

Original Research Article

Phenomenological Comparison of Traditional Iranian and Iraqi Houses Based on Gaston Bachelard's Theories

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Abstract

Problem statement: In traditional architecture, the house is not merely a place of dwelling but also a space in which human lived experience, memory, imagination, intimacy, and sense of belonging are formed. From this perspective, Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological approach, particularly the concepts developed in "The Poetics of Space", provides a framework for understanding the house as a lived and meaningful space. However, the experience of space in different architectural traditions is shaped by cultural, social, and climatic contexts, and phenomenological concepts cannot be applied uniformly without taking these differences into account. Accordingly, the central problem of this study is to examine how the spatial elements and organization of traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses can be interpreted through Bachelard's phenomenological concepts, and how the cultural and climatic differences between these two contexts influence the lived experience and perception of domestic space.

Research objective: The present study aims to examine and compare the formation of spatial experience in traditional courtyard houses in Iran and traditional houses in Baghdad. It analyzes such dimensions as spatial intimacy, memory, imagination, privacy, dwelling, and the relationship between interior and exterior spaces based on Bachelard's ideas, while also seeking to identify the potentials and limitations of this theoretical framework for a comparative reading of traditional Iranian and Iraqi architecture.

Research method: The research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach and a comparative method. Its data were collected through the study of documents, written sources, theoretical texts, and selected examples of traditional houses in Iran and Baghdad. The selected cases were analyzed through Bachelard's phenomenological concepts, with particular attention to the cultural, social, and climatic contexts of the two architectural traditions.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that both architectural traditions employ elements such as central courtyards, controlled lighting, transitional spaces, and spatial hierarchies to create an intimate and meaningful experience of dwelling. Nevertheless, the quality and meaning of this experience differ across the two contexts. In traditional Iranian houses, elements such as *orsi* windows, beyond their climatic function, contribute to the experience of light, color, view, and imagination; whereas *mashrabiya* in traditional Baghdadi houses is more closely associated with privacy, visual control, and the regulation of the relationship between interior and exterior spaces. Moreover, spaces such as *sardab* and other shaded areas demonstrate that the lived experience of the house cannot be explained solely through a poetic reading of space; rather, climatic conditions, social patterns, and culturally specific modes of dwelling must also be taken into consideration. Therefore, Bachelard's ideas offer considerable potential for understanding the subjective and lived dimensions of traditional houses in the Middle East. Their application, however, requires a comparative and critical reading that regards the phenomenological experience of space as emerging from the interaction between architectural features and their cultural, social, and climatic contexts.

Keywords: *Phenomenology of architecture, Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, Traditional Iranian houses, Traditional Iraqi houses, memory, Lived experience, Dwelling*

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Introduction and Problem Statement

In the architectural traditions of the Middle East, the house is not merely a place of residence, but also a realm in which human relationships, collective memory, lived experience, and the representation of cultural values are formed. In this regard, traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses, characterized by complex spatial structures, introverted organization, central courtyards, and diverse systems for regulating light and privacy, constitute prominent examples of the relationship between architectural form and culturally embedded ways of life (Memarian & Sadoughi, 2011). These houses have evolved over centuries through interaction with climatic, social, and religious conditions; consequently, their study can reveal deeper dimensions of the experience of dwelling.

Among the theoretical approaches concerned with the experience of space, architectural phenomenology occupies a particularly significant position. In “The Poetics of Space”, Gaston Bachelard (1958/1994, 3–20) regards the house as one of the fundamental realms in which human imagination, memory, and identity are formed. From his perspective (ibid., 30-59), domestic spaces acquire meaning through lived experience, while elements such as the room, corner, cellar, staircase, and roof can play a role in shaping the inner world of the human being. Bachelard (ibid., 72) emphasizes that the house is a realm of dreaming, memory, and a sense of belonging, and famously writes:

“The house, more than the landscape, is a psychic state”.

Despite the importance of Bachelard’s thought in studies of architectural phenomenology, a fundamental question concerns the extent to which his concepts can be effectively applied to the analysis of non-Western architectural traditions, particularly the traditional houses of Iran and Iraq. Although certain characteristics of these houses can be interpreted through concepts such as intimacy, privacy, memory, and poetic dwelling, the climatic, cultural, and social differences between the two architectural traditions may give rise to distinct spatial experiences that do not necessarily correspond fully to a Bachelardian interpretation in all cases (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, 17–28).

Accordingly, this study seeks to examine traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses within a comparative framework by employing Bachelard’s phenomenological approach. The aim of the study is not merely to identify manifestations of Bachelardian concepts in these houses, but also to assess the degree of correspondence, difference, and, in some cases, divergence between theory and architectural experience in the two cultural contexts under investigation.

Research Question

1. To what extent can the spatial elements of traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses be interpreted through Bachelard’s phenomenological concepts, such as intimacy, memory, imagination, and dwelling?
2. How do the cultural and climatic differences between the two architectural traditions affect the lived experience of space and the meaning of dwelling?
3. Which architectural elements demonstrate the greatest, and which the least, degree of correspondence with Bachelard’s theoretical framework?
4. What potential does a comparative study of traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses offer for rethinking the concept of the “poetics of space”?

Literature Review

Phenomenological approaches to residential architecture have attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent decades, particularly following the publication of Gaston Bachelard’s “The Poetics of Space”. Bachelard (1958/1994) reconceptualizes architectural space not merely as a physical structure, but as a realm of dreaming, memory, and lived intimacy. He writes that “the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind”. The concept of “topoanalysis” the systematic study of the intimate sites of lived experience that he introduced has subsequently become an influential theoretical framework in architectural phenomenology.

Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980, 17-28) continued this line of inquiry in “Genius Loci”, emphasizing the existential meaning of place. He argued that architecture should provide the conditions for meaningful dwelling

and suggested that traditional houses often fulfill this need more effectively than modern buildings.

With regard to Iranian architecture, Memarian & Brown (2003) examined the spatial structure of traditional Iranian courtyard houses and demonstrated how climatic, cultural, and symbolic factors intersect in their design. They emphasized that the introverted character of Iranian houses is not merely a response to environmental requirements, but also reflects Islamic concepts of privacy and the importance of family relationships (Memarian & Brown, 2003, 34–42).

Similarly, in the context of traditional Iraqi architecture, Al-Haidary analyzed the spatial organization and socio-cultural values of traditional Baghdad houses. His research highlighted the multiple functions of central courtyards, mashrabiyas, and thresholds as both climatic and symbolic elements (Al-Haidary, 2008, p. 118).

Despite the growing body of phenomenological research in architecture, a considerable portion of existing studies has primarily focused on applying theoretical concepts to architectural examples, while paying less attention to the limitations, differences, and possibilities of critically reinterpreting such theories (Pallasmaa, 2005, 9–17). Moreover, in the field of traditional Iranian and Iraqi architecture, relatively few comparative studies have simultaneously examined similarities and differences in the lived experience of space across these two cultural contexts.

