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## The Contemporary Islamic House

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# The Contemporary Islamic House

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Honors Program of the Department of  
Architecture in School of Architecture, University of Arkansas.

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Table of Contents:

List of Figures	2
Introduction	4
Program	6
Building Traditions	12
Translating Tradition	15
The Islamic House	23
Bibliography	25

## List of Illustrations:

Figure 1. Internal Focus of the Traditional House	8
Figure 2. Understated Exterior of the Traditional House	8
Figure 3. Bent Entry of the Traditional House	9
Figure 4. Organization of the Traditional House	9
Figures 5-11. Programmatic Kit of Parts	10-12
Figure 12. Traditional Recesses	12
Figure 13. Traditional Sunken Courtyard	13
Figure 14. Traditional Iwan Space	13
Figure 15. Traditional Water Element	13
Figure 16. Traditional Masharabiya Screen	13
Figure 17. Western Building Façade	14
Figure 18. Western Exterior Spaces	14
Figure 19. Western Spatial Organization	14
Figure 20. Western Open Plan	14
Figure 21. Western Site Orientation	15
Figure 22. Changing Needs of the Kitchen Space	15
Figure 23. Changing Needs of the Living Space	16
Figure 24. Detailed Plans	17
Figure 25. Sections	18
Figure 26. Exterior Rendering	19
Figure 27. Elevations	19
Figure 28. Renderings of Screens, Open	20
Figure 29. Rendering of Screens, Closed	20
Figure 30. Rendering Looking across Courtyard	20
Figure 31. Transformation of <i>Masharabiya</i> Screen	21

Figure 32. Transformation of Water Element	21
Figure 33. Transformation of Iwan and Reception Spaces	22
Figure 34. Transformation of Courtyard Zones	22
Figure 35. Fixed vs. Free Courtyard	22
Figure 36. Comparison of Bent Entries	23

*“When the full power of a human imagination is backed by the weight of a living tradition, the resulting work is far greater than any that an artist can achieve when he has no tradition to work in or when he willfully abandons its tradition.”*

*-Hassan Fathy*

## Introduction

Hassan Fathy defined culture as “the result of the interaction between man and his environment when man attempts to satisfy his physical and spiritual needs.”<sup>1</sup> This is true of the preindustrial architecture of any given region. At the physical level, it embodied knowledge with regard to orientation, climate, building materials, and construction methods.<sup>2</sup> At the spiritual level, preindustrial architecture facilitated the religious life-style in its daily rituals, “unifying the socio-cultural and religious aspirations of the individuals and the community.”<sup>3</sup> Since the Industrial Revolution, ways of living around the world have undergone considerable change. Subsequent emphasis on industrialization has given rise to different patterns of both building and living. These models were not conceived on the basis of social needs, life-style, or religion.

Muslims around the world practice a long-established religion that involves teachings, practices, and rituals that encourage and lend structure to society in all aspects. Islam shaped specific ideas and styles about dwellings and other architectural forms. The house was once considered a typology within Islamic architecture, as it facilitated the religious life and was a space for daily prayer rituals at home. It was created based on religious prescriptives regarding hospitality, spirituality, family, and privacy. The Qur’an, the central religious book of Islam, which Muslims consider the verbatim word of God, and the hadith, regarded as a body of authoritative statements or acts from or about the Prophet Muhammad, both embody Islamic discourses about domestic space that emerged during the historical formation of the religion.

However, there is no written canon to instruct Muslims on precisely how to construct, orient, and ritualize their houses. Qu’ranic rulings concerning the houses of God, his Prophet, and ordinary believers do not constitute a complete code. They are partial attempts at ordering spatial behavior based on social practice,

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<sup>1</sup> Hassan Fathy. *The Arab House in the Urban Setting, Past, Present, and Future: The Fourth Carreras Arab Lecture of the University of Essex, 3 November 1970*. London: Longman Press Limited, 1972, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Balkrishna V. Doshi. “Cultural Continuum and Regional Identity in Architecture.” in *Architectural Regionalism: Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity, and Tradition*. Ed. Vincent B. Canizaro. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007, 111-118, 112.

<sup>3</sup> Doshi, 112.

religious belief, and historical circumstances. In the case of Islam, actual human dwellings and verbal images of houses have obtained rich and diverse variations in different contexts and cultures since the religion's inception. This is due to the effect of varying cultures and conservatisms within Islamic civilization throughout the world. No culture or tradition remains unchanged over a period of fourteen centuries and in forty Muslim-majority countries. However, ethnographic research suggests that "Muslims widely attribute religious significance to their houses today, even when their dwellings happen to be apartments designed according to European and American prototypes."<sup>4</sup>

The proposed design is a dwelling that physically manifests the varied needs of the Islamic system and religious prescriptions with clear separation of private life. The program is based on the requirements of an upper middle class Muslim family that comprises several generations under one roof that widely vary in their social and religious practices. This is set up in order to create a flexible design that accommodates diversity and to acknowledge the varying domestic routines of Muslims throughout the world. The proposed site is in the middle of Mohandiseen, Cairo, Egypt, a neighborhood that has become a mix of traditional informal housing and 60s-era Western villas. Cairo is a historical Islamic city that sees the intermixing of traditional and contemporary every day. As the desert climate fostered the creation of the Islamic house, it seems important to revisit that birthplace in understanding how to reconnect to it. The underlying organization principle lies in solving the paradigm of seclusion and exposure, as exhibited in a hierarchy of spaces—public, semi-public, and private. Again, it should be made clear that this proposal is not meant to prescribe a certain view of Islamic domestic life for all Muslims, but to accommodate Islam's diversity with a flexible design.

