

Re-dignifying vernacular for constructing national identity: Elitism, grand traditions and cultural revival in Bahrain

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Abstract

Since the discovery of oil, the decline of the pearl industry and the emergence of modern architecture, most vernacular buildings in Bahrain had become dilapidated. Over time, their occupiers had moved onto other modern and luxurious buildings that are available aplenty now, although often lacking in local identity and national character. Recently, there is a renewed interest in the historical vernacular, considered necessary to be rejuvenated for the infusion of national pride and construction of national identity. The Ministry of Culture as well as reputed architects have adopted strategies of 're-dignifying the historical vernacular' of Bahrain with the intention of rekindling the interest in the historical traditions and re-infusing them to modern life. This paper examines a number of re-dignified buildings, and re-invented grand traditions of Bahrain and how they are being re-modeled for the present day consumption. It advances the theory that architecture and national identity are intertwined through 'elitism' and 'grand traditions', and buildings that embody such narratives are considered culturally rich. It thus re-assesses the reproduction of vernacular being articulated in the present context of globalization.

Keywords

Bahrain, Grand traditions, National identity, Re-dignifying vernacular.



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1. Introduction

The significance of vernacular for the construction of identity of a nation is often overlooked and not explicitly acknowledged, although evidence abounds in countries where rich vernacular had existed. Bahrain, an island in the Arabian Gulf sandwiched between Saudi Arabia and Qatar is a country where this link has recently become explicitly articulated by the state, aptly supported and acknowledged by the general public. Undeniably, Bahrain has been endowed with rich traditions and vernacular that claim a significant history of more than 5000 years, and the rejuvenation of its vernacular is nothing to be surprised of. Identity however is not something static and is to be constructed not only by means of rejuvenating the vernacular. It is multi-faceted and thus vernacular provides a veneer of that identity which is immersed in the past that can be projected into the future. This duality of its potential re-deployment endows it with a complexity and richness that need to be understood and grasped with their nuances of existence and articulation. This paper seeks to examine a number of recently executed projects rejuvenating the vernacular traditions of Bahrain and delves into the links they exhibit with the 'forms of traditions' and cultural facets, together with the socio-economic and socio-political meanings associated with their makings.

At the turn of the century, it was modernism that was employed often to generate pride and national identity in many societies which were in the process of inventing themselves anew. Even a country like India with abundance of rich vernacular recovering from years of colonization sought not to return to roots but to seek alternatives from modern architecture in their quest for national pride. For example in commissioning Chandigarh, it has been said,

"Our basic purpose [in Chandigarh] is to create a sense of pride in the citizen, not only in his own city, but in India, its past and its potential imminent future We are seeking symbols, to restore or to create pride and confidence in [the Indian] himself and his country" (Campbell, 1989:429)

Post-modernism however brought to light the value and relevance of traditions and the vernacular and have re-infused the sense of culture and history as a significant component of identity construction. Geoffery Bawa, the Sri Lankan architect who spearheaded critical regionalism indeed created numerous projects of such revisionist approaches from the construction of the holiday resorts to the national parliament of Sri Lanka. In fact, when construction of national identity is the objective of a project, it has become quite common for many to return to the vernacular in search for the roots and the culture core that nurtures and cherishes the traits that are to define identity. Perhaps it is for this reason that United Arab Emirates later regretted the erasure of all its vernacular and historical buildings in the pursuit of a new modernism and fast development in the making of Dubai (Mitchel,2007).

2. Theorizing national identity, vernacular culture, and elitism

The concept of a "nation" is the manifestation of various internalized and externalized forces and conceptualizations of a group of people whose existence situates them in a locality as well as globally, contributing to a sense of belonging and attachment to the group of their own. Identity is a social construct that emanates from this sense of belonging which enables people to distinguish themselves against 'others'. Architecture, the material construction of everyday living of people contributes both directly and indirectly to this process through material as well as non-material attributes. Indeed, at the heart of this lies an inalienable bond between people and the land upon which they 'dwell'. However, it is only if architecture possesses such possibilities to inculcate a bond between people and places, and provide unique symbols and material artifacts of character that they will be treated as being able to represent the nation.

