

The Challenges of Retrieving the Traditional Courtyard Houses of Baghdad

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An invasion of modern detached houses has disturbed the complex, coherent structure of traditional neighborhoods. In modern day Baghdad faces the daunting task of retaining the characteristics of a traditional Arabian city. Have traditional residential units not yet been retrieved? What are the challenges and obstacles of restoration? The courtyard represented the heart of the Arab house. It was located where all habitable and service rooms were grouped and looked toward daily light and natural ventilation and recreation as well. The traditional house was a place for gathering and entertaining. The clustered pattern and spatial arrangement of attached houses had been adapted to serve and accommodate extended families. For decades, this traditional family structure had essentially contributed to building a strong, steady social relationship. The international style of the 1930s in Baghdad and socio-economic changes have lost the residential architecture most of its substantial characteristics, produced Neo-Orientalist architecture. The current political situation in Baghdad has also introduced new practices that represented a fundamental obstacle of restoration. The paper examines the possibility of retrieving traditional courtyard houses in Baghdad in the light of three main challenges: modernization and contemporary Western views, family structure and social mobility, and current political issues.

INTRODUCTION

Almost half of traditional houses that exist in Baghdad struggle to survive (Al- Sumaria News 2013). The rapid growth of the city as well as the population are the main reasons for the decline of traditional residential neighborhoods in Baghdad (Al-Akkam 2013, 40). In addition, the high standard of living and destruction of neighborhoods, to allow for more traffic, have erased most of the traditional features of the family sanctuary (El-Shorbagy 2010, 15). The concept of a traditional compact house is based on an open rectangular space located at the center of the house. The design of these houses developed over time based on a general cultural consensus. The non-courtyard or detached houses built on the outskirts of Baghdad contributed dramatically to saving the suburbs from the threat of the Tigris River flood. Gradually, nearly all the houses erected in Baghdad belonged to this type of structure. However, modern detached houses are imitations of the houses of Western Europe and North America, which are alien to the culture of the region (AL-Azzawi 1984, 34).

Between the 1950s and 1960s, Baghdad witnessed a steady stream of migrants, especially from the rural areas of the southern part of Iraq. Besides the city's high population growth, Baghdad suffered from other urban problems such as a lack of transportation, facilities and services, urban land, and building materials. Awni, mentions that the city of Baghdad owned four different types of housing during that period. Traditional courtyard houses, the oldest dwelling type utilized by low- and very low-income earners, were situated in the old center within an inner ring of a five-kilometer radius. Transitional houses were also located within a five-kilometer radius and along the city's outer edge. The third type were detached and semi-detached houses. This housing type was a result of Western culture and modernization, and they were occupied by middle and high classes who represented 40% of the urban population. They were located in Baghdad's periphery and scattered areas of the old city. "Walk-up apartment housing" then emerged to accommodate the population growth (Awni 1979, 10-12).

Al-Ashab's investigation in 1974 demonstrates that Baghdad has four housing types: traditional courtyard houses of one or two stories, modified courtyard houses, also of one or two stories, covered 1–3-story houses, and modern detached Western houses of 1–2 stories. The street pattern of the first type is narrow and zigzagging, with solid high walls with heavy non-facing doors. These shaded alleys are exclusively dedicated to pedestrians and animals. The second type has straight, wider streets, facing large regular windows and doors. The third and fourth types come with a Western street pattern (i.e., a street of a boulevard or vehicular type). The latter two house types are mostly for single families, having an outward-looking style with front gardens (Al-Ashab 1974).

Al-Azzawi's study in 1984 also examines the housing types of Baghdad. Broadly, Baghdad has five urban house types: traditional courtyard houses, modern non-courtyard houses, the transitional houses of the 1930s, subsidiary houses, and flats. In fact, the last two housing types are not widespread, and these form a very small proportion of Baghdad's housing stock (AL-Azzawi 1984, 35-37). The paper examines the challenges of retrieving the prototype of courtyard houses in Baghdad based on internationalized influences on housing units as well as urban form, family structure, and political issues.

INTERNATIONALIZED INFLUENCES: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN TRADITIONAL CONCEPTS AND INTERNATIONALIZATION

Bianca has observed that “There is a close interaction between what people build and what they believe” (Bianca 2000). Baghdad’s housing units did not encounter adaptation or integration challenges. The residential architecture of the 1930s and 1940s was highly influenced by classical Italian, French, and Palladian styles. The upper/middle-class villas of that period adopted the Western style by using Italian and French catalogs, which made the houses more “eclectic.” At the beginning, the discontinuity and conflict between the traditional and the modern style urged some to reinterpret traditional courtyard houses, which were gradually covered for climatic reasons. However, the response to modernity was more powerful: as a villa or a house represented a symbol of wealth and prestige, people tried to expose their power outside when the European-style balconies were replaced by the mashrabiya and the front garden replaced the courtyard (Ani 1994, 53-54).

