

HISTORICAL RESIDENTIAL HOUSES IN AS-SALT REMARKS ON THEIR SHAPE AND FUNCTION

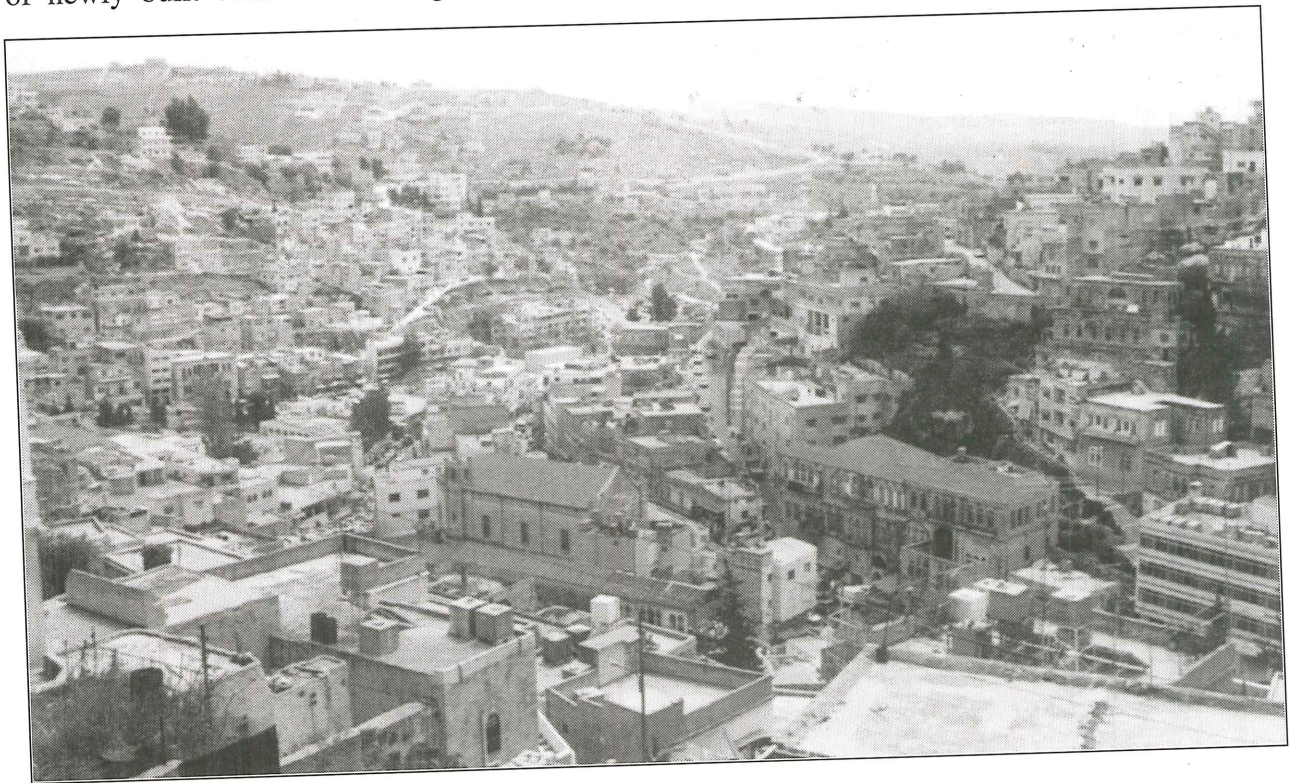
by

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Introduction*

The town of as-Salt is situated 20km north-west of Jordan's capital 'Ammān in the hilly area of the al-Balqā' at the edge of the al-Ghawr. (Fig.1) Today's visitors of as-Salt may get the impression of a small Middle Eastern town, marred by a large amount of newly built concrete buildings, its his-

torical meaning accessible only through written sources and few public buildings. But while walking in the narrow alleys and steep stairways on the slope of the hills it is remarkable that the townscape is more intact than it seems at first glance. Especially the private quarters have preserved their traditional character. This observation has led



1. View of as-Salt from Jabal al-Qal'a.

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to an empirical study on the vernacular private architecture, its plans and uses. During two field seasons, in spring and autumn of 1993 a large number of houses were surveyed, examined and the inhabitants were interviewed to get varied information about the historical organization and division of a house and its rooms. In some cases the owners who inhabited the houses in earlier times were found and questioned about their youth and life in the buildings.

In 1990 the Royal Scientific Society published a documentation on as-Salt's architectural heritage, which contains plans of the most important public buildings, private residences and exemplary sketches of smaller houses. Hence the following study has to be understood as a supplement to the work done previously.

First traces of a human settlement at as-Salt can be dated back to the Iron Age, but not much is known about its physical appearance. In Roman times, the town was known by the name of "Saltus", meaning "wooded valley". But even the few traces of the Roman town which were found, for example the remains of a public bath in the city centre (today an Anglican church), have not been properly examined until now. According to Byzantine sources the city was the seat of a bishop. In 1321, the first detailed written account was published, which describes as-Salt as "... a town in the Jordan province. It is a small town with a castle, lying among the hills east of the Ghaur, a days march of Ajlun. It lies opposite of Jericho, and the castle holds the Ghaur under dominion. From under the castle of Salt there gushes out a copious spring, whose waters flow through the town. The place possesses many gardens, and the pomegranates exported from thence are celebrated in all countries. The city is prosperous and very populous" (LeStrange 1890: 228).

Not much has come down to us about the events before the Ottoman conquest of the Bilād ash-Shām and the following centuries.

