

Identification and valorization of elements of the Alhambra's authentic gardens

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is the identification and valorization of the gardens' authentic elements, in particularly observed through prism of ethic and religion. As an example, the paper uses the traditional elements and characteristics of the Alhambra gardens. The paper first presents the development of the Alhambra complex, one of the most famous in Islamic art. The Alhambra steadily developed in the 13th and 14th century thus gradually creating the entire complex. Such spatial conception relies on Islamic principles and the relationship between man and nature. Therefore, the analysis of this treasured space also explores the relationship between the philosophical ethics of nature and religion.

Key words: *Alhambra's gardens, open space, traditional elements, ethics of nature, Islamic art*

1. Introduction

Cultural interfusion of different civilizations and the intertwining of their ideas have always existed in human creation. Humans assigned natural and supernatural characteristics to nature. They were creating cults, myths, sects, religions, and beliefs in whose center was almost always nature or some natural phenomenon.

Garden art in this paper is founded especially on the characteristics of Islamic culture in medieval Mediterranean Europe. Such gardens are the most recognizable in Spain (the Alhambra and Generalife in Granada).

In Islamic architecture, space is never separated from the form. Space is not only a frame where the form sets. Forms characterize the space they are set in. That means that the walls of the courtyard and arches determine the space within the traditional Muslim town or a house, typical for the Alhambra's gardens.

The space is cut in a manner that reaches the synthesis and unites different aspects of life. Islamic architecture is prone to the polyfunctional usage of architecturally designed space, Skliar concludes. The groundwork of forming in Islamic creation is derived implicitly out of a religious assumption of paradise [1]. Original, formed scheme emerged within Islamic creation, as a rule, geometrical frame, and an equally regular crisscrossed fragmentation within it. Vegetation is placed entirely irregularly. Therefore, water takes over the symbolic and practical role. According to Kalin, common features had always existed among the oldest civilizations. Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian, and ancient Indian and Chinese cultures did not formulate general rules and principles in their teachings about nature and the world. Motivation for observing nature was a practical need while the foundation of learning is empiricism - experience and observation. There is no question 'why' not even the answer to it. Therefore, the ideal in ethics is that one should live following the nature of the world and one's rational nature [2].

2. Philosophical ethics of nature and religion

Ever since civilization's beginnings, humans have been fascinated with nature, natural phenomena, and the realization they are a part of it. Hans Jonas describes nature as a 'person'. Nature could survive without humans but humans without nature could not. German ecologist Klaus Meyer – Abisch sees the continuation of nature within us, where it becomes language and art, while other beings live its life – that is the true existence of nature. Our lives and the life of the world around us are nature's existence. That "*natura naturalis*" – the creative force is all around us. That is the reality of the world's center [3].

“Isn't nature divine, and as such enriched with inner values, and man is not her master and ruler but a mere part of it?!” [4]

The history of Islamic thought sheds plenty of light on the logic of history. Controversies over the rules that govern history exist for a long time. Idealists like Max Weber, Windelband, and Rickert believe undoubtedly that historical events are exposed to the influences of biological, geological, and racial forces. However, those forces are always executed by human beings, who use and rule over them.

“Just like the divine laws are immutable but reflected in the changeable, temporal, and historical world, the eternal and immutable essences manifest following those laws but in changeable forms. Authentic achievements of Islamic art are based upon those essences...” [5]

This quote by one of the most renowned Islamic scholars, Eva de Vitray, guides us nicely into the topic of the role and significance of Islamic art and its reflection within the frame of the world's art.

Thereby, Islamic art was considered as a way of seeing the truth as beauty in history based on its transhistorical and timeless dimensions. Its essence and primordial character does not depend on temporal forms and temporary worlds of culture nor does it depend on what has manifested and that is prone to changes. It depends on what the world in its multitudes invokes from the bottomless pits of the spirit. The ideal in ethics is to live following the nature of the world and one's rational nature [6].

German ecologist, Klaus Meyer – Abisch states that existence of nature is expressed as our lives and the life of the world around us. Also, the creative force *“natura naturalis”* around us is the reality of the world's center [7].

Luc Ferry in his book *The New Ecological Order* analyzes practical consequences and political implications of ethics not based on humans but on nature itself. Those are defined as “ecological”, as an organism of higher-order with particular interests and rights. *“The love of nature poorly concealed the hatred of men”*, can be pointed out as one of the book's highlights [8].

