

Gender and Space Approach in Reading the Physical Patterns of Traditional Houses in Great Khorasan (Case study: Kabul City)

Samira Hosseiny Roubary¹ , Hossein Soltanzadeh² , Mehrdad Matin³ , Mohammad Mohammadzade Dogahe⁴ 

1. Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: samira.hosseiniroudbary@iau.ac.ir

2. Corresponding author, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: hos.soltanzadeh@iauctb.ac.ir

3. Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: Mehrdad.matin@iau.ac.ir

4. Department of Architecture, Rou.C., Islamic Azad University, Roudbar, Iran. E-mail: Mohammad.Mohammadzadeh@iau.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigates how gendered socio-cultural structures are materially inscribed in the spatial configuration of vernacular dwellings in Kabul historically part of Greater Khorasan, in present-day Afghanistan. The primary aim is to identify and critically elucidate the qualitative spatial boundaries that govern gender-based segregation at the architectural scale, within a context where social norms, cultural traditions, and environmental conditions jointly produce distinct male and female domains.

Methods: A qualitative, descriptive-analytical methodology was adopted. Data collection comprised field documentation of six representative traditional houses in Kabul, including precise spatial mapping, analysis of historical and architectural documents, and semi-structured interviews with residents and local cultural and architectural experts.

Results: Findings reveal that two spatial components operate as the principal agents of gendered spatial organization: “Hijra”, the innermost, private, and exclusively female domain; and “Dara”, the central courtyard functioning as a semi-public, male-oriented space. This spatial dichotomy is articulated through geometric organization, hierarchical access control, and mechanisms of visual surveillance. Crucially, these architectural strategies do not merely accommodate functional needs; they actively reinforce and reproduce prevailing gender norms. The study concludes that traditional domestic architecture in Kabul functions not as a passive mirror of culture, but as an active agent in the structuration and perpetuation of gendered social relations within the domestic sphere.

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Introduction

Kabul is a dynamic urban area, functioning both as a residential and commercial hub. It is bounded to the north by the Kabul River, to the south by Shir Darwaza Mountain, and to the southeast by the Arg-e Bala Hisar fortress. Administrative and political centers of Afghanistan are concentrated from the southern to the western parts of the city. As the current capital of Afghanistan, Kabul encompasses a historically rich and valuable urban fabric, shaped by a diverse cultural and architectural heritage resulting from the long-standing presence of various ethnic groups throughout its history. The historic core of Kabul is notably characterized by a mixed lifestyle among Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims.

Culture, as an overarching framework, encompasses all dimensions of human life including science, religion, art, ethnicity, customs, and every form of human capability. Architecture and culture are inextricably intertwined, such that the cultural identity of any civilization is inherently reflected in its built environment and spatial configurations (Ayoobi and Inceoglu, 2021). Gender, as a socio-cultural construct, is deeply embedded in domestic space and is closely linked to the subcultures of a given region subcultures that, in turn, are intrinsically connected to the region's geography.

In contemporary architectural discourse, the challenge of identity particularly the reclamation of national and indigenous values, traditions, and architectural authenticity holds significant importance. Over time, the domestic sphere has undergone profound cultural transformations. Historically, within the traditional societies of Greater Khorasan, socio-cultural norms assigned the interior domestic space primarily to women, designating specific areas of the house exclusively for female use, in accordance with prevailing gendered cultural perceptions. Thus, the house functions as a spatial manifestation of a community's or tribe's way of life at a particular historical moment, embodying its gendered cultural prescriptions and proscriptions.

Research demonstrates that, in the adaptive reuse of historic houses, physical, behavioral, and functional factors operate in an overlapping manner. This process not only reactivates collective memory, reinforces historical identity, and preserves the intrinsic values embedded within these buildings, but also encourages users to observe social norms and maintain sustained engagement with these spaces (Moeini et al,2025).

Given that the present study seeks to investigate how gendered cultural constructs and their associated variables influence the spatial formation and organization of indigenous houses in traditional Kabul architecture, the central hypothesis posits that the spatial configuration of indigenous dwellings reflects a gendered worldview. To test this hypothesis, following a comprehensive review of the literature and problem formulation, six indigenous houses in Kabul

were selected and analyzed in terms of their spatial relationships and morphological configurations.

Subsequently, the study examined how these configurations relate to key dimensions of gendered culture namely, hierarchies of privacy and sanctity, gendered spatial domains, segregation patterns, and spaces specifically allocated to women.

A review of existing scholarly literature reveals that no independent study to date has addressed this specific intersection of gender, culture, and indigenous domestic architecture in Kabul. Accordingly, this research endeavors to bridge this gap by integrating theoretical insights drawn from domestic and international academic books and peer-reviewed articles, alongside empirical fieldwork including observational studies and structured interviews. By critically analyzing the relationship between these empirical findings and gendered spatial perspectives, and by tracing the emergence of such spatial boundaries within the morphological structure of indigenous houses in contemporary Kabul, Afghanistan, the study employs a comparative and qualitative analytical framework to arrive at robust and academically valid conclusions.

Research Background

Studies whose approaches or presented data could contribute to advancing the present research can be categorized into four main groups:

1. Books on Culture and Gender in Traditional Contexts: Notable among these is *Traditional Architecture: House Form of the Islamic Community of Bohras in Gujarat* (2007) by Madhavi Desai. Architectural studies in India, like in many parts of the world, have historically focused predominantly on monumental and historical buildings. The development of architectural history and theory in the Indian subcontinent has remained heavily centered on classical structures, often overlooking the systematic documentation and interpretation of indigenous spatial narratives. Indigenous architecture, however, is less about stylistic chronology or aesthetic formalism and more a product of cultural and environmental determinants a tangible expression of the lifestyles of the communities for whom it was built. Another significant contribution is Desai's *Gender & The Indian City: Re-visioning Design & Planning* (2022), which adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing together scholars, practitioners, and experts who compile empirical research and case studies examining women's lived experiences in urban design and planning. This volume addresses gender-sensitive approaches to public space design, urban mobility, resettlement, and affordable housing, ultimately exploring how women can claim their rightful legal and social space in the socially constructed city.
2. Works on Greater Khorasan and Its Architecture: *Historical Buildings of Khorasan* by Ali Asghar Moqaddasi offers a profound exploration of the vast territory of Greater Khorasan and its architectural heritage, deeply interwoven with complex cultural matrices. Due to its historical depth, geographical expanse, and enduring cultural authenticity, Greater Khorasan has nurtured diverse cultures, belief systems, intellectual traditions, and artistic expressions over centuries.

