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Indigenous Architecture in motion: narratives of circassian architecture

The popular conceptualisation of vernacular architecture is based on contextualising traditional architecture, built for a given time, in a particular country or a regional/geographical area.[1] Consequently, the existence of a building form can be described as the direct and primary result of specific local influences (e.g., materials and environment).[2] When exploring the vernacular architecture of the Circassian ethnicity in the Middle East, it is not enough to investigate this contextualisation in one area. There is a need to go beyond patterns at one location and to trace the migration flow of the architectural patterns back to their domestic origins at the Caucasus.

(From previous page)

1.
Kingston Heath, Vernacular Architecture and Regional Design (Oxford and Burlington: Routledge, 2009).

2.
Ibid.

Historically, generations of Circassians were subject to various types and forces of movements, including forced migration and colonisation. Their original homeland is in the Caucasus. Since the start of the 1700s, their land possessed colonial interest to many great powers of those times, mainly the British and Russian empires. After the end of the Russo-Circassian War (1763 – 1864), many surviving Circassians were forced to flee their homeland in the Caucasus. By the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, they reached the Middle East, building settlements in Transjordan, the Golan Heights and Palestine.

This context of mobility and motion during the 18th, 19th and early 20th century have challenged the Circassian culture, and by extension their vernacular architecture which could not become a static heritage of a past that was handed down from one generation to another. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how the Circassian vernacular architecture time-tested adaptation during its migration and resettlement. This paper aims to investigate the aspects of motion that affected the transfer of the vernacular Circassian typologies from the Caucasus Mountains to the Middle East with focus on the role of intangible building techniques in adapting to landscape, climate, and available natural resources.

Tracing back the impact of migration and environmental change on space building challenges the traditional definition of vernacular architecture. In other words, investigating the role of intangible heritage as a driving force in shaping the vernacular practices help expanding the nowadays boundaries of vernacular architectural interventions beyond the boundaries of the context to a specific location. It could also contribute to the potential applications of vernacular architecture in the face of the 21st century challenges such as climate change related migration.

Documentation in Motion

The Circassian vernacular architecture, like many postcolonial cultures, is a fading heritage in both modern-day Russia and the Middle East. Circassian houses have been disappearing due to several reasons, such as war and rapid urbanisation. In my quest to draw a connection between the Caucasus and the Middle East, it was not possible to depend solely on the search for existing Circassian houses that are still standing.

To document vernacular Circassian architecture, first I had to look for its

footprint in historical documentation of the regions where Circassians have lived, and some still are living; such documentation of the construction process and the building techniques required a trans-disciplinary search and knowledge exchange with history, anthropology, literature and art. As a consequence, this search has highlighted the role of media in exploring, archiving and conserving the intangible heritage as a dynamic and living practice. Secondly, given that many buildings outlast builders, personal testimony about buildings served as a way of obtaining limited cultural context and historical depth of the oral history about the skills utilised and passed on from the original builders to users when they were still alive.

Tangibly, Circassian dwellings fell into two categories: 1) dwellings that had been destroyed over time due to several reasons, such as the systematic destruction of the 1930s in the Soviet Union (USSR) and the 1967 war in the Golan Heights of Syria, 2) dwellings that had been obliterated by rapid urbanisation including several locations in Jordan and the only two towns that still exist in Israel today.

Intangibly, the Circassian culture benefited from several visual notation and communication across several historical contexts and geographical locations. Given the geopolitical importance of the lands where Circassians lived, the evolutionary development of the Circassian society has been of interest to western researchers and politicians who passed through the Caucasus and the Middle East. Many artists, journalists, anthropologists, archaeologists and travelogues documented the Circassian way of life, economy, and material culture; their work had much emphasis on the clothes, daily culture, and portraits for people and dwellings. Visual and literary arts on the Circassian ways of life remained preserved and documented in archives and museums; however, digital archiving converted the content of documentation into "intangible cultural heritage" by making them accessible online. This accessibility was boosted by the arrival of social media with its broad connectivity and online participation and observation, which created repositories of cultural heritage for the Circassian communities. Consequently, Circassians in the diaspora were given a clearer view of how the life of their ancestors was like in the Caucuses, and the Circassians in Russia were more informed of the cultural production of the Circassians in the diaspora.

