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# Observations of Turfan

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Renee Chow**

The oasis of Turfan appears as an improbable stretch of green in a desert known as the Taklamakan Depression. The Depression, located some 150 feet below sea level in western China, is a landscape of endless red rock and dust, where the summer temperature can be in excess of 110° F and the roads are far more suitable for camels than wheeled vehicles. It is not a place that could be accused of being picturesque.

It is a region known for its grapes, melons, colorful clothing, and almond-eyed people, where dinner consists of kebabs, lamb pies, and flat bread called *nang*. Historically, Turfan was at the crossroads of two cultures, laying on the ancient silk route that the traders of the west passed over on their way to Xian, then the capital of imperial China.

Turfan's image is hard to "see." Like most of China, it is defined by walls, walls that enclose the courtyards and contain the streets. Modestly constructed of clay bricks and sparingly used wood from the poplar trees grown around the village, the walls are continuous with very little articulation and give the space of the village a closed feeling.

It was to this place that the two of us and Paul Hajian, all from MIT, traveled to study the built environment of the Uygur people, one of the Islamic minorities in China.

We shared the belief that understanding begins with



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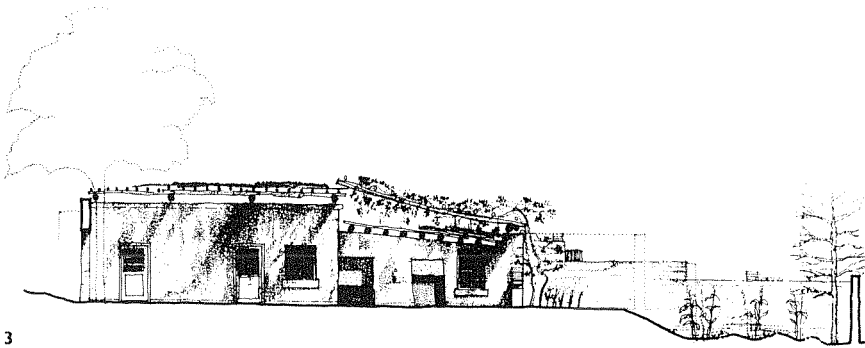


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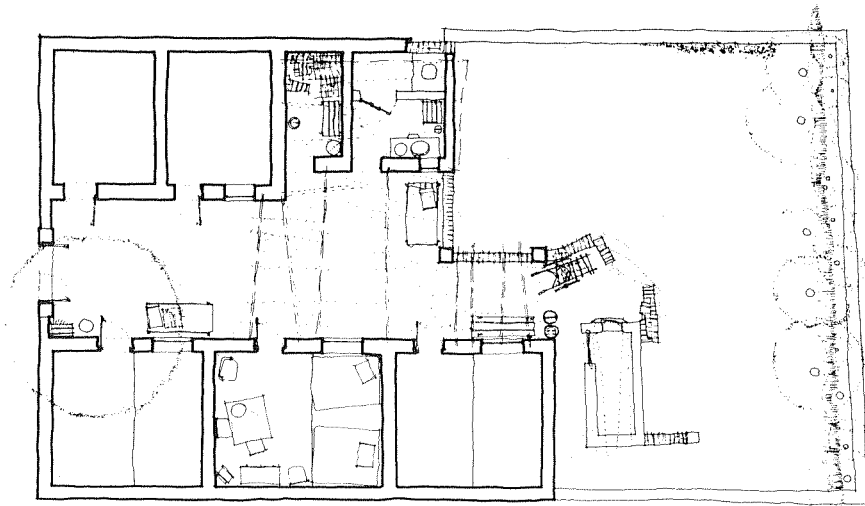
**1 The road to Turfan**

**2 Uygur children**

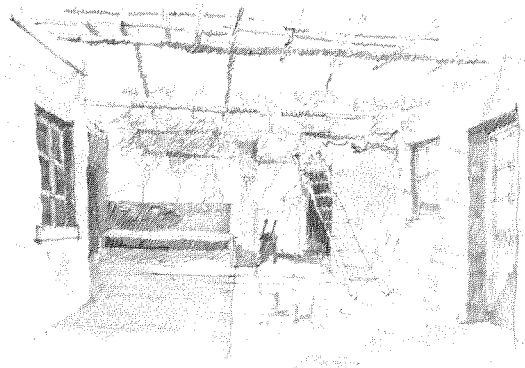
Drawings and photographs by Thomas Chastain,  
Renee Chow, and Paul Hajian



