Living Traditions of the Afghan Courtyard and Aiwan

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The article builds on an analysis of domestic outdoor space from different regions of Afghanistan at a variety of scales in an attempt to derive general principles of architecture in an Islamic tradition. It proposes that a principle of “diurnal rotation” is key to the layout of domestic courtyards in Afghanistan. According to this principle, activities naturally rotate around courtyard areas according to daily and seasonal cycles and in response to climatic factors. The article shows how such a practice of rotation is also evident in the layout of a typical neighborhood mosque, and it explores the cosmological significance of such ingrained spatial structuring. Finally, it proposes that such deeply embedded principles are a possible source for the enduring strength of Afghan building tradition, as evident in monumental structures such as Herat’s Masjid-i-Jami and the great palace complex of Lashkari-Bazaar.

Important commentators on Islamic architecture and art have, over the past forty years, called for deeper analysis of Islamic buildings. By moving beyond “archaeological” or “aesthetic” levels, works of architecture may be better understood within their social settings and/or according to a more profound philosophical and religious framework. Of course, this can best be done where there exists a continuum of both building and socio-cultural vitality. With a comparatively undisturbed tradition of Islam for more than 1,100 years, Afghanistan offers such an opportunity. In Afghanistan it is still possible to study a living tradition of steadfast continuity and associated lifestyle — albeit one which is particularly threatened today.

Apart from its highly varied climate and topography, Afghanistan possesses a distinctive building culture that is both ancient and enduring. This culture is distinguished by two coexisting modes of living: agricultural settlements with towns and cities that date to at least the time when the region was part of the empire of Alexander the Great; and the vigorous Central Asian tradition of nomadism and transhumance, designed to take advantage of high-elevation grazing and unpredictable rainfall.
In reality, these two patterns of habitation have not always remained separate. A rich nomad and his extended family could sell their flocks, and buy arable land. And more recently, people have begun moving from rural regions to cities in search of work — squatting for a time in rudimentary settlements in peripheral areas, which are then improved if opportunity allows, in reflection of worldwide urbanization trends. Nonetheless, it is the age-old processes of settlement and evolving habitation in Afghanistan that provide observable patterns which are significant and traditional, and which, we believe, may be useful in understanding larger-scale historical forms.

TRADITIONAL LIFE IN THE COURTYARD

The religious, social and physical conditions outlined above set the scene for the constitution of living patterns in Afghanistan. In particular, the tendency of families to become extended (even to tribal units) and for women rarely to go out in public have led to the development of open-air courtyards wherein domestic activities may be pursued most of the year. It is difficult to understated the importance of such spaces. The strength of family ties and traditional hospitality, not to mention interfamilial socialization, have long been accommodated in open courtyards. One family may visit another and stay several days; neighbors and other relatives may be frequent guests; and women of neighboring houses may gather in one house during daylight hours when male family members are absent in order to pursue crafts and communal cooking.

Further, the open court is the place for all cooking in a traditional household, with special ovens, or tandoor, built beneath ground level. And it serves as the workshop of the house, the place where traditional craft items (such as Afghanistan’s famous carpets) are made, and where sewing and embroidery are taught to girls. Visiting teachers or older family members also provide education in the Koran to young people in the courtyard. Finally, since younger children are not allowed outside the house by themselves, the court serves as their supervised play area.

Within the traditional Afghan courtyard, the sakooncha, a solid platform half a meter high, allows people to sit above the level of circulation. And in certain instances, courtyards are also adorned by a well, tree, fountain, or ornamental pool.

The courtyard has long served as the setting for all the diversity of living in the traditional Afghan house, a fact borne out by the extension of the word hawili (court) to include both house and home. What, then, is the pattern or organization of the diverse activities in such spaces? We will begin our exploration by looking at the use of courtyards in the most rudimentary settlements, called qawwal. These are the typical habitation of migrant families in Afghanistan whose heritage stems from the Central Asian tradition of nomadism and transhumance, mentioned above.
THE QAWWAL

The qawwal shown here was surveyed outside the city of Kabul in 1972 (fig. 2). Kabul is located at 1,820 meters above sea level, and is characterized by a cold winter and a hot, dry summer. This qawwal consists of eight family units of varying sizes, with a sakooncha in front of each unit of one or two huts. The dwellings form an approximate cluster, with a small masjid, or mosque, nearby.

