Stéphane Pradines (ed.). *Earthen Architecture in Muslim Cultures. Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*

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Stéphane Pradines (ed.). *Earthen Architecture in Muslim Cultures. Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018, 283 p. (Arts and Archaeology of the Islamic World, vol. 10), ISBN 978-90-04-35531-6

- 1 In parallel with historiography in general, architectural history has been primarily concerned with the heritage of elites, forgoing other social groups: this book, thus, aims to rectify this deficiency by highlighting the continuity of earthen architecture in many regions of the world and do away with the still-prevalent fallacy according to which mud-brick “preceded” red brick and both were eventually superseded by stone. Pre-modern societies across Asia, Africa, Europe, and America, primarily relied on earthen architecture on all social levels, despite the subservient role of the latter to pyramids, ziggurats, hypostyle halls, triumphal arches, etc.. Although only three of the twelve essays in the volume deal directly with the Persianate world, for the sake of comparativity all studies will be briefly referred to in this abstract.
- 2 In “Adobe as an Islamic Standard: Vernacular Cosmopolitics” (pp. 11-21), Rolando Melo da Rosa seeks Quranic and other Islamic textual references on adobe to find theological justifications for this widely-employed building material. He juxtaposes the inherent humility of *labina* (adobe) in the Prophet’s mosque with its ephemeral nature. The necessity to periodically renew earthen structures led to a quick “paradigm shift”

from adobe (starting with ‘Uthmān, the third Caliph) to stone and, recently, reinforced concrete, steel, and glass.

- 3 “The Great Mosque of Timbuktu: Seven Centuries of Earthen Architecture” (pp. 22-36), by Bertrand Poissonnier, is a post-restoration survey “of what is often said to be the biggest and oldest visible earth construction in sub-Saharan Africa”, concentrating on its four building periods. The next essay, “The Periphery Walls of Sijilmāsa, a Medieval Islamic City in Morocco: Contribution to the Identification of Typological and Functional Variability of the *Pisé* Technique” (François-Xavier Fauvelle, Elarbi Erbat, Romain Mensan and Axel Daussy, pp. 37-54) stems from another recent conservation project. Besides the walls in question, it is concerned with the uses of *pisé*, i.e., the construction method called *ṭabīya* in Arabic. Two more studies investigate Maghribī architecture. Marinella Arena and Paola Raffa introduce instrumental surveys of spontaneous rammed earth construction over a wide territory in their chapter about the “Draa Valley: Tighremt and Igherm, Morocco” (pp. 55-83), among them walls, gates, and surveillance towers; while Mounia Chekhab-Abudaya (“The Use of Earth in the Construction of the Qṣūr in Southeastern Algeria”, pp. 84-103) selects a group of fortified villages (*qṣar*), typically built on outcrops, from this type of semi-sedentary settlement which is found also in Libya, Mauritania, Mali, southern Morocco, and southern Tunisia.
- 4 The next chapter, “Identity and Architecture: The Fātimid Walls in Cairo” (pp. 104-145), by Stéphane Pradines, brings us to what seems to be a deceptively well-known subject until we realise that the walls which once intersected the three famous Fātimid city gates of Cairo are virtually unknown. While these walls have disappeared almost without trace, the most recent survey could elucidate their nature. Accordingly, they were initially completed in *pisé*, then progressively rebuilt using mud brick and limestone in phases which the author characterises as “Berber”, “Nubian”, and, “Armenian”, respectively, with the latter referring to the constructions of Badr al-Jamālī and their denial of vernacular traditions. Christian Darles describes and interprets Yemen’s still-living architectural practice from the molding of bricks to erecting tower houses in his “Mud Brick Architecture in Ḥaḍramawt-Yemen under the Qu‘aiti and Kathiri Sultanates” (pp. 146-166).
- 5 Moving closer to the Persianate world, “Building on the Shoreline: Insights into the Use of Earth in the Architecture of the Late 18th and 19th Centuries in Qatar” (pp. 167-202), by Moritz Kinzel, deals with material from Zubāra, Furayha, and some other sites, comparing permanent constructions (made of stone and mud, etc.) with semi-permanent buildings, including *barastī* structures. In “Residential Compounds: Earthen Architecture in the Central Desert of Iran” (pp. 203-232) Atri Hafez Naiemi focuses on the complex settlements located around the fringes of the Dašt-i Kavīr, particularly Yazd province. Analysing satellite images of Yazd, the location of ca. 80 complexes were revealed, along with the great architectural richness of the study area. Considering their number, size, and complexity, two significant factors were taken into account to examine them in their environmental context: routes and underground water systems. According to the architectural analysis of 33 case studies, there are some key points that yield an initial typology. Three examples, Šahrāsab, Saryazd, and Dihšīr, were subject to a more detailed analysis to illustrate the three main types. Type one is represented by a group of fortified compounds reinforced with defensive structures, i.e., curtain walls, towers, fortified gates, moats, arrow slits, and machicolation. Type

two includes another group of fortified enclosures in which, compared with the previous group, the residential element predominates. Here a large number of residential units provide permanent housing for their inhabitants, rather than only shelter. Finally, type three represents multi-functional walled settlements. Made of numerous residential units surrounded by sophisticated defensive structures, they are also equipped with special elements, including cisterns and large warehouses. These three types of enclosures survived as self-sustainable residential complexes until the 20th century. In his essay, entitled “Traditions of Monumental Decoration in the Earthen Architecture of Early Islamic Central Asia” (pp. 233-148), Paul D. Wordsworth posits that individual buildings made from unfired earth have remained side-lined in discussions of Central Asian architecture and indeed Islamic architecture as a whole. According to the author, the most representative Central Asian examples of these buildings can be grouped under the rubric of *kōshks*. None has been subject to extensive and systematic excavations, and their research is further hindered by their general lack of epigraphic evidence. Representing a wide chronological range, the study focuses on typology. Wordsworth identifies purpose-built platforms on which the *kōshks* of the Marv oasis are built as one of their salient features. Their second distinctive element, of possible Sasanian origin, is corrugation. The corrugated style is most distinctly represented in the *kōshk* architecture of the Āmū Daryā basin, and more specifically in the region of Marv, in modern Turkmenistan. A further characteristic that distinguishes the group is the frequent use of *pīšṭāqs*, creating grandeur beyond the functional needs of a doorway.

- 6 “Ottoman Earth Architecture in Buda (1541–1686)” brings us to Ottoman Hungary (pp. 249–266). Its author, Adrienn Papp, reflects on the occupiers’ disinterest towards the stone-built mediaeval buildings of Buda despite the easy availability of local stone, and draws attention to their predilection for wooden structures filled in with mud brick, even in the governor’s palace. In her interpretation, this can be explained as a conscious Ottomanisation of the urban space, the employment of a familiar technique, as opposed to the continuation of “foreign” building methods.
- 7 The last chapter, “Between Tradition and Modernity: Building with Earth in a Contemporary City” (Elizabeth Golden, pp. 267–289, the bibliography is somehow mixed with that of the preceding chapter), explores the potential of pre-industrial earthen architecture for sustainable development, chiefly through the example of Niamey, the capital of Niger, where most industrialised building materials need to be imported while earth is local, cheap, sustainable and earthen architecture can be as comfortable as anything. The case study is offered as a viable solution for contemporary urban planning in most of the regions covered by the volume.

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