FUNCTIONAL HOUSING IN THE MIDDLE AGES

SVEND RIEMER

Housing conditions of the Middle Ages were just about close enough to the contemporary scene to be referred to by planners and architects with either envy or contempt. The city of the Middle Ages has been glorified by the architect from the esthetic point of view. Its so-called organic qualities have been praised. But the city of the Middle Ages has also been sneered at by the engineer who contemplates with bewilderment a street pattern that seems to have been laid out by cows being driven home from pasture.

Neither envy nor contempt, however, can do justice to the historical past. We must try to give a functional interpretation to medieval construction and city planning, understand the purposes for which these medieval cities and homes were built. We cannot remain satisfied with off-hand remarks explaining that medieval cities were placed on mountain peaks, on islands or peninsularae for defensive purposes etc. We must consider the peculiar medieval needs for family living. We must realize that the city, the residence, and the furniture of the Middle Ages can be fully appreciated only if we abstract our own ideas of comfort and propriety. We must realize, particularly, that our way of life is set apart from that of the Middle Ages by an increased emphasis upon the desire for privacy.

Such functional analysis must get at the core of medieval housing attitudes. The home life of the early Middle Ages lacked privacy to an extent unimaginable to even the poorer classes in modern society. What is more remarkable, this lack of privacy did not cause much suffering or frustration since the desire for it was highly undeveloped. There was no indication in that world of the “invisible wall” which in our present civilization separates human beings from each other; which makes them shrink at close bodily contact and turn from observation of intimate bodily functions.

Eating habits can be used to illustrate the point. It was quite customary, up to the 15th century, to dine from a limited num-


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ber of table settings, with several people using the same plate, the same cup, and the same knife. This sharing of the same table setting was not induced by the lack of utensils. On the contrary, the late Middle Ages displayed a considerable amount of luxury at the table in the use of various bowls, vessels of all sorts, plates and service dishes. There was simply no attempt to provide for nicety in eating habits. The wealthy merchants of the 13th century, for example, used different knives and spoons at different seasons; they used ebony handles at Fast, ivory work at Easter, and inlay work at Lent. These tools then were obviously supplied up to the level of luxurious consumption. But the possibility of providing separate tools for the individual guests at the dinner table did not even dawn upon a people adapted to a low threshold of shame, a people with little desire for immaculate privacy.  

This trait had its implications in the housing and city planning of the Middle Ages. Bedroom behavior was free from shame. Nightgowns came into use only as late as the 15th and 16th centuries. People slept in the nude or in their clothes. The display of the naked body was not frowned upon. Sleeping quarters were not isolated but were readily shared by all members of the family as well as their servants and their guests. Beds were shared at all ages by non-married members of the two sexes. Matters of intimate hygiene, moreover, were to a large extent transferred from the individual home to the community bathhouse. With regard to requirements for tub bath and steam bath, the standard of living in the Middle Ages was by no means low. But at the occasion of the weekly bath the entire family might have been parading through the city streets in a state of almost complete undress protected possibly by only a loin cloth.

The frank manner in which Erasmus of Rotterdam, at the very end of the Middle Ages, discussed matters of sex in a book of manners designed for an eight-year-old school boy indicates an absence of shame and protective secrecy as far as all elementary bodily functions were concerned.  

This desire for privacy, unique to our modern civilization, first appeared with the development of the small family which threw a circle of in-group out-group relations around parents and off-spring. It was unknown to a pattern of family life which

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3 Ibid., p. 85.
3 Ibid., pp. 230 ff.
overflowed into a wider circle of servants, friends, relatives, and members of the community.

The sex mores of the Middle Ages were "up to the point"; they were naive and free from that refined stimulation of the sex drive which has permeated our culture since the days of the Renaissance. Illegitimate children, to be sure, were in abundance, and there was a definite place for them in society. There was prestige in being the bastard child of a high-ranking father. Sex activities were considered the normal share of any adult's life. As far as women were concerned, presupposing a possible later marriage, only the premium upon virginity which guaranteed to the father the legitimate birth of his own children put a barrier to sexual relations. Bachelors were more or less expected to take advantage of the brothel. At the same time, the married man had to sneak into the Red Light district of the medieval city; his sexual adventures outside marriage were frowned upon or even punished because they infringed upon the right of his spouse to marital relations.