A typical daily sequence of activity in the qawwal begins with an early, light breakfast for the adult males, after which they leave for work. Women, old people, and children of the cluster then gather in the eastern part of the open space, where they have their breakfast and make arrangements for the day’s chores. During the summer months this is the starting point for a gradual rotation, or “migration,” of the inhabitants around the edge of the enclosure in a clockwise direction, following the available shade provided by the huts and other screening features. Thus, at noon, lunch is eaten in the southern sector; and in the afternoon activity moves to the western areas, where the preparation of dinner commences. By late afternoon the males have returned home, and afterwards dinner is served, either individually by unit or collectively. When the evening meal is collective, it will be served in the northern area. But even when dinner is served separately, most residents of the qawwal will still gather in the northern area in the evening — especially men, the elderly, and the young. For this reason, the northern sakooncha is generally larger than the others. Finally, at night, if conditions dictate outdoor sleeping, arrangements will be made in the eastern and southern sectors, thus avoiding the strong morning sunshine.

In winter, the patterns described above are altered. While many activities are brought indoors, the remaining outdoor tasks follow a similar pattern — only now they take advantage of the warmth of the sun during the day. Thus, the morning is spent on the western side, noon time on the northern side, and afternoon on the eastern side. The summer preference for an end-of-day gathering in the northern sector carries over into winter, but takes place indoors to avoid the cold.

DIURNAL ROTATION

Although the qawwal is generally not a permanent settlement, its significance for this study rests in the dominance it expresses for open over closed space. Because of the small size of the constituent huts, inhabitants must take every advantage of the open court, and recurrent patterns of use are dramatically established. As described above, these take the form of a gradual circular migration — what we choose to call “diurnal rotation.”

While this principle is clearly expressed in the qawwal, it is also typical to some degree of the use of all open domestic courtyards in permanent Afghan houses. It is thus a pattern intimately bound to a traditional lifestyle, and to both daily and seasonal climatic variations. Among other things, the rotation generates a “topography” which gives primacy to the northern sector of the court, and apart from the purely practical advantages indicated, it also establishes a cosmological ordering in relation to the overall enclosed space. By this we mean an ordering of space and attendant forms in accordance with the meridional axis, with the major formal element to the north. However, this scheme is subordinate to the powerful force of rotation itself, which generates a vertical axis in the center, and confirms the nature of the house as microcosm.

Such cosmological ordering has become formalized in more elaborate and enduring examples of Afghan settlement. A major factor articulating this process was the introduction of the aiwan, generally accepted to have been a Persian form dating back to at least the great loggias of the Achaemenid period. However, in all these configurations, the principle of diurnal rotation provides an essential key to understanding the sequence of activities. This is as true of the simple hauili as it is of more complex aiwan-courts, which we shall now examine.
THE QALA

By far the most prevalent form of rural settlement on the arable plains of Afghanistan is the qala, a substantial adobe structure representing a more ordered form than the qawwal.4 The qala is normally established by a khan, a landlord or tribal headman, to accommodate his extended family and shareholders. It consists of a four-square enclosure with walls about eight meters high and two meters thick. Corner and median watchtowers allow it to act as a fortification protecting people and animals and providing a secure storage place for farm produce. The interior of the qala enclosure is generally subdivided using thinner mud walls to form a number of hawili, with a guestroom over the single gateway.