The city developed slowly on the eastern slopes of the Jabal al-Qal'a. In 1596 approximately 200 Muslims and 125 Christians inhabited the town. During the seventeenth and eighteenth century the Ottoman administration lost more and more influence in the southern parts of their empire, which were now mostly controlled by local beduin tribes. In 1848, after the Ottomans had regained control of the Bilād ash-Shām from the Egyptians, who had ruled the area for eight years, their efforts to stabilize the region were renewed; in 1867 the al-Balqā' was announced as a *qaḍā'*, and in as-Salt a post of *qā'immaqām* (governor of a *qaḍā'*) was established.

The impact of these changes have been described by Lawrence Oliphant, who visited the area around 1880: "In the days of Burckhardt (1812, A.M.) it only contained about 3000 inhabitants, but it has increased principally during the last ten years, owing to the establishment here of a seat of a government. Prior to that time Salt, though nominally governed by the Porte, was principally independant; its lawless population knew no other restraints but that which a sense of self-preservation imposed upon them, for they were constantly quarreling with each other or fighting the Arabs.... Since, however, the Turkish government has managed to substain authority, the inhabitants find that the security which has resulted therefrom has attracted strangers with capital, and that they have materially benefited by this sacrifice of their liberties." (Oliphant 1880: 228).

Houses and Rooms: Their Shape and Function

In general house forms can be explained according to climatic, material or social factors. The climate and local available building material are often forming the shape of a building while the social structure of the society is influencing the inner organization. Until the mid-19th century as-Salt was pre-

dominantly characterized by rural traditions, but economical wealth changed step by step the lifestyle of the inhabitants, so that an urban way of life developed in the late 19th century, which found its most marked expression in a change of the architecture of the private houses. But at first this change, as characteristic as it has been for the town itself, did not reach the surroundings. Accordingly, Oliphant remarks: "throughout the Belka there is no settled population, excepting the town of Salt." (Oliphant 1880: 196)

Hospitality in the Traditional Society - Public Guest-houses

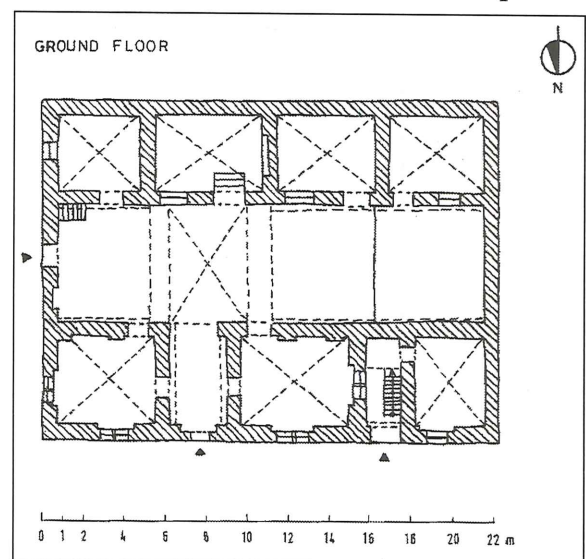
Searching for the architectural traces of these transformations, the alteration of the reception rooms hits the eye, they got a specific importance, being a visible feature of the changes in the society.

In a traditional Middle Eastern village, family life and public life of the male villagers are strictly separated. For this reason detached buildings are reserved for assemblies, large family festivities and for the reception and entertainment of guests visiting the village. The buildings are located along the mainroads, off the living quarters. The halls are characterized by a longitudinal plan, which allows a large number of men to sit side by side on mattresses, spread on the ground. Even in as-Salt family and public life were separated in the described way. The Swiss Johann Ludwig Burckhard visited as-Salt in 1812 and described the importance and organization of public guest-houses (*al-Maḍāfāt*) in detail. He mentioned four halls, three belonging to the Turks, one to the Christians. The term "Turks" has to be interpreted as "Muslims" because it is improbable that the Ottoman administration maintained three guest-houses in a town of minor importance. The maintenance of the *al-Maḍāfāt* financed

jointly by the community, every guest-house got a kind of manager, who signed as the responsible. All expenses were divided between the families according to their wealth. Burckhardt emphasizes that the sum to be paid was small in comparison with the one demanded by the government for their official guest-houses. The stress Burckhardt lays on the city's independence shows the weak influence the Ottoman Empire has had in 1812 on the region. Evidence has survived of only one traditional guest-house; it dates back to the first quarter of the 20th century. It may be considered as a proof that with the development of urban lifestyle traditional rural customs did not vanish.

Maḍāfat al-Khreisat (Figs. 2-4)**

Although the guest-house of the al-Khreisat family has lost its original function, the traditional use of the building can be recovered with the help of its groundplan (Fig.2). The guest-house is a building of two floors in the upper part of Wādī al-Akrād Road, the main road of the town. An inscription on the portal dates the building to the year 1334/1915-16. The façade facing the street is similar to the ones of private



2. The guest-house (*al-Maḍāfah*) of the family of al-Khreisat.

** All figures are partly revised sketches taken from: Royal Scientific Society, *Handbook of Archi-*

tectural Heritage in Jordan/Salt-Amman 1990; *Maḍāfat al-Khreisat* p.50; *Bait Mismar*, pp.37,43.



3. *Maḍāfat* al-Khreisat.



