



LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS
MODOS DE HABITAR

ABADA EDITORES

LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL CULTURA Y CIUDAD
GRANADA, 23-25 ENERO 2019



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Presentación.....	XIX
Juan Calatrava	

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 1

Arquitecturas de la casa: el espacio doméstico a través de la historia

Lo público y lo privado en la forma urbis de Santiago 1910. El espacio doméstico en el Canon Republicano.....	22
Josep Parcerisa Bundó, José Rosas Vera	
La Alhambra habitada. Experiencias del paisaje desde el espacio arquitectónico..	37
Marta Rodríguez Iturriaga	
Housing and Children: Architectural Models from the Modern Movement.....	48
Alexandra Alegre	
Högná Sigurðardóttir. La misteriosa marca indeleble del origen.....	59
Julio Barreno Gutiérrez	
Las casillas de peones camineros y su implantación en la costa del sudeste de España.....	73
Antonio Burgos Núñez, Juan Carlos Olmo García, Francisco José García Castillo	
El <i>palazzo all'italiana</i>, de la casa del príncipe al principio urbano.....	82
Michele Giovanni Caja, Maria Pompeiana Iarossi	
The City and the House: Going Back to the Future.....	95
Antonio Alberto Clemente	
Traditional Urban Housing at Alentejo's "Marble Area".....	104
Ana Costa Rosado	
La consolidación del cuarto de baño en las viviendas de la ciudad de São Paulo, Brasil.....	117
Clarissa de Almeida Paulillo, Tatiana Sakurai	
La cama <i>amueblada</i>: del objeto a la estancia.....	126
María de Miguel Pastor, Carla Sentieri Omarrementería	

The Spaces, the People and the Ways of Being at Home in the North of Portugal in the 19th Century	136
Alexandra Esteves	
Casa de John Soane en Londres (1792-1827). Luz, iluminación y patrimonio	143
Rosalía Fenutría Aumesquet, José Joaquín Parra Bañón	
Rita Fernández Queimadelos. Los proyectos de viviendas realizados en la DGRD (1943-1946)	154
Paula M. Fernández-Gago Longueira, Eduardo A. Caridad Yáñez	
Arqueología urbana en Barcelona: aproximación a los espacios domésticos entre los siglos IV-VI	167
Francesc Xavier Florensa Puchol	
Memoria e identidad: el espacio de almacenaje en el imaginario doméstico	178
Marta García Carbonero	
Between Doorkeeper Apartments and Housemaid Rooms: Ways of Living in a Changing Lisbon	188
Maria Assunção Gato, Filipa Ramalhe	
La casa popular de zaguán, patio y corral. Habitabilidad y protección para el siglo XXI	196
Vidal Gómez Martínez, Blanca del Espino Hidalgo, María Teresa Pérez Cano	
Casa en transformación: cocina y tecnología en el siglo XX en Cuenca (Ecuador)	206
María Augusta Hermida, María José Cañar, Guillermo Mauricio Torres	
Granada: la arquitectura doméstica de la ciudad cristiana	218
Carlos Jerez Mir	
Consideraciones históricas sobre la casa tradicional gallega y otras construcciones adjetivas	230
Francisco Xabier Louzao Martínez	
Modern, Rationalist and Mediterranean: Residential Architecture during the Italian Colonization in Libya	236
Andrea Maglio	
El confort en la vivienda canaria: de la arquitectura tradicional a los EECN	250
Eduardo Martín del Toro	
Instalaciones de la casa: el espacio doméstico en el siglo XX en España a través de la tecnología	261
César Martín-Gómez, José Manuel Pozo Municio	
El diedro casa ciudad en la arquitectura nobiliaria de Sevilla: la plaza del Duque	272
Pedro Mena Vega	
Un primer acercamiento a la <i>Quinta Nova da Assunção</i> en Sintra	282
Iván Moure Pazos	

The Construction of “Minho’s” Domestic Space in Portugal’s 18th Century..... Flávia Oliveira	294
Arquitectura moderna en la ciudad histórica. Adalberto Libera y la casa Nicoletti (Roma 1932)..... Carlos Plaza	302
Casa Bellia en Turín: nuevos espacios para la burguesía..... Alice Pozzati	315
Live-Work Architecture. Learning from Peripheral Neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro..... Ana Slade	327
The Relationship Between Inhabitants and Vegetation in the Houses of Maceió in the 19th..... Tharcila Maria Soares Leão, Josemary Omena Passos Ferrare, Veronica Robalinho Cavalcanti	339
The Home and the World: Domestic Dynamics of the Postwar American Suburban House..... Luísa Sol	350
El hogar de Telva. Miradas femeninas al interior doméstico español 1963-1975..... Jorge Tárrago Mingo, Cristina Sunga Zamora	360
La casa jesuita en Granada: el Colegio de San Pablo..... María del Carmen Vílchez Lara, Jorge Gabriel Molinero Sánchez	371
La habitación en la arquitectura agraria granadina..... Eduardo Zurita Povedano	381

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 2

El proyecto doméstico como núcleo de la modernidad: casa singular y vivienda colectiva, del Movimiento Moderno al siglo XXI

Habitar el arte: la casa del coleccionista como modelo experimental de espacio doméstico..... Ángeles Layuno	394
Domesticidad Mediterránea vs. Modernidad americana de Posguerra. Sert y Rudofsky..... Mar Loren-Méndez	411
Tradiciones en las políticas de vivienda pública..... Josep Maria Montaner Martorell	422