The example illustrated here was surveyed by Kazimee in 1976 (fig. 3). Its northwestern hawili, shown here in greater detail, is surrounded by three building masses (the eastern one of which contains stables). The northern building mass facing onto this hawili has a sakooucha in front, with a second, smaller sakooucha located against the western building mass. In other hawilies in this qala, the northern sakooucha is replaced by a baranda, a narrow, covered platform that serves much the same purpose. Changes in the internal arrangement of the qala can easily be made by removing and re-erecting the internal walls. This freedom is reflected by the “migration” of the inhabitants within the qala unit, resulting in a more complex form of diurnal rotation.

The qala is a most striking instance of rural settlement, and as Colucci has noted, similar inhabited walled villages were found in Khwarism in the first millennium B.C.8 Such continuity underlines the tenacity of Central Asian traditions in Afghanistan, and the antiquity of the living patterns of the region. In this instance, the roof of the baranda also anticipates the covering afforded by the aiwan. Such a higher degree of formalization can be found in the following example.

A VILLAGE HOUSE NEAR KANDAHAR

An aiwan is a room, three sides of which are closed and one side of which is open to a courtyard. Its integration into the Afghan housing tradition is shown in the next example of a hawili, located in a rural hamlet south of the city of Kandahar. At 1,067 meters above sea level, Kandahar has a hot, dry summer and mild winter.

This example shows a variety of enclosed spaces derived from a simple aiwan, laid out in overlapping building masses around a rectangular courtyard (fig. 4). All the interior spaces are formed from mud-brick domical vaults. The larger aiwans have internal piers to support these vaults, and in many cases the aiwans feature enclosing screens, or even curtain walls, separating them from the court. The most complex aggregation is the building mass on the western side of the court. It has a rhythm of A:B:C:B:A, of which only the B sections now act as true aiwans—that is, being completely open to the court (fig. 5). There are small rooms above the B sections, reached by staircases behind. By contrast, sections A and C represent larger, full-height chambers, with the piers supporting section C’s roof forming side “aisles,” or subsidiary spaces.

In addition to these basic spatial divisions, this house is characterized by thick walls that allow built-in alcoves with shelves, and all surfaces are plastered inside and out. In the courtyard, there is a long sakooucha in front of the western building mass. The northern building mass is also fronted by a large sakooucha, with an aiwan abutting it where it joins the eastern building mass. Finally, a baranda is included within the southern portion of this eastern mass.

In this example it is important to note how the aiwan enjoys a greater importance with relation to the court than any of the other outdoor elements. It is here that elders and guests are entertained at night, leaving the sakooucha for more informal socialization by other family members. Formal daytime gatherings of women and their neighbors may also take place in the aiwan. Because it is reserved for such higher-level social situations, the aiwan is always kept in formal readiness. Such clear recognition of its architectural significance reflects its long history in Asian lands.

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Figure 3. Plan of a qala. The heavy shaded lines in the northwest corner show the floor plan of the house there. The light shaded areas represent the roof plan of the rest of the qala. The mosque is shown with heavy shaded lines in the center.
The accompanying illustration provides a schematic representation of the development of formal elements in or around such a courtyard (fig. 6). It should be remembered that a hawili may be occupied by more than one family, so several aiwans may be occupied simultaneously. The southern building mass consists of three rooms that accommodate general gathering and cooking.

A HOUSE IN HERAT

Herat is an ancient city in western Afghanistan that dates to at least pre-Achaemenid times. Destroyed several times during the Middle Ages, it was known as Alexandria after the Macedonian’s visit, and was the capital of the medieval state of Khorasan. Historically, Herat served as an important meeting point of the two branches of the Silk Route, which ran north and south, respectively, of the Hindu Kush Mountains to the west. Located at 930 meters above sea level, Herat’s climate is largely arid, with a hot, dry summer and a mild winter.

The example we have chosen is a large, baked-brick house belonging to a rich merchant (fig. 7). Like the Kandahar house in the preceding example, it features four building masses disposed around an almost-square court, 17m x 18m. Here, however, the domed chambers of each flanking mass communicate internally — with the corners
taken up by storage spaces, an entrance lobby from the street, and a small yard containing a latrine. The large court is fully paved with square bricks, which lends more flexibility to its use. This court has only a well, but others like it may also contain a reflecting pool and accompanying flower beds, symmetrically arranged. Some courts also have trees.

