

The Architecture of Nuzi and Its Significance in the Architectural History of Mesopotamia*

MIRKO NOVÁK

Eberhard-Karls Universität, Tübingen

The numerous excavations conducted in the Near East since the Nuzi excavations were completed have added a great deal of new information on the architectural history of Mesopotamia, particularly with respect to the public architecture of temples and palaces. However, only recently have private dwellings been subjected to the kind of excavation and analysis that public structures have had. This survey discusses both public and private architecture at Nuzi in the light of recent finds throughout Mesopotamia.

In 1939 R.F.S. Starr published the results of the excavations conducted by the Harvard University expedition at Yorgan Tepe.¹ Since then there have been only a few studies concerning the architecture of this important site.² The focus of nearly all these studies has been public architecture, represented by a temple of long use and a well-decorated and large-scale palace. The private dwellings, on the other hand, have just recently begun to be subject of further analysis.

A large number of excavations in the Near East and the publication of their major results in the last fifty years have shed new light on the architectural history of ancient Mesopotamia, for which Nuzi has remained an important source. In turn, the architecture of Nuzi can now be understood much better than at the time of publication.

Since the interests of most scholars in several aspects of archaeology and history have changed in recent decades, new questions have arisen with respect to the material. The socio-economic aspects of archaeology and, especially, architecture have become very important issues. In this context it has become clear that the well-investigated town of Nuzi, with its large corpus of written sources, may offer new and important information. Therefore, it seems to be opportune

* I thank Dr. Anthony Green for helping me compose this paper in acceptable English.

¹ On the excavations at Nuzi and its history, stratigraphy, architecture, and art, see Starr 1939 and Stein 1997.

² See references below.

to take a look at the architecture of Nuzi with regard both to pure architectural history as well as socio-economics. No final answers, of course, can be offered in a short paper. It is impossible to reflect on all aspects of the architecture of Nuzi. Here, just a brief overview and a consideration of context can be presented, in the hope that further research on the material might be undertaken.

First the outer shape and inner structure of the whole town will be briefly discussed; then the development and organization of the public and private buildings. Thereupon follow some concluding remarks on the significance of Nuzi in the architectural history of Mesopotamia.

1. THE TOWN

The general plan of the ruins shows a nearly square main mound measuring about 200 m in length and width (Fig. 1). A rectangular town wall formed the outer shape of the town.³

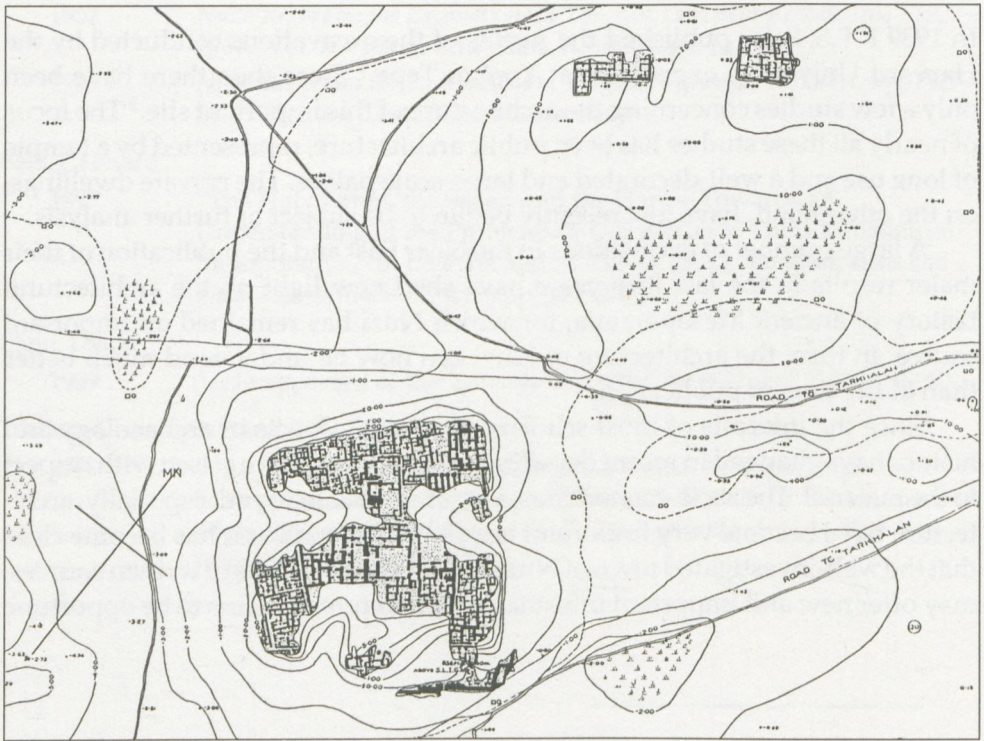


Fig. 1: General plan of Nuzi (from Starr 1939, Plan 2)

³ McAdam 1981.

Some 300 m north of the fortified town, a group of wealthy private houses, the residences of rich landowners, was investigated. The excavators thought that they were *extra muros*. Several modern excavations in the Near East now have made clear that many ancient cities were characterized by a separation between an "inner" and an "outer" town, a separation that was created sometimes by an inner fortification wall. On the other hand, large parts of flat outer towns often have been totally destroyed by modern agricultural activities.

This leads to the suggestion that the *villae* indeed were part of a—possibly also fortified—outer or lower town, which is no longer preserved. G. Wilhelm has drawn attention to another piece of evidence that supports this theory; in the Nuzi texts there is reference to a *kerhu* of Nuzi, a Hurrian word meaning "inner town."⁴ Thus the area surrounding the temple and the palace may therefore be identified as the *kerhu*, i.e., the inner town of a larger scale Nuzi. However, only a small portion of the city wall—which probably was the separation wall between the inner and outer town—has been investigated. Though the fortification as a whole was nearly rectangular, the construction of the wall itself was irregular.

