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The Oval Temple at Khafajah, built during the Early Dynastic period of ancient Mesopotamia, creates a prominent and protected environment for its shrine. Sited in the middle of a city, it consists of a large, ovaloid enclosure surrounding a rectangular temple complex, constructed in sun-dried mud brick over an imported foundation of pure sand, isolating it on the sides and the bottom from its surroundings.

In section, each level of enclosure is raised from those outer, lifting the temple complex above the city, and the shrine above the temple. As a result, its most sacred building is visible from outside the walled complex and for a large distance beyond. Furthermore, this creates a stepped elevation of the visitor as s/he approaches the inner sanctuary, which is raised closest to the heavens. The two ovaloid enclosure walls, each with only one entry point, isolate the inner courtyard from the rest of the city, blocking out its traffic and noise. This creates a serene backdrop for temple activities, while also providing an easily-defensible structure for protection from any aggressors. The staggered-axis entry points—the gates slightly south, and the sanctuary access slightly north—and the shrine's position set back from the entry, also screen the shrine from the street. Echoing its setback position within the courtyard, the altar is likewise set on the opposite side from the shrine's offset corner entry.

The contrasted styling of the temple also delineates its hierarchy. Contrasting with the complex and rectilinear passageways and entrances of the

urban fabric, the smooth, undifferentiated, and round exterior walls present a monolithic and continuous barrier between the city and the temple, their only interruption the main entryway from the northwest side. Inside, the rectangular sanctuary is raised high on a rectangular platform, both the shrine and its platform embellished with a regular pattern of bold, rectangular buttressing, providing further contrast from the outer temple walls. The rectangular inner courtyard provides a supporting frame for the rectilinear styling of the inner temple. Housing for supporting activities mediates the transition between its rectangular boundary and the ovaloid exterior, filling the space between the courtyard and the inner wall. By contrast with the impenetrable walls from the outside going in, the edges of the inner courtyard are perforated with entrances into these supporting chambers. A secondary complex, with its own singular entrance, fills the northern corner of the space between the two outer walls.

Overall, the Oval Temple at Khafajah creates an effective plan for the temple. The stepwise raising of platforms and massive exterior walls create prominence for its role in the city. The circulation pathways create a protected sanctum for the shrine while also providing easy access from its own tributary structures. And most distinctively, the massive oval walls and rectangular platform and shrine establish by their nesting, and reinforce by their contrasting styles, the multiple levels of hierarchy between the most sacred space of the interior and the surrounding city.

Bibliography

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