

Traditional houses in the South-Western Iberian Peninsula: Themes for a cross-border comparative typological study

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Abstract

Up until the 13th century, the South-western Iberian Peninsula shared the same cultural and political conditions under the rule of garb-Al-Andaluz. The administrative separation of this territory between two different kingdoms led to deep changes in the culture and daily life on either side of the border, which may have reflected on housing structures. Did the 13th-century border between Spain and Portugal trigger divergent paths in housing types? Or has the previous common background prevailed in shaping house models in the territory around the Guadiana Valley? This paper proposes a set of themes to begin a cross-border study on the traditional house, its changes and continuities. The research is based on in loco architectural surveys of common houses in the Algarve, Alentejo (Portugal) and Andalusia (Spain). The buildings are analysed as regard their spatial organizations, constructive techniques and urban implantation allowing some themes of change and continuity to emerge. This then allows comparisons between the types of traditional houses in these border regions, their common characteristics, differences and evolution paths. It is noticeable that, given how the South-western Iberia represents the same territorial unit in terms of climate and orography, and – until the 13th century – shared the same historical context, the urban similarities were profound. It is therefore almost surprising how divergent the housing evolution between the two sides would become. The study of housing architecture is of particular relevance to the history of people as the variations reflect how the habits and customs of societies. Especially in societies sharing the same starting point, it shows how habits and customs may diverge after separation into two different administrative entities.

Keywords: Housing; themes; affinity; South-western Iberia.

1. Introduction

Bibliography on vernacular architecture usually devotes extensive introductory chapters to the description of the environment in which this architecture is set. The geophysical, productive, climatological, demographic realities are analysed based on the conviction that these parameters are the defining ones of vernacular

architecture – fundamentally the climate and the geological composition of the soil – when establishing the housing needs, as well as the resources available for construction. While it is true that these parameters condition the material configuration of vernacular architecture, on an architectural, formal and typological level, there are factors of identical relevance: the cultural

ones. These are particularly evident in the border regions, where, with a common geology and climate, different responses can be observed in vernacular architecture regarding the social, family and economic needs of the people who build and inhabit it (Feduchi, 1978).

The southwest of the Iberian Peninsula is a clear example of the profound influence of cultural factors on vernacular architecture, and the transition from Muslim to Christian domination in the 13th century clearly demonstrates this. During the period of Almohad domination, religious and socio-cultural traditions were reinforced, with significant influence on the house, which has a clear typology based on simple rooms arranged around a central courtyard that acts as a distributor and which is accessed through the entrance vestibule with a right angle turn that does not allow to see the domestic space. It is a purely interior house, which can be found throughout the south of the Iberian Peninsula, from Mértola (Alentejo) to Siyāsa (Cieza, Murcia), via Saltés (Huelva).

However, from the time the territories were taken over by the crowns of Portugal and Castile in the 13th century onwards, profound changes were observed in the vernacular house, which embarked on very different paths on either side of the Guadiana.

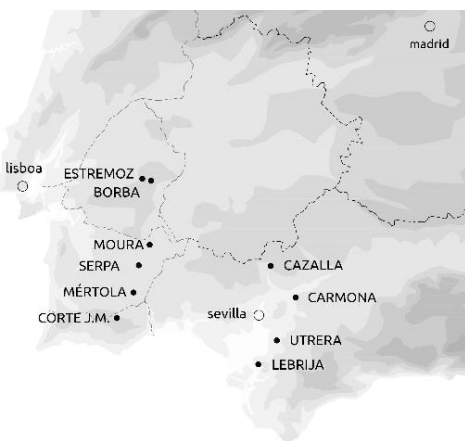


Fig. 1. Location of case-studies. Alentejo: Estremoz, Borba, Moura, Serpa, Mértola. Algarve: Corte João Marques. Andalusia: Cazalla de la Sierra, Carmona, Utrera, Lebrija.

Some themes of affinity and divergence in housing models appeared after detailed studies of cities and towns in the regions of Alentejo, Algarve and Andalusia, detailed below (Fig. 1).

