

## Chapter One

### The Holy Qur'an on Housing

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I shall discuss those aspects of housing which the Holy Qur'an, the primary source of Islam, deals with, directly or indirectly. Those references are deemed very crucial as they constitute part of Allah's revelation to man, as well as because they were aimed at contributing to the cleansing of the nascent Islamic society from all the erroneous beliefs and practices that had resulted from people's earlier rejection of truth and its ways, replacing them with the new ones instead which were inspired and guided by Allah's direct intervention, i.e., revelation.

The Qur'an's references to the issues pertinent to housing are presented in a number of contexts. Normally, the contexts revolve around providing education, guidance, inspiration, orientation and clear signs to the followers of Islam whose primary task will always be to live up to the requirements of their vicegerency (*khilafah*) mission on earth, creating in the process a virtuous society, culture and civilization, as well as making the earth a beautiful, safe and consequential place to live in and work at. Thus, the references of the Qur'an to housing are sometimes direct and sometimes indirect. They at times are in the contexts which are solely dedicated to housing, and at other times in the contexts which are dedicated to some other themes of which the theme of housing is seen as a supportive, complementary or an elucidatory one. The difference in the Qur'anic contexts, styles and tones on housing notwithstanding, the Qur'an intends to expound to the last of Allah's messengers, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), and through him to the first and every subsequent generation of Muslims, a selection of normative and enduring values, truths and life principles which are central to the religion of Islam and will always have to feature dominantly in the lives and earthly accomplishments of those who follow it, i.e., Muslims.

The values and principles which the Holy Qur'an prescribes through the various aspects of the theme of housing to Muslims in their undertaking of creating a just society and a righteous culture and

civilization, are extremely important. This is so due to the extraordinary significance, position and role the house or dwelling phenomenon plays in Islam. The house in Islam is a microcosm of Islamic culture and civilization in that individuals and families bred and nurtured therein constitute the fundamental units of the Islamic *Ummah* (community). The places where people live are the first and arguably most influential and critical educational centers. If functioning properly, such centers have a potential to produce, in concert with other societal establishments and centers, the individuals who will be capable of transforming and making better their immediate surroundings and the whole communities they belong to. Conversely, if misconstrued and their roles distorted, the places where people live have a potential to become a breeding ground for nearly all social ills, which if left unchecked are able to paralyze entire communities and eventually stifle the civilizational undertakings of theirs.

This is due to the simple fact that a society is no more than a mixture of individuals, which are grouped into families. The family institution is the most basic social unit which signifies a person's foundation in life with which he permanently stays affiliated and to which he always leans and feels strongly inclined: physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. A society is an organization whose most basic and at the same time most significant configuration substance is its people or individuals, who, in turn, make up the family units which are a society's destined and thus uncompromising and unalterable building blocks. It goes without saying that a relationship between the society and its substance and basic units or blocks is a causal one, the latter, that is, the family institution and its members, being the cause and the society with its total conditions being the effect. This means that the health or the development, for example, of a society depends mainly on the health and development of its substance and basic units or blocks, that is, its family institution and its members. An improvement in the family inevitably and proportionately leads to an improvement in the society. Likewise, any degeneration in the family inescapably and proportionately leads to a degeneration of the society. It follows that the best method in diagnosing and remedying the ills of a society is one which makes the contributions and roles of the family institution as part of its focal interest, that is to say, the method that seeks out and deals with the root causes of a problem. Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi thus went so far as to

conclude that the family is indispensable for the fulfillment of the divine purpose. Regardless of which is the cause and which the effect, “civilization and the family seem to be destined for rising together and falling together.”<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Iqbal too clearly hinted at how important the family in Islam is when he said that among a few general principles and rules of a legal nature that the Qur’an lays down, a majority of them are relating to the family on account of it being the ultimate basis of social life.<sup>2</sup>

If this is the importance of the family institution in Islam, it then easily can be gauged how important the house phenomenon or institution in Islam is because the house is the framework for the family. It is both the means and field for the implementation of a major portion of the vicegerency mission of the family members that live therein. The house thus both facilitates and promotes the fulfillment of such a mission. The existence of the family depends on the existence of the house, its physical locus. The proper functioning of the family depends on the proper planning, building and functioning of the house. The ways in which houses are planned, designed and built either encourage and assist their members in executing their tasks as Allah’s vicegerents on earth, or obstruct and slow them down in doing the same. The family means the house, and the house means the family. Hence, it could be also stated that the house institution is indispensable for the fulfillment of the divine purpose on earth, just as it is the case with the family institution. Regardless of which is the cause and which the effect, human civilization and the phenomenon of the family seem to be destined for rising together and falling together.

This is especially so in the case of Islam and Muslims because Islam is a comprehensive worldview and a complete way of life where no segment of human existence has been neglected. Islam signifies not only the prescribed rituals at appointed times, but also comprehensive articles of faith, philosophy, ideology, culture, civilization and all life’s systems: personal, family and societal. Practicing or living Islam inevitably means the creation of a comprehensive culture and civilization that carry the imprints of Islamic values, teachings and principles at all of its levels, in some

---

<sup>1</sup> Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi, *Al-Tawhid: its Implications for Thought and Life*, (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1995), p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, <http://www.allamaiqbal.com>.

aspects more and in other aspects less. The subject of architecture is no exception to this tenet. Islamic beliefs shape the ways Muslims build and use their built environment. Thus, since the dawn of Islam and Islamic society, the Islamic residential architecture always occupied a prominent place in Islamic art and architecture, surely second only to the mosque architecture.

Building houses that would function as the family development centers has always been seen by Muslims as an obligation (*wajib*). Such is seen as part of people's observance of the objectives of the Islamic *Shari'ah*, that is, the preservation of religion, life, intellect, wealth and progeny. In other words, building houses for this particular purpose becomes an integral part of one's worship paradigm (*'ibadah*), the reason for which Allah, in fact, had created man on earth and had bestowed upon him the vicegerency mission (*al-Dhariyat*, 56).

For Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, having a house falls within the necessary minimum that must be sought by every single person since the lack of it causes the people to be displeased with Allah and even sometimes to deny Him.<sup>3</sup> By saying this, al-Ghazali obviously had in mind an Islamic dictum according to which if the execution of an obligation (*wajib*) depends completely on something, the latter then unconditionally becomes an obligation (*wajib*) as well. In this case, if the fulfillment of people's duties towards Allah and society cannot be done if they are homeless and without the blessings and benefits of the family life, then providing for them that which is essential is an equally important duty (*wajib*). Homelessness is one of the most harmful ailments that individuals and societies alike can face. To individuals, it causes anxiety, stigma, apathy and spiritual as well as emotional instability. As far as societies are concerned, on the other hand, homelessness contributes to general delinquency, insecurity, disorder, decline in morality and sluggish economy.

The Qur'anic references to the subject of housing, by and large, could be classified into the following broad themes:

1. The house as a shelter and private sanctuary;
2. Peaceful and constructive coexistence with the environment (the houses of bees, ants and the spider)
3. The house and the subject of privacy;

---

<sup>3</sup>Muhammad Abul Qasim, *The Ethics of al-Ghazali*, (Kuala Lumpur: Central Printing Sendirian Berhad, 1975), p. 127.

4. The house and harboring superstitions;
5. The house as a place of delight;
6. The house and people's spiritual failings;
7. The house as a microcosm of culture and civilization.

These housing themes were as relevant during the time of the revelation of the Qur'anic verses concerned as they are now, and as they will always be. Islam is based on essential human nature, which is constant and not subject to change according to time and space. It is the outward forms which change while the fundamental principles, the basic values and the essential human nature together with men's basic needs remain unchanged forever. Hence, being the revealed Book of guidance for all peoples, ages and places, the Qur'an pays little or no attention whatsoever to those housing aspects which are susceptible to change due to the change of conditions and circumstances. Presenting what could be branded here as the philosophy and the conceptual framework for housing – which was complemented and further explained by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his *sunnah* whose life as a messenger of Allah serves as the second primary source of the Islamic message – has been the objective of the Qur'an.

Having said this -- as a small digression -- it should be remembered that it is the nature of Islam that it provides humanity with basic rules of morality and guidelines of proper conduct in those spheres of life which are not related to the prescribed ritual worship or to its belief system, such as the spheres of housing and the whole of art and architecture, for example. Upon such general principles and guidelines people can establish systems, regulations, views and attitudes in order to comprehend and regulate their worldly life in accordance with their time, region and needs. Since every age has its own problems and challenges, the solutions and perceptions deduced from the fundamental principles and permanent values of life have got to be to some extent different. Their substance, however, due to the uniformity and consistency of the divinely given foundation and sources from which they stem, will always be the same. Islamic residential architecture, in particular, and Islamic architecture, in general, thus promotes the notion of unity in diversity, that is, the unity of message and purpose, and the diversity of styles, methods and creative solutions.

Finally, although I will be using the terms "the house and housing" most of the time and not only in this chapter but throughout

the book, what is meant by those terms are all common types of residential units and dwellings that Muslims may have: houses or apartments, in independent or shared structures.

### **The house as a shelter and private sanctuary**

The Qur'an highlights that the house is a shelter or a private sanctuary to its residents. Allah says: "It is Allah who made your habitations homes of rest and quiet for you..." (al-Nahl, 80) The word used for the house in this verse is *bayt* (*min buyutikum sakanan*) which is derived from an Arabic verb *bata* which means, among other things, to spend or pass the night, to stay overnight, etc. The house is called *bayt* because when the bustle of the day starts fading away with the arrival of the night, man, just like most of the earthly creatures, hasten to withdraw to his sanctuary or shelter (the house) so as to take rest, enjoy tranquility and seek refuge from the disadvantages, and even perils, associated with the night and its drawbacks.

Allah the Creator of the night and day refers in the Qur'an to the night as "*sakan*" (al-An'am, 96), which means "rest and tranquility", and as "*libas*" (al-Furqan, 47), which means "robe". In the verse where the night is called "*libas* or robe", the sleep phenomenon, which is central to night activities, is called "*subat*", which means "repose and tranquility". In opposition to the night, and in order to wrap up a set of major natural laws that govern human existence, Allah calls in the same verse the day as "*nushur*", which means "resurrection". The relationship between the house (*bayt*), on the one hand, and night and "*sakan* or rest and tranquility", on the other, appears clearer and stronger if we recall that one of the Arabic expressions for the house is "*maskan*", which is derived from "*sakan*". Even in the Qur'anic verse mentioned above, according to which human habitations have been made as shelters or the homes of rest and quiet for them, the word "*sakan*" has also been employed as a foremost description of what the house (*bayt*) is to man.

