

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 4

4.1. THE CITY OF ALHAMBRA

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The Alhambra is a palatine city, a city of palaces, that was planned and built to be the seat of the Nasrid dynasty, which reigned from 1238 to 1492. Its urban layout reflects common practice in the medieval Islamic West and, particularly, in Al-Ándalus. Over the course of its more than two and a half centuries of evolution, its many different spaces slowly developed within an area of 105,000 m², not including the surrounding external areas and the adjacent buildings that are related to the Alhambra. During this time the city was in constant transformation, just as the sultanate itself was, with permanent instability and policies depending on alliances or submission with the Christian kingdoms to the north and the other Muslim kingdoms to the south.

After the conquest, the Catholic Monarchs, for symbolic reasons, made the Alhambra one of the kingdom's residential cities. It took on greater importance during the reign of their grandson, Emperor Charles V, who completed the fortification according to 16th century poliorcetics (siege warfare) and ordered the construction of a large Renaissance palace that bears his name.

Modern historiography has likened the shape of the Alhambra complex to that of a boat anchored on a mountain, which in Arabic was called Sabika. The mountain is an extension of the Sierra Nevada range into the province's fertile plains. Such a setting made it possible to circle the entire city of the Alhambra with a defensive wall, making it impenetrable to possible assaults despite the frequent raids and attacks that its enemies perpetrated against Granada. It also had defensive walls connecting it to Granada; to the north with the Albaicín and to the south with the Bermeja Towers. The Alhambra has four main gates for entering and leaving the complex: its names are Puerta de las Armas (Gate of Arms), Puerta del Arrabal (Gate of the Arrabal), Puerta de los Siete Suelos (Gate of Seven Floors), and Puerta de la Justicia (Gate of Justice).

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On the inner part of the wall, all along the perimeter, a walkway made it possible to move among the various spaces easily and quickly. Also, in the event of attack, it could be used for defence purposes. About thirty towers of different shapes and sizes dot the defensive walls. These towers serve as both strategic locations within the defensive system and as observation points for looking out at the surrounding territory from the complex, giving the Alhambra its appearance as a fortified structure.

As a palatine city, the Alhambra's Dar al-Mulk or Dar al-Sultán (the alcázar, "al-Qasr") was the most important space, being the residence of the dynastic family. Today this area is known as the Nasrid Palaces ("Palacios Nazaríes" in Spanish). In it there were also administrative offices, meeting rooms for the Sura, the Council of Viziers, and halls where the rulers held audiences. These buildings were also the site of institutional celebrations and receptions to commemorate important dates on the Muslim calendar or important events in the Kingdom. This area was considered a single space but it had various palaces built in different periods. They almost always adapted and redecorated previous buildings or built an entirely new one over the old one. The palaces were structured similar to any other residence but were larger and had decorations fitting of the emirs who occupied them, as well as patios, observation points and gardens in which water and vegetation played a very important role. The palaces had baths (hammam) and small mosques for the various daily prayer sessions required in Islam.

The city's primary defence and the security of the ruling family were guaranteed from the Alcazaba (al-Qasba), a military district where the elite guards lived with their families. It was equipped with a community oven, an underground cistern for storing water ("aljibe") and a hammam, like any neighbourhood lying on a city's outskirts. Strategically located, it was directly linked with the rest of the Alhambra and with the adjacent neighbourhoods of the city of Granada.

To meet the needs of the city and the court there was the Madínat al-Hamrá', a residential neighbourhood within the Alhambra's walls. It was arranged along the "main street" (Calle Real), which had a slight upward slope from west to east. This medina, being a Muslim city, was arranged around a main Mosque, which had a hammam that provided some revenue for the mosque. Next to the Mosque there was a Rawda or royal cemetery for sultans. The medina also had houses, some of which were quite notable, in which individuals with government posts, civil servants and Court assistants lived. In

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the high part of the city there were small artisan workshops, with kilns for ceramics and glass, a tannery and even a mint where coins were made.

The section of the Acequia Real (royal channel) that ran through the city was adjacent to the main street, supplying water to the entire complex through a network of cisterns, waterwheels and countless offshoots. Small squares, minor streets, shelters and other constructions completed the urban landscape of the city of the Alhambra.