

Space Design and Privacy in a Saudi House

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Abstract

Owners shape the interior spaces of their houses to support their daily needs. In Saudi Arabia owners' decisions are influenced by social needs and rules. These social rules, in traditional houses, require multiple spaces that share the same function yet each target specific users. The spaces are mainly gender oriented, and reflect different sides of the owners' needs. This paper focuses on one of these personal needs: privacy. The paper looks at the meaning of privacy and its importance inside contemporary Saudi houses. Privacy, as an issue, is international and affects people globally. It is asked here whether privacy is a culturally universal or culturally specified concern, and is concluded that it is an international concern yet with cultural specifications; something to be, respected by designers and reflected in their designs for living spaces. In this paper we have conducted an empirical study (interviews and observations) with Saudi females in order to understand the meaning of privacy in the context of Saudi contemporary houses. We aim to understand the meaning of privacy conceptually and ways to materialize the concept to support owners' social and personal needs inside their houses. The analysis explores different ways that owners reflect their need for privacy, through their verbal expressions and their actions in their houses. The research observed the value of privacy from the participants' perspective, resulting in the establishment of conceptual boundaries and suggesting methods to apply in Saudi Arabia and similar cultures where privacy meaning and values are similar.

Key Words: Privacy, interior design, Saudi houses, culture, visual, interpretation, spatial design.

1. Introduction

Privacy is addressed in the literature as *the concept of privacy*. The conceptualisation of privacy indicates its depth as a term, and particularly that it is involved in different subject areas. This paper refers to it within the field of architecture and interior design, and specifically with regard to the interior spatial environment of contemporary Saudi houses.

Each culture has its own norms and social specifications with regard to what is accepted and what is not. In Saudi Arabia there is a complex relation between hospitality and privacy within the environment of the house; the balance between those two social requirements and the internal social boundaries is a natural consideration.

The researcher has experienced diverse environments, where differences and similarities have presented themselves; conceptual, static and dynamic physical

differences, where the need for, and importance of, privacy are reflected in the development of the house design.

From this experience, it was noted that the visual aspect of privacy is strongly considered. Even when users do not state that this is the case, they act upon its value and importance to them. This does not exclude the importance of acoustic and aroma privacy in the house. These needs serve the important social obligation of hospitality, upon which house owners pride themselves. As mentioned earlier, there is a complex relation between privacy and hospitality, where they complement one another, and both are representative of the owner's social status and identity.

This paper serves two purposes: firstly, it gives a broad view of the concept of privacy; secondly privacy needs representation within contemporary Saudi houses, with reference to traditional Saudi houses, to trace the development of this concept of privacy and its connection to hospitality and its implementation.

2. Literature Review

The literature has addressed the issue of privacy, in an attempt to identify both privacy and its boundaries. It has been considered by different cultures and times, for example, in England, Italy and China, where some patterns such as the link between the role of the different genders in the house and their privacy boundaries were noted. As Newell mentions, there is a connection between gender and emphasis on privacy needs, males being keener to maintain high levels of privacy.

Proximity theory by Hall¹, Westin² and Pedersen's³ identification of privacy addresses individual needs for privacy, and touched upon the physical boundaries of the concept, which are affected by the individual him/herself and other external factors such as the environment in which they live.

Also, literature addresses the universality and localisation of privacy, as per the effect of globalisation in generalising this concept universally⁴. Yet the cultural influence that played a role in modifying it was hard to neglect. The conceptual meaning of some architectural and spatial elements is better valued when the reasons for their creation are known; such as the social and environmental driving factors.

