

1983 PROJECT SUMMARY

Restoration of the Azem Palace  
Damascus , Syrian Arab Republic

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SYR.

The conservation of Azem Palace , the 18th century residence of the Governor of Damascus .

Date of Completion : 1955

I. Objectives

- To restore the most lavishly decorated residence in Damascus ;
- To introduce restoration and conservation techniques to Syria ;
- To sensitively integrate a new residential building within the palace complex ;
- To adapt the palace to museum function .

II. Description and History

Azem Palace is one of Damascus' major architectural monuments . Located in a compact quarter of the old city , the palace is in close proximity to the Great Mosque (Ommayyade Mosque) and the Assad Pacha Khan . The palace was constructed in 1749 on the former site of a Mamlouk palace . Commissioned by the Governor of Damascus , Assad Pasha el Azem , the building was appointed with the most sophisticated decorative elements money could buy .

Assad Pasha's decedents continued living in the palace after his death . Though their numbers increased , their social status declined . In 1922 , the French government bought approximately 80% of the palace from Pasha'a 120 living heirs . The colonials allocated most of the palace to the French Institute , reserving some sections as residences for French officials .

In 1925 , during Syria'a attempted independence from France , the Azem Palace fell under fire . Much of the structure was damaged . After the siege , the French Institute commissioned their resident architect to design new quarters within the palace to accommodate the Institute's staff . Plans were drawn , but by 1936 only one new building , a residence , was realized . The French government continued its proprietorship of the Azem Palace until 1946 when , with the independence of Syria , the building was returned to the Syrian government .

The Azam Palace has five distinct areas : the salamlik ; the haremlik ; the hammam ; a service courtyard ; and a backyard . The main entrance leads through a broken , domed corridor into the courtyard of the salamlik . The salamlik , or men's quarter , is the public section of the palace consisting of several rooms and a large iwan all organised around a courtyard . The haremlik is reached from the salamlik courtyard through an enclosed passageway . The haramlik , or women's quarter ( the family's private area) has two large reception areas , a series of private rooms for the governor's wives and family members , a five-arched veranda and a large iwan arranged around a courtyard measuring 42m x 25m .

The other three parts of the palace were connected to the haramlik courtyard . First , the bathhouse ( hammam ) was located to the east . Second , to the west was the service courtyard surrounded by the kitchen , servant's rooms and a stable - the service courtyard had a direct access to the street through the stable . The third section was a background connected to both the salamlik and haremlik courtyards .

### III. Design and Construction

The size of spatial units in the palace virtually consistent as it follows from the structural limitation of wood roofs . The bigger rooms are composed of two or more units and usually have a split floor level - the lower level would contain a fountain and was considered the entrance . All rooms were richly decorated with polychrome stone revetment and mosaics . Ceiling were ornamented with muqarnas . The courtyard pavement continues the geometric patterns and are animated with pools and landscaping . In building the palace, Assad Pasha gathered together the best craftsmen available . Materials were required from far and wide . Even the demolition of buildings was ordered to obtain architectural elements such as columns .

The restoration of the Azem Palace involved both reconstruction and restoration . Although some archaeological studies were undertaken for the palace by the French Institute for Oriental Studies as early as the 1920's , it was not until the 1950's , under the direction of the Institute's resident architect , that major restoration began . In the restoration , great care was taken to replicate original materials ( some materials were appropriated from old houses in Damascus ) and to use and develop a labour force equal to the high caliber of craftsmanship in the original structure . This was true for both structural and finish elements , be then in stone or wood . In the case of the haremlik , which was severely damaged by the 1925 fire , and the arcaded verandah , reinforced concrete was introduced for roofs . To protect the stone paving in the courtyard , an appropriate drainage system was introduced .

The architect of the restoration , Michel Ecochard , in the 1930's had designed two staff residences to be sited within the palace complex . One was constructed in 1936 . The annex is located in the back courtyard between the haremlik and salamlik . The design of the annex took its inspiration from the Modern Movement . The building is on two levels . The ground level , reached through the salamlik , has a livingroom , and spacious verandah . The first level has three bedrooms and a bathroom . The building is characterised by thin , exposed concrete columns and large, industrial sash windows .

Upon restoration , the palace was converted into a museum by the Syrian Department of Antiquities . The Museum of Folk Arts now occupies the salamlik and haremlik . The hammam is open to visitors . The rooms associated with the service courtyard now house offices and workshops . And the annex building is used as a guesthouse .

IV. Construction Schedule and Costs

Initial archaeological studies	1920's
Design of the annex	1935
Construction of the annex	1936
Restoration of the palace complex	1945 - 61
Opening of the palace to the public	1961

Costs for restoration currently unavailable

V. Project Significance

The restoration of Azem Palace is exemplary for its use of authentic elements and its highly competent execution . It has inspired other restoration projects in Damascus - both private and public - and throughout Syria .

The change in function from palace to museum has proved successful .

The 1936 annex merits note . Without relying on pastiche , it blends sympathetically with the 18th century structure .