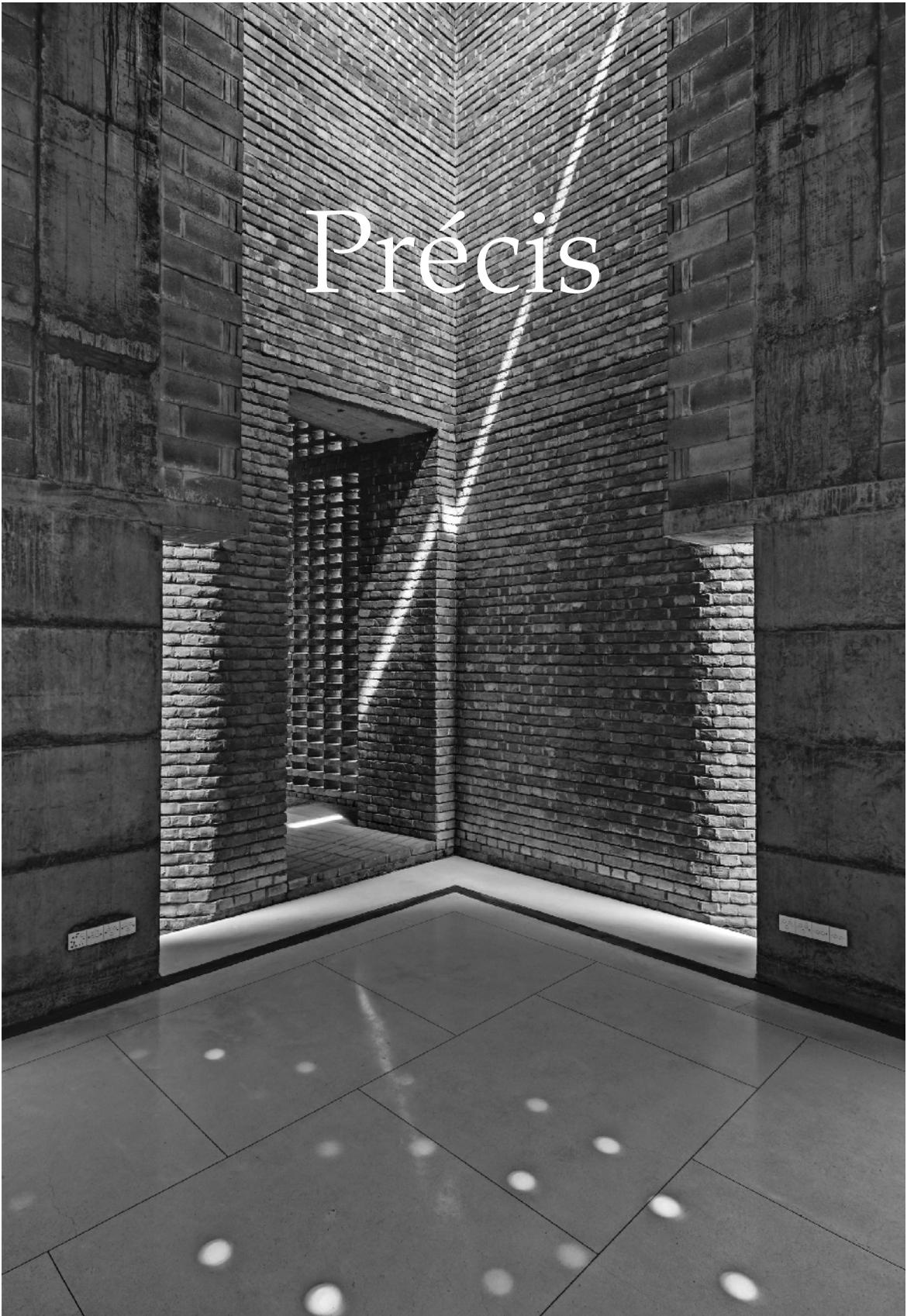


# Précis



## **CONFERENCE PRÉCIS**

IJIA's précis serve as records of important exhibitionary events, seminars, conferences, conference panels, roundtables, workshops, or announcements that treat or are relevant to Islamic architecture, design, planning and urbanism and are usually written by a participant in the event.

**MIDDLE EASTERN CRAFTS: YESTERDAY, TODAY, TOMORROW,  
VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM, OCTOBER 11–12, 2018**

*Reviewed by Anna McSweeney, University of Sussex*

Craft is having a moment – the international market for contemporary craft is more buoyant than ever, with record trade figures and increasingly high-profile exhibitions and publications.<sup>1</sup> But contemporary craft from the Middle East is not equally represented in this global turn. Middle East artists and galleries did not feature among the 2018 or 2019 finalists for the prestigious Loewe and Collect craft prizes. The work of the intrepid curator Mariam Rosser-Owen at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) will go some way towards restoring the reputation and visibility of craftsmanship from the region. In 2015 she won a New Collecting Award from the Art Fund that has allowed her to focus on contemporary craft from North Africa, an award that led to her organization of the conference *Middle Eastern Crafts: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* that took place at the V&A in October 2018.