Accordingly, the present study, while drawing upon Bachelard's concepts, seeks to assess both the potentials and limitations of this theoretical framework when confronted with two distinct architectural traditions. Through this comparative approach, the study aims to contribute to a more critical understanding of the concept of the poetics of space¹.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the ideas of Gaston Bachelard, particularly those presented in "The Poetics of Space". In this work, Bachelard (1958/1994, 3-20) moves beyond purely geometric and functional approaches to space and emphasizes lived experience, imagination, memory,

and the affective dimensions of dwelling. From his perspective, the house constitutes one of the most fundamental centers in the formation of the human inner world: a space in which memories, dreams, and feelings of belonging accumulate and through which the experience of dwelling acquires meaning. Bachelard (ibid., 72) explicitly states:

"The house, more than the landscape, is a psychic state".

Accordingly, the house is examined not merely as a physical reality, but as a psychological and phenomenological state. Within such an approach, architectural elements acquire meaning only when they are understood within the context of human lived experience.

• Intimate immensity

One of the central concepts in Bachelard's thought is "intimate immensity". He (ibid., 184–187) demonstrates how seemingly limited and enclosed spaces can evoke a sense of openness, infinity, and expansiveness in the human mind. This concept is particularly significant for the analysis of traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses, since spaces such as the central courtyard, iwan, roof, and even certain semi-open spaces can generate an experience in which physical limitation does not necessarily entail perceptual limitation.

However, the present study also emphasizes that the experience of "intimate immensity" is not realized in the same manner in all spaces or for all users and may undergo transformations under the influence of cultural, climatic, and social contexts.

• Topoanalysis

Bachelard (ibid. 17) introduces the concept of "topoanalysis" as the study of the intimate sites of lived experience. In his view:

"A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability".

Topoanalysis seeks to understand the affective, mnemonic, and imaginative layers of space and is therefore a suitable tool for studying traditional houses. Nevertheless, the present study does not employ topoanalysis as a means of a priori confirming Bachelardian concepts; rather, it uses it as an interpretive framework for assessing the degree of correspondence or discrepancy between theory and architectural experience.

• Dwelling, place, and lived experience

Bachelard's ideas overlap in many respects with those of Martin Heidegger. In his essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking". Heidegger (1954/1971, p. 145) regards dwelling as a fundamental mode of human being-in-the-world and argues that architecture should provide the conditions through which this dwelling can acquire meaning.

Continuing this intellectual tradition, Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980, 18-23) developed the concept of "Genius Loci", demonstrating how places embody identity, memory, and meaning. This perspective provides a basis for comparatively examining traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses as two distinct modes of realizing dwelling.

• Body, perception, and the sensory experience of space

Juhani Pallasmaa (2005) further develops the phenomenological understanding of space by emphasizing the multisensory experience of architecture. From his perspective, architectural experience is not achieved through vision alone; rather, all human senses participate in the perception of space. This approach is particularly relevant to the analysis of architectural elements such as the mashrabiya, orsi, thresholds, light, shadow, and the material textures of traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses.

• Potentials and limitations of the Bachelardian framework

Although Bachelard's concepts make it possible to understand many dimensions of the experience of dwelling in traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses, this theoretical framework cannot fully account for all the social, historical, and cultural layers of space. Certain architectural elements may evoke not only intimacy and imagination but also feelings of ambiguity, restriction, or even anxiety. Therefore, while drawing upon Bachelardian concepts, the present study adopts a critical approach and seeks to examine differences, tensions, and varying degrees in the realization of "the poetics of space" within the two architectural traditions under investigation.

Accordingly, the theoretical framework of this study is

not merely a tool for matching architectural examples with Bachelard's theory; rather, it provides a basis for a critical dialogue between phenomenological concepts and the diverse experiences of dwelling embodied in traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses.

Phenomenological Interpretation of Vernacular Houses in Iran and Iraq from a Bachelardian Perspective

• The central courtyard: The phenomenological core of traditional Iranian and Iraqi Houses

In the traditional architecture of Iran and Iraq, the central courtyard constitutes the core of spatial organization and the center of the inhabitants' lived experience. In both traditions, the courtyard functions as an intermediary between the private realm of the house and the external world, providing a setting for family interactions, everyday rituals, and the formation of collective memories. This quality corresponds to the concept of "topoanalysis" in Gaston Bachelard's thought, through which the house is understood as a collection of accumulated images and memories that generates a sense of stability and belonging in human beings (Bachelard, 1958/1994, 17 & 18).

In his discussion (ibid., 183-186) of "intimate immensity," Bachelard demonstrates how confined spaces can evoke an experience of openness and infinity in the human mind. The central courtyard in traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses exemplifies such an experience: although enclosed, it opens onto the sky and, through the presence of natural light and the rhythms of temporal change, creates a sense of connection with a world extending beyond its physical boundaries.

In traditional Iranian houses, particularly those in Kashan and Yazd, the central courtyard is characterized by a clearly articulated geometric order. The combination of the pool, symmetrical garden beds, *iwans*, and spatial axes creates a sense of visual balance and tranquility. The presence of water in the central pool, in addition to its climatic function, lends the space a contemplative and imaginative quality. In "Water and Dreams", Bachelard (ibid., 12-15) considers water an

element capable of evoking memory, imagination, and contemplation. From this perspective, the reflection of light and the image of the sky on the surface of the pool produce a poetic experience of stillness and introspection (Fig. 1-1).

In traditional Baghdad houses, the central courtyard likewise plays a significant role in the spatial organization of the dwelling. However, differences in climatic conditions and the dense urban fabric have resulted in courtyards that are generally more compact and function-oriented (Al-Haidari, 2001, 215–225). The presence of mashrabiya and semi-open spaces surrounding the courtyard, in addition to moderating environmental conditions, provides a means of establishing a controlled relationship between the private interior and the surrounding environment. Consequently, whereas the Iranian courtyard tends to evoke an experience characterized more strongly by contemplation and retreat, the Baghdad courtyard possesses a more social and dynamic quality (Fig. 1-2). Nevertheless, the phenomenological experience of the courtyard is not identical in the two traditions, and it cannot be regarded universally as embodying a poetic quality. In Iranian houses, geometric order, the presence of water, and spatial quietness provide favorable conditions for the emergence of a contemplative experience. In Baghdad houses, by contrast, urban density, the relatively smaller dimensions of courtyards,

and the predominance of climatic and functional considerations may, in some cases, diminish the intensity of this poetic experience. In other words, the quality of “intimate immensity” is not realized to the same degree in all examples and under all circumstances.

