

The Traditional Arabic House Its Historical Roots

Basam Behsh

Arkitektur - utlandsbyggande, LNTH

I artikeln behandlas frågan om det traditionella, så kallade arabiska bostadshusets ursprung, och författaren finner att detta går tillbaka till tider före islam och till andra kulturer. Byggnadsformen är således snarare en funktion av bland annat klimat, än av kultur. Artikeln bygger på ett kapitel till författarens förestående licentiatavhandling.

Abstract

The Arabic courtyard house has been physically and symbolically adjusted to serve two inseparable functions. Firstly, as a shelter (MA-AWA), providing the inhabitants with proper protection from unfavourable outside conditions (climate). Secondly, as a habitat (MASKAN), in which the inhabitants may comfortably satisfy their physical and emotional requirements (culture).

Although this type of house has, to a large extent, been architecturally stamped with Islamic culture, its roots in fact go back into antiquity.

The aim of this paper is to trace the origins of the Arabic house and its subsequent development throughout the history of Syria.

Definition

The term "Arabic house" is used in this discussion to refer:

- Architecturally to the inward facing style, in which the rooms are arranged around an open space located in the centre of the house.
- Culturally to the house as being compatible with the demands of Islamic culture in which the issue of privacy was a dominant social aspect.
- Environmentally to the house which was designed to be functional under the extremely hot climatic conditions.
- Geographically to the house which became prevalent in the area where the Arabic language is prominent.

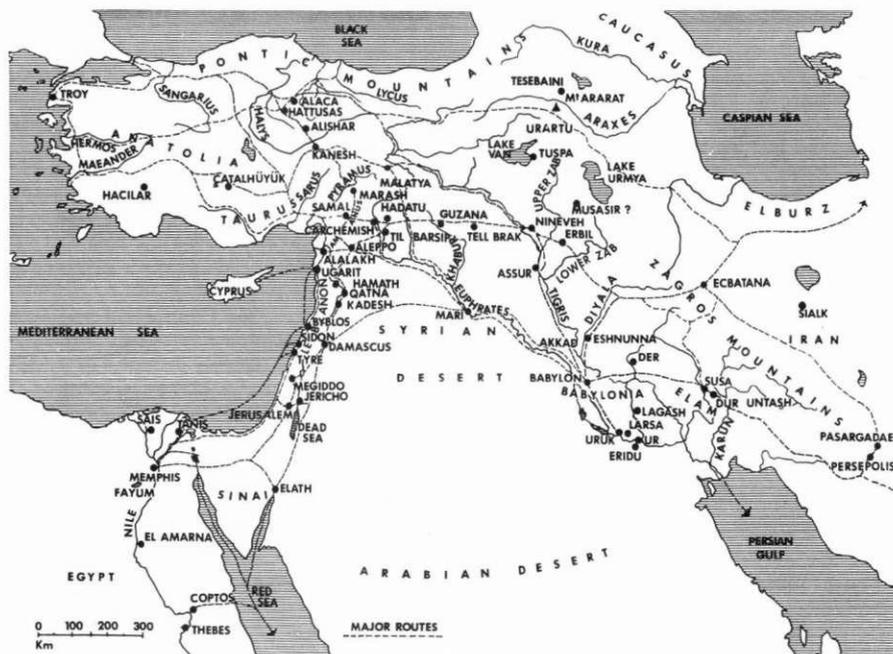


Fig 1. Ancient Syria

Introduction

Since the evolution of the courtyard form in many parts of the Arabic and Islamic world occurred simultaneously with the spreading of Islamic culture, many architectural studies give priority to the social factors of Islamic culture in determining the architectural character of the Arabic courtyard house. The significance of the environmental factors are seen as secondary, being demonstrated only in the modification of the internal-spatial organization. The conclusions which emerge from this stand-point regard the house as the product of a certain cultural period, as a response to a specific socio-cultural system, thereby underestimating the importance of the environment.

The main question which this discussion intends to address is that the courtyard house, in term of 'habitat' can be considered as the result of a certain cultural period, but in terms of 'shelter' it can be regarded as the outcome of the totality of human experience, accumulated throughout the history of the area, in which environment played the dominant role in determining the architectural character of the Arabic courtyard house.