4. Main portal to the ground floor of the *Maḍāfat* al-Khreisat.

houses: It is built of well-cut yellow limestone and it is dominated by a splendid decorated entrance on the ground floor with a balcony above. Behind the entrance a narrow, barrelvaulted alley, with doors leading to the left and right adjacent rooms, opens into the barrelvaulted central hall, which extends to the full length of the building. Further crossvaulted rooms are adjoining to the north and the south.

The central hall is the largest part of the building. It is about 21m long and 5.5m wide, an unusual dimension that is related to the above-mentioned use of the guest-house (*al-Maḍāfah*) as meeting and sleeping place. In the middle of the hall is a pit, which was used as a fireplace to prepare the traditional coffee. Today it is covered with cement. The western part of the hall, covering one third of the entire surface, is one step higher than the eastern part. Here the place of honour was situated, in the middle of the western wall sat the *ash-Shaykh* and beside him, according to their status, the other persons took their place (see also Nippa 1989: 159f.).

A second entrance was on the eastern

narrow side of the hall. It seems to have been of lower importance, because it was left undecorated. It is today bricked up, like the window openings framing the door. They provided the only possibility to lighten the hall, which is now filled with darkness. Adjacent to the north and the south of the hall exist rows of several rooms. Their use cannot be defined clearly. The rooms on the slope side of the building can be reached through some steps and have window openings towards the central hall. At the rear wall recesses are built in the wall, formed in its upper part by natural rock. It is a strange method of construction, which is also found at several other public and private places all over the town. The rooms at the slopeside probably were used as sleeping and storage places. The first floor is accessible through an entrance to the right of the main portal, which is not as richly decorated as the main entrance. It is supposed that the second floor was built several years after the construction of the groundfloor. The plan is characterized by two central halls placed beside each other, with adjacent rooms. Today a family inhabits this floor, but the prevailing opinion is that, after its construction, the second floor was used for sitting and sleeping while the groundfloor was kept for storing goods and as a stable.

It is obvious that the shape of the *Maḍāfat* al-Khreisat differs much from those known in rural areas. But since as-Salt has developed an urban character during the late 19th century it is not surprising that customs were more elaborate here than in the villages. Mohammed al-Khreisat refers to hotel-like compounds with a stable for animals and sleeping places for visitors. They were installed because of the city's growing economic importance (as mentioned in the registers of the local administration in 1925) (al-Khreisat 1986: 98). It is worth thinking about the possibility that the *Maḍāfat* al-Khreisat, as it is called, was used as such a "hostel" (*funduq*) after the second floor was

completed.

From Rural One-room Houses to Urban Houseforms

As-Salt's extreme topography determines certain principles, according to which all historical buildings are arranged. The steep slopes of the hills al-Qal'a, al-Jad'a and as-Salālim necessitated openings towards the valley. Since the climate of the al-Balqā' region is neither extremely hot nor cold, climatic considerations, that is the advantageous use of winds and shade have been neglected, and priority has been given to the maximum use of daylight. The slopes also prevent a horizontal enlargement of the houses and require a type of house, which is growing in height. Simple houses consisting of two rooms, can have only two storeys, one room in each.

Another feature of the traditional house is the use of the smooth local limestone, which is characterized by a dark yellow colour. In some dwellings, the outer surface of each stone was decorated with small drilled holes. The homogeneous use of this stone must once have imparted to the city a picturesque atmosphere.

The oldest houseform which can be found in as-Salt is the rural one-room house. Its only room is divided into several levels of different heights. The ground level (*qā' al-Bayt*) was used for work considered unclean, storing dirty material or sometimes a part was used as a stable. Some steps above, there was the level for living, cooking, working and sleeping (*al-Mastaba*). A third level (*as-Siddah*) fulfilled several functions, varying from season to season. During the warm summer months it was used as a storeroom, but in winter it was turned into a place for working and sleeping, for it was usually located above the stable and the heat emanating from the animals warmed this high place. The specific division of space served the needs of its rural owners, mostly farmers. Usually, the

house was used only by family members and female guests, if no male person was around. Male visitors were received and accommodated in the family's or the tribe's guest house. The peak of one-room houses in as-Salt were the years before 1867, but even with the introduction of houses containing several rooms one-room houses were still built.

Room Functions and Spatial Division

With the changing social and economical background, the desire of the wealthier part of the population of as-Salt grew to enrich their style of living. Architecturally, this wish found its expression in the addition of further rooms to their residential buildings, accompanied by functional divisions. With growing trade activities, building patterns from neighbouring regions were introduced, anticipated by and mixed with vernacular traditions. A visible example of this procedure is the use of cross- and barrel vaults and domes as roofing constructions, a technique that is originally known from Palestine and can be found as a main method of construction in as-Salt from the second half of the 19th century onwards.

Examining the spatial organization of a several-room house, three areas with different main functions can be distinguished: Reception parts, family living-rooms and domestic rooms. Each part may be subdivided. A special importance is attached to the reception rooms: Even in a two-room house one room is reserved for the reception and entertainment of guests. The rooms are usually located in places that are light and easy to aerate and splendidly decorated. Courtyards, halls and other rooms serve as family rooms. They are multipurpose rooms for all daily activities like sitting, sleeping, working and so on. Unlike the guest rooms most of them are characterized by seasonal oriented uses: there are rooms preferred during summer (like courtyards and *al-īwāns*) and winter rooms. It is common that a room

is used as a living room in winter and turned into a storage place during the warm periods. Domestic rooms are of less importance and located at the darker slope areas of the house, which are also harder to ventilate. Shops have an exceptional position: They can be integrated to the ground floor of wealthier houses, but are never found on the same level as the living rooms.

