

The Influence of Islamic Architectural Elements on Traditional and Contemporary Buildings in Bahrain

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Abstract

Despite globalization and the moves towards western modernity, Islamic architecture that is prevalent in the Middle East, continue to influence the contemporary architecture as same as it did in the past. It is certainly so in Bahrain. In this context, this research investigates the influence of Islamic architectural elements on both traditional and contemporary buildings in Bahrain. The central issue explored is how these elements—such as courtyards, domes, mashrabiya, and calligraphy—contribute to cultural identity, environmental responsiveness, and social functions in the built environment of Bahrain. The study particularly examines how these elements are preserved, adapted, or reinterpreted in modern architecture amid the pressures of globalization and urban developments.

To examine these, a mixed-methods approach was adopted. This included qualitative interviews with architects, urban planners, and community members, and detailed case studies such as Beit Al Quran, and structured site observations. Interviews offered insights into the design intentions and cultural significance behind architectural choices, while observations focused on user engagement, spatial experience, and community interactions. The case study analysis provided tangible evidence on how Islamic design principles are expressed in the forms, functions, and symbolism in both the historical and modern contexts.

The findings reveal that Islamic architectural elements remain highly relevant in Bahrain today, serving not only aesthetic purposes but also reinforcing community values and environmental adaptation. Traditional features are creatively integrated into modern buildings, maintaining cultural continuity while addressing thw contemporary needs. It is thus concluded that Islamic architecture in Bahrain is a living tradition—evolving with time but is deeply rooted in identity. Furthermore, it highlights a gap in existing research regarding the user experience and the design process in modern Islamic architecture, suggesting the need for further explorations in these areas.

Keywords: Traditional, Islamic Architecture, Courtyard, Mashrabiya, Bahrain

Introduction

The built environment of Bahrain presents a rich architectural dialogue between tradition and modernity, shaped profoundly by the influence of Islamic design. From historical structures like traditional houses and mosques to contemporary developments, Islamic architectural elements—such as geometric patterns, courtyards, domes, mashrabiya, and calligraphy—continue to define the aesthetic and cultural identity of the country. In fact, these features are not merely decorative; they carry symbolic, spiritual, and functional meanings, embedded in principles of unity, privacy, and environmental responsiveness. As Bahrain continues to urbanize and embrace global architectural trends, questions arise about how these traditional Islamic features are preserved, adapted, or reinterpreted in modern architecture.

This issue is particularly important in the context of globalization and rapid urban developments, as a result of which architectural identity is often at risk of being diluted. Understanding how Islamic elements are retained or transformed helps in preserving cultural continuity and informing sustainable and context-sensitive design approaches in Bahrain. Moreover, while much research has focused on the historical and aesthetic aspects of Islamic architecture, there is a noticeable gap in examining how these elements are experienced by people today emotionally, socially, and functionally especially in contemporary buildings.

In this context, this study aims to investigate the ongoing influence of Islamic architectural elements on both traditional and contemporary buildings in Bahrain. The objectives are:

- (1) To identify and document key Islamic design features found in Bahraini architecture;
- (2) To identify how these elements function within the modern contexts;
- (3) To unearth user experiences and social interactions in these spaces; and
- (4) To provide recommendations for future architectural practices that should honour cultural heritage while addressing the current needs.

Theoretical Background

This research is grounded in several key theoretical ideas that help explain the relationship between Islamic architecture, cultural identity, and the evolution of the built environment of Bahrain. At the core is the idea that architecture reflects cultural values and environmental adaptation. Rapoport (1969) argues that built forms are not just physical structures, but expressions of the social, religious, and environmental contexts from which they emerge. In Bahrain, this is evident in how traditional Islamic features—such as courtyards, domes, and mashrabiya—have been integrated into houses and public buildings to accommodate local climate and social customs.

Oliver (1987) expands on this by emphasizing the importance of vernacular architecture, which relies on local materials, climate-responsive design, and cultural traditions. Traditional Bahraini buildings exemplify this through their use of coral stone, wind towers, and shaded courtyards—elements deeply rooted in Islamic design principles. These features are not only functional but also support the Islamic emphasis on privacy, inward orientation, and harmony with nature.

Phenomenology, particularly the work of Norberg-Schulz (1980), provides another useful lens, focusing on how people experience space through light, texture, and movement. In Islamic architecture, these sensory qualities are central: filtered light through mashrabiya screens, rhythmic geometry, and the spatial hierarchy of sacred and private areas contribute to a powerful emotional experience that fosters a sense of belonging and spirituality.