Aldo Leopold, an American naturalist, ecologist, conservationist, philosopher, educator, a writer is a man whom many consider a founder

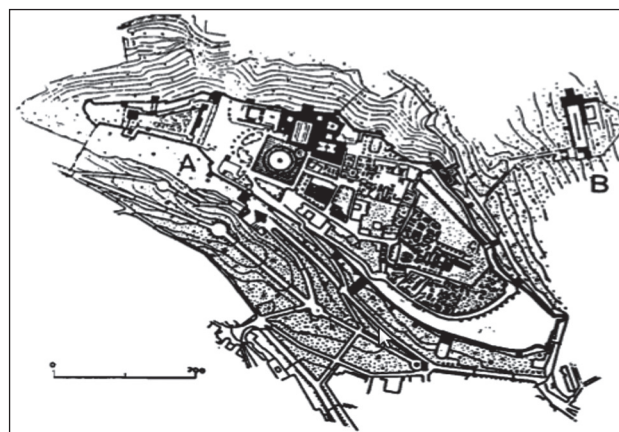
of wildlife preservation in America. He was one of the first who has based ethics on ecological examination of natural processes and contemporary theory of evolution, not on the spiritual, religious, and moral approach to nature. He is well known to millions of people for his concept called “The Land Ethic” [7].

3. The Alhambra

The Alhambra (El – Hamra) is a palace complex of the Nasrid Dynasty in Granada. It is one of the most famous examples of Islamic art and at the same time, the pinnacle of medieval Islamic culture on the Iberian Peninsula. The history of the Alhambra complex can be traced to the 9th century.

3.1 Formative architectural characteristics

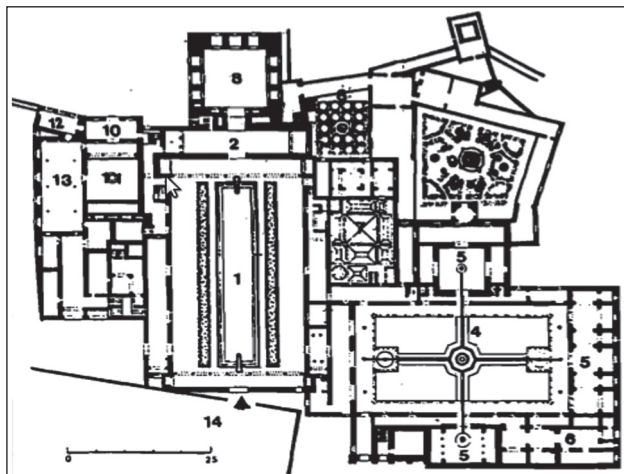
The Red Fortress is mentioned for the first time in the annals around the year 860. The oldest buildings in the complex of the Alhambra date from the 11th century and the Ziriyid Dynasty. The Alhambra we know today started getting its configuration during the rule of the last Muslim sultan on the Iberian Peninsula during the first half of the 13th century. This Nasrid Dynasty proclaimed Granada as their capital.



Picture 1. The Alcazaba Complex – sultan's fortresses in Granada with the monumental Alhambra (A) and the summer residence Generalife (B) [9]

There are very little data about the construction of the Alhambra, the costs, architects, or life within its walls during the Nasrid Dynasty. The first sultan who took over the royal seat in the Alhambra was Muhammad IV. During the rule of his

heir Yusuf I, the palace was lavishly decorated. The palace reached its highest glory during the reign of Muhammad V who ruled twice throughout the 14th century. In that period, The Palace of the Lions and the Mosque with the Courtyard of the Myrtles were constructed [10].



Picture 2. The ground plan of the Alhambra [9]

From the geographically most advantageous position at the high plateau, the Alhambra watches over the Kingdoms beneath. The Alhambra was the administrative and political center of Granada. Therefore, it was in the spirit of the typical Muslim palace complexes that consist of the ruler's residence and government buildings. The Alhambra's development followed the order of the architectural ideas of the medieval Islamic culture.

It is constructed as an independent fortified city, separated from Granada with the long walls, with about 30 towers of different sizes and functions. Granada and the Alhambra are two cities

that complemented each other but that were independent. The only touching point was The Gate of Arms. The parties used it to enter the palace complex and plea for the royal reception, to finish administrative work, pay the duties, or run some other errands. The Alhambra's city walls have four big gates almost equally set, two on the northern and two on the southern side. The Alhambra is highly esteemed due to the Palaces of Comares and Lion, built during the 14th century. From the 16th century, both were renamed to Casa Real Vieja ("Old Royal Palace") to differ from Casa Real Nueva ("New Royal Palace") the grand renaissance palace of King Charles V built at that time [10].

3.2 Symbolically ethical messages of forming the Alhambra's gardens

The strong contrast between the outer and inner courtyard where the rooms are is typical for the Islamic architecture on the Iberian Peninsula. The same applies to the palaces. The inner courtyard sweeps over the senses with the richness of colors, smells, light, and imagination.

