

Reconstructing Authenticity: Diriyah Gate as Urban Spectacle in Post-Oil Riyadh (2010 till Present)

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Abstract

This year marked the first decade since Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) announced the ambitious reform of Saudi Vision 2030 back in 2016, which aims to divert the Kingdom's revenue from oil production into other sectors like tourism and service industries. With the support of the Sovereign Fund Public Investment Fund (PIF), many mega-projects such as the Line and Oxagon Village by NEOM were launched. Riyadh as the capital of the Kingdom was historically conservative in urban development, where it was overshadowed by regional rivals like Dubai and Doha in the Gulf region. The geopolitics of the country also influenced such context, with the new young leader MBS pushing many new urban developments in the region. In a matter of a decade, the country has transitioned from a state led economy to a neo-liberal model, where the government is promoting economic growth in the private sector, particularly through large scale real estate development in cities like Riyadh.



Introduction

This essay examines Diriyah Gate as both a preservation project and an urban strategy, situating it within the broader transformation of Riyadh from a historically conservative desert capital into a vibrant metropolis.

The three variables guiding this analysis are: (1) the site of Diriyah and the city of Riyadh, (2) the contemporary period from 2010 to the present, and (3) a critical frame that interrogates heritage as a tool of state branding rather than pure preservation. Through this lens, Diriyah

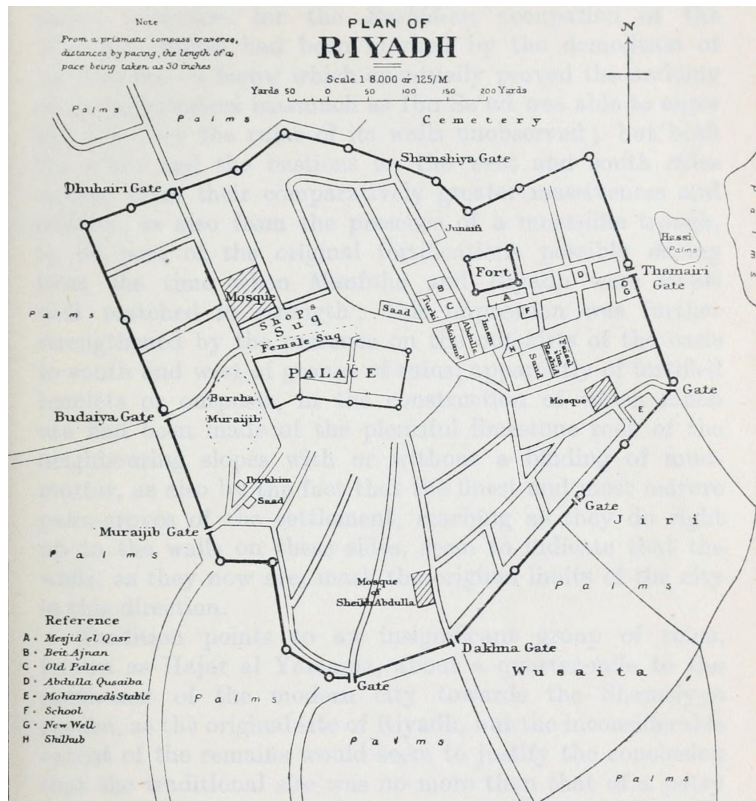


Fig.1 - H. St. J. B. Philby (1922) The heart of Arabia[1], London: Constable. Yasser Elsheshtawy, "Chapter 5: Riyadh's Urban Growth and Development: A Historical Overview," and "Chapter 10: Conclusion: The Future of Riyadh," in Riyadh: Transforming a Desert City (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2022), 100.



Fig.2 - Riyadh market viewed from palace roof, 1937 (Source: Royal Geographical Society. Yasser Elsheshtawy, "Chapter 5: Riyadh's Urban Growth and Development: A Historical Overview," and "Chapter 10: Conclusion: The Future of Riyadh," in Riyadh: Transforming a Desert City (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2022), 101.

is understood not merely as a historical restoration project but as a constructed “urban spectacle” that redefines authenticity to serve its post-oil national narrative.

