CHAPTER THREE

DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE IN CAIRO

The Palace

There are no remains of Fatimid or earlier palaces, and very few Mamluk palaces have survived, none in its entirety. However, masses of waqf documents from the Mamluk period give us a wealth of written information about the layout of palaces and houses during this period. Some palaces, such as the Īwān al-Kabīr, were built with columns supporting domes. Others were built on the qā'a plan with two iwāns facing each other and the central space covered by a dome or a lantern. The architecture of princely city residences differed from royal residences in the Citadel.

The principal structure of a Mamluk residence was the qā'a. The word originally meant courtyard, but the qā'a was a reception hall, either on the ground floor or a second story. In either case, it was the highest structure in a house and occupied most of its elevation. A central lantern protruded above roof level. The qā'a also must have occupied the optimal orientation of the house, dictating arrangement of the smaller, private rooms surrounding it on different levels.

The qā'a arrangement is documented from the Fatimid period. The descriptions indicate that folding doors closed each of the two iwāns and that the central area was not roofed, though it most likely was protected by tents or awnings. The central area, as in Mamluk residences, had doors to the other rooms, to the latrines, and to the exterior, as well as doors leading to the mezzanine loggias overlooking the qā'a. These are called maghāni (Mamluk) or aghānī (Ottoman), suggesting that they were intended for musicians entertaining the audience below in the qā'a. In the Mamluk period, they were decorated with turned-wood screens called mashhā'īyya.

In houses excavated in Fustāt, a Mesopotamian plan was identified. A courtyard was surrounded by four unequal iwāns, the principal one having a tripartite arrangement with the central space wider than the lateral rooms. A fountain stood in the middle of the courtyard. Multistoried houses also are described by several visitors to Fustāt, and these had precedents in pre-Islamic Egypt.

Domestic architecture appears to have undergone a development parallel to that in religious architecture, as courtyards became reduced and roofed and lateral iwāns became mere recesses. There was, however, in very large residences another type of courtyard that was not the center of daily life as was the qā'a, but which played the role of a vestibule.

The covered qā'a was high with a protruding lantern or dome, and a marble jet fountain in its center. In Mamluk and Ottoman qā'as, both the lantern and fountain were octagonal in shape, and the fountain was usually inlaid with multicolored marbles. In some halls, water flowed from an opening in the iwān, down a marble slab called the salsabīl to be collected in the basin of the central fountain. This running water cooled the hall in summer, aiding hot air to move upwards and escape from the wooden lantern on the roof, and thus improving ventilation. An air shaft, the malqaf, had been used in Egypt since Pharaonic times. This shaft was behind the wall of the main iwān and connected at roof level with a sloping vent oriented to the north. The qā'as that survive from the Ottoman period are similar in plan to those of the Mamluk period, though their proportions are different.

Fenestration

The windows of great residences are described as having iron grills surmounted by arched windows with stucco and colored glass, as in the mosques. Iron grills were precious and less wealthy people used wood. The palaces of the Citadel were famous for their gilded iron grilled windows overlooking the entire city. The palace of Baṣhtāk on Muʿizz Street is described by Maqrīzī as overlooking the street through its iron grills. Speaking of a dilapidated palace, he notes that its marble was replaced by stone and its iron by wooden windows. Often, the iron grills of mosque windows were taken down and melted to provide funds to maintain the rest of the premises, another proof of the value of iron. Like the mosques, residential architecture was extroverted, with windows onto streets wherever possible.
The mashrabiyya or latticework panel of turned wood is an art typical of Cairo. The name is derived from the mashraba, the niche made of turned wood to hold the porous clay jugs that cool water by evaporation. The advantage of mashrabiyya work is that it filters light while increasing ventilation, and allows one to look outside without being seen. City streets that were very narrow made such devices necessary for ventilation, and nineteenth-century illustrations show these mashrabiyya loggias, supported by corbels, almost touching each other over the narrow street below. The Islamic Museum in Cairo has a multitude of these mashrabiyya patterns on display.

As no Mamluk palace has survived complete, it is difficult to know what their doors, or portals, were like. The palace of Qusun, however, has a stalactite portal that is surpassed in magnificence in Cairo only by the portal of the mosque of Sultan Hasan. We know that important amirs were entitled to have a loggia or ṭablakhāna for a ceremonial orchestra, performing according to the amir’s rank. This ṭablakhāna must have resembled the loggia of a kuttāb, and the amir put his carved and painted emblems, with his name and titles, on the exterior of the residence. Some residences were occupied by the amirs during their lifetimes, but not inherited by their families. Rather, they went to the inheritor of the amir’s function, as did the royal residences at the Citadel.

