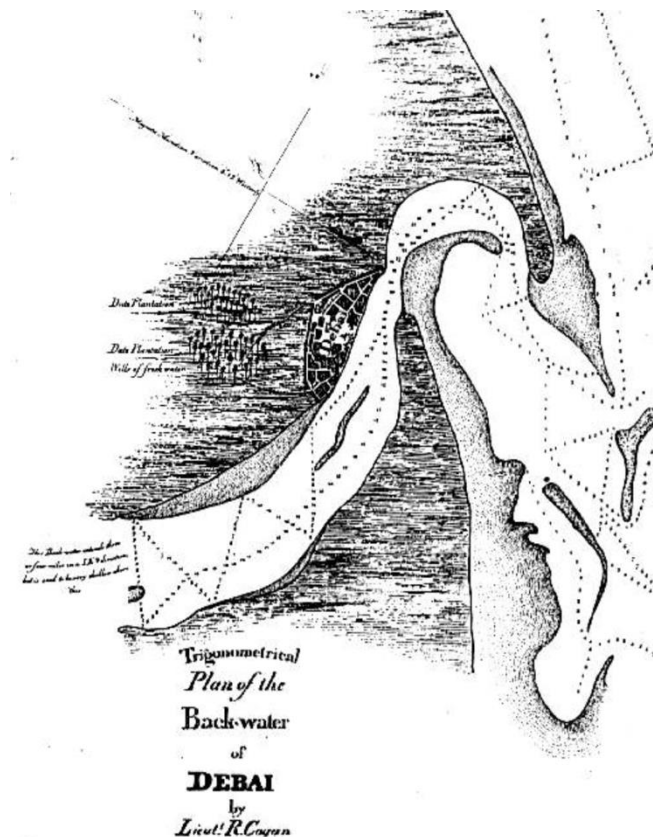


# Al Shindagha – Through Time

## History

This particular piece of Dubai's urban fabric, called Al Shindigha, has a history that almost defines Dubai and its heritage. I would like to go on a journey through time to briefly examine how exactly it does this. The journey begins in 1822 when the British Lieutenant Cogan drew a descriptive plan and elevation of the city of Dubai at the time. This description also stated that there were about 1200 people in total living in the area which was surrounded by a low wall and 3 watch towers, the wall was about 2.5 meters high and 60 centimeters thick made from coral stone and gypsum. The inhabitants lived in average houses that were very traditional and mostly made from mud.



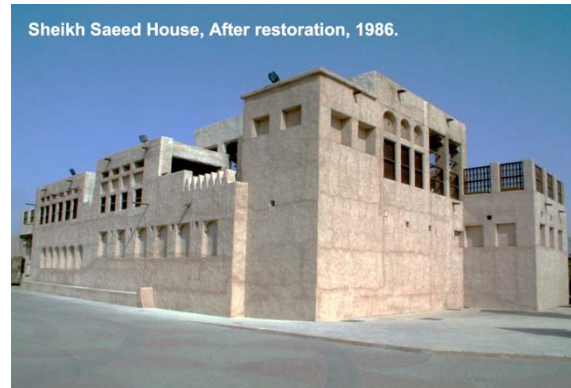
Al shindagha is at a very important geographical location within Dubai and perfectly exemplifies the emergence of the city from this particular location. The first reason is that it was a transit point for two different modes of trade/transportation; the old caravan route which joins Iraq to Oman, and also a sea port for the old dhow ships (which the Burj al-Arab is modelled after) that connect countries in east Africa, India, China and countries in the northern part of the Gulf region. This explains the emergence and reason for choosing this area for settlement as prime property/location. Arc Rashad M. Bukhash (the Director of Architectural Heritage Department at Dubai Municipality and Chairman of Architecture Heritage Society in UAE) confirms this by saying "Like most Arabian Gulf coastal cities, Dubai was established on land near a creek and fresh water. Creeks provided natural ports for dhows, and the sea was a convenient way of transportation, besides being a means of providing food and pearl diving".

The building typology and composition (which I'll explain in more detail later on) of Al Shindagha at this point was like most of the rest of Dubai (Bur Dubai) at this point, there were certain elements that were prevalent, but at the same time it was an amalgamation of many different/borrowed elements. It includes both traditional and indigenous architectural elements; traditional being that which is passed down over time, and indigenous which emerges from site specific conditions. In a conference for Architectural Review called 'Modernity and Tradition in Architecture', Bukhash stated that "In general it is influenced by Islamic architecture which developed in the region. Its main features are simplicity, functionality, durability and suitability for climatic environments and social life. The courtyard houses are an aspect of Islamic architecture and are well suited to the local climate". Brief examples of elements that were 'borrowed' from other countries include; intricate carving on doors and balconies that were borrowed techniques from India, as well as wind-towers (bastakiya) and decorative panels (mashrabiya) that came from Iran.



