The city of Yazd has one of the most extreme climates in Iran. In the summer it can reach 34 degrees centigrade in July, while it can plummet to below freezing in the winter. The climate naturally affects the way the houses are built. Traditionally, the citizens of Yazd leave the hot and dusty city in the summer and resort to the mountain ranges in the north and the south. Two major Iranian deserts, Dasht-e-Kavir and Dasht-e-Lut, converge near the city.

Yazd formed a major cross-roads between two important trade routes—one from the Mediterranean to India, the other from Arabia to China. The Arab influence manifests itself in the typical Yazd house which locally is called "Arab" house.

RIGHT: rooftops looking in the general direction of House I and House II from the roof of the Friday Mosque. Sand dunes and mountains are visible in the distance. Focusing more closely on the city fabric, several characteristics of the Islamic city emerge. The different levels of the city—streets, courts, balconies, roof—become ambiguous. The roof turns into a surface, as active as any on the ground. The tenuous relationship of levels animates the fabric of the city just as the rooftops animate the horizon with its domes, balconies, wind towers (badgirs), and steps. The elements give rise to a stage set effect which invites exploration. Note that the true ground plane appears at lower right where the figures are walking. Yet even here the street is not merely a street but a tunnel below other buildings.

Ambiguity of use is further enhanced by uniformity of appearance. The unity of the city fabric is reinforced by the use of clay as a principal building material. Visually, there are no clues which separate lots. The lack of distinct property lines also reinforces the feeling of unity.

ASPECTS OF FORMAL STRUCTURE:
Interlocking progression from individual house, to neighbor groups sharing same cul-de-sac access, to neighborhoods sharing public amenities (mosque/school, bath, washing house).

BELOW: Looking at the Friday Mosque from the bazaar roof. The roof is an accessible and commonly used space. Here it is used as a place to dry freshly dyed yarn. The holes in the domes of the bazaar are for ventilating the dyeworks below.

BELOW: Children's Hospital near the Friday Mosque. The ambiguity of levels is again apparent. The hospital resembles a large house with a sunken court where the family retreats in hot weather. The Friday Mosque entrance iwan, beyond, is one of the tallest in Iran. Its exaggerated height resembles the prow of a ship, acting as a reference point in the uniform city fabric.

BELOW: rooftopscape from the Friday Mosque looking west, showing typical house courts embedded in the city fabric. While on an urban scale, the street appears as if carved out of a mass, in reality the wall defining it is a thin membrane at the building scale. The narrowness of the streets provides shade from sun and protection from dusty winds.

BELOW: A narrow street near the Friday Mosque. The wall to the left is the Mihrab Wali facing Mecca. But such a distinguished function is not signaled on the exterior. It is totally anonymous to the passer-by. The buttresses placed here seem to hold up the wall itself. Their true function—holding up the dome of the mosque—is hidden from the outside.

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The Rayyan House (House 1), located at the northern edge of Yazd, was built in the 1880s (Qajar Dynasty). It was destroyed some time after 1925 when it was documented by Professor Forster. These drawings are based on his measurements. Its unusually grid-trace internal planning makes this house especially compelling. House 1 is the most formal of all the "Arab" houses presented here.

PLAN OF HOUSE 1: The formal entry is at the western end of the southern perimeter. It looks out on its own court on its own axis but leads to a corridor on the east. The Islamic house is zoned according to certain traditions. On axis, moving north from the entry, are the guest quarters, with their own court. The area to the east of the entry is the women's quarters (mehrbanu) with two small, symmetrical courts. This area also holds the summer quarters characterized by a spacious porch or talat. The women's quarters constitute virtually a house by themselves. Opposite, across the large men's court (balo), are the winter quarters and to its east the kitchen and latrines. All other rooms are for miscellaneous purposes. The figurative qualities of the plan are represented on the facade of the talat and the wind tower behind it.

ASPECTS OF FORMAL STRUCTURE: From top to bottom: spatial and constructive aspect. Carden grid is contrasted with principal and secondary plan "figures" which denote analogous use differentiation. The lower diagrams emphasize two scenarios, respectively: Opposition of winter to winter quarters, and connection of two major courts by a double-faced room. This room is singularly capable of accommodating honored guests and "fringe" relatives.

LEFT ABOVE: East-west section looking south from center of main court. The underground apartments are used during the hottest days because they are provided with a complex ventilation system involving a wind tower and an underground pool.

BOTTOM: North-south section through center of main court.
The Talas House (House II) in Yazd was built in the late 18th-early 19th century. House II is similar to House I in that its living quarters are organized around courtyards, yet its plan is less rigid. Formal entry through the hall (eight-sided entry room) on the northwest side leads to the women's quarters with a court to the right and the guest quarters with a smaller court to the left. The largest court organizes the main living spaces. The summer quarters with the taller are on the north and the winter quarters are to the south. The kitchen, further to the east, is separated from the main body of the house. Through the use of wind towers and basement rooms a microclimate is created which modifies the extreme conditions of the summer heat.

The looser plan of House II adapts more easily to the city fabric. Unlike House I which is a closed system, formally complete in its distribution of rooms and therefore difficult to add to, House II is a more open system and lends itself to the addition of spaces. Materials for both houses are baked brick and adobe. Wood is a precious material and is used sparingly.

ASPECTS OF FORMAL STRUCTURE:

From top to bottom: Unlike in House I, one "tartan" grid does not link all spaces and volumes together. Instead, there are three different tetrads, each corresponding to a major courtyard. Similarly, the "squares" are less independent. In the lower two diagrams, a third open space (rather than a room as in House I) links the two dominant courts because of the strength of its east-west axis. It is meant for guests or distinguished visiting relatives. The court also has the usual north-south axis with a wind tower anchoring its southern end.

Left top: East-west section through house looking south

Left bottom: North-south section through the western court showing the wind tower. Both sections show underground rooms which stay cool during the hottest days.
Yard, typical house courtyard with talor (porch), badghir (wind cowl), and double-sunken center court where trees grow around a pool, all contributing to a comfortable micro-climate.
Above: One-hundred-eighty-degree panorama from east to west, facing southwest. Each major court is relatively independent. It is therefore possible to easily acquire new property or sell it.

Far Left: Main entrance to House II from entrance of neighboring house (left) and from hatch out to alley (right).

Left: Western court of House II. The raised wooden platform is for social gatherings in the talar and in the upper balcony level between the wind tower and the rear wall of the talar.

Left: Street from the west to House II on the right. The arches supporting the two neighboring houses create a rhythm which unifies the narrow street, turning it into an independent element.

Right: Detail of a courtyard facade from a similar 18th century house in Yazd. The interlocking pinwheel latticework of the window shows the extreme care with which precious wood is handled and displayed. In the shallow plane of the window the latticework gives a feeling of depth and three-dimensional space.