

**Shibam, the Manhattan of the desert between
seniority and the risk of extinction**

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Introduction

If you mention skyscrapers today, everyone will refer to the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, which was built with the latest engineering technologies that facilitated the construction of skyscrapers amidst different geographical terrains. As for the oldest of them, which made the English explorer Freya Stark call it "Manhattan of the Desert"¹, or as the German orientalist Hans Hilfertz calls it "Chicago of the Desert"², it has existed since ancient times, specifically in eastern Yemen, known as Shabam.

For Shibam Wijdan in the heritage of the Arabs before Islam, in the description of the Canadian Qais Hadhrami, he said in his poem (To Whom is Home):

I stayed at home as if I was * * * an early morning starch

A nose like the blood of a deer is freed * * * from pubic wine or shabam vines



Harun al-Rashid

As for the aftermath of Islam, the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid, who ordered its construction in 166 AH, is the best witness that Shibam was present in the cities of the Abbasid state, because of its religious and economic importance.

The Yemeni historian Abu Muhammad al-Hasan al-Hamdani referred in his book "The Attribute of the Arabian Peninsula" to the seniority of the construction of Shibam, which dates back to the twelfth century BC, and that it is the first country of donkeys.

It is considered the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Hadramawt during the fourth century AD, after its capital was Shabwa, which collapsed after the destruction, so its residents fled to Shabam to build their new home, as mentioned by Al-Hamdani, and Shabam is located on the trade route in the Arabian Peninsula, through which caravans of spices and incense pass.

¹- Source: Southern Gates of the Arabian Peninsula, Trip to Hadramawt 1934: p. 211

²- Source: Yemen through the back door: p59

However, the deterioration is apparent in Shibam as a result of tampering with the color of its white and brown buildings, as some buildings appeared in blue, as well as according to UNESCO, neglecting the old agricultural flood management system in the Hadramawt Valley, and the excessive pressure on traditional sewage systems by introducing modern water supplies along with drainage systems, causes a deterioration of the city's features. At the end of 1984, the Director-General of UNESCO made his appeal for the preservation of the cities of Shibam and Hadramawt (which is concerned with bad people).

UNESCO has been cooperating with the General Authority for the Preservation of Historic Cities in Yemen to rehabilitate buildings in Shibam since 2000, and 60% of those buildings have been rehabilitated, while on the other hand 90% of the old buildings have been documented³.

However, due to the ongoing war in Yemen since 2015, which has cast a shadow on tourism and antiquities, how is Shibam doing in the current situation? Are restorations related to the preservation of this historic city being completed?

Urbanism in Shibam



Aerial photo of the city of Shibam, which is surrounded by a fence

If we talk about the seniority of building skyscrapers in the world, we will not find what is older than the tall buildings of Shabam, which are built of milk bricks, and dried in sunlight in the form of rectangles that are stacked above each other to see a building up to 15 floors, covered from the outside with plaster mixed with dirt and straw,

and the thickness of its ground floors ranges from one and a half to two meters, and the

³- Source: UNESCO Platform, retrieved from link: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/192/>

upper floors are coated with thick layers of white alabaster, while the windows are made of artfully carved wooden materials with openings to allow the passage of air currents when closed⁴, and their manufacture is commensurate with the nature of the weather in winter and summer. The roofs of these houses are water-resistant after placing sand plaster made of lime, wood ash, and coarse sand. This architectural style gives strength to these houses for two or three centuries, and the oldest of these houses that have been monitored through the history of construction on their door is the house of Abdullah bin Faqiqiq built in 1609, but most of the houses date between 1880 and 1915 according to what the leader of the⁵ French mission pointed out . Jean-François Breton while documenting Omran Shibam.

As for its majestic floors, each floor played a specific role. The storage of grain and basic food is carried out on the ground floors, which provide room for ventilation in order not to spoil the materials stored in them, while sheep and goats are housed in neighboring rooms on the first floor at night.

As for the second and third floors, they have several rooms for their male occupants called "Khodour", while the fourth and fifth floors are allocated to women in addition to kitchens and toilets, and the sixth and upper floors are allocated to children or newly married in the extended family (the extended family is the families that extend outside the core of the family, and consists of the eligibility of the husband and wife such as uncles, uncles and grandparents).



From one of the men's druggies

The building in the city of Shibam dates back to the sixteenth century AD, specifically after the massive flood that destroyed this city in March 1532, as indicated by UNESCO sources, which included the city in the World Heritage List in 1982, and according to the statistics on which d. Jean-François Breton, the number of dwellings that existed

⁴- Source: Yemen National Information Center, retrieved from the link:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20060717202529/http://www.yemeninfo.gov.ye:80/English/culture/shibam.htm>

⁵- Source: From Saba to Sana 'a: French archaeological research in Yemen until 2012, retrieved from the link:

<https://books.openedition.org/cefas/2698>

under the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (before unity) was estimated at 500 dwellings, and he has an author who came through the results of the visit of the joint French–Yemeni mission, as he called him "Shabwa, the ancient capital of Hadramawt", in 1996, and before him the author of "Shabam and the Valley of Hadramawt", in which he mentioned the summary of his visit and photography of this city in 1985.



