

## going up



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# It's the Moroccan role

Rooted in Berber tradition, the courtyard houses of the Maghreb have had a profound influence on domestic architecture in the Arab world. It is a design form perfectly suited to the Gulf, writes **Manisha G Harkins**

Soaking up the atmosphere in the courtyard of a 400-year-old Moroccan *riad* (courtyard house), you can't help wishing you could immediately transport this fresh and ethereal open-air space back home. In the words of Christopher Ryan, the general manager of Dar Les Cigognes, a *riad* that has been converted into one of Marrakech's most appealing hotels, "The most alluring aspect of the courtyard is that it brings a touch of the garden into the middle of the house... placing it at the heart of the home, with the sounds of splashing water, the chirping of the birds... it is all very refreshing and immediately makes you forget the hustle and bustle outside."

Maximising opportunities for indoor-outdoor living, the courtyard answers our primal, age-old yearning to bring nature into our homes, and renders our outdoor surroundings extensions of our interior spaces. Its roots may be in the ancient, Berber tradition of North Africa's Maghreb, but here in the Gulf a courtyard is utterly relevant. "It fulfils our climatic needs: keeping the extreme summer heat as well as the cold desert winters out via four thick walls and square/rectangular shape," explains Daousser Chenoufi, a Tunisian architect based in Dubai.

Aside from this practical draw, a typical courtyard is a visual feast – in all of the minutiae of its design. "In general, all riads share certain very appealing elements: namely the open *bhous* (seating areas leading into the courtyard), the central fountain and, commonly, four orange or citrus trees (typically bitter orange, mandarin or lemon)," says Ryan.

"There are other typical features of a courtyard that architects and homeowners here could copy: the geometric patterns and symmetrical layout, the *houmat* or terracotta flooring, the colourful *tadelakt* finish on the walls (a smooth and shiny, marble-like surface), and greenery climbing the walls and shading the space. Most people are also familiar with the *zelij* tilework and motifs, heavily influenced by Andalusian ceramics and hues," adds Chenoufi.

And that brings us to an important facet of courtyard style. These days, this special indoor-outdoor space has mostly moved on from its humble, ancient Berber beginnings.

Today's courtyards take many stylistic cues from southern Spain: richly carved woodwork and gypsum, intricate arches, colourful tilework and elaborate fountains, stone, marble and painted ceramics. It's no surprise, considering that the Moors ruled the Iberian Peninsula for 700 years, importing many of their ideas. Interestingly, it didn't stop there.

"The impact of the design style is far-reaching and you'll find all



The classical proportions and Moorish design details of this courtyard at Riad Enija – a 200-year-old silk trader's townhouse in Marrakech – create a magical space for indoor-outdoor living. Restored by its owners, the designer Ursula Haldemann and the architect Björn Conerdings, the riad is now a boutique hotel. Reto Guntli / zapimages

of the familiar elements in places that Portugal and Spain subsequently colonised, such as Puebla in Mexico for example," says Ryan. All of this goes to show that the peripatetic courtyard style is easily applicable in any similar conditions – whether we're talking about North American adobe structures or Arabian Desert dwellings.

What's more, here in the Gulf courtyard design is an ingenious solution to a number of cultural considerations. Chenoufi explains: "It has a religious purpose; externally, *dars* (houses) or *riads* are closed. Galleries frame some courtyards, adding an additional buffer. Muslim families retain their privacy but experience the fresh

air and nature in a proper outdoor area."

"In the Islamic world, wealth is a private affair. Hence, from the front door of any traditional *riad*, there is always a bend in the hall before you get to the courtyard, or there's an anteroom to stop prying eyes from looking in," Ryan says.

If you are welcomed inside, it's



A fine example of its genre, the courtyard at Riad Enija overflows with greenery.

**Riads share certain appealing elements: seating areas, the central fountain and four orange or citrus trees**

only the treatment of the courtyard that reveals the class of its owner. Richer materials, larger fountains, and more ornate carvings are the give-aways here, but the actual concept is universal and there's no difference from the outside. "That's another reason it's relevant for today, for all time. It is a wonderful antidote to the consumerist culture

and its showiness," Ryan says.

