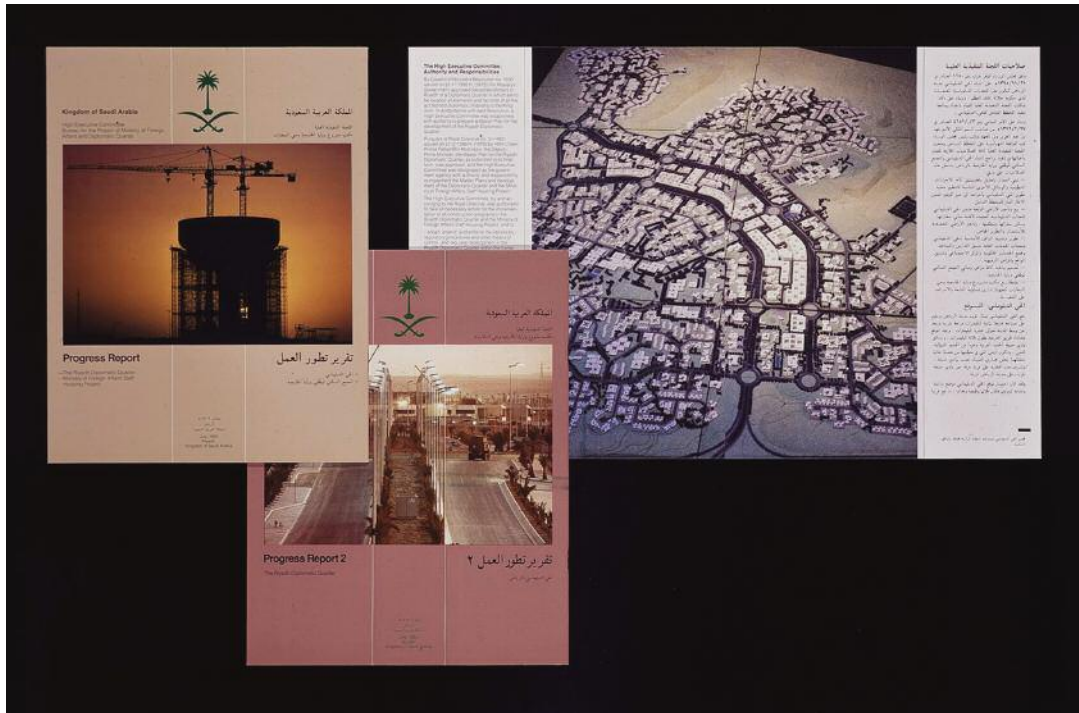


Arabian Nights! and Days! and Nights!

by Richard Danne

In 1995 I was invited to participate in “Cross-Cultural Design,” created by Henry Steiner, a New Yorker who has practiced design in Hong Kong for decades. His beautiful book features designers’ projects produced across radically different cultures, and here is my contribution:



“Some years ago, Saudi Arabia decided to move its capital to Riyadh, so a dramatic new city for some 50,000 international diplomats was being built. This was a massive undertaking, requiring the combined efforts of 100 different planning, landscape, and architectural firms. It was a remarkable project, which eventually yielded stunning results. The Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs selected our firm to design a series of Progress Reports to document the evolution of this amazing city. These reports were distributed to diplomats around the world, with text in both Arabic and English.

In traditional Arabic fashion, the books read from back to front. And in my format, the Arabic columns of text appeared on right hand pages and were mirrored by English translation on opposite pages. The client thought our solution was very effective and something of a breakthrough. One of the difficulties we

encountered was that only the infrastructure construction work had been completed when we designed the first report. Therefore, we used architectural drawings and models, along with excellent mood photographs of the site taken by Wayne Eastep.

Before traveling to Riyadh, I read a great deal about the history and culture of Saudi Arabia. I needed to be aware of the differences in our societies. Making presentations in an Arab country to a Royal Crown Prince requires a knowledge of protocol and a great deal of patience. It is common to wait for days on end, while being gracefully entertained. I was lucky that I was able to make my presentation within 24 hours after my arrival, and it was a success.



The real trouble began after the meeting. A shooting incident in a Palestine holy mosque created a serious reaction in the region, and Saudi Arabia went on military alert. The airport was closed! Things were very tense and there was virtually no news from outside the country. Each night I went to the airport, hoping it might be open, to find it teeming with soldiers – like an eerie scene from a bad movie.