While the conference expanded the reach of Middle East crafts to include work from Afghanistan, Palestine, Jordan, and the Gulf States, Rosser-Owen's curatorial focus is on contemporary craft from North Africa and especially Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt – regions which have vibrant contemporary traditions that are also well represented in the historic collections of the V&A. For the first time in nearly a century, the V&A has begun to acquire contemporary craft from the region to add to its world-class historic Middle East collection. This is a welcome move that will confirm the V&A's place as a world centre of Middle Eastern craft, both historic and contemporary.

In his welcome speech, Tim Stanley (Senior Curator, V&A) highlighted the new engagement of the museum with contemporary craft since the inauguration of the Jameel Prize for contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic tradition at the V&A in 2009. In his keynote lecture, Marcus Milwright (University of Victoria, Canada) urged us to put aside the idea of contemporary craft in the Middle East as continuing an unbroken, unchanging historic tradition, as well as to resist a narrative of loss and decline of skills and techniques. In rejecting these larger narratives, he looked to local stories of making material culture for evidence of resilience and creative recycling, revealing evidence of widespread resistance and creative adaptation to macro-economic changes.

The themes highlighted by Milwright were developed in the papers over the next two days. With its lively mix of artists, artisans, art historians, and museum and heritage professionals and practitioners, the strong message from the conference speakers was one of resilience, adaptation, local innovation, extraordinary skill, and increasing global visibility and demand. Other recurring themes included the question of authenticity of practice and tradition; the tension between artist studio and workshop practices and the ethics of working with craft workers in often poor socio-economic circumstances; the impact of changing technologies and evolving market demand; and craft as an expression of cultural identities.

Dina Bakhom's illuminating paper on the restoration of medieval *minbars* in Cairo focused us on one of the overall themes of the conference, the question of authenticity and who gets to determine where that authenticity lies – is it in the material, the technique, the function, or the continuity of use of an historic object? Highlighting the conservation work of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in historic Cairo, she examined how and why restoration decisions were made. The resilience and adaptation of artists in response to changing markets were highlighted in Seif al-Rashidi's and Sam Bowker's papers on the Khayamiya tentmakers of Cairo. They asked a fundamental question: what sustains a craft tradition? The answer for the tentmakers is adaptation, as a changing market from an historic local demand for portable architectural textiles to a new global market for tourist objects and artist collaborations has changed the kinds of work produced. The resilience of artists was evident in the work of individuals such as Hany Abdel Khamer whose deeply political work *Revolution Khayamiya* (2011) he completed in the evenings, away from the publicity of the workshop.

The second panel brought an historical perspective to the Maghreb, with insights on ceramic revivals in Tunisia and Algeria and clashes of identities by Clara Ilhan Álvarez Dopico. Margaret Graves spoke about the vexed question of cultural authenticities and colonial anxieties in a paper on nineteenth-century Moroccan ceramics. The theme of authenticity ran through her paper, as it questioned the concern for cultural purity in Moroccan ceramic traditions. Jessica Gerschultz finished the panel with a paper on the Tunisian tapestry artist Safia Farhat in which she remapped the transregional history of modernist tapestry as feminist labour.

Day two was largely dominated by short papers from craft practitioners and those working in heritage industries. Fascinating papers from Thalia Kennedy (Turquoise Mountain), George Richards (Art Jameel), Kendall Robbins (British Council), and Lisa Ball-Lechgar (UAE) addressed craft from the perspective of the heritage organizations promoting regeneration, renovation, and restoration in Afghanistan, Dubai, Jeddah, and the UAE. Working with communities and local individuals, the projects they described offered training programmes to local craft workers, access to materials as well as the hugely important access to new global markets. The contribution of the Afghan master carpenter Naseer Yasna was invaluable, as he described how his work that was 'rooted in tradition but clearly in our own time' was supported by Turquoise Mountain.

Sometimes the need to access global markets involves a more fundamental change in craft practice, as Simon Fraser and Liz Wright discussed for their community-driven project with Safi ceramicists in Morocco. Access to global markets for their traditional ceramics was restricted by a reluctance among the potters to move away from the toxic, lead-based glazes that made their ceramics unmarketable on a global scale. This revealing paper also described the

challenges as well as enormous potential of enabling communities to access their own local craft heritage. The importance of access to local heritage and equality of opportunity was also clear in the paper by Khaldun Bshara, whose Riwaq centre for the preservation of cultural heritage in Palestine works on a system of reciprocity to restore community value and status to heritage sites. Locally sourced materials, job creation, and skilling up a local population for employment as well as increasing awareness of local built heritage were key to these community-led craft initiatives.