Buchli (1999) tells us that the constructed material world concretizes and expresses the values of a society and its founding ideologies. McMahon, (2004) puts it more succinctly

and asserts that collective identity of a people is reflected through material culture and that architecture is one of its expressive mediums. In fact, it is well known that architecture creates meanings, and that architectural elements produce symbolism, narratives and ideological connotations (Goodman, 1988). What is often called 'national architecture' thus reflects the perceived self of its people through styles, elements, order and compositional languages it employs. National identity however is imagined to exist without or even before material culture comes into existence and therefore architecture, which then it represents. To the contrary, it is argued that as a tangible manifestation of a way of thinking and inhabiting the world concretized through symbols, architecture by itself does create national identity rather than simply reflect it.

Throughout history and across the world, architecture has produced unique and intrinsic symbols for articulating the notions of nations representing many different people. Classical architecture accomplished this task gracefully through the monuments while the vernacular lent a humble and quiet hand. Architecture contributed to the construction of identity in two ways. First, it inculcated an attachment to the past, glorified it and continued to make them be present, at any given time. Secondly, it endowed legitimacy to those who authored them to be part of the nation. As Goodman (1988) shows, the states and aristocrats derived their power through the execution of such architecture. Added to these were symbolic meanings derived from myth and mysticism. For example, classical orientalism couched in notions of cosmic energies and supernatural connections brought about a sense of commonality and belonging among people who believed in them which the rulers employed to assert and retain political power. Architecture was thus engaged to authorize accepted ideologies and to construct a collective consciousness as a socially cohesive imagination fostering a strong sense of attachment to a geo-political body among a given group of people. When skillfully crafted, architecture

thus persuades consensus and brings about a sense of belonging necessary for constructing the notion of a nation and help sustain a group of people in collective unity.

Smith (1991) writes that symbols "have always possessed the emotive collective qualities" that can bring a nation together, and that architecture is indeed such a symbol. Symbols as material representations of people are impregnated with latent and manifest meanings: often political or ideological. As Hobsbawm (1992) points out, culture, symbolism and tradition are at the base of national identity. In his seminal book "the invention of tradition", he explains that traditions are often constructed and given a semblance of historical continuity and legitimacy, when in fact they are mere innovations of older customs or very novel and relatively recent creations. Often, the continuities or meanings claimed are argued to be misconceptions of the historic past or myths.

Multiple processes are sought to construct nationhood, although often the historical traditions are taken as one of the most desirable. Historical traditions embody the imagined continuity of historical narrative, social and cultural relevance and the collective consciousness of the communities of the past. However, as Colquhoun argues, "the use of the past to supply models [a way of practicing historicism] for the present depends upon the ideological distortions of the past" (1996; 207) and therefore may or may not construct identity *per se*. Nevertheless, each collective of people and the geo-body that provides for anchorage of their collective identity adopt multiple techniques and strategies including the practice of historicism not only to construct the nation, but also to re-define and deploy the notions of nation as an essential component of their being.

Often, among such techniques, deployment of what is perceived as 'an authentic character', generated by uniqueness of culture has always played a significant role. In fact, Rapoport (1969) establishes the criticality of culture over numerous physical factors in the making of the domestic form and its contribution to the generation

of character of rural settings. Similarly, Lim (1998), Lim and Beng (1998), and Williams (1980) point out the relationships between culture and architectural traditions (i.e. folk, vernacular). Taken together, their observations clearly establish that, culture, tradition and authentic character inherent in the vernacular are intrinsic manifestations of the values of a given group of people and therefore have the potency to generate symbols for the construction of national identity. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) elaborate further to suggest that it is 'selective traditions' that help articulate 'architectural identity' that are effectively deployed to narrate the notions of a nation.

Rapoport (1969) differentiates between 'grand design traditions' and 'folk design traditions', which can be associated respectively with 'high' and 'other levels' of cultures of a given society. Bottomore (1993) also offers a similar cultural division. Wijetunge (2012) drawing on these connections establishes that in fact, these variations of traditions possessed and articulated by elites, sub-elites and peasants need to be clearly understood in terms of their potency for establishing national identity since they play different roles. Wijetunge (2012) shows that the links between elites, sub-elites and peasants articulate veneers of national identity through grand and folk traditions. He points out that as Mosca defines, the elite are not only raised high above the rest of society but are in fact, intimately connected with the masses through the 'sub-elites'. This larger group of sub elites represents for all intents and purposes 'the society', and were also referred to as the 'middle-class' in the 20th century. This particular group does not only supply recruits to the governing elite class, but composes a vital element in the government of society. Within the middle-class, we may find 'higher' and 'lower' strata, according to Bottomore (1993:53); the former comprised of those in "professional, technical and [relatively] higher managerial occupations". The lower conversely, will extend to the ones in the "more routine clerical and administrative jobs". The middle-class could also be placed on par with the idea of

'intelligentsia'.

