The Alhambra is famed for its beautiful site, commanding views of the fertile Granada plain and the snowy Sierra Nevadas, and for its architecture, the fourteenth-century Nasrid palaces of Comares and the Lions (Palacio de Comares and Palacio de los Leones), as well as the Renaissance palace of Charles V (r. 1516–56). Linked with this renown are efforts to explain how those structures were occupied, a critical concern given the Alhambra’s sitting in a climate of extremes. While there has been much speculation about this issue, the architecture itself reveals a great deal. The Nasrid palaces illustrate a wealth of passive strategies to cope with climate, providing insight into how the palaces were inhabited and the lifestyles they reflect. The Alhambra’s later occupation by the Roman Catholic conquerors who came to inhabit Granada is a counterpoint, highlighting salient Nasrid palace features. Studying how the Alhambra was used by two successive and competing cultures leads to a better understanding of Nasrid architecture itself, as well as of the reasons for Charles V’s construction of his “new quarters” and Renaissance palace.

When the Nasrids won control of Granada, the Alhambra was greatly expanded as a royal precinct. The focus became the Comares and Lions palaces, which were constructed during the reigns of Yusuf I (r. 1333–54) and Muhammad V (r. 1354–59 and 1362–91), respectively. These works define a phase of intense construction during the Nasrids’ 260-year rule, and the palaces were the dynasty seat until their 1492 surrender to Queen Isabella I of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon, commonly known as the Catholic Monarchs (r. 1474–1516). Isabella and Ferdinand added the Comares and Lions palaces to their other Spanish residences and essentially inhabited them as they were, but when their grandson, Charles V, rose to power in 1516, he had to balance his charge to preserve the Nasrid palaces with other concerns, such as his larger, more cosmopolitan court and greater status as Holy Roman Emperor. His new palace, on which construction began in 1533, was conceived as a more appropriate residence for his visits to Granada; “new quarters” were built for use until the palace was completed.

The Alhambra’s tangled past is the result of distinct, overlapping cultures, each with its own architectural vocabulary. It is necessary to address not only the Nasrids’ Comares and Lions palaces, but also the question of how those structures were occupied and found lacking by Charles V. Linked with these issues is Granada’s climate: winter–summer temperature swings, ranging from -13 to +43 degrees Celsius, demand consideration. The Nasrids themselves recognized these severe conditions, as did those who followed them. As early as 1600, Luis del Mármol considered climatic issues in relation to the habitation of the palaces, writing that the Comares Palace contained the “summer rooms,” while the Lions Palace was “where the sultans lived in winter.” Although there is no architectural basis for this summer and winter dichotomy, Mármol’s outlook has nonetheless been consecrated, repeated through the centuries. Other speculations—such as the suggestion of a Nasrid “winter palace” razed for the Palace of Charles V, itself completed over the course of four hundred years, shrouding architectural intentions and leaving questions about its potential occupation—further complicate serious discussion.

The efforts to explain how these palaces were inhabited, however, reveal the issue’s import. With only scant documentation most references to the Alhambra’s inhabitation are anecdotal and have not been subject to rigorous analysis. Even with the Nasrid Alhambra’s
continuities with other architectural traditions, it has no existing parallels on the same scale, pre-dating or contemporary, that provide clues as to how it was occupied. The data gathered while monitoring some key rooms of the Comares and Lions palaces during both summer and winter illustrate the effectiveness of Nasrid passive environmental strategies, suggesting various occupation patterns and adding to the general discussion of Nasrid architecture. Monitoring the Renaissance palace is not possible because it houses offices and a museum, but by studying it and the “new quarters” through other means, as well as by examining how the conquerors occupied the Nasrid palaces, certain issues become readily apparent. One sees that despite cultural differences, both the Nasrids and those who succeeded them used, in the broadest sense, similar strategies in designing and inhabiting spaces, although they applied them in profoundly different ways.

THE NASRID PALACES OF THE ALHAMBRA

Like other peoples, the Nasrids coped with climate through the use of seasonal wardrobes and room furnishings such as tapestries and rugs, dressing themselves and arraying their rooms to maximize comfort. Braziers, with the warmth of burning embers in winter, and pools and basins, with their evaporative cooling effect in summer, were additional measures to moderate temperature. In addition to these interventions, which only help to temper the environment, Nasrid rulers had palaces throughout the region, where they could enjoy the benefits of different environs. This is seen in the Generalife, a summer retreat with surrounding gardens and greenery, only slightly uphill from the Alhambra palaces, yet far removed from the precinct’s confines and dense building mass (fig.1).

Besides traveling to more seasonal locations or moderating a room’s habitability, the Nasrids sought...