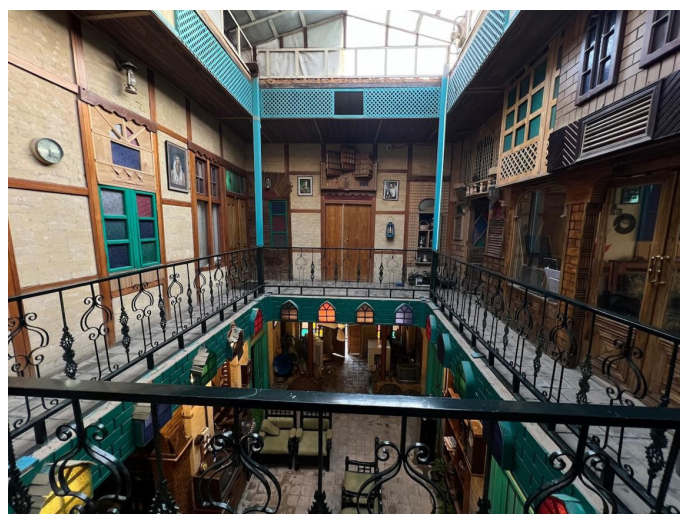
Thus, the central courtyard can be regarded as one of the architectural elements in both traditions that most closely corresponds to Bachelard’s concept of “poetic dwelling”. Nevertheless, cultural, social, and climatic differences mean that the lived experience of this space is realized in distinct ways in Iran and Iraq. The central courtyard in traditional Iranian houses functions as a space of “intimate vastness” (Bachelard, 1958/1994, 183–186), where light, water, and everyday dwelling become interwoven. Traditional Baghdadi Houses and the Central Courtyard

• Entrance, *hashti*, and threshold: The phenomenology of the transition from outside to inside

In the traditional architecture of Iran and Iraq, entering the house is a gradual and multilayered process that shapes the lived experience of dwelling. Spatial hierarchies, the winding of circulation paths, and intermediary spaces between the public and private realms reflect the importance of privacy, seclusion, and psychological preparation for entering the inner domain of the house. This characteristic corresponds to what Gaston Bachelard (*ibid.*, 218–221) describes as “zones of



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(2)

Fig. 1. (1). The central courtyard of the Tabatabaei House (Kashan). Photo: Seif Haq, 1991/ (2). Courtyard view of a traditional house in Baghdad, Iraq. Source: Al Ani, 2011.

intimacy” and intermediary spaces between the external and internal worlds.

In traditional Iranian houses, particularly those in Kashan and Yazd, the entrance consists of several elements, including the entrance portal, doorway, hashti, and corridor. This spatial organization prevents an abrupt transition into the private realm and creates a gradual movement from the external world toward the tranquil interior of the house (Memarian & Brown, 2003, 34–42). As an intermediary space, the hashti serves a functional purpose while also creating an experience of pause, change of direction, and psychological preparation for entering the intimate world of the house. This quality can be related to Bachelard’s conception of the house as a refuge for dreaming (Bachelard, 1958/1994, 6–8) (Fig. 2-1).

In traditional Baghdad houses, the entrance system is likewise based on preserving privacy, although its structure is generally simpler and more compact than that of Iranian examples (Al-Haidari, 2001, 215–225). The indirect configuration of the entrance and its connection to the central courtyard prevent direct visual access from the exterior into the interior, while also facilitating ventilation and the regulation of climatic conditions. Here too, the threshold constitutes a boundary between two distinct realms a boundary that, in Bachelardian terms (Bachelard, 1958/1994, 218–221), can be understood as a site of transition between two existential states (Fig. 2-2).

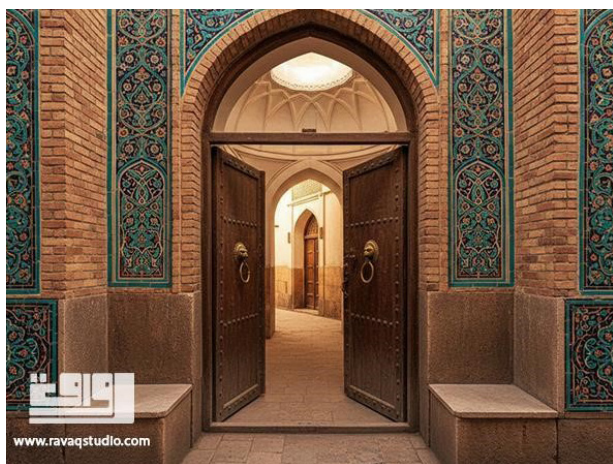
Despite these similarities, the experience of the threshold

is not identical in the two architectural traditions. In Iranian architecture, the presence of the hashti and corridor transforms the process of entry into a gradual and contemplative experience, whereas in many Baghdad houses, constraints arising from urban density and the smaller dimensions of plots have resulted in a simplification of this spatial hierarchy. Consequently, the poetic quality of the threshold is not realized to the same degree in all examples.

From a critical perspective, not every transitional space should necessarily be regarded as poetic. Some entrance elements have been shaped primarily in response to functional, climatic, and cultural requirements rather than as carriers of imaginative or mnemonic meanings. Therefore, although the hashti and threshold in many traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses facilitate an experience characterized by privacy, anticipation, and gradual spatial transition, the intensity of this experience and its poetic quality vary across individual examples.

In this context, Heidegger’s (1954/1971, 145–161) perspective on dwelling is also noteworthy. He argues that dwelling is not merely a matter of inhabiting a building, but rather a mode of being-in-the-world realized through the human relationship with place. From this perspective, the threshold of the house can be understood as the point at which this existential experience begins: the place where the individual separates from the public realm and enters the domain of dwelling.

The entrance, hashti, and threshold in traditional Iranian



(1)



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Fig. 2. (1). The hashti and entrance space of the Tabatabaei House, Kashan, Iran. Source: www.ravaqstudio.com/ (2). The corridor (entrance space and hashti) in a traditional house in Baghdad, Iraq. Source: Warren & Fethi, 1982.

and Iraqi houses possess considerable potential for phenomenological interpretation. Nevertheless, the greater complexity of spatial hierarchies in Iranian examples and their relative simplicity in many Baghdad houses result in different degrees of realization of the concepts of “existential transition” and “poetic dwelling” within a Bachelardian framework.

• Orsi and mashrabiya: Two distinct experiences of light, privacy, and imagination

In the traditional architecture of Iran and Iraq, the orsi and mashrabiya are among the most prominent elements regulating the relationship between the interior space and the external world. Although both elements play a role in preserving privacy, moderating climatic conditions, and controlling light, the spatial experience and phenomenological quality they produce are not identical. This difference provides an opportunity for a critical reconsideration of Bachelard’s theory and demonstrates that similar architectural elements do not necessarily generate the same experience of “the poetics of space”.

