

## THE PROFILING OF AL-ROZNAH IN OMANI INTERIOR DESIGN: FROM CULTURAL IDENTITY TO CONTEMPORARY LOSS AND REINTERPRETATION

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of Al-Roznah, a traditional architectural element in Omani's interior design. It has multifunctional elements, blending aesthetics and practicality. The research further explored the cultural significance, the functional role and the decline of Al-Roznah in contemporary interiors. A qualitative method was employed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The fieldwork was conducted in four (4) historical neighbourhoods in Al-Dakhiliyah Governorate, documenting variations in Al-Roznah's design, materials, and uses. The findings have shown the shifting role from a symbol of Omani cultural identity to primarily decorative features due to several factors. Thus, the article highlighted the efforts for Al-Roznah's restoration of traditional values into contemporary interior design for future generations.

**Keywords:** Al-Roznah, Omani interior design, wall cavities, Omani Heritage, Traditional elements.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Traditional architectural elements are integral design features preserving cultural identity, serving as vessels of historical, social, and aesthetic significance. The Al-Roznah, specifically in Oman, is a wall cavity, distinctive by its geometrical shapes, pointed arches, rounded ends, and intricate wooden or stone shelves. It symbolises the connection between form, function, and heritage (Al-Kalbani et al., 2018). In the past, Al-Roznah is used for practical and decorative purposes. It also offers storage solutions while enhancing the interior design of Omani homes. However, in contemporary architectural practices, such traditional features face challenges, from functional redundancy to loss of cultural significance.

The transition from traditional to modern design has sparked concerns about the "contemporary loss" of Al-Roznah as its role evolves or diminishes in Omani interiors. Modern lifestyles, urbanisation, and changing aesthetic preferences have contributed to this phenomenon, where cultural elements are often overlooked or replaced by more generic, globalised design approaches (Al-Riyami, 2020). Despite such challenges, efforts to restore and reinterpret Al-Roznah within contemporary settings are emerging, aiming to create a balance and harmony between heritage preservation and modern functionality.

This article examines the evolution of Al-Roznah in Omani interior design, focusing on its journey from a cultural cornerstone to its modern reinterpretation. Through research, fieldwork, and case studies, it explores the challenges facing Al-Roznah, efforts to preserve its relevance, and its modern-day significance in Omani homes. Most of the residential

communities in Oman have similar elements. The facilities were mainly built from mud, stone for foundations, plaster and sand, and indoor windows and ceilings were constructed from local and imported wood (Sheikh, 2019). The article highlights the perspectives of Omani youth, the role of community spaces like mosques in preserving this tradition, and its adaptation in contemporary settings such as cafes and traditional inns.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on preserving architectural heritage in the face of globalisation and modernisation by profiling Al-Roznah's transformation and identifying strategies for integrating it into modern interior design. It highlights the need to maintain the cultural identity embedded in traditional elements while ensuring their relevance and appeal in today's dynamic design landscape.

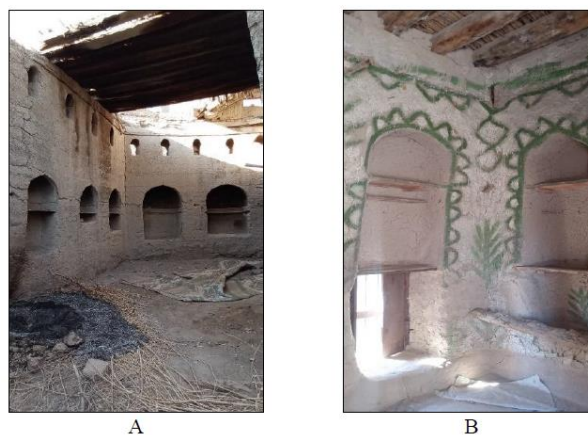
## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The word 'Al-Roznah' is originally from Persia and means light or glow in the dialect of the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine).

### 2.1 Definition of Al-Roznah

The term Al-Roznah, also referred to as Al-Kuwa (النَّكْوَة) or "niche," is described in various Arabic dictionaries and literature. According to Mujahid (2018), the word "niche" originates from the language of Abyssinia, where it refers to a hollow space within a structure. Mujahid (2018) further elaborates that it was historically associated with ironwork, where lamps were attached, and the wick was placed within the niche. Similarly, it has been described as a hollow space in the wall, not functioning as a window but often used for placing lamps (Niche, n.d.). Qudamaa (2017) notes that niches were sometimes round or oval and served dual purposes, such as ventilation and lighting, as well as for defence, allowing for strategic placement within walls. Hejles (2019) characterises Al-Roznah as an interior wall feature consisting of shelves built into walls, forming recesses or voids that enhance functionality and aesthetics. These built-in cavities could be square, round, or oval, providing storage or decorative functions.

