

Social Values as Key Factors in the Design and Organization of the Dwelling

Rachel Sebba

The paper deals with the meaning of home in a multicultural society which is undergoing cultural change. Through the analysis of dwellings in Arab villages and Jewish settlements in Israel, the paper reveals the characteristics of the dwelling as a cultural instrument that at the same time serves to preserve traditional values from the past, supply its dwellers with ongoing demands of the present and affords them the conditions to change in the future.

By comparing the physical variables of the home in both cultures, the paper points to the differences between them and refers to their roots.

Keywords: meaning of the home, design variables, cultural differences, social values, arab building.

The ways of building houses in Palestine are changing rapidly. Modern methods are everywhere being introduced, both in towns and villages. Iron-girders, concrete (simple and reinforced), tiles, cement pavements, and the like, are becoming more and more common. A few years more and the characteristic Oriental ways of construction will have been more or less abandoned. Canaan, (1933). p.1.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

More than 60 years after these words were written, most of the dwellings in Arab society in the Galilee are built of reinforced concrete, the openings are protected by aluminium windows and plastic blinds and the floors are covered by modern tiling. Flowing water, electricity and gas reaches every apartment. At the side of the house, there is at least one modern car and inside televisions and telephones, a refrigerator, oven, washing machine and often a computer can be found. It seems that Canaan's fears have been realized: that western technology and western style, which predominate in the Jewish Israeli neighborhoods around, have been absorbed into Arab building whilst erasing the lines of the traditional style of building.

At the same time, anyone travelling along the roads of the Galilee today, can identify the Arab village from afar through its unique physical characteristics.

The characteristics that reappear over and over in Arab houses in the Galilee (and cannot be found in the Israeli Jewish neighborhoods) strengthen the underlying assumption that the Arabic household in the Galilee can be con-

ceived as an authentic cultural creation — it is not the traditional house (or tent) as represented in the Museum of Mankind in London, nor delineated in Canaan's book nor in other sources (for example, Amiry & Tamari, 1989; Havakook, 1986) but rather — a contemporary folk creation, repeated in thousands of variations, built at the initiative of its creators-owners who shape and change their daily living space according to their needs and means, everywhere and at any time.

From the surroundings, this creation absorbs the necessary elements to enable its owner-creator to deal with conditions approaching in the future, without deserting the cultural fundamentals of his society. Its authenticity does not derive from a visible resemblance to the traditional model, but rather, from the fact that it offers a solution to new situations without giving up the principles which influenced the formation of the Arab dwellings in the past.

In referring to the home, Duncan (1985) states that the built environment is not only a window to a culture, but also a medium through which culture is expressed. According to Gauvain & Al. (1983), "The design, use, and modi-

fication of dwellings serves as a sensitive barometer of the state of a culture, not only in time of stability, but also during periods of social change” (p. 211).

While relating to expressions of social change in the dwelling, Rapoport (1983) states:

We have to consider the specifics of the changes ... so that what is being given up, retained or adopted provides clues the relative importance of elements.” p. 258–9. ... One needs to identify those elements of the built environment which are supportive of the core cultural elements. p. 256.

Research objectives

This research adopted Rapoport’s line of thought with a view to decoding, through the use of systematic analysis, the cultural messages encoded in the Arab dwelling which has been undergoing structural and technological changes in the last 60 years.

The analysis herein attempts:

- 1 To delineate the environmental elements which are distinctive to the Arab dwelling.
- 2 To identify the variables that conjoin the physical design and its cultural meanings. (Rapoport, 1975. p. 45)
- 3 To identify central factors that play a role in preserving the cultural core.

METHOD

An analysis of the essence of the changes can be carried out by comparing the attributes of the existing Arab dwelling to the traditional house (or tent), on the one hand, and to a western house in the Jewish settlement, on the other. In both cases, a clearer picture can be obtained if we examine the differences between the model under discussion and the model that does the influencing, rather than the similarity between them.

In the first case, where the differences between the existing and traditional Arab home are examined, we can track the domains that have been changed and investigate the characteristics of the process (Sebba, 1992).

In the second case, where the differences between the existing Arab home and the western house that served as its model are analyzed, we can uncover the domains that were preserved and through them identify those elements termed by Rapoport as the “culture core”, as well as the role played by the house in preserving them.

In order to study the structure of the Arab house and its meaning as an “active component of culture”, the research examined and recorded its physical variables and investigated its

residents’ patterns of dwelling and their attitudes towards their home.