De la Weissenhoff a Oporto, un camino de servicio.....	430
José Manuel Pozo Municio	
Le Corbusier's <i>Immeuble-villas</i> and an After Lunch Remembrance.....	441
Marta Sequeira	
Le Corbusier. <i>Une science de logis</i>.....	454
Jorge Torres Cuelco	
La casa productiva. Propuestas para la autosuficiencia alimentaria durante la República de Weimar.....	470
David Arredondo Garrido	
<i>Modernità y mediterraneità</i>: sincretismo habitacional de Luigi Figini y Gino Pollini.....	482
Emilio Cachorro Fernández, Cristina Medina Valverde	
El <i>piano Fanfani</i> en Roma: la torre de viviendas y la casa patio.....	496
Ana del Cid Mendoza	
Feet on the Sand: Living Spaces in Apartment Buildings by the Sea in Maceió, Brazil.....	510
Camila Antunes de Carvalho Casado, Maria Angélica da Silva	
Atomic-age Housing. The Fallout Shelter in Cold War America.....	521
Chiara Baglione	
De la manzana a la supermanzana. Recuperación e innovación en la cultura urbanística.....	531
Raimundo Bambó Naya, Javier Monclús Fraga	
La ventana y el balcón sobre avenida Providencia (1931/1981): evolución y permanencia de la arquitectura doméstica.....	544
Pedro Bannen Lanata	
Towards the Modern Block: Evolution of an Urban Type in Kay Fisker's Prewar Architecture.....	554
Guia Baratelli	
La casa en Isle of Wight (1955-1956) de James Gowan, austeridad en la modernidad británica.....	566
Alicia Cantabella Gallego	
<i>Villeggiatura</i> urbana: una residencia secundaria en el núcleo urbano de São Paulo.....	576
Sara Caon	
Otredades en la habitabilidad de un Monterrey moderno: primeros edificios de departamentos como alternativa a la vivienda unifamiliar.....	586
María de los Ángeles Castillo Soriano, Alberto Canavati Espinosa	
Brutalismo doméstico. Un espacio para la contemplación.....	597
Rubens Cortés Cano	

La Casa Barata dos Santos como experimento, por Nuno Portas y Nuno Teotónio (1958-1962)	608
Mª Ángeles Domínguez Durán	
Exploraciones cartográficas comparadas de paisajes residenciales: polígonos vs periferias ordinarias	620
Isabel Ezquerro, Carmen Díez-Medina	
The House as Experiment: House in Sesimbra (1960-64) by Portas and Teotónio Pereira	634
Hugo L. Farias	
La piedra en la casa moderna	645
María Ana Ferré Aydos	
Las casas unifamiliares no construidas del programa <i>Case Study Houses</i>	657
Pauline Fonini Felin	
Modern Housing and Duplex Apartments: Study of Discourses and Practices of a Typology	670
Sabrina Fontenele	
Polígonos de vivienda. Relevancia del diagnóstico en la regeneración urbana de espacios libres	681
Sergio García-Pérez, Javier Monclús, Carmen Díez Medina	
A City of Order: on Piccinato's Ataköy	692
Esen Gökçe Özdamar	
Paisaje y ciudad en las viviendas de la Universidad Laboral de Almería	702
José Ramón González González	
La imagen de arquitectura en la construcción del subconsciente colectivo	713
Carlos Gor Gómez	
Prácticas Concretas	725
Pablo Jesús Gutiérrez Calderón	
Tropical and Colonial: Single Houses as a Modern Lab in Angola and Mozambique (1950-1970)	737
Ana Magalhães	
Casa y Monumento: Roma habitada	748
Sergio Martín Blas, Milena Farina	
Las viviendas para empleados realizadas por las grandes empresas en la España de la posguerra	760
Miriam Martín Díaz, Enrique Castaño Perea	
Lecciones de Louis Kahn: la sala y la casa en Rogelio Salmona y Livio Vacchini...	771
Clara E. Mejía Vallejo, Ricardo Merí de la Maza	

Interior Biopolitics—Domesticity as Mass Media in the Making of Swedish Social Democracy	783
Carlota Mir	
El arte de lo doméstico. Las casas de Alison y Peter Smithson	795
Carmen Moreno Álvarez, Juan Domingo Santos	
La vivienda colectiva como reactivador de hechos de vida urbana	806
Sebastián Navarrete Micheliní	
The Façade as an Interface in the Housing Architecture of Rio de Janeiro: Design Repertoire	819
Mara Oliveira Eskinazi, Pedro Engel Penter	
Manuel Gomes da Costa. La casa algarvia del arquitecto	831
José Joaquín Parra Bañón	
A Wealth of Typological Solutions from the Twenties: Vienna and Frankfurt	842
Alessandro Porotto	
Un pueblo entre los muros de un cortijo	856
Ana Isabel Rodríguez Aguilera	
This House Is Not a Home	872
Ugo Rossi	
Los dibujos de Rafael Leoz sobre vivienda social	883
Jose Antonio Ruiz Suaña, Jesús López Díaz	
La calle sube al edificio. Vivienda en galería en Madrid, 1949-1956	897
María del Pilar Salazar Lozano	
Casas como células. La metáfora biológica y los nuevos hábitats plásticos, 1955-73	908
Massimiliano Savorra	
El hogar que envejece	918
Marta Silveira Peixoto	
Repetition and Geometry: The House of the Painter Zigaina Designed by Giancarlo De Carlo	928
Luisa Smeragliuolo Perrotta	
Plinio Marconi's Public Housing Projects between Innovation and Historical Continuity	938
Simona Talenti, Annarita Teodosio	
Casas patio y bloques: las formas de la vivienda para la ciudad moderna, Arica 1953-73	949
Horacio Enrique Torrent Schneider	

Doméstico y prefabricado: vivienda unifamiliar en Collado Mediano de Alejandro de la Sota	961
Miguel Varela de Ugarte	
Modern Living: Particularities in Rio de Janeiro	971
Denise Vianna Nunes	
Equipando la casa moderna. España, 1927-1936	982
María Villanueva Fernández, Héctor García-Diego Villarías	

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 3

La vivienda contemporánea desde el punto de vista patrimonial

Un carmen en el barrio del Realejo de Granada	997
Ricardo Hernández Soriano	
T y Block House, dos viviendas en Nueva York	1007
Antonio Álvarez Gil	
Experimentos de casas en el paisaje. Lo cotidiano y lo sublime	1020
Rafael de Lacour	
Cooperativas vecinales para la recuperación patrimonial de barriadas. Sixto (Málaga)	1031
Alberto E. García-Moreno, María José Márquez-Ballesteros, Manuel García-López	
Domesticidades del proyecto social del Régimen a través de los poblados de Bárcena (León)	1043
Jorge Magaz Molina	
La casa como memoria viva: injertos domésticos en ruinas vernáculas	1055
David Ordóñez Castañón, Jesús de los Ojos Moral	
PAX – Patios de la Axerquía. Rehabilitación urbana y de casas-patio con procesos cooperativos	1068
Gaia Redaelli	
La casa contemporánea en el cine: estrategia de difusión y promoción del patrimonio cultural	1080
Iván Rincón Borrego, Eusebio Alonso García	
Rehabitar después de Habitar	1092
Conceição Trigueiros, Mario Saleiro Filho	