None of the gates was excavated; therefore their number and structure remain unknown. The alignment of the streets and the existence of three deep *wādīs* suggest that the city had at least three accesses, one in the northeast (Square "N"), a second in the southwest (Square "F" or "K"), and a third one in the southeast (Square "P", "Q", or "V").

The street system of Nuzi is characterized by a three-step hierarchy with one straight main axis, several regular quarter access streets, and some dead-end alleys in the dwelling quarters (Fig. 2).⁵ It seems that several streets ran along the inner sides of the city wall. Although only the existence of one of them—Street 10—has been proved, the spatial organization of certain houses makes it clear that more streets of that kind must have existed.

The main thoroughfare, Street 5, connected two gates—the one in the northeast and that in the southwest—and separated the temple and the palace. This, and the fact that the well-built main drainage channel ran under its pavement, shows the importance of this intra-urban axis. Street 4 connected the third gate with Street 5 and was therefore the second prominent axis of the town. Some other streets (e.g., 11, 12, 14, and 15) were dead-end streets.

The inner town was divided into four parts: the official space with palace and temple in the center and three quarters with private dwellings. The "Northwestern Ridge" (NWR) stretched north of Street 5, the "Southwestern Section" (SWS) west of the palace, and the "Northeastern Section" (NES) east of it.

Analysis of the houses and their inventories revealed that different social classes of inhabitants used different quarters—a distinct case of social segre-

⁴ Haas – Wegner 1995: 193ff.

⁵ Wirth 1975: 66ff.

gation.⁶ The most prominent quarter was the Northwestern Ridge, where the richest people lived. The most standardized houses existed in the southwestern section. The houses in the northeastern section show a large variation in the social status of the inhabitants.⁷

In general, the town gives the impression of a planned organization. The main features were the rectangular outer shape, straight-running, and almost regular streets and the centralized position of palace and temple. The differences in the forms of the houses and alignments of the streets between Stratum III and the later Stratum II may indicate that the earlier phase of the town was more regular. Through time, a kind of urban dynamic took place: due to social differences among the inhabitants, some houses occupied former open spaces or parts of other houses. This, perhaps, is good evidence of the social inequality in ancient Nuzi.

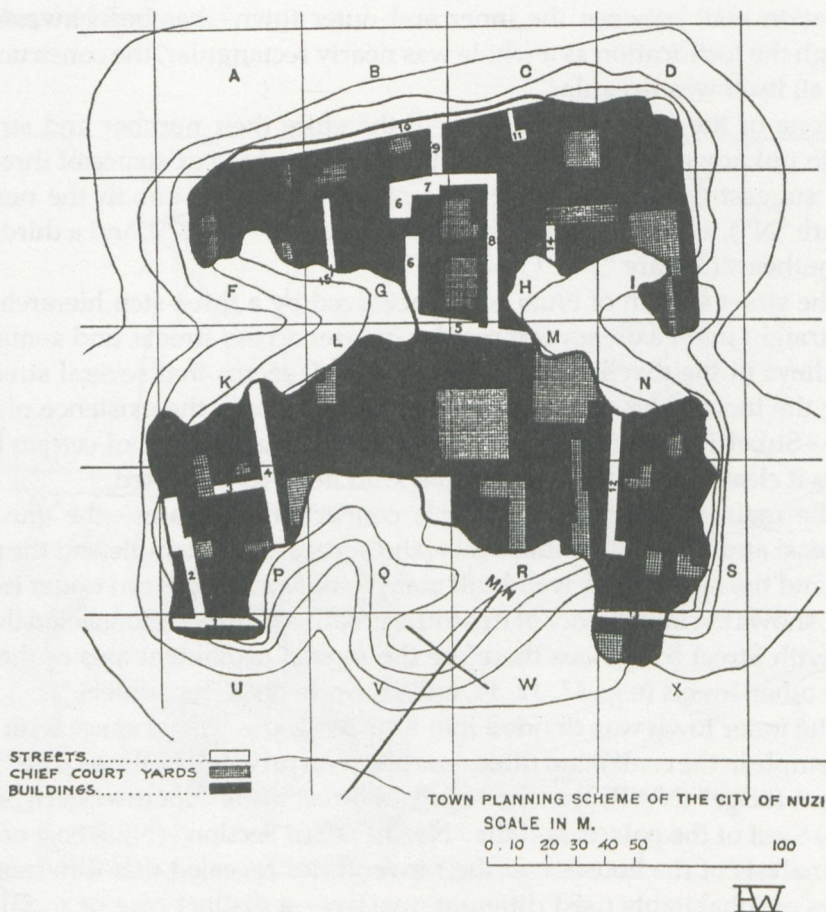


Fig. 2: Street system of the town (from Starr 1939, Plan 16)

⁶ Novák 1994.

⁷ For the textual evidence, see Morrison 1987 and Morrison 1993.

2. THE PALACE

The royal palace was situated in the center of the town, south of the temple (Fig. 3).⁸ The main entrance is not preserved but was probably situated in the northern or northwestern part of the building and led from Street 5 via a vestibule into court M 94. The street itself, as the main axis through the town, connected the palace with the temple area.⁹ The palace was divided into three parts. The first, surrounding the paved courtyard M 94 with its benches on the southwestern and southeastern walls, was obviously an "official" quarter. To the east lay the administrative and supply area, with kitchens and baths, as well as production and storage rooms.

The first audience hall (M 89) separated this part of the building from the central one with its main court (M 100)—the largest in the whole palace. To the southeast a sequence of large rooms with Q 103 was accessible. Its structure is reminiscent of the later Neo-Assyrian scheme, well known in palaces and residential houses.¹⁰ Additional living rooms, with baths and storage chambers lay northwest of court M 100.

The most important room arrangement stretched to the southwest of M 100—the two large halls L 20 and L 11. L 20, the smaller one, had a broad entrance from the court. Two brick pillars in front of the entrance may have supported a wooden roof. The construction of such an anteroom is reminiscent of the medieval Islamic *Tarima*. A similar architectural element is known from Syrian palaces, for example at Ebla and Alalakh, and became part of the later *hilāni*.¹¹ The largest room of the palace, L 11, was situated behind L 20. The arrangement, as a whole, can be identified as a typical Old Babylonian audience hall suite found, for example, in the palace of Zimri-Lim at Mari.