2. Themes of affinity and divergence in Southwestern Iberian vernacular houses

2.1. Composition of adjoined rooms

The traditional architecture of the southwestern Peninsula is characterised, in many of its territories, by a cell composition, in which structural walls delimit each space of the dwelling. In terms of the organisation of domestic space, this model means the successive crossing of compartments that almost always have identical dimensions. This solution is particularly fit to the growth of housing over time, encompassing the change in the family nucleus and available resources.

In rural areas, this transformation process tends to result in a morphology with irregular contours, not determined by the property structure, associated either to disperse buildings or small settlements. Sometimes it may combine large-diameter building complexes associated with different roofing systems, as occurs, in a similar way, in the small mountain villages of the Algarve mountains in Portugal (Fig. 2) and the Aracena mountains in Andalusia (Costa, 2014; Cáscales Barrio, 2017).

In the urban context of the border regions, the emergence of this model appears associated with the medieval Christian period, and the narrow plots characteristic of foundation cores and the two-compartment dwelling developed in-depth (Costa, 2016). In any case, there was a progressive transformation of domestic architecture in the more noble urban areas – keeping the same compositive principles – associated with buildings of wide façades, with storage or commercial spaces on the ground floor and housing on the upper floor. If in pre-existing neighbourhoods, this typology often resulted from the combination of several narrow plots, as was confirmed for Mértola (Costa & Rosado, 2021), in the areas of

expansion, it derived from the alteration in allotments (Rosado, 2022). An example of the importance of the cell composition in wealthier houses of the modern period is, for example, in the urban nuclei of the southern Portuguese coastline, with the characteristic dwellings with multiple four-sloped roofs – *telhados de tesouro* – which record, through their morphology, the structural geometry of the building.

In this way, the transformation of domestic architecture during the modern period resulted in a greater diversity of architectural solutions, in some cases of regional expression, in terms of, for example, the organisation of domestic activities, the relationship with the exterior space, the emergence of vaults, especially on the ground floor, the importance and design of the chimney, as well as in the design of the window frames, and other.

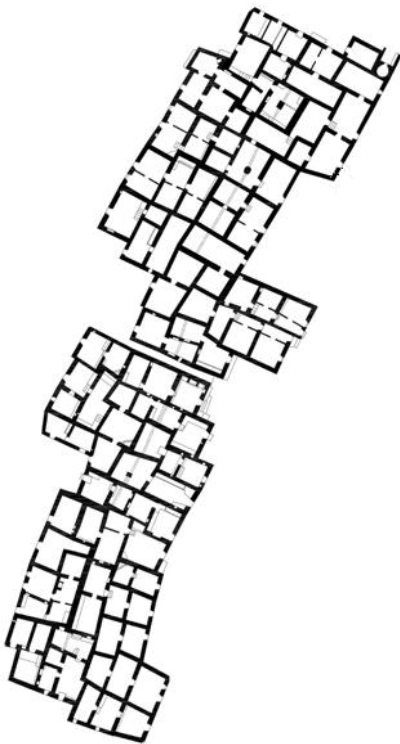


Fig. 2. Corte João Marques. Serra do Caldeirão, Algarve, Portugal (Source: Costa, 2014).

Altogether, these specificities tend to emphasise the role of the border as a line of

differentiation of the wealthier house, which will be accentuated later in the contemporary era. Also contributing to this was the gradual loss of importance of the cell composition in domestic architecture, associated with the emergence of more complex roof solutions and with larger spans and the growing importance of partition walls in the organisation of interior space, as we shall see later on.

2.2. Crossing and corridors

A different internal organisation seen in some regions on both sides of the border is the one based on the crossing pathways of the house, and where the corridor's appearance is a key element of the house's structure. The corridor would have emerged as a space dedicated solely to circulation around the beginning of the 17th century, as *in loco* surveys and historical documents seem to indicate.