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- 3, 4 **Turfan courtyard**, plan and section, a place made by walls and trellises
- 5 **View** inside the collective space of the courtyard
- 6 **Typical documentation drawing** for understanding Turfan
- 7 **Water runs in channels through the town on the way to the fields**
- 8 **Turfan street**, a place defined by water, trees, and walls

observing and sought to describe this place in ways that would help to reveal its nature. As architects, this of course meant drawing, but the question was *what* to draw. On the surface, the architectural form of the environment seemed limited and plain. We turned, instead, to look at inhabitation, and Turfan is an intensely inhabited place.

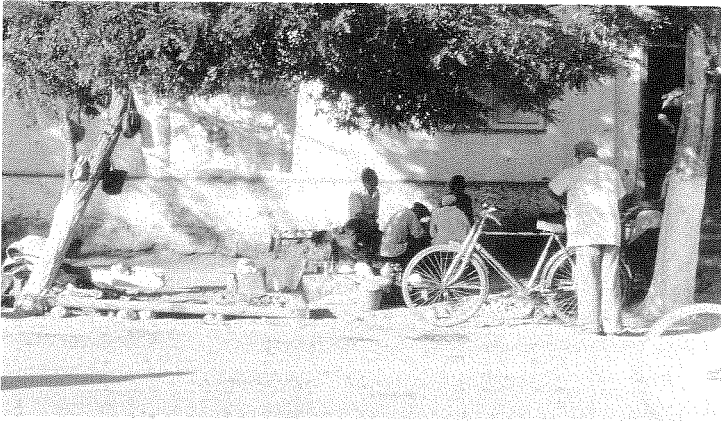
The desolate landscape beyond concentrates life inside the oasis. Colors, vegetation, water, even animals, are made more vibrant by the proximity of the barren openness beyond. In looking at this life, we were also searching for the forms that promoted such inhabitation. This meant documenting the environment by drawing every “thing” in it; our process was in the space, not outside of it.

This observation resulted in an appreciation of a complex built environment made of water, screens, and walls, which created a system of places by transforming light. Of these elements, it is the water that provides the primary definition for inhabitation. Water is gathered in wells that reach miles into the desert. Every morning the water is pumped from the wells into a system of irrigation channels. These channels flow down from the center of the town and market, weaving through the residential areas on their way to the fields.

Throughout the village, the channels line the streets, sitting out some six feet from the walls, creating a strong physical continuity in the public space. For example,







