For most of its history, Yemen has been integrally linked to Southeast Asia, East Africa, the Iranian Plateau and the Mediterranean Basin through trade and pilgrimage. Geographically and socially diverse, one may trace this diversity through the cultural interactions and hybrid architectural fabrics of various regions. Foreign styles and ornamental features have been introduced as typological and aesthetic changes. At the same time, traditional construction techniques are flexible enough to incorporate these new developments. In this way Yemeni architectural history represents a dialogue between cultures both within and outside of the modern nation. The hybrid architectural fabric of Tarim, the theological, juridical, and academic center of the Hadhramaut Valley, is a good example. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, merchant families in the Hadhramaut Valleys grew rich from the Indian Ocean trade. The al-Kaf family was considered to be among the most influential of these merchants. Many members of the family were respected religious scholars. At the same time, they were the first Westernizing elite of the region and contributed to public works projects in the name of modernization. Their status was thus based on a complex relationship between traditional society, modernity, and international economics. Their palaces remain as a testament to both their affluence and the complex identity of the modernizing elite of the colonial period.

The palaces and public buildings constructed under the patronage of the al-Kafs and other affluent families were executed in the stylistic idioms they encountered in British India and Southeast Asia or were found in pattern books from urban centers such as Cairo. The palaces include examples of Mughal, British Colonial, Art Nouveau, Rococo, Neo-Classical, and Modernist unparalleled in Yemen. Construction techniques based in the thousand year old traditions of unfired mud brick and lime plasters served as the primary methods for executing these buildings. The significance of the Tarimi palaces, most of which are undocumented, led to their listing on the World Monuments Fund (WMF) 100 Most Endangered Sites list for 1998-2001. Over the last thirty years, these building have been neglected and in some cases abandoned falling into a state of severe disrepair. Many are now in danger of imminent collapse and a full documentation and conservation program is needed for the historic core of Tarim.
With the support of the American Institute for Yemeni Studies and the Columbia University Media Center for Art History, Archaeology and Historic Preservation a small team was put together to document Qasr al-'Ishshah, the largest and most significant of the al-Kaf Palace Complex. The team consisted of Prof. Pamela Jerome, Architect and Conservator; Dr. Selma Al-Radi, Archaeologist and Conservator; James Conlon, Research Associate for Archaeology and Historic Preservation; Gina Crevello, Conservator; Lamya Khalidi, Archaeologist; Abd Allah al-Saqqaf, Architect (GOAM, Sey’un); and Abd al-Karim al-Barakani and Salah Sultan al-Husssieni, GOAM Representatives, Sana’a.

The Historical Society for the Preservation of Tarim rented part of Qasr al-'Ishshah in 1997 and has currently opened part of the house to the public as a museum. Due to large-scale collapse, the society has been unable to present most of the house to the public. Since the initial feasibility study of 2000, a large portion of the central section of the West Façade has collapsed (fig. 1). The collapse not only took down the façade, but also a large extent of the interior rooms on the west side of the building. Karami Faraj al-Tumur, a Tarimi master mason (usta bana), conducted a survey of the damage estimating the cost of repair at 1 million YR. ‘Umar al-Hallaj, an architect working with GTZ on the Shibam Development Project, confirmed al-Tumur’s estimate. In addition to the damage on the west façade, the rooftop and floors of the northwest kitchen wings have collapse through three floors (fig. 2.). A portion of the northeastern structure of the ‘Ishshah Complex, the oldest building of the group, also collapsed approximately three years ago (fig. 3). The team ascertained that the northwest section of this house collapsed several years prior as well. Many other elevations and roofs show severe damage, and both interior and exterior surfaces in the entire building demonstrate extensive deterioration in the mud brick and plaster fabric. Due to this scale of deterioration, irreversible structural damage is immanent. As a preliminary measure, additional funding must be secured to rebuild and restore the collapsed western façade and interiors. If this work is not carried out, the northwest wing of the main palace will inevitably collapse.

The team conducted a full u

3. Fallen interior of

en wing.
oration of the ‘Ishshah Complex. This work included full evaluation and condition assessment; plans, elevations, and measured drawings; and conventional, digital and QuickTime Virtual Reality photography of the more than three hundred rooms of the Complex. In addition to documentation, samples of the ‘Ishshah’s mud brick and plaster construction materials were taken for further analysis in the United States. The team also took Universal Transverse Mercator points of twenty-eight other al-Kaf family palaces for future condition assessment and the development of a Geographic Information System.

These palaces comprise a unique and irreplaceable architectural heritage. Measures must be taken to declare the area encompassing the standing palaces a protected historic district in order to facilitate their conservation. Conservation priorities and adaptive reuse plans must also be developed in future seasons. In the case that these palaces cannot be saved, they must be fully documented at the very least. The team intends to continue with this documentation program.

1. Collapse, west façade,