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Documenting the traditional architecture of Khatbah village in Saudi Arabia (poster)

AISHA ALSHEHRI

Summary

Saudi Arabia is known for its diversity of culture, environment, and architecture. Khatbah village is situated in a valley, in the mountainous south-western province of ʿAsīr. Accordingly, this environment determines the building materials, which are stone and local wood. This research paper focuses on building features and materials that reflect the environmental, social, religious, and security factors. These factors, however, are different from one region to another within ʿAsīr because of the changes in climatic conditions as well as the topography. The purpose of this poster is to document the traditional architecture of Khatbah village, including the main architectural features and materials used. Such research hopes to raise awareness and excite the interest of locals in the importance of maintaining their heritage and culture, especially as there is no previous documentation of Khatbah's architecture.

Keywords: Khatbah village, traditional architecture, architectural features, building materials, historic buildings documentation

Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is particularly significant because of its strategic location. It is situated in south-west Asia. Saudi Arabia is divided into five provinces: west, east, north, south, and central. Furthermore, it is important in the Islamic world because of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

This paper will focus on the ʿAsīr region which is located in the southern province. It has the highest summit in Saudi Arabia, Jabal Sawdā'. As for the climate, the region is considered as one of the rainiest in Saudi Arabia. Because of the changes in climatic conditions as well as the hills between the Sarawāt Mountains and Tihāmah plain, however, the architectural features and building materials reflect the environmental, social, religious, and security factors of the design, which vary from one region to another (Abdulwahab et al. 2010).

Khatbah village is a valley located in the south-west of Saudi Arabia (Fig. 1). It is surrounded by the Rimān Mountains, part of the Sarawāt mountains range. The village is scattered over the hills while the farms extend into the valley. Accordingly, this environment determines the building materials, which are stone and wood from the local trees. Khatbah village has many traditional buildings that follow the typical style of the region. The houses have small windows and doors to respect privacy



FIGURE 1. A map showing the location of Khatbah village (©Google maps).

and keep out the heat. In addition, most of the rooms are small because most activities occur outdoors.

I was fortunate to interview one of the locals, Khidr ʿĀyid, who grew up in a neighbouring village with the same traditional houses. He told me various stories about Khatbah village and its valley that was sometimes used as a battlefield to defend the village from attackers in the old days. I asked him about the lifestyle of the people there:

‘The community lifestyle was one that was open and unrestricted, people were united and often collaborated in everything especially in building their houses. Their meeting places were not segregated and were used by both males and females. However, the situation changed in modern times and a strict religious doctrine affected the society and the building design.’

I met Bālgāsim ‘Alī, who also used to live in one of these traditional houses, and asked him about the main components of these houses and their function:

‘Each house had two main sections; *sifil* (on the ground floor) and *ulu* (on the upper floor) are the main interior sections which included bedrooms, a living room, a storage room, a kitchen (*bayt al-nār*), and a *marāḥ*, which was a room for animals, whereas the main exterior sections were the *saqīfah*, which was used as a balcony, and an area (*jrīn*) to dry the grain. Not all the families had a *marāḥ*, a room for the animals, because it depended on the wealth of the family. Also, the size of the houses did not depend on the number of family members.’

He continued by explaining the traditional ways of building:

‘We brought the stone all the way from the mountain or the valley on donkeys, the wood came from a

local tree called *sidr* (*Ziziphus spina-christi*), and we also used mud. Building houses was based on the collaboration of the village members under the supervision of senior builders of the village. But there are no traditional builders today.’

I asked him about the public buildings available at the time, he replied: ‘there was a mosque, also used as a school, a *sūq* which was most important, and cemeteries. We took care of ourselves at home when we got sick.’

Architectural analysis

Bayt Āl Mihrās is a preserved traditional building located in Khatbah village. The house was designed for an extended family and was later transferred to one of the owner’s sons. It consisted of seven rooms while the roof was used as a sitting area, meaning that it followed the traditional southern style of the ‘Asīr region. On the ground floor, called *sifil*, there were rooms consisting of a *marāḥ* with a *marbat* outside the room to hold the animals, a *jrīn* to store grain, two pantry rooms, and a kitchen (*bayt al-nār*) at the back with another storage room. On the upper floor there were two living rooms, also used as bedrooms at night with doors that opened onto the roof of the ground floor, which is called *saqīfah*. The design of the house with its all divisions therefore followed the typical design of the area. The exterior of



FIGURE 2. The exterior of Bayt Āl Mihrās (photograph Aisha Alshehri).

the house also followed the typical design of plain walls with some decorations around the windows. The walls are constructed in local stone while the windows were made of wood brought from local trees (Fig. 2).

This house is a good example of the traditional houses of the southern region. Unfortunately, the owner of the house abandoned it in the 1970s because of the lack of services in the village, a story that was repeated in many other villages.

Bayt Āl Bin Raḥmah is another example of a traditional house in Khatbah village. This house was not built by the last owner, who came from outside the village and bought it. The house, unlike Bayt Āl Mihrās, was built for a medium-sized family and consisted of only five rooms. It also had a *sifil* on the ground floor, which had a kitchen with two storage spaces. On the upper floor there were two rooms used as living rooms and bedrooms, with a *saqīfah* used as a sitting area. The interior was plain, but the windows had simple decorations (Fig. 3). The doors and windows of this house were small and rectangular for privacy and to keep out the heat. The exterior was also plain and unplastered and made of stone as well as local wood, following the typical style. The owners left the house in the 1960s.

