

Rethinking Arabic Courtyard Housing

Path, Space and Social Threshold

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Thesis

In this project I have been investigating the traditional Arabic Courtyard as a typology that can facilitate for new family structures in a postwar Aleppo.

Background

The civil war in Syrian Arab Republic that started in 2011, created the largest refugee crisis after the world war II, forcing XX numbers to flee from their home and seeking sanctuary elsewhere. While world leaders are looking for the international solution of the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis, many Syrians are looking forward for the opportunity to come back home as soon as possible. As there is little to come back to as many of the Syrian towns are in complete ruins and offering to people who once lived there.

In contemporary urban studies and architecture, architects are focusing on solutions and rethinking ways to serve the affected community. And there are many factors to take into account in a complex reconstruction situation. Economy, timeline, construction methods, how fast and for how many is it possible to respond - to mention a few. But the main focus in this project is not answering to all those challenges and needs, but explores how the traditional typology can take into account the new situation where the traditional family is not necessarily the construction. That the ones that return and would like to live together and start again, building up the community could be new constallation. Single mothers with children, Siblings, young male etc.

The aim of this project is to create an architecture that responds to the needs of new social structures act like a vessel by respecting the past, responds to the present and incorporate the possibility of a different future.

The typology:

Courtyard housing is one of the most enduring architectural forms transcending regional and cultural boundries with its simple construction, social and family structures. The emphasis on courtyard housing in Islamic architecture gave it the name "Architecture of the veil", because of its focus on the inner spaces, which are not visible from the outside.

Hvorfor har den forsvunnet mer og mer?

The form and typology of the courtyard has changed a lot over the years. In order to understand this evolutionary process of the Arabic Courtyard housing, a methodology was devised based on a typological analysis procedure. I traced 15 different floorplans of Arabic courtyard houses from 1700s to 20th century.

this methodology, I was able to identify key elements in the courtyard house that illustrate their change and development. These are: the entrance, the courtyard, and the iwan. The Arabic courtyard house has many other important elements but these three elements are the elements I wanted to take with me as core elements in my project, since they also are important tresholds between the public and private.

Key components

The Entrance:

Entrances in the Arab courtyard houses are broken, or separate. The idea of using broken entrances was to provide privacy for the house residents, preventing the street pedestrians from seeing inside the house. another aspect of these broken entrances was to protect the interior of the house from wind, dust and noise. In the nineteenth century some exposure to activities of the court for the visitors was accepted.

Around the fourties, the entrance was always emphasized by an attached lobby or a hall, as a pause before accessibility to the interior space. Entrance remains as the element to separate the public from semi private zones of the house. Afterwards the entrances are served as welcoming gates to the multifunctional spaces that they open up to.

The Courtyard:

The courtyard, is a square or rectangular open space, usually located in the center of the house. The courtyard performs an important role as a modifier for climate and as well as for lighting purposes. Various daily activities are performed in the courtyard, especially in small houses. The courtyard is the core element for both functional and climatic consideration as well as other socio-cultural aspects which creates an introverted inner world for those who don't often go outside the house.

The courtyard type continued in the period 19th/early 20th centuries, here in more apartment-like houses, in which it played the role of directing circulation space leading to staircases of different wings of the buildings. Due to increasing population, change of family structures and affordability of a courtyard house, eventually as we can see in the analysis, that the courtyard lost its environmental role.

Due to the rise of numbers of floors is also an aspect that led to its complete disappearance but continued to be a part of the houses in form of a yard, and not necessarily occupying a central location of the house.

The Iwan:

Iwan is a reception space overlooking the courtyard. With its double height it becomes an eye-catcher in the house. With emphasis on its size, interior organization or division into sub-spaces to accommodate diverse activities within the same large space. Always located of easy access from the entrance and close enough to the courtyard. In the early nineteenth century this element shrank into a hall for guests designated for living and dining activities. Later on the iwan no longer existed, but transformed into several divided spaces accommodating living, dining and receiving guests etc until the introduction of the open plan due to the modernisation where one large space is left free to accommodate those activities. It can be argued here that this change took place for functional reasons, and not only related to cultural purposes.

By the end of the 20th century the living space appeared once again as the heart of the house, positioned in the best location among other spaces of the house, standing out to be the semi-private -semi-public zone of the house.

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Taking this discussion on private/semi-social and public forward, I used these elements as core elements in developing my project, and to see how I can with these changes in both size and function, can explore a housing block for different family structures of today.

The reconstruction component in this project however is more than the shape of its buildings. It is as the way in which people interact with the space and atmosphere created. It lays its foundation on the social aspects of the communities. Bringing people together is of enormous importance in healing a broken community.

The context, neighborhood and site

The aim of this project is to re-think the Arabic courtyard – a courtyard could be implemented in other urban contexts. The selected site is meant as an example, as a pilot. It lays good in between the modernized new housing typologies, and the old courtyard housing.

Reading of the neighborhood

By using the city as a transcript for giving shapes to the functions where circles and arches and domes play the part of more dynamic and flexible semi-social functions. Squares represent the private functions. Walking from the street through the building and opening into shared void spaces that bring pause to movement. This connective tissue between each space becomes a social threshold.

These common spaces represent the iwan in my project. This space works as meeting spaces for residents, where some are very generic, like meeting area, play etc, other functions are given some specific programs. Under female spaces there are two common/prayer rooms, a community kitchen and children's play/study area and common laundry rooms.

These spaces in the path work as connectors for the 70 private units which are located across the entire site. Points of entrances are carefully located and are broken to the public pathway. And they so carefully correspond to the patterns of movement and programmatic distribution on the ground, while the placement of the spaces produce and gives visual connectivity through the many layers of buildings courtyard which consist of many different activities such as vegetable gardens, playground, and fruit gardens.

There are three types of units, in different dimensions but flexible to host any kind of scenario. The space between the units becomes as important as the object of architecture itself. Multiple hierarchies of movement and places of pause produce many scales of publicness and privacy.

This grouped organization is both one building and many buildings, autonomous and highly connected.

Construction method

This project is built after simple construction principles and prefabricated materials that are cheap, easily accessible and commonly used in area. The main structure consists of concrete bricks of standard size, prefabricated concrete slabs, and concrete columns.

