5.5. THE WATER IN THE ALHAMBRA

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The significance of water in Islamic civilization reaches its functional, artistic and symbolic pinnacle at the Alhambra and Generalife. Water does not only meet the basic needs of Muslim men and women, but forms part of their fundamental religious precepts; it is an element required to reach a state of purity. In their collective worldview—founded between oasis and desert thanks to background and provenance—even the question of where to settle is subject to examination. It must be rich with rivers and woodlands, resembling a celestial garden or Paradise itself, conceived of in Islamic eschatology as the eternal abode. These are abstract universes where water stimulates the senses, recreating images loaded with poetry and aesthetic fantasy.

Located on Sabika Hill next to the Darro River, forming part of an idyllic landscape where the freezing water of the Sierra Nevada is the foremost element, the Alhambra is the fulfilment of this philosophy. While the water running through the Alhambra is a resource that was necessary to support the urban and agricultural lifestyles that converged in the city, it is also the architect of a unique network of contrasts and relationships between interior and exterior spaces, between home and garden, in a true spiritual union between architecture and nature.

The considerable flow of water entering the Alhambra is lifted from the Darro River by the Acequia Real (Royal Channel) while an offshoot, the Acequia del Tercio (Channel of One Third), carries it to the Generalife. This water fills the Albercón de las Damas (Water Pond of the Ladies), a tank that supplies the orchards and gardens. The Royal Channel in the meantime branches out into an extensive network that disperses various distribution points, usually in the form of aljibes (underground cisterns), albercas (pools), ponds, basins and fountains throughout the landscaped spaces, medina (city), palaces and the Alcazaba (citadel).
The distribution network is made up of different types of pipes, depending on the nature of the area through which they run: lead and ceramic atanores (water pipes), small marble conduits that form part of a fountain or outline ponds, tiled piping, cobbled channels and slender streams and waterfalls in walkways and groves. The network is completed by arquetas (surge tanks), hydraulic splitters and cauchiles (reservoirs) to regulate the water delivery.

The characteristic water repository found in the monument’s gardens and landscaped courtyards is the alberca, a shallow, rectangular open-air water tank. The simplest are supplied by a surge tank located on one of the pool’s short sides from which water spills into the alberca through a simple ceramic channel. The alberca in the Patio de los Arrayanes (Court of the Myrtles) is particularly remarkable thanks to its monumentality, proportion and beauty. Located along the courtyard’s midline, the alberca is bordered by long myrtle hedges that are framed, in turn, by white marble conduits running down the length of the pool, while two low piquera (outlet) fountains supply the water that slides gently without disturbing the stillness of the alberca. Here the water acts as a mirror for the surrounding architecture in a balanced setting where the sound and sight of the liquid gurgling from the spouts mixes with the aroma of the vegetation while at the same time regulating the surrounding temperature. It also fulfils a symbolic function as it is located in the Palacio de Comares (Palace of Comares), the official and ceremonial centre of the Nasrid monarchy, occupying a predominant position in front of the throne room and thus demonstrating the majesty of the sultan through the symbolism of water in Islamic tradition: abundance, wealth, power and eternity.

In general, the many fountains and basins that hold the Alhambra’s water vary in size, are made of marble, are circular and shallow and are sunk directly into the floor or have edges that are flush with the pavement. They conform to one of two types: the so-called “diagrammatic” type, which has a low cylindrical bowl that may be closed or contain a conduit through which the water gushes from a spout and the so-called “scallop” type, a hemisphere with an undulating rim that simulates the waves of the sea. The Fuente de Lindaraja (Fountain of Lindaraja), which is of the latter type, is two metres in diameter and richly decorated. A poem carved along its rim describes it as the most beautiful work in the East and West, comparing its interior plays of water to the star-filled celestial sphere.
Without a doubt, however, the most unique and admired fountain in the Alhambra is the Fountain of the Lions, located in the central courtyard of the Riyad Palace or Palace of the Lions, built by Mohammed V as a residence and pleasure palace for the court. The fountain is a large dodecagonal basin held up by twelve radially arranged sculptures of lions with spouts. It is part of a hydraulic system made of up ten secondary fountains and two perpendicular conduits that emerge from a series of arcades and interior rooms to meet under the main fountain before continuing their route to the opposite end of the structure, forming a closed circuit where the water endlessly runs and flows, a striking visual effect.

Although the importance of water throughout the Alhambra is unquestionable, this is mostly clearly discernible in the royal gardens and orchards of the Generalife. Wisely incorporated into each of the spaces—whether an agricultural or residential area, a private or open patio, gardens or groves—the role of water materializes in an eloquent diversity of technical approaches and formal materials. The well-managed water from the Royal Channel leaves behind its untamed course to placidly enter the Patio de la Sultana (Soultana’s Court) where it surfaces in a small canal and two pools and then jumps a level in a small waterfall to descend to the large canal that crosses the Patio de la Acequia (Courtyard of the Channel) where it rests again before being launched out of spouts to the other side of the canal. There it hides and then appears again in a fountain basin before spilling over and hiding for good, its aquatic dance having come to an end.

In the Generalife, water catches the eye and heightens the intensity of every element and building, however simple. One such example is the Escalera de Agua (Water Stairway). This four-part construction has intermediate landings, each with a fountain in the middle. A ground-level longitudinal canal runs down the stairway, joining the fountains and, in turn, becoming enclosed within two small side walls finished with glazed tile conduits down which the water descends. Covered by a canopy of bay trees, the water and the sensory experience it produces, along with the play of light and shadow, fills the space with magic.
It is impossible to understand the Alhambra without its water. Its presence can be felt in every corner, some times more palpably than others, giving a unique personality to all the spaces, which blend to produce a harmonious unity.