



## **‘Omani Burqa’ vs. Decorated Façade of Modern Omani House; the Case of Salalah, Dhofar Region, Oman**

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### **Abstract**

Visiting Oman, one firstly encounters wide roads and exaggerated decorations of house façades—situated behind high walls. These broad roads and decorated dwellings are unlike traditional Omani architecture which can be identified as very sensitive to scale and climate. Omani architecture can also be visualized from the narrow streets and low height buildings across many well-preserved villages; built using humble mud or stone structures. Another encounter one might have is the traditional ‘Omani burqa.’ It is worn by some Omani women, originally designed for protection from dust and sand, which mimics the features of a falcon. Lately, the ‘Omani burqa’ has developed into a true fashion-item and is used as a ‘face mask’ with different colors and shapes. Fashionable burqas are often decorated with shimmering crystals or diamonds which differs from the traditional design. What is visible behind the ‘burqa’, the ‘eye’, and the ‘burqa’ itself, become quite embellished, subsiding the importance of the other parts of the face. The façade design of a modern Omani house and its walls are like the modern ‘burqa’ and the ‘eye’. Even though the house is separated from the street by high walls, the importance of visual access from the street to façade can be perceived from the highly decorated house façades, and decorated walls at the same time. This study—using visual analysis of house façades in Salalah, Oman—attempts to identify the architectural elements used in architectural design. These elements are repeated all over Oman, to accentuate visibility from the street to the façade. Eventually, the study concludes that the importance of the visibility from the street to the façade, in a changing ‘closed’ society, is the leading factor for the embellishment of the wall and the façades, rendering the overall design behind the wall insignificant.

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### **Keywords**

Omani burqa; Façade; Decoration; Wall; Street

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### **1. Introduction**

Change in the built-environment is an evolutionary process. What causes this change is tied to the obvious; industrialization, development of the economy, technology, increased population and movement of people, urbanization, and etc. There is also the element of culture that brings change in architecture. As Bavin (1989) states “cultural meanings provide the bases by which society organizes and shapes its material world...Material culture, then, has the potential to reveal the shared understandings of society and groups within it”. This also posits the hidden element of continuity within the changed material culture where the continuity is rendered by the material culture that cannot be observed by the eye of a distance beholder. Culture and traditions are part of this continuity, even

though they might take different forms and functionality over the course of time. Continuity might involve repetition of patterns (i.e. patterns of thinking and behavior) and may also involve social trends developed over time, which is also about awareness of a society's past. On the other hand, continuity embodies the notion of adaptation and transformation. However, continuity and adaptation (or transformation) do not necessarily happen in unity. For example, certain traditions might continue without major change over the years (i.e. behaviour), whereas the location or the space these traditions take place might change and adapt to the present time, i.e. material culture. As Pocock (1962) states, "societies are organized to ensure their own continuity and thereby serve the function of preserving something from the past". Therefore, we can understand change, within the context of this study, as how material culture has developed and modified over time continuing the past within the shelter of the present to preserve privacy.

Considering that the notion of continuity of certain cultural tradition is embodied with the material culture, this study, therefore, attempts to connect how material culture change, i.e. decorated facades -hidden behind the decorated walls- of architecture versus the burqa<sup>1</sup> is an attempt to hide what is considered private in a closed society, therefore to protect the past within the present. Architecture is used as part of material culture and is presented as an artifact (Yapicioglu & Cazacova, 2016) and burqa is also represented as part of the material culture of a closed society, in this case Dhofari region of Oman. The study initially will discuss our approach to our research followed by the tradition and history of Omani burqa and its evolvement throughout the past and the present. Our study then will be followed by our evaluation of the façade elements of the traditional and contemporary housing of Dhofar region in Oman, where comparison of the past and the present will be presented. The study will conclude by our discussion and the conclusion

