a deal with the Al Thani family also solidified their status above other tribal leaders in the territory.

The relationship between Sheikh Jasim and the Ottomans soon began to deteriorate. For this reason he preferred to live outside the capital, as Bidda Fort hosted an Ottoman garrison of 250 men. He had residences in east Doha, Wakra (15 kilometres south of Doha), Wajba (15 kilometres west of Doha; fig. 1.2),[4] Daayen (30 kilometres north of Doha), and elsewhere. Rumours about his dissatisfaction with the Ottomans surely had some truth, especially since they required him to pay customs to Istanbul. In 1892, Sheikh Jasim resigned as *kaymakam*, which was interpreted as a rebellious act.

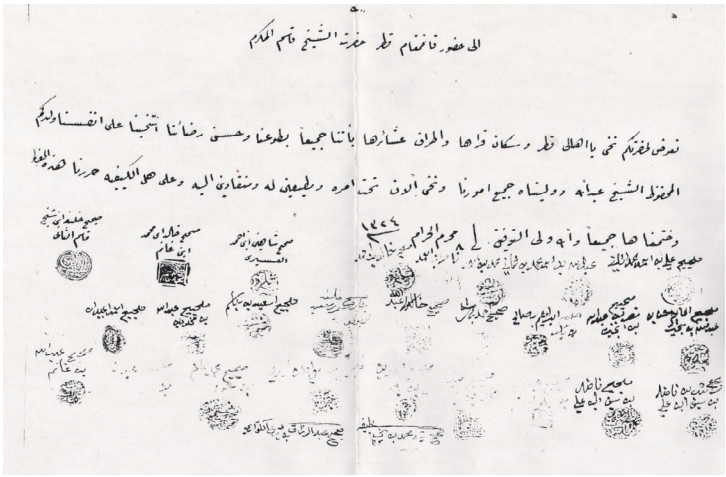
The Ottomans responded by sending an army of about 200 soldiers from Basra to Qatar. They attempted to attack Sheikh Jasim's forces near Wajba Fort, but he intercepted them on their way and forced them to withdraw. The Ottoman army retreated to Bidda Fort, where Sheikh Jasim laid siege to them, cut their water supply and eventually persuaded them to surrender. They soon reached a peaceful



1.2. Wajba Fort, palace of Sheikh Jasim bin Muhammad, built in the late 19th century.

3. See Kurşun, *The Ottomans in Qatar*, pp. 48–65; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 94–96.

4. See Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, pp. 89–92.



1.3. Letter to Sheikh Jasim bin Muhammad in which members of the Al Thani family declare their support for the heir apparent Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, dated 1324 AH/1906 CE.

settlement in which both parties agreed to reconfirm the status quo: Sheikh Jasim received a pardon and amnesty.[5]

After Sheikh Jasim's final resignation, the title of *kaymakam* passed on to his brother, Sheikh Ahmad bin Muhammad.[6] From 1901 until his death in 1913, Sheikh Jasim lived in semi-retirement in his fortified residence at Lusail (20 kilometres north of Doha),[7] mostly earning his income from pearling while several of his relatives acted as governors of cities. For instance, his brother Sheikh Ahmad represented him in Doha, his son Sheikh Khalifa in Bidda, another son Sheikh ʿAbd al-Rahman in Wakra and yet another son Sheikh Muhammad in Umm Salal. His eventual successor Sheikh ʿAbd Allah was not prepared to have a political role and showed more interest in pearl fishery and trade. However, when his uncle Sheikh Ahmad died in 1905, he was nominated as governor of Doha and even as heir apparent.[8] Sheikh Jasim sent a letter to Istanbul, requesting the appointment of his son as *kaymakam*. No less importantly, he needed to have his extended family on board, so he invited many of the Al Thani notables to a gathering on 4 March 1906. They produced a short document, including the names and seal impressions of various family members, with which they declared their backing for Sheikh ʿAbd Allah as the future ruler of Qatar (fig. 1.3).[9]

Sheikh ʿAbd Allah still retained his pearling business and even worked as an agent for his father. In 1907, he spent three months in Mumbai (then part of British India) attempting to sell pearls.[10] Since that city was one of the largest trade centres in the Indian Ocean and was being rapidly developed by British and local investments, it must have made a favourable impression on him. Coincidentally, against a background of strengthening ties between the Ottomans and the Germans, the

5. Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, pp. 51–54; Kurşun, *The Ottomans in Qatar*, pp. 89–98; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 99–112.

6. *Administration Report 1892–93*, p. 10; *Administration Report 1893–94*, pp. 8–9; Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 1: pp. 822–824; Kurşun, *The Ottomans in Qatar*, pp. 89–100.

7. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian* Gulf, vol. 2: p. 1112.

8. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 1: p. 826; vol. 2: p. 491; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 177–179.

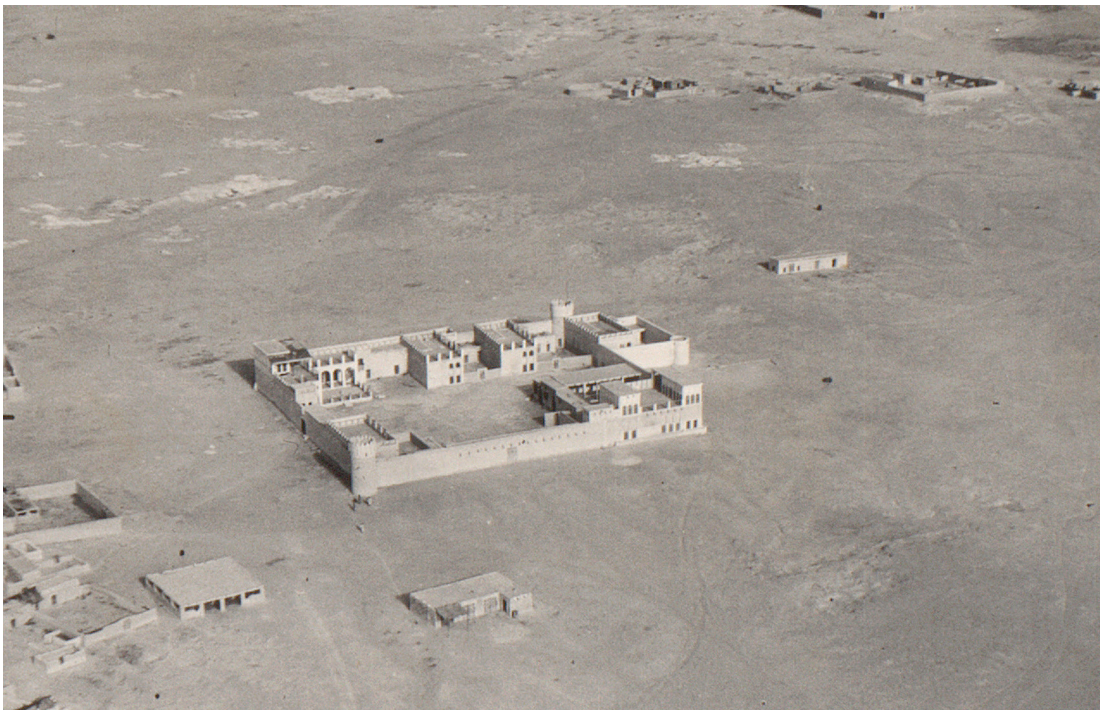
9. al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, pp. 65–66.

10. Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, p. 181.

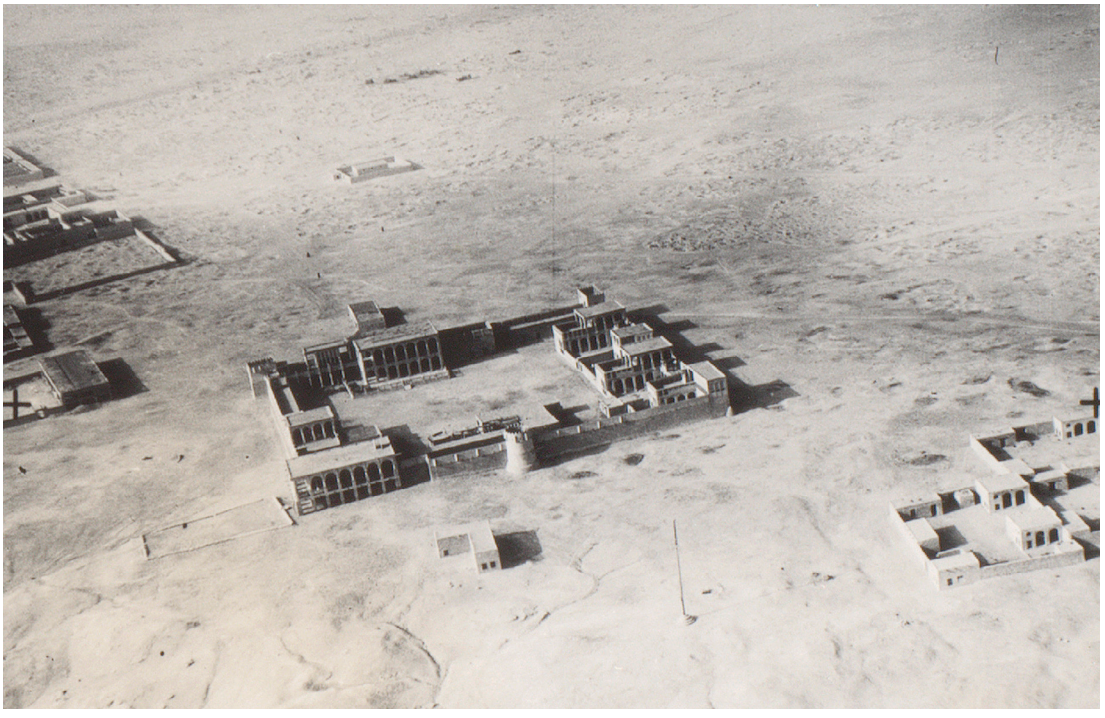


1.4. Zubara Fort, commissioned by Sheikh ʿAbd Allah in 1938.





1.5. Rayyan Palace, 1934, commissioned by Sheikh ʿAbd Allah c. 1930.



1.6. Doha Palace (present-day Amiri Diwan), 1934, commissioned by Sheikh ʿAbd Allah c. 1930.

British Empire decided to expand its power over the Gulf. After repeated negotiations, they proclaimed control over Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, which the Ottomans had no alternative but to accept in the 1913 Anglo-Ottoman Convention.[11] The agreement obliged the Ottomans to withdraw their troops from the Gulf, including the garrison stationed at Bidda Fort; it was not until 1915 that the withdrawal was complete.

As a further step, Britain sought to prevent Qatar from falling to the hands of the Saudis, who were quick to annex the Ahsa' Oasis, directly west of Qatar, into their state. This was the same year in which Sheikh Jasim died and Sheikh 'Abd Allah (r. 1913–1949) took over the leadership, although not without initial opposition. According to British intelligence reports, several of his relatives considered allying with Saudi Arabia in return for power, while Sheikh 'Abd Allah aimed to secure his territorial integrity and independence from the neighbouring states. The considerable sums inherited from his father came particularly handy at this moment,[12] in that he could offer to pay an annual tribute to the Saudis. He then signed the Anglo-Qatari Treaty on 3 November 1916. Officialising Qatar as a British protectorate, this document guaranteed defence against any outside force by sea.[13] The country thus became one of the many protectorates under the British Government of India, even while retaining autonomy over its internal affairs.

Yet, a key point was still missing from the country's territorial integrity: a solution to the Zubara conflict. This historic city, situated at the northwest of the Qatari Peninsula and mainly deserted by then, has often been a subject of dispute between Qatar and Bahrain. When British surveyors began to search for oil fields along the coast, they needed to know to whom the territory belonged. Proclaiming his rights, Sheikh 'Abd Allah made a ceremonial visit to Zubara on 3 May 1937. Part of his argument was that the ruling family's ancestor, Sheikh Thani bin Muhammad, had been born in that city. After a minor battle took place between the Qatari- and Bahraini-supported forces, the British decided to prevent further escalation and ruled in favour of Qatar. Then, reasserting his position both symbolically and effectively, Sheikh 'Abd Allah established Zubara Fort (fig. 1.4) a stone's throw away from the ruinous Murayr Fort, which had overlooked and protected the city's primary source of fresh water. The builders salvaged stones from the partly dismantled old structures.[14] The new Zubara Fort signified the ruler's expansion of power over the historical site. Once again, these events elevated the prestige of the Al Thani family in the eyes of many Qataris, strengthening their support for Sheikh 'Abd Allah.[15]

The life of Sheikh 'Abd Allah presents several shifts from pearl fishing to statesmanship and royal representation. After being officially appointed as governor of Doha and heir apparent in 1906, he retained his interest in the pearling

11. Kurşun, *The Ottomans in Qatar*, pp. 121–134; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 201–211; Tallon, 'Allies and Adversaries'.

12. Lowe, 'A Considerable Fortune'.

13. 'Persian Gulf Katr Treaty'; al-Shilaq, *Fusul min tarikh Qatar*, pp. 64–70, 235–241; Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, pp. 55, 59–61; Crystal, *Oil and Politics*, pp. 114–115; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 214–226; see also Morton, *Masters of the Pearl*, pp. 98–100.

14. 'File 19/243 IV Zubarah', fol. 12r; Polak-Springer, 'Bordering Zubara'; Morton, *Masters of the Pearl*, pp. 110–114.

15. See also Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, pp. 85–91.



1.7. Meeting in the royal palace at Rayyan, c. 1940s, from left to right: Sheikh Hamad, Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, Sheikh ʿAli and unknown British officer.

business, which was indeed the backbone of the economy.[16] Although he was among the wealthiest people in Qatar, his residence was perhaps little distinct from those of many other merchants. Located in the east end of Doha in a neighbourhood known as (Old) Salata,[17] it stood along the coastline, where he could draw his ships (commonly known as dhows) on the sandy seashore directly outside his home. After 1913, his status began to change significantly; his navigational skills in the sea of international politics not only successfully secured outside protection and internal independence for Qatar but also proved him an able ruler. It is reasonable to assume that,

16. Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, p. 185; Carter, *Sea of Pearls*, pp. 165–175; Morton, *Masters of the Pearl*, pp. 82–90.

17. As will be described in Chapter 6, the name derives from the Suluta tribe, who were the main inhabitants there.

in parallel, his residential compound expanded and became a proper royal palace with representative functions.

Among the closest associates of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah was Muhammad bin Maniʿ (1883–1965). Born in Unayza (Saudi Arabia) and educated in Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo, he was a renowned Hanbali Muslim scholar of his time.[18] Accordingly, when Sheikh ʿAbd Allah invited him to Qatar, the ruler emphasised that he also followed the Hanbali school of Islamic law.[19] Bin Maniʿ worked as the chief judge, preacher, advisor and teacher in Doha from 1916 to 1939, during which time he established a school, known as the Athariyya School, inside the Old Palace.[20] He portrayed Sheikh ʿAbd Allah as a pious man of outstanding discipline, who would only allow the most virtuous into his *majlis* ('council hall') and who had learned a great deal about the Qur'an and its commentaries, the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, history and poetry.[21] An anecdote narrates that he banned the teaching of Arabic grammar from a certain textbook because its author had followed different tenets of Islam.[22]

Ever since coming into power, the Al Thani family have paid much attention to architectural patronage, especially concerning palaces, forts and mosques. Sheikh ʿAbd Allah himself commissioned three palaces: one in (Old) Salata, one in Rayyan (fig. 1.5) and one known as Doha Palace (fig. 1.6). The first is the subject of this book. The second was a rectangular compound with fortification towers in two corners, probably established in the 1920s and used as his main residence from around 1930 onwards. It also included apartments for his sons, Sheikh Hamad, Sheikh ʿAli and Sheikh Hasan, and a mosque. Doha Palace stood where the Amiri Diwan does today, built near the site of the old Ottoman fort, and a few of its structures still survive incorporated into the more recent wings. It gave the impression of a fort, forming a square layout and including royal offices for state administration. After abandoning the Old Palace sometime after 1925, Sheikh ʿAbd Allah used the two others, perhaps one for official and one for private purposes (fig. 1.7).

These buildings, like Zubara Fort (built in 1938), indicate that Sheikh ʿAbd Allah continued his architectural patronage even during a period of fierce economic difficulties. The traditional methods of pearl fishing drastically and irreversibly declined in the Gulf around 1930. The international market, already shaken by the global economic crisis known as the Great Depression, turned towards the cultured pearls invented in Japan. Qatar lost its prime source of income – as did the ruler himself. The country's economic troubles would only be solved after the discovery of oil fields and, in particular, with the onset of oil exportation in late 1949. Thanks to this natural resource, by the time Sheikh ʿAbd Allah died on 25 April 1957, Qatar had become a very different country.

18. On his life, see Al al-Shaykh, *Mashahir ʿulamaʾ Najd*, pp. 411–417. Unfortunately, his memoirs from Qatar contain little information on this period and more on his second sojourn there between 1958 and 1965; Bin Maniʿ, *Qatar fi mudhakkirat*.

19. Bin Maniʿ, *Qatar fi mudhakkirat*, p. 73; see also Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 2: p. 1113. Established after the teachings of Ahmab bin Hanbal (d. 855), Hanbalism is known as the most strictly traditionalist among the generally accepted Sunni schools and today remains the official school in Qatar.

20. Naji, 'Tarikh al-taʾlim al-shaʿbi', pp. 296–304; al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, pp. 107–108; al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, vol. 2: pp. 292–308; Khayyat, *al-Shaykh Muhammad bin ʿAbd al-ʿAziz*, pp. 134–136.

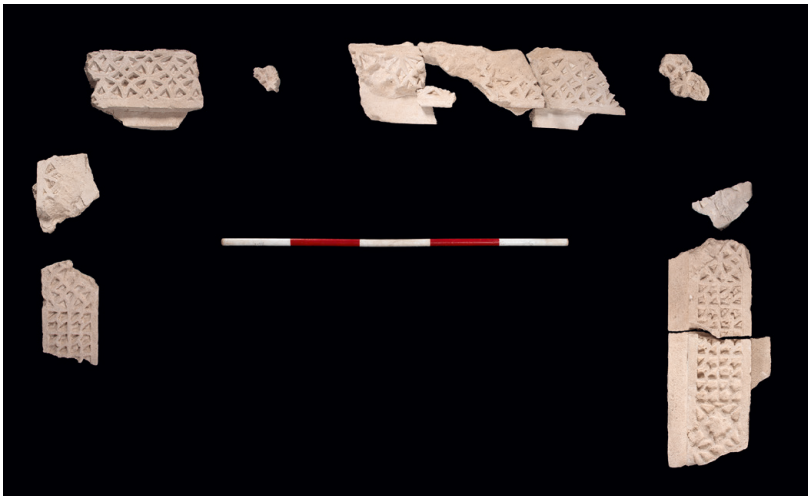
21. Bin Maniʿ, *Qatar fi mudhakkirat*, pp. 73–74.

22. al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, p. 69.

Importing Materials, Building Homes



2.1. Bird's-eye view of the Zubara archaeological site, from the east.



2.2. Carved gypsum decoration fragments from a door frame of a palatial compound, Zubara archaeological site, second half of the 18th century.



The built heritage of the Arabian Gulf, like any region in the world, has its local characteristics. Although it falls under the umbrella of Islamic architecture, most scholars of the field tend to overlook the region, probably because its aesthetics are at odds with the romanticised or Orientalist expectations about the Middle East.[1] The *Aladdin* animated film's imaginary capital, Agrabah, was inspired by the monuments of Cairo, Agra or Istanbul more than those of Doha or Dubai. Many studies still focus on imposing edifices at the expense of vernacular traditions, making everyday houses fall off their radar. Leaving such prejudices aside, this chapter serves as an introduction to the physical aspects of the Old Palace, discussing construction materials and techniques commonly used in Qatar during the first half of the 20th century. It will also touch upon the broader context in which these buildings came into existence, especially concerning building materials traded across the Indian Ocean.

To understand the building blocks that constitute a Qatari home, the city of Zubara is a convenient starting point (fig. 2.1). Today the best-known archaeological site in the country, the city flourished from the 1760s until 1811. The excavated dwelling units are representative of the period's domestic architecture in the Gulf and were predominantly single- or two-storey structures arranged around courtyards. The typical construction materials were beach rock, sourced within the city, and limestone, also available within a few hundred metres. In most buildings, the stones were uncarved, roughly shaped lumps held together by a thick mortar usually made of soil or gypsum (more precisely: anhydrite). The plaster facing of the walls was also made of gypsum, which is a naturally occurring mineral found on the coasts in tidal flats. It had to be burned and crushed, and then mixed with water to make a paste applied on the walls and occasionally decorated with geometric designs (fig. 2.2). The craftsmen also used this material to make decorative window grilles.[2] The construction techniques of the houses of Zubara, as we will see throughout this book, were typical of later Qatari buildings, including the Old Palace.

In most cases, traditional houses in early- to mid-20th century Qatar were modest, simple structures fitting with social and climatic requirements. A perimeter wall surrounded the plot, delimiting an elongated compound with a few rooms arranged along its sides. Such houses, with open spaces much larger than the built-in areas, were typical of the location and period.[3] Additionally, courtyard houses – that is, houses built around the four sides of a central courtyard – also became popular. The rooms were elongated, opening into a veranda or *liwan* (a roofed corridor aligned with pillars on one side and a wall on the other) or directly to the courtyard. As a rule, the layout followed the convention

1. Exell and Rico, '"There Is No Heritage in Qatar"'.

2. Al-Kholaifi, *Athar al-Zubara wa-Murwab*, pp. 23–54; Kinzel, *Conservation Handbook of Al Zubarah*; Kinzel, 'Building on the Shoreline'.

3. Nagy, 'Social and Spatial Process', pp. 215–216; Fletcher and Stepney, 'Morphologies of Housing in Doha'. The former study describes this type as 'yard-oriented house', while the latter calls it *bayt sha'bi* ('common house').



2.3. House of Muhammad Saʿid Nasr Allah, the only surviving building in Doha with a windcatcher, possibly built in the 1920s.

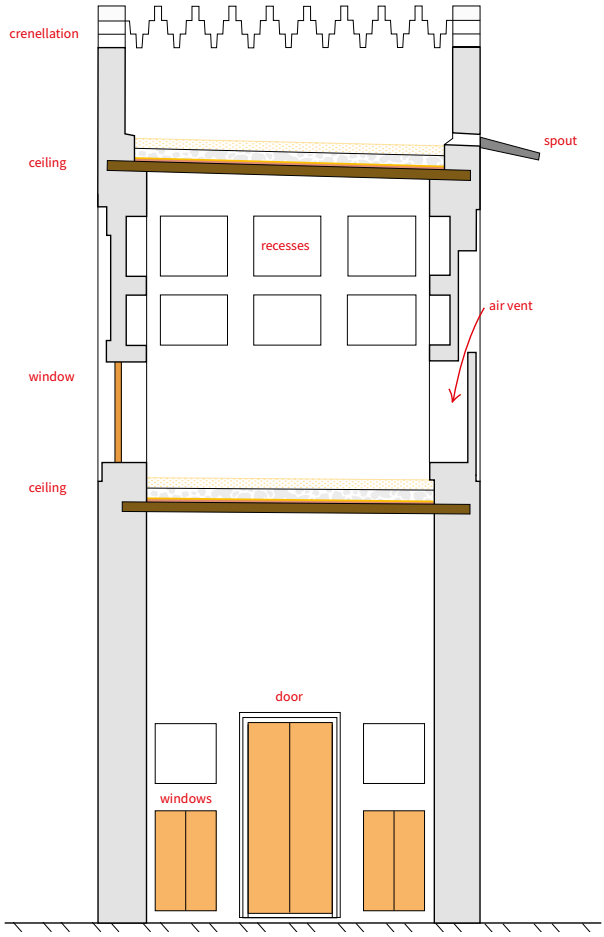
of separating the family's private areas from the semi-public, often well-decorated, *majlis* room(s) attended by guests.[4] Qatari houses had various parallels with those elsewhere in the Gulf, including the southwest coast of Iran, in their construction techniques, layout and the use of *majlis*es.[5] There was particularly little to distinguish Bahraini and Qatari buildings in terms of structural and decorative features in this period. These characteristics remained more or less unchanged until the 1950s when modern construction techniques began facilitating new forms.

