

AN ISLAND MOSQUE IN JEDDAH

Text and photographs by Abdel Wahed El-Wakil

On a fine morning I was summoned by the Mayor of Jeddah, architect Mohamed Said Farsi to accompany him on a marathon drive about the city to monitor the artworks being erected. International artists, sculptors and painters including architects had been encouraged to contribute to the intended beautification programme.

All over the streets, roundabouts and side pavements, a heresy of forms which had mushroomed, forced me to comment untactfully on the majority of this monstrous display of unleashed imagination. My criticism continued until Mayor Farsi curtailed my comments by stating that he wanted me to produce, for Jeddah, a sculpture expressing a continuity within the tradition of Islamic art.

Being familiar with the Mayor's nature I fully realised the challenge inherent in this demand. Now my task, with all diplomacy, was to try and evade producing the implied artwork.

"Your Excellency, you know quite well that I have my reservations about sculpture and painting

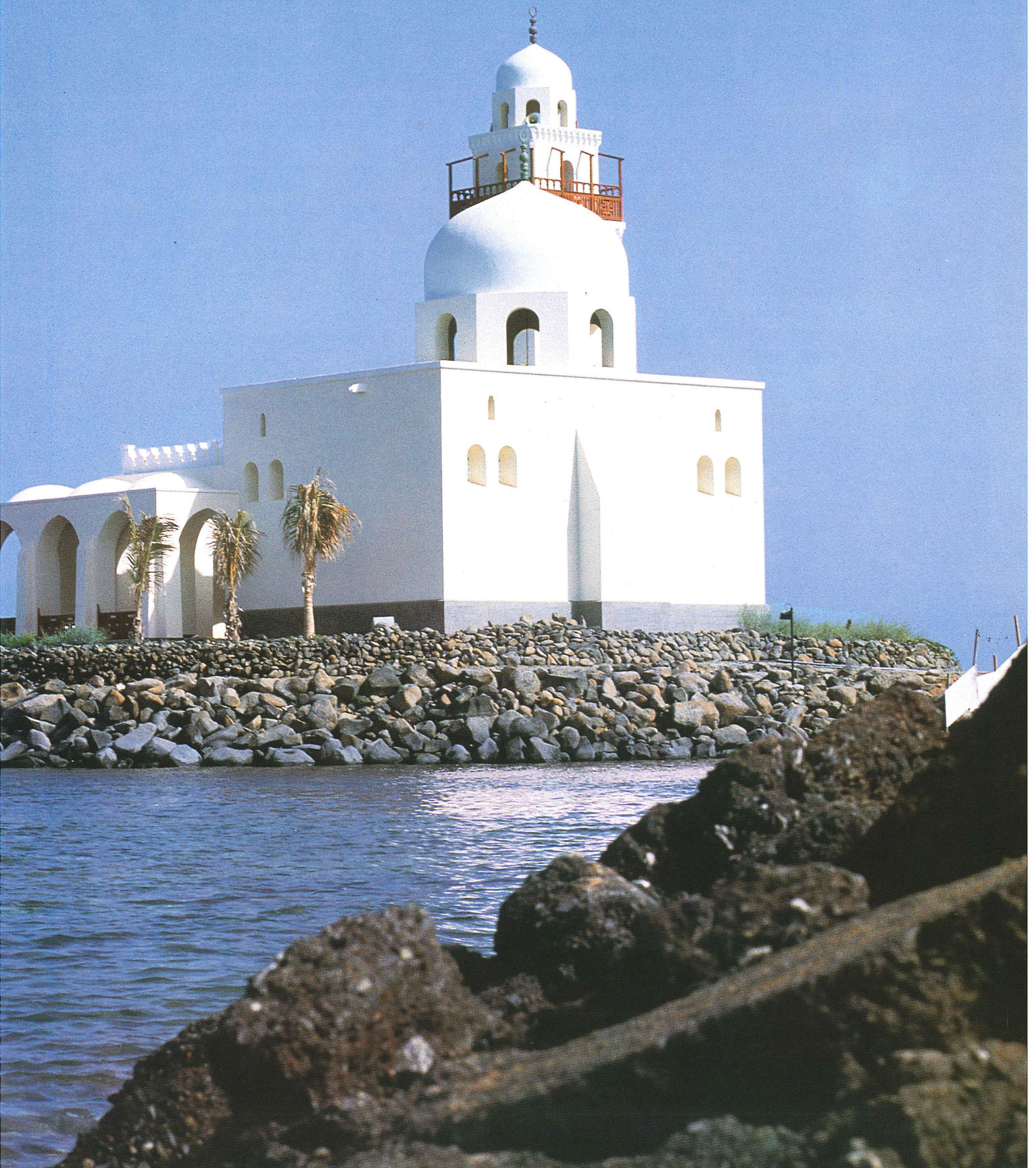
as such". When I had begun classical painting and sculpture during my adolescence under the tutelage of an Italian teacher in Alexandria, I discovered a lack of fulfilment in producing the "beautiful useless" related to the fine arts. My preference for the functional arts brought me into architecture during my university years.