## 2. Methodology

This paper, as was stated in the introductory section mainly focuses on the cultural reflections on modern architecture in Dhofar region, Oman and more specifically on how material culture, burqa and architecture façade, manifests itself visually/symbolically as a medium between the past and the future continuing the culture of privacy in a closed society. Most importantly the study attempts to identify the false and/or decorated façade elements used in modern architectural design, which are repeated all over Dhofar, to accentuate visibility from the street to the façade to disguise the privacy behind the façade almost like the burqa and the decorated eye. Moreover, architecture practices as a didactic statement of 'how a given society ought to live, think, and/or feel...' (Robinson, 1990). Therefore, by analysing the mythical culture of burqa and its visual cues on modern architecture and the traditional housing façade elements in Dhofar, it is the purpose of this case study to analyze and interpret the juxtaposition of the modern and the traditional in their attempt to continue the tradition of privacy in Dhofar Region, Oman. The research is based on, an anthropological approach, i.e., a qualitative approach, using observation as the primary mode of study, where raw data in the field is abstracted out as a meaningful understanding. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) put it, qualitative researcher study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, and phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible, including photographs among other documentations like, recordings, field notes, interviews and etc. This methodology, like a designer approaching a project, virtually assures that common cultural understandings will be identified for the research interest at hand. Furthermore, it does not impose a theory, but let the understanding derive from the investigation.

In order to achieve the aim of this study - how material culture, burqa and architecture façade, manifests itself visually as a medium between the past and the future continuing the culture of privacy in a closed society- this research, initially, reviewed the originality, functionality and the evolution of burqa via literature review and documented the emergence of modern style trends in burqa design. Furthermore, the raw data for the research, following the research methodology aforementioned, collected through 'in situ' documentation, via photographs of different

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<sup>1</sup>Burqa is a face mask or a veil worn by girls/women from puberty onwards or from the age of about 18 (Mubarak, 2012) to cover their faces.

residential buildings, in Dhofar region, i.e. modern residential. The modern residential buildings documented are spread out in the region of Dhofar and mainly in the suburbs of Salalah. It is also important to mention here that, the traditional housing in Dhofar region was previously documented (Cazacova, 2014) and studied in detail that this study uses as a reference of Omani traditional housing in Dhofar region.

### 3. Burqa (female's face mask) – originality, functionality and evolution

According to the description given by Balfour-Paul (1997) there are two distinctive types of face masks worn by Omani women: The Bedouin burqa and Saif Malik burqa.

The description of Omani ancient Bedouin burqa, which is displayed in Figure 1a, is found in quite a few travelers' manuscripts such as Wellsted (1838) "Travels to Arabia", Pfeiffer (1850) "A Woman's Journey Round the World", Oppenheim (1900) "Vom Mittelmeer zum Perzischen Golf", Ruete (1907) "Momoirs of an Arabian Princess", and Balfour-Paul (1997) "Indigo in the Arab world". According to the travelers reports Omani ancient Bedouin burqa is a veil of rectangular shape made of blue satin<sup>2</sup> embroidered in Red, Blue, Gold or Silver color trimmed with a gold border and a vertical (right over the nose) whalebone stiffener in the middle with two openings on either side, which are large just enough for the women to see the passing objects (Wellsted & Raymond, 1838; Pfeiffer, 1850 & Oppenheim, 1900). The upper part of the mask was fastened to the head with silk strings interwoven with gold or silver chains and kept the hair cover in place. The lower part fully hides the nose and partially the cheeks, thus, the eyes and the lower part of the face remains free (Ruete, 1907; Balfour-Paul, 1997).

Saif Malik ancient burqa face mask wore by Omani women is more provocative than Bedouin burqa model and provides minimal covering of the face (Fig. 1b). It is rectangular of butterfly shaped mask framing women's eyes with a vertical inflexible string in the middle (on the nose). The

mask was embroidered and beautifully patterned with coloured silk, gold and silver threads and tightened to the head by four strings on both sides on the ears.

