

A building boom in the Hindukush

Afghanistan 1921-1928

Traditional Afghan domestic architecture is inward-oriented and designed to provide maximum privacy. In urban residences known as *serai*, central courtyards form the core of the household and rooms are arranged around them on two or more floors, to form adjoining apartments for the multiple wives and joint family members who traditionally dwell together in this Muslim society. Staircases rising to the flat mud roof provide free, unobserved movement throughout the building to accommodate the ladies who are secluded from all males outside their immediate families.

Courtyard facades are composed pre-dominately of floor to ceiling windows, but the back walls, seldom pierced, present blank faces to all passers-by. No breaks occur between houses, and no decoration appears on the tawny mud-plastered exterior walls to give even a hint as to the character, or affluence, of those living behind them. Everywhere all is deliberately anonymous.

No substantial changes affected domestic architecture for centuries until Amir Abdur Rahman (r. 1880-1901) rejected the old traditions and introduced free-standing, courtyardless structures. Designing all of his own palaces in the arcuated Central Asian Islamic tradition, his plans were rigidly symmetrical. The buildings were generally single-storey, with rooms uniformly arranged around lofty central domed halls; four small square rooms connected by galleries or columned verandas were inevitably placed at each corner.

Stucco decoration in the Islamic tradition appears on both exteriors and interiors where foliated scrolls and arabesques soften the austerity of the massive baked brick walls, never less than 1.5 m. thick. Occasionally coloured patera inlaid with mirrors were employed, but surfaces were most characteristically finished in gleaming white lime plaster and whitewash.

Amir Abdur Rahman's palaces were built exclusively for the monarch, however. The ladies of the *harem* continued to reside in traditionally designed *harem-serai*.

The first hint of strong influences from the Indian subcontinent, which would dominate architectural design during the subsequent reign, appears on a palace constructed c. 1891 by Amir Abdur Rahman's son, Habibullah. The plan incorporates the basic features utilised by Amir Abdur Rahman, but rectangular roofs replace the domes his father would have used and gables are introduced.

Both British and Indian architects were employed during Amir Habibullah's reign (1901-1919) and gradually Islamic traditions in architecture disappeared. Colonial styles prevailed, including limited use of such neo-classical decorative motifs as stucco quoin designs, pediments, fluted pilasters and pseudo-classical capitals. Art Nouveau also made an appearance. Ornate metal grillwork supported the glass roof of a veranda over one portico and newer staircases of elaborate metalwork were attached to several palaces.

Again, these colonial structures were used almost exclusively by the Amir for court ceremony and the traditional *serai* continued as the favoured abode. Nevertheless, interior decor evidenced a decided fondness for Victoriana. Architecture from this period reflected the Afghan propensity for creating hybrid fashions by amalgamating foreign notions with their own culture.

In 1919, however, influences from the Indian subcontinent ceased abruptly on the assassination of Amir Habibullah. His successor's flamboyant personality was attracted by European traditions.

Amir Amanullah (ruled 1919-1929), third son of Amir Habibullah, initiated two major building projects. A new capital city named Darulaman was laid out some 10 km south of the capital of Kabul, in which the centerpiece was a grandiose Secretariat (Qasr-e Dar ul-aman) in the tradition of European 18th-century palaces. It was his secret hope that Darulaman might rival New Delhi.

The Amir's most passionate dream, however, was to transform his summer capital at Paghman, a picturesque village clinging to the mountainsides of the Hindu Kush some 20 km west of Kabul, into a European resort. Under avid royal encouragement, amounting at times to thinly disguised compulsion, members of court were induced to build private western-styled villas. The government contributed a mosque, hospital, hotel, theatre, shopping centres, in addition to an extensive public garden replete with a café decorated with Art Nouveau metal-work, bandstand and fountains. At the entrance to Paghman a Victory Arch commemorated Afghan successes during a 3-week war fought with British India in 1919.

Between 1921 and the end of 1928, despite tribal revolts which seriously interrupted construction throughout 1924, upwards of 70 structures were either wholly or partially completed.

This frantic building activity was formally launched by the proclamation of a

building code published in July 1922, the first law to regulate private construction. It clearly defined the Amir's aversion to the closed, anonymous architecture characterising old Kabul. Furthermore, it stressed maximum participation; western architecture was no longer to be the sole prerogative of the monarch. Houses were required not only to be visible from the street, but separated one from the other by at least 15 m and set back at least 10 m from the street with trees and ornamental plantings in front. Free land, easy credit, free electricity and exemption from such taxes as the streetcleaning tax, were offered to those who guaranteed to build quickly according to prescribed qualifications.

The Amir requested assistance from Germany in building Darulaman, and a team of 22 engineers sent by the Mayor of Berlin arrived in Kabul in May 1922, under the leadership of Walter Harten. Although Harten's cubist plans for Qasr-e Darulaman were rejected by the Amir, he did receive private commissions.

A French cultural delegation also arrived in May 1922, and was soon joined by the architect André Godard, whose design for Qasr-e Darulaman was enthusiastically received.

In June 1922 a combined diplomatic and commercial mission arrived from Italy and the engaging young Angelo Mario De Gado was subsequently entrusted with the overall supervision of construction in Paghman. In addition, several Austrian prisoners of war, who had escaped from Russia into Afghanistan in 1918, were active as interior decorators.

Word of the building boom soon reached Europe, attracting others, including a number of architects from Turkey. Tewfik Bey was an interesting member of this group. Formerly with the Turkish Embassy in the United States, later a salesman in Philadelphia, and then a movie extra in Hollywood, where he studied scientific farming in his spare

time, Tewfik Bey finally wound up in Afghanistan as agricultural advisor to the Amir. But he also tried his hand at architectural design, taking his inspiration, he himself admitted, from Swiss chalets and from houses he could remember seeing in the United States.