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 4
La casa: mitos, arquetipos, modos de habitar

Notas sobre la casa como jardín..... Xavier Monteys	1104
Interiores de exteriores. La otra raíz del habitar..... José Morales Sánchez	1116
Género y modos de habitar en la Andalucía del siglo XIX..... Juan Manuel Barrios Rozúa	1127
La casa veneciana, desde fuera..... Francisco A. García Pérez	1139
Muerte de la ciudad y desintegración de lo urbano. La casa como refugio..... Juan Carlos Reina Fernández	1151
The Home and Its Transformations in the Daily Life of a Brazilian Social Housing Complex..... Fernanda Andrade dos Santos, Eda Maria Góes	1164
El jardín secreto de Luis Barragán..... Paloma Baquero Masats, Juan Antonio Serrano García	1177
A «Part of Sky and a Part of Sea, Even Alone»: Luigi Moretti Villas..... Gemma Belli	1189
La cocina como principal motor de cambio en la vivienda moderna y contemporánea..... Juan Bravo Bravo	1199
Casa contra arquitectura, Bernard Rudofsky y el “arte de habitar”..... Alejandro Campos Uribe, Paula Lacomba Montes	1212
El espacio doméstico en las exposiciones: nuevos conceptos durante la 2ª mitad del s. XX..... Manuel Carmona García	1224
La cocina-moderna en la vivienda colectiva española de la primera mitad del siglo XX..... María Carreiro Otero, Cándido López González	1236
Espacios de sombra y aire, transiciones en la arquitectura mediterránea..... Antonio Cayuelas Porras	1248

Habitar los hospitales: el bienestar más allá del confort.....	1259
Pilar Chías Navarro, Tomás Abad Balboa	
La cocina genérica: del marco físico a la atmósfera esencial.....	1272
José Antonio Costela Mellado, Luis Eduardo Iáñez García	
The House of Silence: The Franciscan Dwellings in the Colonial Convents of the North-East of Brazil.....	1282
Maria Angélica da Silva	
Arquitectura y jardín en la vivienda doméstica española del movimiento moderno.....	1294
Manuel de Lara Ruiz, Carlos Pesqueira Calvo	
The Italian House vs The American House. Decoration and Life-Style in the 50's...	1309
Elena Dellapiana	
Casas de vidrio – 1950: análisis de cuatro ejemplos coetáneos.....	1321
Ana Esteban Maluenda, Héctor Navarro Martínez	
Microarquitecturas a medida. Experiencia de arquitectura social.....	1330
Antonella Falzetti	
The Made-to-Measure House: From an Ideal Home to a Palace Between the 19th and 21st Centuries.....	1341
Maria Teresa Feraboli	
Holiday Houses in Italy in the 1930s.....	1351
Adele Fiadino	
Habitar la materia: apilar Cerdeña. Casa de vacaciones en Arzachena, Marco Zanuso	1361
Mario Galiana Liras, Miguel A. Alonso del Val	
1978. La Gran Casa, o sobre el interior en la obra de Enric Miralles.....	1372
Carolina B. García Estévez	
Donde termina la casa y empieza el cielo.....	1384
Ubaldo García Torrente	
Green Housing Dream. From Welfare Equality to Deregulation and Desire: Understeshöjden, 1989.....	1397
Andrea Gimeno Sánchez	
The “Medieval House” of Coimbra: Archeology of Architecture in the Demystification of Archetypes.....	1407
António Ginja	
La casa de luz tenue. A propósito de Alvar Aalto, Luis Barragán y Antonio Jiménez Torrecillas.....	1418
José Miguel Gómez Acosta	

Un análisis de la casa excavada-subterránea basado en la Sintaxis Espacial.....	1428
Antonio J. Gómez-Blanco Pontes	
King's Foundation: House, Power and Modernity in King Manuel I's inventory (1522-25).....	1440
Luís Gonçalves Ferreira	
"Raumplan-dwellings": domesticidad y espacio en proyectos de Sejima-SANAA..	1449
Aida González Llavona	
La casa moderna en Cereté, una lección patrimonial.....	1461
Massimo Leserrí, Merwan Chaverra Suárez	
When a Big House Opens Its Doors: The São Marcos Hospital in Braga (17th-18thCenturies).....	1471
Maria Marta Lobo de Araújo	
El mito de la casa pompeyana entre los siglos XIX y XX.....	1478
Fabio Mangone, Raffaella Russo Spena	
Tiendas de campaña en Marte.....	1493
Josemaría Manzano-Jurado, Santiago Porras Álvarez, Rafael García Quesada	
La casa patio tradicional de la medina marroquí.....	1506
Miguel Martínez-Monedero, Jaime Vergara-Muñoz	
La forma tectónica de la casa: lo ontológico frente a lo representacional.....	1518
Alejandro Muñoz Miranda	
Habitar el cerro: la casa del arquitecto Bruno Violi en Bogotá.....	1530
Serena Orlandi	
Comida a domicilio.....	1541
Nuria Ortigosa Duarte	
Domestic Topographies: The House of Lino Gaspar, Caxias, 1953-1955.....	1551
Maria Rita Pais	
La ritualidad higiénica como domesticación espacial en el arte contemporáneo....	1563
José Luis Panea Fernández	
The Housing General Histories and Classes in Literature.....	1572
Fabrizio Paone	
"Paraísos" en el armario: homosexualidad y negociación doméstica en la California prebélica.....	1587
José Parra-Martínez, María-Elia Gutiérrez-Mozo, Ana-Covadonga Gilsanz-Díaz	