A persistent challenge that Qatari builders (or indeed anyone in Qatar) faced was the nearly unbearable heat during the summer months. It was necessary to come up with ways to improve air ventilation within a house. In Iran, the most efficient solution was the windcatcher, known in Persian as *badgir* and in Arabic as *malqaf*, which consisted of a square tower with openings on its upper shaft, channelling wind into the rooms below. Only a single historical example of a windcatcher survives in Doha, in the house of Muhammad Saʿid Nasr Allah (dated to the 1920s),[6] although others might have existed (fig. 2.3). A more standard solution was to build horizontal slits into the walls, which formed vents and brought in a cooling breeze fuelled naturally by the difference in air

4. See Remali, Salama, Wiedmann and Ibrahim, 'A Chronological Exploration'; Jaidah and Bourennane, *The History of Qatari Architecture*, pp. 19–23; Eddisford and Carter, 'The Vernacular Architecture of Doha', pp. 84–85; Al-Mohannadi and Furlan, 'The Syntax of the Qatari Traditional House'.

5. See, for instance, King, *The Traditional Architecture of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 177–207; Lewcock and Freeth, *The Traditional Architecture in Kuwait*; Yarwood, *Al-Muharraq;* Khajehzadeh, Vale and Yavari, 'A Comparison of the Traditional Use', p. 473; Memarian and Brown, 'The Shared Characteristics'; Hawker, *Building on Desert Tides*, pp. 44–63, 79–101; Pollalis and Ardalan, *Gulf Sustainable Urbanism.*

6. Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, pp. 145–147.

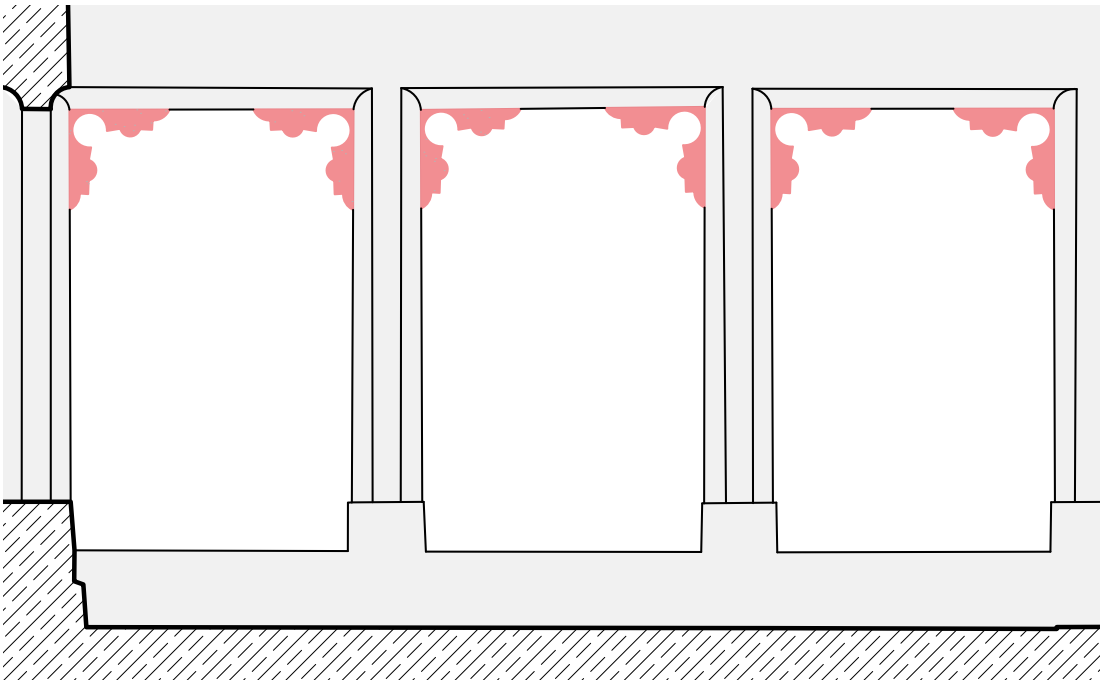


2.4. Cross section of a Qatari house with an upper-floor room showing how the air vents functioned.

pressure and temperature. This device required two flat stone slabs placed horizontally above each other with a slight overlap and a gap between them, one connected with the upper and one with the lower part of the wall (fig. 2.4). Alternatively, the windows were usually positioned facing the courtyard, where the veranda provided shade over them.[7] As will be discussed in later chapters, the Old Palace has several air vents and shaded windows.

The natural resources of Qatar determined the chief construction material, which has always been stone: limestone or beach rock, the latter known as *farush* and sourced from the shores. The required amount could usually be collected as cobbles, though in some settlements the material needed to be quarried and broken into lumps. Well-shaped, cut stones appear only in more durable structures such as forts, towers and minarets. Similar to those of Zubara, the walls of houses in Doha were usually made of uncarved stones locally available;

7. Eddisford and Carter, 'The Vernacular Architecture of Doha', p. 83; Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, p. 184.



2.5. Partial cross section of the Radwani House courtyard, Doha, built c. 1930 (now part of Msheireb Museums), with the decorative brackets of the veranda highlighted in red.



2.6. Majlis building, Doha Palace (present-day Amiri Diwan), with decorative brackets, built c. 1930.

their core would be filled with mud and gravel, while their surfaces received several layers of plaster.[8] The simple mud-facing of the walls required regular maintenance, especially after heavy rain, whereas the gypsum-rich plaster was sturdier. Yet, since the use of gypsum mortar was optional, these walls were unlikely to hold much longer than a few decades against the wind, rain, salt and humidity.

The pillars were normally built using the same technique as the walls or, rarely, were made of finely cut stones. They formed colonnaded verandas fronting a room or even surrounding the central courtyard of a house, supporting horizontal beams. As per Gulf tradition, corners at the meeting points of beams and pillars often featured so-called brackets reminiscent of capitals (fig. 2.5–2.6). Decorative arches with no structural function appeared notably above wall recesses. Conversely, load-bearing arches – presumably because they would have required carved stones or bricks – were seldom built except in a few mosques. The Old Palace was no exception: although it seemingly features two types of arches, none had a structural function. The three houses belonging to Sheikh ʿAbd Allah and two of his sons included verandas with four-centred (or 'keel-shaped') arches, similar to those in the gateways leading into the compound. In contrast, the two *majlis*es of the palace used semi-circular arches, but the main burden still rested on invisible wooden beams incorporated within the structure.

Known in the local Arabic dialect as *sabban*, seashells were another natural resource used by Qatari builders as mixers of mud or plaster (and later cement) and as substitutes for pebbles for ground covering. Since they accumulate on the shores in mass quantities, they are easily collected, and many rooms in both houses and mosques were sprinkled with seashells. Whether this was the case with the Old Palace is a possibility; the more likely option was to leave the rammed soil as a walking surface just as in the outside areas. Vegetation was noticeably sparse in Doha; maintaining a palm tree in one's courtyard was considered something of a luxury because it required regular watering.

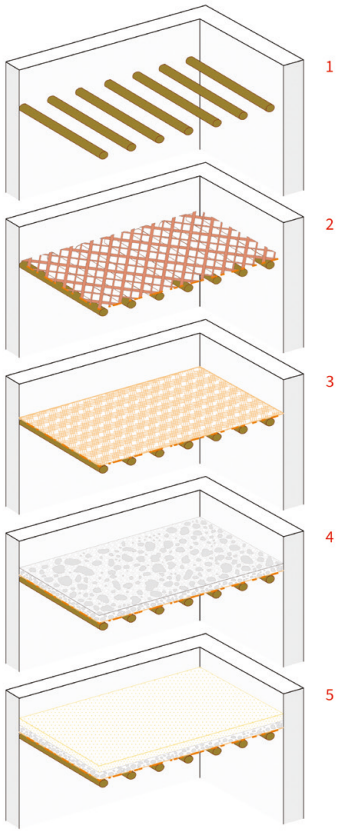
Given the country's arid climate, few species of tree grew on its lands, and those that did were either too precious or unfit for construction purposes. The tamarisk, acacia, olive and jujube trees were usually short and weak, just like the wood typically available from mangroves in places along the shores. The scanty population of palm trees was too valuable to cut. Qatar instead relied on timber imports for building houses and boats. Indian teak, the best quality wood, was used specifically for finely decorated doors.[9] Ceilings used mangrove poles, known in the local dialect as *danchal*, as beams which spanned every room at regular intervals (fig. 2.7). Thus, the timber's length determined the room's width, usually no more than 4 metres. The beams penetrating the wall structure

8. Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, pp. 36, 227–231; Hawker, *Building on Desert Tides*, pp. 86–93.

9. Onley, *Qatar, India & the Gulf*, pp. 84–86; Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, pp. 186–191.



2.7. South veranda of the Inner Majlis, Old Palace.



2.8. Layers of traditional construction technique of a Qatari ceiling: *danchal* beams (1); bamboo slats (2); palm mat (3); gravel (4); mud (5).

were surmounted by bamboo slats (placed either across or diagonally), a palm leaf mat, gravel, mud and, optionally, gypsum mortar (fig. 2.8).[10] This local technique allowed the use of ceilings as terraces or even to support additional rooms on the upper floor, as was the case in some parts of the Old Palace.

The main components of a Qatari ceiling, the *danchal* beams, came primarily from East Africa. Although the so-called 'grey mangrove' exists in the Gulf, its quality and quantity are significantly inferior to the (misleadingly named) 'Asiatic mangrove' native to the East African coast. Countless poles, known in the Swahili language as *borit*is, were shipped from Kenya and Tanzania to the Gulf, where they became *danchal* beams (fig. 2.9). The Australian adventurer and writer Alan Villiers (1903–1982), who sailed from Yemen to the Swahili coast and back aboard a dhow in 1939, described the mangrove timber business at Lamu, Northern Kenya, as follows:

> Lamu has […] mangrove poles called *borities*, cut from the low islands. Arabia is a treeless land and any wood is at a premium there. The cheapest wood, and the strongest for many uses, has always been the mangrove pole. It can be had simply by cutting it from its swamp. Up and down the east coast of Africa these great swamps cluster and the mangrove thrives. There is something in the soil washed down from the interior which puts iron into the heart of these coastal trees, and long use of them in Arab building has proved their worth. The dimensions of many an Arab room are fixed on the beach at Lamu, for the ordinary Arab house, away from centers like Aden and Bahrein, is built of coral rock fastened with mud and lime, and roofed with earth-covered matting spread on mangrove poles. It is cheap, and satisfactory in a dry land.
>
> All along the Lamu waterfront stand piles of these mangrove poles, red with their heavy gums and tan. Picturesque small dhows discharge them from upstream, and Swahili guards grade them,



2.9. Loading of mangrove poles (*boritis*) onto a dhow at Lamu, Kenya, 1947.

10. Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, pp. 232–236; Eddisford and Carter, 'The Vernacular Architecture of Doha', pp. 86–87; see also Hawker, *Building on Desert Tides*, pp. 93–98.



2.10. Interior of the lower-floor council hall of the Inner Majlis, Old Palace.

> count them, and brand them with the government hammer. The ring of hammers of the government's forestry guards is a familiar sound all day, and the stacks of *borities* grow until they tower over the Swahili huts.[11]

According to official records, Kenya exported an average of nearly 400,000 poles every year between 1904 and 1978, most of which came from the Lamu archipelago and ended up in the Gulf (fig. 2.9).[12] Apart from Lamu, other sources of mangrove timber were the island of Zanzibar and the Rufiji Delta in Tanzania.[13] As for the bamboo elements of Qatari ceilings, most of these materials travelled from South Asia along an ages-old trade route between India and Arabia.[14] Presumably the same stands for the numerous metal bars protecting the windows, examples of which are all around the Old Palace.

Among the decorative techniques of Qatari houses, the wooden doors made of Indian teak were the most distinctive elements, clearly visible from the street. The larger entrances often had a wicket door – that is, a smaller door built within

11. Villiers, *Sons of Sinbad*, p. 164.

12. Curtin, 'African Enterprise in the Mangrove Trade'; Kokwaro, 'The Distribution and Economic Importance'. In addition to official export, the smuggling of unregistered and illicitly cut *boriti*s was, according to Villiers, also common practice. Villiers, *Sons of Sinbad*, pp. 244–245.

13. Villiers, *Sons of Sinbad*, p. 244; Sunseri, *Wielding an Ax*, pp. 30–31; Mkumbukwa, 'The History of Use and Conservation'.

14. Hawker, *Building on Desert Tides*, pp. 84–85; Pankhurst, 'Indian Trade with Ethiopia'; Onley, 'Indian Communities in the Persian Gulf', pp. 232–233.



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

a bigger one – known in the local Arabic as *farkha* (literally meaning 'chick'). Decorative nails and carved motifs embellished the woodwork, while the window shutters were usually without decoration. The composite ceilings were often painted in several colours, especially brown, yellow and red. The Old Palace also has five peculiar ceilings made of wooden planks painted with floral and geometric motifs in many colours, which seem to be unparalleled in the country at the time (fig. 2.10). Yet the most characteristic decorative technique was the carved gypsum work with various geometric designs.[15] Two different methods were standard. One required the wall surface to be freshly covered in gypsum; the craftsman either carved the motifs with a chisel or moulded them into the wet surface. In the other, decorative panels were made separately: first by pouring the material into a frame, then engraving it with decorative elements, and lastly, fixing it upon the wall (fig. 2.11).[16]

The history of traditional architecture in Qatar occasionally appears in the literature as static and uniform,

15. See Abdulla, *al-Zakhrafa al-jibsiyya.*

16. Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, pp. 223–227; see also Abdulla, *al-Zakhrafa al-jibsiyya*, pp. 125–133.



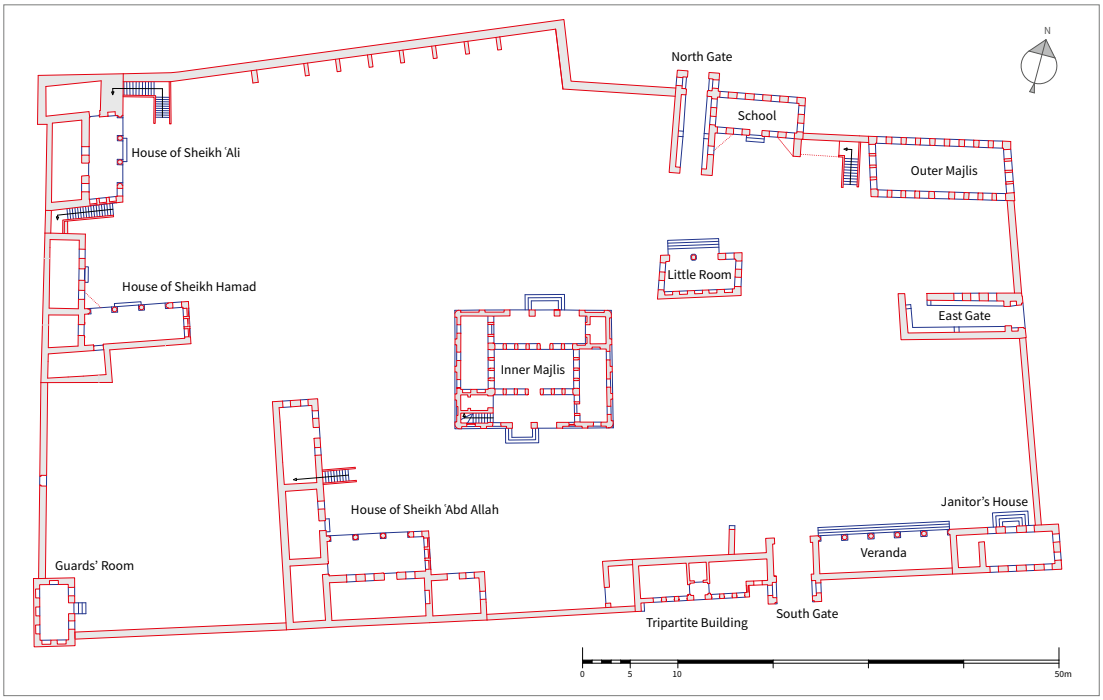
2.12. Gate with *muqarnas* hood, house of Nasir al-ʿUbaydan, Doha, c. 1980. Dated to the first half of the 20th century, the building no longer stands.

with little development or individualism – as though neither the patrons nor the architects had any original ideas. Part of this undeniable 'conservatism' can indeed be explained by the limited availability of natural building materials, which left little room for experimentation. However, uniformity was never absolute or complete, and the number of buildings surviving today certainly constrains our perception.
The general features outlined above did not mean that Qatari patrons were devoid of individual ideas and project requirements, and especially the larger houses varied to a great extent. Additionally, certain elements indicate the contribution of foreign, migrant master-builders hired for the projects. One example is the abovementioned windcatcher in the house of Muhammad Sa'id Nasr Allah (fig. 2.3); another is the now demolished house of Nasir al-'Ubaydan in Doha, which had a gate with a *muqarnas* ('stalactite') hood or semi-dome typical of Iranian architecture (fig. 2.12).[17] Such examples indicate that traditional Qatari houses complied with the individual patrons' requests. Migrant architects, just as anywhere in the world, contributed with their know-how to the local built heritage – including, as we shall see, the Old Palace.

When assessing heritage architecture in Qatar, and having the misleading impression of uniformity, one should bear in mind the implications of the commonly applied restoration methods. Many traditional buildings have undergone commendable preservation attempts during the last decades. However, comparing photos before and after the intervention occasionally reveals that certain original elements were lost – while supposedly authentic ones added – in the process. No less questionable is the method of erasing a heritage house and then building it anew from the ground up, something that has not been a rarity. Wall colours tend to disappear, while *danchal* beams can pop up in place of a ceiling originally built of concrete, which seems to result from a misguided assumption about what a heritage building must have originally looked like. As a result, visitors not only have difficulties telling apart old from new but also, upon seeing a couple of restored houses, may misread traditional Qatari architecture as virtually uniform.

17. Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, p. 179; on the migration of Iranians to Qatar, see Nagy, 'Making Room for Migrants'.

From Residence to Representation



3.1 Site plan of the Old Palace, following the restorations completed in 2015.



3.2. Our virtual reconstruction of the Old Palace, 1920s, view from the south.

When you wander around the Old Palace today, it appears as a largely empty space with just a few scattered buildings (fig. 3.1). It is difficult to find logic in their arrangement, not least because some original structures no longer survive (fig. 3.2). Yet the positions of the extant buildings and the spatial communication between them may indicate that the patron gradually added new buildings and functions, as was common in Qatari architecture. Anyone wealthy could be expected to keep beautifying or developing their home, particularly if it happened to be a royal palace. The typical layout, arranged in a spacious compound, allowed the owners to supplement it with new structures, enlarge the existing ones and even subdivide or expand the general footprint. As will be described below, the Old Palace underwent various modifications. What was first just the residence of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah one day became the chief royal palace in Qatar, incorporating representative spaces for official business. The following chapter summarises what can, with some degree of certainty, be known about the Old Palace's development during its occupation by Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, distinguishing between two main construction phases.

The palace's history goes back to foggy beginnings. According to some interpretations, a residence belonging to Sheikh ʿAbd Allah's brother Sheikh ʿAli bin Jasim had stood in the same spot before 1888, when its owner died in battle. This view holds that Sheikh ʿAbd Allah moved into the abandoned residence and later turned it into his royal palace. Although the same narrative has appeared in several publications,[1] it seems to originate from a much later oral tradition – that is, from rather slim evidence. While it cannot be ruled out, no reliable source indicates that Sheikh ʿAli bin Jasim ever lived in this area of Doha, let alone in the same building.

A more plausible view holds that it was Sheikh ʿAbd Allah who established the Old Palace during the first decade of the 20th century, around the time of his appointment as Doha's governor in 1906.[2] The earliest known source for its existence is an Ottoman map of the Arabian Gulf, which includes an inlet depicting Doha Bay. Among its many labels in Turkish, the most relevant says *Şeyh Abdullah'ın kalesi (hanesi)*, which means 'the fort (house) of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah' (fig. 3.3). A black mark next to this label coincides with the location of the Old Palace. The problem is that the document bears no date. However, because it depicts the Najd *sanjak* ('administrative district') of the Ottoman Empire, which was abolished in 1915, it must predate that year. It is inconceivable that the Ottomans could have conducted detailed surveys in Qatar after effectively losing control over it.

Moreover, the map shows special interest in the properties belonging to the Al Thani family, labelling them as *kale* ('fort') and *hane* ('house') and adding the names of their owners. Some of the identified properties belonged to the ruler Sheikh Jasim

1. Jodidio, *National Museum of Qatar*, p. 32; al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, vol. 1: pp. 289–290; al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, pp. 142–144.

2. Al-Kholaifi, *Handasat binaʾ al-Qasr al-Qadim*, p. 12 (note that the English version of this book is mistranslated on this point); Facey, 'Palace at Meeting Point of Empires'; cf. Wright, *The Old Amiri Palace*, n.p.

bin Muhammad and his brother Sheikh Ahmad bin Muhammad. Given that the latter died in 1905, the labels suggest that the draftsman relied on a survey carried out before that date. According to this piece of evidence, the palace already existed, and thus its foundation can be ascribed to the first years of the 20th century. At the time Sheikh ʿAbd Allah was merely a pearl merchant. The site's location on the coast, near the easternmost end of Doha, suited his pearling activities: he could draw his dhows directly onto the beach right outside his home, as it was common elsewhere in the city (fig. 3.4). Indeed, according to the recollection of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru, a close friend of the elder sons of the family, the main advantage of this location was its 'anchorage' on the shore – that is, a place to park boats.[3]

What did the first residence of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah look like? Unfortunately, no textual or pictorial evidence survives from the period on this question, and it is thus inevitable to rely on the buildings' layout. The earliest known photos and aerial images from the 1940s–1950s depict several internal partition walls within the Old Palace, including one running towards the north from the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, which would have been the compound's original west wall (fig. 3.5). As noted in the previous chapter, a typical Qatari house at the time consisted of elongated rooms along the perimeter walls of a compound, which meant that an L-shaped house would have occupied the compound's corner. Such was most probably the case with the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, with its rooms facing north and east in the shape of an 'L'. This layout strongly suggests that the house stood in the southwest corner of the compound, which was much smaller than today (fig. 3.6). Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru corroborates these observations, stating that the oldest building was the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, and all others developed as later expansions.[4]



3.3. Detail of an Ottoman map of the Arabian Gulf, early 20th century, inset depicting Doha and its surroundings (cf. fig 1.1).

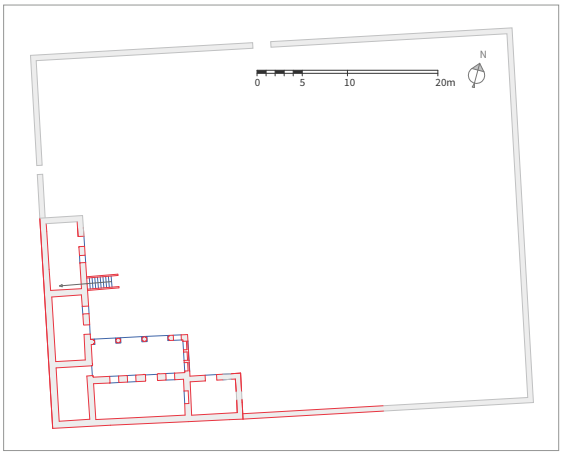
3. See Appendix.
4. See Appendix.