However, the significations of the word *bayt* (the house) must be viewed from a much wider perspective. *Bayt* does not imply just a place where one takes refuge overnight. Rather, it implies a place where one takes refuge whenever necessary from all the hazards of the outside world. The word "night", as in the connotations of "*bayt*", is rather symbolic. The house phenomenon, thus, ought to be read as

a retreat, a shelter or a safe haven for all times if need be, rather than for certain periods only. To the Muslim, the house is a haven that offers him total and endless warmth, privacy, refuge, security and protection. The house is a shelter or a sanctuary where one can live and enjoy himself without being affected by much of the laws, rules and regulations which regulate the outside world. The house is a place where the inhabitants -- and nobody else -- pass a great many laws, rules and regulations with regard to their routine doings within the boundaries of their house.<sup>4</sup>

It follows that homelessness is one of the most harmful occurrences. It accounts for one of the most dangerous deceases and biggest obstacles on the way to the progress of a community. Homeless people and their lives are defenseless, vulnerable, open to the elements, indifferent and bleak. In the same vein, furthermore, forcing somebody out from his house, the Qur'an, while frequently referring to it, regards as an extremely serious crime against humanity. The victims of such a crime are promised Allah's unreserved help, protection and abundant reward, while the perpetrators are assured of His wrath and retribution. Says Allah, for example: "So their Lord accepted their prayer: That I will not waste the work of a worker among you, whether male or female, the one of you being from the other; they, therefore, who fled and were turned out of their homes and persecuted in My way and who fought and were slain, I will most certainly cover their evil deeds, and I will most certainly make them enter gardens beneath which rivers flow; a reward from Allah, and with Allah is yet better reward." (Alu 'Imran, 195)

Because the house is the safest shelter and the most private sanctuary to its residents, one of the miracles of Prophet Isa (Jesus) has been associated with it. As one of the signs of him being a prophet of Allah, Prophet Isa told the children of Israel, to whom he had been sent: "...and I inform you of what you eat and what you store up in your houses; most surely there is a sign in this for you, if you are believers." (Alu 'Imran, 49) The message of this Qur'anic verse is that unless he was a prophet of Allah from whom he used to receive the revealed knowledge, by no means was Prophet Isa able to know on his own what he had informed his people about. The

---

<sup>4</sup> Spahic Omer, *The Origins and Functions of Islamic Domestic Courtyards*, (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2008), p. 15.

houses and what transpires inside them denote one of the greatest secrets of men, which one easily conceals from all except from Allah who alone knows the secret of the heavens and the earth, and who alone knows that which people disclose and which they hide. (al-Baqarah, 33)

During the early days of Islam when some people fell short of realizing this sanctity of the house, needing some time to do so, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his household had no choice but to put up with some considerable discomfort until Allah through His revelation to the Prophet (pbuh) eventually intervened, and as a form of education to the people concerned, brought the said matter to an end. Allah says in the Qur'an: "(As for) those who call out to you from behind the private apartments, surely most of them do not understand. And if they wait patiently until you come out to them, it would certainly be better for them, and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful." (al-Hujurat, 4-5) By reason of the significance of the mentioned incidents and the lessons given as a consequence, the chapter which deals with them is called "*al-Hujurat*" which means "the private or inner (Prophet's) apartments or houses".

Allah also says: "O you who believe, do not enter the houses of the Prophet unless permission is given to you for a meal, not waiting for its cooking being finished -- but when you are invited, enter, and when you have taken the food, then disperse -- not seeking to listen to talk; surely this gives the Prophet trouble, but he forbears from you, and Allah does not forbear from the truth. And when you ask of them any goods, ask of them from behind a curtain; this is purer for your hearts and (for) their hearts; and it is not for you to cause trouble to the Messenger of Allah, nor that you should marry his wives after him ever; surely this is grievous in the sight of Allah." (al-Ahzab, 53)

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) for some time was more than anybody else exposed to the malpractices of certain people in relation to the status of human houses as people's shelters and private sanctuaries because he was Allah's Messenger to people, i.e., he was the man of and for people. He was easily accessible to everyone, for his houses adjoined his mosque, the principal mosque in Madinah, which since its inception functioned as the community development center. Moreover, there always were new converts, many from outside the precincts of the city of Madinah, who expectedly were very eager to see, meet and talk to the Prophet (pbuh), overlooking as a result some basic principles of the required



etiquette. Finally, the Prophet (pbuh) had to suffer from some people's disregard for the inviolability of his houses because the people were coming from different places, contexts and cultural and ideological backgrounds, many of them needing some extra time for the new faith, which they willingly had embraced, to completely penetrate and conquer their minds and hearts.

The house is a symbol of man's noble status on earth, relative liberty and independence. It affords him the necessary comfort, retreat, security and safety, functioning as his shelter and safest haven on earth. People's houses stand for their very identity and the identity of their culture. If they signify how far a people have moved ahead in terms of culture and civilization, then likewise, in the opposite scenario, houses unmistakably exemplify how low a people have sunk in the same regard. Allah thus sees it apt to use the notion of ruined, abandoned, worthless and unutilized houses for projecting an image of the failure and downfall of a people or a civilization. One of the foremost messages thus meant to be conveyed is that the wrongdoers cannot hide away or escape from Allah's wrath and decrees, especially those decrees which concern the appointed times of such persons' demise and the destruction of their boastful civilizational achievements. They cannot find refuge even inside the most clandestine and safeguarded sections of their houses. The dismal and horrid sites of the abandoned and destroyed houses of the wrongdoers, which once functioned as their shelters, categorically testify to that.

Hence, when Allah wants us to derive some lessons from the fates of the selected past rebellious nations, He draws our attention towards the ruins of their houses, thus implying that their inhabitants have vanished long ago, succumbing to their mortality and the mortality and relativity of their material legacies. They were easily overtaken by Allah's will and judgments. Their ways and standards of living availed them of nothing after Allah's final verdicts concerning them had been pronounced. And finally, their ostensible luxury, contentment and security that they apparently possessed and enjoyed were, in actual fact, a grave deception and a root cause of their waywardness.

Allah says, for example, about Thamud, the mischievous people of Prophet Salih: "And they planned a plan, and We planned a plan while they perceived not. See, then, how was the end of their plan that We destroyed them and their people, all (of them). So those

are their houses fallen down because they were unjust, most surely there is a sign in this for a people who know.” (al-Naml, 50-52)

Furthermore, about the dreadful end of ‘Ad, the vicious people of Prophet Hud, Allah says: “And mention the brother of ‘Ad; when he warned his people in the sandy plains,-- and indeed warners came before him and after him --saying: Serve none but Allah; surely I fear for you the punishment of a grievous day. They said: Have you come to us to turn us away from our gods; then bring us what you threaten us with, if you are of the truthful ones. He said: The knowledge is only with Allah, and I deliver to you the message with which I am sent, but I see you are a people who are ignorant. So when they saw it as a cloud appearing in the sky advancing towards their valleys, they said: This is a cloud which will give us rain. Nay! it is what you sought to hasten on, a blast of wind in which is a painful punishment, destroying everything by the command of its Lord, so they became such that naught could be seen except (the ruins of) their houses. Thus do We reward the guilty people.” (al-Ahqaf, 21-25)

It should be recalled here that ‘Ad were a materialistic people. A highlight in their materialistic civilizational achievements was their ostentatious built environment, including the houses. They felt quite secure in their grand residences, palaces and fortresses, believing only in brute force when dealing with those who came within their power. They excessively prided themselves on show and parade, building palatial monuments on every high place, not because they needed them but in order to amuse themselves and impel others to hold them and their material prosperity in awe and utmost respect. However, when Prophet Hud came to them with Allah’s message and clear signs, they ridiculed and rebuffed them, so Allah destroyed them by a furious wind, exceedingly violent. “Verily in this is a sign: but most of them do not believe”. (al-Shu’ara’ 139)

Allah says about these behavioral tendencies of ‘Ad: “Do you build a landmark on every high place to amuse yourselves? And do you get for yourselves fine buildings in the hope of living therein (for ever)? And when you exert your strong hand, do you do it like men of absolute power?” (al-Shu’ara’, 128-130)

Another hint at the boastful lofty architecture of ‘Ad is given in the following verses, where a reference, perhaps, has been made to their capital city, Iram: “Don’t you see how your Lord dealt with the ‘Ad (people), of the (city of) Iram, with lofty pillars, the like of which were not produced in (all) the land?” (al-Fajr, 6-8)

In the Qur'anic chapter *al-'Ankabut* (the Spider), in three consecutive verses, Allah summarizes the agonizing fates of three mischievous nations: Madyan, the people of Prophet Shu'ayb, 'Ad and Thamud. Underscored in those verses is the role of the remnants of their ruined and deserted houses as a manifestation of what had befallen them as a result of their abuse of their position, intelligence, talent and skill. They utterly betrayed the trust with which Allah had entrusted them. Instead of gratefully striving towards contributing some goodness to the interests of mankind, having been assigned a massive civilizational enterprise with their prophets in control, they, instead, en masse failed, giving in to the advances of Satan and their own selfish interests. They thus presented Satan with a license to hoodwink them into skepticism, non-belief and rejection of prophets, self-centeredness and pleasure-seeking, who then easily manipulated them keeping them back from the rays of the truth and the right path. The materialistic lifestyles of Madyan, 'Ad and Thamud, which their dwelling places personified, proved of no use whatsoever in holding back Allah's punishments for them once they had been decreed.

“And to Madyan (We sent) their brother Shu'ayb, so he said: ‘O my people, serve Allah and fear the latter day and do not act corruptly in the land, making mischief.’ But they rejected him, so a severe earthquake overtook them, and they became motionless bodies in their homes. And (We destroyed) 'Ad and Thamud, and from their (ruined and deserted) dwellings (this) is apparent to you indeed; and the Satan made their deeds fair-seeming to them, so he kept them back from the path, though they were endowed with intelligence and skill.” (al-'Ankabut, 36-38)

Finally, in yet another context, Allah says about those past nations or communities which did injustice to themselves by rebelling against Allah and His messengers, and thus brought the inevitable upon themselves: “And how many towns have We destroyed which exulted in its means of subsistence, so these are their houses, they have not been dwelt in after them except a little, and We are the inheritors.” (al-Qasas, 58)

**Peaceful and constructive coexistence with the environment (the houses of bees, ants and the spider)**

The house serves to man as a shelter on earth partly to accommodate and facilitate his earthly mission, and partly to afford him a safe environment to live in. Thus, the house to man is not an end in itself; it is just a means as well as the ground for the implementation of his noble purpose on earth. There is much more to the house than its structural components. It personifies as much the physical as the ontological and spiritual dimensions of existence. Certainly, this has been clearly suggested to man in the instances where the Qur'an refers to the houses or habitations (*buyut*, plural of *bayt*, or *masakin*, plural of *maskan*) of some other terrestrial creatures, such as the bee, the ants and the spider, with which man shares this earth and which man normally places on quite a low level in the hierarchy of animate or inanimate things that surround him. The three mentioned kinds of animals -- it could be safely asserted -- represent the whole animal kingdom, if not the whole ecosystem, in terms of deriving and applying the spiritual lessons from their accounts.

About the bee and how they were instructed by their Creator to make their habitations or houses, Allah says: "And your Lord revealed to the bee saying: make hives or houses (*buyut*) in the mountains and in the trees and in what they build (human built environment). Then eat of all the fruits and walk in the ways of your Lord submissively. There comes forth from within it a beverage of many colors, in which there is healing for men; most surely there is a sign in this for a people who reflect." (al-Nahl, 68-69)

About the ants and how on an occasion they were advised to enter their shelters or houses (*masakin*) lest Prophet Sulayman (Solomon) and his army crush them while passing by, the Qur'an says: "Till, when they reached the Valley of the Ants, an ant exclaimed: O ants! Enter your houses lest Solomon and his armies crush you, unperceiving. (al-Naml, 18)

Furthermore, the Qur'an compares the acts of associating other gods or patrons with Allah (*shirk*) with the spider and its frail house, affirming that just as the house which the spider builds for itself is the frailest of houses, so is associating other beings with Allah a baseless delusion, the biggest crime and an exploit that brings no good or benefit to its benefactor. The Qur'an says: "The parable of those who take protectors other than Allah is that of the spider, who builds (to itself) a house; but truly the flimsiest of houses is the spider's house;- if they but knew." (al-'Ankabut, 41)

From the instances where Allah in diverse contexts mentions the habitations, shelters or houses of bees, ants and the spider, the following four conclusions could be made. How important those conclusions and messages are, shows the fact that the three Qur'anic chapters wherein the verses we refer to are mentioned have been named after the animals to which the references are made. The three chapters in question are: *al-Nahl* or the Bee, *al-Naml* or the Ants, and *al-'Ankabut* or the Spider.