By analyzing architectural form, urban planning strategies, and representational techniques, including visual building elements, spatial planning, and typological reinterpretation. This essay argues that Diriyah operates as a prototype of controlled authenticity. It produces a curated past that simultaneously legitimizes political authority and positions Riyadh within a global economy of cultural consumption. It also raised the question: Is heritagization in Diriyah a tool of collective memory or real estate speculation?

Riyadh Before Spectacle: From Oasis Settlement to Car-Centric Metropolis

Urban Growth of Riyadh

Prior to the mid-twentieth century, Riyadh was a compact, pedestrian-oriented settlement organized around mud-brick architecture, narrow alleys, and courtyard houses adapted to the desert climate. The city's spatial arrangement was featured with clusters of courtyard houses around mosques and markets, a typology shaped by the scale of width of a shaded passage in many cases.

The city's transformation began in earnest during the oil boom of the 70s. The Doxiadis masterplan designed by Greek urban planner Constantinos Doxiadis, introduced a rigid grid system of superblocks measuring approximately 2 by 2 kilometers (as seen in the masterplan below), a settlement built around a central spine that could grow indefinitely. This plan reoriented Riyadh toward automobile-dependent urbanism characterized by low-density suburban expansion, wide arterial roads, and segregated land uses. Traditional urban forms were largely abandoned in favor of modernist planning principles imported from Western contexts. New suburbia with single-family houses was formed on the American car-centric model of living. Urban anthropologist Pascal Menoret argues that the Doxiadis plan completed Riyadh's transformation from “a snug pedestrian city into an open-ended and car-

centered suburbia shaped by princes, planners, and developers”¹³. It could be said that Riyadh developed without a lived urban ground that produces civic identity. The superblock, surrounded by highways, created what critics described as an “island of human traffic in the ocean of mechanized circulation”²⁴.

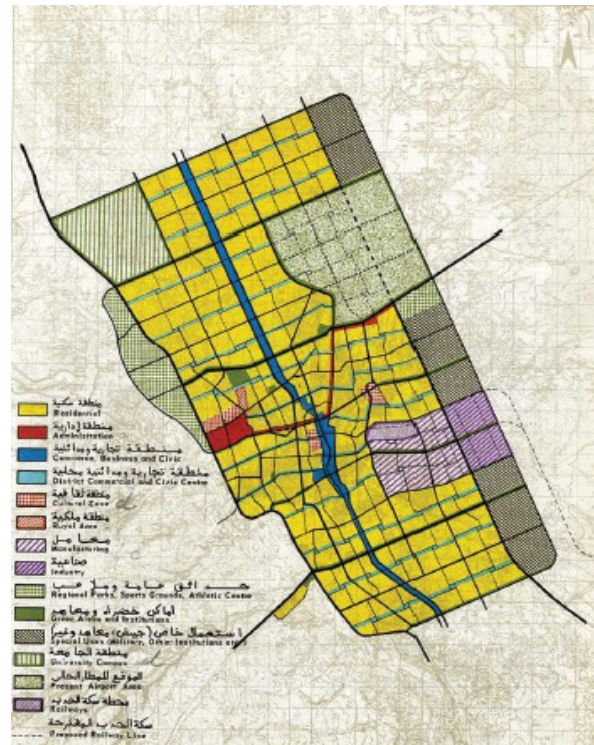


Fig.3 - Doxiadis Masterplan of Riyadh in 1970 (Source: Riyadh Development Authority).

Faisal bin Ayyaf Al-Mogren, “Operational Planning: An Alternative View of Doxiadis Project in Riyadh,” in *Urban Modernity in the Contemporary Gulf*, ed. Roberto Fabbri and Sultan Saoud Al-Qassemi (New York: Routledge, 2022).

1 - Pascal Ménoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism, and Road Revolt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 63

2 - Yasser Elsheshtawy, “Chapter 5: Riyadh's Urban Growth and Development: A Historical Overview,” and “Chapter 10: Conclusion: The Future of Riyadh,” in *Riyadh: Transforming a Desert City* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2022), 131.



