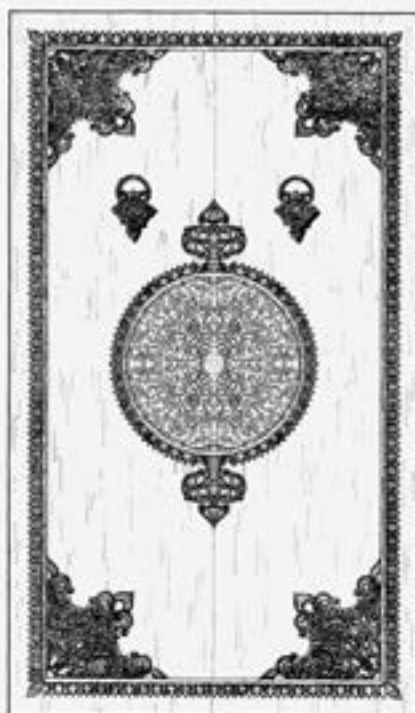


# MASJID AL-ATTAR



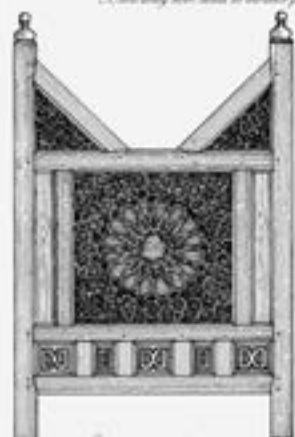
*Room entry door detail at entrance portal*



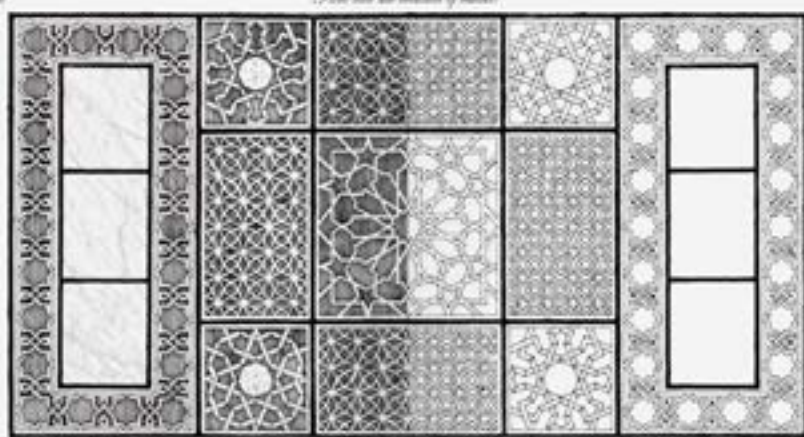
*Front and side elevation of mosque*



*Knabeh's door detail*



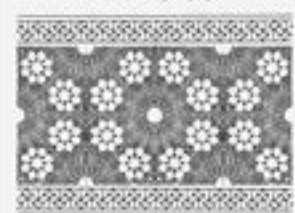
*Side elevation of the pulpit*



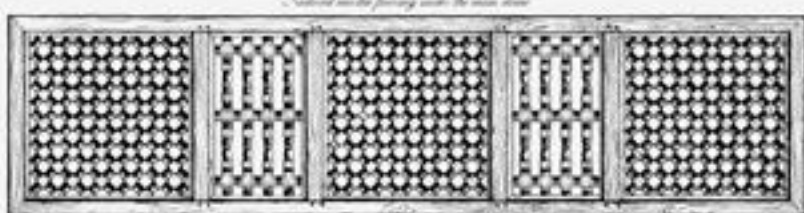
*Patterned wall covering under the main dome*