This comprehensive understanding underscores the multifaceted nature of Al-Roznah, which blends functional utility, aesthetic design, and cultural heritage within traditional Arabic architecture.



**Fig. 1:** Al-Roznah with the different Arches in Harat AL Aqr in Bahla, Oman

(Source: Author, 2023)

Al-Roznah designs are illustrated in Fig.1, featuring distinct wall cavities observed in Harat Al Aqr, Bahla, Oman. These niches are characterised by pointed arches, rounded ends, and geometric patterns, showcasing the traditional craftsmanship of Omani architecture. Al-Roznahs, in this context, serve both functional and decorative purposes, acting as built-in wall cavities for storage or display. Using locally sourced materials such as mud and stone emphasises their integration into the thick walls of traditional homes, reflecting the resourcefulness and aesthetic sensibilities of the era. This diversity in arch design highlights the adaptability of Al-Roznah to different architectural styles within the region, preserving its cultural and functional significance.

## **2.2 Omani Al-Roznah**

The material culture of Oman is prosperous and varied, and it can be dealt with comprehensively. To understand a culture, one has to look at the integration of history, including architecture and art. Traditional Omani architecture has a wonderfully sensitive appreciation of the natural environment's materials and colours (Hegazy (2014). The human-scale buildings have some of the most distinctive architectural features, such as carved wooden doors with chiselled geometric or floral patterns; carved window screens; mud, lime plaster and stucco work Al-Salmi et al.,(2008), and also the Al-Roznah.

Thousands of forts, souks (also known as bazaars), and ancient monuments fascinate travellers with the presence of the Sultanate's ancient traditions. Some aspects of Omani architecture, such as doors, windows, and historical wall openings, show the nation's connection to its heritage. These architectural features are often found in heritage sites and museums. Doors, windows, and Al-Roznahs were among the most important forms of decorative expression in traditional Omani buildings, David (2020).

In the past, these items were considered symbols of status and hospitality. These elements often take the form of inscriptions from traditional arts, such as arches, windows, and niches, and are often engraved with verses of the Qur'an. The frames and details of old wooden doors and windows and handcrafted wall openings are usually decorated in bright colours (Al-Salmi et al., 2008).

As mentioned previously, Al-Roznah is usually a non-window interior wall opening in the form of cavities or voids in the internal walls of a room. The Al-Roznah may be designed with built-in wall shelves made of either wood or either wall material. It could be built on the ground level and up to the roof of the building, where the elevation of the Al-Roznah and the depth of its cavity varies inside the wall to its thickness (Zakaria, 2017). Al-Roznah displays crucial things such as clothes, lamps, weapons, books, and Al-Quran.

The Omani Al-Rwazin (plural of Al-Roznah) has similar shapes but with either curved arches or pointed arch tips. They varied between unilateral and bilateral and up to triple vertically or between stanchions and windows. The Omani architect added longitudinal frames carved with geometric and plant motifs, adding elegance and beauty to the Al-Roznah (Zakaria, 2017).

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative research design through semi-structured techniques such as focus group discussions and expert interviews. Other methods include observation and case studies (DeFranzo, 2011). According to Obidat (2000), gathering information regarding the current situation and its historical circumstances and identifying the influencing factors from past experiences is feasible. Additionally, the study investigates Al-Roznah as a critical element of Omani architectural heritage, from functional, aesthetic, and cultural significance.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The case studies exploring Al-Roznah focus mainly on the context of four historical neighbourhoods (Harrahs) in the Al-Dakhiliyah Governorate of Oman. This method enables a detailed examination of Al-Roznah's architectural and cultural characteristics and variations across residential settings.

#### **3.2 Data Collection Methods**

##### **3.2.1 Field Observations**

Observations were conducted at the four selected Harrahs: Harrat Al-Bilad (Manah), Harrat Al-Aqar (Bahla), Harrat Al-Nizar (Izki), and Harrat Al-Khadeemah (Al Hamra). The selected Harrahs come from a region with nearly consistent weather, humidity, and temperature conditions, as well as agricultural areas and groundwater sources like wells and Aflaj (ancient Oman's irrigation systems) (Al Ghafri, 2018). Field notes and sketches were made during the observation process to document the dimensions, materials, and decorative patterns of Al-Roznah features within the houses. Additionally, digital photography was utilised to capture visual details of Al-Roznah structures, inscriptions, and motifs. Thus, Al-Roznah was photographed in several locations, and the images are crucial for documenting the data and explaining it systematically.