Fig.4 - At-Turaif during Ottoman Ruling Yasser Elsheshtawy, "Chapter 5: Riyadh's Urban Growth and Development: A Historical Overview," and "Chapter 10: Conclusion: The Future of Riyadh," in *Riyadh: Transforming a Desert City* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2022), 101.

By the early 2000s, Riyadh had achieved rapid modernization but lacked a coherent urban identity. Unlike regional counterparts such as Dubai or Doha, which embraced spectacle architecture as tourism branding and instruments of civic identity, Riyadh remained relatively restrained. Diriyah's redevelopment since the 2010s is a strategic intervention aimed at this identity deficit, not through the production of new icons, but through the recovery of the Saudi's founding story.

Diriyah as Origin: Constructing a National Narrative

Founded in the fifteenth century and established as the capital of the First Saudi State in 1727, Diriyah represents the political origins of the Al Saud dynasty.

In recent years, the Saudi government has actively reinterpreted this history to construct a new national narrative of the "Cradle of the Kingdom". The formal declaration of 1727's founding day (February 22nd) as national holiday in 2022, exemplifies this shift to recognize such significance to a state level. By emphasizing the political establishment of the state under Imam Muhammad bin Saud rather than the religious alliance of 1744 with reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. This reorientation reduces the influence of religious partnership with the Wahhab movement, while elevating the monarchy as the exclusive source of political legitimacy. This designates Diriyah, the seat of that 1727 establishment, as MBS's symbolic center of a reconfigured national identity.



Fig.5 - Salwa Palace floorplan that shows its complex-like form with annexes. P. 76.

Nbanbaba Almogren, *Diriyah Narrated by Its Built Environment: The Story of the First Saudi State (1744–1818)* (master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2020), MIT DSpace, <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/127856>



Fig.6 - New additions and installations inside Al-Turaif district.

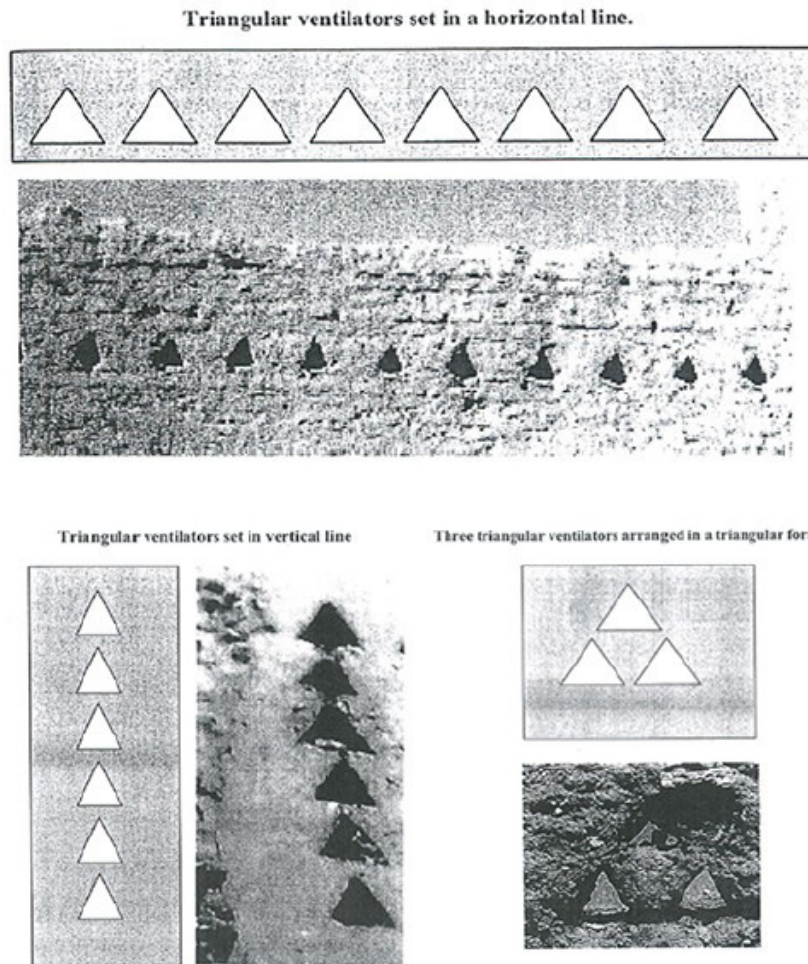
Nbanbaba Almogren, *Diriyah Narrated by Its Built Environment: The Story of the First Saudi State (1744–1818)* (master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2020), MIT DSpace, <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/127856>