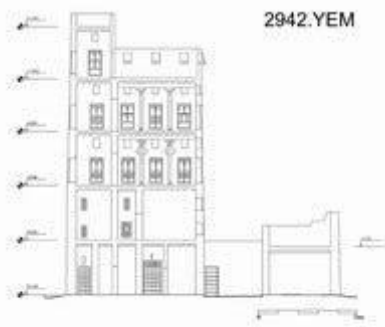
Shibam Fort Gate

Dr. Britton says: A quarter of the population of Shabbam traveled abroad after the middle of the seventeenth century, and Wa settled in Singapore, Malaysia, Java, Batavia and the South of India, to form the largest return on wealth between 1820 and 1870, as it was invested in the construction of expensive buildings in Shabam, in a picture that reflects the prestige of these commercial families in building high-rise structures.

Shibam has been a fortified city since the fifth century BC, when it belonged to the Kingdom of Hadramawt. It is not only surrounded by two mountains, including a valley in which flooding occurs, but also by walls seven meters high, with one gate, which were taken care of during the rule of the Sultanates during the period of the British protectorates in the Arabian Peninsula, such as the Kathiri Sultanate and the Sultanate of Bani Daghar. The area of its walls extends 250 meters from north to south and 380 meters from east to west.

⁶- Source: Shabwa, the ancient capital of Hadramawt, retrieved from the link: <https://ia903109.us.archive.org/19/items/yemenhistorybooks/YHL/178-book.pdf>

⁷- Source: Shibam and Wadi Hadramout, retrieved from the link: <https://www.archnet.org/publications/2894>



Saving Shibam

According to the report of the German Agency for International Cooperation (GTZ) entitled "Rehabilitation of the city of Shibam" in 2000, in which the agency stated that the implementation of the urban development project in Shibam was initiated in three stages for a period of ten years, which is a joint Yemeni-German initiative, aimed at stopping the migration of the population into Yemen or abroad, by providing technical and financial support to renovate nearly half of the housing stock. The agency worked with local authorities to improve basic services and infrastructure. Through this project, 200 houses and mosques of Shibam were restored, and this was assisted by the American economist Burkhard von Rabenau, who developed solutions to keep the population in Shibam with the aim of reviving its reconstruction. This project cost about 5.1 million dollars, according to the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation.

The agency also trained local artisans, provided literacy classes for women and opportunities to learn new skills, and revived agriculture in the remote area through the restoration of the old canal and the flood irrigation system⁸.

But in a 2007 report, it turns out that the number of buildings in Shibam decreased from 500 dwellings – Dr. Breton in advance – to 437 private houses (398 of them are uninhabitable and 39 are in ruins, and there are six mosques within the city walls in addition to six mosques located in irrigation fields in the stream of floods outside the city walls. There are also two primary schools and only one scientific corner. The city also has four public squares in addition to smaller squares between residential compounds, and four buildings that include charitable associations; two public palaces, the city gate, a health clinic, and a government complex at the southern gate consisting of four buildings. There are 134 shops in Shibam⁹.

Finally, UNESCO included all Yemeni heritage cities, in particular Shibam and Sana'a, on the List of Endangered Heritage in the results of the 39th session of the World Heritage Committee on 28 June¹⁰ 2015.

This danger is still renewed, especially after the December 2021 floods, which destroyed parts of the buildings, and the Deutsche Welle DW channel has highlighted the negligence of Yemeni officials, and the attempts of the Association for the Protection of Clay Architecture to preserve what is left of this urban heritage, as stated by its Secretary-General Berk Baswetin, who called for an emergency office to save the infrastructure damaged by the floods.

Tourism is no longer the same as it was in the past. The contemporary Dutch traveler Boris Kester compares two trips to Shabam, one in May 2004, and the other in July 2021, where tourists are accompanied by a tour guide who has weapons, as well as to enter and leave Shabam at specific hours. The checkpoints were also something interesting that Kester did not find on his previous visit, due to the war in Yemen that has been going on since 2015.

⁸- Source: Rehabilitation of Shibam City, retrieved from the link: <https://www.archnet.org/publications/5263>

⁹- Source: Urban Development Project, retrieved from the link: <https://www.archnet.org/publications/1569>

¹⁰- Source: Al-Hader, Sana'a and Shabam on the List of Endangered Heritage, retrieved from the link: <https://ar.unesco.org/news/lhdr-wsn-wshbm-gy-m-ltrth-lmhdd-blkhttr>

This is the case of Shibam, who no longer has a government to take care of her, and the efforts of the population are modest to preserve what remains in light of the rise in the prices of clay building materials due to the decline in the exchange rate and the deterioration of the economy.

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