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THE FURNITURE AND JOINERY INDUSTRIES IN KUWAIT

Country Paper

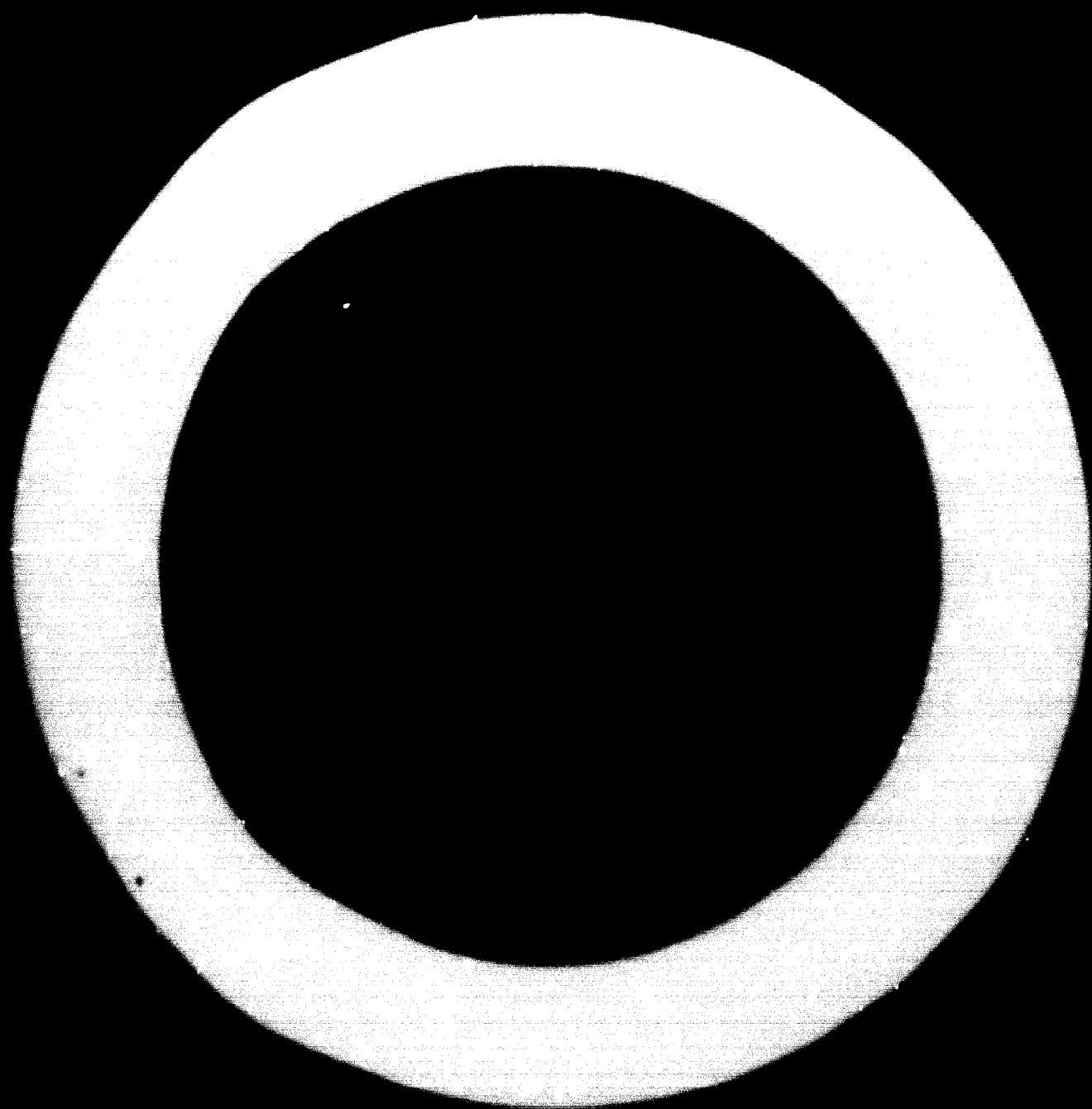
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The joinery and furniture industries as such date back to the early fifties when Kuwait started with the large-scale exploration and export of crude. The old established joinery shops could not cope with the heavy demands made by the oil companies and Government agencies which required support facilities involving all types of joinery and carpentry activities.

From the beginning and even today all the requisite materials for the joinery, carpentry and furniture industries have to be imported. Skilled and semi-skilled labour has been hired from neighbouring Arab countries, Pakistan, Iran and India, and expert technicians are still recruited from abroad. The Oil Industry's demand support facilities in the field as well as housing for its staff gave rise to the procurement of furniture and allied products through local market channels. Encouraged by future prospects, local entrepreneurs started importing in bulk various types of timber, plywood, blockboard, etc. and several small joinery workshops were set up to cut timber to size and produce joinery for buildings. Owing to their lack of technical knowledge and acute shortage of skilled labour, some workshops failed and others had to seek joint-ventures with industrialists from other Arab countries. Only when mechanized and properly supervised by competent and experienced personnel, could these workshops cope with the production of building joinery and other support facilities for the oil industry.

