

THE URBAN NOMADS OF IRAQ
The Urban Iraqis Living Like Nomads in their Urban Homes

Dr Şubhi (Hussein ‘Alwān) Al-‘Azzāwī, Architect and Urban Designer

Synopsis of paper to be presented at the Third Architectural Conference
University of Technology, Baghdad, 29 & 30 Nov. 2010

The urban Iraqis in Baghdad, who had traditionally lived and are still living in indigenous courtyard houses, lead a nomadic way of life within them.

Every year around mid-May, they vertically transfer their family living activities in section from the habitable rooms and spaces (**Tārma**) at first floor to the habitable spaces (**Līwān / Iwān, Tārma** and **Tarār / Talār**) at ground floor, to the habitable cellar at subterranean level (**Sardāb**, or more accurately, **Sard-Āb**), to the habitable semi-cellar at semi-subterranean level (**Nīm Sardāb**) during the different periods of daytime, and to the roof terrace to sleep overnight. This seasonal activity may be referred to as the summer vertical transfer, or simply the summer transfer (**al-Rihla al-Şayfiyya**, simply **Rihlat al-Şayf**), which is traditionally and colloquially referred to as the “ascend to the roof terrace” (**Şa’dat al-Sat-h**, or colloquially, **Şa’dat al-Satih**).

Every year around mid-October, they also transfer their family living activities in the opposite direction. This seasonal activity may be referred to as the winter vertical transfer, or simply winter transfer (**al-Rihla al-Shitwiyya**, or simply **Rihlat al-Shitā’**), which is also traditionally and colloquially referred to as the “descend from the roof terrace” (**Nazlat al-Sat-h**).

The families of such houses do that in order to enjoy the best thermal comfort conditions available in the naturally conditioned environments within various habitable rooms and spaces of these indigenous courtyard houses.

This may be analogous to the Bedouin Arabs in Arabia, who in summer travel with their herds to the Levant in the north in order to feed on the cultivation of the desert after the rainfall of the winter season. They also travel to the Yemen in the south to feed on the cultivation of the desert after the monsoon rainfall (**Mawāsim**) from the Arabian sea and the Indian ocean during the summer season. These seasonal journeys are referred to in the holy **Qur’ān** as the “winter journey” and the “summer journey”.

In spring (which lasts for about four to six weeks from mid-April to mid-May), there may also be a horizontal shift in the sleeping arrangement of the family members from the habitable rooms to the habitable spaces (**Tārma** and **Riwāq**) at first floor. This is because during such a period, it is too hot to sleep indoors while it is too cold to sleep on the roof terrace.

In the autumn (which lasts for about four to six weeks from mid-October to mid-November) there may also be a horizontal shift from the habitable rooms spaces at subterranean, semi-subterranean, ground floor, and roof terrace levels to the habitable spaces at first floor for the same reason as in spring.

Architecturally and spatially (in plans, sections and in three dimensional forms), such in-between spaces (or transitional spaces from inside to outside and vice versa) reflect the nature of the transitional seasons of spring and autumn (from winter to summer and vice versa respectively).

It should be pointed out that the same is true of Iraqis living in similar houses in other cities of Iraq, which are characterised by hot and dry climates in summer lasting for about five months, such as the holy town of Kādhimiyya, the city of Hilla, the holy cities of Karbalā' and Najaf, etc.

These activities in the various seasons and at different times of the day within them, show that the Iraqis in their indigenous courtyard houses traditionally have led a way of life, which can be described as nomadic (rather than settled), mobile (rather than stationary), kinetic / dynamic rather static, active (rather than inactive), energetic (rather than unenergetic)!

With regard to the new modern contemporary architecture of future Iraq a series of questions are raised as follows.

- How should architects (Iraqis and non-Iraqis) react to such traditional family living activities and patterns of use of habitable rooms and spaces?
- Could they provide various habitable rooms and spaces, which are designed and designated to suit and be used in different seasons and at different times of the day within the same season as in indigenous courtyard houses?
- What are the concepts, plans, forms, sections, elevations, building materials and detailing of the new , modern, contemporary architecture of future Iraq (in terms of houses, housing, schools, buildings, etc.)?
- Should they design for a mobile and active or stationary and inactive way of life, as people in the West (the Europeans) lead?
- Should Iraqi architects take the lead and influence the West in designing the new, modern, contemporary architecture and urbanism, which are climatically responsive, environmentally friendly, passive solar designed, energy efficient, zero energy developments, and zero carbon footprints?

In his paper, the author would attempt to answer these and similar questions with illustrations (plans, sections, elevations, views, and scientific graphs).

Copyright: Dr Şubhī Al-‘Azzāwī, AA Dipl, PhD (UCL), ARB. 10 & 11.05.2010.
Consultant Architect & Urban Designer,
Climatic & Environmental Design Consultant
18 Farm Holt, New Ash Green, LONGFIELD, Kent DA3 8QA, England, UK
Tel / Fax: + 44 1474 879 501. E-mail: subhi60azzawi@onetel.com