### *Lesson one: man and the environment*

As the vicegerent on earth, man must coexist peacefully with all the animate and inanimate beings with which he shares the earth. In all his actions, initiatives and achievements, man must afford the highest level of respect and appreciation for his surroundings. Man is bidden to duly enjoy his rights and dutifully discharge his responsibilities on earth, but also to ensure that other creatures unhindered enjoy their rights and discharge their responsibilities. The whole creation, including man, constitutes a macro-web whose parts are neatly interwoven, drawing and depending on each other for their survival. They all originated from One God and Creator and are sustained by Him. Thus, to Him alone, all acts of submission and worship are due. If man has a purpose on earth, so is the case with every other portion of the earth and the entire universe. In a nutshell, man's rights over his natural surroundings are the rights of sustainable use based on moderation, balance and conservation. The rights of man's natural surroundings over man, on the other hand, are that they be safe from every misuse, mistreatment and destruction.<sup>5</sup>

This close and peaceful coexistence between man and his natural surroundings is clearly implied in Allah's words "...and in what they (people) build (i.e., human built environment)" when He revealed to the bee the settings for its habitations and houses, which would be at times in the mountains and trees and at other times in the elements of human built environment. Since this revelation to the bee is part of the Qur'an, the comprehensive revelation of Allah to man, man's responsibilities towards not only bees but also towards all animals and the rest of the constituents of nature with which man

---

<sup>5</sup> Abd-al-Hamid, *Exploring the Islamic Environmental Ethics*, in: *Islam and the Environment*, edited by A. R. Aqwan, (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1997), p. 59.

lives and interacts, taking from them and giving to them in return, is unmistakably spelled out. The relationship between man and the surrounding flora and fauna is to be reciprocal.

Also, the concern of ants that Prophet Sulayman and his mighty army might unintentionally harm them, suggests the extent and seriousness of man's responsibilities towards the environment. Man's honorable title and his civilizational achievements will account for naught if he destroyed the natural contexts in which he operated. The habitations and houses of animals must be guarded and sustained by man so that they function as their genuine shelters and refuge against the drawbacks of both nature and man's misjudgments, which can be intentional or otherwise, just as human houses or habitats are to function in the same way. Man, as Allah's trustee on earth, must always work towards this balanced and sustainable scenario. In fact, such represents a chief goal of man's earthly mission. Islam teaches that no slightest harm (*darar*), to anybody and anything, and under all circumstances, is to be inflicted.<sup>6</sup>

### *Lesson two: human houses and the environment*

The second lesson is closely related to the first one.

Man must bear in mind that as he is a permanent member of the macro web of creation, likewise his houses, no matter how complex and sophisticated they might be, in term of their plan and design as employing the latest building materials and technology, and in terms of their function as accommodating the most sophisticated and stylish sedentary and elegant lifestyles of man – man's houses, after all, are an ecological thing. This means that human houses – just like any other architectural piece and expression -- in order to be created, man must borrow diverse natural ingredients and minerals which are readily available for him in nature. Those ingredients and minerals are then made use of, cleverly manipulated, processed and finally, in the form of newly created or built elements of human built environment, they are returned and placed back into their original natural contexts.

Man's houses and the natural environment are inseparable, at both the conceptual and practical planes. The environment holds enormous potential and diversified resources which are meant only

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, Kitab al-Ahkam, Hadith No. 2331

for man, Allah's vicegerent on earth. They are to be seen as the facilities which facilitate each and every facet of man's fleeting stay on earth. The environment is to be seen by man as an "ally" or a "partner", so to speak, in the execution of his earthly mission. Thus, when building houses, or any other edifices, man first and foremost must be concerned about how the end result of his efforts will stand out when compared with the existing universal setting, a result of heavenly artistry, in terms of both houses' function and their outward appearances: will they complement or contrast with it; will they be compatible or incompatible with it; will they be at "war" or in "peace" with it?

The natural environment is to be perceived simultaneously as both an obstruction and help. Therefore, while creating his built environment, man must seek both to invite nature's support and to force back its perils. In case of housing, if atmospheric phenomena and the geography of the housing site are given due consideration, the placements and forms of houses in relation to their sites with an arrangement of its axes and inner spaces, are bound to be turned into some effective devices for controlling ventilation, sanitation, heating and cooling. Such houses, surely, will then become very safe and comfortable for living. They will be far less susceptible to the discomfort and drawbacks caused by certain environmental factors than such as were neglectful of the same matter. It goes without saying that some of the most prominent characteristics of the houses in Islam must always be the following: they are heavily loaded with the Islamic spirituality; they are economic and safe; they are users friendly; they are environment friendly; and, they are sustainable.

However, in order for man to achieve this state of affairs, when it comes to peacefully and productively coexisting with the natural environment, man, principally, must equip himself with an adequate knowledge about Allah, his own self and the environment. Only the adequate and abundant knowledge in man leads to the creation of a judicious and responsible attitude and conduct towards the environment. The knowledge is the cause, the attitude and conduct are the effect, and both the built and natural environments, in turn, are the target and field for the implementation of the latter. One of the excellent ways to acquire the needed knowledge and wisdom is to contemplate and "read" the natural environment within the conceptual framework provided by Allah and His revealed Word to mankind. It is because of this that Allah's words about bees, their houses and their

relationship with man are wrapped up by the following: "...most surely there is a sign in this for a people who reflect." (al-Nahl, 69)

Also, for the same reason, indeed, the Qur'anic exposition about the spider (*al-'ankabut*) and its house is concluded with the following words: "...if they but knew." (al-'Ankabut, 41) Moreover, the two verses that follow the parable of the spider and its house are even more emphatic in their meaning and style with regard to the real knowledge and the environment as one of its main sources. Firstly, Allah discloses that it is Him who is most wise and most knowledgeable. Hence, the revelation given to man through prophets by virtue of it originating from Allah and His infinite knowledge must be regarded as the best and most authoritative guidance to man. Allah says: "Surely Allah knows whatever thing they call upon besides Him; and He is the Mighty, the Wise." (al-'Ankabut, 42).

In the second verse following the parable of the spider and its house, Allah says that only those people who have the proper knowledge, which originated from and is inspired by the revelation, can rightly see and understand life and its vast treasures. The parable of the spider and its house signifies one of the many examples that Allah gives in the Qur'an so that people can come back to their senses and rectify and sharpen their vision of themselves and the life's manifold realities, in the process creating a desirable cultural and civilizational legacy. Allah says: "And such are the parables We set forth for mankind, but only those understand them who have knowledge." (al-'Ankabut, 43)

It stands to reason, therefore, that the environment and proper dealings with it stand for a source of man's spiritual and intellectual enlightenment on condition that man's treatment of it is right. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the environment, in a sense, participates in revealing Truth to man. It is in fact a revelation itself. Thus, in addition to having the composed or written Qur'an (*al-Qur'an al-tadwini*) there is a cosmic or ontological "Qur'an" (*al-Qur'an al-takwini*) as well. Both revelations complement each other, as it were, in furnishing man with the necessary substance so as not to let him betray the trust of productively inhabiting the earth which he had wittingly accepted. It follows that those who fully submit to the divine Will and read, understand and apply the written or revealed Qur'an, they easily see upon the face of every creature "letters" and "words", or messages, from the "pages" of the cosmic Qur'an. For this reason



are the phenomena of nature referred to in the Qur'an as signs or symbols (*ayat*), a term that is also used for the verses of the Qur'an.<sup>7</sup>

### *Lesson three: the physical and spiritual strength of the house*

The house must be safe and strong structurally. In terms of its function, however, it must satisfy and accommodate the needs and requirements of its users. The mission of the house must correspond with the mission of its residents. It mirrors, upholds, facilitates and promotes it. Only when the vision, orientation, purpose and functions of the house and its users are based entirely on the notion of *tawhid* (the Oneness of Allah), can a house be described as strong, good, or functional. A house which is short of this calling or function is to be perceived as frail, hollow and malfunctioning.

Hence, it goes without saying that if the house is to serve to man as a shelter and private sanctuary against the physical threats from the outside, be they natural or man-generated, it likewise is to serve as a spiritual shelter against the threats of faithlessness, wrongdoing and all of their protagonists. The house is to be both physical and spiritual threats resistant. Moreover, it is to function as an incubator of all goodness and morals, and to aim at producing the people who in their thoughts, words and other life initiatives will epitomize such morals and goodness. Indeed, as per the mentioned parable in the Qur'an according to which the acts of associating other beings with Allah (*shirk*) are likened to the spider's house, the flimsiest of houses are those houses which at their conceptual, physical or functional level are founded upon, breed and uphold the crime of taking protectors other than Allah, which, in fact, is the fountainhead of all forms of sin and spiritual failings that man may end up doing. Irrespective of how strong structurally such houses might be, they are still deemed as fragile, hazardous and inapt. Their harmful aspects and features by far outnumber and outdo the useful ones.

### *Lesson four: the house and man's earthly mission*

Man must remain faithful to his honorable earthly mission of vicegerency (*khilafah*). The house, as an educational and family

---

<sup>7</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Environmental Crisis*, in *Islam and the Environment*, p. 17.

development center, is instrumental in upholding the role of man on earth. Man is not to succumb under any circumstances to the advances of his animal lusts and desires. In case he does, man will then sink to as low a rank as animals. Instead of living gracefully on earth as its vicegerent, man will then live miserably spending his tenure on earth but in pursuing the lowest of goals, i.e., in satisfying his animal desires and lusts. The habitat of man, as a consequence, will be turned into an avenue for the pursuing of his despondent life objectives. It will contain far less substance, meaning and ontological worth than any of the houses of animals. About the condition of those who turn away from Allah and His guidance, Allah says: "...they have hearts with which they do not understand, and they have eyes with which they do not see, and they have ears with which they do not hear; they are as cattle, nay, they are in worse errors; these are the heedless ones." (al-A'raf, 179)

As a final point, the gist of all the four lessons explained above, that is, the peaceful and consequential coexistence between man and the flora and fauna, on the one hand, and between human habitats and the flora and fauna, on the other, and the spiritual significance of the house phenomenon which is strongly connected with the purpose and mission of man on earth -- all this is unmistakably implied in the following Allah's words: "...and (Allah) made for you, out of the skins of animals, (tents for) dwellings, which you find so light (and handy) when you travel and when you stop (in your travels); and out of their wool, and their soft fibers (between wool and hair), and their hair, rich stuff and articles of convenience (to serve you) for a time. It is Allah Who made out of the things He created, some things to give you shade; of the hills He made some for your shelter; He made you garments to protect you from heat, and coats of mail to protect you from your (mutual) violence. Thus does He complete His favors on you that you may bow to His Will (in Islam)." (al-Nahl, 80-81). Certainly, it is not a coincidence that this divine proclamation on the benefits which man draws from his natural surroundings, from the matters concerning his habitat to the wellbeing of his own self, come after the proclamation of Allah that it was Him who made human houses "homes of rest and quiet for you" (al-Nahl, 80) -- the words which have already been quoted in the context of the house functioning as a shelter and private sanctuary to man. Therein the reliance of man, human habitat and the environment on each other in order that the purpose of existence of each and every one of them is

made possible and facilitated in a triangle of faith, worship and the highest level of spiritual representation and meaning, is readily apparent.

### **The house and the subject of privacy**

Islam is very firm in calling for privacy protection. However, as one is required to safeguard his privacy and that of his family, he is likewise required to respect the privacy of others. Deliberate invasion of one's privacy by whatever means and degree is deemed a serious offence with far-reaching consequences. It falls under the category of inflicting harm or damage (*darar*) on others, which cannot be tolerated in Islam.

In some very broad terms and rather indirectly, the Qur'an warns of disrespecting one's privacy in the following dramatic mode: "O you who believe! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible): for suspicion in some cases is a sin: and spy not on each other, nor speak ill of each other behind their backs. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Nay, you would abhor it ... But fear Allah: for Allah is Oft-Returning most Merciful" (al-Hujurat, 12).

The Qur'an at the same time provides some suggestions as to how to cure such a menace: "O you who believe! Enter not houses other than your own, until you have asked permission and saluted (*salam*) those in them: that is best for you, in order that you may heed (what is seemly). If you find no one in the house, enter not until permission is given to you: if you are asked to go back, go back: that makes for greater purity for yourselves: and Allah knows well all that you do" (al-Nur 27-28).

Allah also says: "But if you enter houses, salute each other -- a greeting of blessing and purity as from Allah. Thus does Allah make clear the signs to you: that you may understand." (al-Nur, 61)

Hence, seeking permission from, and saluting by giving *salam* (the Islamic greeting) to, the occupants of a house before entering it is a requirement in Islam. Permission is to be sought three times.<sup>8</sup> If after the third time permission is not granted, the visitor is to go back, even if he knew that there were occupants inside a house.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Mukhtasar Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Ikhtasarahu al-Sabuni Muhammad 'Ali, (Beirut: Dar al-Qur'an al-Karim, 1981), vol. 2 p. 596.