As our journey progresses, we find that in 1841 an incident occurs that later has a big impact on the architectural landscape and population of Dubai. But before discussing the occurrence, we have to understand the context of how Dubai was at the time - it was mainly split into two lands; the north side of the creek (Deira) and the south side of the creek (Bur Dubai). So in this year there was a smallpox outbreak in Bur Dubai which made a lot of the population to move to Deira, the reason this was impactful was because, apart from the population shift, the new inhabitants began building houses and markets, increasing density in the area, this implies that Shindagha subsequently remained mostly deserted for some time. This 'ghost town' period can be felt if you visit Shindagha after visiting an old neighborhood in Deira, you can feel the difference and sense the period of static engagement. Another reason for this is because in 1894 another catastrophic event happened – there was a big fire that burnt down most of the buildings, forcing people to rebuild. The more wealthy inhabitants took this opportunity to build new houses from materials like coral stone and gypsum, which is more fire resistant; again another layer of construction innovation that is not visible in Shindagha.

Al Shindagha was chosen in 1896 as a strategic location to build the palace and abode of the ruling Maktoum family, it was the perfect place between Deira and Bur Dubai and overlooking the Arabian Gulf. In my opinion this particular moment in history can be said to be defining for the legacy of Shindagha Neighborhood because it would later (from 1912-1958) be known as the palace of Sheikh Saeed Al Maktoum, and subsequently become a historic center as well as well as a heritage village. This also has a sociological significance from an architectural perspective, tourist might look at it as just an old building, but infact if you know how to read the architectural language so beautifully embedded within the walls of this edifice, you could come to know the residence of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dubai.



There is a certain proximity in the articulation of houses next to the palace, a harmony and symbioses with the community, a lack of barriers or demarcations. This tells us a lot about the close relationship that rulers of the time had with their people. There is also a sense of modesty and humility that you can absorb that stems from the culture and religion practiced by the rulers; all the openings of the house are above eye level and relatively small, the entrance is not grandiose but rather refracted and more like a maze that guides you through one door and around the wall to another before being embraced by the house hall. Another extremely interesting feat of this house (along with all the other houses in Shindagha) is the orientation, which is along the southwest-northeast axis facing the qibla (Makkah) which further solidifies the priorities and values of the people that lived there.

Ruling Dubai was not always easy though, as Sheikh Butti bin Sohail came to experience in 1906 when he took the throne. In just 6 years of his rule before he died, there were violent storms and many Dubaians lost their lives. There were also some Dubaians that indulged in smuggling goods and arms trafficking which led to the British invasion in 1910 and positioning of HMS Hyacinth (Navy Ship) in Al Shindagha, causing more (minor) skirmishes. All this describes a rich history of politics that happened in Shindagha Neighborhood.

In 1908 G.G. Lorimer (one of the best historians and geographers on the Arabian Gulf) described the geopolitical and economic state of Dubai during this period. He stated that "There is no customs, the yearly revenue is \$51,400 mainly from pearls. In Deira side there are 1600 houses and 350 shops. In Shindagha area there are 250 houses. In (Bur) Dubai there are 200 houses and about 50 shops. There are about 4000 date palm trees in the town, 1650 camels, 45 horses, 380 donkeys, 430 cattle and 960 goats. In the creek, there are 155 boats for diving and trading and 20 small boats (abras) to take passengers between the two banks of the creek". This shows a resulting state of the difference of the two sides, as well as the economic state.



Up until 1930, the main income of the region was from pearl diving, but Japan then started producing cultured pearls which really affected the economy. This coupled with the second world war brought a very strenuous 2 decades and caused people to migrate to close-by countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in search for more prosperous opportunities. The population of the city decline significantly from about 40,000 in 1940 to just 20,000 by 1953. After somewhat of a hardship that Dubai went through, in 1955 cement was imported for the first time, and a year later the region's first ever concrete building was constructed. This new building material was cheaper than gypsum, that was previously used, and therefore preferred. It only took a few years for concrete buildings to become widespread and completely replace gypsum and coral stone.

