

Gender and Space; Analysis of gender zones of Sethi Havelis, Peshawar

Samra M. Khan

Associate Professor

Department of Architecture & Design

CIIT, Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: sjmkhan@yahoo.com

Abstract:

The haveli form evolved in vernacular architecture to support traditional patterns of living. The socio-cultural dimensions of society were strongly reflected in the spatial division of the haveli on the basis of gender. In the sub-continent, the understanding of vernacular architecture and its representation of women's status as outlined by spatial hierarchy is still largely un-documented. This paper explores the hypothesis that forms have the ability to adapt to socio-cultural changes and needs in societies, it studies architectural spaces of the Sethi Mohalla, Peshawar, on the basis of gender, in order to understand the manifestation of the socio-cultural norms of the era. The methodology of this study includes interviews with the female residents of the havelis, direct observation of the spaces and analysis of spatial configuration by drawings. The analysis was based on; i) the access to the women's spaces, ii) the integration or segregation of space in context of social contact and the iii) aesthetic quality of these spaces. The paper concludes that architecture is indicative of the socio-cultural era it is produced in and can be used as a mechanism to create a secondary role for the female gender.

Key words: Haveli, vernacular architecture, social- cultural, women, engendered spaces.

Introduction:

Traditional cultures placed a great deal of emphasis on the hierarchy and organization of spaces; regulating the use and occupation of public and private space. The subsequent order of space in traditional domestic settings expressed the relationships between men and women and their hierarchy within the social fabric. The Sethi havelis built from 1823 -1920s in particular reflected the social and cultural values of their age through the organization of spaces into gender based domains, reinforcing the sex-roles as propagated by 19th century patriarchal society.

The Sethis were affluent businessmen who established a mohalla in Peshawar in the 1800s (Qizilbash, 1991), close to the Western Gate of Gor Khuttree and the trade center of Qissa Khawani Bazaar. The mohalla consisted of seven havelis which were constructed in the cultural traditions of 18th and 19th century domestic architecture of India and Bukhara (Per.com. Sethi, N. Nov 15th 2008). The built environment is shaped by human intentions and embodies cultural values and standards of acceptable behaviour (Weisman,1981a). The organization of the Sethi mohalla, the havelis' individual layouts and their relationship with the streets, give an indication of the particular set of socio-cultural rules that dictated the formation of the spatial hierarchy.

The impacts of this spatial segregation on women of the havelis were dominant till the last two decades in which social values underwent a change and women became more integrated in society. The study of the architectural design of the Sethi havelis and the mohalla is undertaken in order to understand how socio-cultural norms of 19th century Peshawar enforced spatial hierarchies based on gender. The resultant separated zones helped to control and regulates access to the public domain in favour of men. The hypothesis behind the analysis is that the physical and visual qualities of architecture are indicative of the social order and structure of society. The assessment of the havelis' layouts is based on the movement between public and private zones and the responsiveness of space to social rules of segregation and integration. The aesthetic quality of space is also analysed to understand their importance within the spatial hierarchy.

Historic Overview: Women's role in Society

Culture has been one of the major forces that have shaped the built environment. Rapoport (1969 a) states that the environment reflects socio-cultural forces including religious beliefs, family/clan structure, social organization and social

relations between individuals. The role of women in society is subsequent representation by the spatial hierarchy of architecture. The socio-cultural norms of a patriarchal society invariably form architectural space to the advantage of men. The gendered nature of the field was challenged by feminist scholars in the 70s and early 80s (Ahrentzen, 1996a) who argued that it played an integral role in the processes of disempowerment of women. Architecture created by the patriarchal society confined women to less advantageous physical surroundings. According to Weisman (1981b) the 'man-made' environment reinforced the patriarchal definitions of women's role in society.

Studies carried out by Farah & Klarqvist (2001) on domestic space in Arab Muslim societies, endorse that the division of space and its use was based on gender classification. Men occupied baithaks (reception rooms), which underlined their authority as head of the household. In these spaces of position and power, men took care of the business of the family. As a consequence, his work and time both were highly valued and merited his hierarchy within the house and its spaces. Traditional cultures assigned women to the kitchen and other service areas; these 'spaces of duty' did not add to her status or esteem. Within these, she was engaged in work that had no social value, significance or recognition by the patriarchal society (Grosz, 1991).

