

The old families of the Levant rehabilitate their cultural heritage

FAMILY HOMES BECOME THEME RESTAURANTS, GALLERIES, MUSEUMS

Rami Farouk Daher
Special to The Daily Star

AMMAN, Jordan: Whether it is the Hariri, Debbane or Audi families in Lebanon; the Shomans, Tells, Batainehs or Bisharats in Jordan; the Toukans, Khouiris, Qattans or Husseinis in Palestine; the Ayidis, Jabris or Azems in Syria; many of the Arab world's notable families are re-emerging on the public scene as patrons of art, heritage and culture after years in the wilderness.

Family estates, historic mansions and heritage sites are being conserved, rehabilitated and adapted into centers of culture, museums, art galleries and even theme restaurants, all of which are appreciated by a wide spectrum of society. The patrons behind these schemes are reclaiming their position across the region through the appropriation of heritage and through an appeal to culture, art and the intelligentsia.

But what is worth noting is how the same urban elite that emerged in the Middle East during the 19th century (defined as "notables" by scholars and historians) are now reinstating their position within civil society as active supporters of culture and critical public debate.

Sidon in Lebanon is a perfect example of local families involved in the local cultural scene. The Debbane family is restoring and adapting its old residence into the new Debbane Palace and Sidon History Museum, while the Audi family has renovated its home into the city's famous Soap Museum. The Audis have also been heavily involved in urban regeneration activities in Sidon through the work of the Audi Foundation.

The Debbane Palace was originally built by the Hammoud family in 1721 and acquired by the Debbanes in 1800. It underwent several periods of restoration, especially after 1999, when the descendants of Raphael Youssef Debbane set up the Debbane Foundation, establishing the Debbane Palace and Sidon History Museum.

The objectives of the museum are to represent and shed light on Sidon's urban, socio-economic and political history. With the aim of constantly renewing the visitor's interest in the city, the museum not only includes artifacts from the past but also focuses on the societies that produced them, including artifacts from people's daily lives, family social structures and political circumstances, not to mention construction, architecture and town planning.

The Audi Foundation transformed its family residence into the organization's headquarters and a thematic museum devoted to handmade soap, relating its history to the region at large, stretching from Tripoli in Lebanon to Aleppo



Debbane Palace was originally built by the Hammoud family in 1721 and acquired by the Debbanes in 1800. It has undergone extensive restoration after the Debbane Foundation was set up in 1999

in Syria, and from Nablus in Palestine to Salt in Jordan. The museum illustrates the various stages and diverse shapes of soap manufacturing.

The Audi family has also been involved in renovating facades along neighboring Al-Chakrieh Street and rehabilitating traditional housing units in the same historic neighborhood.

The Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, established by the Arab Bank in Jordan, is another example of family and corporate philanthropy in the region geared toward supporting

Local families in Damascus share a strong sense of pride in their city

change and transformation in contemporary Arab cultural discourse. The Shoman Foundation, through its different cultural activities, such as the Shoman Forum (a series of public lectures by local Arab critics and thinkers), provides an alternate voice, especially crucial during times of crisis.

The Foundation has been extensively involved in the conservation and protection of

Amman's architectural heritage through the Darat al-Funun Project: an old, deserted complex built on ancient ruins and converted into a nexus of art and culture. It is accessible to all groups of society and serves the Jordanian public.

In 1993, the complex was revamped in such a way as to allow for a panoply of cultural events and historical layers (references to ancient Roman, Byzantine and early 20th-century Amman) to coexist. The project connects with the community both physically, through its architecture and overall layout within the neighborhood, and spiritually, through its transparency and accessibility.

Similarly, the Tell family – of the famous Jordanian poet Arar – has continuously supported northern Jordan's local art scene and rich cultural life. The Tells are patrons of several heritage conservation and cultural projects in the city of Irbid, such as the rehabilitation of their old Madafa (a communal place for hosting family gatherings and events and for receiving guests and travelers, Jordanian family places of genuine hospitality). The family also converted Arar's old house into a cultural center that was offered as a gift to the city.