In the following section, the different types of rooms, their shape and function, will be presented in detail.

Reception Rooms (*Ghurfat al-Istiqbāl, al-Maq'ad, al-Maḍāfah, Ghurfat aḍ-Ḍuyūf, ad-Dīwān*)

Every house with several rooms contains a room to welcome and accommodate visitors. Women or couples visiting relatives in another town or village, usually slept in their host's house because the tribe's *al-Maḍāfah* was taboo for women. In their own houses men and women received their guests separately. Women were obliged to leave the room whenever male visitors appeared and vice versa, men were not allowed to keep company with female guests. Reception rooms were, as mentioned above, located at high status places in the house and carefully decorated. These features allow us to identify today the historical place of the guest room even in the case of rooms where several changes have occurred. Comparing the reception rooms of several houses, the following could be proved as the major criteria for the choice of the guest room: The survey showed that it was of major importance to choose a room located towards the valley. This facilitated illuminating and ventilating the room. Large windows allowed one to enjoy the panorama of the town. To facilitate the movement of men and women after visitors had arrived, it was desirable to combine orientation towards the valley and vicinity to the entrance. However, priority was given to orientation towards the valley, consequently no objec-

tion was raised to make a visitor cross the internal house, provided that the entrance was placed on the slope side. In many cases the reception room has two doors, one of which connected the area near the entrance to the room and another one which provided access from the inner part of the house. This constellation allowed the women to leave the room unseen, as soon as guests appeared.

Mrs Stuart Ersekin, who visited as-Salt in 1924, described the traditional interior of a reception room as follows: "Earlier in the day we had visited a better-class house in which I had been kindly received by a mother and two daughters in the typical room with a divan that Arabs keep for their guests. The floor was tiled, the walls were whitewashed, two recesses were piled up with rugs and carpets that were used when friends came to stay." (1924: 23-24).

Even if the room was equipped in a simple way, the tiled floor stressed its importance and the piled-up mattresses were a sign of the family's wealth. The meaning of the stapel of mattresses may be compared with the European table silver, which can be considered as both a kind of investment and a visible status symbol. Regarding the use of the reception room as a sleeping room, too, such easy to move fittings were suitable to enable the spreading out of rugs and mattresses as sleeping places at any time.

Nowadays, the reception room furniture bears the marks of European influence. Sofas and armchairs have a fixed place in the room and are hardly ever moved.

Courtyards (*Hosh*)

It is necessary to distinguish between several types of courtyards serving different functions.

The first type is formed by several surrounding houses of families belonging to the same extended family. Mostly, these houses are small and located in the oldest quarters of as-Salt. The courtyards function

as a semi-private zone of access, comparable to the typical cul-de-sac in oriental Islamic towns.

Another form is found in houses containing two or three rooms. The entrance of the house leads into a courtyard, which is placed in front of the rooms. The courtyard usually forms a rectangular of the same size as the building. These courtyards are the main place where the families stay during the warm seasons. The women are doing their daily work in the yard, they eat there and sit in the evenings together.

You rarely find in as-Salt the large courtyards so typical of the courtyard houses all over the Arabic-Islamic world.

Central Halls (*Şālūn, wasaṭ ad-Dār, Şālit-aj-Julūs*)

Central halls are found mostly in houses containing at least four rooms, placed to the left and the right of the hall. The central hall is commonly of longitudinal shape, which covers the full length of the house. The resulting plan builds a certain type, which is called after its most characteristic element: the central hall house. It is not only the spatial centre of the house, but also the main lounge of the family where children play, people can sit and all movements in the house cross. Therefore "*Wasaṭ ad-Dār*" "centre of the house" is a common term for the central hall besides the term "*Şālūn*". Another name is "sitting hall", which refers to its general use.

The central hall is usually placed directly behind the entrance door. Thus it is not necessarily oriented towards the valley, but may also be placed alongside the slope. Sometimes adjacent rooms have window-like openings towards the central hall. These windows function practically to lighten up the central hall itself and the rooms at the slope side, but since they repeat the shape of the larger outer windows and allow direct view into the inner part of the rooms, their meaning in terms of social life has to be

stressed, too. The openings make all events in the house transparent and tie the rooms together.

In Arabic countries, it is a rare phenomenon that the entrance door leads directly into the inner part of the house. Usually, bent alleys are built to prevent any stranger from looking into the interior. For that purpose large curtains are often fastened behind the entrance, which at the same time functions as a porch.

Viewed under the aspect of construction, different forms of central halls can be distinguished:

a) the covered central hall:

It is a barrel-or crossvault covered room in the centre of the house

b) the central hall with uncovered partitions in the front or in the rear of the hall.

Most of these light-wells have been covered today to avoid rainwater flowing into the hall in autumn and spring

c) the central hall with a courtyard in its centre.

The central part of the hall is an open space and forms as a small yard. But this yard is not comparable to the large yard of the courtyard-houses known from other Arabic cities, since it is much smaller and has neither space for a fountain nor for a small garden. By contrast, it has to be seen in relation to the covered areas at the frontside and at the rear, opening with an *al-iwān* arch towards the yard and forming together with the courtyard the central hall.

Al-iwān

The *al-iwān*, a hall, open at one end and often facing a courtyard, is a common type of room in Islamic architecture. In as-Salt, the *iwan* opens with a wide arch towards a yard or a courtyard. Sometimes the central room of a three-room house is built as an *iwān*. Or it appears in connection with described type of the central hall described above. *al-iwāns*, as shady and well-ventilated rooms, are preferred living rooms

in summer.