3.4. Dhows lined up on the coast of Doha Bay, 1903.



3.5. Aerial photo of Doha, detail showing the Old Palace and its surroundings, 1948.



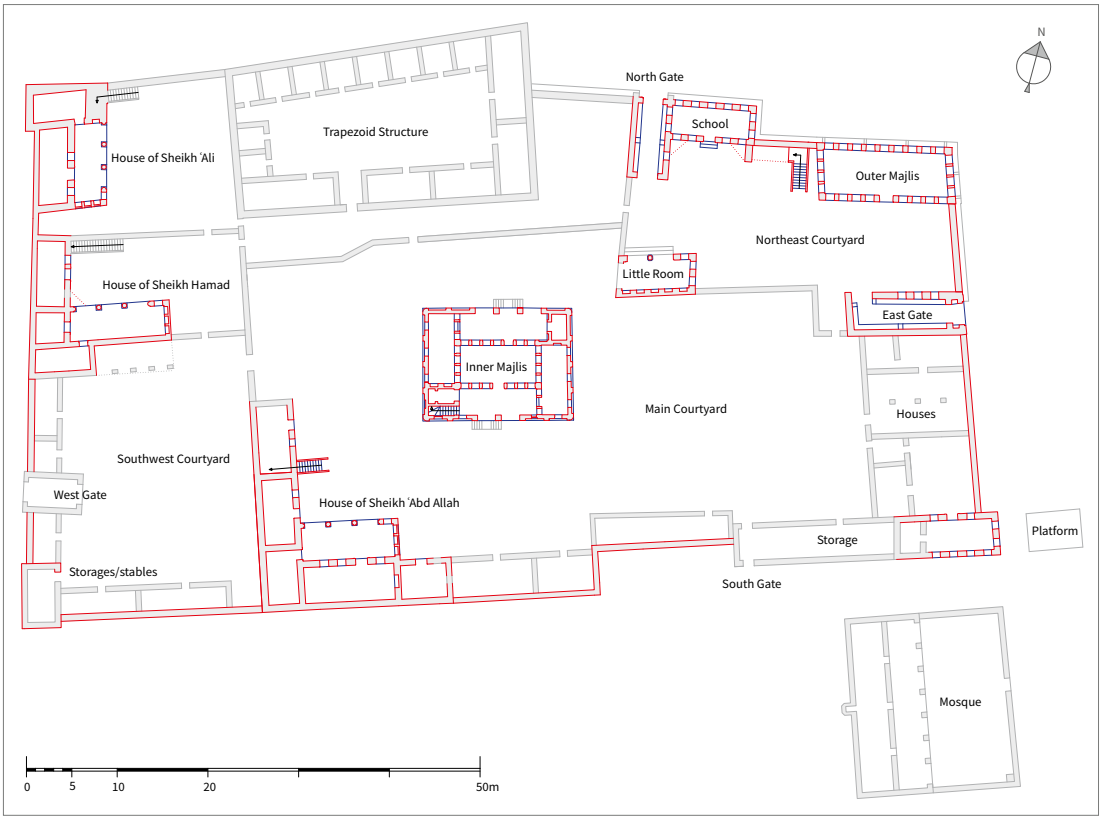
3.6. Reconstructed site plan of the original residence of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, before c. 1905 (walls outlined in red exist today, while those in grey are conjectural).

Whether there were any other – today unknown – buildings within the compound of this first phase is unclear. The partial excavation of the site found some remains underneath the Inner Majlis, which may have belonged to an older structure related to the first residence.[5] In any event, it seems that all surviving buildings (except for the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah) were added at a later stage. For all we know, there was nothing to distinguish this residence from countless others in Doha. Since Sheikh ʿAbd Allah was, thanks largely to his pearling fleet, among the wealthiest people in the country, the simplicity of his home may have reflected his genuine modesty. He lived here with his family before becoming Doha's governor in 1906.

Accepting that the original residence's layout was much simpler, as stated by Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru, also entails that all other buildings came into existence at a later point. In this second construction phase, more or less parallel developments occurred in and around the earlier residence, expanding it in three directions (west, east and north). The palace reached its present-day extent: the original compound became the Main Courtyard, now stretching as far as the East Gate. In the aerial from 1948, one can trace most of the walls around the Main Courtyard, along with several buildings added in the second phase, including the Inner Majlis, the Little Room and a few others along its south and east sides (fig. 3.5). It is also clear that the various units within the palace were divided by partition walls. Thus, a site-plan level reconstruction of this phase – informed by several aerials and other pre-restoration photos – presents a more densely built-in space than today (fig. 3.7).[6] Directly outside the palace's southeast corner stood the mosque (fig. 3.8). Although its date is unknown, it is likely to be contemporary with the second phase.

5. Arrok, 'Excavation Works Inside and Around Doha Old Palace'.

6. Perhaps a questionable section is part of the north wall of the Main Courtyard, running alongside the Inner Majlis, which was already in ruins by the 1940s and then rebuilt along a slightly different line by 1952. The analyses of the different units within the palace, as reconstructed in this plan, will be discussed in the second half of this book.



3.7. Reconstructed site plan of the Old Palace at its largest extent, 1920s (walls outlined in red exist today, while those in grey are conjectural).

The palace's expansion to the east also involved appending the Northeast Courtyard, which formed a clearly delimited rectangular unit with semi-public buildings (fig. 3.7). Two of the palace's main gates led here, indicating that this was the most accessible for visitors. Indeed, the Outer Majlis in the palace's northeast corner must have been, at least on certain occasions, where the public could meet with the ruler (fig. 3.9). The School Building standing next door, which was known as the Athariyya School, also bore a public function. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Saudi jurist and founder of the school, Muhammad bin Maniʿ, moved to Doha in 1916, and so he could only have started teaching after that date. One may add that, from the ruler's perspective, both the Outer Majlis and the Athariyya School served representative purposes: one to meet the public and the other to teach children, thereby casting his image as a keen educator. Today, part of the layout of the Northeast Courtyard is no longer visible since the walls once linking the Little Room with the North Gate and the East Gate, respectively, were demolished in the later decades.



3.8. Mosque outside the southeast corner of the Old Palace, 1959 (the building was demolished in the 1970s).





3.9. School Building (left) and Outer Majlis (right), Old Palace.

Once standing between the Northeast Courtyard and the Main Courtyard, the Little Room appears somewhat enigmatic today. It forms a small rectangle open only on its north side with two arches (fig. 3.10). According to a common interpretation, it was a vestibule, a place to offer guests coffee before they proceeded to see the ruler.[7] While this view fits with Qatari custom, if it was a venue for greeting visitors before they entered the Main Courtyard, heading towards the Inner Majlis, one would expect it to provide access to that area. However, it does not – or at least not since it underwent restoration in the 1970s. Partly ruined at the time, with its west wall missing entirely, it was reconstructed by mirroring the surviving east wall. In contrast, pre-restoration photos show that the missing west wall had an engaged pillar in the building's northwest corner, which would have supported an arched opening on its west side (fig. 3.11). Thus, visitors entering through the two arches on the north wall could turn right and proceed towards the west. The Little Room functioned as the chief gate between the Northeast Courtyard and the Main Courtyard, leading towards the Inner Majlis. Still, whether anyone received coffee here, as asserted by oral tradition, must remain an open question.

It follows from the above interpretation that the Little Room and the Inner Majlis belonged together in terms of

7. Al-Kholaifi, *Architecture of the Old Palace*, p. 13; Wright, *The Old Amiri Palace*, n.p. Additionally, according to the recollection of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru, Sheikh ʿAbd Allah used to receive morning visitors in this building, which sounds at odds with the inconvenience of this space for that purpose.



3.10. Little Room, Old Palace.

function: one provided access towards the other (fig. 3.12). Since the Inner Majlis, impressively sized at two storeys with a council hall situated on each floor, would have functioned as a venue for royal meetings, both buildings should be dated to the second phase, after the residence turned into a royal palace. Relying on oral tradition, several studies mention that the Inner Majlis was founded in 1918 when Sheikh ʿAbd Allah recruited the Bahraini master builder ʿAbd Allah al-Mayl to construct this building.[8] Once again, the recollection of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru corroborates this view, although he was uncertain of its date.[9]

Another building of particular interest is one that has completely vanished. Along the north side of the palace stood the Trapezoid Structure, somewhat oddly positioned and oriented. Traces of its layout are visible in the aerials from the 1940s–1950s, which incorporated various rooms along the four sides of a central courtyard (fig. 3.5).[10] What was the purpose of this Trapezoid Structure? Its layout finds an analogy with the stables in Rayyan (today in Education City),[11] so it is possible that horses were kept here. Alternatively, one may notice that the Old Palace virtually lacks domestic service facilities, such as kitchens and servants' quarters, unless this Trapezoid Structure was used for those purposes.[12] However, a further

8. Abdulla, *al-Zakhrafa al-jibsiyya*, pp. 69–70; Wright, *The Old Amiri Palace*, n.p.; al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, vol. 1: p. 292; al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, p. 152.

9. See Appendix.

10. Today no trace of the Trapezoid Structure survives since by 1952 someone decided to dismantle its ruins. When the Old Palace was converted into Qatar National Museum in the 1970s, a new building occupied the same spot – see Chapter 4 (fig. 4.6). However, the more recent restorations recreated the rough outlines of the Trapezoid Structure on the ground.

11. See Hardy-Guilbert, *Qatar: Architectures*, p. 29. The author attributes the stables to Sheikh ʿAbd Allah.

12. This interpretation agrees with the recollection of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru, stating that kitchens were in the north area of the Old Palace, see Appendix.



3.11. Little Room, Old Palace, before the first restorations in the 1970s, showing that the west side originally had an arched opening.

possible function seems even more likely: accommodation for those working on pearling boats. The pearl fishing business in the Gulf often utilised unfree labour as divers (who dove for oysters) and hauliers (who did the rest of the hard work).[13] The 1934 manumission certificate of a certain Bashir bin Faraj Allah, a former slave and pearl diver, testifies that he grew up in the palace of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah.[14] Thus, since the ruler kept his dhows just outside the Old Palace to the north, from where the fleet would sail out on pearling expeditions, it is reasonable to propose that he housed his workforce in this building.

Whatever its purpose, the Trapezoid Structure was oddly positioned with respect to its immediate surroundings. Its northeast corner protruded from the palace's perimeter wall (fig. 3.7). Such misalignment of buildings usually indicates that they were not established according to one general plan but either in different periods or for independent purposes. However, the west wall of the Trapezoid Structure perfectly aligned with the House of ʿAbd Allah. A likely explanation is that the Trapezoid Structure already stood on its own outside the (smaller) residential compound in the first phase of construction. Then, with the expansion of the palace in the second phase, the new layout incorporated this building.

The palace's expansion to the west appended three new units to the original compound: the Southwest Courtyard and the Houses of Sheikh ʿAli and Sheikh Hamad (fig. 3.13). In Qatari society, it has been customary that when a son marries, he builds a house for his new family within (or alongside) his parents' home.[15] This tradition explains the need for the two new residences within the Old Palace. Since Sheikh ʿAli was born in 1894,[16] followed by Sheikh Hamad two years later, it is



13. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 1: p. 2228; Carter, *Sea of Pearls*, pp. 212–213. See also Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 263–267; Hopper, *Slaves of One Master*, pp. 86–89, 101–104.

14. 'Manumission of Slaves', fol. 145r. One may note that the biography of Bashir, as described in the document, is unrealistic (or at least imprecise). What matters here is that he (and his parents before him) served the Al Thani family in Doha.

15. Nagy, 'Keeping Families Together'.

16. See Al Thani, *al-Haly al-dani*, pp. 16–17.



3.12. North and West sides of the Inner Majlis, Old Palace.

likely that their houses date to the 1910s, which more or less coincides with other developments taking place in the second construction phase. As for the Southwest Courtyard, Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru recalled that camels had been kept here, and that members of the Al Thani family had typically entered the palace through its West Gate.[17]

In summary, it emerges that Sheikh ʿAbd Allah initially had little more than a modest residence where he lived with his family from the beginning of the 20th century. Only after his status changed, especially after 1913, did he begin developing the site into a proper palace by adding new courtyards and buildings. Now the ruler of Qatar, he required a more spacious complex suitable for his title. The former residence became part of the Main Courtyard within a larger compound. The ruler's two elder sons, Sheikh Hamad and Sheikh ʿAli, soon reached an age where they married and thus required their own houses. The new representative buildings, some of which may well be the work of ʿAbd Allah al-Mayl, befitted the functions of a royal palace, especially if one thinks of the different forms of councils and meetings between the ruler, tribal leaders, advisers and the public. Admittedly, there is no proof that the expansions all occurred simultaneously, and this chronology will be refined in the later chapters of this book.

Sometime after completing the Old Palace, Sheikh ʿAbd Allah abandoned it in favour of two newer palaces, one now within the Amiri Diwan and another in Rayyan. It is, unfortunately, unclear when he moved out: suggestions oscillate between the early 1920s and the late 1930s. Evidence has yet to emerge for any of the suggested dates. Perhaps the ruler and his family left in the late 1920s, though parts of the site may have remained occupied for some time thereafter.[18] What is certain is that the two other palaces of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah were completed before 1934, which is the date of their first known photos (figs. 1.5–1.6). Thus, as this chapter has suggested, the Old Palace's heyday was roughly in the 1920s after the previously small compound had grown in size, complexity and prestige, with several representative buildings popping up on its premises.



17. See Appendix.

18. Wright, *The Old Amiri Palace*, n.p.; Al-Kholaifi, *Architecture of the Old Palace*, p. 12; Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, p. 125; cf. al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, vol. 1: p. 294; interview with Mohammed Abu Hindi, part 2, 1:12:50–1:13:05.



3.13. Our virtual reconstruction of the Houses of Sheikh Hamad (left) and Sheikh ʿAli (right), Old Palace, 1920s, view from the east.

Museumising the Past



4.1. Upper-floor council hall of the Inner Majlis, Old Palace, 1959, showing members of a family who lived there at the time.

According to old photos as well as oral tradition, the palace of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah was left mostly abandoned for decades, while several of its buildings became partly or entirely dilapidated. If you visited in the late 1950s, as did the British scholar John Craven Wilkinson, you could meet a local family living among the crumbling remains (fig. 4.1). However, the 1970s brought unexpected changes to the site. In the wake of Qatar's independence from the (by then no less crumbling) British Empire in 1971, the need for creating a local narrative of the past became a prime concern of the ruler – now titled Emir – Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad (r. 1972–1995) and his advisers. They decided to establish Qatar National Museum and chose to revive the remains of the Old Palace for that purpose (fig. 4.2). The site made an obvious reference to the Emir's grandfather, Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, while also linking the ruling family with the exhibited material culture of Qatar. Display and location contributed equally and meaningfully to the creation of the country's national story. The following pages will discuss the birth of this museum, focusing on how it affected the Old Palace in terms of function and layout.

As described by the museum's head curator Michael Rice (1928–2013), Sheikh Khalifa commissioned a national museum that would 'contain the evidence of Qatar's history and the traditional way of life of its people before these were irrevocably lost.'[1] It was also intended to 'provide a basis for the formation of a historical and cultural consciousness'.[2]

1. Rice, 'National Museum of Qatar', p. 79.
2. Rice, 'National Museum of Qatar', p. 81.



4.2. Inner Majlis, Old Palace, before the first restorations in the 1970s.



4.3. South Gate (right) and Tripartite Building (left), Old Palace, after the opening of Qatar National Museum in 1975.



4.4. Little Room and Inner Majlis, Old Palace, after the opening of Qatar National Museum in 1975.



4.5. Beduin tent in the courtyard of the Old Palace, after the opening of Qatar National Museum in 1975.

Clear as these statements might be, an unpublished report from 1975 listed the project's goals in more detail:

> A. To reinforce the feeling of national identity by presenting the geological evolution, history, ethnography and natural history of Qatar to visitors, local populace and, especially, schoolchildren.
>
> B. To preserve for posterity the evidence of Qatar's history and traditions, which would otherwise be lost.
>
> C. More specifically, to restore a complex of buildings which is intimately linked with that history.
>
> D. To provide research facilities for local and foreign scholars and institutions interested in the area.
>
> E. To provide a place of recreation for Qataris and visitors.[3]

Whether or not the plans were as concrete from the outset as described here, the museum pursued those principles with the country's first (and perhaps the largest ever since) nation-building cultural project. The commissioners clearly intended to create a 'national narrative' or 'myth', an interpretation of the past that would fit with their general political agenda and vision.[4]

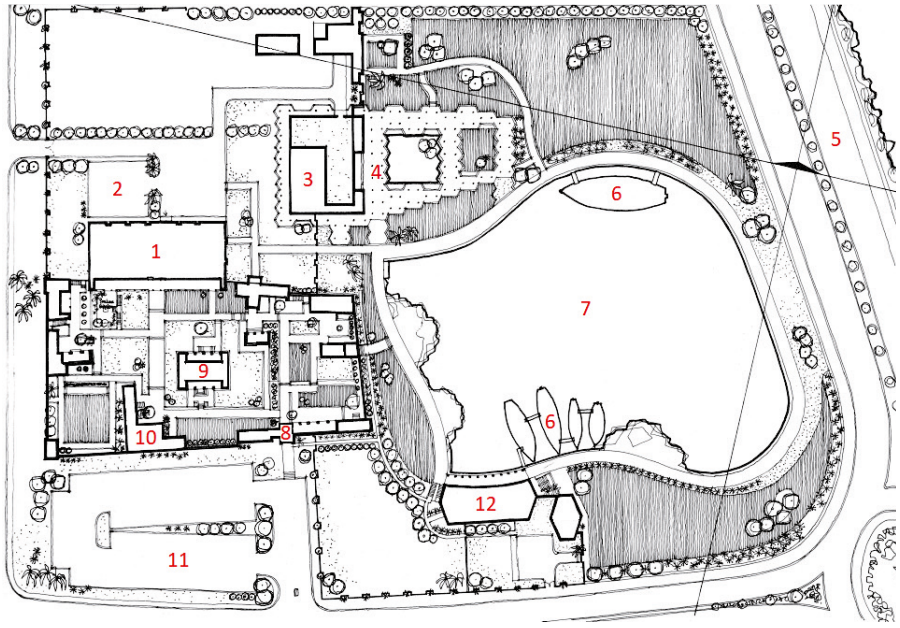
From early on, there were two main strands in the project's development: the site preparations and the curatorial work for the permanent exhibition. The former was in the hands of the Qatari government, with Ahmad As'ad al-Ansari from the Ministry of Public Works supervising the restorations of the Old Palace.[5] The planned museum required various modifications to the site, about which little documentation exists today. Yet, if one compares photos taken before and after the restoration works, one can easily find differences. It appears that the restorers possessed some old images in addition to personal recollections that they could follow, at least as far as the general forms of the buildings were concerned, and thus rebuilt some of the partly or heavily ruined structures. This was what happened to the Houses of Sheikh 'Abd Allah, Sheikh Hamad and Sheikh 'Ali, the so-called Guards' Room, the North Gate and the Little Room, among others. In cases where neither semi-ruinous walls nor photographic evidence existed – such as the Trapezoid Structure and the southeast area of the palace – no reconstruction was possible. The inner partition walls between the courtyards were removed to make the entire compound more accessible to the public. They also decided to replace most of the extant decorations: many panels of carved gypsum work, painted ceilings, coloured glass and wooden doors were made anew, partly because some had been vandalised.[6] One may notice that wherever the original decorations are known from old photos, the substituting pieces followed them rather loosely or, in some cases, were simply new additions. The site's general aesthetics also changed: every building became white in contrast with their original sandy-yellow colour (figs. 4.3–4.5).

3. 'Project Summary'; cf. Al-Mulla, 'The Development of the First Qatar National Museum', pp. 118–120.

4. Crystal, *Oil and Politics*, pp. 162–164; Al-Mulla, 'The Development of the First Qatar National Museum', pp. 118–124; see also Bounia, 'The Desert Rose as a New Symbol', p. 216.

5. See 'National Museum of Doha', pp. 167–168. According to a later recollection, Sheikh Khalifa personally oversaw the progress of the restoration works; Al-Mulla, 'The Development of the First Qatar National Museum', p. 119; see also the interview with Michael Rice, 12:00–12:20; interview with Mohammed Abu Hindi, part 2, 1:18:30–1:22:30.

6. See Lockerbie, 'Old Qatar 02'.



4.6. Site plan of Qatar National Museum, designed by Anthony Irving and completed in two phases: 1975 and 1977. Drawing by Anthony Irving. (1) Museum of the State, (2) staff parking, (3) power station, (4) café, (5) Corniche Road, (6) dhows, (7) lagoon, (8) South Gate (main public entrance), (9) Inner Majlis, (10) House of 'Abd Allah, (11) public car park, (12) Maritime Museum and Aquarium



4.7. Bird's-eye view of Qatar National Museum, after the second phase was completed in 1977, from the east.

Several new structures appeared in the Old Palace, though not all with a historical precedent (figs 4.6–4.7). The South Gate served as the new public entrance to the museum, with a car park situated nearby. It imitated the basic style of older buildings, although with more extensive decoration in the gypsum revetment and two painted ceilings similar to those in the Outer Majlis and the ground-floor council hall of the Inner Majlis. Whatever structure stood here previously, it vanished long before the restorations; the same stands for the Veranda with five arches attached to the east side of the South Gate. Lastly, the Tripartite Building, entered from the outside, was a wholly new addition: pre-restoration photos demonstrate that no structure had existed there. It served as a ticket office for museum visitors (fig. 4.3).

The reconstruction work also introduced different ground levels to the compound. Older photos predating the 1970s show a flat piece of land with undifferentiated walking surfaces, and the buildings were mostly on an equal level or, in some cases, preceded by a few steps. Once the palace grounds were turned into gardens for the museum, three different surfaces were added: pavement, *sabban* ('seashells') and soil (fig. 4.4). Walking around was a very different experience from either before the 1970s or in the present day; visitors were restricted to using paved passages incorporating steps, while the other areas featured trees, bushes and flowers. The empty plot between the Inner Majlis and the House of Sheikh Hamad had a Bedouin tent, which was part of an exhibition featuring traditional objects of desert life (fig. 4.5). The combination of the freshly restored, shining white walls and rich vegetation must have impressed visitors, especially since – as demonstrated by aerials from the period – the greenery stood in sharp contrast to the arid surroundings.

As for the curatorial strand of the project, the Qatari government – represented by the Minister of Information 'Isa Ghanim al-Kawwari – initially contacted the British Museum to advise on, and contribute to, the prospective Qatar National Museum. A key figure in the project was the aforementioned Michael Rice, a PR specialist by training, amateur archaeologist and consultant to the British Museum. Previously, his PR company established a small archaeology museum in Manama (Bahrain) – though it soon moved to Muharraq – in 1970. According to Rice, this particular project aroused the curiosity of the Qatari Emir, who wished to have a museum much grander than the one in Bahrain and recruited Michael Rice & Company in May 1972.[7] Bearing the title 'co-ordinator', James (Jimmy) Butts, a controversial character well-connected in the country, ran most of the ground operations in Doha.[8] The work had to advance swiftly. They prepared a progress report by November 1973 describing the overall concept for the museum displays, the various types of objects to be exhibited, as well as content

7. Interview with Michael Rice, 2:30–6:45; Rice, *The Archaeology of the Arabian Gulf*, pp. xi–xiii. The story is also described by the author in his unpublished book manuscript titled *The Unveiling of Arabia*.

8. The archive of the National Museum of Qatar holds Jimmy Butts' extensive correspondence regarding the establishment of the museum, which reveals a plethora of information (including diplomatic intricacies). See also the interview with William Facey.



4.8. Museum of the State, Qatar National Museum, designed by Anthony Irving and completed in 1975 (the building was demolished in 2010).

research on Qatari history and culture.[9] Already supported by some scholars who contributed to the research, the company hired the young historian William Facey to oversee the project's completion.[10] Yet the most urgent need was to find a large number of presentable objects that were nowhere available at the time.