Bent entrances were used for residences, as might be expected, leading into a courtyard. This courtyard was not a gathering place or reception area, but a semi-private place for the inhabitants and visitors to dismount. Around the courtyard were storerooms and the entrance to the stable. The courtyard was generally not paved, and might have a well and trees. A residence might have another courtyard for a garden. From the courtyard, several doors led to the qa'a and its apartments. Important residences had more than one qa'a.

The facade of the courtyard in extant Mamluk and Ottoman houses has a high portal like that of contemporary mosques and its rich decoration is in the style applied on exteriors rather than interiors, confirming the character of the courtyard and the maqṣad as extroverted and connected to the street, rather than as the center of private life.

The semi-public function of the courtyard is complementary to the street pattern of medieval cities, where only a few wide thoroughfares existed. The rest were narrow winding lanes that protected the privacy and security of the inhabitants. The small lanes had doors that were closed at night. The entrance courtyard
was a source of air and light, and a place where visitors could dismount, a merchant offer his goods, and wares be loaded and unloaded. Women would not be seen in this semi-public area.

**The Maqṣṣad**

The maqṣṣad, or sitting room, common in houses of the late Mamluk and Ottoman periods, is an arcaded loggia overlooking the residence’s courtyard from the first floor and facing the prevailing breezes from the north. It had smaller rooms and a latrine attached. This is where the master of the house sat to oversee his stables and storerooms and receive visitors. In houses along the Khalij or ponds, the maqṣṣad opened onto the view of water and gardens. In the earlier Mamluk period, the maqṣṣad is described as a mezzanine loggia built to overlook the stables of the residence. The importance of stables in the Mamluk cavalry society was also seen at the Citadel, where palaces overlooked the royal stables. A houseowner’s wealth was also evident in the saddlery kept in the stable area. Later, it appears that the maqṣṣad developed into a part of the courtyard, facing north and at the same time overlooking the stables.

Domes inlaid with-colored glass over bedrooms are often mentioned in waqf descriptions of Mamluk houses. A fifteenth-century European traveler, Felix Fabri, describes the house of an amir as having a menagerie of wild animals and exotic birds. He stresses the beauty of the stable’s horses and the luxurious display of saddlery. He also mentions a prison found within the confines of the palace and a domed tower used as a private apartment.
Pl. 31. Mashrabiyya window at the house of al-Razzāz.

Pl. 32. The portal of the palace of Amir Qūsūn (palace of Yashbak), 1337.

Pl. 33. The maqṣād at the house of al-Razzāz, fifteenth-eighteenth century.

**Decoration**

Palaces were decorated in the same style as religious buildings of the same period. Windows, as mentioned before, were treated the same way. Polychrome marble dadoes covered the lower parts of walls; stalactites and inscriptions in painted and gilded wood were used on the upper walls; the ceilings were painted and gilded. Inscriptions of poetry might be found instead of Quranic texts. At the Suhaymī house, these are presented in cartouches in nastaʿlīq script, as they are in contemporary religious buildings. The inner portals of Ottoman houses, trilobed and framed with heavy moldings, recall the facade decoration of mosques and sabīls. Turkish style tiles are also found in some
Ottoman interiors, including the Subaymi house, just as they are in contemporary mosques and sabil.

Houses were furnished mainly with carpets and wall hangings. Silk was used for summer carpets, wool in the winter. There was no dining room; food was brought on trays that could be carried away after meals. In the bedrooms, covers were stored in cases during the day. Wooden shelves held china placed as decoration, and the wall cupboards themselves were decorated with inlaid work. Numbers of bronze lamps, with inlay and openwork, and candlesticks inlaid with gold and silver in the Mosul technique that reached Egypt after the Mongol invasion of Baghdad, displayed in the Islamic Museum, give us an idea of how interiors were lit.

The Rab

A rab is an apartment complex with living units rented by the month. It was composed of a row of apartments reached from a gallery on the first floor. Each apartment was a duplex on two floors, with a private section of roof space. The lower floor had the latrine, a niche for water jugs, and a reception hall; the upper floor included the sleeping area. Usually there was no kitchen. Large houses had private rooms (karin) and other rooms where women were not allowed, but this degree of segregation could not be afforded in small houses or in the units of a rab.