While seeking permission, a person is not to face directly the entrance into a house. He is, as per the teachings of the Prophet (pbuh),<sup>9</sup> to stand either at the right or at the left side of the entrance. This is because in the earliest days of Islam, as an outstanding pagan custom which Islam dealt with gradually and wisely, many houses had neither doors nor screens, so the people were asked not to look into the interior of the houses before being granted permission to do so. Even after the doors and screens had become a norm, standing at either side of the entrance into a house and seeking permission to enter it, still applied -- and it even now does -- as a sign of genuine respect for people's and their houses' privacy, and also as an extra cautionary step towards the duly honoring of the inviolability of the house and the basic rights of its residents.

Once the door of a house is opened and some of its interior exposed, a careful and gradual transition from the outside to the inside by those who do not reside therein is to be implied and put effectively into practice, in order that the impact of such an action is minimized and made as cordial and welcoming as possible. Seeking permission to enter houses while standing at either side of their main entrances, as well as greeting by *salam* their occupants, are the steps in that direction. Without a doubt, such is a very important aspect of what could be termed here as the Islamic domestic or communal ethics.

Islam goes so far as to counsel Muslims to greet (*salam*) their family members every time they enter their own houses. Certainly, nobody will ever be happy to see a family member, or to be seen by a family member, in an unlikable and embarrassing state. Family members are not to take each other by surprise when returning to and entering their houses. Surprises may not be always pleasant and agreeable. This applies especially to adults. Along the same lines, children are to be brought up and educated.

Even a person entering an empty house is advised to give *salam* and greet his own self and the angels who coexist and reside in peace with believers by saying: "Peace be upon us and upon all the good servants of Allah".<sup>10</sup> Angels are said to be answering this type of greeting. The Prophet (pbuh) has said that for a person

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., vol. 2 p. 596.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., vol. 2 p. 620.

greeting his own family members is a source of goodness for both the family and the house.<sup>11</sup>

The issue of entering houses as highlighted in the verse mentioned above ought not to be confined solely to conventional entering through gateways. It indicates, moreover, having any kind of access to, or penetrative sensory contact with, any division of people's houses and from anywhere.

That the house in Islam is its occupants oriented, and that seeking permission prior to entering it from, as well as saluting, those in it is only for securing their own good, wellbeing and interests, testifies the following verse which comes after the above-mentioned verses. According to it, the requirement of seeking permission before entering uninhabited houses due to some legitimate goals that one may have, is put aside, because, obviously, that would be superfluous and no harm thus could be generated to anyone. Allah says: "It is no sin in you that you enter uninhabited houses wherein you have your necessities; and Allah knows what you do openly and what you hide." (al-Nur, 29)

Indeed, since the human body has its own 'awrah (parts of the body that must be properly covered in certain situations and under certain circumstances) which can be revealed only to a few, likewise the house has its own 'awrah, that is, restricted and classified aspects, which can be seen and used only by certain categories of people and at appointed times. This is so because the house serves as the physical locus of human life. Some activities of the residents of a house can be shared with others, other activities are meant for the residents of a house alone, and yet many other activities in a house are neatly divided along the lines of gender, age and the domestic status of its residents. Thus, each and every house ought to be planned and designed in order to cater for the complex needs of its residents.<sup>12</sup>

If some parts of man's and woman's body are private and if certain activities of theirs are to be carried out secretly, then the sections of the house which serve as a framework for such activities are to be secret and restricted too. If every human being is an inner independent world resplendent with feelings and cravings, then the house also is to be an inner autonomous world most fitting for the

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., vol. 2 p. 620.

<sup>12</sup> Spahic Omer, *The Origins and Functions of Islamic Domestic Courtyards*, p. 229.

expression or satisfaction of such feelings and cravings. To outsiders, the latter signifies as much a mysterious and elusive realm as the former. Not more than a few persons can make their way into either of the two worlds unearthing their cherished treasures. The house is a treasure many aspects of which are never accessible to the public. Even visitors, despite the Islamic unparalleled emphasis on hospitality, do not enjoy the absolute freedom of movement inside their host's house which the house design and the arrangement of spaces inside it emphatically enforce.<sup>13</sup>

It follows that it is an Islamic requirement that house designs promote the protection of human privacy. If people do not really care about the 'awrah of their bodies and what implications such has for their activities, they would not care about the 'awrah of their houses either. In the same vein, if they are aware of the importance of the 'awrah of the body and its implications for their domestic activities, people will certainly care about the 'awrah of their houses as well. Hence, the house is always to be viewed as a means for the fulfillment of some high, noble and venerable life objectives.

According to Sayyid Qutb, there are many types of 'awrah.<sup>14</sup> The 'awrah of the body is just one of them. There is an 'awrah (restricted and classified areas or aspects) in food, clothes, furniture, etc. Virtually, every human activity at certain times and under certain conditions contains some aspects which people do not like to be freely exposed to the public eye. In everything people do, there is an 'awrah. There is also an 'awrah in human emotions and the conditions of the soul. People certainly do not like themselves and things related to them to be seen by others unless they are clean, beautified, orderly and "prepared" for the public interest.<sup>15</sup>

Sayyid Qutb also asserted that Allah made houses as places of rest and quiet. In them, the human mind and soul take refuge from all the troubles and anxieties that may beset men, not only from outside the house's realm but also -- symbolically rather -- from any angle or direction of this terrestrial world. The house is capable of all this provided it "becomes a safe haven which cannot be infringed upon except with the knowledge and permission of the house's family members, and at the times which only they deem appropriate, and

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>14</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1982), vol. 4 p. 2508.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., vol. 4 p. 2508.

under those circumstances which they see as suitable for others to meet them.”<sup>16</sup>

The Qur’an uses the term “*’awrah*” in the three following contexts: 1) the many types of *’awrahs* of women (al-Nur, 31), 2) the three times of privacy (three *’awrahs*) for parents when the rest of the inhabitants inside their houses, including children, must seek permission before entering their room (al-Nur, 58), and 3) in relation with the hypocrites of Madinah who alleged that their houses were “*’awrah*”, that is to say, they were exposed, vulnerable, unprotected and in great danger, so they had to go back to their houses using it as an excuse so as not to join the Prophet (pbuh) and the rest of Muslims for an impending military conflict: “and they were not exposed; they only desired to run away.” (al-Ahzab, 13)

Indeed, it is because of this significance, purpose and function of the house in Islam, and how the *’awrah* of the house exists only because of the existence of the many types and levels of *’awrah* in the lives of its occupants, many of which the house is expected to meticulously treasure and guard, that the quoted verses on seeking permission prior to entering people’s houses is followed by the comprehensive verses about people’s modesty, lowering their gazes, guarding their private parts, and the *’awrah* of the body of the believing women and who exactly can see what and how much thereof. Allah says: “Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do. And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their ornaments except to their husbands or their fathers, or the fathers of their husbands, or their sons, or the sons of their husbands, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or those whom their right hands possess, or the male servants not having need (of women), or the children who have not attained knowledge of what is hidden of women; and let them not strike their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may be known; and turn to Allah all of you, o believers, so that you may be successful.” (al-Nur, 30-31)

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., vol. 4 p. 2507.

In the same vein, the wives of the Prophet (pbuh) have been instructed to keep maximizing the roles and functions of their houses, while unreservedly enjoying comfort, privacy and security in them. Their houses were to be transformed into the centers of learning and spiritual upbringing for the members of the *ahl al-bayt* (the Prophet's family), from where all the other Muslim houses and households were bound to benefit. "And stay quietly in your houses, and make not a dazzling display, like that of the former times of ignorance; and establish regular prayers, and give Zakat and obey Allah and His Messenger. And Allah only wishes to remove all abomination from you, you members of the Family (*ahl al-bayt*), and to make you pure and spotless. And recite what is rehearsed to you in your houses, of the Signs of Allah and His Wisdom: for Allah understands the finest mysteries and is well-acquainted (with them)." (al-Ahzab, 33-34)

However, whenever they leave their houses for whatever legitimate reasons, that is, whenever they step from the private to the public realm where a different set of rules apply, the wives of the Prophet (pbuh) – and indeed all the believing Muslim women – have been instructed to be vigilant so that the potential hazards of the outside world are successfully kept at bay. The transit from the inner domestic to the outer public world is regarded as a serious matter in Islam. Thus, with the intention that its impact is curbed, relevant measures have been put in place. The object of those measures "was not to restrict the liberty of women, but to protect them from harm and molestation."<sup>17</sup> Allah says: "O Prophet, say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers that they let down upon them their over-garments; this will be more proper, that they may be known, and thus they will not be given trouble; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful." (al-Ahzab, 59)

"O wives of the Prophet, you are not like any other of the women; If you will be on your guard, then be not soft in (your) speech, lest he in whose heart is a disease yearn (should be moved with desire); and speak a good word."(al-Ahzab, 32)

It stands to reason and as a small digression, based on the discussion above, that the Prophet (pbuh) was allowed, divinely instructed and guided, to marry more wives than anybody else, eleven in all, because, among other things, that way the Islamic

---

<sup>17</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an, English Translation of the Meanings and the Commentary*, see the commentary of the verse no. 59 from the *al-Ahzab* chapter (*surah*).



community was to have the privilege of enjoying a number of sources of knowledge, especially with reference to such important practical issues as the family institution, the house and its functions, privacy, husband-wife and parents-children relationship, etc., but which are governed by the strict rules and regulations of privacy. If the Prophet (pbuh), for example, had only one or two wives, and not eleven, then there would have existed only one or two, and not eleven, sources of knowledge for the Islamic community to benefit from in more than a few extremely important fields of knowledge and practical dimensions of Islam, a comprehensive way of life. In that case, moreover, educating the *Ummah* (Islamic community) would have been too heavy a burden for the Prophet's one or two wives to bear.

This was so owing to the significance of the house and family institutions and how they function in Islam, on the one hand, and owing to the fact that the Prophet (pbuh) is the role-model and a principal source of revealed knowledge to Muslims, on the other. Hence, the wives of the Prophet (pbuh) have been instructed, as in one of the verses cited above: "And recite what is rehearsed to you in your houses, of the Signs of Allah and His Wisdom." (al-Ahzab, 34) "The Signs of Allah" means the Qur'an, and "His Wisdom" means the *sunnah* or the established religious practices and daily routines of the Prophet (pbuh). The wives of the Prophet (pbuh) were commanded not only to recite to and among themselves, but also to convey to the rest of the believing Muslim community what knowledge and wisdom have been rehearsed and practiced, and how exactly, in their houses, so that the rest of the Muslim houses too could fast evolve into the dynamic centers of learning and spiritual upbringing. That knowledge and wisdom, just like any other, was not to be concealed, knowingly or otherwise, from anybody. In Islam, there is no such thing as a form of knowledge or wisdom that is irrelevant or trivial. The Muslims looked up to the wives of the Prophet (pbuh) for inspiration, knowledge and guidance in so many topics on housing and the family institution, during the life of the Prophet (pbuh) and afterwards, and they delivered. They were such remarkable educators of the community. This educational role of the Prophet's wives appears to be implied in them being called by the Qur'an (al-Ahzab, 6) as the Mothers of believers (*Ummahat al-Mu'minin*).

No wonder then that the issues of privacy, seeking permission before entering people's houses, the overall function of houses, dress code, lowering gaze, ethics of verbal communication, all-purpose

modesty, etc., are all interconnected and often grouped together in the Qur'an. They are seen as the integral parts of a comprehensive whole called Islamic moral values, which aims to create and sustain, hand in hand with the belief system and the prescribed religious rituals of Islam, a strong, pure, cultured and progressive Islamic society.

