

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 4

4.2. THE STREETS AND GATES OF THE ALHAMBRA

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The Alhambra, like any important medieval city, had fortified walls all around it. The walls have been preserved up to our day, although they have experienced significant mutilations and repairs. Four gates allowed entry from the outside and as many as thirty towers stand over the walls, in which Nasrid builders created an admirable discourse of architectural functionality, technical skill and political representativeness.

The four gates, located in strategic points of access, have certain shared characteristics and also clear differences. They coincide in that they have the same design consisting of a ramped passage with bends, or angles (bends serve defence purposes while the ramps allow for a speedy access). All four gates are located inside imposing, reinforced towers. And they all have the typical pointed horseshoe arch with an alfiz, or frame. Yet, despite an apparent reiteration of forms and decoration, Nasrid builders surprise us, once again, with their array of design solutions, since no one gate or arch is like the others, except in the case of the arch found in the entrance to the Puerta de las Armas (Gate of Arms) and the arch found in the exit from the Puerta de la Justicia (Gate of Justice).

Looking at them in chronological order, the first gate is the old Alcazaba gate, which has a single bend and a stone arch with a recessed alfiz. The structure is simple and small in size but it foreshadows the subtleties that the future will bring. The Puerta del Arrabal was built later. It is the outer area's oldest gate and it was used mainly for going to and from the Generalife. It retains only a stone arch at the end of a long passage that goes around the Torre de los Picos. The second gate to be built is the Puerta de las Armas (Bāb al-Silah), the Gate of Arms. Located on one side of the Alcazaba, it is believed to have had the most transit. If its inner distribution is noteworthy, with its two exits, one leading to the Alcazaba and one leading to the urban area and palaces, even more outstanding is the beauty of its vaults, especially the umbrella dome at the entrance, painted to look like brick. Almost completely

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disappeared ceramic work on the spandrels of the outer arch, and the aforementioned vaults, are the beginning of the path of aesthetic delight that will reach its maximum level in the two gates of the city's southern flank.

The last two gates correspond to the rule of Yūsuf I, a period that saw significant renovation in the palaces of the Alhambra. The first gate is popularly known as the Puerta de Siete Suelos, or Gate of Seven Floors (Bāb al-Gudur). It is also known as the Puerta de las Albercas. Although greatly mutilated, having been blown up during the Napoleonic invasion, it shows enormous height and a very original configuration, consisting of two towers with a gate between them, aligned with the wall. It provided access to the medina section of the Alhambra, the artisan workshops and some of the palaces in the upper area.

The most grandiose of the gates of the Alhambra, of Granada and of all Al-Andalus is the Puerta de la Justicia or Puerta de la Explanada (Bāb al-Šarī'a), the Gate of Justice or Gate of the Esplanade. This is practically the only building in the whole Alhambra that has the year of construction (1348) and the name of the person who ordered its construction appearing on it, in an extremely beautiful inscription in marble. It is an exceptional gate because it perfectly integrates constructive, strategic and decorative elements, all of which are at their maximum expression. The use of different materials is remarkable: stone, marble, ceramics, brick and tapia, which are found both inside and outside in differentiated ways for reasons of resistance, functionality and beauty. Also present are some cultural elements, such as the key and the symbolic hand. Other admirable characteristics include: the recessed placement of the entry arch, made necessary by the machicolations, or openings in the upper part designed for attacking invaders; fully armoured door, with its original lock still in place; its zigzag passageway with four angles, each section of which is topped with different vaults; its impressive height; in short, an excellent display of the most outstanding moment of Nasrid art.

STREETS

Although much of the Alhambra's urban layout has been lost, parts of some of its most important streets are still visible. It is believed that the most frequently used access to the Alhambra was the Gate of Arms. After passing through the gate people reached a street that could be watched from the walls of the Alcazaba and the general adarve, or ramparts. This street led, after passing through the Puerta de

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la Tahona, to an esplanade, recovered a few decades ago, under the Plaza de los Aljibes. Three streets started in this esplanade, which also gave access to the administrative area of the palaces. The first street went to the left, along a strategic tower called (among other names) the Tower of Muhammad. This was the Calle de Ronda, a walkway that went all around the city just inside the walls, like a ring road. It served as a moat that both separated the civil part of the city from the military part and allowed a quick response to the just right place in case of attack, while in times of peace it could be used as a direct route to some workshops or functional buildings related to the palaces, such as the baths. This walkway is in fairly good condition in the area near the towers, toward the eastern part and the Secano, an area devoted to agriculture.

The esplanade was the starting point of two other streets. The Calle Real Baja (Lower Royal Street), now visible only where it begins and behind the Palace of the Lions, zigzagged around the outside of the main palaces, separating them from the urban parts of the city and the rauda, or royal cemetery, and then went to the Partal. A third street, beginning just where Calle Real Baja began, took the form of a ramp that led to a landing or a small esplanade. This was the location of the Puerta Real, or Royal Gate, now gone, and the extant Puerta del Vino (Wine Gate). This landing was also the end of the street that came from the Puerta de la Justicia or the Puerta de la Explanada. The Wine Gate, which received this name in Christian times, was originally one of the oldest and it is the only gate inside the walls that remains standing. It was a kind of arc de triomphe and had a basic stone decoration on the outer face, contrasting with the delicate ceramic decoration on the inner face. This decoration used the cuerda seca (dry cord) technique, which in the Alhambra is found only here. This part of the gate also has some of the very few remnants of sgraffito and painted decorations still seen on the Alhambra's outer walls. Here began Calle Real Alta (High Royal Street), the widest and longest in the Alhambra. It served as the main thoroughfare connecting this military and palace-access area to the medina, workshops and palaces found in the southern and eastern parts of the complex. There were a number of buildings around it, such as the royal mosque and its adjacent baths, some of the Alhambra's earliest palaces, numerous houses and workshops where artisans worked to meet the Court's needs. This is really the only street that has the same use and configuration as it originally did, albeit only partially. Another series of small streets moved laterally out from Calle Real Alta, to the right and left, some leading to Calle Real Baja. Some remnants are still visible but they are not well defined.

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