To illustrate this hypothesis, the most typical architectural aspects of the Arabic house will be used as parameters and these aspects will be traced through the various historic periods of the region.

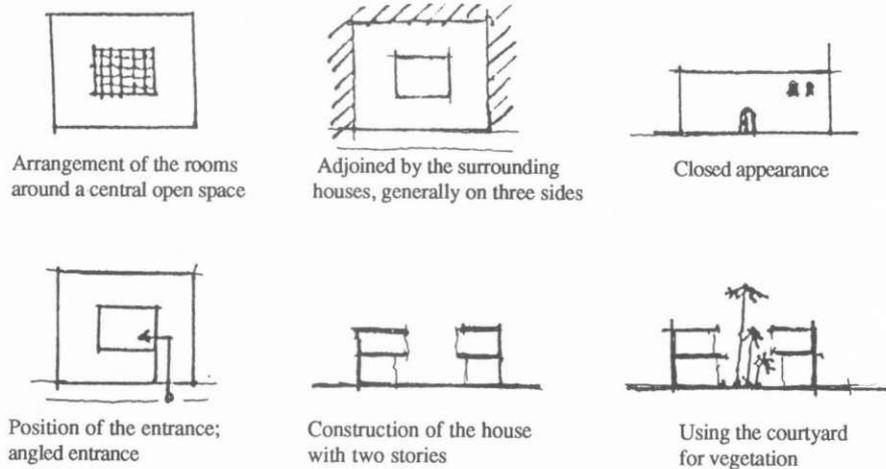


Fig 2. The most characteristic architectural aspects of the traditional Arabic house will be used as parameters in this study.

The historical background

The eastern province of the Mediterranean occupies a distinct strategic position, which made it a centre for many civilizations throughout history. Historians indicate that early human civilization emerged from this area. The first inhabitants to settle arrived in about the third millennium B C, from an unknown part of the Arab peninsular, driven by drought and other hardships of daily life. These people spread into the area, where water and fertile land was readily available (Syria and Mesopotamia). They established a number of civilizations in the area, the most important being Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Arameans and Phoenicians. In the cities of these peoples, a system of planning attained a high level of sophistication which can be compared with the system known during the Islamic period. Some of the most important cities might have been Ur, Babylon and Assure. The architectural style of these cities reached a high standard during this period. The cities were divided by crossed streets and were provided with water-supply systems, being relatively similar to the cities of today. Illustrations of these cities are given in figures 3, 4 and 5.



Fig 3. A residential quarter from the Sumerian city Ur, c 2100 B C.

The most distinctive architectural aspect of these cities was that they consisted of conglomerations of mudbrick houses, built along narrow, winding streets. The layout of the individual house was generally determined by the shape of the plot of land available to the builder.

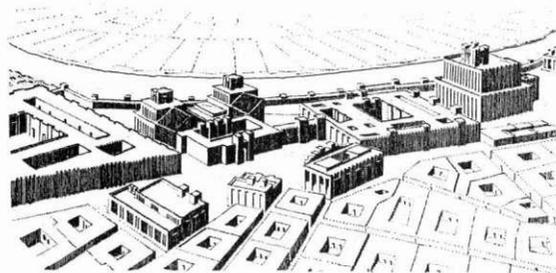


Fig 4. Assure during 900-800 B C.

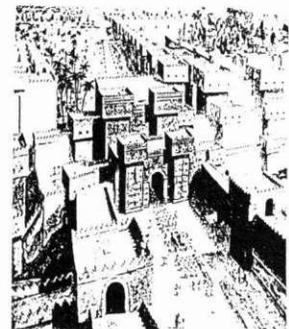


Fig 5. Babylon during 700 B C.

The predominant style of the house built during this period was an inward facing, with the rooms arranged around an open central space, which was often filled with plants. Because of the limited construction techniques available at that time, the rooms were long and narrow. The house often consisted of two stories and the external walls were thick and with very few windows. A number of architectural forms which belong to this period will be illustrated in the following figures.