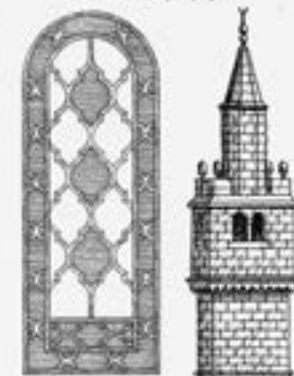
*East elevation of the pulpit*



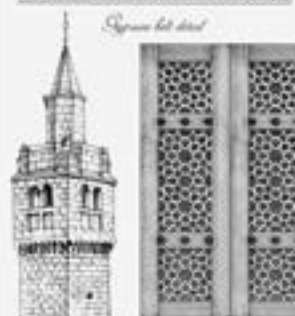
*Spacious hall detail*



*Three arches detail below ground floor plan*



*Second floor window*



*Knabeh's door detail*



*Knabeh's door detail*



*Second floor window*



*Knabeh's door detail*

Mohamad Hamouie

## *The Architect-Craftsperson*

### *El Arquitecto-Artesano*

### *O Arquitecto-Artesão*

#### Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

The scarcity of craftsmanship in our society is the result of modernist philosophies that celebrate mass production, mechanized industry, exponential economic gain and a corporate/developer-led economy. This relatively recent rupture in thousands of years of human history has led to the loss of generations of valuable knowledge and of an understanding of life stretching beyond material face value. A reconciliation between the traditional values of craftsmanship and contemporary technological advances has been at the core of my practice for over three decades. Here, the need for the “Architect Craftsman” is presented as an alternative approach to the egocentric modernist figure of the “Architect Artist” that has in recent times so widely informed our ways of building.

La escasez de artesanos en la sociedad actual es resultado de las filosofías modernas que celebran la producción en serie, las industrias mecanizadas, el beneficio económico exponencial y las economías mundiales dirigidas por empresas y promotores. Esta ruptura relativamente reciente con los miles de años de historia tradicional de la humanidad ha llevado a la pérdida de valiosos conocimientos de generaciones y de una forma de entender la vida que va más allá de su valor material nominal. La reconciliación entre los valores de la artesanía tradicional y los avances tecnológicos ha sido la base de mi práctica profesional durante más de tres décadas. Aquí, la necesidad del “Arquitecto artesano” se presenta como planteamiento alternativo a la aparición de la figura egocéntrica y vanguardista del “Arquitecto artista”, que últimamente ha dado forma ampliamente a nuestros modos de construir.

A escassez de artesanato na nossa sociedade contemporânea é o resultado de filosofias modernistas que celebram a produção em massa, indústrias mecanizadas, ganhos econômicos exponenciais e economias mundiais lideradas por corporações e promotores. Esta ruptura relativamente recente nos milhares de anos da história humana tradicional levou à perda de gerações de conhecimentos valiosos, e de uma compreensão da vida que vai para além do valor facial e material. Uma reconciliação entre os valores tradicionais do artesanato e os avanços tecnológicos contemporâneos tem estado no centro da minha prática há mais de três décadas. Aqui, a necessidade do “Arquitecto Artesão” é apresentada como uma abordagem alternativa à emergência modernista e egocêntrica do “Arquitecto Artista” que, recentemente, foi tão amplamente atribuída às formas de construção.



*There are, however, cases in which men feel too keenly to be silent, and perhaps too strongly to be wrong; I have been forced into this impertinence; and have suffered too much from the destruction or neglect of the architecture I best loved, and from the erection of that which I cannot love (John Ruskin 1849).*

Wherever in the world we look today we see cities in crisis. Most of the traditional city fabric has been destroyed, damaged or left to decay. With a few exceptions, it has been replaced by morphological schemes and building types that bear no resemblance to their urban context. They are true images of our fractured and fragmented societies, torn between tradition and modernity.

### The traditional view of things

In traditional societies, human behavior was continually guided by spiritual values that had their source in a sacred order. This sacred order existed in the vertical dimension of heaven, thereby giving access to the divine source at any moment, and the horizontal dimension in the depths of time, thereby linking successive generations to the originary event of revelation. The immutable nature of the Divine gave the guiding principles of traditional societies “constant and universal qualities”, providing a point of reference.

The extraordinarily beautiful buildings and towns of the past were the product of cooperation between builders and craftspeople, who labored with love and were organized in guilds. These guilds preserved the sacred order. This was a moral and spiritual order first and foremost. The guild’s moral and spiritual horizon guaranteed workers’ dignity and freedom and the quality of their work. It gave work its character and guaranteed its craftsmanship.

The beauty of traditional craft comes from three ingredients: the beauty of natural materials, the beauty of natural processes, and the beauty of natural forms. It was in the crucible of the builder-craftsperson’s creative imagination that forms and materials were alchemically transformed into the beauty we see in traditional work.

Condition of the interior before restoration (1) and Interior view looking towards the new mezzanine (2) of the Masjid Al Attar, Tripoli, Lebanon, 2019 - In progress



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Builders and craftspeople toiled silently and anonymously, serving their community. Submission to tradition granted the modestly talented builder-craftsman the accumulated wisdom of countless generations and the gift of creating unparalleled beauty – a beauty he could not have produced alone.