Since the climate in summer is hot and dry, and since there is no mechanical air-conditioning, the south building mass is built over a half-basement, which is used as a place to take siestas. However, the north and east masses are also raised above the level of the court, with the chambers traditionally serving as aiwans through the opening of screens (most of which have now been replaced with brick infill walls). A narrow, deep aiwan in the center of the north building mass contains stairs that connect to the roof, allowing it to be used for sleeping in hot weather.

This house reveals a more articulated development of the basic form illustrated in the previous examples. Yet even though it makes use of a variety of floor levels, it still serves as the setting for the basic schema of diurnal rotation. For example, the kitchen is found on the west side, since cooking normally takes place in the afternoon.

Another important feature of the Herat house is the provision it makes for guests. To maintain complete privacy in the hawili, the guest passes through the domed entrance lobby and up a staircase leading to the roof. This stairway is joined halfway up by another set of stairs rising from the court. The last leg of the combined stairs then emerges in a long enclosure built on top of the eastern building mass, which incorporates two aiwans facing each other from its opposite ends.

As we have seen in the previous examples, the basic configuration of this house reflects the tradition of migrating to the optimum internal location, summer and winter, day and night. As such, the Herat house sums up the main features of the Afghan house in developed form: the dominance of the hawili, its orientation, and the rhythmic alignment of the aiwans and chambers tied together by diurnal rotation. In decorative terms, the facades of such richly constructed buildings usually also express their internal rhythm using flat bands to frame each frontal arch, and there may be a unifying cornice, composed of corbelled strips and occasional dog-tooth courses of brick work.

This discussion of dwellings, from the qawwal to the large Herat hawili, has served to establish our concept of diurnal rotation. But it also shows how there is an underlying principle, or habit, of social “migration” in Afghan domestic spaces — that is, the migration of episodic social groupings within a large general enclosure, roofed and unroofed. This is certainly a manifestation of the predominantly Afghan lifestyle of al-fresco habitation, made possible by the climate (or necessary in the absence of air-conditioning). However, it may also represent a memory or cultural trait tied to the spatial freedom and motility that only the nomad can enjoy — though such freedom is never absolute.

We now turn to other major urban built forms where the court form appears, to see if the pattern of diurnal rotation prevails there as well.

A LOCAL MOSQUE IN HERAT

Of the many kinds of public buildings common in the Islamic world — caravansary, hammam, and bazaar — the mosque and the shrine are the most important, both socially and architecturally. From its very beginnings in the city of Medina in Arabia, the Muslim place of public worship was modeled on the court of the Prophet’s house. It is not possible here to give a detailed discussion of the development of this paradigm. It is sufficient to say the large courtyard has remained, in many regions of the Islamic world, the dominant element of the mosque. Given the lifestyle of Afghanistan, it is not surprising, therefore, that the court-mosque is the norm. The example shown here of a neighborhood mosque in Herat further indicates how the court-mosque model has been complemented by the principles just discussed with relation to Afghan houses (fig. 8).
The Masjid-i-Haji Abdul Rashid is built on an irregular site, laid out between roughly parallel north and south boundary walls, with the qibla toward the west. The building is entered from the north, leaving a small eastern portion, separated from the main court by a wall with its own mihrab, to serve as the mullah’s quarters. There are three rooms for the mullah along the north wall of the small court, conforming to domestic usage. In addition, the mosque contains five identifiable prayer areas: (i) five aiwans along the main qibla wall, the central one of which is larger to indicate the location of the mihrab; (ii) a large sakooncha in front of these aiwans, separated from them by a level change and brick piers; (iii) a summer prayer area in the southeast corner, with its own mihrab; (iv) a women’s mosque along the north wall, also with its own mihrab; and (v) the aforementioned court of the mullah, used by small groups in his company.