To pursue the objective of my research, I could use this visual documentation to connect the motion of the Circassian people to the movement of the Circassian culture, and by extension, their vernacular practice in space.

I found this link through a historiographical literature review, during which I have identified and collected around 1,200 media objects about the life of Circassians. Examples of these are the artwork of Scottish artist William Simpson who travelled through 'Circassia' in the autumn of 1855 with Henry Pelham-Clinton, 5th Duke of Newcastle (Figure 1), in addition to the photographic collection of George and Agnes Horsfield, Gottlieb Schumacher, and Gertrude Bell of the Middle East between 1890 – 1920 (Figure 2).

Figure 1.
A sketch by William Simpson. it illustrates one of the guesthouses where the artist stayed in during his tour among several Circassian villages in the west Caucasus [Provenance: Victoria and Albert Museum, United Kingdom]

Given that such documentations were mainly produced by foreign scholars, they were defined by a deep-rooted orientalist and archaeological approach. Furthermore, these documentations are situated within diverse fabrics of historical and political events, motives, memories, stories and sites. Therefore, chronological analyses of those documents were necessary to investigate the accuracy of historical and political context of each source. Also, the content of the objects should be verified by the Circassian oral history of their culture. As such, I combined my literature research with

interviews of members of the Circassian community and researchers in Jordan. The outcome of this process presented documentation of habits, skills, ideologies, impressions, feelings, emotions and individual/collective memory in connection with the tangible and the intangible Circassian culture.

Finally, I conducted a historical-comparative analysis to feature the evolution of the daily life and morals of Circassian society in the Caucasus and the diaspora at the Middle East; this resulted in the identification of key elements of the Circassian architecture as an insight into what had changed and what had not in the traditions of architecture in each period and each location.

Figure 2.
Circassian house in Amman
1890s – Gertrude Bell [Source: U. S. Library of Congress]

Typologies in Motion

The key elements of the Circassian village "Aul" and the Circassian dwelling "Adyghe Wuna" were influenced by human developmental and historical events. Therefore, the analysis of Circassian settlements must carefully consider the context in which they were built. Through this process, it was possible to identify the unique features in the dwellings and to detect chronological changes in the settlements and dwellings linked to the cultural context, climate, war and displacement, as explained below.

As a start, in the Caucasus, the Circassians did not develop a stable way of life. The historian Walter Richmond clarified two main reasons that prevented the Circassians from developing stability.[3] Firstly, the harsh climate of the Caucasus was associated with a relatively short growing season; therefore, frequent famines occurred with any late spring or early fall. As a result, the Circassians lived a semi-nomadic life, raising herds of sheep and cattle. Secondly, the Circassian land's strategic location along the Black Sea coast has exposed them to raids by their neighbours, so often that they had to abandon their homes when attacked, and rebuild somewhere else once the danger had passed. The main goal of those attacks was to captive humans and sold them as slaves in markets in the Middle East and Europe. This transport of people in addition to the spread of the plagues constantly exhausted the Circassian population and paralysed their ability to establish stable settlements or cities. In light of the lack of a stable central authority, the Circassian livelihood revolved around the smaller community of the "Aul" (village). Even politically, these villages were utterly independent; this decentralisation took a literal form in the east part of the Caucasus.

Circassian villages were described by French merchant Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1605-1689) who drew sketches of plans and a general view of unusual settlements taking a round shape that belonged to the Circassians. Tavernier's notes also indicated a high level of technical knowledge among the inhabitants of these settlements (Figure 3). The settlements will stretch to be half the size of a football field. The houses were built next to each other, wall to wall in a circle. In the centre, an inner circle of small buildings was used for animal husbandry (e.g. horses, dogs); storage for water was located at the main entrance on this inner circle. The door of each house faced the outside of the main round wall, and each house had a fireplace to be used for cooking and as a heating source.[4] The Institute of