Profundidad espacial. Abriendo el muro. De la habitación sin nombre al jardín de invierno.....	1599
Marta Pérez Rodríguez	
Rooms. Aldo Rossi and the House in Ghiffa: Symbol, Dust and Desire.....	1609
Michelangelo Pivetta, Vincenzo Moschetti	
La colina habitada: características morfológicas y modos de habitar el campo.....	1620
Luigi Ramazzotti	
El <i>studiolo</i> como teatro de la mente.....	1632
Jaime Ramos Alderete, Ana Isabel Santolaria Castellanos	
Modos de habitar en contexto de montaña: la región oriental del Atlas en Marruecos.....	1641
Miguel Reimão Costa, Desidério Batista	
La casa en Santiago de Chile a fines del siglo XVIII: valores materiales y simbólicos.....	1652
Marisol Richter Scheuch	
Hombres de condición inquieta y despegada: el fascinante espectáculo de la precariedad.....	1660
Carmen Rodríguez Pedret	
Maid Rooms and Laundry Sinks Matter: Modern Houses in a Non-modern Context.....	1671
Silvana Rubino	
Inquietante domesticidad.....	1679
Alberto Rubio Garrido	
Houses for Whom? Between the Habitat and the Inhabiting, on Henri Lefebvre's Quest.....	1688
Teresa V. Sá	
Una casa es una «machine de l'émotion».....	1698
Javier Sáez Gastearena	
Espacio doméstico e higiene. Políticas del habitar en Sevilla entre los siglos XIX y XX.....	1710
Victoriano Sainz Gutiérrez	
La vivienda de los fareros, entre la casa y la máquina.....	1720
Santiago Sánchez Beitia, Fernando Acale Sánchez	
Naturalezas en la intimidad; acerca del jardín en los espacios domésticos contemporáneos.....	1732
Juana Sánchez Gómez, Diego Jiménez López, Isabel Jiménez López	
Cármenes, pequeñas historias domésticas.....	1743
Juan Antonio Sánchez Muñoz, Vincent Morales Garoffolo	

Algunas casas modernas: de la caverna al hogar.....	1755
Rafael Sánchez Sánchez	
Recuerdos de una escalera. Experiencias domésticas desplazadas en la obra de Siza.....	1764
Juan Antonio Serrano García	
¿No habitar es modo de habitar? Siglos de permanencia de mitos y criminalización.....	1778
Sonia María Taddei Ferraz, Evelyn García da Cruz, Paula Andréa Santos da Silva	
Tres modos de habitar la casa popular: cereal, vid y olivar.....	1787
Salvador Ubago Palma	
La expresividad de la racionalidad: La casa estudio para Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo	1800
Luis Villarreal Ugarte	
Habitar en Iberoamérica.....	1811
Graciela María Viñuales	

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 5

Miradas externas: la casa en la pintura, el cine y la literatura

Habitar la aventura: casas de Jules Verne.....	1824
Juan Calatrava Escobar	
Casas vacías, olvidadas y recordadas: arte, literatura y memoria.....	1836
Marta Llorente Díaz	
La villa Arpel: machine à habiter, “donde todo se comunica...” (Mon Oncle, J. Tati, 1958).....	1850
Antonio Pizza de Nanno	
El relato doméstico desde una estrategia vertical.....	1855
Agustín Gor Gómez	
Fondos de escena en el cine de Ozu.....	1868
Carlos Barberá Pastor	
Habitar tras la Transición: los hogares cinematográficos de P. Almodóvar y A. Gómez.....	1879
Ruth Barranco Raimundo	
Espacios domésticos en transición y la ciudad moderna en Ohayo (1959) de Yasujiro Ozu.....	1888
Bernardita M. Cubillos Muñoz	

La casa Stahl, una vida de ficción.....	1898
Daniel Díez Martínez	
Habitaciones para la escritura: el autor y su espacio de trabajo.....	1909
Tomás García Píriz, F. Javier Castellano Pulido	
Ámbitos privados de la residencia colectiva en el imaginario cinematográfico español.....	1920
Josefina González Cubero, Alba Zarza Arribas	
Los registros de la luz. Vermeer y Hopper.....	1929
Luis Eduardo Iáñez García	
Allí reside el tiempo, mi infancia. La cabaña telúrica de Andréi Tarkovski.....	1940
Alejandro Infantes Pérez, Javier Muñoz Godino	
La casa, la calle y el territorio. Narraciones fotográficas de Guido Guidi.....	1951
Marco Lecis	
Entre la literatura y el cine. La casa de Sokúrov en <i>El segundo círculo</i>.....	1961
Pablo López Santana	
Habitar un espacio, contemplar un paisaje: mujer, jardín y arquitectura doméstica en China (desde el siglo X hasta el XVIII).....	1972
Antonio Mezcuá López	
Registro de una mirada, Cape Cod House.....	1981
Jorge Gabriel Molinero Sánchez, María del Carmen Vílchez Lara	
La casa como metáfora del viaje. Fotógrafos y arquitectos en Mallorca.....	1993
Maria Josep Mulet Gutiérrez, Joan Carles Oliver Torelló, María Sebastián Sebastián	
La mirada indiscreta: la ventana en el cine como generador de emociones.....	2004
Patricia Pozo Alemán	
El telar es el cuerpo, el cuerpo es la casa.....	2016
Anita Puig Gómez	
El espacio doméstico en el cine de Jacques Tati: del bloque tradicional a la vivienda sobre ruedas	2024
Helia de San Nicolás Juárez	
Fisonomías arquitectónicas. La mediatización de casas de personalidades en Galicia.....	2034
Jesús Ángel Sánchez-García	
Mujeres y jardines en la China clásica: espacios domésticos en <i>Sueño en el Pabellón Rojo</i>.....	2046
Beatriz Valverde Vázquez	
Notas autobiográficas de los autores.....	2054

La casa tradicional urbana de la zona de los mármoles de Alentejo *Traditional Urban Housing at Alentejo's "Marble Area"*

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Resumen

Este artículo presenta parte de una investigación sobre la arquitectura doméstica tradicional en Alentejo, Portugal, asiente en levantamientos *in loco* de edificios habitacionales en diferentes ciudades. Se muestra la génesis y evolución de los tipos de habitación de la zona, así como las matices entre tipos y las influencias en la transformación de la habitación. Al ser un porcentaje significativo de los centros históricos, el estudio de la casa incluye la evolución de los tejidos urbanos. Se alia el levantamiento arquitectónico y fotográfico de más de una centena de casos con información documental de archivo y testimonios memoriales de vecinos. Los modelos de la zona derivan de las características urbanas de sus pueblos fortificados, aliados al uso de materiales como la piedra mármol y el barro en la construcción. La comprensión de la evolución del habitar es clave para entender la historia de las gentes y el cotidiano urbano.