Finally, postmodernism and critical regionalism—articulated by scholars like Jencks (1977) and Frampton (1983) highlight how modern architecture can draw from historical and cultural references without mimicking the past. In Bahrain, this is seen in the way contemporary buildings incorporate Islamic motifs in abstract or symbolic forms, creating a dialogue between tradition and innovation.

Together, these theoretical perspectives contribute to a comprehensive foundation for understanding how Islamic architectural elements continue to shape both the aesthetic and cultural identity of the traditional and modern spaces of Bahrain.

Review of Literature

Research into the influence of Islamic architecture in Bahrain has highlighted both its historical importance and evolving relevance in the modern era. Many scholars have examined a variety of themes, including traditional design principles (????), cultural identity (????), user experience (????), and the challenge of integrating Islamic motifs into contemporary forms (????).

For example, Al-Haddad (2015) provides a detailed study on the architectural features of traditional Bahraini mosques, emphasizing how they reflect both functional and spiritual values. His analysis identifies recurring Islamic elements such as domes, arches, and geometric decoration as symbols of religious devotion and cultural expression. He notes that “the mosque’s form goes beyond aesthetics—it reflects a lifestyle rooted in faith”. He emphasizes the social function of mosque spaces, particularly their role in community bonding and spiritual life.

Mahdi (2017) on the other hand, explores the defensive and cultural aspects of Bahraini forts, linking them to Islamic architectural traditions in the region. He identifies features like thick walls, inward-focused layouts, and the use of locally sourced materials as being influenced by Islamic architectural values of privacy, climate adaptability, and regional identity. While he focuses more on historical and military architecture, he also supports the broader idea that Islamic design principles are inherently functional and culturally grounded.

In terms of theoretical framing, Rapoport (1969) argues that architecture reflects the values and lifestyles, of a society, as well as the climate of the region: a point echoed by many scholars examining Islamic architecture. In fact, his concept of the “cultural shell” is often used to explain the persistence of traditional elements in regions like Bahrain, where Islamic motifs are deeply embedded in social and religious norms. Adding to these, Oliver (1987) builds on this perspective by emphasizing vernacular architecture—structures that arise naturally from the needs and conditions of a community. He shows that traditional buildings in the Gulf often reflect Islamic planning principles, particularly inward-facing courtyards, passive cooling systems, and community-oriented spaces.

Recent studies also address how contemporary Bahraini architecture navigates the tensions between traditions and globalization. In this regard, Abdulrahman (2019) argues that modern buildings in Bahrain often adopt global aesthetics without losing the touch with their Islamic roots. He observes that “even in glass-and-steel skyscrapers, one may find pointed arches or Quranic calligraphy abstracted into the design” (Abdulrahman, 2019:23). This blending of motifs, he notes, reflects an intentional strategy by architects to remain connected to cultural identity while engaging with international design languages.

However, the question of user experience is less explored although it has begun to emerge in recent literature. In this regard, Al-Khalifa (2020) investigates how the residents perceive modern Islamic-inspired housing in Bahrain. She finds that while many appreciate the visual and symbolic references to tradition, others feel these features are often superficial and lack the emotional depth of traditional homes. Her interviews suggest that elements like courtyards and screened windows (*mashrabiya*) are valued not only for aesthetic reasons but for the sense of privacy, security, and cultural familiarity they provide.

From a theoretical standpoint, Norberg-Schulz’s (1980) work on phenomenology is particularly relevant. He emphasizes how people experience architecture through sensory and emotional connections. Although his work is not Bahrain-specific, it has influenced later studies (????) that examine how Islamic architectural elements—such as light filtering through latticework or the acoustics of a domed prayer hall—create atmospheres that evoke spiritual and cultural resonance.

Postmodernism also offers a lens for interpreting the contemporary architecture Bahrain’s. In this regard, Jencks (1977) introduces the concept of hybridity and the mixing of

historical references with modern forms. His theory is evident in the analysis by Al-Khalifa (2020), who notes that some Bahraini architects consciously use Islamic motifs to “anchor” modern buildings in a recognizable cultural narrative. This narrative function, according to Jencks, is central to postmodern design.

Moreover, King (2004) discusses how globalization affects architectural identity. He warns that without thoughtful adaptations, local styles risk being overwhelmed by generic international trends. His critique is particularly relevant in the Gulf context, where rapid developments often lead to imported designs. However, he also acknowledges the potential for creative reinterpretation, arguing that “architecture can remain rooted while being open to the world”.

