

## YEMENI JOURNAL FEBRUARY 2011. Simone Swan of Adobe Alliance

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My friend Salma Samar Damluji whom I had met at Hassan Fathy's Cairene house in the late 70s and have not seen since sent me an irresistible invitation to the mud brick conference she is conducting in Yemen, beginning February 28th, 2011, entitled Mud, Stone and Shale. Samar and I are newly in touch, hence the exciting invitation which I accept. She was at the time an Iraqi student at the Architecture Association of London, and had a quality of appreciation and conspiracy one does not forget. Like me, she is an admirer of the gifted architect- environmentalist-philosopher Hassan Fathy. Together we once saved his life by speeding him to surgery in Alexandria from his remote house, a veritable palazzino, on the road to Marsa Matruh. We had no car, Samar hailed and stopped a benevolent driver traveling eastward to Alexandria. She now lives in Beirut and works in Mukalla with the University of Hadramut For Science and Technology, and at the Da'wan Mud Brick Architecture Foundation, on many aspects pertaining to the precious realm of Yemen's adobe architecture: restoring, revealing, preserving.



Samar's conference themes cover 1. Architectural Rehabilitation, 2. Modern & Traditional Buildings: Innovation, Construction (my chosen category,) 3. Yemeni Vernacular Architecture at Risk: Dilapidation, Destruction & Flood Damage, 4. Future Use of Restored Residential Clusters & Heritage Landmarks, 5. Environmental Issues: Sustainable Planning Methods & Guidelines. I would have addressed the contemporary.



I mentioned this invitation to Jenny Quillien, a friend in Santa Fe, hazarding "Would you like to come?" Her response was, "In a heartbeat." She knows Sanaa. We decided that since we each have commitments as of early March -- she to teach, I to my Adobe Alliance workshop in Presidio, Texas, we would explore Yemen for two to three weeks before the five days of conference by arriving in Sanaa February 10, visiting



the Yemeni island of Soqatra off the coast of Somalia, then wending our way to Shibam, the Wadi Daw'an, joining Samar's gathering in Seyoun February 28th.

My anthropologist companion Jenny researched and booked our complicated flight reservations Albuquerque/NYC/Amman/Sanaa/ Seyoun/Dubai/Amman/NYC/Albuquerque. Before leaving the States I asked if political events in Tunisia and Egypt would pre-empt the conference but was told not.

Pamela Jerome of Columbia university greatly enriched our trip with priceless advice on hotels and people. Close, dear friends welcomed us for overnight stops in Manhattan and Amman. After a deliriously happy time in Jordan visiting my Belgian

friend Anou Borrey, senior officer in Gender Justice at the United Nation's Development Programme in Baghdad, but living more securely in Amman, also re-uniting with my beloved friend Abdallah al Kouatly of earlier New York days, we flew to Sanaa, capital city of



Yemen. Once aloft , we pooled our cash to pay hotels, taxis, reservations, restaurants. Our Sanaa hotel, Arabia Felix, was a delight, with good meals served in a shaded courtyard, and views of the old city where ancient hand-made residences of earthen material of immense beauty reach up to eight stories. As the structures rise, floor after floor, the adobes diminish in size, making them lighter and easier to handle.



We walked the souks (markets) for two days, watching flocks of women in black totally covered except the eyes. They move with an energetic step, even in the heat, and if their eyes crinkle as they watch us I could sense their smiles. Lively, wiry children play in the busy alleyways, street life is alive with shouts, taunts, cries, the patter of running feet and, alas, the exhaust from motorbikes. The men, free as sparrows, chat endlessly and loudly but never intrude; they are dignified and chivalrous.



By noon they are no longer discreet: The qat market takes place, they exchange money (\$5) for small plastic packets of tiny fresh green leaves, once offering us grey-haired ladies a sample with the sales pitch of "Yemeni whiskey!" One good-natured fellow popped a sprig in my mouth.



When the qat is sold, and all argumentative negotiations have taken place, they chew. One cheek billows out, green drool trickles down chins, conversation is animated for two or three hours until silence gradually gains over the market place of Sanaa. *Assoupissement* -- drowsiness -- has begun. Soon we spy merchants nodding off, sprawled under their tents, shaded by their awnings -- at the spice market, in front of the stalls heaped with plastic



objects made in China, perfectly silent, in a post-chewing torpor. Jenny takes photos surreptitiously. Even into the late afternoon Sanaa is silent, men have retired together to shady spots and dark warehouses to sit immobile, in the ritual of digesting their leaves of qat.

News reaches us on the internet and on Arab television at the hotel. We are enthralled by dispatches from Egypt. Yemen is not mentioned, though we hear rumors of peaceful, rather mild demonstrations in Sanaa, possibly a few blocks away, in favor of the ousting of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. "Nothing much," shrugged our waiter in the courtyard of the Arabia Felix while serving steaming aromatic curried chicken.