Arguably, it is the vernacular of the 'middle-class' or more specifically of the sub-elites that is taken as truly representative of a society and defines the identity of a nation. Firstly, they stand out as the majority. Secondly, they form the middle-ground. Most importantly however, they form the essential links between the Grand and the Folk; in the case of the past, the aristocrats and the peasants and in the contemporary context the upper class and the lower; often also referred to as the rich and the poor. This means that neither the elitist architecture nor the architecture of the poor have the legitimacy and the authority to represent, and therefore claim to construct national identity by themselves. This paper argues that this 'vernacular of the middle-class' or the 'sub-elite' burrows selectively from the Grand and Folk traditions, and re-deploys them as appropriate to be representative of both simultaneously yet also constructs a unique veneer of traditions and thus holds the power to represent and construct the notions of a nation.

3. Constructing nation: The case of Bahrain

In Bahrain, the explicit movements to construct a national identity began only a few decades after the discovery of oil, rising from a society organized largely in a tribal fashion inhabiting the island for centuries. Nationalism for Bahrain, however, has not been a struggle against "others" from whom control and hegemony had to be regained. More specifically, it has been an internal manifestation that gathered the "self" of smaller groups, whose sense of a larger nation had almost been absent. In fact, despite having been in existence for centuries, its society had been incoherently organized under the jurisdictions and allegiances to regional leaderships in the form of "Sheikdoms". Prior to the present dynasty of rulers who took control in 1787, Bahrain was in the control of regional rulers either from Persia or the neighbouring sheikdoms. The idea of a nation, national identity and sovereignty had not figured in those regional formations and confrontations as



Figure 1. Bahrain- the location amidst 'other' culturally similar nations (Source: Google maps).

defining and rallying notions.

Since the discovery of oil, Bahrain has moved across many fronts to construct a sense of statehood and a nation, through the construction of national symbols or the promotion of reconstructed historical narratives. They have endeavored to assert their social and cultural uniqueness and construct adequate representations through material culture. The search was for styles in the arts and architecture that was inherently their own, which reflected true "Bahraini identity", and opposed those trends raging in Europe, particularly those of the British, which had begun to influence Bahrain as a British Protectorate. However, its first production of "national" architecture—the Bab-Al-Bahrain, or the gateway to Bahrain—was also designed by a British surveyor: Belgrave. Built in 1945, centrally located as an entry gate to the Manama Souq, Belgrave attempted to localize a predominantly British-style building by introducing arches and recesses around the windows. The traditional Bahraini roof parapet and motif details transformed to fit in with the style of the building was a feeble attempt to balance the fusion of an alien style to the vernacular styles of Bahrain. With the sense of national identity taking a more articulated form, its inadequacy as a national monument was strongly felt and, in 1986, it was decided to refurbish it in order to incorporate more powerful Islamic architectural features. Indeed, most recently in 2012, it has been rejuvenated together with the tra-



Figure 2. Bab-Al Bahrain-the gateway to Bahrain (Source: Ministry of Culture, Bahrain).

ditional market (Souq) that buttressed its centrality so that it gained significance again as a national monument generating a national public space. In a larger scheme of Re-diginification of the historical vernacular, Bab-Al-Bahrain takes up the highest position of those elite buildings; buildings belonging and representative of the state, and spearheads the glorification of the buildings of the sub-elites. Bab-Al-Bahrain however is solely inadequate to generate an authentic character that can be claimed to belong to the Bahraini people considering the fact that there have been more elaborate and authentic architecture its people had produced developing their characteristics in response to climate, ways of life and culture over time. It is undeniable that the 'buildings-of-the-everyday', and of the sub elites possessed richer character which can be deployed, re-dignified and glorified to claim a unique identity for Bahrain.

