

INTRODUCTION **ÁLVARO SIZA**

I met Sahel Al Hiyari in 2002. We were both involved in a unique program sponsored by the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. The program promotes extensive contact over the period of one year between an experienced professional and a younger colleague in a number of artistic disciplines: dance, literature, music, theater, and the visual arts (architecture was chosen to represent the visual arts for the year 2002).

Our first meeting, in Porto, was registered by a photographer who accompanied us, while trying to be as discreet as possible. Soon, his presence became unnoticeable to us. We talked about our countries and their cultures; about geography and history; about travels. We discussed complex contemporary conditions; we compared our different professional experiences; we talked about architecture.

Sahel Al Hiyari went to school in Amman before going on to university at the Rhode Island School of Design in the United States. He later continued his education as an architect at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design and at the University of Venice. He practiced in the United States, in Italy, and in his home country, Jordan, where he established his studio in Amman.

Through the course of the conversation I got a sense of the diversity of experiences he had interiorized during his lengthy stays in these different countries, as well as his resolve to live and work in Jordan, despite the many opportunities that had been made available to him elsewhere.

Together, we looked at our projects. We discussed - in this and in other meetings - the similarities and differences in our work conditions, and the limitations and encouragements of each of our contexts, both influenced by today's environment of globalization. I could tell that in his discourse and in his projects, the persistence of his cultural roots and his knowledge and grasp of the evolution of technology and the visual arts coexist, while facing the different developmental stages that shape our unstable and complex contemporary world.

This double consciousness is present in all his projects; it determines both consolidation and transformation in variable yet fruitful expressions. For Sahel, tradition and modernity are neither opposed nor incompatible. He belongs to that group of architects who believe in a relationship between experience and expression, and in a continuity that does not exclude (but rather enables) the transformation of a given society, and even provides an operative accompaniment to that transformation.

The different projects he presented to me, whether of a small or a significant scale, show the desire to create a modernity based on the impulse of a cultural evolution and of the multiplication of relationships. Some characteristics of this impulse are common to all of his projects: the adjustment to climate, topography, and context (whether stable or in a process of formation or transformation; dense or dispersed), as well as the attention given to the control of light. These circumstantial conditions present a privileged working tool. They simultaneously determine the use and adjustment of traditional processes to whatever contributions technological evolution can provide.

This is a path that admits no ambiguities; it does not allow the modern to be dressed up as traditional. What it does admit is what it states and transforms, the almost inexpressible 'spirit' that runs through centuries of settlement and intersections, and the receipt and spread of culture.

This publication illustrates and explains this journey: The Sand Lofts Apartments in Kuwait City is a project that enlivens an urban area undergoing profound change, in which two solid towers, vibrant in their solar protection skin, define a central space, permeated into a ground floor of complex geometry; the intelligent insertion into the landscape of bodies that rise from a smooth hill, surrounding an excavated succession of interior and exterior spaces in A-House in Yemen; the renovation of a small house located amongst humble urban structures in Amman; the vibrant texture of a wall in Darat

al-Funun, where craftsmanship meets the multiple possibilities granted by the use of concrete; the carefully planned internalization of the Clinical Psychologist's Workspace, inserted in the essential cubism of Amman; or the volumetric and spatial quality of K-House, lost in a fragile tissue of walls and buildings. All those projects are a testimony to a design activity that no longer is just a promise.

Addressing the ongoing transformations in a crucial region of the world that has provided the setting for numerous centuries of human settlement requires energy, knowledge, and talent. All of these qualities are patently evident in the work of Sahel Al Hiyari and in the work of a group of architects in Amman with whom he is connected. His efforts at renewal do not concern Jordan alone. No efforts at renewal are strictly local today.

Porto, October 3, 2005