A rab was usually the structure above a row of shops, though shop people did not necessarily inhabit the rab above. A rab might also be built above a wakala, or a khana where there might be up to four such complexes on four sides, corresponding to the rectangular plan of such buildings around a courtyard. In general, the wakala and khana were commercial centers, while the qaysariyya was industrial. There also, however, those working in the ground floor areas did not necessarily inhabit the rab above.

These dwellings were extroverted, meaning that whenever possible windows opened onto the street, otherwise onto the courtyard. There are rab's above the wakala of Sultan al-Ghuri, not far from his religious complex in the city, and at the wakala of Sultan Qaytbay near Bab al-Nasr. Remains of the khana of Sultan al-Ghuri at Khan al-Khalili suggest that it was multistoried. It is a large complex used today by artisans. The commercial center at Jamaliyya was...
crowded with such structures, many of them rebuilt in the Ottoman period

**Houses**

Between a grand residence and the 1a[b] apartment unit were other levels of housing, of which very little has survived from the Ottoman period and nearly nothing from the Mamluk. These small, or medium sized, houses are described in their waqfs documents as following the same principles of the qa’a complex and the living unit of the rab[a], that is, a reception hall on the ground floor surmounted by smaller rooms on the upper level. In the Bahri Mamluk period, each of the elements, hall and upper rooms, had a separate entrance from the street, and sometimes there was a third entrance to the stable. Later, however, it became common to have one door into a vestibule, from where the other doors led. The vestibule might be open to the sky, forming a small courtyard that in the Ottoman period included a maq'ad. In Ottoman houses, the open courtyard was more common than in Mamluk times, probably because the city had become more densely built and public thoroughfares more limited, so that open courtyards became necessary for light and air. This also explains the extensive use of mashrabiyyas in Ottoman Cairo.

**Kitchens**

Whereas large residences had their own kitchen, small houses did not. Common people bought their food ready-cooked. It could be that the lack or high expense of fuel, as the traveler von Harff tells us, was the reason common people could not afford to cook at home.

Maqrizi’s descriptions of Cairo streets mention stalls and markets for cooked food, which in modern terms would be regarded as small restaurants. Travelers in
Egypt have always been struck by the number of such stalls, the medieval equivalent of “fast food” outlets. Travelers relate that cooks wandered the streets with their stoves and utensils or settled along the pavements, offering a large variety of foods—chicken and meat grilled or boiled, fish and vegetables. Fried cheese is often mentioned in Arabic accounts as the popular dish of Caïrones. A German fifteenth-century traveler estimated that 12,000 cooks with their portable kitchens, as well as 48,000 bakers, provided food to Cairo’s population, and another contemporary traveler estimated their numbers at 24,000 cooks, 48,000 bakers, and 30,000 water carriers, commenting, “Now reckon how many people there must be to eat and drink all this!”

Large Ottoman houses had, apart from the usual kitchen, a kitchen for coffee. Coffee was introduced to Egypt in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, under Ottoman rule, and soon became the popular beverage. Coffee houses, found in all quarters of the city, also became places to smoke tobacco, while entertainment was offered by storytellers, musicians and singers. Coffee houses were a favorite investment for the wealthy, and were often endowed to religious foundations, even though coffee was at first banned by the religious establishment. The coffee houses also became the locale of narcotics smoking, hashish and opium, particularly by Ottoman soldiers.

Baths

While large houses frequently had a kitchen, a bathroom was less common. The fourteenth-century jurist Ibn al-Hašṣābi deplores the fact that people who built
luxurious houses failed to provide a room for washing. Maqrizi, who gives the list of Cairo’s hammams, describes them as usually located near princely residences, implying that they were not only used by the amin’s household, but also by the public, and were built as a commercial investment. These were Roman-style steam baths, common in Egypt in pre-Islamic times. In the Ottoman period, however, waqf documents refer regularly to a hammam in large residences and a mustahamm in smaller dwellings, which seems to have been a small room lacking the sophistication of the larger bath. The private hammams surviving in Cairo are all from the Ottoman period. The Ottoman period thus brought an obvious improvement in domestic architecture.