Bayt Āl Bin ʿAlī, located in Khatbah village, followed the typical style. This was the smallest house, built for two family members. It consisted of three small rooms connected to each other on one level, comprising the kitchen (*bayt al-nār*), also used as a storage room, a living room used as a bedroom at night, and a *marāḥ* for animals. The house also had *jrīn*, which was a space on the ground floor in front of the kitchen where the grain was dried (Fig. 4). The exterior is simple and unplastered, as is the interior. Only a small part at the animal's room was restored. The house has very small doors and windows for privacy and to keep out the heat. The building materials are typical, consisting of stone, wooden supportive columns in the interior, and beams from local *sidr* wood. The family left the house in 2000.

Bayt Āl Bin Qilhās consists of six rooms, a *bayt al-nār*, two storage rooms, and a *marāḥ* for animals on the ground floor with a *marbaʿ* to hold the animals (Fig. 5). On the first floor, there were two living rooms used as bedrooms at night with a *saqīfah* — the roof of the ground floor used as a sitting area. The exterior of the house follows the traditional style of the village, plain without any plaster on the walls, which are made of local stone. It has small, rectangular windows and doors with geometric decorations made of the local *sidr* wood. The interior is the same as the exterior, the walls lack plastering and the roof is covered with local tree branches.



FIGURE 3. A decorated window in Bayt Āl Bin Raḥmah (photograph Aisha Alshehri).

Conclusion

Traditional building materials were stones, used for construction, and *sidr* wood, also used in supporting columns and for the structure of the roof. These materials reflected the mountainous surroundings of Khatbah village. Plain walls in both the interior and exterior were typical, although in recent times some of the owners had plastered their buildings.

There are common components in the interior of the houses in Khatbah. *Sifil*, the lower level, *bayt al-nār* or kitchen, and *jrīn* where grains were dried, were the main lower-floor components of most houses. The *saqīfah* flat roof, living room, and bedrooms were the upper-floor components.

Lack of services forced the locals to leave their village and move to the cities. Unfortunately, these traditional



FIGURE 4. The jirān of Āl Bin ʿĀlī House (photograph Aisha Alshehri).

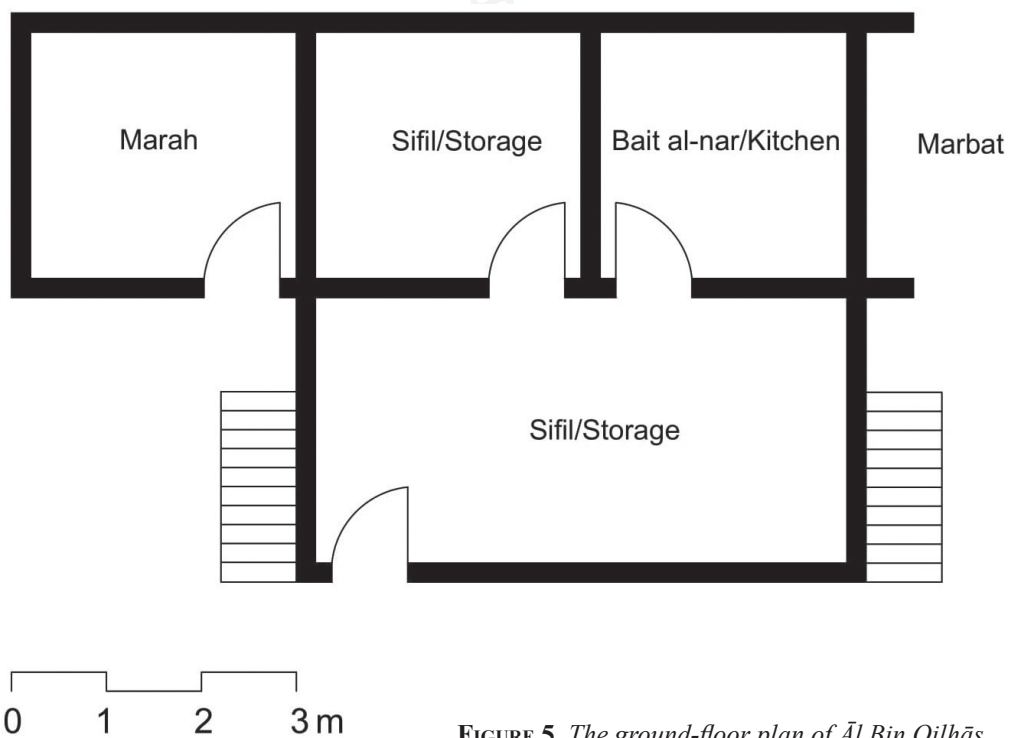


FIGURE 5. The ground-floor plan of Āl Bin Qilhās house (drawn by Aisha Alshehri).

buildings were abandoned and left unmaintained. Documenting these buildings before they are lost forever is essential as their future remains uncertain.

I would like to thank her for her support and kind assistance.

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