FIGHTING TO SAVE THE HEART OF JEDDAH
SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD Hasan Mahmoud Al-Esa and 58-year-old Ahmed Mohammed Malabari, 58, are past their retirement ages. But their job skills are so rare that they have been commissioned to help save a crumbling piece of Jeddah’s 1,400-year-old history.

Al-Esa and Malabari were building contractors in their prime, one an architect and the other a painter. Between them they hold the secrets of how the Old Quarter in the downtown Balad can be restored.

I started my career as a Me alim [architect] when I was 15 years old, Al-Esa tells The Saudi Gazette. We’d build houses with white bricks brought from Al-Ruwais, (some 3 km outside Old Jeddah). The mud we used to bring from the sea using donkeys and camels.

The buildings in the Old Quarter are of mud and limestone with wooden beams called Gondol brought from Sudan holding up the roof.

The buildings are very strong and we used to build a house within three weeks, Al-Esa recalls.

For Malabari, the work was more physical. My job was the most exhausting and dangerous, Malabari says. I used to hang down from a rope with my bucket to paint the whole building from top to bottomward.

The paint he used then was a white lime locally called Noura, the very same paint he uses today to restore the buildings to their former glory.

Some of the buildings in the Old Quarter are more than 1,000 years old, explains Sami Nawar, director of the Jeddah Historical Area Protection Administration who is determined to use whatever means possible to save the structures.

We have Al-Jame Mosque, which was built by Omer Bin Al-Khattab, the second Caliph, some 1,400 years ago and people are still offer their prayers in it, he notes.

It was Nawar who tracked down the two old men and put them back to work again. These two old men teach and supervise young Saudis to fix and rehabilitate the old buildings.

Up until about 25 years ago, the old city was rapidly deteriorating. But thanks to preservation laws many buildings remain.

There are almost 500 historical houses in Jeddah and they are all preserved and protected by a law decreed 25 years ago, says Nawar. Jeddah is the first city in Saudi Arabia to have this law.

Nawar says the area has 13 historical buildings that need to be restored. We have a special program to restore these houses.

According to Nawar, the historical buildings are very strong but a few have been severely damaged because of improperly done renovation work from poor understanding of traditional architecture. Some owners of these buildings tried to illegally expand them on the ground floor, which required removing some of the beams and columns supporting the building, Nawar rues.

Also a concrete water tank put on top of one house is causing a huge overload on the building and this needs to be fixed. Such factors lead to damage and collapse of some parts of the
buildings.

But Nawar is pleased to note that more than 85 percent of these houses are living houses people still use the houses as residences. He observes that the buildings are so structurally sound that even heavy air-conditioning units attached to them pose no problems.

The historical area of Jeddah is very rich, he says. We used to discover items from time to time such as cannons, books and recently we uncovered a water cistern which was the main water source for Jeddah 500 years ago.

Jeddah is one of the oldest cities in Arabia, with traditional roots going back as far as Adam and Eve.

Caliph Omer Ibn Al Khattab built the first mosque in Jeddah 1,400 years ago and Caliph Osman Bin Affan chose Jeddah as the main port for the city of Makkah. It became known as Balad Al-Kanasil the City of Consulates.

In the 16th century, the Ottomans built a stonewall around the town to fortify it against attacks from the Portuguese. Originally, four gates were set in these walls, Bab Shareef opening towards the south, Bab Makkah facing east, Bab Jadeed in the north wall and a west gate facing the Red Sea.

Jeddah remained a fortified, walled town for centuries of Ottoman influence and was not released from Turkish rule until 1915. Further evidence of Turkish influence can be seen in Jeddah’s architecture. The buildings of old Jeddah stand tall and graceful, constructed of coral limestone and decorated with intricately beautiful wooden facades, known as Rawasheen (singular Roshan).

These were designed not only to break up the sun’s glare, but also to take advantage of the cooling sea breeze when the inner windows were opened. One cannot help but feel that, with the enclosure of the town within high walls, the sea breeze may not have stood much chance of reaching Jeddah’s early inhabitants, hence their penchant for building their houses tall and for sleeping on the roofs on hot summer nights.

The origin of the city’s name poses an interesting dilemma for etymologists. Juddah (pronounced Jiddah) in Arabic means seashore, which seems logical enough, but the school of thought which prefers Jaddah or grandmother, is given credence by the traditional location of Eve’s tomb within the city. Jeddah is, in fact, incorrect, but is popularly used by most non-Saudis living there.

Jeddah has grown from humble origins. It began about 2,500 years ago as a tiny fishing settlement. In the beginning of the 20th century, Jeddah occupied an area of one square kilometer and it had only four districts Al-Mazloum, Al-Sham, Al-Yaman and Harat Al-Bahar. Today, the area has increased to 600 sq. km and its Red Sea paved coastline stretches 85 km from north to south.

Jeddah has grown to be the second largest city in Saudi Arabia and the recreational, tourist and shopping focus of the country.

Over the years, many historical buildings in the Old Quarter area were demolished by their owners and substituted by new modern buildings. Commercial interests pose perhaps the biggest threat. The Old Quarter is the most expensive spot in the city, Nawar observes.