In the houses with adjacent rooms, the existence of two rooms in the second section of the building allowed the easy introduction of paths to cross the house without compromising the private domestic spaces. The transformation of one of the two rooms of the second section (frequently referred to as chambers or attics in the historical documentation) into a circulation space was possibly the origin of the corridor as we know it today. In the city of Serpa, historical records (AMS/SCMS/M/E1/1673) show how the circulations spaces (corridors) were akin in shape and dimensions to the other rooms in a mistake in a house description entry (AMS/SCMS/M/E1/fl10/n°24) that reads "(...) another room in front of the door, I mean, the corridor (...)". The fact that the circulation space was simply one more room is explicit in another entry of the same document (AMS/SCMS/M/E1/fl24/n°64) reading "(...) another room that serves as corridor (...)".

Over time, the crossing of the house is no longer done through the "rooms that serve as

corridors", as a new space of different dimensions appears. It had the sole function of circulation, and it was used to connect the house with the backyard, separating the living spaces and working spaces of the house. A probable use would be crossing the house by animals (horses or donkeys for example) without them accessing zones of family uses such as the food preparation area or resting zones.

In fact, the division between "clean zone" and "dirty zone" is defined with some clarity. There is the possibility that the allocation of an entire room for circulation began to be felt as excessive (even though it could be combined with other uses such as storage), and it may be from the need to optimise the space that the circulation spaces reduces its width, assuming a width/length ratio that today we identify as corridor proportions. In other cases, the corridor is subtracted from a room, so its width would have to be the minimum necessary otherwise, it would impede the use of the adjoining room (Fig. 3, Fig. 4).

This spatial innovation manifests itself either as a lateral or central corridor, in the second section of the house between the entrance room and the yard, or between the entrance room and the rooms of the third section, when these exist. In the Alentejo archive cases, there seems to be a predominance of the corridor in a lateral position, next to the two chambers of the second section that are accessed from the entrance room (Fig. 5). However, in the cases identified today, the corridor assumes a central and structuring position on the axis of the house, combining the function of crossing the house with independent access to the interior compartments, both in Alentejo and Andalusia cases. Thus, it is the corridor that centralises the house's circulation and not the entrance room.

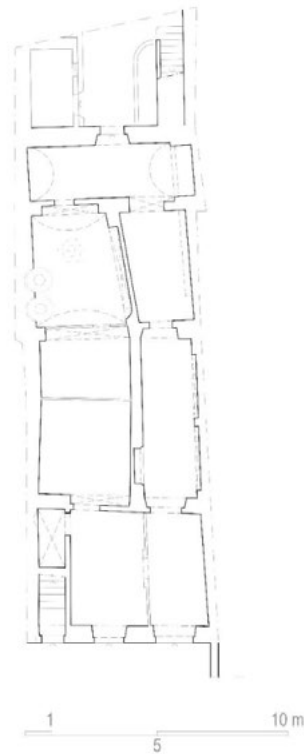


Fig. 3. Groundfloor plan. Terreiro das Servas 13, Borba (Source: Rosado, 2021).

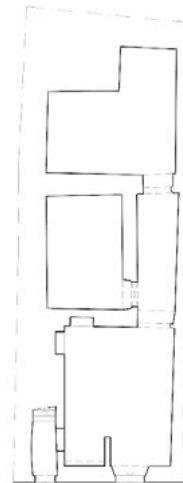


Fig. 4. Groundfloor plan. Rua do Afã 12, Estremoz (Source: Rosado, 2021).

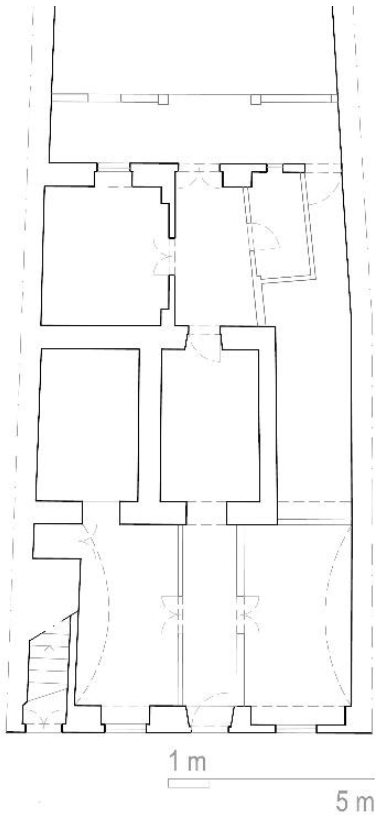


Fig. 5. Groundfloor plan. Rua de Santa Catarina 13, Moura (Source: Rosado, 2021).