##### **3.2.2 Measurements and Drawings**

Two measuring tools were used to measure Al-Roznah. One is a steel-type measuring tape used in the most challenging and complex to-reach areas, especially the depth measurement, while the other is a flexible measuring tape. It measured the longest bars in a home whose floors and ceilings collapsed. In this study, Al-Roznah was physically measured (length, width, depth, and positioning) to understand its structural variations across different sites. The information was later transferred into AutoCAD software through field measures and sketches. This software refined and analysed the collected measurements, ensuring accuracy in representing the architectural details.

##### **3.2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with local experts who lived in old Omani houses and personally used Al-Roznah. These experts also included artisans and long-term residents who possess knowledge of Al-Roznah's construction, functionality, and cultural significance. During the interviews, the participants will be introduced to the research topic and will be asked according to three research questions. The topics included historical uses, traditional construction methods, and perceptions of Al-Roznah in contemporary contexts.

### **3.2.4 Archival Research**

Archival research involves authorities providing detailed information, especially from archival records. It usually involves primary research from the authorities concerned with restoring old Harrah and the Ministry of Heritage and Municipality. This method enables the researcher to trace the feature's development and role in Oman's architectural heritage. On the other hand, to place Al-Roznah within a larger cultural context, these comparative analyses were conducted with other traditional niches in neighbouring Gulf and African regions.

## **3.3 Data Analysis**

### **3.3.1 Qualitative Content Analysis**

Field notes, interview transcripts, and visual documentation were systematically coded and categorised to identify recurring themes and patterns. Key themes included functionality, aesthetics, preservation challenges, and reinterpretation in contemporary design.

### **3.3.2 Visual and Dimensional Analysis**

Through fieldwork sketches, the drawing measurements were then transferred into AutoCAD. The software is used to produce precise 2D and 3D drawings and plans with exact measurements, thus allowing for a detailed understanding of the geometrical shape and spatial characteristics of Al-Roznah, particularly its structural integration within the thick walls of traditional Omani houses. It has been noted that the wall of the old Omani house is built from simple, local raw materials of clay and sand, has a substantial thickness of 50 cm and 80 cm and up to 1 meter and 1.5 meters. The wall's thickness of 1.8 meters and 2 meters was also found.

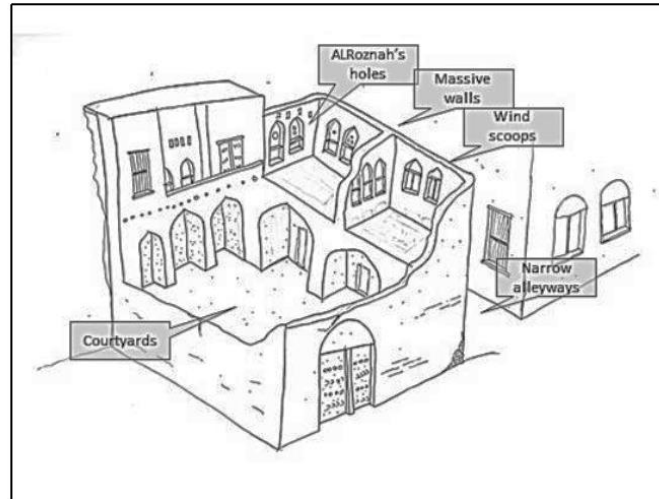
The dimensions of the Al-Roznah vary significantly across regions; on average, the widths range from 40 to 95 cm, with a maximum of 1.5 meters, while the depths span from 30 cm to 1 meter. Heights start at 90 cm and reach up to 3 meters. Patterns and inscriptions were examined to explore their symbolic meanings and aesthetic contributions.

## **3.4 Study Scope and Limitations**

The study focuses on the four Harrahs within the Al-Dakhiliyah Governorate. These Harrahs are listed as Harrah One (Harrat Al-Bilad in Manah), Harrah Two (Haarrat AL-Aqar in Bahla), Harrah Three (Harrat Al-Nizar in Izki), and Harrah Four (Harrat AL-Khadeemah in ALHamra). These sites are chosen for their historical significance and well-preserved architectural features. Limitations include access restrictions to specific sites and reliance on oral histories, which may introduce subjective interpretations. In addition, some of the Harrah was undergoing restoration works, which prevented the researchers from thoroughly investigating the Al-Roznah and everything associated with it. Despite such obstacles, the study helped disseminate a valuable contribution to documenting and preserving Omani architectural heritage.

