Beit Al Qur'an: 'A New Museum Concept in Bahrain'
The Holy Qur'an's influence on every aspect of a Muslim's life whether spiritual or temporal is a force for good and a fountain of creativity from which the Muslim genius sprang. It is this fundamental and unbreakable bond between the Holy Qur'an and all Muslims that is the inspiration for the amazing explosion of intellectual and artistic activities throughout the early and middle Islamic era, a bond that shall remain as the major influence and the guiding light of our lives as Muslims.

In a small way, Beit Al Qur'an and its aims are nothing but a continuation of this noble and eternal bond which cements us as Muslims to the word of God Almighty, the Holy Qur'an. Beit Al Qur'an is a novel concept combining a cultural institute with a museum for Qur'anic manuscripts. It celebrates Islam and Islamic Culture and Civilization.

My first serious exposure into Islamic Art in general and early Holy Qur'anic manuscripts in particular was during my study period in the West, where I visited a number of great museums and collections. These visits were a source of concern and inspiration. My main concern was that there was little appreciation of our artistic heritage in our own countries and that the great collections of manuscripts and Islamic art were held in the West rather than at home. I was at the same time inspired by the great collections I saw to do something effective at preserving what we have. I made myself the promise to develop our own institutions to match those I saw in the West.
I started collecting Holy Qur'anic manuscripts modestly but over a period and as the collection grew, their message and magnificence called for their exhibition to the widest public possible. I did not have to think long for the purpose of my collection. I realised that what I had was a small fragment of a continually living tradition, a tradition of dedication to the service of God Almighty and the Qur'an and the work should be celebrated by the widest audience possible. I also felt passionately that there was a need for an institution dedicated not only to the display of Holy Qur'anic manuscripts in my possession, but also to the service of the Holy Qur'an and the presentation of its message to all, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

I was gratified, but not surprised, when I first mooted these ideas with colleagues and friends to receive tremendous moral and later material support from them and from people from all walks of life. That is how the idea of Beit Al Qur'an was born, and the construction phase of the project was completed in 1990, with God's help and the generous contribution of the people. Once completed, I donated my rare collection of Qur'anic manuscripts and other related material to Beit Al Qur'an to be held in trust for all humanity and for Muslims in particular within this unique institution.

The principles for which Beit Al Qur'an was established and the combination of elements and functions in the building introduces a new religious/cultural concept in Bahrain which to the best of our knowledge is unique not only in our area but also world wide. The Holy Qur'an is the word of God and as such any institution that houses Qur'anic manuscripts must reflect the special relationship we have as Muslims with the Qur'an. The constituents of any such institution must also reflect the framework and influences that the Holy Qur'an establishes for our lives.

Beit Al Qur'an was conceived in the tradition of the old "Madrasas" schools. It is not a museum per se, but rather an independent Islamic Cultural Institution. It is open to Muslims and people from all nationalities and beliefs, dedicated to the service of The Holy Qur'an and its study. The main objectives of the institution are:

- The service and understanding of the Holy Qur'an.
- The presentation of the Holy Qur'an to all, of all ages and the encouragement of its learning, study and recitation.
- The promotion and sponsorship of cultural activities, exhibitions, lectures and seminars aimed at the dissemination of knowledge about the Holy Qur'an, Islamic heritage and civilization.
- The promotion and sponsorship of research and studies by scholars into Qur'anic sciences.
The active collection, collation and preservation of Holy Qur’anic manuscripts and related material from all over the world from different periods and make these available for scholars and researchers and hold these in trust for all Muslims.

The promotion of museological studies into the preservation, restoration, display and storage of old manuscripts and books.

The publication of books and other material relating to Qur’anic studies and Islamic culture and heritage.

The cooperation with other museums, institutions and individuals to stage and promote cultural activities and exhibitions.

To fulfill these aims and objectives, Beit Al Qur’an was built with the following main elements and ancillary support services. The combination of these elements and the services they offer is entirely new in museum design concepts and to our knowledge were not used before in any institution in the manner they function at Beit Al Qur’an:

The Mosque/Prayer area (The Abdul Rahman Janim Kanoo Mosque) where prayers are conducted five times a day, cementing the relationship between all Muslims and the Holy Qur’an. A stained glass dome covers the circular space which is large enough to accommodate 150 worshippers.
• The Conference Hall
(Muhammad Bin Khalifa Bin Salman Al Khalifa Conference Hall), is a fully equipped space, with Audio-visual aids and simultaneous translation facilities, capable of holding 1500/200 persons for lectures, seminars and conferences.

• The Library
(Al-Furqan Library) with its modernly equipped reading rooms, seminar areas and individual research rooms serving serious researchers and the general public alike. The Library provides a reference base for scholarly works at Beit Al Qur'an. The initial compliment of 18,000 volumes in Arabic, English and French will be extended to include all living languages in the future.

• The School
(The Yasuf Bin Ahmed Karano School for Qur'anic Sciences), comprising of six fully equipped classrooms and their support facilities, where students can recite and learn about the Holy Qur'an.