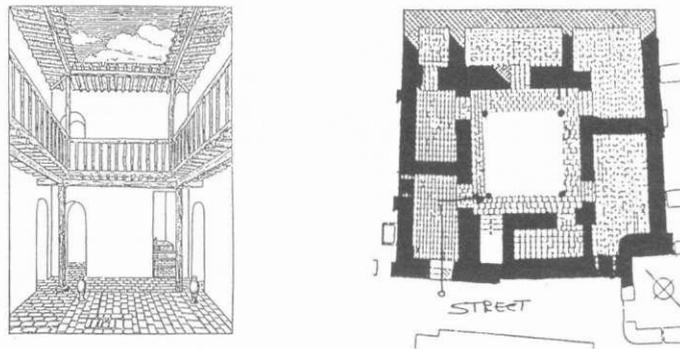


Fig 6. A traditional Sumerian house, 2200 B C.

The Sumerian house consisted of two stories with an open courtyard located in the centre, surrounded by a single row of rooms. The stairs were located close to the entrance lobby and led to the rooms on the upper floor. The walls were very thick, built with heavy materials, whilst the roof was relatively thin and built with light materials. The idea of the courtyard with a gallery around it was well known during this period, but roofing using vaults and domes were as yet unknown, wood being generally used for this purpose.

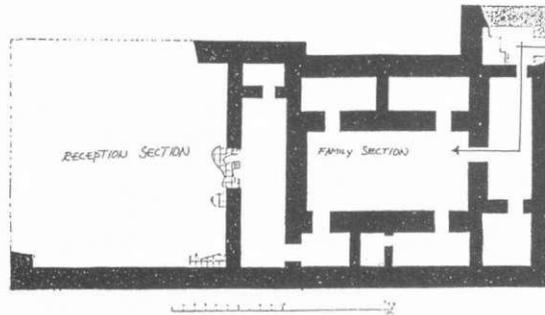


Fig 7. A traditional house in Assure, c 2000 B C.

The rooms in this type of house were grouped around two open spaces. The external space included a reception section, whilst the internal space includes the family's section. This architectural layout strictly reflected both the environmental and social conditions of the period in which the separation between visitors and inhabitants of the house was a dominant architectural form. This theme is clearly observed in the typical Islamic house in which the first section is called Salamlek (reception section) and the second section is called Haramlek (family's section).

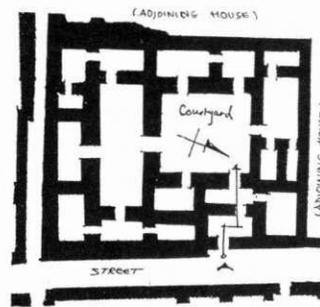


Fig 8. A traditional house from the Merkes quarter of Chaldean Babylon. The theme of concentration on the interior of the house can be clearly observed in this example. It protects the inhabitants against hostile environmental conditions. Also the openings were oriented towards the north, to take advantage of the prevailing winds.

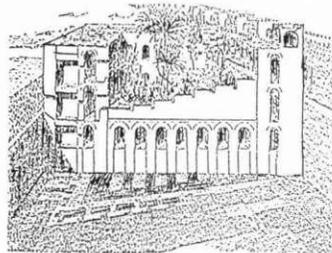


Fig 9. The roof gardens within a Babylon house. Trees and plants were frequently used as devices for improving the internal conditions of the house.

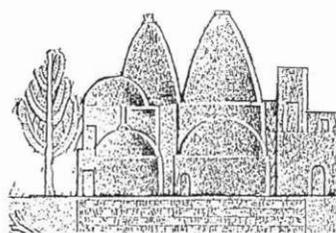
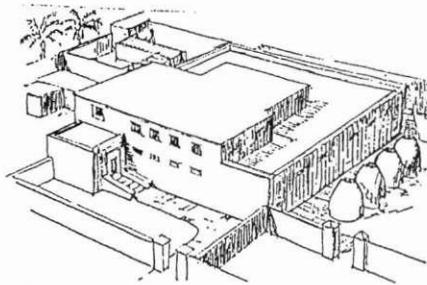


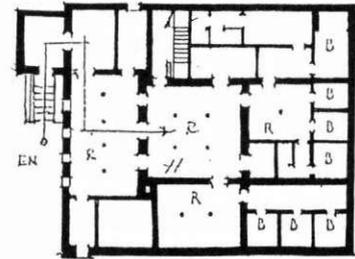
Fig 10. A part of a relief from Sanherib's palace in Nineveh. This relief gives a general idea of the architectural character of a house of this period. Domes were already being commonly used. This traditional style of construction is still used in the northern region of Syria today.