Equality of opportunity among artists and artisans emerged as a particular concern in many of the papers presented by artists in the second panel. Eric van Hove argued for an ethical approach to working with local artisans in his atelier outside Marrakesh, highlighting the importance of naming individual artisans and of paying them a high wage for their skilled work. Textile artist Sara Ouhaddou and installation artist Amina Agueznay in Morocco as well as Kuwait-based product designer Kawthar al-Saffer were grappling with similar issues as well as with questions of visibility and access to global markets. The potential of craftwork as a dynamic force for social change was evident in the work of Palestine architects Elias and Yousef Anastas and in the dynamic approach of graphic artists Oman al-Zo'bi and Yousef Abedrabbo in Jordan, whose Amman-based collective Eyen collaborates with traditional calligraphers including women from the Iraq al-Amir women's co-operative.

Q&A sessions were lively and informed, while breakaway sessions included handling sessions for both newly acquired and historic objects from the V&A Middle East collection. The independent design historian and Jameel Prize 5 judge Tanya Harrod provided a welcome overview of the important themes that had emerged in her perceptive closing remarks, arguing that while craft may be a contested concept, in the Middle East it is very much alive.

### Contributor Details

Dr. Anna McSweeney is a lecturer in Islamic art and architecture in the Department of Art History at the University of Sussex. Her book *From Granada to Berlin: the Alhambra Cupola* (Verlag Kettler, 2020) traces the history of a carved and painted wooden Nasrid ceiling from the fourteenth-century Alhambra palace to the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin today. Following her Ph.D. from SOAS, University of London (2012), she was an *Art Histories and Aesthetic Practices* fellow at the Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin (2013–14) and a *Bilderfahrzeuge* research fellow at the Warburg Institute, London (2015–18).

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### Endnote

1. World exports in crafts increased from \$19.9 billion in 2002 to \$35 billion in 2015, with an average growth rate of 4.42 per cent. UN Conference on Trade and Development report 'Creative Economy Outlook. Trends in international trade in creative industries' (2018), [https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/ditcted2018d3\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/ditcted2018d3_en.pdf). See also Anna Mignosa, Priyatej Kotipalli, eds, *A Cultural Economic Analysis of Craft* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1–12.

**RECONSTRUCTING NEIGHBOURHOODS OF WAR, ORIENT-INSTITUT  
BEIRUT, NOVEMBER 29–DECEMBER 1, 2018**

*Reviewed by Ahmad Sukkar, Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture,  
MIT*

Elaborating approaches to reconstruct neighbourhoods of war, the Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB), an institute of the Max Weber Foundation – German Humanities Institutes Abroad, organized an international conference in Lebanon, a country with a complex experience of post-war reconstruction of which there has been considerable criticism. At a time of intense debate on urban conflict and reconstruction in the so-called Arab Spring countries, especially Syria, but also in Iraq and Lebanon, the conference was wisely planned to be not merely about the history of conflict in war-torn cities that has led to the need for their reconstruction, nor simply about the formalities of post-war reconstruction. Instead, it focused on the level of the neighbourhood and discussed people-centred and bottom-up approaches to post-war reconstruction. Comparing different cities that had similar experiences of post-war reconstruction, well-established researchers and young scholars presented 20 papers in 9 panels in 3 days. They discussed what could be learned from similar neighbourhoods in order to avoid past mistakes. Combining practical aspects with theoretical concepts taken from the humanities and social sciences, the interdisciplinary approach of the conference involved historical and cultural studies, architecture, urbanism, and more.

In a wider context that traces the international research agenda in recent years, research at the OIB has been focusing on what the director, Professor Birgit Schäßler, refers to as ‘questions of entanglement, connectivity and interrelatedness’.<sup>1</sup> These questions deal with the relations that exist between different people, people and what they produce, people and the environment, and people and the divine. In the context of this conference, these relations manifest themselves as ‘neighbourhoods’. In them, communities, individuals, and states interact between the two poles of war and reconstruction, which are productions of human activity that affect the built environment and come as a result of perceptions of cultural and ethnic identities that are often shaped by traditional religious and new secular views in Middle Eastern contexts.

The research theme of ‘relations’ in the form ‘neighbourhoods’ was introduced through Marwan Rechmaoui’s artistic view of the neighbourhoods of Beirut, which draws on identities in contested societies and the social and cultural production of the Lebanese post-war urban fabrics of sectarianism. His artwork appears in the form of flags with signs that reflect the etymology of the names of districts and their religious and cultural identities, abstract sculptures of repetitive and out-of-scale buildings, and mono-coloured maps in the form of flat sculptures of quarters of Beirut city. All of this reflects tedious repetition and capricious fluctuations of modernity within Middle Eastern traditions of the neighbourhoods.

