

Residents' Satisfaction with the Villa as a Housing Type in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract. The villa as a housing type in its modern form in Saudi Arabia has been widely built since the early fifties of the last century. Doubts about its appropriateness to the Saudi society have been repeatedly pointed out in the literature. The intent of this study is to evaluate the level of acceptance the villa enjoys within present Saudi society, and to gauge this society's degree of satisfaction with its design. It also addresses two issues in some depth: the use of the villa's garden and privacy concerns.

The study was based on a questionnaire administered in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and answered by 250 participants. It was found that the villa is well accepted and highly preferred as a housing type by the participants. It was also found that the participants were mostly satisfied with the design of the villa, although they had some reservations among which were high running costs and lack of complete privacy. The main issue that was evident throughout the study, however, was that it has become empirical to reexamine negative propagated ideas about the villa. Such propagated ideas include the inadequacy of the villa for the Saudi society, the view of the villa's garden as a wasted space, and privacy as a constant concept.

Introduction and Background

The villa type house in Saudi Arabia is a detached housing unit surrounded by an open space. This open space is completely fenced by a wall typically not lower than two meters (Fig. 1). The use of the villa as a modern type of housing was introduced to the country and encouraged by the Arab American Oil Company (ARAMCO) during the early fifties of the 20th century through the well-known Home Ownership Plan. Since then, the villa was under constant scrutiny for the purpose of evaluating its legitimacy and its capability to satisfy the needs of the Saudi society.

Some of the early studies which discussed the subject include PhD dissertations of Al-Hathloul (1981), Winterhalter (1981), Fadan (1983), and Akbar (1984). These studies discussed the changing pattern of modern Arab cities due to the application of modern principles of urban planning, urban design, and architecture. Since these early studies, the villa was seen as a type of

housing which lacks quality, particularly with respect to privacy and sociability⁽¹⁾.

Later studies concentrated on specific areas of the villa and residential developments in modern Saudi cities. Such studies include the work of Akpinar (1992) who evaluated the quality of modern housing in Saudi Arabia, and Alnowaiser (1996) who discussed more appropriate zoning regulations for residential areas. Similarly, Eben Saleh (1997) looked at the issues of privacy and security in contemporary neighborhoods as a concern worth of consideration. He also presented another point of concern related to lost architectural identity in the modern urban fabric of Riyadh (Ebn Saleh, 1998). Hakky (1996, 1997) explored the influence of current changes in society on the form of modern Arab cities in general and the villa as a type of housing in particular.

(1) See also the work by Amad (2003) where she discusses the failure of modern housing to appropriately respond to social, cultural, and environmental needs of modern Arab societies.

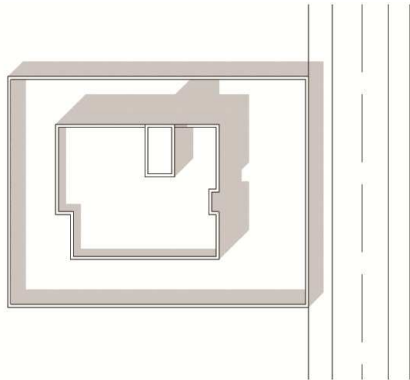


Fig. 1. A typical villa with its fence and surrounding open space.

The villa was often compared with the traditional courtyard house to show its shortcomings. Among the many comparative studies between the two types of housing is the one presented by Al-Hussayen (1995) where he introduced valuable conclusions in relation to size, proportion, and environmental and social suitability of the villa. In another comparative study between the two, Bahammam (1998) looked at the importance of considering the right size for the villa in order to make it more economic and suitable for typical Saudi families. However, some studies related to the issue of public satisfaction with the villa concluded that people prefer the villa for their residence (Al-Tassan, 1986; Al-Saati, 1987). Although some studies tried to introduce solutions to problems found in the villa, in general a negative image of the villa can easily be detected in the literature. Akpinar summarizes criticism of the villa as a housing type in five points (Akpinar, 1992): (a) it introduced fracture in the urban texture; (b) it weakened the sense of belonging in a community; (c) it reduced possibilities of social interaction especially for women; (d) it meant the loss of the courtyard; and (e) it segregated even the household members due to increased number of rooms and total area of house.

