

IV. Memory & Mediated Experience

The Alhambra is a monument created to make you dream. The blind walls, the wood, the arcades, the brick pilasters are all covered with the unifying mantle of plaster as though it were an immense veil in which epigraphs and geometric constructions with plant motifs go hand in hand. They help to recreate an atmosphere that is directly related to the satisfaction of the prince, that is, the tribute to glorious events, recreation of paradise and spiritual union with nature through the garden and orchard in which the Alhambra is introduced by means of concomitance with the urban and rustic villas of classic antiquity.¹



Figure 4¹ Torre de las Enfantas (Tower of the Princesses) (Goury, Jones and Gayangos)



Figure 4³ Court of the Lions (Prangey)



Figure 4² Sala de Las Dos Hermanas (Hall of the Two Sisters), Northeast Corner, Detail of Carved Stucco Wall Ornament and Muqarnas Dome (Low)

Although it is easiest to conceptualize the Alhambra's microclimates as self-contained, protective bubbles, it is more accurate to think of them as a continuous *atmospheric system*. Muhammad V and the Nasrid sultans were not only protecting their bodies from the extremes of the outside atmosphere, but they were relating with the environment through sensational atmospheric media. To produce these atmospheric spaces, they relied on memory, and the advent of the mirador view toward the landscape led to a new kind of relationship between human beings and their environment.

Sensory experiences in the Islamic garden not only “contributed to the beauty and comforts of the material world,”² but they also produced atmospheric spaces for contemplation. In other words, the same surfaces, openings, and water manipulated for thermodynamic comfort in the Alhambra were *simultaneously* manipulated to inspire abstract reflection and creativity. For example, the pool in the *Patio de los Arrayanes* allowed its dweller to duplicate—or reflect—the view of the garden, the throne tower, and the sky. When the angle

of incident light from the sun equaled the angle of reflection toward the viewer’s eye, the pool would even glitter and sparkle.³ Similar to Buddhist monks, the Nasrids also deliberately blocked out light for the purposes of meditation, abstraction and relaxation.⁴ Like European kings sitting around a fireplace or bonfire, Nasrid sultans would sit next to the soft murmur of the interior fountains to stimulate conversation and deep thought.⁵ It is clear that the Nasrids had a reciprocal relationship with these atmospheric sensations, as reflected in the flowering of abstract metaphorical poems and design motifs throughout interior walls of the palaces.