Within the context of the Muslim society of 18th and 19th century India, women were actively discouraged from being active in the public domain by religious and socio-cultural constraints. Religious guidelines emphasize purdah and discourage the active participation and integration of women in the public domain. It places them under the protection of their male guardian (wali). The male protection of females took the form of physical boundaries and confines within domestic architecture. Islam & Al-Sanafi (2006) confirm that the importance of privacy is one of the major considerations in the design of a Muslim's house. In Peshawar, the religious constraint of purdah was made more stringent by the conservative Pathan customs that resulted in the absence of women from all public domains. The gazetteer of the Peshawar district (1897-98) reports that within Pathan society, women are looked on as property to be watched and kept secluded.

These aspects of segregation were also reinforced by the 'progressive' male writers of 19th century India¹. Their books served as the moral guides of society, prescribing the honourable (thus acceptable) code of behaviour for women (Thanvi, reprinted 2007); encouraging them to restrict their movement within the zenana domain, avoiding contact with and intrusion in the male domain. These socio-cultural restraints reinforced the division of architectural space into the public and private realms. The haveli became a metaphor for gender roles and positions within the family and in society at large; creating separate spheres for men and women that coexisted but did not overlap.

The Development of the Sethi Mohalla.

Charalambous (2007), states that social expressions of culture, such as groups and family structures often have settings associated with them or are reflected in the built environment. The establishment of a mohalla for the Sethis created privacy for their community, which helped to provide protection and prescribed acceptable social behaviours for members of the kinship and their families. Within the confines of the mohalla, the Sethi havelis had protected haveli entrances that helped to segregate the beruni (outer/public) from the anderooni (inner/private) spaces. The doorways had chokis for male members of the family to sit and socialize with other neighbours. Men had social interactions in the street and at the front door. The haveli had all other openings on the upper floors in the form of jharokas and arousi windows, to discourage view from the street and to provide privacy for its womenfolk.

The haveli design placed the mardana (men's domain) next to the entrance, as part of the public sphere. The zenana (women's domain) was placed furthest from the entrance and mostly on the upper floors. The women of the households (1832-1930) confined by religious and socio-cultural traditions of purdah and rarely used the front entrance of the haveli (Per Com. R. Sethi, Nov 15th 2008). The contact between women (immediate family) took place through connecting doors between adjacent havelis and in 1902 the overhead bridge, the chatty galli (covered street) was built to connect the family havelis across the street (Per com. R. Sethi. Nov 15th 2008). The chatty galli, contained and regulated the movement of women in the public domain of the street (fig. 1). Rapoport writes,

who communicates with whom, under what conditions, how, when, where and in what context is an important way in which built environments and social organizations are related. (Rapoport, 1980 a)

¹ Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi, Depty Nazir Ahmad

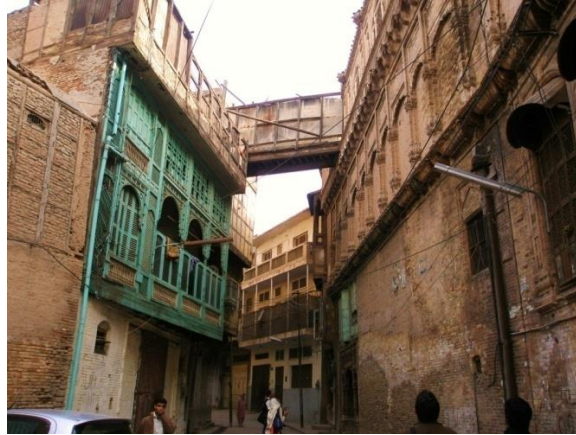


Fig 01: View of *chatty galli* in the main Sethi street.

Methodology of the Study

This is a retrospective study of the Sethi havelis constructed during the period from 1832 to 1920, when the spatial configuration was determined by the cultural traditions of the era. After an initial survey, three havelis (Gul Ahmad Sethi, 1832, Karim Buksh Sethi, 1898) and Abdur Rahim Sethi, 1912) were chosen as a representative sample for this study as these best reflected the nature of the gender zones under study and were accessible. The sample size was determined by the main focus of this study on the qualitative issues characteristic of all seven Sethi havelis, and not on quantitative issues and statistical analysis.

The methodology employed for this study included direct observation of the spaces, photography, making measured and analytical drawings and personal interviews with residents of the mohalla.

The socio-historical information was collected by a series of interviews with the male and female family members. Spatial analyses via drawings and diagrams helped in understanding the physical and visual divisions of architectural space. The analysis focused on exploring the social significance of the spatial structure and how it responded to socio-cultural rules such as privacy, control and social interaction. The architectural quality of spaces was also studied in order to determine their role and importance of different spaces within the household.

