

# Fusing Cultural Traditions with Modernity to Create Unique Spatial Experiences: Architectural Contribution of Nora Almutawa of Bahrain

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## Abstract

Contemporary architecture refers to the architectural styles that represent all which is new and emerging in recent years. It is characterized by innovation and the use of modern technologies and new materials, reflecting the rapid changes in societies and technological progress. Thus, contemporary architecture blends various influences and adapts to modern needs, reflecting the changing nature of society, technology, and the environment. It is constantly evolving, creating functional, flexible, and visually striking spaces that respond to both aesthetic and practical requirements of the contemporary world. Different architects therefore take different approaches to the creation of built-environments today. In Bahrain, the approach that architect Noor Al-Mutawa has taken to making the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate is notable, and this paper delves deep into its conceptualizations, the architect's approach and the physical and spatial manifestations.

This research adopts a qualitative approach involving, observations, interviews with the architect and photographic recording as research methods. The research was carried out from October to December 2024.

The findings reveal that the building fuses tradition with modernity and produces unique spatial experiences. It is one of many contemporary buildings in Bahrain, exhibiting modern architecture and present-day tendencies of architectural production and stylistic reinterpretation.

**Keywords:** Tradition, Modernity, architecture, Spatial Experience, Bahrain.

## Introduction

Contemporary architecture is the architectural style that represents all which is new and emerging in recent years. This architecture is characterized by innovation and the use of modern technologies and new materials, reflecting the rapid changes in societies and technological progress. Furthermore, Contemporary architecture blends various influences and adapts to

modern needs, reflecting the changing nature of society, technology, and the environment. It is constantly evolving, and creating functional, flexible, and visually striking spaces that respond to both aesthetic and practical requirements.

The Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate is one of many contemporary buildings in Bahrain, exhibiting modern architecture and present-day tendencies of architectural production and stylistic reinterpretation. It is an independent administration in Bahrain under the Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs, with its highest authority being the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate Council, formed by a Royal Decree. Based in Manama, the directorate oversees and develops projects in line with the Islamic law. The original building, rehabilitated in 1984 (Fig 1), has been now replaced with a new structure due to the expansion of the public road, which occupied half of the original site.



**Fig. 1:** Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate in 1984

Source:

The new building, designed by architect Noor Al-Mutawa of N.j Engineering Company, consists of four floors and a ground floor. The design incorporates a rectangular block for the upper floors, with the first two floors and the ground floor featuring corners slashed to preserve the public space. A pedestrian walkway and a covered entrance have been added on the ground floor, along with shops integrated into the building. Parking has been allocated on a portion of the street without affecting the overall street area.

The building includes a reception office, open offices, and overlapping departments, with partitions added to accommodate the growing administrative needs. Its Islamic architectural character, featuring *mashrabiyyas*, creates intricate shadows and regulates sunlight through traditional Arab-Islamic patterns. The corners of the upper floors are suspended at different angles, resembling glass balconies that provide natural light, ventilation, and shade for the lower levels.

Eng. Noor Al Mutawa is a Bahraini architect and project manager known for her impactful contributions to public and private sector developments across Bahrain. With a career rooted in both design and project management, she has played a vital role in delivering key infrastructure, healthcare, and cultural projects that align with national development strategies.

Her work spans conceptual design, design development, and multidisciplinary coordination, with a focus on public-sector architecture that responds to the evolving needs of Bahraini society. Noor has held leadership roles in government entities and private firms, contributing to landmark projects such as government headquarters, hospitals, educational institutions, and mixed-use developments.

The architectural philosophy of Noor Al-Mutawa is rooted in a deep understanding in context-driven design, where architecture serves both function and culture. Her projects reflect a strong sensitivity to local identity, sustainability, and community needs. She approaches each design with an intent to harmonize built form with its social and environmental context, ensuring that each space enhances the quality of life for its users. Her approach is collaborative and interdisciplinary, often working across engineering, planning, and design teams to deliver integrated solutions. She emphasizes clarity in spatial organization, practicality in material choices, and innovation in response to contemporary challenges. Noor's architectural method balances modern functionality with respect for Bahrain's architectural heritage, aiming to create environments that are timeless, efficient, and community-oriented. [Al Mutawa, 20 Jun 2025]

In 2009, Noor Al Mutawa founded N.J Engineering; it believes in collaborating with the clients, the users and the professionals to create innovative, original and unexpected design solutions. Research into new construction methods, products and materials is a natural extension of their design work. In their own words, the motto of the company is "creating a world where design creates opportunity for all: uplifting communities, improving lives and preserving the environment." She further says that "we create healthy, innovative and unified architecture." Indeed, this statement aligns with the philosophies of prominent architects such as Diébédo Francis Kéré, Sir David Adjaye, and Cameron Sinclair.

The Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate in Bahrain is an example of modern architecture that combines Islamic customs with a contemporary style. The structure has been created by Noor Al Mutawa and embodies creativity, cultural identity, and environmental awareness. Mashrabiyyas, suspended corners, and flexible space planning are important elements. This study examines the ways in which the design of it responds to the administrative requirements and urban challenges and achieves its noble objectives. This paper also places the work of Al Mutawa on par with the internationally renowned, socially conscious architects.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper deals with the ideas of tradition, modernity, and spatial experience. Culture and tradition are interrelated, as tradition can be seen as the transmission of cultural values, beliefs, and practices across generations. According to Edward Shils, tradition is "anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present" (Shils, 1981). It is not static but continuously reshaped by social and historical contexts. In architecture, tradition is often embodied in forms, materials, and spatial arrangements that reflect local customs and collective memory.

In contrast, modernity represents a rupture from the past, marked by rationalism, industrialization, and the pursuit of progress. Anthony Giddens describes modernity as "the modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence" [Giddens, 1990]. In architecture, this translated into a shift towards functionality, abstraction, and universal design principles—epitomized by the Modern Movement and architects like Le Corbusier. The Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate building in Bahrain embodies this modern shift. Its layout and design emphasize functionality, abstraction, and institutional clarity, aligning with modernist ideals (Le Corbusier, 1923; Giedion, 1941).

As a result, the building communicates bureaucratic modernity more than cultural specificity, highlighting the broader tension in the Gulf between global architectural modernism and local identity.

However, architecture is not just a visual or functional practice; it is a spatial experience. As Juhani Pallasmaa (1996) emphasizes, architecture engages the full range of human senses and connects the individual to the surrounding culture and environment. The built environment becomes a medium through which cultural identity is experienced and communicated. For example, the use of mashrabiyyas in Middle Eastern architecture not only provides climatic comfort and privacy but also embodies a cultural vocabulary of modesty, beauty, and social interaction (Bianca, 2000).

The tension between tradition and modernity in architecture raises questions about authenticity and identity. Can modern architecture express local culture without merely mimicking historical forms? Kenneth Frampton argues for a “critical regionalism” that resists both placeless modernism and sentimental historicism, instead rooting architecture in the specifics of place, climate, and cultural context (Frampton, 1983). This approach recognizes that spatial experience is shaped by both inherited tradition and contemporary needs.

In this context, the relationship between identity, technology, and environment in Arab and regional architecture cannot be ignored. The rapid growth of digital technologies has significantly impacted modern designs, but its impact on biological and environmental forms remains unknown. Arabs prioritize maintaining cultural identities in a globalized world. Several studies and architectural critiques highlight overlapping themes in their approaches to culturally rooted, climate-responsive, and community-oriented design.

### Review of Previous Projects

Many scholars have examined the evolution of contemporary architecture as a departure from traditional design principles, a shift that gained momentum in the early 20th century with the rise of modern architecture. Figures like Le Corbusier promoted universal, functional design based on industrial materials and forms, often disregarding local cultural contexts. In response to this modernist movement, some architects began to reclaim vernacular traditions to address environmental, social, and spiritual needs within architecture (Frampton, 2007).

A prominent example of this reaction is Hassan Fathy (1900–1989), the Egyptian architect renowned for his advocacy of traditional construction techniques and community-centered design. His best-known project, New Gurna Village (1945–1948), near Luxor, utilized mudbrick, passive ventilation, and domed roofs to reflect the environmental and social realities of rural Egyptian life. Fathy's philosophy was not merely about nostalgia for the past but about reviving sustainable, affordable architecture that empowered local communities. His writings and buildings challenged the alienating tendencies of modernism by reconnecting people with their built environment and cultural identity (Fathy, 1986; Steele, 1989).