3. Walter Richmond, The Circassian Genocide (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

4. Murat Mukhamedovich Orquasov, Materials of the Circassians Homes' Architecture (Nalchik, 2011).

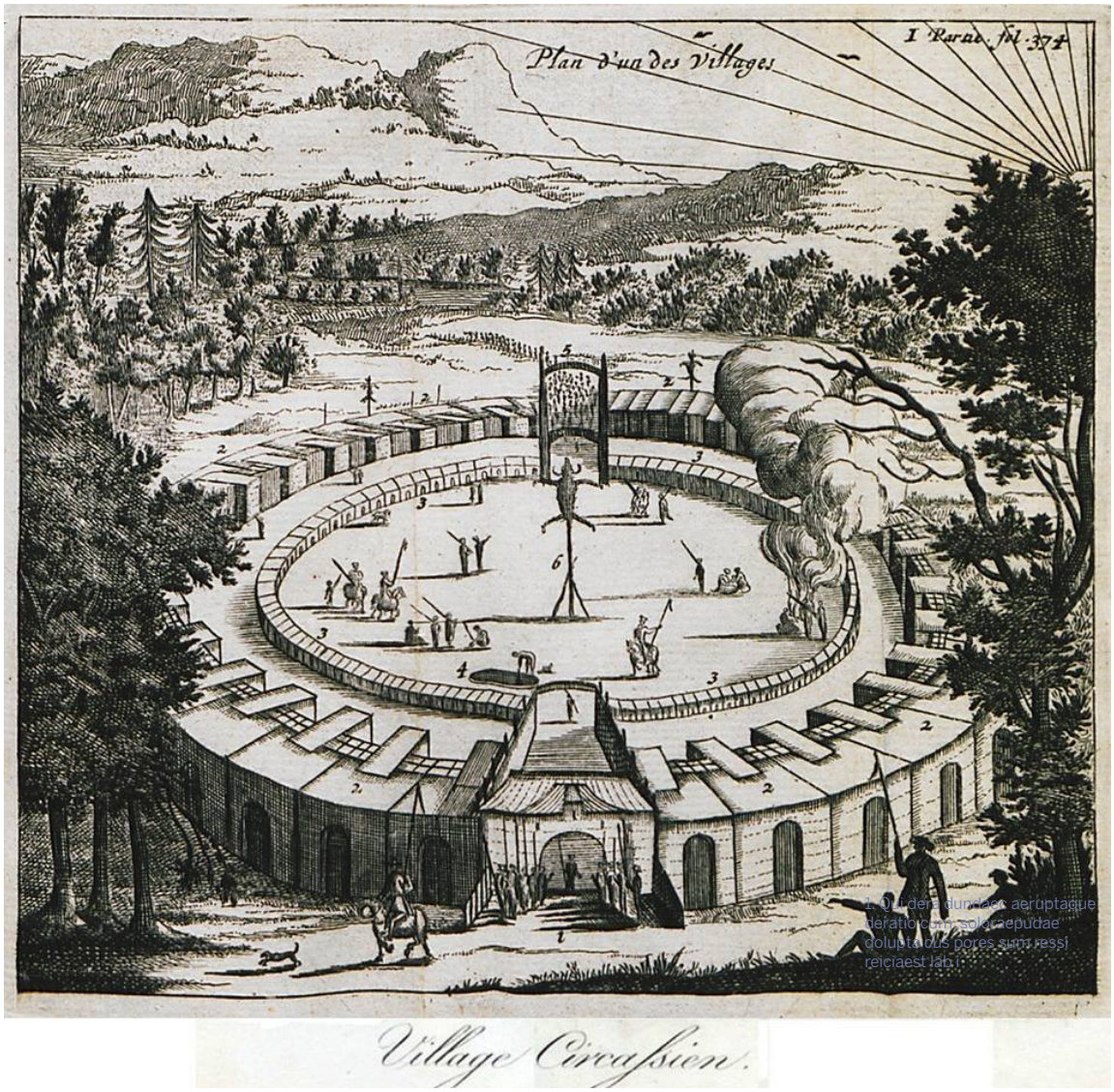


Figure 3.
Illustrations of a round Circassian village drawn by 'Jean Baptiste Tavernier'
(French traveller), 1632 [Source: Fontana, 2017]

Archaeology at Russian Academy of Sciences analysed aerial photographs and found about 200 ancient settlements built on a single architectural plan, expectedly before the 17th century.[5] The Turkish traveller Evliya Chelebi (1611-1682) also described these round settlements during the first half of the 17th century and wrote:

"Circassians organised their settlements in the treeless terrain as a camp, or a circle; building houses made of combining wattle of reed branches, hazel and other light- weight materials and walls of clay."[6]

However, this circular settlement was a rare form of the Circassian commune, and was only familiar to the eastern tribe "the Kabardians". This limited use might be a result of the predominance of animal husbandry over agriculture at the end of the 13th century, and the political situation

5.
ibid.