Provision of private houses with hammams did not, however, diminish the role that public baths had played in Egypt since Roman times and whose functions were far wider than hygiene. Their primary aspect was social, particularly the women’s baths, which were comparable to clubs. Women in particular enjoyed the opportunities the hammams offered to gather, away from their houses, and their only opportunity to go out without their husbands. Marriages were often arranged in the hammams where the matchmakers went to look for potential brides. Further, a bride’s visit to the hammam was an obligatory part of wedding ceremonies and festivities. Ibn al-Hajj criticized women’s visits to hammams, saying they merely led women to show off their clothes and jewelry, adding that such female gatherings were harmful. On the other hand, in the tale of Abū Sir and Abū Qir in the Arabian Nights, is the comment, “Your city is not perfect unless it has a hammam.” Ibn Khaldun wrote that hammams are a mark of highly civilized cities, since luxury reveals wealth and prosperity.

The hammam had not only social and hygienic, but also medical functions, as heat was believed to cure illnesses. Public baths were lucrative businesses and are often mentioned in waqf documents as endowments. They had sections for men and others for women, and were sometimes attached to religious foundations. When establishing a khanaqah in a Fatimid palace, Salāh al-Dīn added a bath for the use of Sufis; this suggests that there had been none before. The khanaqah of Amīr Shaykhū had a hammam nearby, most likely endowed upon the foundation, as was the bath with the complex of Sultan al-Mu’ayyad Religious foundations often provided the Sufis with the fee for their visits to the hammam and for soap as well. Because of their

PL 37 The hammam of Sultan al-Mu’ayyad (Pauty).

sophisticated infrastructure, the hammams had local continuity, new ones were always built on the site of previous structures to make use of its infrastructure. This often makes them difficult to date.

A traveler to Fustat in the Tulunid period gives us the following account: He arrived at Hammam al-Rūm (the Greek Bath), very popular at the time, and found no one to serve him, though there were at least seventy attendants, each with three assistants, to serve customers. He left the bath and went to another, with the same experience. Only at the fourth bath did he find an available attendant. He was astonished to imagine the population of Fustat, when told that the city had 1,170 baths! This most likely was an exaggeration, though it is also reported that Fustat’s atmosphere was highly polluted primarily from the smoke from the multitudinous bath ovens. Until the last century, Cairo’s
hammāms flourished and often impressed travelers, scholars and orientalists. There are still a few traditional baths operating, though they have quite lost their glamor.

The thirteenth-century physician ʿAbd al-Latīf writes that the hammāms of Egypt were the best in the Orient. He mentions their decoration, the marbles, columns, vaults, painted ceilings, and vivid colors. The remains of stucco stalactites, once in a Fustāṭ hammām, showing a dancer and a man seated with a cup in hand, is displayed at the Islamic Museum in Cairo.

**Architecture of the Hammām**

According to Pautry, hammāms are difficult to date as they bear no inscriptions and have been throughout their long history often restored and remodeled. The Egyptian hammām is based upon Roman bath tradition, with some modifications. In general, the traditional hammām was entered through a narrow door like that of a shop, having no facade except for the entrance, the rest of the building was usually behind a row of shops. Next to the entrance was a small room for a doorman, and the entrance was bent. The first hall, the maṣlah, for undressing, was paved with marble and had a central fountain.

This hall was surrounded by recesses with benches spread with carpets and mattresses. Marble columns flanked the recesses, and latrines were nearby. The hall was similar to a residential reception hall. The next hall, bāṭl awwal (first room), was rectangular and vaulted, with openings in the vault filled with glass to introduce light. The hall was slightly warmed, and included mattresses for guests to relax upon. A narrow door led to the next room, the center of the hammām, the bāṭl al-jūnūn (hot room). Its center was enhanced by a dome and marble inlaid floor. Here the customer got his massage. From the hot room, corresponding to the

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**Fig. 10 Hammām al-Ṭanbali (Coste)**
caldarium of Roman baths, one passed to the maghṭas (Roman laconicum) equipped with water taps in recesses and basins for barhing. The maghṭas had warm-water basins set into the floor, usually with two different temperatures, and this was the most highly decorated part of the ḥammām. Near the maghṭas was the heating-equipment room, the bayt al-nār. Its huge water containers were heated by fires fed by garbage collected in the neighborhood.

The plans of Cairo's ḥammāms studied by Pauty show great variations in layout, size, number of rooms, and decorations. The ḥammām that Sultan al-Mu’ayyad built near his religious complex has a magnificent dome on stalactites, surrounded by four unequal iwāns facing the domed area through pointed arches, similar to a madrasa plan. While the masīakh or vestiary was treated with great lavishness, the rest was more modest and reduced.