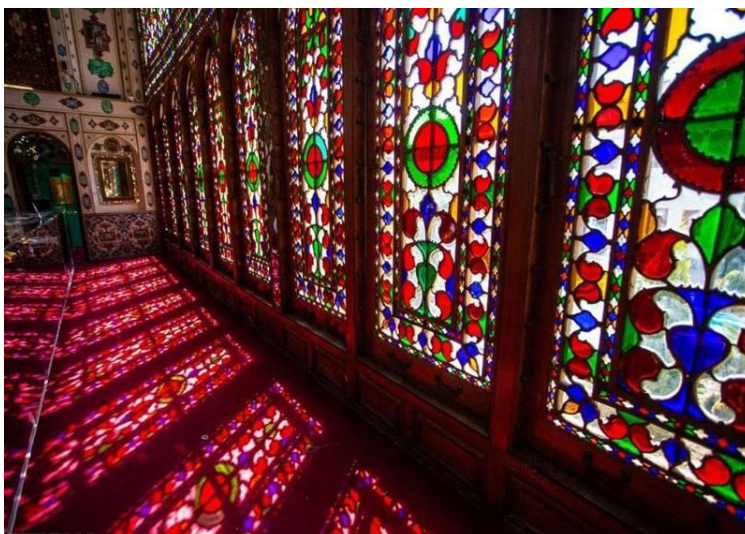
Bachelard (1958/1994, 30-59) emphasizes the role of light, imagination, and poetic images in shaping lived experience and argues that domestic spaces acquire meaning through the interplay of light, memory, and dreams. From this perspective, the window functions as an intermediary between the interior and exterior and as a realm in which imagination can emerge.

In traditional Iranian houses, particularly those in

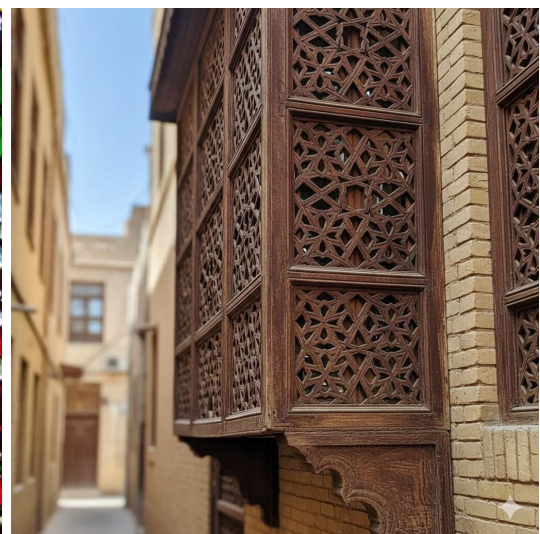
Kashan and Yazd, orsi introduce light into the interior in layered and colorful forms through their colored glass panes and delicate wooden latticework. The reflection of light on interior surfaces, the changing colors throughout the day, and the presence of moving shadows create an imaginative and contemplative atmosphere. Such qualities correspond closely to Bachelard’s (*ibid.*, 183–186) understanding of dreaming and the presence of poetic images in space. Moreover, the interplay of light, water, and color in many Iranian houses produces a multisensory experience, which Juhani Pallasmaa (2005, 40–47) regards as one of the fundamental characteristics of architectural perception (Fig. 3-1).

By contrast, although the mashrabiya in traditional Baghdad houses similarly regulates the relationship between the interior and exterior, it places greater emphasis on visual control, natural ventilation, and the creation of shade than on the interplay of color and imagination (Al-Haidari, 2001, 215–225). The dense wooden latticework of the mashrabiya allows inhabitants to observe the exterior without exposing the private interior of the house to direct view. Consequently, the experience generated by the mashrabiya is more closely associated with protection, privacy, and climatic control than with a dreamlike or imaginative experience (Fig. 3-1).

This difference constitutes one of the most significant points of distinction between the two architectural



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(2)

Fig. 3. (1). The orsi window of the historic Tabatabaei House and the reflection of light and color in the interior space, Kashan. Source: www.irna.ir/ (2). The shanasheel (mashrabiya) in traditional houses of Baghdad, Iraq. Source: Warren & Fethi, 1982, 77.

traditions. While the Iranian orsi, through its colored light and changing visual effects, produces a quality more closely related to Bachelardian notions of imagination and memory, the Iraqi mashrabiya more strongly represents an intelligent response to climatic and social requirements. For this reason, the two elements cannot simply be subsumed under a single, generalized concept of “poetics”.

From a critical perspective, although both the orsi and mashrabiya possess phenomenological potential, the degree to which this potential is realized differs. The orsi, through the presence of light, color, and complex sensory experience, demonstrates greater correspondence with Bachelard's concepts, whereas in the mashrabiya, functional and climatic dimensions tend to predominate over imaginative ones. This suggests that Bachelard's theory, which primarily emphasizes the individual and poetic experience of space, requires greater attention to climatic and social contexts in order to account for all dimensions of traditional Middle Eastern architecture.

From Norberg-Schulz's perspective (1980, 18–23), architectural elements acquire meaning when they are capable of establishing a relationship between human beings and the genius loci, or spirit of place. Accordingly, both the orsi and mashrabiya possess meaning, but this meaning is realized through different forms of experience in the two architectural traditions.

Although the orsi and mashrabiya share certain physical and functional characteristics, the lived experiences they generate are not identical. The Iranian orsi demonstrates the greatest correspondence with Bachelardian concepts of imagination, memory, and dreams, whereas the Iraqi mashrabiya is more closely associated with protection, privacy, and climatic adaptation. Thus, these two elements represent different degrees of realization of “the poetics of space” within the two architectural traditions.

• **Light and shadow: Between dream, tranquility, and ambiguity**

Light and shadow are among the most fundamental elements shaping the experience of space in the traditional architecture of Iran and Iraq. In Gaston Bachelard's thought (1958/1994, 179–186), light is not merely a physical phenomenon but possesses a poetic

quality that is connected to memory, dreams, and the human inner experience. He argues that images of light and darkness constitute part of the realm of imagination and play a role in shaping the lived experience of space. From this perspective, light and shadow are not merely decorative elements but existential components that influence the quality of dwelling.

In traditional Iranian houses, light enters the interior indirectly and in a controlled manner. The central courtyard, orsis, iwans, and limited openings allow light to diffuse gradually throughout the interior at a moderate intensity. The reflection of light in the pool, its passage through colored glass, and the gradual changes in illumination throughout the day create a multilayered and imaginative atmosphere. Such an experience corresponds to Bachelard's understanding (ibid., 180–183) of light as a medium for dreaming and inner tranquility. From Pallasmaa's perspective (2005, 40–47), architecture is likewise not experienced through vision alone; rather, light, shadow, and material together constitute a multisensory and existential experience (Fig. 4-1).

In traditional Baghdad architecture, the role of light and shadow is above all closely intertwined with climatic conditions. The presence of mashrabiya, shading devices, and semi-open spaces transforms the intense light of the exterior environment into a softer and more controlled illumination within the interior (Al-Haidari, 2001, 215–225). In these houses, shadows, in addition to their climatic function, create conditions conducive to comfort, privacy, and repose. From this perspective, shadow is not merely the absence of light but an active element in shaping the experience of dwelling (Fig. 4-1).

Nevertheless, the experience of shadow does not always possess a poetic or tranquil quality. As Bachelard (1958/1994, 35–40) demonstrates in his analysis of the cellar and dark spaces, darkness can evoke not only tranquility but also feelings of ambiguity, isolation, and even anxiety. This aspect can be observed particularly in certain semi-dark spaces, corridors, and subterranean areas of traditional houses. Therefore, the various manifestations of shadow cannot be interpreted as uniformly positive or poetic.