Rasem Badran, a Jordanian architect, similarly blends Islamic architectural heritage with modern functionality. Grounded in the principles of Islamic urbanism, Badran emphasizes human scale, spatial hierarchy, and place-making. His work on the Greater Mosque of Riyadh (Imam Turki bin Abdullah Mosque) demonstrates this synthesis: integrating Najdi vernacular features such as arcades, courtyards, and textured limestone within a civic and religious framework. This approach revives the historical role of the mosque as a center of both spiritual and communal life, bridging sacred and public space within an evolving urban context (Badran and Amiry, 1999; Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 1995)

Mohamed Makiya (1914–2015), one of the most influential Iraqi architects of the 20th century, also contributed significantly to the fusion of modernism and Islamic tradition. Makiya believed that architecture should serve as a cultural narrative, drawing from historical forms while addressing contemporary needs. His projects—such as the Baghdad University Mosque and restoration efforts in historic cities like Samarra—embody a sensitivity to Islamic geometry, calligraphy, and spatial flow while using modern construction methods. His designs reflect a deep understanding of heritage as a living entity, continually evolving yet rooted in identity. Makiya's contributions are especially significant for their ability to communicate cultural continuity in a rapidly modernizing Arab world (Makiya, 1990; Makiya and Al-Radi, 1995).

Badran's King Abdul Aziz Historical Centre in Riyadh (1999) similarly reflects his commitment to contextualism, featuring restored mud-brick buildings, traditional spatial hierarchies, and shaded public courtyards that promote cultural continuity and collective memory (Middle East Architect, 2024).

Another example is the Al-Bujairi Heritage Quarter in Diriyah, where Badran led the revitalization of the historic Wadi Hanifah River edge. The project weaves architecture and landscape into a pedestrian-focused public realm using indigenous materials, narrow alleyways, and terraces that reconnect visitors with Saudi heritage and reinforce a sense of place (IAA, n.d.).

These architects' commitments to contextual architecture share similarities with Bahrain's endowment architecture, which must consider spiritual symbolism and environmental conditions.

Similarly, Rasem Badran's architecture is grounded in Islamic urbanism and seeks to maintain a sense of place through traditional forms, human scale, and spatial hierarchy. His design for the Great Mosque of Riyadh.

### Research Methods

This research employs case study as a method. Data gathering involved the following.

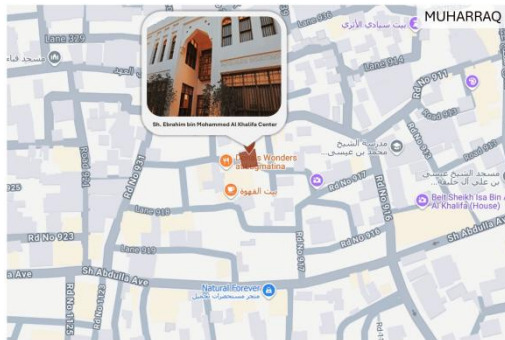
1. A survey of the site and the surrounding,
2. A meeting with the senior engineer of the Jaafari Endowments Administration,
3. A visit to the administration building.

In-depth records and information regarding the structure—including its phases of construction and renovation before reaching its final form—were gathered from both archival documentation and on-site observation. The research focused on key structural and architectural elements that needed articulation. Specific data were sourced from The Daily Tribune (Bahrain), notably its coverage of Jaffari Endowments projects—such as the inauguration of the Al-Watiya Mosque (The Daily Tribune, 2 November 2024). Additional insights came from the French Chamber of Commerce & Industry in Bahrain, which detailed the installation of solar panels on the Seef government building under Jaffari Waqf's oversight (FCCIB, 30 November 2018). Technical documentation and finer architectural observations were supplemented by the official Archnet database, particularly its detailed entry on Rasem Badran's Great Mosque of Riyadh redevelopment (Archnet, n.d.).

The website of architect Noor Al-Mutawa's private firm, NJ, also provided information about her beliefs, vision, and objectives (NJ Engineering, www.nj-eng.com).

### The Case Studies

The fusion of tradition and modernity in Bahraini architecture is exemplified through two contrasting but complementary buildings: the Sh. Ebrahim Cultural Center and the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate. Both reflect the evolving narrative of Islamic architecture in the 21st century, where architects are tasked with honoring heritage while addressing the functional demands of contemporary life. Architect Noor Al-Mutawa, who designed the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate, articulates spatial experiences by integrating these dual aspects—though with varying emphasis compared to more symbolically rich structures like the Sh. Ebrahim Cultural Center.