In response to this strong negative images and criticism, this study aims to gauge public satisfaction with the villa as a home and identify the most important concerns related to it.

The Study and its Methodology

The study is based on the following two points:

1. It accepts and acknowledges the fact that the villa carries its own problems, but they are solvable within a framework that respects the identity and dignity of the villa itself.
2. It tries to base its findings of the villa's problems on residents' opinion. In a way, thus, the study can be seen as a post-occupancy evaluation effort.

Three objectives were identified for the study:

1. To observe the level of preference of the villa as a housing type.
2. To examine the level of satisfaction with its design.
3. To evaluate its main drawbacks.

In order to achieve these objectives, the study was based on primary data collected through a designed questionnaire. This data was interpreted through simple statistical analyses that included basic documentation of frequencies.

Characteristics of the Studied Sample

Most subdivisions in Saudi Arabia exhibit parcels of land that range in their areas between 400 to 900 square meters (Hakim, 1984). Subjects participating in the study were residents of villas of this range of size. The studied sample comes from 25 different residential areas in Khobar and Dammam, the two main cities of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The residents of these neighborhoods belong financially to the upper middle class of the Saudi society. This class is usually well educated and widely exposed to Western culture.

The study is based on 250 responses to a distributed questionnaire. The number of female participants was only slightly higher than that of males' (129 female subjects and 121 male subjects); thus, an almost equal representation of the two genders was achieved. Most of the questionnaire's participants were married and over 20 years old (Table 1). This was important to observe in order to make sure that those who responded to the questions represent the group that usually takes decisions in relation to house selection and design. The sample is relatively very educated also (Table 2); thus, in summary, the studied sample is mostly well to do, middle aged, and well educated.

Table 1. Age, sex, and social status of the studied sample

Age	Sex				Total
	Male		Female		
	Single	Married	Single	Married	
Less than 20 yrs	4	0	19	0	23
Between 20 and 40 yrs.	9	44	3	85	141
More than 40 yrs.	1	63	1	21	86
Total	14	107	23	106	250

Table 2. Educational levels of the studied sample

Educational Level	Male	Female	Total
Elementary school	0	2	2
Middle school	0	2	2
High school	23	52	75
College degree	81	65	146
Post graduate degree	16	7	23
Not given	1	1	2
Total	121	129	250

Sample’s Preference of the Villa as a Housing Type

Literature tends to imply that the villa as a housing type was enforced on the Saudi society in such a way that it became the only option available. Al-Hathloul (1994) explains that lots granted to the public had typically a square shape measuring 20 X 20 meters. These measurements along with enforced setbacks made the villa the only possible housing type. Al-Saati (1987), Eben-Saleh (1997), and Bahammam (1998) assert that conditions put forth by the Real Estate Development Fund (REDF) in 1975 had a major role in establishing the villa as the only available housing type. In other words, residents have no choice in selecting their own type of housing. It follows that residents may not be totally satisfied with the villa.

In order to validate this conclusion, the paper examined whether residents of the villa are in favor of this type of housing. Firstly, subjects were presented with four types of housing to arrange in accordance with their preference of each as a residence. The four given types were: villa, apartment, courtyard house, and house with a private unfenced yard (this can be seen in private compounds

in Saudi Arabia)⁽²⁾. They were also given the chance to add a fifth type if they saw fit.

Over three quarters of the sample selected the villa as their preferred type of housing (Table 3). Courtyard house obtained the second highest preference but with only 12.8% of the total sample. It is worth noting here that 3.2% of the sample selected other types of housing, which were identified as either palace or chalet. In principle, both can be seen as a variation on the same theme of the villa. Similarly, a house with a private unfenced yard is also similar in concept to a villa. Thus, with less than 1% of the sample selecting apartment as its preference, the competition was only between the villa and the courtyard house. The villa as a concept gained 86% of the total sample.