## 4.0 RESULTS

This section explains the findings and analysis of the Al-Roznah evolution of Omani interior design. It emphasises transitioning from a functional and cultural feature to a contemporary reinterpretation. The study is structured into key themes supported by visual data, where applicable.



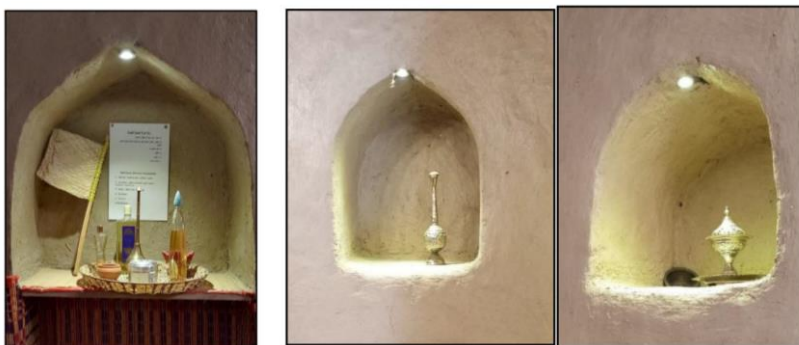
**Fig 2:** A section shows the wall thickness and Al-Roznah in an old Omani house  
(Source: Author, 2023)

The figure (Fig 2) illustrates a cross-section of a traditional Omani house, highlighting two significant architectural features: the wall thickness and the Al-Roznah. The thick walls, characteristic of traditional Omani architecture, provide excellent thermal insulation by absorbing heat during the day and releasing it slowly at night, thus regulating indoor temperatures. The Al-Roznah, a small decorative opening, allows natural light and ventilation into the room, enhancing comfort while adding cultural aesthetic value.

### 4.1 Functional and Aesthetic Roles of Al-Roznah in Traditional Omani Interiors

Al-Roznah was traditionally used as both a functional and decorative element. It was initially designed for:

- **Storage:** Used for household items such as utensils, books, and personal belongings.
- **Display:** Showcasing decorative objects and religious artefacts.
- **Ventilation and Lighting:** Providing airflow and light in compact spaces without additional openings.



**Fig 3:** (From left) Women's beauty collectables and silver trays displayed in Al-Roznah  
(Source: Author, 2022, 2023)

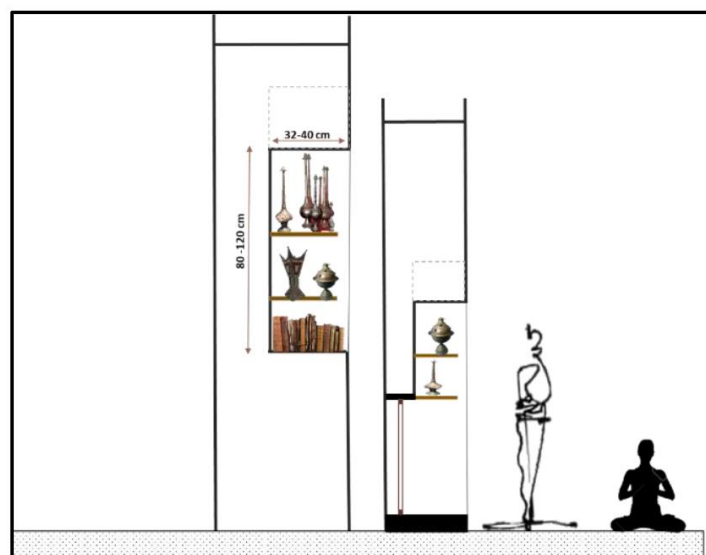
The figure (Fig 3) showcases a traditional Al-Roznah display featuring women's beauty collectables and silver trays. These elegantly arranged items reflect the region's cultural heritage and aesthetic preferences. The Al-Roznah, as a decorative element and a functional space for displaying valued possessions, underscores the blend of beauty and utility in traditional Omani interiors. Regarding aesthetics, Al-Roznah included pointed arches, carved wooden or stone shelves, and geometric shapes representing Omani artistry and cultural values.