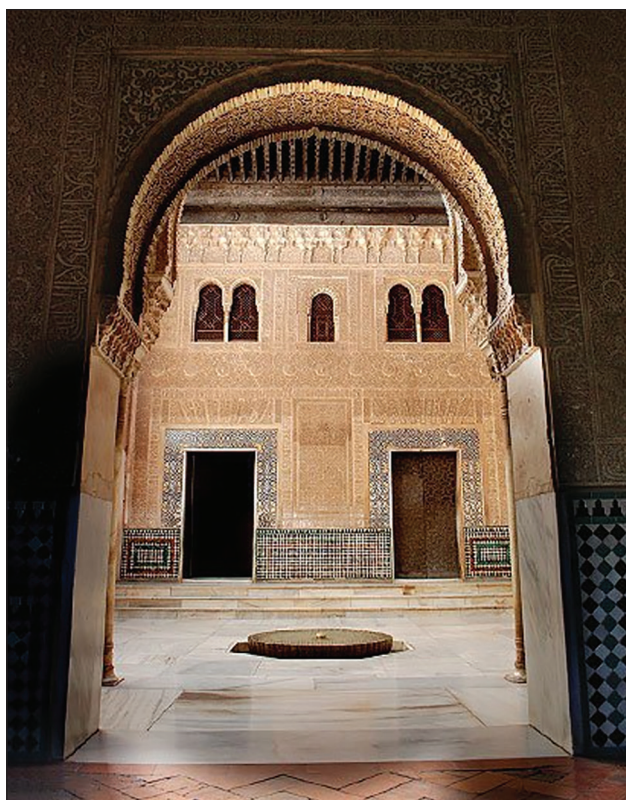
The way palaces were divided into chambers helps us conclude they had administrative functions as well. That arrangement starts with a series of inner courtyards, arranged hierarchically to limit the entrance to those courtyards with controlled access. Different decorative styles of the palace express power and supreme rule, and they must have invoked reverence in everyone who would enter it.

At the center of the Myrtles courtyard is a rectangular pool. Nearby buildings reflect on the



Picture 3. The view from the hill of the Albaicin on the Alhambra's palace complex [10]

pool's calm surface, thereby creating the impression of spaciousness, which makes it a crucial architectural element. On the narrower sides of the courtyard, the water flows out of two fountains and runs by spilling through tiny openings at the corners. The water circulates making the surface of the pool smooth as a mirror which the Arabian poets call the sea.



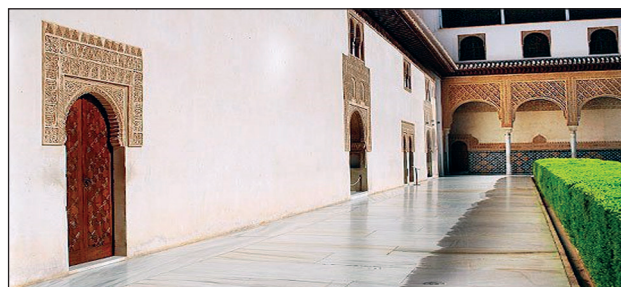
Picture 4. The inner courtyard [10]



Picture 5. The main façade and the courtyard of the Comares Palace [10]

The most elegant residential spaces are mostly placed in northern parts, lit by the south. In gen-

eral, the aspiration to keep the privacy and the intimacy of space meant that the rooms did not have openings on the outer walls, but were directed to the inner courtyards. There the portico marked the openings of the most elegant premises, almost always placed on shorter sides of the courtyard.



Picture 6. The southern side of the Myrtles Courtyard [10]

The most famous part of the Alhambra is the Court of the Lions, *Platio de Los Leones*, with its marble fountain supported by chiseled lions. Four water channels are projected from the fountain to all four sides of the world and they enter the palaces' premises. Those premises are encircled by 124 slender and elegant marble, ivory, and cedar columns. The walls are covered with popular and colored tiles called *azulejo*.



Picture 7. Fountain in the Court of the Lions [10]

Even in the 14th century, the hydraulic system ensured sufficient pressure and level of water in the fountain. Twelve lions with their jaws of running water, according to Hattstein, symbolize 12 zodiac signs, therefore the eternity [10].

The main illustrative conception of the Islamic garden the Arabs brought to the Iberian Peninsula is founded on the synthesis of two opposite tendencies. Its characteristics are the oriental richness of the motives and aspiration towards the abundant decorativeness; the classical clarity of the overall composition which we can also see on the Portal

Palace (*Palacio de Portal*), the oldest palace in the Alhambra built in the 14th century. The only remaining original structures are the big central pool and the portico with five arches, the reason the palace got its name. Arcades from that portico originate from that part. In front of it is the usual, elongated pool. By the end of the 19th century, this part of the Alhambra was divided into small, private parcels that the local governments gradually repurchased to encircle the memorial complex.

