Analysis of the Interior Design Components in Traditional Courtyard Houses in Irbid, Jordan

Dana K. Amro and Azizi Bahauddin

School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Courtyard housing has existed for thousands of years, and it first appeared in the buildings of the Belad Al-Sham area. In neighboring countries such as Jordan, traditional courtyard houses have their own characteristics that suit the local region, which affect interior elements. This courtyard is a private and isolated space surrounded by living spaces of the house. This study aims to identify similarities between the traditional courtyard houses in Jordan and the old Damascus courtyard houses. According to the study question what are the common interior design components in traditional courtyards houses in Jordan compared to traditional courtyard houses in old Damascus. A survey research design that uses content analysis techniques is used to explore the traditional courtyard houses in Jordan. These houses are then identified through field observation after site visits and photographic documentation. Two case studies were analyzed; these case studies cover two styles of interior design components in traditional courtyard houses in Jordan. Findings suggest few similarities between the two styles. However, the interior finishing in traditional courtyard houses in Jordan is simpler than that in the old Damascus courtyard houses even if these houses are for wealthy people.

INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the Arab world, one can understand the various unique examples of traditional architecture, mainly houses. Despite cultural differences in each region, the design of houses has retained a communal architectural language that responds to both the common social and well-known religious needs [1]. Early Ottoman buildings in Jordan are difficult to date precisely from the 18th century. The main features of the historic fabric are represented by the early Ottoman villages (1880–1918) [2]. The courtyard is an architectural component that suits the local culture and local society [3]. Moreover, the elements of interior space are the major entities that provide meaning to the overall space. Elements of the interior space define the space, thereby creating boundaries, and play an important part in defining the function of a space. These elements provide identity and authenticity to the interior space [4]. The best examples of 19th century architecture for courtyard houses in Jordan can be seen in the cities of Irbid, Salt, and Madaba [3]. Interior elements in traditional courtyard houses in Jordan have not been adequately researched. To fill this gap, this study aims to identify the common interior design components in traditional courtyard houses in Jordan in contrast to those of traditional courtyard houses in old Damascus. Traditional courtyard houses are analyzed from within the city of Irbid (north of Jordan). These Ottoman-era houses have two styles: inward, which solely looks into the courtyard (such as the Arar house) and both inward and outward views (such as the Al-Nabulsi house). The analysis focuses on the most essential elements: space planning, circulation system, and the main finishing elements.

Methodology:

The research applies a qualitative method. Case studies are the main tool for this study, with observation, architectural documentation data, and visualizing materials used as qualitative data collection tools [5]. This study uses the following approaches:
i. Survey strategies to explore appropriate data that achieve the objectives of the study. The survey covers traditional courtyard houses in Jordan built between the 18th and 19th centuries.

ii. Random selection was conducted to select two traditional courtyard houses as case studies to be analyzed. The criteria for these choices are:
   - Traditional houses with courtyards and built in the Ottoman era
   - Traditional courtyard houses built along the Jordanian borders and in Irbid

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

(i) Space Planning:

During the Ottoman period, the traditional courtyard house in old Damascus is mainly divided into two parts: haramlek, which are areas reserved for female members of the family, and salamlek, which are areas reserved for male members of the family. Some wealthy families have khadamlek in their houses (Fig. 1). According to Islamic belief, men and women must have separate areas in the house [4, 7]. Basically, the traditional courtyard house arrangement is limited to one story, where the top floor is always considered the most important part of the house and used as the sleeping area. The traditional courtyard house is composed of three parts: a basement floor, a ground floor that comprises the main living areas called salamlek, and a first floor that comprises the private areas called haramlek [8].

![Fig. 1: Three divisions in the old Damascus traditional courtyard house.](image)

Traditional Jordanian courtyard houses are divided into two areas: the guest area and the family area, which ensures privacy for female members of the family and protects them from guests. The first case study is the Arar house. Its space planning is unlike that of the second case study, the Al-Nabulsi house. Space planning is limited to one story, where the entrance opens directly to a large courtyard. The guest room is far from the entrance, so the guest has to pass through the courtyard. The remaining five rooms are the living room, kitchen, and bedrooms. For the second case study, namely, the Al-Nabulsi house, the style is very similar to the Damascus style, which comprises two stories. The ground floor has guest rooms (salamlek space), a living room, a kitchen, and other service areas. Inner stairs link the two floors; the first floor is used as a sleeping area, and a private area, which is haramlek space, has external façade balconies.