In the 1930s, during the residential architecture boom, two housing types emerged within the interlaced urban fabric side by side with traditional courtyard houses. The individual, low-rise housing of the 1930s was retained on the central concept plan, while the opened centered space was changed to a main covered hall. The new modern type also retained its traditional spatial arrangement, such as a flat roof and basement. Gradually, upper and middle classes began to move to the new suburbs, leaving the old center in a poor situation. Since aristocratic families left the center and rented their houses to rural migrants, who flowed from all over the country to work in the booming capital, these traditional courtyard houses faced radical changes. For the new settlers, these units had a dual function: small shops and work areas on the lower floor and housing on the upper floor (see image 1). At the same time, and little by little, according to the Road and Building Law, suburban housing followed the Western style (Pieri 2006, 11-12).

Oil revenues and the explosion of international references contributed significantly to introducing many modern movements such as Bauhaus, Corbusian modernism, and regionalism. The 1950s witnessed the emergence of the first high-rise buildings scattered randomly within the traditional fabric of the center. In 1954, the Development Board asked Doxiadis to redesign the entire city based on “repeated modular housing.” Regarding private houses, many private companies tended to create different styles that stayed away from the traditional style as much as possible. In the 1950s, Baghdad was thus invaded by “the international villa,” modern detached housing (Bianca 2000,250).

Education also played a crucial role in the decline in traditional housing. In 1921, the British established the Public Works



Image 1: Housing transformation in the 1930s (Al Kazaar 2014)

Department after their arrival. At the end of their mandate in 1937, the Public Works Department was administered by the first Iraqi government architect, Ahmad Mukhtar. Mukhtar was one of the first Iraqi architecture students who graduated from a European university. Further, oil revenues gave an opportunity to many Iraqi middle classes to travel, especially to the coasts of Lebanon and Syria where the French style dominated (Bianca 2000,254).

After the spread of the international style in the 1930s, Baghdad’s compact urban fabric rapidly responded to the new materials and technologies. The traditional urban pattern transformed into an incompatible form according to the new way of living, which coincided with adopting the new technology (Ani 1994). Indeed, the beginning of the modern urban system was in 1914 when the oldest street in Baghdad, Al Rasheed Street, was built for horse and carriages and vehicular traffic. In 1936, a second important street was erected in Baghdad by the Germans. These two colonial, arcading streets made considerable changes to Baghdad’s urban fabric (Bianca 2000,251).

During that period, there were many proposals to redesign the city. Most of these were implemented by foreign companies across Baghdad. In addition to the new street networks that penetrated the traditional fabric, high-rise buildings started to compete with the symbolism of the minaret. Marketplaces expanded to compete with governmental offices and mosques. These processes, in turn, encouraged residents to leave their traditional neighborhoods and be displaced to new quarters. Residential units remained inward looking with three sides attached to other houses, while the front facades faced onto the new wide streets. In the 1970s and 1980s, as the international style continued to expand vertically, Baghdad grew horizontally. The total size of the city increased by more than eight times. Accordingly, huge parts of traditional neighborhoods were demolished, announcing the emergence of new neighborhoods along the new main streets or around centers of activity such as markets and mosques. Because of the increased use of automobiles and



advanced transportation, new intersections, sidewalks, and squares were constructed (Ani 1994).

Baghdad is no less interesting than many developing countries that experienced colonial or semi-colonial control. Al-Ashab describes Baghdad's urban expansion of the 1930s as an unhealthy and uncontrolled expansion probably affected by the unguided expansion of most Arab metropolises. The physical features of Baghdad's street identity have changed much more rapidly than the social aspect. "If traditional parts are not maintained, Baghdad is in danger of losing its own character and even its own identity. Arab culture in Baghdad and many other Arab cities has had to surrender to the impact of misunderstood conceptions of civilization" (Al-Ashab 1974). (Image 2)

SOCIAL MOBILITY AND FAMILY STRUCTURE: SATISFIED LIVING WITH MINIMAL AMENITIES

Many scholars describe a house as a symbolic social place that reflects the social network of its inhabitants. Othman and others mention that each house should comprise three main structures: "The personal home, the social home, and the physical home." The social home offers a space for sharing, entertainment, and communication. The architectural vocabulary of traditional attached houses such as indoor decorative details and spatial arrangements reflected the notion of domesticity and enhanced the personal daily journey. The distinctive habitable spaces and architectural elements contributed to reinforcing the social behavior



