Due to its enclosed form that hides and protects the internal parts, the courtyard house is identified tout court with Islamic culture. This culture has put at the centre of its philosophy the protection of the family and the separation of women from public affairs. With a few exceptions, the large majority of traditional urban Islamic fabrics adopt a type related to the enclosure. Actually, a careful examination of the walled Islamic cities would record the presence of more elementary forms of dwelling next to the large and hairy dars. Those are simple one-room houses with a unique access on the main front that provides air and light to the interior. These elementary units are either the residual of rural types or abusive invasions of leftover public spaces of the city; they are in any case typological variations. They are called alwe at Algiers, for instance, where they rise two levels above the ground. These mono-cellular types once aggregated in series have generated the row house type in the western medieval cities. In the Islamic cities, on the contrary, they have always shown a marginal and disaggregated character.

Due to the limited space of this essay, these minimal types will be out of consideration.

Studies of the courtyard house rest on an ever-present ambiguity that tends to perpetuate the image of a generic and universal type, indifferent to the site and immutable over time. However, the work of Orientalists and Arabists, celebrating the courtyard as the heart of the dars, of the extended family, has muddied the waters in architectural terms. Satisfied with generic symbolic and functional virtues, they have omitted structural and typological components that are essential to the full appreciation of the courtyard house. They have failed to recognize the historical phases which mark the change of the type and its various translations in different geographical locations.

In the following passage Vittorio Gregotti underscores the tectonic importance of the courtyard as an architectural act par excellence,
“the enclosure not only establishes a specific relationship with a specific place but is the principle by which a human group states its very relationship with nature and the cosmos. In addition, the enclosure is the form of the thing; how it presents itself to the outside world; how it reveals itself.” Given the fact that the archetype courtyard house represents a primordial act of enclosure and construction, it is senseless to establish primogeniture for something that is as essential to mankind as the wheel. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider that every cultural region developed shelter and enclosure along different lines, through the choice of a specific elementary cell or by addressing the typological process in a specific direction.

This chapter seeks to describe the typological processes inherent in the evolution of the Mediterranean “Islamic” courtyard house with reference to the forces intrinsic to the building plot. It will also discuss the complex problems found at the level of the aggregation of building types and the accumulation of the courtyard house into the characteristic Middle Eastern city.

The Courtyard House

In the typological history of the courtyard house there was a critical moment when in a precursor an area around a mono-cellular unit was marked off by an enclosing wall. After that, the enclosing wall became a reference point, with an aggregation of more cells around a central space. Unlike the side-by-side placement of serial cells, the enclosure simultaneously suggests the final form of the courtyard house and emphasizes its inward looking content.

Much has been written about the sacred significance of the courtyard house. For example, it has been suggested that the courtyard of an Arab house evokes the Garden of Eden. Gottfried Semper associated the enclosure with a southern Mediterranean agricultural society that must struggle to coax a harvest from a grudging soil and