Multifunctional Rooms (*ghurfa*)

Traditionally, there is no division between sleeping rooms and living rooms in the Arab house. Fittings were stored in recesses and taken out according to need. Mattresses and rugs were piled up in wide niches during daytime and spread on the ground at night. Small and narrow recesses, closed by wooden, skillfully carved panels were used to store dishes and other belongings. Essential requirement of all goods was the possibility to be easily moved, for example rugs, pillows, low tables etc. Windows towards the street were sometimes closed by wooden bars (*Mashrabiyya*), to avoid people looking into the interior. During the last decades separate sleepingrooms for the parents became common and today can be encountered in almost all houses. In addition, heavy furniture, for example television sets, have brought about a major change in space division, which nowadays follows more or less European patterns. Yet every household still keeps its pile of rugs and mattresses, and often children have a nap in any room or the central hall during daytime. Despite adaptation to modern times traditional habits are still alive.

Kitchen and Bath rooms (*Maṭbakh* and *Hammām*)

If possible, kitchen and washing facilities are placed at the dark slope side of the house. In the middle of the kitchen was a pit, where coals to cook on were put. Therefore another term for kitchen (*Maṭbakh*) was fireroom (*Ghurfat an-Nār*).

Bathrooms were equipped with a masoned basin, which was filled by hand with water. Wealthier houses used to have further facilities to heat water. A major problem of large households was the supply of fresh water and wood since the first water pipes to residential buildings were built at the beginning of the 20th century. Every

day the women had had to bring the water from the three fountains in the city centre to the households.

A small wash-basin used to be in the central hall beside the entrance door near to the reception room. Here guests could wash their hands before sitting down in the guest room.

Further bath- and washing facilities were available in the public bath in the al-Ḥammām Street and at the spring of 'Ayn as-Sāḥa. Until the last decade of the 19th century latrines were not integrated into the house.

Storerooms (*al-Mustawda'*)

Storerooms are always placed on the ground floor of a building and may have different shapes. There are large halls covering the whole floor as well as floors partitioned into several smaller units. Only stores for private goods were usually located at the same floor as the living rooms, and placed on the slope side of the house near the kitchen.

Shop (*Dukkān*)

In noble houses shops are integrated in the building, but traders usually owned separate shops, which could also be located in another quarter or in the city centre. Shops in the mansions of the latifundists or wholesalers, like the Abujaber or Toukan house, were narrow rectangular cells on the ground floor with an open front facing the street. During the night, the frontside was closed by large wooden shutters. Sometimes stores were built at the rear of the shops. There was usually no direct connection with the residential part of the house.

Roofs

In houses without courtyards or terraces, the roof of the house, sometimes used also for domestic purposes, was used to dry clothes or to spread out vegetables intended for consumption in winter. In summer it was not common to sleep on the roof, because of

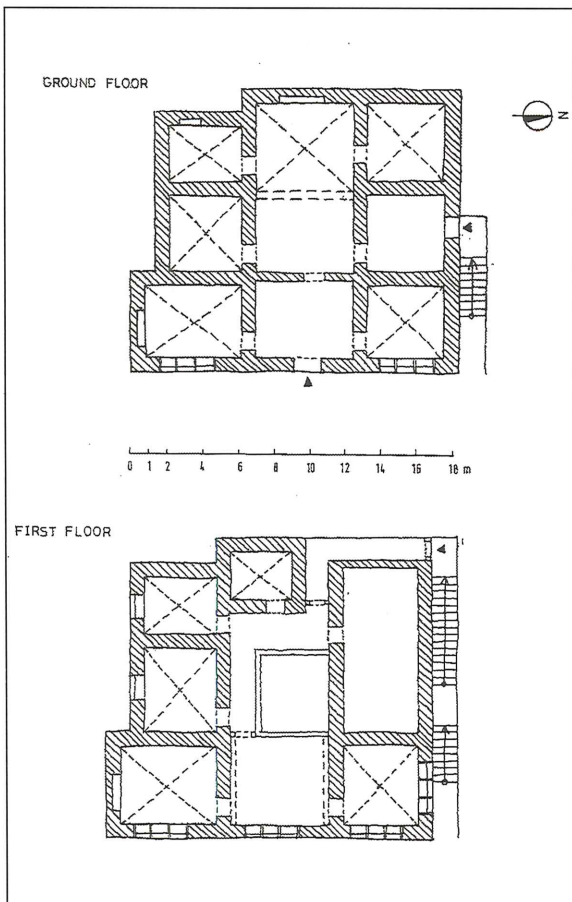
the close vicinity of neighbouring houses.

In the following part, an entire house will be analysed according to the disposition of the rooms described above and their effect on the spatial organization of the house. The house of the family Mismar has been chosen as an example, since it includes both common characteristics in as-Salt and ideosyncrasies. It is a medium-sized mansion and its spatial conception can be considered as a typical pattern of a Salṭeze central hall house. Furthermore, interviews with the owner made clear, what its historical use had been.