6.
Evliya Çelebi and Joseph Freiherr von Hammer-Purgstall, Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa, in the 17th Century.

which allowed the Kabardians only to build their communes in open fields, as reported by the French traveller Jean de Luc: [7]

"Most of the Circassian settlements were located in the woods. Only the eastern of the Adyghe tribes – the Kabardians – dared to settle in the open areas, building their settlements in the form of a circle or a quadrangle".

A Circassian village was built for several hundred people as a single project, on a single foundation. Everyone farmed. The main economic activities were pastoral and agricultural in nature. The land and livestock ownership remained collective. Forests were rich and widely spread; therefore, they provided more than enough wood for fuel and construction. The Circassians rarely built in stone, but preferred wood and thatch. The forests also provided means of isolation for the farmsteads keeping them surrounded by groves of walnut trees.[8] Evliya Chelebi described the Circassian settlements as a group of ten houses which is surrounded by hedges of wattle as a fence of a castle.[9] According to Tavernier and Chelebi, the formula of the life in those Circassian settlements could be described as the following:[10]

"It is a small municipality of several houses (20 to 50). The appearance of each house should imply the ability of the owner to co-exist in a large society and not standing out in front of the neighbours financially. The principles of justice and strength were reflected in the construction of settlements, cohabitation, and total material equality. This led to the fact that issues relating to the development of the social order laid on the shoulders of men, who all together provided leadership and military associations. This in turn led to the martial way of life for all those living in the community".

Furthermore, the motion of people had a significant influence on the nature of the village's structure. For safety reasons, Circassian settlements were unstable and needed to be transferred from one place to another. This semi-nomadic way of life and preparedness for immediate move both limited the building of permanent and more developed circular communes. The Circassians needed to build less developed Circassian Houses "Wuna" that can be disassembled and taken away when necessary. Therefore, walls are not connected tightly to the roof corners, and joints are only coated with clay from outside. This necessary building skill is indirectly mentioned in a modern ironic Kabarda saying: "Who does not know what to do [that]? It is like disassembling and reassembling the house". [11]