**Fig 2:** Location Plan of Sh. Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Center, Muharraq.  
Source: Google Maps



**Fig. 1:** Location Plan of Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate, Manama.  
Source: Google Maps

### Sh. Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Center: A Model of Symbolic Tradition

The Sh. Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Center is deeply rooted in Islamic and cultural heritage of Bahrain. Its architecture is an embodiment of traditional Islamic design principles—balance, simplicity, light, and connection with Nature. Its spatial layout promotes contemplation and tranquility, with courtyards, water features, and natural ventilation working in harmony to create an environment reflective of classical Islamic architecture. The design does not merely preserve heritage aesthetically; it immerses visitors in the values and atmosphere of Bahraini cultural identity. Traditional elements such as *mashrabiya*s, calligraphy, and natural materials are thoughtfully incorporated to serve both the symbolic and environmental functions.

### Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate: A Functionalist Approach with Cultural Hints

In contrast, the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate reflects a more utilitarian interpretation of Islamic architecture. Noor Al-Mutawa adopts a modern architectural language—clean lines, minimal ornamentation, and a strong emphasis on spatial efficiency. While the building is designed to serve administrative and public service functions, it retains certain traditional elements such as the inclusion of *mashrabiya*s, which serve a dual role: providing shade and privacy while referencing Islamic design heritage. However, the symbolic and spiritual richness found in the buildings such as the Sh. Ebrahim Cultural Center is more muted here, suggesting a shift in focus toward pragmatism and institutional needs.

## Findings

### Noor Al-Mutawa's Articulation of Spatial Experience

Noor Al-Mutawa's design philosophy in the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate illustrates a fusion of tradition and modernity that prioritizes user experience and spatial clarity. She employs traditional motifs not as dominant visual statements but as subtle nods to heritage—integrating them into the structure to meet environmental needs (e.g., reducing solar gain) and to hint at cultural identity without overwhelming the modernist framework. Spatially, the building is organized to facilitate efficient administrative workflow, but through the use of filtered light, rhythmic openings, and geometric harmony, she maintains an echo of the contemplative spatial qualities of traditional Islamic architecture.



**Fig. 3:** The façade shows modern arches and mashrabiya designs inspired by traditional Islamic architecture .

Source: Author



**Fig. 4:**The exterior glass façade view of the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate in Bahrain.  
Source: Author's photo

As can be seen, while the Sh. Ebrahim Cultural Center leans more towards preserving the symbolic tradition and immersive cultural experience, the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate, under Noor Al-Mutawa's direction, represents an adaptive fusion—where traditional elements serve functional roles within a contemporary architectural framework. This duality highlights how Bahraini architecture is negotiating the space between heritage and progress, with architects like Al-Mutawa articulating a modern Islamic spatial identity that respects the past while addressing the needs of the present

The façade of the Jafari Awqaf Directorate in Bahrain is a reflection of its religious and cultural heritage, reflecting the religious symbolism of the community. However, the modern architectural style, which contrasts with traditional Islamic elements, has been criticized for lacking traditional features such as arches and ornamental calligraphy (Al-Kodmany, 2018). However, the contemporary and minimalistic approach of the building has gained attention due to its inclusion of arches and ornamental mashrabiyas (Fig 4), which are considered reinterpretations of traditional motifs (Elsheshtawy, 2004). The façade may not blend in with the neighboring structures, but its creative design decisions hint at sustainability and creativity. Some argue that these contemporary additions align with current ideals such as environmental sustainability (Salama, 2015), while others argue that these creative approaches go against traditional religious structures (Necipoglu, 2005).

### **Integration with the Local Context**

The architectural philosophy of Noor Al-Mutawa is rooted in a deep understanding of cultural identity and environmental sustainability, with a strong focus on the intelligent use of technology and local materials.

Indeed, the architects view its projects as landscapes—an essential and generous element. Without boundaries, landscapes are endless and open; they connect architecture to its surroundings and bridge the interior with the exterior. By thoughtfully considering the surrounding environment, Mutawa ensures a high degree of sustainability and circularity in its projects.

Through this integrated approach to architecture, Noor Al Mutawa has left a significant mark on numerous architectural projects across the Arab world. Her work goes beyond creating mere buildings; it creates urban spaces that reflect her profound vision of architecture and its role in society.