In order to test the manner in which differences between Arabic and Jewish culture are expressed through the structure of their dwellings, a comparison was made between the findings of this study and those of a similar study done in the Jewish settlements.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through observations, measurements and photographs of the dwellings and their surroundings and through interviews with all the members of the family. The interviews referred to the residents’ perception of their home and their environmental behavior.

The study was carried out in two Arab villages and in two Jewish settlements. The dwellings of 34 families were documented in the Arab villages and the dwellings of 45 families were documented in the Jewish settlements.

The data analysis included:

- 1 Analysis of schemes of the house plans, describing the spatial relationship between the different rooms of the house. Delineating the house as a territorial system, extending it as a functional system, analysis of the characteristics of physical variables such as: windows, floors, walls, decorations, furniture, etc.
- 2 Interpreting the variables of the physical environment through data gathered during the interviews.
- 3 Analyzing the data through comparison to parallel data obtained from the Jewish population.

This article does not survey the internal-cultural differences found in the research, but rather examines the main common denominators of the dwelling patterns of Arab society in Israel, (a society which shares the same language and traditional customs developed within the context of life in the desert). This particular study compares them with those of the Israeli culture (which is overall Hebrew speaking and built its habitations according to western standards).

RESULTS

As previously pointed out, the Israeli Arab village can be identified from afar by the shape and size of its buildings and by their siting on the ground.

From nearby, the Arab character of the settlement is communicated by the mutual location of the houses, by the various stages of the structures, their relation to the roads and other public areas, by the nature of the landscape and by the character of the facades.

Inside the home, the Arab features are con-

veyed by the size of the rooms and their relative location, through the characteristics of the furniture and their use and by the family's patterns of behavior.

Comparison of the ingredients of the Arab village with those belonging to the Israeli settlement shows extensive differences in their environmental character and in their meaning in many topics. A number of these will be introduced below: First, I will present the physical characteristics of the building that reflect the choices made by the people involved in their construction. Then, I will turn to the design of the dwelling and the manner in which it reflects behavioral and social considerations and norms.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Size and Volume of the Structures

The Israeli Arab village (A.V. henceforth) is made up of buildings that have 1–3 storeys with one apartment (or, rarely, two) on each of them. Dwellings of other dimensions cannot be found. The similar size of the dwellings results from the correspondence between the structural unit and the social unit: every building serves as the living area for a nuclear or extended family and is usually built for and by the family.

The residential building in the Israeli Jewish settlement (J.S. henceforth) can be anywhere between 1–17 storeys and includes between 1–120 apartments. The size of the building has no connection with social factors. The variety of sizes amongst the buildings is a result of aesthetic and economic considerations. There are no family ties or initial social commitments between people who live in the same neighborhood.

The Shape of the Structures

Despite the similarity in size of the Arab houses, they differ in shape; it is impossible to find two identical houses within a village (with the exception of those cases where two brothers build their houses together).

Buildings of the same cluster, in the J.S., on the other hand are identical in size and shape and resemble each other like cars of the same model. Dwelling units are designed on the basis of similar programs and are identical in most design variables.

The Dynamics of Building

The A.V. is in a state of continual building: The Arab enlarges his house, adds a floor when needed and starts building houses for his sons while they are still young. As a result, the entire built-up area is in a continuous process of change and the scenery is one of building in

growth. The dynamics of building contribute to increasing the varieties of shapes and sizes. No effort is made to orchestrate all the parts of the building (or its shapes, materials and colors) nor to integrate them from an aesthetic point of view.

In the J.S., residential neighborhoods are built at one time, and represent the design concept of a given architect at a given time. They are therefore homogenous in character. The entire neighborhood and each of its buildings are designed at the same time as integrated configurations and parts of an overall geometric pattern. Any addition or removal could harm this composition.

The Density of Building

The density of houses is similar but not identical in the various areas of the A.V. This density is dynamic: it grows over the years as a result of additional building all over the village.

The density of the J.S. is not evenly spread throughout the place. It is determined by the different dimensions of the structures in the different parts of the neighborhood. However, this density is static; it is established at the design stage and hardly changes subsequently.

Orientation within the Settlement

Orientation in the A.V. is based upon acquaintance with the place and depends on descriptive variables. Since there is no geometrical principle underlying the design of the A.V., one cannot rely on logical rules for orientation in the place. Anyone wishing to go to a particular house in the village, needs the residents' help to find the way.

