

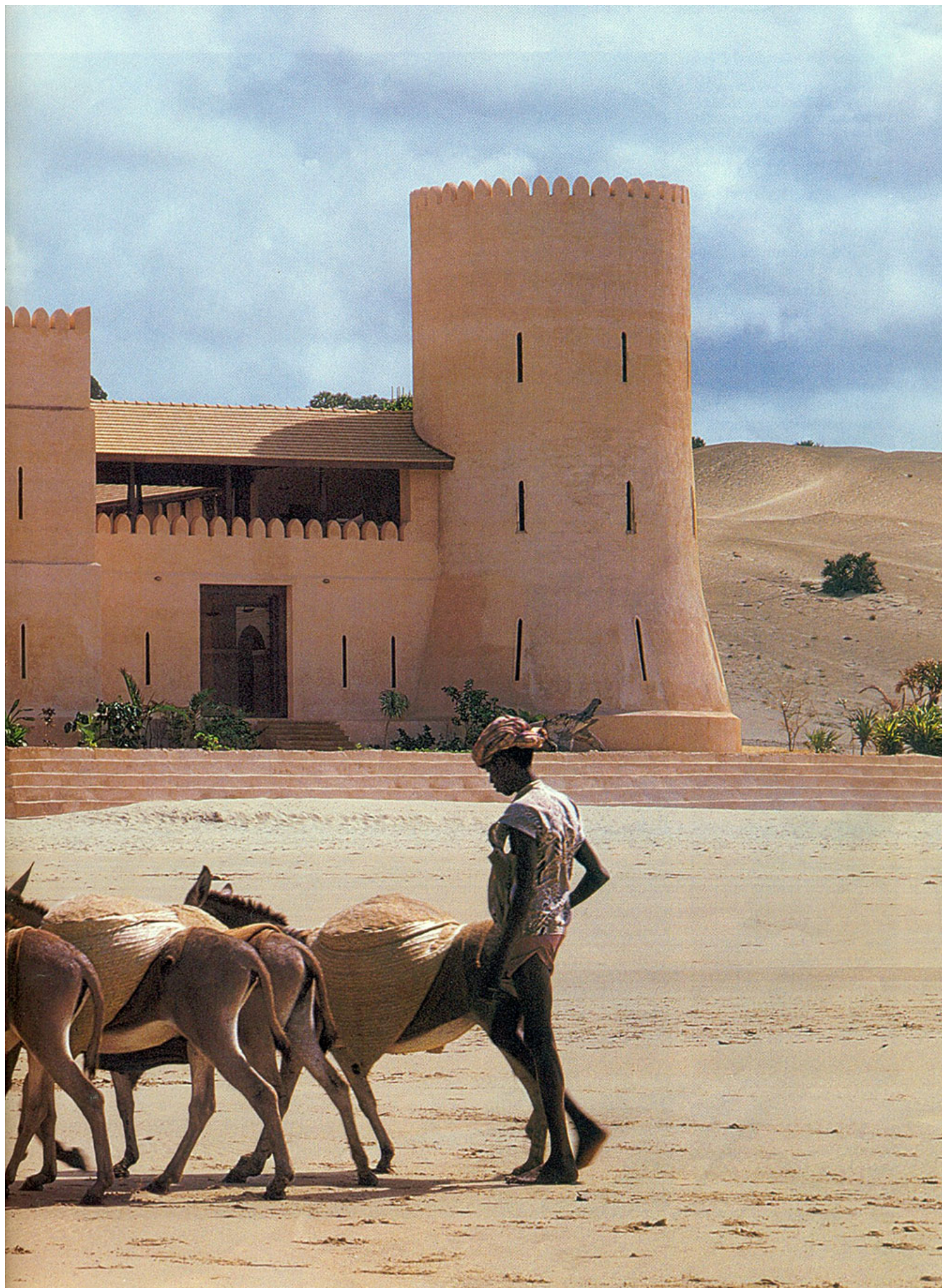
# CASTLE in the Sand

A TRADITIONAL OMANI FORTRESS RISES ON  
AN ISLAND OFF THE COAST OF KENYA

Architectural and Interior Design by Claudio Modola  
Text and Photography by Tim Beddow









PRECEDING PAGES: Designer Claudio Modola, who is based in South Africa, conceived what he calls a "vaguely military" residence for an Italian businessman on Lamu Island, off the coast of Kenya. Locals often pass through Shela Beach, fronting the house, with sand from nearby dunes.