Palabras clave: casa tradicional, Alentejo, pre-industrial, tipos

Bloque temático: Arquitecturas de la casa: el espacio doméstico a través de la historia

Abstract

This article presents part of a research on traditional domestic architecture in Alentejo, Portugal, based on in loco surveys of houses in different cities. It comprehends the origins and evolution of housing types in the area as well as it shows types' differences and the influences in their evolution line. Since common housing is such a big part of historic urban tissues, the study on housing includes the urban evolution itself. The research combines architectural and photographic surveys of over 100 case studies with archive information and inhabitants' testimonies. The Marble area has shaped specific housing types, due to the combination of urban features of its fortified towns, with particular construction materials as marble stone and clay. Understanding dwelling evolution is a key factor to apprehend history of common people, of their relations and of urban life.

Keywords: traditional housing, Alentejo, pre-industrial, types

Topic: Architectures of the house: domestic space throughout history

Introduction

Pre-industrial traditional housing represents a large bulk of Iberian cities' historical centres and it is the building typology under the greatest threat of disappearance. The past half-century saw big changes in terms of housing functions and traditional dwellings, with very little room specialization, were deemed unfit for contemporary lifestyle needs. Despite the relevance of housing in cultural studies, common housing is often the least studied and documented typology. Its study is urgent to achieve an accurate conservation.

This article presents part of a wider research on traditional domestic architecture in Alentejo, southern Portugal, based on *in loco* surveys of houses in different cities. Research combines architectural and photographic surveys of case studies with archival information and inhabitants' testimonies. This paper presents the case studies of Borba and Estremoz, which belong to a particular area inside Alentejo known as the Marble Region. A total of 143 housing buildings were analysed: 57 direct surveys in Estremoz, 11 in Borba, while the remaining cases proceed from archival data (47,55% of case studies come from direct surveys). Archival documentation stems from both historic archives of Évora's District –taxes and notary registers, inventories of city council's property for the cities of Borba and Estremoz– and Council's archives of private constructions, existent in all Portuguese municipalities.

1. Territory and urban context

Alentejo, literally “beyond the Tagus”, is the Portuguese territory located south of the Tagus river. The region's boundaries stand at the Atlantic Ocean (east), the Spanish regions of Extremadura and Andalucía (west) and Caldeirão Mountains (south). As part of Southern Iberia, the region participated in Mediterranean routes since Hellenic times, forming part of Roman Lusitania and the *Gharb Al-Andaluz*. Mediterranean influences resulted in an early and long urban tradition that would endure until the *Reconquista*.¹ From there on, the importance of the frontier between Portugal and Spain would determine urban hierarchy. Despite the Western border of Alentejo being on the Atlantic shore, the territory shows strong interior territorial features regarding urban network organization. The frontier condition even determined cities' morphology as they became militarized in their essence, with constant defence requirements.

Immediately after the *Reconquista*, the need of territorial re-organization originated new settlements, particularly in eastern Alentejo, where the border with Castile was yet to be fixed. Royal power would put forward the deployment of new towns from mid-13th century onwards, motivated not only by defensive reasons but also by the administrative need to occupy low density areas. The novel urban constructions would show similarities with French *bastides* and would share a restricted set of planning rules.² These common features allow us to acknowledge a well-defined Portuguese medieval urbanism, based on: the preference of towns' placement on defensible hill-tops, the existence of a linear axial street connecting the town's gates and predetermined dimensions of allotments and streets' width.³

¹ Orlando Ribeiro, *Portugal – o Mediterrâneo e o Atlântico* (Coimbra: Coimbra Editora, 1945), 88-90.

² Jorge Gaspar, “A Morfologia Urbana de Padrão Geométrico na Idade Média”, *Finisterra*, vol. IV 8 (Lisbon: IGOT, 1969), 207.

³ Luísa Trindade, “Urbanismo na composição de Portugal”. PhD Diss. (Coimbra: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra, 2009), 185.



Figure 1: Marble Area location and road connections
Source: A. Costa Rosado (2018)

These cross-cutting urban characteristics can be seen in the cities of the Marble Area – Estremoz and Borba. This particular area of Alentejo stands out in the regional context due to the existence of a geological anticline formation of Marble stone which is 30 kms long and 10 kms wide. Exploitation of this mineral resource allied to fertile soils make this area exceptional within the regional context, due to its agriculture- and industry-based wealth. But its territorial importance derives mainly from its strategic location on the ancient route of Mérida-Lisbon and on the confluence of several key pathways of the southern Portuguese road network – direct roads to Santarém, Elvas, Évora. Furthermore, it constitutes the second line of defence vis-à-vis Spain, and, in case Elvas would fall, it was the next protection of the road to Lisbon.

It is therefore natural that the area's occupation would receive royal attention in the 13th century. Although both locations were quite probably populated before Christian conquest,⁴ the urban manifestations of Estremoz and Borba arise and consolidate themselves during the kingdoms of Afonso III and Dinis, and hence are considered of medieval origin. Estremoz, of a superior strategic interest, grew exponentially from the attribution of its Charter in 1258 until the end of the 13th century, denoting a personal interest of the monarch in its development. The city began at the Citadel, walled in 1261, and by 1279 it had doubled its area with the construction of the residential neighbourhood of Santiago. The entire town is based on medieval urbanism guidelines: a structural continuous axis connects the Citadel doors, extends toward Santiago's church and anchors an allotment based on modular rectangular plots. At the Citadel's centre, beside the fortress and main church, the square opens out.

Santiago's morphology seems to reveal king Afonso III's contact with geometric urban planning of the *bastides* during his stay in France,⁵ due to its uncanny similarity with those villages: the main linear street connects the church with the Citadel door and structures a rectilinear urban mesh of parallel and perpendicular side streets. As Liberato theorizes,⁶ it is very probable that a square existed at its mid-point – a space that would be occupied in the 17th century by military barracks. Allotment comprises equally dimensioned rectangular plots, narrow and deep, that still surface in today's planimetry even if original dimensions are unclear. It is common, during this period, to use a modular plot of 30x60 palms (6,60 to 13,20 m),⁷ named *chão*. When looking at current edifications in Santiago, the depth of 13,20 m appears with some clarity in plans, although plot width is widely variable – which is not surprising, considering the seven centuries of constant alterations. Trindade has encountered relations between plot and street width in several medieval planned Portuguese towns,⁸ with dimensions between 15 to 30 palms⁹ (3,30 to 6,60 m). Considering this hypothesis of street and plot width relation, and knowing that Santiago's main street width is, on average, 20 palms (4,40 m),¹⁰ a test was made with a plot of 20x60 palms (Figure 2). It shows coincidence with the present urban grid, especially in the distances between transversal streets, making it a strong possibility of original allotment dimensions.

