

INSIDE THE KINGDOM: PART III

February 19, 2002

Elizabeth Farnsworth interviews architect Sami Angawi in the final portion of her three-part series of reports from Saudi Arabia, a nation that has remained largely inaccessible to foreign reporters.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Jeddah is a city of more than a million on the Red Sea that has long served as the gateway for Muslim pilgrims traveling to nearby Mecca and Medina. Muslims from all over the world have settled here, making the city a melting pot of people and ideas; of old and new. The old is visible downtown, where wood lattices cover windows on buildings constructed long ago. Streets are narrow and shops are small and intimate. New Jeddah can be seen on the great boulevard leading to the Red Sea, where dozens of modern sculptures line miles of street and beach. Children play here as families picnic on their day off.

Architect Sami Angawi comes from an old Jeddah family descended from the prophet Mohammed. He's an authority on the architecture of his region, and his religion. He has spent the last ten years building a home that he hopes embodies both.

Traditional Hijazi architecture

SAMI ANGAWI, Architect: The house here is a reflection of traditional Hijazi architecture.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And Hijazi, explain what that means.

SAMI ANGAWI: Hijazi is the local region here, which is an ancient name for this region. And Hijaz has always been the reflecting point. It's the melting pot of the Muslim world. So you can see something in Hijaz, which is from India, and you see something from Morocco, and something from Turkey, and something from Yemen. Everything is a reflection of the idea of the unity and the diversity. My statement here is that to live in a time now, you don't have to forget your traditions. So it's the balance between the constant and the variable. And that's how it's always been in Islamic tradition; Islamic architecture.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Angawi has designed into his house the dualities he thinks Islam embraces. The home is very private but also open to the world, as he thinks his religion has been. Many openings to the outside are screened, but light permeates every room, flowing through windows that evoke Islam and Christianity alike. There's a sunken dining area that feels like Japan, and tiles from various parts of the Muslim world. The designs of the tiles are themselves works of art, as are the quotes from the Koran and other details.

SAMI ANGAWI: Well, as you notice as you walk in the house from one place to another, it's really like walking in my mind.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: What do you mean?

SAMI ANGAWI: What I mean is, is that's how my mind works. I see things from different perspectives. I see it in layers, I see it in details, and that's why I look even at our Islamic culture and Islamic concept from different perspectives. And that's how we have to see it now.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: What do you mean?

SAMI ANGAWI: Not single minded. Not just seeing one thing. You have to see more than one thing in order to reach the balance, because you cannot have balance with just a one-sided scale.

Example of the true Jihad

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Angawi contrasts his vision of his religion with the more fundamentalist vision of Islam that has become familiar to foreigners since September 11th. He sees his house as an example of the true Jihad, as opposed to Jihad as Holy War.

SAMI ANGAWI: There is always a choice in what's called Jihad, which is, again, misunderstood by Muslims and by non-Muslims. Jihad starts with yourself, with your inside, with your body, with your family, with your house. This is Jihad what I'm trying to do. The beauty you see is the Jihad of trying to do something beautiful.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: It's almost as if in your art and in your person you want to embody this vision of Islam that you think is the proper one, or is the way it should be? How would you put it?

SAMI ANGAWI: I put it that I'm not inventing anything. I put it that I'm part of a tradition, part of a heritage, which is 1,400 years old if we take it to the prophet Mohammed. If we take it to Abraham, it's at least 5,000 years old, or how long ago Abraham was. And it's a continuity of tradition. Not only ours, but tradition since the beginning of time. We believe in continuity.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: In the past, Angawi said, Islam was open to many influences and traditions; and this is what made it a great civilization. He's worried that in Saudi Arabia, the cradle of the religion, Islam has become restricted to one narrow interpretation that is intolerant of other views.

SAMI ANGAWI: The way it's taught is mainly in one direction, of one view. Again, I'm not saying it's right or wrong. This is not for me. I'm not a religious specialist. But I know when I look at my Islamic culture and Islamic tradition and civilization, I know that one of the reasons that we did have this great civilization is because different views were represented: The flexibility that was there, the adaptability that was there. And we very much need that now, to bring that back and to teach our children how to have a dialogue, how to discuss, how to interact with other people; how to be friends and how to follow the prophet.

The prophet at that time had said, "My companions are like the stars. Whichever one you follow, you are on the right path." And so that even though the companions had many different opinions, he didn't say, "shut up," and "you are right," and "he was wrong." No. He was always against extremism. He discouraged and even spoke strongly against extremism. Our crown prince was saying that recently. He was saying, "Don't be extreme on religion. Don't be extreme on religion. Don't be extreme on religion." Three times.

Islam in his work

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: The extremism of the Islam taught in Saudi Arabia, often called Wahabbi or Salafi Islam, has affected Angawi directly in his work. He started a center in Jeddah to preserve the Islamic and natural environment of the holy areas of Mecca, the birthplace of Mohammed, and Medina, which houses the prophet's tomb. He said much of historic Mecca -- as seen in this old footage -- has been razed to the ground, partly to build accommodations for the millions of annual pilgrims, but more ominously because religious leaders in Saudi Arabia fear historic sites will be used for a form of idol worship.

SAMI ANGAWI: I feel very, you know, bad about those places being gone. You know, like this one here is one example, and I have many other examples. This is the tomb of the first wife of the prophet, which was there and was totally demolished and is gone because of certain viewpoints that this could lead to idolatry.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: It could lead to idolatry?

SAMI ANGAWI: Idolatry, yes. Again, another site, which I worked on in discovering and actually digging, the house of the prophet in Mecca, near the mosque, and it has to be taken away and covered away.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Angawi also said that in the great mosque in the old days, four schools of thought were taught, and that a pilgrim could choose up to 35 different "rings" of teaching in the courtyards. I asked him what it's like now.

SAMI ANGAWI: Unfortunately, it developed into a way, which is only one viewpoint is presented. And of course, if you all the time you just listen to yourself, or those who only compliment you all the time, you think you're right and nobody else is right.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: So now, there's really only one form of Islam being taught in Mecca and Medina that's spreading all over the Muslim world, isn't it?

SAMI ANGAWI: Mecca is really, I think, critical, and Medina, that the beauty of the diversity, the beauty of the tradition that is, like I explained, many-sided views, and so on, is, in a way, has been now very much limited to basically one viewpoint. I'm not saying that viewpoint is maybe wrong or bad. I'm just saying we need to balance it and we need to listen to different views. It's

very essential now. As we are a growing part of the world, Islam is the religion of balance. If we cannot do it in Mecca and Medina, where can we do it?

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Angawi said his house is his answer to how more balance can be achieved through evolution, a respect for the past, and not radical change. He promotes dialogue about Islam in his work in Jeddah, as well as at Harvard, where he teaches part of each year. And he is convinced evolutionary change in his religion is already underway.

SAMI ANGAWI: I'm living now. But living now does not mean that you cut yourself from the past. Or appreciating the past and carrying on with it doesn't mean you do not live now. And that was always the challenge in Islamic tradition, Islamic culture, is to carry on.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Sami Angawi, thanks for being with us.

SAMI ANGAWI: Thank you very much.

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