There are several overarching questions that this design explores:

- 1) If there exists no normative canon for special household rituals and geomantic procedures in Islam, how are the religious meanings of the houses in which Muslims live designed? 2) How can the dwelling adapt for various levels of conservatism and

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<sup>4</sup> Juan Eduardo Campo. *The Other Sides of Paradise: Explorations into the Religious Meanings of Domestic Space in Islam*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1991, 3.

liberalism within the same space? 3) How is the paradigm of seclusion and exposure resolved? 4) How does the design pull from existing traditions without direct imitation?

## Program

As stated previously, the program is based on the needs of an upper middle class Muslim family that comprises several generations under one roof that widely vary in their social and religious practices. The oldest generation (grandparents) represent the conservative end of the religious spectrum. This is set up in order to create a flexible design that accommodates diversity and to acknowledge the varying domestic routines of Muslims throughout the world. Much of the program requirements are set by the basic needs of a general family: social gathering space, kitchen, bedrooms, and bathrooms. However, the subtleties of the program are formulated by interpretations from the Islamic texts.

The Qur'an and authoritative hadith collections hold a position of primary importance here for several reasons. First, they contain the earliest surviving statements of Islamic ideas about God, humans, and the nature of existence. Second, Muslims regard the Qur'an as the literal word of God, and the hadith as statements containing the divinely inspired words and actions of his messenger, Muhammad. Muslims believe these works express timeless truths that should inform human thought and action, they have studied and used them for guidance throughout history.

The Qur'an is a compilation of prophetic orations in the Arabic language conveyed by Muhammad to an assortment of groups. Qu'ranic house terminology is deployed in four different contexts: verses concerned with God's house, sacred history, rules of behavior, and the hereafter.<sup>5</sup> According to the Qur'an, human dwellings, like God's house, have been created by God:

Allah has made your homes the place for your rest, and animal skins for the true believers. Allah has made your homes the place for your rest, and animal skins for tents as houses so that you may find them light when you travel and easy to pitch when you stop; while from their wool, fur, and hair, *He provides you* household items and articles of convenience for you prescribed term *of life*...Thus He completes his favor to you, so that you may become Muslims. If they still give no heed to you *O Muhammad, you need not worry*, for your duty is only to

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<sup>5</sup> Campo, 13.



convey the message clearly. They recognize the favors of Allah, yet, they deny them; most of them are *ungrateful* disbelievers. (16 Nahl: 80-83)<sup>6</sup>

These surah verses maintain that houses and domestic furnishings are more than just material things. They are provided to humans by God. Recognizing this leads to Islam—submission. “To this extent, all houses can have religious significance; however, the verse also indicates that failing to acknowledge God’s grace in such mundane matters places people in the dangerous condition of denial.”<sup>7</sup> Houses are the objects of regulatory discourse in the Qur’an. These commands provide guidelines to worshipping in houses, matters connected with visitation and commensality, the roles of women, and purity in the house.

The hadith literature comprises a much more extensive collection of statements than the Qur’an. As the Qur’an contains the literal word of God, Muslims believe hadiths to be the authoritative word of Muhammad or his Companions. Ideally hadiths reinforce and elaborate upon statements made in the Qur’an. Houses and behavior in them are regular objects of discourse in the hadiths. They are particularly concerned with houses as places for prayer, and with rules governing both access to and control over domestic space. The hadiths indicate that within the universal definition of mosque space, Muslim houses occupy a special position. Performing prayers at home is supposed to bring it blessings. According to Ibn Umar, the Prophet declared, “Perform some of your prayers in your houses, and don’t make them into graves!”<sup>8</sup> Other hadiths equate prayer with light, stating, “As for a man’s prayer, it is light; so illuminate your houses!”<sup>9</sup> There are also hadiths that disclose that Muhammad commanded his follower to build mosques in their domestic compounds, and to purify them and keep them in good repair. From this literature, several fixed design principles can be derived:

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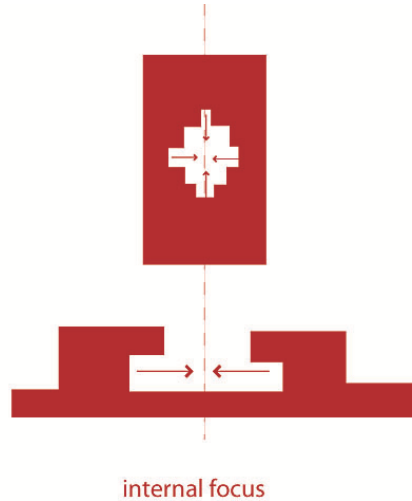
<sup>6</sup> *English Translation of the Meaning of Al-Qur’an: The Guidance for Mankind*. Trans. Muhammad Farooq-i-Azam Malik. Houston: The Institute of Islamic Knowledge, 1997, 385.