While some view it (globalisation) as an evil trend towards dehumanization and economic domination others view it as a multifaceted phenomenon that pauses challenges and offers new opportunities.⁵

Globalisation is viewed not only as an obstacle, but as a challenge that defines a place. Part of this challenge is to engage with users of a space, knowing that their lifestyle patterns create a track, even if an unchanging one. Observing life inside the house is an important start, as it has been said that the house 'is our first

universe.⁶ Therefore, a start can be made by returning to vernacular architecture, which, it is argued, is a result of different input from the users' environment - their climate, social and personal needs. An example can be found in Rapoport's⁷ book, with regard to a tribe's dwelling organisation, and the effect of an external alteration to that vernacular environment. The figures below display the original and conceptually improved dwelling, yet this improvement was not environmentally friendly as far as the users were concerned, as it took away from them some of their social rights. From the perspective of the researchers concerned, they were improving the living environment of the users, but they were not considering the implications related to these changes.

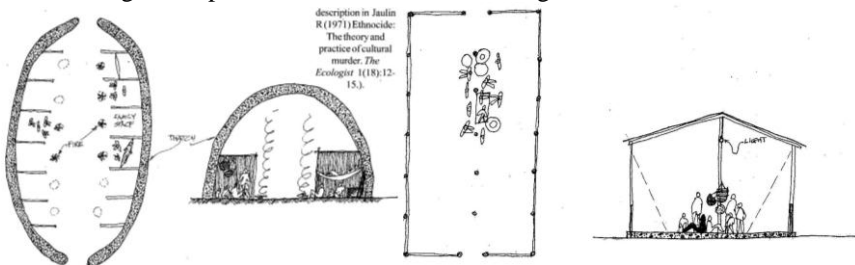


Figure 1 Original housing organisation on the left and 'improved' housing on the right

This external input on vernacular architecture extended furthermore to other architectural buildings, which is, according to Rapoport, a result of the gap between the architecture and the users; architects assuming that they know more about the lifestyle. This leads us to the case of Saudi Arabia, where development houses are becoming popular because of the need for accommodation, yet the functionality of these houses with regard to one of the major social needs is lacking; privacy and its relation to hospitality acts as a social need in Saudi culture. The way people deal with privacy inside their contemporary houses is a result of adaptation to what was presented to them. Architects, as Rapoport³ suggests, need to focus on *end user designs*, which requires more understanding of users' needs and social patterns of use inside the house.

This concept is a variable item. It cannot be determined or identified by itself as a single entity. Moreover, privacy is the outcome of the influence of various parties and involvers. Therefore, if privacy needs to be defined, it should be identified and analysed by its influential parties and involvers.⁸

Accordingly, it would be more efficient to analyse and identify privacy within the affecting influences in the selected environment. The environment selection is as important as identifying the affecting factors, the interior spaces of the house were the selected environment. Space is lived 'rather than conceived, and it is a

representational space rather than a representation of space'.⁹ Therefore, understanding space and the relation it has with time and users' actions leads to a knowledge of the meaning and value this space holds. Hence the house was selected as a space in which to observe privacy and its relation to hospitality as a main factor within it.

3. Methodology

The research follows an ethnographic approach in collecting the primary information; this methodology helped the researcher to be part of the investigated sample, being involved and reflecting on this involvement as appropriate. This involvement also assists in gaining a different perspective, using personal knowledge of the topic in hand to expand the knowledge acquired from the literature review. Interviews and participant observation were the selected ethnographic methods. This paper will discuss the data collected through participant observation.

4. Methods

Ethnographic observation helps the researcher to blend with the cultural context under study and experience the living environment. The researcher's knowledge of the cultural context helped acknowledge those actions which were relevant to the research. Before undertaking the observation phase, some points needed to be considered: namely timing, sample selection and the focus on the observation-targeted area of knowledge.

First, the area of knowledge to be targeted was defined as privacy inside a selected Saudi house. Then the timing was chosen to coincide with different occasions and social interactions. Lastly the sample selected was a family house where the researcher was able to experience the nuclear and extended family lifestyle of contemporary family houses in Saudi Arabia.

