

THE LEBANESE HOUSE...

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“Then a mason came forth and said, ‘Speak to us of Houses’, and he answered and said, ‘Build of your imaginings a bower (a place closed in with foliage) in the wilderness ere (before) you build a house within the city walls.’”

“On Houses” from *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran



When we talk about the Lebanese house we enter a world of sunshine and light, of color both subtle and vivid, of simplicity of form and elegance of proportions. We enter the lives of a community that lived in simplicity and in harmony with its surroundings. The rugged nature of the landscape offered them security and a fair amount of independence from the rulers of the rest of the country. Gently sculpting the landscape into terraces, they were able to cultivate the land for their living. Inspired by the beauty of their land, they created an architecture from its stones and timbers both simple and refined.

The relationship of architecture to nature is the central force in the design of any Lebanese house. A moderate climate allowed the Lebanese to enjoy the outside for more than six months a year. From most locations, dramatic landscapes provided exciting and inspiring views. Thus was born an architecture that was open to the outside, embracing the landscape, capturing the cool breeze in summer and the warm sun in winter. This openness was achieved through a variety of architectural means. The house was opened up by a simple window or an elaborate gallery depending on the wealth of the owner. In the

grand houses of the region, courts surrounded by graceful arcades opened to the side of the valley forming a platform for the enjoyment of the dramatic landscape. In more modest houses, an elegant mandaloon window framed the view and brought light and colour to the heart of the house.

The family as ever, was at the center of social life. The turbulent history of Lebanon linked the sense of belonging of the Lebanese, in the first instance, to his family. The attachment to his home was always strong because it is the gatherer of his family, past and present. Proverbs, sayings, social habits, and rituals are in the thinking of people can be understood through social habits and rituals that are connected to the house.

“In their fear, your forefathers gathered you too near together. And that fear shall endure a little longer. A little longer shall your city walls separate your hearths from your fields.”
(1)



Even today, family members tend to build their homes next to one another. In the villages houses were usually built “wall to wall”, two houses sharing a wall in between. This has enabled family members to remain close to each other as well save on the cost of the next new house. When a child was born, his umbilical cord would be cut on the seventh day and hung over the main door of the house, in the hope that the child will grow up close to his home and near his family.

The stability and continuity of the family was of utmost importance. In the traditional wedding ceremony, depending on the wealth of her family, the bride was brought to her husband’s house riding a horse or a mule. Just before entering her new home, she would be given a piece of yeasted dough to throw against the wall. If the piece adhered to the

wall, the women rejoiced taking this omen as an indication that the marriage will last and bear children. A recent tradition has the bride enter her new home backwards so that her “entry” will be without “exit”.

For the people of Lebanon, building their own home is still the achievement of their lives. Irrespective of social class or background, this is a common dream. Every emigrant's ultimate aim is to return to his village and build himself a splendid house. There are many proverbs and sayings that testify to the importance of houses such as **“A pile of stones is better than a pile of gold”**, **“A house is splendor and pride (*izz*)”**, **“The house is the first shelter and the last sale”**. (2)

Rituals related to the building of houses still exist today. The house foundations are supposed to be “watered with blood for them to solidify”. The house owner should slay sheep and pour its blood on the earth before putting the first foundation stone. Another tradition is to slay the sheep when they reach the building of the roof. In both cases, these rituals came from the time when neighbors helped the house owner at various stages in the building of his house. The sheep was slain and offered to the helpers as food and thanks. However, these traditions soon acquired a spiritual dimension and hence continue to be performed today. It is still common to find under the doorsills or over the doors a talisman placed discreetly for good luck and more importantly, as a protection from the evil eye.

The simplest Lebanese house consists of one large room called *al illiya*, which as its name indicates is the uppermost part of the building. The *illiya* is built on top of a vaulted lower room called the *kabou*. The *kabou* is used for storing animals, firewood and tools. The *illyia* contains the living quarters and enjoys the best views. The terrace in front of it (*stayha*) is where the family gathers in the evening to enjoy the cool night air and even sleep on hot summer nights. The *stayha* is frequently roofed over with a grapevine to provide it with shade from the sun and shelter from the evening dew.



