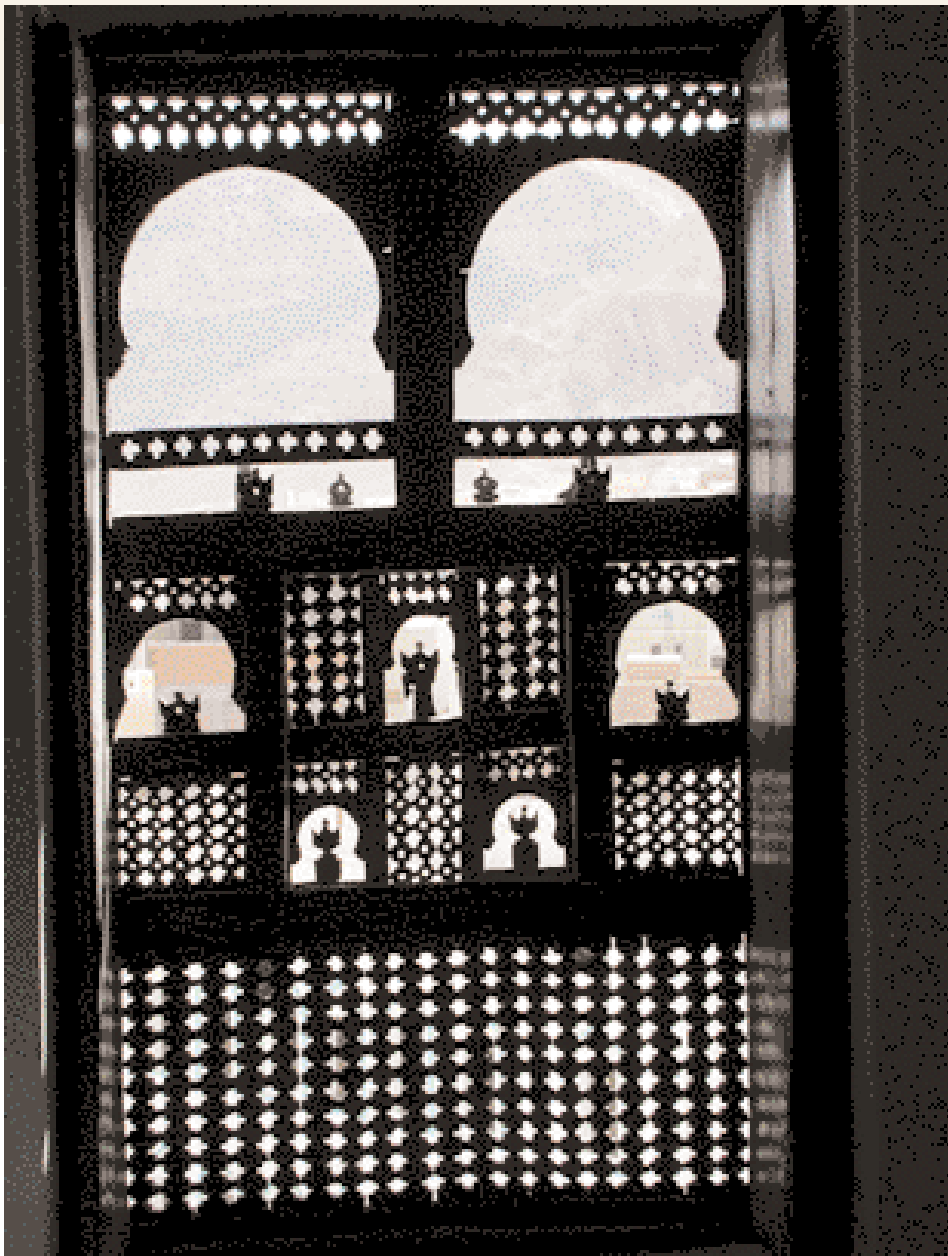


# Shibam

## Yemeni History and National Beauty

> Hadramaout -  
Khalid Al Dhababi

Since childhood, I heard many stories and accounts about the town of Shibam Hadramaout, its ancient history and bewitching beauty. I was always dreaming about visiting the town and getting to know it at first hand.



Arabesque

أرابيسك

**B**efore my visit I had many questions about this city and its ancient history. It is one of the rare cities which attracted the interest of UNESCO and was declared a World Heritage Site. Arab tourists called it "the oldest skyscraper in the world". This nickname is not exaggerated. Indeed, the city was built several centuries before the construction of New York by the Americans. Modern skyscrapers, in the four corners of the world, are built using cement and iron; Shibam takes pride in the fact that its skyscrapers were built from pure clay and have always resisted the erosion of time.

