Sheikh Saeed Al-Maktoum House
Shindagha, Dubai

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Sheikh Saeed Al-Maktoum House located in Shindagha, Dubai dating back to 1896, was once the seat of government as well as the official residence of ruler.

The four wings of the house were added in stages and were occupied by several rulers who reigned Dubai since 1896 namely, Sheikh Maktoum bin Hasher Al-Maktoum (1894-1906), Sheikh Saeed Al-Maktoum (1912-1958), and Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al-Maktoum (1958-1990).

The combination of climate, the local construction know-how, available construction materials, the socio-economic aspects of its people, and their cultural heritage have shaped the layout of the house. After reconstruction of the house in 1986 by Dubai Municipality, it is being used as a museum. Sheikh Saeed Al-Maktoum House won the Arab Cities Organization prize in 1988.

The location: Shindagha
Strategically located in Shindagha on the trade routes between the Gulf, and Dubai souq the house also served as the collecting point for fees levied to dohows entering the city. Other historic buildings in this area include several mosques, several watchtowers, and historic homes of Sheikh Juma Al Maktoum, and Sheikh Obaid Bin Thani.

A traditional house
Sheikh Saeed Al-Maktoum House the house was built around a large central courtyard, covers 660 square meters, included four sets of living quarters for Sheikh Saeed, his sons and their families. It featured four wind towers, both in the ground and the first floor. The house is composed of several of large Majlis, living rooms, storerooms and kitchens, one large and two smaller courtyards. The upper story is accessible individually by staircases.

The size of a house was influenced by the custom of an extended family living under the same roof.

Private and public areas were kept distinctly separate. The inner, private quarters were for the family and consisted of a smaller courtyard surrounded by rooms on two levels.

Privacy was ensured by the use of entrances, which would reduce visibility from outside, and entrances were separated into main doors and a side one. A porch covered the main entrance, and once inside, benches on either side provide a resting ground for visitors. In the outer, public part of the house a short hallway off the main entrance give access through a small courtyard to the Majlis without allowing visitors to see into the private quarters of the house. Windows in the Majlis are set high and faced the exterior of the house. The men for receiving and entertaining guests most often used the Majlis. At ground level, high windows and walls safeguarded the privacy of the women, who were not to be seen by strangers, and ensured the family's security and peace of mind.

As an extended family home, which was enlarged over
the years to meet the family’s needs the family grew to incorporate married offspring and their children, additional rooms were built and extra floor were added. The house was extended into the outer enclosure of the walls in form of a new house since extra space was needed.

Most rooms via a veranda opened onto the central courtyard, to which only family members had access. In the hot summer months the family would spend most of the time in and around the courtyard. Children would play, and the family’s animals, chickens and camel for instance, would also spend some part of the day here. The three courtyards were varied in size. During the hottest part of the day the courtyard would be a particularly cool and pleasant place. Palm trees, or Nakhl, Indian Almonds, known as Loz, were planted to provide shade and fruit.

Winter rooms and stores were on the ground floor, whilst summer rooms, were on the upper level. Small niches allowed light and ventilation into the outer rooms, whilst all the family rooms had individual doors opening onto the courtyard, and sometimes a window as well. The length of the ceiling beam governed the width of a room, which was generally about three meters long, so rooms were long and narrow.

Light and ventilation was provided by small, high windows in ground floor rooms, and by several continuous windows on the upper level. Apart from such rooms as the kitchen, the bathroom and the storeroom, other rooms would serve a variety of purposes. The kitchen was open in the side facing the courtyard; household utensils were kept in niches set into the walls. Verandahs, or Liwan, faced the courtyard, were a popular place to sit and talk, to drink tea or coffee, and enjoy the cooling breeze.

**Decoration**

Sheikh Saeed Al-Maktoum House is extremely plain. External concessions to decoration are those to doors, crenellations and finishes along the roofline, incised with flora and geometric motifs. The courtyard was surrounded on some of its sides by a loggia, supported on a row of columns. These columns were square in the older and hexagonal topped with lotus-shaped capitals, a particularly popular design in Dubai for the more recent ones. The columns themselves were carved, and are linked by arches to form an attractive arcade around the courtyard. Carved wooden lattice screens closed off the loggias at ground and upper level. Parapets, handrails, and wind towers were embellished with geometric and floral patterns.