Islam is so concerned about the subject of privacy that house plans and designs must not lead to, or encourage, the intrusion of privacy even among family members, among family members and visitors, and among visitors themselves. Allah says in the Qur'an: "O you who believe! let those whom your right hands possess and those of you who have not attained to puberty ask permission of you three times; before the morning prayer, and when you put off your clothes at midday in summer, and after the prayer of the nightfall; these are three times of privacy for you; neither is it a sin for you nor for them besides these, some of you must go round about (waiting) upon others; thus does Allah make clear to you the communications, and Allah is Knowing, Wise. And when the children among you have attained to puberty, let them seek permission as those before them sought permission; thus does Allah make clear to you His communications, and Allah is knowing, Wise." (al-Nur, 58-59)

This is one of the reasons why children when they come of age should have their own separate rooms. Children of different genders are to be separated too. That means that as a minimum requirement in almost every house there should be a room for parents, another room for female children, and yet another room for male children, in addition to a common living room, a couple of toilets, a kitchen and a common store. House designs and plans, it follows, must be very much mindful of, and responsive to, these requirements. According to Abdullah Yusuf Ali, the message of the two verses mentioned above is general, meaning that "all in the house, including the stranger within your gate, must conform to these wholesome rules (on privacy)."<sup>18</sup>

### **The house and harboring superstitions**

People must make sure that no superstitions, or any forms of unbelief, are instigated, bred and promoted inside their houses. If

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., see the commentary of the verses no. 58 and 59 from the *al-Nur* chapter (*surah*).

allowed, that is bound to create some serious repercussions for the status of the house as the family education and development center, and for those who live in it.

It has been reported that during the Prophet's time and according to some people's culture, if one set out on a journey and if at an early stage of it one changed his mind, he would return. However, due to some unfounded beliefs and superstitions, the person would enter his house only from the back and never through the front door, supposing, albeit baselessly, that such a conduct is of virtue.<sup>19</sup> So the Qur'an denounced this practice because it was founded on false beliefs, and because it runs contrary to the Islamic moral principles with reference to the functions of the house and its remarkable roles in developing a righteous and vibrant society with individuals who possessed an upright, unprejudiced, balanced, sensible and dynamic outlook on life. People must pay most attention to the most important things in life. Logically, they must pay least attention to the least important things. Baseless, meaningless and deceptive issues and things must be shunned at all times as they disturb one's focus and attention and mercilessly consume his time, energy and willpower. There is no greater good than the divine truth and everything associated with it, directly or indirectly. At the same time, however, there is no greater evil than the falsehood and everything associated with it, directly or indirectly. Surely, the ways houses are planned, designed, built and used must put into effect these tenets.

Allah says on the cited Arab custom: "They ask you concerning the new moon. Say: They are times appointed for (the benefit of) men, and (for) the pilgrimage; and it is not righteousness that you should enter the houses at their backs, but righteousness is this that one should guard (against evil); and go into the houses by their doors and be careful (of your duty) to Allah, that you may be successful." (al-Baqarah, 189)

Mentioning this superstition together with the notion of the new moon by whose appearance the period for the pilgrimage (*haji*) to Makkah is fixed, some assume that the superstition is related in particular to traveling during the pilgrimage season. Abdullah Yusuf Ali says: "There were many superstitions connected with the new moon...The Arabs, among other superstitions, had one which made

---

<sup>19</sup> *Mukhtasar Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, vol. 1 p. 16

them enter their houses by the back door during or after the pilgrimage. This is disapproved, for there is no virtue in any such artificial restrictions. All virtue proceeds from the love and fear of Allah.”<sup>20</sup>

Certainly, this superstitious belief had more than a few implications for the ways some houses in the Arabian Peninsula at the time of the Prophet’s mission have been designed and built, because there must have existed at least an opening at the back of houses big enough for a person to go through for performing the said function. Some houses did not have any rear opening, however, so the people had to use the stairs and climb over the back wall to the roof of the house and then from there to descend into the house proper.<sup>21</sup>

Then, curing a set of other superstitions relating to the roles of the house, Allah says: “There is no blame on the blind man, nor is there blame on the lame, nor is there blame on the sick, nor on yourselves that you eat from your houses, or your fathers' houses or your mothers' houses, or your brothers' houses, or your sisters' houses, or your paternal uncles' houses, or your paternal aunts' houses, or your maternal uncles' houses, or your maternal aunts' houses, or what you possess the keys of, or your friends' (houses). It is no sin in you that you eat together or separately. So when you enter houses, greet your people with a salutation from Allah, blessed (and) goodly; thus does Allah make clear to you the communications that you may understand.” (al-Nur, 61)

This verse obliterates a number of powerful superstitions which were able to stifle both people’s right and accountable thinking and the status and function of the house, which, in turn, could hold back the right, fair and dynamic development of the whole community. If those superstitions were upheld, or simply ignored, advancing the idea of the house as a family development center, the fundamental societal unit and a microcosm of culture and civilization, would have been considerably jeopardized.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s comment about this verse is as follows: “There were various Arab superstitions and fancies which are combated and rejected here. (1) The blind, or the halt, or those afflicted with serious disease were supposed to be objects of divine

---

<sup>20</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’an, English Translation of the Meanings and the Commentary*, see the commentary of the verse no. 189 from the *al-Baqarah* chapter (*surah*).

<sup>21</sup> Fakhruddin al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-Kabir*, <http://www.altafsir.com>.

displeasure, and as such not fit to be associated with us in meals in our houses: we are not to entertain such a thought, as we are not judges of the causes of people's misfortunes, which deserve our sympathy and kindness. (2) It was considered unbecoming to take meals in the houses of near relatives: this taboo is not approved. (3) A similar superstition about houses in our possession but not in our actual occupation is disapproved. (4) If people think they should not fall under obligation to casual friends, that does not apply to a sincere friend, in whose company a meal is not to be rejected, but welcomed. (5) If people make a superstition either that they should always eat separately, or that they must always eat in company, as some people weary of their own company think, either of them is wrong. Man is free and should regulate his life according to needs and circumstances."<sup>22</sup>

In his commentary of the Qur'an, Ibn Kathir dwelled on a number of reports which contain the reasons for revealing the above-quoted verse. According to some such reports,<sup>23</sup> many Arabs, at first, used to feel too embarrassed to eat with the blind, because they could not see the food or where the best morsels were, so others might take the best pieces before they could. They felt too embarrassed to eat with the lame, because they could not sit comfortably, and their companions might take advantage of them. They also felt too embarrassed to eat with the sick, because they might not eat as much as others, so they were afraid to eat with them lest they were unfair to them in some way. Then Allah granted the people a dispensation in this matter.

As per some other accounts,<sup>24</sup> however, before Islam and the mission of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), the people used to feel too embarrassed and too proud to eat with the blind, the lame and the sick, lest they might have to help them and thus put themselves in an awkward situation. So Allah revealed the verse in question in order to rescind this negative thinking.

It has been further reported that "a man would take a blind, lame or sick person to the house of his brother or sister or aunt, and those disabled people would feel ashamed of that and say: "They are

---

<sup>22</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an, English Translation of the Meanings and the Commentary*, see the commentary of the verse no. 61 from the *al-Nur* chapter (*surah*).

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Karim*, (English translation) <http://www.tafsir.com>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*.

taking us to other people's houses." So the same verse was revealed granting permission for that."

As yet another reason for revealing this verse, "a man would enter the house of his father or brother or son, and the lady of the house would bring him some food, but he would refrain from eating because the master of the house was not there," so Allah revealed the said verse allowing the opposite, i.e., a person can eat in the house of his father or brother or son, even though the master of the house is not there.

Furthermore, the Muslims used to go out on military campaigns with the Prophet (pbuh) and they would give the keys of their houses to people they trusted and say: "We permit you to eat whatever you need." But they would say: "It is not permissible for us to eat, they have given us permission reluctantly and we are only trustees." The same verse abrogated this custom as well.

Some people also used to say, as a result of a wrong reasoning: "Allah has forbidden us to eat up our property among ourselves unjustly, and food is the best of property, so it is not permissible for anyone among us to eat at the house of anyone else." So after the revelation of this verse, the people stopped practicing this unfounded custom.

Finally, there were even those who would feel embarrassed and would refrain from eating alone until someone else came along, but Allah made the matter easier for the people telling them that they can eat either together or separately. Some people went so far as to believe that it was a source of shame for them to eat alone, to such an extent that a man might keep on driving his laden camel even though he was hungry, until he could find someone to eat and drink with him.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, people are warned against vainly harboring a fallacious belief that the endless privacy, security and comfort of their houses – and other worldly fortresses -- though able to ward off a great many hazards of the outside, could do anything about thwarting or deferring the greatest of man's anxieties: death. Indeed, defeating, or at least postponing, death, when its time arrives, is the greatest craving of people, especially unbelievers. Allah says: "Wherever you are, death will overtake you, though you are in lofty towers, and if a benefit comes to them, they say: This is from Allah; and if a

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

misfortune befalls them, they say: This is from you. Say: All is from Allah, but what is the matter with these people that they do not make approach to understanding what is told (them)?" (al-Nisa', 78) The phrase "lofty towers" can also signify palaces, sophisticated houses, and any other worldly fortress of man, as they all serve similar purposes.

Allah also says that a person whose appointed time of death has come will surely be taken away from his house, his safest and most inviolable earthly sanctuary, to the place where he is destined to die. Nothing can avert this inevitability. Man is thus better off if he acknowledges, comes to terms with and starts looking forward to experiencing this astonishing truth, rather than to vainly try to ignore or distort it, and then start developing and living under some illusions with regard to the contrary. Allah says: "They say: Had we any hand in the affair, we would not have been slain here. Say: Had you remained in your houses, those for whom slaughter was ordained would certainly have gone forth to the places where they would be slain, and that Allah might test what was in your breasts and that He might purge what was in your hearts; and Allah knows what is in the breasts." (Alu 'Imran, 154)

Finally, as a small digression, Islam's prohibition of concocting, nurturing and harboring superstitions, not only at home but also in all the tiers of existence, led to the conspicuous absence of literal or deadening symbolism and formalism in genuine manifestations of Islamic culture and civilization, including the built environment. Indeed, demoralizing and de-spiritualizing superstitions, literal symbolism and throttling formalism are all interlaced. Irrespective of which one exactly is the cause and which one is the effect, they give rise to, cultivate and sustain each other. They draw strength from each other. They form a dominant triangle of ignorance, confusion, deceit and agnosticism which contaminates, hinders and is capable of totally stifling the spiritual enlightenment and growth of people, their institutions and society as a whole.

Thus, Islam proscribes superstitions, plain symbolism and formalism in religion, denouncing them in various contexts and in some very powerful terms. Due to this, mainly, the form in the Islamic built environment is always required to follow and serve the requirements and interests of the function and its many dimensions: corporeal, cerebral and spiritual. The form divorced from the function is insignificant. The importance of the form, by and large, is a

supportive one, supplementing and enhancing the function. The function always comes first, the form is second. The former is the objective, the latter a means. It follows that the legitimacy of the form lies in the legitimacy of the function, and how strongly and in what an association they are bonded.

Islam is a religion not only of a faith and abstract philosophy but also of deeds, action and concrete life strategies. The term "*islam*" means "*submission*", which in itself implies a continuous and comprehensive action. Islam is not a religion of symbols, slogans and rhetoric. It strikes a fine balance between the exigencies of the material and spiritual aspects of existence, between the conditions of this world and the Hereafter, and between the requirements of personal, family as well as societal development. Islam means having a strong and complete faith in Allah and the other required realities from the spiritual and corporeal worlds plus performing good deeds under all circumstances. Possessing either aspect of Islam without the other is insufficient for attaining salvation. The two must be integrated in a whole that is called "Islam", which, in turn, must be interwoven with the life-force of the notion of comprehensive excellence or *ihsan*. Normally, what a believing person does first is securing the belief aspect, which then causes him to do good deeds. The relationship between the two is a causal one the former always being the cause and the latter the effect. There is no person who has faith but does not perform good deeds. Likewise, there is no person who does deeds sanctioned by Islam and in the name of Islam but has no Islamic faith. A strong relationship between faith and good deeds are the only way towards comprehensive excellence.