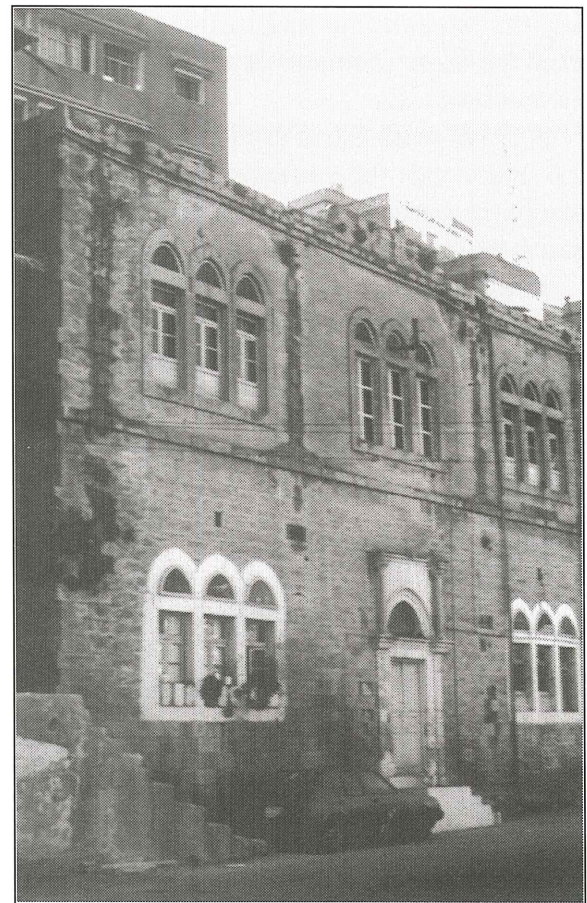
Bayt Mismar (Figs. 5 - 7)

The house of the family Mismar is located in the ad-Dayr Street at the lower slopes of Jabal aj-Jad'a and it faces the valley. It is a two-storeyed building, built of well-cut yellow limestone, with a flat roof. The slight curvatures of the roofing mark the apex the crossvaults covering the rooms. According to information given by the family, the ground floor was built in the last decade of the 19th century and the first floor was added in 1910. Its landlord was the latifundist and trader Abdallah Mismar. It is known that the mason was the Syrian Hajj Hussein Faris. After the death of Abdallah Mismar, three of his sons lived in the building, the two younger ones on the ground-floor and the oldest, ash-Shaykh of the tribe 'Awamaleh, on the first floor. Yet around 1970 the family moved to the modern quarters of the town. These days, the ground-floor is inhabited by a Palestinian family and the first floor is used as a handicraft school (Fig. 5).

The plans of both floors are characterized by their symmetric, stereotyped shape. The groundfloor can be entered from the valley-side oriented eastward. A longitudinal hall, which lies on an east-west axis, is dominating the plan and is placed directly behind the entrance door. The hall forms a small courtyard in its centre. Reception and



5. The house (*Bayt*) of the family Mismar.



6. Bayt Mismar.

living rooms flank the central hall in the direction of the valleyside, whereas domestic facilities are placed at the slope side. The first floor plan closely resembles the one of the ground floor, even though it can be entered from the slope side. Living- and guest-rooms are situated at the valley side, kitchen, bath- and storerooms at the slope side.

Some steps, rising along the wall, are placed in the middle of the house wall facing the valley thus forcing a visitor to turn around before entering the house and preventing him from catching a glimpse of the inner part. The beautifully adorned portal is the climax of the simply decorated façade. The central hall is situated behind the entrance. In its front and rear it is covered by crossvaults, with both compartments open in a pointed *al-īwān* arch towards a small courtyard in the centre. Especially during the warm summer months the hall was the

main place where the family stayed. On each side of the central hall there are located three crossvaulted rooms, each one connected independently with the hall. The left room at the valley side was used by Abdallah Mismar as a reception room. The room to the right was an ordinary living-sleeping-room. After the death of Abdallah Mismar, two of his sons shared the rooms, each of them using it for his family. The intermediate room in the southern row contained the kitchen and behind it, at the slope side, a store was placed. The intermediate room in the northern row was used in an unusual way. On the one hand, it was used as a store for part of the crop yield harvested on the families' *latifunds*, before selling it to local traders. For that reason a second entrance was built at the southern side of the house, leading into the store. But this entrance gave not only direct access to the



7. Bayt Abujaber.

crops, but also led to the staircase into the first floor. This constellation served three functions: It avoided that the trading activities disturbed the family life on the ground floor; it provided the first floor with a separate entrance and, thirdly, connected both floors through the inner part of the house.

The landing of the staircase on the first floor was placed on a terrace at the north-western part of the house. For this reason, the first floor had to be entered at the rear. A narrow alley, in whose western part the natural rock was used as an outer wall, leads into the central hall. Due to the courtyard on the ground floor, the central part was open and just covered by a narrow gallery to connect the front and rear area. The valley side of the hall was originally formed as an iwan-hall and covered by a barrelvault. Although this floor had to be entered from the hillside, the guest room was situated in the northern room beside the valley-sided *al-īwān*. This proves that only rooms that were light and easy to aerate rooms were chosen as reception rooms. Even the special representation duties of the eldest son as one of

the tribe's ash-Shaykh, did not force the family to place the reception room near the entrance door. The disturbance of family life, due to the present constellation, was obviously of minor importance. Since it was regarded as shameful when women crossed the way of a visitor in the house, they had to withdraw from the reception room before the visitor entered the valley-sided *al-īwān*. The reception room had the most splendid interior of the house.