3. Scientific Articles on Indigenous Houses of Kabul: The article “Mutual Relationship of Culture and Architecture: Focused on Residential Houses in Kabul City” by Ahmad Walid Ayoobi and Mehmet Inceoglu (2021) investigates structural models in historic houses of Herat (as a cultural proxy for the broader Khorasani context) and identifies layered cultural patterns rooted in the ethnic and gendered worldviews of Afghan society. Despite demographic shifts and the disruptive impact of prolonged conflict, the study observes a persistent cultural inclination toward gendered spatial segregation, indicating the deep entrenchment of such practices in the region’s socio-cultural fabric.
4. Domestic Scholarly Articles on House and Gender Perspectives: The study by Hasna Varmaghani and Hossein Soltanzadeh (2015), titled “The Role of Gender and Livelihood Culture in House Formation,” examines the significance, dimensions, and components of gender in shaping traditional housing. Through six case studies of Qajar-era houses in the historic fabrics of Rasht and Bushehr, the research analyzes how livelihood strategies and gender norms influence the formal and spatial configuration of dwellings.

Research Necessity, in light of this literature review, is threefold

- To contribute to the intelligent revival of traditional architecture in contemporary design practices;
- To enable a critical re-reading of gendered concepts in architecture that are historically and culturally embedded, thereby clarifying the precise boundaries through which gendered cultural perspectives actively shape domestic spatial configurations;
- To establish a theoretical and empirical foundation for designing more equitable, culturally responsive, and gender-sensitive residential environments that address contemporary social needs.

Research Objectives

- To delineate the precise operational boundaries between spatial–morphological structures of indigenous houses in Herat (as representative of Greater Khorasan) and gendered interpretations.
- To rigorously examine the qualitative dimensions of gendered culture as a variable in analyzing the morphological configuration of indigenous houses in Kabul, situated within Greater Khorasan.

Research Questions

- What is the relationship between the culture and gender norms of Kabul’s inhabitants and the morphological configuration of indigenous houses in Greater Khorasan?
- How do the morphological and spatial structures of indigenous houses in Kabul reflect and reinforce gendered perspectives?

Methodology

Within the framework of indigenous architectural studies, traditional houses are understood not merely as physical constructs but as reflections of the cultural, social, and gendered systems

of their originating communities. Given the qualitative and interpretive nature of this inquiry, the research variables are conceptualized at two levels: independent and dependent.

The independent variable is the physical–morphological structure of traditional houses in Kabul as a representative case of Greater Khorasan’s indigenous domestic architecture. This encompasses components such as spatial hierarchy, access and movement patterns, spatial partitioning systems (e.g., haram [private]/ birun [public]), visual control mechanisms, mobility boundaries, and the articulation of private, semi-private, and public domains. These components are derived from theoretical frameworks in behavioral architecture and culturally grounded spatial theory (Rapoport, 1969; Lawrence, 1987).

The dependent variable is the gendered spatial patterns reproduced within the domestic realm, operationalized through indicators including: unequal access to shared spaces, restrictions on women’s visual and physical mobility, gender-based allocation of interior spaces, and the presence or absence of women in reception or external interaction zones. These indicators are informed by the gendered spatial practices paradigm and theories of power and space (Foucault, 1977; Weisman, 1992).

The research employs a descriptive-analytical method to investigate the relationship between these variables. Through systematic analysis of the physical structures of selected houses, coupled with a theoretically grounded gendered reading, the study identifies meaningful patterns that reveal how gender inequalities are materially reproduced through architectural design. This methodological approach ensures analytical transparency and traceability of interpretive logic, meeting the rigorous methodological standards expected in doctoral-level architectural research (Groat and Wang, 2013; Madanipour, 2003).

Result

Traditional Settlements of Kabul

It is widely accepted that housing constitutes one of the most fundamental social needs. Culture, in turn, encompasses the shared ideas, beliefs, emotions, customs, and values that shape human behavior and inform creative expressions across diverse domains such as art, music, literature, and architecture (Dupree, 2002). The built environment functions as a cultural descriptor what Karakul (2014) terms “architectural culture” manifested through diverse architectural elements and intangible values, and articulated most clearly through indigenous architectural languages in urban spaces.

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between culture and architecture. Hassan Fathy asserted that every nation possesses a distinct architectural style in which its culture is visibly expressed through form, habits, traditions, and social customs (Fathy & Steele, 1997). Islamic culture, in particular, is profoundly embodied in the built environment. As Baydar (2004)

notes, citing Robert Powell, understanding architectural form, spatial hierarchy, and layout necessitates careful consideration of underlying cultural factors. Architecture thus serves as both a reflection of a society's identity and a symbolic-cultural representation of its civilization, offering a lens through which to interpret societal values (Kazemian and Zare, 2014).

Afghanistan's strategic location along historic trade routes connecting India and Central Asia has rendered it a crossroads of civilizations and cultures (Ayoobi and Inceoglu, 2021). Due to its geopolitical position on major commercial corridors, Afghan architecture and culture have been deeply influenced by regional civilizations (Najimi, 2016). This confluence of dominant cultures, historical invasions, and layered influences has established Afghanistan as a multicultural society, with each ethnic group expressing its identity through a distinct architectural idiom.

Ethnically and tribally, Afghanistan comprises diverse groups. Following the advent of Islam, the Pashtun tribes were traditionally divided into seven principal branches: (1) Sarbani, (2) Gharghashti, (3) Bettani, (4) Mato, (5) Sarwani, (6) Ghartani, and (7) Estarani each well-known among both commoners and elites (Kateb Hazara, 1993). Other communities, including Turkmens, Tajiks, Hazaras, Arabs, and Uzbeks, also inhabited the region. As noted by Kateb Hazara (1993), "In cities such as Mazar, Balkh, and Kandahar, as far as Lakan, they engaged in agriculture and pastoralism, while the Turkmens remained nomadic and primarily occupied with animal husbandry, often marked by inter-tribal and ethnic tensions."

Some scholars identify the Afghan people specifically as Western Pashtuns residing in the regions of Kandahar and Herat, using the term "Afghan" exclusively for inhabitants of this area (Farhang, 1992). It can thus be concluded that the Pashtuns descendants of Iranian-speaking peoples now primarily inhabit present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan and constitute the majority of Afghanistan's population (Farzin Nia, 2001). Most historians locate the earliest Pashtun settlements in the Sulaiman Mountains and adjacent territories west of the Indus River (Gregorian, 2009).

The traditional and historic form of dwelling in Kabul was the Kala a residential typology originally associated with rural populations (Ayoobi and Inceoglu, 2021).

Kabul: Architectural Diversity

As the national capital, Kabul's urban form and architecture embody a rich repository of cultural heritage. Residential houses where the majority of the population resides play a pivotal role in shaping the city's architectural character. Over time, these dwellings have undergone

significant cultural transformations, manifesting diverse spatial and formal expressions (Ayoobi and Inceoglu, 2021).

Kabul is an ancient city with deep historical roots. The Rigveda, a sacred Hindu text dating to approximately 1500 BCE, refers to the present-day Kabul River as the Kubha (Anwar, 2017). Its mountainous terrain provides natural defensive advantages and a favorable climate, which have historically supported continuous urban settlement. Moreover, its strategic position along ancient trade routes linking India and China to Iran and beyond facilitated economic and cultural exchange, contributing significantly to its historical development (Bechhoefer, 2016).