The founding significance of Diriyah is further confirmed by its UNESCO inscription in 2010, covering approximately 160,000 square meters. At-Turaif was inscribed as an outstanding example of Najdi architectural style and as the birthplace of the Saudi dynasty. The state's subsequent investment in restoring the site, transforming an archaeological ruin into a managed cultural destination, builds upon this external validation. International heritage certification helped legitimize the Diriyah Gate for both local audiences and the international tourist market that Vision 2030 explicitly targets.

National Significance of the New Birthplace

Architectural Significance

At the architectural scale, the redevelopment of Diriyah is characterized by the meticulous reproduction of Najdi vernacular forms. Mud-brick massing, thick walls, triangular openings, and courtyard typologies are some of the defining features of the built environment. These elements are not only aesthetically distinctive but also climatically responsive, reflecting strategies for thermal mass and privacy. The triangular ventilator, arranged in horizontal lines, vertical sequences, or triangular



(Figure 19: Three basic types of geometric triangular openings arrangement.)

Fig. 7 - Triangular ventilators that are common in Al-Turaif district.

Nbanbaba Almogren, Diriyah Narrated by Its Built Environment: The Story of the First Saudi State (1744-1818) (master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2020), MIT DSpace, <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/127856>

clusters, recurs across building facades as a functional and ornamental device (as seen from the elevational drawing above). Buildings were built in close distance, creating a close alleyway that provides shaded passages. The newly constructed outdoor museum reflected the attention to details, where newly added pathways allow visitors to walk through the exterior walls. The curated experience was also accompanied by outdoor projection, aligning with the national narrative of the significance of the Saud family. Such careful treatment of the heritage therefore helped MBS to establish his institutional reputation around Diriyah's development.

In Diriyah, authenticity from the Alturif district has taken into visual coherence. The architectural language is standardized and codified, creating a consistent aesthetic that can be recognized and marketed. This process can be understood as a form of "heritage," in which cultural elements are selectively preserved, stylized, and oftentimes commodified. The term, developed in critical heritage studies, describes the transformation of historical fabric into a managed product for consumption, a process involving selection, simplification, and the suppression of contradictions.



Fig.8 - Aerial promotional photo of Diriyah gate development in future by the Diriyah Company.
 Diriyah Company, "Masterplan," Diriyah Company, accessed May 3, 2026,
<https://www.diriyahcompany.sa/en/masterplan>



Fig.9 - Construction of the new diriyah with the slogan: Where heritage meets modern living.
 "View of Diriyah Gate development" (photograph), ResortX, accessed May 2, 2026,
<https://www.resortx.com/diriyah-gate/?page=5>

Heritage as Branding: Positioning Diriyah in the Saudi's post-oil identity

Newer development in Diriyah represents a shift from preservation to heritage production. Since the 2010s, numerous large-scale developments have been led by the Diriyah Gate Development Authority (DGDA) and the Diriyah Company, two state managed public agencies that helped to plan, lease and manage land development in the area. Diriyah positions itself as a destination offering both authenticity and modernity, with luxury hotels, cultural institutions, and corporate headquarters adopting Najdi architectural language while integrating contemporary facilities (as seen in the render above). The concentration of luxury tourism, anchored by international hotel brands, makes clear that the development targets high-spending visitors from the Gulf and the West: a luxury-only neighborhood structured around the gated community model.