Table 3. Preference of housing types by studied sample

Preferred Type of Housing	Total	Percentage
Villa	197	78.8
Apartment	2	0.8
Courtyard house	32	12.8
House with a private yard	11	4.4
Other types of housing	8	3.2
Total	250	100

Sample’s Satisfaction with the Villa

More than 85% of the subjects indicated that they were satisfied with the layout of the villa (Table 4). The rest of the sample reported a number of reasons that made them unsatisfied. The main cause of dissatisfaction, mentioned by six respondents only, was the lack of a living room in the first floor. The

(2) Hilton (1989) defines compound housing as “a group of houses contained by a surrounding wall or fence with controlled access to the contained area, which includes shared outdoor spaces, external circulation and some amenities”. Saudis have started as early as the late 1980s to use compounds for residence although originally the idea of compounds was to house expatriates.

second reason of dissatisfaction was the kitchen; it was seen as inappropriately located within the layout of the ground floor, preferred to be located in the first floor, or suggested to be as a separate structure. Other isolated complaints were related to the fact that the villa is too large, has a chaotic layout, or is too isolated from a social point of view. All these complaints, save the social issue, are not related to the villa as a concept but to personal preferences within the overall design of the villa. Social isolation will be addressed in more detail later on since it has been discussed in the literature.

Table 4. Level of satisfaction with the villa's design

	Total	%
Satisfied with the typical layout of the villa	214	86
Not satisfied with the layout	36	14
Total	250	100

Overall Evaluation of the Villa

In order to obtain a better view of the subjects' level of satisfaction with the villa, two questions were presented; the first consisted of a list of attributes for respondents to state whether they consider each as attractive, a drawback, or of no concern to them. The second was an open-ended question where subjects were to state what they consider the four most positive and four most negative points related to the villa. For the first question, only 238 questionnaire forms were used because 12 forms did not show clear or complete marking. Attractive attributes seemed to be greatly agreed upon, for 12 of them obtained over 90% of total respondents (Table 5). Most of these attributes were related to the following points:

1. Presence of open space (garden, play area for children, visual connection between inside and outside).
2. Privacy (social, independence in services).
3. Size of house (large house, possibility to expand)⁽³⁾.
4. Flexibility in design (meets individual needs, its design can be modified).
5. Independence of functions within the house (separate floor for bedrooms, separate rooms for guests, separate quarters for servants).

(3) Bahammam (1998) presented an informative study in relation to villa's size where he argued that interest in large size villas is not due to actual need, but rather because of social and cultural factors.

It is reassuring to see the presence of garden as the most attractive attribute followed by privacy.

Table 5. The 14 most attractive points of the villa according to subjects

Attractive Points	Total	%
It includes a garden	231	97.05
Its size is always larger than an apartment	229	96.21
It can be designed according to individual needs	227	95.37
It provides enough privacy	227	95.37
It includes a play area for children	227	95.37
Bedrooms are located in a separate floor	220	92.44
It provides separation between guests and residents	220	92.44
It is socially impressive	219	92.02
It includes a car park	218	91.59
It provides a visual connection between inside and outside	217	91.18
It provides complete independence (ex: utilities)	216	90.75
Servants can be isolated from the rest of the house	215	90.34
It is possible to modify its design	212	89.07
It allows expansion	202	84.87

Drawbacks did not have as high consensus as the attractive attributes did; the percentages of the most undesired qualities of the villa exhibit this point (Table 6). However, strong agreement went to the issue of security (exposure to theft). Cost was the second crucial issue; this was observed in relation to running cost (i.e., electricity for air conditioning and cost of maintenance). Interesting observation is related to privacy in the garden; almost three quarters of the respondents reported that the lack of privacy is a concern, yet almost the same percentage of the respondents felt that outer fence hides the house's beauty. This is an interesting dilemma that needs serious efforts on the part of designers. The size of the villa, which was considered as a highly attractive attribute earlier, backfires here with almost two thirds of subjects complaining about the necessity to have a number of housemaids to take care of the property.