On Rice's call, the British archaeologist Beatrice de Cardi (1914–2016) submitted a proposal to conduct excavations in Qatar, aiming to establish a collection of artefacts, for which she received approval from all parties, including the Emir. As she wittily described in a later interview: 'My brief was to fill the gap between the Neolithic and the Oil Age, in order to fill the proposed museum with objects that were relevant and hopefully would be interesting to the public'.[11] Her archaeological report, published in 1978, adds that the team sought to collect as much Qatari material culture as possible during 10 weeks of extensive fieldwork between November 1973 and January 1974. They surveyed and excavated at 51 sites.[12] Apart from the archaeological artefacts, the task of gathering ethnographic materials was assigned to a committee of Qatari notables headed by Yusuf al-Darwish Fakhru, while the public was invited to contribute their private objects of heritage value.[13]

9. Michael Rice & Company, *Qatar National Museum*.

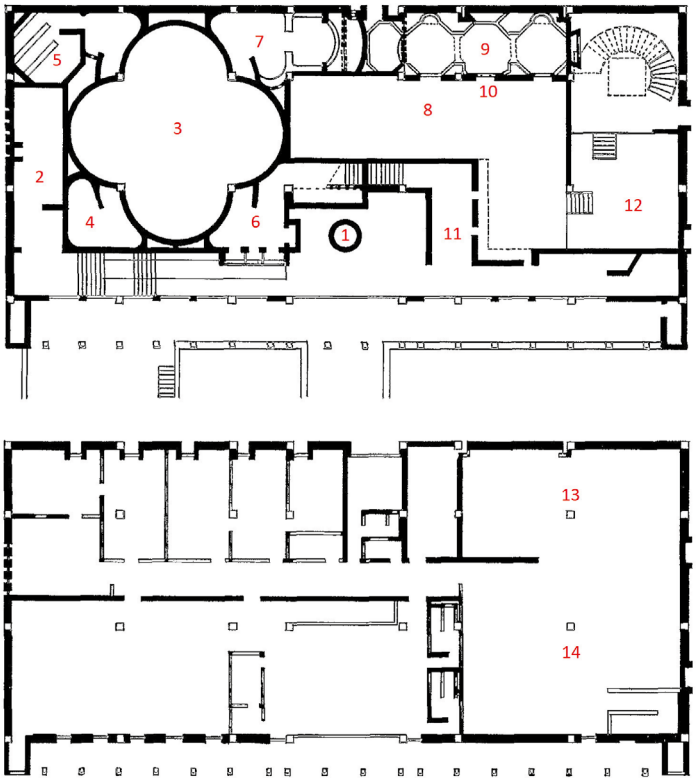
10. On the creation of the museum, see the interview with William Facey, 26:20–34:30; interview with Michael Rice, 6:40–16:30, 41:56–54:20; also *Qissat bina' Mathaf Qatar al-Watani*, short film in 2 parts; Al-Mulla, 'The Development of the First Qatar National Museum'. The same company established a museum in Oman and seven others in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s; Rice, *The Archaeology of the Arabian Gulf*, pp. 56–58; Cassola, 'The Saudi Arabian National Museum'.

11. Interview with Beatrice de Cardi, 15:40–16:05.

12. De Cardi, *Qatar Archaeological Report*, pp. xvi–xvii, 1–8, 180–199; see also the interview with Beatrice de Cardi.

13. Rice, 'National Museum of Qatar', pp. 82–83; interview with Michael Rice, 1:09:30–1:11:30; 'Project Summary'; Al-Mulla, 'The Development of the First Qatar National Museum', pp. 120–121; Jodidio, *National Museum of Qatar*, p. 44. Yusuf al-Darwish Fakhru was member of a prestigious trade family closely associated with the Al Thanis, and his father had studied at the Athariyya School of the Old Palace, see Appendix.





4.9. Site plan of the Museum of the State exhibition galleries, Qatar National Museum.

Above: ground floor / below: first floor, exhibition spaces labelled as follows: (1) Geology, (2) Archaeology, (3) Life of the Bedouin, (4) Bedouin in Their Nomadic Existence, (5) Hospitality and Customs of the Bedouin, (6) Bedouin Arms, (7) Weaving and Other Crafts of the Islamic Period, (8) Bedouin Tent: Its Contents, How It Is Mounted and Objects of Daily Life, (9) The Hunt, (10) Animal Life, (11) The Physical Environment, (12) The History of Qatar during the Islamic Period, the Pearl Trade, the Role of the Al Thani Family in State Affairs from the 19th Century Onwards, (13) The Role of Oil in the Development of the State since the 1930s, (14) Qatar Today, the Structure of the Government and the Projects Undertaken by the Different Ministries.



4.10. Museum of the State, Qatar National Museum after the first phase was completed in 1975.



The largest addition to the Old Palace was the chief exhibition space called the Museum of the State, standing on the north side of the compound (figs. 4.8–4.10). It was designed by the Beirut-based British architect Anthony Irving (1925–2015), with the assistance of Gordon Jones, in close collaboration with the curatorial team. They intended to keep the new building's height and appearance in line with the Old Palace; thus, the lowest of the three floors was sunk to basement level. The building applied only modern materials shipped from the United Kingdom, mostly reinforced concrete covered in plaster on the inside and gypsum cement on the outside. It had a chic yet modest façade with 15 arches, entered through a staircase descending to the entrance on the basement level. The exhibitions were on two floors, with sections on geology, geography, archaeology, armoury, ethnography and modern history, among others. The second floor included an auditorium, a library, a study room, conservation facilities and offices (fig. 4.9). Additionally, parts of the Old Palace also featured displays: the Little Room had a historical section, the upper-floor hall of the Inner Majlis had a numismatic display, while the three houses introduced their original owners.[14]

The speediness of this first phase of the project, which was completed in about three years, seems impressive today. The November 1973 progress report by Michael Rice & Company revealed that the general plans were already well advanced: the outlines of the proposed exhibition closely resembled the final version. However, the document also noted that the intended completion date of the project, 22 February 1974, would be impossible 'due to delays in the construction phase of the buildings and the preparation of the site'.[15] The deadline for multiple tasks – conducting archaeological fieldwork, curating displays, restoring old buildings and constructing new ones – was indeed tight. Eventually, Qatar National Museum opened to the public on 23 June 1975. But this was only the end of the project's first phase; the next one required another two years.

The second phase of the project, completed in October 1977, involved the addition of the Maritime Museum and Aquarium (fig. 4.11) and the artificial lagoon, coinciding with the construction of Corniche Road (fig. 4.12).[16] The new display building was modern in style, with its main façade following the curve of the lagoon. It housed exhibitions on fishing and pearling, two traditional activities crucial to the economic history of Qatar, alongside displays of marine life in the region.[17] The lagoon had several dhows moored to its shores, commissioned to form part of the museum's collection. As described by Rice, they were 'a tribute both to their builders and to the men who sailed the often dangerous waters of the Gulf from the days of remote antiquity to the twentieth century'.[18]



14. Hopkirk, 'Collection Will Help to Rescue Disappearing Life Style'; Rice, 'National Museum of Qatar', pp. 84–87; 'National Museum of Doha', pp. 170–171; interview with Mohammed Abu Hindi, part 2, 1:22:30–1:31:00.

15. Michael Rice & Company, *Qatar National Museum*, n.p.

16. Jodidio, *National Museum of Qatar*, p. 43.

17. On the history, organisation and research of the Maritime Museum and Aquarium, see the interview with Mohammed Abu Hindi, part 2, 6:30–1:03:00.

18. Rice, 'National Museum of Qatar', p. 87.



4.11. Maritime Museum and Aquarium, Qatar National Museum, designed by Anthony Irving and completed in 1977 (the building was demolished in 2010).



4.12. Bird's-eye view of Qatar National Museum, after the second phase was completed in 1977, from the northeast.



4.13. Five-riyal banknote, reverse, 1973.



4.14. Postage stamps issued for the inauguration of Qatar National Museum, 1975.

On the north side of the lagoon was a café arranged around two courtyards, with interconnected parasols standing on pillars. Lastly, two car parks lay on the north and south sides of the Old Palace, one for staff and one for visitors (fig. 4.6).

The creation of Qatar National Museum effectively guaranteed the survival – indeed rebirth – of the Old Palace, which would have otherwise entirely vanished. Instead, it became the first protected monument in the country. Given its link with the royal family, this was a logical place to create a narrative of Qatar's past; here, the story of the Al Thani family becomes the central stem of national history.

While parts of the palace underwent reconstruction, the designers duly kept the size and impression of the new structures harmonious with the old. The project was a pioneer, not only as the first museum – and indeed the first *national* museum among the neighbouring Arab countries – but also as the first adaptive reuse of heritage architecture in the country. As a result, Qatar National Museum received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1980. This was the inaugural cycle of this prestigious prize, for which the award committee selected 15 projects – both restorations and new constructions – around the Islamic world. The Old Palace also achieved international fame: a volume presenting the laureate projects discussed it alongside other award-winning monuments from Senegal to Indonesia.[19] That is, the site's museumisation meant that it was featured for the first time in the discourse about Islamic architecture.

By this time, Qatar not only recognised the significance of its built heritage but also begun to popularise it. For instance, new stamps were issued that, for the first time, differed from those of the British Empire: they no longer depicted Queen Elisabeth II (r. 1952–2022). Instead, local monuments started appearing on some of them. On 24 October 1972, Qatar Post released stamps to commemorate United Nations Day, with the images representing some of the specialised agencies of the UN: the one for UNESCO showed a surveyor in front of the Inner Majlis. Among the first Qatari banknotes issued in 1973 was the five-riyal bill depicting the Old Palace (fig. 4.13). Then, issued for the opening of Qatar National Museum, a set of stamps presented the restored buildings alongside objects from the newly displayed collection (fig. 4.14). In this way, the state ensured that images of its prime piece of cultural heritage would reach the broadest possible audience.

19. 'National Museum of Doha', pp. 163–171.

Governing Doha's Landscape



5.1. National Museum of Qatar, designed by Jean Nouvel and opened in 2019.



Qatar National Museum served for about two decades as the country's primary site of memory, a place where visitors could learn about the past. In 1996 it closed to the public, after which most buildings from the 1970s were demolished to make way for a new museum that would better represent the modern state. Now called the National Museum of Qatar, it manifests in the shape of a desert rose, a natural crystal formation found in arid climates (fig. 5.1). This contemporary – or even neo-futuristic – landmark has once again turned the Old Palace's surroundings into something unprecedented. The following chapter will discuss how the joint vision of the commissioner and the designer created a new visitor experience for encountering this piece of built heritage.

Soon after succeeding his father, HH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani (r. 1995–2013) decided to aggrandise the existing national museum, creating a completely new building with reconceptualised and enlarged exhibitions. What he needed first was a visionary plan. At the time, the renowned French architect Jean Nouvel was working on another project in Doha's West Bay district, a skyscraper known by the name Burj al-Dawha or Doha Tower.[1] Since this building's commissioner, Sheikh Sa'ud bin Muhammad Al Thani (1964—2014), was Qatar's Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage, he was also closely involved with the new museum project and introduced Nouvel to the royal family. The architect soon turned out to be the right person to translate an abstract idea into concrete shape.

In 2003, the Emir signed a contract with Atelier Jean Nouvel for the future National Museum of Qatar, the planning of which took no less than five years. The designer's first proposal, which suggested bringing the exhibitions mostly underground so that the Old Palace would remain prominent, was soon abandoned.[2] As a second proposal, he conceived a magnified sculpture composed of interlocking disc-shaped volumes inspired by the form of a desert rose. As described by the Emir's daughter and present-day Chairperson of Qatar Museums, HE Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani:

> In 2008 my father HH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani approved Jean Nouvel's designs for a new building, after encouraging him to explore the desert to find inspiration to represent Qatar's identity in a symbolic way. Ten years later, my brother HH Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani officially inaugurated this Museum, a celebration of both the old and the new, with the Palace of Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al Thani at the heart of the modern structure.[3]

Occupying about 40,000 square metres, the layout of the National Museum of Qatar assumes an irregular trapezoid shape surrounding a large open space (the so-called Baraha), interrupted only on the west side where it embraces the Old Palace (fig. 5.2). The exhibition galleries thus create a complete circuit only when one passes through the palatial compound.

1. See Jodidio, *The New Architecture*, pp. 100–113.
2. Jodidio, *National Museum of Qatar*, p. 83.
3. Al Mayassa, 'Foreword', p. 20.

Nouvel is known to be an architect who takes pre-design research as a key task, aiming to reflect on the locality of his future building. Here he describes his overall concept for the museum's general narrative:

> Three economic miracles occurred to shake up this overwhelming tranquility [of Qatar]. The first, dating from Roman times, was associated with pearl fishing and the pearl trade. The second, in the aftermath of the Second World War, was the amazing discovery of oil, followed twenty years later by the discovery of another treasure: gas. The desert peninsula of Qatar and its people suddenly saw enormous, dazzling change and the country turned into a real crossroads, alluring and open, and attracting visitors from far and wide.
>
> The building I designed needed to reflect these three different stories. The first, which covers a long period, is the story of the peninsula and its inhabitants. The second is an exploration of the coastal and desert lifestyles as well as the pearling industry, and [the] third covers the spectacular acceleration that gave the kingdom – in just a few decades – the power and prosperity we associate with it today. Because of its economic power, Qatar has become a world leader in fields as diverse as education, communications, and energy technology.[4]

These words reveal a significant point in the architect's process of conceptualisation and design. He first and foremost envisioned a building that could express Qatari history and identity. It was carefully laid out for the specific site and purported to engage with the heritage element that is the Old Palace, ultimately seeking to create a new national symbol (fig. 5.3). Nouvel continues:

> The desert rose, a flower-like aggregate of mineral crystals occurring only in arid coastal regions, is the first architectural structure that nature itself creates, through wind, sea spray and sand acting together over millennia. It's surprisingly complex and poetic.[5]

A nascent symbol in the making, the desert rose has undergone a semantic transformation which has brought it to the surface of general Qatari consciousness. The new museum has intentionally developed the form into an emblematic expression and representation of the nation. It is not surprising to now find desert roses, whether real or replica, on sale at local gift shops: this can be seen as part of the popularisation of this novel symbol.[6] Although it was the architect who chose this particular object as inspiration, he worked closely with the royal family, who readily embraced his idea by endorsing the building's design. In the words of HE Sheikha Al Mayassa: 'the Museum is indeed a symbol of our cultural identity – from the desert to the world'.[7]

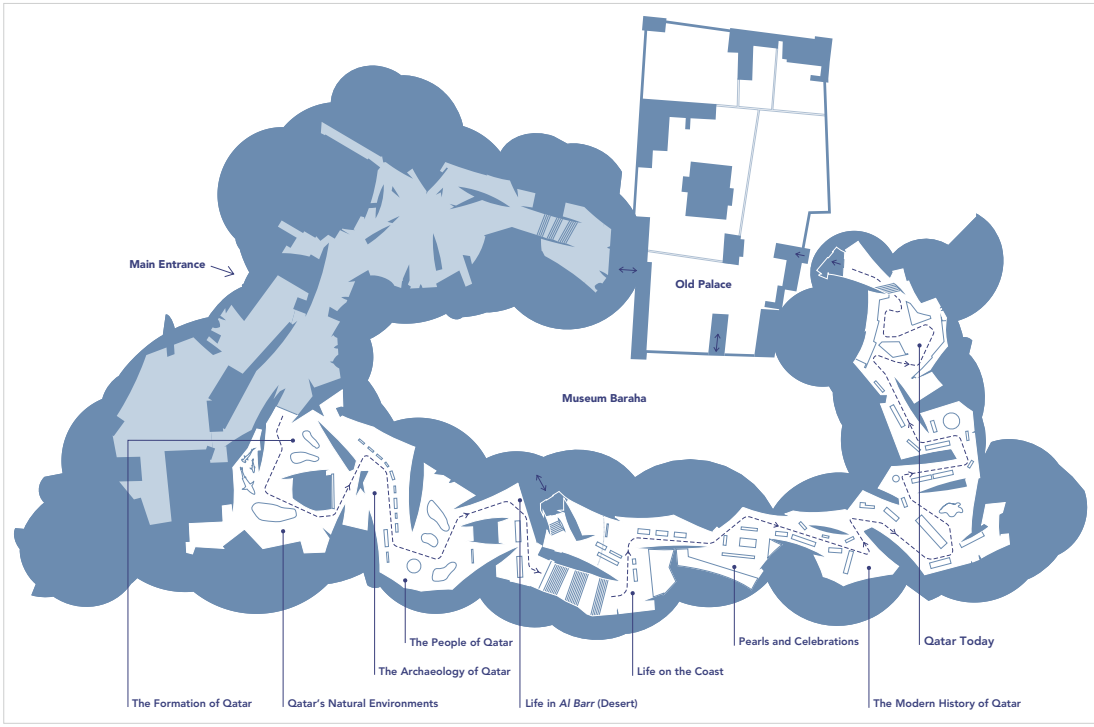
Technical challenges came when translating the natural form into a sizable building. According to Nouvel:

4. Nouvel, 'Architectural and Museographical Design'.

5. Nouvel, 'Architectural and Museographical Design'.

6. Bounia, 'The Desert Rose as a New Symbol', p. 216.

7. Al Mayassa, 'Foreword', p. 20.



5.2. Site plan with exhibition galleries embracing the Old Palace, National Museum of Qatar.

> Taking the desert rose as a starting point turned out to be a very progressive, not to say utopian, idea. I say 'utopian' because, to construct a building 350 metres long, with its great big inward-curving disks, and its intersections and cantilevered elements – all the things that conjure up a desert rose – we had to meet enormous technical challenges. This building is at the cutting-edge of technology, like Qatar itself.[8]

The building's sheer size and eye-catching appearance are clear visual statements, creating a monument that indeed dominates its surroundings. The new museum also conforms to the fashionable concept that architecture is no longer to be restrained by straight, chiefly vertical or horizontal, lines. Here the disc-shaped elements appear to be freely placed, though in a somehow harmonious manner. Contemporary construction materials – namely, steel and glass fibre – allowed the designer to break with former conventions:

> I owe my love of things that aren't quite vertical to one of my teachers and mentors, Claude Parent, with whom I worked a great deal. A number of floors are on an incline. You walk under them, you walk up, and you become aware that there are hardly any vertical lines anywhere. Looking more closely, you can find a few elements that appear to be vertical but, in reality, are not. You only get the impression they are because that's the natural scheme of things.[9]

8. Nouvel, 'Architectural and Museographical Design'.

9. Nouvel, 'Architectural and Museographical Design'.



5.3. Bird's-eye view of the Old Palace and the National Museum of Qatar, from the northwest.



Nouvel's design strongly impacted the functionality of the spaces, something that the architect considered secondary in importance. None of the walls are straight and none of their surfaces are flat, which makes the conventional forms of museum displays, such as pre-made exhibition cases, impossible to use here. He maintains that the building's sculptural effect, by no means restricted to the outside, was consciously meant to enhance the visitor experience. Consequently, the curators equally faced (to borrow Nouvel's expression) 'enormous technical challenges' when striving to fill the new museum with permanent exhibitions. The galleries, with their narrative displays tracing the history of Qatar through millennia, were to be fitted within those disc-shaped volumes. Peggy Loar, the museum's former director between 2008 and 2012, has described what a tremendous yet rewarding curatorial task it was to combine Nouvel's visionary concept with the stories and expectations of the Qatari people.[10] Along the same lines, the museum's gift shop, designed by the Australia-based company Koichi Takada Architects, took inspiration from the desert, specifically from the Dahl al-Misfir sinkhole (35 kilometres west of Doha). The result conformed with Nouvel's general concept in that the space's practicality is second to its visual effect (fig. 5.4).[11]

The incorporation of the Old Palace into this new setting was a direct engagement with Qatar's history. Nouvel has repeatedly described this building as a significant piece of heritage that was to form part of the visitor experience. However, one may note that the monumental scale of the new museum, dominating the landscape along the south end of Corniche Road, visually dwarfs the Old Palace (figs. 5.5–5.6). The new building stands in contrast with the old in almost every respect: the avoidance of straight lines, the scattered appearance, the construction techniques and materials, the symbolic expression of meaning and, above all, the scale. The chief link between the two is colour. Today both appear in a creamy sand-like yellow (though the museum in a greyer tint), reminiscent of the desert. This is no coincidence; the original palace used sand as the main component of its wall plaster, whereas the desert rose is a natural formation from the same material.

Their colour matching results from the thorough restorations of the Old Palace that occurred alongside the construction of the new museum. Having realised the extent of the buildings' deterioration since the 1970s, Qatar Museums recruited the German company Ziegert Roswag Seiler Architekten Ingenieure to carry out the project. One of the first emergency measures was dismantling the roof and the upper-floor gallery of the Inner Majlis in 2012–13, replacing the materials (mostly concrete) added during the 1970s and stabilising the foundations. The work ensured the long-term survival of the building and preserved the materials from

10. Interview with Peggy Loar, 1:05:30–1:07:00.

11. Jodidio, *National Museum of Qatar*, p. 271.



5.4. Interior of the National Museum of Qatar gift shop, inspired by the Dahl al-Misfir sinkhole, designed by Koichi Takada Architects and completed in 2019.



5.5. Bird's-eye view of the Old Palace and the National Museum of Qatar, from the northeast.

its original construction. The Architectural Conservation Department of Qatar Museums participated in the project, while the Department of Archaeology conducted excavations within the compound. Although they uncovered various artefacts, not one object seems to date back to before 1950.[12] This suggests that the royal family moved all their belongings to their new homes when vacating the palace, whereas the discovered objects attest to later habitation at the site.[13]

During the second half of 2013, the work proceeded with the complete removal of the white plaster that had covered the buildings since the 1970s as part of the preparations for the main phase of restoration, which took place between December 2013 and June 2015. This work involved stabilising and desalinating the structures, replacing many elements with more durable materials, constructing new floors and rebuilding the parapets on the upper-floor terraces and the merlons on some of the perimeter walls. Every structure received a new, breathable plaster in the abovementioned sandy-yellow colour, which closely resembles how they would have originally appeared,

12. Arrok, 'Excavation Works Inside and Around Doha Old Palace'. However, the artefacts excavated at the site are still awaiting a thorough study (Ferhan Sakal, personal communication).

13. Several photos from around 1960 demonstrate that a family lived among the remains, see Chapter 4, fig. 4.1.



except that they seem entirely uniform. The north side of the compound – where the Museum of the State once stood – required a new perimeter wall. The ground level became mostly flat, with indications of where some of the partition walls stood between the courtyards.[14] The only vegetation in the palace is a few palm trees. The goal of these new restorations was partly to ensure the buildings' preservation and partly to return them to their original forms, even though some dated only to the 1970s. For instance, the Veranda and the Tripartite Building, flanking the South Gate on either side, were new additions built during the establishment of the old Qatar National Museum.

Jean Nouvel's innovative structure not only replaced its predecessor but also consciously broke with its perspective. The different age required different solutions. In the 1970s, Michael Rice's team oversaw the entire project; the design of the buildings and the curation of the exhibitions went hand in hand, and the Old Palace was the main setting for the displays.[15] The Museum of the State, just like the Maritime Museum and the lagoon, was chiefly practical and modest,

14. Bulosan, 'Conservation of Old Palace'; for a brief overview, see Jodidio, *National Museum of Qatar*, pp. 53–57. It seems that the indicated partition walls follow those from the 1950s, which do not always correspond with the original layout. For our virtual reconstruction, including the original layout of the partitions, see fig. 3.2.

15. See the interview with William Facey, 45:10–47:50.



5.6. Bird’s-eye view of the Old Palace, from the northwest.

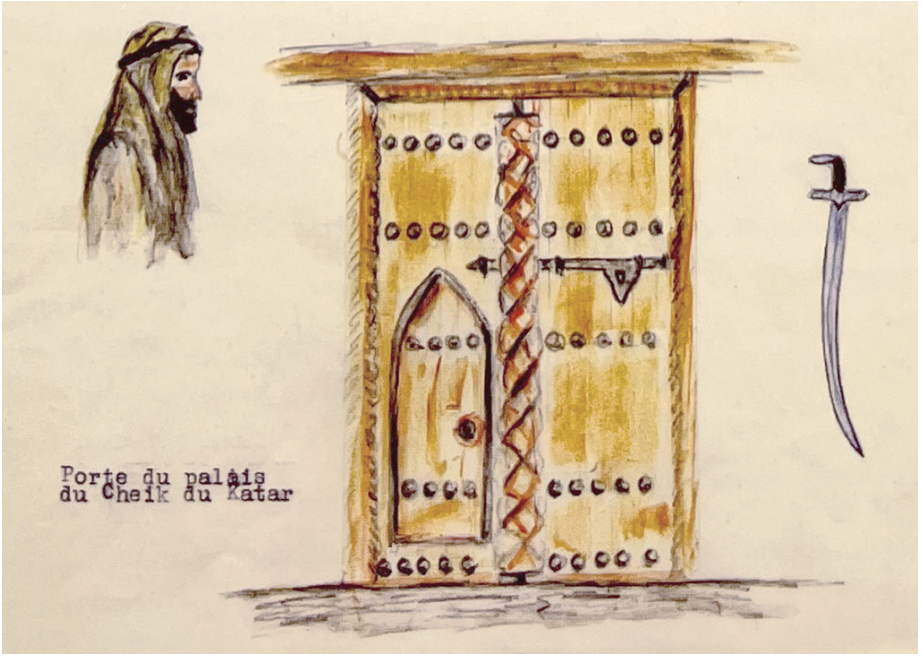
subordinating appearance to functionality. The height of the newly added buildings carefully avoided overshadowing the Old Palace. Visitors first entered the compound, with various displays inside the heritage buildings and a lush garden between them, from where they could proceed to the Museum of the State and the Maritime Museum. In contrast, the new museum ostentatiously gives preference to monumentality and visual effect; the outshining of the past is, thus, inevitable or even desired.

