Domains of Privacy and Hospitality in Arab Gulf Homes

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This paper reports findings of an ethnographic study of homes in the Arab Gulf country of Qatar. Our analysis and contribution focuses on the tension between privacy and hospitality in Qatari homes in the context of identity threats posed by being a minority in their native land and by an influx of Western modernity. By developing an understanding of the privacy/hospitality dialectic in Qatar, we provide insights into how these values are incorporated or resisted in the design and use of family homes in a modern era of increasing globalism.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Cultural and symbolic meanings of spaces within homes have been extensively studied in the West (e.g., Becker 1977; Bryson 2010; Duncan 1996; Gallagher 2006; Garber 2000; Kron 1983; Marcus 1995; Munro and Madigan 1999; Pink 2004; Taylor 1999). Little comparable work has been done in Arab-Islamic societies. Homes have been the locus of adaptation in Muslim societies for centuries (Campos 1991). The question that begs our attention is how Arab-Islamic houses and their meanings are defined in a modern global era. What remains of their former religious and cultural meanings and what has been altered by global forces and Western lifestyles? In particular, how has an infusion of wealth affected the symbolism and meanings attributed to the domestic space among Qataris? We attempt to answer these questions by focusing on the tension between privacy and hospitality as encoded in Qatari households. Qatar and the Gulf States in general offer a unique context compared to other Arab-Islamic countries for several reasons: 1) Qatar is a society that requires strong adherence to traditional values and social norms, as seen for instance in the head to toe covering of women in black and men in white, 2) Qataris have one of the highest per capita incomes in the world, and 3) Qataris are a minority in their own country due to the dramatic presence of foreigners from both Western and Non-Western cultures (only 16% of Qatar population are Qataris). The latter condition creates a fear of dilution of ethnic identity among locals since there is pressure on them to acculturate to the immigrant rather than the more normal reverse situation.

Our study involved observation and in-depth interviews with twenty four middleclass home-owning Qatari families living in Doha. The interviews discussed the meanings of home, favorite areas of the home, situations in which these spaces are used, usage patterns by other family members, and so forth. Projective exercises included metaphorical descriptions (e.g., “If my home was an animal, it would be...”) and audio and visual elicitation (based on photographs of various areas of the home, taken with informant permission, and audio and video recordings of the interviews and observations).

Interviews and visual data revealed a significant perceived need for privacy by Qataris as encoded and reflected in the architecture, design, and preferred styles of homes. Such a focus on privacy in Qatari homes is to a large extent tied to the perceived need to protect women’s sanctity and keep her body away from strangers’ gaze. In all homes visited, the space designated as private was for the family (husband, wife and children) as well as female visitors. The public or communal area, the majles, was for men and their male visitors. The men’s majles is a cultural symbol of Arab hospitality, pride, and honor. It is seen as an essential part of male hospitality rituals; a space where men entertain and socialize with other men and which should be open at all times.

The evident desire for and emphasis on privacy in Qatari homes seemingly presents a contradiction to the revered hospitality of the Arab Gulf culture. How could hospitality, defined by some as the fundamental openness to the other (Kuokkanen 2003), be of such central value for people whose homes are surrounded by high perimeter walls with strictly secured gates amongst other symbols that sharply separate the private and public domains? To resolve this seeming contradiction we need to go back to the underlying meaning of privacy in Arab-Islamic culture. The notion of privacy in the Arab-Islamic paradigm is largely related to the requirement of modest self-presentation for Muslims in public and particularly women. As such, privacy in the home aims to provide women with the reserve and convenience they need to allow being uncovered and away from the public gaze. Women embody morality and virtue in Arab Islamic culture.

Their respected privacy is instrumental to the honor and reputation of the whole family and clan (Torstwick and Faier 2009). Therefore, the underlying meaning of privacy in the Arab-Islamic culture is respect and not seclusion. It is collectively and “public” in nature and does not conflict with the emphasis put on hospitality in Qatari homes. On the contrary, hospitality is another main driver of family and tribal reputation for which women also bear a major responsibility. In addition to gaining reputation by showing generosity (karim in Arabic) in entertaining her women guests, a woman is also expected to help her husband, brothers or father to gain fame and reputation for hospitality in the community by preparing sumptuous food and drinks for their male guests and sometimes by contributing financially to entertain guests in the best possible way not to bring shame and bad reputation to the family.

However, the problematic relationship between emphasized visual and non-visual domains of privacy on one hand and the centrality of hospitality in Qatari society on the other hand is worth discussing in the context of the relationship between the local and the foreigner in Qatar. The de facto integration versus segregation of Qataris and non-Qatari residents of Qatar presents another glaring apparent contradiction to Arab hospitality inasmuch as few non-Qataris are visitors in Qatari homes.

While the skin can be seen as defining cultural boundary between the self and the world (Smith 2003), the Qatari home defines spiritual and cultural boundaries between the family, its privacy, and the Other. The underlying meaning of hospitality is openness and incorporation of the other into the private family domain and self. The sharp physical and symbolic separation of the family private domain from the public sphere can be seen as attempts to reinforce cultural boundaries between the “authentic” and “pure” domestic sphere and the impure contaminated public sphere increasingly dominated by the presence of foreigners or the “Other”. In line with Shove (2003), migrating and perfuming the home seems to provide local Gulf people with powerful symbolic means for imposing ethnic boundaries between them and ‘invading’ foreigners, as well as creating a positive good smelling ambiance for guests.

As the inflection point of intimate contact between host and guest, self and other, local and global, Qatari and non-
Qatari, and friend and stranger, both hospitality rituals and the privacy ethos define and encode the relationship between Qatar’s minority hosts who are threatened by a loss of identity and their majority guests who remain strangers despite their numeric dominance. With its more collectivist orientation and strong gendered protectionism, the gulf may place more emphasis on both constructs than other cultures and may enact them in culture-specific ways, but the same constructs can be found in homes elsewhere. Contemporary cultures must decide how to work out the balance of privacy and hospitality.

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