Yemen has been integrally linked to Southeast Asia, East Africa, the Iranian Plateau and the Mediterranean Basin over the course of many centuries. Geographically and socially diverse, one may trace this diversity through the cultural interactions and hybrid architectural fabrics of various regions. Foreign styles and ornamental features have been introduced as typological and aesthetic changes. At the same time, traditional construction techniques are flexible enough to incorporate new developments. In this way Yemeni architectural history represents a dialogue between cultures both within and outside of the modern nation. The hybrid architectural fabric of Tarim is a good example of this cultural dialogue.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, merchant families in the Hadhramaut and Do'an Valleys grew rich from the Indian Ocean trade. The al-Kaf family was considered to be among the most influential of these merchants. As `Alawi Sada, the al-Kafs were amongst the families claiming direct lineage to the Prophet Muhammad. At the same time, they were the first Westernizing elite of the region and contributed to public works projects. The al-Kaf family was not shy of politics either. They often negotiated between the Kathiri Sultans, tribal leaders, and the new class of British expatriates. Many members of the family were also respected religious scholars. Their status was thus based on a complex relationship between traditional society, modernity, and international trade. Their palaces remain as a testament to both their affluence and the complex identity of the modernizing elite of the colonial period.

With the departure of the last division of British troops in 1967, a socialist regime came to power and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) was formed. Most of the affluent Hadhrami palaces were appropriated by the new government and converted into multiple family housing units. In 1990, South and North Yemen unified and most of the palaces were returned to the descendents of the original owners while others have been converted into schools, museums, or other public buildings.

For various social, political and economic reasons Yemen’s diverse built environment has remained vibrant in the face of recent transitions in Middle Eastern society. Yemen has some of the best-preserved Arabo-Islamic monuments and sites as well as living craft traditions, but this unique heritage is

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1 For a discussion of the social history of architecture in the Hadhramaut Valley, see Selma Samar Damluji (1992), The Valley of Mud Brick Architecture: Shibam, Tarim, and Wadi Hadramut. Reading, Garnet.
beginning to disappear. As Yemen is further incorporated into regional and global economic patterns, its traditional occupations, materials and architectural forms are being abandoned.