The influx of manpower in the oil industry and Government agencies gave rise to a demand for furniture and furnishing. Both domestic and office furniture was imported in bulk up until the late fifties. Local workshops were too busy with building joinery and could hardly pay attention to this problem. However, by the early sixties the building joinery industry had established its position and took the initiative in furniture industry sector (for domestic use by the staffs of the oil companies and Government agencies staff). The imports were thus reduced to some extent. However, the difficulty of obtaining materials and skilled technicians for upholstery continues. Furthermore, individual buyers specify materials of their own choice which have to be imported, consequently delivery dates of the finished goods have to be extended. The importers of upholstery materials are still hesitant about stocking a wide range of fabrics in sufficient quantity. Even today manufacturers are obliged to airfreight basic materials to meet stipulated contract dates.

General specifications for timber and allied products have been compiled by the Ministry of Public Works. These specifications conform to British Standards in general. The timbers in normal use are teak-wood, meranti and Yang (known as red wood) and spruce as soft wood. Teak logs are imported from Burma and Thailand; red woods from Malaysia and Singapore, and soft-wood from east European countries. Beech wood is mostly used in the furniture industry. Timber is seasoned in kilns, but there are no plants for pressure preservation treatment of timber. Other types of timber, such as mahogany, oak, maple, pine, etc., are imported by manufacturers direct from Lebanon for their own use specific projects. These timbers are not available ex-stock from any importers in Kuwait. Plywood and block-board of various grades and thickness are imported from various European and Far Eastern countries. Block-board and particle board (chipboard) is also manufactured locally, but production is just enough for the manufacturer's own needs. The only decorative plywood is teak plywood (5 m/m thickness). Normally MR grade plywood is used for flush doors, while for flooring grade 20 m/m plywood is always available locally.

Various types of commercial and decorative wood veneers are imported for panelling and furniture industry. Two workshops are equipped with machinery to splice veneers and glue it to boards. Plastic laminates are imported. However, there are reports that a plastic-laminate factory is to be set up in Kuwait. Flush doors, solid core or semi-solid, have been standardized and are manufactured locally; however, good quality foam rubber is still being imported.

There being no restriction on imports, Kuwait market is open to any exporter from any part of the world except from sources banned by the Israel boycott office. Consequently, locally available materials vary in quality and prices. Qualified interior decorators and designers are needed to propagate the use of new materials. Even today, industry lacks designers with imagination and initiative, with the result that the wide range of new materials in vogue in other countries are just lying in the show cases of local importers. The public in general is well versed with modern decor and furnishing and would be only too pleased to discuss their requirements with qualified designers and welcome their proposals. Though the furniture industry has made progress, it has not been streamlined and quality furniture is still being imported.

The local industry competes very keenly for various Government and oil company tenders for furniture and furnishings. Each year various Ministries viz. Education, Health, Housing and Defence etc., issue tenders for the supply of furniture of local or foreign manufacture. Although local industry is given protection to a certain extent, it needs further assistance. This system has encouraged mass production of typical furniture and the reduction of production costs.

The extreme climatic conditions pose problems. Summer temperatures rise up to 48°C with frequent dust storms; humid conditions also prevail. Glues, lacquers and paints have to be stored in air-conditioned ware-houses and imports regulated to keep pace with consumption in order to avoid longer storage periods. Furniture finish is of comparatively poor quality owing to dust particles suspended in the air. It is practically impossible to have air-tight areas for finish finishing operations. Moreover, something must be done to encourage local labour to learn technical trades in order to overcome the shortage of skilled labour.

Finally, there is a problem of marketing the manufactured goods. The show rooms are being run directly by the manufacturers and the tendering is also direct. There has been no agreement between the various manufacturers to manufacture selected items only, leaving other items to be manufactured by others. Thus, each manufacturer is endeavouring to meet all customer requirements under one roof. This increase in costs and unhealthy competition results in comparatively poor workmanship.

Industry is thus confronted with a complex of problems and needs a common platform to discuss the shortcomings with guidance from developed nations and local Government agencies.

ANNEX

The statistical figures have been compiled through information obtained from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Local Industries Houses, importers and manufacturers.

Number of joinery manufacturing firms Approved by Ministry of Public Works	24
Number of reputed established furniture manufacturers	6
Number of firms manufacturing wooden prefabricated housing units	3
Number of persons employed, supervisors, techni- cians, skilled and semi-skilled tradesmen	Approx. 2100
<u>Volume of Production Annually:</u>	
Buildings and general purpose joinery	Over KD. 5 million
Domestic, schools, hospital and allied furniture	Over KD. 2,75 million
Prefabricated houses	Approx. KD. 0,80 million
<u>Materials imports:</u>	
Sawn softwood	76,000 m ³
Teakwood logs	22,000 m ³
Redwoods, beechwood and other timbers	10,000 m ³
Commercial plywood	24,000 m ³
Decorative teak Veneered plywoods	5,000 m ³
Veneers	57,000 m ³
Particle boards	3,000 m ³
Fibre boards	3,000 m ³
Finished furniture all types	Approx. K.D. 100 million
Finished joinery	Almost Nil
Hardware, fabrics, vinyl foam, etc.	K.D. 0,35 millions
<u>Exports:</u>	
Finished joinery	K.D. Approx. 40,000
Finished furniture	K.D. Approx. 150,000
Prefabricated houses	K.D. Approx. 700,000



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