Living Under the Crescent Moon. Domestic Cultures in the Arab World.

"The casbah of Algiers has everything: all the elements of an architecture that shows immeasurable sensitivity to human needs and desires." With this statement, Le Corbusier expressed his great admiration for the architecture of the Orient. Following in his footsteps, many of today's architects and designers draw inspiration from the Arab world. At the same time, due to the present political situation, our knowledge of these countries is generally limited to daily news reports on politics and social issues. Now the Vitra Design Museum is exploring the myths and realities of the Arab world in its exhibition "Living Under the Crescent Moon" which offers a comprehensive and fascinating survey of Arab domestic cultures.

The exhibition demonstrates the diversity of domestic lifestyles between Morocco, Syria and the Arabian peninsula – from the nomadic tents of the Tuareg or Bedouins to Moroccan casbahs; from the grand courtyard houses in cities such as Marrakech, Damascus or Cairo to buildings by twentieth-century architects like Hassan Fathy, Elie Mouyal or Abdelwahed El-Wakil. Numerous models and reconstructed room environments provide visitors with an opportunity to physically experience various building types, while domestic objects such as ceramics, textiles, tools and architectural elements offer impressions of everyday customs. The elaborate spatial installation also conveys the refined sensuality of life in Arab countries. Especially for the exhibition, numerous photographs and films were produced that document forms of domestic life virtually unknown to outsiders.

With interiors of private homes on display, "Living Under the Crescent Moon" offers the visitor insights into a previously little known realm of the Arab world, for the private sphere has traditionally been protected from strangers. Since no area of daily life is as familiar as our domestic environment, the exhibition makes it possible for the visitor to compare his or her own living situation with life in the Arab world. It becomes evident that the challenges to design remain the same: What solutions are required by the daily routines of private life with regard to sleeping, eating, home life, housekeeping? How do decoration, form and function relate to one another in buildings and objects? To what extent do ornaments, symbols and colours express cultural identity even today?

In its treatment of these issues, the rich heritage of Arab domestic cultures often reveals an astonishing modernity, whether one considers the reductive formal qualities of many things, the multi-functional uses of rooms and objects, the systems to regulate interior temperatures, or the efficient use of water. Architects such as Hassan Fathy from Egypt or Moroccan Elie Mouyal have utilised many of these solutions in their buildings, wedding them with elements of modern architecture. The influence of modernism was considerably advanced by architects such as Jean-Francois Zévaco, Edmond Brion, Wolfgang Ewerth, Michel Ecochard, Yona Friedman, Frei Otto and others. Beginning in the 1930s, they used Arab countries as important fields of experimentation and continued to develop the International Style there. The importance that the Arab world has since acquired with respect to international architecture is evident in view of projects by Arata Isozaki or Studio 65 for residential villas on the Arabian peninsula, but also in Jean Nouvel's Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris.
The exhibition "Living Under the Crescent Moon" also shows negative aspects of the radical modernisation of Arabian architecture, such as the decay of historic city centres, the population shift from rural to urban areas and the emergence of uniformly drab satellite towns. Many of the traditional forms of living presented in the exhibition "Living Under the Crescent Moon" may be documented here for the last time. Organisations such as the Aga Khan Trust for Culture are committed to bringing these problems to the attention of today's architects. As "Living Under the Crescent Moon" clearly demonstrates, Arab countries can draw upon a vast repertoire of solutions within their own traditions with regard to the sensible and sustainable modernisation of indigenous architecture and modes of living. – And what we can learn from the Orient: hospitality is and remains the highest virtue in any household.