The study focused on the following specific parameters of assessment of the havelis:

1. The Access into havelis:
 - 1.1 Visual and Physical barriers
 - 1.2 Depth of men and women's areas from the main entrance
2. Responsiveness of space to social rules
 - 2.1 Degree of Control of space
 - 2.2 Social Interactions
3. The Aesthetic quality of space.

4. Analysis of spatial hierarchy and gendered spaces:

4.1 The Access into Havelis;

The mohalla and its havelis was composed of a series of social control mechanisms (Rapoport,1969 b) that allowed integration of men and segregation of women from the public domain.

4.1.1 Visual and Physical barriers

Space mechanisms separating the external/male domain from the internal/feminine space included the use of bent deorhis (passageways), multiple doorways along the deorhi, levels and stairs in the deorhi and finally placing the family courtyard perpendicular to the street (fig.2). These multiple boundaries maintained a high degree of visual and physical privacy by keeping the men and women's domains separate. Rapoport (1980,b) defines privacy as the control of unwanted interaction with other people. The deorhis of the Havelis, were bent at different angles ranging from 45° – 180°, revealing the behavioural pattern and separation needs of the society; where street pedestrians and outsiders must not see the inside of the haveli and vice versa.

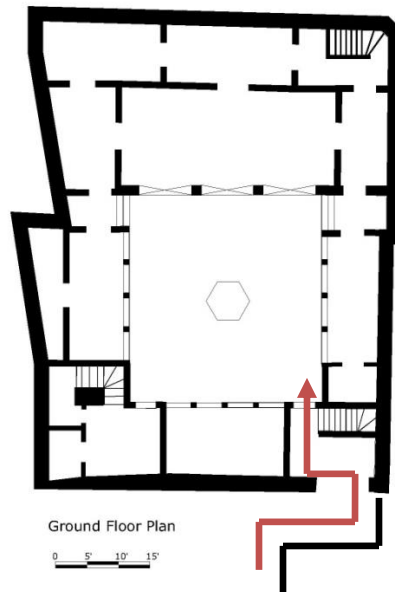


Fig 02: Plan of Gul Ahmad Sethi haveli; entrance deorhi sequence.

Depth of men and women's areas from the main entrance

An important factor in access to a space is its proximity to the main street. The depth of male and female zones was calculated in the three havelis (table1) and the mean depth of each space calculated.

Table 01: Distance of Male and Female zones from the street.

Sl	Haveli	Distance of Male zones from street	Distance of Female zones from street
1.	Gul Ahmad Sethi	5 m	29 m
2.	Karim Buksh Sethi	3 m	26 m
3.	Abdur Rahim Sethi	5.5 m	24 m

Mean depth of male areas = 4.5 m, while the

Mean depth of female areas = 26.33 m.

This shows that on the average the travelling distance from the street to the female zones of the havelis was upto 6 times the distance to male areas (fig 3).

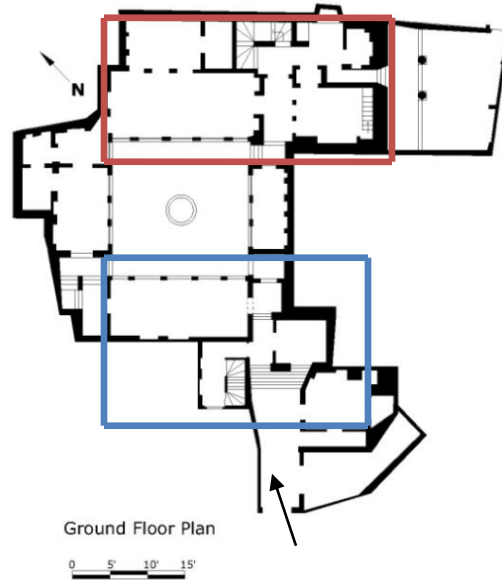


Fig 03: Plan of Karim Buksh haveli with gender zones; M (blue) F (red).

Responsiveness of Space to Social rules

Spatial connections of the male and female zones with the public realm and their interconnections can be studied to understand the degree of integration or segregation that a space has. This is studied in context of the following:

4.2.1 Degree of Control:

The degree of control that one space has over another space, dictates the independence or interdependence of the latter. This can be expressed by the layout model of a house. There are generally two layout models of a house (Farah & Klarqvist, 2001 b). The first is the parallel model, which allows both genders to enter the house and have similar access to their spaces, the second is the sequential model where the female areas are accessible only through male areas and are set behind them (fig.3 & 4).