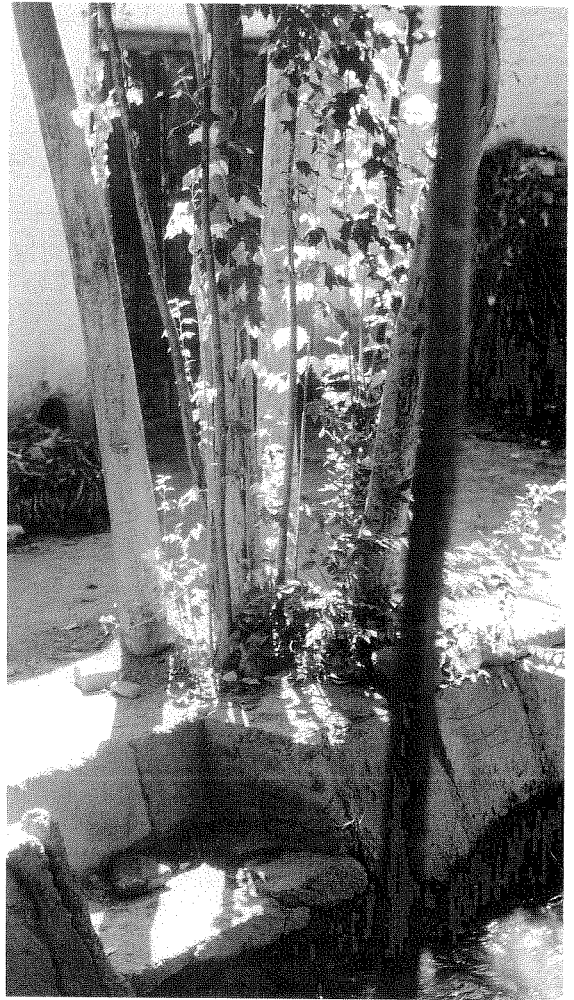
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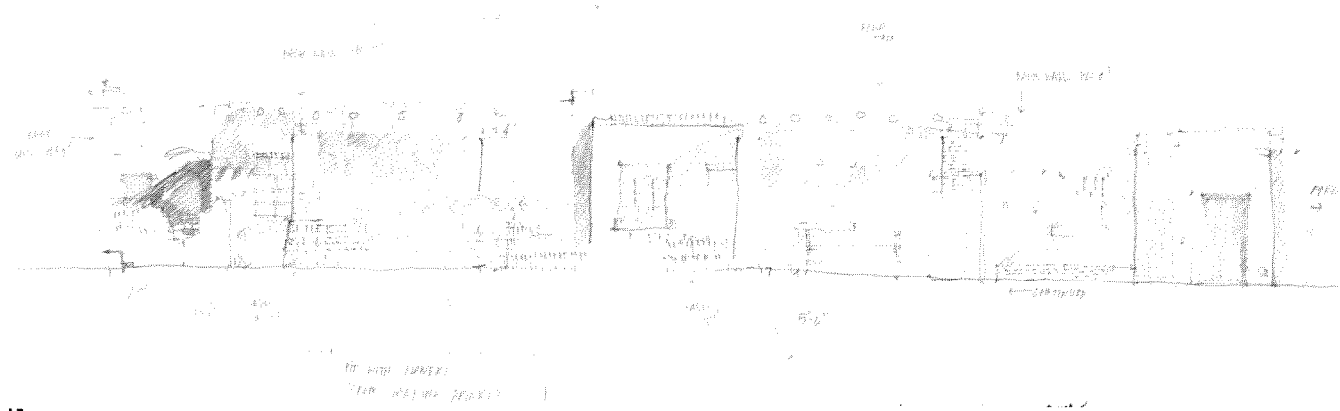


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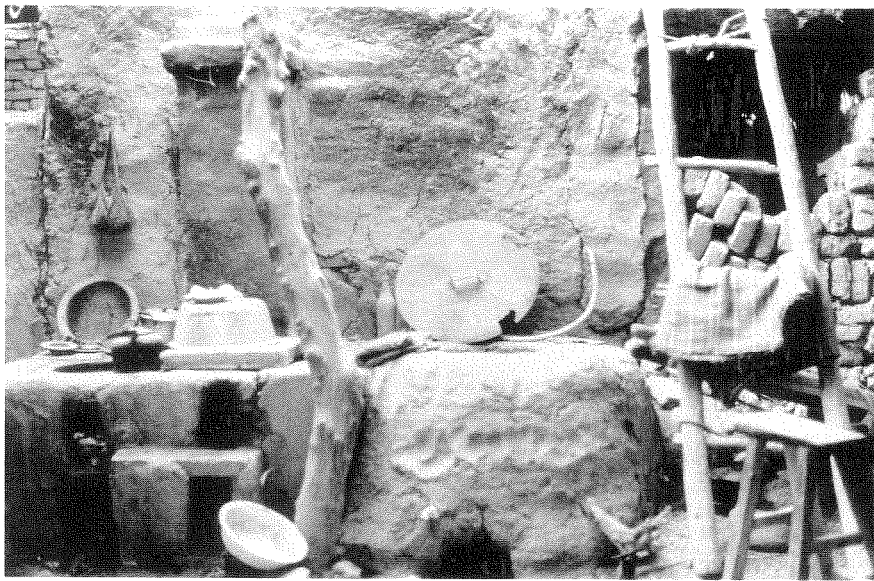


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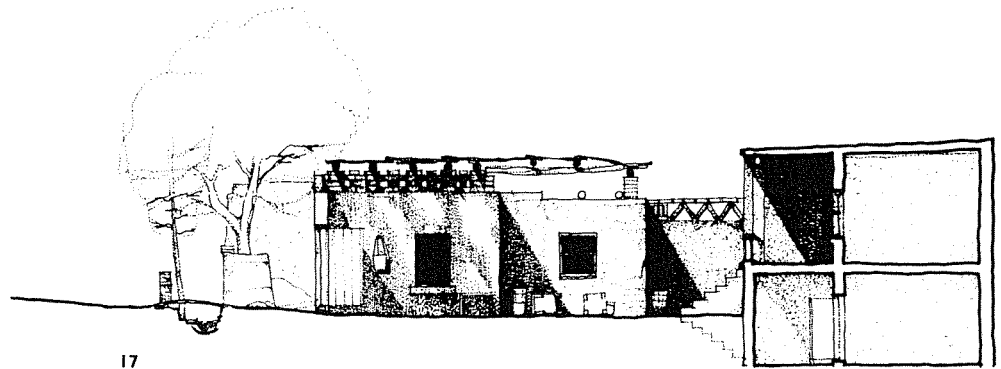