The J.S. is designed according to a geometric pattern. The buildings are located within a grid or along clear lines. Orientation is based on the principle of a logical progression of houses along axes.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITE

The houses in the A.V. follow the natural lines of the ground. Despite the fact that most of the houses are located on hills, there is almost no leveling of the ground in order to build. The existing houses and the domestic nature of the building process rule out the possibility of laying an extensive framework and using heavy machinery to work the land.

The dwellings in the J.S. are situated on leveled, cultivated earth. Infrastructure for the buildings and roads are laid out before beginning construction of the houses.

The Landscape

Greenery in the A.V. is rare. The land around

the house is utilized for practical purposes (parking, storage of building materials, etc.) and is a potential building site for houses in the future.

Greenery in the J.S. is well maintained. The garden in front and around the house is part of the dwelling in all types of buildings.

Relation to thoroughfares

Dwellings in the A.V. are not located along thoroughfares. Vehicles move along various paths and park in adjacent places. The road system in the village is inadequate, has narrow paths, sharp turns, excessive slopes, etc.

Dwellings in the J.S. are arranged along thoroughfares. Vehicular traffic reaches all dwellings and is planned to exacting standards.

The placing and direction of the house

A considerable number of dwellings in the A.V. are built in blocks with the openings of the house placed according to sundry considerations (the opening of a son's house may be directed towards the opening of his father's house, in the opposite direction to the opening of his brother's house, towards Mecca, or towards the road, etc.). The village fabric as a whole can be interpreted according to the social relationships between the inhabitants.

The lack of clear relationships between the home and the layout of the village, together with the domestic approach to building, create a situation where the house has no front and no back.

The road arteries in the J.S. are considered to be public areas. The front of the house facing this artery is cared for as a representative facade, as is the land between the front and the public area.

The Yard

There is sharp separation between the family and the public orbits in the A.V.: Whoever crosses the line between the public area and the yard, has entered into the family's realm. The yard is an area for meeting the family, who live nearby and a common play area for the children, who are mostly siblings and cousins. It is considered an area of potential expansion and is used to store building materials, firewood, vehicles and often animals.

The space between the family's unit and the public area in apartment buildings in the J.S. is considered semi-public space. It is intended for the use of all the inhabitants (who are not related to each other) for purposes defined in the law of common dwellings. In the main, this area is used as a garden which adds aesthetic value to the building.

THE PLAN OF THE HOUSE AND THE USAGE OF ROOMS

The synthesis between the traditional principles of Arabic society and the modern forms adopted from Israeli settlements can be perceived in the plan of the house. The common lines in most plans focus on the following phenomena:

Most of the dwellings in the A.V. include a number of rooms, a kitchen and bathroom under one roof, but their composition is unique to each household.

Following traditions, dating back to the Bedouin tents, the dwelling is clearly divided up into a guest area (recognized as male territory) and a family area (recognized as female territory).

The rooms of the dwelling, whose average area is double that common in the Israeli settlements, are similar in character, size and location and are connected to a central open space (not a corridor). Due to these characteristics, the rooms are adaptable to various usages as well as to different social groups and provide the possibility of interpreting the dwelling differentially.

The rooms serve for entertaining guests and family members, for eating and watching T.V. together and for sleeping. The bedrooms are devoid of activity during the daytime and their blinds are almost always drawn. Regardless of the size of the home, boys sleep with their brothers and girls with their sisters, as a norm.

From looking at the house, one cannot guess the number of people living inside. There is no connection between the number of rooms and the number of occupants.

The kitchen is separated from the guest areas by location or by partitions. In many houses, there is a modern show-kitchen in the front of the dwelling and a place for cooking and baking in the back or outside.

In the housing in the Jewish settlements, one finds:

The layout of the apartments in the J.S. is identical for all the parallel units in a building or block of buildings.

The apartment is divided into family areas and individual territories (which cannot be found in the Arab dwellings).

The rooms of the apartment in the J.S. differ in area, character and position. Due to these characteristics, the rooms are not adaptable to various usages or to different social groups.

The number of rooms and the nature of furnishings in an apartment reveal not only how many inhabitants live in the dwelling, but

also their ages and occupations.
The kitchen usually opens onto living areas.

The Openings

The windows and doors in the A.V. house are similar in design, but not in usage, to those of the J.S. The proximity of the houses to each other and the wish to maintain privacy and cleanliness have brought about a situation where the windows are almost always closed and the blinds drawn. Windows without blinds are glazed with opaque glass.

The height of the windows is not adjusted to the manner of sitting on the floor. Doors, on the other hand, are almost always open, enabling direct physical and visual contact with the outdoors.