More supporting data came from two open-ended questions that solicited positive and negative qualities of the villa. The most frequently repeated positive quality was the size of the villa; having a garden was the second quality (Table 7). Comfort, sun and air ventilation, and aesthetic quality were also on top of the list. Similarly, negative qualities mentioned by the respondents emphasize earlier

findings; the first three negative qualities were related to cost: expenses of utilities, maintenance cost, cleaning requirements (Table 8). Lack of garden and small size garden were two points high on the negative quality list. This goes in support of the main argument proposed here that the garden is an important element of the villa in the minds of residents.

Table 6. The 11 most important drawbacks of the villa

Drawbacks	Total	%
Exposed to theft	215	90.34
It consumes extensive amount of energy for A/C	182	76.47
It lacks privacy in the garden	167	70.17
Its outer fence hides its beauty	165	69.33
It requires a number of house maids	155	65.13
Completely isolated	121	50.84
Setbacks consumes a large area of the lot	108	45.38
Its maintenance is expensive	101	42.44
It is similar to old houses with their outside yards	66	27.73
It consists usually of several floors	56	23.53
It is similar to the Western house	30	12.61

Table 7. First 12 points mentioned by the sample as positive attributes of the villa

Positive Point	Frequency
Large size	156
Has a garden / children play area	68
Privacy / Isolation	55
Comfortable	49
Good sun and air ventilation	34
Has garden and swimming pool	30
Elegant / beautiful / modern	27
Good location	21
Divided into wings	19
Independence	19
Quite	16
Sufficient services	16
Open and connected salons	14
Social status / Grandeur	11
Safe	11

Table 8. First 12 negative points as seen by the studied sample

Negative Points	Frequency
High consumption of water and electricity	47
High maintenance cost	43
Requires extensive cleaning and maintenance	35
Small	34
Requires servants	28
Small garden	22
No garden	18
Lacks privacy in the garden	18
Exposed to theft	17
High construction cost	16
Isolated	14
Bad use of open spaces (setbacks)	14

Evaluation of the Villa's Main Drawbacks

Literature identifies a number of drawbacks related to the villa; some are of planning nature and others related to the villa itself. This paper deals with concerns related to the villa's design only. The first drawback that is typically argued is the fact that the villa's garden is unused because of its small size and the harsh climate of Saudi (e.g., Al-Saati, 1989; Akpinar, 1992; and Al-Hussayen, 1995). The second concern is privacy, especially in the garden and near windows (e.g., Al-Saati, 1989; Alnowaiser, 1996; and Eben Saleh, 1997). The issue of the villa's security (Eben Saleh, 2001) and the idea that it is generally oversized (Bahammam, 1998) are two more concerns. The first two problems though have become clichés constantly identified with the villa; thus, they are discussed in more details here.

Use of the Villa's Garden

Villa's garden is defined here as the open space between the house of a villa and its outer walls. As a solution for the drawbacks of the garden, literature typically suggests a courtyard for the house. Earlier findings, however, (Table 3) indicated people's preference of villa over courtyard house. The question here is more specific: to what degree people living in a villa are in favor of a courtyard over the outer garden. This question is critical since its response can validate the earlier argument in connection with people's satisfaction with the villa.

Three quarters of the subjects indicated that they do not prefer to have an inner courtyard in their

houses (Table 9). One quarter, on the other hand, prefers a courtyard to a house garden. Out of the 65 persons who indicated that they prefer a courtyard to a house garden, only 18 gave reasons for their preference, which were of social (issue of privacy) or environmental (ventilation, natural light) nature.

Table 9. Preference of having a courtyard in the house

	Total	Percentage
Prefer courtyard	65	26
Do not prefer it	185	74
Total	250	100

In order to further understand the role of the garden in the life of those who live in villas, two more questions were presented. Firstly, they were asked whether they use the garden or not. Three quarters of the respondents indicated that they do; only one quarter of subjects reported that they do not. Such a high percentage of people who use the garden is strongly indicative of its important role in the overall design of the villa. The subjects were then asked about reasons that would discourage them from using the garden (Table 10). Climate was the first reason; almost half of the subjects felt that weather in the area prevents them from a full utilization of the garden. The second reason, given by almost a quarter of the subjects, was exposure to neighbors; in other words, lack of privacy.