Weddings were community affairs; and the visual participation of friends and relatives did not stop at the threshold of the bridal chamber. Dances and games were occasions for frank sexual solicitation. They were aimed at physical contact and occasions for denudements. Sexual stimulation, on the other hand, was more strictly limited to such definite occasions than in our own times.

We may ask whether we are at all entitled to talk about the "private lives" of the Middle Ages. The life of the family flowed over its boundaries and mingled with that of the wider community. The portals of the private houses in the medieval cities were thrown open. In the narrow streets of the residential sections practically all traffic was barred. These streets were not designed for traffic; they were merely extensions of the family abode and the workshops of the different craftsmen. In fact, there was no separation between a man's place of work and his private dwelling; nor was there any clear-cut distinction between leisure time and time for gainful employment.

It is wrong, furthermore, to assume that the lives of the citizens were more or less confined to the "residential" sections of town. We carry a false image in our minds if we visualize

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these old cities as a composite of primarily church and cathedral, and then private dwellings. This is the picture of many of these cities which has come to us in our times. Actually, the civic center—as we might call it today—formed a small town of its own, located adjacent to or in the immediate vicinity of the central market place. Later, as the private lives withdrew within the small family circle and more and more activities were taken out of public circulation, many of these public buildings lost their functions. They were turned into private homes, or they stood unused, or they were entirely torn down and replaced by residential construction.

The citizens of the Middle Ages participated in a never-ending round of social occasions. They were well provided for with the necessary community facilities. They had not one, but many, buildings available for a rampant club life and for active leisure-time activities. Leisure, to be sure, was not indulged in every single day or for definitely set hours as in our culture. The allotment of leisure time followed a different principle. Some one hundred days or so of the year were dedicated to different saints and set apart for rest and merry-making.

Needless to say, there were also public buildings designed for administrative and commercial functions, and in the late Middle Ages, perhaps even to industrial functions. But these buildings, in one form or another, were made available to all citizens by the fusion of work and play, of informal social gatherings and purposeful occupational endeavors, and by the lack of distinction between different types of activities which later were to become clearly segregated from each other with the spread of division of labor. They constituted truly a part of the living space of the entire urban population. They were places in which to walk around and meet friends for a chat or, possibly, a business deal.

Then, there was the city hall, equipped for administrative and judiciary purposes as well as for dances and festivals. There was the market place into which, in the more agreeable seasons, intra-mural activities easily overflowed. These activities were facilitated by galleries and colonnades crowded with peddlers and farmers and urbanites selling their goods. The spectacle of public punishments took place in front of the city hall. Here also, celebrated visitors were entertained with food and drink. Frequently, city halls were extended in size to accommodate the increasing amount of community activities. Special
dance houses were built and made available for private weddings, for citizen groups, or, on special occasions, for the entire citizenry. The bath-houses also served as places of entertainment, as did the brothels where the unmarried male population spent the evening.

There were the armories, the store houses; there were special buildings for the various guilds equipped for trade as well as drinking and club activities. There were the cloth-houses, the cheese-houses, the wine-houses, the butcher-markets, and the exchange. There were the saloons for wine and beer; and there were inns where the transients crowded, washed their clothes, bathed and dressed, and ate and drank in one large living space on the ground floor, retiring for the night into large, barrack-like bedrooms.

There were hospitals for different types of diseases, many of them charitable foundations sponsored by the nobility or wealthy merchants. Ball-houses were available for the games of the time. Homes for the aged accommodated those without family assistance at a time of need. An entire subsidized "housing project" with rent-free private dwellings as well as community facilities was donated by the Fuggers, a wealthy merchant family in Augsburg.

An appraisal of housing conditions in the Middle Ages has to consider this emphasis upon communal living. The entire city, with all its private as well as public buildings, must be the unit of observation for any attempt at a truly functional analysis.