Finally, Fathy (1986) provides insights into sustainable Islamic design. His pioneering work on passive cooling and environmentally responsive architecture underscores the intelligence behind traditional forms. Elements such as wind towers, shaded courtyards, and natural ventilation systems are not only environmentally sound but also deeply tied to Islamic and regional heritage. Recent research in Bahrain (e.g., Abdulrahman, 2019) suggests a growing interest in reviving these traditional strategies within contemporary design, especially as sustainability becomes a global priority.

In summary, the literature offers a well-rounded understanding of the enduring and evolving influence of Islamic architectural elements in Bahrain. While much research focuses on historical significance and visual motifs, newer studies are beginning to explore how these elements function in modern buildings and are perceived by users. However, there remains a gap in empirical research on how Islamic elements are experienced socially and spatially in contemporary settings, a gap that this study aims to address.

Research Methodology

This research employs a multitude of research techniques and methods to gather data. These include qualitative interviews with architects, urban planners, and community members, and detailed case studies such as Beit Al Quran involving structured site observations.

Qualitative Interviews

The primary method of data collection was qualitative interviews conducted with a range of participants, including architects, urban planners, and community members. These interviews aimed to capture different perspectives on how Islamic elements are integrated into the built environment of Bahrain today.

For the interviews, a semi-structured interview format was used. This method provides a balance between consistency across different interviews with standard answers and the flexibility to allow the participants to elaborate on the topics they found important. To begin with however, a set of open-ended guiding questions were posed at the beginning. These questions included the following.

- How do you see the influence of Islamic architectural elements in buildings around Bahrain?
- In your opinion, which elements are most important or most symbolic?
- How do people respond to traditional design features in the modern buildings?
- What challenges do architects face when trying to blend traditional and modern designs?

Respondents were encouraged to speak freely and share their personal experiences or professional insights. In fact, this conversational format allowed for richer, more detailed responses and helped uncover themes that may not have emerged in a more rigid interview setting.

All the interviews were conducted in person or via video calls. With consent, interviews were audio recorded for accuracy. In cases where recording was not permitted, detailed notes

were taken by hand during the conversation. After each session, interviews were transcribed for analysis.

Case Studies

In addition to the interviews, case studies were conducted on selected buildings that exemplify the integration of Islamic architectural elements in both traditional and modern contexts. Buildings such as Beit Al Quran, the Al-Khamis Mosque, and selected contemporary public buildings were analyzed.

Site visits were carried out to document physical features, observe user behavior, and understand spatial layouts. Particular attention was paid to Islamic design elements such as domes, arches, courtyards, geometric patterns, mashrabiyas, and calligraphy.

Case study 01: Beit Al Quran

Case study 02: Al-Khamis Mosque

Case study 03: Contemporary public building

Observation and Visual Data

Structured observations were also a critical component of this research. They were conducted during different times of the day, particularly during prayer times, to assess how people interact with the architectural spaces. Key aspects observed included:

- Patterns of movement and gathering
- Social interactions in courtyards and prayer halls
- Use of shaded areas and seating
- Emotional and spiritual responses to spaces

Photographs were taken at each site to visually capture architectural details, spatial arrangements, and moments of interaction. These visual data supported the analysis of how Islamic elements shape user experience and spatial behavior.

Findings

Qualitative Interviews

A total of 15 participants were interviewed, including 5 architects, 3 urban planners, and 7 community members. Semi-structured interviews allowed respondents to speak freely while also addressing consistent themes across all the responses. Interviews were either audio-recorded or documented via detailed handwritten notes when recording was not possible. The goal was to gather personal insights into how Islamic architectural elements are perceived, valued, and incorporated in Bahraini architecture today.

Architects' Perspectives

It was revealed that from an urban planning standpoint, Islamic architectural elements play a significant role in shaping not just individual buildings, but also the broader spatial character of the neighborhoods. In the older districts of Bahrain such as Muharraq, the layout of houses, narrow alleys, and communal courtyards reflect Islamic principles of privacy, community interactions, and climate adaptation. In newer developments, echoes of these ideas-like centralized mosques, shaded walkways, and public spaces that foster a sense of belonging are seen. There's a growing trend toward sustainable urbanism, and Islamic architectural traditions offer a rich source of passive design strategies that align well with that goal.