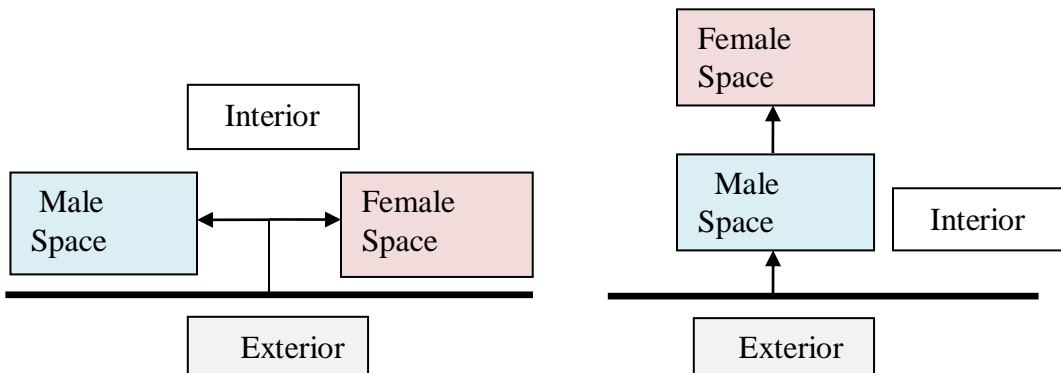


Fig 04: The Parallel Model.

Fig 05: The Sequential Model

In all the Sethi havelis the layout follows the sequential model where all female areas are accessible by passing through the male areas. It shows that the male areas are more integrated with the public sphere, while the female

areas are segregated and controlled via the male areas (fig 5). This model also signals a more dominant position of the male gender (Farah & Klarqvist 2001c).

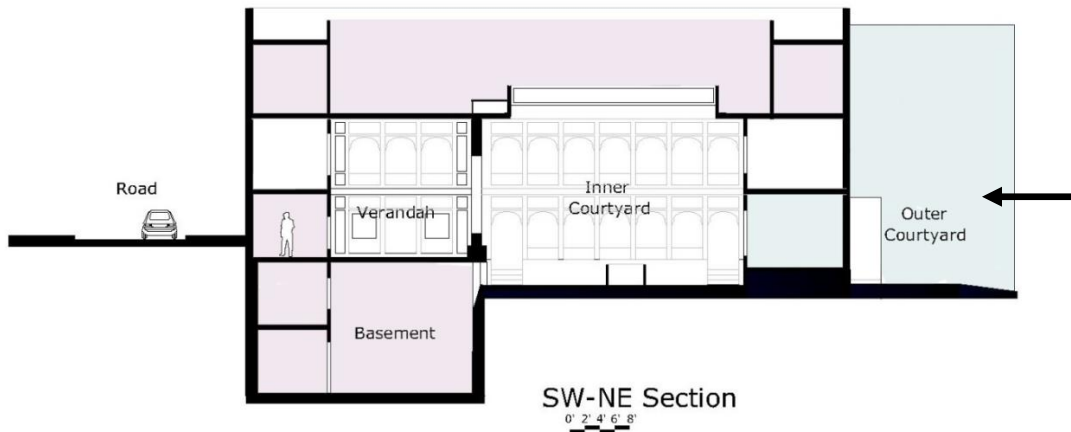


Fig 06: Section through courtyard of Gul Ahmad Sethi haveli, street entrance is from the right.

4.2.2 Social Interactions; Integration and Segregation of Space:

The male zones lie between the female zones and the street. Most of the female zones are located on the top floors and had no direct connection with the street. The first and second floors of all adjoining havelis have connecting doors and all movement of women took place on these levels. The access between the female zones of different havelis was secluded (fig.6) and above street level. An interesting and unusual practice of the havelis' design was the placement of the family's kitchen on the top floor and the construction of a large takht (bench) outside it. This indicates that socialization between women took place at the top level of the house. The chatty galli connected the women's zones of the Karim Buksh and Gul Ahmad Havelis.