The instrumentalization of heritage is perhaps recognizable through the banners across construction hoardings announcing "Where Heritage Meets Modern Living," a slogan that shrinks the distance between the archaeological and the commercial reality into a single marketing proposition. The commodification of the Diriyah's ruins has generated a revival of Najdi architectural vocabulary, including mud-brick aesthetics, geometric ornament, and triangular ventilators, now integrated into commercial mega-projects such as the MBC Media Headquarters (a large Middle-eastern broadcaster), whose heritage-inspired facades mark a new model of institutional branding based on cultural "authenticity". The pedestrianized environment and alleyway streetscape contrast sharply with the car-centric surroundings of Riyadh's suburbs (as seen in the render below), producing an enclave of walkability within a city organized around the freeway interchange. The result is a branded environment calibrated for both local and international audiences.



Fig.10 - Future architectural renders of the Diriyah streetscape.
Diriyah Company, "Diriyah Square," Diriyah Company, accessed May 3, 2026,
<https://www.diriyahcompany.sa/en/retail/diriyah-square>



Fig. 11 - Gated community setup in newer Diriyah.
"Saudi's First Ritz-Carlton Residences Announced in Diriyah," Construction Week Saudi, November 24, 2023,
<https://www.constructionweeksaudi.com/news/ritz-carlton-residences-diriyah>



Fig.12 - Ritz-Carlton Residence in Diriyah, featuring traditional motifs and geometrical pattern.

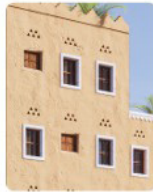
"The Ritz-Carlton Residences, Diriyah," Diriyah Company, accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.diriyahcompany.sa/en/diriyah-living/ritz-carlton>.

Central Najdi - Architectural Design Guidelines

- 1 Ornaments placed above rectangular windows.



- 2 Rectangular windows with wooden shutters and white frames.



- 3 Use of greenery and window shutter to enhance privacy on the ground floor.



- 4 Recessed doors with white frame.



7.4 Superficial elements

- 1 When integrating traditional elements on existing or new structures, it should be done in a conscious manner adhering to original precepts through which such motifs and elements were used.
- 2 Careless copies of historical motifs, lackluster incorporation of local symbols, poor consideration of proportions, massing, volume, and other instrumentalization of traditional motifs should be avoided.

Fig.13 - Central Najdi - Architectural Design Guidelines, Application Handbook - Low Rise Building, from Ministry of Municipalities and Housing. Architecture and Design Commission, Hail Building: Low-Rise Central Najdi Architecture (Riyadh: Architecture and Design Commission, 2025) https://architsaudi.dasc.gov.sa/sites/default/files/2025-12/03-HB_LowR-Central_Najdi-Eng-v3.pdf



Fig.14 - Ritz-Carlton Residence Construction in Diriyah, showing the use of reinforced concrete.

“View of Diriyah Gate development” (photograph), ResortX, accessed May 2, 2026,
<https://www.resortx.com/diriyah-gate/?page=5>

The architectural branding has also been codified into what the Ministry of Municipalities and Housing now calls the “Central Najdi Architectural Design Guidelines.”³This document, produced as a standardized application handbook for low-rise mixed-use buildings, provides detailed specifications for compositional rules, traditional elements, colors, materials, and patterns. It even identifies “superficial elements,” careless copies of local symbols, as visual pollution to be actively discouraged. The irony is evident: a state-authored design code seeks to police the authenticity of forms whose very replication it mandates at scale.

Aimed “to help designers and builders of low-rise mixed-use buildings apply the architectural character of Central Najdi to their projects”, which provides detailed guidelines on compositional rules, traditional elements, colors and materials, patterns and public realm. It also laid out the “dos and don’ts” that addressed visual

pollution and hostile environment, it has also specifically identified the use of so called “superficial elements” in facade design, which discourage the careless copies of local symbols and historical motifs. The strict control of design elements reflected the consistency that the Diriyah authority aimed to maintained throughout the development phase of Diriyah

The authenticity of these forms is paradoxical. While buildings often reference historical precedents, they are often reconstructed using modern materials and techniques. Reinforced concrete structures are clad in mud-like finishes (as seen in the construction photo below), and traditional forms are adapted to accommodate contemporary functions such as luxury hotels, museums, and retail spaces. Construction photographs of the Ritz-Carlton Residences in Diriyah reveal the gap between surface and structure: Najdi decorative elements applied to concrete frames and modern parking garage. The result is a building that looks like the old Diriyah but is assembled like a luxury commodity.

