Herati housing of Afghanistan

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In the course of its diverse and complex history, Afghanistan has come to be the home of some sixteen separate ethnic groups, each with its own language, architecture, and economic structure. As a result, the country is blessed with a wide variety of vernacular architecture and folk housing, which is characterized by a subtle balance between the man-made form and the surrounding natural environment. These houses, whether they are the nomadic tents of the Kochi tribes, the fortress-like qulas of the Pashtoon clans, or the communal villages of the Nuristanis, share in common a representation of housing within a traditional, pre-industrial urban form. They successfully integrate an economy of materials and structural techniques with climatic conditions and the prevailing norms of social interaction and family conduct.

The traditional, pre-industrial Afghan city functioned within a feudal system that was firmly based upon the Islamic code of ethics. Such virtues as adherence to family ties, traditional occupations, and respect for the hierarchy of caste, formed the basis of the society and were reflected repeatedly in its architecture and town planning.

Afghanistan is in the early stages of a process of modernization and industrialization which threatens to overwhelm the harmony of traditional urban life. While it is not possible to curb modernization, it is necessary to control it so that what is new is not used to destroy mindlessly what is good from the past.

Herat

Located along the ancient trade route between Kabul and Persia, the old city of Herat is the best surviving example of traditional urban form. The plan that is documented here is based upon a survey conducted in 1916 (Fig. 1, p. 248). Although the town has grown substantially since then and has overflowed its boundaries, the old section of Herat retains its original form and many of the traditional activities.

Although the history of Herat goes back to Alexander the Great who reportedly ordered the building of a mighty citadel on the site in 330 B.C., the origin of the layout is unknown. The rectangular plan is similar to traditional Arab town plans and may have been laid out during the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries when Persian and Middle Eastern influence was the strongest in the area.

The original city was laid out in a quadrangle 1300 m by 1500 m with housing for 80,000. Four thick mud walls, outfitted with gates, drawbridges, and towers, totally enclosed the inner city. The regularity of the north wall is interrupted by the old citadel, Arg-i-Kuhna, a large brick structure which sits on a hill overlooking the city. Later, a second citadel, Arg-i-Nau, was built between the old citadel and the north wall. The city was also protected by a moat, a second trench and a low outer wall.

From each of the gates, major axial streets cut through the city dividing it into quarters. These wide, straight...
streets were lined with shops and caravansaries, large buildings with rooms arranged around a central courtyard which served as hotels and warehouses. The social and commercial heart of the city, the Char Suq, was located at the central intersection. Its name, literally translated, means "four-cornered bazaar."

Public baths also served as meeting places. In 1906, Herat had one public bath for every 200 houses. These baths were large masonry buildings and included both communal and individual rooms for bathing.

The most important mosque or "Masjid-i-Jamai" was in the northeastern quadrant of the city and brought all the town together for the Friday prayers. In addition, there were small mosques in each residential area.

Herat, like most traditional Afghan cities, was the market town and administrative/religious center for a large rural hinterland. The peasantry was engaged in tenant farming, while the landlords lived within the city alongside merchants, craftsmen, and the region's religious and political authorities. The peasants would visit the city on a regular basis to trade, deposit their grain, and attend major religious festivals. As a result, the region has two distinct house types: the large urban house and the simpler rural peasant's house.

**Urban houses**

The approach to the urban dweller's house is via one of the narrow twisting pedestrian passageways that crisscross Herat (Fig. 2). The house itself is a large complex of buildings entered through a long narrow outer court called the hawyeli birun. This space serves as a buffer between the street and the main house and has rooms for the field workers, visiting peasants, and domestic animals. This space is "semi-public" in the sense that strangers may enter without permission of the
Fig. 3: The inner court of an aristocratic urban house

An orchard or hagcha is at one side of the outer court and is surrounded by a low wall. A small guest house or seracha is built within it.

Before entering the main house, there is an entrance foyer at the far corner of the outer court with benches. The women of the house can carry on trade with tradesmen in this area without being seen and guests may wait for admittance to the inner court or hawyeli darun.

The inner court is surrounded on all sides by an arcade in the character of traditional Islamic architecture (Fig. 3). There is a shallow circular pool in the center reflecting the sky above and various rooms are entered from the sides.

There are five types of rooms around the inner court. The family's summer quarters and winter quarters face each other on opposing sides. Then on the east and west are the secondary rooms reserved for servants and dependent relations, and the various utility rooms. Corner rooms, not benefiting from openings on the court, are used for cooking, storage, latrines and cisterns.

Much of the daily life takes place on the roof which is reached by two staircases. Women gather to knit, card wool or perform other tasks next to the high parapet walls which block the wind and the view from neighboring houses.

The urban house is constructed of sun-dried brick faced with a layer of fired brick, with an additional layer of gypsum plaster on the interior walls. Climate control is achieved by the central courtyard, wind scoops on the roof which funnel the cool north wind down into the main rooms, vaulted crawl spaces under the floor, and wooden sunscreens in the openings (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Section of the aristocratic urban house showing the wind scoop
Fig. 5: Partial plan of a village showing rooms, courts, and open paths

Fig. 6: Sections of a two-story village house

Fig. 7: Arched kitchen opening onto a roof top in a Herati village

Fig. 8: Herati village showing cubical room units
Rural Herati housing

In rural Afghanistan, class differences and religious taboos are neither as strong nor as conspicuous as in the cities. The less rigid social order of the countryside is reflected in the traditional dwelling. There is no formal hierarchy of spaces. Instead of the elaborate series of courtyards and entrance ways which separate the family members from the life on the streets, there is only an entrance door between the street and the inner courtyard (Fig. 5).

The rural house is usually two stories high (Fig. 6). The ground floor is used for livestock and storage and the second floor for living. The basic structural unit is a domed cube 3 m on a side, constructed of mud. Both the individual house and the village derive their form from the aggregation of these cubes (Figs. 7-9). Initially, a house is formed by arranging rooms either on one side of a courtyard or in an "L" along two sides. As the needs and resources of a family grow, additional rooms can be added both vertically and horizontally. Eventually, as the space on individual lots is exhausted, the adjacent streets and paths are spanned.

Conclusion

Afghanistan is still 90 percent rural and the country has hardly been touched by twentieth century technology, with the result that traditional building methods are not a part of history but a continuing craft. However, modernization is beginning to effect Afghanistan's mushrooming urban centers, upsetting the balance of traditional culture and the built environment. It is still possible and necessary to understand traditional solutions in evaluating new alternatives.