Throughout its history, Kabul has experienced successive waves of invasion and cultural influence, each introducing distinct architectural styles and traditions (Anwar, 2017). The architectural history of Kabul can be broadly divided into two periods: pre-Islamic and post-Islamic, reflecting shifts in religious and cultural paradigms.

The pre-Islamic era is closely associated with the Kushan Empire (1st–3rd centuries CE) (Frye, 1946). During the 5th century CE, under the Hephthalite (White Hun) rule, Kabul evolved into a fortified stronghold and served as an administrative capital, becoming the region's most prominent economic and religious center (Paiman, 2015).

Islamic architecture in Afghanistan, meanwhile, reflects the legacy of successive dynasties including the Samanids, Ghaznavids, Timurids, Mongols, Ghurids, and Khorasani rulers (Dupree, 1977). Culturally, Afghan architectural styles can be categorized into three major influences: Central Asian, Iranian, and Indian civilizations with which Afghanistan has maintained deep historical ties. Given its strategic centrality and status as the national capital, Kabul stands at the intersection of these three cultural and civilizational currents (Najimi, 2016). Subsequently, in accordance with the zoning classification, the location of Kabul, Afghanistan, as well as the specific zones and boundaries of the houses under study in the present research, are delineated, as illustrated in Figure 1.

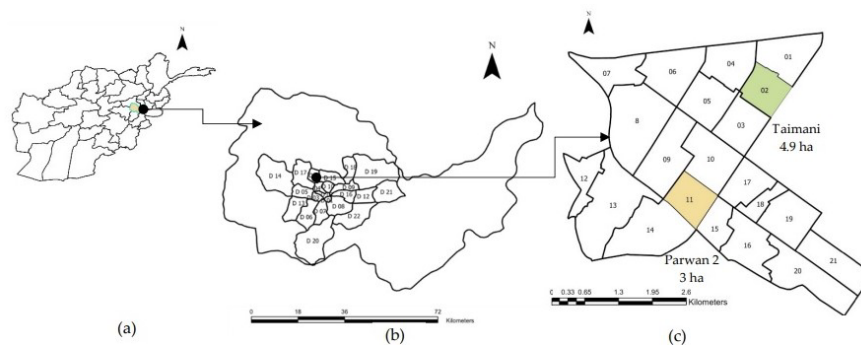


Figure 1. Data obtained from the Kabul Municipality; (a) Afghanistan and the location of Kabul Province; (b) Kabul Province and Kabul City; (c) A central district within Kabul City (Amiryar and Asano, 2022).

Indigenous Housing and Architecture of Kabul

Due to its strategic location along historic trade routes, Afghanistan has been profoundly influenced by neighboring civilizations and cultures. The history of residential lifestyles in Afghanistan particularly indigenous housing can be categorized into three primary typologies: (1) nomadic and pastoral communities, who dwell in tents, yurts, or huts depending on geographic and cultural contexts; (2) rural agrarian communities, who reside in kalas inward-oriented compounds enclosed by robust defensive walls and watchtowers; and (3) urban populations, who traditionally inhabit courtyard-based houses (Szabo, 1991).

In Kabul, these influences have coalesced into three dominant architectural styles Central Asian, Iranian, and Indian which are widely recognized as the most prominent expressions of Islamic-era architecture in the region. These styles continue to be visibly reflected in buildings constructed across various historical periods. As Kazemian and Zare (2014) argue, indigenous architecture is not static; rather, it evolves dynamically within society, gradually transforming into a built form that harmonizes with prevailing social, climatic, and technological conditions.

As the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul embodies a mosaic of urban identities that reflect the country's distinct socio-political trajectories of development (Issa and Kohistani, 2007). The city's architectural character is particularly representative of Afghanistan's broader cultural and architectural ethos (Frye, 1946). Architectural forms and styles inherently respond to societal needs and the quality of life of inhabitants; consequently, architecture must not only follow but also rapidly adapt to any cultural or social transformation.

Afghanistan's multicultural fabric is expressed through its ethnic diversity, with distinct groups inhabiting different regions of the country. Kabul, as the national capital, has historically served as a convergence point for all Afghan ethnic communities, prompting widespread migration and settlement from across the nation (Keynejad et al., 2018). Many architects and sociologists emphasize the reciprocal relationship between culture and architecture (Karakul, 2014). Nevertheless, Afghanistan possesses a distinctive architectural idiom one that resonates with local culture, climate, and environmental characteristics across all provinces.

Kabul, as the political and cultural nucleus of the country, functions as the meeting ground for these diverse cultural expressions, endowing the city with unique architectural, historical, social, and political attributes (Issa and Kohistani, 2007). Through its urban form and architectural heritage shaped by an evolutionary process spanning multiple civilizations Kabul presents a rich repository of cultural treasures (Kazimee and Najimi, 2017).

Residential houses are among the most vital indicators of Kabul's traditional architectural style. Under the influence of diverse cultural currents, several house typologies can be identified in the city, with the foundational form commonly referred to as the kala a term denoting historic

architectural patterns specific to this region (Sakaguchi et al., 2016). Figure 2, illustrates the location of the study area, highlighting the medium density of traditional houses in Kabul, alongside the floor plan of a traditional house within the aforementioned district.

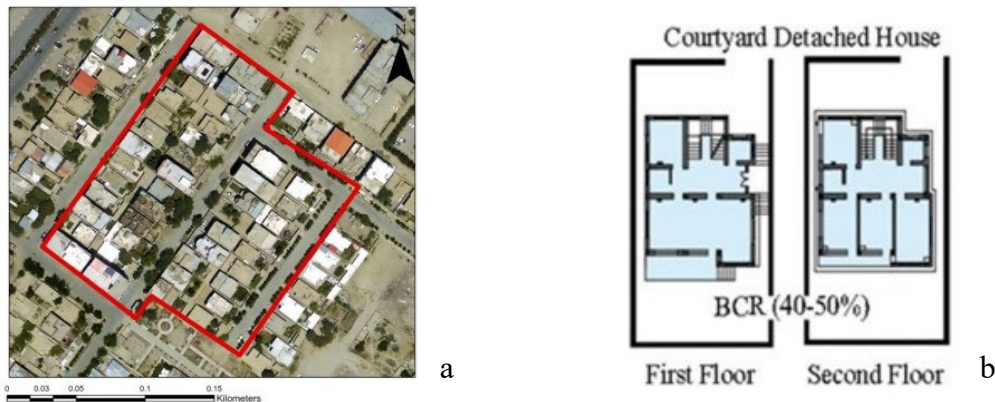


Figure 2. (a) Location of the study area with medium density of traditional houses in Kabul; (b) Plan of a traditional house within the aforementioned area (Amiryar and Asano, 2022).

Gender Perspective in Kabul

Throughout history, cultural contexts and intersecting systems of oppression have, over time and across eras, rendered Afghan women into what Das and Rai (2022) describe as “docile bodies.” This process wherein patriarchal power permeates everyday practices and social norms guides individuals toward self-surveillance, self-discipline, and ultimately, self-submission. In Afghanistan, particularly in Kabul and other urban centers, prescribed norms and routines for women are structured according to dominant patriarchal mandates that dictate the contours of their lives.

