The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 5

5.7. LIGHT IN THE ALHAMBRA
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The Alhambra is near the Mediterranean and in these latitudes light is variable but can at times be very intense, bright and blinding. However, before analyzing the role of light in the creation of the Alhambra we will begin with a simple reflection on light and its parameters.

Light, paradoxically, cannot be seen. What we see are the effects of light, and thus in order to be perceived light needs matter as a support. The different qualities and characteristics of matter are what give light a presence and the ability to shape, reflect, diffuse. Herein lies its potential to deepen, highlight, define, and create so many other effects. Including stirring the emotions of a sensitive visitor.

From the material perspective, we can conceive of the Alhambra as an inhabited mountain, rough with rocks, clay and earth on the outside but welcoming, with wood, plaster and marble, on the inside. It is like a piece of fruit that has to be opened and tasted to really understand its qualities and properties. The dense compactness of the outside, marked by its defensive purpose as a fortress, dematerializes as we move through its interior, which is perceived as delicate, comfortable, sensitive. The precise and careful design and construction of the spaces in relation to natural light is what creates these qualities, as detailed below.

Light is the principal building material used in the construction of the Alhambra. With it, spaces are defined and sequences are established, important areas are highlighted, increasing in height, vaults and coffered ceilings are accentuated with well-paced series of openings, ornamentation is enhanced, emphasizing its reliefs and spaces are made to interact, thanks to the arrival of new light that filters in through wooden latticework. We can see that on a single surface there are different types of openings and filters to create layers of depth in the spaces, in their various co-ordinates, offering diverse intensities of light to each one of the intersecting gazes. All of these resources also appear to great
effect in the opposite direction and shadow is another material very skillfully used, creating semi-
darkness for transit areas and making certain areas darker to suggest intimacy.

But let us return now to the external vision. Our eyes tell us that this fortress has countless openings of
various sizes, protected by latticework, although in proportion with the massiveness of the complex
they may seem very small. As we look further east these openings become more and more present.

The architecture of the palaces uses openings of all types to illuminate interior areas. From the star-
shaped skylights in the baths to the deep recesses in the thick walls and thresholds that become rooms,
a wide range of openings format, modulate, shape and filter the light. To soften the intense light and
thermal energy, a variety of techniques and strategies are used to calibrate it and diffuse it. Plaster or
wood latticework and also glass and fabric offer myriad possibilities for doing this. To bring light in and
distribute it, interiors often alternate surfaces of glass, plaster, stucco and ceramics, which reflect and
colour the light, giving it infinite nuances, tones and shadows.

This capacity to create spaces and atmospheres according to the arrangement of openings through
which light enters is often altered with flexible and mobile elements that allow the conditions to be
modified in all circumstances and that respond to different options in relation to lifestyle and habits,
or protocol, or weather changes, which are quite extreme in the city of Granada.

From the courtyards and receiving gardens, where the wait becomes a pleasant stroll, light gradually
descends, through a sequence of different spaces, porches, arcades, thresholds and antechambers. The
architecture of the Nasrid Palaces strikes a balance between natural lighting and the needs of protocol,
between the functionality of the spaces and the representation of power and its administrators. Light in
this case can be used to show forms of treatment or to establish hierarchies in the treatment of visitors.

Another element skillfully used in Islamic architecture, to give light a more dynamic nature, is
water, which is a good support for reflection and movement. The combination of all the architectural
and ornamental features with such diverse treatments of natural light is the origin of the visual richness
of the Alhambra.