<sup>7</sup> Campo, 15.

<sup>8</sup> *The Book of Tawheed*. Compiled by Muhammad Abdul-Wahhaab. North Carolina: International Islamic Publishing House, 1998.

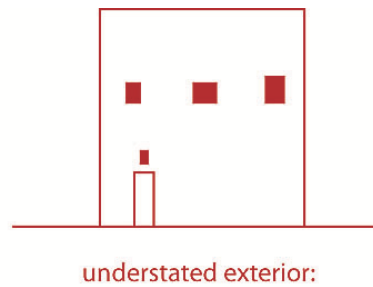
<sup>9</sup> Abdul Wahhaab.

Fig. 1



Traditionally, the Islamic house has always been associated with the courtyard type dwelling. "Admittedly the courtyard house is the most common form in many parts of the Muslim world, especially in the traditional heartlands of Islam...There are those, consequently, who have maintained that it is particularly Islamic, that its design has a cosmic, or archetypal, significance in Arab Muslim environments."<sup>10</sup> But there is no strong evidence to support the validity of such an interpretation. However, the courtyard house has recognized value as a dwelling type for its inclusion of nature into the home without the sacrifice of private life.

Fig. 2

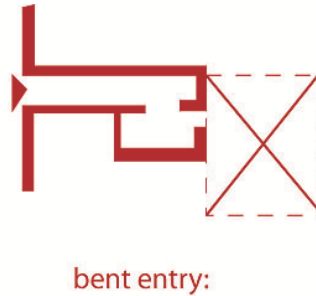


The external walls have few and little openings. This allows protection from noise and dust and privacy from any passerby.

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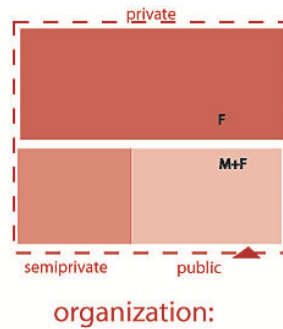
<sup>10</sup> Campo, 94.

Fig. 3



The entrance is designed to obstruct any view of the interior: a bent entrance faces a blank wall with reception adjacent. This provides privacy and further protects the house from noise. Within the Islamic house, there are several different levels of entrance throughout the house.

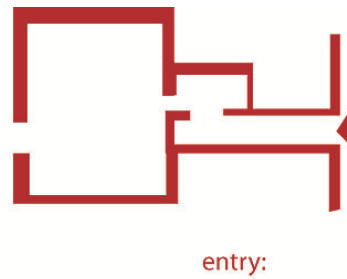
Fig.4



The importance of privacy in the Muslim life is seen in the clear division of the different areas of the house. Male and female areas are separated and only select visitors are allowed into the private domain of the house.

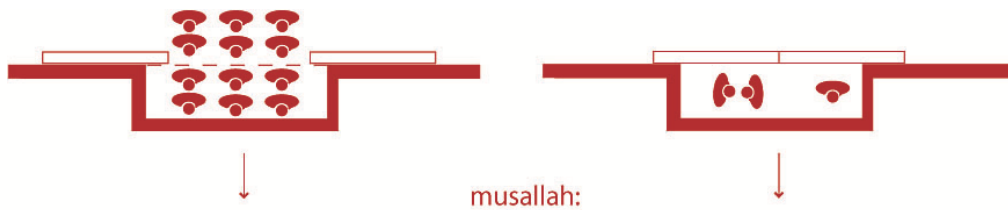
This comprises a set of fixed principles that are always kept in mind while designing. However, they do not encompass all spatial and programmatic components of the design. Also, they do not explain how to design—they are simply objectives to achieve *in* the design. Through the program of the house and the family and the program derived from the Islamic literature, a kit of parts is created:

Fig.5



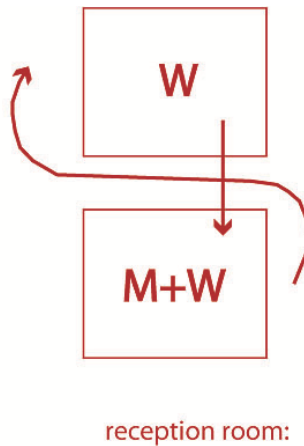
The entry into the house faces onto a blank wall to prevent any of the interior. It does not give immediate access to the living spaces of the family.

Fig.6



The musallah is a space designated for the daily prayers, meditation, discussions and other religious activities both for the individual and the collective. It is a space that closes to itself when a person is meditating or expands to include the space of the courtyard for larger prayers.

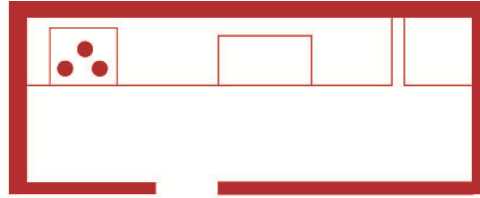
Fig.7



Hospitality is strongly encouraged in Islam. A separate reception area distinct from the private family living is traditional. It has a public component for men and women to freely intermingle and a private component for the sole use of women. As such they are connected for women to travel freely from one to the other but separate to prevent male intrusion.