The differences between the two architectural traditions are also significant in this regard. In Iranian houses, the interplay of light and its reflection in water and colored glass reinforces a contemplative and imaginative experience, whereas in Baghdad houses, light and shadow tend to respond more strongly to climatic requirements and thermal comfort than to visual and poetic experience. Consequently, the phenomenological quality of light is not identical in the two traditions, and the degree to which Bachelardian concepts of dream and memory are realized varies accordingly.

From Norberg-Schulz's perspective (1980, 18-23), light is one of the fundamental elements shaping the "genius loci", or spirit of place, and its quality plays a crucial role in the perception of spatial meaning. Nevertheless, the experience of light and shadow is always dependent upon cultural context, environmental conditions, and the inhabitants' ways of life and cannot be reduced to a universal pattern.

In conclusion, light and shadow in traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses possess considerable phenomenological potential, but this potential is not realized to the same degree in every context. While soft light, the reflection of water, and moving shadows can provide a setting for dreams, memory, and repose, deep darkness and semi-ambiguous spaces may also evoke feelings of isolation,

uncertainty, or insecurity. This duality demonstrates that a Bachelardian reading of light and shadow requires attention to diverse and sometimes conflicting lived experiences.

• Stairs: Between functional movement and the vertical experience of space

In Gaston Bachelard's thought (1958/1994, 25-40), the vertical elements of the house occupy a distinctive position. In "The Poetics of Space", he distinguishes between upward and downward movement and argues that the experience of ascending and descending within the house is not merely a physical displacement but is connected to the psychological and imaginative dimensions of human experience. From his perspective, movement toward the upper levels is often associated with a sense of openness, light, and elevation, whereas movement toward lower spaces may evoke depth, memory, and, at times, ambiguity.

In traditional Iranian houses, stairs are generally designed in relation to the central courtyard, iwans, rooftops, and, in some cases, cellars. These stairs are often constructed from local materials and constitute part of the spatial hierarchy of the house (Memarian & Brown, 2003, 34-42). In many houses in Kashan and Yazd, the gradual movement from the courtyard to the iwan, or from the ground floor to the rooftop, produces a transformation in the perception of



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Fig. 4. (1). Light and shadow in the courtyard of the Tabatabaei House, Kashan; a spatial experience between dream, tranquility, and ambiguity. Source: www.depositphotos.com/ (2). Filtered light passing through the mashrabiya of traditional houses in Baghdad. Source: Warren & Fethi, 1982, 77.

space and landscape that can be related to Bachelard's concept of "ascent" (Fig. 5-1).

In traditional Baghdad houses, stairs likewise play an important role in connecting different levels and providing access to *shanasheel* (mashrabiya) and rooftops (Al-Haidari, 2001, 215–225). In many cases, however, the design of stairs is governed more by functional requirements and the physical constraints of the building than by symbolic meanings. Consequently, the spatial experience generated by stairs in Baghdad houses often possesses less explicit phenomenological significance than elements such as the courtyard or mashrabiya (Fig. 5-2).

From a Bachelardian perspective (1958/1994, 25-36), the verticality of the house possesses psychological significance. He regards the attic as a symbol of light and mental order and the cellar as a symbol of the deeper layers of the psyche. In this context, the stair functions as a pathway connecting these different levels. Nevertheless, this interpretation cannot always be fully applied to traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses, since many stairs are designed simply to facilitate circulation and lack prominent symbolic qualities.

This point reveals one of the important limitations of the Bachelardian framework. Although certain vertical paths can generate an experience of openness, anticipation, or gradual discovery, not every staircase necessarily carries poetic meanings. In many examples, users' experiences

of stairs are more closely related to everyday movement and practical function than to imagination or memory.

From the perspective of architectural phenomenology, what gives a staircase meaning is not its mere existence, but the manner in which it relates to other spaces and to the inhabitants' lived experience. When a staircase leads to a new vista, an open rooftop, or a contemplative space, it can acquire phenomenological qualities; when it functions solely as a means of circulation, however, its poetic potential is diminished.

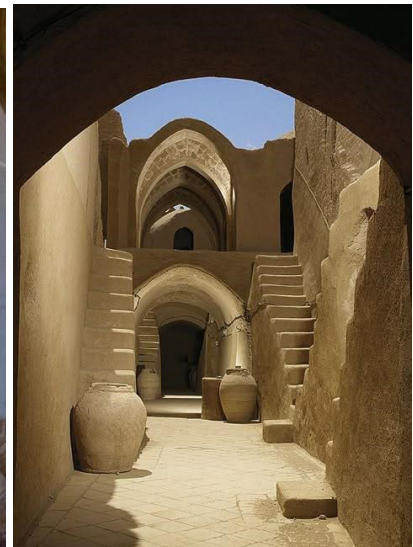
Consequently, compared with elements such as the courtyard, orsi, or iwan, the staircase demonstrates a lower degree of correspondence with Bachelardian concepts. Although the notions of verticality and movement between different spatial levels are significant in Bachelard's thought, their realization in traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses is neither always explicit nor uniform.

• Roof: Lived horizon, openness, and the difference in experience between the two architectural traditions

In Gaston Bachelard's thought, the experience of horizontal spaces oriented toward the sky is associated with concepts such as "intimate immensity" and the desire for openness. In "The Poetics of Space", he (ibid., 183-186) demonstrates that open and elevated spaces can evoke experiences of liberation, contemplation, and imagination, to the extent that the



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Fig. 5. (1). The stairs of the Tabatabaei House, Kashan, Iran. Photo: Mostafa Meraji, 2016/ (2). The staircase in a traditional house in Baghdad, Iraq. Source: Warren & Fethi, 1982.

boundary between external reality and the inner world becomes partially blurred. Within this framework, the roof, as one of the most important horizontal surfaces of the house, possesses a particular capacity to generate an experience situated between “earth” and “sky”.

In traditional Iranian houses, the roof is not merely a functional element covering the building; it is also part of the inhabitants’ everyday life and lived experience. In cities such as Kashan and Yazd, rooftops become spaces for sleeping, conversation, and contemplation on warm summer nights. This human presence within an open space in direct contact with the sky generates an existential experience of openness and tranquility that can be related to Bachelard’s concept of “intimate immensity”. In this context, the roof becomes a place for pause, observing the sky, and experiencing silence (Memarian & Brown, 2003, 34–42) (Fig. 6-1).

By contrast, in traditional Baghdad houses, the roof likewise possesses multiple functions, but its role is more strongly influenced by climatic conditions, urban density, and different patterns of dwelling. Although rooftops are sometimes used for nighttime rest or limited activities, such uses are not as extensive or pronounced as in Iranian examples (Al-Haidari, 2001, 215–225). Consequently, the lived experience of the roof within this tradition is more strongly governed by climatic and functional necessities than by the formation of a sustained contemplative space (Fig. 6-2).