We know very little about the individual dwelling unit of the Middle Ages. Information about residential housing of the early Middle Ages is distorted by repeated processes of remodeling which were carried out to accommodate changing needs and to house the population increase which thronged the limited space available inside the city fortifications. Although we know more about the late than about the early Middle Ages, documentary materials lend us some help in the reconstruction of the early dwelling units. These materials, however, are available not in the form of floor plans but in the form of descriptive statements. And even these are rare because the private lives of the era did not hold the center of the stage. The interest in objective environmental description arose much later, possibly during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance; and for earlier information, therefore, we have to remain satisfied with passing remarks.
The early burghs of the Middle Ages—dwelling units and defensive shelters of the feudal nobility—contained many features that were to influence the urban residence for centuries to come. The choice of location, naturally, was entirely dominated by the need for defense against enemy raids. They towered on mountain cliffs or were protected by island or peninsular positions. They nestled in swamps or selected open spaces where a minimum of protection was offered to the approaching enemy.

The differentiation between shelter inside the moat or behind protective walls was not devoted to the needs arising in connection with the private lives of the noble family, but rather to the many special requirements for the defense and sustenance of the large feudal household which included servants, knights, pages, managers, clerks, cooks, stable grooms, and others. Between the inner and the outer wall, if two defensive walls were provided to increase the safety of the burgh, were the stables for the horses, the chicken coops, and the various other structures necessary to retain sufficient livestock in case of a siege. In the main building there was an armory, cellar, and a grain house. There was a chapel also where services were held for the servants and the noble family alike. Clerk, manager, and cellar official might have been provided for with special rooms of their own. There was, of course, a kitchen, and frequently a special baking room as well. It is only when we come to a consideration of the general living space and the rooms which held the private or social lives of the noble family and its entourage that we are struck by an amazing lack of differentiation.

If we glance at the floor plan of a medieval burgh we are bewildered by the complete lack of any system of communication which we have learned to consider a necessary prerequisite of even the most modest family dwelling of the present ages. There were no halls which made the individual rooms directly accessible without passing through other rooms located closer to the entrance door or to the stairway. As a matter of fact, the flight of rooms on the second floor—which generally contained the living quarters—was strung up in a row very similar to the arrangement of the railroad flats in cheap tenement houses in our metropolitan centers. The galleries which appeared in the later Middle Ages—viewed as an element of esthetic embellish-

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ment or as a stand for spectators engaged in watching the tournaments in the court of burgh or castle—may have been even more important at the time of their introduction because of the privacy which they provided. They were the forerunners of interior halls and corridors. Originally, there was only a directly interconnected sequence of rooms.⁶

Privacy was obtainable, under these conditions, only in those rooms most remote from either entrance or stairs. Thus, there entered into the assignment of the available rooms for specific purposes a hierarchical arrangement which, very naturally, reserved the remote quarters for the most privileged inhabitants, i.e., the lord of the burgh, his family, and especially honored guests. Adjacent rooms served as anti-chambers, such as the knight-chamber, and as general living space or possibly servants’ quarters. Those rooms closer to the entrance or stairs were increasingly public in character. Alcoves and bay-windows, which we associate with life in burgh or castle or even the medieval city residence, may not have held, for the contemporaries, what seems to us the primary advantage of a pleasant view on the surrounding landscape, but may have served, rather, as a refuge from the humdrum of the social life to which small groups might retire for purposes of at least relative privacy.⁷

Life in the burghs of the Middle Ages was far from solitary. There was a constant coming and going, and while there were few complaints that these roaming strangers interfered with the privacy of the residents of the burgh, we find comments about the actual danger involved in the penetration of the fortifications by unknown men who might easily defeat the purpose of defense against the outside world. Under ordinary circumstances, the feudal residence was open to anybody. Thieves and robbers as well as hold-up men might enter. And they could remain unobserved in the turmoil of various activities which continuously linked the open spaces, the court of the castle, and the residence proper. The burgh was filled with all the noises of the farmyard. There were cattle in the stables as well as sheep, horses, and other livestock. Riders went out to supervise the peasants, and they returned to report to the feudal lord in his private chambers. Wagons with supplies crossed the drawbridge and rattled

⁷ Ibid., pp. 12, 13.
into the court. There was little occasion, indeed, for quiet solitude.

Nor was the need for it felt. The active life was spent in the open spaces. The burgh provided a refuge only, against the enemy as well as against the extremities of an unfriendly climate. Winters, needless to say, inflicted severe suffering. The heating facilities were totally inadequate. The open fireplace provided relief only to those seated in its immediate vicinity while the less-honored guests, knights, pages and servants, froze in the expanse of the wide rooms or halls. There was no window glass in the early Middle Ages, and wind, rain, sleet, and snow were kept out by wooden shutters which left the interior in complete darkness. Winter was a time for hibernation. Life literally stood still and was awakened only when the spring breezes invited a closer relationship with the out-doors. We have to realize that certain wants—requirements which seem indispensable to us—were not even experienced as such in the Middle Ages. It would be wrong to try to understand through our perspective of the 20th century the functional relationship between technical means for providing them and the demand for improvements.