Image 2: Traditional and modern street (Pinterest)

among family members and between neighbors. Regardless of the size and shape of the courtyard house, the spatial arrangement provided an intimate place for gathering, entertainment, and relaxation. This advantage, as well the high privacy, gave the traditional house a kind of functional flexibility. For instance, the central yard acted as an outdoor room, which could be utilized as a kitchen in the mornings and as a living room in the evenings (Taleghani 2014, 67-68). The spatial arrangement of traditional courtyard houses was based on the rooms assembled around the distributed space or the courtyard. These units were virtually independent by themselves and each one had almost individual access to the adjacent spaces for services and storage. The cellular units represented "houses within a house" that met the family's many demands. In fact, a single room in this subdivision system tended to have multifunctional use, such as a living room, a dining room, and a bedroom at the same time. Simplicity was one of the most prominent features of traditional families, reflecting significantly in the design of residential units. Prestige and power were absent from the traditional street facades and the compactness of the courtyard houses enhanced "urban entities" and social structure, presenting good neighbors (Bianca 2000).

The social structure of the traditional Iraqi family was generally extended; often three or more generations shared the same unit. This extended structure, in fact, had many psychological and physical advantages (Dhami and Sheikh 2000). Until the mid-1940s, some poor Iraqi Jewish families shared the same building. Each family had one bedroom with a small kitchen, while two or more families shared the same toilet and washing room. The courtyard represented the only space for pleasure. Families did not have a radio, television, or smartphone. Despite life's difficulties and limited amenities, families lived happily because they lived next to each other and next to their extended families. Family celebrations such as marriages and religious occasions were important and

formed an essential social interactive not only within relatives but also among neighbors. Personal occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries received little interest. In the late 1940s, after modernization movements, many Western-style hotels, nightclubs, and movie theaters became attractive to many families and teenagers. Consequently, common traditional activities shrank and disappeared gradually (Bechor 2013).

The urban pattern of traditional neighborhoods also played a major role in shaping the social features. Originally, Arabic traditional cities were walkable cities. The pedestrian road was constructed in isolation from the vehicle road to produce a safe environment for neighborhood inhabitants. Narrow shaded alleys and accessibility to all services such as schools and markets encouraged residents to walk. The traditional interlaced urban form gave the city a sense of humanity. Additionally, this integral physical environment enhanced the quality of the social life of the whole community. As a strong social life was achieved through the physical structure of the street, the traditional courtyard house also offered a steady social life among its occupants (Almullahwaish 2015, 86-87). Salman argues that pulling housing units away from the wide main streets can restore the lost social needs of the residents by involving large windows that open onto a house's front garden (Salman 2014).

The urban layout of any city reflects its social values. Le Corbusier finds that changing social values is a normal result of changing the spatial layouts of cities. The emergence of the international style in the 1930s was considered to be one of the most critical urban changes. By the 1950s, the urban layout of Baghdad had changed completely. The influences of 1930s modernism, in fact, broke away from traditional thinking and changed the attitude of the whole of society. Changes in such traditional social values are very difficult; however, the rapid and sudden changes of the 1930s made everything possible and applicable and hard to restore them again (Hussein 2013, 2). Moving to new suburbs and adopting internationalized principles created a new family structure (Othman, Aird, and Buys 2015, 13). Family's relationships and their daily lives have significantly shaped house characteristics. Today, a house is a living machine, achieving the minimum demands of inhabitants (Yazdani, Rajaei, and Abaspoor 2012). Huge transformations have occurred to absorb the new way of life, which made certain traditional spaces unnecessary such as flat roofs for sleeping, the food cellar or basement, and courtyards. Further, some essential functions disappeared such as the seasonal movement of inhabitants. In modern types, the concept of social space was destroyed; all habitable and service rooms were situated along a corridor that eliminated the sense of the gathering space (Bianca 2000).

That quick growth of the Westernized style in both streets and residential units produced new residential neighborhoods,

called governmental residential quarters. The government has, by adopting this modern type, created a kind of class segregation. The new social segregation was based on the economic and educational status of the families (Al-Ashab 1974). Significantly, this kind of segregation helped enhance the fragmentation of the social bond and family structure. The new modern family of the 1930s preferred to become an isolated component, but the restoration of the courtyard houses is a challenge (Othman, Aird, and Buys 2015, 15).

CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION

Since the war finished in 2003, Baghdad has suffered from a chronic shortage of housing units. Although Iraq has been facing a risk resulting from internal displacement and terrorist actions, the Iraqi government has not taken any serious step toward the housing crisis. Baghdad's Mayor Salah Abdilrazaq says "because we do not have any housing project from the government since 1982, so this crisis has been accumulated for more than two decades." Between 2003 and 2008, it is reported that 3.8 million Iraqis were uprooted from their homes (Jahn, Van der Auweraert, and Cvetkovski 2015). Baghdad is considered to be the second largest internally displaced person host, mainly originating from the provinces of Anbar, Salahaddin, Ninewa, and Baghdad itself. Most displaced families either rent houses or live with host families, while a smaller proportion are housed in temporary settlements such as camps or slums situated in different parts of Baghdad (Higel 2016). Increasingly, Iraqi refugees and displaced persons have competed with the destitute of stable areas, increasing the prices of safer lands. However, the property market in insecure areas has dropped, making the displaced unable to sell their houses (Lischer 2008).