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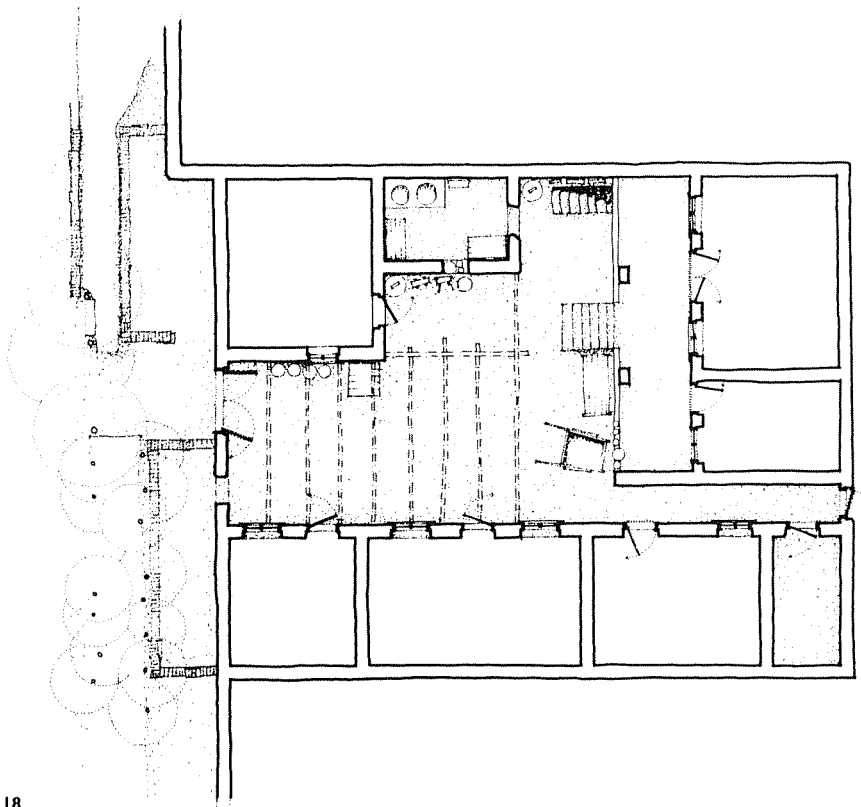
14, 15 Courtyard plan and section shows all the materials, objects, animals, and activities that inhabit the space

16 Courtyard walls are molded and thickened





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17, 18 Plan and section of courtyard with two-story house

is again the transformation of light that defines the area for inhabitation. Here, though, the screens are horizontal trellises on which grow grapes. Under these screens in the shade of the filtered light is the collective space of the courtyard where families cook, work, play cards, and even sleep on hot nights.

Dark, cellular rooms along the perimeter of the courtyard open onto this collective area and thicken the walls with barrel vaulted spaces. In this way a layering of insideness and transition is created not only by the enclosing walls but by the transformed light quality, from the bright openness of the desert to the dark enclosing shade of the rooms.

At times water channels penetrate courtyard walls, transforming enclosures with the sound of rushing water and cooling air.