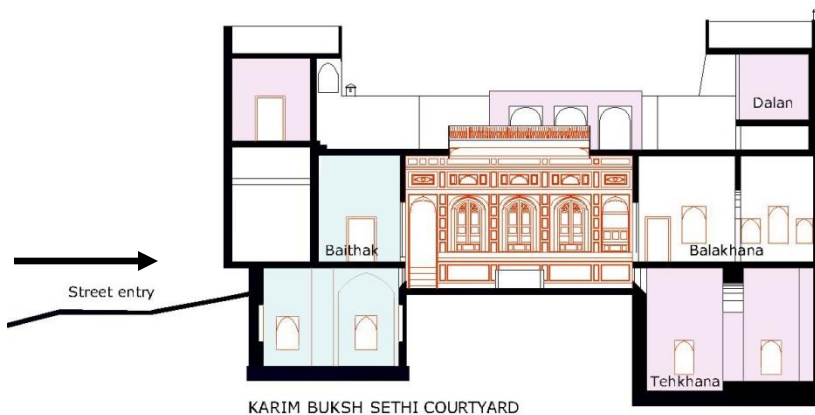


Fig 07: Street access directly into m (blue) and controlled access to f (pink) zones

The segregation of the gender zones (fig 6) was horizontal and vertical. In the Karim Buksh haveli, there was segregated use of the two tehkhana (basements). All the havelis placed the male zones between the street entrance and the zenana areas (fig 5 & 6). The street and public domain was more integrated with the male zones, and were segregated from female zones, while all the private/female spaces were well integrated with one another.

4.3 The Aesthetic Quality of Space

The aesthetic quality of space is an important element indicative of its social value. Baithaks (Reception rooms) of the mardana quarter of the havelis were the most ornamental with naqqashi (fresco), aina-kari (mirror-work) and gachbori

(painted and plain stucco) work. They had elaborate khatamband (marquetry) ceilings and Mughal chini-khanas (fig 8). Their placement around the courtyard provided a cooler environment.

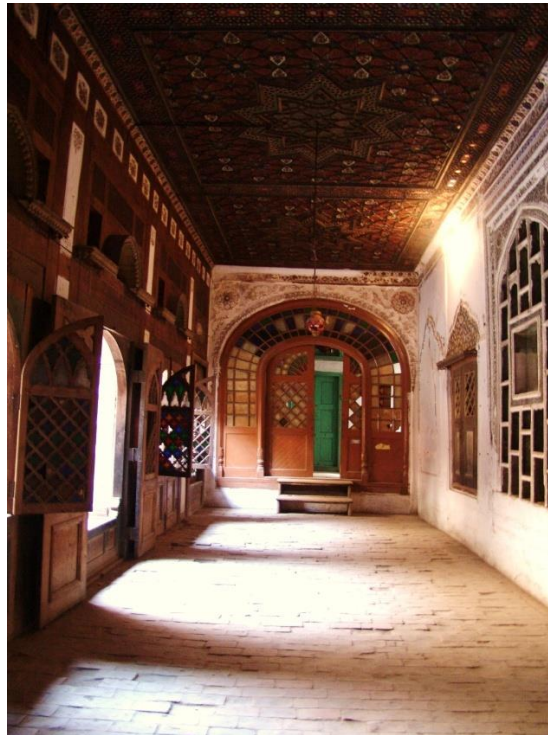


Fig 08: Interior of Male *baithak*, Karim Buksh Sethi Haveli

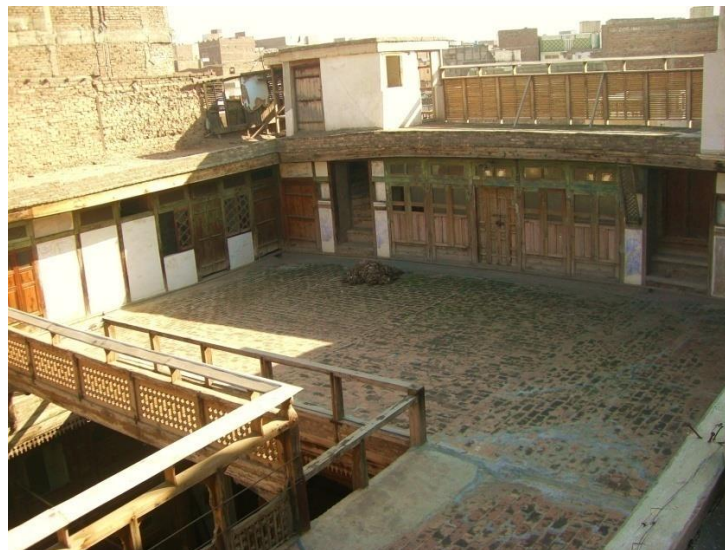


Fig 09: Kitchen and other service areas on top floor, Gul Ahmad Sethi Haveli

The kitchen and other utilitarian areas of the havelis were plain and unadorned. Their placement on the top floors, along with very functional structures exposed them to the extremes of the environment (fig 9).