The neighbour city of Borba, of lesser importance in territorial defensive strategy, gained a much more agricultural character than the militarized Estremoz. Its establishment was done in a valley bottom instead of a hill top, which allowed the design of a regular geometric urban grid inside a square-shaped wall. The fortification was built after the granting of its Charter in 1302 and enclosed an area of ~20.520 m²,¹¹ against the ~91.725 m² of contemporary Estremoz. Inside the walls, the urban mesh was structured by four parallel streets running north-south,

⁴ Marco Liberato, "Núcleos urbanos e afirmação de soberania no Alentejo duocentista: Estremoz", in *La Historia Peninsular Los Espacios de Frontera* (Madrid: Sociedad de Estudios Medievales, 2012), 189-204.

⁵ Liberato, "Núcleos...", 189-204.

⁶ Liberato, "Núcleos...", 189-204.

⁷ Hélder Carita, *Bairro Alto. Tipologias e modos arquitectónicos* (Lisbon: CML, 1994), 23.

⁸ As Salvaterra (30/30), Viana do Castelo (20/20) or Nisa (15/15). Trindade, "Urbanism...", 219.

⁹ 1 palm = 22 cm.

¹⁰ The width of 20 palms would be constant since, at least, the 1500's, considering that the *Manueline* marble portals found on both sides of the street would not have been moved from their original place.

¹¹ António Abel, "Vilas de fundação medieval no Alentejo: contributos para o estudo da morfologia urbana". Master diss. (Évora: Universidade de Évora, 1995), 55.

crossed by two transversal streets, without a town square. It was soon overgrown, and the town organically expanded towards the East, anchored in the road to Estremoz. The first expansion, though spontaneous, left a void between the eastern wall and the first constructions, in order to delimit a market square. By mid-15th century a new neighbourhood had been planned and erected south of the Castle.¹² Unlike the organic growth of the 14th century, this ensemble shows regular features in the street design, referred to as "fish bone": one linear street crossed by six transversal ones (Figure 3). It creates rectangular-shaped quarters, apparently divided in plots of 30x60 palms, i. e., the module of a *chão*.

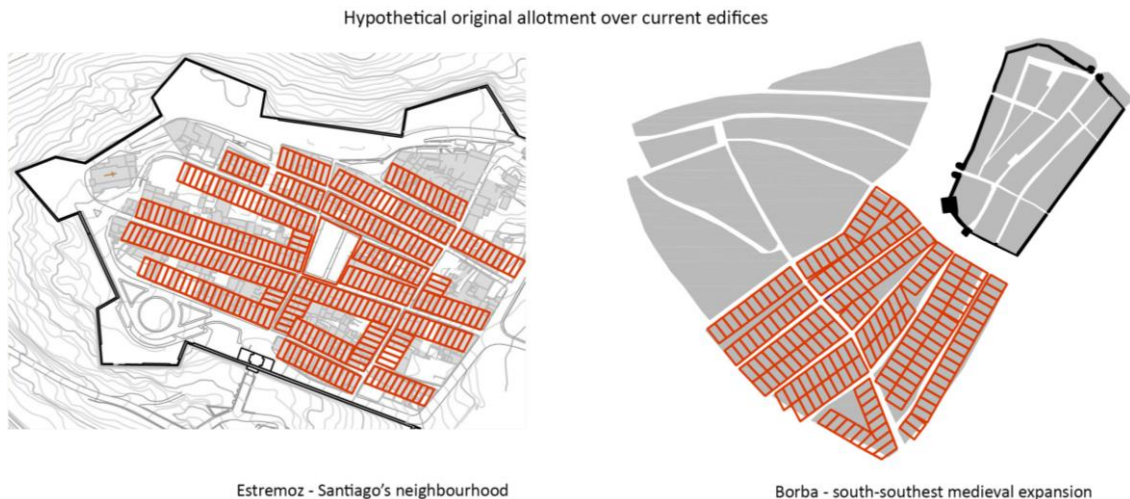


Figure 2: Allotment hypothesis
Source: A. Costa Rosado (2018)

2. Typologies

2.1. Medieval common house

The deep and narrow plots found in the origin of both case studies, as well as many other medieval towns, correspond to a well-documented type of house, commonly referred to as the bi-cellular house. It is the most widely spread house type in Portugal and likely one of the oldest types still found in Portuguese urban centres, probably due to its simplicity and versatility. It is composed of two rooms, which align in depth [A1]. The first room connects to the public street, while the back room could sometimes open to a yard. In Estremoz, historical sources corroborate the longevity of this housing type, its preponderance in the urban fabric, and name its rooms: *front house* and *barn*.¹³ From there, correspondent space functions can be induced: the front house would host daily familiar activities, while the back room would serve, generally, as storage. Both rooms could be used as chamber, but fire would be lit in the front room, closer to the (often) only opening providing ventilation – the street door. Hence, chimneys would later appear at houses' main façades. Historical documents also provide measurements, from which

¹² João Simões, *Borba - Património da Vila Branca* (Lisbon: Colibri, 2007), 32.

¹³ In the original: *Casa dianteira* and *celeiro*. Ana Rosado, Marco Liberato and Miguel Reimão Costa, "Evolução histórica da arquitetura da habitação e da organização espacial na colina de Estremoz: primeiros resultados de uma análise multidisciplinar", *IV Fórum Luso-Brasileiro de Arqueologia Urbana* (Faro: FAUR, 2017), 291.

average dimensions can be extrapolated: inside the Citadel, two-room houses would be 2,80 to 5 meters wide and 7,80 to 11,65 meters deep; in Santiago, they would vary between 3,25 to 6,60 meters wide and 8,30 to 14,30 meters deep.¹⁴



Figure 1: A1 type

Source: A. Costa Rosado (2018)

The enclosed areas inside fortifications and the pre-determined nature of the allotment help to explain the constraint of housing space, and also its difficult expansion. The bi-cellular house would see two mutations, regarding its internal organization, before 1500. The first was a natural linear growth by the addition of a third compartment in depth. It could either appear by occupation of the backyard or by internal re-divisions. The third room is referred to as *middle room* in historical sources and would be a completely interior space. The second layout mutation, when expansion outside the plot limits was impossible, was to divide the back room with a partition wall. The resultant layout would show a large front room with door and chimney and two small back rooms, which were almost always interior [A2].