Table 10. Reasons for not using the garden of the villa

Why do you not use the garden?	Total	%
It is exposed by neighbors	56	22.4
Climate does not permit	113	45.2
Garden is small	22	8.8
I do not have time	40	16
Other reasons	7	2.8
No responses	12	4.8
Total	250	100

It is interesting to mention here that Al-Saati (1989) found in a similar study he conducted, that 47% of participants thought that yards were not used most of the time because of exposure by neighbors as opposed to only 22.4% of the participants in this study. This difference may mean that the design of the villa during the last 20 years has become more sensitive to this particular issue. In conclusion, the respondents believe that the garden is an important

part of the villa and that it is more used than is usually portrayed by literature. However, it needs special attention to deal with the issues of climate and privacy.

The Privacy Issue

Privacy in the villa type of housing has been questioned time and again through a number of studies. The lack of the use of the villa's garden was repeatedly attributed to its visual exposure by surrounding neighbors (Al-Hussayen, 1995; Eben Saleh, 1997, 2001). As mentioned earlier, almost a quarter of the subjects saw exposure to neighbors as a reason not to use the garden. In order to further investigate this issue, the subjects were asked to identify places where privacy is most violated in the villa (Table 11); the garden was the most frequently mentioned location. Areas next to windows were second, and a few even saw the inside of the house lacking full privacy⁽⁴⁾.

Table 11. Areas where privacy is most felt to be lacking (the respondent can give more than one answer)

Privacy is lacked	Total	Percentage
inside the house	11	4.4
in the garden	123	49.2
next to windows	107	42.8
No response	9	3.6
Total	250	100

The subjects were asked to select one of four given solutions for the problem of privacy; they were also given the chance to propose their own solutions. The four given solutions were:

1. *Closing the second floor windows:* Although this seems to be a very drastic solution, and in fact not accepted architecturally or environmentally, it is a practice that is seen in Saudi cities.
2. *Not using the garden:* This option will validate earlier findings related to the use of the garden.
3. *Increasing the height of the fence:* This phenomenon is seen in most villas across the board. It is widely criticized by literature; thus, it was interesting to see how people feel about it.

(4) It is interesting to note here findings by Al-Saati (1989) also in relation to this issue: 69.6% of respondents agreed that yards can be overlooked by neighbors; 52.3% agreed that the interior of houses are within the range of vision through opened windows; and 31.2% approved that females in particular have difficulty moving around the house in the presence of guests.

4. *Living in a courtyard house:* A large number of studies resort in their proposals to solving present residential problems to the option of living in a courtyard house. Again, it was important to seek the opinion of residents regarding this critical point.

Increasing the fence's height was the option selected the most by subjects (Table 12). Additional 10.8% of the total subjects suggested planting trees as one of their proposed solutions (Table 13). This is basically a variation on the same concept. Thus, almost 55% of the subjects opted to increasing the fence's height. Expectedly, the second highest selected option was treatment of windows; 16.4% selected closing the windows and 5.6% proposed different treatments for the windows such as using tinted glass or curtains. Adding the two percentages together gives the treatment of windows slightly over one fifth of the total responses. The advantage of these two solutions, increasing the height of the fence and treating the windows, is that they do not entail any real change to the villa whether as a concept or design.

Table 12. Ways to solve the privacy issue in the garden

Privacy Problem Can Be Solved Through	Total	%
Closing the windows	41	16.4
Not using the garden	17	6.8
Increasing the fence's height	113	45.2
Living in a courtyard house	23	9.2
Other solutions	55	22

Table 13. Suggestions by subjects for solving the privacy issue in the garden

Solving the Privacy Problem Can Be by	Total	%
Planting trees around the periphery	27	10.8
Treatments of windows	14	5.6
Other solutions	14	5.6
Total	55	22

While living in a courtyard house got less than one tenth of the sample, the respondents suggested three new options: social arrangement such as careful selection of neighbors who would respect each other's privacy, larger distance between houses, and having one-floor villas. The first proposal is particularly interesting because it relies on social ground and not architectural one. It requires further investigation in relation to the concept of 'urf

(accepted social practices)⁽⁵⁾. Although the last two proposals obtained a very small percentage of the total number of responses, they are worth serious consideration. This is because they involve planning solutions for the problem. For example, using one floor villas means that fences can be of a normal height and thus visually less of an eyesore. Similarly, the utilization of larger lots allows further distances between houses, thus less visual contact, and more chances to create secluded open spaces⁽⁶⁾. It can be concluded then that the subjects see the villa's major drawback; namely, privacy as an issue that can be solved via simple means. Accordingly, it becomes the designers' duty to work out better designs for fences and windows for this purpose.

Conclusion

The study has shown that the villa as developed in Saudi Arabia is well accepted by the examined subjects who mostly belong to the well educated and well-to-do segment of the Saudi society. It has certain drawbacks that, although important, do not make it an unacceptable form of housing for the Saudi family. Furthermore, these drawbacks can be dealt with to reach a more sensitive design for the villa that can better accommodate its residents.

Furthermore, the study indicates two crucial issues. Firstly, the villa should be accepted as a legitimate housing type based on two factors: its presence is physically irreversible, and the society has accepted it and adapted it to its lifestyle. Secondly, the study of privacy in the villa shows that the Saudi society, like any other society, is going through a continuous change and development. It was shown earlier that within about twenty years people's views have changed towards the use of their private gardens. Although one piece of statistics cannot prove much, it should definitely be taken as indicative of some change regarding this issue⁽⁷⁾.

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(5) For the concept of 'urf and its role in the forming of Arab-Islamic urban fabric, see Hakim (1994).
 (6) Riyadh Action Master Plan prepared by SCET International in 1976 proposed solutions for the issue of privacy based on carefully studied distances between houses.
 (7) Al-Faqih (1993) also talks about change in attitude towards privacy in Jordan. He explains that the large glass windows and open balconies, which have started to be heavily used in villas, reflect this change of attitude.

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رضا السكان عن الفيلا كنمط سكني في السعودية

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(قدم للنشر في ١٤٣١/٩/١هـ؛ وقبل للنشر في ١٤٣٢/٥/١٣هـ)

ملخص البحث. بدأ انتشار الفيلا كنمط أساسي من أنماط السكن في السعودية منذ خمسينيات القرن العشرين. وبالرغم من انتشار استخدامها، إلا أن الدراسات المتعلقة بها تكرر التشكيك بصلاحياتها للمجتمع السعودي؛ لذلك تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقييم مدى قبول المجتمع السعودي للفيلا كنمط سكني وقياس مدى الارتياح لتصميمها. وتناقش الدراسة أيضاً بشكل تفصيلي موضوعين هما: استخدام الحديقة الخاصة بالفيلا، والخصوصية التي توفرها الفيلا.

اعتمدت الدراسة على استبيان تم توزيعه في المنطقة الشرقية من السعودية، وتمت الإجابة عنه من قبل ٢٥٠ شخصاً. وقد تبين أن الفيلا كنمط سكني معاصر مقبولة تماماً، بل ومفضلة من قبل العينة التي أجابت عن الاستبيان. وقد وجدت الدراسة أن العينة راضية عن التصميم المعماري للفيلا بصورة عامة مع بعض التحفظات كالكلفة العالية للإشغال، وعدم توفر خصوصية تامة. إلا أن الأمر المهم الذي خلصت إليه الدراسة أنه صار من الحتمي ضرورة إعادة النظر بالصورة القديمة السلبية المرتبطة بالفيلا والتي كثر الترويج لها في السابق. ومن مواصفات هذه الصورة القديمة أنها تظهر الفيلا على أنها نمط سكني غير مناسب للمجتمع السعودي، وأن الحديقة المحيطة بالفيلا غير مناسبة للاستخدام، وأن الخصوصية مفهوم ثابت لا يتغير مع تغير المجتمع. أظهرت الدراسة أن كل هذه المفاهيم غير صحيحة تماماً وأن للفيلا مميزات صارت ماثراً اهتمام وتفضيل المجتمع السعودي.