With the rapid developments in Qatar over the last decades, it is hardly surprising that the royal family wished to create a new and extraordinary national museum. When it opened on 28 March 2019, Nouvel's building achieved precisely that goal: people could explore, both inside and out, a magnified sculpture of a desert rose. The new museum combines contemporary international architectural trends with environmental and national consciousness, exemplifying what is nowadays fashionably described as 'glocal' – a hybrid of global and local. Additionally, both the commissioner and the designer made it clear that the new structures were not to erase but to supplement the extant built heritage. Reference to the Old Palace manifests not only in spatial layout but also in a shared anchoring point: the colour of the desert.

Even though the Old Palace might feel merely as one of the displayed objects within the grand scheme, it is also where the museum circuit terminates, thereby occupying a highlighted position. By the period's general view (and official law) on what constitutes national heritage – namely, a building older than 40 years – the palace was generally regarded as critically important to be safeguarded.[16] The old museum buildings were less fortunate. As relatively recent structures, they were considered devoid of heritage value. Since today no physical remains or interpretative signs remind the visitor of the former museum, it seems as though the new one has consciously wiped out its predecessor. The only element that Nouvel kept (in a shrunken size) was the lagoon on the east side of the complex. With the erasure of the 1970s phase, the present contrast between the traditional Old Palace and the neo-futuristic new museum is even more self-evident.

16. See Rico, 'Modernism in Qatar', p. 227.

Entering the Compound



6.1. Watercolour sketches of Sheikh 'Abd Allah, a wooden door of the Old Palace and the sword gifted to Charles Fouqueray, 1918.



6.2. Our virtual reconstruction of the Old Palace, 1920s, with the four gates indicated.

During World War I, the French painter Charles Fouqueray (1869–1956) worked as an official illustrator for the French navy, accompanying a contingent to Arabia. He visited several cities and painted watercolours to accompany his typewritten journals. A short entry from 1918 describes his visit to Doha and meeting with the ruler Sheikh ʿAbd Allah:

> During the few hours spent in Doha, I was received by the ruler. His name is Shaykh ʿAbd Allah bin Jasim. His palace, with its crenellated walls, is situated near the coast. A large redwood door from the Indies, heavily studded in brass, allows access into this august residence. Sheikh ʿAbd Allah has a handsome face with a trimmed beard and small, fox-like eyes. Friendly and curious, he engaged with me in a conversation that lasted more than an hour along with his brothers. They were constantly offering me coffee and dates. I could not refuse. Arab courtesy obliges! I tasted these delicacies sitting on an Oriental rug and leaning on thick, colourful cushions woven from camel hair. Curious to see me, he asked me to talk about France, which I did with pleasure. But what pleased him the most, what gave him reassurance, was to learn that France and England had been solid friends for twenty years. As a token of friendship, he offered me a *khanjar*;[1] I gave him the only object I had on me at the moment: my silver compass engraved with my initials. He seemed delighted and inspected this very scientific object from all angles. After I left the princely residence, I made a few quick sketches imbuing my eyes with the ochre so characteristic of Qatar.[2]

This account has several peculiar details, beginning with the implication that the Old Palace was easily accessible to a foreign traveller. The ruler and his brothers were happy to sit down and speak with him inside one of the *majlis*es. Fouqueray pasted a few coloured sketches in his journals, one of which depicts the described 'large redwood door from the Indies', featuring a wicket door (or *farkha*) and metal knobs. Without mentioning which gate he entered through, he provides us with its rough image, alongside the 'handsome face' of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah and the sword he received as a gift (fig. 6.1).

The Old Palace has four entrances today: one on the west side, one on the north, one on the east and one on the south (fig. 6.2). As discussed in Chapter 3, all four were originally built in the second construction phase, when the compound underwent expansion. Leading into different units within the palace, they would have allowed access to different groups of people. What remains to be established is, accordingly, the specific functions of those gates, on which their surroundings (both inside and outside) reveal some useful information. The following discussion has two goals. One is to provide an interpretation of the four gates during the site's heyday in the 1920s; the other is to trace their history in the later periods, which are linked to the old Qatar National Museum and the new National Museum of Qatar, respectively. For instance, old photos from the 1950s–1970s demonstrate that two of

1. *Khanjar* means 'dagger', though Fouqueray sketched a sword as the illustration for his journal. My assumption is that he received a sword but mislabelled it in the text.

2. Billecocq, *Le Qatar et les français*, pp. 154–155 (my English translation from the typewritten French text).

the gates were completely ruined and had to be built anew as part of the first restorations of the Old Palace. Then, the new museum repurposed some of the gates, making visitors use and experience them in novel ways.

Before reclaiming lands from the sea, the coastline near the Old Palace formed a natural cape or peninsula known as Ra's al-Nis'a, where a small fort stood in the 19th century, situated about a kilometre east of Doha. It is not entirely clear how densely populated the surroundings of the Old Palace were, even though John G. Lorimer's descriptions published in 1908 and 1915 are informative in that regard. By the time Sheikh 'Abd Allah moved here in the first years of the 20th century, the city had stretched as far as Ra's al-Nis'a and three neighbourhoods had developed: Salata, Al Bin 'Ali and Marqab al-Sharqi. The first was named after the Suluta tribe, who had migrated from Iraq to settle in Bahrain and Qatar. Lorimer estimated 3250 Sulayti (singular of Suluta) people living in this part of Doha.[3] According to later depictions, especially one bird's-eye view from 1934 and aerials and maps from the 1940s–1950s, small compound houses were located in the north area of Salata, northwest of the Old Palace (fig. 6.3). Directly to the south stood a large palace closely comparable with that of Sheikh 'Abd Allah, separated by a street with a mosque at its east end (fig. 6.4). According to the early 20th-century Ottoman map discussed in Chapter 3, this was the palace of Sheikh 'Abd Allah's father, Sheikh Jasim bin Muhammad (fig. 3.3). Further to the south, various other small houses appear in the old maps and photos. Nothing stood between the Old Palace and the seashore towards the east and northeast. Today, however, none of the surrounding buildings survives since they were demolished to make room for Qatar National Museum in the 1970s, when the shore also expanded eastwards.

The first entrance to be discussed is the West Gate. Although no trace of it survives except for a small door on the west wall of the compound, it is reasonable to suggest that there was originally a proper gate here, and not only because this was the most logical entry point when coming from the city. In aerials and maps from the 1940s–1950s, one can see traces of a path approaching the suspected position of the West Gate, already ruined by that time, leading into the Southwest Courtyard of the palace (fig. 6.4). Indeed, according to the recollection of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru:

> At this time the main entrance was through a very much larger gateway on the same site as the present door in the wall linking B7 (the Guards' Room) and B5 (the House of Sheikh Hamad). The Al Thani habitually rode through this entrance, mounting or leaving their camels in the enclosure adjoining the gateway, passing on foot through a further gateway immediately north of B4 (the House of Sheikh 'Abd Allah).[4]

3. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 2 (geographical and statistical): pp. 488–490, 1509, 1843–1844; see also Fletcher and Carter, 'Mapping the Growth'.

4. See Appendix.



6.3. Bird's-eye view of Raʾs al-Nisʿa (east Doha), 1934, from the southeast.



6.4. Map of Raʾs al-Nisʿa, Salata district (east Doha), 1952, with the Old Palace at its southeast corner.



6.5. Our virtual reconstruction of the Southwest Courtyard, Old Palace, 1920s, including the West Gate.

That is, the West Gate must have been tall enough to allow the passage of a person mounted on a camel. An average dromedary is about 2.15 metres tall at the tip of its hump, which means that the door's lintel was at least 3 metres from the ground. The North Gate's opening is about 2.7 metres high, which gives us a useful analogy for our reconstruction (fig. 6.5). It is also noteworthy that the above-quoted source describes it as 'the main entrance'; however, this was only for family members. Palace visitors who came to see the ruler must have taken a different route to enter.

Given the nature of the seashore – with small sandy bays to the north and mostly rocky patches to the east of the palace – it is safe to say where Sheikh ʿAbd Allah used to park his dhows (fig. 6.4). The 1940s–1950s aerials even show



several boats stranded on the sandy beach right outside the north wall of the Old Palace (fig. 3.5). Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru recalls that when he was young 'it was possible to walk across a dense mass of moored dhows from the Palace to the northern shore of the bay some 300 yards away'.[5] In other words, the boats were lined up on the east shore of Ra's al-Nisʿa, similar to those along Doha Bay (fig. 3.4). This suggests that the North Gate functioned as the ruler's exit towards the sea, even though it may have also served as one of the public gates, especially since it led into the semi-public Northeast Courtyard encompassing the Outer Majlis and the School Building. As will be further described in the next chapter, these areas were the most accessible to common people.

5. See Appendix.



6.6. North Gate, Old Palace.



6.7. North Gate, Old Palace, before the first restorations in the 1970s, showing the collapsed outside façade.



6.8. North Gate, Old Palace, after the opening of Qatar National Museum in 1975.

The North Gate forms a short corridor aligned with benches on either side (fig. 6.6). These would have been used by either guards or visitors waiting to be admitted to the palace. The upper floor has an elongated room of the same size, accessible through a staircase ascending on top of the adjacent School Building. The purpose of this room is somewhat unclear as the recent literature makes various claims as to whom it belonged. However, as Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru, who was a student of Muhammad bin Mani', states that his teacher used to climb down from this room to give daily classes, his narrative seems to be the most plausible.[6]

The North Gate survived nearly completely up to the 1960s, when its outer (north) façade collapsed (fig. 6.7). While turning the palace into the old Qatar National Museum in the 1970s, it was reconstructed with a projecting arch featuring extensive gypsum work and stairs that descended to the new ground level on the outside (fig. 6.8). At the time, this gate provided a link towards the car park for museum staff and, for visitors, towards the museum café (fig. 4.6). More recently, since the opening of the National Museum of Qatar in 2019, it has become the visitors' main entrance to the palace compound. Before reaching the end of the permanent exhibition in the main building, they pass through a small gallery displaying photos of the palace accompanied by a short history, introducing them to the final 'object' they will see. This arrangement emphasises the curators' attempt to create a smooth transition between the contemporary and the heritage buildings.

6. See Appendix; Wright, *The Old Amiri Palace*, n.p.; cf. Al-Kholaifi, *Architecture of the Old Palace*, p. 14.



6.9. East Gate, Old Palace.

The East Gate forms a corridor aligned with benches on both sides, similar to the North Gate, except that here the inner end opens to the right-hand side (fig. 6.9). Known as a bent entrance (which makes visitors turn at a right angle), the purpose of this layout was to control the gaze: no one in the corridor, waiting to be admitted, could see straight into the compound.[7] In local architecture, wicket doors functioned in a similar way: with only this part open, an average-sized person could not inadvertently glance inside the home, affording a level of privacy to the inhabitants.[8] As we know from Fouqueray's sketch (fig. 6.1), one of the doors also had a wicket – and this was probably the East Gate. In any case, it is clear that the palace applied both of the above techniques in its gates to prevent the unwelcome gaze. Additionally, according to the recollection of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru, the ruler habitually used the East Gate to exit towards the mosque and participate in communal prayers.[9]

As demonstrated by photos taken before the first restorations in the 1970s, the East Gate survived nearly intact, featuring various gypsum work on either end of its corridor (figs. 6.10–6.11). From the outside, one could even see a fragmented cartouche with an Arabic inscription that

7. Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, p. 173.

8. See interview with Mohammed Ali Abdulla, part 3, 1:01:30–1:04:00.

9. See Appendix.



6.10. East Gate, view from inside the Old Palace, before the first restorations in the 1970s.



6.11. East Gate, view from outside the Old Palace, before the first restorations in the 1970s.

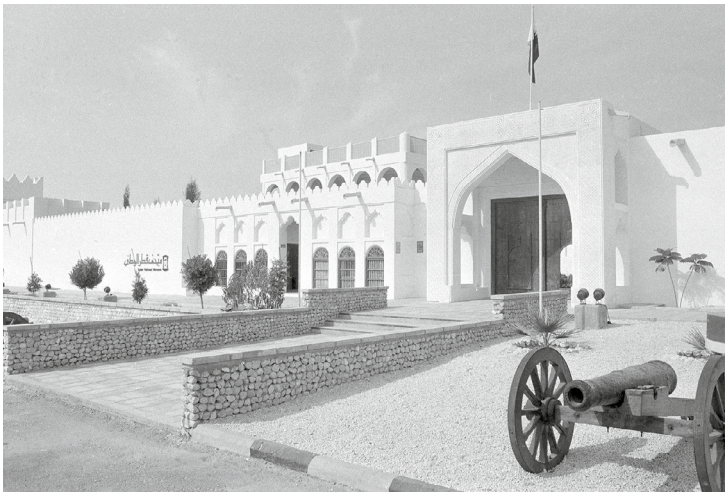
once greeted visitors. Set in a rectangular frame and painted pale blue, the door resembled the one depicted by Fouqueray (fig. 6.1), except for its colour and inclusion of two wickets instead of one. Then, the 1970s restorations brought about a new set of gypsum work for this gate, which also gained a new function: after seeing the exhibitions in the Museum of the State, visitors could proceed through the East Gate towards the lagoon and the Maritime Museum (fig. 4.6). Since the opening of the National Museum of Qatar, the East Gate now leads towards the Baraha, the museum's inner courtyard, and towards the Desert Rose café on the opposite side.

The South Gate poses several questions, especially since it was already in ruins by the 1950s (fig. 6.12). One can see its location but discern little about its original form in the old aerials. According to Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru, there was no entrance to the palace from this direction, only a small door used for delivering supplies to the storage area behind it.[10] However, while converting the palace into Qatar National Museum in the 1970s, the commissioners decided to use this as the visitors' entrance to the compound and essentially created a new gate (fig. 6.13). The structure projects from the façade with extensive gypsum work and two wooden ceilings

10. See Appendix; and also Wright, *The Old Amiri Palace*, n.p.



6.12. View across the east area of the Old Palace, 1957. The Little Room, the North Gate, the School Building and the Outer Majlis are still visible in the background, while the south perimeter wall and the adjacent buildings have vanished (cf. fig. 7.1. below).



6.13. Tripartite Building and South Gate, Old Palace, after the opening of Qatar National Museum in 1975.



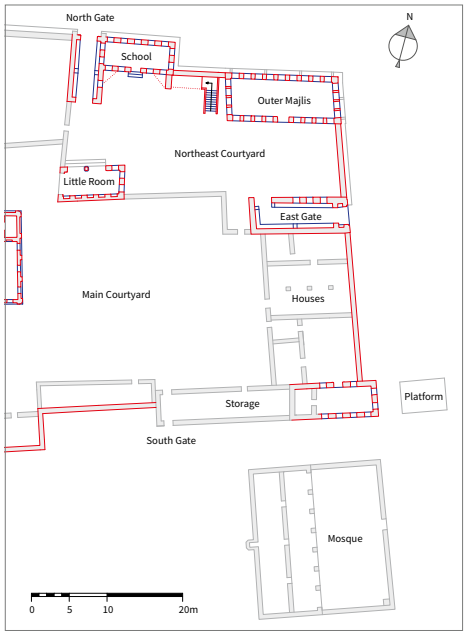
painted with colourful geometric elements. The anonymous architect followed the style of traditional Qatari buildings, so much so that it is difficult to distinguish it from those that were merely restored. As the public car park was right outside, visitors would proceed to this gate, purchase their ticket from the window on its left-hand side, and then enter the former palace turned museum. Today, the situation is quite different: the adjacent Tripartite Building and its ticket window have lost their function. Visitors primarily use the South Gate to exit the palace, returning to the main lobby of the new museum and thereby completing the gallery circuit. Thus, they arrive back at the contemporary building after a short exploration of Qatar's architectural heritage (fig. 5.2).

It emerges that the four gates of the Old Palace served different functions; indeed, they were apparently part of a complex system designed to control access. As typical for a royal palace anywhere in the world, security must have been an obvious priority. The bent entrance at the East Gate was probably meant for the public, as it prevented them from gazing inside before admittance. It is easy to imagine someone like Fouqueray entering here and then proceeding directly to the Outer Majlis to meet with Sheikh ʿAbd Allah and his brothers, as described at the beginning of this chapter. At the opposite end once stood the West Gate, used exclusively by the Al Thani family. However, the functions of the four gates shifted in the later periods: the West Gate was reconstructed as a small (and defunct) door, while the South Gate, built in a new shape, became the main public entrance in the 1970s. Today's visitors arrive mainly through the North Gate. These changes caused the orientation of the Old Palace to repeatedly rotate, as each period chose to utilise it according to their different needs.

Between Public and Private Space



7.1. Our virtual reconstruction of the east area of the Old Palace, 1920s, view from the south.



7.2. Reconstructed site plan of the east area of the Old Palace, 1920s (walls outlined in red exist today, while those in grey are conjectural).

If you enter the Old Palace through the North Gate, the first building you see is the Little Room right in front of you. Although today standing free, it was once connected with both the North Gate and the East Gate by partition walls, delimiting the Northeast Courtyard and shielding the other, more restricted areas within the compound (figs. 7.1–7.2). As is typical of palaces (especially Islamic ones), the separate spatial units differed in privacy and, therefore, in security. The Main Courtyard would have already been on another level in that regard, while further to the west lay the private quarters of the royal family. It is little surprise that the main public functions, namely those of the School Building and the Outer Majlis, were in the Northeast Courtyard (fig. 3.9). The following pages will explain how these buildings operated during the Old Palace's heyday, before moving on to look at the east area of the Main Courtyard and focusing on the reconstruction of a few structures missing today.

Adjacent to the North Gate stands a modest rectangular room. According to the common interpretation, corroborated by Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru, it was the school established by Sheikh ʿAbd Allah within his palace, named the Athariyya School. Its chief purpose was to educate not only his own children but also members of the general public.[1] Although recent scholarship disagrees on its foundation date, it is known that Muhammad bin Maniʿ, the Saudi jurist, preacher and advisor to the ruler, was its chief (and probably only) teacher.[2] Since his biography states that he moved to Qatar in August 1916,[3] the school's establishment must have occurred soon afterwards. This period corresponded with the general expansion of the palace, which involved appending the Northeast Courtyard in the second construction phase.[4]



7.3. Interior of the School Building, Old Palace.

1. See Appendix.

2. Bin Maniʿ, *Kitab irshad al-tullab = Thalatha rasa'il*, p. 112; Naji, 'Tarikh al-ta'lim al-sha'bi', p. 296; al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, vol. 2: p. 293; al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, pp. 107–108; al-Qibti, *al-Madrasa al-athariyya*, pp. 29–30, 37.

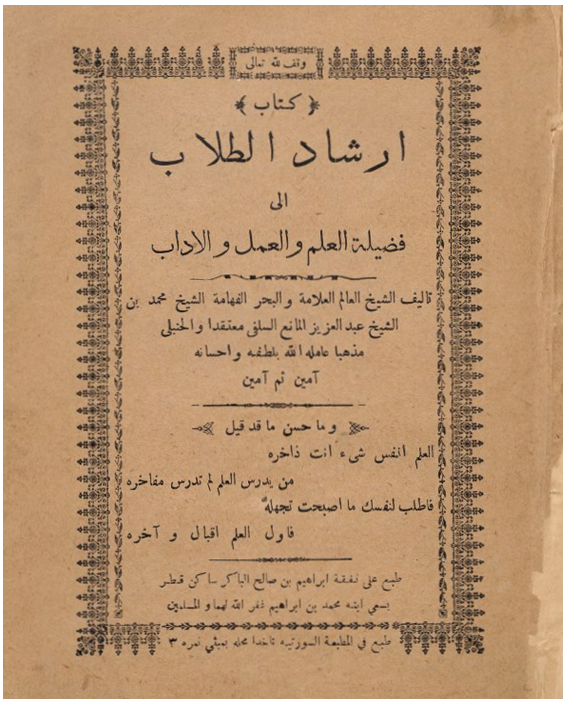
3. The date is mentioned as Shawwal 1334 in the Muslim calendar, equivalent to August 1916; Al al-Shaykh, *Mashahir ʿulamaʾ Najd*, p. 414. See also Bin Maniʿ, *Qatar fi mudhakkirat*, pp. 73–74, where the author confirms the year 1334; and Khayyat, *al-Shaykh Muhammad bin ʿAbd al-ʿAziz*, p. 134.

4. The account by Fouqueray, quoted in the previous chapter, indicates that the expansion of this area was completed by 1918 when he visited it. Billecocq, *Le Qatar et les français*, pp. 154–155.



7.4. Our virtual reconstruction of the Northeast Courtyard, Old Palace, 1920s, including the North Gate and the School Building.




وقف لله تعالى

كتاب

ارشاد الطلاب

الى

فضيلة العلم والعمل والاداب

تاليف الشيخ العالم العلامة والبحر الفهامة الشيخ محمد بن
الشيخ عبد العزيز المانع السلفي معتقدا والحنبلي
مذهبا عامله الله بلطفه واحسانه
آمين ثم آمين

وما حسن ما قد قيل

العلم انفس شيء انت ذاخره
من يدرس العلم لم تدرس مفاخره
فاطلب لنفسك ما اصبحت تجهله
فاول العلم اقبال و آخره

طبع على نفقة ابراهيم بن صالح الباكر ساكن قطر
بسعي ابنه محمد بن ابراهيم غفر الله لهما و للمسلمين

طبع في المطبعة السورتيه تاخذا محله بمبئي نمره ٣

7.5. Cover of the first edition of *Kitab irshad al-tullab* by Bin Mani', 1920.

The School Building was just like any other structure, with no sign to indicate its specific function, and featuring simple architectural and decorative forms (fig. 7.3–7.4).

Since Qatar had no advanced school system at the time – education was limited to reading and writing in elementary schools known as *katatib* (singular: *kuttab*) within mosques – Sheikh ʻAbd Allah decided to change that situation. The foundation of the Athariyya School – seeking to provide higher education – within the royal palace was a well-known and widely praised act by the ruler, one that has persisted in Qatari collective memory. During the following decades, nearly all local intellectuals studied there. Among them were Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru[5] and Salih bin Sulayman al-Mani' (c. 1902–1968), who later worked as secretary to Sheikh ʻAbd Allah, effectively running palace administration and correspondence.[6] The sources even claim that pupils from around the Arabian Gulf – including Saudis, Iranians and Kuwaitis – came to study there.[7] However, given the modest size of this room, the fame of the Athariyya School presumably derived from the erudition of its head teacher Bin Mani' rather than from the number of students. Alongside the Arabic language, he taught the Qur'an and the basics of the *shari'a*, the Islamic legal system, in accordance with his (and the ruler's) preferred interpretation: the Hanbali school of thought.[8]

5. See Appendix; and also Khayyat, *al-Shaykh Muhammad bin ʻAbd al-ʻAziz*, pp. 123–124.

6. On his life and roles in the palace, see al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ʻAbd Allah*, vol. 2: pp. 40–41, and also in Chapter 8.

7. Naji, 'Tarikh al-ta'lim al-sha'bi', pp. 301–303; al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ʻAbd Allah*, vol. 1: pp. 84–86, vol. 2: pp. 275–308; al-Qibti, *al-Madrasa al-athariyya*, p. 31.

8. Naji, 'Tarikh al-ta'lim al-sha'bi', pp. 296–304; al-Qibti, *al-Madrasa al-athariyya*, pp. 37–42; al-ʻAbd Allah, *Tarikh al-ta'lim fi al-Khalij*, pp. 307–309.



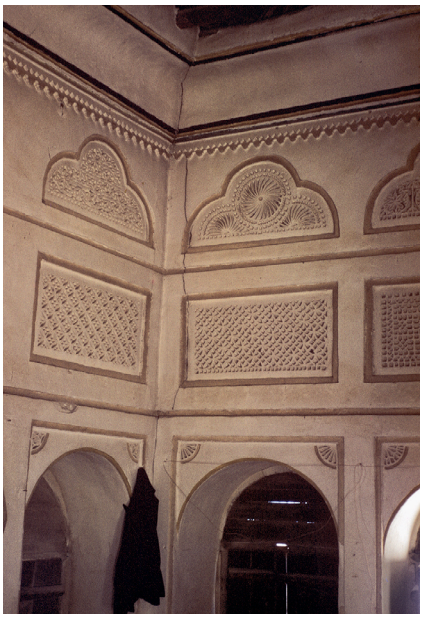
7.6. Outer Majlis, Old Palace.