**O**n Lamu, a sleepy, blissful island off the Kenyan coast, little has changed for decades. It sits languorously in the Indian Ocean on a once important trade route. There is still just the one Land Rover (for the district commissioner); the notion of fast food is quite absurd and nightlife almost nonexistent. Muezzins perform their duties from a dozen mosques five times daily. People of European descent (*wazungu* in Swahili) have always been drawn here in small numbers to build or own properties, but the overall fabric of the island remains thankfully unspoiled.

Residents therefore—native and foreign alike—were alarmed and skeptical at the prospect of a private *Beau Geste*-style fort materializing on the sand dunes beyond the village of Shela at the entrance to the main sea channel. Lamu is low-key and discreet. The gossip was that it would be vulgar and out of place. During the two years of its construction, as its shape became apparent, there was a general mellowing toward it, and, since completion, the fort has matured into somewhat of a landmark. Anxious objections have been rescinded. Now local pilots approaching the island fly low along the beach and dip their wings over it as a nod of approval.

Its success is due totally to the collaboration of the Venetian owner and Italian-Swiss designer Claudio Modola, whose sympathetic understanding of the area and its history and culture







and his desire for authenticity have joined forces to create a unique residence from a blank canvas. Visitors today—enlightened to the facts—can only exclaim, “It looks as though it’s been here forever!”

Modola had been living in Kenya for some years, involved in different projects, when the owner contacted him to say that he had purchased a large plot of land on the beach beyond Shela. Would he make a proposal for the site?

“It was an exciting challenge,” says Modola, “to conceive a structure that suited the client’s needs, fitted into the landscape and had some historical link with the region.” The client, a “Renaissance man,” as Modola describes him, had been visiting Lamu for several months each year since 1980, regarding it as a “refuge,” so when the designer suggested a residential fort, “he applauded the idea, and the project began,” says Modola.

Before any drawings were made, Modola visited Oman, where the methods of fort building—both military and



“The rooms open onto a courtyard, like a common space for soldiers,” says Modola (above). “The configuration resembles a traditional Omani fortress.” LEFT: Made from materials such as coral, lime and sand, the residence has 11 bedrooms surrounding the central courtyard.





LEFT: Situated above the entrance and overlooking the sea, the dining room has an open-beam ceiling and a mahogany table accompanied by sultan chairs. A silver water dispenser rests beside Modola's version of Omani crenellations, which echo the forms of the windows throughout.

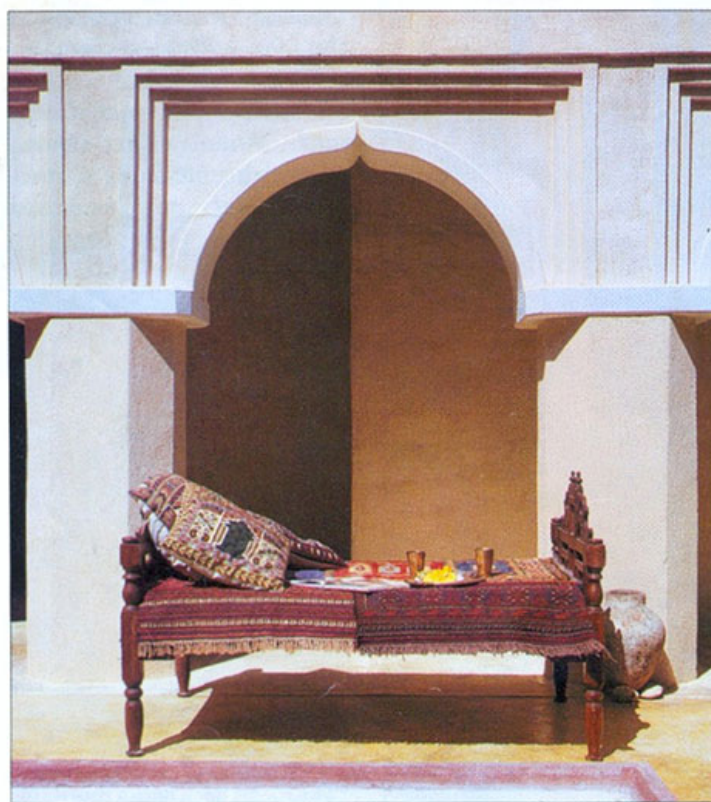
domestic—are an intrinsic part of the architectural heritage. Though Oman had a direct link with the island of Zanzibar to the south, Lamu was used as a supply depot, and many of the trading dhows that plied these waters were made in Oman, reinforcing the historical association. Omani merchants became extremely wealthy through this sea trade, building fortified mansions whose designs were the inspiration for Modola's plans.