Most significantly, many families designed their own homes and normally only the most cursory plans were drafted. With these plans in hand, it was the local masons who translated them into reality. Since most of the chief masons had received their training as apprentices to British and Indian architects during the previous period, colonial styles and decoration naturally continued.

Despite the presence of the foreign experts, the Amir, who adopted the European title of King in 1923, followed his grandfather and father in designing buildings. Magazine pictures inspired many ideas.

In the Bala Bagh (High Garden) at Paghman, a tall wall divided the King's official quarters, containing his office called Koti Surkh (Red House), from his private residence. Koti Surkh was the first building to incorporate an oriel window and two-storey veranda, two elements which subsequently enjoyed great popularity. At Koti Safeed (White House), a residential-guest house just north of the office, massive two-storeyed 5-window bays were dominated by ornate round windows with foliated scrolls decorating the spandrels suggestive of Amir Abdur Rahman's period.

Two years later, when the two-storey residence was constructed in Bala Bagh, square Germanic towers were combined with oriel and bay windows. The royal apartments were located upstairs on the south side, while the rest of the building contained long rows of bedrooms and was, in effect, simply an elongated modification of the traditional *haremsrai* for, although the King had only one wife, many ladies of the royal family made their home with him. Serv-

ants' quarters were located in the basement.

Hidden among the bowers of the terraced gardens were several pavilions, fountains, tennis courts and a swimming pool, in addition to garden statuary made entirely from brick finished with gypsum plaster to simulate marble. Such statuary was a novelty, and those in human form created controversy among the King's conservative subjects who accused him of becoming an idol worshipper.

The Queen Mother built close-by, just outside the walls of Bala Bagh. The three-storey Villa Ulya Hazrat (Her Majesty's Villa) combined a domed round tower and round windows reminiscent of Amir Abdur Rahman's period with a gabled roof characteristic of Amir Habibullah's structures, together with the newly introduced two-storey bay and verandaporch.

King Amanullah assisted his eldest brother, Enayatullah, in designing a villa, using as a model a picture from an American magazine. Built just south of Villa Ulya Hazrat, it followed the original quite faithfully, with the exception of the addition of a third storey.

Villa Enayat was a single family dwelling. Prince Enayatullah married only once and his wife occupied the second floor where the principal living room was located. Second floors customarily contained the major living and entertainment rooms, a pattern set during the reign of Amir Habibullah.

On the first floor, the eldest son was accommodated next to the dining room, in the bowed room with its attached bath and flush toilet on the north side. The other numerous children occupied rooms on the ground floor, and the dormitory on the third floor.

If designs were hybrid, exterior decoration was wildly eclectic. Variety was the ideal. Because the building code required that facades be visible from the street, much attention was devoted to their ornamentation. Construction was

still of baked brick, but walls had slimmed down to a thickness of about 70 cm. Plastered surfaces were generally colour-washed in pastel hues onto which the heavy white stucco reliefs were affixed by wooden dowels.

Pronounced rustic effects came into vogue. At the theatre the pink plaster was flecked with white and scored to resemble large blocks of porphyry; quoin designs were made more prominent by mixing small pebbles with the stucco; black stone chips filled panels on the facade of the Villa Ulya Hazrat; stone-fill plinths were universally employed; and rough-cut stone decorated the entire facade of the hospital.

At Kot-i-Safeed simulated weatherboarding was made from stucco and combined with a unique punctuated diamond design, heavy stucco hood-moulds, and a three-pronged motif ornamented with blossoms.

Neo-classical designs proliferated and were often combined with motifs suggestive of Baroque, Rococo and even Mannerist traditions, chosen in any combination from large design books zealously compiled by the chief masons. At the Villa Enayat, for instance, stucco weatherboarding, pseudo-Mannerist, pseudo-Corinthian, and highly stylised Ionic motifs were combined with festoons and floral ornaments; the Prince's personal emblem adorned the gables.

Substantial Ionic columns stood at the entrance and in the foyer of the Bala Bagh residence where the variety of

exterior decoration was particularly exuberant. The slender fluted columns framing the windows on the south facade have Ionic capitals so delicate they seem hardly able to support the hefty curved and triangular denticulated pediments; one large shaped pediment is filled with entwined vines and flowers. Elsewhere, two modified volutes joined by an acanthus-like plant take the place of pediments. Windows in stucco frames are placed above other entablatures.

Varied European motifs and Afghan adaptations covered both exteriors and interiors, either delicately or ponderously. The introduction of cement at Qasre Darulaman increased the weightiness of its decorative elements. Some interiors were daubed with paint and stencilled with Greek fret designs and floral festoons in imitation of wallpapering, a technique introduced by the Austrian interior decorators. Painted dados simulating marble were popular.

Experiments continued until revolution erupted in November 1928 and ended with the exile of King Amanullah and most of the court-oriented elite in January 1929. The building programmes ceased, but seeds for the future had been planted. Today, urban middle class Afghans aspire to build in western style, albeit without the flamboyance of this unique period. Traditional architecture tends to be ignored and foreign plans uncritically accepted.

Update by Nancy Hatch Dupree:

The author returned to Paghman in 2000 and found all the major villas, the hotel and the library, the hospital and the barracks, plus the Public Gardens with its pavilion and graceful horse fountain had disappeared. There was no trace of even the large cinema building. Only the roller once pulled by elephants lay forlornly by the roadside. All the bricks and construction materials had been taken by a mujahideen commander for the construction of his own palace on a neighbouring hill. Only some parts of the mosque were still recognizable.

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