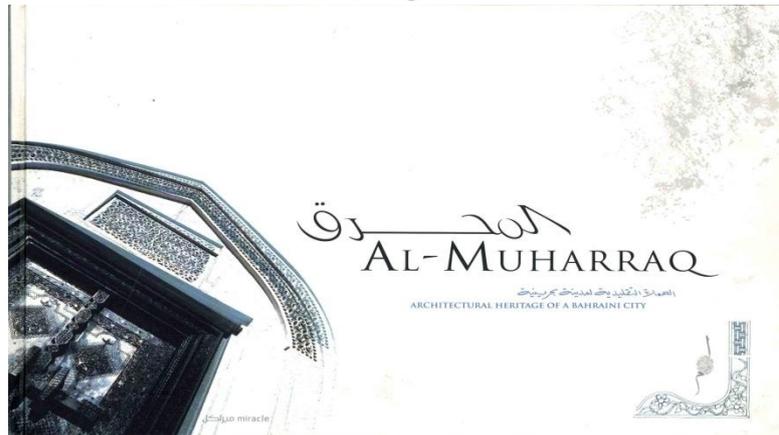


## BOOK REVIEW

### **AL MUHARRAQ: Architectural Heritage of a Bahraini city**



**Naseem Hussain**

It's rare to find a book which talks about the traditional heritage of a city and actually makes you feel everything about it, through sheer power of the words and imagery even without having to visit the place physically.

This book is about the traditional Islamic Al-Muharraq city in Bahrain. Bahrain is used to be historically also known as Dilmun and is said to have had million palm trees and prosperous lush greens and clean water. It had thus developed a human civilisation that enjoyed long life. History claims that people from far afield travelled there looking for eternity and that explains the fact that the island is house to the largest burial mounds of the world.

An island in the Gulf of Arabia, it is thus rich in its architectural heritage and the buildings show how a vernacular tradition has evolved interacting with environmental forces fashioned by the culture, religion and customs over the years. Al Muharraq is a city that had become synonymous with this rich past and the society that has lived through the centuries.

The book identifies the soul and sense of the city which it presents to the reader in such a way that it can be experienced to the fullest as it used to exist. Comprised of 8 chapters expressed in 228 pages, it is written in both English and Arabic and is illustrated extensively with a large number of beautifully hand-sketched drawings and colourful photographs. It gives the reader a complete image of the city to understand how traditions and culture have played an undeniable role in defining its character, space and form.

In 1988, Dr. Yarwood on whose research collection, the book has been written, was employed by the Muharraq Municipality and had painstakingly recorded the architecture of the city; its minute details. He was concerned that Al-Muharraq was decaying quickly and needed to be urgently rescued of whatever that survives of its architectural heritage.

Dr. Yarwood has had detailed records from 1983-1985 that sheds light over the historical impact Al-Muharraq has had on Bahrain. It has grown at a time of strong family / tribal identity which has grown into a more sophisticated society keeping its old roots together until today. The book has been edited by Dr. Souheil El Masri compiling original texts, drawings and Photos by Dr. John Yarwood. It speaks of Al Muharraq's precious sites and monuments with each tiny detail presented, starting from the urban structure and ending at the styles and materials, including examples of old houses and sites, finally discussing the overall traditional architecture of Bahrain.

The authors clearly show that Al-Muharraq has a strong unity between both the living forms and the man-made tangible objects which include monumental sites that reflects cultural symbols and meanings.

In fact, the book provides accurate accounts of 12 buildings, mostly residences, such as Bin Matter House while acknowledging that its findings come from a variety of sources and findings. These accounts prove that it is genuine and is backed up by research on indigenous architecture stretching over many years.

In discussing the urban structure and house layout, the authors begin with a general observation of the Islamic city which is to become the underlying theme of the entire book. It says: "the interior of your house is a sanctuary: those who violate it by calling you while you are still there do not keep in the respect they owe to the interpreter of heaven". This is precisely what Al Muharraq had been and this is precisely what Dr Yarwood presents through the book.

To do that, the book presents building elements and crafts such as traditional Bahraini patterns, typical parapet details, *mashrabiyyas*, stained glass fanlights, and most notable plaster panel designs, the Quran verses carved on the walls and the wind tower which is a characteristic in the architecture of the Gulf and more so in Bahrain.

The book goes into the building construction and materials to show the simplicity and complexity of combining materials such as palm frond mats, wooden beams, coral blocks and bamboo to carve out niches and openings in the walls to create uniquely Arabic style of Architecture.

It also offers a brief but meaningful introduction to the architectural styles from the earliest period in 1850 to the latest 1940s mapping out a transitional period in 1890 and a middle period in 1930s. This description gives the readers a good understanding of the major changes that took place over the century.

The most comprehensive and significant part of the book is about the detailed descriptions of 12 selected houses which today are considered to define the indigenous character of a Bahraini architecture. Starting from Sheikh Salman's house and moving through Sheikh Isa's house, Siyadi house and Bin Matter house, these twelve houses narrate the story of the origin, interpretation and transformation of Bahraini culture and its value system. This is complemented by descriptive accounts of selected features from thirty two buildings that add and reinforce the ideas that are already explored.

The book is perhaps the best in terms of documentations of these wonderful houses some of which have only recently being restored to their old glory. The craftsmanship of these houses is exquisite and so are the hand drawn sketches of Dr. John Yarwood.

Sometimes one wonders how much patience and dexterity John Yarwood has possessed to record every tiny detail of all these houses. For anyone who wants to understand the traditional Bahraini architecture, there will be nothing more comprehensive than this book.

The comprehension of the city would have been incomplete had there not been a chapter on Souqs of Muharraq which in any Islamic city makes up the social centre. The drawing reconstructing the Souq with details of every sweet shop, baker, grocery, carpenter, laundry, coffee grinder, fishermen, goldsmiths and black smiths are impeccable. Although Al-Muharraq today is entirely different from this map, it helps the reader to imagine the spaces and places that would have existed in the city and wonder around in its narrow streets and alleyways.

Its final chapter on architectural heritage: past, present and future concludes what Yarwood wanted when he painstakingly sketched and recorded the nuances, "The architectural heritage of Muharraq echoes the spirit of Bahraini culture and acts as a living memory of the society".

The book culminates the narrative with a wonderful collection of hand painted images of the most potent houses of Muharraq, which themselves are a pleasure to cherish, celebrating their architectural splendour. Indeed, the authors have done an excellent job in presenting the history and traditions of Muharraq's indigenous architecture and save them as a precious memory for others.

Published by the Miracle Graphics, the book has been printed at the highest standards on quality paper adding a unique quality to its production.

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Naseem Hussain is a student of Architecture at the University of Bahrain. She can be contacted at naseem\_bhr91@hotmail.com

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