The desire for privacy, particularly, is a late flower in the progress of our civilization. We are not as much astonished at the fact that the citizen of the Middle Ages was technically and economically limited in his ability to satisfy his demands for privacy, for separate rooms to accommodate activities that were apt to interfere with each other, or for secluded chambers to shelter the intimate life of the family in retirement, as we are at the fact that he did not take full advantage of even the limited resources available to him. Life, in the Middle Ages, organized itself in a qualitatively different pattern. Ambitions and feelings of achievement took a different turn and became established within a different system of satisfactions.

The floor plan without a system of communications is one of the most striking symptoms to indicate the presence of a qualitatively different pattern of needs. There is no doubt that arrangements could have been made for connecting halls or for the grouping of individual rooms around the general entrance on each floor. Yet, the "railroad" or "shotgun" arrangement of rooms was obviously not considered a nuisance. Moreover, there was a feeling of comfort connected with close human crowding, the comfort that went with the assurance of safety within a
group held together by bonds of loyalty or solidarity. The feudal lord and his family, in particular, were stowed away behind barriers of various categories of subjects committed to the defense of life and safety of their superiors. Even outside the remote private chambers, the feudal lord was continuously surrounded by a bodyguard of servants, pages and knights which, under the circumstances of a hazardous struggle for survival, could scarcely be resented as an infringement upon his privacy. The times were not safe for relaxed leisure in isolated quarters.

Privacy can be enjoyed only where the intimate life of the small family is inviolate by taboos that pervade the entire culture. Only where a feeling of shame is internalized by all members of a civilization, and where the intruder is just as much pained by the disturbance he causes as the one that is intruded upon, is there any meaning in staking out clearly the realm of our intimate and private lives against the sphere of social interaction.

Life in a medieval burgh, thus, was quite similar to that in a temporary camp where the call to arms might sound at any minute. At night, only a privileged few were able to withdraw to separate quarters. The rest prepared their beds wherever a suitable bench could be found. They made themselves comfortable with furs or blankets or pillows, but frequently refrained from undressing completely. Usually, they arranged themselves in status groups for the night, guarding the line of attack against the sanctum of the private chambers of the ruling family.

Under the circumstances, the differentiation of rooms in the burgh made very little progress. All rooms were used as “double-purpose” rooms. Furniture was carried in and out according to the demands of the immediate situation. The dining table was carried into the largest hall or room whenever the entire household assembled at meal times. It frequently consisted of boards placed on supports, barrels or similar contraptions. Benches and chairs were arranged to accommodate a social gathering around the open fireplace. A rearrangement, again, had to be made when the armed guard or the servants prepared themselves for a night’s rest.

The housing investment went into the crude shell of the structure itself, with a flight of rooms available alternately for different purposes. It went further into the utensils required
both for everyday living and for the luxury of special entertaining. The furniture was modest, however, and there was not very much of it. There were curtained beds with canopies to provide a semblance of privacy in rooms otherwise easily accessible to outsiders. There was a decided lack, on the other hand, of permanent installments or fixtures which would have assigned a room to a more or less definite purpose.

It was an easy task, therefore, to prepare an empty burgh rapidly for a princely visit or for occupancy after years of abandonment. Whatever comforts the times provided were quickly moved into the crude shell of a shelter. The burgh, as such, presented itself as an advantageous camping ground, safe against hostile attacks, and relatively protected against the extreme vicissitudes of the climate.

In the medieval cities the private family was sheltered in a great variety of structures. There was a close relationship, particularly in the earlier days, between the house of the peasant and the house of the city dweller. Within the expanse enclosed by the city walls, soon after the foundation and the first layout of the city plan, peasant dwelling and urban residence must, in fact, have been identical in many instances. Farmsteads were part of the urban community. But even the houses of the peasants varied greatly, from simple one-room straw-thatched dirt huts to elevations of several floors, with an entrance door wide and high enough to permit horse-drawn wagons to drive right into the building for purposes of unloading.