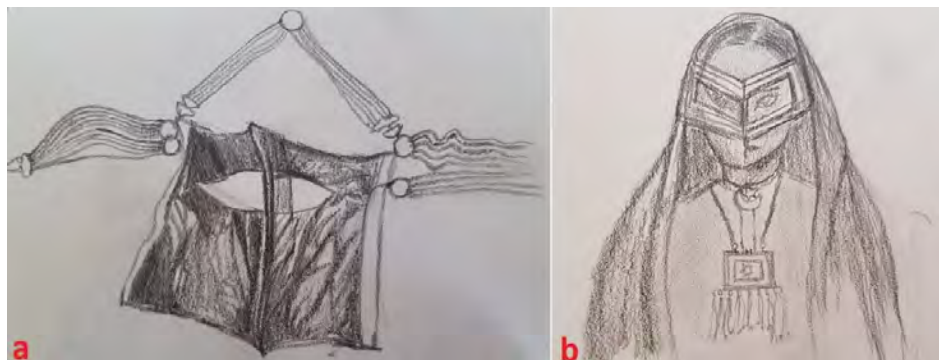


Figure 1. Omani ancient Bedouin burqa (a) embroidered with silver filament and decorated with silver sequins; Omani ancient Saif Malik burqa face mask embroidered with silver (b). Drawings by Osman L, 2017.

An article named "Behind the bars!" published in New York Times magazine published in March 9th, 1916 states that "every woman in Muscat is her own jailer for modesty's sake". Nevertheless, according to the reports found in travelers' manuscripts e.g. Wellsted (1838), Pfeiffer (1850), Omani women generally do not hide their faces, but in Muscat women wear burqas along with a blue or red colored abaya dress when they leave their houses. It is interesting that a century later traveler Balfour-Paul (1997) states the opposite - most of the Omani women wear face masks, except those from Muscat, its surroundings and certain settled parts of the interior who do not wear masks at all. Furthermore, Susan Mubarak in her article for Muscat Daily (Mubarak, 2012) writes that the black veil or burqa is exclusively Dhofari that whenever you see women in Muscat shopping malls wearing a fashionable abaya and black face veil with a slit for eyes, that is a distinguishing sign that she is from the south of Oman (Dhofar).

<sup>2</sup>Ancient Omani Bedouin burqa was made of shiny local indigo-dyed fabric (Balfour-Paul, 1997).

Burqa, which usually symbolize Bedouin heritage, mimics the features of a falcon and is light, breathable and protects women's face from sun, dust and sand (Elazzaoui, 2015 & The "Burqa" as seen in Oman: The veil of the Bedu Woman, 2017). Nevertheless, Ruete (1907) defines the function of burqa as veil hiding women/girl's face from male observers. She also states that an Arab woman was not permitted to show her face. The face should be covered with burqa frequently at home and always at outings. Though is obligatory to wear burqa in the presence of an unmarried man, is used also on the other occasions, depending on the age and wishes of the women/girl and her husband or father.



Figure 2. Omani modern Bedouinburqa worn by Dhofari women (c); Omani modern Saif Malik burqa face mask wornby women/girls as fashion, decoration (batoola) (b). Drawings by the Osman L,2017.

In 2005 the government of Sultanate of Oman announced burqa ban in all institutions of higher education. Female students stopped wearing it (since was not allowed) and with their faces uncovered they became distinctive. The things are changing and the number of young females with uncovered faces can be seen now at the colleges, offices and in the city. Despite the progressive changes in the country, the general attitude of Dhofari is that woman's reputation and identity should be concealed and 'protected' whenever possible. Therefore, the burqa is considered a symbol of Dhofar that reflects the population mentality (Mubarak, 2012). Nevertheless, there are still Bedouin women in the country that wear burqa and do not consider it as an oppression, but rather a tradition (Fig.2c). This tradition originates from pre-Islamic period, it is passed down from one generation to another and still ongoing (Elazzaoui, 2015). However, the burqa in modern Oman, which was originally designed as a functional garment, turned into a fashion item. The women all over the country (even non-Bedouin) wear decorative burqas<sup>3</sup> on different festive occasions e.g. weddings and the like (Fig. 2d) (Elazzaoui, 2015).

