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Abstract

A major architectural issue in the Arab world for some time has been the choice between tradition and modernity. Several noted architects have sought a middle path by seeking to reinterpret the Arab tradition in a modern context, particularly, though not only, in the realm of housing. However, such efforts pose two prior questions. First, how far is there a single Arab tradition as some authors claim (Al-Hathloul, 1981, Kultermann, 1982), or, as others claim, (Kuban, 1983, Grabar, 1980) a collection of locally different cultures or subcultures, with differences as interesting as the similarities? Second, what in any case do we mean by a cultural tradition? Is it expressed in the visible form of the building and its mode of ornament and decoration? Or is it likely to be most powerfully expressed, as space syntax theorists would claim, in the spatial and functional organisation of the building and the relations between the two?

With regard to the latter proposition, some historians and critics within the architectural arena, (Grabar, 1982), have noted the lack of such an approach in studying Arab Islamic architecture. This paper sets out from the latter proposition, that space is fundamental to culture. It seeks to answer the first question with respect to houses in the Arab world: how far do houses in different parts of the Arab world express through their plans a single domestic space culture, or express distinct local – or perhaps non-local – subcultures. Using secondary sources selected for data quality, a sample of 88 houses from 5 cities in different parts of the Arab world was constructed, with a ‘core’ of houses of comparable size and date from two cities in different parts of the Arab world, one (Tunis) tending to a vertical organisation and the other (Baghdad) to a horizontal, and sub-samples with either differences in manifest morphology (tower houses including many without courtyards from Sa’ana), size (mainly small houses from Salt) and time (historic houses from Cairo). It was conjectured that similarities across such a heterogeneous sample would be likely to indicate a strong degree of common culture, while differences in the parts of the sample that were morphologically more similar would be strong indicators in the contrary direction.

The research procedure was to examine the spatial structure of the houses through j-graphs, space types, and syntactic means, and the spatio-functional structure through inequality genotypes, space-type functional analysis, and the relation of

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functions to depth and the integration core. For functional analysis, activities such as male living, female living, reception of guests, cooking, and so on were used rather than the less reliable labels.

The results showed that although there were certain broad features in common across cities, in that houses tended generally to tree-like forms and there was a clear overall inequality genotype, with exteriors strongly segregated and movement spaces around courtyards most integrated, there were substantial spatial and spatio-functional differences between cities. Even within the 'core' sample, the local inequality genotypes of Tunis and Baghdad were quite different, including in the positioning of gendered activities in the houses. There were also substantial spatial difference in growth patterns, and in particular the two cities of the core sample differed significantly in space type mixes under growth.

The analysis thus shows that although there are pervasive common themes underlying the spatial organisation even when there are substantial differences in the manifest morphology (such as having or not having a courtyard, or the 'tower' houses of Sana'a in contrast to one and two storey houses elsewhere), there are also substantial spatial and spatio-functional differences, even where the manifest morphology is fairly similar. The results then suggest, within this limited sample, the broad parameters of a common structure within which significant local variation is allowed to happen, which amount to differences in local space culture.

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