This philosophy must be embodied and strikingly palpable in the field of the Islamic built environment too, in that the latter exists because of the existence of Muslims and their distinctive life philosophy. Moreover, the Islamic built environment exists in order to serve as a means, the facilities and a physical locus of the actualization of the Islamic message on earth. It represents the identity of Islamic culture and civilization in every time and space. However, this scenario will become viable only when Muslim built environment professionals, as well as people in their capacity as the users of built environment, become very comfortable and familiar with the teachings and principles of Islam, subscribing to and exemplifying them in their thoughts, words and actions.



About this nature of the Islamic message, whereby superstitions, deadening formalism and symbolism, as well as all the attitudes, deeds and conditions that may breed them, are strongly reproached, Allah says: "It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East and the West, but righteousness is this that one should believe in Allah and the last day and the angels and the Book and the prophets, and give away wealth out of love for Him to the near of kin and the orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and the beggars and for (the emancipation of) the captives, and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate; and the performers of their promise when they make a promise, and the patient in distress and affliction and in time of conflicts -- these are they who are true (to themselves) and these are they who guard (against evil)." (Al-Baqarah, 177)

"It is not their meat, nor their blood that reaches Allah; it is your piety that reaches Him. He has thus made them subject to you, that ye may glorify Allah for His Guidance to you and proclaim the good news to all who do right." (Al-Hajj, 37)

"When they are told to follow the (Revelation) that Allah has sent down, they say: "Nay, we shall follow the ways that we found our fathers (following)." What! even if it is Satan beckoning them to the Penalty of the (blazing) Fire?" (Luqman, 21)

"When it is said to them: "Follow what Allah has revealed", they say: "Nay, we shall follow the ways of our fathers." What! even though their fathers were void of wisdom and guidance?" (Al-Baqarah, 170)

### **The house as a place of delight**

Islam perceives the house as a place of matchless delight. It is a ground for taking pleasure in the most and best gifts (*al-tayyibat*) that Allah has made permissible to man. The term "*maskan*", which also means the house, is derived from an Arabic verb "*sakana*" which means, among other things, to calm down, to repose, to rest, to become quiet and tranquil, to feel at ease with. Hence, the words "*sukun*" and "*sakinah*" mean calmness, tranquility, peacefulness, serenity, peace of mind, etc.<sup>26</sup>

The house is called "*maskan*" or "*maskin*" because it offers its inhabitants a chance to take a break from the demands and pressure

---

<sup>26</sup> Abu al-Fadl Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1990), vol. 13 p.211.

of the outside world and concentrate on doing that which leads to a physical, mental and even spiritual recuperation. The house in Islam is a retreat, sanctuary and one's source of rest and leisure. Thus, those who live in such houses do not need to impatiently look forward to breaking away frequently from the strains of work and everyday life and go for splendid holidays.

The people residing in a house are the only authors of a house ambiance and, as such, of their own emotions and overall conditions. For these reasons is there a maxim in many cultures across the world to the effect that "my house is my paradise". Everyone also is fond of saying that "there's no place like home", that is to say, one's home is the best place to be.

Due to the presence of one's closest family members in it, with whom one shares the same vision and life objectives, on the one hand, and due to the ways its spaces are designed, planned and utilized, on the other, the house in Islam is a perfect avenue for its users to disengage from the fetters of the outside life and then unwind, relax and under a totally different set of circumstances take up yet another life's blessed dimension which concerns the family institution and its development. In doing so -- more importantly -- the residents of the house in Islam do not have to show any serious worry or concern about their peace, serenity and privacy being jeopardized, intentionally or otherwise, by the neighbors, visitors, passers-by and such uninvited guests as preachers, promoters, salesmen and others. To its users, the house in Islam thus is a "fortified" private "paradise" on earth. It has been granted by Allah, the Creator and Master of all things, as one of the best and most valuable earthly gifts so that within its realm the foremost joys and pleasures of this life could be appreciated and enjoyed. As such, no one could ever claim a right to deny, manipulate or misuse this divinely given entitlement to man.<sup>27</sup> On this, Allah proclaims in the Qur'an: "It is Allah Who made your habitations (houses) homes of rest and quiet for you..." (al-Nahl, 80)

"Say: Who has prohibited the beautiful (gifts) of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants and the good provisions? Say: These are for the believers in the life of this world, purely (theirs) on the resurrection day; thus do We make the communications clear for a people who know." (al-A'raf 32)

---

<sup>27</sup> Spahic Omer, *The Origins and Functions of Islamic Domestic Courtyards*, p. 28-29.

Because the pleasures, which the house phenomenon entails, undoubtedly symbolize the total pleasures of this world, the Qur'an sees it appropriate to refer occasionally to the concept of the house, or pleasant dwellings (*masakin tayyibah*) in gardens beneath which rivers flow, when referring to the eternal bliss of the Hereafter in Paradise (*Jannah*). It is a well-known fact that the infinite pleasures of Paradise are beyond the cognitive abilities of man in this world. What is mentioned in the Qur'an about Paradise is just with the aim of bringing the state of the same as close to the limited human mind as possible. The actual similarities in the pleasures of this world and the Hereafter are in terms of names only. Nothing else is the same. Thus, due to the significance of the house in the life of man while in this world, the Qur'an refers from time to time to the same concept when describing and bringing close to man's mind the infinite pleasures of Paradise. That means that the idea of the house is bound to play a central role in man's blissful life in Paradise as much as it does in this world, with the difference that the heavenly houses will be perfect, will have perfect occupants, and will function perfectly in perfect conditions and surroundings. The pleasures and joys of perfect heavenly houses, it stands to reason, will serve as a microcosm of the complete pleasures and joys of Paradise, just as it is the case with the notion of the house in this earthly life. Allah says about this, for example: "O you who believe, shall I lead you to a merchandise which may deliver you from a painful chastisement? You shall believe in Allah and His Messenger, and struggle hard in Allah's way with your property and your lives; that is better for you, did you but know! He will forgive you your faults and cause you to enter into gardens, beneath which rivers flow, and goodly dwellings in gardens of perpetuity; that is the mighty achievement." (al-Saff, 10-12)

"Allah has promised to the believing men and the believing women gardens, beneath which rivers flow, to abide in them, and goodly dwellings in gardens of perpetual abode; and best of all is Allah's goodly pleasure; that is the grand achievement." (al-Tawbah, 72)

This point becomes further elucidated by referring to a prayer of Pharaoh's believing wife, where she implored Allah, among other things, to build her a house in Paradise in nearness to Him, as a representation of the heavenly bliss to her. She beseeched: "My Lord, build for me a house with You in the garden and deliver me from

Pharaoh and his doing, and deliver me from the unjust people.” (al-Tahrim, 11)

In some of his traditions (*hadith*), Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) also referred to the importance of the roles the phenomenon of the house will play in Paradise. In one of them, he implored Allah to grant one of his companions, following the latter’s death, a better house in Paradise than what he had in this fleeting world.<sup>28</sup> The Prophet’s occasional words that “Allah will build, or make, a house for someone in Paradise”, as a reward for certain deeds that a person might do, are the Prophet’s unambiguous reference to the ultimate salvation and happiness that a person concerned will procure in the Hereafter.

Finally, as the houses in Paradise will accommodate, facilitate and symbolize much of its bliss meant for its residents, in Hellfire, likewise, there will be houses which will serve the similar purpose, but in relation to accommodating, facilitating and symbolizing the torment of the residents of Hellfire. The Prophet (pbuh) said about this, for instance, that everyone has two houses, or places of abode, (*manzil*) waiting for him in the Hereafter: one in Paradise and one in Hellfire. When a person dies and if he enters Hellfire, the residents of Paradise will inherit his house there (while his house in Hellfire he will occupy himself).<sup>29</sup>

### **The house and people’s spiritual failings**

The Qur’an warns that the blessing and sanctity of the house must not be abused. The house must not be turned into a field, or a catalyst, for defying Allah’s authority and the authority of His divine commandments. Doing that would imply a clear sign of one’s disobedience and ungratefulness. In case someone rebels against Allah, using his house as a place and protective shield for his misbehavior, then only he will be the one to be blamed for whatever might come next as a consequence. Often, however, it is not only people that are affected by the unavoidable outcomes resulting from their mischief, but also their houses, the very symbols of their being and their identities.

While revealing the causes of the spiritual collapse of certain people in this worldly life, Allah singles out the trap of excessive love

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, Kitab al-Jana’iz, Hadith No. 1489.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Kitab al-Zuhd, Hadith No. 4332.

for houses in which many people fall, as one of such causes. People tend to adore unduly their houses making use of them either as the end of their flawed spiritual cravings, or as the means for achieving some other forms of their waywardness. This is perhaps for the reason that people misconstrue the house phenomenon: as both a concept and sensory reality, as well as the roles of its form and function, and thus invest a lot of time, wealth and energy in those aspects of the house which are of less significance for the realization of man's purpose on earth. Allah says: "Say: If your fathers and your sons and your brethren and your mates and your kinsfolk and property which you have acquired, and the slackness of trade which you fear and dwellings which you like, are dearer to you than Allah and His Messenger and striving in His way, then wait till Allah brings about His command: and Allah does not guide the transgressing people." (al-Tawbah, 24)

When exposing the addiction to materialism and the selfish fancies and aims of the polytheists of Makkah, who persistently defied Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his message, Allah says: "And they say: We will by no means believe in you until you cause a fountain to gush forth from the earth for us. Or you should have a garden of palms and grapes in the midst of which you should cause rivers to flow forth, gushing out. Or you should cause the heaven to come down upon us in pieces as you think, or bring Allah and the angels face to face (with us). Or you should have a house of gold, or you should ascend into heaven, and we will not believe in your ascending until you bring down to us a book which we may read. Say: Glory be to my Lord; am I aught but a mortal messenger?" (al-Isra', 90-93)

Insisting on having "a house of gold", among other things, so that they could believe in the Prophet (pbuh) and his message, bears witness to the gross misjudgments, self-centeredness, going astray and the intellectual as well as spiritual flaws of every unbeliever and skeptic, which the polytheists of Makkah typified. As expected, the material aspect is the only lens through which things and events, including the issue of the house and housing, those people observe and judge.

Furthermore, Allah looks down on excessive and meaningless house beautification and ornamentation rooted in unbelief and wrongdoing. By extension, the same applies to attaching excessive and inappropriate attention to the overall form of houses, especially if

that becomes at the expense of their proper function. So little value is it attached to such matters in the spiritual world. The same more often hinders than helps. It is more essential, and so timely required, that houses are bolstered and embellished with the strong faith of their occupants and the sincere good deeds of theirs towards Allah, people and the elements in nature. The beautification of houses and their general physical appearances are to be viewed and appreciated only against the backdrop of this spiritual paradigm. Allah thus says: "And were it not that all people had been a single nation, We would certainly have assigned to those who disbelieve in the Beneficent Allah (to make) of silver the roofs of their houses and the stairs by which they ascend. And the doors of their houses and the couches on which they recline, and (other) embellishments of gold; and all this is naught but provision of this world's life, and the hereafter is with your Lord only for those who guard (against evil)." (al-Zukhruf, 33-35)

Qarun, who was of the people of Prophet Musa (Moses) and who was one of the most affluent people that ever lived, was and remained the symbol of disobedience, arrogance, extravagance and selfishness. In order to punish him appropriately and thus bequeath a comprehensive and lasting lesson to others, from his contemporaries and from all the subsequent generations, Allah caused the earth, upon which he used to walk ungratefully and haughtily, to swallow up him and his house. This way, the punishment and the lessons intended were most apt.

Qarun's arrogance and pomp was duly met with utter humiliation. His portrayal of his self as someone existing on a higher plane than the rest of his "lowly" contemporaries, especially the believers who followed Prophet Musa, was met with him being swollen by the earth to its deepest point, thus implying that not only was he "brought down to earth", but also that in disgrace and humiliation he was sent, literally, as much low as he fancied to go high. He wanted the pinnacle of worldly power, prosperity and contentment, but got the nadir of failure, shame, regret and chastisement in both worlds.