Not all of us can leave our mark through our own invention, but through the grace of tradition we can transcend our limitations.

Innovation or change always happened, but innovation in the traditional view of things was “change within continuity”. This is change driven by innovations in design, technology, and materials within a continuity with a cherished past, giving it a seemingly “static” quality..

### **The modern view of things**

Modernism, and by extension modernist architecture, represents a break, a rupture in the traditional view of things. It made a break with a way of understanding both the world and humankind.

The new understanding of the world involved an abandonment of metaphysics as the framework for the study of the natural world (as was the case in traditional societies) and the rise of positivist science. The new understanding of humankind involved a personal autonomy for the individual unfettered by tradition or external authority. This began with the Renaissance and continued well into the twentieth century. The individual became little more than a product of his or her time.

This historicization of consciousness and repudiation of the traditional view led to the development of the modern individual, whose rise was a tacit recognition of the self as detached from the interrelationship that had defined each person and given him or her purpose and meaning. Individuals were no longer linked to a higher order but seemingly free to do as they pleased. This gave the modern view of things a dynamic and horizontal character in that it is not the symbolism of things that is of interest but their ever-changing material and theoretical connections.

Thus, modernism’s rallying call became “innovation for innovation’s sake”. As a result, architectural theory and practice ceased to be a normative body of knowledge grounded in a sacred order of tradition to become a self-conscious solipsistic discourse adrift in the ever-changing currents of history. Guilds were dismantled in the name of efficient industrial production and craftspeople reduced to laborers. Then the architect-artist was born.

Architect-artists are driven by new theories, a sense of authority allowing them to look upon the past as an accumulation of what was done over thousands of years and to decide what is to be kept and what is not. Architect-artists never ask whether a historic building is true or false, good or bad, right or wrong; rather they will report on who designed it, what inspired him, who the patron was, which style it belongs to, and how original it is.

So according to this modern view, everything is tied to its historical context and time, its horizontal dimension, with no enduring and universally valid norms connecting the past with present and future.

### **Reconciling tradition and modernity**

One can appreciate that the modern world has offered great technological improvements and opportunities. But a fair assessment of its legacy, particularly its architectural legacy, will be critical. Its “innovation for innovation’s sake” and iconoclastic approach to all things past make for a dubious doctrine, whose erosion of the fabric of our beloved traditional cities must be regretted. The paradigm of the architect-artist that dominated the 20th century may be said to be *passé*. And nor can we rely on the traditional builder-craftsperson. Alas, guilds have long since disappeared and with them many crafts; the master-apprentice relationship that allowed architectural



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Detail of the zelig base and gypsum carvings (1) and the brass lantern in the entrance portico (2) of the Jameh Al Khareiji, Eastern Province, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2010-2020