Milić concludes that in this general concept, already copiously elaborated by Persia, the Arabs brought in almost fanatical idolatry of water and greenery as its own genetical heritage of their nomadic ancestors. Water, an invaluable commodity and synonym for life in the desert homeland of Arabic culture, more than in any other historical period became part of everyday life and every religious ceremony. It is an integral part of any bigger architectural ensemble, the central motive of every garden composition [9].

Shelter, water, sanctuary, and shade are the heritage elements of the Islamic style. The gar-

den is understood as a separate world, detached on purpose from the daily worries of the nomadic desert life. That is a place where the view on the water with an appropriate sound atmosphere has a crucial role.

It can be concluded that these practical forms of the Islamic garden, originally applied only in the hot, dry parts of the world have a deeper, philosophical meaning. The gardens mostly used the water. It represents the holy motive in the form of mirror fountains and pools. On the other hand, it expresses power and prosperity. Philosophically, the essence of creating the Muslim garden is infinite dawn stretched beyond the visible, material world. Maybe the most important channel is the one in the shape of a cross that cuts the garden into four parts. Symbolically, it represents four main rivers in Paradise written in the Qu'ran. In one river flows the water, in the second milk, in the third wine, and in the fourth one, purified honey.



Picture 8. The view on the Portal Palace and the garden details [11]

4. Conclusion

While tracing the philosophical thought through the history of human civilization, in this case, mostly the civilizations of the East, we encounter different, sometimes difficult questions and views. We have seen that Islamic art is abstract and that it combines the flexibility of the line while emphasizing the archetype. That is why mathematics has so strongly affected the Muslims. Its abstract nature has set the bridge between the multitude and oneness they sought.

Considering that nature had been creating some sort of fear, the man assigned to nature and its rhythm of life and death divine traits. First religions had tied their rituals to nature's rhythm and those religions adjusted a man to nature's rhythm. Therefore, the harmony between man and nature implies man's aspiration to submit to nature.

In modern times, man as a subject changes the relationship between man and nature. We no longer consider him as someone who has to adjust to nature. On contrary, we consider him capable of determining that rhythm. For him, nature becomes an object of exploration, planning, and exploitation thus becoming its sovereign. The initial relationship of adjusting disappears and in its place comes the submission of nature to the man's will.

When we think about the preconditions of life, we touch upon faith because faith lives only on the grounds of creation. Life was created. Our space is the space of nature and the outside world. Eastern philosophy perceives man as a secondary phenomenon, and art portrays him that way. In paintings, the scenery is in the focus while the human figure is small, somewhere in the background. Nature is primary.

As Isanović concludes, Islamic architecture emerges from respect for nature. It cooperates with nature, becoming its extension and complement [12]. Architectural and spiritual harmony of simple palace forms, carvings of inner arches, walls, and ceilings, reflect in square or rectangular pools of calm and green water. They intertwine with stone fountains and their subtle water flows. Series of courtyards and open chambers create the unity of outer and inner space joined by exquisitely decorated walls, sunlight that reaches inside with the murmur of water.

We can conclude that Islamic art is actually a constituent of the entire ecological harmony, considering that it has always emerged in consent with the powers and elements of nature. Therefore, it completely uses light and shade, warmth and coldness, wind, and aerodynamics, water, and its cooling effect, earth, with its insulating and protective qualities under stormy weather.

Islamic art influenced the basic principles of creating open spaces in the Alhambra. Islamic art developed on the principles of Islam, which can be seen on the principles of opened-closed, constructed-not constructed, as well as the relationship with nature, the connectedness of man with nature built for the measure of a man.

Comparing the landscape architecture of Spain to the one in medieval Europe, Spain represents a positive exception. Already in the VII century in Spain, regional Islamic architecture, known as Moorish style, developed. That style formed a special and striking style of gardens, based on the life that follows the principles of Islam. There was a multifaceted use of water: in the form of pools, fountains, water channels, etc. All of these elements were miniatures, like gardens. Water is an integral part of every big architectural ensemble, the central motive of every garden composition. Color is used on the principle of contrasts. Areas of lively colored flowers were in front of every tall greenery of the darker shade. Distinct shadows, even more, emphasized this contrast. This entire composition was in contrast with the white wall of the inner courtyard. The third element of the Moorish garden was the smell. It was emphasized by planting the oriental plants of pleasant and specific smells. Paths had also presented an important significance in the Moorish garden, which we can notice in the example of the Alhambra. By the rule, they were paved and elevated above the green planes because of the irrigation.

The Alhambra's gardens were resting places for the great Muslim kings. The Alhambra is a perfect example of harmony and beauty, architecturally reflected through light and water. Water, functioning as a mirror, contributes to the feeling of peace and airiness.

All these integral elements of the Alhambra's gardens may serve as guiding principles in the contemporary design of open spaces. Presented

elements follow the characteristics of traditional construction and confirm the suggested hypothesis of this work. The elements, regardless of the time of their creation, can still be used in contemporary design.

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