This historical transition involves what Schwartz (2024) identifies as “the replacement of law by norm as the primary instrument of social control.” Through the establishment of specific gendered norms and standards, power operates via continuous surveillance to produce the very subjects it seeks to govern. Consequently, Afghan women’s choices and decisions are profoundly shaped by what Schwartz (2024) terms “patriarchal power” a force that institutionalizes routines and behavioral codes to enforce social control over women’s bodies, mobility, and agency.

An Afghan woman interprets her position in life through the cultural framework and value system of her local community. This interpretive process encompasses her psychological well-being, physical health, social relationships, levels of autonomy, personal beliefs, and her interactions with the prominent environmental stressors and structural constraints surrounding her (Ahmed and Ghosh, 2003).

Since ancient times, various Afghan tribes have imposed gendered regulations that govern women's activities including work, education, and freedom of movement in order to reinforce their submission of Afghanistan's patriarchal social order. Despite pervasive surveillance, behavioral codes, and restrictive social expectations, Afghan women continue to aspire to lives in which they can not only exercise their freedoms and rights but also actively contribute through education and employment to the financial well-being of their families and communities (Ahmed and Ghosh, 2003). The components influencing the gender structure are examined in Figure 3, whereas those associated with Afghanistan's gender culture are analyzed in Figure 4.

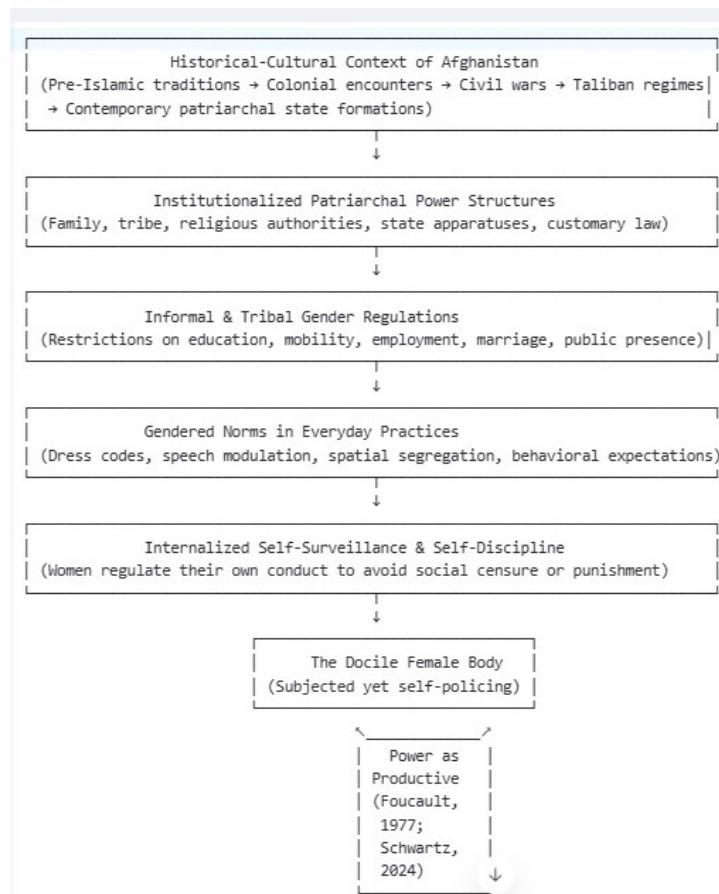


Figure 3. Components influencing the gender construct (Source: Author, 2025).

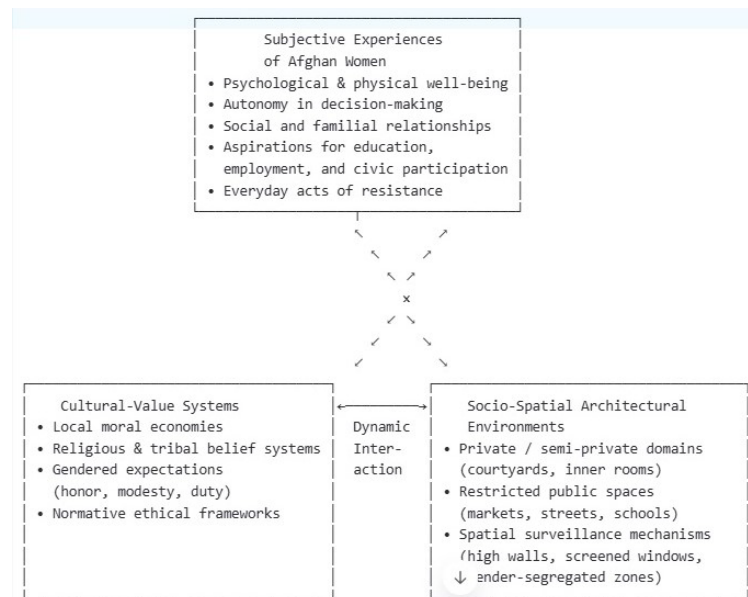


Figure 4. Components associated with Afghan gendered culture (Source: Author, 2025).

Gender and House Form

Gender roles have historically exerted a profound influence on the spatial organization of the domestic realm. In traditional Afghan households, spatial divisions within the house align closely with gendered activities: women, whose daily lives are predominantly confined to the interior domestic sphere, and men, who engage primarily in external socio-economic activities. This spatial differentiation is not arbitrary; rather, it is deeply consonant with cultural norms and reflects societal expectations regarding the traditional roles and responsibilities assigned to each gender within the family structure.

The unpaid care economy encompassing domestic labor, childcare, and caregiving for other household members is overwhelmingly shouldered by women. Within the Afghan socio-cultural context, women are frequently married at a young age, experience early and repeated pregnancies, and are disproportionately exposed to various forms of gender-based violence. These intersecting factors significantly contribute to heightened risks of physical and psychological morbidity, and even mortality, among Afghan women (Ahmed and Ghosh, 2003).

In the historical and traditional domestic architecture of Afghanistan, gender inequality is visibly inscribed not only in private residential spaces but also in collective and public urban environments. A review of scholarly literature indicates that historic houses in Afghan cities exhibited a distinct architectural identity, characterized by a clear hierarchy of privacy

(haram/birun). These spatial configurations particularly evident in cities like Herat were instrumental in preserving cultural identity and reinforcing gendered boundaries through architectural form (Samimi et al., 2017). Figure 5 presents the typology of traditional house plans in Kabul, illustrating the introverted type with a central courtyard.

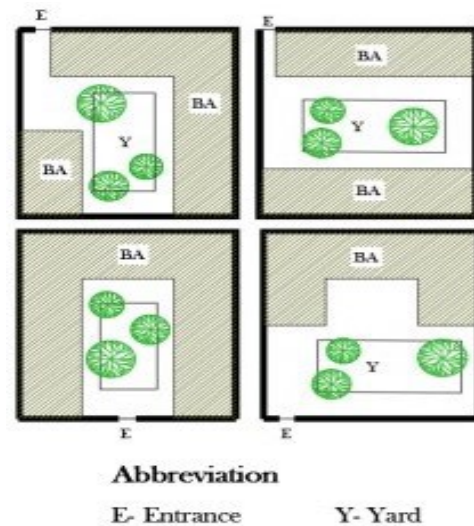


Figure 5. Typologies of traditional Kabul house plans: inward-oriented with central courtyard (Ayoobi and Inceoglu, 2021).