The wall itself has a different meaning on the interior of the courtyards than on the streets. More than just containing space,

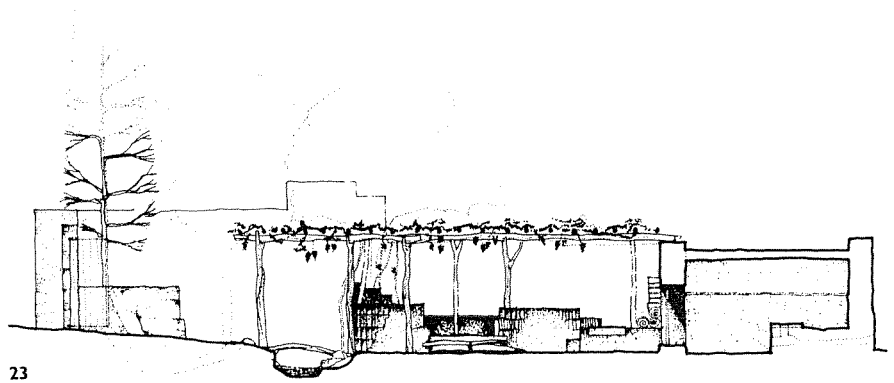


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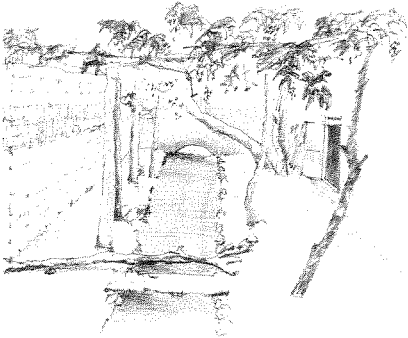


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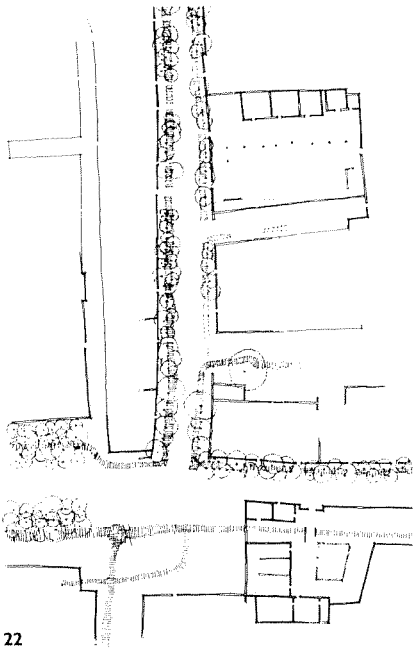
19, 20 Molded courtyard walls