• The Museum
(Al Hayat Museum) with its ancillary facilities occupies the most substantial area by far of Beit Al Qur'an. It comprises of ten inter-connected halls over two floors with five easy split level ramps linking the two levels. The visitor is taken effortlessly from one hall to another by the subtle changes in level. The treasures on display exhibit different aspects of the Beit Al Qur'an collection, a glorious testament to genius of the Islamic calligrapher and his very special relationship with the Holy Qur'an. The museum is environmentally controlled to allow for the safe exhibition of the Beit Al Qur'an collection of rare manuscripts.
A DREAM COME TRUE

Beit Al Qur'an was inaugurated for public use by His Highness the late Amir of Bahrain, Sheikh Isa Bin Sulman Al Khalifa in Sha'ban 1410 Hijira March 1990 AD. A dream come true, for what started as a simple idea, was now a tangible reality, a cultural institution housing a collection of Holy Qur'ans and Qur'anic manuscripts comparable with the best in any museum, library or private collection in the world. It is with a particular sense of pride that I would like you to note that the US Dollars 10 million building and equipment costs was totally borne by public donations. People from all walks of life gave generously and often anonymously. We were filled with equal gratitude at receiving the generous donations of wealthy individuals and the humble contributions of small school children. Beit Al Qur'an stands today a monument to their generosity and a symbol of their reverence for the Holy Qur'an. It is a monument truly raised by the people, for the people. This I believe is a unique and a new experience in our area where an institution and a museum was totally funded by public donation. The task of collecting funds from the public over the period of development and construction was far from easy in an area where such traditions of public sponsorship are not customary. We often ran out of funds with serious risks to the continuation of the project. However, we prevailed through our trust in God and the people's generosity.
We have been and always will be keen to add to our collection, authentic Holy Qur'anic manuscripts of any age or condition. Our aim is simple. It is to protect and preserve this heritage and make it available for future generations.

The task of collection however is not so simple, for as you may well know, Islamic and Qur'anic manuscripts are extremely rare and their value has inflated in recent years. In addition, there is a tendency, criminal in my view, to fragment and break up manuscripts for monetary gain. Consequently our task of collecting and collating them becomes infinitely more difficult. This is a problem that should be addressed by all responsible people in this field for we are witnessing in these acts the sacrilegious destruction of unique works of human heritage.

Despite these difficulties, we have managed over the years to collect and collate a number of Holy Qur'anic manuscripts which rank amongst the best in the world.

Beit Al Qur'an is proud to have in its collection a wide range of unique treasures spanning the Islamic era from the early beginnings to the present day from China, east, to the Iberian Peninsula, west. We have on display Qur'anic parchments from the 1st C.Hijra (7/6 CAD). We have complete Holy Qur'ans and complete sections from Islamic Spain (Cordoba, Seville and Granada). Our collection from the Maghrib (North Africa) includes such very rare items as the blue parchments from Qairawan and a folio from the unique Holy Qur'an of the Nurse of Sultan Badis of Tunis (12 CAD).

The art of calligraphy and illumination is represented by a wide range of Holy Qur'ans from Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Persia and Moghul India. The printed Qur'an section of the Museum boasts arguably the earliest copy, printed in Germany and dated (1694). We also have a wide range of translations of the meaning of the Holy Qur'an on display in many living languages, many of which are first editions. The modern art section of the museum displays calligraphic Qur'anic compositions by recognised artists from around the Islamic world.

In museums, the display of manuscripts whether on paper or vellum present very special problems. Their extreme sensitivity to humidity and temperature is such that a steady control is essential if the manuscripts deterioration due to chemical and biological activities is to be limited. In addition, all manuscripts are extremely light-sensitive, particularly in the ultra-violet range and the illumination levels have to be restricted. Also the colour rendering properties of the lighting system should be such as not to significantly alter the colour quality of the manuscripts on display.
THE FUTURE

We believe we have achieved a great deal in a relatively short time, but this is only the beginning. Our work has started on solid foundations and since the opening of Beit Al Qur’an we have initiated a number of planned programmes. But the road is long and we are ambitious and God willing, we hope to achieve prominence not only in our area but worldwide.

Whatever, one important issue that I suspect will always remain with us, is that of finance. We are determined to keep our very high standards and keep our independence as an international institution. We hope that Beit Al Qur’an will always be supported by public donation, but in addition we have initiated a number of schemes to help Beit Al Qur’an on the financial road ahead. We do need substantial resources what will generate enough income to preserve our independence.

From the museological side, we will support studies on the curation and preservation of old manuscripts. We have already supported a seminar with the British Council in this field of work and will continue to support such work in the future. We will be celebrating our 10th Anniversary in March 2000 by a number of exhibitions, and other activities.

We see in our area an expanding interest in heritage, and I mention with particular pride that a small country like Bahrain, the population of which does not exceed 650,000, has two universities, a splendid National Museum, a Heritage Museum and Beit Al Qur’an. The cultural movement that these institutions generate give us hope for the future and spur us to expand our activities, perhaps by establishing further institutions and organisations relating to Islamic Art and Culture in particular. Our measure of success will be judged by future generations. I hope we will not fail them.

Finally, I extend to you all a warm invitation to visit and correspond with us at Beit Al Qur’an and share with us the blessing of the Holy Qur’an and the beauty and consummate skill of Islamic calligraphers throughout the ages.