The time selected was during the month of Ramadan, where different social activities commence and various levels of privacy could be touched upon. Also, hospitality varied depending on the occasion and the kinds of visitors received. Due to the consent agreement between the researcher and observed participants, the researcher was not able to obtain visual material such as pictures. Therefore detailed written notes that recorded participants' behaviour were taken. Observation notes were concerned with the paths users took inside the house to achieve their own required privacy levels and in parallel provide visitors with the hospitality levels expected. These written notes were then used with the provided floor plans to generate visual material for the research.

5. Outcome and Findings

At the start of the observation, the aim was to experience privacy in the selected sample, to be involved and explore the concept of privacy personally. After going

through the experience, it was noticed that privacy was shaped by internal and external factors. One of the internal factors is the owners' own personality, which is formulated in accordance with their background. The other important factor is social norms, which are a changing external factor. In part, social norms involve the act of hospitality, which is expected in the Arabic region as part of its identity and heritage.

Social patterns of use are an essential guide to how people use their houses and express their needs. The following will illustrate some of the social patterns within different social events, compared to the owners' daily routine inside the house, which was noted during the observation phase. The drawing in Figure 2 illustrates rooms' accessibility by different types of users; owners, family members and other visitors.

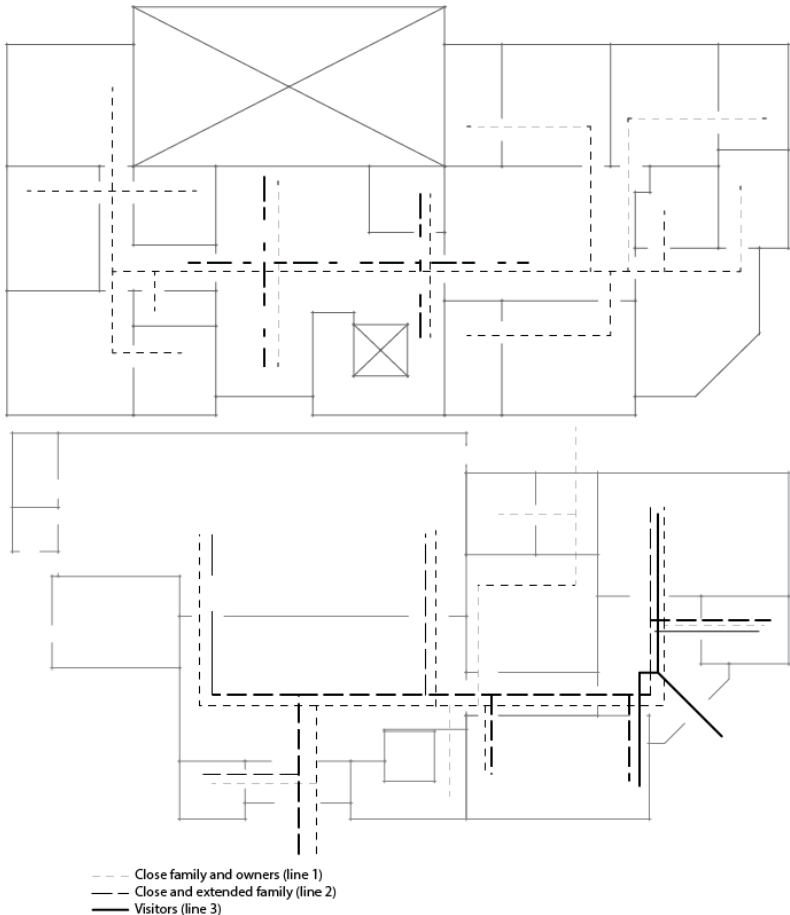


Figure 2 Ground floor plan on the bottom, first floor plan on the top

Line 3 represents the visitors' routes inside the house and shows that they are restricted to the right section of the ground floor only. *Line 2* represents the extended family routes inside the house, and includes all of the ground floor and some parts of the first floor. Lastly, *Line 1* represents the owners' and some close family members' routes inside the house, and shows that they accessed all rooms.