From a phenomenological perspective, the roof can be regarded as a point at which the human body experiences its greatest proximity to the horizon and the sky. This condition makes possible the emergence of a

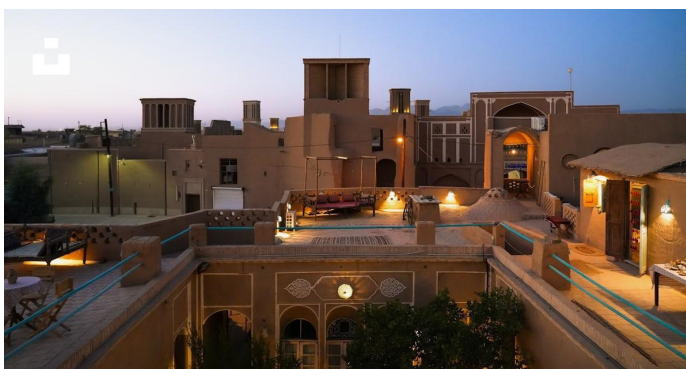
spatial awareness of “being above” and “openness”. Nevertheless, as observed with other architectural elements, this experience is not realized to the same degree in all contexts. In some examples, the roof functions primarily as a technical surface with limited access rather than as a space for poetic dwelling.

From this perspective, the roof, like other elements of traditional architecture, possesses two levels of meaning: one functional and climatic, and the other phenomenological and imaginative. The intensity with which the latter dimension emerges is greater in Iranian houses than in Baghdad examples, although its potential exists within both traditions.

This difference demonstrates that Bachelard’s concept of “intimate immensity” cannot be applied uniformly to all rooftops across the two architectural traditions. Rather, it should be understood as a context-dependent possibility: under certain conditions, it may become an actual experience of openness, while under others, it may remain merely a limited potential.

• **The cellar (Sardab): Spatial depth, memory, and the duality of tranquility and ambiguity**

In the traditional architecture of Iran and Iraq, the cellar is one of the less visible yet highly meaningful spaces within the structure of the lived experience of the house. Generally located below ground level, this space emerged in response to the hot and dry climatic conditions of the region and played an important role in temperature regulation, water storage, and the provision of thermal comfort. From the perspective of architectural phenomenology, however, the cellar is not merely a functional space; rather, it carries



(1)



(2)

Fig. 6. (1). Rooftops of traditional houses in Yazd, Iran. Source: Urban Development and Regeneration Organization of Yazd Municipality/ (2). Rooftops of traditional houses in the old fabric of Baghdad, Iraq. Source: G. Eric and Edith Matson Archive, Library of Congress.

a deeper layer of perceptual, psychological, and imaginative experience.

In his analysis (Bachelard, 1958/1994, 35–40) of spaces of depth, particularly the underground and the cellar, Gaston Bachelard points to a fundamental duality between security and anxiety. In his view, subterranean spaces may simultaneously evoke a sense of refuge, silence, and inwardness, while also generating experiences of ambiguity, darkness, and the unconscious. This duality demonstrates that darkness is not inherently poetic or threatening in human experience; rather, its meaning emerges in relation to lived context and cultural memory.

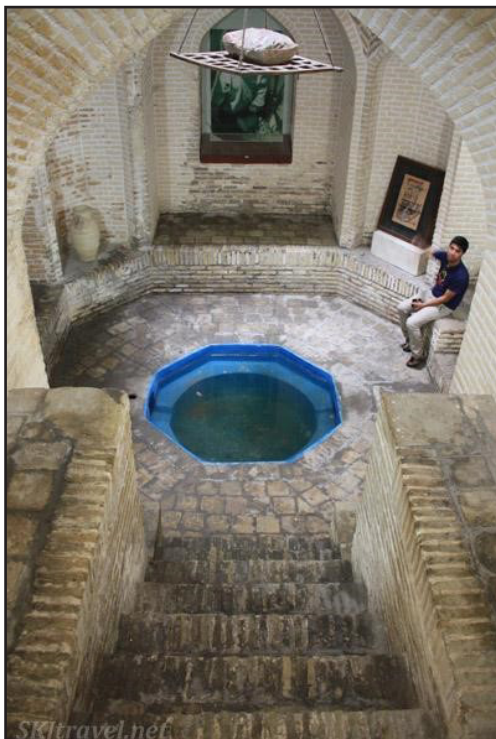
In traditional Iranian houses, cellars were often used as places for resting during the hot season, storing food, and, in some cases, seeking seclusion. Their stable thermal conditions, relative silence, and distance from the bustle of the courtyard could transform these spaces into places of inward reflection and a form of both physical and psychological tranquility. Under such conditions, the cellar may acquire a quality close to that of “poetic seclusion”: a place in which the body

and mind withdraw from the intensity of environmental stimuli, thereby creating the possibility for memory formation and stillness (Fig. 7-1).

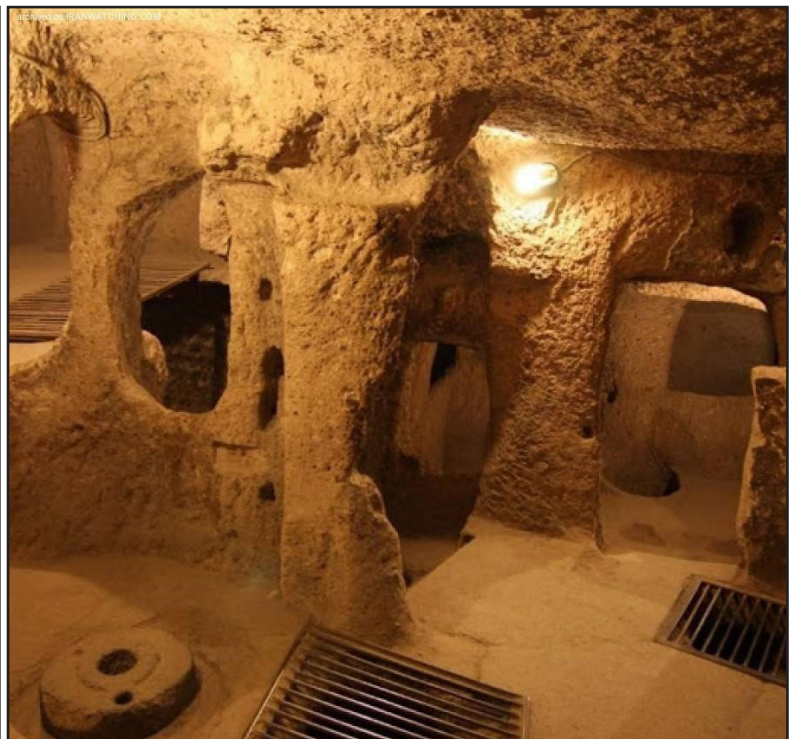
By contrast, in some examples of traditional houses in Baghdad, cellars, where present, were more closely associated with climatic functions and storage, and in many cases they had more restricted access and less frequent human presence (Al-Haidari, 2001, 215–225). As a result, the lived experience of such spaces was less likely to develop into an experience of memory and poetic dwelling and tended to remain primarily at the functional level (Fig. 7-2).

