

A fruitful meeting between Arabic and Danish culture

"Art and culture are among the best instruments available for strengthening mutual understanding between different peoples".

H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi af Sharjah.

As long ago as 1761, King Frederik V sent a scientific expedition to the Arabian lands that was led by Carsten Niebuhr. The explorer's task was to gather information about, and thereby achieve a better understanding of, Arabic culture. Since that time cultural links between Denmark and the Arabian lands have been expanding. But today it is especially important to strengthen these links; first and foremost because of the case of the "Mohammed cartoons" weakened them. Therefore it is our task to regenerate them in a vigorous way.

In 1999 Dorte Dahlin exhibited paintings at the 4th International Biennale arranged by Shahjah in the United Arab Emirates. "During this stay" - as she has explained - "I was struck by the Arabian radiance". It led to Dorte Dahlin being asked to arrange a large exhibition at the Museum of Art in Sharjah in which both artists and architects participated. This event resulted, in 2001, in the Danish Ministry of Culture taking the initiative to establish a cultural exchange agreement with the Ministry of Culture in Sharjah. The Danish obligations under this agreement were, in the first year, carried out by several of the staff members from Royal Danish Academy of the Fine Arts together with Dorte Dahlin. The various forms of cooperation were all educative and aimed at building bridges between Arabic and Danish cultures.

Exhibitions, workshops and lectures were arranged in both Copenhagen and Sharjah. The leadership of this exchange agreement was later taken over by a network institution that received the name **Nomad Academy**. It was led by Dorte Dahlin and several colleagues from Denmark as well as other countries, and has already completed a long list of projects that are accompanied by catalogues and books published in both English and Arabic.

All these activities are described in detail on the website: www.nomad-academy.org.

On 12 November 2008 the *Nomad Academy* opened a new exhibition at the Museum of Art in Sharjah. It was entitled *Nomad Academy goes Public* because it was decided that the projects to be presented would be intended for – to a lesser or greater degree – internal or external public space, or in the surrounding landscape of Sharjah as well as in the virtual world.

Sculptor Mogens Møller and architect Jan Havshøj, together with the Iranian Islam-expert Nasser Moaedi Jorfi, have created the project *Moonlight Oasis*, which is a new interpretation of the well-known poetic moonlight gardens from an artist's point of view. In these gardens white lilies that reflected the moonlight were planted; the gentle gleam from rows of glowing candles sailing in small boats in cross-shaped channels of water, intermingled with the golden reflections from moonshine. Mirrors were often placed among the colourful mosaic patterns in the gardens' tiled pathways. Light was cast back like the sparkle from the facets of a gemstone. In the poetic moonlit garden music was played and poetry read. In *Moonlight Oasis* the Islamic understanding of the moon as a symbol of Allah's love for the faithful, is interpreted from a modern viewpoint.

Mogens Møller has described *Moonlight Oasis* this way: "A known feature of the desert, called a "barcan" curves around – like a monument of nature – a modern observatory in which a telescope constantly follows the moon. Electronic equipment magnifies and intensifies the picture of the moon into a knife sharp digital picture of 6 m in diameter. This picture will be the largest existing, direct picture of the moon, framed by a ring of stalactites. The moon picture can light up performers who either recite poetry, play music or dance. The moon picture can be transmitted to anywhere on the earth. From the top of the barcan's vast sloping, shining, tiled surface – that has the form of a half moon – flow quantities of water. A wellness centre will be associated with the Moonlight Garden in which various treatments, for

example, using alternative natural medicine, can be undertaken. The project is displayed at the exhibition as precisely prepared models in bronze and gips with coral (the local custom for building), supplemented by drawings and photographs and likewise an Arabic poem about the moon, created as a calligraphic work.

Lightscape contains proposals for light-art on high buildings in Sharjah. It visualises the question of concealment and transparency in architecture and the merging of private and public spheres in the global media space. Dorte Dahlin and Annemette Larsen, who created the project, have described it in the following way: "In the exhibition a 3 x 7 metre glass wall is displayed, built as a house facade of 1:1. The wall divides the room into a private and a public space in which the private space is installed as an Arabic bridal-suite – filled with mirrors, pictures and the symbolic marriage bed with red sheet and green silk cloth that, according to old Bedouin tradition, must be shown as evidence of honour and innocence. The public space is characterised by a large billboard-print that shows 2 tall buildings in the desert; the one simply adorned with lacy lighting (fine lace from Tønder) over the entire height of the building, while the second is adorned with an equally monumental and self-lighting solar cell panel.

The glass wall itself is constructed of dark, half-transparent spy mirror with a section of Privalite glass which, depending on the supply of electric current, can be clear glass or milky white. Whilst the spy mirror creates shadowy figures, when people move between the rooms, the Privalite glass functions as a screen for a computer generated film. The film is comprised of an unending and unpredictable succession of pictures that blow like snowflakes among animated crystals in various directions, speeds and combinations. Among the pictures can be seen photos from the public and the private space. The outer public space – with the moon, Saturn and the Milky Way in the fore – and the intimate and near space - with a filigree-like drawing, beads formed like a teapot, henna decorated fingers, an eye and a poem about a kiss. In short intervals the Privalite glass is completely clear: in brief

glimpses there are free views from the bridal suite to the public space and vice versa; sudden outward and inward views that make the combined space into a transparent and boundless labyrinth of information. On these “living” facades, which almost dissolve the form of the house into a private-public media-surface, deep differences in our cultures regards what is publically accessible, become intertwined in one move. The global media-world's demand for transparency seeps into classic Arabic architecture, which with its traditional closed facades, hides a labyrinth, an immeasurability of space and details.