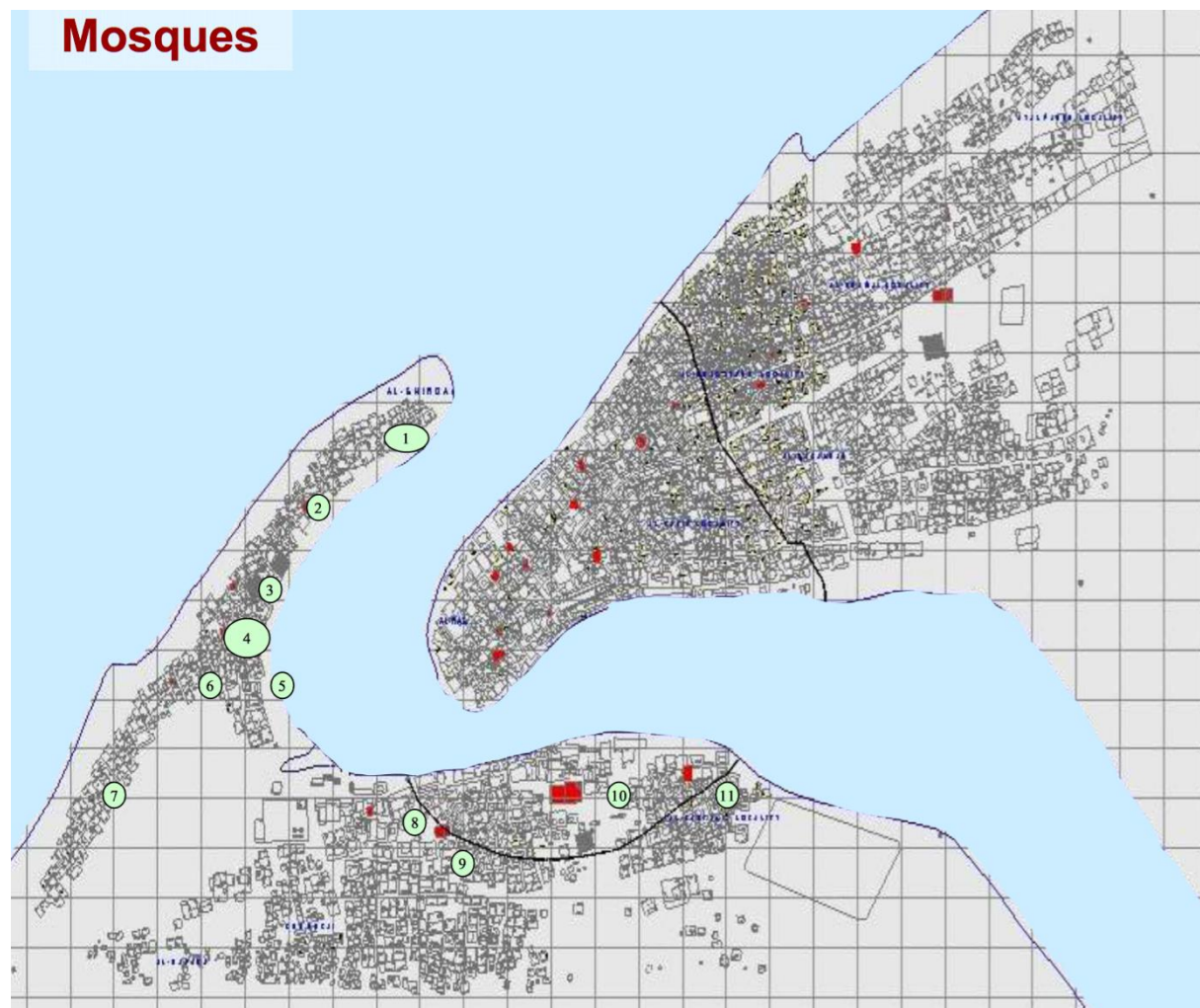


In 1969 oil production began (after signing the agreement with Britain in 1937) and that completely changed the climate of infrastructure and the built environment in Dubai for decades to come. The use of concrete in building coupled with the increased income from oil production birthed a new era of modern style architecture and rapid growth for decades to come.

### **Architecture**

Despite evolution in materiality and typology, Shindagha managed to retain it's indigenous heritage and integrity through some distinct and defining architectonic languages. There are three main factors that influence it's design and all other designs of this period – the climatic conditions of the region, the social and religious aspects, and the locally available materials.

To deal with the intense climatic conditions of the Arabian desert, multiple typologies and strategies emerged, the first being the proximity of buildings. This high density articulation creates narrow alley ways (sikkas) which remains shaded for most of the day (except for when the sun is at 90 degree altitude during spring and fall equinox). Also, because the buildings mostly face the qibla, the alleys run along the northwest-southeast axis and end at the creek, allowing the prevailing winds (from northwest) to pass through, the narrowness increasing the velocity and thus creating optimal conditions. Second is the courtyard housing typology with inward looking rooms that have shaded verandahs overlooking the courtyard, the stack effect allows hot air to rise into open space and cool air is drawn in from the surrounding spaces. Thirdly the wind-towers (bastakiyas) which are situated above living spaces (bedrooms and living rooms) allow trapped air to be transferred to the rooms beneath, and during winter they are covered with wooden planks to avoid rain entering.