Conclusion:

The study of the layout and design of the Sethi mohalla and its havelis reveal the creation of physical and visual barriers to separate gender based zones. The architectural design indicates the dominance of social values of privacy, male authority and female segregation.

The masculine zones are well integrated with the street and are placed between the public street and the private zenana, indicating the role of the male as protector of his realm. The women's zones are segregated from the entrance of the haveli and placed on the top floors, signifying that these are the controlled spaces. The integrated male zones have easy access to the street and the public realm; a place of exciting possibilities and independent decisions. Women's movement is restricted vertically and horizontally; they may only enter other women zones and never the public domain. The chatty galli is an iconic architectural mechanism of gender segregation of the Sethi Mohalla. This maintained the street level as a male domain by keeping women visually and physically absent from the public realm.

The aesthetic quality of spaces determines their importance within the spatial hierarchy. In the Sethi havelis, men had the power to control the production of the built environment and they controlled its subsequent use. The spaces men occupied were the most decorative and rich spaces of the haveli; the ornamentation of space attaches value to it and to its user. The better designed and decorated spaces of the mardana (men's quarters) indicates the dominance of the masculine areas over the plain, utilitarian feminine areas. The lack of ornamentation of the zenana areas suggests that the space is of relatively less significance, and reflects on its occupier as being the subordinate in social terms. The division of space symbolized the social position and control of men; it also underlines the powerlessness of women over their environment.

The spatial hierarchy of the Sethi havelis shows an order symbolic of the prevailing culture, where, women were constrained physically and socially inside gender based zones (Zenana). Patriarchal society used architecture to enforce the social order of empowering men, while rendering women powerless.

References

- Ahrentzen, S.** (1996) *The F Word in Architecture: Feminist Analyses in/of/for Architecture*, Dutton, T. A., Mann, L. H. (Eds). *Reconstructing Architecture : Critical Discourses and Social Practices*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, (p. 81). Retrieved on Oct.12th 2009 from <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/comsats/Doc?id=10159654&ppg=81>
- Charalambous. N.**(2007), *Social and Spatial patterns of Cultural Heritage*. XXI International CIPA Symposium, October 01-06th,2007, Athens, Greece. Retrieved on April 24th 2009 from <http://cipa.icomos.org/fileadmin/papers/Athens2007/FP042.pdf>
- Farah, A.E., Klarqvist, B.**(2001). *Gender Zones in the Arab Muslim House*, 3rd International Space Syntax Symposium. Atlanta. Retrieved on April 14th 2009 from: http://undertow.arch.gatech.edu/homepages/3sss/papers_pdf/42_Farah&Klarquist.pdf
- Gazetteer of the Peshawar District 1897-98, (2004), pp104-105. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications.
- Geasz, E.**(1999) *Women, Chora, Dwelling, Space, Time and Perversion, The Politics of the body*. In, Prologue; *Gender Space Architecture: An interdisciplinary Introduction*. Borden, I., Penner, B., Rendell, J. (Eds). U.K.: Routledge.
- Islam, M. A., Al-Sanafi, N. H.** (2006), *The traditional courtyard house of Kuwait and the influence of Islam*. *Courtyard Housing Past, Present & Future*. Edwards, B., Sibley, M., Hakmi, M., Land, P. (Eds). (p 91). New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Qizilbash, R.** (1991). *Decorative Woodwork in Muhallah Sethian*. Master's Thesis. (p11) Peshawar: The University of Peshawar.
- Rapoport, A.**(1980). *Vernacular architecture and the cultural determinants of Form*. *Buildings and Society, Essays on the social development of the built environment*. (p 292), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rapoport, A.** (1969) *House Form and Culture*. (p 47) N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Thanvi, A.A., Behisti Zewar**, India: *Idara Isha'at-e-Diniyat*. Bahishti Zewar: Heavenly Ornaments Retrieved on May 12th 2009 from <http://islamicbookstore.com/b2467.htm/>
- Weisman, L.** (1999). *Women's Environmental Rights: A Manifesto*. In, Prologue; *Gender Space Architecture: An interdisciplinary Introduction*. Borden, I., Penner, B., Rendell, J. (Eds).(p1) U.K.: Routledge.