If these more philosophical reasons don't apply to you, don't fret; most of us dream of this type of gorgeous indoor-outdoor space because it simply oozes style. Even if we can't restructure our existing houses to incorporate a full-blown courtyard, we can still weather our house or garden walls in *tadelakt* fashion, add bright mosaics around a water feature or include majlis-style seating, and replace flooring with small terracotta tiles and vibrant ceramics.

Don't forget to include geometric patterns in some form. "The patterns on our fountain and within the floor tiles, for example, are all traditional Islamic designs: infinite designs that repeat and intertwine, with each pattern's elements connecting to another element, and the combination of all forming the same motif again on another scale," says Ryan.

Elegant greenery is also de rigueur as are Moroccan-style metal lanterns, which are pierced by countless holes that cast pinpricks of light onto the walls. And when you finally have your North African inspired space fully decked out, kick up your feet and pour yourself a replenishing glass of mint tea.

## ask the expert

### Natural stone brings a contemporary touch

**Q** The flooring in my villa is the one thing that jars. I have recently redecorated and the ceramic tiling is completely out of character with my more modern scheme. Although the look is contemporary, I still want my home to appear warm and welcoming overall. I'd also like to differentiate the living spaces with different types of flooring. Would stone work well throughout the whole villa?

**A** Natural stone is an excellent choice for both modern and traditional properties and is available in such a wide range of varieties, colours and finishes that there is sure to be a stone to suit your scheme – and every room.

For modern interiors, Piedra Plana Extra, a pale limestone, is the perfect choice for a neutral palette, especially when laid in a large format. It can easily be co-ordinated with the rest of your interior and is extremely

hard wearing. To liven up your home, co-ordinate with brightly painted or wallpapered walls and contemporary accessories.

To create a more classic look, limestones such as Field Stone or Old Gold have a warmer tone and are especially well-suited for use in entrance halls. Choose tiles that have been hand-finished with pillow edges to make a welcoming appearance and warmer feel.

In addition, you can soften the look of stone by pairing it with other natural materials, such as pale wooden furniture and softly textured fabric accessories, to produce an inviting and homely space. Add underfloor heating to combat any objections to stone feeling cold underfoot.

If you are looking for a more dramatic effect, couple a black marble or slate with a paler limestone like Vanilla in a checkerboard pattern. Use this in your hallway and then choose complementary stones for

the rooms running off the hall. This will not only create a sense of grandeur to your entrance but will also help to define your space.

In an open-plan layout, try laying tiles in varying patterns or formations to create interest and differentiate between areas. Most stones will be suitable for this but speak to your supplier if you are keen on mosaics, since not all stone can be worked to such a small size.

Consider your colour scheme and how it will work with the stone you have chosen. Darker stones like black granite or our new Mahogany limestone look spectacular against strong colours such as deep red, which will also inject a sense of warmth to your room. A richly detailed Persian rug would look stunning against the dark brown tones of Mahogany limestone, and will also add to the inviting feel of the room.

In a more neutral-toned scheme any stone looks fantastic, as it

naturally co-ordinates with most grey, brown and gold hues. Selecting blues and greens as accent colours will tie in the natural characteristics of the stone, and may further complement your choice if you have selected a blue-hued stone such as Bruma Purple marble.

Overall, select the stone you that most like and is best for the job. Your supplier will be able to advise you on your choices, but most stones are usually suitable for most applications, whether indoors or out. By deciding upon natural stone for your flooring you are making a choice that you will be able to enjoy for years to come, and it will only get better as time goes by.

Emily Davies was talking to Gary Walters, the managing director of Stone Age. [www.estone.co.uk](http://www.estone.co.uk)

➔ For more stone flooring ideas see page hh8



Black marble and pale limestone set in a checkerboard pattern can create a dramatic effect on your living space. Alto Nero