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Some notions about the architecture of the National Museum of Yemen in the al-Mutawakkil quarter of Sana'a

*Richard van der Wijnen**

The National Museum of Yemen is located in the Dar al Sa'ada, the former palace of Imam Yahya in the *al-Mutawakkil* quarter of Sana'a. Recently, a project has been initiated to redevelop and enlarge the permanent exhibition. This makes it necessary to restore the adjacent North Wing of the former Turkish Military Hospital. From that point on it becomes urgent to reflect on the significance of the site and its relation to the city.

wing however, has disappeared and instead we now find the Dar al-Sa'ada in its place, build around 1922-1923.

Also, on the map of Manzoni, it can be observed that a large garden surrounded by walls belonged to the hospital. It is known that the Turks carefully chose the position of the hospitals. Before settling on a location, they used to expose the lungs of dead animals to the air in various areas. The lungs



How do we know which of the buildings that we see today were once part of a Turkish Military Hospital? By comparing the first detailed map of Sana'a, drawn and colored by the Italian traveler Renzo Manzoni in 1879, with a modern plan, it becomes clear where the hospital was located.

On the Manzoni map it can also be seen what a central, dominating position the palace held in between the new Bir al-Azab garden quarter to the west and the old city of Sana'a to the east. From the maps we can also conclude that both the north and the south wing of the hospital still exist, as indicated by the magenta lines on the maps. Looking at the buildings on site, we can get a confirmation by comparing the stonework of the north wing with that of the south wing, which are identical in design. The central

that best resisted decay indicated the most favourable locations. They also knew that calm and rest was beneficial to the healing process, so they preferred locations on the outskirts of the city. In this case, their eye fell on the al-Mutawakkil palace garden, for it was there that the Yemeni Imam's had their residence since the 13th / 14th century. The palace garden was also known as the Bustan al-Misk and this name evokes visions of a scented garden modeled on the traditional oriental concept of paradise. The presence of clear running water and possibly also fountains in the garden must have been a decisive factor for the Turks.

Further research learned that there were three military hospitals built by the Turkish in Yemen. The one in Hodeidah still exists and can also be seen today. A third one was built in Taiz.

* Dutch expert.



The military hospital in Hodeidah is a one story building, with several wings organized around a central courtyard. The corridors all face the courtyard and in the middle of it is a fountain. The north and south wing of the hospital in Sana'a also has the corridors facing the courtyard, thereby confirming the typology of the Turkish Military Hospital. But where is the Turkish fountain in the courtyard of the hospital in Sana'a? While excavating the central courtyard in preparation of the construction of the Underground Storage Building, traces of a fountain were indeed found in the centre of the courtyard. The presence of water in the Bustan al-Misk is confirmed by the Manzoni map, on which one can clearly see the *ghayl* in the form of a blue line running from the south to the north. The fountain that one can now see in the courtyard is imaginative, but the reconstruction can be justified. The Dutch ambassador in Jeddah, van der Meulen, allows us a glimpse in how the hospital used to function:

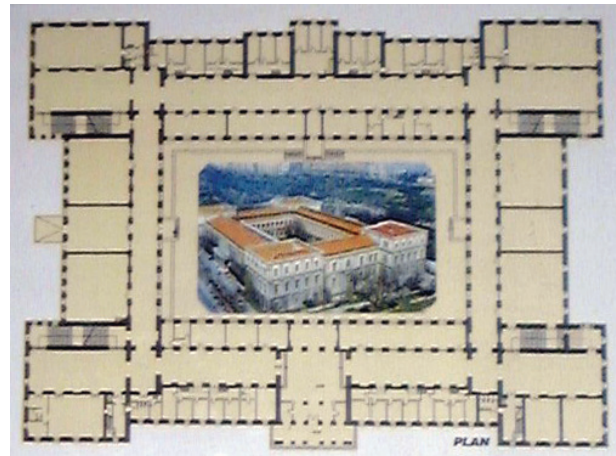
"It was thanks to our good relations with Dr. Petrie that we were both able to visit the Government Hospital in Sana'a. He was responsible for a third of it; a Syrian army doctor was in charge of the military part and an Italian doctor, a surgeon, had the surgical part of the hospital. The building lay outside the town wall, near the Jewish quarter, and had been erected after the Turkish occupation of the country but was in the massive style of all the Turkish official buildings."(1)

Since the defeat of the Turkish army before the gates of Vienna in the 16th century, the Turkish have adopted a strategy of modernization. And although the Arabian hospitals were well in advance over anything

in Western Europe during most part of the middle ages and beyond, for the construction of their military hospitals, they called on German, French and English specialists. It can be safely assumed that the typology of their military hospitals originated from European examples.



The Coolsingel hospital in Rotterdam, for example, was set up as a corridor-hospital, just as the military hospitals in Sana'a and Hodeidah. With lifts, heating, ventilation and running water, it was at the time the most modern hospital in Europe. Build by the architect Rose in 1840, he also introduced the rounded arch style in the Netherlands in which he followed the German architect Schinkel. If one wants to, one can see a reminiscence of the fully rounded arch in the flat rounded arches of the hospital in Sana'a. From the perspective of influence and the exchange of new ideas, it is intriguing that the interior of the hospital in Rotterdam is designed in an oriental style. Today, it is hard to imagine that at the time this style could be associated with progress.



And between 1848 and 1853 a British architect called W. James Smith designed the Taskisla building in Istanbul as a military medicine academy for the Ottoman Army under the rule of Sultan Abdülmecid. During construction, the plans were modified and the building's function was changed to the military barracks in 1849. Today the technical university is located in the building. This plan provides another clear link in typology to the Military Hospital in Sana'a because the corridors and the proportions of the wings are very similar. However, it should be noted that the plan also suggests the possibility that the corridor in the central wing of the Military Hospital in Sana'a was not facing the courtyard but was located in the middle.