**Table 1:** Functional and Aesthetic Roles of Al-Roznah in Traditional Omani Interiors

Feature	Traditional Function	Aesthetic Characteristics
Storage niches	Utility for everyday items	Minimalist, integrated within thick walls
Religious niches	Quran display in mosques	Elaborate carvings and inscriptions
Decorative wall features	Enhancing interiors	Geometric and floral motifs

Table 1 outlines the functional and aesthetic roles of the Al-Roznah in traditional Omani interiors. Storage niches within the Al-Roznah are typically minimalist and seamlessly integrated within thick walls, serving as practical spaces for everyday items. Religious niches, often found in mosques, display the Quran and feature elaborate carvings and inscriptions that reflect these spaces' cultural and spiritual significance. Additionally, the Al-Roznah includes decorative wall features that enhance the interiors with geometric and floral motifs, adding an artistic touch to the architecture.

#### 4.2 Comparative Analysis: Traditional vs. Contemporary Al-Roznah



**Fig 4:** Section drawing of the Al-Roznah showing the aesthetic character in displaying antiques and possessions

(Source: Author, 2023)

Table 2 below compares Al-Roznah's traditional and modern applications. The comparisons are based on several key factors: design elements, material usage, functionality, aesthetic role, and cultural significance. The comparative analysis highlights Al-Roznah's transformation in response to modern interior design trends while considering its cultural heritage.

**Table 2:** Comparisons of traditional and modern applications of Al-Roznah

Aspect	Traditional Al-Roznah	Contemporary Al-Roznah
Design Features	Geometric patterns, pointed arches, and wooden/stone shelves.	Simplified forms, often with metal or plaster materials.
Materials	Local materials include mud brick, wood, and stone.	Modern materials like aluminium, plaster, and glass.
Functionality	Multifunctional: used for storage, display, and ventilation.	Primarily decorative, it is used in cafes, hotels, and commercial spaces.
Aesthetic Role	Integral to interior design, contributing to cultural identity.	Aesthetic features in modern spaces are often devoid of cultural context.
Cultural Significance	Strong cultural and symbolic importance linked to Omani heritage.	Limited cultural relevance is often seen as a design trend.
Placement in Spaces	Embedded in the architecture, it is integral to daily life in homes.	Added as an ornamental feature in contemporary settings.
Preservation and Restoration	Preserved through traditional restoration techniques.	Restoration often focuses on aesthetic preservation, losing traditional integrity.

Thus, due to the transition from one period to another, society has lost the culture of the Al-Roznah. Modern society merely thinks that the function of the Al-Roznah is limited to displaying antiques and possessions that reflect the material and social level and preserving the personal tools of the family members.

#### 4.3 Decline in Contemporary Usage

With the modernisation of Omani homes, the practical need for Al-Roznah has gradually decreased. The functional role of Al-Roznah has also diminished, as it is now often relegated to decorative purposes in main halls, while bedrooms and kitchens opt for more contemporary fittings. Through observations, some modifications to the modern Al-Roznah are made. These modifications are as follows:

- **Replacement by Modern Furniture:** Cabinets and modular furniture have replaced the original storage function.



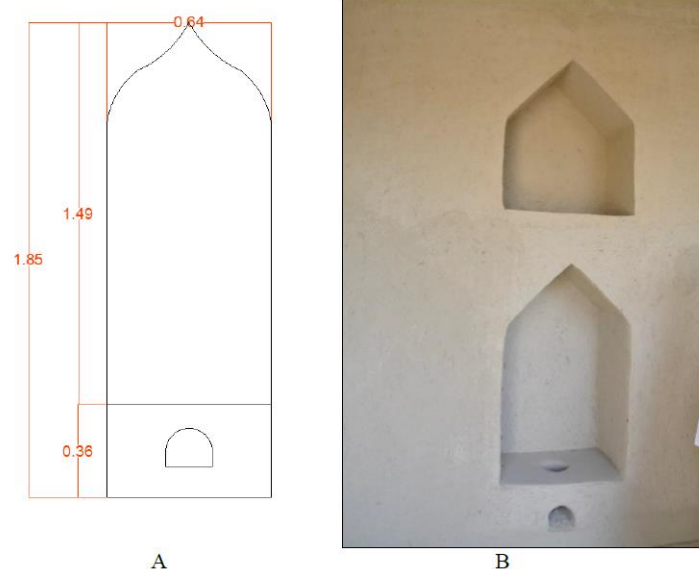
- **Shift in Material Use:** Different materials, such as plaster or aluminium, are used in modern adaptations, which compromises authenticity.
- **Functional Loss:** Often referred to decorative purposes in main halls, with bedrooms and kitchens opting for modern fittings.