In 2009, UN-HABITAT reported that Iraq had a housing shortage of one-and-a-half million units, which was predicted to reach two million units in 2016. In that way, the most interest is concentrated on the lower and middle income housing of Iraqi families. The difficulties that many families faced accessing affordable houses in Iraq in addition to the sectarian violence that happened in 2006 and 2007 encouraged many families to occupy displaced properties. Moreover, the intense waves of displacement and a shortage of housing stock have broadly led IDPs and poor families to occupy public properties. In 2008, over 250,000 IDPs were living under the frequent threat of eviction by the government (Jahn, Van der Auweraert, and Cvetkovski 2015). The government has tried to deal with the Baghdad housing crisis. For example, al Sadr city, one of the poorest and densest Baghdad neighborhoods, covers just eight square miles, but is home to almost three million occupants. The two solutions to the overcrowding based on Salah Abdilrazaq's proposal are either persuading residents to move to the city outskirts with low-cost housing or shifting them temporarily while their houses are being rebuilt by international or local companies (PRI's The World 2010).

The current political situation and lack of rules have also allowed some new universal waves to sweep over the city since 2003. Features of globalization appear on residential private buildings owing to an absence of rules and studied schemes. Regarding residential units, houses have not followed any design standards. However, they have achieved the traditional compact concept with some environmental strategies. This compactness, in fact, is due to many issues such as land prices and safety. For instance, three sides of a house are attached to high concrete walls; this compactness has inversely been working with the environment to reduce the amount of natural light and ventilation inside a house, maximizing the heat gain from these walls. Furthermore, for security and privacy, inhabitants have added different shapes and sizes of security sheets over windows. These heavy panels are used to control passerby views from the main street and to ensure safety as well. These additions have even met the environmental and social needs of occupants in Baghdad (Salman 2014).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The traditional house was a place for gathering and entertaining through spatial arrangement and adaptation as well as the right and responsibility of each family member. For decades, traditional courtyard houses had been adapted to serve and meet the demands of extended families. The clustered spatial arrangement of the traditional house had significantly contributed to building a strong, steady social relationship. The international style of the 1930s imposed a physical structure that did not meet individual and collective social desires. Baghdad had lost the most essential characteristics of traditional housing. The linear spatial arrangement of contemporary detached housing contributes to creating isolated habitable rooms facing a covered corridor. Further, the traditional urban pattern has rapidly responded to the modern waves. Unconsidered pathways and the streetscape of the modern city have significantly contributed to city's loss of its human scale and social network.

The pattern of urban family life changed. Previously, two or more families shared the same house within the same budget, even when their sons were married. Furthermore, cities did not offer enough open public spaces for entertainment, and so the courtyard represented the only attractive place for all family members to gather. The economic aspect is another important challenge that affects the reconstruction of the traditional prototype. People prefer to possess small houses with multiple rooms rather than a big one with an indoor open space such as a courtyard house. Because of high land prices, people split up one parcel into multiple units to construct their houses. Now, people spend almost all their days outside. The

internal open space type, indeed, is not considered these days. Gradually, economic, technological, and political pressures started to involuntarily shape social demands.

The retrieving process, in fact, is not as easy as simply borrowing elements from a heritage or imitating former details. It is an integral system between residential units and the surrounding environment. Since cars became essential for each family, the concept of revival has been more complicated. The traditional city fabric played an important role in enhancing social networks. Narrow shaded alleys facilitated services, and the absence of cars was integrated with the traditional courtyard house's characteristics. The critical political situation in Baghdad has also represented a fundamental obstacle for restoration. Current political circumstances are part of the challenge of retrieving traditional courtyard houses. The housing crisis and displacement issues do not give an opportunity to the government to encourage or motivate people to restore the traditional style. At present, the government needs a quick implementation such as precast units for displaced families to reside in a good environment and stop informal temporary settlements from proliferation. Therefore, the problem of the international style of the 1930s will be repeated.

Fortunately, Baghdad still possesses a few traditional neighborhoods where the buildings retain their traditional features. Residents are used to walking to their houses, leaving their cars outside at the city edges. Due to neglect, however, residents have begun to sell their houses to the government, which in turn has demolished the huge areas and implemented several modern commercial centers and residential projects. Indeed, retrieving the concept of traditional compact cities is not simple, especially these days, but at the same time not impossible to achieve.

NOTES

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