The exhibition is, apart from the red and green silk sheeting in the bridal chamber, kept in black and white and therefore contains a poetic reference to the traditional clothing used in the public space, where men in white and women in black themselves create a moving graphic landscape. *Lightscape* can also be reproduced on a large scale and installed on the facades of high buildings. Finally, it is possible to extend the work to such an extent that whole city quarters can be characterised by different light themes. Some possible themes are shown in a long series of small prints that hang in the Arabian bridal chamber as dreams of the future about the city.” The concept is carried out by the two artists together with computer expert Thomas Holmbäck, painter Abdul Rahem Salem from Sharjah and architect Hans Feldthusen.

The project *Paint the Desert* is an installation created by Stig Brøgger. He has adorned the walls of the museum with poetry that he has written. The poems are in both Arabic and English. He has always been fascinated by the desert with its wide unending space, mysterious mirages and the vast heavens. Often he has portrayed the desert as a far reaching space that is cleansed of images and dense patterns of meaning. The silent desert is perhaps one of the few free spaces or meditative places where the visual bombardment of the current age cannot be seen or heard and where there is space for immersion and intensification of artistic activity. For, as he expresses it: “The desert / is the last place /for fantasy / and imagination /

the rest of the world / is being covered /by globalizing buildings / and tourists.”

Sharjah Dialogues consists of two talking benches. They are created by artist Peter Holst Henckel. When one sits on one of the benches a recorded conversation between a woman and a man commences, which you can listen to while resting. The texts are written by Ursula Andkjær Olsen and recorded in Arabic by Duna Dhali and Fanar Ghali who are both actors and poets. When sitting on the benches one is drawn into a space filled with poetry and humour and new dimensions in everyday life are revealed.

The artist group *Superflex* chose to exhibit a copy of the biogas unit that during the last many years has been set up at several places in other countries. The unit is simple and therefore easy to maintain. It can provide enough gas for a family with children and domestic animals. Ownership of this artistically designed orange unit means that women do not need to continue walk far in order to collect fuel to burn. On a video you can see how they dance with joy about a future in which they are freed from that heavy burden of work.

A journey – a meeting is an installation created by the graphic artist Lars Grenaae. It consists of a series of prints that are produced in new forms of mixed techniques. These graphic works contain humour-filled references to explorers – such as Carsten Niebuhr and Jens Munk – who have explored the Arabian lands. They are linked together by stylised circular graphic sheets that create an illusion of movement.

Joachim Hamou chose to create *An Arabic theatre* that uses neither words nor pre-selected “performers” and is therefore in tact with an old Arabic theatrical tradition. The theatre is built in such a way that dialogue can be established, not only between visitors to the exhibition, but also with the museum's architecture and the variety of life on the street – with traders, discussions, prayers and echoes of many other sounds. This theatre invites visitors to the exhibition to be “performers” and find out themselves what should be shown on the screen. It prompts them to – from a nowadays point

of view – to pose the following question: how can we today describe what is “characteristically Arabic”?

Kirsten Dehlholm, together with her colleagues in *Hotel Pro Forma*, has created a video-installation called *Algebra of Place*. It visualises the theme “to journey into new cultures with body and soul”, by showing a series of episodes that take place in the many departments of a fictive international hotel. Visitors to the exhibition experience what the people are like that they meet on the different videos, eventually widening their experiential space in such a way that a more nuanced, balanced picture of Arabic culture is mediated – without the one-sidedness so often met.

In 2001 Dorte Dahlin started to work for the establishment of a “little sister” to the Arab World Institute in Paris. In 2005 it inspired the students at the Institute for Architecture and Aesthetics at the Århus School of Architecture to work on projects for an Arabic cultural centre. After a study tour to the School of Architecture in Sharjah there were 35 proposals put forward for the tangible framework for “an Arabic Cultural Centre in Copenhagen”. These suggestions were developed and given the title *100 Gardens – an Arabic cultural centre in Copenhagen*. They are now displayed in the form of illustrations, models and electronic presentations. Andriette Ahrenkiel, Torben Nielsen and Hans Feldthusen from Århus School of Architecture led the project.

One of the proposals was entitled *Salamander*. It was produced by Martin Krogh and Martin Laursen who today lead the architect firm ADEPT Aps, which has won several international competitions. They have described it this way:

“The main intention of the project is to mix the functions of an Arabic cultural institution, such as museum, exhibition, concert and theatre facilities as well as library, with functions such as residences, offices, and shopping facilities. In that way the building can function as an attraction that can be a meeting place for a wide cross-section of both the residents of

Copenhagen and its visitors. Further, the project seeks to create a cultural building with many public interfaces both internally and externally. Therefore the building is raised and stretched out around Enghave Station. This allows a large space under the building with new walkways and bicycle bridges. With such an organisation of the building's functions and its many public spaces, its form and dynamic expression will appear salamander-like. The area is kept as an open space with squares and gardens where inhabitants can meet, while at the same time an international landmark is created with clear intentions for visitors from around world."

Designer Niels Peter Flint has presented an architectonic project that he has called *Worldby*. It shows models of a town that will constantly be observed from new angles through presentation of videos, paintings and pictures using other media. The project is based upon principles of ecology and reveals itself as a *Utopia*. At the museum in Sharjah this project was presented in such a way that visitors could sketch their own ideas about the towns and society of the future. They could jot them down on a blackboard and thereafter these were recorded and placed on the Internet. In this way guests to the exhibition were very successfully activated.

The various projects gave occasion for fruitful discussions and stimulating contributions in the printed and electronic press. It attracted considerable attention that so many Danish artists had worked intensively to create these projects, which were influenced by Islamic culture and in some cases were intended for Arabian public spaces.

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