It appears as a powerful genie which emerged suddenly from the desert of Hadramaout, captivating all who visited it, forcing them to sing its praises. The German Leo Hersh was the first European to visit in 1893. The English Orientalist, Dr. Sargent, also visited when London University sent him to study the popular poetry of Hadramaout in 1947. Other Europeans also witnessed the wonders of Shibam.

We had to climb a small hill to appreciate a panoramic view of the city at twilight. Whereas my friends were busy taking photographs and joking, I retreated to a corner, reflective of the location of the city in the middle of the valley of Hadramaout. It was called the Al Ahqaf Valley, neighbouring the old settlement of Aad, mentioned in the Koran ("And remembers the brother of Aad (Hud) when he warned his people in Al-Ahqaf", (Sura Al Ahqaf/ 21). ▶



General view

منظر عام



A night view

منظر ليلي

The location clearly illustrates that the founders were perfectly aware of the importance of the area. It was the capital of the valley and the meeting place of the caravans bringing the richness of the time: incense, etc from the east, Dhofar and the old port of Hadramaout, where the products of India and China were transported, towards the cities of Shibam and Shabowa, capital of the kingdom of

Hadramaout, and Maareb, capital of the Sabaens, then on to Egypt or Sham. With the advent of Islam, the inhabitants of Shibam played a major role and contributed in a distinguished way to the Islamic conquests: the city had the badge of honour to accommodate the companion of the Prophet, Zayd Ben Labid Al Ansari, governor of Hadramaout, who resided there as well as in Tarim.

### Buildings in Shibam

Professor Abdullah Al-Kaf made a considerable effort to provide me with historical information and facilitate my research and visit to this historical city. Following up the history of this city in reference books, I learned that during the second decade of the 9th Century of Hegira, the architect of Hadramaout started ▶



Alleyway

زقاق



Traditional technique

مهارات موروثه



Alleyway

زقاق



Building work

عملية البناء

“ The workmen start initially by clearing the ground reserved for construction emphasising that it must be firm. They then, bring fine clay from the bed of the river and mix it with straw. ”

to think and work day and night to build a city whose area did not exceed 350,000 sq. m. The only way for him to go was up! Thus, this city was built with construction on several levels: 500 houses whose height varies between 25 and 30 m, with five or six floors. It shelters in its beautiful tangled lanes many mosques, religious schools and souks strewn in its alleyways.

How was it possible to build from clay? The locals, especially those with long experience in construction have the answer. I tried to find such a person, usually called “Al-Mua’allem” (the Master), who is in charge of construction. He told me that the workmen start initially by clearing the ground reserved for construction emphasising that it must be firm. They then, bring fine clay from the bed of the river and mix it with straw. Some of the strong men are selected to mix it with their hands and feet until it becomes flexible and put it into moulds. Bricks 40-50 cm x 20-30 cm will be made and dried in the sun. After having established the stone foundation, the building will start.

The first level is often a store for the harvest. The second is reserved for the cattle and the hen house. The third is for the men and the fourth for the women and the kitchen. The fifth is for the family and the sixth for children who have just married.

When contemplating the city from outside, one notices that most of the houses are intertwined. From a distance, they appear as a one unit, whose facades are decorated by white gypsum (annoura) which covers the frontages and sometimes even the interior reflecting a brilliant image with the rising and setting of the sun. Solid wood is used for the windows and doors, often exquisitely decorated reflecting the beauty of these dwellings.

The city is surrounded by a clay brick wall of 7-9 m, as a fortification for defense. There are two gates. At the main gate visitors cars are parked, and one can have discussions with the inhabitants especially after the afternoon prayer (Asr). The locals gather to exchange views on politics, economics, art, culture and religion. It is also a place where one can taste the stimulating tea of this ▶



Brick making

صنع لبنات البناء



An aerial view

منظر جوي

city, and shop for local goods: artisan products, fruits, vegetables and meat at very cheap prices.

While walking in the lanes of this eternal city, one is bathed in the beautiful perfume of incense, coming from numerous shops which sell various types of very high quality incense. In another zone the smell of bread which prevails, particularly at midday, is an

invitation to discover the gastronomy of Shibam and how its dishes are prepared. The beautiful smell of the bread prepared by a baker smiling and welcoming, charms the customers to sit beside him on the ground which is covered with a palm woven mat, and receive bread on a dish of woven palm and an original coffee. A simple way of life in this original architecture is

decorated with the values of modesty, thoughtfulness and generosity.

The city of Shibam Hadramaout is a unique relic of the oldest clay skyscrapers in the world, the most beautiful city of Yemen whose architecture is original and art fascinating. It should be visited by European and Arab tourists as well as people interested in the Islamic world's history and heritage. ■