

Barrio de Viviendas (Neighbourhood of Dwellings)



[1] Among the Alcazaba's most outstanding elements is the Barrio de Viviendas (Neighbourhood of Dwellings), which is currently not open to visitors due to the fragility of the remains and the narrowness of the area. These are very uniform vestiges that date back to the 11th century, with no other buildings constructed on top of them. They are a perfect example of the advanced degree of civilization achieved by the Islamic urbanism of those times, with streets following straight lines, bent entrances, houses full of intimate spaces built around a central courtyard, very well organised, with independent sanitation, and rainwater collection that drained into culverts, which also collected waste from toilets and evacuated everything outside the enclosure.

The Barrio de Viviendas is also referred to as the Barrio Castrense (Military Neighbourhood) because of its similarity with the area that exists in the interior of the Alhambra's Alcazaba, although the latter is much poorer in terms of what has been preserved, and is later in date than that of Malaga's Alcazaba, dating back to the 13th century. The area is very small, and is divided into five small blocks with two straight narrow streets at right angles, in the form of a "T" and an "L", as is seen in Muslim urban design. It is bordered by two narrow streets that separate it from the walls, forming a wall-walk. The access was protected by very narrow openings, just one metre wide, with double-leaf doors, which when open were embedded in a gap in the wall, allowing them to stand flush against the wall, leaving more space. The houses have almost no foundations, but were built directly on the rock, which in some cases was shaped to build the homes. Both the interior streets and the wall-walk are paved with large slabs of fossiliferous stone.

There are nine houses in total. We are not sure whether one belonged exclusively to the neighbourhood or formed part of the palace. It is currently occupied by the Alcazaba's Restoration Workshop and is built around a square courtyard below which is a beautiful cistern of almost 25 m², built with barrel vaults on two arches, which

occupies more than half of the courtyard. During the reconstruction designed to give a use to this house, it was decided to create a building with a single floor in the form of a "U", because the original remains did not allow for a larger reconstruction in terms of height in this area adjacent to the palace, which, as we have already seen, also appeared to have been well-cleared.

Given the poor quantity of remains that appeared in the majority of the Nasrid Palace, it was a very pleasant surprise to find the Barrio de Viviendas intact and with so many original remains. On the old plans the area appeared as orchards and was certainly abandoned by the occupants due to the complicated nature of its access, at the highest end of the fortress and totally surrounded by walls.

Two other large dwellings, each of more than 180 m², which were not reconstructed in the 1970 intervention, present the same distribution as the other houses in the area: bent entry in order to preserve intimacy, a central courtyard, with culverts for rainwater collection, rooms opening onto the courtyard, with pavements and plinths plastered and painted in almagra (a dark ochre) and a cornered off latrine, with its drainage culvert taking the waste outside the enclosure. This is important because, like the rest of the fortress, the Barrio de Viviendas sits on rock, which would have made it very difficult to dig the cesspits that were very common in the houses of the city. This provided quality of life to the inhabitants. All the houses had their own separate latrine; in several of them the quality of the original remains has revealed that they possessed a window that gave them light and ventilation.

Abundant remains were found of the other six houses (85, 82, 80, 52, 52 and 37 m²), and this prompted the efforts made to preserve them, especially the decorative plinths, and they were included in an intervention made by the architect Rafael Manzano Martos in 1970. He gave them a second floor, since several of them featured remains of a very narrow and steep staircase which climbed up to a possible upper floor or roof terrace. Remains of cupboards and other spaces were also found, because in this area the original remains, which were never built over, came to a height of between 0.50 and 1.50 metres. It has been frequently discussed whether it was appropriate to have given the houses sloped roofs, as was done in this intervention, or if it would have been more appropriate and correct to give them flat rooftop terraces. Currently, there is work going on to protect the larger houses, without rebuilding them.

In some cases, the courtyards of the houses are paved with reused marble placed upside down. In the area of the baths a large fragment of marble slab was found, carved with 10th century caliphate arabesque decoration. The floor of the rooms was covered with a layer of lime mortar dyed with almagra (ochre), and decorative plinths were also found in the rooms and in the streets, also painted in almagra. The Barrio de Viviendas dates to the 11th century, and the plinths (from the dated texts that could be seen) and the decorations have been dated to the 12th century, to the Almohad period, since they would almost certainly have been renovated.

The last of the houses was affected by a remodelling or strengthening of the Torre del Homenaje (Keep) in the 14th or 15th century, which intersected the wall-walk and occupied one of the rooms.

The Barrio de Viviendas is completed by a small bathing area, next to the larger houses, with all necessary services, woodshed, boiler, toilet and the bathing room itself, which must have been supplied by water from the cistern that is next to it.

Dr Rafael Puertas Tricas estimated that some 50 people may have lived here, obviously linked in some way to serving those in power; in a few cases they may have been simple servants, with relatives or those with roles related to the governance of the fortress occupying the larger houses.

[1] The information presented in these texts was extracted from the book written by Fanny de CARRANZA SELL, *Alcazaba de Málaga, Colección Domus Aurea, Ediciones Esirtu, Malaga, 2010.*