After what seemed like an eternity, air space was cleared and I got a flight out, thanks to military personnel. As I winged my way to Rome, I felt extremely fortunate and wiser. I was working on a unique project, learning about a completely different culture, and the visit had been extraordinary!

Oh yes, I should add that the next presentation was handled via DHL.”

Well that’s the story I wrote at the time, and it was accompanied by visuals of the Progress Reports. The whole story couldn’t be told because I didn’t want to embarrass Henry or get anyone (myself) in trouble. But working on such a sensitive project, especially in the Middle East, is very delicate stuff. So here are some of the more colorful details that I couldn’t divulge at the time.

April, 1982

The trip over was a struggle, 17 hours, door-to-door. I flew to Rome first and then took a Saudi Airlines flight to Riyadh, arriving in the late afternoon. Dead tired, and loaded with apprehension after hearing horror stories about baggage checks and detentions for the least little thing. Not too likely in my case because I was traveling with a letter from the Foreign Ministry which explained my presence in Saudi Arabia. Yet there were other reasons for anxiety, I had cameras – almost forbidden in the Country. I only knew one person there... and he wasn't at the airport to meet me! The terminal was crowded, somewhat smelly and hot, even though it was Spring.

I finally cleared inspection but felt completely alone. Men and boys swarmed around me, all wanting to separate me from my luggage and take me to my destination. Emir Habiby was my contact, a great guy who I had met in New York, but there had been some miscommunication. I managed to reach Emir by phone and we agreed to rendezvous at his brother's apartment, who was out of the Country at the time. The two were American citizens, lived on separate Coasts, and both were hired as consultants for this massive Diplomatic Quarter project.

The apartment was located in a two-story building, was attractive enough and comfortable. It had a refrigerator loaded with oversized pita bread. Then there was cooked chicken, a fairly sizable amount had been left behind though I was never sure it was meant for me. Otherwise, a fairly simple place but with one true asset: a serious collection of LPs, including Mozart, Bach, and other Classical staples. Things were looking up! Little did I know how critically important these items would become over the next few days.

Emir got me settled and he notified his people of my safe arrival in Riyadh. Then he arranged to pick me up the next day to start the protocol, the patient waiting to be called for my presentation. As mentioned, this process is all very gracious and you are served endless cups of delicious tea with small goodies to nibble. The phrase “bottomless cup” must have been created for this. The fundamental question being: How much tea can one human possibly absorb without entirely floating away? Nice social custom, but with a serious downside.

On the second day I was ushered into the elegant offices of the Director General of the Diplomatic Quarter project. There were several other men in the room dressed



Enormous water towers under construction.

in handsome robes appropriate for their Kingdom rank. Not, the usual *Guys in Ties*. I was very respectful of them and the situation, but I was hired as an expert and needed to be my confident self. They reviewed the design presentation of the first “Progress Report,” asked the right questions in perfect English and, to a man, responded positively. They were delighted.



Most traditional Arabic/English publications read back-to-front with the Arabic text first – the English translation starts at the other end and the two meet in the middle. It’s a very awkward format. My book had the Arabic text and its English translation facing each other, on the same double spread in a mirror-image mode. The client thought we had “reinvented the wheel” and were generous in their praise. Not knowing what to expect, I was surprised that the meeting only lasted an hour and that we were laughing and exchanging pleasantries as if we had known each other before. I exited the building with Emir, both of us pleased and relieved. If you are going to travel half way around the world to present... much better to get a win!

The Diplomatic Quarter itself was breathtaking, and unprecedented in both style and scope. Each country had selected one of their leading architects to design its Embassy. The comprehensive Master Plan was done by Germans (figures), and Landscaping by English (also figures). The infrastructure was being built by Korean workers who were reportedly obligated to fight and defend should Saudi Arabia be invaded during this time. Schools, public spaces, athletic clubs, all designed by noteworthy firms from around the world – Unbelievable!



