

Making Souk Waqif

Doha, Qatar

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A successful formula for preservation: pure surrender to nostalgia and strict abstinence from steel and concrete.

It happened one day that I was at the Diwan Amiri listening to some architects present ideas for the new Diwan Amiri. I asked: 'why don't we see any local features in the design?' The architect gave me a sarcastic look and responded, 'Is there any architecture that belongs to this place?' Of course I didn't like his response. I began to dig and gather as much information as I could about the DNA of our culture.

But in a way, I had already started. I am a painter and an illustrator. My first job after completing my fine arts studies in the US came with a house. And of course this house was a disaster. It had seventeen balconies, and in front of each balcony there was a huge window. There were probably seven air conditioners running. The privacy was zero. The security was zero. The comfort level of the house was even worse.

So I began to design my own house using traditional means and ideas. After I built it, the house was so comfortable. I still live in this house, and my kids grew up in it.

So in a way my house brought me to the Souk Waqif project. The Emir once drove by the house with someone who knows me. He asked, 'whose house is this?' He learned that I was a painter and that I had designed my own house. The Emir said that I should come see him. When I went to visit him, it happened to be at the same time some international consultants were presenting a proposal for His Highness on how to rehabilitate Souk Waqif. His Highness didn't like the proposal. He wanted something more authentic, more local.

I was asked for a proposal. I made about three or four quick paintings. I submitted the paintings on a Wednesday. They went to His Highness. On the Saturday, his assistants came back to me and said, 'His Highness wants you to start tomorrow'. I said, 'I am not an architect. I am not an engineer. I am not a contractor. I am only an artist. How do you want me to do this?' They said, 'We will provide you with any contractor you want. And he wants you to start soon.' It was 2003.

So I took on contractors and I trained them in how to restore traditional buildings, how to know the material, how to restore it properly and to finish it. To push the results a little more, I trained the workers how to treat the plaster with an aging technique. When His Highness started to see the results, he was pleased.

The problem that we had when we started the project was that the souk properties belonged to private owners. Sometimes two people owned a shop. Sometimes one person owned a whole string of stores.

And the souk's infrastructure was obsolete. The electricity lines were limited and old – about thirty-years-old – and strung all over the place. So the government had only one choice: to own the souk as a whole. That is what happened. The government had to buy everyone out. After that it was working without any obstacles.

My research showed that about two thirds of the souk was in its original condition; made out of stone, earth, wood and gypsum. Some of it was more than two centuries old. The other third had been demolished by owners in the 70s and 80s. They just put up new block work instead. I made the choice to remove the one third which was new material and rebuilt it with the old material.

In the past, when someone wanted to build a room onto his house, he would go to the mosque. After prayers he would announce: 'My friends, my brother, my relatives. I want to build a room onto my house, and I've prepared the breakfast, the lunch, and dinner. Everybody is welcome.' The next day you will find ten or eleven men working with him. It was a collective activity, something that people did and felt happy doing. It brought them together, and they built it. The architecture was not something that I need to go to the university for, and of course the whole thing is more complicated now: the services, the infrastructure, the rules, the regulations. But building happened through cultural memory.