A guest room is provided for overnight visitors. It is somewhat isolated from the family living area so as to provide both the guest and the family their respective privacy.

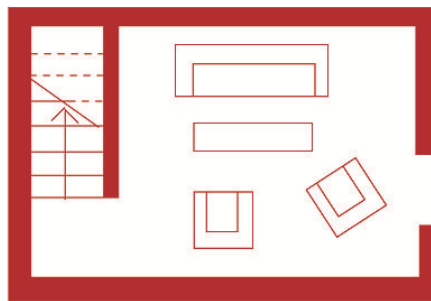
Fig.8



kitchen:

The kitchen serves living, guest and reception spaces. It is both a public and private space, depending on the social occasion.

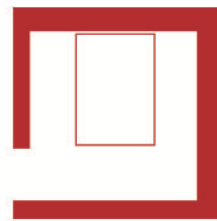
Fig.9



family living room:

The family living room is the most public of the private spaces. It is a place for family and close friends only. It provides the only access to the stairs leading to the private upstairs.

Fig.10

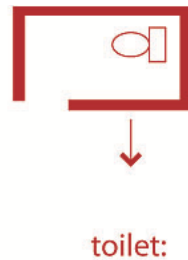


bedroom:

“Bedrooms should be designed in such a way as to help one face the *qiblah* whenever one goes to sleep.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Omer Spahic. *Studies in the Islamic Built Environment*. Malaysia: Research Centre, IIUM, 2004, 179.

Fig.11



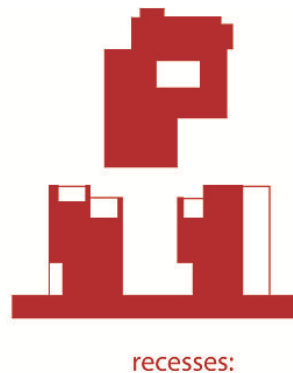
“When designing toilets, one must bear in mind that the Muslims are asked not to face the *qiblah* or turn their backs to it whenever they defecate or urinate. They are to face any of the two other sides, as uttered by the Prophet...”<sup>12</sup>

### Building Traditions

When studying historical and contemporary precedents, Islamic and Western, it becomes clear that there are a number of building traditions that show up consistently in the two different types. By studying them, one can learn which are efficient and functional to the design and which are arbitrary.

The traditions found in the Islamic house are as follows:

Fig.12

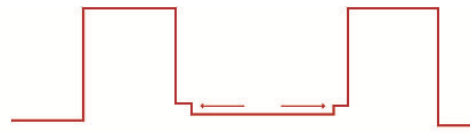


“...it appears that generally in Islamic architecture the simple line of a wall or a level ceiling is too sharp an edge for Islamic taste, and the vertical edges of a building separating it from the outside world on its sides are rarely

<sup>12</sup> Spahic, 179.

kept at 90 degrees or less, but are recessed or protruding with broken surfaces aimed at lessening the impact of the cut-off in God's space shared by all humans."<sup>13</sup>

Fig.13



sunken courtyard:

Typically, the courtyard is one step lower than the interior space. This prevents water seepage and marks the place where shoes are removed.

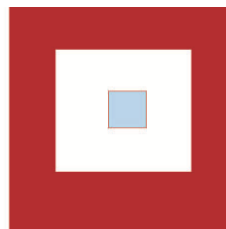
Fig.14



iwan:

The iwan is a three-sided room that opens onto the courtyard. The iwans give onto loggias which provide shade.

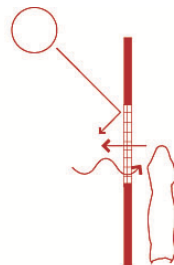
Fig.15



water:

Traditionally, a fountain is placed in the center of the courtyard to provide for ablutions prior to prayer.

Fig.16



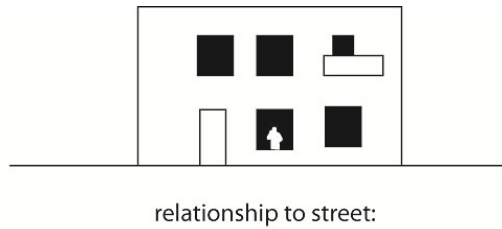
masharabiya:

These wooden screens create private views as well as provide ventilation and prevent glare from the sun.

<sup>13</sup> Spahic, 157.

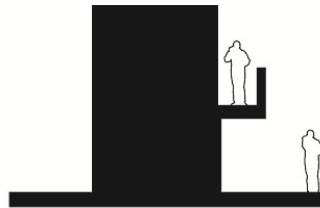
The following Western building traditions have been replacing the Islamic traditions as Western building forms are imported:

Fig.17



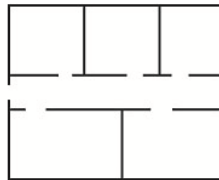
Numerous windows appear on the external façade of the street. They provide light, ventilation, public view, and most importantly, the desire to be seen as progressive.