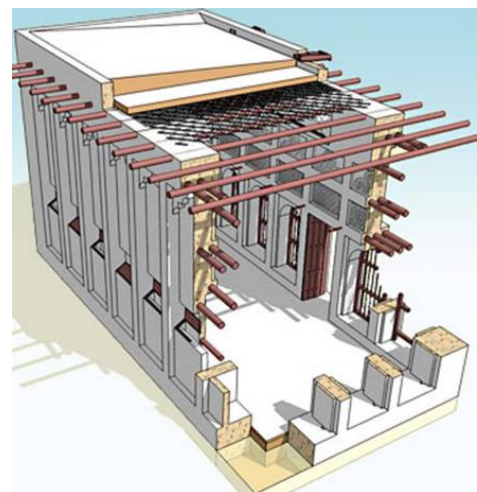


The dominant religion in Dubai was and is Islam, the most unique thing about Islam (in terms of architecture) is that it is more than a religion, it is a way of life that governs every aspect of life including personal attributes and social construct in society. This is important here because the core competency of architecture is to organize social processes in society at all scales and to do that we have to understand people's social values. Islam's teachings encourage modesty, privacy, importance of family, and the sanctity of women in a household, the courtyard typology helps fulfil these with its inward looking rooms that allow the exterior walls to be plain and solid, except for ventilation openings that are high up to prevent visibility for pedestrians. The zigzag/maze entrance also helps encourage privacy to prevent people

from seeing inside the house when passing by. Lastly, the wind-towers which provide ventilation and privacy, help decrease the need for windows.

Shindagha also uses materials that can be considered sustainable, or as previously put in architectural terminology 'vernacular'. Prior to some of the restoration works that have been done in the area, there were different materials that were used, which changed over time. There are two main construction methods that were used, one for lower income houses, and the other for public buildings (like mosques) or palaces.

Before people decided to settle in Shindagha, there were desert bedouins that travelled around the area and had dwellings that were portable. They built these from camel hairs that were died using plants and then woven together to create tents that could be dismantled (bait shaar). As settlers decided to start building more permanent dwellings, they first used palm tree trunks (areesh) and palm tree fronds (daen). Areesh was used for the main structural system while daen was used to build the walls and ceilings; they were tied together using fibres from coconut trees (kombaar). Because of the importance of Shindagha (due to its location and the palace being built there) the people that lived there were quite wealthy and therefore could afford to start building their homes from gypsum and coral stone, which then replaced the palm tree houses (khaima). Most of the houses were only one story in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Dubai was open to international trade which attracted many merchants who began building two story houses. Shortly afterwards the production of concrete began to replace some of the gypsum and coral stone houses.



The public buildings were mostly built from coral stones and gypsum, the coral stones were gathered either from shore or dug up from the sea. The gypsum was manufactured at the perimeter of the city; gypsum stones were burnt for a couple of days and then grounded till they became powder and mixed with water. It is also noticeable in some of the older buildings sandalwood joists and rectangular wooden (morrabaa) joists are used, these were introduced in the 1920s and '30s from east Africa and India through trade, also burned mud (sarooj) was introduced from Iran as a waterproofing strategy. Again, in the later half of the century, after concrete was introduced, some of the buildings were replaced with this new material.

Today these buildings are preserved from their original (20<sup>th</sup> century) state except for a few restoration and infrastructure works that have been done.



## People

To help better understand the phenomenology of Al Shindagha, Hasan Saleh Musabih (58), who has lived in this neighborhood from childhood, will take us on a short journey through time. Hassan explains that the main priority of this area during his childhood was education, there was such an importance given to it and that helped a lot children turn into intellectuals and also stay out of trouble. There was a school called Al Shaab School in Shindagha which had all types elites and skeikhs children. The school was built and funded by the Kuwaiti government and only offered high school diplomas for boys, for any higher education pupils would have to continue in other countries (usually Bahrain). The school taught Philosophy, Music, Math, English, and Science, and uniforms and books were provided all free of charge annually and the teachers came from different nationalities. Every morning the students were given breakfast and vitamins to make sure they had a good nutrition and they were forced to exercise regularly. Hasan persisted on how meaningful and affected lives of the students were by this experience as he reminisced with us. Unfortunately, this school no longer stands today as it was demolished and replaced with a bus station.