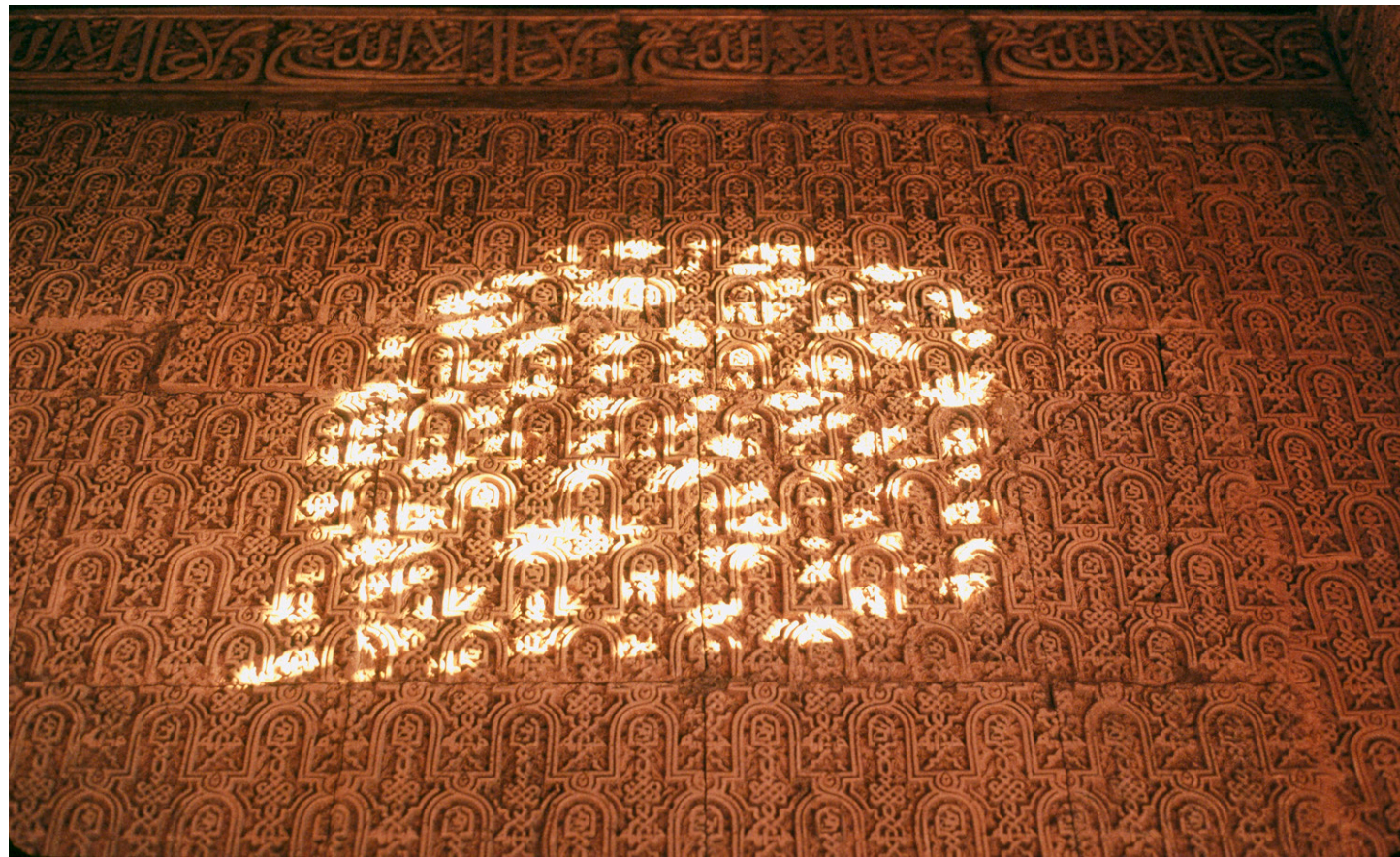


Figure 4⁴ Palace of the Lions (Low)



Figure 4⁵ (overleaf) Patio de Los Arrayanes (Mezquita)