#### 4. Traditional Omani Dwelling façade vs. contemporary façade

Originally, Omani and particularly Dhofari, similarly to the rest of the Arabic peninsula lived in traditional houses made of local materials that was found in abundance in the region. Majority of the houses were made of stone, rocks, lime and etc. where the harsh conditions of the desert and the traditional life style embodied both in the form, design and the materials of the traditional housing (Tab. 1). As Table 1 depicts, one of the very striking elements of the traditional house in Dhofar is its accessibility from the street. The visual from the street to the façade was a direct access where the façade elements were modestly arranged; the front door, the door to the majlees<sup>4</sup> and the scattered windows over the façade. Even though ornamentations were used, mostly on the doors and on the screens of the windows, they were on a modest scale and weaker in reference. Most importantly, the reference on decoration was a representation of the local craftsmanship in wood-carving (Damluji, 1998). The

<sup>3</sup>Modern decorative burqa, which became a fashion in Oman, is called Batoola. Batoola is custom designed and made in different colors, materials and of different shapes (Elazzaoui, 2015).

<sup>4</sup>Majlees is a reception hall of a residence for male visitors only, which is used on different festive occasions. Usually is easily accessible from the street and has a segregated entrance and bathroom.

openings on the façade were simple in shape and weaker in reference. Moreover, the openings on the façade were almost indicative of the plan behind the façade and emphasized the overall form of the building. Another important element that supports this argument is that the builder's modest, almost naive, approach to the arrangements of the façade elements which does not accent symmetry focusing on the functionality of the architectural elements on the façade.

Traditional dwelling facades (Salalah and Mirbat cities) study's results.



Figure 3. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 4. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 5. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 6. Façade's photograph building location

Notes: Facades common attributes - asymmetry; natural construction material (sandstone, limestone, limestone plaster, e.g., which give the appearance of sandy colour<sup>5</sup>); minimal features and no any pure decorative features; functional + decorative features (wooden carved windows and doors, roof crenelated parapet, etc.); the facade attributes reflect the interior spaces layout; accented entrance to the majlees; direct access to the house from the street; inner courtyard.

<sup>5</sup>According to the Dhofar Municipality Building regulation (1996) the buildings should be of sandy color matching the surrounding environment.



Figure 7. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 8. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 9. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 10. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 11. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 12. Façade's photograph building location

When we evaluate the façade of the contemporary housing in Oman, Dhofar region, the decorated high walls immediately meet us with decorated (gilded) metal gates encircling the residents where the access from the street is interrupted (Tab. 2), unlike the traditional house, and the main entrance is merged with the entrance to the majlees. This perhaps, initially, evokes the feeling of a continuity of the closed society tradition for the eye of a distance beholder, however, the continuity of the tradition and adaptation to new is nevertheless in contradiction. For example, the decorative porch/portico, with no obvious function, is usually built elaborately in the middle of the façade, declares openness like you will see in a public building but not necessarily on the façade of a residential building in a closed society. One other feature on the façade presenting the dichotomy between open and closed is the vast amount of large, i.e. out of scale, openings on the façade with other decorative accents. Unlike the traditional house of Dhofar, these openings are situated in a way that they emphasize a very strong symmetry giving the wrong sense of what is behind the façade, but again quite inviting. Moreover, they are tinted in different colors for privacy almost defeating the purpose of the openings. Our further analysis of the façade surfaces one more conflict between culture and architecture. As Table 2 depicts, the extremely rendered façade with eaves, pediment, moldings, pilasters, arches, columns, balconies, quoins, colour, etc., almost declares anything else of the building insignificant, i.e. function, form and plan and most importantly Islamic culture. According to the Cazacova (Cazacova & Al Kathiri, 2014), only 12% of the decorative elements used on facades in Dhofar region are Islamic in origin.

Contemporary house facades (Salalah and Mirbat cities) study's results.