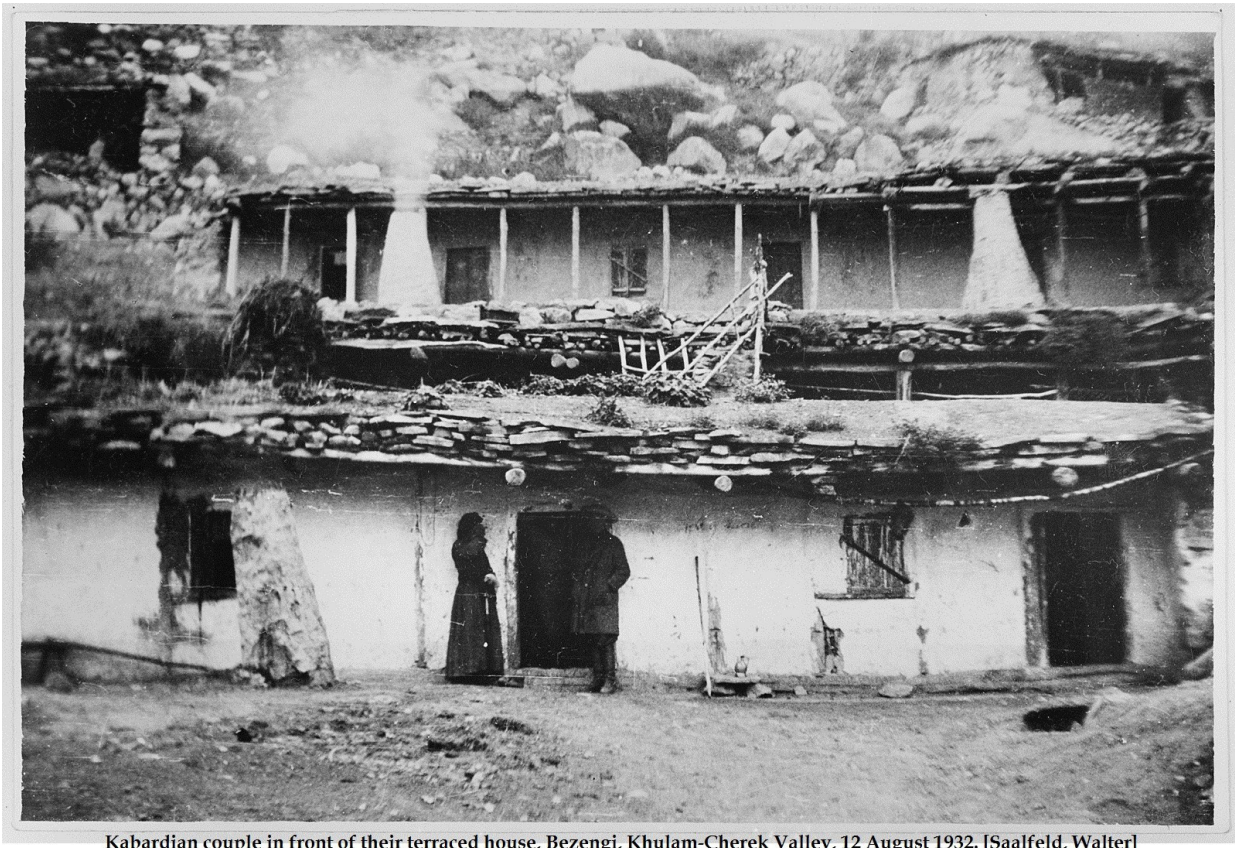
7. Orquasov, Materials of the Circassians Homes' Architecture.

8. Paul B. Henze, The North Caucasus: Russia's Long Struggle to Subdue the Circassians (Santa Monica: The RAND Corporation, 1990).

9. Kadir I. Natho. Circassian History (Bloomington: Xlibris Corporation, 2009).

10. Veniamin Kubishev, Dwellings and Villages of the Caucasus Nations (Moscow: Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union, 1982).

11. Natho, Circassian History.



Kabardian couple in front of their terraced house. Bezengi, Khulam-Cherek Valley. 12 August 1932. [Saalfeld, Walter]

Figure 4.
Photos of the Kabardian inhabitants of the village of Bezengi, Khulam-Cherek Valley Kabarda. Captured by 'Walter Saalfeld' on August 12, 932 (German Alpine Expedition; 30 July-7 October 1932)

Similarly, the shape of the Circassian traditional house, the "Wuna", had evolved through time considering changes in the construction process and materials (Figure 4). In general, the Circassian family lived in an estate consisting of three separate courtyards and a number of dwellings enclosed by a wattle fence. The number of dwellings inside one fence could be up to 15, depending on the number of married adults living with the family. The complex included three separate courtyards: 1) clean or residential which contains the dwellings, 2) a farmyard which produces grains, and 3) a vegetable garden behind the house which would contain outbuildings for livestock, stables and food storage. The courtyard close to the main family building would have a guest house to show respect for the guest. Given that, culturally the host is responsible for the safety of the guest. James Stanislaus Bell (1797-1858) was part of the British "delegates" that toured the Circassian land in the 1830s wrote in his book "The Diaries of Stay in Circassia": [12]

"Half-way up one of these hills, about a mile and a half from the beach, stands the cot I now occupy. I have an exquisite view from the green plateau in front, of the hills on either side, a part of the valley and the

12.
James Stanislaus Bell. Journal of a Residence in Circassia During the Years 1837, 1838, and 1839 – Vol. 2 (London: E. Moxon, 1840).

delta of the Subesh, and the sea beyond. The cottage itself, like all in this neighbourhood, has a thatched roof, resting upon walls of strong stakes, hurdled and plastered, inside and out, with clay washed with a white, or rather pale green colour. The floor, too, is of clay and is carefully swept, and repeatedly watered during the course of the day. At one end of the room (the house consists of but one room, with a stable adjoining) is the fireplace, —a circular inde tuee in the floor, over which is placed a semi-circular funnel, of about five feet diameter at the base, through which the smoke escapes. At one side of this fir-place is a small raised divan, well-cushioned, for my accommodation; and the fire is constantly heaped with great billets of oak, which at present is very agreeable, as this is the rainy month, and, for the last two days, we have had torrents of rain, accompanied with a high cold wind. This accounts for my writing so much.....”