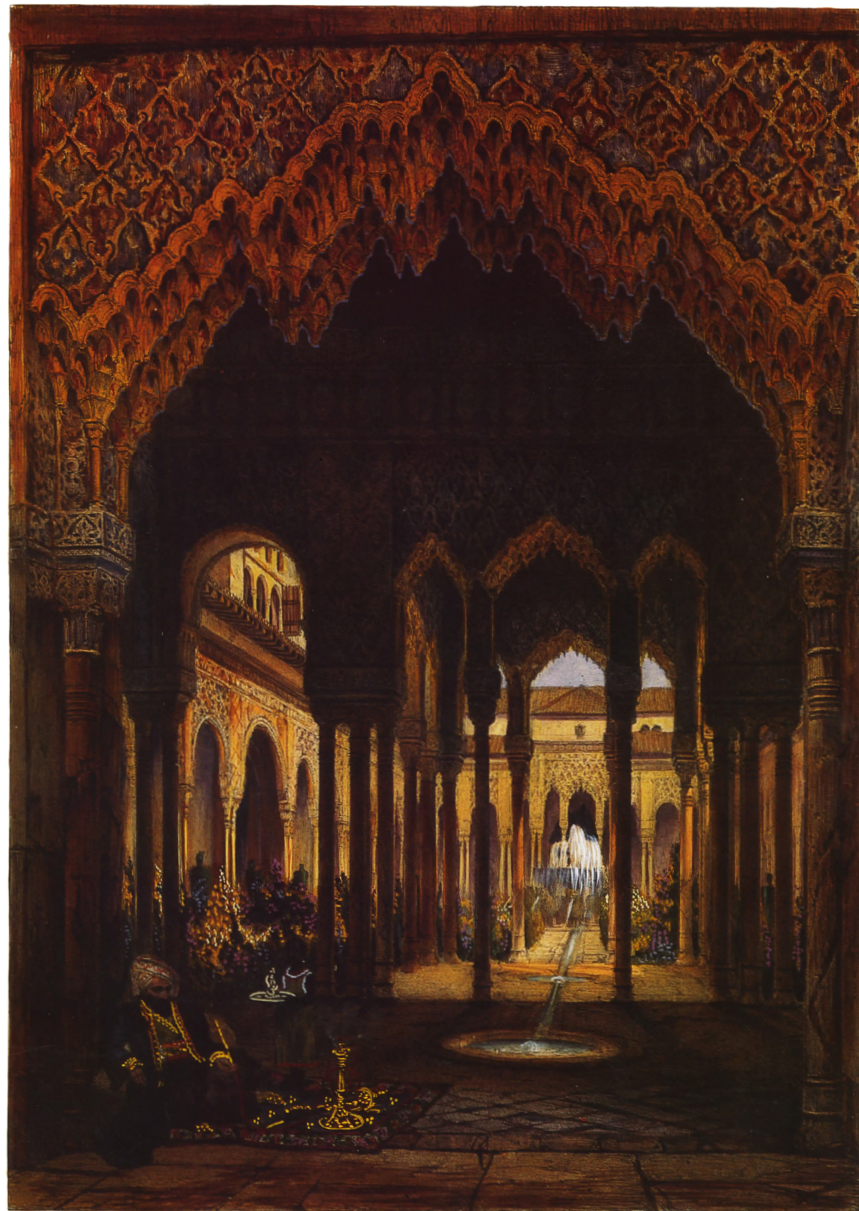


Figure 4⁶ Entry of the Court of the Lions, Alhambra (Prangey)

It is important to focus on the way in which the atmosphere of the Alhambra mediated the relationship between the body and environment, and that is through memory:

...sometimes the most poignant qualities of a site come from not what is actually there, but from what is connected to it, through time and space, by our recollections and hopes. The vision, even more powerfully than the scent, of a blossom may remind us of a moment in our past and let us store up future memories or form links with poems or paintings that hold meaning for us.⁶

The inescapability of using memory to modify the environment is perfectly illustrated in a poetic conversation between the first Islamic ruler in Iberia, Abd al-Rahmān I, and his palm tree:

A palm tree stands in the middle of Rusāfa, born in the West, far from the land of palms. I said to it: "How like me you are, far away and in exile, in long separation from family and friends."

You have sprung from soil in which you are a stranger; and I, like you, am far from home. May dawn's clouds water you, streaming from the heavens in a grateful downpour.⁷



Figure 4⁷ Detail of roof in the Alhambra (Moody)

Figure 4⁸ The Torre del Mihrab (Ruggles)





Figure 4⁹ Hall of the Ambassadors (Prangey)

al-Rahmān had been displaced from Syria, just as the Arabs of Granada had been displaced from most of Iberia. al-Andalus therefore became the “quintessential lost place”⁸ and nearly all of the atmospheric devices employed in the Alhambra harken back to the quintessential time and space of Hispano-Islamic cultural memory, *Madināt al-Zahra’*.

Refinement of the *mirador* at the Alhambra allowed Islamic cultural memory to reconnect with the past in new ways. As mentioned previously, the collision between the *Bedouin campground* and the *chahar bagh* in the early Islamic *munya* had produced “the ultimate luxury,” where rooms were gardens and gardens were rooms.⁹ But with the *mirador*, Iberian Muslims would start to consider rooms and gardens in a continuum with the surrounding landscape. This channeled the way in which desert nomads relate to their environment, in which weather, atmosphere and the body are fully connected. The Nasrids therefore had a chance to fully reunite human and environment.

But because the Nasrids were a sedentary agricultural society guided by the good judgement of the sultan, this continuous atmosphere instead created a *subjective* relationship between human and environment. The novelty of this paradigm can be highlighted in the difference between the *small garden* and the *large garden*. In the *small garden* typology, a “beholder gazed at the garden from within the garden itself,” and, “its plan was subordinated to the immediacy of the color and scent of the plants and flowers and the sound of trickling water.”¹⁰ By contrast, the *large garden* created an illusion of priority, of human beings prior in time and space to their environment. Since the only valued landscape in Medieval Iberia was one that could be modified for cultivation,¹¹ the person responsible for shaping it, the sultan, could now gaze upon it and see himself as its architect.¹² Much like the occurrence of this phenomenon in