This wide diversity of spaces indicates a conscious response to all varieties of seasonal and diurnal conditions. Communal prayer can thus enjoy a fluidity of location within the confines of the enclosure. It should be remembered that the sacred quality of a mosque is essentially embodied in the prayer space it provides for each worshiper. It is not bound up in the form of the building itself, as is the case with Christian churches. Thus, a certain fluidity and “independence” of sacred locations is perhaps natural. But this mosque clearly also reflects the informality of layout described with reference to the Kandahar house. This close affinity with domestic tradition is evident, among other places, in the use of the sakooncha and in the similar design, scale and construction of the north and south building mass-
mosque is also a scene for public teaching of the Koran to children, for which there is also ample accommodation.

Taken together, all these aspects of life in the Haji Abdul Mosque make it a revealing example of the intersection between the religious dimension of public social activity and architectural setting. This mosque also provides an important link when attempting to understand the connection between domestic architecture and larger-scale forms.

TRADITION: TIME AND SPACE

The examples of small-scale architecture discussed above are clearly, in construction and use, products of an ancient tradition. It is now necessary to expand on the nature of this tradition and how it should be understood.

Dalebor Veseley has written that in the Western intellectual tradition since the eighteenth century, “tradition is a dimension of culture which has not only been discredited . . . but has also been obscured beyond recognition.” Such a provocative view depends on a willingness to recognize the shortcomings of modern philosophies of history and interpretation, whereby the full historical reality of tradition has been deformed and suppressed by what Veseley has called the “imposed standards of scientific truth.” In fact, modern hermeneutics has shown that the Enlightenment’s desire to understand tradition correctly — that is, according to reason and without prejudice — is itself a form of prejudice. Among its other consequences, such an attitude has privileged individual judgement and reason as a source of truth over established systems of authority. In this way, for example, the Enlightenment endangered the foundations of such disciplines as Biblical criticism.

As for European architecture, Veseley has pointed out how the idealized theories of the Renaissance on Classical tradition collapsed before the Enlightenment’s inquisition; and further how the mythical, religious and ontological foundations of architectural order were pushed aside. Nevertheless, he claimed that certain traits of traditional knowledge still persist in discussions of architecture, “in terms of proportions, rules and other explicit principles, and how far the order of architecture is always part of the given order of culture.” In this sense, all architectural tradition is the equivalent of embodied memory, accessible in a latent way to the possibilities of reverie, imagination and creativity, and supported by the permanent presence of cultural meaning.

At its highest level, tradition has been identified with the *philosophia perennis* of Steuchus Eugubin (sixteenth century) and the neoscholastics. This term echoes the *philosophia priscorum et prisca theologia* of Marcilio Ficino, who used these concepts to refer to a primordial tradition to which all religions are inwardly related. The term *philosophia perennis* was also employed by Leibniz, Aldous Huxley, and W.N. Perry, and has been defined by Frithjof Schuon as “that meta-

physical truth which has no beginning, and which remains the same in all expressions of wisdom.” This, in turn, suggests the term *sophia perennis*.

This is not the place to dwell on the import of *sophia perennis* in its wider manifestations. But it is important to find out what it means in terms of Eastern Islam. Here the recent works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr are instructive, particularly those in which he has expounded a *cosmologia perennis*, in which the natural world is a theophany of divine qualities, seen “with the eye of the heart.” In Islamic thought, many such cosmological schemes have coexisted, some based on the text of the Koran and others descended from Hellenism. But there remains the constant theme of a hierarchic universe, manifested by the Divine Principle, and related intimately to the inner being of man. As distinct from the linear time of Christian and Western tradition, a cyclic view of time holds sway in Islam, reflecting the transhistorical nature of the Koran.

In this regard, Nasr has divided cosmic reality in its temporal order into two poles. One is “subjective,” relating to consciousness as past, present and future. The other is “objective,” involving cyclic time, with a quartenary structure. The latter may be identified on several levels as morning, midday, evening and night; the four seasons of the year; or the four ages of man — infancy, childhood, adolescence, and old age. These Nasr has linked as a *cosmologia perennis* to the four *yugas* of the Hindu cosmic cycle. Thus, the past of “objective” time is a reflection of the origin, the outward (*al-zahir*), and also a reminder of paradise lost, imperfection, and all that man leaves behind on his spiritual journey. Meanwhile, the future relates to the eternal world to come, the inward (*al-batin*), and the paradise of revealed promise. In between, the present moment is the gateway to eternity — according to Dante, “the point at which all times are present.”