3.1. Architecture, nation and vernacularism

In constructing national identity since discovery of oil, two interrelated trends had emerged in the Gulf region and Bahrain was no exception: one was to look to one's own cultural heritage to find a truly national style in architecture. The other was the use of European classicism, subtly modified to create a national character to arise through international form. In Bahrain, the former led to the discovery of a vernacular-influenced architecture, with tenets stemming from the ancient past that prevailed predominantly in the Muharraq Island. Interestingly, both these trends were also present in the nations of many other states that were emerging from the clutches of the British



Figure 3. *Imitated Palladian Villas – vernacular of the middle class seeking a new Identity in Bahrain (Source: Author).*

Empire in the global south and led to similar outcomes. Of focus here are the practices that have evolved in the domestic architectural scene of Bahrain, which have been driven by individual fascinations, market forces and popular perceptions. At the beginning, many of the villas and residential buildings imitated Palladian architectural forms and symbolism in preference to the historical vernacular. In fact, symmetry in form, elaborate domes, pediments and porticos reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance were seen as legitimate forms that could establish the newly gained place in the world. The sub-elites were quick to abandon the traditional and the vernacular as they perceived these to be belonging to the past and not having the symbolism to project the newly acquired wealth or the flamboyance of the status of a 'rich nation'.

This 'new vernacular' imitating the Palladian villas owes much to the perception that they offered the expression of values of the new elites whose oil wealth took them to the European capitals at ease. Indeed, it was necessary to project a semblance of flamboyance and ostentation. The tall columns, the pediments and other symbolic elements aptly offered a sense of wealth and aristocracy, the natives had hardly possessed before the discovery of oil yet acquired overnight and had to be displayed and presented to the world and unto themselves. Plethora of such dwellings surrounded by high, ornate and illuminated enclosure walls had emerged and continue to inspire the contemporary elites and sub-elites who find this international form, easy to be fused with some local symbols so that

a suitable hybrid could be developed.

3.2. Vernacularism

However, it was soon discovered by the state that if there is an architecture that reflected the deep roots of people inhabiting the island, it would be the traditional urbanism of Muharraq and the vernacular of its sub-elites who had made it the capital of Bahrain before it was set aside to be the second city pursuant to the first wave of globalisation. This was facilitated by the research done by an expatriate on the architecture of Muharraq highlighting the value and significance of the vernacular (El Masri and Yarwood, 2005). Undeniably, the global perceptions and focus on the preservation of heritage that had emerged in the world had also awakened the state authorities to look at the dilapidated city in a new light.

In fact, Bahrain's present capital city Manama does possess historical vernacular and could have also been a potential area of rejuvenation and glorification. However, at the beginning, Manama was seen as somewhat devoid of such characteristic architecture, particularly because much had been abandoned and had gone into disuse there; also occupied by the Indian migrant labourers who had arrived after the discovery of oil, as cheap accommodation. However, more recently, vernacular of the Manama's sub-elites have also received focused attention in addition to those of Muharraq.

The revitalization and urban renewal of Muharraq was thus not only an attempt to develop the region of which some quarters were in a dilapidated state, but also a conscious attempt to redefine the cultural identity and the nation of Bahrain. Beginning with the publication of the works of Yarwood (El Masri and Yarwood, 2005), Bahrain has recognized an enclave of Muharraq as the heart of the nation through the establishment of a series of historical vernacular centered around Sheik Ibrahim Cultural Centre, comprised of the renovated and re-presented residences of the Sheiks and cultural gurus of the past; the elites and sub-elites of Bahrain.

This spatial enclave of the "heart of the nation" is located close to the Sheik



Figure 4. *Re-dignified historical vernacular: Bin Matar House in Muharraq (Source: Author).*

Isa House; once the home of the Amir's great-grandfather, Shaikh Isa bin Ali Al khalifa, and Siyadi House, built by the pearl merchant Ahmed Bin Qassem Siyadi. They provide the significance and ambience for the location, while the narrow alleyways and other elements prevalent in the area add to this ambience. These elements represent a balance between sensitivities to climate and needs of privacy with fine, exquisite internal ornamentation to counter the barren desert and create pleasant and habitable spaces. In re-dignifying the 'heart of the nation', specific historical vernacular carefully chosen from the former residences of the sub-elites have been renovated, and re-presented having been re-glorified by means of documentation, renaming, and by celebratory events being organized there. The buildings and spaces show the numerous traits that Bahrainis would cherish and celebrate as uniquely theirs.