Fig.18



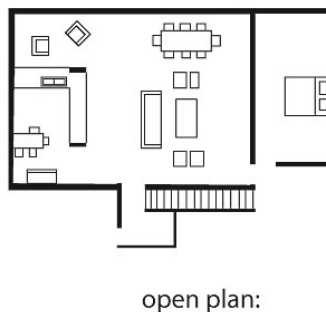
The exterior spaces become public and street oriented. Their purpose shifts from enjoyment of the exterior to expression and manipulation of the façade.

Fig.19



The corridor replaces the courtyard as the organizing element of interior space. This means that all of the rooms enter off an internal hallway rather than the exterior space.

Fig.20





The open floor plan makes use of large, open spaces and minimizes the use of small, enclosed rooms. This organization significantly weakens the boundary between public and private.

Fig.21



house located in the middle of the plot:

The garden replaces the courtyard. The house is towards the center of the plot. The resulting spaces are front and back gardens with two thin strips along the sides.

### Translating Tradition

It becomes clear that the design has to become a reconciliation between these two different traditions. The contemporary Islamic house that meets the needs and the desires of the Muslim family sits between these two different worlds of building. For example:

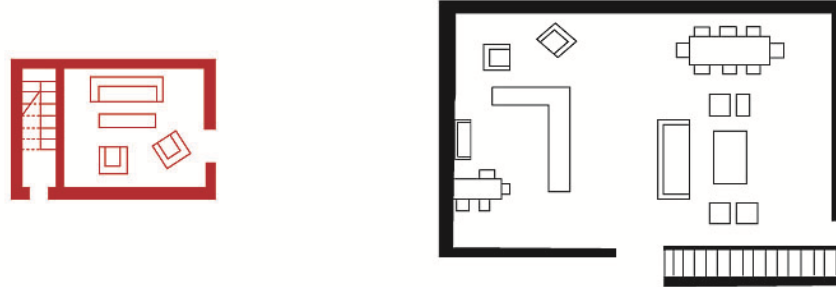
Fig.22



kitchen:

The kitchen acts as a transition space between private and public as it serves both. Normally, it is an enclosed private space but on such occasions as Ramadan and other feast days, the kitchen becomes an open, public place where men and women socialize. As such, it needs to be able to close itself to normal social situations and open up during day to day life and religious holidays.

Fig.23



### living room:

Traditionally, the family living room has been small and enclosed but the introduction of western technology and society has created the desire for an open space allowing for numerous activities at once. It has become a space for more intimate family friends to socialize.

### The Question

How are these traditions reconciled? More specifically, how do these spaces open themselves up to the courtyard for day to day life but close against the courtyard when needed?

### A Solution

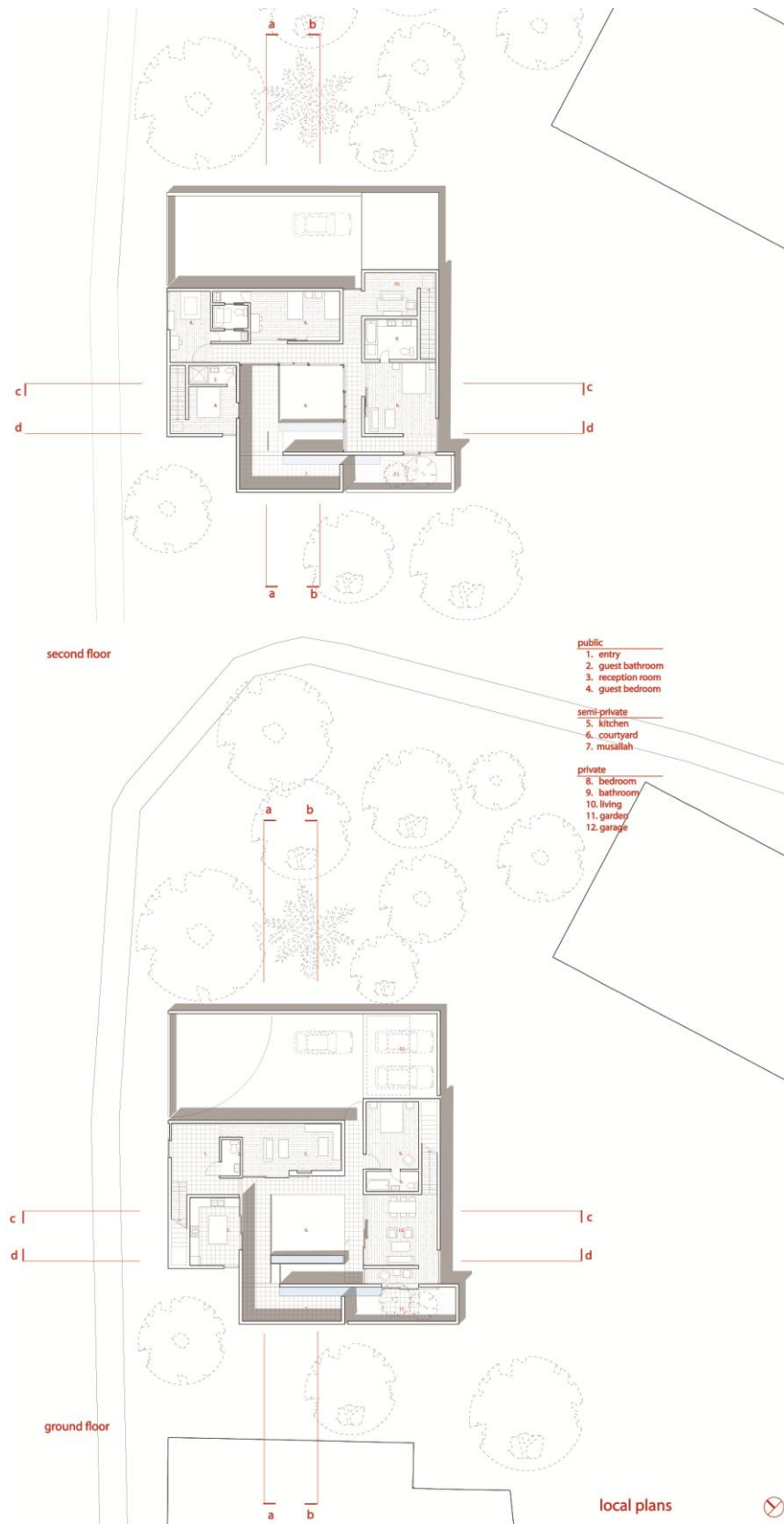
Open and closed. Open or closed.