Nevertheless, the cellar should not be regarded either as an inherently poetic space or as one that is exclusively threatening. As Bachelard emphasizes, dark spaces may simultaneously become sources of tranquility and anxiety. Darkness in the cellar may generate a sense of refuge and inwardness, while at the same time producing a certain ambiguity and distance from the external world. The experience of the cellar, therefore, is inherently dual and dependent upon the psychological, cultural, and lived condition of its inhabitants.

The cellar is an ambivalent space that can simultaneously evoke experiences of tranquility and stillness, as well as ambiguity and isolation, at the phenomenological level (Bachelard, 1958/1994, 35–40).



(1)



(2)

Fig. 7. (1) Access and staircase to the sardab in a traditional house in Yazd, Iran. Source: Foruzanmehr, 2015/ (2). Entrance to the sardab in a traditional house in Baghdad. Source: Ghasemi, 2015.

From a critical perspective, the cellar is one of the most significant spaces for revealing the limitations of an exclusively poetic reading of architecture. Unlike the courtyard or the orsi, which are often associated with concepts such as imagination and light, the cellar demonstrates that spatial experience may simultaneously contain contradictory layers: tranquility versus anxiety, seclusion versus isolation, and stillness versus heaviness. In this regard, the cellar, as the “deep space of the house,” provides an opportunity to reconsider the concept of dwelling. Dwelling here is not merely a luminous and imaginative experience; rather, it is a multilayered and sometimes contradictory experience in which darkness plays as significant a role as light in the formation of meaning.

• **Iwan and *shabestan*: Between openness, shadow, and the collective experience of space**

The iwan and shabestan are key elements of traditional Iranian and Iraqi architecture that possess not only spatial and climatic functions but also deeper layers of lived, ritual, and social experience. These two elements, particularly in their relationship to light, shadow, and spatial orientation, facilitate a multilayered experience of dwelling in which the boundaries between private and collective space, interior and exterior, and light and darkness remain in a state of continual suspension.

In Gaston Bachelard's thought (*ibid.*, 218–221), intermediate and semi-open spaces are of particular significance because they enable transitions between different perceptual and existential states. He emphasizes that the experience of space is always formed at the

boundary between inside and outside, and that it is precisely these boundaries that activate the capacities of imagination and memory. From this perspective, the iwan can be regarded as one of the most prominent “threshold spaces” in traditional architecture.

In traditional Iranian houses and buildings, the iwan, as a semi-open space, functions as an intermediary between the courtyard and the interior. Through shade, natural ventilation, and openness toward the courtyard, it enables a simultaneous experience of presence and distance, participation and seclusion. In many cases, the iwan is not merely a transitional space but also a place for pausing, conversation, observation, and even individual contemplation. This quality corresponds closely to Bachelard's notion of “open intimate space,” in which the individual, while remaining present within a collective setting, experiences a form of poetic inwardness (*ibid.*, 183–186) (Fig. 8-1).

In traditional Iraqi architecture, the iwan, in similar or adapted forms, likewise plays an important role in regulating the relationship between interior and exterior. In many examples, however, greater emphasis is placed on its climatic function, particularly the provision of shade and the reduction of heat intensity (Al-Haidari, 2001, 215–225). Consequently, although the spatial experience of the iwan within this tradition retains social and interactive qualities, compared with some Iranian examples, it is less frequently elevated to a level of poetic contemplation and existential pause (Fig. 8-2).

Alongside the iwan, the shabestan, as an interior, deep, and shaded space, offers a different experience



(1)



(2)

Fig. 8. (1). The iwan and courtyard space in the historic Tabatabaei House, Kashan, Iran. Photo: Mehdi Karimi, 2015/ (2). The columned iwan (*talar*) in a traditional house in Baghdad, Iraq. Source: Warren & Fethi, 1982.

of dwelling. Shabestans in mosques and some large traditional houses provided spaces for gathering, worship, conversation, and collective presence. Through limited illumination, repeated columns, and a distinctive spatial rhythm, these spaces create a form of collective inwardness in which silence and communal presence are experienced simultaneously.

From a Bachelardian phenomenological perspective, such spaces can be understood in relation to “meaningful silences” a silence that is not merely the absence of sound but rather a particular quality of presence and contemplation. Nevertheless, unlike entirely individual spaces such as a corner or a room, the shabestan possesses a stronger collective dimension. Its poetic experience, therefore, is not exclusively individual but shared and social.

At the same time, an important critical point must be taken into consideration: the iwan and shabestan do not invariably embody a poetic or deeply phenomenological experience in every example. In some cases, these spaces are simply functional responses to climate, spatial density, or ritual requirements. Accordingly, the degree to which Bachelardian concepts are realized in these elements varies, and they cannot be interpreted uniformly across all architectural examples.

Rethinking the Potentials and Limitations of a Bachelardian Reading

The comparative study of traditional Iranian and Iraqi houses based on Gaston Bachelard’s theories makes it possible to understand deeper layers of the lived experience of space; at the same time, however, it encounters certain theoretical and interpretive limitations. One of the most important of these limitations is the potential tendency of this framework toward a “homogenizing aesthetics,” whereby all architectural elements, regardless of their functional, climatic, and social contexts, may be interpreted under the overarching concept of “poetics”. Such an approach may lead to an oversimplification of the complex experience of dwelling.

The present study has demonstrated that not all architectural elements necessarily possess a

poetic quality. For example, stairs, in many cases, serve a connective function primarily and are less likely to carry an imaginative or memory-oriented experience. Likewise, in the case of cellars, spatial experience is not invariably univocal but rather dual, in that tranquility and stillness may coexist with the possibility of ambiguity, isolation, or even anxiety (Bachelard, 1958/1994, 35–40). This demonstrates that architectural spaces are inherently multilayered and, at times, contradictory in meaning.

Furthermore, the comparison between Iranian and Baghdad houses has revealed that certain elements, such as the orsi in Iran, possess a greater capacity to generate imaginative experiences, whereas in Iraqi examples, comparable elements such as the mashrabiya are more strongly governed by climatic and regulatory logic. It therefore cannot be assumed that a single theoretical concept is realized equally across all cultural contexts.

In this regard, another challenge associated with the Bachelardian approach lies in its emphasis on the individual and inward experience of space. Traditional Iranian and Iraqi architecture, however, has been profoundly shaped by social, ritual, and collective structures. In other words, dwelling is not merely an individual experience but also a social and historical phenomenon whose meaning emerges through its interaction with economic conditions, religion, climate, and relations of power.

From Norberg-Schulz’s perspective (1980, 18–23), although the concept of “genius loci” can contribute to an understanding of the relationship between human beings and space, this concept too, if employed in a reductionist manner, may lead to a form of cultural essentialism. Consequently, phenomenological analysis must always be accompanied by attention to the historical and material contexts of architecture.

Accordingly, the present study demonstrates that the concept of “the poetics of space” should not be regarded as a fixed and universal characteristic but rather as a context-dependent possibility that becomes activated in certain elements and under particular conditions, while remaining wholly or partially absent in others. This is

particularly evident in the comparison between the two architectural traditions of Iran and Iraq, where climatic, cultural, and urban differences play a decisive role in shaping the lived experience of space (Table 1). Ultimately, the principal value of the Bachelardian approach lies not in providing a comprehensive interpretive system, but in opening up the possibility of attending to neglected layers of spatial experience. Nevertheless, this approach is most effective when situated alongside historical, climatic, and social analyses, while avoiding the reduction of architectural experience to an exclusively poetic reading (Table 2).