In spite of considerable contact between Egypt and this area at the time of Thutmosis III (1490-1439 B C), architectural exchange was limited particularly concerning the internal organization of space in residential dwellings. However, a certain influence may be observed in the buildings of the coastal area of Syria. In the Egyptian house, the concept of a central open space or courtyard was rare, in this instance the rooms were arranged around a central roofed area. The separation between the family's area and the reception area was not so clearly marked as in the Syrian and Mesopotamian examples. In figure 11 and 12, two examples of Egyptian houses are given for comparison.

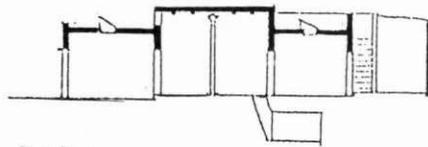


Perspective

Fig 11. An Egyptian House, c 1360 B C.

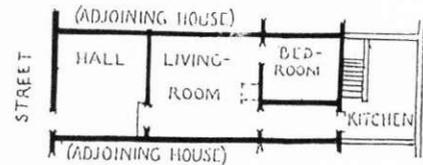


Plan



Section

Fig 12. An Egyptian House, c 1500 B C.

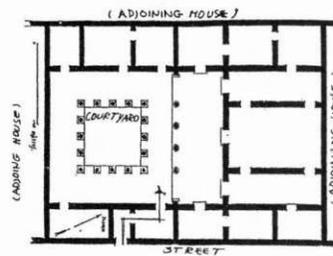


Plan

Syria had been successively ruled since 333 B C by Seleucides, Romans, Byzantines, Sassanians, until the Moslems entered in 636 A D.

From the first to the third centuries A D, Syria played a significant role in the field of architecture, and this influence apparent in Roman civilization. Apollodoros the Damascene was a famous architect, responsible for many important buildings during this period. In 244 A D, Philip the Arab was crowned Emperor of Rome. His father had been one of the elites of Shahba in Horan in the south of Syria. J Warren verifies the role played by Syrian architecture throughout the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries, and in this context, states that, "... Its robust Hellenism was exported to Constantinople, Italy and Adriatic." (J Warren, 1978, p 230).

During this period the courtyard style house was still being used, with some modifications. The house consisted of two main sections. The first, the Atrium, included the reception rooms - whilst the second part, the peristylum, consisted of the family's private rooms. This theme can be compared with the previous description of a traditional house of Assyria (see figure 7).



Here, the courtyard is surrounded by a roofed gallery. The connection between the interior and the exterior of the house occurred indirectly, through an intermediate area. The explanation for that can be attributed to the cultural and climatic demands.

Fig13.
House at Palmyra in Syria, c A D 100.

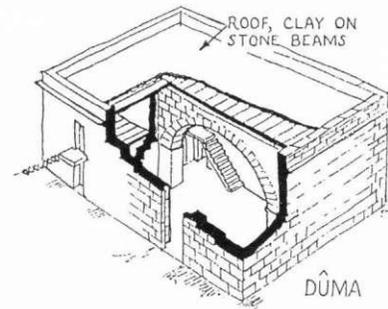
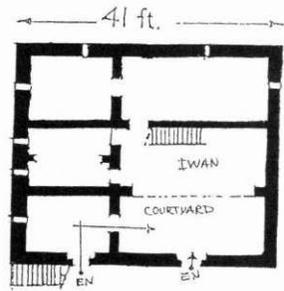


Fig 14. House at Dûma, near Damascus, in Syria, c 250 A D.

This illustrates another style of house, in which the courtyard is located at the side of the building. This type of house is still in use, and tends to be associated with the rural area. It can be seen that there are two entrances, providing access to the two sections of the house. The first section was regarded as the family's private quarters, whilst the other section was usually regarded as the reception area. The semi-open area - I WAN - included in the traditional house of the Islamic period, can be traced to this type of house.