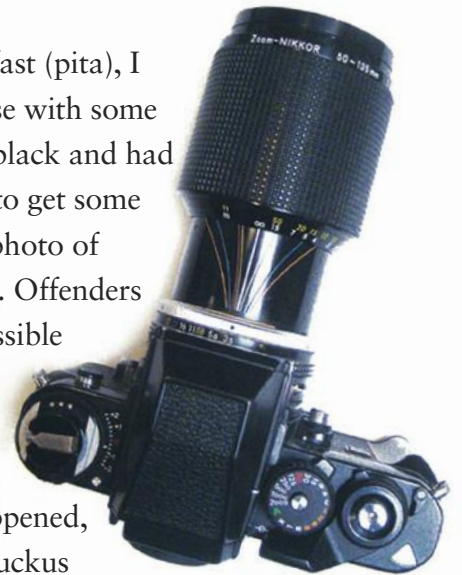
Model of the Diplomatic Club, a social center.

[So you might be wondering: Why was the Saudi Ministry publishing these books to begin with? Well the old Diplomatic Capitol was located in Jeddah, on the coast of the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia is a strict country, though Jeddah had a looser social and religious code (one could actually get a cocktail there). But Riyadh is the religious capitol of this Islamic Kingdom. By contrast, Jeddah was Las Vegas! The world’s diplomats didn’t necessarily want to move to Riyadh. It presented an enormous Public Relations problem for the Saudis, so the books were conceived to cast the new Diplomatic Quarter in the best possible light. The hope, after seeing and reading these books? “Well maybe it won’t be so bad being holed up in an enclave, smack in the middle of one of the hotter deserts, not able to order a beer.” Good luck to our marketing team.]

That evening, word came over the radio of the shooting in that Mosque in Palestine, and all hell broke loose. Air space was immediately shut down and that full military scramble ensued. Based on past experiences in the Region, these events went on for days, or weeks. I had come oh so close to “getting out of town” but now all was uncertainty. I called my wife Barbara in New York to give her the bad news (you simply don’t want to be caught in the Middle East in the middle of a shooting war).

I proceeded to spend a very restless night, unable to sleep.

The next morning, after fumbling with a different kind of breakfast (pita), I looked out my living room window. Across the street was a house with some women moving behind the walled courtyard . All were wearing black and had veils, even at home. Being an avid photographer I decided I had to get some shots, though I knew it was dangerous. In this culture, taking a photo of a person’s face or their home is tantamount to stealing their soul. Offenders can be severely punished over such activity so I was aware of possible “consequences.” I unpacked my Nikon and lens (brought them to shoot photos of architectural models) and parted the curtains slightly. When just the right movement occurred in the garden I promptly ran off a few frames. I’ll never know for sure what happened, perhaps the sun reflected off my lens, but suddenly there was a ruckus down below. Several men came running out the front gate and across the street towards my building. My life began to flash before my eyes...



I ran around quickly dismantling my camera and hiding the parts in different places. Shouting voices in the stairwell and men running up the stairs! Then nothing. I positioned myself on the couch with a book and tried to settle down, but my heart was racing. Then there was a knock at the door and I opened it. A tall man sized me up and down, and demanded to know what I was doing in this apartment. I explained that it had been loaned to me while I worked on the Diplomatic Quarter project. Whether he completely believed me or not, he finally accepted my story and moved on. I quietly closed the door, my heart still pounding. I don’t know if my camera had prompted all this activity or something entirely different.

Lesson learned: I disposed of the film before leaving the Country (it wasn’t worth ending up in prison) and the camera never came out again.

I checked the radio for any new information on the military crisis, but little was forthcoming. You couldn't call the airlines, you had to go out to the terminal at night and stand in line with hundreds of other desperate people, only to find out there were no commercial flights. Military vehicles everywhere only added to the tension and posed a very simple question: "Am I going to get out of here?"

There were hundreds of consultants and workers employed on this huge project. Someone heard about my plight (word travel fast in a closed community like this) and I was invited to an informal dinner party at the home of an Australian architect. With nothing on my social calendar, I said yes.

I was picked up at a certain hour and driven to a very large private residential area. All the consultants lived there and were allowed to behave like back home, while Saudi officials looked the other way. A consultant would "sign on" for a stint of specified length, usually six months. With nothing to do in the desert, six months was an eternity. At the party, everyone was commiserating with me about being pinned down there. They could truly identify – though they made good money, they were also pinned down and most hated it. There were professionals from around the world and everyone at the party was letting go, making the most of the situation.



Landscape plan for a typical neighborhood.