Among them, the Bin Matar house stands out and provides a fine example of vernacular architecture of the sub elites that represent the identity of the nation. As its tribute says, "The name of the building is Memory of the Place – Bin Matar House, and this name reflects the dual function of this traditional building in presenting the identity of a people. Firstly, the building embodies a definite cultural identity through its specific architecture and design elements. At the same time, it is also a repository of memories, through the individuals that lived in the building and the events that took place there.

The Bin Matar House is dedicated to conserving both traditional Bahraini architecture as well as the memory of the Bin Matar family" (Sheik Ibrahim Cultural Centre).

Salman Bin Matter was the most wealthy pearl merchant of the late 19th century Bahrain. His dwelling had been constructed in a traditional Bahraini manner, using palm tree trunks, sea-stone and gypsum. The traditional ceilings made of a palm leaf and wood beam combination in red and black are unique to Bahrain. It also displays the authentic building character emanating from walls finished with a rugged texture, white washed and allowed to weather.

3.3. Bahrain Pearl Trail

Complimentary to these is the unique setting of the Bahrain Pearl Trail now recognized as a world heritage site. Here, the historical vernacular of the sub-elites as well as those of the lower strata of the society who had toiled in the days when Bahrain was considered the 'Pearl of the Gulf' as a result of the precious natural pearls has been re-presented. The vernacular of the pearl craft however is neither a single location nor a building. It is indeed a pathway that one can walk along and discover numerous elements that rekindle a historical narrative. Beginning from the "oyster beds where the divers may have captured the pearls, the seashore and its festival at the beginning of the season, the 'Amarat and the ship building sites in front of them to the historic markets and residences

Building title	Original ownership and purpose	Notable characteristics of Architecture	
Shaikh Ebrahim bin Mohammed Center for Culture and Research	original majlis of Shaikh Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al Khalifa; son of Shaikh Mohammed bin Khalifa Al Khalifa, the fourth ruler of Bahrain		Bland façade with patterned recesses. Decorative, arched and recessed entrance with a patio facing the alleyway. Extensively detailed wooden craftsmanship in the doorway. Patterned stucco on walls in the interior with a wooden decorative stairway at the double height entrance lobby. Decorative wooden balustrade. These are typical of traditional Bahraini vernacular
Abdulla Al Sayed House	Abdulla Al Sayed; original residence		Façade with square and patterned recesses. Merlons (Hamaem) in the parapets in corners to break the skyline. Breakers in the corners on the parapets. Extensive use of arches. Current building is internally modified, although still retains the character and ambience particularly with craftsmanship of wood work and white walls.
Ibrahim Al Arayed House	Bahraini poet Ibrahim Al Arrayed, who was Bahrain's foremost figure in poetry and literature for over half a century		Geometrical decorative plant decorations in doors and windows. Bahraini colonial style with grand spaces of high volumes. Criss- crossed wooden balustrades and recessed square patterns in the walls both inside and outside. Interior modified in the present building to a more modern appearance.
Mohammed Bin Faris Sut Music	Bahraini singer and musician Mohammed bin Faris was a master of the Sut; music that originated in the Arabian Gulf. Original residence		Arched openings; recesses in the walls in the shape of squares as well as arch form particularly above doors. Open courtyard has now been enclosed with glass roof. Elaborately decorative wooden doors and some decorative metal work all provide an ambience of simplicity and charm.
House of coffee	A combination of three old traditional Bahraini houses		This has a blank traditional façade abutting the alleyway. Walls still have the square recesses in the walls to break the monotony. Simple single un-decorative entrance. However, the Interior has been modified to a modern coffee shop as seen in this image.
Kurar house	Kurar House facilitates the preservation of the art of dying and unique Bahraini art of Kurar embroidery.		A traditional house with a courtyard and a tree, displays fine workmanship of rugged walls and wooden doors and windows. Traditional timber ceilings and a roof top with a thick white balustrade typically present in Traditional houses.
Information Centre	Used to be a local majlis meaning a gathering place for men		Features traditional Bahraini architecture with quite number of decorative wooden doors. Walls heavily recessed with squares to create a pattern. White washed walls with a ruggedly and unevenly finished surface. Double height volumes of spaces create a cheerful space indoors and simple façade to the outside.

Figure 5. Vernacular of the elites and sub-elites representing the nation of Bahrain.