Prompted by my architect friend Abdallah, we book five days on the exotic Yemeni island of Soqatra off the coast of Somalia. We fly over amazing territory immediately southeast of Sanaa. The topographic panorama reminded me of a passage in Redmond O'Hanlon's Borneo book:

*A map of the convoluted surface of a giant brain, an impossibly complex fingerprint, a mad doodle of hieroglyphs, each one a hill defined by valleys, a chaos of circles and whorls and jiggles, the work of a thousand barometer pens set free across the paper.*

After a brief flight over the Indian Ocean we land on Soqatra, a rock outcrop over 1500 meters high and measuring 3625 kilometres square. Here natives speak Soqotri, a Hashemite language not largely Arabic. Our driver Abdullah and the semi-English-speaking guide, also Abdullah, are alert to our needs and curiosity in the mornings.



They offer snippets of history and take us to the exotic botany that flourishes there : dragon blood trees (*dracaena cinnabari*), cucumber trees; bottle trees which I had first discovered in Baja California Sur sprouting a few supercilious pink flowerlets above their smooth-skinned bellied trunks. Vernacular



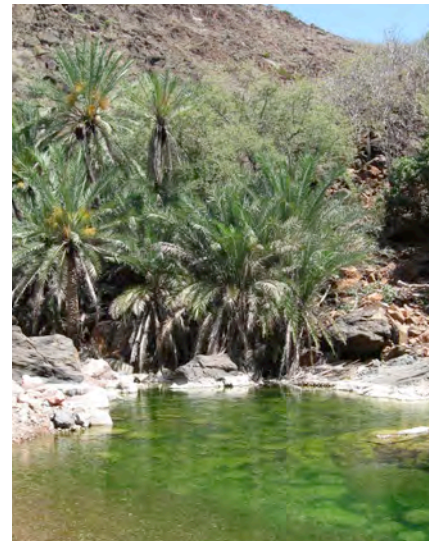
building in this sparsely populated island consists of flat-roofed stone houses, shoe-box proportions, no variety. Once the Abdullaahs have chewed their mid-day qat, they are well organized to schedule us to desport ourselves without them in a lagoon, on high white dunes, at a superb beach, or in the deep





swimming hole of a wadi -- a canyon -- while they discreetly remove themselves to concentrate on their daily qat ritual. By sunset with bloodshot eyes, their speech slurred, they half heartedly prepare our evening meal and set up our tents.

At the oddly designed and slovenly built new Taj Soqatra hotel where we spent two nights, the bathroom yields a trickle of cold water, the room smells of cigaret smoke and urine. Sheets are



not fresh. A long dining table stands outside in an alleyway.

Plastic chairs shelter many a heart-rendingly emaciated cat, and the small species of Soqotran goats get entangled in our legs and feet, some placing their front paws on the table.



Excellent is the Ethiopian-type bread, a huge disc of dough

tasting of embers. The menu? Rice, tough fish, grey goat meat (boiled?), a sauce of cut canned vegetables,

sometimes a broth. I ask morning and night for an egg

(*bayd* in Arabic.) Invariably we are served hot tea in



miniature glasses, half filled with sugar, until we alter the ceremony.

The all male personnel is everywhere eager to understand us and

quick to please. They sprint to and from the kitchen with their



orders, shrieking gleefully and endlessly with their friends and guests.

Not one woman in the town, only in a distant fishing village where I sneaked away from our male hosts serving sweet tea to spy on wives and children. I was first waved away without hesitation, then beckoned back to sit with them. With gestures one woman points out the eleven children she has brought into this uncluttered world of Soqatra. Little girls remove their scarves to reveal fine features, adoring eyes and beautiful dark skin. A young mother leaned out of her tiny room in a stone house to brandish a sleeping, swaddled cherub of a brown baby. Jenny eventually spoke with but one woman during the entire trip: The woman had signalled to Jenny, removed her face covering, and announced her name.

On what we hoped was our last day on Soqatra, Yemenia airline had somehow booked us to Sanaa instead of flying us to the port of Mukalla where we intended to hire a car headed for the gleaming high rise hand-built city of Shibam, which I'd seen only in photographs; thence to Seyoun to join Samar and the other unidentified enthusiasts in mud brick architecture. The last day is spent reading, Jenny works on a manuscript and we wait till the end of the day for the internet shop to open. Catching up on emails we





learn in a message from Samar, five days before the event, of the postponement of the conference entitled Earth Architecture, Mud, Stone, and Shale.

We have no choice but to take the next day's flight to the seaport of Mukalla.

Determined to visit the extraordinary architecture northeast of there despite the cancellation, we settle into the Hotel Hadramaut on the sea shore, surrounded by green trees and thirsty garden beds. Jenny exclaims and calls for me to marvel at the luxury of a sparkling white tiled bathroom enhanced with hot water, bath and shower, and fluffy white towels. I am most grateful. She then interviews a driver and makes a deal for the five hour journey to Shibam the next morning.