From the drawings, three main privacy related zones are highlighted in the house. Visitors were welcomed to access the guest living and dining rooms; visitors even have their own personalised entrance, which directs them to an isolated section of the house. When there are no visitors these rooms are not to be used.

Meanwhile, family members and extended family members are allowed into the whole of the ground floor and some rooms on the first floor, in the semi-private zone of the house. These rooms are designed to be for everyday use and ready to welcome people at all times of the day. These users also have their own entrance so they would not have to access the public zone.

Finally, there is the private zone of the house, which some close family members and the owners are allowed to access, using the same main entrance as the rest of the family members to the semi-private zone of the house. The private zone of the house has the family living room and the bedrooms on the first floor and the main and dirty kitchens on the ground floor. From Figure 2 it can be seen that there are three living rooms and three dining areas/rooms, which reflect the three different zones of the house. Each space is used in accordance with the users in the house as well as the time they are in the house. The diagrams also reflect the owners' interpretation of privacy needs in their house design, to meet their requirements and the social influences forming these needs.

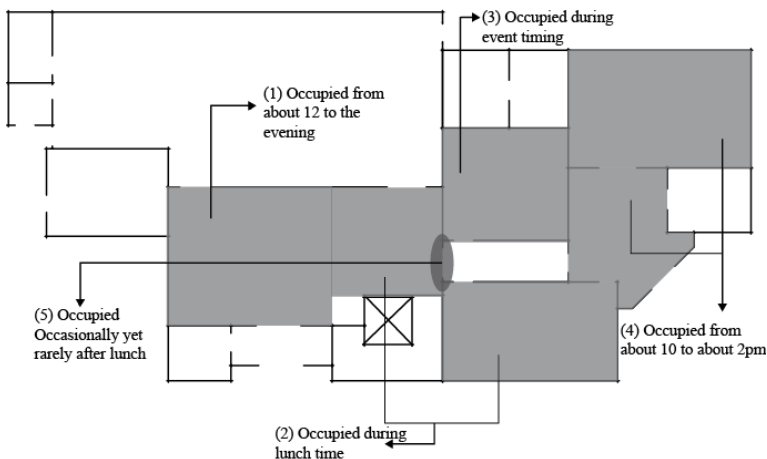


Figure 3 Spaces accessed in the event of extended family gatherings, in this case for the religious celebration after Ramadan

In the case of an extended family gathering within the house, such as a gathering for a religious celebration, users are distributed as displayed in Figure 3. Spaces 1 and 4 are occupied by visitors, male members would be in space 4 which has its personalised entrance, and space 1 would be used by female family members and relatives, again with its personalised entrance. Only the owners enter space 3, the kitchen, as illustrated in Figure 2, and this space is occupied all day as long as there are people in the other spaces of the house to assist the owners in their hospitality duties. Space 3 services the formal and semi-formal dining areas which are located next to it. Spaces 2 are occupied at lunch time and after that guests would go back to their sitting area, space 1, whilst the party that had previously occupied space 4 would vacate that space.

On occasions where female members want to greet other closely related male members, such as their uncles, they would meet at space 5, and that could happen before lunch but mostly after lunch. This might expose female visitors who are in space 1¹⁰, but that is unlikely to happen as careful measures are taken.



Figure 4 Traditional courtyard houses on the left and the observed house on the right

The drawings above display a traditional courtyard house from the Arabian Gulf on the left and the observed house on the right. In Figure 4 (a), the highlighted space represents the courtyard in the traditional house and living areas in the

observed house. The similarities come from the functional use of the space. Both are centrally located in the house, distributing users circulating to other rooms of the house. These spaces are not only spatial design elements, but also social areas for the family.

In the drawings in (b), the highlighted areas are the broken entrance in traditional houses, and the entrance halls in the observed house. These spaces help to create a visual preparation for people entering the house, and visual protection to people already inside the house.