3: Exterior view of the Jameh Al Khareiji as seen from the garden



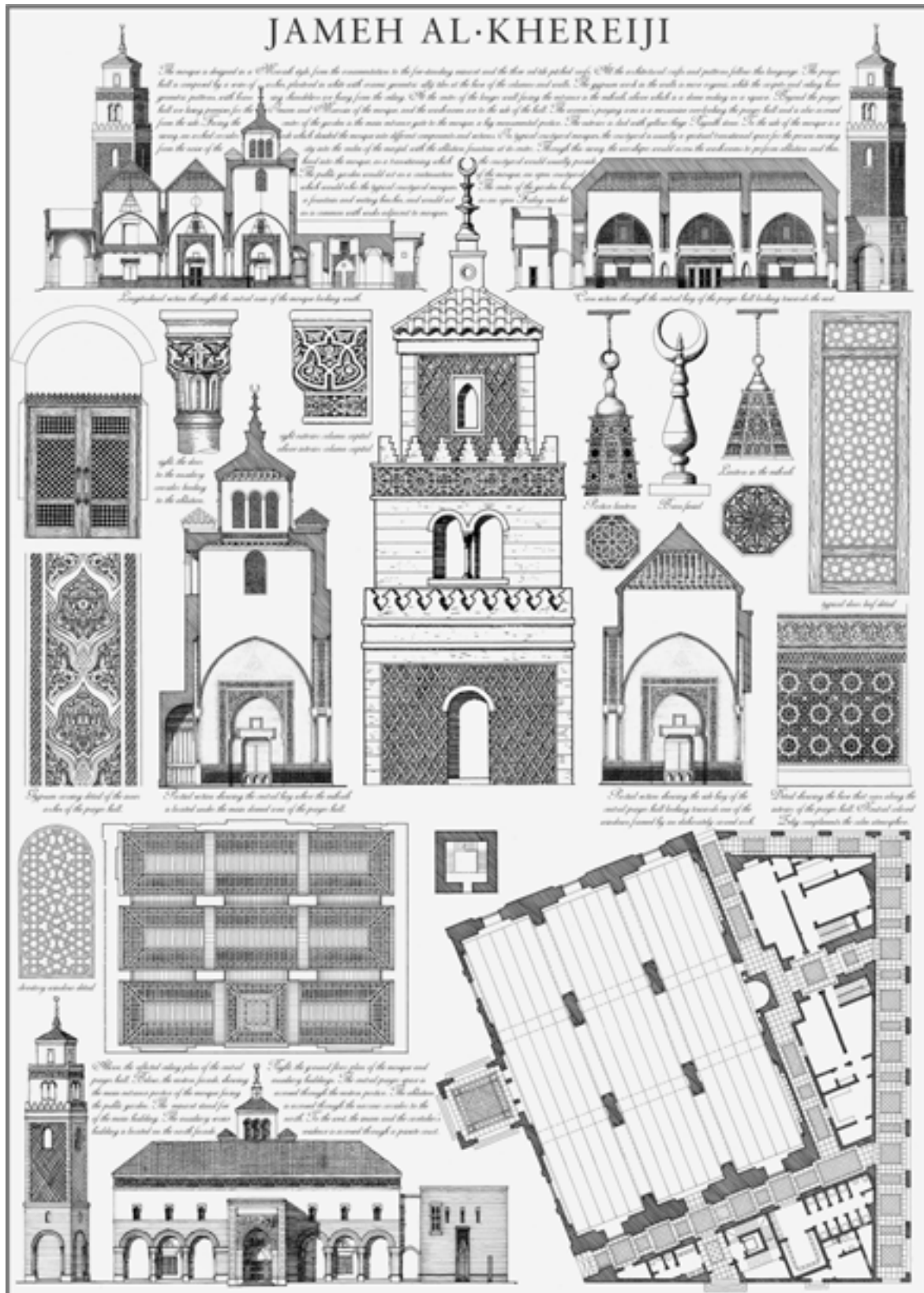
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knowledge to be passed on has been replaced by modern university architectural education, and architectural theory – the stability of meaningful forms – has at best been preserved as a historical relic that may or may not inspire architects.