The roof of the *illiya* itself is usually of a light timber construction and is supported by external walls and one or two internal columns depending on its size. A two-column *illiya* indicates wealth and success and is a source of pride for its owner. The roof is built up of a layer of crushed stone over a thick layer of earth. The layer is carried by a vaulted stone or timber structure. The roof requires regular maintenance for compacting the earth to stop the penetration of rain. This is achieved through dragging a stone roller (*mahdalleh*) over it to close any cracks that may appear.



The ritual of rolling the roof was part of the preparation of the house for winter. It was also known for a husband whose wife was having difficulty in childbirth to be asked to go roll the roof. This probably had little to do with anything spiritual but was a clever way of giving the nervous father something to do and to get him out of the house.

The roof tops were and are to this day an important part of the house. The long and hard winter months made September a busy month due to the necessity of stocking up the house with foodstuff (*mouni*). The short availability and high cost of food in winter was turned into an art of conserving, drying and pickling all sorts of fruits and vegetables by the villagers. Small bunches of sticks and pine cones for use as fire wood were dried on the roof. Figs, raisins, apricots, pine kernels, tomatoes, green beans, *burgul* and *kishk* were dried for the *mouni*. *Burgul* is cracked wheat while *kishk* is *burghul* marinated in yogurt. The making of *kishk* is a highly laborious process. The women frequently collaborated in the preparation of their stocks. To prepare *kishk*, they would ask the single men and women of the village to help them, providing them with an opportunity to meet. In September, the roofscape of any village in Lebanon is like an oriental carpet rich with patches of color and texture.



The stone stairs leading up to the roof look at first glance very curious. They start at a distance above the ground and are inaccessible without a wooden ladder. This was to stop children and animals from getting to the roof and the winter's *mouni* drying on it. The stairs in themselves were a piece of sculpture. Built of individual pieces of solid stone, they cantilever out of the wall and cast their deep shadow on it animating the simple stone facade through the play of light and shadow.

The external walls of the house were built of rough solid stone except for the walls that have a south westerly exposure. These were built as two separate parallel walls to stop rain penetrating into the house. Inside, the simple *illiya* is subdivided into three areas. In front of the entrance door is the *majaz*, which is a square area lower than the main floor. There, people took off their shoes so as not to sully the main floor, usually covered with straw mats and kilims. In the *majaz*, one also found water jars placed on small wooden benches and a little opening that served as the cat's own door. The rest of the room was subdivided into a small area for the storage of food (*mouni*), and a main living /sleeping space. In the middle of the main space, there usually was a fire place that consisted of a simple semi circular arrangement of stones. In winter, the family gathered next to the fireplace for cooking and warmth. Smoke was simply allowed to escape through high level ventilation holes in the walls. Fireplaces were only found in larger homes and palaces.

The subdivision of the *illiya* was created by a double timber structure that served as storage called *satween*. Its top most part called the *kwar* was used for storing food and had holes over it leading to the roof. The lower part known as the *yuk* was used for storing the family bedding. This they closed by a simple curtain.



One entertaining family story is about a great aunt who upon seeing her prospective husband approach their house had nowhere to hide except in the *yuk*. Half way through the conversation between her future husband and her father, she felt the bedding slide from underneath her and soon found herself flat on her back at their feet.

“But you, children of space, you restless in rest, you shall not be trapped nor tamed. Your house shall be not an anchor but a mast. It shall not be a glistening film that covers a wound, but an eyelid that guards the eye.” (1)

As the needs of the family grew and more space was required, more rooms were added side by side. A gallery of arcades was then added at the front to serve in most cases as a circulation area between the rooms. The gallery also served as a semi enclosed outdoor space that opened the house onto the views of the valley or garden.