"On my return," says Modola, "I had a clear idea for the building—one round tower with three square corner ones—its position against the dunes and the methods of construction." In all, there were to be 11 bedrooms, the owner's in the round tower, with five on each side of the building above the arcaded courtyard, where a small swimming pool was positioned at the far end. The dining area was to face the ocean, directly above the main entrance. To maintain the illusion of a genuine fort and to make it work as a private house, the bedrooms overlooking the courtyard are open, with thick, white canvas draperies for privacy. "Installing 11 windows or balconies for the rooms would simply have ruined the effect," says Modola. However, each does have its own staircase and individual bath—a comfortable contrast to many original Omani forts.

Once Modola had his client's approval for the design, the real work could begin. Organization bordering on the military and an acceptance of certain discomforts in living



and working conditions would be essential. A friend put him in touch with a construction company in Mombasa that specializes in building roads and bridges in remote parts of Africa. "I knew a local Lamu company could do the job, but it would take four



"The way the light and shadows play off one another in the courtyard is very dramatic," says Modola. ABOVE: An East African *pili-pili* bed covered in rugs from Afghanistan and Pakistan lies near the pool.





or five years, which was too long for the client. The right outfit had to have experience in those conditions."

But initial events were inauspicious. The first supply ship from Mombasa, carrying the 100-member workforce and towing a barge with

80 tons of lime, metal and cement, hit a ferocious storm. Fortunately, there were no casualties, but much of the cargo had to be dumped for the vessels to remain stable. On arrival they set up camp in the dunes. In time they created a small village,

with security, accommodations and food tents.

The first priority was to start making the building blocks. Machines were set up that produced seven of these blocks (each weighing 50 pounds) per day. They were composed of local topsoil

Brass Moroccan lanterns are set in the master bedroom's deep window recesses. Near the colonial-style bed is a Zanzibari carved chest topped with an African seed game known as *baa*. The bedside table holds a wood-and-metal lamp converted from a kerosene lamp.





ABOVE: A Masai guard, wearing a traditional *shuka*, stands on a pathway outside the round tower containing the master bedroom. "The owner has parties here, under the full moon," says Modola. BELOW: A dhow in the channel separating Lamu from the island of Manda.

mixed with lime and silicate. Each block then underwent a vibrating process to compact it. Thousands were made this way.

After six months, when the 16-foot-deep foundation was finally completed—"There's almost another fort under-

neath," says Modola—the client was able to witness his fort rising above the ground for the first time. But local merchants were stretched to supply the required number of timbers for the ceilings. Ever one to overcome adversity, Modola eventually sourced *mungati* (dense, strong wood) in neighboring Tanzania and Congo and had it delivered overland in a matter of weeks.

Logistics were paramount. "Most of our materials had to be brought onto the beach," explains Modola, "and the approach to the fort had to be judged by the tide. We were continually battling with strong currents, and, on top of that, we had a long rainy season in the first year, when we were working with-

out a roof over our heads."

Eighteen months later, with as many battles behind it, the fort finally opened its massive doors to its owner. Modola consulted with Ian Cameron, a local antiques dealer, on furniture, carpets, lamps and *objets* to fit the environment, and the owner's bold and imaginative dream of a desert cathedral became a reality and an appropriate domain for these shores.

And Modola's brainchild had been triumphantly completed against formidable odds. In the end, though, his reward was simply found in the attitude of the workforce, "whose grit and dedication to seeing the project succeed was quite exceptional," he says happily. □





In lieu of walls on the courtyard side of the bedrooms, there are draperies. "It feels theatrical," notes Modola. A path leads through the garden to the swimming pool and spa. Kenya-based landscape designer Jackie McConnell adorned the area with frangipani, jasmine, baobabs and palms.

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