A contemporary critical analysis of the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate in its urban context would highlight the need for the building to harmonize with its surroundings. It should not only function as an independent structure but also as a cultural, social, and ecological asset that enhances urban experience. The design of the building must prioritize accessibility, engagement, and integration while respecting the scale and public functions of its environment.

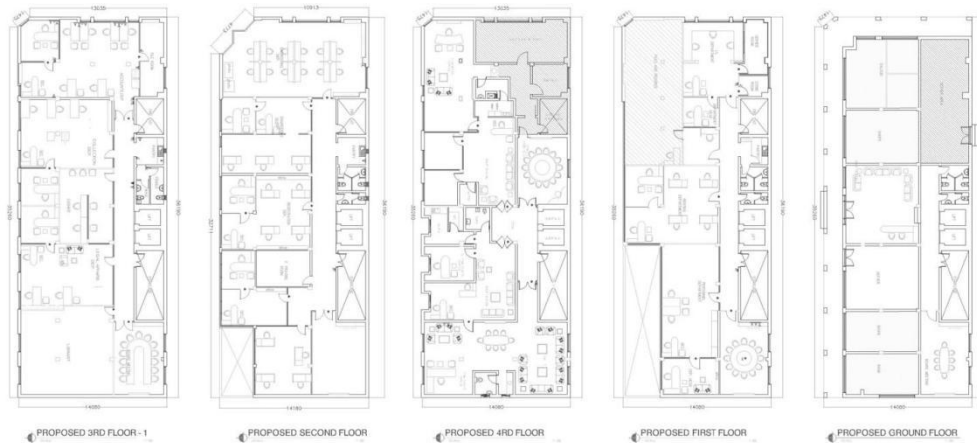
The Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate should complement the architectural landscape of its location, whether urban, residential or historic. By incorporating local design elements, such as traditional Bahraini features like arches, courtyards, or ornamental tilework (Fig 4), the building can respect its cultural context while enhancing its aesthetic appeal. On the other hand,

a structure that uses radical modern styles or foreign materials, such as steel and glass, may appear out of place and disrupt the architectural identity of the area.

The location of the building is also crucial for its integration into the community. It should be placed in a way that facilitates social interactions, is easily accessible, and does not disrupt the natural flow of the neighborhood (Fig 5). A poorly chosen site could obstruct pedestrian pathways, block important views, or distance the building from the key residential or public areas, reducing its significance. Moreover, limited parking and lack of pedestrian access can hinder ability of the visitors to engage with the building and its surroundings, impacting its function as a community hub.

### Functions and Use of Space

In the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate, the ground floor hosts public-facing services, including a reception desk, open offices for quick consultations, a small service area, and a security office, with successive floors dedicated to office spaces for the expanding administration. However, due to the growth of the organization, the building has undergone internal changes to accommodate overlapping departments. This has resulted in the addition of partitions that have created narrower spaces (Fig 6), a response to the lack of a clear architectural plan for future growth.



**Fig. 5:** floor plans for Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate, Manama.

Source:

Indeed, this expansion and modification of the interior layout, while addressing immediate spatial needs, has created some issues in terms of spatial flow. Narrow spaces and cramped office areas compromise both the functionality and efficiency of daily operations. In modern architecture, it is important to ensure that spaces are well-organized and effectively zoned to support both administrative and religious functions without negatively affecting the overall use of the building.

Ultimately, the design needs to support both its administrative tasks and social functions without causing congestion or disorganization. In this sense, unfortunately, the lack of a cohesive architectural strategy for future growth has hindered the potential of the building to serve as a seamless and efficient space for both work and religious activities.

### Islamic Architectural Style Between Modernity and Tradition

The design of the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate in Bahrain exemplifies contemporary architecture balancing modernity and tradition in Islamic design. Its minimalist approach, characterized by the use of modern materials such as glass, steel, and concrete, contrasts sharply with traditional Islamic architecture, which is typically marked by symbolic elements like domes, arches, courtyards, and intricate ornamentation (Fig 4). The design of the Directorate, characterized by stark geometric forms and a lack of traditional Islamic features, may alienate it from its cultural and spiritual context. This shift towards abstract modernism, reflecting the

urban development of Bahrain, raises concerns about losing the deeper symbolic and spiritual connections inherent in Islamic architecture. Critics argue that the simplicity of the design may strip away the warmth and intricate beauty associated with religious spaces. However, this minimalist approach may also be a reinterpretation of Islamic architectural values for the modern age, focusing on transparency, openness, and functional clarity.

The Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate, a modern Islamic building, has sparked controversy over its minimalist approach and departure from traditional Islamic forms. This research argues that, it may be disconnected from the cultural significance of Islamic architecture, although some see it as an evolution, presenting a complex dialogue between the past and the future.



**Fig. 7:** Sustainable main door with Islamic design.

Source: Author

### **Sustainability and Environmental Considerations**

The design of the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate by architect Noor Al-Mutawa incorporates sustainability through the use of environmentally friendly materials like wood and glass, aiming to reduce energy consumption and maintain ecological balance. The design of the building also emphasizes harmonizing with the surrounding environment, incorporating natural elements like light, air, and water, with large windows facilitating natural light and ventilation to create a comfortable and sustainable interior.

However, the hot desert climate of Bahrain presents challenges for this approach. The extensive use of glass, while providing aesthetic appeal and natural daylight, can lead to heat gain and increased energy consumption, raising concerns about the environmental sustainability of the building. Traditional Bahraini architecture addresses similar climatic challenges through passive cooling, natural ventilation, and shaded courtyards, which reduce reliance on energy-intensive systems (Fig 8).

The design overlooks these passive cooling strategies, instead relying on modern materials that, while reducing artificial lighting, do not fully consider indigenous sustainable practices. By incorporating sustainable technologies such as photovoltaic panels and energy-efficient glazing, the building could better balance modern aesthetics with environmental responsibility, addressing the ecological needs of its desert environment.



**Fig. 8:** Shading corridors by using mashrabiya.  
Source: Author

## **Interviews & Public Opinions of the Building**

### **Interview with an Employee of the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate**

As part of the scientific research on this building in the context of contemporary architecture, this research conducted an on-site interview with one of the employees to gain insights into the history, use, and spatial experience of the building.

The interview began with a warm welcome from the senior engineer MH, who expressed the willingness to participate and also to identify him by name. When asked about the average number of visitors the Directorate receives on weekdays and weekends, he explained that the number varies significantly depending on the type of consultations and departmental needs. Therefore, it is difficult to provide a precise estimate.

Delving into the history of the building, he provided a timeline of its development. The Awqaf Directorate has originally begun with just two rooms in 1927. The first actual building has been constructed in 1930, and it has undergone renovation in 1984. The current structure has been fully constructed in 2009 under the supervision of the architect Noor Al-Mutawa. This information highlights the evolution of the institution in response to the growing administrative needs.

When asked about the motivation behind the 2009 reconstruction, MH cited two primary reasons: the expansion of the administrative structure and the deterioration of the previous building. These factors have necessitated the complete redevelopment of the facility.

One of the key points of inquiry was the location of the building, particularly given that its surroundings do not immediately reflect its religious or cultural function. MH explained that the site was originally chosen due to its proximity to the *matams* and mosques in the Manama area. Staff could previously walk to the nearby places of worship and view them from the windows. However, urban expansion and the rise of the surrounding buildings have since obscured these views, diminishing one of the initial advantages of the location.

Regarding current suitability of the building for administrative work, MH noted that although the building has been initially compatible with the organizational structure, the rapid expansion of the Directorate has rendered the space insufficient. Departments have been

established using partitions, leading to overlaps and spatial inefficiencies. As a result, a new building has been constructed in the Seef area, and a complete relocation is expected within the next year.

The interview also focused on environmental comfort within the building. According to MH, street noise is a common issue due to poor sound insulation, and the heat insulation is inadequate despite the use of thick glass windows. As a mitigation measure, window tinting has been applied to reduce solar heat gain.

One architectural feature of interest is the addition of *mashrabiyas*. These have been installed in 2015 as part of a development initiative aimed at introducing Islamic design elements while also reducing direct sunlight in the pedestrian areas. This demonstrates an effort to blend aesthetic tradition with practical environmental control.

In conclusion, MH offers valuable insights to understand the architectural and functional challenges of the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate building. These observations inform the critical analysis of how contemporary architectural interventions meet—or fall short of—administrative and environmental needs in heritage-sensitive contexts.