The third part of the palace, of a more private character, lay behind the audience rooms in the southwest. It is characterized by several sequences of rooms serving different functions.

The entire palace was richly decorated with wall paintings and furnished with brick and marble paving, and had a well-organized drainage system.

The two main features of the palace were inner courtyards in the center of different suites and sequences of rooms—in German *Raumketten*—which created so-called *Agglutinate*. Elements of Old Babylonian palace architecture, such as

⁸ A description and typological classification of the building in relation to the palace architecture of Mesopotamia has been presented by E. Heinrich (Orthmann 1975: 267f.; Heinrich 1984: 82ff.); its spatial system and inner structure have been analyzed by J. Margueron (Margueron 1982: 425ff.).

⁹ Heinrich 1984: 82f.

¹⁰ Heinrich 1984: 83.

¹¹ Novák 1996: 338f.

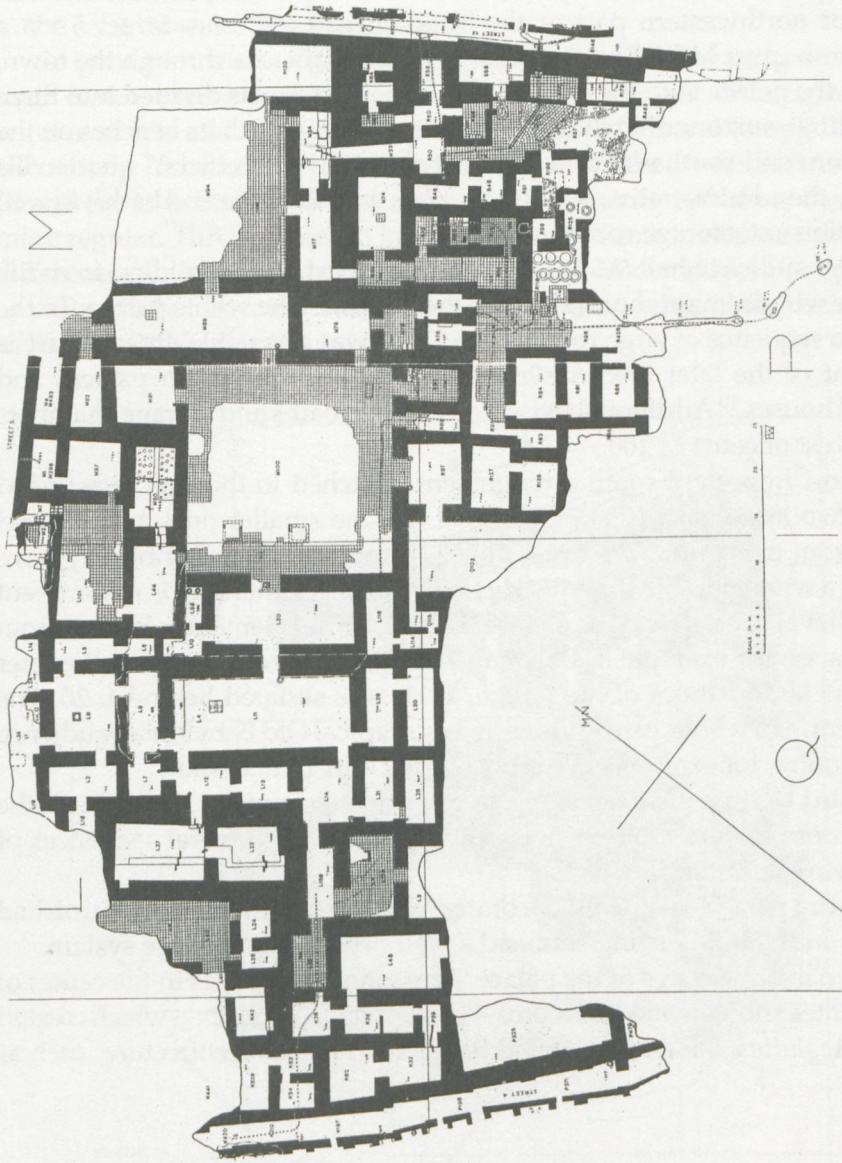


Fig. 3: The royal palace (from Heinrich 1984, Abb. 43, after Starr 1939, Plan 13)

the audience hall group, were mixed with new ones characteristic of the later Middle and Neo-Assyrian palaces—for example the structure with a series of several courtyards maintaining different degrees of “privacy.” This shows that the building was erected at a time of changing architectural movements; it marks a time when new forms began to evolve and old ones started to lose importance.

3. THE TEMPLE

The only identified sacral building in Nuzi was situated north of Street 5, neighboring the palace (Fig. 4). As excavations have shown, the temple was built in the third millennium and was in use until the end of the occupation of the town. In the earliest phase, G, dating to the late third millennium, only the northwestern shrine existed. But in phase F, that is during the Old Babylonian Period, it was transformed into a double shrine and remained so up until the latest phase, A. One of the shrines was probably dedicated to Ištar-Šawuška, the principal goddess of Nuzi.¹² The other may have served as the temple of Teššub, although there are no direct references for this identification.