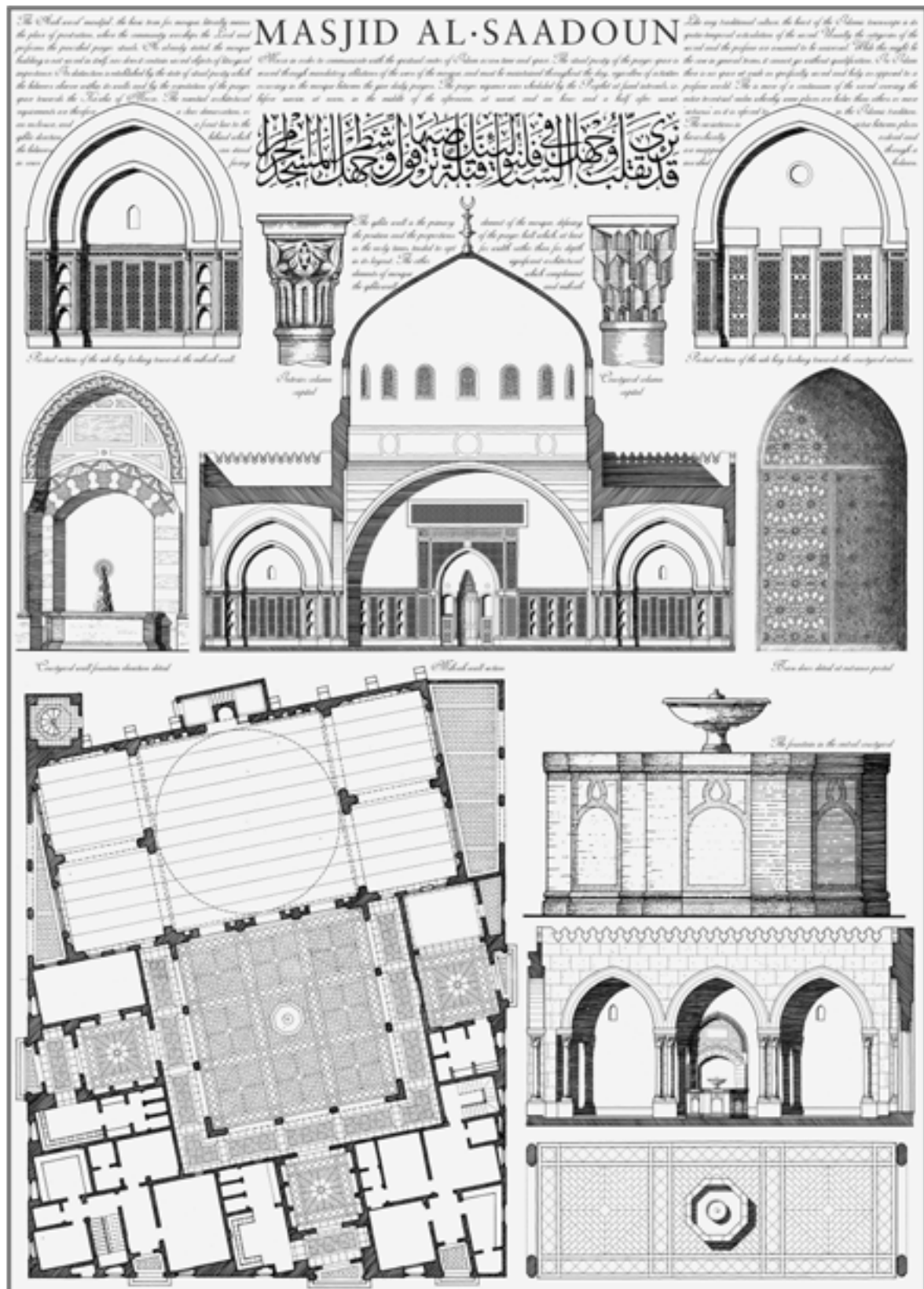
In this context, what type of designer can preserve tradition and embrace what the contemporary world can offer? The “architect-craftsperson” – one who combines craftsmanship and the building arts with the role of architect. It is to this paradigm that I like to see myself as belonging.

Drawings, details and patterns of the  
Jameh Al Khireiji, Eastern Province,  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2010-2020



This is not to call for a return to the past. That is simply impossible. Without slavish imitation, the past and its architectural vocabulary and forms, its structural solutions, its sustainable practices, its existential meanings, and its historical significance should be taken as a model to be learned from and improved upon. I have always advocated a relationship to tradition and the past not of

Drawings, details and patterns of the Masjid Al Saadoun, Eastern Province, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2011-2021





1



2

imitation but of emulation with innovation. The architect-craftsperson loves tradition and gives it a future in a contemporary context.

The traditional crafts have not entirely disappeared. They have survived in discrete pockets the world over. So the architect-craftsperson has an opportunity here but also a responsibility of

Gypsum carving of the four squinches supporting the dome (1) and intricately carved gypsum work on the dome above the prayer hall (2) of the Masjid Al Saadoun, Eastern Province, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2011-2021

3: Exterior view of the Masjid Al Saadoun from the east



3





View from the prayer hall towards the entrance (1) and the mihrab (2) of the Corniche Musalah, Eastern Province, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2013-2019