This latter feature was retained in the merchant’s house of the late Middle Ages. The main entrance, however, which formerly opened sideways to the farmyard, was shifted around to the street front. This was essential to aid transportation in a growing urban environment.¹

In addition to the isolated structures, we have to consider the typical row house of the late Middle Ages which allowed for efficient utilization of valuable land. By means of vertical partition, many isolated structures were converted to half-houses, some of which were still retained after complete deterioration or demolition of the other half. These half-houses deserve some further comment.² That dwelling units should have been divided

²Ibid., p. 39.
under the pressure of continuous population increase is well understandable. With modern conditions in mind, however, it will appear to us that a horizontal division should have been preferred, separating different floors from each other and making flats or apartments available to different renters just as in the tenement house of the industrialization period.

For an explanation, we must consider, first, the complex role of the family house in medieval urban society. Inhabited by independent craftsmen, it served in most cases simultaneously as a workshop and domicile. The workshop required direct access to the street for purposes of trade, barter, and transportation. One or several upper floors would never have provided for these needs. Where upper floors were made available for a separate household, they accommodated families of married apprentices. Due to severe restrictions on apprentice marriages, these were exceedingly rare.

We must also consider another reason for the avoidance of house partitions by different floor levels. The medieval house completely lacked any unified system of stairs connecting clearly separated floors from each other. The height of individual rooms was not standardized. Ceilings might have been arbitrarily high or low according to the preference of either builder or owner. Thus, floor levels were not nearly as apparent as they are in our modern structures. Nor was access to the higher levels of the house gained by a system of stairs running through the entire structure. From the ground floor to the room on top there might have been some simple steps in one part of the building. The uppermost rooms, however, might just as well have been reached from a room on the middle level not directly connected with the ground floor. Vertical communications wound somewhat awkwardly through various rooms on different levels of the entire structure. Thus, any horizontal division of the structure would have meant an intolerable impasse upon family privacy.

Needless to say, the floor plan of the medieval city house was characterized by a crude and elementary set of interior subdivisions. The floor plans of one one-story and one two-story house show these houses to have been about 17 feet wide at the street front. The two-story house extended deeper into the backyard. The most striking feature of the plan was the hall-kitchen com-

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16 Ibid., p. 91.
bination into which one entered directly from the outside. The kitchen was indicated only by the open fireplace which was contained in an alcove-like arrangement off a long hall which extended through the entire length of the building. Later on, there was a tendency to close off the kitchen from the relatively spacious entrance hall. Apart from kitchen and hall, there was one large room on the ground floor, available for general living purposes (Stube), and a smaller room (Kammer), used primarily for sleeping purposes. While these floor plans constituted a first improvement beyond the one-room shacks of poor city dwellers in the early phases of the Middle Ages, they did not measure up to the more intricate and elaborate arrangements of the patrician homes which were located closer to the center of town, and which came into their prime toward the end of medieval urban culture.

These simple abodes extended the institution of home ownership through wide strata of the city population. While ownership was confined, in most cases, to ownership of the building and other improvements, the rent to be paid for the “eternal” lease of the land never attained the exploitative character of apartment rentals in the cities of late antiquity. There was, of course, a class of servants and apprentices and other individuals without property. They were deprived of the privilege of forming households and had to live as best they could in the anti-chambers, the attic rooms, or the special wings given to the servants in the homes of full-fledged citizens.

The wealthy merchants owned the most luxurious city residences. Through a huge portal, large enough to let wagons laden with goods pass, one entered into a tremendous hall which served as a temporary storage space for various commodities which were piled high awaiting either distribution into cellars or special storerooms or preparation for shipment to other cities or the market place. The ground floor, furthermore, contained office space. A counter separated the entrance hall from both storeroom and office, and here goods were checked in or out. The living quarters were confined to the upper floors.

A special wing of the house might have been projected into the courtyard. Here, the ground floor was taken up by the stables. Otherwise, the “back-house” contained the servants’ quarters, possibly kitchen or bath-house. The toilet also, if we want to apply this term to the so-called “stink-hole” frequently
not emptied for a decade or more, was often located in the rear of the main house. The living quarters proper consisted of smaller or larger rooms, connected with each other in a somewhat haphazard manner, and assigned to specific uses by the scanty furniture of the period. There were no fixtures which committed individual rooms to specific purposes, however, and the entire problem of communications was not systematically planned so as to provide a maximum of privacy where such might have been needed. Rearrangements in the use of rooms easily accommodated changes in family composition.