First we need to meet with the travel agent in the town of Mukalla and to exchange dollars for riyals. We ask the gallant desk manager to hail a cab. No taxi: The police tells the hotel we are to be escorted by soldiers bearing guns and bandoliers with live shells. Seven of them climb out of a military pick up, and look around the hotel. What I do not grasp that day is that we are the only two foreign tourists in the entire city, and that we apparently require protection from kidnapping.



Instead we are as indignant as the hotel manager who informs us they want money. I declare that my government finances their huge

armament supply -- Bell helicopters, endless fighter planes, long rows of tanks we have seen lined up at airports -- so my taxes have already underwritten their *baksheesh*. We proceed into town to perform our errands followed by the open pick-up bristling with soldiers in camouflage. On the way we witness along the port a joyful group of students running toward downtown, no doubt shouting for a regime change.

We are sequestered for five days in the sweet hotel until we can regain our flight home. We are the only clients. Tourism is dead. Jenny chortles that we are under house arrest. Turns out she is correct. We enjoy our stay nevertheless for we have time to think,



to work, to swim, to write, and in the lounge to watch al Jazeera, on all day and night in Arabic. We witness the early events in Libya and their contrast with the organized, passionate turnover in Egypt. I bridle at seeing Hillary Clinton messily clad and coiffed, her tone one of admonishment instead of a dignified, ministerial pronouncement.

Samar mercifully sends us a colleague of hers, the engineer Dr. Abdullah Ali BaGhamiyyan, director of the Daw'an Foundation who takes us for an outing in his car, no military escort, just as friends of a friend. He shows us the former sultan's house in Mukalla with its cherished trinkets from Europe and historic photographs of the British rule once stationed in Aden, one signed by an English general to His Royal Highness the Sultan of the Protectorate of Hadramaut. I spy a sculpture with a dog and ask if it is

a *sloughi*. It is. Next day Abdullah Ali drives us to see an adobe edifice of beautiful traditional architecture, now out of favor. He takes us to a "typical Yemeni" restaurant where you first wash your hands at a sink on the landing, sit on the floor and with your hands eat rice, fish, salads, and a tasty array of dips and sauces scooped with the national large slab of bread. He invites a most amiable engineer friend and his accountant to join us. They are cool and impeccably dressed in the Hadramaut fabrics for men's skirts, and tailored shirts of the finest cottons. We have coffee -- invariably nescafe despite coffee having originated in Yemen centuries back -- and tea at the hotel while he tells us about his city, his life, his wife's preference for concrete housing, her independence, and about their children, one in college in Amman, Jordan. We talk about water supplies, municipally sanctioned wastefulness, mud brick and lime plasters, *noura* in Arabic. Dr. BaGhamyyan leaves, presenting each of us with a large bag of local crafts in pottery and weaving.

Samar calls again. The conference will be revived in November 2011. To avoid airline penalties we fly Sanaa, Dubai, Amman. It takes all day. We are rewarded with the welcome of my friends in Amman to whom I had imparted the wrong date. They are forgiving and take us to a worldly restaurant of fine food and wine, and chivalrous waiters, the brasserie Centro. We fly next day over Israel and myriad settlements, then Crete, Italy and Sicily, the snowy Alps, and the coast of France, clear to the eye from Bordeaux to the end of the Finisterre. Fifteen hours to Manhattan on Royal Jordanian, a royal airline indeed, with service as it was in the States thirty or more years ago. I am regaled by a classic film with David Niven and Cantinflas, *Around The World in Eighty Days*. On landing at JFK, towing luggage, we freeze to the bone waiting a good hour



in line for a taxi. My Ethiopian friend Guenet has prepared a sumptuous dinner with two friends I was eager not to miss, one Spanish, the other from Hong Kong. The end of the voyage is in Albuquerque where Jenny's friend Charles greets us with flowers and a ride home to Santa Fe.

The next dawn my son Eric Swan drives us, with my beloved Catahoula hound Hassan Fatima and my grand-dog, his Malina, the nine hours to Presidio, Texas, where an Adobe Alliance workshop has begun. Instructed by Stevan de la Rosa, interns and students are building a Nubian vault with the smaller mud bricks, guided by parallel strings, set with mud mortar.

We are yet in another desert in a most harmonious atmosphere, no other structure in sight but my hand-built vaulted and



domed mud brick house with its two courtyards. It has not rained one drop for six months here on the Texas-Mexican border. Because of the drought and unseasonal frosts, little is in bloom. I am blessed with the soft voices of students and interns, with silence, with the hum of bees in the hesitantly flowering creosote bushes, but miss the muezzin's punctual call to prayer, and the sound of spoken Arabic.

By March 23 over three hundred peaceful, unarmed, and determined Yemenis have been murdered by Saleh's forces. Today the commanders of his vast armaments, supplied by the U.S. , have resigned, as have members of the diplomacy.

Simone Swan, March 23, 2011.