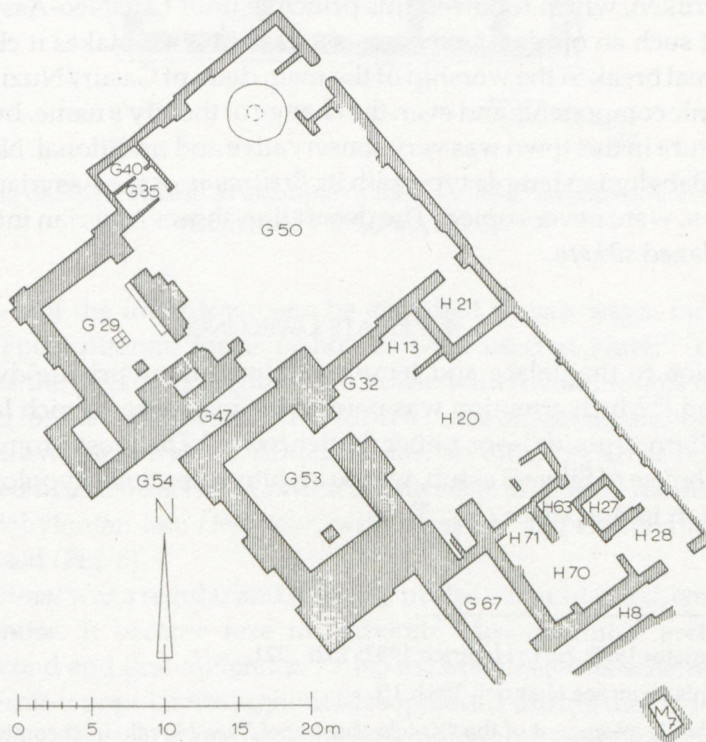


Fig. 4: Temple with double shrine of Šawuška and Teššub (?). Phase B (from Heinrich 1982, Abb. 294, after Starr 1939, Plan 12)

¹² Stein 1997: 173.

The form of the double temple—with its two shrines—has been analyzed by Ernst Heinrich,¹³ who classified it as a so-called *Herdhaus*.¹⁴ It was formed by an enclosed court and the two *cellae*. The main feature of both was the *Knickachsschema*, the “bent axis-scheme”; this means that the visitor to the shrine had to turn at a right angle after entering the room.¹⁵

Barthel Hrouda has stressed in several papers that the *Knickachsschema* was associated with early Hurrian civilization, and thereafter mainly developed in Assur and the area east of the Tigris for the cult of Ištar-Šawuška.¹⁶ But the earliest phases F and G, which date to the pre-Hurrian “Gasur”-period, and the later phases A–D, all show the “bent axis-scheme.” Due to the lack of a hiatus, it seems that the temple kept in general its original plan following an old principle.

The “*Knickachsschema*” was known in northern Babylonia already in the third millennium, and probably derived from the Uruk-period *Mittelsaalhaus*, as it is seen in the temple of Šin in Ḫafāgi.¹⁷ In the Ur III period it disappeared in Babylonia itself but was—on a small scale—still in use in Assyria and some other parts of northern Mesopotamia. Worthy of note are the temples of Ištar and Aššur in the town of Assur—but also some smaller shrines, for example in Dūr-Šarrukēn, which followed this principle until Late Neo-Assyrian times.

That such an outdated scheme was used in Nuzi makes it clear that there was no real break in the worship of the main deity of Gasur/Nuzi in spite of the new ethnic components and even the change of the city’s name. Indeed, the cult architecture in this town was very conservative and traditional. New influences like the Babylonian temple type with its *Breitraum*, or the Assyrian one with the *Langraum*, were never copied. The decoration shows Assyrian influences, such as the glazed *sikkātu*.

4. PRIVATE DWELLINGS

In addition to the palace and temple of Nuzi, many private dwellings were excavated.¹⁸ Much attention was paid to the residences of rich landowners in the northern “suburb”—or rather “outer town.” The most prominent of these was the house of Šilwa-Teššub, whose architecture shows typologically a close connection to the palace (Fig. 5).¹⁹

¹³ Orthmann 1975: 267f.; Heinrich 1982: 152f., 221.

¹⁴ For this term, see Heinrich 1982: 1ff.

¹⁵ For the development of the “*Knickachstempel*,” see Novák, forthcoming.

¹⁶ See, e.g., the paper published in 1995, “Zur Frühgeschichte der Hurriter” in *Eski Yakın Doğu Kültürleri Üzerine İncelemeler* (In Memoriam I. Metin Akyurt, Bahattin Devam, Anı Kitabı), 17375. Istanbul.

¹⁷ Novák forthcoming.

¹⁸ Starr 1939; Novák 1994; Bardeschi 1998a; Bardeschi 1998b; Miglus 1999.

¹⁹ Orthmann 1975: 265f.; Heinrich 1984: 86f.; Bardeschi 1998a: 225ff.

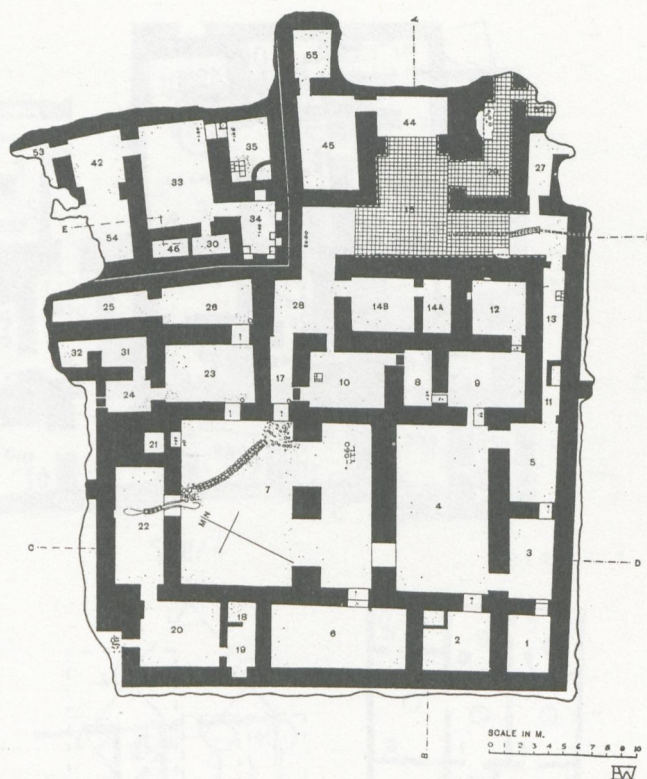


Fig. 5: House of Šilwa-Teššub as example of the so-called “suburban dwellings” (from Starr 1939, Plan 34)

The houses of the inner town can be classified in two ways: formal and functional.²⁰ Four different forms of houses were used at Nuzi:²¹ The most important was the *reguliertes Agglutinat*, a house with several rooms of almost equal size (Fig. 6) that were arranged to form a more or less regular block. The second prominent form was the *Mittelsaalhaus*, an often tripartite house that was dominated by a central hall connected with several smaller rooms (Fig. 7). In contrast, Babylonian-like *Hofhäuser*, with a central and dominating court, were rarely used (Fig. 8).