### **Public Perception of the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate: Interviews with Visitors**

To better understand public interaction with the space, two interviews were conducted with visitors to gather firsthand impressions of the design and usability of the building. The first interviewee had only seen the building after its renovation and therefore could not compare it with the original structure. However, they both expressed satisfaction with the overall functionality of the building. According to them, the design is “good and comfortable,” and they appreciated the clear organization of departments, facilitated by a reception desk that directs visitors to the appropriate offices. This reflects a positive user experience in terms of wayfinding and layout.

Despite this, however, the visitors highlighted a critical issue: noise during prayer times. Moreover, the visitor 1 noted the lack of waiting areas, especially during busy morning hours, and recommended the addition of open or public spaces for the people to sit while waiting. From an aesthetic perspective, the visitor 1 described the building as having a “beautiful design.” They also acknowledged that while the structure clearly functions as a religious building, its appearance contrasts with the surrounding architecture of Manama.

The second visitor provided a contrasting perspective, having visited the original building several times due to their father working as a director of the Matam. They recalled the old building as being “very dilapidated and narrow from the inside,” despite its overall size. In comparison, the new building was seen as more spacious, with better spatial organization, including the separation of different departments.

Like the first interviewee, the second visitor also agreed that the building is clearly designed to serve its visitors. However, they both suggested that the waiting area should be expanded. In fact, they emphasized the lack of adequate parking as a significant drawback. Regarding the architectural design, they found it generally good but noted that it lacks the decorative elements commonly found in traditional Bahraini religious buildings. They remarked that while religious buildings in Bahrain typically feature ornate details, the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate does not, making it stand out from its surroundings. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that variation in design is expected in Manama, where religious and residential buildings co-exist closely.

These interviews reveal that while the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate is generally appreciated for its functional improvements and modern layout, several aspects require attention. The lack of sufficient waiting areas and parking, and limited traditional decorative elements are areas for potential enhancement. At the same time, the building is recognized for serving its administrative and religious purposes effectively, reflecting a careful balance between modernization and tradition, albeit with room for improvement in cultural integration and user comfort.

## Community Perceptions: Interviews with Neighborhood Residents

Interviews were also conducted with local residents living near the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate. The goal was to assess how the building is perceived by the surrounding community, particularly by those who interact with its presence daily—even if they have never entered the facility. These interviews offer valuable insights into the visual impact, integration with its urban context, and functionality of the building from the perspective of its neighbors.

The first interviewee, a 26-year-old resident, said that although they had never visited the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate, they appreciated its external appearance. This underscores the significance of façade design in shaping public opinion, even among those who do not directly interact with the interior of the building. However, the interviewee also mentioned a recurring issue: congestion and a lack of sufficient parking around the building. This concern was echoed across multiple interviews, suggesting that availability of parking is a notable point of tension between the building and its surrounding community.

The second interviewee, aged 35, also had no direct experience visiting the building, yet offered a more detailed critique of its visual character and relationship to its surroundings. While acknowledging that the modern appearance of the building does not clash overtly with the neighboring structures, they noted that it stands out due to its use of decorative elements such as *mashrabiya*s. They described the building as “slightly different” in shape, and commented that while the contrast is not necessarily negative, the structure appears overly closed off. The interviewee proposed the introduction of open spaces to help the building blend more harmoniously with its environment. Specifically, they suggested that the endowment shops connected to the building could be replaced with communal or open areas, as the shops were seen as mismatched with the overall character of the building.

The third resident, a 21-year-old, similarly had not visited the building but expressed a positive view of its design. They appreciated the uniqueness of the structure and how its visual identity has made it easy to recognize. The resident highlighted the aesthetic impact of the *mashrabiya*s installed in the passage between the entrance and the parking area, noting that the interplay of sunlight created a beautiful effect, adding to the architectural appeal of the building.

Collectively, these interviews reveal that while the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate is widely recognized for its distinctive and modern exterior, there are concerns about practical integration with the urban fabric. Parking shortages, the lack of open spaces, and the presence of commercial units that may not suit the architectural language of the building were mentioned as areas for improvement. Nonetheless, the design elements such as the *mashrabiya*s and the clarity of architectural identity were appreciated, suggesting a balance between modern innovation and cultural symbolism.

These community-based observations provide critical feedback for urban planners and architects on how religious and administrative buildings can harmonize with their neighborhoods—not only through visual coherence but also through spatial generosity and contextual sensitivity.