Emphasizing ‘The Importance of Being Earnest about Neighbourhoods’, the first panel examined three cases of war-torn neighbourhoods from Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. It included critical reflections on spontaneous settlement, social reproduction and ethnic identity in historical settlements in Homs,

the changing neighbourhood relations in Mosul, and spontaneous repair practices for residential buildings in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War.

Based on this overview of the current situation across the Middle East, the next panel examined case studies of and possible lessons from the global experience in neighbourhoods following WWII, including the reconstruction of Warsaw, neighbourhood rebuilding in Berlin and Dresden during the Cold War, and the revival of downtown Hiroshima after the mass destruction of the atomic bomb.

Given the scale of destruction in Syria, it was no surprise that several papers explored neighbourhoods in major Syrian cities. One paper focused on the possible partnership between the common reconstruction actors (state, international aid, architects, and people) within the informal building processes in Damascus. Three papers focused on neighbourhoods in Aleppo's old city, including the recovery of memory as an aspect of reconstruction, the socio-political deliberations on reconstruction, and the coherent renewal of urban social networks.

It was no surprise either that several papers analysed neighbourhoods in Lebanon, including community relations in war literature. Four papers outlined the challenges of reconstruction after the 2006 Lebanon War. Two of them focused on Beirut's neighbourhoods, examining propertied landscapes in Haret Hreik and demonstrating the politicization of post-war reconstruction in Southern Beirut. Two papers were on cases of reconstruction of neighbourhoods beyond Beirut, explaining the power dynamics in reconstructing the urban-rural transition (peri-urban) neighbourhood of South Lebanon and demonstrating the politics of identity reconstruction of the historic neighbourhood in Bint Jbeil.

Scholars illustrated the role of youth teams in reconstructing Mosul, evaluated the impact of enforcing homogeneity on the neighbourhoods of Baghdad, and assessed the impact of immigration on the post-war reconstruction in the neighbourhoods of Khorramshahr after the Iran-Iraq War. They also surveyed new planning strategies from the Balkans, Cyprus, and Afghanistan and analysed the concept of mapping out the relationship between intimacy and distance in a Kashmiri neighbourhood.

The conference identified the problems of reconstruction, such as the connection between the people-centred, bottom-up approaches and government-led, top-down approaches when political systems are contested and often inefficient. The case studies discussed grand challenges, including how to bring together antagonized communities and reconstruct inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous places in cities and rural areas, where reconstructing a home means that people feel at home. The people-centred, bottom-up approaches were stressed in papers including those on the role of youth teams in reconstructing Mosul, the socio-political deliberations in the old city of Aleppo, the politics of identity construction in Bint Jbeil, and the two communities of the Kashmiri neighbourhood before and after the militancy relationship.

The last round included 'Lessons for the Present and the Future'. Discussing the global and critical perspective of reconstruction with the participants, the director concluded that throughout the world, but especially in the Middle East, reconstruction encounters political and ideological challenges that require creative and sophisticated approaches to overcome them. Some participants called for greater use of artistic approaches that support the positive initiatives of participatory reconstruction throughout the Middle East and facilitate the integration of these initiatives within political structures

by raising questions and conducting research about empowering people to become integral to the processes of decision-making.

Comparing approaches from the Orient and the Occident, the director discussed how they vary in terms of rebuilding heritage identity and urbanism. What can academics and research and cultural institutes such as the OIB do, and how could they connect people, especially young people? These were key questions regarding improvements for future conferences in a region where young people are the main engine for development and where research centres have a limited role, despite the increase in their importance.<sup>2</sup>

### Contributor Details

Ahmad Sukkar is an Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture Postdoctoral Fellow at MIT 2019–20. He is a former Postdoctoral Visiting Fellow at the OIB, Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at the American University of Beirut, Visiting Lecturer at the University of Cambridge, and Imam Bukhari Visiting Research Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (supported by a Barakat Trust Award). His doctoral thesis on the body and architecture in pre-modern Islam at the London Consortium (University of London and the AA) was shortlisted for the British Association for Islamic Studies' De Gruyter Prize for the Study of Islam and the Muslim World.

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### Endnotes

1. Orient Institut Beirut, *Annual Report 2017* (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut), 9.
2. Articles are published on the TRAF0 Blog for Transregional Research, curated by the Forum Transregional Studien (Berlin), the Max Weber Stiftung – Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland (Bonn) and CrossArea e.V. – Verband für Transregionale Studien, Vergleichende Area Studies und Global Studies (Leipzig), <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/category/reconstructing-neighborhoods-of-war>.