Bin Mani‘ compiled a textbook for students titled *Kitab irshad al-tullab ila fadilat al-‘ilm wa-l-‘amal wa-l-adab* (‘Book of guidance for students towards the virtues of knowledge, practice and etiquette’), which was first published in 1920 (fig. 7.5).[9] This work is an introduction to Islamic sciences in general, giving step-by-step coursework for children who could already read and write. The text is divided into short chapters that they were expected to memorise, as per the traditional method of Islamic education. The book focuses on the significance of learning – or, as commonly phrased, the ‘seeking of knowledge’ (*talab al-‘ilm*) – as a form of worship, though only if acquired with the right intention and from the right sources. Regarding the latter, the text is filled with quotations from the Qur’an and every argument finds support in the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, or later Muslim scholars. Most prominent among the later scholars – only ever mentioned with the honorific *shaykh al-Islam* – was Taqiyy al-Din Ahmad bin Taymiyya (d. 1328), a renowned authority of the Hanbali school. Bin Mani‘ dedicated two chapters to the praise of his scholarly model. The author also gave firm instructions about the students’ required etiquette, notably their obligation to show the utmost respect towards their teacher and tolerate his occasional anger. Once acquainted with knowledge, the students were expected to turn into

9. See digital version available at: ediscovery.qnl.qa/islandora/object/QNL%3A00010734#page/1/mode/1up. The book was later republished as part of Bin Mani‘, *Thalatha rasa’il.*



7.7. Interior of the Outer Majlis, Old Palace.



7.8. Interior of the Outer Majlis, Old Palace, 1959.

teachers and spread their knowledge, but only to the worthy: 'Whoever delivers knowledge to whom it does not belong is like one who adorns pigs with pearls and gold'.[10] Presumably this book was only one among several used for the classes.

The simplicity of the school's architecture stands in contrast with the building on its east side, the Outer Majlis, which was the most richly decorated structure within the Northeast Courtyard. It is among the few buildings with windows to the outside, and they were located on the palace's perimeter wall, which was a common feature in traditional Qatari *majlis*es. This type of window not only facilitated light and ventilation but also served as an indicator of where a publicly accessible space was located, clearly visible to those approaching the compound.[11] Here, when the visitors entered through the East Gate, they arrived facing the Outer Majlis (fig. 7.6). The windows, running all around the lower parts of the walls, formed semi-circular arches, originally filled with wooden shutters. The room's decoration currently includes various gypsum panels and a wooden ceiling made of planks, painted with geometric forms in multiple colours (fig. 7.7). However, an old photo predating the first restorations shows that the ceiling once had *danchal* beams, indicating that the planks were added in the 1970s (fig. 7.8). It is similar to the one in the lower-floor council hall of the Inner Majlis[12] and bears an even stronger resemblance to the two smaller ones in the South Gate (likewise dating to the 1970s).

10. Bin Mani', *Kitab irshad al-tullab = Thalatha rasa'il*, p. 60.

11. Nagy, 'Social and Spatial Process', pp. 218, 223–225.

12. See below in Chapter 8 and also fig. 2.10.



7.9. Outer Majlis, Old Palace, 1959, showing benches around the building.

It has been widely popular in Gulf architecture to include a *majlis* or *majlis*es in the house. Such rooms stood near the main gate or even outside the house proper, complying with the boundaries between the public and private areas or, in other words, separating genders.[13] The chief function of a *majlis* was (and still is today) to receive guests and hold social gatherings, especially among extanded family members or friends, and it is the most richly decorated room in the house. The *majlis* is expected to be relatively opulent: the place to show off. It was, accordingly, embellished with special décor and furniture. The Outer Majlis of the Old Palace, however, would have functioned differently than in a regular home and can reasonably be described as the audience hall where Sheikh ʻAbd Allah received members of the public. For instance, the French traveller Charles Fouqueray would have sat with the ruler and his brothers here, in a discussion accompanied by

13. See, for instance, Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, p. 137; Nagy, 'Social and Spatial Process', pp. 212–227; Almahmoud, 'The Majlis Metamorphosis', pp. 78–82, 94; Al-Mohannadi and Furlan, 'The Syntax of the Qatari Traditional House'; Eddisford and Carter, 'The Vernacular Architecture of Doha', pp. 83–84; and also Chapter 8.



7.10. Veranda and South Gate, built during the first restorations in the 1970s, Old Palace.

coffee and dates. He described the furnishing as that of an 'Oriental rug' and 'colourful cushions woven from camel hair'.[14] The significance of this building derived from the ruler's regular presence; this was where common people could meet and speak with him.

Although the recollection of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru also states that Sheikh 'Abd Allah used to sit on a bench outside this building, engaging in casual conversion with passers-by,[15] it is more likely that he remained in his comfortable room and let people outside the building interact with him through the windows. In any event, it was typical of a Qatari *majlis* to have a bench along its outside wall, and old photos show that this was also the case here: the structure included stone-built seating with armrests (fig. 7.9). The benches once continued as far as the East Gate and, on the north side, beyond the North Gate. Although it was partly reconstructed in the 1970s (fig. 6.8), none of it is visible today

14. Billecocq, *Le Qatar et les français*, p. 154.

15. See Appendix.



since the ground level has risen significantly. It also seems that the windows of the Outer Majlis had no coloured glass, as seen today, but only metal bars and wooden shutters, as presented in our reconstruction (fig. 7.1).

While the above buildings pose only a few questions concerning their original forms, the situation is quite different in the area to the south. As described in Chapter 4, the South Gate and the two buildings flanking it were newly added in the 1970s (fig. 6.13). The Tripartite Building was a logical addition, since the museum required a ticket office, whereas the Veranda is a bit of a puzzle today. The restorers decided to create five arches harmonious with the form of the equally new South Gate, featuring extensive gypsum work decoration (fig. 7.10). Impressive as it might be, the sceptic may add that, in Qatari architecture, a veranda would exist chiefly to create shade in front of a room, not as a standalone structure. Next to the Veranda, in the southeast corner of the palace, stands the

so-called Janitor's House, which is the only part that survived into the 1970s, though in a semi-dilapidated form (fig. 3.8). All the surrounding buildings were missing by this time. The key evidence for reconstructing their original layout is an aerial photo from 1948 (fig. 7.11), several elements of which can be confirmed from other aerials taken in the 1950s (fig. 7.12).

To begin with, the South Gate was exactly where it is today, except that it was less grand and functioned as a service entrance. Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru recalls that it was a modest door which led into storages of 'fodder and food, mainly hay and dates'.[16] Indeed, there was a rectangular building on the gate's west side (which disappeared between 1948 and 1952) and a longer one on its east side (corresponding with today's Veranda). Next came the so-called Janitor's House in the southeast corner of the Old Palace, which was divided into two rooms, a larger and a smaller one. According to Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru, it was 'used by the Divine [*sic*] who had charge of the mosque which originally existed immediately south of B10 (the Janitor's House) outside the perimeter wall'.[17] This odd phrasing – presumably coming from the narrator (Jimmy Butts) rather than the informant (Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru) – suggests that it was the *imam* ('prayer leader') who lived here and who, of course, claimed no divinity. It is unclear who that may have been, but we do know that a mosque stood right outside (fig. 3.8), which makes it reasonable to assume a link between the two. Additionally, the old aerials indicate the existence of a rectangular platform known in the local dialect as *dichcha*, which was commonly used as an outdoor *majlis*, next to the east wall of this building.

It is evident from the old aerials that several other structures stood between the so-called Janitor's House and the East Gate. On the south side of this area was a small courtyard with a room flanking it from the west, delimited by a wall from the north. On the other side of this wall was an even smaller courtyard, with a veranda (of three pillars), a small room and another open space on the north side, adjacent to the East Gate (fig. 7.1). Since a wall clearly divided this area into two units, the structures must have formed two separate houses, one of which may have indeed belonged to the mosque's *imam*.[18] Perhaps the other person living here was in charge of the food supplies reportedly delivered to the palace through the South Gate. It is worth adding that this area was interconnected with the Main Courtyard of the Old Palace further to the west, which means that these units were off-limits to visitors, unlike the Northeast Courtyard.

The Northeast Courtyard was a self-contained unit within the Old Palace added in the second phase of building activities, most likely between 1916 and 1918. Open to visitors, one could enter here with relative ease, for instance, to meet the ruler in the Outer Majlis and submit a petition, or to pick up

16. See Appendix.

17. See Appendix.

18. Or, according to Wright, this might have been the house of one of the brothers of ʿAbd Allah. Wright, *The Old Amiri Palace*, n.p.



7.11. Aerial photo of Doha, detail showing the Old Palace and its surroundings, 1948.



7.12. Aerial photo of Doha, detail showing the Old Palace and its surroundings, 1956.

their children after school (fig. 7.4). The fact that Sheikh ʿAbd Allah established a School Building and invited the renowned scholar Bin Maniʿ to teach there certainly raised the ruler's prestige and popularity among Qataris. Recent literature has emphasised how the Athariyya School led to an unprecedented scholarly awakening in the country, thanks to the ruler's love for sciences and learning.[19] Without questioning that, one may notice the political benefits from the patronage of this institution. The first generation to study there, during the reign of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, constituted an educated elite in conformity with the Hanbali school and were personally obliged to the ruler.

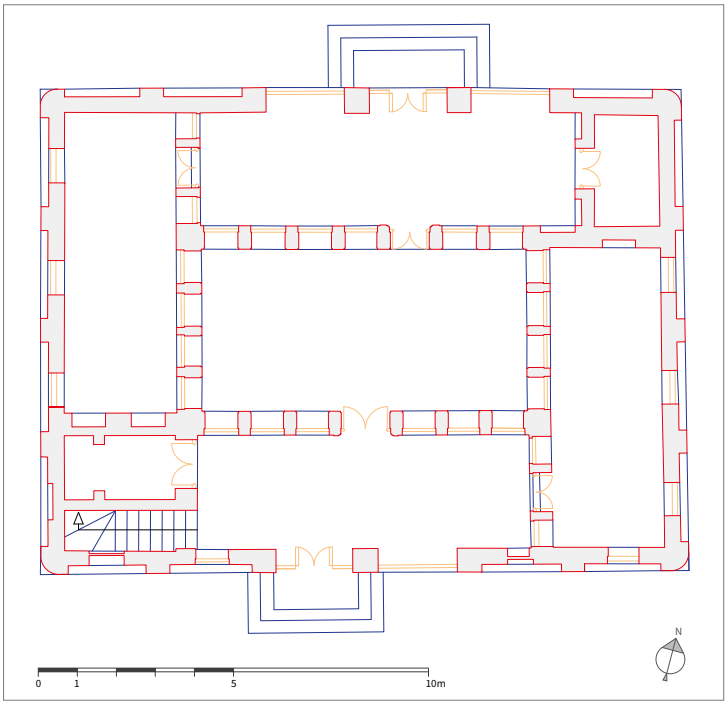
With the establishment of Qatar National Museum and the accompanying modifications in the 1970s, the Northeast Courtyard virtually disappeared. The inner partition walls between the different courtyards of the palace were demolished, and visitors could walk around the entire compound through gardens. Although it was a logical decision when opening the site to the public, this also meant that visitors would have less understanding of the original functions of the separate units. Without partitions, the different levels of security and privacy became obscure. In turn, the new restorations in the 2010s came up with a compromise: the layout of the partition walls would be indicated on the ground. Thus, today we can explore the compound freely and still understand how the courtyards were once divided. There are, however, two main inaccuracies in the current layout. The 1948 aerial shows that there were two additional partitions running from the Little Room to the East Gate and the North Gate, respectively, while the one running to the south was a subsequent addition around 1950. Our reconstruction follows the original lines of those walls, as indicated by the oldest aerials (fig. 7.11).

19. See al-Qibti, *al-Madrasa al-athariyya*, pp. 31–33; al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, pp. 107–110.

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 ʻAbd 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 *majlis*es. Even in the Old Palace, all buildings apart from the two *majlis*es 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 *majlis*es 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 ʿAbd 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 ʿAbd 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-Zakhrafa al-jibsiyya*, pp. 69–70; Wright, *The Old Amiri Palace*, n.p.; al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd 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 ʻAbd 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 ʻAbd 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 ʻAbd Allah*, pp. 188–197. Sheikh ʻAbd 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 ʿAbd 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-Maniʿ (c. 1902–1968), a poet and court officer of Sheikh ʿAbd 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 ʿUkaz.[9]

This metaphorical reference is to the pre-Islamic tradition of holding annual markets at a place called Suq ʿUkaz 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 ʿAbd 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 ʿAbd 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-Maniʿ.[10] The teacher of the Athariyya School, Muhammad bin Maniʿ (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 ʿAli, took their share of responsibilities. It seems likely that Sheikh ʿAbd 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 Maniʿ, *Qatar fi mudhakkirat*, p. 74; al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, vol. 2: pp. 30–33, 40–46, 87–177; al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, pp. 121–129; and also Kafud, *al-Adab al-Qatari al-hadith*.

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

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

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 *majlis*es 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 ʿam* ('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 ʿam* 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 ʿAbd al-ʿAziz bin ʿAbd al-Rahman Al Saʿud (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-ʿAziz 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 *majlis*es 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 *majlis*es 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 ʿAbd Allah and ʿAbd al-ʿAziz – 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 ʿAbd 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'.

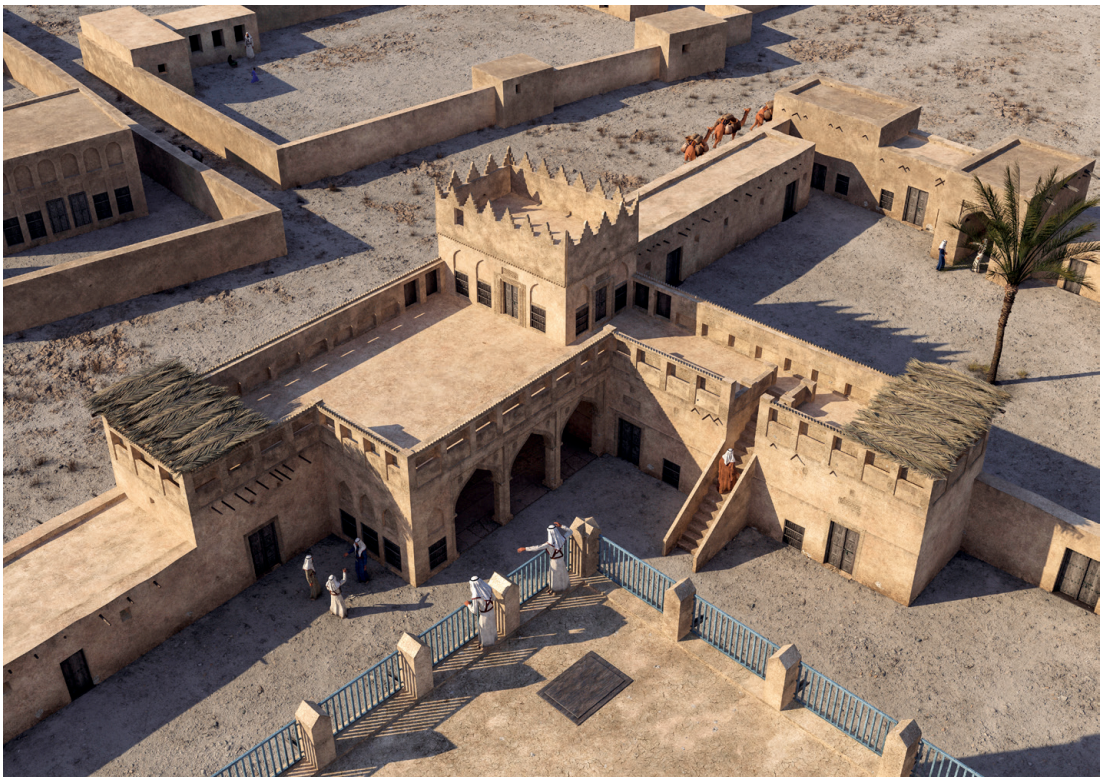
16. *Qissat bina' Mathaf Qatar al-Watani*.

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

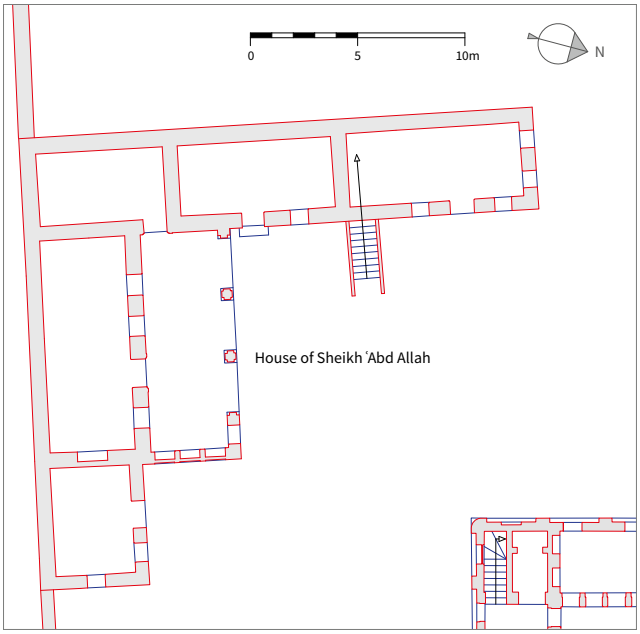


8.9. Inner Majlis and Museum of the State (in the background), after the opening of Qatar National Museum in 1975, as seen from the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah.

Maintaining the Ruler's Privacy



9.1. Our virtual reconstruction of the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, Old Palace, 1920s, view from the northeast.



9.2. Site plan of the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, Old Palace, following the restorations completed in 2015.

The biography of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah poses several basic questions that are difficult to answer because of the lack of documentary evidence. One concerns his birth year, on which various suggestions exist in the literature. The generally well-informed British diplomat and scholar John G. Lorimer identified it as 1876,[1] which seems plausible given that Sheikh ʿAbd Allah's future wife Sheikha Maryam al-ʿAtiyya was born the next year.[2] However, an equally probable date is 1871 or, at least, this is what oral tradition has traced back to a family narrative.[3] The question must remain open. In any event, he was somewhere in his mid-20s to early 30s when, most likely between 1900 and 1905, he decided to settle down at the east end of Doha and establish his new residence there. As discussed in Chapter 3, he initially had a smaller compound, with his house standing in the southwest corner (fig. 3.6). Even though the palace underwent a large-scale expansion in the second construction phase after 1913, adding several representative buildings, the ruler of Qatar continued to live in a modest house (fig. 9.1). This chapter focuses on the reconstruction of his personal home, including how the different rooms would have functioned, and engages with the royal family's privacy in terms of separating genders.

Today, the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah has five rooms and a veranda on its ground floor (fig. 9.2). Every room is rectangular in shape and accessible directly from the courtyard or through the veranda. The entire footprint measures about 250 square metres. The three arches of the veranda are four-centred (or 'keel-shaped') in form, standing on pillars and featuring decorative gypsum work in straps, roundels and small rectangles (fig. 9.3). The largest room is directly behind the veranda and has three windows and a door within a gypsum frame featuring several additional decorative panels both on its front wall and inside (fig. 9.4). The rest of the rooms are mostly devoid of decoration. A staircase ascends to an L-shaped terrace occupying nearly the same area as the ground floor, from where one can access an additional room in the southwest corner. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the Houses of Sheikh ʿAli and Sheikh Hamad were similar in layout but less than half the size.

Since parts of the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah were already dilapidated by the 1970s, the authenticity of its current form is somewhat questionable (fig. 9.5). Contrary to the present arrangement, if one looks at aerials of Doha from the 1950s, one finds a significant difference in layout: the northernmost room was absent before the 1970s restoration. These aerials, just like other pre-restorations photos, show no sign of a room there (fig. 9.6). Only rubble covered the place it should have occupied (fig. 9.5). However, an aerial from 1948 (the earliest visual evidence) demonstrates that the accumulated stones had once belonged to a room, which

1. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 1, Part 3, pocket no. 8; cf. 'Sheikh Abdullah Bin Jassim Al Thani'.

2. Bin Maniʿ, *Qatar fi mudhakkirat*, p. 49.

3. al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, vol. 1: pp. 106–111; al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, p. 58.



9.3. House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, Old Palace.

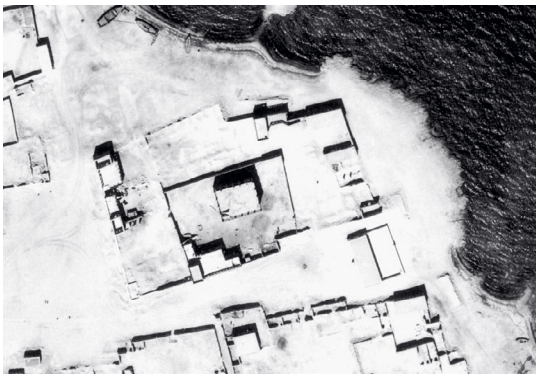

AL NAIMI
Cafeteria
AL NEEL
ROASTERIES
شرق
SUPERMARKET AL WEAM
AL JAZEERA KABAB



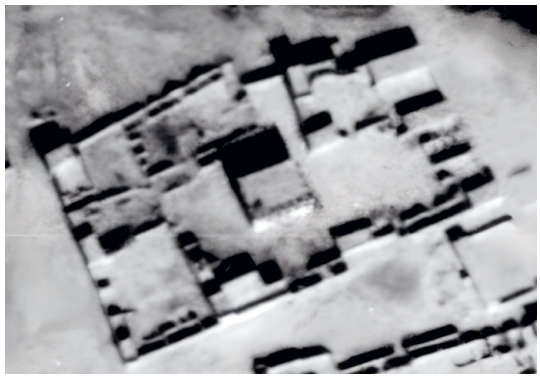
9.4. Interior of the largest room in the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, Old Palace.



9.5. House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, Old Palace, before the first restorations in the 1970s.



9.6. Aerial photo of Doha, detail showing the Old Palace and its surroundings, 1956, showing the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah without its north room.



9.7. Aerial photo of Doha, detail showing the Old Palace and its surroundings, 1948, showing the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah with its north room.

means that its restoration (more precisely: rebuilding) was true to the original (fig. 9.7). The same aerial also shows traces of additional structures, such as an extension of the east wing, which no longer exist today. The room in the southwest corner was divided by a partition wall delimiting its south part, which would have functioned as a washroom. It was typical of traditional architecture in the Arabian Gulf to have a separate room in the house for this purpose.[4] Unfortunately, the restorers decided to change the layout by removing this partition wall, just as they did in the Houses of Sheikh ʿAli and Sheikh Hamad.

Another question concerns the reconstruction of the rooftop terrace, which today is surrounded by a parapet made of alternating pillars and pairs of stone slabs with a gap between them.[5] Although the purpose of these air vents was to channel the breeze, the open terrace seems genuinely unfit for activities under the Qatari sun. It is difficult to imagine what the space may have been used for during daylight hours, especially in the summer. However, evidence from old photos demonstrates that the terrace was not entirely open to the sky. There were horizontal beams, supported by the pillars, running around the entire area (fig. 9.8). They were topped by zigzag finials, which indicates the full height of the original parapet, except for the four taller pillars in the east section of the terrace that reached roughly the same level as the top of the door to the upper-floor room. These pillars certainly supported some sort of shade; understanding these elements requires a short excursion to a subject hitherto unaddressed in this book.

Traditional architecture in the Gulf used various forms of lightweight structures made primarily of wooden poles, bamboo and palm fronds (or leaves), known in the local Arabic dialect as *ʿarish* or *barasti*. Although often overlooked in the literature, these were no less characteristic of the region's

4. Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, pp. 153–158; Kahraman and Carter, 'Adaptation of Heritage Architecture', pp. 20–22.

5. See also above in Chapter 2.



9.8. House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, Old Palace, before the first restorations in the 1970s, featuring four taller pillars on the rooftop terrace.

heritage than more durable – that is, stone – buildings. Many Gulf settlements before the mid-20th century included entire neighbourhoods or, at least, clusters of *barasti* huts. Doha was no exception.[6] They generally served as makeshift dwellings for people who otherwise lived outside the city and came only for a specific season of the year, usually to conduct trade or find temporary employment. Or, when standing in the courtyards of stone-built houses, they provided shelter for family members or animals, or both.[7] Unfortunately, no such structures survive in Qatar, even though many are known from old photos, indicating that lightweight architecture was well developed at the time.