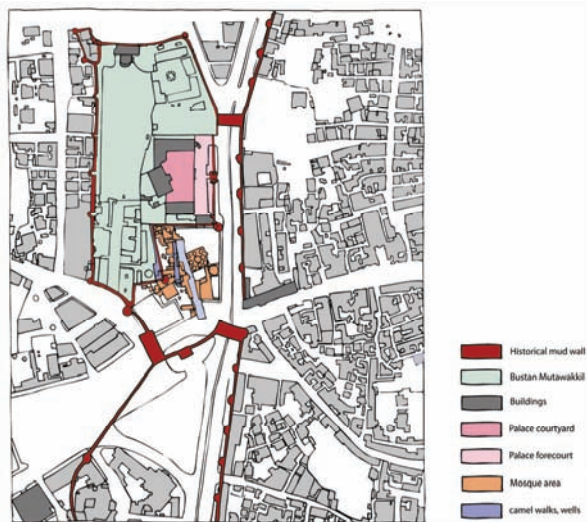
The application of an oriental style to the interior of the hospital in Rotterdam is mirrored by a striking building in Sana'a in which modernism is applied in a South Arabian environment. Possibly in the thirties, a crisp and pure modernist building, on the left of the photo, was built next to the Dar al-Shukr, the former palace for the wives of the Imam. It shows a strong resemblance to, for example, the buildings of the Dutch architect Dudok. Today, the building unfortunately no longer exists and the oversized Yemen Bank for Reconstruction and Development stands in its place. This historic example of oriental modernism resulted in a spectacular skyline in which the modernist cube sets up an interesting contrast with the traditional domes of the mosque. It is a dialogue in which no building overpowers the other. It shows how

international and fluid architecture is and it certainly questions dogmatic conservation of cultural heritage in which there is no room for dialogue and experiment. The group of buildings is certainly more interesting with the cube than without it.

The north wing of the military hospital has always had two stories. By studying the stonework of the north wing, which is still in its original condition, it can be concluded that the whole hospital was conceived with two stories. For that reason, it was decided to restore the south wing to its original height. At the same time, the symmetry of the two wings was re-established and with that the courtyard was clearly defined. At present, it is possible for the visitor to visualize the Turkish hospital as it used to be. Also, the scale of the two wings perfectly matches the newly re-created central courtyard, giving it the quality of an urban cultural public square. And it clearly sets the stage for this extraordinary architectural gesture of Imam Yahya, through which he demonstrated his power by placing his palace on the remnants of the crushed Turkish architecture.

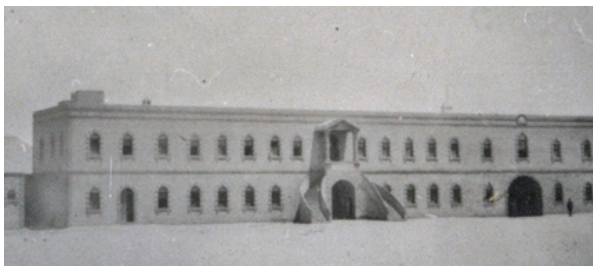


On another old photograph it can be seen that the present day al-Mogni street was used for official receptions and as a parade ground for the military. From the gatehouse of the National Museum, which is on the left, one could reach a forecourt in which the Imam used to hold public council under a tree. A second gate finally led to the main courtyard which was not accessible to the public. The mud brick walls on the right of the photograph have since been demolished.



The idea of a succession of spaces from public, semi-public to private can be found in many other palaces and temples such as, for example, the forbidden city in Beijing. The empty space of the courtyard, whether it is Turkish or if it belongs to Imam Yahya, is the main structuring element for the architecture of the National Museum. In the above scheme, the different qualities of the open space are indicated. This principle is another element that is important for the restoration of the buildings.

However, there is a mystery still remains unsolved. Up till today, no photograph has been found of the Turkish Military Hospital in Sana'a. The question if there was a central entrance and staircase or if the staircases were in the corners of the wings of the Turkish Military Hospital in Sana'a still remains unanswered. And also, we do not have any idea of what the courtyard looked like.



A comparison with the Turkish Barracks in Sana'a suggests that there might have been two elegant external curved staircases with a portico in the classical style bearing the Ottoman seal in the center of the main wing of the Turkish Military Hospital.



Further research in Istanbul yielded a photograph of the *apothécaire* of the Turkish Military Hospital in Sana'a. This handsome building still exists, although in time a second floor has been added. It is located at the south-east corner of the courtyard. As can be seen, a Greek portico used to stand in front of the entrance bearing the Ottoman *thugra*. Today, different shaded stones in the elevation still mark the location of the supporting beams of the portico. And excavations in front of the door confirmed the presence of the platform on which the portico once used to stand. The doors of the entrance still bear two happy Turkish copper half moons.

As long as the mystery of the central wing remains, we will have to make the best interpretation of the past with the information that is available. It should be remembered however, that at the time of its construction, around the 1850's, the Turkish Military Hospital was perfectly modern. Today, it contrasts with the noisy and taxi filled business streets of Sana'a and upon entering the courtyard we feel like being thrown back in some distant time. It is hard to believe that this effect is created by one building from the 1850's and one from 1922. And finally, as the modernist building shows, we also have to look to the future and adapt our heritage to our present needs without being afraid of experiment and new solutions.

(1) Faces in Shem, D. van der Meulen, 1961, John Murray, London

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