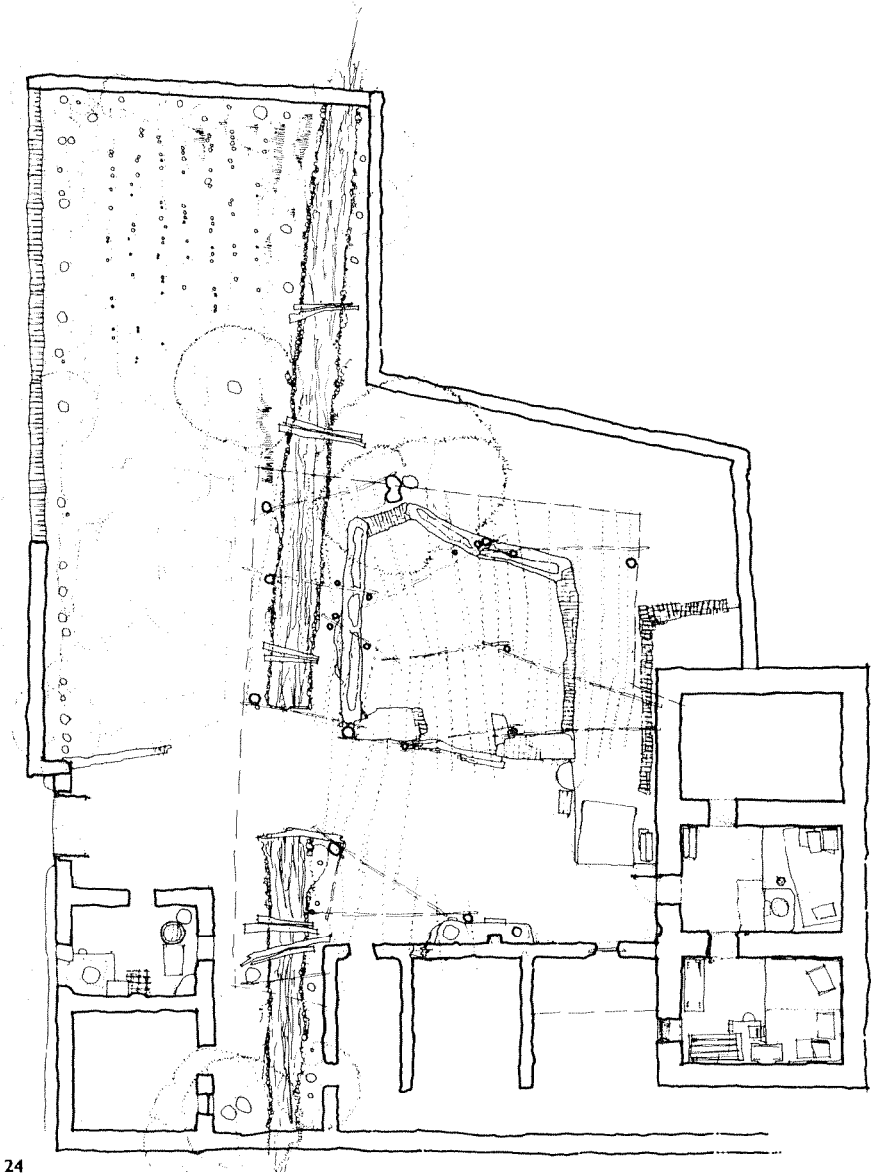
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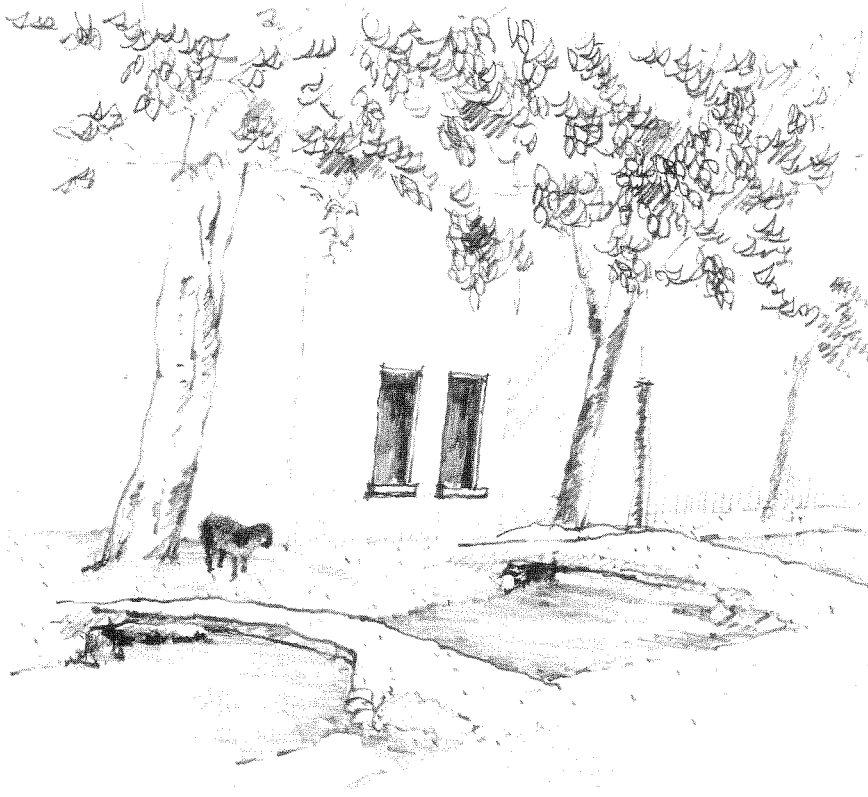
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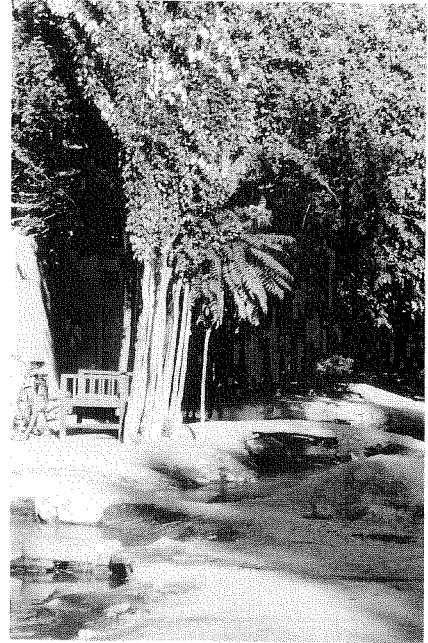
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21, 23, 24 Plan, section, and view showing water flowing in channel through a private courtyard

