

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 3

3.2. CITY HOMES AND PALADES

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After 1013, when the capital of the Zirid kingdom was established in Granada, on the same site as the ancient Ibero-Roman city, the density and expansion of its urban fabric increased steadily for the next five centuries. This growth accelerated after 1238 when it became the capital of the Nasrid kingdom. After the Castilian conquest of 1492 a substantial transformation of the city began, with the aim of widening the streets, and many buildings were demolished. This practice increased after the mid-19th century with alignment plans and the opening of new streets and squares. Despite this, there are still many extant examples of larger houses of the al-Andalus period. On the other hand, the urban archaeology which began in the 1980s has not produced the results that were anticipated, with very few exceptions.

In the Andalusí townhouse, the courtyard is the centre of family life, the place where light and air come into the home, as houses were closed off from the street to ensure privacy and security. The absence of openings on the ground floor of the façade, except for the door and the bent entranceway, also ensured the family's privacy. Porticoes were an important part of the courtyard, as there was at least one in every Nasrid residence of any importance. At first the porticoes simply supported the roof, but as cities became more crowded and upper floors became common, galleries were built above them leading to the upper rooms. These superimposed elements were heavily decorated and also protected the wooden doors and façades of the main lower and upper rooms. Houses often had acequias and ceramic pipes to bring in water, which was stored in large vessels and cisterns. There were also drains in the courtyard and a latrine, all connected to the town's sanitation network.

Nasrid architecture was characterised by the creative and ingenious use of inexpensive materials produced within the kingdom of Granada. The walls were made of rammed earth, consisting of clay soil, gravel from the conglomerate soil of the hills on which the city stood, and a small amount of lime. In low-lying areas, to avoid rising damp, a mixture of rammed earth edged with brick and frameworks

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filled with large round stones was preferred. The woods most used for the frameworks were pine and oak from the nearby mountain ranges, using slender elements except in the beams of the courtyard porticoes. Curved clay tiles, which came from late Roman tradition and are incorrectly called Arab roof tiles, were used for practically all roofing.

The four best-conserved Nasrid houses in what is now the Albaicín district, which we will briefly describe below, stood on an average plot of about 280 m². There can be no doubt that these richly decorated buildings belonged to notable families and would not be representative of most people's homes, which were smaller and more prone to deterioration over time. All of them had rectangular courtyards placed along the preferred north-south axis, so that the main rooms, located behind the porticoes on the short sides of the courtyards, had north and south-facing aspects. The rooms to the north were usually more important.

From 1527 to 1946, the Zafra house formed part of the Dominican convent of Santa Catalina de Siena, founded in a bequest by Hernando de Zafra and his wife. During restoration work in 1991, we found archaeological data indicating a previous layout with porticoes of five arches and no walkway on the east side. In a later phase the porticoes were reduced to their three central arches in order to create a walkway on the east side and widen the one on the west side. At this stage the upper floor was also built, and all these alterations increased the living area considerably. The archaeological excavations of 2011 uncovered flowerbeds on both sides of the long reservoir along the main axis of the courtyard, although they were not restored.

From 1507 to 1930, the Daralhorra palace was part of the Poor Clares' convent of Santa Isabel la Real, founded by the Catholic Monarch, Queen Isabella I of Castille. It belonged to the Nasrid royal family, and its layout reflects the characteristics of this house type, now fully developed. The main rooms are double height, while the longer sides have two floors of secondary rooms. Above the eaves, which unify the four sides of the courtyard even though they have such different compositions, there is a second floor over the north walkway with a gallery entrance. In the middle of the upper rooms on this side, projecting balconies look over the landscape. In the north-east corner there is a small lookout tower enabling direct visual communication with the Alhambra.

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The courtyard at no. 4 on Calle del Cobertizo de Santa Inés street has walkways on three sides, double on the northern side, while the east side is formed by the wall of the neighbouring house. Unusually, rather than echoing the layout of the north side with a main room behind a portico, the south side has a dining room or summer living room which leads onto the courtyard through five richly decorated openings, with a living room above it.

The house at no. 14 on Calle del Horno del Oro street has porticoes of three arches on marble columns leading to the rooms on the short sides of the courtyard, and flat arches on pillars on the other two sides. The upper floor, which must have been built in the first quarter of the 16th century, repeats the same layout as the lower floor, with a wooden perimeter gallery, except on the western side, which consists of six brick arches. Thus, this is a good example of a Nasrid house being reused in a later period.

To conclude, it is important to remark that the Albaicín boasts an extraordinary architectural heritage of nearly a hundred houses in the Andalusí tradition, which were the homes of Moriscos in the 16th century. Archaeological investigation in these houses has shown that many of them were Nasrid buildings which were reused or remodelled in the Morisco period.