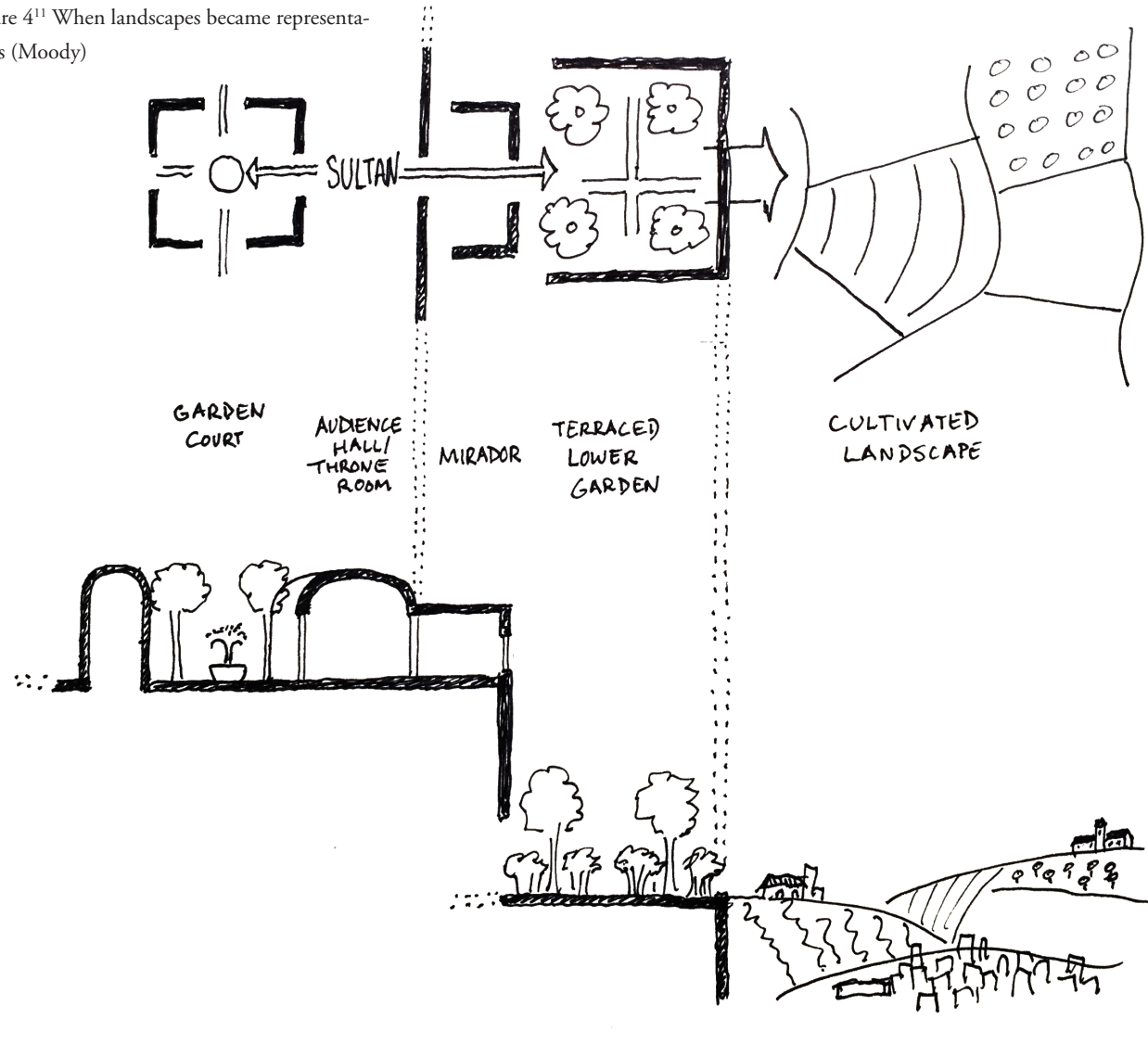
Figure 4¹⁰ (Overleaf) Palace of the Lions (Low)

18th Century England, where the public prospect would survey the entire landscape and the people who inhabit it from a high point, this created a distinction between subject (sultan) and object (the view).¹³ It had profound implications for Medieval society, where “walls, doors, screens, and veils curtailed vision at every pass...even in the supposedly public spaces of the city—the markets, musallas, cemeteries, and parks—there were few occasions when long-range views encompassing large spaces and many people were possible.” By con-

trast, “when views were possible, they were highly charged with meaning”¹⁴. Therefore the landscape outside the Alhambra became just as much of a *representation*, or a medium, as the atmospheric sensations of the garden courtyards within.

Yet the dawn of this new atmospheric and perceptual paradigm proved to be crucial in the survival of Islamic Spain, for it produced the wit and guile necessary to keep the more powerful Christian Castile and Berber Merinids from seizing the defenseless Nasrid dominion for hundreds of years.

Figure 4¹¹ When landscapes became representations (Moody)



References

- 1 Salmerón Escobar and Kelham, *The Alhambra*. 54.
- 2 Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*. 42.
- 3 Moore, Mitchell, and Jr, *The Poetics of Gardens*. 38.
- 4 T.F. Editores, *Alhambra and the Generalife*. 267.
- 5 Ibid. 277.
- 6 Moore, Mitchell, and Jr, *The Poetics of Gardens*. 10.
- 7 Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscape, and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*. 42.
- 8 Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*. 7.
- 9 Moore, Mitchell, and Jr, *The Poetics of Gardens*. 194.

- 10 Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscape, and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*. 106.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid. 108.
- 13 Ibid. 107.
- 14 Ibid. 107.



Figure 4¹² View of Granada and the Sierra Nevada