Kiosk



Yuk

The simple stone construction and the graceful proportions of the gallery are a testimony to the high degree of skill and ability of the stone masons. Each of the round columns of the gallery was called a *shamaa*, meaning a candle. This was usually made up of one large piece of stone cut and chiseled to create the slender round column. The taller the column, the larger the original piece of stone and hence the higher the cost of construction. High galleries with tall columns were therefore a source of pride for their owners. The play of light and shade of the gallery gave the houses a lightness and delicacy of form that blended well with the softness of nature.



Another way of enlarging the simple house was through the use of the *liwan* unit. This is a semi-enclosed space with a large archway connecting two rooms together. The origin of this unit is probably Persian where such units were known as “*Iwans*” and were a common feature of their architecture. The *liwan* became a gathering space for the family and friends, extending the house into the surrounding garden. A friend whose house had such a space came home one stormy winter’s night to find a group of elderly villagers sheltering in his *liwan*. After the storm subsided the villagers thanked him and as they left told him, “A house that provides shelter for strangers is a house of *barakah* (Blessing).”



The relationship of architecture to nature is found even in the few courtyard houses that exist today. The mild climate and the difficult sloping terrain of Lebanon make the creation of a courtyard type house both redundant and difficult. Contrary to the traditional Arab courtyard house that is completely enclosed, in Lebanon, the courtyard is open to the side of the valley or at least has a kiosk or a major decorative window framing the view.



The *Mandaloon* window is one such window. It is a two arched opening with a small colonette in the middle. This is typical of Lebanon in the Middle East. Its name is said to derive from its use where the lady of the house would sit behind this window and listen to her suitor serenade her on a Mandolin. A special Lebanese feature of this window is the addition of a plant box that once more brought nature even closer into the home.

The most common form of the Lebanese house, however, is the central hall house. This simple cube with its red tiled roof is a later development of the Lebanese house. Usually consisting of two floors, the lower floor is vaulted and is used for storage while the upper floor contained the living area. As its name indicates, the plan of this type of house consists of a central space surrounded by several rooms



The central hall called *Dar*, is the heart of the house that serves as a multipurpose room for family and friends. With the entrance at the back, the house addresses itself to the valley and views. Nature is here celebrated through the elegant triple arch that opens out the hall through its full height to the view. The triple arch has a central door with a window on each side and a small balcony outside it. The orientation of the main space towards the valley and hence the breeze, the high ceilings and the placement of windows and doors ensured excellent cross ventilation. This created a comfortable cool environment even in the midst of summer.

The red tiled roof, probably an Italian import, appeared in the nineteenth century. Never used as a living space, the roof has no windows nor chimney stacks. Known locally as the *Tarboush* or fez of the house, the red roof was a source of pride for its owners.

The simplicity of the stonework and the lack of decorative friezes is a testimony to the skill of the masons. Their work was of such perfection that joints and connections did not need to be hidden or masked by decorative bands. Windows were simply articulated in the facade by a simple projecting frame to set them off against the wall surface. Decoration found in the ironwork or plaster work was inspired by nature. Abstract floral or leaf motifs were repeated in different houses adding to the harmony of the architecture and landscape.

“Your house is your larger body (nature, the forest, the world of freedom). It grows in the sun and sleeps in the stillness of the night; and it is not dreamless. Does not your house dream? and dreaming, leave the city for grove or hilltop?” (1)

The beauty of the traditional Lebanese house is in its simplicity and modesty. It blends into its surroundings through the use of natural materials and its acknowledgment of nature. Always a source of pride for its owners, it never dominated the landscape nor was it ostentatious. In all its different forms and styles, it always embraced and celebrated nature. By bringing nature into the heart of the house, it enriched the lives of people and inspired them. By adding harmony and beauty to their every day life, the Lebanese house fulfilled the ultimate aim of architecture.

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