Many of the surviving traditional houses in Qatar today have open terraces on their roofs, with no indication of any structure above them, which may be misleading. According to old photos, the terraces occasionally featured stone pillars supporting a *barasti* shade (fig. 9.9); in other cases, it stood on wooden poles only.[8] Aerials from the 1950s show countless lightweight structures throughout Doha, some in courtyards, some on terraces, and some on their own. Such *barasti*s would soon collapse without regular maintenance (and typically become firewood), which explains why none of the surviving traditional houses retain such structures in their terraces or courtyards. The same happened in the Old Palace, where the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah had four pillars reaching higher than the parapet wall, thereby revealing the existence of a

6. Adham, 'Rediscovering the Island', p. 224; Hawker, *Building on Desert Tides*, pp. 59–61, 95–98; Fletcher and Carter, 'Mapping the Growth', p. 453. Visiting Doha in 1863, Palgrave noted 'palm-leaf huts', see *Narrative of a Year's Journey*, vol.2: p. 231. The most informative study of *barasti*s in the region is Piesik, *Arish: Palm-Leaf Architecture.*

7. Nagy, 'Social and Spatial Process', pp. 55–57. The term *barasti* can also describe the typical roof structure of a Qatari house, where *danchal* poles, bamboo slats and palm mats were the main elements, as discussed in Chapter 2 (fig. 2.8).

8. Fletcher and Carter, 'Mapping the Gowth', pp. 453–455. See also the book cover of Eddisford and Morgan, *The Radwani House*.



9.9. Life at a marketplace probably in Wakra, 1959, showing a building with a *barasti* shade resting on pillars.

barasti shade. A pre-restoration photo also shows vestiges of a partition wall on the terrace, once running between two of the pillars, indicating that the shaded area was separated from the rest of the rooftop (fig. 9.10). It is likely that other parts of the terrace were covered too, except that none of the supporting pillars (if they had any) remained in place by the time the earliest known photos were taken.

When attempting to reconstruct the interior one must admit that there is practically no information on the furnishing of the House of Sheikh ʻAbd Allah. Little more is known about the entire Old Palace, except for Fouqueray's mention of a rug and cushions in the Outer Majlis.[9] The rooms retain only recesses that presumably held objects such as utensils, clothes or books. The short sticks protruding from the walls were used to hang objects such as oil lamps, which were the primary source of light before the introduction of electricity in the 1950s. Although the National Museum of Qatar holds several objects ascribed to Sheikh ʻAbd Allah, it is unclear whether he used any of them while living in the Old Palace. For instance, the collection's wooden chest, used for keeping and sorting pearls according to their size and type, was a utilitarian object, devoid of decoration, commonly owned by pearl merchants.[10] He also had a typical Arabian dagger decorated with pearls and a sabre with an ivory hilt and a gilded scabbard, which was a type of ceremonial Saudi sword.[11] It is likely that it was presented to him as a diplomatic gift.

9. Billecocq, *Le Qatar et les français*, p. 155; see also above in Chapter 7.

10. On the use of such a pearl chest, often known as *bishtakhta*, see Carter, *Sea of Pearls*, pp. 239–242.

11. al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ʻAbd Allah*, pp. 202–203. For similar pieces, see North, *An Introduction to Islamic Arms*, nos. 25 a–b; Elgood, *The Arms and Armour of Arabia*, pp. 19–25; figs. 2.18–2.24; *Arabian Swords*.



9.10. Terrace of the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, Old Palace, before the first restorations in the 1970s, showing the remains of a partition that separated the east area of the terrace.

A piece of Persian carpet also in the collection is remarkable for its stylised figural images (little birds and possibly humans) and its inscription in the centre: 'Sheikh ʿAbd Allah bin Qasim al-Thani Qatar year 1353 AH' (equivalent to 1934/5).[12] Although too late in terms of date to have been used in the Old Palace, it shows the sort of objects he had commissioned or received as gifts, even bearing his name (fig. 9.11). Qataris had easy access to Persian carpets in this period; additionally, the local form of traditional weaving, which produced textiles known as *sadu*, often covered rectangular cushions in *majlis*es. Such objects would have furnished the Old Palace.

Initially, the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah was home to four people: Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, his wife Sheikha Maryam al-ʿAtiyya, and their two sons, Sheikh ʿAli and Sheikh Hamad.[13] The children were between 5 and 10 years of age when they moved here. As was standard at the time, the individual rooms within the house had no prescribed functions and their use could also change according to the season. The specific activities that once took place within these partitioned spaces are difficult to reconstruct, perhaps with the exception of sleeping: it is known that Qataris generally used the rooftops for sleeping during the summer to cope with the heat. Here, the upper-floor room would have been a convenient place for that. Although today rebuilt with air vents in its west and south walls, old photos demonstrate that this room originally had windows on all four sides (fig. 9.12). Additionally, since the largest room on the ground floor, set behind the veranda, was also the most richly decorated space, this must have been the centre of

12. al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah,* pp. 206–207.

13. On the family, see al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, vol. 1: pp. 199–224. Sheikh ʿAbd Allah also had a second wife and a third son, although it is unclear where they lived.

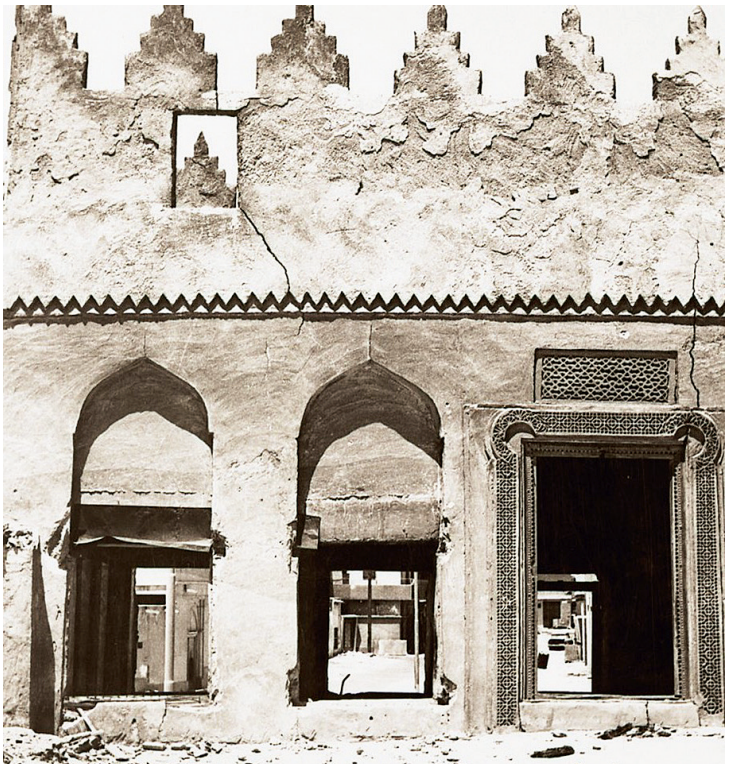


9.11. Carpet featuring the name of Sheikh 'Abd Allah, made of wool in Qashqai style, Shiraz (?), 1934/5.

family gatherings, for instance to share meals. The room at the east end of the house had no windows and probably functioned as a storage area.

As a family home, this building was certainly among the private areas of the Old Palace, even though, somewhat surprisingly, there was no physical separation in the form of a partition from the Main Courtyard with the Inner Majlis, a venue for gatherings attended by guests. While the ground-floor council hall of the Inner Majlis had entrances from the south and north – one towards the House of Sheikh 'Abd Allah and one towards the public gate of the Main Courtyard (the Little Room) – the upper-floor council hall was only accessible from the south. The galleries surrounding this room provide a viewpoint over most of the Old Palace. Only its southwest corner, directly overlooking the House of Sheikh 'Abd Allah, had a curtain wall on this floor (fig. 8.4). It is worth highlighting that the two buildings' arrangement goes against the oft-heard narrative about Qatari architecture, portraying it as strictly regulated by social (or, as some like to assert, religious) principles on the segregation of genders. The position of a *majlis* is generally described as crucial, supposedly arranged so that male guests need not have any physical or visual interaction with female members of the household.[14] However, the Old Palace did not succumb to such a clear-cut rule. Instead, as noted in the previous chapters, the level of security and privacy gradually increased from east to west through the division of separate courtyards, yet with no private courtyard for the ruler's family.

14. Nagy, 'Social and Spatial Process', pp. 65–67; Othman, Aird and Buys, 'Privacy, Modesty, Hospitality, and the Design'; Al-Mohannadi and Furlan, 'The Syntax of the Qatari Traditional House'; Fletcher and Stepney, 'Morphologies of Housing in Doha'.



9.12. Upper-floor room on the terrace of the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, Old Palace, before the first restorations in the 1970s.

The story of this building exemplifies the difficulties of combining a family home with a royal palace. One required privacy, while the other obliged the ruler to conduct official duties. The original residence of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah was virtually indistinguishable from any other in Doha, comprising an L-shaped house at the corner of a small compound. Soon after becoming the ruler of Qatar in 1913, he began to add new buildings and courtyards with different levels of privacy and security, including the Inner Majlis, which would have served as the centre of administration, business and literary gatherings. As an imposing structure, it inevitably allowed for the visitors' gaze to infringe upon the family home. Given the general conservatism of Qatari society at the time, this arrangement may not have been to everyone's comfort. In other words, the intimacy of the family home became lost or, at least, more difficult to maintain with the new constructions in the second phase. The conflicting situation may partially explain why Sheikh ʿAbd Allah eventually decided to abandon it. Within a decade after the large-scale expansions of the Old Palace, it seems that he and his family decided to move to Doha Palace and the one in Rayyan.



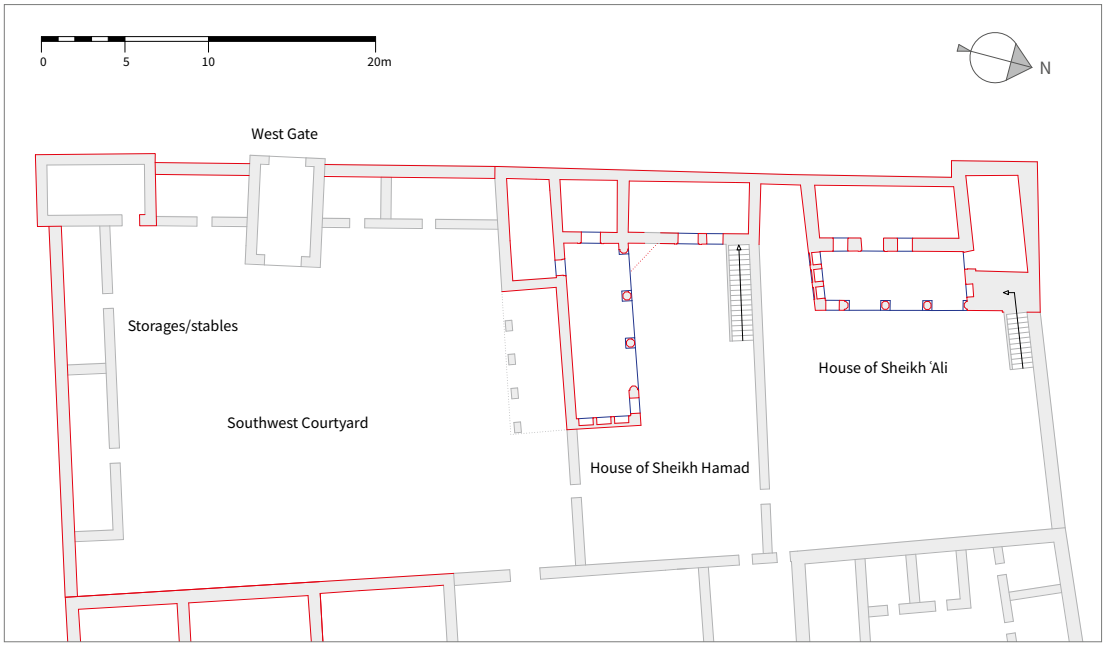
9.13. House of Sheikh 'Abd Allah, Old Palace, before the first restorations in the 1970s.

The way we experience the House of Sheikh 'Abd Allah today results from its more recent reinterpretations, first in the 1970s and then in the 2010s. As noted above, an entire room was added during the first restorations, in agreement with the evidence of the 1948 aerial, while the parapet walls on the roof terrace were reconstructed without the horizontal beams and pillars that had once supported a *barasti* shade. Additionally, parts of the veranda were largely ruined and required rebuilding (fig. 9.13). As for the decorative elements, the gypsum panels were recarved, though in some cases – such as the frame of the door leading to the upper-floor room – with an altered design (fig. 9.12). The recent restorations, while removing the former additions of concrete and returning the building's colour to the more authentic sandy-yellow, also created a memento of the past. In the largest room, a vertical band was left without plaster, purportedly for visitors to observe the contrast between traditional construction materials and the concrete used in the 1970s restorations (fig. 9.4).

New Homes for New Families



10.1. Our virtual reconstruction of the west area of the Old Palace, 1920s, view from the east.



10.2. Reconstructed site plan of the west area of the Old Palace, 1920s (walls outlined in red exist today, while those in grey are conjectural).

If you belonged to the Al Thani family and wished to access the Old Palace during its heyday in the 1920s, you could use the West Gate. To enter in style, you would be riding a camel. But if you were of less prestigious ancestry, it is highly improbable that you would be permitted to enter through here; your only chance would be if you were employed to look after the camels parked just inside. At least this is the impression presented in the recollection of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru about the West Gate and the area behind it:

> The Al Thani habitually rode through this entrance, mounting or leaving their camels in the enclosure adjoining the gateway, passing on foot through a further gateway …[1]

The Southwest Courtyard was among the private areas of the palace, from where one could reach the Houses of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, Sheikh Hamad, and Sheikh ʿAli. Unfortunately, given that few of the surrounding buildings survive today, it is difficult to visualise this courtyard's general appearance, with the notable exception of the camels resting in a shaded corner (fig. 10.1). The following pages will offer thoughts on the functioning and reconstruction of the three units in this area (from north to south): the House of Sheikh ʿAli, the House of Sheikh Hamad and the Southwest Courtyard (fig. 10.2).

Sheikh ʿAli (1894–1974), the firstborn son of Sheikha Maryam al-ʿAtiyya and Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, was one of the key figures who lived here. He was between 6 and 10 years of age when he found himself moving to a new home at the east end of Doha, the Salata district, along with his parents and younger brother, Sheikh Hamad. One can imagine the two boys occasionally standing on the coast and watching the dhows embarking on or returning from pearling expeditions. After their father became the ruler of Qatar in 1913, various constructions began around the residence. The Old Palace underwent a general expansion which included the foundation of the Athariyya School after 1916, where both sons would spend several hours a day listening to the teachings of Muhammad bin Manīʿ.[2] Around the same time, Sheikh ʿAli married his cousin Sheikha Hamda bint Thani bin Jasim, and their first son was named Sheikh Jasim bin ʿAli (1918–1980). If we presume they married one year prior to Jasim's birth year, we can tentatively speculate that Sheikh ʿAli would have built his house around 1917. As described in Chapter 3, this was part of the second construction phase of the Old Palace.

The House of Sheikh ʿAli occupies the northwest corner of the Old Palace, and it was originally preceded by a rectangular forecourt separated from the rest of the compound by a partition wall on the east side (fig. 10.2). The building incorporates only two rooms on the ground floor, occupying about 115 square metres. The larger one is more richly decorated, with gypsum panels on both the outside and the inside, shaded behind a veranda with

1. See Appendix.

2. See Chapter 7. On the life of Sheikh ʿAli, see al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, vol. 1: pp. 202–209; Al Thani, *al-Haly al-dani.*



10.3. House of Sheikh ʿAli, Old Palace.

three arches (fig. 10.3). This room would have been used for family gatherings. The smaller room (in the northwest corner) was divided into a larger and a smaller space, the latter of which can be interpreted as a washroom. A U-shaped staircase ascends to the rooftop terrace; from here, one can access the upper-floor room with windows and air vents built into the width of the wall, providing ventilation in the manner discussed in Chapter 2 (fig. 2.4). Thanks to the natural breeze, this was the most comfortable place to sleep for the family, especially during the summer heat.

The building's reconstruction poses only a few questions. A 1959 bird's-eye view photo shows that it was nearly intact and more or less identical to the current one (fig. 10.4). However, old photos also indicate that significant chunks – including the upper-floor room and most of the veranda – subsequently collapsed, probably around 1970, just before the beginning of the first restorations (fig. 10.5). The restorers thus had to rebuild those parts of the house and did so with high accuracy, presumably following the evidence of old photos and personal recollections. The only aspect that seems implausible in its present form is the staircase, from which nothing but the upper part survived into the 1950s. Contrary to its current shape with three flights of stairs, it probably had only two flights in an L-shaped form. Additionally, like the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah discussed in the previous chapter, part of the rooftop terrace presumably had a *barasti* shade at its southwest corner where vestiges of a thin partition wall are visible in pre-restoration photos.[3] This is how the building appears in our reconstruction (fig. 10.1).

3. Pre-restoration photos also show a higher pillar standing in the southwest corner of the terrace (figs. 9.6, 10.4, 10.5).

Sheikh Hamad (1896–1949), the younger brother, was little more than 5 years of age when the family moved to the new residence at Salata and in his early 20s when he began to take classes at the Athariyya School after 1916. His first wife was Sheikha ʿA'isha bint Khalifa. The birth year of their first-born child, Sheikh Jasim bin Hamad (1921–1976), suggests their house may have been constructed around 1920, about three years after his brother's. That is, the building activities of the second construction phase of the Old Palace may have stretched for about four years, rather than all expansions taking place simultaneously. The recollection of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru – although mixing up the two brothers – confirms the chronological order of their houses.[4]

The House of Sheikh Hamad lies between that of his elder brother and the Southwest Courtyard, and was originally preceded by a rectangular forecourt (fig. 10.2). Roughly following the L-shaped form of the House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah, its footprint is about 125 square metres (fig. 10.6). The main oddity here is that the largest room – presumably the chief gathering place for the family – is on the west side, while the veranda runs most of its length without a room behind it on the south side. Since the whole building had to be rebuilt in the 1970s, one may ask how authentic the resulting layout might be, but there is no easy alternative to suggest. The original length of the veranda is questionable since nothing but the spring of its west arch appears in the pre-restoration photos (fig. 10.7). In this case, the restorers followed the analogies from the Houses of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah and Sheikh ʿAli, both with three arches, closely imitating the House of Sheikh ʿAli. This seems to have been a reasonable decision, even though the details were inevitably speculative. In contrast, the rebuilt position and form of the staircase were mistaken, as it now

4. See Appendix. It was surely the transmitter of this record who made the mistake, rather than the informant who knew both brothers personally.



10.4. Bird's-eye view of east Doha, detail showing the Old Palace and its surroundings, 1959, from the northeast.



10.5. House of Sheikh ʿAli, Old Palace, before the first restorations in the 1970s.



10.6. House of Sheikh Hamad, Old Palace.



10.7. House of Sheikh Hamad, Old Palace, before the first restorations in the 1970s, showing most of the building collapsed.



10.8. So-called Guards' Room, Old Palace.

emerged from the forecourt of the House of Sheikh ʿAli on the wrong side of the wall once dividing the two forecourts. Old aerials and other pre-restoration photos indicate that it was a single-flight staircase ascending straight to the north end of the building. In addition, the upper-floor room appears slightly taller in the pre-restoration photos than today, while the rest of the terrace presumably had a *barasti* shade, as presented in our reconstruction (fig. 10.1).

It is reasonable to assume that the Southwest Courtyard developed about the same time as the unit directly north of it (the House of Sheikh Hamad), that is to say, in (or slightly before) 1920. As restored in the 1970s, the only room around this open space stands in its southwest corner (fig. 10.8). Although currently known as the Guards' Room,[5] the recollection of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru presents a more plausible function: '[it] was built within the south-western angle of the wall for the head retainer who looked after the camels.'[6] In other words, it belonged to the man in charge of the camels, who would saddle and unsaddle them and provide them with food and water. They were probably kept on the north side of the courtyard, adjacent to the House of Sheikh Hamad, where our reconstruction includes their parking lot (fig. 6.5). According to old aerials, two pillars stood near the house's rear wall (and two more can be conjectured), which once presumably supported a *barasti* shade (fig. 9.6). This arrangement makes it likely that the camels used to rest here, where one may also imagine a trough filled with water along the wall.

Additionally, there were several other structures in this virtually empty space. To understand their original layout, the most informative sources are, once again, the pre-restoration aerials. The one from 1948 shows that the courtyard had a door in the northeast corner leading to the Main Courtyard and presumably another to the House of Sheikh Hamad (fig. 9.7). The location of the West Gate is clear, but there is little hint about its shape.[7] As discussed in Chapter 6, Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru describes a large gateway perhaps similar to the North Gate (though without its upper-floor room and somewhat shorter). It would have formed a corridor with benches on the sides and the entrance door high enough to allow entry while mounted on a camel (fig. 6.5). In the same aerial photo, one can make out traces of various ruined structures around the courtyard, including two rooms flanking this gate from the north and the south, one in the southwest corner (slightly projecting from the perimeter walls), and two others along the south wall. Our reconstruction of the buildings relies on these pieces of evidence (fig. 10.1).

In the 1970s, the restorations of the west area of the Old Palace was a challenging task. Some buildings were in ruins at the time and had to be rebuilt to provide spaces to display parts of the permanent exhibition. Thanks to earlier photos, the Houses of Sheikh ʿAli and Sheikh Hamad were relatively

5. Al-Kholaifi, *Architecture of the Old Palace*, p. 14.

6. See Appendix. According to Lorimer, writing c. 1907, about 800 camels and 150 horses lived alongside the 12,000 inhabitants of Doha, Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 2 (geographical and statistical): pp. 489, 491.

7. However, in a bird's-eye view photo from 1934 (reproduced above as fig. 6.3), after some virtual enhancing, traces of the West Gate might be possible to identify.



10.9. Interior of the House of Sheikh Hamad, Old Palace, after the opening of Qatar National Museum in 1975.

accurate except for the two staircases. The objects displayed in these rooms as part of the old Qatar National Museum presented some information about the original occupants, alongside basic furnishing that illustrated the types of material culture that they would have used (fig. 10.9). One of the rooms was dedicated to traditional coffee-making, with numerous types of *dalla*s ('coffee pots') typical of the Gulf, where visitors could have a taster (fig. 10.10).

The buildings around the Southwest Courtyard, in turn, were so heavily ruined by the 1970s that rebuilding them was not possible. The only exception was the room in the southwest corner. The restorers ultimately decided to rebuild the West Gate as a tiny door, but thanks to the recollection of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru, one can visualise an impressive gate at this spot. He also recalls that the family's livestock would enliven the Southwest Courtyard with their occasional groaning noises – a sound reminiscent of the Chewbacca character from the *Star Wars* movies, which was allegedly an imitation of an upset camel.[8] Today, the Southwest Courtyard has three modern *barasti* shades, two on the north and one on the south sides, which may seem appropriate for the space, though we have no evidence of their original existence. In any case, this area of the Old Palace rarely receives visitors nowadays, which incidentally agrees with its original function as a private space: access here was restricted to Sheikh 'Abd Allah, his sons Sheikh 'Ali and Sheikh Hamad, and their respective families and servants (including the camel keeper).