Furnishing

Western furniture entered the Arab household in the following sequence:

- 1 Wardrobe for clothes and linen (in the family area.)
- 2 Cupboards or showcases for guestware (in the guest area).
- 3 Western lounge furniture (in the guest area).
- 4 Beds (in the family area.)
- 5 Table (in the central open space).

The introduction of western furniture into the dwelling precedes its use; many houses in an Arab village have sofas never sat upon, dining-room tables never sat at, and beds never slept upon.

The traditional use of mattresses and pillows for sleeping and sitting and the use of metal plates on wooden feet for serving food have created dynamic living patterns expressed in flexibility in determining the functional interpretation of the dwelling according to the circumstance. These patterns are preserved in most houses and are backed up by the adaptability of the rooms.

Similar to the Japanese sleeping patterns, described by Benedict (1946), every evening the Arab child can choose his/her sleeping place together with the neighboring sibling. This choice can overstep the boundaries of the house, if the child prefers to eat or sleep at a grandmother's or uncle's home, to play and prepare homework with cousins.

The adaptability of the house (which can be ascribed to the traditional living patterns in the one-roomed peasant home or in the Bedouin tent) is nourished today not only by the size of the household, but also by the collective attitude of the Arabs towards their extended family and by their (still) active norms of hospitality.

In the Jewish settlements, one finds:

The patterns of living in the J.S. are static. The furniture is stable, suited to the room and assigned to specific users.

Comfort

Comfort in the Israeli Arab dwelling is achieved through the adaptability of the rooms, the mobility of furniture and the lack of territorial bounds on the use of stable furniture.

Comfort in the Israeli Jewish household is achieved through designing and adjusting the dimensions and materials (of the space and furniture) to specified functions and situations.

RELATIONSHIP OF THE PERSON TO THE HOUSE AND SURROUNDINGS

The Arab lives in (or near) the house in which he grew up: from childhood he has grown up in the place, which he inherited from his father, and will leave to his son. The house bridges the generations; it is the medium through which the father supports his son in his first steps and the son supports his father in old age.

Due to the patrilocal tradition, the dwelling is part of the family's confines. The extended family expands the immediate social and psychological circle, enhances personal security and enables the children to elaborate complex inter-personal relationships with parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, cousins etc. Their grandparents continue living together with young people and children, participate in their upbringing and blunt, thereby, the feeling of the course of time.

The adherence of the Arab to his family is to a large extent at the expense of his concern for the community outside the kinship circle. This trend is expressed through neglect of public areas, common functions and infrastructures of the village.

The connection between a specific person and a specific place are set before birth and continue after death — it carries with it the promise of a place in the world and converts the house from a physical asset with economic and psychological advantages to a spiritual-symbolic entity which is not for sale.

The house concurrently gives the Arab a feeling that he belongs to the place and that the place belongs to him. The commitment between the Arab and his ancestors and offspring is materialized throughout the house. The Arab does not choose or sell his dwelling. His relationship with the place is expressed through mutual adaption; patterns of

Arab living show initiative not only in building and extending the houses but also in day-to-day life.

The house and its position comprise a central factor in Arab life. The Arab does not tend to marry off a son until he has built a home for him. He prefers to marry his son to his brother's daughter, enabling a connection with the daughter and her children whilst continuing the patriarchal tradition.

To the question: "What is the home similar to?" that was addressed to Arab and Jewish students, most of the Arab students replied: "The home is like a garden". The explanations were: "The garden protects its inhabitants, giving them shade and beauty". "The garden requires constant attention but it lives, changes and grows over time". "The garden enables peace and quiet". "Even if there are many people in the garden, it is not crowded".

The garden expresses the attachment of man to the environment, displays a selective attitude to the natural surroundings and connects a specific individual to a specific place with an indissoluble link, a link which carries an obligation to the land.

In housing in the Jewish settlements:

The patrilocal tradition does not prevail. The Jewish Israeli child does not know where s/he will live when s/he grows up. Most likely that place will be chosen according to considerations of comfort and access to work or services. Most probably s/he will change her/his dwelling several times in her/his life.

Since parents and their adult children do not share the same neighborhood, they do not help them with everyday activities of raising their own children, nor do they expect their children to support them in their old age. (Huber & Spitze, 1988)

Life within the home of a nuclear family, sometimes a single parent, next to neighbors who are not relatives, narrows the immediate social circle and the number of people who can assist children and old people when needed. Relationships with society outside of the household are limited, in most cases, to a specific matter and a specific time, which, by their very nature, are not intense nor elaborated.

The security provided by the house is directly dependent on its physical characteristics and economic worth.