The walls of the dwellings were built of clay. However, there had been some cases of stone construction in the late 19th century by the surviving villagers after the genocide. Bell described the clay walls of the dwellings: “The clay walls of my house are still quite damp, and I think that the construction of it may have been the occupation which prevented my noble host from waiting upon me sooner”. [13]

13.
ibid.

While the traditional Circassian dwelling with the long rectangle layout is the most common form built by the Circassians in the Caucasus and the villages in the Middle East, they still showed several variations and elements. The rectangle dwelling could be either a single chamber or a one-roll of multi-chambers. Similar to the circular communes, the entrance of the dwelling would be open to the outside; this quality of easy access is believed to be a sign of hospitality and openness. Each dwelling was to have at least one chamber for women. [14]

14.
Kubishev, Dwellings and Villages of the Caucasus Nations.

The shape and materials of the roof were connected to natural and climatic conditions of the area rather than the materials of the walls. In the areas of heavy rainfall, the roof was made steeper; while, in the areas of less rain, the roof would be flat or sloping. Both peaked roof and flat roof were made of reed and straw. The roof rested on special strong beams that were connected, but not so tightly, to the walls, to provide possible detachment in the future when disassembling the house. The peaked roof had a truss construction, with a hook at the top end of the branches connecting the beams with the columns they support.

Most dwellings would have a porch extending along its front, which was

considered an indispensable part of the dwelling, just like its walls and roof. The porch and the dwelling were designed as one single entity. The front porch underlined the entrances of the chambers. It was connected to both the roof and the floor which would be elevated with several stair steps on edge. The ending of the columns holding the porch would have a decorative ending of the shape of the letter "T" (Figure 5).
The fire in the home, especially in the wintertime, had to be maintained around the clock; therefore, the fireplaces were constructed with the dwelling units. The fireplaces were located at one end of each chamber.[15] The roof above the fireplace was arranged with an exhaust opening: a "semi-circular funnel" located above the floor at a distance of about 1.5 metres to drain the smoke and went up to end high with a cone-shaped pipe on the roof. The kitchen and the eating area also contained a fireplace.

15. Kubishev, Dwellings and Villages of the Caucasus Nations.

The fireplace, the wood construction of the roof, the rectangular layout and the general structure of the village are ethnically defining elements of the Circassian vernacular architecture. These elements are present in the collected work of artists and media. The above-discussed elements of the Circassian architecture represent a tangible form of culture that was created through intangible skills and traditions and was, passed on from one generation to the other. They had also emigrated with Circassians from the Caucasus to the Middle East. Despite the evolvement of the Circassian dwellings based on local context and political forms, many unique elements of the Circassian architecture remained present across times (Figure 6).

After the end of the Circassian-Russian Wars, the remaining Circassians built several villages in the Caucasus. The houses remained populated from the end of the 19th century until the 1930s. The dwellings in those villages took a steadier form with the ceasing of the constant movement for safety. The formulation of the house represented patriarchal family life as it had the possibility for expansion. The earthling flat roof became more common than before. However, the conical flew over the hearth, and the porch extending along its front remained present in many dwellings.[16] Tsarist Russia had a policy of eliminating the traditional Circassian "Aul". This policy was taken to the extreme by the Soviets during a collectivisation campaign in the 1930s. Nearly all "Aul" were abolished; their inhabitants moved to large villages where they were integrated with other ethnic groups like the Ossetians. [17] In the Soviet Union, Circassians built houses

16. Kubishev, Dwellings and Villages of the Caucasus Nations.

17. Richmond, The Circassian Genocide.

(Previous page)