One of the Damascus families keen on protecting and supporting public projects related to the arts, heritage and culture is the Ayidi family. Othman Ayidi founded the Ayidi Foundation in 1977. Since then, it has not only supported several cultural initiatives in Damascus and elsewhere in Syria, but it has also financed archaeological excavations and architectural restoration works in places like Apamea and the Citadel of Aleppo. In addition, the foundation has undertaken

several conservation projects in Damascus itself. Local families in Damascus share a strong sense of belonging and pride for their city. The Jabri family has recently transformed its family residence in the historic neighborhood of Al-Hamrawi into a restaurant. What is interesting about this rehabilitation project is that it has succeeded in attracting a diverse clientele of local Damascene

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families – of different social strata and of different ages – in addition to foreigners living in or just visiting Damascus.

In Palestine, despite the severe conditions of the current occupation, philanthropists of different Palestinian families such as the Qattans, Aqquas, Shomans, Sabbaghs and Khouiris have established the Jerusalem-based Welfare Association, a perfect example of corporate philanthropy aimed at supporting local Palestinian institutions and the general public.

One of the association's main projects is the restoration of the Old Town of Jerusalem. Within this one very important project, the association has been able to finish about 22 smaller projects; the most significant being Dar al-Aytam al-Islamiah, Al-Madrassa Menjakiah and Souq al-Qataneen.

Since it was established in 1984, the Welfare Association has accomplished around 400 projects in the areas of conservation of historic monuments, construction, health, education and the rehabilitation of damaged buildings and infrastructure. These projects have provided about 320,000 days of work for thousands of workers in the West Bank and Gaza.

The different examples above testify to how notable families in the region are attempting to rewrite themselves into history and into today's society, at a time when many different groups are active in civil society. These families definitely represent an old – and new – group, one that is re-introducing itself in the region not only through the patronage of heritage projects, the arts and culture, but also through socio-economic and political initiatives.

Furthermore, these local family heritage projects produce an important opportunity and a new accessibility for the rereading of history and memory of the recent past in Bilad al-Sham. This is part of a recent paradigm shift in scholarly Arab historiography in the region that is characterized by a shift from focusing on the grand narratives of national and formal history to focusing on the local, granting a voice to social and urban history, the ordinary and the everyday.

These projects offer an ethnographic approach to the understanding of local history and the role of different families and foundations, providing the chance to investigate and research intersections and mediations between state and society today.

Finally, these projects not only assert the role of such families and foundations in the public sphere, but also grant a voice to re-articulated memories on a regional level, focusing on patterns, interconnections and moments of change and transformation.

Al-Azhar's (slow) evolution through the ages

Ancient seat of learning has a history of resisting the new

Donna Bryson
Associated Press

CAIRO, Egypt: The Fatimids – Shiite Muslims who invaded Egypt from Tunisia – founded what would become the Sunni Muslim world's most prestigious seat of learning.

Al-Azhar Mosque was completed in 972 AD, just three years after the invasion, as Fatimid Army commander Jawhar the Sicilian built the city of Cairo. The city and the mosque, which most scholars believe was named for the Prophet Mohammed's daughter, Fatima al-Zahraa, both flourished during a golden age in the early years of Fatimid rule.

The mosque drew scholars from across the Muslim world and grew into a university, pre-dating similar developments at Oxford University in London by more than a century.

Al-Azhar's Fatimid heart, a hall supported by 76 alabaster columns, still stands today.

Egypt remained Shiite until the 12th century, when the orthodox Sunni Muslim Saladin consolidated control over the country. Today, Al-Azhar, Egypt and most of the Muslim world is Sunni.

Al-Azhar has a history of resisting the new.

Ibn Khaldoun was a celebrated medieval historian, and an expert on the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed who even lectured at Al-Azhar. But for 500 years, until the 1920s, Al-Azhar banned his masterpiece, a tome in which he cast a skeptical and scientific eye on world history as it was known in his time.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, scholars frus-

trated at what they saw as Al-Azhar's sterility and its failure to engage creatively with the West founded a rival, the Egyptian University, which would become Cairo University.