The *Agglutinat* was a regular and simple, but also very outdated, concept for building a house. It became rare in elaborate Mesopotamian architecture during the second and first millennia.²² Also the *Mittelsaalhaus*-scheme was an early design—most popular throughout Mesopotamia during the Uruk period. Only in Assyria was it still in use until the first millennium, as evidenced by the private houses seen at Assur.

²⁰ Novák 1994.

²¹ For the terminology of the classification of house forms, see E. Heinrich 1975, 177ff.

²² Miglus 1999.

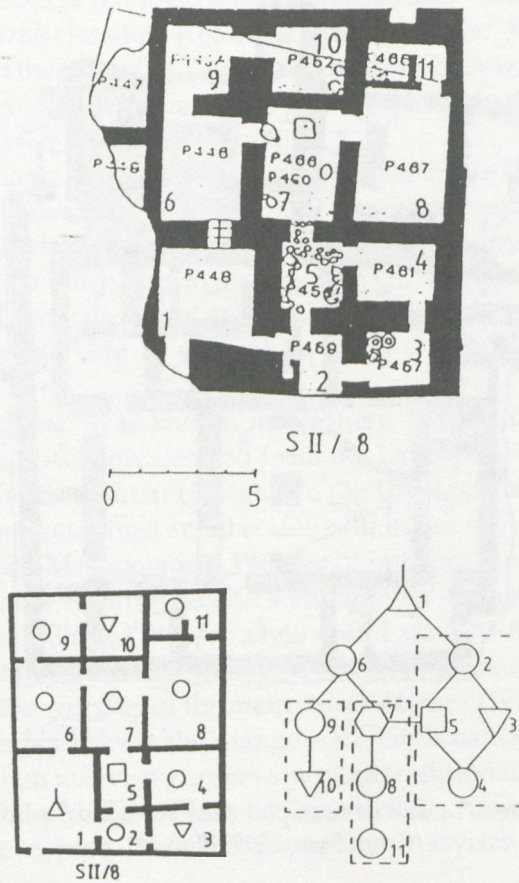


Fig. 6: Group SII/8 as an example of the “reguliertes Agglutinat”
(from Novák 1994, Abb. 10, partly after Starr 1939, Plan 13)

The house-forms at Nuzi give the impression of a conservative architecture, on the one hand, and of close relations to Assyria on the other. Babylonian influences were not present on a large scale. A dominating feature was, as in parts of the palace, the sequence of rooms, the so-called *Raumkette*. A good example is Group 17 in Stratum II, where at least 11 rooms were constructed in a single row.²³

There is no marked difference between the houses in Stratum III and II, except that the latter became more irregular in shape and the sizes of the units differed more markedly.

The functional classification of the houses is based on the analysis of their inventories and installations. Both provide distinct archaeological evidence for

²³ Novák 1994: 424, Abb. 17.