Nasr has further written that the present moment “ . . . is to time what the point is to space. To be at the central point here and now is to live in the Eternal which is always present.” Thus, space is differentiated, imbued with the Divine Reality, and qualified by time as the presence of the sacred. “The orientation of cultic acts, the construction of traditional architecture, and many of the traditional sciences cannot be understood without grasping the significance of the traditional conception of qualified space.” In Islam, all earthly space is polarized by the primordial temple, the Ka’ba; and in an analogous way, inhabited space is polarized by the center, the gateway to Eternity.

In terms of the Afghan houses described previously, the enclosing enceinte of the house — *gala* and *hauulti* — defines *al-zahir*, outward, the past and all the other meanings described above. Meanwhile, it defines as *al-batin*, inward, the future and all its possibilities. There in the court, the cosmic cycles unfold in their four stages around the center, the stages precisely fixed by the sun’s movement. Entities such as cosmic rhythms, spatial polarization — as well as form, matter and number — are understood by the *scienția sacra* as the esoteric dimension, and not the exoteric of positive religious knowledge.
A similar condition obtains with regard to the foundations of Islamic art. According to Nasr, the failure to recognize the true nature of this sacred dimension has blinded Western scholars and art historians. “[They] insist on finding sources for the Islamic, or rather metaphysics, of art while they have been searching in treatises of theology and jurisprudence.” Instead, Nasr has affirmed the continuity of a parallel oral tradition of cosmological principles pertaining to art in certain parts of the Islamic world.

This phenomenon is certainly to be found in Afghanistan. Here, Aflaton (Plato) remains the subject of anecdote by unlettered people. Likewise, the teachings of Sufism are still considered repositories of Islamic esotericism. In fact, Sufis are still counted among the master builders and craftsmen of living memory, and the appellation “Sufi” is still used as a courtesy title for master builders and respected craftsmen. Much other evidence exists of a link between the esoteric tradition of Sufism and building and craft activities in Afghanistan today.

WESTERN ISLAM: ARABIC SPACE

As an important, but limited, confirmation of the principle of rotation from another part of the Islamic world, we now turn to the observations of Bernard Huet concerning the traditional house and city in the Magreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia). Based on conflicts that arose in his architectural teaching in North Africa, Huet contrasted the geometric and spatial attitudes of Europeans with his findings concerning the perceptions, codes and conventions of Arab builders. Specifically, to the Arab conception of space, Huet attributed “global properties,” attached to the topological “quality” of a form rather than the geometric “quantity” of a shape. Such properties are “founded on implicit circularity,” he wrote, a principle that exists in both courts and rooms — even T-shaped rooms. Huet believed such circularity might most clearly be detected through the use of repeated design motifs, such as always leaving the center empty. For example, “It is exceptional to find an object located at the center of courts,” he wrote. In such design schemes, composition is additive, a juxtaposition of autonomous parts that is carried over even into the decoration. Thus, in habitable rooms, furniture and other fittings are not isolated things, but are situated in pairs and arranged according to a representational role in the living space.

“Explicit allusions to circularity as a geometrical shape are rather exceptional, which makes it all the more meaningful,” Huet wrote. He found the roots of such meaning both in the radial (but static) disposition of the Islamic community, five times a day round the single center, Makkah, and in the circumambulating of the Ka’ba. Beyond such observations, however, he did not offer further interpretation of the circularity principle. In particular, he did not refer to any sense of either individual or group motility, or to the fixing of qualitative stations in time and space, as we have described with regard to diurnal rotation in Afghan houses.

