

Two Houses in the Arabian Desert: Assessing the Built Work of RCR Architects in the UAE

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Abstract : Today, when many foreign architects are receiving commissions in the United Arab Emirates, it is essential to analyze how their designs are influenced by the region's culture, environment, and building traditions. This study examines the approach to siting, geometry, construction methods, and material choices in two private homes for a family in Dubai, a project being constructed on adjacent sites by the acclaimed Spanish team of RCR Architects. Their third project in Dubai, the houses mark a turning point in their design approach to the desert. The Pritzker Prize-winning architects of RCR gained renown for building works deeply responsive to the history, landscape, and customs of their hometown in a volcanic area of the Catalonia region of Spain. Key formative projects and their entry to practice in UAE will be analyzed according to the concepts of place identity, the poetics of construction, and material imagination. The poetics of construction, a theoretical position with a long practical tradition, was revived by the British critic Kenneth Frampton. The idea of architecture as a constructional craft is related to the concepts of material imagination and place identity--phenomenological concerns with the creative engagement with local matter and topography that are at the very essence of RCR's way of designing, detailing, and making. Our study situates RCR within the challenges of building in the region, where western forms and means have largely replaced the ingenious responsiveness of indigenous architecture to the climate and material scarcity. The dwellings, iterations of the same steel and concrete vaulting system, highlight the conceptual framework of RCR's design approach to offer a study in contemporary critical regionalism. The Kama House evokes Bedouin tents, while the Alwah House takes the form of desert dunes in response to the temporality of the winds. Metal mesh screens designed to capture the shifting sands will complete the forms. The original research draws on interviews with the architects and unique documentation provided by them and collected by the authors during on-site visits. By examining the two houses in-depth, this paper foregrounds a series of timely questions: 1) What is the impact of the local climatic, cultural, and material conditions on their project in the UAE? 2) How does this work further their experiences in the region? 3) How has RCR adapted their construction techniques as their work expands beyond familiar settings? The investigation seeks to understand how the design methodology developed for more than 20 years and enmeshed in the regional milieu of their hometown can transform as the architects encounter unique characteristics and values in the Middle East. By focusing on the contemporary interpretation of Arabic geometry and elements, the houses reveal the role of geometry, tectonics, and material specificity in the realization from conceptual sketches to built form. In emphasizing the importance of regional responsiveness, the dynamics of international construction practice, and detailing this study highlights essential issues for professionals and students looking to practice in an increasingly global market.

Keywords : material imagination, regional responsiveness, place identity, poetics of construction

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