You couldn't bring liquor into the Country, so one of the guys had fashioned a crude wine. Starting with grape juice, he had added yeast to create a powerful home brew (in a hurry). It was not pretty, this dark vat of liquid with the moldy white stuff floating on the surface, but no one else minded because it yielded the desired effect – and no one died! I've never seen so many unhappy people having such a wonderful time. Believe me, I appreciated the companionship and the respite from my overall predicament. After this spontaneous evening of fun and games, they drove me back to my lonely apartment.

Emir felt particularly bad for me, not being able to go back to NY. He took me to lunch at a lovely Lebanese restaurant, for the best cuisine to be found in the Middle East. And at night he took me out to the airport for another try. After a couple of these nights, I was directed by some friendly military personnel to the front of a line where arrangements were made for my departure the next day. I don't know who pulled the strings... but I showed up way ahead of schedule, still not quite believing it would happen. As I boarded the Saudi plane and took my seat, I began to think "this might work!"

To my surprise, two landscape architects I had met at the party were also boarding the plane, one English and one German. They acknowledged me with nervous smiles. Nervous for good reason... I would find out later they were going AWOL on their contracts. In other words, they were leaving early with no intention of ever coming back! This alone was a criminal offense, but the “sacred” desert rocks hidden in their luggage could have landed them in the slammer for life. The plane lifted off, rocks and all. It was surely the nicest takeoff I have ever experienced, we were actually heading towards Italy – and the Promised Land.

We landed in Rome and took a cab to the Hotel Superiore, a small place I’d heard about near beautiful Villa Borghese Gardens (think Respighi’s *Pines of Rome*). Those consultants obviously hadn’t made plans, so they decided to stay at the same hotel. After checking in, I went upstairs to unpack my camera and race around the “Eternal City.” The other two guys went straight to the bar, *with* their luggage. They were about the happiest cats I’ve ever seen. They had escaped Saudi Arabia and their contracts, with contraband – and were proceeding to “make up for lost time.”

I scurried around the City, shooting as fast as possible. The light was incredible and I thought: “I have never seen a more beautiful place” (remember, I had escaped a temporary bondage too). As darkness approached I somehow found my way back to the Hotel, walked through the lobby and past the tiny bar. Sure enough my new pals were still celebrating their good fortune, still doing their best to drain the place.



*The famous
“Spanish Steps”
of Roma.*

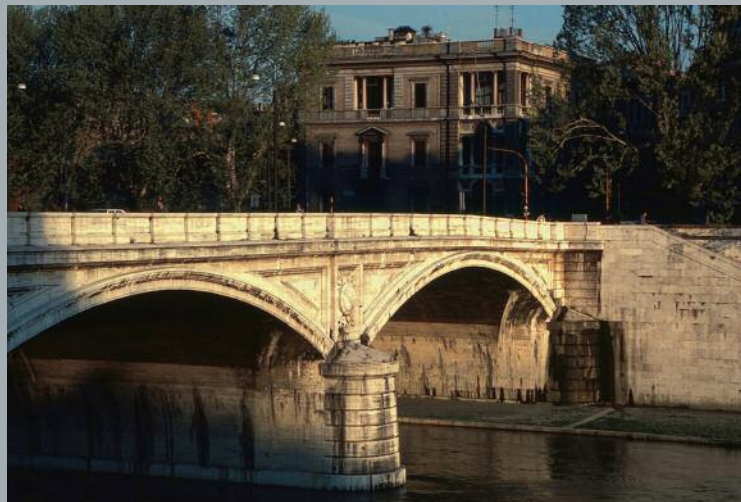
Instead of joining them I went up to my room and phoned Barbara in New York. She didn’t tell me then but she had been very sick with flu, and me stuck on the other side of the globe. I couldn’t wait to get home to my family and the next day I was flying back, grateful for many things: the Diplomatic Quarter project; my first taste of Italy; the feeling I had dodged a bullet.

People ask what I do, I answer that I’m a graphic designer and they invariably say “that must be fun!” The fact is, it has been fun and I wouldn’t trade my career with anyone. But here’s something they don’t tell you in design school – it can also be “dangerous!”

Roman Half/day

Photographs taken
that April afternoon, 1982

Trevi Fountain



River Tiber



The Vatican



Arabian Nights Post Script

I sustained myself in that apartment by eating all the chicken, all the pita bread, everything in the fridge. Not a healthy diet but balanced by those fine recordings. I exited in such a hurry and never left a proper note, this is my chance to make it right.

Many thanks, Mr. Habiby, for that critical life support!