Indigenous Houses of Kabul

In the historic urban fabric of Kabul, the external façades comprising street-facing and side walls, protective parapets, exterior windows, and the main entrance are the only visible elements from the public realm, thereby constituting the primary components of the street-level streetscape. Traditional house façades were constructed using locally sourced materials, including adobe (sun-dried mud bricks), straw-reinforced mud plaster (kāh-gel), and wooden doors and windows.

Buildings in Kabul designed according to traditional architectural principles reflect a deep responsiveness to local socio-cultural requirements. The archetypal residential form is the inward-oriented, courtyard-centered house a typology that aligns precisely with the cultural and lifestyle norms of Afghan society (Kazimee and Najimi, 2017). In contrast, many large-scale urban development projects implemented in Kabul such as Karte Seh, Karte Char, Karte Naw, Karte Mamurin, Karte Parwan, Wazir Akbar Khan, and others represent housing models shaped by external cultural influences rather than indigenous traditions (Kazimee and Najimi, 2017).

Traditional houses in Kabul are distinctly introverted in spatial organization (Kazimee, 1977). From the perspective of traditional architecture, the street façade (nema) and the building's

massing (including number of storeys) are among the most visually prominent elements, as they are directly observable from public thoroughfares (Schadl, 2004).

Structurally, traditional Kabul houses were built using stone foundations and walls made of sun-dried mud bricks (*khesht*), coated with a protective layer of straw-mud plaster. Roofs consist of a thick earthen layer supported by wooden beams, with the entire surface sealed by an additional *kāh-gel* render to prevent water infiltration from rain or snow (Azizi and Ando, 2019). These courtyard houses are typically situated within narrow, winding alleyways and exemplify the vernacular residential architecture of the region (Schadl, 2004). Figure 6 illustrates the spatial layout and gender zoning of a traditional vernacular house. As illustrated in Figure 7, the traditional houses under study, characterized by their morphological organization and spatial divisions, are situated within the historic urban fabric of Kabul.



Figure 6. Spatial arrangement and gendered zoning of a traditional indigenous house (Samimi et al., 2023).



Figure 7. Example of a traditional house with morphological organization and spatial divisions, located in the historic fabric of Kabul City (Ayoobi and Inceoglu, 2021).

Introduction to the Case Study Houses

In the present study, six traditional houses in Kabul were selected and analyzed based on the previously defined study areas. The analysis focused on key spatial elements to examine internal divisions, inter-spatial relationships, and morphological configurations within each dwelling. The selection criteria prioritized houses exhibiting the greatest variation in morphological structure, as this diversity enables a more nuanced investigation of how gendered cultural norms are spatially manifested in Kabul's traditional domestic architecture.

All selected houses are over 130 years old, reflecting architectural practices and socio-cultural conditions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They are located within Study Areas 1 and 2 of the historic urban fabric of Kabul. Additionally, supplementary references to kala compounds in Study Area 4 were incorporated into the analysis to more precisely delineate spatial and gendered boundaries within the broader urban context. As detailed in Table 1 below, the Murad Khani house, characterized by its exquisite ornamentation and situated within the historic district, is clearly illustrated; this residence is specifically located in Zone 1 of Kabul. As depicted in Table 2, proceeding from the bottom right to the left, the Arefan, Asheghan Kela, and Moradi houses are illustrated, while the upper section showcases the Fathollahi and Farshi residences. Furthermore, Table 3, presents the Haj Ahmad House, recognized as one of the most exquisite and intact traditional houses in Kabul.

Table 1. The exceptionally ornate Morad Khani House, located in the historic neighborhood (Zone 1) of Kabul City (Ayoobi and Inceoglu, 2021).

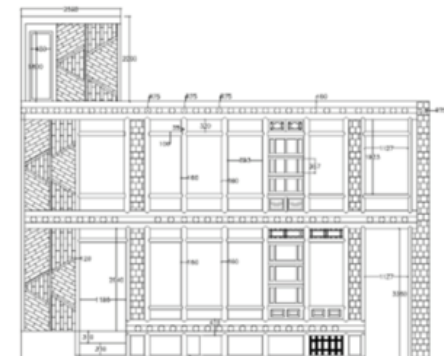


Table 2. From bottom right to left: Arifan–Aasheghan Kala and Moradi House; top half of the image: Fathollahi House and Farshi House (Samimi et al., 2023).