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Architectural Elements in Traditional Iranian and Iraqi Houses Based on Bachelardian Phenomenological Concepts. Source: Authors based on Bachelard (1958/1994, 17–59 & 184–187), Heidegger (1971), Norberg-Schulz (1980).

Architectural Element	Traditional Iranian Houses	Traditional Iraqi Houses	Related Bachelardian Concept	Degree of Correspondence with Bachelard's Theory	Critical Considerations
Central Courtyard	Center of family life and introverted seclusion	More socially oriented space with greater interaction	Intimate immensity; poetic dwelling	High	The experience of intimacy is not identical in the two traditions.
Entrance and Threshold	Complex spatial hierarchy	Greater flexibility in spatial organization	Threshold; existential transition	High	The experience of passage differs across the two cultures.
Orsi	Interplay of light and color; imaginative experience	—	Imagination, memory, and dream	High	Its poetic quality depends on lived experience.
Mashrabiya	—	Emphasis on privacy, ventilation, and visual control	Seclusion and protection	Moderate	Its functional dimension is more pronounced than its poetic dimension.
Light and Shadow	Soft light and semi-dark spaces	Denser shadows and natural ventilation	Imagination and poetic dwelling	Moderate	Shadow may generate tranquility as well as ambiguity and anxiety.
Stairs	Connection between levels and gradual movement	Similar function with limited differences	Verticality and ascent	Moderate	Their symbolic significance is not uniform across all examples.
Roof	Individual seclusion, summer sleeping, contemplation	More social and collective function	Transcendence and intimate immensity	Moderate to High	The experience of the roof differs significantly between the two traditions.
Cellar	Climatic refuge and space of silence	Cool space and storage	The unconscious and memory	Moderate	Darkness may generate both tranquility and a sense of isolation.
Iwan	Intermediate space and contemplation	Semi-open space with greater interaction	Threshold and spatial mediation	High	Its role is more prominent in Iraq.
Shabestan	Seclusion, stillness, and concentration	More limited presence	Corners of memory	High	Its poetic quality depends on individual experience.

Conclusion

This article aimed to provide a phenomenological analysis of traditional houses in Iran and Iraq based on the ideas of Gaston Bachelard in “The Poetics of Space” (Bachelard, 1994, 3–20, 183–186 & 218–221). The findings demonstrate that the experience of dwelling within these two architectural traditions cannot be explained solely at the physical or functional level; rather, it must be understood in relation to memory, imagination, embodiment, and cultural contexts. Bachelard’s key concepts, including “intimate vastness,” “topoanalysis,” “corners of memory,” and

Table 2. Convergences and Divergences between Bachelardian Reading and Traditional Houses in Iran and Iraq (Note: In the title of the table, the term “Bachelardian reading” is preferable to “Bachelard’s theory”, because Bachelard did not necessarily analyze all of these architectural elements directly or historically. This formulation is therefore methodologically more precise). Source: Authors.

Bachelardian Concept	Points of Convergence	Points of Divergence
Intimate Vastness	The central courtyard, <i>iwan</i> , and rooftop as spaces that expand lived experience and establish a connection between interior and exterior	Certain enclosed and dark spaces that limit the experience of “vastness” and openness emphasized by Bachelard
Imagination and Reverie	Orsi windows, the interplay of light and color, and changing reflections that foster imagination and the poetic experience of space	Mashrabiya and certain purely functional elements that do not necessarily possess an imaginative or poetic dimension
Spatial Memory	The courtyard, shabestan, and sardab as spaces that contribute to the formation of memory, childhood experience, and the continuity of lived experience	Changes in the use of spaces and differences among users’ experiences, which may prevent the formation of a uniform or shared memory-based meaning
Shelter and Tranquility	The courtyard and iwan as intermediate, tranquil, and protective spaces	The sardab and deep shadows, which in some lived experiences may generate ambiguity or anxiety rather than tranquility
Poetic Dwelling	Many traditional spaces particularly courtyards, <i>iwans</i> , private rooms, and semi-dark spaces possess the potential to realize poetic dwelling	This quality is not realized equally in all elements or houses and depends on the cultural context, function, time, and individual experience of the inhabitants

“spaces of reverie,” provide a means of accessing the latent layers of the lived experience of the home.

The findings indicate that architectural elements in the Iranian and Iraqi traditions are not phenomenologically equivalent in terms of their experiential potential. While elements such as the central courtyard, orsi windows, and iwan in Iranian houses demonstrate the greatest degree of convergence with Bachelardian notions of imagination, memory, and intimacy, elements such as the mashrabiya and courtyard organization in traditional Baghdadi houses place greater emphasis on climatic regulation, privacy, and the management of the relationship between interior and exterior. These differences suggest that the “poetics of space” should not be understood as a universal quality, but rather as a context-dependent possibility shaped by culture and climate.

The comparative analysis further demonstrates that the degree to which architectural elements correspond to Bachelard’s theoretical framework is not uniform. Certain elements, such as the orsi window and the central courtyard, possess a strong capacity to generate

imaginative and memory-oriented experiences, whereas elements such as stairways or certain parts of the sardab may produce ambivalent experiences or function primarily at a practical level. This observation highlights the necessity of avoiding a one-sided and purely aesthetic reading of traditional architecture.

From a critical perspective, the study demonstrates that although the Bachelardian framework is highly effective for understanding the lived experience of space, its isolated application may lead to a reduction of the social, climatic, and historical complexities of architecture. Accordingly, this study proposes that Bachelardian phenomenology should be employed in dialogue with more context-sensitive approaches, including the historicity of space, climatic analysis, and social studies of architecture, in order to avoid interpretive one-sidedness.

Ultimately, by emphasizing differences, divergences, and varying degrees of realization of theoretical concepts across the cases examined, this research moves beyond a merely confirmatory approach. It demonstrates that the principal value of

phenomenological analysis lies not in establishing complete correspondences, but in revealing the tensions, gaps, and multiple possibilities inherent in spatial experience. Accordingly, the “poetics of space” should not be regarded as a fixed quality, but rather as a potential mode of experience that becomes activated in some spaces while remaining limited, transformed, or differently configured in others.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Endnotes

1. For further study, the following sources in the mentioned areas may be consulted: In the field of phenomenology of architecture and philosophy of space: Tuan (1977), Seamon (2000), Casey (1993), Harries (1997)/ In the field of Gaston Bachelard's theories: Bachelard 2011, 1983/2021/ In the field of traditional houses of Iran and Iraq: Pirnia (2013), Grabar (1987), Bianca (2000), Habibi (2011), Fathy (1986)/ In the field of light, shadow, and psychology of space: Pallasmaa (2001, 2005/2011), Holl (2006), Zumthor (2006).

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