Space shortage would, however, foster a more significant transformation: growth in height. By 1515, the existence of houses with upper rooms is documented;¹⁵ often with only one upper room which would serve as a chamber. The first additions in height do not necessarily resemble a second floor. The upper rooms would be lower than the ground floor, as seen in Santa Maria de Borba 9-15, and/or located above only one of the ground level compartments. In Estremoz, examples of one upper room located above the *barn* room, documented in historic archives, can still be seen¹⁶ in houses with half-floor levels, adjusted to terrain slope. In these cases, there

¹⁴ Rosado, Liberato and Costa, "Evolução ...", 292.

¹⁵ Rosado, Liberato and Costa, "Evolução ...", 292.

¹⁶ Rua da Calçada da Frandina 11-13 e Rua Magalhães de Lima 79-81.

can be seen two different moments of growth in height as, later, one entire regular upper floor is added on top of the medieval rooms [A3a].

Plot	Layout	Stair location	Example
A. 	1. 	a)  	
		b)  	
		c)  	
	2. 	 	
	3. 	a)  	
		b)  	
	4. 	a)  	
		b)  	
B. 	1. 	 	
	2. 	 	
	3. 	 	
C. 	1. 	 	

Figure 2: Type synthesis table
Source: A. Costa Rosado (2018)

2.2. Modern period

The addition of even-level upper floors would be the rule in the 16th and 17th centuries, not only in common housing but specially in the creation of noble homes. For the common house, the ongoing process of spatial differentiation becomes more defined as the ground floor is freed for business and craftsmanship, and familial functions move upwards. Vertical displacement includes kitchen and fire, with chimneys located either at the façade, in line with earlier types, or moving to the back of the plot (Figure 5). The staircase is straight, located in a lateral position – parallel to plot-division walls – and accessible through the front room. Even if the ground floor is not open to trading functions, its use will become ever more functional, hosting barns, wine and oil cellars, etc. Partition walls will be replaced by wide brick arches, in an attempt to create open floor plans. Brick will gain prominence as a construction material, with its frequent use in arches and vaulted ceilings, now needed to achieve production-assigned wide spaces and to support the structural weight of upper floors.

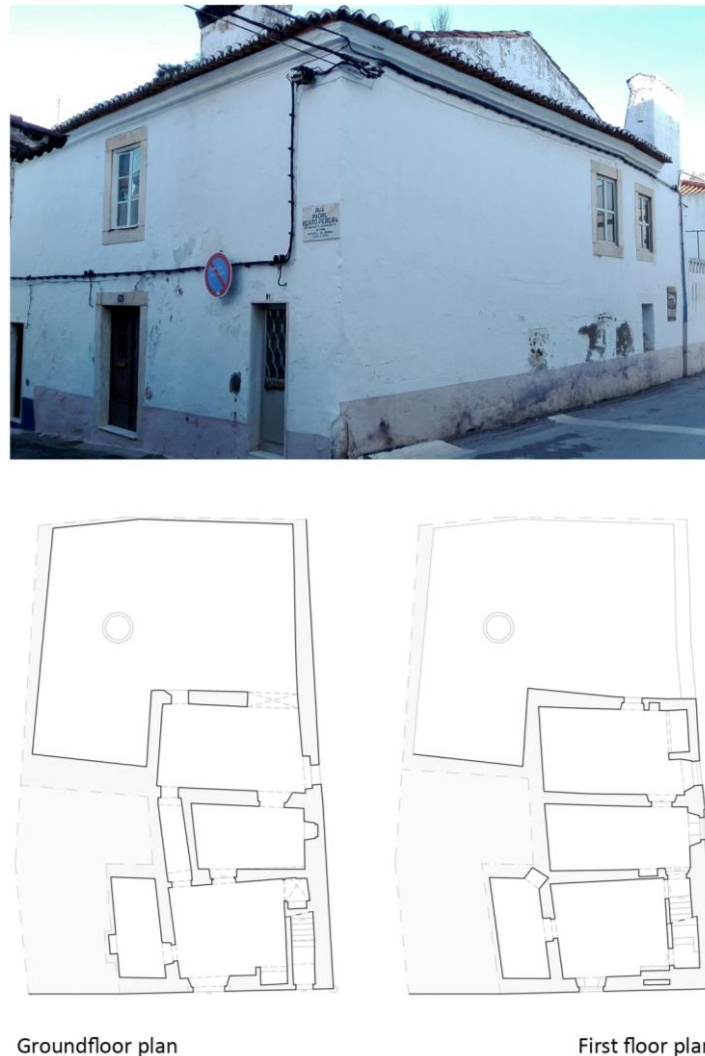


Figure 3: In this example in Borba, it can be seen the first kitchen –ground floor– located next to the main façade and the second kitchen –upper floor– displaced to the back. Padre Bento Pereira, 81
Source: A. Costa Rosado (2018)

It is worth mentioning noble or wealthy house development, as its creation processes are the same that guide common housing, only applied at a bigger scale. Projects are hardly constructed from scratch: most frequently a set of adjacent plots or houses is merged to create bigger plots,¹⁷ almost always maintaining its structural partitions on the ground floor level. Over those, a new even upper floor is added, with a layout unrelated to downstairs' rooms. Marks of nobility or owner status would appear at the façade, often harmonized with erudite elements as French window frames, balconies or friezes [A4].

In Borba, from the late 17th century onwards, a particular type of wealthy (but not noble) home derives from the city's main economic activity: wine production.¹⁸ This house type, referred to as *vintner house*, occupies large plots, often resultant of plot agglutination, and dedicates the ground floor level to the installation of winery and ceramic wine-amphora storage. The functional low level contrasts with comfortable first floors, as this bourgeois house per excellence shares the functions of production and social status affirmation. Depending on the owner's wealth, dimensions and decoration could vary substantially. In the upper rooms and on the façade, decoration could go from plain to erudite, with elements such as balcony windows, cornices or pilasters on the outside and wall paintings on the inside.



