

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

## MODULE 3

### 3.5. THE *MARISTÁN* AND ITS RECOVERY

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#### I. INTRODUCTION

The Maristán (hospital) of Granada is located in the Bajo Albaicín, very near Carrera del Darro street. It was founded by Muhammad V in 1367, some time after the completion of the Palace of the Lions (1365). The only hospital of al-Andalus for which we have relevant information and material remains of interest, the site is almost unique in its evocation of the splendour the city of Granada attained in the 14th century.

It underwent a significant change of use with the arrival of the Catholic Monarchs, when it was converted to a Mint in 1499. Later, it was a wine warehouse in 1748, a prison in 1825, and finally, it was divided into apartments. It changed ownership again in 1841, and for the first time its demolition was proposed, and partly carried out (north and west wards) in 1843. In 1981 the procedure was begun to officially declare it an Archaeological Site, but in 1983 there was another attempt to demolish it, leading to its expropriation in 1986, when it passed into public ownership. It was declared a heritage site in 2005.

#### II. ITS LOCATION IN THE URBAN CONTEXT

Its location is strategic, in an area of public activity in the medieval city, attested by the proximity of the Arab bath of El Nogal or walnut tree known as the Bañuelo, the Casa de Zafra, and the bridge of Los Tableros, with floodgates to control the water flow and create a reservoir. This was complemented by the coracha wall to protect the transfer of water to the Alhambra fortress and the Bajo Albaicín district. Investigation on the site has confirmed the existence of a large platform in the location of the Maristán, stabilised with large stone weights, and the presence of a deep well, over 9 metres, both very probably relating to transporting the water held by the bridge.

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The building's dimensions are generous: 37.50 x 25.15 metres, with a courtyard of 26.16 x 15.00 metres holding a reservoir of 16.20 x 4.50 metres. This was an important structure which stood out in the network of medieval streets, with a regular, grid-based floor plan.

### III. ORGANISATION OF THE HOSPITAL

Its porticoed structure is organised around a central courtyard, presided over by a large reservoir or alberca which becomes the hospital's mark of identity, with two lions in the middle of the long sides, now in the Alhambra museum. The smaller wards are organised as a continuous sequence of rooms opening onto a peristyle on the ground floor and a gallery on the upper floor. This beautiful outer structure is surprising in its simplicity and functionality, as it allows traffic to flow unimpeded throughout the surrounding the portico, which distributes the space, provides privacy and filters the sunlight.

Archaeological research has shown that the four corners held stairs to the upper floor, which also connected the courtyard to the exterior space. Notably, a main longitudinal axis emphasised the placement of the entrance on Calle Concepción street and continued to a site on the south side, which was probably a complementary space such as a garden or market garden, still to be investigated. It is now occupied by residential buildings.

Based on the extant remains, we cannot distinguish the location of specialist areas for medical practice, but a layout with this design would clearly be very well suited to housing wards and hospital services. Some latrines have been identified from the period when the building was a mint, possibly on the site of earlier medieval latrines, in the southwest corner towards Calle Bañuelo street, indicating that this corner was connected to hygienic functions which would be fundamental for a building of this type. Similarly, on the ground floor, in the middle of the southern ward there is a doorway to the space behind. Both discoveries indicate the flexibility of regular organisational structures for creating unique functional spaces without altering the general architectural design.

The Maristán is a building of balanced proportions in which all activity centred on a large courtyard which combined the functions access to and distribution of the space, as well as hygiene: ventilation



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and natural light. The presence of water turns the courtyard into a garden. The mere existence of the reservoir, and the sound of the lion fountains, were surely part of the healing ritual. Finally, the beautiful views of the Alcazaba of the Alhambra provided a sense of relationship and belonging to the seat of political power and connects to other structures, the palaces, based on the function of very large courtyards provided with water.

## IV. RECOVERY OF THE SPACE

All that remains of the emerging structure is the southern portico, where some of the rammed earth walls and brick pillars of the main portico remain, as well as some wooden ceiling structures. It is in a very poor state of conservation. In 1988 the ruins were protected with a steel structure supporting a corrugated fibre-cement roof. Although intended to be temporary, it remained in place until 2020. This long period of abandonment was only interrupted in 2016, when the Patronato de la Alhambra y Generalife decided to intervene in the south pavilion. A project was organised and work began at the end of 2019, scheduled to finalise in 2021.

The intervention focused on the south pavilion for the first phase of recovery, based on the existing remains, with an associated excavation and archaeological supervision throughout the restoration process. The goal was to recover as much of the structure as possible and integrate it in a technically very complex consolidation process, in order to connect with the authenticity of the site and achieve appropriate conditions of construction and stability.

As this action covers only the south pavilion, some preliminary minor work on the east and west sides, and the recovery of part of the courtyard and the reservoir, the project includes a proposal for the entire site in a second phase which would complete the Maristán with a structure differentiated from the original, as the remains in the rest of the plot are not as complete as those of the south pavilion. Digital restoration images show both the restoration of the south portico and the combination of all the sectors thanks to a contemporary spatial structure which would be recognisable and could be visited, allowing the other areas to be protected. The recovery of the courtyard and the reservoir are the common thread of the proposal, and the installation of two replica lion fountains would have a functional and symbolic significance, bringing water back to the site.