The general similarity in architectural style which can be observed between the type of houses of this period and that of the previous period, particularly the traditional house of Assure in figure 7, indicates that there were common factors creating an architectural unity between them. It could be argued that it was environmental factors which played a major role in continuing use of this particular architectural style.

In the early part of the seventh century the area was occupied by the Sasanians. Their rule was short lived, terminated by the arrival of the Muslims in 632 A D. A short time later, the Islamic Caliphate moved from

Medina to Damascus, in 661 A D. This then became the capital of the Islamic state whose sovereignty extended from India in the east to Spain in the west.

Before the appearance of Islam, the Arabian peninsular was the centre of the Arabic culture, in which the Arabic poetry and literature had attained a very high standard and the south and south-west of this area, Mecca, Medina, Tai'f and San'a, were well known as commercial centres. Consequently, when Islam emerged, a regional architectural tradition was already well established which continued there until the present day, (G T Perthenbridge, 1978, p 194). This architectural tradition should not be compared with that found in the north region - Syria and Mesopotamia - but its influence on the first Islamic monuments of this area cannot be ignored.

In the first period of Islam, the Moslems felt it to be unnecessary to spend time and money on buildings, the main part of their attention being directed to confirming the position of Islam. Ibn Khaldoun says, in this context, "In the beginning, religion forbade them to do any excessive building or to waste too much money on building activities for no purpose." (G T Perthenbridge, 1978, p 208). Consequently the building activities during this first period were limited. The first house to be built during this time was the Prophet's house, which was built on his arrival in Medina. Creswell regards this house as the first architectural monument of Islam (A C Creswell, *Early Muslim architecture*, vol I, 1932). This house consists of three parts. The first was used as the Prophet's residence, the second for the Prophet's meetings with his companions and for prayer and the third as a temporal residence for the Prophet's visitors. The house was constructed with mud bricks and roofed with palm branches and mud. A diagram of this house follows in figure 15.

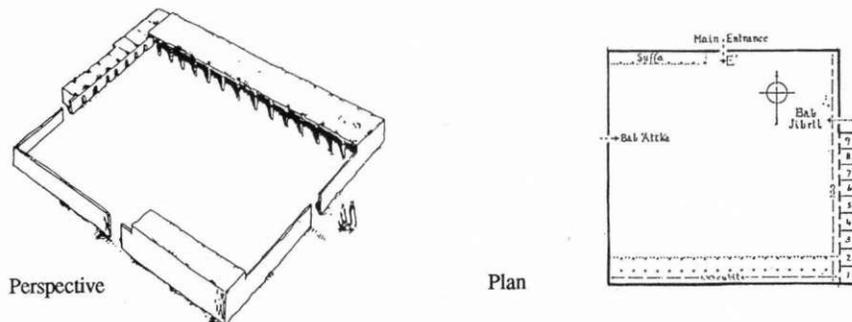


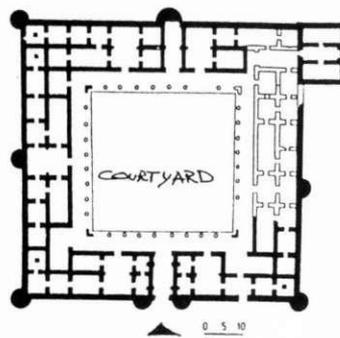
Fig 15. The Prophet's house at Medina in Saudi Arabia, 622 A D.

This house is regarded as the first architectural monument built in Islam.

After the moving of the Islamic Caliphate from Medina to Damascus 661 A D, where the urbanization and high architectural standards prevailed, the conquerors recognized an urgent need to impose their own architectural style, which would satisfy both the physical and spiritual requirements of the new religion which they had brought to the people. Secondly, they felt, to some extent, in competition with the Christian monuments of the region (J Gurbe, 1978, p 13). However, the conquerors lacked the skills necessary to implement their building programme and were forced to incorporate the local builders, masons and carpenters, who did possess these skills, into their plan. Also, local building materials continued to be used because of their obvious availability and suitability to the climatic conditions of the region. These two factors provided the local architectural heritage with the opportunity, by virtue of Islam, to re-emerge in a new, universal dimension, which lasted from that time until the beginning of the 20th century.