Domestic luxury of the Middle Ages led to the installment of a bathroom and an adjacent dressing room. These rooms, according to the customs of the times, had a relatively public rather than a private character. Thus we find them frequently on the ground floor where the problem of drainage could be solved more easily. The wine cellar, also, formed an important part of the house. It was accessible through a special entrance from the outside rather than by stairs in the interior of the building. The kitchen, generally, faced the yard and was located on the ground floor at the back of the main structure.

In these patrician mansions, then, we observe some differentiation. The assignment of specific rooms to specific purposes, however, was limited to those parts of the house that provided some sort of public service, in either work or recreation. The living quarters offered an undifferentiated shell—so many rooms of varying size that could be used, like the living space in the early burghs—for different needs.

It is not possible to overemphasize the lack of internalized controls guarding the intimate aspects of family life. The avoidance of cross-traffic through rooms was rarely a matter of serious concern. Genre pictures of the times show us congregations of family members, guests and servants, all in a more or less advanced stage of undress. Doors were flung wide open to any possible intruder. Through the master bedroom one could look into the hall and other chambers. Outsiders could enter the room where the family members were asleep, and, naturally, the simple beds of the servants were frequently located at the foot of the family bedstead.

The furniture was scanty and of a very modest type. Compared with modern conditions, only the beds were more elaborately equipped. This was due to the lack of shelter against in-
trusions. In bed, at least, the curtains kept the sleeping family out of sight. The canopy had the additional function of protecting the bed against stucco, or possibly vermin, falling from the ceiling. A wash-stand, a low chest, and possibly a chair or two were frequently all the furniture provided in the bedroom. Clothing and linen were stored in a large chest in the hall.

Wood panelling tended to be replaced, toward the end of the Middle Ages, by tapestry for mainly sanitary reasons. While tapestry could be removed and cleaned from time to time, the wood panelling served as a refuge for vermin unless it was ripped out and completely replaced. Glass windows, also, were introduced in the late Middle Ages, but were an expensive luxury item even then. Only shutters, with possibly parchment or paper or oiled linen windows, were available as a protection against the cold. The inadequate heat from the open fireplace was gradually replaced by tile stoves which kept the house comfortably warm even during winter time. In study and library, chairs and desks made their appearance. An important storage space for small utensils was the mantel of the wood panelling. In the window nooks there were bookshelves and simple benches covered with pillows for comfort. All in all, however, the housing luxuries of the times were not aimed at increasing the comforts and conveniences for everyday living; they were dedicated rather to artistic display, to elaborate ornamentation of the limited stock of available furniture, and to the embellishment of plates, utensils, and vessels.

Where wealth permitted, the city dweller provided the family with a garden house outside the walls of the city. There the summers were spent in a relatively pleasant environment far from the heat as well as the stench and the filth of the congested city street.

Progress in living standards advanced all through the course of the Middle Ages, but more so with regard to public rather than to the private aspects of life. To be sure, public needs may have been more urgent. The population pressure of the late Middle Ages, combined with inadequate provisions for sanitary water supply and for the elimination of waste products, caused blatantly intolerable conditions. Thus, from the gradual paving of the streets to restrictions of sewage disposal, to the installment of public toilets, to the elimination of pig-stys from the narrow city streets, to the installment of a plumbing system
that piped running water into the individual dwellings, to city ordinances which safeguarded the need for sunlight in the side alleys and to the installation, furthermore, of a system of street lighting, and to the organization of a more efficient machinery for the fighting of fires, the citizenry at least kept in step with some of the needs growing out of the cumulative process of congestion.

We venture to suggest, however, that the direction of improvements was influenced more by the emphasis on public relations rather than the protection of private family interaction. We are confronted with a different culture than our own. Its system of shelter can be fully appreciated only by the consideration of preferences that show a surprising disregard of modern "essentials." The individual arranged himself and his way of life under technological, economic, and social conditions so remote from the contemporary scene as to furnish the foundation of a personality structure that must appear as "strange" to the superficial observer.