(Table 3) below compares the traditional usage and modern adaptation of Al-Roznah in Omani homes. Traditionally, Al-Roznah served as a central storage feature in all rooms, constructed using materials like mud, stone, and wood, and was an integral part of the structural design. In modern adaptations, however, its role has been reduced to a decorative function, often limited to areas like main halls. The materials used have shifted to aluminium and plaster, compromising the authenticity of traditional designs.

**Table 3:** The comparison aspects between traditional usage and modern adaptation.

Aspect	Traditional Usage	Modern Adaptation
Storage	Central in all rooms	Limited to decorative function
Material	Mud, stone, and wood	Aluminium and plaster
Integration	Part of structural design	Add-on or symbolic feature

Additionally, Al-Roznah has become more of an add-on or symbolic feature rather than a functional part of the home's structure. Despite these changes, it remains a valued element, connecting contemporary interiors with traditional Omani heritage.



**Fig 5:** The dimensions of the cooking Al-Roznah stove at Harat ALBilad in Manah, Oman (2023) show that the stove's functions have evolved from decorative purposes.  
(Source: Author, 2023)

Traditionally, the buildings were constructed with simple wood moulds, with stone added to strengthen their structure. Mud clay is the natural choice for constructing the Harrah and the Al-Roznah. However, in contemporary usage, the Al-Roznah has been modified and lost its original design, which depends on pointed arches and layers of shelves. It was built with

aluminium on the house and painted in wood. Thus this is due to the availability of different types of wood and the development of trade and industry, which eventually became feasible for everyone.

#### 4.4 Preservation Efforts in Religious and Cultural Spaces

Mosques continue to preserve the traditional function of Al-Roznah. In these sacred spaces, the Al-Roznah often serves as a niche for displaying the Quran and holding other religious artefacts. Through observation, the preservation of Al-Roznah in religious and cultural spaces is as follows:

- **Quran Storage:** It is needed to maintain its original function in a religious context.
- **Symbolism:** It symbolises the nation's cultural identity and heritage.
- **Restoration Projects:** Restoration projects mainly focus on preserving traditional niches in historical and cultural settings.

Furthermore, environmental factors like humidity and material erosions frequently challenge the success of Al-Roznah's preservation initiatives.

#### 4.5 Contemporary Reinterpretation in Hospitality and Heritage Spaces

Modern reinterpretations of Al-Roznah are prominent in the hospitality sector, especially in cafes, traditional inns, and cultural tourism spaces. The aesthetic of Al-Roznah was highlighted to reflect the Omani character, enhancing its value.

- **Lighting and Decor:** Al-Roznah is enhanced with lighting to emphasise its aesthetic value.
- **Cultural Branding:** Used as a symbol of Omani heritage to attract tourists.

This practice showcases the beauty of the Al-Roznah and serves as a decorative feature that enhances the space's overall ambience.

**Table 4:** The comparison aspects between traditional usage and modern adaptation.

Sector	Examples	Purpose
Hospitality	Cafes, inns	Cultural branding, heritage tourism
Public Spaces	Museums, Heritage centres	Education, cultural preservation

The comparisons in (Table 4) above show the traditional usage and modern adaptation of Al-Roznah across different sectors. In the hospitality sector, traditional Al-Roznahs are found in cafes and inns, serving purposes related to cultural branding and heritage tourism. These elements are used to enhance the cultural appeal of these establishments, attracting visitors who are interested in experiencing traditional architectural features. In public spaces such as museums and heritage centres, Al-Roznahs are preserved to serve educational purposes and cultural preservation.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The Al-Roznah, an essential feature of Omani architectural heritage, is proven to have functional and aesthetic importance. It embodies the intersection of cultural identity and functional design. Historically serving as a multifunctional element, Al-Roznah was integral to traditional Omani interiors, blending aesthetic appeal with practicality. However, its

significance has gradually declined from time to time and primarily acted as a decorative feature in contemporary modern spaces.

Despite these challenges, Al-Roznah remains a cultural icon, notably in religious and heritage-focused settings like mosques, traditional inns, and cafes. These issues must be dealt with care accordingly by the respective authorities, and the importance of community education in preserving the architectural heritage. In addition, it is essential to balance preservation with innovations, ensuring Al-Roznah elements are relevant in modern design practices while upholding their cultural essence.

## 6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Further recommendations include researching the historical variations of Al-Roznah across Oman and documenting regional differences and their cultural implications. Researchers could also explore the psychological and social impact of Al-Roznah as a cultural element in modern interiors, particularly its influence on identity and well-being.

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