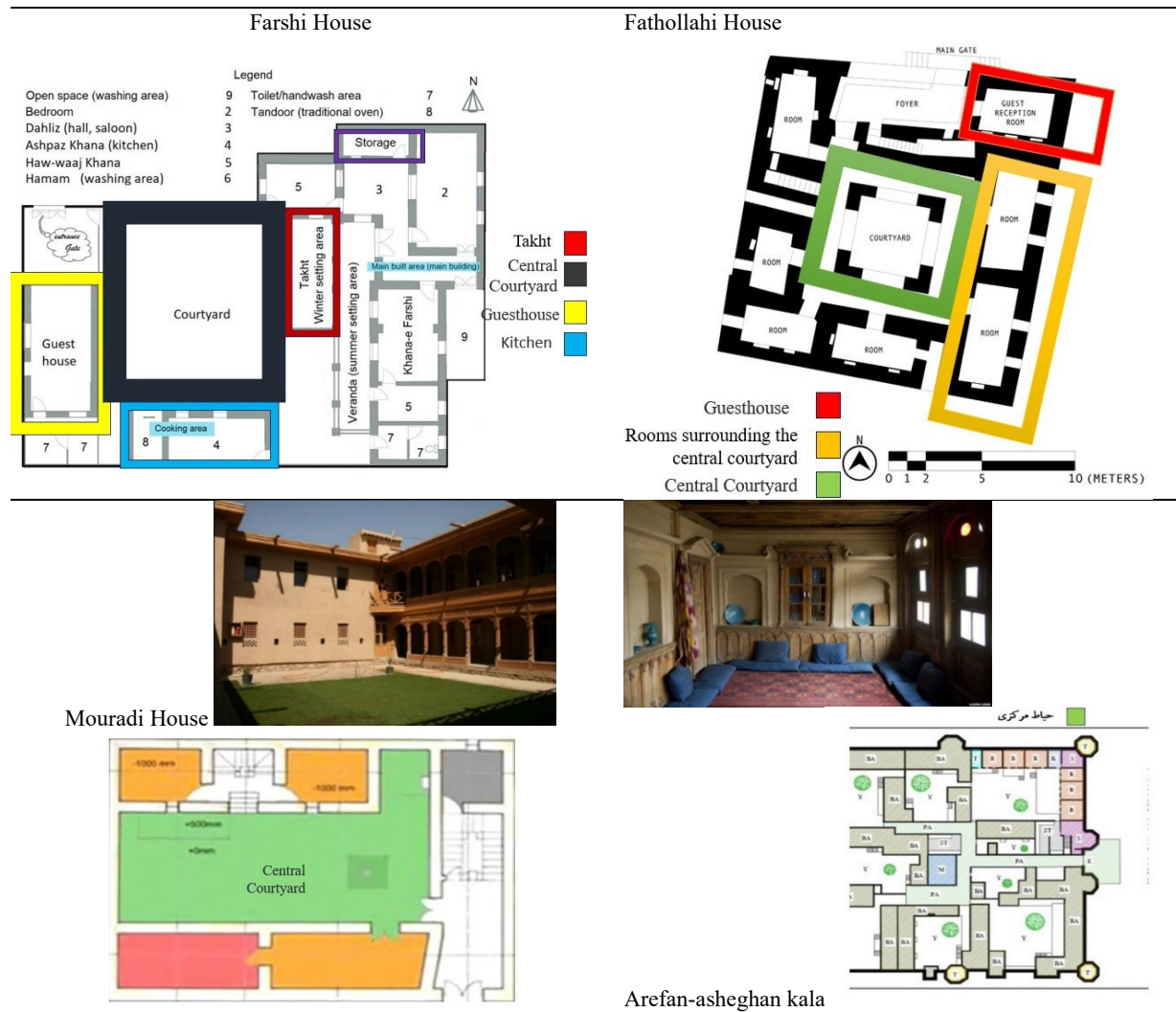
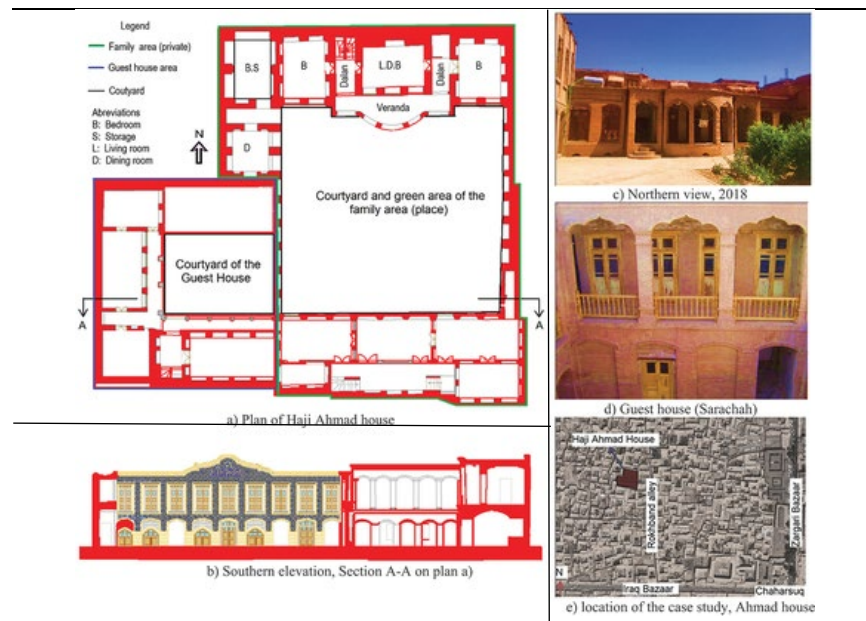


Table 3. Haj Ahmad House (Azizi and Ando, 2019).

Discussion

Morphological Analysis of the Physical Elements of Houses

Based on the conducted analyses, it is evident that, historically, a prevailing spatial conception held that in hot and arid regions, the courtyard functioned as a geometrically ordered, regular, and integral component of the house or sara. In many areas, this central courtyard was specifically referred to as the miyansara (Soltanzadeh, 2011). This spatial paradigm characterized by inward orientation emerged from the confluence of formal socio-political policies, climatic conditions, religious worldviews, and chronic insecurity, culminating in an introverted architectural model centered on the courtyard (Piran, 2007).

In Kabul, the courtyard stands as one of the most significant physical elements of the traditional house so central that it may be regarded as the organizing nucleus around which all other spatial components are configured and articulated in dynamic relation.

Entrance (Dargah)

In the indigenous and traditional houses of Kabul's historic urban fabric, the entrance is spatially segregated, clearly demarcating the domestic realm from the public domain. Its design is deeply intertwined with ethnic and cultural ideologies. Climatic adaptation is also a key determinant of introversion in Kabul's domestic architecture; the entrance's ornamentation and decorative motifs further reveal the prominent and culturally resonant role of ornamentation in traditional house design.

Whether located in the city's more temperate peripheral zones or within its dense urban core, the traditional Kabul house is consistently introverted, exhibiting no direct spatial or visual connection between its main volume and the adjacent alley, street, or other public urban spaces.

In Kabul, the entrance zone typically integrates functional spaces such as storage rooms, corridors, and stables (*ākhor*) reflecting the household's livelihood patterns. These elements are strategically arranged to ensure both separation from the public sphere and convenient access aligned with the daily activities of household members.

Notably, in the traditional houses of Kabul culturally and architecturally proximate context the entrance functions as a semi-private threshold, charged with the critical role of safeguarding the privacy and sanctity (*hijab*) of the inner domestic sphere. Figure 8 illustrates the entrance portal of an unnamed house situated in the Arefan-Asheghan neighborhood of Kabul.



Figure 8. Entrance portal (*dargah*) of an unnamed house in the Arifan–Aasheghan neighborhood of Kabul City (Samimi et al., 2023).

Courtyard Houses

One of the most prevalent residential typologies in Afghanistan is the courtyard house, in which over 95% of the population resides. Traditional courtyards in Afghanistan and particularly in Kabul serve three primary functions:

- 1.They provide secure, fully private open interior spaces for all household members, especially women and children;
- 2.Through their surrounding walls and the orientation of rooms, they create favorable microclimatic conditions offering shade in summer and shielding interior spaces from cold winter winds;
- 3.In accordance with Afghan cultural norms, they enable multiple family units to cohabit within a single courtyard compound (Sakaguchi et al., 2016).

In Kabul, the urban population traditionally resides in courtyard dwellings that can be understood as evolved or refined versions of the rural *kala*. These houses reflect the socio-spatial distinctions inherent in Afghan urban life (Bechhoefer, 1977). Guy Peterbridge distinguishes between two courtyard house types: the internal courtyard house, where the building envelope surrounds the courtyard, and the external courtyard house, where the courtyard encloses the

dwelling (Bechhoefer, 2016). Some scholars argue that traditional courtyard houses in Kabul represent a singular, advanced evolution of the kala typology.

These dwellings are typically divided into private and semi-private zones, structured according to Afghan familial and cultural norms to ensure clear boundaries between family members and guests (Watts, 1983). The traditional urban courtyard in Kabul is generally a quadrangular space, with rooms arranged on two or three stories around its perimeter. This layout is carefully calibrated in response to diurnal cycles, climatic conditions, and cultural practices (Kazimee and McQuillan, 2002).