22 Street plan for house in 21



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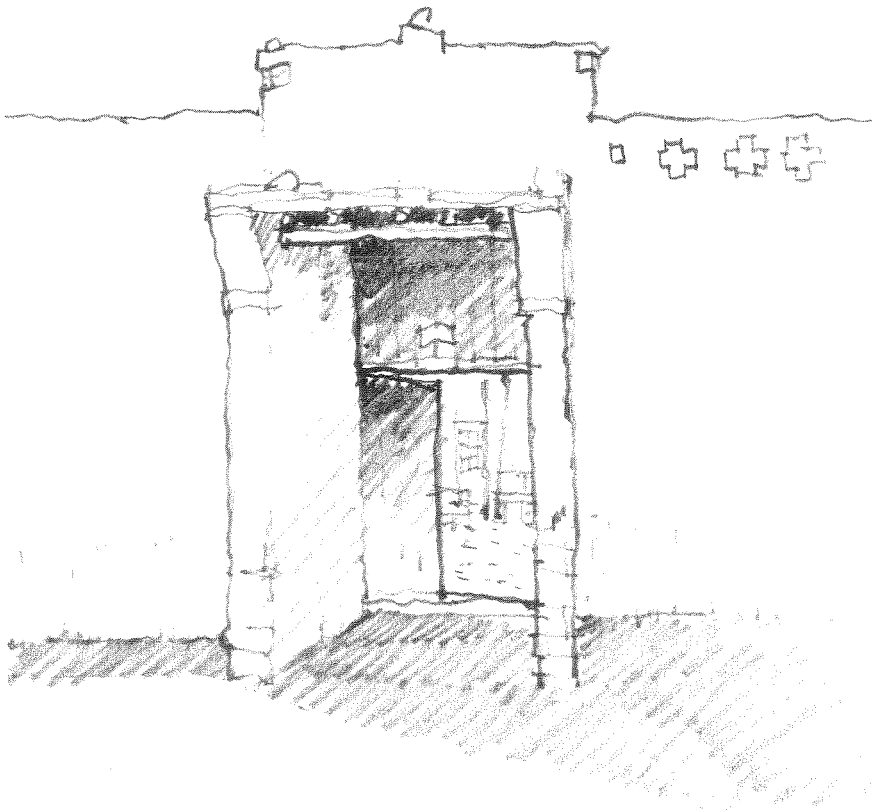
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25, 26 Bridges crossing a channel

27 View from inside the collective space of the courtyard to the entrance gateway



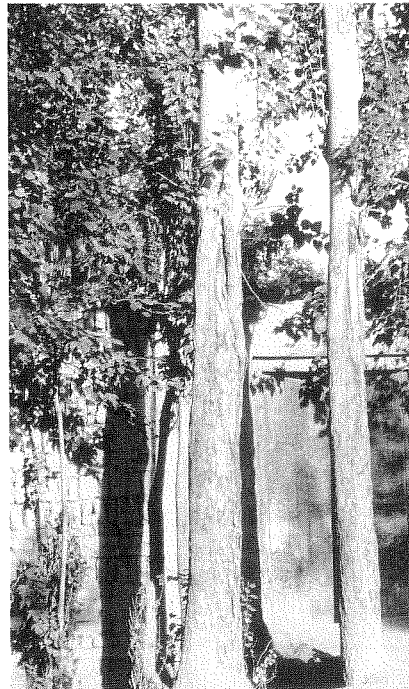
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the wall becomes a surface molded into benches, cooking surfaces, shelves, and niches which promote inhabitation by people, pots, dried vegetables, and an occasional chicken.

Turfan seems hidden behind walls. The transition from the street to the enclosed courtyard is composed of a small bridge over the water channel and a gate in the wall. The gate, which is the only element along the street that identifies the private territory behind the wall, is built to indicate status and personal choice.



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It is not, though, the object quality of the gates but their position relative to the collective space in the courtyard that holds the key to understanding the nature of this environment. While the walls separate the public and private worlds, the gate's location in the wall, when opened, offers a direct view into the trellised area of the courtyard. Thus, while our initial perception was of an environment that felt closed, the experience of the space proved it to be very open. The gateway was more than a transition; it was a view into the daily life of the people.