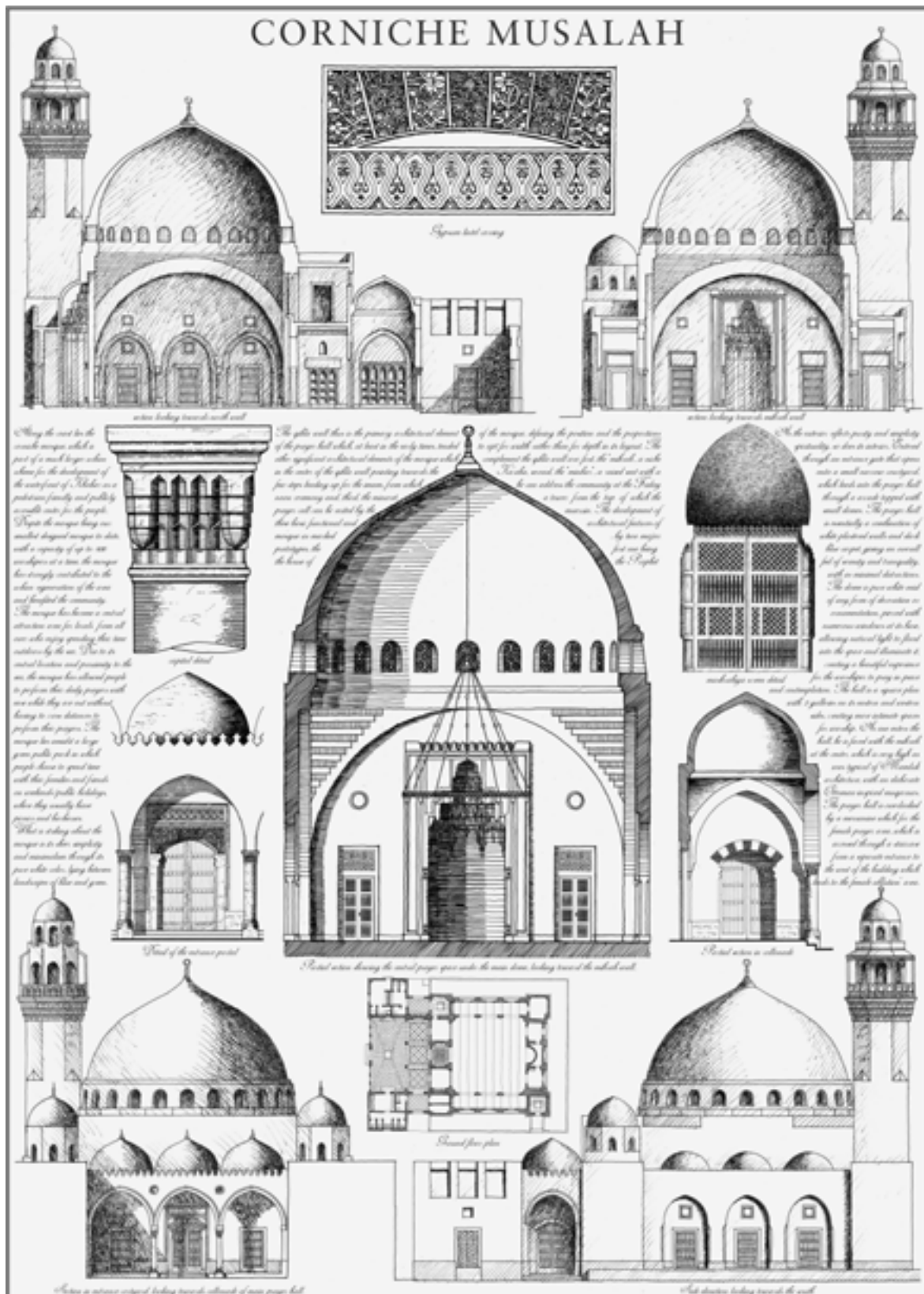
View of the mosque from the bay. Corniche Musalah

leadership and stewardship: to guide and preserve craftspeople and their craftsmanship. This is why I work closely with craftspeople around the world, visiting their workshops, designing and detailing the work we do, staying with them until the final touch is given. The building site becomes a community of workers collaborating to produce space for the soul.



The architect-craftsperson's responsibility is great. It requires several qualities: a sensibility toward beauty, a love and understanding of precedent and architectural typology, sufficient technical training, a collaborative spirit, and creative talent.

Drawings, details and patterns of the  
Corniche Musalah, Eastern Province,  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2013-2019





1



2



3

Details of the mezzanine *mashrabiya* screen (1) and the new mihrab (2) of the Masjid Al Attar, Tripoli, Lebanon, 2019 - In progress

3: Detail of the mihrab muqarnas and Iznik tiles of the Masjid Al Saadoun, Eastern Province, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2011-2021

This may seem quite a burden. It is, but it is a burden of love. There is nothing more satisfying than successfully channeling the spirit of the past through the design process into a unique contemporary product that embodies best contemporary practice, materials, and technology while providing continuity with tradition and spiritual meaning.

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## Biography | Biografia | Biografia

### Mohamad Hamouie

His private research and practice have made him one of the leaders of New Traditional Architecture in the Middle East. He is a member of the INTBAU College of Traditional Practitioners, a Professor of Practice and the Director of the Institute of Islamic Art & Architecture at the Lebanese American University in Beirut. In 1993, Hamouie established his private practice. His first project, the Central Mosque in Shkodër, Albania was nominated for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2001. Through his comprehensive knowledge of history and awareness of local context, Hamouie has designed and built more than 300 projects. Collaborating with master craftsmen worldwide, his buildings are as much guided by contemporary theories as by traditional values.