Rooms are often designed with inward-facing orientations to maximize security and privacy for residents (Woodbridge, 2012). Each room typically features a window opening onto the courtyard and enjoys direct, independent access to it. Courtyard compounds commonly include: a dedicated children's play area, a separate kitchen located in one corner, open rooftop terraces, a raised family gathering platform (*sakoonja*) approximately 0.5 meters high, landscaped green spaces, and occasionally a water pool or cistern to moderate the microclimate (Kazimee and McQuillan, 2002).

The historical development of kala and courtyard houses in Kabul is deeply intertwined with the region's cultural, environmental, religious, and historical trajectory. The arrangement of rooms around a central void follows an ancient residential archetype. Moreover, Kabul's traditional architectural style embodies a self-sufficient, introverted family-oriented society (Issa and Kohistani, 2007). The defining characteristics of Kabul's indigenous housing typology centered on the inward-looking courtyard house demonstrate a spatial system that is not only culturally resonant but also inherently flexible, readily adapting to the evolving needs and aspirations of Afghan households (Kazimee, 2017). Figure 9 illustrates the central courtyard of an old, unnamed house situated in the Murad Khani neighborhood of Kabul.

In some instances, courtyard walls form part of the building structure itself; in others, they serve solely as boundary enclosures. The courtyard remains uncovered, allowing natural light and ventilation to permeate the domestic core (Schadl, 2017).



Figure 9. Central courtyard of an old, unnamed house in the Morad Khani neighborhood of Kabul City (Ayoobi and Inceoglu, 2021).

Sara (Guest Reception Area)

In the ethnic and cultural framework of Afghan society, the guest reception area (sara) occupies a dual spatial position: it is situated either within the semi-private zone of the house or, more commonly, in a distinctly segregated compartment separate from the private family quarters. This arrangement ensures that the sara remains proximate to the kitchen and neshastan (sitting area), facilitating the host's traditionally the Afghan woman's duties in hospitality and guest care, which are central to Afghan social norms (Azizi and Ando, 2019).

The primary societal role assigned to Pashtun and Tajik women and Afghan women more broadly is that of homemaker: managing domestic affairs and raising children. Within the prevailing cultural consensus, this domestic role constitutes the principal and widely accepted social identity for women, with few alternative roles formally recognized or encouraged by the majority of Afghan society (Azizi and Ando, 2019). Figure 10 examines the architectural components of a traditional house, alongside the typology of traditional residences in Kabul.

In rare spatial configurations, the sara is positioned near the entrance of the house, entirely isolated from the private domestic realm. In such cases, it maintains direct access only to public or semi-public circulation zones such as the entrance corridor (dalān), stables (ākhor), and the reception sitting area (neshab) thereby ensuring strict separation from family spaces while enabling functional efficiency in hosting guests without compromising household privacy.



Figure 10. Components of a traditional house in Kabul City (Kazimee, 2002).

Private Quarters of the House

The spatial retreat of rooms into the innermost zone of traditional and indigenous houses in Kabul is clearly evident and strictly adheres to a hierarchical system of privacy (haram). Rooms are positioned toward the rear of the plot, within the domain reserved exclusively for family members, thereby ensuring the security and privacy of residents (Bechhoefer, 2016). Each room typically features a window opening onto the central courtyard and is provided with independent access to this shared open space. In some houses, this connection is mediated through an eyvān (a

vaulted or open-fronted porch), which serves as an intermediary transitional space between the private rooms and the courtyard.

In elite or aristocratic residences, additional seasonal spaces are often incorporated such as a *zamestān-neshin* (winter quarter) and a *bahār-khāb* (spring sleeping area) reflecting both climatic responsiveness and socio-economic status. Within these affluent households, women maintain minimal interaction with public domains, and their presence in public spaces is culturally discouraged or deemed unjustifiable. Figure 11, illustrates the layout of the upper-level rooms and the spatial hierarchy within the Murad Khani House, situated in Kabul. Despite significant historical transformations and urban changes over time, much of Kabul's historic urban fabric continues to reflect deep-rooted ethnic and cultural traditions. The morphological configuration of houses consistently reproduces a clear spatial hierarchy of privacy, systematically separating private domestic zones from public urban realms. In Afghan ethnic culture, the layered organization of privacy particularly the safeguarding of the private sphere within the domestic domain is accorded the highest cultural and social value.



Figure 11. Layout of upper-floor rooms and spatial hierarchy in the Morad Khani House in Kabul City (Ayoobi and Inceoglu, 2021).

Tanoor (Traditional Oven)

The kitchen holds a significant role in Afghan households across the country. In traditional Kabul houses, the kitchen is situated within the private domain of the home, typically adjacent to the guest reception area (*sara*), private rooms, or the *eyvān* (veranda), and is often located near the *neshastan* (family sitting area). In larger houses, the kitchen is connected to the courtyard and other domestic zones via an *eyvān*, ensuring both functional access and spatial separation. It occupies a distinct, dedicated space within the house.

A defining feature of Afghan kitchens is the presence of the *tanoor* a traditional clay oven. In Kabul's traditional houses, the *tanoor* is either housed within a designated corner of the kitchen or positioned in a secluded corner of the courtyard. Beyond its primary function for baking bread, the *tanoor* and kitchen system historically served as a supplementary heating source during winter months (Kawish and Ando, 2019). Crucially, the kitchen and by extension, the *tanoor* constitutes

the core of the female domain, representing the spatial embodiment of women's domestic responsibilities.

In the layout of indigenous houses within Kabul's historic fabric, the kitchen is typically placed in close proximity to the grain storage room (anbār). In larger residences with dual kitchens, one is often located near the entrance (serving guest-related functions) and the other within the private family quarters. Rarely is a kitchen placed near the main entrance unless the guest reception area is also situated there.

Gender and the Formation of the House

Culture and lifestyle have always maintained an intimate relationship with architectural space so much so that architecture is often regarded as a measurable reflection of a society's cultural values (Armaghan et al., 2013). Historically, houses in Afghanistan were originally conceived in accordance with Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), evolving over time to align with cultural norms of modesty (hijab), address specific socio-spatial needs, and accommodate the daily lives of family members particularly women, who spend the majority of their time within the domestic sphere.

In Afghan society, gender roles are defined within a rigid socio-cultural framework. Like other Islamic cities, Kabul's domestic spatial organization especially concerning women's living quarters has been consistently shaped across different historical and political regimes by local interpretations of Islamic principles and customary norms (Hamouche, 2009). Within this framework, women are relegated to passive, static roles, and this socio-cultural construct is profoundly inscribed in the architectural morphology of traditional houses.

Gender-Segregated Spaces

Traditional houses in Kabul exhibit limited spatial diversity, reflecting a highly regulated domestic order. Women are continuously engaged throughout the day in household and childcare duties, with severely restricted access to public spaces, limited social presence, and minimal recognition of social rights. A central issue in the gender-space relationship is how gendered territories are formed materially manifested through the segregation or integration of public and private realms and the degree of spatial enclosure (Varmaghani and Soltanzadeh, 2018).