Figure 13. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 14. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 15. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 16. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 17. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 18. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 19. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 20. Façade's photograph building location





Figure 21. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 22. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 23. Façade's photograph building location



Figure 24. Façade's photograph building location

Note: Facades' common attributes - surrounding wall; ornamented gate; symmetry; sandy color; excessive ornamentation (eaves, pediment, moldings, pilasters, arches; columns, balconies, quoins, etc.); tinted colorful windows; porch and decorative (false) porch/portico; outer courtyard; Islamic design features<sup>6</sup> and other than Islamic design features; the façade attributes do not reflect the interior spaces layout; main entrance merged with the entrance to the majlees; access to the house via gate and outer courtyard.

Our comparison of the traditional versus the modern house in Oman, Dhofar region, clearly states the conflicts between continuity and adaptation, and how certain traditions transform under the pressure of time. In Arab Gulf countries, like almost everywhere else, traditional houses are built to adapt to the local natural habitat and to satisfy societal and cultural values. As mentioned by Eldemery (2009) the Arab city is trying to catch up with the modernity, started losing its local image, uniqueness, and ability to meet its particular needs. As income and population continue to climb steadily in the Gulf countries, modern styled housing design, which values aesthetics, construction cost and modern technologies over cultural values, has become increasingly preferred over traditional architecture.

<sup>6</sup>According to the Dhofar Municipality Building regulation (1996) buildings' facades should be of local Islamic design style.

## 5. Discussions and Conclusions

Golari rightfully argues that the introduction of wealth and modernity into the Gulf region, a traditional society, has been very rapid and is based on a marginal economy, the oil. Golari further remarks; “unlike Europe and North America, there has been no philosophical ‘enlightenment’, trial-and-error development of civil institutions, and no cultural or political evolution in parallel with the growth of an industrial consumer society”. Sultanate of Oman in Persian Gulf, regardless of its latest efforts of oil independent economies, is not immune to Golari’s remark. The undeclared history of modernity is obvious both in Oman’s built and social environment, where the present modern material culture conflicts with the past traditions. Nevertheless, the field of architecture, as a material culture, is also striving to catch up with these developments to meet the demands of this rapid ever-changing environment, consequently finding itself squeezed between to the tension of the past and the future. Today’s physical environment in Oman, regardless of the extreme climatic conditions, is not similar what it was less than fifty years ago. With increased urbanism and developed transportation systems, an Omani city does not reflect continuity of traditional identity and can be considered as transformed. How this transformation, however, changed the traditions of Omani culture in its spatial environment is an interesting phenomena. The private culture of Oman still persists, or continues, regardless of the changes in the material culture and one of the most striking examples of this continuity is the Omani burqa worn by the women that connects the past and the traditions to the present.

The study here presented that the architecture (material culture) in Dhofar, Oman, has developed and modified over time continuing the past within the shelter of the present by studying the changes and evolution of burqa, facades of traditional and the modern house. It is shown that, even though the house is separated from the street by high walls for privacy, the importance of visual access from the street to façade can be perceived from the highly decorated house façades, and the decorated walls at the same time. Essentially, all these elements are quite inviting from the street regardless of the high walls around the house, which is in conflict with the intention of the wall, privacy and closeness. Today, their veiled faces distinguish Dhofari women. Originally, however, the Dhofari women used burqa for its functionality, for protection from the sun and the dust, and not for hiding what is behind the burqa. This is almost like the façade of the traditional building that was built very modestly using local materials where functionality was of the foremost importance. There was no surrounding walls or elaborated decorations but a simple façade with minimum openings and roof parapets, which clearly emphasized the form and the layout of the building. Traditionally, Dhofari women did not use the burqa to cover their faces and burqa, over time, is transformed from a garment of function into a decorative accessory to hide the face, like the façade of the traditional house. The façade and the wall of modern Dhofari house are almost like the painted eye of the Dhofari women wearing burqa; a decorated mask that conceals what is real by accentuating what can be seen outside of the wall from the street to preserve privacy.

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