Figure 5 & 6.
Photos of the documentation work by architect and professor Kamal Jalouqa in Jordan [Source: Private Files of Professor Kamal Jalouqa]

with some similarities to the "Wuna". However, living in extended family compounds and multi-story dwelling started to emerge.
Circassian refugees in the Middle East have built villages in Jordan, Syria, and Palestine. The architecture of those villages was affected by the local context. In Jordan, for example, when first arrived, Circassians took shelter inside the caves of the old Roman ruins of Amman and Jerash. After feeling safe to settle, they started building villages on the land distributed to them by the Ottomans authorities. During the construction process, they used some of the stones from Roman ruins to layout their settlements. The village layout was influenced by the use of the land in agriculture, and the division process by the Ottomans. The ownership of the land was given to each household (i.e. it was not collective as it used to be in the Caucasus).

Additionally, land-separations (i.e. fences) were used to divide the land into plots and on each plot a house was built. As a result, the Circassian settlement did stand out in the landscape of the region, because their organisations were different from the Arab settlements. The Arab village had a centralised quarter for houses in a compact form and an expansion of the agricultural land outside the village. While the Circassian settlement was divided as a house-plot next to another; each plot included an individual house and the agricultural farm attached to it. Besides, using carts to transport their goods affected the spatial layout of their villages. The roads between the houses were wider than in the other Arab settlements in the region.

As for the formation of the dwelling "Wuna", the rectangular dwelling with a roll of several rooms open to the outside was the main layout of the Circassian houses in all areas. The roofs of the houses built in both Syria and Palestine were steeper; while the roofs of the houses built in the desert of Jordan were mostly flat. The building materials remained to be mud and clay in Jordan; however, stone dwellings started to appear in Syria and Palestine using local stones available in the areas they settled in. Further influences of local construction can be seen through the details of windows and the use of brick materials in roofs. Moreover, the wattle fencing and the "T" decoration were present in many photos of Circassian houses in those various locations.
As identified, the key elements of the Circassian dwelling "Adyghe Wuna" gave an insight into what had and had not changed in the building traditions in each period and each location. Generally, similar trends in the building traditions can be seen in the Circassian houses in Syria, Palestine

and Jordan. Building traditions of the Circassians remained expressive of the Circassian culture, despite the immigration of the Circassians into a different environmental and cultural context in the diaspora. The unique traditional characteristics of the Circassian architecture remained present. The ethnographically defined elements of the "Adyghe Wuna", such as the fireplace, the wood construction of the roof, the rectangular layout and the general structure of the village, were present in Circassian villages in the Middle East. In summary, it is possible to say that the origins of the building forms and construction methods of the Circassian settlements in the Middle East lay in the Caucasus (Figure 7).

Figure 7.
Photos of the ruins of Circassian houses in Bereka, the only remaining Circassian village in the Golan Heights of Syria [Source: Private Files of Architect Amjad Alkoud]

Knowledge in Motion

As mentioned in the introduction, it is assumed that the different forms of vernacular architecture are direct correspondence to their local environments.[18] Therefore, understanding the design means analysing the location. However, the Circassian vernacular architecture had presented a sense of out of place adaptivity. In order to understand the vernacular architecture by the Circassian, another approach has to be taken. I tried to combine both tangible architectural space and intangible elements of culture and history with the aims of demonstrating contextualised information and capturing details that are hard to determine through the traditional process of analysis. In the context of migration, the Circassians did not have a collective vision to preserve their architectural heritage.

18. Heath. Vernacular Architecture and Regional Design.

The Circassian architecture was a distinguished cultural practice that evolved organically from everyday human practices and interactions with the surrounding environment. The Circassian vernacular architecture (i.e. "Wuna") was found in a different context from its original terrain due to what was passed on from one generation to the next in relation to collective technical know-how, high construction skills, social culture of collaboration in the building process, and collective culture of space ownership (Figure 8). These results show that the adaptation of intangible knowledge was a key component of the Circassian vernacular architecture. This case study shows the importance of drawing a better representation of the vernacular architecture based on the knowledge of what is culturally generative and dynamic rather than environmentally determined only; such an approach would have a positive impact on how architects understand the vernacular production of space today. While the challenges of migration and cultural or climate change will further transform the architectural spaces into spaces of physical and social exchange between different parts of the world, this will encourage architects to consider how to exchange knowledge between various locations and various cultures. The transformation of the Circassian vernacular architecture proves that vernacular knowledge can be borrowed and appropriated from one location to another. When adopted in new contexts, old techniques can merge and mutate to generate new ones that break out of the narrative of locality and identity.