Perspectives of the Urban Planners

“From an urban planning standpoint, Islamic architectural elements play a significant role in shaping not just individual buildings, but also the broader spatial character of neighborhoods.

In Bahrain's older districts like Muharraq, the layout of homes, narrow alleys, and communal courtyards reflect Islamic principles of privacy, community interaction, and climate adaptation. In newer developments, we still see echoes of these ideas-like centralized mosques, shaded walkways, and public spaces that foster a sense of belonging. There's a growing trend toward sustainable urbanism, and Islamic architectural traditions offer a rich source of passive design strategies that align well with that goal."

Perspectives of the Community Members

One of the community members said that

"Yes, I definitely see the Islamic influence-it's part of our everyday life. You feel it in the way old houses are built to protect family privacy, or how mosques are central to every neighborhood. Even in new buildings, you often see patterns or arches that remind us of our culture. I like that some modern buildings try to keep that feeling alive, even if they use different materials or styles. It makes the city feel connected to its roots, not just like anywhere else in the world. I think it's important we keep that balance-modern life, but with our own identity still strong."

CM01: Interview on ????

Case Study: Beit Al Quran Architectural Overview

Beit Al Quran, located in Manama, served as a major case study due to its exemplary integration of traditional Islamic elements into a contemporary institutional building. Designed by PACE Architectural Engineering in Kuwait and completed in 1990, it incorporates domes, mashrabiya, calligraphy, courtyards, and geometric ornamentation across all its spaces.

Use of Space

The observations reveal that spatial organization within Beit Al Quran reflects a deeply Islamic spatial philosophy. There, the central courtyard acts as a unifying core, linking the prayer spaces, the galleries, and the library. In fact, it features the following.

- An octagonal fountain, symbolizing spiritual cleansing.
- Mashrabiya on all sides, combining visual rhythm with privacy and shade.
- A domed roof with skylights, enhancing natural light and spiritual ambiance.

Moreover, each circulation route—from the reception to the exhibition halls—was observed. It was observed that they follow a processional logic, which evokes traditional Islamic emphasis on layered experience and gradual revelation of space.

Experience of the Mosque and Prayer

The mosque at Beit Al Quran is sunken, creating a quiet transitional space. This symbolic descent into the prayer area enhances spiritual focus. A large stained-glass dome and a finely crafted mihrab with blue ceramic tiles define the space. Muqarnas decoration beneath the dome and Quranic inscriptions offer a powerful sensory and religious atmosphere.

During observation at prayer time, the building became a lively, communal space, with users gathering in the courtyard, greeting one another, and sharing conversations before and after prayer. This reinforces the building's dual role as a religious and social hub.

Educational and Exhibition Areas

It was noted that the exhibition spaces, featuring ten gallery halls connected by smooth ramps, have been designed to foster a narrative flow. Artifacts are housed in settings that mirror traditional Bahraini interiors, including coffered wooden ceilings, calligraphy panels, and

mosaic work. Visitors were observed pausing and reflecting in areas with strong symbolic detailing, particularly near verses of the Quran or traditional patterns.

The library and madrassa extend the cultural and educational functions of the Building with double-height reading halls, skylights, and wooden lattice ceilings which maintain a spiritual and culturally grounded ambiance, reflecting critical regionalism.

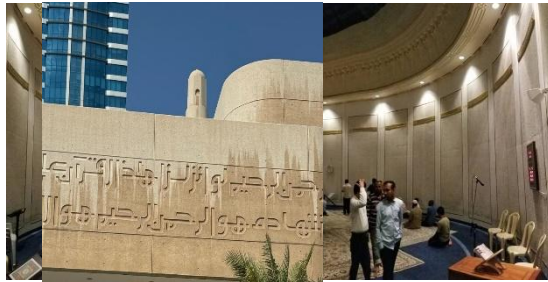
Visual and Environmental Design

Throughout the building, attention to natural lighting and material authenticity stood out. From stained glass skylights to carved wooden mashrabiya, each design decision seemed to reference Islamic aesthetics while supporting the modern functions.

Images were captured across key zones—courtyard, mosque, library, and gallery—documenting the architectural features and user interactions. Maps and floor plans from archival records and onsite interpretation helped further analyze the spatial composition and flow of users.