The 19th century corresponds to the change in construction materiality in the division between compartments, which would be, from then on, made by thin partitions that allow the maximisation of inner areas. The major change in the organisation of inner circulation is the extension of the corridor to the first section, placed in a central position and adjacent to the door. The direct access to the corridor transforms the entrance in the house, which is made directly to the circulation space and not through an entrance room or hall. The centralisation of the circulation space achieved by placing the corridor at the axis reinforces the trend of façades with a central door flanked by two symmetrical windows. The communication between the various rooms is no longer direct but done through the axis of circulation.

Although the evolution of the corridor is shown here as a consequential process, increasingly leading to a greater specialisation of rooms and avoidance of direct room-to-room circulation, nowadays there can be seen movements in the opposite direction, in the demolition of load-bearing walls between corridors and rooms to enlarge the room area.

In the Andalusian cases, the crossing pathway through the house is much more marked in plan than in Alentejo's cases, either because of the plots' greater depth or because of the consequent succession of covered and void spaces. In the Andalusian home, void spaces (yards) are frequently found in greater numbers – often two empty spaces per dwelling – and structure the pathway through the house.

Although sharing the same backyard with the Alentejo's cases, the Andalusian houses often present a central patio-shaped void separating the house's first two sections from the compartments between patio and yard, almost always reserved for agricultural or productive functions (Gómez Martínez, 2017, p. 206). Due to its direct relationship with the voids, the corridor, although covered, does not constitute an interior compartment of the house, and the route through the Andalusian house has an exterior character as opposed to the Alentejo's interior pathway (Fig. 6).

2.3. Courtyards and backyards

As noted earlier, the conquest of the territories under Almohad rule by the kingdoms of Castile and Portugal in the 13th century brought about a change in the religious, political and social paradigm that crystallised in a veritable cultural revolution. The house, as a support for the activity of the closest social nucleus – the family – immediately reflected these changes. While the Almohad inner-wall fabric of the cities was maintained in its majority, at least in some cases, the size and configuration of the house changed radically with the new customs. Those new types of house were located both in

the renewed city centres and in later urban expansion areas. In this context, the patio (courtyard) acquired a predominant position in the organisation of the house in Western Andalusia, both in the modest houses of day labourers and in the manor houses, although with very different roles. Depending on the role played by the courtyard, we can differentiate between courtyard houses and houses with a courtyard. In the former, the courtyard has a profoundly functional role, as it accommodates daily life activities in the open air as well as work associated with agriculture and domestic livestock farming. In the latter – heirs of the Roman Domus through the reinterpretation carried out in Italy during the Renaissance – the courtyard is the main element around which all the rooms and distributions are organised, positioning itself as an element of social representation.

The traditional popular house in the west of Andalusia is organised in sections parallel to the façade that alternate with interior free spaces according to the following sequence: façade body, patio, intermediate body and backyard (*corral*), all of them crossed by a system of independent passages composed of the hallway (*zaguán*) and the corridor of the intermediate body. This pathway protects the privacy of the living quarters and allows direct access to the backyard for tools and farm animals. The living quarters are located in the main bodies, whose under-roof spaces were used for storage.

The kitchens were located next to the patio or backyard, as well as the latrines, stables and spaces for raising small animals such as chickens, rabbits or even pigs. The same use of the backyard is common in many of the domestic buildings on the Portuguese side, although in these cases the patio is absent, as we have seen. In fact, similar but simpler typologies can also be found in the western part of the province of Seville and the province of Huelva, which dispense with the courtyard and the intermediate body. They are composed of a single front body and backyard, always accessed through a hallway.