Figure 4: Noble and vintner houses: Figure 6.1: Plain façade, Figure 6.2: winery, Figure 6.3: *barroque* marblework, Figure 6.4: Plot agglutination with first floor regularization
Source: A. Costa Rosado (2018)

In addition, different types of common housing emerge in both cities when urban expansion extends outside the planned areas, with variations in plot shape and dimension. Besides the common narrow-and-deep medieval plot, wide-and-short and square-shaped plots spread. Resultant housing types still present a similarity with A-type characteristics: the fireplace is located in the front room and inner space organization follows the same pattern of kitchen

¹⁷ Properties' donation by the King to a nobleman, so he could build an imposing home, is registered in historic documentation (1449): IAN-TT, Místicos, liv. 3, fl.212.

¹⁸ In the late 17th century and throughout the 18th century, wine had a major valorization due to trade agreements with England. To Borba, where wine quality was above average, it meant an economic shift towards one-crop culture, a risky bet that paid off as the village began a golden economic period – most of its monuments and palaces date from the 18th century.

location next to the street and private rooms at the back [B1 and B2]. The constrained plot area makes it more frequent to have staircases in an “L” shape, i. e., with a mid-level landing, and the bigger flight running parallel to the façade wall. Central straight stairs are rare and were only found in square-shaped plots as those found in Rua do Arco 25 or Rua dos Malcozinhos 20 [C1].

2.3. From 19th century onwards

Two aspects will mark house evolution starting from the mid-19th century: crescent functional room specialization and population growth. Inside common homes – whose original rooms were conceived as multifunctional spaces – adaptation to new privacy and functional standards was difficult, and consisted mainly of adding corridors and other distribution spaces. Those are delimited by stucco and wood partition walls without any structural function. Besides these morphological changes, increasing demographic pressure led to a physical separation of the house levels, creating two or three homes from a previous single-family edifice. Access to stairs, formerly done from the front room, would become independent from the main entrance: new doors are opened to create direct street access. Their minor hierarchic importance is shown at the façade, as they are smaller than the original doors and not decorated.



Figure 5: Door hierarchy. Rua da Calçada da Frandina, Estremoz
Source: A. Costa Rosado (2018)

The inversion in the demographic cycle from the mid-20th century onwards, due to Alentejo's rural exodus, resulted in a cross-sectional regional depopulation, felt especially in small hamlets and in cities' historic quarters. Cities' inhabitants rejected the often walled-in and difficult to access historic centre, preferring new-fashioned, well-connected neighbourhoods instead. This rejection is also related with traditional housing inside historic areas. There were fundamental changes regarding the expected house functions and traditional dwellings, often with layouts of 2 or 3 rooms and very little room specialization, which did not meet contemporary lifestyle needs.

The differences between the old and new residential standards have led, among other effects, to a general tendency to rebuild former partitions, by aggregating two or more fractions in order to get larger/smaller rooms in a different distribution of the domestic space. As the redistribution of plots of vernacular architecture has been a recurrent resource throughout history, this is

hardly new or damaging to this heritage. On the contrary, alterations in the materials used can be much more pernicious. The shift from wooden beams to concrete slabs is one of the most commonly seen and most intrusive alterations, alongside the use of plastic paints that cover masonry with water and airproof coatings – while formerly, limestone rendering would let inner wall humidity evaporate – or the replacement of the wooden casements of windows and doors with aluminium models.

2.4. Materials

Even without going too further into the vast theme of traditional housing materials, it is imperious to mention the use of stone, and especially of marble stone, in this area's constructions. In Estremoz and Borba marble stone is used in almost any type of house, even in the simplest ones. Constructive elements as wall-corners, door and window frames or wall socles are generally made of marble, with more or less refined stonework depending on the house owner's wealth and on the period of construction. Door and window frames, together with other elements, as balconies, are key to dating edifices. The study area is rich in sculpture work in constructive elements: from ogive gateways of the *Manueline* period, to baroque exuberant designs, without forgetting regional 17th century models.



Figure 6: Marble doorframes
Source: A. Costa Rosado (2018)

3. Conclusion

The results obtained in this research stem from the analysis of data obtained in both field surveys and archival search, conducted in 2017-2018, for housing buildings in Estremoz and Borba. The analysis resulted in the grouping and classification of housing types by category according to the parameters of (1) plot shape, (2) internal layout and (3) stair location, as shown in Table 1. The first criterion, plot shape, divides cases into three categories: A corresponds to the narrow-and-deep plot, B to the wide-and-short plot and C to the square-shaped plot. Category A has disproportionately more cases (and variations in types) than B and C, as the narrow-and-deep plot is used systematically in the planned medieval genesis of both case studies' urban fabrics, and hence, is more frequent.

Within the three categories, cases were divided by their internal space organization, i.e., their layout and the position of walls. Inside A, inner space distribution logic can either be (1) *linear*, with all rooms following one another in depth; (2) *front-back*, when plot depth is constrained and the back room splits into two chambers; (3) *linear with corridor*, a more complex type where rooms are aligned in depth but circulation does not imply the crossing of adjoining rooms and (4) *merged*, when two or more narrow plots merge together, yet keeping a narrow-and-deep rectangular shape proportion. In group B, plot constraints in depth expansion result in substantially smaller houses. They are divided into (1) single-room houses, (2) houses of two rooms, arranged side-by-side, parallel to the street, and (3) houses of two wide and short rooms, arranged in depth, perpendicular to the street.

The type is identified by the combination of number and letters of the categories in which it is inserted. For square-shaped plots (C) we only found examples of four rooms with a central staircase. Hence, all cases in the C category belong to type C1. A total of 8 types were identified, some with variations regarding stair location or shape. Those variations are indicated by a small cap letter. For instance, the common bi-cellular home type is identified as A1. If it has evolved into a two-floor house, with a lateral staircase, it would belong in A1a subgroup.

The typological categorization is valid for this particular area and results from the sample obtained. It is not improbable that, with a bigger number of case studies, other types could have appeared. However, it is believed that those would be exceptional types, as fundamental types are identified and described in this study. This conviction arises from the correspondence of these categories with some identified by other authors who studied the Alentejo region. That comparison between types across the region will be the natural evolution of this line of research.

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