The floor was covered with flower-patterned tiles, manufactured in Hebron. A large recess was built into the western wall, as a place to pile up rugs. To the left and right of the recess smaller niches were placed, which could be closed by carved wooden doors. At both outer walls of the room are rows of windows, each consisting of three windows. The windows have straight lintels and pointed tympana, originally filled with coloured glass pieces. Since the window frames were flush on the outer façade, the resulting stone benches at the innerside of the room were used as seats or sometimes for sleeping. The valley-sided

al-īwān and the adjacent room to the south were used in a variety of ways. The *iwan* was the preferred living and sleeping place in summer and the family shifted into the better protected closed room in winter. Both rooms have rows of windows facing the street, whose shape repeats the one of the reception room. In analogy to the guest-room, recesses and niches function as store- and sideboards. The floor was originally covered with simple slabs of yellow limestone. The intermediate room in the southern row was another multifunctional room though of lower importance because of its darkness. The kitchen was placed in the southern room at the slope side. A pit in its centre was used as a fireplace where food was cooked. The kitchen was (in contrast to the other rooms) not plastered and the vault construction of quarried stone and mortar are visible. The bathroom, located to the north beside the kitchen, was fitted with a facility to heat water which was extraordinary in as-Salṭ at that time, characterizing the house as a noble one. Except for the *al-īwān* in the central hall, all rooms of the first floor are crossvaulted. The open terrace at the northern side was used for domestic purposes so that the roof itself was not used for household activities. To avoid flooding of the courtyard, rainwater was led through drainages at the edges of the roof along the outer walls down to the ground.

Much housework was done by the women of the three families together, in summer mostly in the small courtyard on the ground floor. Usually, daily food was prepared together for the 25 persons making up the households. On special occasions, like weddings, when the extended family gathered, the terrace was used as a large fireplace, where the traditional dish "*mansaf*" (lamb with yoghurt) was prepared. In addition, a baker was ordered to prepare "*knaffeh*", a warm dish made of sugar and cheese. For these occasions the entire house was used as a festivity hall, the male guests celebrated

on the ground floor, the women were sitting on the first floor.

During recent renovations some changes have been made: the valley-sided *al-īwān* on the ground floor was closed and the open terrace on the first floor covered and re-shaped into a single room. Also the original staircase in the inner part of the house was destroyed and a new one built along the western outer wall of the house. The bathroom was modernized.

Complex Mansions (Fig. 8)

In complex manorial buildings the plan described above is used as a unit to which further units of the same type may be added according to the specific needs of the families. Thus, one house may contain three or four central halls with adjacent rooms, placed either horizontally beside each other or vertically on different floors. An illuminating example for this procedure is the house (*Bayt*) or so-called palace (*Qaṣr*) Abu-jaber, a major mansion of the city. It was built between 1887 and 1909 and belongs to the latifundist family Abujaber. After the death of the landlord Šāliḥ Abujaber his three sons inhabited the building with their families. The groundfloor is characterized by a large number of narrow cells, used as shops to sell the crop yield of the latifundist's fields, with adjoining stores at the rear, while the first and second floor contain apartments to accommodate the families and a guest-wing. Analyzing the plan, it is obvious that the arrangement of rooms follows strictly the specific need of the owner. Every apartment has a separate entrance from outside as well as a connection to the other units through the inner part of the house. An extraordinary position assumes the western part of the first floor. The wing was kept to receive the visitors of the well-known family. Behind the main entrance, located on the main street and the 'Ayn as Sāḥa, a staircase leads into the first floor and allows access either to the left to one of



8. Main portal of the Bayt Abujaber.

the private apartments or to the right to the families public guest-wing (*al-Maḍāfah*). The guest section contains a large hall, several rooms and an open terrace located towards the street, used as places where guests could sit, eat and sleep and a kitchen and toilet at the slope side. The Abujaber palace was the first building in as-Sal where latrines were integrated into the building. A second entrance of minor importance is situated at the back of the house. From there, a stairway leads into the *al-Maḍāfah* on the first floor and the apartment of the eldest son, who was representing the family, on the second floor. This constellation formed a hidden connection between his private rooms, the guest-wing and the exit. It allowed family members to enter or to leave unnoticed the *al-Maḍāfah* either to go outside or to their private apartment.

Comparing the two residential floors, built between 1896 and 1909, a dissolution of the traditional symmetric central-hall scheme is obvious. The first floor plan still follows strictly the vernacular rules with a longitudinal hall and adjacent rooms, while the second floor shows a rather free variation of the traditional plan in each apartment.

Conclusion

The analysis of the above described houses has demonstrated, that the invention of the guest room is of particular importance. It allows us to trace back the development of residential housing and living patterns. While in the rural community separated houses were used by the villagers to receive visitors or as a meeting place, the development of house forms consisting of more than one room fostered the establishment of a specific guest room in each house. Although several transformations have taken place, their splendid interior can serve as a hint for identifying the historical reception room. Thus they form a starting point for the analysis of the spatial organization in historical residential mansions. In palaces by contrast, entire wings were reserved for guests, forming a kind of guest-house within the house, and identified by the same term "*al-Maḍāfah*". They were setting signs of the landlord's wealth and hospitality. In the course of the 20th century the tradition of building guest-houses for family festivities decreased consistently. Yet during its last decade, however, old customs have begun to be rediscovered – a process which found its expression in a new guest-house, still under construction. According to the owner's statement, the reason for the erection of the building was the insufficiency of modern flats for large festivities. For this purpose, the extended family decided to build together – as they had done in former times – a location separated from their residences.

The Influence of the Surrounding Regions on the Vernacular Architecture

As mentioned above, the architectural development can be traced back to the creation of a post of a *qā'immaqām* and the resulting social changes. Therefore, it seems reasonable to search for influences emanating from the neighbouring regions which might have effected this transformation.

How can the development of this house type be explained? Is it supposed to be a transformation of the vernacular architecture or is it possible to prove that elements have been taken over from the neighbouring regions?