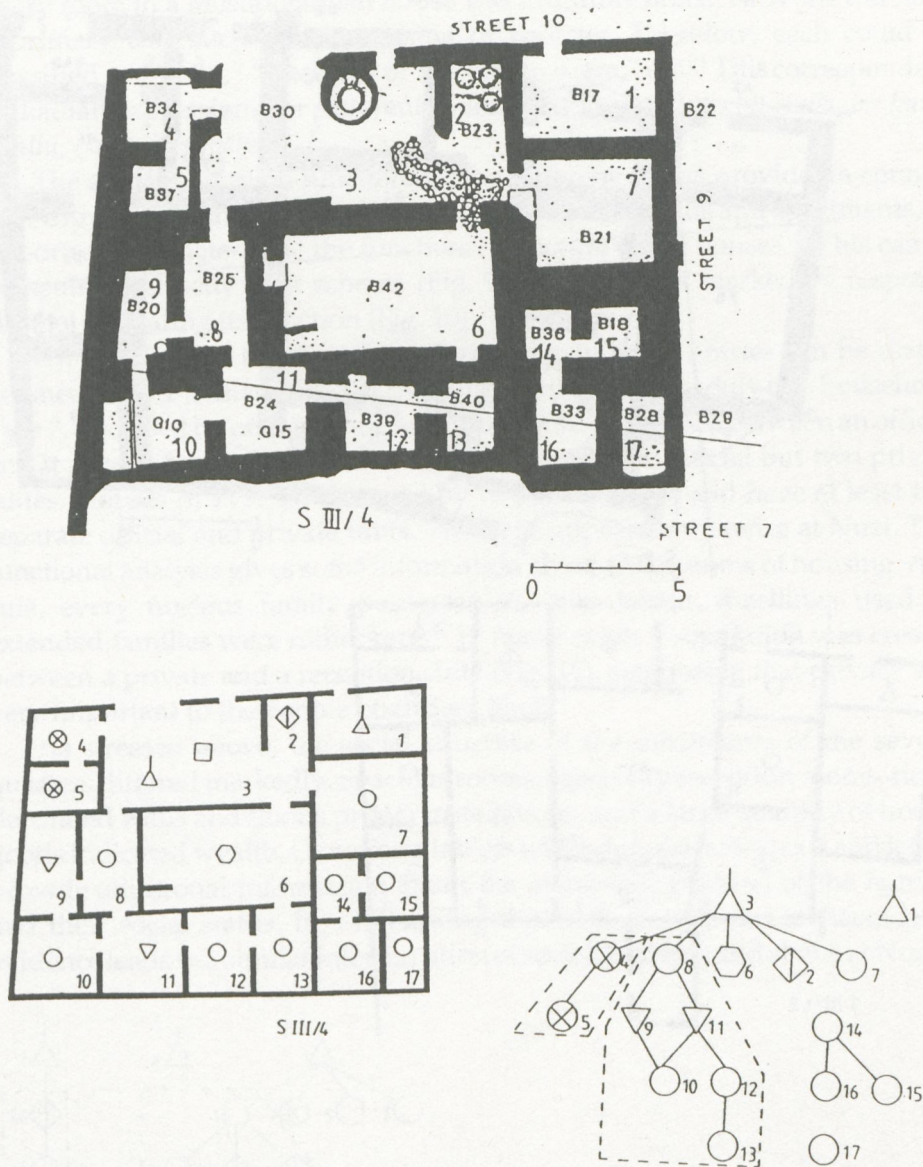


Fig. 7: Group S III/4 as an example of the "Mittelsaalhaus" (from Novák 1994, Abb. 31, partly after Starr 1939, Plan 11)

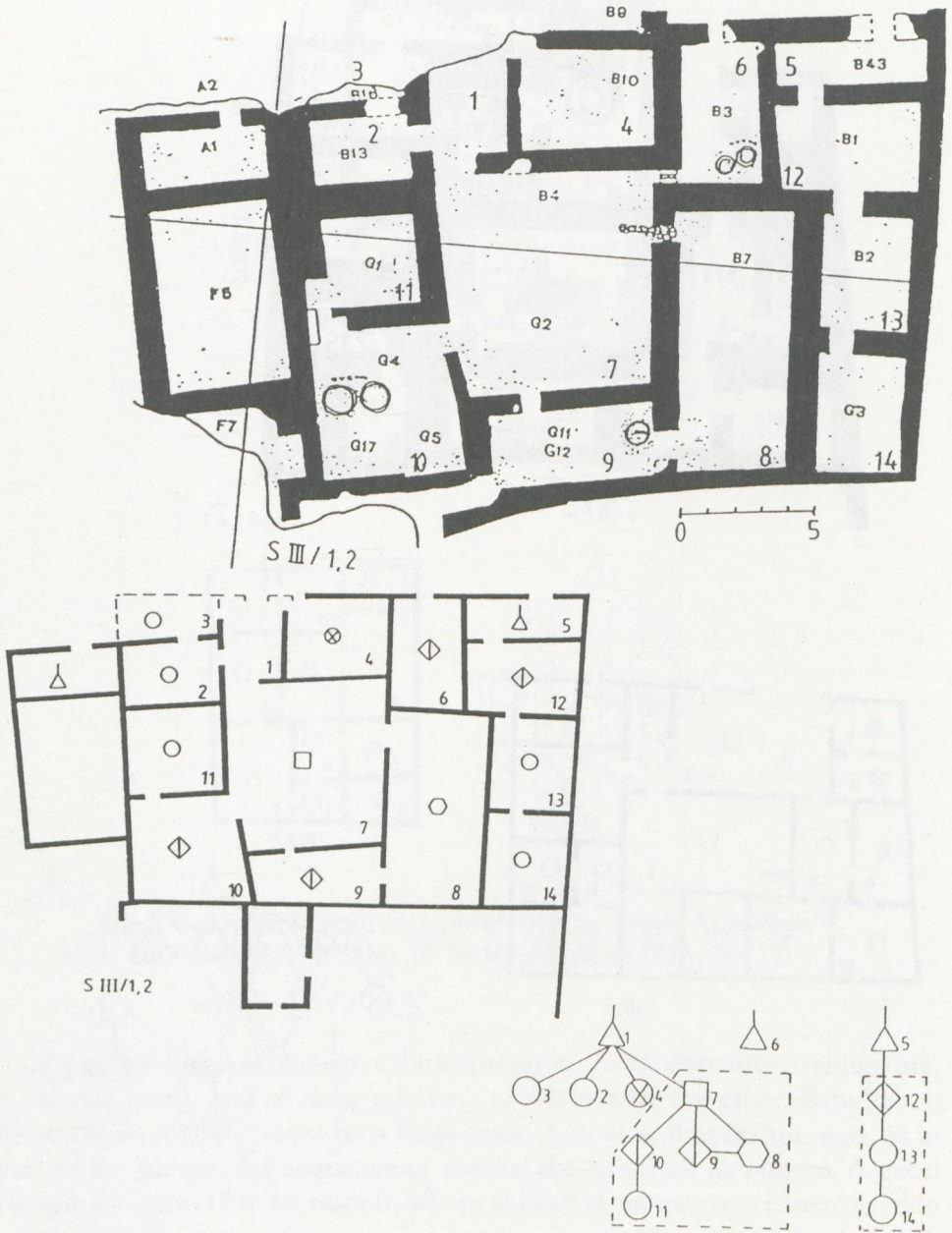


Fig. 8: Group S III/2 as an example of the "Hofhaus"
 (from Novák 1994, Abb. 30, partly after Starr 1939, Plan 11)

the activities that took place in the different chambers and courts. Although every room in a Mesopotamian house was multifunctional, each one did have a primary use, such as for washing or cooking. Therefore, each could be classified as a "bath," "kitchen," or "reception room," etc.²⁴ This corresponds to Akkadian expressions for different types of rooms, such as *bit rimki*, *bit ħurši*, *kisallu*, *ekallu* or *pāpāhu*.²⁵

The so-defined main functions of the different rooms provide, in connection with the formal structure and organization of the units and apartments, an opportunity to determine the functional structure of the houses.²⁶ This can be presented distinctly by a schema (Fig. 9): each room is marked by a special symbol indicating its function (Fig. 10).