Although Kabul's traditional houses respond effectively to local climatic conditions, a significant portion of their spatial configuration particularly the division and hierarchy of spaces stem from the enduring influence of ethnic traditions, cultural beliefs, and gendered worldviews. This is clearly evident in the morphological and physical structure of these dwellings.

Through the analysis of these spatial responses and their correlation with traditional house typologies, we arrived at the following synthesis, presented in Table 4, which delineates the relationship between gender and space in Kabul's indigenous domestic architecture.

Table 4. Relationship between gender and domestic space in Kabul (Source: Author, 2025).

Space Type	Spatial Divisions of the House	Function / Use		Location within the House
Mutable	Iwan	Residence and guest reception during hot periods		Connected to the bedrooms
	Courtyard	Residence and guest reception, Private, Governed by a hierarchy of mahram relationships		Interior on the ground floor
	Manger /Animal Trough	Tending to livestock		External access in some houses
Fixed and Recurrent 1. Bedroom 2. Kitchen 3. Living Room	Open Yards/Unpaved Courtyards	Exterior	Guests, Visits by female neighbors, Non-mahram individuals	Temporary residence Semi-private zone
		Interior	Privacy, Women's and children's daily life and activities	Household residents' dwelling Mahram privacy zone
	Number of Floors	Ground Floor	Service, Storage, Kitchen, Mange	Access from both inside and outside the house
		First Floor	Residential, Private, Living room	Characterized by a hierarchy of mahram relationships
	Micro-spaces	Vestibule /Entrance Hall	Temporary reception, Semi-private	Temporary pause, Acquaintances
		Corridor / Hallway	Temporary Pause Semi-private Separation of interior and exterior spaces Establishment of spatial hierarchy	Household visitors

Spatial Hierarchy

Direct transition from public to private realms is never immediate; it is always mediated through thresholds and transitional spaces most notably the interface between the interior and exterior of the house. In many traditional houses in Kabul, the entrance features a designated threshold zone (dargah) that serves as a spatial buffer (Kazimee, 2002). Historically, the design and layout of rural traditional houses have been shaped by both functional requirements and the cultural norms governing the lives of women in Afghan rural communities. In most traditional Kabul houses, one passes through the entrance threshold and enters the courtyard the most central and vital spatial element of the dwelling. Some of these houses feature a covered eyvān (veranda) adorned with elaborate ornamentation, while others, particularly in the historic urban fabric, possess a very modest and unadorned entrance. Crucially, traditional and indigenous houses in Kabul are invariably separated from the public urban realm by an impermeable boundary wall devoid of openings that functions like a veil or screen, rigorously shielding the domestic interior from external view and access.

Privacy and Sanctity (Haram)

The establishment of privacy is a fundamental human concern manifest across all spatial scales. In the domestic context, privacy creates a boundary but not one of absolute separation. Traditional houses in Kabul embody a multi-layered interpretation of hijab (modesty/seclusion), extending this principle from the individual body to the household and, by extension, to the urban environment. This spatialized modesty actively conceals women's personal and social presence within the domestic sphere. Architectural forms in Kabul reflect a confluence of diverse ethnic legacies, social dynamics, and climatic adaptations (Samizay, 1980). A careful analysis of spatial organization reveals how house design must respond to the imperative of privacy resulting in a clear demarcation between public and private domains, with women's spatial sanctity as a central concern within this segregation. Understanding the cultural values and gendered perspectives embedded in domestic spatial design is therefore essential for the thoughtful planning of interior spaces (Zalloom, 2018). The observance of privacy and hijab operates as a structuring principle that organizes spatial hierarchy a principle that household members have historically prioritized from the outset of dwelling formation. The gendered indicators influencing privacy, spatial hierarchy, and zonal organization within the house are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Influence of gender on the hierarchy of privacy (haram), spatial zoning, and spatial hierarchy in traditional houses (Source: Author, 2025).

Spatial hierarchy	Yard zoning	Hierarchy of mahram relationships	
1. Gateway	Entrance	Non-rigid	Internal domain
2. Courtyard	Residence		
3. Bedroom	Guests		
4. Iwan	Service	Living room, Hall, Staircase	
5. Kitchen	Courtyard	Fully rigid	External domain
Arrangement based on the most frequent spatial layout in traditional Kabul houses		Windowless compound wall, Front room (in some houses), Elder's sitting area and corridor (in some houses)	

Findings

The interpretive analysis of scholarly literature, combined with the morphological examination of traditional houses in Kabul, yields the following key findings:

1. Spatial Segregation and the Primacy of Privacy: Traditional houses in Kabul place exceptional emphasis on the establishment of spatial boundaries and the segregation of domestic space from the public urban realm. This spatial strategy manifested through

opaque boundary walls, veiled thresholds, and controlled visual access stems from deeply rooted indigenous beliefs and long-standing cultural norms that prioritize the concealment of private life from public view.

2. **The Courtyard as the Organizing Nucleus:** The central courtyard (hayāt) constitutes the most pivotal spatial element in Kabul's traditional and vernacular houses. All other functional zones and spatial divisions are configured in direct relation to the courtyard's position and form. Critically, the courtyard is designed to accommodate and facilitate the daily activities of women and children, serving as the primary domain for their domestic and social engagement within the confines of the home.
3. **Gendered Spatial Practices:** The spatial organization and physical articulation of houses in Kabul are intrinsically shaped by prevailing gendered worldviews. These perspectives are not static but are historically and socially constructed, emerging from ethnic ideologies and localized subcultural norms embedded within Afghanistan's socio-political fabric.
4. **Hierarchical Spatial Zoning:** Indigenous houses in Kabul and by extension, those in Greater Khorasan exhibit a clear tripartite spatial hierarchy: (1) the public realm (streets and alleys), (2) the semi-private threshold zone (dargah and entrance corridor), and (3) the private domain (courtyard and interior rooms). This stratification reflects a dual responsiveness: to climatic and geographic conditions, and to socio-cultural imperatives centered on hijab (modesty) and haram (sanctity).
5. **Introverted Typology in Historic Neighborhoods:** Houses in Kabul's historic districts particularly in the Arifan–Aasheghan and Morad Khani neighborhoods are characterized by an inward-oriented morphology centered on a private courtyard. Within this configuration, the guest reception room (sara) is typically aligned along the main axis of the house, set back from the entrance, and accorded high symbolic and functional value as a spatial expression of Afghan hospitality norms and religious values.

Correlation Between Dwelling Scale and Privacy Mechanisms: A direct relationship exists between the size of the dwelling and the complexity of its privacy-preserving mechanisms. Larger houses employ more elaborate spatial buffers, visual barriers, and sequential thresholds to prevent unmediated access to private chambers. This design logic is culturally transmitted across generations and is fundamentally grounded in religious doctrines and gendered cultural codes that regulate visibility, movement, and social interaction within the domestic sphere.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization of the article and writing of the original and subsequent drafts.

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Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

The authors avoided data fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, and misconduct.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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