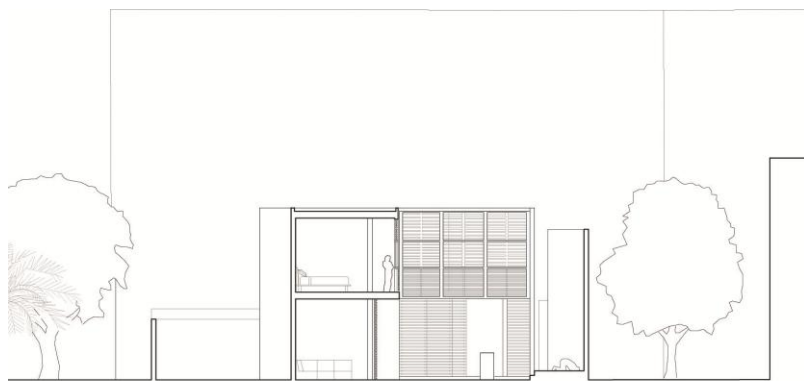
The courtyard is enclosed by walls. The courtyard is open to the sky.

The courtyard is closed to the site. The courtyard is open to the space of the home.

The spaces of the dwelling are open or closed to the court. The spaces of the dwelling are open or closed to one another.

Fig.24

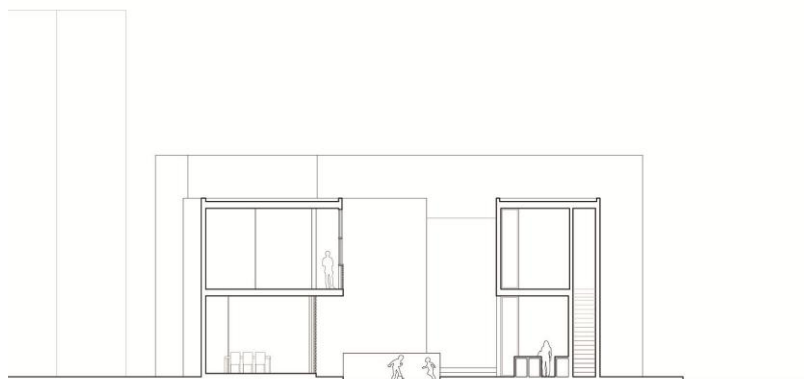




aa



bb



cc



dd

sections

Fig.25

Fig.26



Fig.27

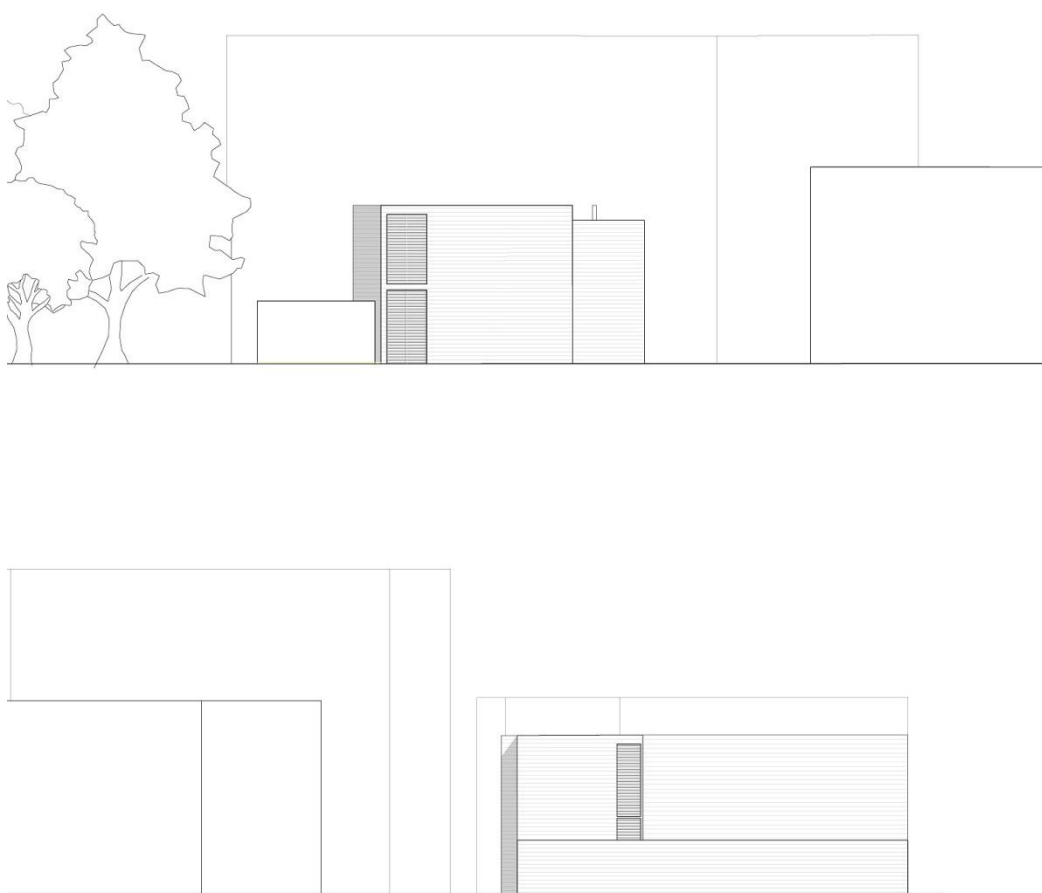


Fig.28-29

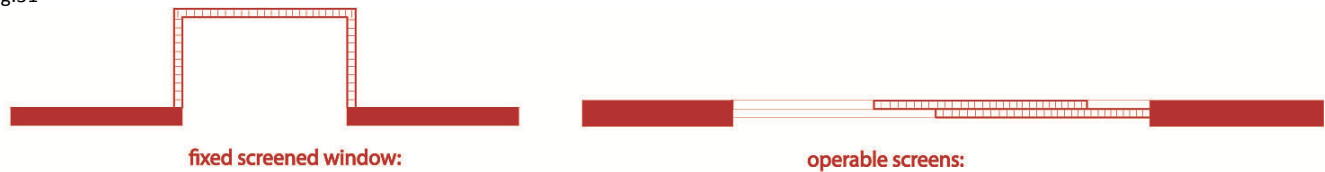


Fig.30



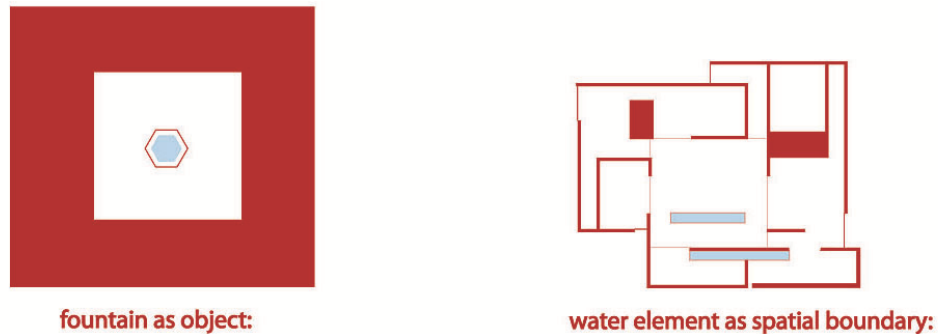
This is achieved through the conviction that traditional is modern. The philosopher Karl Popper proposed that it is possible to create new theory in order to solve the problems (varying religious practices) that the old theory (architectural forms of old) did not solve, rather than discarding the old theory as if it never existed.<sup>14</sup> The new theory in this case would be the transformation of traditional elements and solutions to account for new desires in spatial function. The principles of this approach allow for new structures, forms and materials previously unassociated with the house in history which offer both new ways of viewing familiar space and creating new space.

Fig.31



Traditionally, the *mashrabiya* is a fixed window screen that allows light but prevents public view. This element is transformed and offers new spatial possibilities through *movement*. Instead of always enclosing space, this new element offers the possibility of enclosing an open space as needed.