Throughout this period, the gradual intermarriage which occurred between the comprehensive spiritual dimension of Islam and the physical dimension, which was already established, soon resulted in the distinctive architectural style of the region. J Warren states that, "... by 750, when the Umayyad dynasty was destroyed, a distinctively Muslim architecture was evolving, owing in a considerable part, to builders and craftsmen drawn from Egypt, Mesopotamia and elsewhere." (J Warren, 1978, p 230).

The main achievement of this Islamic period was the reorganization of the interior space of the courtyard house, firstly, in response to the new Islamic culture and secondly in an attempt to be more functional in relation to the thermal performance. The following figures illustrate some examples.



Thick walls, blank external facades and a square open space located in the centre of the building, were the most distinctive architectural features, which characterized a house of this area.

Fig 16. QASER AL-HAYAR AL-GHARBI, West Palace in Syria. 724 - 743 A D.

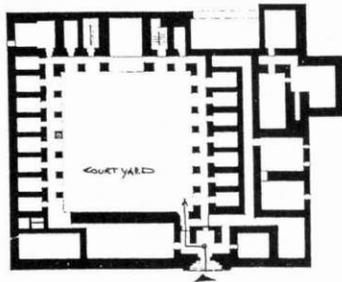


Fig 17.
Abbasid palace in Baghdad, 1250 A D.

The influence of the previous civilization is apparent here, particularly in the use of long corridors to separate the main parts of the palace, also the use of a gallery which surrounded the courtyard. These features can be observed in the architecture of ancient Mesopotamia.



Fig 18.
A typical Arabic quarter in Old Damascus.

The houses are built close together, along narrow, winding streets. This gives a distinctive architectural style to the area. A comparison between this city and the cities of the ancient period reveals a great deal about the intimate relationship found between them. A large part of this relationship can be attributed to the climatic demands. This can be compared with figure 3.

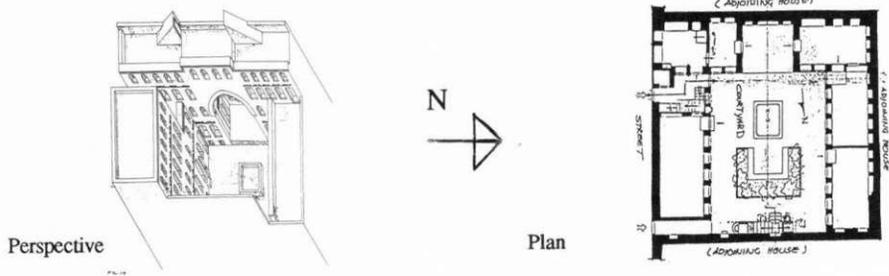


Fig 19. A typical Arabic house at Aleppo in Syria. Still inhabited.

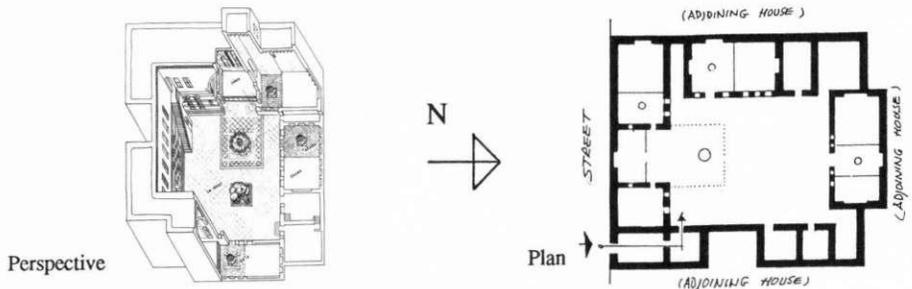


Fig 20. A typical Arabic house in Damascus.



Fig 21. The inside of a typical Arabic house in Damascus.

The most distinctive features of the courtyard is the use of water and plants. This can be compared with the Babylonian house in figure 9.

In some of the wealthy town houses in Damascus, two separated sections were included. One was specified for visitors, AL-SALAMLEK, whilst the second was specified for the family, AL-HARAMLEK. This arrangement can be seen in the traditional Assure house in figure 7.



Fig 22. A typical Arabic house in Damaskus.