The design of the modern house is "cut to the cloth" of the family profile. This design in itself is a factor in leaving the home as a result of changes in the family structure.

The space left by the children, who depart

upon reaching adulthood, becomes a silent witness to the irreversibility of time and can void the everyday life of its contents. Over the years, the house becomes a burden with which an aging person can no longer cope.

The prevalent answers of Jewish students to the question: "What is the home similar to?" were "The home is like a nest", "The home is like a shelter", "The nest is a warm and comfortable place", "A place to be raised in", "The shelter is a place of security", or "It protects you from the society around ... and from the weather".

People, like animals, need a nest to raise their offspring until they reach adulthood. The nest can be rebuilt every season in a comfortable place. The shelter too is not linked to a specific place, as long as it serves its purpose and protects us from the ravages of weather and from others of our species who have no shelter of their own.

CONCLUSIONS

The fabric of the A.V. is an accumulation of thousands of decisions and personal choices which constitute a living entity, an organic reality in which the dwelling represents the social unit and the builder is identified with the tenant.

This fabric accompanies, throughout its formation, the course of life of its constructors and constitutes a factor unifying family members, expanding the immediate social circle, linking the generations and blunting the sense of time together with apprehension of the finality of life.

The layout of the J.S. is an expression of modern, rational design that was developed by western culture following the industrial revolution and influenced by two world wars.

The fabric of the J.S. is a static-geometric reality, an outcome of the decisions of a single architect or team of designers. This fabric does not represent a distinct social unit. The constructor (or designer) is not identified with the tenant. It is adapted to a certain stage in life, and is used, like the nest in nature, to raise the young to adulthood.

Its character does not contribute to cohesion of the family members and debarbs intergenerational coexistence. It intensifies feelings of loneliness and awareness of helplessness in a person in face of the passing course of time.

A comparison between dwellings in the Arab village and in the Jewish settlement in Israel shows that despite the similarity in format, components and materials, they differ in their meaning and function, in the role they play in the life of their inhabitants, in the patterns of dwelling, and in the design approach and pro-

cedures.

The Arabs introduced western ingredients into their dwellings in a process similar to that described by Levi-Strauss (1985) regarding myths: “Not without deforming ... (them) through mental operations ... remodeling ... (them) consciously or unconsciously, until ... (they) become their own” (p. 108). “For even if the same elements have been retained here

and there, experience proves that these identical elements can be accounted for by way of different reasons” (p. 103).

The orchestration of the physical elements in the Arab dwellings shows that the Arab society has adopted methods and solutions developed by western culture without approving its values and without accepting its conceptions of time and space.

Acknowledgments:

This research was supported by Technion V.P.R. fund, Glasberg–Klein research fund.

REFERENCES

- Amiry, Suad and Vera Tamari, (1989) *The Palestinian Village Home*. British Museum, London.
- Benedict, Ruth, (1946). *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Canaan, Taufic, (1933).“ The Palestinian Arab House, Its Architecture and Folklore”. Reprint from *The Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, Vols XII, No. 4 and XIII, Nos 1 & 2)
- Duncan, J.S., (1985). “The House as Symbol of Social Structure” in I. Altman & C.M. Werner, (eds). *Human Behavior and Environment* Vol. 8: Home Environments. Plenum Press, New York, pp. 133–151.
- Gauvain, M., I. Altman, & H. Fahim, (1983). “Homes and Social Change: A Cross-Cultural Analysis” in N.R. Feimer, & E.S. Geller (eds.). *Environmental Psychology*, New York: Praeger, pp. 180–218.
- Huber, Joan & Glenna Spitze, (1988). “Trends in Family Sociology” in Neil J. Smelser (ed.) *Handbook of Sociology*. California: Sage.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, (1984) in *Apostrophes* (T.V. program) presented by Bernard Pivot, in Antenne 2, France.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, (1985). *The View from Afar*. Translated by J. Neugroschel & Ph. Hoss. New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publishers.
- Rapoport, Amos, (1975). “An ‘Anthropological’ Approach to Environmental Design Research” in B. Honikman (ed.), *Responding to Social Change*. Dowden, Pennsylvania: Hutchinson & Ross, Inc. pp.145–163.
- Rapoport, Amos, (1983). “Development, Culture Change and Supportive Design” in *Habitat International*. Vol. 7, No. 5/6. pp. 249–268.
- Sebba, Rachel, (1992). “The Three Faces of Cultural Change”. Paper presented at the IAPS 12 International Conference, 13 July, 1992, Greece.