Overall, the value of Huet’s work for our purposes lies in his general observation of circularity. Although he understood it to function in a much less dynamic and situational way than we have described, he claimed it pertained not only to open courts, but to each room of the house. Huet even applied his notion of circularity to the Arab city. Thus, the medina was not the result of a topographic division of surfaces, as in the West. In its labyrinthine continuity, it was impossible to understand the Arab city according to Euclidean typology. Most importantly, Huet’s observations, taken as a whole, underline the shared presence in historic Islamic peoples, of a common sensibility and a common order of culture that have contributed to the development of a distinctive Islamic architectural and artistic heritage.

SUMMARY: THE FOUR-AIWAN COURT

The traditional urban hawili in Afghanistan, as shown, is a four-sided complex of aiwan-ranges and rooms built in a relaxed composition around a court, regulated by the implicit principle of diurnal rotation. However, in keeping with the commentary above, we do not believe the cultural order and meaning of diurnal rotation lie in the imitation of nature. Rather, to borrow a phrase from Vesely, we regard the architecture of the hawili as the “mimesis of exemplary situations.”

In the cultural history of Afghanistan, these “exemplary situations” can assuredly also be found in the classic four-aiwan court. Here the primary role of architecture as a symbol of cosmic form is more transparent. And through history, its symbolic role as a privileged receptacle has been exploited in numerous large-scale representations. Two such building types where these issues are clearly illustrated in Afghanistan are the Friday mosque and the palace. We will end this article by discussing an important example of each.

Located in the northeast quarter of the city, Herat’s great mosque, the Masjid-i-Jami, is a major monument of Afghan culture (fig. 9). Although its early history is unclear, it was first built in its present form under Sultan Ghiasuddin-Ghori around 1200 A.D. Partly destroyed during the Mongol invasion of 1221, the Masjid-i-Jami was subsequently rebuilt and reclaimed in its early thirteenth-century form, and it has since been repaired and redecorated many times. The most recent restoration came in 1966, when arrangements were made for it to cater to 155 students, thus reinstituting its educational and academic role.

The Masjid-i-Jami consists of a large court surrounded by a great forest of piers and domed vaults. The dominant spatial importance of its four aiwans is further reinforced by pushtaks, high frontal walls rising over each aiwan arch (with towers added at the main aiwan). These surfaces contrast with the deep aiwan recesses and provide a field for decoration and cal-
ligraphy. Yet despite such imposing scale, the use of the Masjid-i-Jami is governed by the same principle of diurnal rotation as in the Hajji Abdul mosque. In particular, since the qibla faces almost due west, students, teachers, and the pious can use the court and its four aiwans throughout the day as a hawili. Such a flexible pattern of use is further indicated by the small mihrab and qibla wall in the northern part of the court.

If the present four-aiwan form of the Masjid-i-Jami is identical to the Ghiyasuddin rebuilding, this structure may be broadly representative of pre-Mongol mosque architecture from Iran to Central Asia. The historical significance here would be great, since there are literary references to ninety major foundations in these lands, which were destroyed during the invasion of the Mongols.

As important as the diurnal character of this great mosque may be, it is in the Dar-al-imara, the palace, that the truly habitation character of diurnal rotation may best be seen in monumental form. In Afghanistan, the great palace complex of Lashkari-Bazaar, built by the Ghaznavid Dynasty (Masaud I, 1030–1041), is of major importance in the area’s history (fig. 10). Daniel Schlumberger’s discovery of the ruined palace in 1948 and his identification of it with literary references has led some to consider it the first example of the four-aiwan court in Islamic architecture. At any rate, it is most likely the earliest surviving datable representation of such a building form in Eastern Islam. In general terms, the classic form of the four-aiwan court at Lashkari-Bazaar is a fitting representation of the glory of the Ghaznavid Dynasty, whose power extended across Central Asia, India and Iran, and the palace most certainly helped in the dissemination and preeminence of the form.
At Lashkari-Bazaar, the principal palatial entity is situated on a bluff on the eastern bank of the Helmand River. It is laid out in accordance with diurnal rotation, taking the form of a four-aiwan court on the meridional axis, with a larger north aiwan. The north and south parts of the palace, used for winter and summer habitation respectively, are penetrated by the main axis, which ends in external outward-facing aiwans. In addition, the room in the center of the north (winter) part features a platform for banquets, that would seem to confirm its use for gatherings on winter evenings. Water, an essential ingredient of such large-scale court architecture, was probably also present in the large hauili. Indeed, there are remains of elaborate staircases to the south, which may have been used to bring it up from the river.