A Comparison between a house of this period (Islamic), taking into account the architectural features illustrated in figure 2, with the last periods, (fig 6 Sumerian, fig 7 Assure, fig 8 Babylon and fig 13 Palmyra), gives a strong impression that the basic form of the traditional Arabic house was designed primarily to meet the prevailing climatic conditions of the region. The form has then been adjusted to fulfil the prescriptions of the cultural demands.

Conclusion

The history of the traditional Arabic house can be divided into three main periods:

The first period extends approximately from 3300 B C to 300 B C. It was characterized by the dominance of Mesopotamian culture. During this period the courtyard house acquired its basic physical shape, evolving mainly to function as a shelter. A number of construction techniques, such as domes and arches, as a response to the relative scarcity of wood in the region have been established. It could be suggested that the archetype of the courtyard house is rooted in this period.

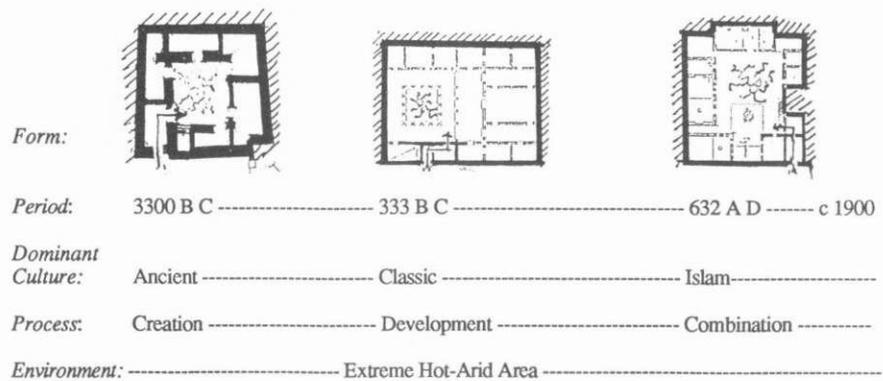
The second period began with the invasion of the Persians from the east and the Greeks from the north. The eastern part of the region, Mesopotamia, was ruled by the Sassanian, whilst the western part, Syria, was ruled by three successive empires, Seleucides, Roman and finally Byzantine.

During this period, the courtyard house was developed to function basically as a habitat. The influence of the secular quality of the new cultural aspect was remarkable, in which great emphasis was given to the internal spatial arrangement, external appearance and aesthetic aspects. Construction techniques had been specifically developed, including the use of arches, vaults, domes and pediment roofs.

The third and last period extends from the 7th to the beginning of the 20th century. This period began with the Islamic conquest of the region. If the courtyard house of the ancient period was seen as an architectural phenomenon, representing the basic environmental features of the area, the classical as representing the cultural aspects, then the Islamic period gave the courtyard house a new functional meaning. The internal spatial arrangements were adjusted to meet the demand of both culture and environment. In the first instance the house provided shelter in which man could protect himself against the environment, and secondly it provided a habitat in which man could comfortably carry out his ritual and social activities. The Arabic word 'maskan' is usually used to define this type of house - meaning with a peaceful and holy interior. 'Maskan' is literally related to the word 'sakina', which has the meaning, peaceful and holy.

It can be seen that the most important architectural achievement of this period was the coming together of the two themes - shelter and habitat. This form reached its peak at the end of the Islamic period, fulfilling both the physical and symbolic needs of the people. In this context, Evans states that "... the consistency of design extends from the urban form down to the detailed design of the grills in the windows and colour of the floor tiles." (M Evans, 1980, p 155).

These successive periods of the traditional courtyard house can be illustrated thus.



Finally, it can be concluded that the physical qualities of the traditional Arabic house, in terms of climate, represented the accumulated experiences of the human effort which has occurred throughout the history of this area. The courtyard house has formally evolved to meet the impact of the local environmental factors, and has connotatively adjusted to fulfil the demands of the socio-cultural factors. The local environmental factors imposed a constant pressure whilst the cultural factors was demonstrably a changing pressure, varying from one period to another. However, this process does not diminish the fact that the traditional Arabic house had its roots in the world of Mesopotamia and ancient Syria.

Basam Behsh

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