With Qarun his house was swollen as well, for the reason that as he and his acts were epitomizing all the wrong hedonistic tendencies, his house, likewise, was epitomizing the same thing, but in the sense that the house operated as the container, or the chief physical locus, of his wickedness where it was, more than anywhere else, strategized, cultivated, advanced and practiced. Qarun's house

served as the launching pad for his spreading of evil to the outside world. Destroying both Qarun and his house meant the total obliteration of a sophisticated evil scheme. While Qarun was the main protagonist in such a scheme, his house played the most vital role in sustaining it.

Allah says about Qarun's story: "Surely Qarun was of the people of Musa, but he rebelled against them, and We had given him of the treasures, so much so that his hoards of wealth would certainly weigh down a company of men possessed of great strength. When his people said to him: Do not exult, surely Allah does not love the exultant; and seek by means of what Allah has given you the future abode, and do not neglect your portion of this world, and do good (to others) as Allah has done good to you, and do not seek to make mischief in the land, surely Allah does not love the mischief-makers. He said: I have been given this only on account of the knowledge I have. Did he not know that Allah had destroyed before him of the generations those who were mightier in strength than he and greater in assemblage? And the guilty shall not be asked about their faults. So he went forth to his people in his finery. Those who desire this world's life said: O would that we had the like of what Qarun is given; most surely he is possessed of mighty good fortune. And those who were given the knowledge said: Woe to you! Allah's reward is better for him who believes and does good, and none is made to receive this except the patient. Thus We made the earth to swallow up him and his house; so he had no body of helpers to assist him against Allah nor was he of those who can defend themselves. And those who yearned for his place only the day before began to say: Ah! (know) that Allah amplifies and straitens the means of subsistence for whom He pleases of His servants; had not Allah been gracious to us, He would most surely have abased us; ah! (know) that the ungrateful are never successful. (As for) that future abode, We assign it to those who have no desire to exalt themselves in the earth nor to make mischief and the good end is for those who guard (against evil)" (al-Qasas, 76-83)

The similar reasons given as regards the relationship between the malevolence of Qarun, his house and his ultimate doom, could also be given as regards the relationship between the malevolence of some other past communities, which Allah had destroyed, and between their houses and their ultimate doom. In some instances concerning those communities, people's houses were used as both

the means and arena for the execution of the divine pronounced sentences. Their houses, at the end, became their own necropolis. For example, about the cruel fate of Thamud, the wicked people of Prophet Salih, Allah says: “So when Our decree came to pass, We delivered Salih and those who believed with him by mercy from Us, and (We saved them) from the disgrace of that day; surely your Lord is the Strong, the Mighty. And the rumbling overtook those who were unjust, so they became motionless bodies in their homes, as though they had never dwelt in them; now surely did Thamud disbelieve in their Lord; now surely, away with Thamud.” (Hud, 66-68)

About the disastrous end of Madyan, the evil people of Prophet Shu'ayb, Allah says: “And when Our decree came to pass We delivered Shu'ayb, and those who believed with him by mercy from Us, and the rumbling overtook those who were unjust so they became motionless bodies in their homes, as though they had never dwelt in them; now surely perdition overtook Madyan as had perished Thamud.” (Hud, 94-95)

The wording in the last two verses is very similar to the wording in the verses quoted earlier on Thamud, the people of Prophet Salih. This is, perhaps, because of the similarities in the nature and extent of the wickedness of both communities. Those probable similarities are indicated at the end of the last couple of verses, in Allah's words: “now surely perdition overtook Madyan as had perished Thamud”.

A companion of the Prophet (pbuh), Abdullah b. Umar, if he wanted to stir up his heart, he would go to the site of a ruined building and from its entrance he would call out in a sad voice: “Where are your (the building's) occupants now?” He would then come to his senses and recite the following Allah's words: “Every thing is perishable but He; His is the judgment, and to Him you shall be brought back.” (al-Qasas, 88)<sup>30</sup>

### **The house as a microcosm of culture and civilization**

The house is a microcosm of culture and civilization because the primary elements of society, individuals organized along with the family lines, are born, raised and educated in them. The strength of the institutions of the family and house denotes the strength of a society and the verve of its cultural and civilizational agenda.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Mukhtasar Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, vol. 3 p. 27.



Similarly, frailties in the institutions of the family and house denote frailties in a society and in its cultural and civilizational agenda.

One of the Arabic words used for the house is “*dar*”.<sup>31</sup> The term “*dar*” is derived from an Arabic verb “*dara*” which means, among other things, to circulate, to take place, to go on, to be held, to center on or around, etc. The house is called “*dar*” because it is the physical locus of the family institution and its manifold activities. It is very seldom that the houses in Islam are devoid of active life and human actions at any point of a day, on account of them being the center for promoting and upholding the family unit, as well as for educating and preparing individuals for the challenges of the outside world. Thus, the author of an Arabic lexicon “*Lisan al-‘Arab*” (The Language of the Arabs), Ibn Manzur, stated that “*dar*” (the house) is drawn from the verb “*dara, yaduru*” because of so many human activities taking place therein.<sup>32</sup>

The house in Islam is a framework whose plan, spatial arrangements and form facilitate and further encourage the worship (*‘ibadah*) practices of its users. The entire life of a believer is a form of total submission and service to Allah, the Creator and Master of the universe. As such, the house in Islam can also be described as a place of worship (mosque or *masjid*), as is the case with any other segment of the genuine Islamic built environment. Indeed, the whole of the Islamic built environment could be perceived as a macro place of worship (mosque or *masjid*) because it serves the dignified interests and accommodates the sanctified requirements of Allah’s faithful servants whose life on earth through the deeds, words and thoughts of theirs accounts for a sweet and incessant song of praise and glorification of their Master.

If the mosque institution plays the role of a community development center, then the house institution plays the role of a family development center. In reality, the two roles complement and support one another. The role of the Islamic house as the family development center is no less significant and, thus, is no less rewarding than the mosque institution which functions as the community development center. This strong alliance between the institutions of the house and the mosque in developing the Islamic society (*Ummah*) is supported by a fact that the Arabic term “*bayt*”,

---

<sup>31</sup> Spahic Omer, *The Origins and Functions of Islamic Domestic Courtyards*, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Abu al-Fadl Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-‘Arab*, vol. 4 p. 297.

which is normally given to the house, is every so often given to the mosque as well, especially to the Ka'bah in Makkah, the first and holiest mosque on earth. The Qur'an refers to the Ka'bah as "*bayt*" as many as sixteen times.

By reason of this correlation between the house and the mosque institutions, the word "*bayt*", which literally means "my house", as part of a prayer (*du'a*) of Prophet Nuh (Noah), is sometimes understood to mean "my house" and sometimes "my mosque".<sup>33</sup> The Qur'anic verse in question is as follows: "My Lord, forgive me and my parents and him who enters my house (*bayti*) believing, and the believing men and the believing women; and do not increase the unjust in aught but destruction!" (Nuh, 28)

Also, in the following Qur'anic verse, the word "*buyut*", which literally means "houses", is normally taken in to signify "mosques", based on the content of the verse. However, some commentators of the Qur'an believe that the word in question means both "mosques" and "houses",<sup>34</sup> as they all function in their respective ways as the places of worshipping Allah (*'ibadah*). Says Allah: "In houses (*buyut*) which Allah has permitted to be exalted and that His name may be remembered in them; there glorify Him therein in the mornings and the evenings, men whom neither merchandise nor selling diverts from the remembrance of Allah and the keeping up of prayer and the giving of poor-rate; they fear a day in which the hearts and eyes shall turn about; that Allah may give them the best reward of what they have done, and give them more out of His grace; and Allah gives sustenance to whom He pleases without measure." (al-Nur, 36-38)

The men to whom this verse refers to are instrumental in causing both the mosque and house institutions to function as the community and family centers respectively. Indeed, such men and women are instrumental in causing the total of the Islamic built environment to function as one macro mosque (*masjid*) where Allah alone is desired and worshipped. Without such men and women, it follows, the human built environment, including houses and even mosques, would not only be rendered as meaningless and worthless but also would be gradually transformed into a means as well as a ground for a spiritual deterioration and sin.

---

<sup>33</sup> Al-Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshaf*, <http://www.altafsir.com>.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, <http://www.altafsir.com>.

As a result of this significance which Islam attaches to the societal and educational roles of the house, the Muslims from the very beginning set out to formulate some interesting and highly effective domestic spatial organization and utilization systems. Highlights in such systems are the spaces for guests and visitors, as well as the distinct and, wherever necessary, interactive spaces for children and adults, and also for the male and female members of the household.

In the same way, quite common to the morphology and plan of Islamic houses is to have a designated space, irrespective of its form and size, to function as a mosque or *musalla*. In it, the daily prayers, *tadarus al-Qur'an* (collective study of the Holy Qur'an), meditation, religious discussions, study circles, spirituality enhancement sessions, etc., are conducted individually and collectively among family members. Relatives and neighbors are regularly invited too. Towards this end, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is reported to have directed his companions to have mosques in their quarters and to cleanse and odorize them on special religious occasions.<sup>35</sup> Also, he consented to the idea of his companions earmarking spaces for worship (*'ibadah*) in their private dwellings. He is said to have graced some of such dwellings by personally praying in them.<sup>36</sup> The Prophet (pbuh) even allowed one of his female companions, Umm Waraqah, who was a very learned woman, to lead her household in prayer in her house. He also allowed her to have someone at home to call *adhan* for prayers.<sup>37</sup>

Encouraging his companions not to neglect the projected honorable roles of their houses, the Prophet (pbuh) advised them to perform their voluntary prayers in their houses and not in mosques. Allah would make the prayers as a means of betterment in their houses, the Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have proclaimed.<sup>38</sup> Mosques are only for mandatory (*wajib*) prayers.

In one of his statements, the Prophet (pbuh) went so far as to say that the prayer which a man offers in his house is more excellent than his prayer in the Prophet's mosque, except the obligatory prayers.<sup>39</sup> He also said that the voluntary prayers at home are the

---

<sup>35</sup> Al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Kitab al-Jum'ah, Hadith No. 542.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, Kitab al-Masajid wa al-Jama'at, Hadith No. 146, 747, 748.

<sup>37</sup> Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad b. Hanbal*, Musnad al-Qaba'il, Hadith No. 26023.

<sup>38</sup> Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Book 4, Hadith No. 1705.

<sup>39</sup> Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Kitab al-Salah, Hadith No. 1039.

light of the house. Thus, he asked the people to light up their houses.<sup>40</sup>

For the Muslim women, however, performing even mandatory prayers at home is more auspicious, let alone voluntary ones. The enormity and significance of the women's role in enlivening and utilizing the house institution, as advocated by Islam, comes here clearly into sight because all the rewards which men obtain for performing collective prayers in mosques, women procure too, but on account of them staying behind in their houses, performing their own prayers and overseeing the prayers of children, and attending to the rest of the matters they have been requested to do. Hence, according to a tradition of the Prophet (pbuh), while men are guardians of their families in general terms and are responsible for them, women are guardians of their husbands' houses and children and are responsible for them.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, women have a variety of roles to play outside the house and the family precincts, yet their role inside the house remains a paramount priority. No sooner does a woman's involvement outside the house start having a damaging effect on her role inside the house with her family, than her involvement in the outside world becomes questionable. In a *hadith* (tradition) the Prophet (pbuh) explicitly encouraged women to participate in the good deeds as well as the religious gatherings and activities of the faithful believers (*da'wah al-mu'minin*).<sup>42</sup> This remains the case so long as the prescribed rules and regulations are observed, and as long as women's fundamental roles as mothers, wives, house and family guardians are not neglected.

The Prophet (pbuh) used to say that houses wherein their inhabitants neither pray nor read the Qur'an (houses devoid of good deeds) are like graves and Satan loves to patronize them.<sup>43</sup>

Another Arabic word used for the house is "*manzil*" as well.<sup>44</sup> The term "*manzil*" is derived from a verb "*nazala*" which means, among other things, to come down, to disembark, to make a stop at,

---

<sup>40</sup> Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad b. Hanbal*, Musnad al-'Asharah al-Mubashsharin bi al-Jannah, Hadith No. 82.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 3, Book 46, Hadith No. 730.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, Book 6, Hadith No. 321.