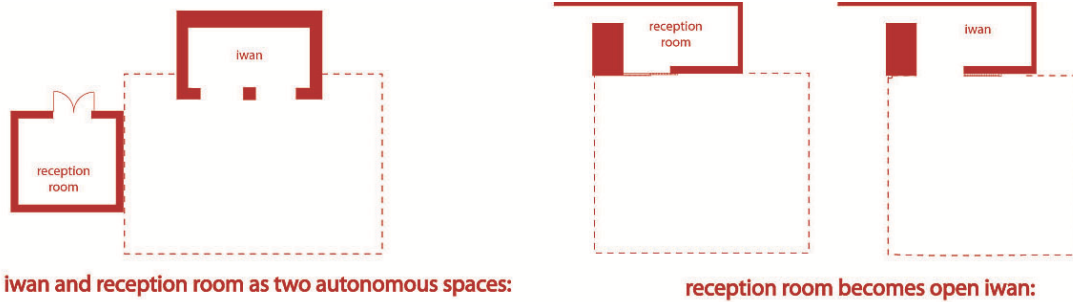
Fig.32



Traditionally, the fountain has appeared in the courtyard as an object placed in space. The fountain can become doubly functional as a spatial element that implies boundary within the open courtyard.

<sup>14</sup> Saleh Al-Hathloul. "Continuity in a Changing Tradition." In *Legacies for the Future: Contemporary Architecture in Islamic Societies*. Edited by Cynthia C. Davidson. London: Thames and Hudson, 1998, 30.

Fig.33



Traditionally, the iwan has been a separate space from the closed reception. Through the use of the operable screen system, one space can become either or both at will.

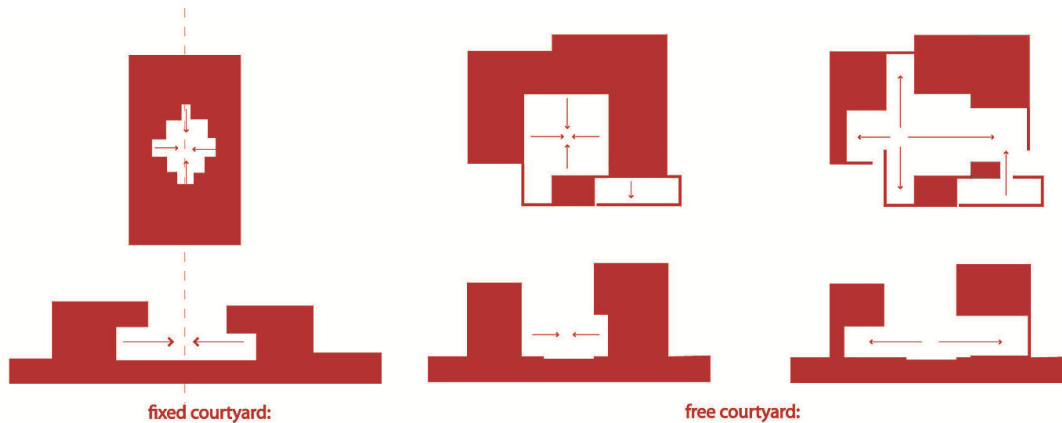
Fig.34



Typically, all of the courtyard space steps down consistently around the interior spaces of the house. However, different areas of the courtyard can step down to create zones of space within the courtyard.

Utilizing these new elements in the design, the space of the dwelling is transformable. The movable screen system allows for the spaces to expand out and encompass the courtyard or close themselves off.

Fig.35



This screen system also allows for a new efficiency of space. Instead of providing a space for every situation, spaces transform themselves to adapt to different social situations. For example, instead of having two separate reception rooms for general reception and for women, there is only one larger reception room. If



there is a need for segregation, this space can transform into two smaller spaces through the use of the screen system.

Within the larger framework of public, semiprivate and private space, each of these respective types of spaces has a permanent dual quality of open and closed, public and private. This is seen in the reception room, the family living room, the *musallah* and the courtyard.

Spaces extend past each other to create visual privacy but are not entirely cut off from each other. The result, in combination with the screen system, is a series of spaces that can open or close to each other as needed. The space of the dwelling becomes a reconciliation of the traditional closed spaces of the historical house and the contemporary open plan of today. Functionally, this creates the same type of space found in the traditional Islamic house but the experience is completely different.

Fig.36



For example, the traditional bent entry involves entering facing onto a wall which blocks view into the adjacent spaces. It achieves this through wall broken only by small openings. The new entry achieves the same objectives but through a more economic use of wall and mass that allows spaces to connect and flow together.

#### The Islamic House

According to Omer Spahic, “pure Islamic architecture is the architecture of the form, design and function which are inspired primarily by Islam, permeated with its spirit and stand for the embodiment of Islamic principles and values. It facilitates, fosters and stimulates one’s ceaseless *’ibadah* (worship) activities...”<sup>15</sup> The entire house is a response to the tenets of the Islamic religion. There are the obvious programmatic elements like the *musallah* which clearly mark the house as a religious one. The organization of space, the courtyard, and the form of the house are larger responses to the religious tradition. It fulfills

<sup>15</sup> Studies in the Islamic Built Environment, 31.

religious prescriptive regarding hospitality, spirituality and privacy. However, the dwelling responds to a different aspect of religion than its predecessors. The design accommodates diversity and acknowledges the varying domestic routines and religious practice of Muslims throughout the world. This is achieved through the flexibility of the use of space.

Although it is designed as a Muslim house, it is not just a space to be occupied by Muslims. The Islamic qualities of the house are subtle and abstract, creating an experience that allows the space to be enjoyed by everyone. The architecture does not work to contrast different belief systems.

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