On the basis of functional structure, four types of houses can be distinguished. *Type 1* is characterized by a single suite, used by only one household. *Type 2*, also used by only one household, shows a separation between an official and a private part of the house. *Type 3* has only one official but two private suites. Houses of *Type 4* were used by two households and have at least two separate official and private units. This type appears only twice at Nuzi. This functional analysis gives some information about the customs of housing. As a rule, every nucleus family possessed its own house; dwellings used by extended families were rather rare.²⁷ In many cases, a separation was created between a private and a reception suite (Fig. 11), suggesting that privacy was very important to the people of ancient Nuzi.

As stressed above, the social structure of the inhabitants of the several quarters differed markedly. Spacious rooms, especially reception rooms, richly decorated walls and floors, proper installations, and a large quantity of luxury goods indicated wealth. Cuneiform tablets with administrative texts and letters provide additional information about the mercantile position of the families and their social status. It is interesting that both textual and archaeological evidence leads to a similar interpretation of social structure and status at Nuzi.²⁸

²⁴ Novák 1994: 364.

²⁵ Kalla 1996: 247ff.; Miglus 1996: 218, fig. 9.

²⁶ Novák 1994: 380ff.

²⁷ For the family structure in Nuzi, see G. Dosch 1996, 301ff. Contrary to her view (that extended families lived together), the domestic architecture at Nuzi clearly shows that only nucleus families used the houses. This corresponds to the results of a study undertaken by Kalla 1996, 252.

²⁸ Morrison 1987; Morrison 1993.

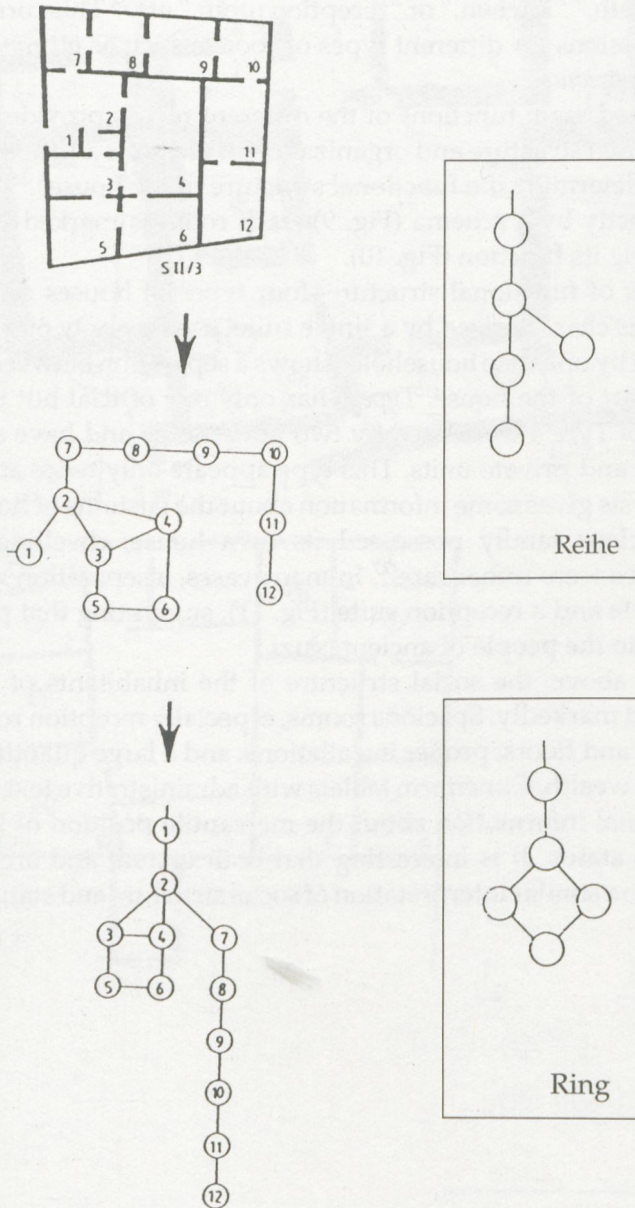


Fig. 9: Systematical scheme for analysing house forms by marking formal units (from Novák 1994, Abb. 4).

TYPES OF ROOMS AND THEIR SYMBOLS

Vestibule	⊗	<i>biwāba</i> (Doorkeeper's Room)
Reception Room	□	Court
Bath	▽	Storage Room
Kitchen	○	Living Room

Fig. 10: Scheme to mark functional room categories (after Novák 1994, 410).

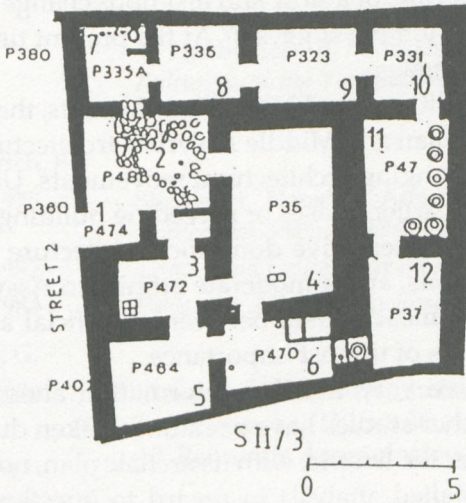
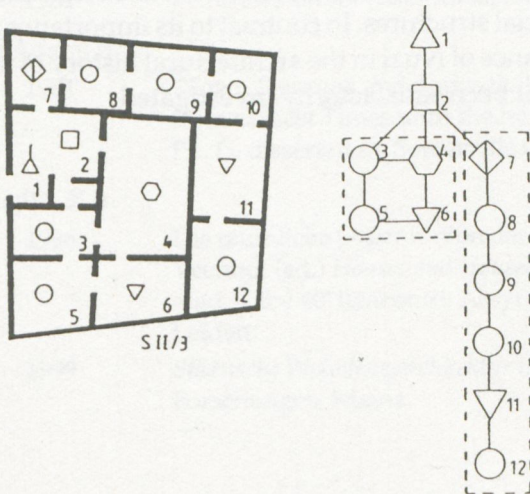


Fig. 11:
Group SII/3 with significant
separation of private and
reception suite
(from Novák 1994, Abb. 6,
partly after Starr 1939, Plan 13).