The mosque drew scholars from around the Muslim world

Taha Hussein, one of Egypt's most celebrated writers and intellectuals, complained in his memoirs of having to learn by rote "what the sheikhs repeated" at Al-Azhar before escaping in its early years, and discovering "a new relish for life." He

went on to shock the sheikhs, who accused him of blasphemy for suggesting scientific skepticism should be brought to bear in understanding the Koran. Al-Azhar was brought – some say dragged – into the 20th century by the late President Gamal Abdel-Nasser, who nationalized a host of Egyptian institutions after toppling the monarchy in a 1952 military coup. Before long, Azharis were proclaiming that Nasserite socialism was Islamic.

In 1961, subjects in engineering and medicine were added to classes on Islamic law, philosophy, the Koran and the intricacies of the Arabic language. Al-Azhar's ancient status as a leader in science and mathematics had long since faded.

Where scholarly critics see stubborn opposition to innovation and intellectual bankruptcy, others see comforting constancy. Writer Hussein summed up the reverence in which many Egyptians still hold Al-Azhar early in his memoirs, when he described himself as a village boy entering hallowed ground: "The fresh breeze that blew across the courtyard of Al-Azhar at the hour of the morning prayer met him with a welcome and inspired him with a sense of security."



Worshippers pray at Cairo's Al-Azhar Mosque

AP/Mohamad Al-Shehry

HOROSCOPE

Aries (Mar. 21 - April 19)

You are feeling very curious regarding a particular situation. Be patient and do not jump to conclusions, and the end will be rewarding.

Taurus (April 20 - May 20)

You have commitments and appreciate sacrifice on the part of others. You have great intuition and you may use your energies to inspire and encourage.

Gemini (May 21 - June 21)

Your growth and success may be linked to questions of security. This is a time during which you can get ahead by finding your limits and establishing a base.

Cancer (June 22 - July 22)

You may find yourself being put to good use by your friends today. You are most original on areas of home and family where you feel most secure.

Leo (July 23 - Aug. 22)

Happy days bring pleasant memories. You enjoy being with a group of people today that have the same interest as you. Your interest is in some new hobby.

Virgo (Aug. 23 - Sept. 22)

The hallmark of the cycle you have just begun is thinking, learning and communicating with style. This is a period of great mental activity and energy.

Libra (Sept. 23 - Oct. 22)

Secrets and the hidden links that unite all things take on great importance in your life now. Digging into the past for the future uncovers answers.

Scorpio (Oct. 23 - Nov. 21)

You may find yourself more than a little acquisitive, and your current appreciation for just about everything may lead you to indulge too much today.

Sagittarius (Nov. 22 - Dec. 21)

There is that feeling that anything is possible. You will accomplish whatever you set out to do today. You have optimism, faith and a tendency to take chances.

Capricorn (Dec. 22 - Jan. 19)

Someone could challenge you today, but you will be proud of the way you react to this situation. Some problem-solving skills will speed up needed healing.

Aquarius (Jan. 20 - Feb. 18)

You might like to ignore responsibilities today, but reality demands you tend to some personal business first. You may feel like sharing time with your lover.

Pisces (Feb. 19 - Mar. 20)

You feel you will soon have control of something important in your life. This could mean your own place of business, your own apartment or home.

STAR SCENE

Change of guard at AUB alumni association

Leila Hatoum
Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: The American University of Beirut's alumni association celebrated the passing of the presidential baton on Wednesday, from outgoing president Mohammed al-Mashnouk to incoming president Fawaz al-Merehbi.

To mark the occasion, the alumni association held an open-air dinner in its temporary headquarters on Wardieh Street. The event was attended

by many social and political figures, as well as alumni members, such as MP Adnan Arakji, MP Ismael Sukkarieh and the honorary counsel general of Malaysia, Omar Jundi.

Mashnouk, whose relationship with the association "extends over 30 years," reminisced about important events and the ways in which the association survived war and fought sectarianism. He thanked everyone who helped the alumni association and said he hoped that it would stay "all

as one team as they ever were." As befit the ceremonial proceedings, he certified "that Merehbi is the 2004-07 new president."

He also wished Merehbi and the newly elected council "the best of luck and success." Merehbi, in turn, said he considered the association as a forum for all graduates to ask: "What can they do for their association?"

Merehbi presented Mashnouk with an armor as a token of appreciation.



Fawaz al-Merehbi and Mohammed Mashnouk



Dina al-Ladiky



Nabil Boustany and Adnan Arakji



Doha and Khalil Khoury

Photos by Mahrouf Khoury

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