According to Vaziritabar,¹¹ though the meaning of privacy and its expression mechanisms might have changed, they originated from the same original needs, as can be seen in Figures 4 (a) and 4 (b), or the development of traditional courtyard house and the contemporary customised house.

6. Discussion

The observation was conducted to assist in answering the main research question: what is the meaning of privacy in contemporary Saudi houses? In order to find this out, an understanding of the lifestyle and the factors affecting it was required. During the observation phase, patterns inside the house were noted that related to privacy needs. These patterns were also related to time and space.

From the observations and the literature review, it was noted that the complex relation between the concept of privacy and acts of hospitality within contemporary houses is no different in importance from the same relation found in traditional houses. The differences relate to physical interpretations that reflect contemporary building regulations and contemporary developed social norms and customs. The conceptual meaning of privacy seems to be constant, and its physical interpretation is similar; that is to say, some designated rooms and interior elements still exist within the sample house, if not directly then conceptually. Moreover, the observation illustrates the spatial identification of privacy levels inside the house reflecting the complex relation between the social requirements of hospitality and privacy, and also demonstrating the relation between space and privacy.

The literature discusses the importance of privacy in the Saudi culture, as it shapes communication patterns and is translated into everyday patterns of life. These patterns were physically incorporated into their house designs, by creating physical boundaries. The literature provided a robust background that the researcher found to be true conceptually, although as mentioned, the interpretation has altered depending on the user and the effect of globalisation. Separation between genders inside the house was a focus of the literature, and was noted in the observation phase as an important need which must be borne in mind in the shaping of the house.

From the observation and interviews, the researcher established the meaning and importance of privacy boundaries, seeking out differences and similarities

between tradition and contemporary means of translating the concept of privacy inside the house. These outcomes can be used to better inform the architect of users' wants and needs, helping them in the design process of contemporary houses.

7. Conclusion

Space defines the physical boundaries of activities, and these boundaries create rooms named after their functions. These spaces hold cultural and social values, and these values are the hidden dimensions of the creation of spaces. Relating space to a concept like privacy as a social input with the context of acts of hospitality forms a social scope that is considered fundamental. These concepts, space and privacy, are influenced by different inputs, yet the common inputs are the cultural and social inputs of the selected location.

Notes

¹ Edward Twitchell Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books: Doubleday & Company, 1969)

² Alan Westin, 'Privacy and Freedom' fw Oscar M. Ruebhausen (New York, Atheneum, 1967)

³ Darhl Pedersen, 'Model for Types of Privacy by Privacy Functions.' *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 19, no. 4 (1999): 397–405, doi:10.1006/jevp.1999.0140.

⁴ Irwin Altman, 'Privacy Regulation: Culturally Universal or Culturally Specific?,' *Journal of Social Issues* 33, no. 3 (1977): 66-84, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=16370030&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁵ Yasser Mahgoub, 'Globalization and the Built Environment in Kuwait,' *Habitat International* 28, (2004): 505–19, 507, doi:10.1016/j.habitatint.2003.10.005.

⁶ Gaston Bachelard and Maria Jolas, 'The Poetics of Space,' *Beacon Press* (1994), 4

⁷ Amos Rapoport, *Culture, Architecture, and Design* (Locke Science Publishing Company, 2005)

⁸ Alireza Daneshpour, Mohamed Rashid Embi, and Mahdi Torabi, 'Privacy in Housing Design: Effective Variables,' Paper presented at the 2th Inrenotional Conference-Workshop On Sustainable Architecture and Urban Design (ICWSAUD2012), Malaysia, 2012, 1

⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 236

¹⁰ As per religious requirements, females are to be covered from male members who are not related to her (who are not her father, brothers and uncles). That led to

social obligation in having different spaces per gender in order for each member to feel welcomed and comfortable within the space they are occupying.

¹¹ Shahram Vaziritabar, *Design and Privacy in Modern and Traditional Housing in Iran*, (Oxford Polytechnic, 1990).

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