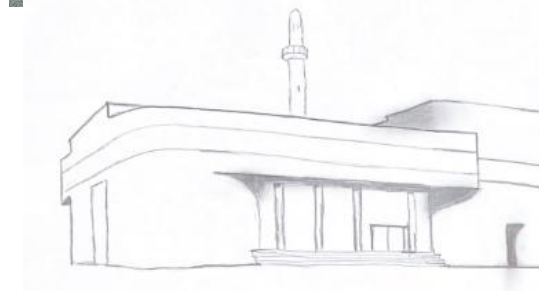
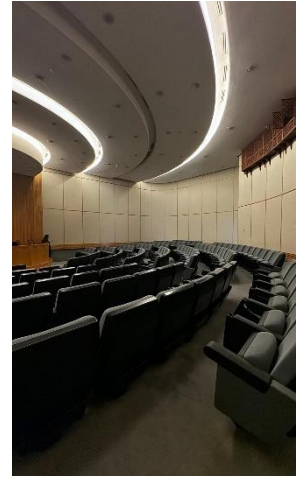
Summary of Collected Data

- **Interviews:** 15 in total (5 architects, 3 urban planners, 7 community members), mostly recorded and transcribed.
- **Visual Data:** Over 50 photographs of key architectural features and user behavior at Beit Al Quran.
- **Observations:** Conducted over 3 visits during different times (including prayer), noting use of space and social interaction.



Analysis and Discussion

By organizing the data into common themes and identifying repeated



patterns in responses and behavior, the findings became more meaningful

and allowed for a deeper understanding of the influence of Islamic architectural elements on traditional and contemporary buildings of Bahrain.

Understanding Interview Responses

Fifteen participants were interviewed, including five architects, three urban planners, and seven community members. The interviews were semi-structured, and most were audio-recorded and later transcribed, while a few were documented through detailed handwritten notes.

In the analysis, the responses were grouped into four main themes:

1. **Cultural Identity:** Most respondents agreed that Islamic architecture plays a vital role in maintaining cultural identity of Bahrain. Architects described how features such as domes, courtyards, and mashrabiyas represent continuity and tradition. Community members echoed this, stating that these features remind them of their heritage and family values.
2. **Functionality and Comfort:** Traditional elements like thick walls, wind towers, and mashrabiyas were still seen as practical solutions to the hot climate and the need for privacy. Urban planners appreciated how these features supported sustainable and comfortable designs, while the residents felt that they improved daily life by maintaining privacy and reducing heat.
3. **Spiritual and Emotional Impact:** Respondents across all the groups agreed that Islamic elements such as calligraphy, arches, and domes created a sense of peace and spirituality. Several community members said that entering spaces with these features made them feel more connected to their faith and history.
4. **Modern Adaptation** – While all the groups appreciated traditional architecture, many also supported adapting these elements to modern forms. For example, the architects spoke about abstracting patterns or modifying features for new materials. However, some community members warned against using Islamic motifs only for decoration without real cultural meaning.

In fact, these themes were consistent across interviews and provided a strong foundation for interpreting the other data collected.

Interpreting Observations at Beit Al Quran

Observational visits to Beit Al Quran focused on how people used and interacted with the architectural spaces, particularly during the prayer times and the public visits. Several patterns of behavior were noted as follows.

- During the prayer time, the mosque became the most active space. Worshippers moved together in unity, forming rows in silence, and engaging in collective prayer. Afterward, they lingered in the courtyard to greet each other and exchange small talk, reflecting the social role of this space.
- The courtyard served as a natural gathering space. Visitors paused here before entering the other areas, used it as a resting point, or interacted quietly with their friends and families. The presence of the fountain and the symmetrical design seemed to encourage calm and respectful interactions.
- In the library and the exhibition areas, visitors were quiet and reflective. They moved slowly, reading the information and examining the artifacts. These areas supported

individual engagement, showing how the space designs could influence the type of interactions.

Overall, spaces with strong Islamic design features—such as the domed mosque, patterned courtyard, and calligraphic walls—appeared to encourage spiritual, calm, and communal behaviors.

Analyzing Visual and Spatial Elements

Visual documentation during the site visits included detailed photographs of the architectural features and the user behavior. These images were useful not only for confirming observations but also helped in analysing which Islamic features were most prominent and how they were interpreted in the modern context.

For example, mashrabiya were found on all the sides of the courtyard. While they were traditionally used for ventilation and privacy, at Beit Al Quran, some were sealed with glass for modern climate control. This demonstrated how a traditional feature was adapted for contemporary use while maintaining its aesthetic and symbolic value.

Domes have also been widely used. For example, the large stained-glass dome above the mosque provided natural light and created a spiritual focus. It was paired with Quranic calligraphy and muqarnas details, connecting the structure with the sacred meanings. In the exhibition space, coffered wooden ceilings reflected the traditional Bahraini houses, while geometric patterns on the floors and walls added a sense of rhythm and unity.

In fact, these features were not only decorative but seemed to influence how people behaved in those spaces. Visitors were observed slowing down, taking photos, or spending time admiring details in spaces where Islamic elements were visually strong. This suggests that architecture played a role in guiding user experience and emotional response.

Patterns and Insights

Combining the interviews and observational data revealed several important patterns:

- **Islamic architectural elements still play an active role in Bahraini life.** They are not just historical or aesthetic, but carry social, spiritual, and environmental values.
- **There is a strong cultural attachment** to features like courtyards, mashrabiya, domes, and Quranic calligraphy. These are recognized by the professionals as well as the public as part of the identity of Bahrain.
- **Modern architecture is reinterpreting traditions**, sometimes successfully, but occasionally in ways that feel disconnected. While abstraction and innovation are valued, users want authenticity and meaning behind the design choices.
- **Architecture influences behavior and emotions.** In spaces like Beit Al Quran, Islamic elements encouraged silence, reverence, social warmth, and reflective movements. The physical layout, ornamentation, and spatial hierarchy guided the users towards certain behaviors and interactions.
- **Different spaces support different types of interaction.** For example, the mosque promoted unity and synchronized behavior; the courtyard enabled light conversations and community bonding; the exhibition encouraged individual learning and appreciation.

It was thus clear that these patterns show how Islamic architecture continues to shape daily life in Bahrain, not just as a style, but as a living part of the built environment.

Conclusions

The data generated in this research reveal that Islamic architectural elements in Bahrain are far more than symbolic references. They are central to how people experience space, maintain cultural identity, and engage with their environment. By analyzing interview responses, site observations, and visual features, the research shows a clear pattern: tradition and modernity are not in conflict, but can coexist through thoughtful design. When Islamic elements are used with respect and understanding, they help buildings become more than

structures—they become meaningful places where people feel connected, comfortable, and at home.

In fact, this research clearly demonstrates that Islamic architectural elements significantly influence both traditional and contemporary architecture in Bahrain. These elements—such as courtyards, domes, mashrabiya, geometric patterns, and Quranic calligraphy—are not merely decorative but serve functional, cultural, and environmental purposes. In traditional buildings, they reflect values of privacy, community, and climate adaptation. In modern architecture, these same elements are reinterpreted using new materials and technologies, maintaining cultural identity while addressing the current needs.

Undeniably, the theoretical perspectives support this understanding. Rapoport's cultural theory, Norberg-Schulz's phenomenology, and Jencks' postmodernism all affirm that architecture reflects deeper cultural meanings and user experiences. In Bahrain, these theories are visible in the blending of old and the new, as architects combine Islamic aesthetics with modern functionality, creating spaces that feel both authentic and contemporary.

Indeed, the Beit Al Quran case study serves as strong evidence of this integration. It combines Islamic architectural features with modern spatial design to create a cultural and spiritual landmark. Elements like the central dome, courtyard, and mashrabiya are used not only to evoke traditions but to shape how people experience and interact within the spaces. Observations during the prayer times confirm that the architecture actively supports social and religious functions, reinforcing the role of the building as a community hub.

Interviews with professionals and community members further validate these findings. Architects and planners highlight how traditional Islamic elements guide modern design decisions, while residents express a strong emotional connection to spaces that reflect their heritage. This shows that Islamic architecture in Bahrain is not static—it evolves with the times while retaining its core values.

Despite these findings, this research has its own weaknesses. While it ascertains and establishes the relevance of and the influence of Islamic architectural elements on traditional and contemporary buildings in Bahrain, this study examined only one case study. As is known, case study findings cannot be generalized. This means that more research is needed to establish this without any doubts and conclusively.

Moreover, there are still gaps in current research. As shown, most previous studies focus on historical buildings, with limited analysis of how Islamic principles are adapted in modern urban and sustainable design. Therefore, more attention is needed on user experiences, design processes, and the challenges architects face in balancing the traditions with globalization.

In conclusion, it can be said that Islamic architecture remains a living and evolving force in built environment of Bahrain. In fact, it continues to shape how people live, interact, and express identity—bridging the past and the present in meaningful and functional ways. This integration ensures that contemporary architecture of Bahrain remains both rooted in traditions and open to change in the future.

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