To answer these questions it is necessary to cast a glance on the architecture of adjacent regions, especially Lebanon and Palestine. The close trading-relations between Palestine and Transjordan and the settlement of several families from Nāblus in as-Salt during the 19th century suggest an influence of Palestinian architecture. Since it can be proved that the roofing construction with cross-and barrelvaults or domes is common in Palestine, one may assume that this method was brought to as-Salt by masons who had come from Palestine to Transjordan. But the floorplan described above cannot be traced back to Palestinian traditions, as a study on the traditional house of Nāblus has shown (Awad 1994: 29-30). Awad describes them as large courtyard houses with an *iwan* as a typical feature and a waterpool in the yard. Most of the noble houses contain three courtyards, located on different vertical levels, and a garden. Usually, the house is inhabited by several members of an extended family. This short description shows convincingly that this houseplan cannot be the root of the Salteze central-hall-house plan.

But in contrast to Palestine the same type of plan is found in Lebanon, where the central-hall-house became the most famous house form and is even considered as the

Lebanese house *par excellence* (Ragette 1980: 92). The comparison between both house types has shown, that apart from basic similarities the Salteze house presents many varieties of plans, caused by the topography of the town, while the Lebanese house features more elaborate decoration patterns and façade mouldings. You may observe that the builders in as-Salt focused on topographic convenience, while in Lebanon esthetic considerations were accentuated. A detailed comparison has yielded the following results:

In as-Salt and in Lebanon, all houses are usually built on slopes. They have cubic bodies, built of locally available stone. The plan and façade are symmetric. The central hall is used as the family's main lounge. If it is directed towards the valley, sitting facilities are found at the valley-sided part. Beside these similarities both house types differ in the following aspects: The central hall house in as-Salt can be one or two storeys high, while the Lebanese house is usually two storeys high. In as-Salt, the ground floor may contain stores or living-rooms, but in Lebanon living-rooms are generally placed on the upper floor. In both places, the access into the ground floor faces the valley, but the upper floor may be accessible in as-Salt from all sides of the house or through the interior of the house. In Lebanon, in contrast, the upper floor can usually be entered from the hillside or one house side. In as-Salt stairs may be at the inner or outer part of the house, while in Lebanon stairs are usually outside. But the main difference is the shape and location of the central hall: in as-Salt, the central hall is always located behind the entrance, but in Lebanon narrow alleys may lead to the central hall, which is always directed towards the valleys. In as-Salt, in contrast, it may be situated either towards the valley or along the slope. The central hall may be covered, a courtyard may be placed in the middle, or the rear part is uncovered, while in Lebanon the

central hall is always covered. In as-Salt the central hall has always a longitudinal shape or in rare cases an L-shape, whereas in Lebanon cross-shaped central halls appear, too. In as-Salt the rooms are usually covered by barrel- or crossvaults or domes, which form flat roofs, while in Lebanon hipped roofs covered with tiles are standard.

How can these similarities be explained? To get an answer it is necessary to include Turkey, the nucleus of the Ottoman Empire, in the research, since in Anatolia, too, central-hall-houses are a commonly found house type (*Şofa-type*). Even there the central hall is the main place for the family to live in, and as it has been noted about the architecture in as-Salt and in Lebanon, it contains often a sitting corner. As in Greater Syria, all rooms are accessible via the central hall and form a kind of independent unit. But apart from that, the Turkish central hall-house of the 19th century differs much from that in Greater Syria. As a result, a detailed comparison does not seem called for. Viewed from the point of construction, the use of wood in some regions distinguishes the Turkish houses from those in Bilād ash-Shām. Also the *kösk*, a room form whose bay windows are the most characteristic feature of Turkish residences, is not known in the southern parts of the Ottoman Empire. Vestibules, often integrated into the plan in Turkey, are not found in Lebanon and Jordan, either. Furthermore, the use of Turkish houses differs in the late 19th century: although a separation between guestwing (*selamlık*) and family part (*haramlık*) was common everywhere, the family wing was organized according to "European" standards. Usually, space was divided according to the daily activities: playing-rooms, dining rooms, sitting rooms, and so on are distinguished.

Despite this the Turkish central-hall-house has to be treated as the root of the ur-

ban houses in Bilād ash-Shām, which was politically integrated into the Ottoman Empire. Since the first central-hall-houses appeared in Lebanon in the mid-19th century and in as-Salt the first building of this type can be dated back to the turn of the century, it is more than reasonable to search for an influence in the Ottoman administration. It has to be stressed that in Turkey (Anatolia) central-hall-houses are known as a common urban house form since the 17th century. Another corroborating fact is that in the far away western parts of the Ottoman Empire (i.e. Bulgaria) central-hall-houses can also be found. Consequently we must suppose that the form spread out from Anatolia all over the empire. It seems that in all places the influence of the Turkish house form on the regional existing architecture took place first in the cities and expanded from there to the surrounding villages. Furthermore, it is known that politically serious attempts had been made to tie the southern part of the Ottoman Empire closer to the central administration. This might also be considered as an argument for a Turkish influence on the architecture of Greater Syria, an influence manifesting itself in the shape of the central-hall-house.

In conclusion it has to be emphasized that this house type became the most famous one in the hilly regions and at the coast of the western parts of Greater Syria. All dwellings, whether in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine or Transjordan display the feature of the central hall, flanked by several rooms. Nevertheless in all regions different details characterize façade and plan, pointing to a remarkable influence of the architecture existing on a vernacular level.

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