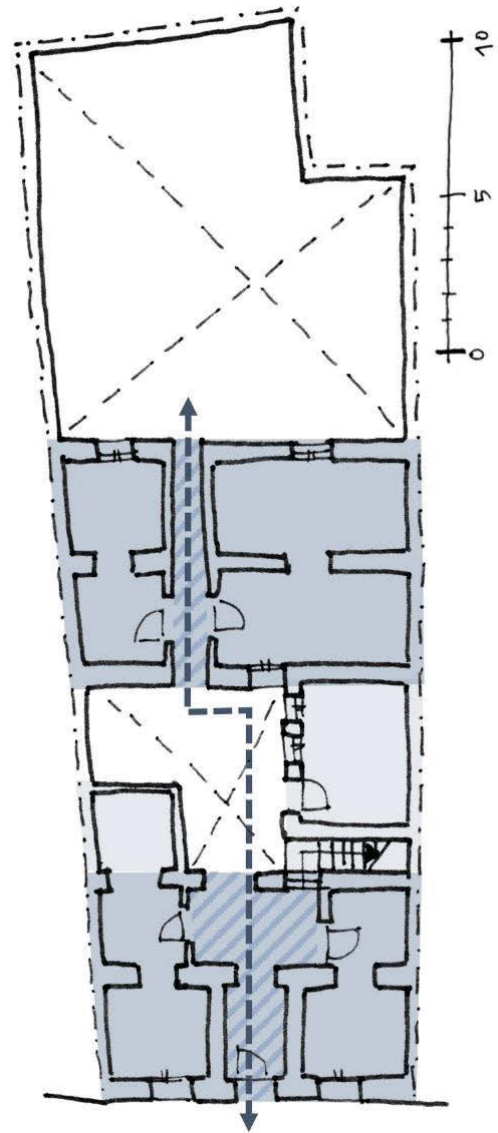


Fig. 6. Groundfloor plan. House in Utrera (Source: PEPCH Utrera 2018).

3. Conclusions

In the Islamic period, the south-western peninsular border region was a territory marked by the continuity and preponderance of the Almohad courtyard house, with characteristics identical to those of other Mediterranean geographies. The transition from the medieval Islamic period to the medieval Christian period resulted in a break

with this model of housing organisation in a way that is still to be understood for many of its regions. In any case, some recent studies on vernacular architecture allow us to equate, in an integrated way, the transformation of the domestic architecture of these regions during the late medieval and modern periods.

The present paper sought to contribute to this line of research, still in an initial phase, by characterising three fundamental themes: the cell composition of adjoining rooms, the emergence of the corridor, and the presence of the patio and the backyard. It was possible to register some common aspects of a shared history that extends from the settlement process of the border region to domestic architecture.

In the urban context, the most modest house tends to be characterised by the composition, in a deep plot, of several cells (each delimited by structural walls and with a single slope roof). This solution was often the basis for forming larger two-storey houses with wide façades, in which the ground floor housed warehouses and commercial spaces while the dwelling occupied the upper floor.

On the other hand, in the one-storey buildings of agricultural owners, in an urban context, the backyard became important for livestock and storage of agricultural products and tools. As a result, the crossing through interior space to the backyard acquired a fundamental role in the organisation of the different domestic activities, often resulting in the formalisation of a corridor. From the 19th century onwards, there was a functional redefinition and generalisation of the corridor as the predominant space in the organisation of the house, associated with the increasingly widespread use of partitions walls.

In any case, the several studies in progress also confirm the border as a space of differentiation of the traditional house, both in its internal organisation and in the architecture image and its formal elements. This conclusion is less evident in the modest architecture of the regions closest to the borderline and more explicit in

the urban centres' richer and larger dwellings, as well as in the rural settlements associated with large estates. One of the elements that confirm this dissimilarity is the importance that the patio, absent in Portuguese territory, acquires in the traditional house's architecture in different Andalusian sub-regions.

With the continuation of the research, we will seek to deepen the importance of the border as a differentiating line of domestic architecture, but considered in the more complex framework of the different sub-regions of Alentejo, Algarve and the western region of Andalusia. The understanding of this diversity should still be framed by the way in which history ended up configuring a set of common themes of architectural transformation evident throughout the study area.

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