

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 5

4.5. THE PALACES

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In a palatial city like the Alhambra, it was the palaces that gave the medieval urban complex its *raison d'être*. Two of these palaces have survived intact to this day, another two are partially preserved and three others stand as reinforced archaeological remains. The complex is also home to two *calahorras*, or miniature palaces hidden inside what appear to be military towers. The area surrounding the Alhambra contains the fully preserved Generalife palace and the reinforced remains of Dar al-Arusa.

The Alhambra is unique in that it has preserved several practically complete Islamic medieval palaces from the 13th and 14th centuries, due to the fact that after Granada capitulated to the Catholic Monarchs, they integrated them into the network of royal residences they maintained in the major cities in their kingdoms. Thanks to the care put into their maintenance and restoration since then –despite occasional periods of negligence–the relative infrequency of military conflicts in the surrounding area and the lack of major earthquakes for almost seven centuries, this undeniable wonder has endured.

The Palacio de Comares (Palace of Comares) represents the culmination of the archetype of a mansion constructed around a rectangular courtyard with porticos on the shorter sides and a large, long central pool with gardens on both sides. This design was applied in the Nasrid kingdom using different scales, ranging from important houses to medium-sized and large palaces. Its immediate origin seems to lie in the al-Qasr al-Sagir, or Minor Fortress located in Murcia, which was built during the brief reign of Ibn Hud al-Mutawakkil (r. 1228-1238) in the Taifa of Murcia (southeastern Spain), which has been partially preserved inside the Monastery of Santa Clara in that city. The Palace of Comares, begun by Yusuf I (r. 1333-1354) and finished by his son Mohammed V (r. 1354-1359 and 1362-1391), was the royal citadel where the Nasrid sultans lived from the time of its construction. The palace is preceded by the Mexuar, the emirate's administrative area, a room with a north-south longitudinal axis that occupies 2,940 m², of which 851 m² comprises a large courtyard. At the extreme north lies the seat of the royal throne, the Hall

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of Comares, a large, square qubba-type room with a vaulted wooden ceiling that represents the earth covered with the seven heavens of Muslim paradise.

To the east and adjoining this palace, Mohammed V subsequently built the Happy Garden, commonly known since then as the Palace of the Lions. Its quite elaborate layout features a rectangular cross-axial courtyard, decorated with a large central fountain from which four narrow conduits emerge at right angles to each other. All four sides are lined with porticoes, with pavilions projecting from the two shorter sides. The latter characteristics are exceptional in Nasrid architecture and have been interpreted as an influence of the contemporary palaces built by Mohammed's ally Peter I of Castile. The centrepiece is the north side, which is dominated by the great qubba or Sala de Dos Hermanas (Hall of the Two Sisters). The most outstanding rooms in this building are covered with surprising vaults of mocárabes (stalactite plasterwork) instead of the wooden structures found in the previous palaces.

The two palaces that are only partially preserved are attributed to Sultan Mohammed III (r. 1302-1309). The Partal is formed by open pavilions lined along a north-south axis. The first is adjacent to a large 340 m² pool, while the southern pavilion has a smaller U-shaped pool. The remains of the other palace have been integrated into the Monastery of San Francisco, which was converted into a state-run hotel (parador) in the twentieth century. The cross-axial rectangular garden here is quite long, with its longitudinal axis accompanied by the Acequia Real (Royal Channel). The qubba with a scenic vantage point on the north side and the archaeological remains of the baths have both been preserved.

The eastern half of the Alhambra contains the reinforced archaeological remains of three palaces excavated at different points in the twentieth century. The largest and most important of these is the Partal Alto (Upper Partal), whose construction is attributed to Mohammed II (r. 1273-1302) and must have been the residence of the Nasrid sultans from the first dynastic line. This can be deduced both from its size and from its Arabic name, al-dar l- kubrà, meaning the Great Palace or, more simply, the Big House. Its design is quite similar to that of the Minor Fortress in Murcia, since the gardens on both sides of a large, long pool are divided into four quadrants by a crosswalk. The so-called Palacio de los Abencerrajes (Palace of the Abencerrajes), which does not contain this crosswalk, must have been the next link in the design evolution. The same design continues in what is called the Palacio del Secano

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(Palace of the Drylands), located next to the tanneries, although it is impossible to fully identify the palace parts due to the paucity of remains.

The two calahorras (miniature palaces) in the Alhambra, known by their romantic names – Torre de la Cautiva (Tower of the Captive) and Torre de las Infantas (Tower of the Princesses)– were built by, respectively, Sultan Yusuf I (r. 1333-1354) and Sultan

Mohammed VII (r. 1392- 1408). The first tower is noteworthy for its decoration, while the more elaborate architecture of the second tower surrounds a covered courtyard.

The Generalife Palace was the royal residence on a large country estate watered by the Alhambra's Royal Channel. Its palace has the same kind of cross-axial design as the one found in the Monastery of San Francisco hotel, a contemporaneous structure. The archaeological remains of Dar al-Arusa, in turn, are set around three courtyards and the remnants of some large, interesting baths.

One characteristic common to all the palaces in the Alhambra is the rich and colourful decoration on their walls, ceilings and floors made up of plant, geographic and epigraphic motifs, the last of which feature a great deal of poetry.