Architecture had expressed a potential function which had promised to consolidate my yearning. However, my frustration increased when I discovered that the final products of modern architecture managed to produce the 'useful ugly' through the machination of industrial technology.

The 'beautiful useless, and the useful ugly' as I later found out was an outcome of the disintegration and segregation between painter, sculptor, decorator, the architect and engineer in modern times. Whereas, a state of natural integration persisted in traditional art and architecture.

View of the mosque from the shore-line.





"Your Excellency, I have doubts as to the prevailing notion of 'art for art's sake' I tend towards a functional art which entails an integral beauty within the artifact".

A discerning smile on the Mayor's face provoked the train of my thoughts, I was now thinking of the ultimate embodiment of the art form. The highest expression of art in space, that which embodies the spiritual genius expressed in sensible form: the place of worship. I was now committing myself to sacred art which extended beyond the domain of our initial intention.

Recalling my attention, the Mayor asked if I had something in mind as he wanted to make a valid statement of contemporary Islamic art.

"Your Excellency, I can think of nothing for the moment". "What I have in mind might not coincide with the scope of our conversation: I see a mosque as expressing beauty through its form"

I had hardly finished my words when I felt the car's sudden acceleration and the Mayor's hand reached for the radio-phone: "That is precisely what I want", he muttered, while over the phone, I could hear him issuing orders, demanding Municipal engineers to join us by the corniche. Addressing me, he continued, "Meanwhile, we shall select a site so my engineers can prepare for your design which, I expect you to start on immediately".

The morning's inspection round had ended and an intensive search for a site was now extending into the early afternoon. Exhausted by the heat and overwhelmed by the escalation of events, my mind wandered into how I would approach the design. I recalled when I first met Hassan Fathy in 1967, and how I had posed the perplexing question to him, "How does an architect proceed to design a new mosque?"

We were on our way back from the Kharga Oasis and Hassan Bey's reply cascaded into a world

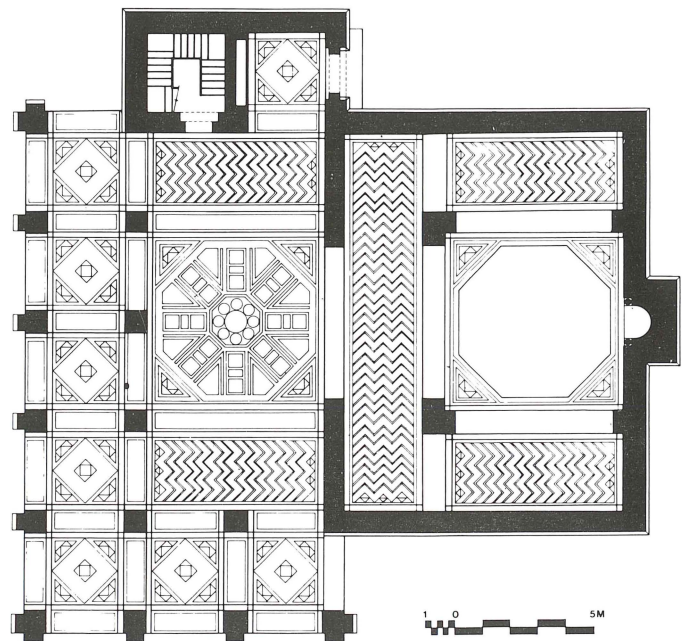
of symbolism, sacred geometry and cosmological doctrines. These responses flowed through my head, as water filtering through sand in the barren desert we were transversing. Everything seemed to elude me: I could not understand how all that he spoke of could be related to my immediate concern. In fact, he made it seem more difficult than when I had first asked the question. Hassan Fathy would never provide an answer. He provoked more and more questions. Frustrating my youthful impatience he would say, "An answer is profitable in proportion to the intensity of the quest". "A problem clearly envisaged, a point succinctly made, holds the elements of the solution in themselves".