It may be appropriate to conclude this line of enquiry with the subsequent story of the two brothers. They lived in their respective homes within the Old Palace for about a decade before their father decided to relocate in the late 1920s to Doha

8. Irwin, *Camel*, p. 139.



10.10. Interior of the House of Sheikh ʿAli, Old Palace, after the opening of Qatar National Museum in 1975.

Palace and the one in Rayyan – where both Sheikh ʿAli and Sheikh Hamad, along with their families, had more spacious dwellings. In 1935, Sheikh Hamad was officially appointed as heir apparent. Since his father gradually bestowed more power upon him by the 1940s, he became the effective leader of the country. However, he died on 27 May 1948. This event momentarily set the succession of the Qatari leadership into question, and Sheikh ʿAbd Allah eventually stepped aside in favour of his eldest son, Sheikh ʿAli, in 1949.[9]

After decades of living in Sheikh Hamad's shadow (in a position colloquially referred to today as 'spare'), Sheikh ʿAli unexpectedly became the ruler of Qatar. The period of his reign, between 1949 and 1960, witnessed the most rapid developments in the country's history: oil exports began at the end of 1949, which immediately sparked an economic boom. Thanks to the new wealth, Qatari building techniques and construction materials underwent drastic modernisation under the supervision of a new generation of trained architects, who introduced cement blocks and reinforced concrete as the chief materials. Sheikh ʿAli was a keen patron of architecture. Alongside his various construction projects, which included housing, schools and hospitals, he also established the so-called Rayyan Palace, completed in 1957,[10] and even had residences in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Switzerland.[11] Yet, his best-known achievement, the newly redeveloped administrative centre in Doha – including the Clock Tower, the Shuyukh Mosque and the new wings of Doha Palace (more recently known as the Amiri Diwan) – was completed only after his abdication in 1960 (fig. 10.11).[12] The contrast between these buildings and his first home in the Old Palace is perhaps too obvious to emphasise.

9. Al Thani, *al-Haly al-dani*, pp. 154–165. On the life of Sheikh Hamad, see al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ʿAbd Allah*, vol. 1: pp. 209–221; Al Thani, *al-Haly al-dani*, pp. 31–33.

10. Muhammad bin Maniʿ, Sheikh ʿAbd Allah's former advisor who later returned to Qatar to serve under Sheikh ʿAli, mentions the completion date of the Rayyan Palace as 22 Rabiʿ II 1377 (equivalent of 16 November 1957); Bin Maniʿ, *Qatar fi mudhakkirat*, p. 76.

11. Al Thani, *al-Haly al-dani*, pp. 89–98.

12. See Al Thani, *al-Haly al-dani*, pp. 446–448; Jaidah, *Discovering Arabian Deco*, pp. 107–110.



10.11. Bird's-eye view of the administrative centre of Doha, c. 1975, from the northeast, showing the Clock Tower, the Shuyukh Mosque and the Amiri Diwan.



Conclusion

During the past 100 years, the generations that have walked the grounds of the Old Palace have had fundamentally different experiences. It was initially a modest residence developed into a place of royal representation, where people – whether Qataris or foreigners – could meet with the country's ruler, Sheikh ʻAbd Allah. During the later decades, anyone strolling along the east coast of Doha would have seen little more than crumbling structures, perhaps fairly described as uninviting on closer inspection. In a period when the country was beginning to experience architectural modernity, less attention was given to buildings that appeared to be dated or out of fashion. However, in 1975, there came the unprecedented opportunity to learn about Qatari history and culture in the freshly opened Qatar National Museum, housed within the rejuvenated Old Palace. National identity there and then became anchored to the site. Today we may still wander through exhibition galleries – in an even grander scheme within Jean Nouvel's desert rose – that eventually lead us to the newly re-evaluated and restored heritage compound. That is, when tracing the history of the Old Palace, the readers of this book do not find a single story from beginning to end as in a movie; instead, they find four episodes as in a series. Each episode is self-contained and independent, perhaps ending abruptly, without necessarily foreshadowing the next one's plot.

This last episode is by no means the end of the series: the Old Palace continues its life. Most visitors tend to appear in late afternoons when the temperature is more bearable, and they can even enter without purchasing a museum ticket. Nouvel designed his neo-futurist building to embrace the Old Palace, ensuring that this piece of heritage is safely preserved, maintained and monitored. However, given the site's central position, one may wonder how it could be better presented to the public. This book has attempted to provide some inspiration on the matter. Since the buildings do not currently feature any permanently displayed objects and include little information on their former functions, there is certainly room for improvement, which will hopefully be realised in the next episode in the life of this monument.

Admittedly, there is more research to be done on the history and functioning of the Old Palace, and even more on how it fits within the subject of Islamic architecture. While providing a few hints here and there, I have remained silent on an aspect that has been on my mind throughout the writing of this book: orientation. Generally described as east-to-west for the sake of convenience, the length of the compound, in fact, leans to the southwest by about 15 degrees. And this axis precisely points towards the direction of another building located some 1200 kilometres away: the Kaʻba of Mecca. Islam's most sacred structure happens to be in a striking alignment with the Old Palace. Although one

may suggest this to be coincidental, with which I agree, the question is not that simple.

One of the ways Muslim people historically defined the correct orientation of mosques – required to be facing the Kaʿba – was through folk astronomy, including the direction of cardinal winds.[1] In Qatar, the most dominant wind is the Shamal, blowing from the north-northwest. It appears that all mosques in the country have their side wall towards the Shamal wind and, thereby, their axes pointing to the Kaʿba. The coincidence lies in the phenomenon that – for a very different, climatic reason – Qatari patrons also preferred to lay out their houses according to the Shamal, especially on coasts where the wind brought cooling breezes without the sands.[2] The location of the Old Palace, in the Salata district, was just such a place given that it lies near the southeast coast of Doha Bay. Almost all houses in the neighbourhood – including the Old Palace – were oriented towards the Kaʿba.

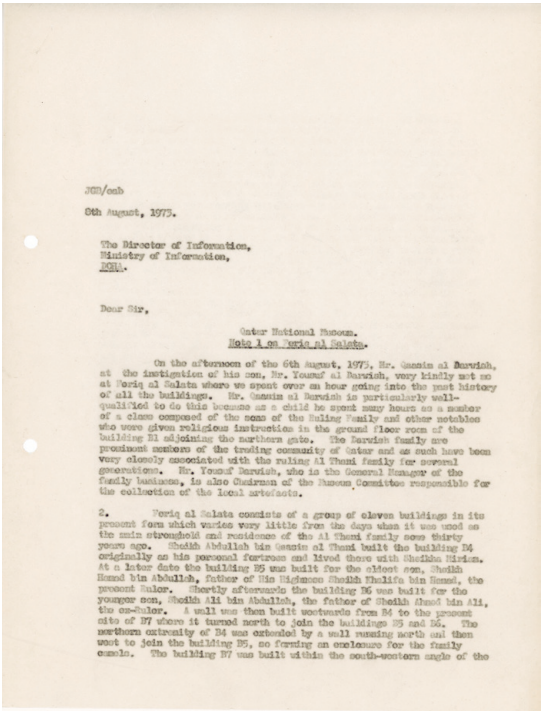
The natural environment gravely impacted the period's sole royal palace. The dominant Shamal wind defined its orientation. Its proximity to the shore allowed the patron's boats to harvest pearls from the sea, providing his chief source of income. The available construction materials determined the shape and size of buildings, though nature cannot inform us about the social aspect of the site, the events that occurred there and how architecture was intended to reflect its operation. To the best of my efforts, this book has attempted to reveal all those aspects in the preceding 10 chapters. No doubt there are many more secrets to be uncovered, but for now this will have to suffice for Doha's Old Palace, which has seen many people, both the elite and the common, the casual visitor and the historian, wander through its storied gates.

1. King, 'The Orientation of Medieval Islamic Religious Architecture', pp. 255–259; King, 'The Sacred Geography of Islam'; O'Meara, *The Kaʿba Orientations*, pp. 27, 40–43. The summer sunrise direction (east-northeast), another traditional method of calculating the direction to the Kaʿba, also corresponds with the axis of Qatari mosques.

2. Fletcher and Carter, 'Mapping the Growth', pp. 469–470.

Appendix

In a letter dated 8 August 1973, James (Jimmy) Butts describes his recent visit to the Old Palace in the company of Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru (c. 1900–1992). Today this typewritten document of three pages – or, more precisely, its carbon copy – lies in the archive of the National Museum of Qatar, in a box with no shelf mark. Given its historical value, I reproduce the document, followed by a site plan of the Old Palace from about the same time, which helps us to identify the buildings referred to as B1–B11. Lastly, I will summarise the most relevant pieces of information in this letter.



JBB/cmb

8th August, 1973.

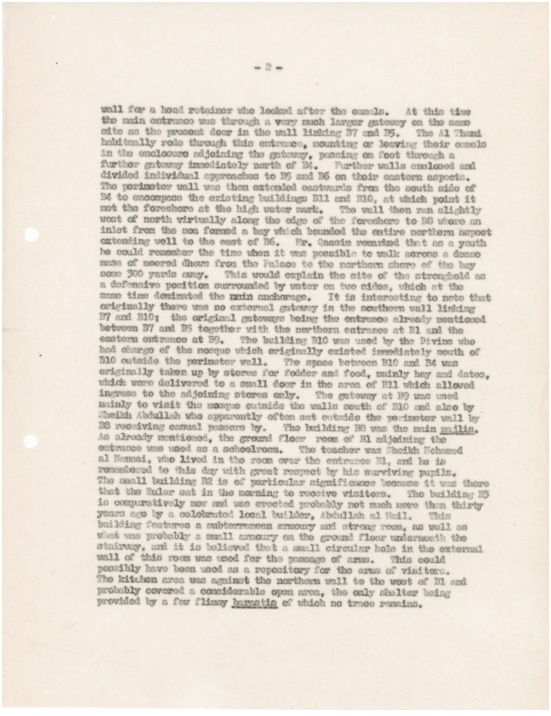
The Director of Information,
Ministry of Information,
DOHA.

Dear Sir,

Qatar National Museum.
Visit to Qasr al Kalata.

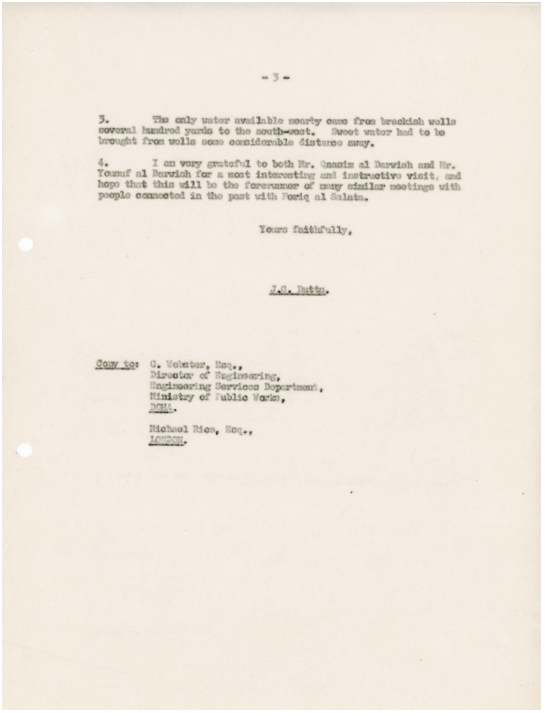
On the afternoon of the 6th August, 1973, Mr. Ghanim al Darwish, at the instigation of his son, Mr. Yousuf al Darwish, very kindly met me at Qasr al Kalata where we spent over an hour going into the past history of all the buildings. Mr. Ghanim al Darwish is particularly well-qualified to do this because as a child he spent many hours as a member of a class composed of the sons of the Ruling Family and other notables who were given religious instruction in the ground floor room of the building B1 adjoining the northern gate. The Darwish family are prominent members of the trading community of Qatar and as such have been very closely associated with the ruling Al Thani family for several generations. Mr. Yousuf Darwish, who is the General Manager of the family business, is also Chairman of the Museum Committee responsible for the collection of the local artefacts.

2. Qasr al Kalata consists of a group of eleven buildings in its present form which varies very little from the days when it was used as the main stronghold and residence of the Al Thani family some thirty years ago. Sheikh Abdullah bin Qassim al Thani built the building B4 originally as his personal fortress and lived there with Sheikha Miriam. At a later date the building B5 was built for the eldest son, Sheikh Hamad bin Abdullah, father of His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad, the present Ruler. Shortly afterwards the building B6 was built for the younger son, Sheikh Ali bin Abdullah, the father of Sheikh Ahmed bin Ali, the ex-Ruler. A wall was then built westwards from B4 to the present site of B7 where it turned north to join the buildings B5 and B6. The northern extremity of B4 was extended by a wall running north and then west to join the building B5, so forming an enclosure for the family camels. The building B7 was built within the south-eastern angle of the



- 2 -

wall for a head retainer who looked after the camels. At this time the main entrance was through a very much larger gateway on the same site as the present door in the wall linking B7 and B5. The Al Thani habitually rode through this entrance, mounting or leaving their camels in the enclosure adjoining the gateway, passing on foot through a further gateway immediately north of B4. Further walls enclosed and divided individual approaches to B5 and B6 on their eastern aspects. The perimeter wall was then extended eastwards from the south side of B4 to encompass the existing buildings B11 and B10, at which point it met the foreshore at the high water mark. The wall then ran slightly west of north virtually along the edge of the foreshore to B9 where an inlet from the sea formed a bay which bounded the entire northern aspect extending well to the east of B6. Mr. Ghanim remained that as a youth he could remember the time when it was possible to walk across a dense mass of seaweed there from the Palace to the northern shore of the bay some 300 yards away. This would explain the site of the stronghold as a defensive position surrounded by water on two sides, which at the same time dominated the main anchorage. It is interesting to note that originally there was no external gateway in the northern wall linking B7 and B10; the original gateways being the entrance already mentioned between B7 and B5 together with the northern entrance at B1 and the eastern entrance at B9. The building B10 was used by the Divine who had charge of the mosque which originally existed immediately south of B10 outside the perimeter wall. The space between B10 and B4 was originally taken up by stores for fodder and food, mainly hay and dates, which were delivered to a small door in the area of B11 which allowed ingress to the adjoining stores only. The gateway at B9 was used mainly to visit the mosque outside the walls south of B10 and also by Sheikh Abdullah who apparently often sat outside the perimeter wall by B8 receiving annual passers by. The building B8 was the main majlis. As already mentioned, the ground floor room of B1 adjoining the entrance was used as a schoolroom. The teacher was Sheikh Mohamed al Hamad, who lived in the room over the entrance B1, and he is remembered to this day with great respect by his surviving pupils. The small building B2 is of particular significance because it was there that the Ruler sat in the morning to receive visitors. The building B3 is comparatively new and was erected probably not much more than thirty years ago by a celebrated local builder, Abdullah al Hajl. This building features a subterranean armoury and strong room, as well as what 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. The kitchen area was against the northern wall to the west of B1 and probably covered a considerable open area, the only shelter being provided by a few flimsy barasthi of which no trace remains.



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3. The only water available nearby came from brackish wells several hundred yards to the south-east. Sweet water had to be brought from wells some considerable distance away.

4. I am very grateful to both Mr. Ghanim al Darwish and Mr. Yousuf al Darwish for a most interesting and instructive visit, and hope that this will be the forerunner of many similar meetings with people connected in the past with Qasr al Kalata.

Yours faithfully,

J.B. Butts.

Copy to: C. Webster, Esq.,
Director of Engineering,
Engineering Services Department,
Ministry of Public Works,
DOHA.

Michael Rice, Esq.,
LONDON.

JGB/eab
8th August, 1973.

The Director of Information
Ministry of Information,
DOHA.

Dear Sir,

Qatar National Museum.
Note 1 on Feriq al Salata.

On the afternoon of the 6th August, 1973, Mr. Qassim al Darwish, at the instigation of his son, Mr. Yousuf al Darwish, very kindly met me at Feriq al Salata where we spent over an hour going into the past history of all the buildings. Mr. Qassim al Darwish is particularly well-qualified to do this because as a child he spent many hours as a member of a class composed of the sons of the Ruling Family and other notables who were given religious instruction in the ground floor room of the building B1 adjoining the northern gate. The Darwish family are prominent members of the trading community of Qatar and as such have been very closely associated with the ruling Al Thani family for several generations. Mr. Yousuf Darwish, who is the General Manager of the family business, is also Chairman of the Museum Committee responsible for the collection of the local artefacts.

2. Feriq al Salata consists of a group of eleven buildings in its present form which varies very little from the days when it was used as the main stronghold and residence of the Al Thani family some thirty year ago. Sheikh Abdullah bin Qassim al Thani built the building B4 originally as his personal fortress and lived there with Sheikha Miriam. At a later date the building B5 was built for the eldest son, Shaikh Hamad bin Abdullah, father of His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad, the present Ruler. Shortly afterwards the building B6 was built for the younger son, Shaikh Ali bin Abdullah, the father of Sheikh Ahmad bin Ali, the ex-Ruler. A wall was then built westwards from B4 to the present site of B7 where it turned north to join the buildings B5 and B6. The northern extremity of B4 was extended by a wall running north and then west to join the building B5, so forming an enclosure for the family camels. The building B7 was built within the south-western angle of the [Page 2] wall for a head retainer who looked after the camels. At this time the main entrance was through a very much larger gateway on the same site as the present door in the wall linking B7 and B5. The Al Thani habitually rode through this entrance, mounting or leaving their camels in the enclosure adjoining the gateway, passing on foot through a further gateway immediately north of B4. Further walls enclosed and divided individual approaches to B5 and B6 on their eastern aspects. The perimeter wall was then extended eastwards from the south side of B4 to encompass the existing buildings B11 and B10, at which point it met the foreshore at the high water mark. The wall then ran slightly west of north virtually along the edge of the foreshore to B8 where an inlet from the sea formed a bay which bounded the entire northern aspect extending well to the east of B6. Mr. Qassim remarked that as a youth he could remember the time when it was possible to walk across a dense mass of moored dhows from the Palace to the northern shore of the bay some 300 yards away. This would explain the site of the stronghold as a defensive position surrounded by water on two sides, which at the same time dominated the main anchorage. It is interesting to note that originally there was no external gateway in the southern wall linking B7 and B10; the original gateways being the entrance already mentioned between B7 and B5 together with the northern entrance at B1 and the eastern entrance at B9. The building B10 was used by the Divine [sic] who had charge of the mosque which originally existed immediately south of B10 outside the perimeter wall. The space between B10 and B4 was originally taken up by stores for fodder and food, mainly hay and dates, which were delivered to a small door in the area of B11 which allowed ingress to the adjoining stores only. The gateway at B9 was used mainly to visit the mosque outside the walls

south of B10 and also by Sheikh Abdullah who apparently often sat outside the perimeter wall by B8 receiving casual passers by. The building B8 was the main majlis. As already mentioned, the ground floor room of B1 adjoining the entrance was used as a schoolroom. The teacher was Sheikh Mohamed al Mannai, who lived in the room over the entrance B1, and he is remembered to this day with great respect by his surviving pupils. The small building B2 is of particular significance because it was there that the Ruler sat in the morning to receive visitors. The building B3 is comparatively new and was erected probably not much more than thirty years ago by a celebrated local builder, Abdullah al Mail. This building features a subterranean armoury and strong room, as well as what 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. The kitchen area was against the northern wall to the west of B1 and probably covered a considerable open area, the only shelter being provided by a few flimsy barastis of which no trace remains. [Page 3]

3. The only water available nearby came from brackish wells several hundred yards to the south-west. Sweet water had to be brought from wells some considerable distance away.

4. I am very grateful to both Mr. Qassim al Darwish and Mr. Yousuf al Darwish for a most interesting and instructive visit, and hope that this will be the forerunner of many similar meetings with people connected in the past with Feriq al Salata.

Yours faithfully,

J. G. Butts

Copy to: G. Webster, Esq.,
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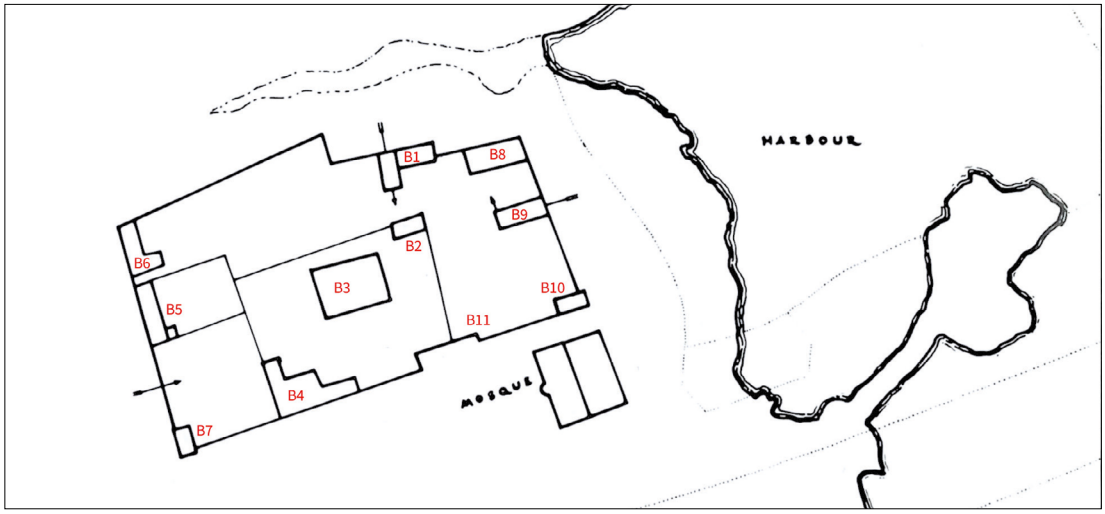

As with any oral history account, the narrative presented here should be taken carefully, especially since the informant Jasim al-Darwis Fakhru described events from a distance of several decades. Additionally, we do not have his own words but only their interpretation by Jimmy Butts, who had no independent evidence at hand to confirm the account. For instance, he consistently names the site as 'Feriq al Salata', which was, in fact, the name of the district and not of the palace. Nevertheless, the report has several significant points that generally agree with the present book's investigation on the development of the Old Palace, and should therefore be highlighted here:

- The School Building stood next to the North Gate and Jasim al-Darwish Fakhru was one of its pupils.
- The House of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah was the first building, constructed when the compound was significantly smaller than today.
- The Houses of Sheikh Hamad and Sheikh ʿAli, along with the Southwest Courtyard, were added in the second phase.[1]
- The building in the southwest corner of the palace, currently known as the Guards' Room, was used by the custodian of the camels.
- There was once a proper West Gate to the compound, used exclusive by the royal family.
- There was no proper gate on the south wall.[2]
- The public entrances were the North Gate and the East Gate.
- The building in the southeast corner of the compound belonged to the *imam* ('prayer leader').
- Other structures in the southeast area of the compound were used as storages of food supplies, accessible through a small gate on the south wall.
- Sheikh ʿAbd Allah accessed the mosque through the East Gate and also used to sit outside the palace, alongside the Outer Majlis.[3]
- The school building was established for the teacher Muhammad bin Maniʿ, who lived in the room above the North Gate.
- Sheikh ʿAbd Allah used the Little Room for receiving morning visitors.[4]
- The Inner Majlis was added in a later phase and built by ʿAbd Allah al-Mayl.
- There was an underground depository for arms beneath the Inner Majlis.
- Kitchens were on the north side of the compound, reportedly in the open area.[5]
- There were *barastis*[6] inside the palace compound.
- There was no freshwater source within the palace or in its vicinity.

1. However, the account seems to have mixed up the two brothers – in fact, Sheikh ʿAli was the older.

2. However, the author mentions below a small gate on this wall, which was presumably at the same location as the current South Gate.

3. The latter point sounds unrealistic, especially since the palace had several buildings (especially the Outer Majlis) to greet visitors.

4. This point seems implausible, especially for the building's small size and lack of protection from the heat.

5. However, since we know that the Trapezoid Structure stood at this location, it is more likely that the informant meant to reference that building.

6. The word *barasti* (or *ʿarish*) means a light-weight structure made of wood and palm fronds (see above in Chapter 9).

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Moments from the History
of Doha's Old Palace

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Nested in Modernity is the first scholarly book to investigate a single heritage site in Qatar: the palace of Sheikh ʿAbd Allah bin Jasim Al Thani in Doha. Physically embraced by the new National Museum today, this esteemed architectural complex is widely regarded as an anchoring point of national identity. Yet, no prior study has traced its history from foundation to the present day or analysed the functions of its various structures. This richly illustrated volume aims to accomplish just that, while it also features virtual 3D reconstructions of the site during its heyday, the 1920s, inviting you on a visual journey.

Péter Tamás Nagy has a D.Phil. from the University of Oxford (2021). Most of his reasearch has focused on Islamic architecture in Morocco, with his thesis investigating the site of Shālla (Rabat) and the history of analogous royal funerary monuments in the region. He is also interested in the modern discovery and reception of Islamic architecture, including how buildings have been studied, perceived, and occasionally imitated in Europe. In his current position with Qatar Museums, he investigates the architectural heritage of the country, focusing on royal palaces built in the 20th century. The present monograph is the main accomplishment of this project to date.

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