5. CONCLUSION

In general, Nuzi with its rectangular outer shape, straight-running and almost regular streets and the centralized position of palace and temple gives the impression of a planned and thoroughly organized town. In the time between Stratum III and II, an urban dynamic led to a successive loss of regularity of the houses as well as of the street alignments. But the process of degeneration of urban structure, which is characteristic of Near Eastern cities,²⁹ was not very marked by the time the town had been destroyed and abandoned.³⁰ This suggests that the town was founded or refounded with a regular shape and structure only a short time before the period of Stratum III.

In contrast, the traditional and archaic form of the temple with its "bent axis scheme" proves the long continuity in worship and architecture from the third millennium onwards. The stratigraphy demonstrates the long use of this building. This leads to the question of how the immigration of the Hurrians and the change between "Gasur" and "Nuzi" took place. Was there a sudden break, as the layout of the town seems to indicate, or a slow and insidious change with definite continuity, as the form of the temple suggests? At the present time, it is not possible to give a satisfactory answer.

The palace shows a mixture of traditional and innovative elements, thereby indicating a link between Old Babylonian and Middle Assyrian architecture. It was obviously erected at a time of changing architectural movements. Unfortunately, nothing is known about its earlier phases or preceding buildings.

The houses at Nuzi represent a conservative domestic architecture with some outdated forms and arrangements, and a moderate affinity to Assyrian buildings. The separation created in most houses between an official and a private suite suggests that privacy was of utmost importance.

Since the excavation reports give very detailed information about the architecture of Nuzi, only a few further studies have been undertaken during recent decades. Unfortunately neither the temple, with its archaic plan, nor the palace have been the subject of detailed analysis in regard to questions of programmatic messages in architecture and decoration or of functional categories and their relationship to social structures. In contrast to its importance as an archaeological site, the significance of Nuzi in the architectural history of the Ancient Near East has, to date, not been satisfactorily investigated.

²⁹ Wirth 1975; Wirth 1997.

³⁰ Novák 1994: 401ff.

REFERENCES

- Bardeschi, Ch. D.
- 1998a *Architettura domestica nella Mesopotamia settentrionale nel II Millennio A.C.* Florence.
- 1998b Quelques Considerations à propos de l'Architecture de l'Agglomeration Hourrite de Nuzi. In: S. de Martino – F. Imparati (eds.), *Studi e Testi I*. Florence.
- Dosch, G.
- 1996 Houses and Households in Nuzi: The Inhabitants, the Family, and those dependent on it. In: K.R. Veenhof (ed.), *Houses and Households in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Papers read at the 40^e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale), 301–8. Leiden.
- Haas, V. – Wegner, I.
- 1995 Stadtverfluchungen in den Texten aus Boğazköy sowie die hurritischen Termini für „Oberstadt“, „Unterstadt“ und „Herd“. U. Finkbeiner – R. Dittmann – H. Hauptmann, *Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte Vorderasiens, Festschrift für R. M. Boehmer*, 187–94. Mainz.
- Heinrich, E.
- 1975 Stichwort „Haus“, B. Archäologisch. *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie* 4, 176–220.
- 1982 *Tempel und Heiligtümer im Alten Mesopotamien*. Berlin.
- 1984 *Paläste im Alten Mesopotamien*. Berlin.
- Kalla, G.
- 1996 Das altbabylonische Wohnhaus und seine Struktur. In: K.R. Veenhof (ed.) *Houses and Households in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Papers read at the 40^e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale), 247–56. Leiden.
- Margueron, J.
- 1982 *Recherches sur les Palais Mésopotamiens de l'Age du Bronze*. Paris.
- McAdam, E.
- 1981 "Town Planning and domestic Architecture in Ancient Mesopotamia from earliest Times until the middle of the Second Millenium B.C.," Ph. D. dissertation, Somerville College.
- Miglus, P.A.
- 1996 Die räumliche Organisation des altbabylonischen Hofhauses. In: K.R. Veenhof (ed.) *Houses and Households in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Papers read at the 40^e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale), 211–20. Leiden.
- 1999 *Städtische Wohnhausarchitektur in Babylonien und Assyrien*. Baghdader Forschungen. Mainz.

Morrison, M.

- 1987 The Southwest Archives at Nuzi. *Studies on the Civilization and Culture of Nuzi and the Hurrians* 2, 167–201.
- 1993 The Eastern Archives of Nuzi. *Studies on the Civilization and Culture of Nuzi and the Hurrians* 4, 3–130.

Novák, M.

- 1994 Eine Typologie der Wohnhäuser von Nuzi. *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 25, 341–446.
- 1996 Der Landschaftsbezug in der orientalischen Palastarchitektur. *Altorientalische Forschungen* 23/2, 335–78.
- forth. Hofhaus und Antentempel—Zur Entwicklung des assyrischen Tempelbaus. In: Meyer, J.-W. – Novák, M. – Pruß, A. (eds.), *Festschrift Winfried Orthmann*.

Orthmann, W.

- (Hrsg.) 1975 *Der Alte Orient*. Propyläen Kunstgeschichte 14. Berlin.

Starr, R.F.S.

- 1939 *Nuzi. Report on the Excavations at Yorgan Tepe near Kirkuk*. Cambridge Mass.

Stein, D.L.

- 1997 "Nuzi." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, 171–75. New York and Oxford.

Wirth, E.

- 1975 Die orientalische Stadt. *Saeculum* 26, 45–94.
- 1997 Kontinuität und Wandel der orientalischen Stadt—Zur Prägung von städtischen Institutionen durch jahrtausendealte kulturspezifische Handlungsgrammatiken. In: G. Wilhelm (ed.), *Die orientalische Stadt: Kontinuität, Wandel, Bruch*. CDOG 1, 1–44. Saarbrücken.