(ii) Circulation System:

In the old Damascus style, the entrance is designed to obstruct any view of the interior space; a bent entrance faces a blank wall with an adjacent reception area, which provides privacy [9]. The circulation system has a functional gradient from the public space (guest room) to semi-public space (courtyard) to private space (the bedrooms). This setup helps to ensure that strangers do not encounter the family members [10]. The courtyard is the heart of the house, and it serves as an intermediary space between the entrance and the inner spaces [1] (Fig. 2).

In the Arar house, the entrance is designed to open directly into the courtyard, which does not provide privacy for family members inside the courtyard. The courtyard is the heart of the house and is a transitional space to other rooms. The circulation system has a functional gradient from the public space (courtyard) to the private space (bedrooms) (Fig. 3). In the Al-Nabulsi house, three entrances open directly to the qa’ah (guest room), which provides more privacy for family members. The courtyard is a transitional space and the link between rooms. The circulation system gradually shifts from public spaces to semi-private spaces and through the stairs to the first floor, which leads to private spaces (Fig. 4).
Fig. 2: The inner circulation system in old Damascus courtyard house.

Fig. 3: The circulation system in Arar house.

Fig. 4: The circulation system on the ground floor in Al-Nabulsi house.

(iii) Finishes:

The interior decoration is very rich in old Damascus courtyard houses, especially in the houses of wealthy families. Occasionally, the floor decoration represents ornamented marble floor tiling, which appears similar to carpeting [11]. Ceilings are also highly decorated with wooden panels that display intricately woven ornamental geometrical shapes. Moreover, the walls are sometimes filled with ornaments, such as intricate wooden ornamental carvings. The walls around cabinets are sometimes covered with wooden panels with engraved calligraphy that matches the cabinet design (Fig. 5) [8]. Traditional courtyard houses contain two types of furniture. One of these is fixed furniture, which includes cabinets built into walls (niches). These are one of the main storage elements in the room, along with built-in stone seats with cushions in the courtyard and living areas. The second type is movable wooden furniture, which mainly includes sofas and chairs, and metal furniture, such as beds [4].

The analysis of the case studies shows that the interior decoration of the Arar house is very simple. The ceilings are up to 4 meters high and are covered with wooden panels with wide arcs in the middle of the ceiling and have no decorative elements. The floor in the guest room uses ordinary tiles, whereas other rooms have cement coverings. Courtyards are tiled with natural stone. Moreover, ordinary walls have niches that serve as bookshelves and built-in cabinets devoid of decorative style. The Al-Nabulsi house is for a wealthy family.
Their house has more architecture and interior decorations than the Arar house. Architecture decorations are found on the external façade, especially on the first floor, which has oriented columns that support windows. In addition, the balconies on the first floor have an oriented fence that overlooks the street. Ceilings in the interior are plain with metal bridges about 4 meters high. The floors are highly ornamented with colored tiles that resemble carpet in most rooms. The walls are simple and contain niches for books and built-in cabinets (Fig. 6).

Fig. 5: The interior finishes old Damascus style.

Fig. 6: The interior finishes in Al Nabulsi house.

Summary:
The case studies revealed that traditional houses in old Damascus and in Jordan have courtyards, which, in both cases, represent the core of the traditional houses. The interior decoration in traditional courtyard houses in Jordan is simpler than that in the old Damascus courtyard houses even if these houses are for wealthy people. The interior decoration of the courtyard houses of merchants is more elaborate than that of courtyard houses owned by peasants, given that the former is considered more well-to-do. Generally, the Jordanian style is more concerned with the architectural ends than the interior. Traditional Jordanian courtyard house styles show certain differences in space planning, such as the separation of sections exclusively for men and women, but not as in the traditional houses of old Damascus. As for the circulation system, two styles of entrances exist: one that opens directly out to the courtyard and one that opens to a room. In both housing styles, the courtyard is the main movement space in the house. Moreover, a comparison between the interior finishing of houses in old Damascus and Jordan shows that Jordanian courtyard houses tend to be simpler and less ornamented. Furthermore, the difference between the houses in old Damascus and houses in Jordan is that the latter are in a rural areas, whereas old Damascus houses are in urban areas as part of the capital of Belad AlSham. Therefore, traditional Jordanian courtyard houses reflect the way of life and understanding of the Jordanian themselves in relation to the people and the surrounding environment. Moreover, traditional Jordanian courtyard houses reflect the culture of the area, have their own identity, and take Jordanian cultural heritage into consideration.

REFERENCES