3 - Architecture and Design Commission, Hail Building: Low-Rise Central Najdi Architecture (Riyadh: Architecture and Design Commission, 2025) https://architsaudi.dasc.gov.sa/sites/default/files/2025-12/03-HB_LowR-Central_Najdi-Eng-v3.pdf

Can “Traditional” Urban Form Function within Modern Planning?

Diriyah Gate is organized around a pedestrian-first planning principle that mimics old-town development in Riyadh, where architects and developers have emphasized walkability across building blocks and minimized vehicle lanes at ground level. Architectural renders show narrow alleyways and pedestrian-only pathways with close spacing between commercial and residential blocks, citing the pre-oil Riyadh as inspiration. This contrasts sharply with the Doxiadis masterplan, which emphasized car-centric principles at every scale. Yet despite the planning effort, car-centric influence persists within and around the development. Large underground parking facilities are being constructed beneath the pedestrian precincts, and the primary means of arrival will remain private vehicles. Walkability is therefore bounded: the district functions as a destination for car-borne visitors rather than an extension of the city's pedestrian network. This reveals the fundamental contradiction of Diriyah's urbanism: it produces the experience of a walkable historic city without producing the systemic extensions for walkability. The narrow alley is real, but it ultimately leads from a parking podium.

Diriyah Gate combines the thematic heritage of At-Turaif with master-planned neighborhoods conventional in real estate development, tailored for commercial offices and high-end residences. It is a highly controlled design project, with strict visual consistency enforced through the Central Najdi design guidelines and the Diriyah Company's development protocols. What results is less a city than a resort organized around historical imagery: a themed environment that produces the feeling of the old town Riyadh. Despite the risk of such commodification, the investment in pedestrian infrastructure, climate-responsive infrastructure, and local vernacular form represents a departure from Riyadh's postwar suburban norm, with potential lessons for the wider urban strategy. The Central Najdi design guidelines, if applied citywide rather than within a branded district, would represent a meaningful contribution to a more distinguishable

urban identity. At present, they remain the property of Diriyah's marketing apparatus.

Conclusion

Diriyah Gate represents a pivotal moment in the development of Riyadh and, by extension, Saudi Arabia. Since Vision 2030's announcement in 2016, many of its mega-projects such as the Line have stalled; Diriyah remains among the most consistently progressing. It embodies the ambitions of a nation seeking to redefine itself through economic and cultural transformation. Through its architectural language, urban design, and symbolic significance, Diriyah constructs an authenticity that is curated, strategically deployed, and embedded with state objectives.

This essay has argued that Diriyah is not simply a restoration project but a prototype of a new type of urban spectacle. It transforms heritage into a tool of branding, producing a controlled environment that balances historical reference with contemporary urban functions. The tension between the genuine Najdi architectural form and its instrumentalization as a marketing language remains unresolved, and it is within this tension that the project's most significant architectural and political questions reside.

The typological question that Diriyah poses, whether traditional urban form can function within modern planning, remains open. The newly built pedestrian alleys and courtyard are considered climatically effective. These are not simply aesthetic choices but performance strategies evolved over centuries of inhabitation of an arid environment. Their re-employment, even in concrete clad with earth-toned render, recovers such historical practice. But the conditions for their generalization, a city built at the scale of the body rather than the automobile, have not yet been created. Diriyah produces these conditions only within a bounded enclave, and ultimately surrounds itself with multi-lane highways.

It could be said that Diriyah invites a new relationship between past and present in the construction of Riyadh's

urban identity. Through MBS's authority, it challenges the notion that authenticity is fixed, suggesting instead that it can be constructed and contested. Diriyah is a site where history is not only preserved but actively reimaged and branded. New buildings were manufactured through strict national guidelines, as much as discovered or inherited. As Riyadh continues to evolve in the coming decades, the lessons of Diriyah will shape how the city negotiates the interplay between tradition, modernity, and national aspiration.

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