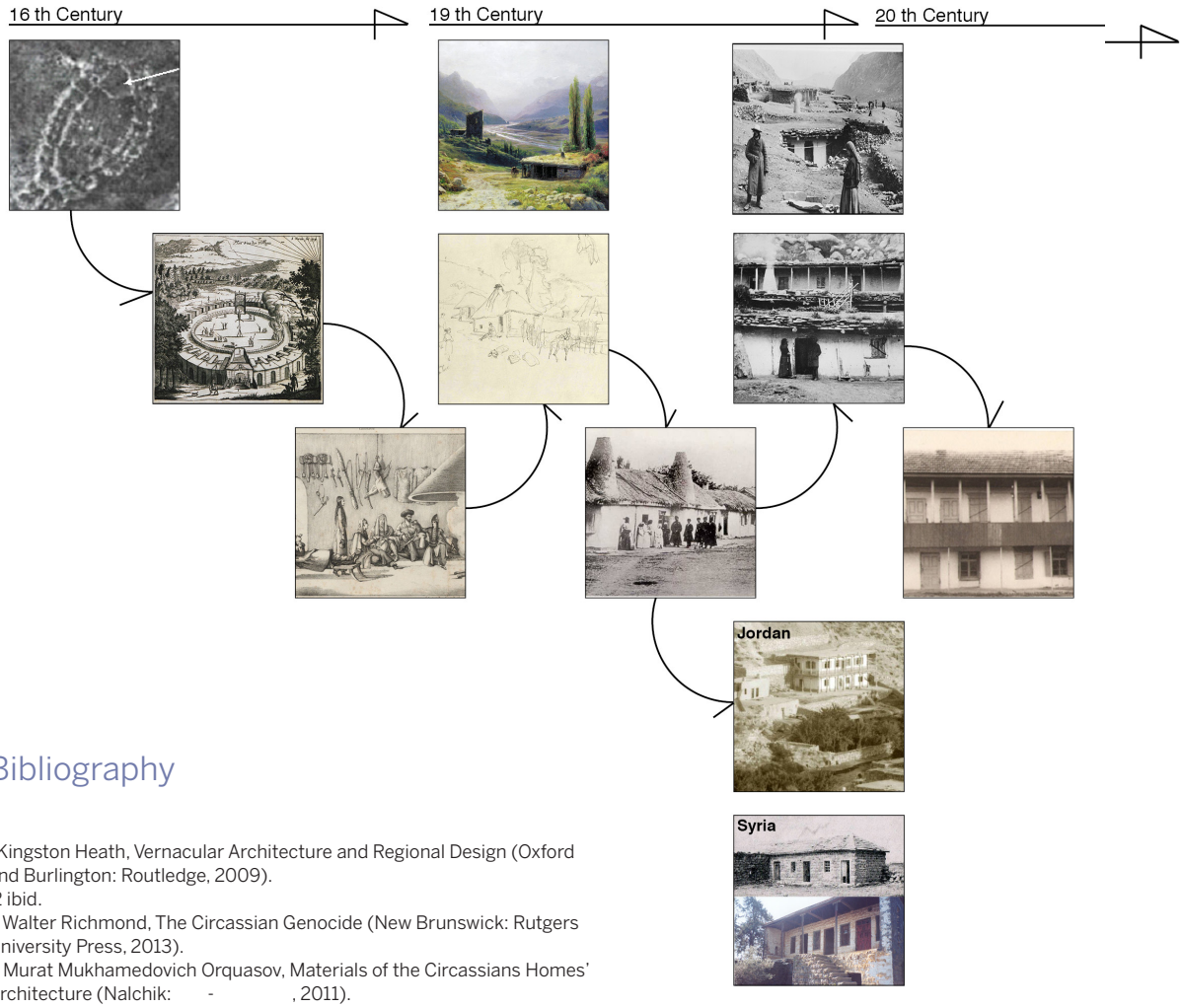


Figure 8.
Illustrative timeline of the progression of the Circassian Architecture

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