Figure 6. Isa Bin Ali House and the Mosque and bait Siyadi in the pearl Trail.

of those involved in the economic system' (Ministry of Culture, Kingdom of Bahrain), it is an entire neighbourhood that had come into being through intricate relations between the sub elites and the workers of the pearl industry. The two miles long pathway brings back the neighbourhood to life, glorifies and presents the everyday dwellings and places that had once represented the core activity of Bahrain that gave rise to its culture and defined the people of the island as pearl divers and seafarers. Among them is the house of one of the grand merchants, and a gamut of dwellings of those who took part in the pearling industry culminating in the house of a nukhida (sea vessel captain) family.

The significance of the pearl trail in the signification of the culture and identity of Bahrain has been clearly expressed, when UNESCO has stated that:

"The site is the last remaining complete example of the cultural tradition of pearling and the wealth it generated at a time when the trade dominated the Gulf economy (2nd century to the 1930s when Japan developed cultured pearls). It also constitutes an outstanding example of traditional utilization of the sea's resources and human interaction with the environment, which shaped both the economy and cultural identity of the island's society". (UNESCO World Heritage Site Profile, 2014)

3.4. Elements in the landscape

A number of elements linked to the larger landscape of the historical vernacular of the sub elites also contribute

to the construction of national identity. Alleyways of the urban settlements for example, are a unique but common spatial practice of most Islamic cities. In Manama and Muharraq, such alleyways abound and signify the vernacular characteristics that have emerged in response to the harsh climate as well as the needs of the family and social life defined by Arab Islamic notions.

Moreover, the wind towers share a common language across the region, although variations exist. The Bahraini wind tower is an architectural element that has now become a marker of its national identity, which has gained popular currency. A rising tower with openings orientated towards the good winds acts as a funnel, catching the breeze and drawing it down into the cavities below where the living spaces are located, while releasing the hot air like a chimney; the wind tower is one of the early forms of "air conditioning" by natural means. It is a built element that provides for iconic imagery, expresses local ingenuity in responding to the harsh climate and therefore can be hailed as a unique symbol of Arab-Islamic-Bahraini identity for all times. Equally reproduced are the unique, wooden-poled palm-mat ceilings that had helped construct a flat mud roof, for Bahraini traditional houses to combat the scorching sun. Traditional urbanism has caught the public imagination and has given rise to a return to such elements and spaces as a way of authoring national identity through architecture, in the current wave of globalisation where such authenticity has cultural capital. For example, Gulf

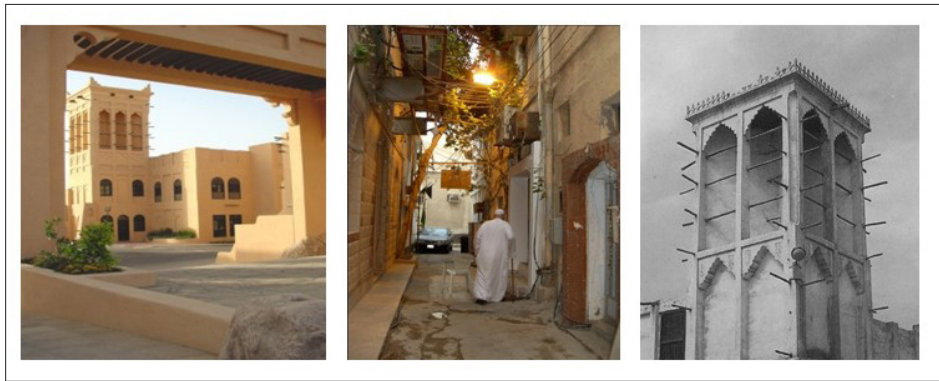


Figure 7. Alleyways and wind towers in Manama (Source: Author).

House Engineering (GHE) is a popular architectural practice that attempts to reconstruct culture and identity through contemporary Bahraini architecture and employs quite skillfully the numerous elements and spatialities of the historical vernacular to create buildings and spaces where one feels a greater sense of belonging to the past while progressing to the luxury of the future. Interestingly, a large number of contemporary sub elites have taken to construct their 'modern' dwellings in the styles of historical vernacular traditions as offered by the Gulf House Engineering and others.