## Sheikh Ebrahim Cultural Center in Muharraq

The architectural landscape of Bahrain is a blend of tradition and modernity, with two notable examples being the Jaafari Awqaf Directorate Building in Manama and the Sh. Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Center in Muharraq.

The Sh. Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Center for Culture and Research, located in the historic city of Muharraq, Bahrain, is an exemplary project of heritage preservation and cultural revitalization. Originally a traditional Bahraini house, the center was meticulously restored in 2002 using authentic building materials such as coral stone, palm trunks, and lime-based plaster. The restoration respects the original spatial configuration while adapting the space to serve as a venue for cultural dialogue. The structure features shaded verandas, carved wooden doors, and traditional decorative motifs such as gypsum panels and *mashrabiya*s that allow filtered light and ventilation, all carefully integrated to preserve the character of the original house. But its restoration emphasizes spatial intimacy and a quiet atmosphere suitable for lectures and exhibitions. The center is used for cultural events, talks, and artistic

presentations, reflecting Bahrain's commitment to connecting its historical identity with contemporary public life [Durrani, 2015].

The Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate in Bahrain uses modern materials and minimalist design, despite concerns about its environmental impact due to its glass facades. Some see it increases energy consumption and may cause heat gain, but the clean aesthetic aligns with the modern, globalized identity of Bahrain.

The Sh. Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Center is deeply connected to the Islamic heritage of Bahrain, embodying principles of harmony with Nature, promoting tranquility, and reflecting cultural identity. However, the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate represents a more modern, functional approach to Islamic architecture, lacking the symbolic richness and cultural references found in traditional Islamic structures.

The Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate, designed by Noor Al Mutawa, skillfully fuses tradition and modernity by reinterpreting Islamic architectural elements through a contemporary lens. Traditional features like *mashrabiya* screens, and natural light play a central role, yet are expressed with modern materials and minimalist forms. Mutawa creates a sequence of spatial experiences that move from public to introspective, using filtered light, solid forms, and thoughtful transitions to evoke calm. The result is a civic space that feels timeless, grounded in Islamic heritage while fully aligned with modern architectural principles.



Fig. 9: Sh.Ebrahim Cultural Center in Muharraq

Source: Author

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate stands as a striking example of contemporary architecture of Bahrain, reflecting both the complexities of modern design and its integration within a traditional cultural and religious context. Since its establishment as a modest administrative office, the building has evolved into a modern structure that represents the architectural progress of Bahrain. The 2009 redesign, led by the architect Noor Al Mutawa, the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate, a modern, contemporary space, has been transformed into a blend of modern and traditional design, highlighting the tension between innovation and cultural heritage. Despite its functional organization and minimalist aesthetic, the building faces challenges in integrating with its urban surroundings and addressing environmental sustainability. To enhance its connection to the environment, sustainable design strategies like passive cooling techniques and green spaces reflecting cultural identity of Bahrain can be implemented. This balance of modernity and tradition can continue to evolve as a model of architecture.

The research on the Jaffariya Awqaf Directorate offers a thorough and well-rounded examination, effectively combining architectural analysis, environmental considerations, historical context, and social perspectives. Its strengths lie in the use of primary sources through interviews with employees, visitors, and local residents, providing valuable firsthand insights into the building's functionality, user experience, and community impact. The study thoughtfully addresses sustainability challenges in Bahrain's desert climate by comparing

modern materials with traditional passive cooling techniques and suggests incorporating advanced sustainable technologies. Additionally, the research's comparison with the Sheikh Ebrahim Cultural Center enriches the cultural and architectural discussion by contrasting tradition with contemporary design, highlighting the building's modern reinterpretation of Islamic architectural elements.

The study does have several drawbacks, though. Its examination of sustainability and space utilization would be strengthened by the inclusion of specific empirical visitor figures and quantitative data to support environmental claims. The small sample size for community and public opinions may not accurately reflect broader viewpoints. A more thorough examination of the building's architectural features, including materiality and construction methods, as well as its urban setting would enhance the study's comprehension of its integration and cultural significance. Furthermore, even while it points out important functional issues like parking, waiting places, and noise, it doesn't go into detail to offer specific fixes or go over improvement plans.

All things considered, the study offers insightful information on the building's design and social function, but it could be improved by adding more data-driven analysis, more community input, in-depth architectural criticism, and useful suggestions for further development.

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