Despite its ruined condition, the palace of Lashkari-Bazaar must be seen as a physical "exemplary situation" of the classic four-aiwan court. The mimesis of this form extended for many hundreds of years, through the subsequent history of Islamic architecture, from India to Egypt. The principle of diurnal rotation was most assuredly employed here, given that the Ghaznavids were hitherto nomads of Turkic origin, and were well accustomed to outdoor living.

Afghanistan has harbored a long and rich architectural tradition. In many Islamic historical contexts, however, the meaning of such architectural history has remained opaque, as commentators have been unable to uncover deeper levels of reality. By setting forth the principle of diurnal rotation as found in Afghanistan, we have attempted to unfold a layer of meaning in the social and architectural order of an Islamic region. Apart from its intrinsic interest, we hope this may improve the understanding of educators and architects who find themselves engaged with this or similar traditions.

REFERENCES NOTES


2. The unique socio-spatial phenomenon found in Afghan courtyards, discussed in this paper, predates the difficult conflicts of the last two decades. Due to the plight of war and the continued destruction of towns and villages, along with subsequent mass migration, settlement patterns as illustrated here have undoubtedly been transformed in many parts of the country. As a result, this analysis may no longer completely reflect current conditions. Nevertheless, these findings should prove instrumental in reconstruction efforts in coming years. In particular, they may serve as a point of departure and a datum line against which to measure the merit of future building proposals.

3. The word sakooncha is common from the west to the southeast of Afghanistan, in both the Pashtun and Persian languages.

4. Use of the term hauili for “courtyard” is extensive throughout Afghanistan.

5. Qawwal is the name of a group of migrant workers (and thus their settlements), who originally came from the Ningrahur Province of eastern Afghanistan. Jats are similar migrants found in the west and southwest.

6. Kazimee was the leader of a group of architectural students from Kabul University who surveyed and prepared measured drawings under the guidance of Stanley I. Hallet and Rafi Samizay. These drawings were published in Hallet and Samizay, Traditional Architecture of Afghanistan (New York: Garland STPN Press, 1980).


8. Qala is an originally Arabic word used to describe a fortress, but it is now commonly used throughout Afghanistan. See B. Kazimee: “Qala: The Fortress Farmhouse of Afghanistan,” 74th Annual Proceedings of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (USA, 1986).


12. Ibid., pp.152–53. The qibla is the direction of Makkah at any given location.

13. In mosques, the mihrab is a niche rising from floor level and placed in the center of the qibla wall.


15. The establishment of hermeneutics as the future basis of the human sciences was the achievement of Hans-Georg Gadamer in his Truth and Method (New York: Continuum, 1993).


17. Ibid., p.9.


19. Ibid.


21. See A. Coomaraswamy, Selected Papers, Metaphysics, R. Ripey, ed., Bollingen Series LXXXIV (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987). E.g., under "Philosophia Ferennis," p.7: "The metaphysical ‘philosophy’ is called ‘perennial’ because of its eternity, universality, and immutability; it is Augustine’s ‘Wisdom uncreate, the same now as it ever was and ever will be’; the religion which, as he also says, only came to be called ‘Christianity’ after the coming of Christ.”


24. Nasr, Knowledge and the Sacred.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.


28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Here we should also note that the circumambulation of the Ka’ba takes place in a counterclockwise direction, which might be interpreted as enhancing the unique and spiritually atemporal experience which the believer undergoes.


All drawings are by the authors unless otherwise indicated.