3.5. Forms of traditions and cultural facets of the dignified vernacular

It is argued that the core cultural facets of the Bahraini Society cannot indeed be usurped from any of the other veneers representing the contemporary life styles and practices but the historical vernacular itself, as often proudly announced by the Ministry of Culture and other state agencies. Evidently, since the establishment of the Cultural Enclave in Muharraq, and the establishment of the Pearl Trail, the 'Timeout Bahrain' a website that discusses culture in Bahrain declared that 'there is something of a cultural explosion in Bahrain right now' (Timeout Bahrain, 2014). The reference is to the ways in which the re-dignification of the historical vernacular seem to have created snow-balling effects in the society where many middle class in particular have begun to appreciate what had existed in the past and how they can indeed be resurrected to define their unique identity in the context of growing consumerism, multi-cultural-

ism and globalisation.

These core cultural facets as resurrected through the re-dignified vernacular can be presented as follows.

4. Conclusions

As has been presented, Bahrain has quite consciously selected and re-dignified the historical vernacular of the elites and sub elites as a means of constructing a veneer of national identity on the foundations of the past. While the more modern enclaves in Bahrain such as the Bahrain Financial Harbor and the World Trade Centre offer a sophisticated veneer depicting the modern and progressive nature of the nation, there are other veneers of identity narrated by other traditions. One of the most unique among them is the death landscapes, that exists only in Bahrain. (Dayaratne, 2012). However, the historical vernacular provide the core around which all of the other veneers are mounted. As Woodward (2002) says, identity is not fixed. Rather it is fluid and contingent. In fact it is always evolving. In the case of Bahrain, distinct national cultural assets have been reconstructed from the recent histories of the settlements in Muharraq; particularly from the grand traditions and historical vernacular of the elites and the sub elites. Quite clearly, this is a process of self-discovery, as argued by Findlow (2000). This paper demonstrates that among the multiple strategies to self-discover and assemble a multitude of facets to represent the notions of the nation, historical vernacular of the elites and the sub-elites have been found to be the most potent. It is clear that through re-dignification, images have been produced that can be

now presented claiming the re-discovery of a valuable culture core that lays a substantially powerful foundation for the construction of the nation.

The search for an Arab-Islamic-Bahraini traditional roots (Fuccaro, 1999) has thus succeeded. This is comparable with the progressive identities of the neighbouring countries, such as Dubai and Qatar, who are struggling to locate, dignify and present similar powerful vernacular for the construction of the notion of National Identity of theirs. In fact, Bahrain has recently claimed to be becoming the 'cultural capital' of the Gulf, by articulating these cultural veneers by constructing further cultural manifestations upon them. These demonstrate both the fragile and competitive nature of identity. As Tajbakshs (2001) shows, identity is not something natural, permanent and definite, but is a social construction, formed by the creation of the "other" identities. It is through the other that one can recognize one's own identity.

This paper argued that national identity is intertwined with 'elitism' and 'grand traditions', and buildings that embody such narratives are considered culturally rich. To a great extent, the Bahraini developments subscribe to this argument. However, the grand traditions do not have to be produced entirely by the elites and sub elites. It can easily absorb and accommodate the ordinary as the case of the Pearl Trail demonstrates. Although again, the grand traditions and the material constructions of the elites and sub-elites lead, the re-dignification is buttressed upon the pearl diver's numerous traditional crafts of pearling, ship building and pearl processing of the lower class, all of which are essential for the narrative. As discussed in the theoretical review however, it is the sub elites—the *nukhida*—the sea captains and other rankers who tie them altogether and provide the web of the narrative.

Finally, the intriguing question is, how does the historical vernacular of the elites, sub-elites and the ordinary play a role in the construction of identity when the real communities no longer exist and the buildings so dignified are devoid of life and presence of the same wholeness that would have

defined the values of the society. Although in the case of the Pearl Trail, there is a serious attempt to bring a sense of this previous life and situation for experience, this is particularly evident in some of the interiors of the dignified vernacular at the Sheik Ibrahim Cultural Enclave; they are alien and far too modern. Moreover, the events that often take place there, are also far too alienated from the life and the places they intend to depict. This suggests that the approach of re-dignification of the historical vernacular of the elites and sub-elites has great potentials to construct national identity but has its own limitations. On the one hand, they can provide the ambience; the canvass for imagination, just like objects of exhibition in the landscape and suggest meanings and values. They have the potential if only the events taking place there can re-enact the historical traditions. On the other hand, Even with such a limited potential, historical vernacular cannot be removed from the landscape. If it is done, construction of national identity will collapse in the absence of a core around which the other veneers of identity could be mounted.

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