<sup>43</sup> Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Kitab Salah al-Musafirin wa Qasruha, Hadith No. 1300. Al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Kitab al-Salah, Hadith No. 413. Al-Darumi, *Sunan al-Darumi*, Kitab Fada'il al-Qur'an, Hadith No. 3208.

<sup>44</sup> Spahic Omer, *The Origins and Functions of Islamic Domestic Courtyards*, p. 26.

to camp at, to stay at, to lodge at, to settle down in and to inhabit.<sup>45</sup> The house is called “*manzil*” because possessing and utilizing it show that one has started to, or has already settled down in a community, and in this worldly life taken as a whole. It symbolizes, furthermore, that one is perfectly clear as to his role, orientation and life goals. The house is a station, or a center, so to speak, from which one ventures into life and to which one returns, having successfully dealt with the challenges of the outside world, or having just decided to take a break before finally prevailing over them. That is why in many cultures across the globe we hear people saying: “No matter where and how far one goes, to his home is one’s ultimate return”.

The house sphere is the only fragment of space in the entire universe which one can regard as his own. It is central to our existence, to our identity. It is an important part of who we are. Through self-expression and personalization, the house comes to resemble or represent our selves. It is a symbol of self, the articulation and confirmation of our very existence.<sup>46</sup> “Home helps us to know our place in the world. It is a center from which we venture and return; it is one way that we order our existence in the world. This ordering is not only spatial but also temporal. Home is strongly related to our sense of continuity: childhood experiences, leaving and returning, and the patterning of our daily lives.”<sup>47</sup>

Due to all these roles played by the house in people’s lives and their intricate civilizational pursuits, the Qur’an often refers to the house and housing phenomena in the various contexts of highlighting the civilizational achievements or failures of some past communities and nations. It was apt to do so in view of the fact that their houses and everything that could be related to them, one way or another, unambiguously exemplified their achievements or failures.

About the material prosperity of Thamud, the people of Prophet Salih, for which they failed to be grateful and which was the chief cause for their rejection of Prophet Salih, Allah says: “And to Thamud (We sent) their brother Salih. He said: O my people, serve Allah, you have no god other than Him; clear proof indeed has come to you from your Lord; this is (as) Allah's she-camel for you -- a sign, therefore leave her alone to pasture on Allah's earth, and do not touch her with any harm, otherwise painful chastisement will overtake you. And

---

<sup>45</sup> Abu al-Fadl Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-‘Arab*, vol. 11 p. 656.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Gifford, *Environmental Psychology*, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997), p. 196.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

remember when He made you successors after Ad and settled you in the land -- you make mansions on its plains and hew out houses in the mountains -- remember therefore Allah's benefits and do not act corruptly in the land, making mischief." (al-A'raf, 73-74)

And about their demise, Allah says, again referring to their houses: "Then the earthquake overtook them, so they became motionless bodies in their homes." (al-A'raf, 78)

The houses of the rebellious people of Thamud served as the symbol of their material prosperity. However, they also served as the basis and center of their misdeeds and so the bastion of their unbelief and repudiation of Prophet Salih and his message. Hence, it was proper that they met their unhappy end right inside their houses so that the spiritual lessons in history and human society for succeeding generations become clearer and more persuasive.

Allah says about the profundity of such lessons: "And you dwell in the dwellings of those who were unjust to themselves, and it is clear to you how We dealt with them and We have made (them) examples to you. And they have indeed planned their plan, but their plan is with Allah, though their plan was such that the mountains should pass away thereby. Therefore do not think Allah (to be one) failing in His promise to His messengers; surely Allah is Mighty, the Lord of Retribution." (Ibrahim, 45-47)

"Does it not then direct them aright how many of the generations in whose dwellings they go about We destroyed before them? Most surely there are signs in this for those endowed with understanding." (Ta Ha, 128)

By the words "and you dwell in the dwellings of those who were unjust to themselves", as in the first set of verses, and by the words "in whose dwellings they go about", as in the second verse, it is meant the disgraceful departure of all the previous mischievous nations, including the nation of Thamud. It also means the arrival of many other protagonists on the scene, including Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and Muslims. They were to play their own role on earth and, as a natural course of events, to inherit the legacies of the past civilizations whose founders and architects, ironically, thought will immortalize them and will help them fend off Allah's pronounced verdict against them. At the core of the cultural and civilizational legacies of the past nations and communities stood their houses for the reasons explained earlier in connection with the stature, roles and

function of human dwelling places. In all this, surely, there are signs “for those endowed with understanding”.

However, while it is a pattern of believers to regularly scrutinize and learn from the lessons presented by the Qur’an, unbelievers remain arrogantly heedless of them, and thus do not allow those divine lessons and signs to have any positive effect on them and their consciousness. It is a surprise that even frequently visiting and making use of the remnants of the houses of some earlier communities, which Allah had destroyed after their mischief on earth had reached an apex and so became unbearable, could not make any impact on the psyche of unbelievers. Allah says: “Does it not teach them a lesson, how many generations We destroyed before them, in whose dwellings they (now) go to and fro? Verily in that are Signs: Do they not then listen?” (al-Sajdah, 26)

The same thing is also implied in the verse quoted earlier: “Does it not then direct them aright how many of the generations in whose dwellings they go about We destroyed before them? Most surely there are signs in this for those endowed with understanding.” (Ta Ha, 128)

About the end of Madyan, the wicked people of Prophet Shu’ayb, Allah says, reminiscent of what He says about Thamud: “Then the earthquake overtook them, so they became motionless bodies in their homes.” (al-A’raf, 91)

Even the destruction of Pharaoh and his vicious people is equated with the destruction of their built environment, including the houses, much of which, arguably, had been erected and maintained by the enslaved children of Israel. Hence, the historic victory of the children of Israel over Pharaoh in the following Qur’anic verse is illustrated by referring to the destruction of Pharaoh’s and his people’s built environment, as well as to the divinely given opportunity to the children of Israel to freely and dutifully participate in the development of human culture and civilization. Allah says: “And We made a people, considered weak (and of no account), inheritors of lands in both east and west, -- lands whereon We sent down Our blessings. The fair promise of your Lord was fulfilled for the children of Israel, because they had patience and constancy, and We leveled to the ground the great works and fine buildings which Pharaoh and his people erected (with such pride).” (al-A’raf, 137)

Furthermore, the extent and severity of one of the punishments meant for the community of the children of Israel as a whole, which

they alone had brought upon themselves due to their continuous and irrepressible mischief on earth, the Qur'an illustrates by saying that their enemies, the instruments of Allah's chastisement, managed to enter and raze the very inmost parts of their houses. By referring to the desecration of the inviolability and privacy of their houses, the Qur'an, as a matter of fact, spells out the total annihilation not only of the defensive resistance but also of the civilizational strength of the children of Israel. Certainly, such entailed some broad and serious repercussions for the survival of their cultural identity. Even their bare survival was at stake.

Allah says on this: "We gave Musa the Book, and made it a guide to the children of Israel, (commanding): 'Take not other than Me as Disposer of (your) affairs.'... And We gave (clear) warning to the children of Israel in the Book, that twice would they do mischief on the earth and be elated with mighty arrogance (and twice would they be punished)! When the first of the warnings came to pass, We sent against you Our servants given to terrible warfare: They entered the very inmost parts of your homes; and it was a warning (completely) fulfilled." (al-Isra', 2, 4-5)

Also, in order to demonstrate the total defeat and neutralization of the treacherous Jewish tribe of Banu Qurayzah, Allah says that the early Muslims in Madinah inherited, apart from their land and property, their houses as well. That is to say, their presence in the land where they used to live was brought to an abrupt end. Others became the inheritors of what symbolized their existence, way of life and civilization, i.e., their land, property and houses. Says Allah about this: "And He drove down those of the followers of the Book who backed them from their fortresses and He cast awe into their hearts; some you killed and you took captive another part. And He made you heirs to their land and their dwellings and their property, and (to) a land which you have not yet trodden, and Allah has power over all things." (al-Ahzab, 26-27)

By the way, the Banu Qurayzah tribe was punished this way because of their treacherous acts against the Prophet (pbuh) and the Muslims in Madinah during the terrifying battle of the Ditch (*Khandaq*) when the very existence of Islam and the Muslims was put in jeopardy, in spite of all the peace and collaboration treaties that had then existed between the Muslims and the Jews. The punishment applied to the Banu Qurayzah tribe was in total agreement with the Jewish Law of the Old Testament. (Deuteronomy, 20:10-18)



In the same vein, Allah says about the downfall and the ensuing expulsion of another treacherous Jewish tribe, that of Banu Nadir, from a Madinah neighborhood: “He it is Who caused those who disbelieved of the followers of the Book to go forth from their homes at the first banishment you did not think that they would go forth, while they were certain that their fortresses would defend them against Allah; but Allah came to them whence they did not expect, and cast terror into their hearts; they demolished their houses with their own hands and the hands of the believers; therefore take a lesson, O you who have eyes!” (al-Hashr, 2)

In this case too, there is an unequivocal reference to the houses of the Jewish tribe of Banu Nadir as an illustration of much of what had befallen them. Their houses functioned as the nests of their unbelief and intrigues against the Prophet (pbuh) and the Muslims, from which they eventually had to be expelled. In the course of events, however, they, ironically, together with the Muslims, ended up tearing down the same houses of theirs. This was an excellent way to convey appropriate messages to both the believers, about the power of Allah and the ways His decrees work towards the spread and dominion of the truth, and to the unbelievers, about how their plans and strategies, no matter how well from the outside they might be thought up, will never outstrip the will, plans and strategies of Allah.

For the same reasons relating to the function of the house did Prophet Musa (Moses) instruct his people, the children of Israel, while still in Egypt under the bondage of Pharaoh, to make their houses into mosques. This was so as to bring the level of their resistance, as well as the spiritual and mental preparations for victoriously leaving Egypt and entering a new phase of their struggle, to a new level. Since they could not openly build and possess mosques, activating them as the places of their collective worship and social meetings where such preparations could have been far better organized and their execution a lot better facilitated and supervised, other alternatives had to be pursued instead.

At the end, a viable solution was devised in such a way that the scope of the function of their houses had to be widened, from the family development centers to the community development and its resistance against the regime of Pharaoh centers. In other words, the houses of the children of Israel, the nests of hope, faith, worship and obedience to Allah and Prophet Musa, were their best hope for a transformation and eventual freedom. They were the essence and

personification of everything the children of Israel stood for while in Egypt. The success of the mission of their houses would have signified the success of their civilizational enterprise as a nation. Conversely, the failure of the mission of their houses would have signified the failure of their civilizational enterprise as a nation.

Allah says about this: “Musa said: ‘O my people, if you do (really) believe in Allah, then in Him put your trust if you submit (your will to His).’ They said: ‘In Allah do we put out trust. Our Lord, make us not a trial for those who practice oppression; and deliver us by Your Mercy from those who reject (You).’ We inspired Musa and his brother with this Message: ‘Provide dwellings for your people in Egypt, make your dwellings into places of worship, and establish regular prayers: and give glad tidings to those who believe!’” (Yunus, 84-87)



A house in the village of Orahovica, near Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina.



A house in Penang, Malaysia.



A traditional house in Rashid (Rosetta), Egypt.





Residential areas in San'a, Yemen.



Residential areas in Teheran, Iran.



A residential area in Bursa, Turkey.



Residential areas in Khiwa, Uzbekistan.





A traditional courtyard house in Cairo, Egypt.



A house in Ghadamis, Libya.



A residential area in Ghardaia, Algeria.



A narrow street running through a residential area in Qayrawan, Tunisia.



A narrow street running through a residential area in Tripoli, Libya.



An ambiance behind a screened window in a traditional house in Cairo, Egypt.





A traditional courtyard house in Bukhara, Uzbekistan.



A traditional house in Ghadamis, Libya,