Gypsum was used for interior decoration. Charcoal was used to contrast with the white. Many of the high, narrow rooms were beautifully embellished with an ornamental plaster cornice, beneath which were rows of stucco panels set above wall niches and windows. Screens and panels were individually designed, depicting intricate arabesques and geometric patterns, with some featuring a stylized flower in an urn.
Cooling with wind tower

Varying in height, some up to 15 meters tall, wind towers consisted of a rectangular tower divided in plan into four triangular sections, which funneled the air downwards and cooled the rooms below. Known locally as Al Barajeel, they helped reduce the intense summer’s heat. Opening onto downstairs rooms, they finished about 2 meters above floor level, creating a significantly cool area beneath. Beds and cushions, food and water could be kept cool here, and in the winter, when cool air was not required; vents could be closed to prevent a draught.

The “air-puller” was another unique method of catching the breeze. They provided ventilation without the need to open windows onto the outside. Between the bearing columns of the house, twin panels of thin shell slabs would be set vertically and parallel to each other through the wall with a narrow space between them through which air could pass. The outer slab was placed with a gap at the top of the opening and the inner slab with a gap at the bottom so that the air could be pulled in to the room from the outside emerging through the gap. A welcome breeze cooled the people sitting on cushions around the room, whilst ensuring their privacy.

“Air-pullers” were also built into walls on the upper floor, to draw in the prevailing wind, and make the verandah a cool place to sleep during the summer.

Construction of the house

Coral from old reefs used to build the house. It was lightweight, simple to cut, and was a good insulator because it enclosed pockets of air. For the foundations the ground was dug up to one meter deep and 60 centimeter wide which then was built up with coral stone and gypsum or Sarooj. Walls were made of three blocks of coral. Thin slabs of shell stone, were cut from large chunks and used as panels between the main columns. Walls were bonded and plastered with a gypsum mortar called Jus, which was made by mixing gypsum and lime. Imported red clay was mixed with manure and water to form Sarooj, a stronger mortar that was used on the roof for waterproofing. On the upper floors the thickness of the walls was reduced, making them lighter and giving greater spaces for ventilation openings. Windows, doors and decorative screens were built between the heavy pillars.

Mangrove was the wood for beams of all sorts. Round mangrove poles, known as Chandal, came in lengths of four
meters, which meant that a room could only be as wide as the length of a pole. This constraint, therefore, to some extent dictated the layout of a house. In the case of wind towers, extended poles were used as scaffolding for construction and maintenance. Lashing together small diameter Chandal made short beams over doors niches. Rectangular shaped red wood poles came in longer lengths. Ceilings consisted of palm ribs or bamboo poles overlaid with palm frond matting, which was covered with a mixture of lime, mud and small stones.

Heavy, solid wooden doors, intricately and richly carved with traditional Islamic patterns, are typical of the region were often made of teak. Doors consisted of tightly aligned wooden panels fastened together with large steel nails. Extracts from Arabic poetry were inscribed along the top of the doors. The exterior framework was made of horizontally aligned steel bars for security, and windows might have two or four shutters.

Tools, used for mixing, transferring, aligning and leveling, were simple and included the trowel, chisel, hammer, axe and spirit level. The carpenter was equipped with several types of saw and drill, and the compass and knife were amongst the tools used in decoration.

**Conservation Work**

The House of Sheikh Saeed Al Maktoum was the first building to be revitalized by the Dubai Municipality. Complete survey of the house was carried out before demolishing it. The demolition was slow and in the process reusable building material was saved. The decision to completely rebuild the house was made due to extremely poor condition and the state that it was in. The new house was built of reinforced concrete however the Coral rocks from the original house were salvaged and re-used in the walls of the new building. Replicas of decorative pieces, woodwork and structural supports were made. To make the building serviceable air-conditioning, lighting, water and drainage were incorporated. Today the house serves as a museum of historic documents and photographs.

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_Darius Zandi brings over 35 years of design and planning experience and over 28 years of experience working in the Middle East. Drawing from a geographically and culturally diverse background, Zandi has made significant contributions to major design and planning projects in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Iraq, Jordan, and the United States, including parks and recreational facilities, historic restoration, and environmental conservation projects.  

_Darius Zandi_ completed his extensive education in architecture, urban planning, film and photography in the United States, and has spent over 13 years working as a Senior Architect and Town Planner for the Dubai Municipality. He currently serves as the Chairman of the UAE Architectural Heritage Society English Chapter and founder of two organizations registered in Dubai, UAE, Total Design, and Total Arts.