The Mayor had abruptly steered his car off the road bringing it to a stop. We were in front of a miniature peninsula and he was asking me to consider it for a site.

Though familiar with Said Farsi's reputation, I was overwhelmed by his incredible drive and perseverance. The idea had caught up with him, and there were many things going around in his mind which seemed to escape me. I began to wonder whether we were both on the same line of thought. "Your Excellency," I enquired, "Will it be acceptable to erect a mosque out here by the beach?" "Are not people accustomed to having a mosque within the neighbourhood, in proximity to shops and houses?"

In a way I was suggesting the possibility of a controversy to the Mayor. "That is true", he exclaimed. "But conditions have changed". "People will be driving out all along the coast to enjoy their week-ends by the sea shore". "Instead of praying on the pavement, the many small mosques we shall build will be there to receive them". "However, the mosque will not only serve as an agreeable atmosphere for prayer, but will have to pay tribute to the natural landscape". I came to realise that the

Below: View of the minaret with a wooden balustrade and the mosque at the left.
Below, right: Ground floor plan.
Far right: View of the main entrance door.







Mayor did not confound continuity with routine. My task was to integrate the continuity of an Islamic tradition within the new context. This was the ambitious programme set out by the Mayor.

The site was ideal with the sea extending to the horizon and the choice to design and build to my heart's desire. An architect's dream come true.

I mused upon the myriad of shapes my imagination concocted. I brought to mind all the new expressions that could possibly be striking and innovative. I considered all the possibilities of new materials such as steel and fibreglass. I thought of all possible images that would represent our modern times that could become a symbol of the new. The nature of the artist is to create, and not repeat himself. For to repeat himself would mean to consume that which has been laid out in the past. And, lastly because the artist knows that everything, even the shape of the stool must live and grow and constantly transform itself: else it is mere dead matter, a museum piece, a product of routine.

Yet, the case of the artist who makes effects by betraying the time proven rules is an ill-doer. Scandalising by means of his techniques he shatters the jar of an age-old treasure, the heritage common to all. In order to express himself, he ruins the possibilities of expression for others. Moreover, when once grammatical mistakes become the rule one can no longer scandalise or startle. By that very same token it becomes difficult to express the beauty existing in

the language of the old-time style: for by making havoc of its usage, the ill-doer has ruled out mutual understanding, the signs and symbols that have been built up from generation to generation, enabling the traditional artist to transmit his thoughts down to the subtlest of shades.

Thus it is by conforming to the rules of tradition that the masterpiece is created. The method of the traditional artist is through: the intelligent repetition of ideal "prototypes" when applying them to any given circumstances: the simplicity of operation and the attainment of grace throughout the process: and, by the perfection of techniques, the mastery of the craft.

Traditional art does not seek to flatter the ego of the individual by promoting the artist as a special man but rather nourishes the soul by achieving in every man, a special artist.

It was with the above in mind that I decided to express myself within the confinements of well established forms. The act of designing and building the island mosque became more of a ritual: that of perfecting an act. A celebration in space for the spirit that is transmuted through time. If the banners of innovation are not fluttering it is because we have decided to keep them furled. The greatness of an artist is more in the faith of his tradition than in the arrogance of his revolt.

Abdel Wahed El-Wakil



Left: A large circular bronze chandelier in the main dome.

Right, above: The courtyard paved in two-tone grey granite.

Right: Open arcade surrounding the courtyard facing the sea.



REGIONALISM AND ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY

