Approaches to Architecture: The Architectural Philosophy of Thamer Salahuddin of Bahrain

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Abstract

Architect Thamer Salahuddin stands as one of the most influential contemporary practitioners of Bahrain whose approach to architecture is shaped by both a deep architectural lineage and a pragmatic design mindset. Born into a family that played a foundational role in the production of the built environment of Bahrain—his grandfather, Salahuddin bin Hassan, being the first recorded architect in the country—Thamer represents a continuation of an architectural legacy while also redefining it for the modern times. In this context, this research examines his approach to architecture.

It employs personal interviews and observations of case studies as research methods. First, after due process, the authors conducted two interviews with the architect Thamer Salahuddin in his office in May 2025, using an informal interview procedure enabling the architect to express his views. During this interview, the architect articulated his approach and also divulged the outstanding projects that exemplify his approaches to architecture. Afterwards, selected case studies were physically observed during the site visits, guided by documentation of the projects in hand. The second interview was also held in his office when he elaborated upon the questions raised by the authors on the specifics of the building projects observed as case studies.

It is concluded that across his practice, Thamer consistently emphasizes his approach to architecture being comprised of four facets. To him as a practitioner, it is primarily a service. However, it is grounded in real human needs, environmental logic, and operational clarity. As revealed, his work reflects a philosophy where functional analysis, contextual understanding and simple, practical construction form the basis of design.

Keywords: Approaches to Architecture, Functional analysis, Contextual understanding, Practical construction, Thamer Salahuddin, Bahrain.

Introduction

It is well known that architecture is a complex phenomenon and its practices also vary. On the one hand, people produce architecture on a daily basis as they live and inhabit the world, which is often recognized as the vernacular architecture. On the other hand, there are those who

have acquired disciplinary specific knowledge and understanding about the deep-seated ideas buttressing the emergence of spaces and places: referred to variously as main stream architecture, interior architecture and landscape architecture. Despite such regimented learning and practices handed down by the academia and the professional practitioners however, each architect understands architecture in his own way.

This is indeed a unique facet of the profession of architecture, unlike medicine law or any other science. In this sense, the practice of architecture can be likened more to an art although, it not just a pure art. There are specifics to which an architect is bound to react in recognized and accepted ways, but there are also facets in which only his or her imaginations can be engaged.

Given this background, no two architects practice architecture exactly the same way. Wijetunga (2012;2024a;2024b) amply illustrates this when they present the works of Geoffery Bawa and Valentine in Sri Lanka. Similarly, Hussain (2025) presents the architectural contribution of Nora Almutawa of Bahrain fusing cultural traditions with modernity to create unique spatial experiences. Karwan (2025) bringing insights from the design studios in Malaysia shows how creating spatial experiences using virtual reality applications in architectural design:

In fact, numerous other writings also exist. In many countries therefore, the architects celebrate each other's works by holding annual exhibitions through which these differences are presented to the other professionals as well as the general public so that people who need architectural services can choose the architectural practice that appears to deliver ''buildings' in the way they appeal to different people.

In Bahrain however, a unique situation exists. On the one hand, the architects are popularly to referred to as 'engineers.' This is a social and cultural aspect that has arisen from the term used to refer to 'architects' in Arabic. On the other hand, there is no organised discipline and practice referred to as architects. Obviously, the two are inter- related. The Bahrain Society of Engineers thus regulate and promote the practice of architecture. Nevertheless, many architects have practiced architecture for quite some time, through what are often referred to as 'engineering offices' and in the names of engineers too.

Architect Thamer Salahuddin stands as one of the most influential contemporary practitioners of Bahrain among few others. However, very little has been studied in terms of how they perceive architecture as well as how they approach the production of buildings. In this context, this research examines his approach to architecture long with the buildings that he has done exemplifying his approach. Its aim is to bring to light the nuances of ideas the architect employs in practicing architectural design, in order to enhance the awareness about the practice of architecture in Bahrain. Its objectives are as follows.

1. To identify the specific concepts and ideas employed by the Architect Thamer Salahuddin, in the design of spaces and developing buildings in Bahrain.
2. To ascertain the ways in which these concepts manifest in the buildings that have been produced in the past.
3. To ascertain the significance of the ideas so employed, in terms of their relevance to the contemporary theoretical debates in architecture.

Research Methods

This research employs personal interviews and observations of case studies as research methods. Two personal interviews were conducted with the architect at his own office: first to enable him to express his ideas and second was after the case studies were carried out. Selection of the case studies were based upon the recommendations of the architect. The second interview was employed to ask the architect to elaborate in the observations and demonstrate how his approach manifests in the buildings. The site visits were guided by documentation of the projects made available by Salahuddin's Office.

Research was conducted in May 2025, and adhered to the principles of ethics. At the outset of the process, architect Thamer Salahuddin was informed of the nature of the research and oral consent was obtained to use the material for the research purpose. He was free to stop

his participation anytime he wanted. No force or coercion was employed. The research did not impinge on the rights of any individual, and did not discriminate against any person. It did not involve any animal studies.

Findings

Architect Thamer Salahuddin stands as one of Bahrain's influential contemporary practitioners, shaped by both a deep architectural lineage and a pragmatic design mindset. Born into a family that played a foundational role in Bahrain's built environment—his grandfather, Salahuddin bin Hassan, being the first recorded architect in the country—Thamer represents a continuation of an architectural legacy while also redefining it for modern times.

Thamer's grandfather, Salahuddin bin Hassan, was among the pioneering architects responsible for several landmark projects in Bahrain, including Bab Al Bahrain, Qudaibiya Palace, and some of the early governmental hospitals. This heritage not only shaped Thamer's exposure to architecture from a young age but also instilled in him a strong awareness of the societal role architecture plays in shaping communities (Interview with Thamer Salahuddin, 2025).

His entry into architecture, however, was not immediate. He initially pursued Business Administration, believing he would follow his family's commercial background, before eventually realizing that architecture offered a more profound and tangible means of improving people's lives. This realization led him to study Architecture in Texas, USA, followed by a degree in Architectural Engineering at the University of Bahrain (Interview with Thamer Salahuddin, 2025).

Across his practice, Thamer consistently emphasizes architecture as a service, grounded in real human needs, environmental logic, and operational clarity. His work reflects a philosophy where functional analysis, contextual understanding, and simple, practical construction form the basis of design. This essay presents an analytical study of his approach and examines how his philosophy materializes in three of his notable projects: the Future Generations Reserve (FGR) Tower, Conrad Tower, and the Al-Khafji Border Post.

Architectural Philosophy

Architecture as a Tool to Serve People

When asked what architecture means to him, Thamer describes it as the ability to create something that improves human life, making daily activities easier, more efficient, and more enjoyable. Architecture, in his view, is not defined by style but by its capacity to solve problems and facilitate human experience (Interview with Thamer Salahuddin, 2025). He sees every building as an opportunity to enhance movement, comfort, clarity, wellness, and usability. This human-centered foundation becomes the lens through which all his design decisions are made.

Form Follows Function: A Foundational Principle

Perhaps the strongest theme in Thamer's philosophy is his unwavering belief in Form Follows Function. He explains this through a simple but powerful analogy:

> "If a human looks beautiful but is bad on the inside, you won't want them; the same applies to a building."
>
> Interview with Thamer Salahuddin, 2025

For him, architecture fails the moment it prioritizes aesthetics over usability. Thus, before engaging in conceptual or formal exploration, he studies the operational requirements of the building, circulation and user movement, environmental factors such as sun, shade, heat, and wind, spatial adjacency, and functional relationships, as well as the needs of the operator. A building's form must emerge as a solution, not as decoration. Performance precedes expression.

The "Story" Behind the Design: Meaning Through Logic, Not Fiction

Thamer repeatedly uses the word story to describe his concepts, but clarifies that this does not refer to fictional storytelling or symbolic narratives detached from reality. Instead, the "story" is the logic behind the design—the reason a building takes a certain shape or adopts a particular organization.

> "You must live the requirements. If you don't live the story, you cannot innovate."
>
> Interview with Thamer Salahuddin, 2025

The story emerges from the client's identity, the project's functional program, cultural or contextual meaning, environmental conditions, and the intended user experience. Thus, the story is not invented; it is discovered through research. It explains why a building looks and performs the way it does.

Research-Based Design Approach

According to the interview, every project begins with a deep study of the brief. For Thamer, reading and analyzing requirements is not a procedural step but the intellectual foundation of the entire design process. He often conducts environmental analysis (sun, wind, heat), case study reviews, operational workflow studies, spatial movement studies, and testing and refining through iterations.

He notes that mistakes in early design stages are essential because they lead to better solutions. Innovation, in his method, emerges not from spontaneous creativity but from informed experimentation, according to the Interview with Thamer Salahuddin, 2025.

Simplicity and Practical Performance

A key evolution in Thamer's philosophy over the years is his growing appreciation for simplicity, practicality, and straightforward construction. He explains that buildings should be complete, efficient, visually coherent, and easy to maintain—not overly complicated or energy-consuming. As he puts it:

> "I prefer to be simple and practical. The building must be complete, look good, function well, not waste energy, and be easy to maintain."
>
> Interview with Thamer Salahuddin, 2025

Material and construction choices are therefore evaluated based on performance, maintainability, and energy behavior, not decorative intent. Practicality is treated as a design value, not a compromise.

Avoiding Ego in Architecture

Thamer advocates strongly against ego-driven design. He believes the architect's responsibility is to serve the user, not impose a personal signature.

> "You must stay away from ego… because everyone thinks they are right."
> Interview with Thamer Salahuddin, 2025

For him, ego leads to unnecessary complexity, higher costs, and buildings that do not serve their intended purpose. The design must respond to the client, context, and climate—not the architect's desire to stand out.

Learning Precision and Design Logic from Nature

A key dimension of Thamer Salahuddin's design philosophy is his observation that nature operates with remarkable precision, balance, and efficiency. Rather than approaching this from a metaphysical standpoint, he interprets natural systems as models of optimized

design—systems where every element serves a purpose and functions within a larger, coherent structure. During the interview, he noted how understanding sunlight angles, wind behavior, and rainfall patterns provides continuous lessons for architectural decision-making.

For Thamer, nature becomes a reference for how shapes, proportions, and environmental responses should be integrated. The consistency and logic found in natural systems reinforce his belief that architecture must be purpose-driven, climate-responsive, and performance-oriented. He studies the way natural forms adapt, how ecosystems regulate heat and airflow, and how landscapes organize themselves efficiently. These observations inform his approach to massing, façade design, shading strategies, and spatial comfort.

In this sense, "learning from Nature" is a technical and analytical process. It treats natural systems as case studies of environmental intelligence, helping the architect refine decisions related to orientation, material behavior, and user comfort. This scientific reading of nature aligns directly with Thamer's broader philosophy of practical, functional, and research-based architecture.

Sustainability as a Rational, Context-Driven Approach

Although sustainability is a dominant theme in contemporary architectural discourse, Thamer Salahuddin approaches it with a measured and rational mindset. During the interview, he emphasized that sustainability should not be treated as an aesthetic trend or an excuse for excessive spending. As he stated,

> "Sustainability is important, but some people spend five times the required cost… this is wrong. It must be studied."
>
> Interview with Thamer Salahuddin, 2025

For Thamer, sustainability is not about adding expensive technological systems. Instead, it begins with fundamental design decisions such as orientation, shading, natural ventilation, thermal behavior, and material selection. He believes that true sustainability is achieved when a building consumes less energy naturally—through intelligent design—rather than relying on costly add-ons.

His perspective positions sustainability as a context-driven, performance-based philosophy, where each environmental strategy must be justified by measurable benefit, long-term practicality, and relevance to the building's climate and use. In this sense, sustainability becomes a logical extension of his broader belief in functionality, simplicity, and environmental responsiveness.

Human Scale and Responsiveness to Urban Reality

A significant aspect of Thamer Salahuddin's architectural philosophy is his emphasis on human scale—the idea that buildings should relate proportionally to the physical and psychological experience of users. During the interview, he explained that excessively tall buildings create functional and experiential challenges rather than serving community needs. As he stated, high-rise towers lead to complications such as ear pressure in elevators, increased maintenance demands, and more complex sanitation systems.

Thamer argues that, within the context of Bahrain, buildings should ideally not exceed around twenty floors to maintain a scale that remains accessible, efficient, and comfortable for occupants. His approach aligns with global urban design principles that promote pedestrian comfort, manageable infrastructure, and cityscapes that feel coherent rather than overwhelming.

For him, human scale is not merely a visual preference—it is a practical, user-centered principle. It reinforces his broader philosophy that architecture must be grounded in real human experience, environmental responsiveness, and long-term usability. By respecting human scale, the built environment becomes more livable, relatable, and functionally sustainable.

Learning Through Error as a Creative Method

Another revealing aspect of Thamer Salahuddin's design philosophy is his belief in the creative value of making mistakes. During the interview, he explained that experimentation—and the errors that result from it—is an essential part of reaching better architectural solutions. As he stated,

> "I make mistakes so that the correct solution can appear."
> Interview with Thamer Salahuddin, 2025

Rather than viewing error as a failure, Thamer considers it an analytical tool that exposes weaknesses in early design ideas and drives the project toward greater clarity and functionality. This iterative mindset aligns with contemporary design-thinking methodologies in which testing, prototyping, and refinement are central to innovation. For Thamer, architecture evolves through cycles of trial and correction, allowing the final design to be more practical, contextually responsive, and attuned to real user needs.

Architecture as a Multidisciplinary Practice

Although Thamer approaches design from a functional and user-centered perspective, he repeatedly emphasizes that architecture cannot be practiced in isolation. During the interview, he highlighted that the built environment is shaped by a wide network of specialized disciplines, each contributing essential knowledge to the final outcome. As he explained,

> "Architecture has specializations—signage, lighting, mechanical systems… the architect cannot know everything, and that is why research is necessary."
> Interview with Thamer Salahuddin, 2025

This perspective positions architecture not as a single-author craft, but as a collaborative and interdisciplinary process. The architect's responsibility, in Thamer's view, is to understand enough about each field to coordinate effectively while respecting the contributions of engineers, consultants, and operators. This philosophy reinforces his belief that design quality emerges from informed decisions supported by technical expertise, rather than from intuition or personal style alone.

Thamer's embrace of multidisciplinary integration reflects a broader global shift toward complex building systems, performance-driven design, and project delivery models that require architects to function as synthesizers of knowledge. His mindset strengthens the architectural process, making it more robust, accurate, and aligned with real-world operational needs.

Client-Centered Flexibility and the Rejection of Stylistic Imposition

A distinctive part of Thamer Salahuddin's philosophy is his refusal to impose a personal stylistic signature on clients. During the interview, he pointed out that MSCEB operates as a commercial firm, serving a wide range of clients with different aesthetic expectations. As he explained,

> "Some clients want a Spanish style… I cannot force my opinion on them."
> Interview with Thamer Salahuddin, 2025

This stance challenges the modernist tradition in which architects pursued a consistent, recognizable style. Instead, Thamer prioritizes client identity, cultural relevance, and project purpose over personal expression. His flexibility is not a sign of inconsistency, but rather a commitment to designing buildings that respond to user needs, budget constraints, and contextual demands.

By avoiding stylistic ego, Thamer treats each project as a new problem that requires a unique solution rather than a repeated visual formula. This reinforces his functional philosophy: the building's purpose, environment, and social use take precedence over the architect's desire for formal recognition. His approach reflects an ethical dimension in architecture—placing the client's needs above individual authorship.

Manifestation of Philosophy in Selected Projects: Case Studies

Case Study 01

Future Generations Reserve (FGR) Tower, Bahrain

Fig. 1. Architectural view of the FGR Tower
Source: MSCEB Company Profile.

According to the Interview with Thamer Salahuddin (2025), the FGR Tower embodies a national narrative connected to the Bahraini flag (al-bayraq). The central triangular mass symbolizes leadership, while the side volumes represent unity between the leadership and people.

The tower's twisting form is not merely conceptual—it creates self-shading to reduce thermal gain, enhances daylight penetration, improves comfort inside office spaces, and aligns with views toward the Bahrain Bay. This project demonstrates his ability to turn symbolic meaning into a functional geometry.

Case Study 02

Conrad Tower (Formerly Energy Bank)

Fig. 2: Exterior view of Conrad Tower
Source: MSCEB Official Website.

Designed originally for the Energy Bank, Thamer Salahuddin claims that the Conrad Tower's concept is rooted in the movement of energy—wind, water, and fire. This concept directly reflects the identity of the client.

As he points out, the tower's curved shape supports aerodynamic performance. The parking podium is shaped like sedimentary rock layers to reference geological formations related to oil. The building includes hotel apartments, office floors, retail functions, and rooftop amenities organized with operational clarity. Given this, the project exemplifies the architects approach quite well.

In fact, this project illustrates how functional logic and conceptual meaning reinforce each other in Thamer's work.

Case Study 03
Al-Khafji Border Post, Saudi Arabia

Fig. 3: Conceptual rendering of the Al-Khafji Border Post
Source: MSCEB Office Display.

Located on the border of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, this project draws on the regional identity of Saudi Arabia and flame-like elements referencing oil culture. These forms are integrated in a way that conveys national meaning without compromising functional performance.

According to Thamer Salahuddin (2025), the climate demanded large shading elements, efficient circulation, and heat-responsive geometry. The project exemplifies how symbolism can co-exist with operational effectiveness. In fact, the architect caters also to the needs of the client who was looking for an exorbitant building to communicate the wealth and opulence present in the two adjoining countries while also resembling the idea of a transitionary exhalation derive in crossing the border. Undeniably, Thamer Salahuddin invests joy in the form while establishing the serious legal and functional clarity required of the place manifested in the exuberant form.

Nevertheless, overriding the vertical and rising spheres is the sense of movement registered as an underlying presence in passing through space.

Conclusion

Architect Thamer Salahuddin's philosophy represents a mature, grounded, and contextually informed approach to contemporary Bahraini architecture. His design method is not driven by stylistic trends but by functionality, research, meaning, and simplicity. Throughout the interview, Thamer emphasized the importance of user needs, environmental responsiveness, and the idea that form must always follow function. His principles extend to sustainability approached rationally, respecting human scale, and viewing error as a creative tool for refinement—each reinforcing his belief that architecture must remain practical, usable, and rooted in real human experience.

Through projects such as the FGR Tower, Conrad Tower, and Al-Khafji Border Post, Thamer translates these principles into built form, demonstrating a consistent ability to merge functional clarity with conceptual depth. His work offers a model for architects seeking to balance modern demands with cultural relevance, functional integrity, and long-term environmental awareness. Ultimately, his philosophy highlights architecture as a service—one that aims to improve everyday life while responding intelligently to context, climate, and community.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in carrying out this research.

Ethical Practice: The authors declare that this research has been conducted employing accepted ethical research practices and does not violate the rights of any social group, a person or animals. The data was generated with a full understanding and agreement of the respondents, and owners of the case studies.

Availability of Data: Data presented in this research are available for scrutiny if so required. In any case, they were used in this paper with the consent of the owners of that data.

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