

Shushtar New Town: the Idea of a Community

Interview with KAMRAN DIBA

Edited by LUDOVICO MICARA and VERONICA SALOMONE¹

Abstract: The text originates from an interview with Kamran Diba, recorded at his home, in Gaucin, near Malaga, on February 17th and 18th, 2016 (Fig. 1). The realization of the interview is by Ludovico Micara in collaboration with Veronica Salomone. The topic of the interview is the Shushtar New Town project, a new urban structure designed and built by Kamran Diba near Shushtar, a historic city in the Khuzestan province in south-eastern Iran.

The story of Shushtar New Town designed and built between 1974 and 1980, on the eve of the Islamic revolution, is an important key to understanding the urban policies in Iran during this crucial historical transition and to assess, in this context, the innovative contribution by its author to the themes of the project and the formation of new cities and new urban communities in developing countries.²

Shushtar is a city in the Khuzestan province, in southeastern Iran, bordering Iraq and overlooking the Persian Gulf. It has a long history, together with neighboring Dezful and Shush (Susa), dating back to the Elamite period (4th-2nd millennium BC) followed by Achaemenid (550-330 BC) and the Sassanid (224-651 AD) periods before being conquered by the Arabs. The city, population now around 100,000, is also near Khorramshar and the areas affected by the worst and bloodiest phase of the war between Iran and Iraq (1980-88). This explains the events which have entailed drastic transformations suffered by the Shushtar New Town. The rich supply of water due to the presence of the Karoun river and the large canal surrounding the historic city,³ (Fig. 2) replenishing water resources with dams, underground channels

1. A warm thanks to Filippo De Dominicis, for his contributions to the bibliography and ideas on the interview.

2. The responses to the interview are in italics.

3. See ICOMOS 2009, p. 259-266.

(Illustrations without references from the Kamran Diba archives)



*Fig. 1. The interview. (Photos by Veronica Salomone).
1. 1. Kamran Diba; 1. 2 Ludovico Micara interviewing Kamran Diba;
1. 3. Kamran Diba illustrating the project.*

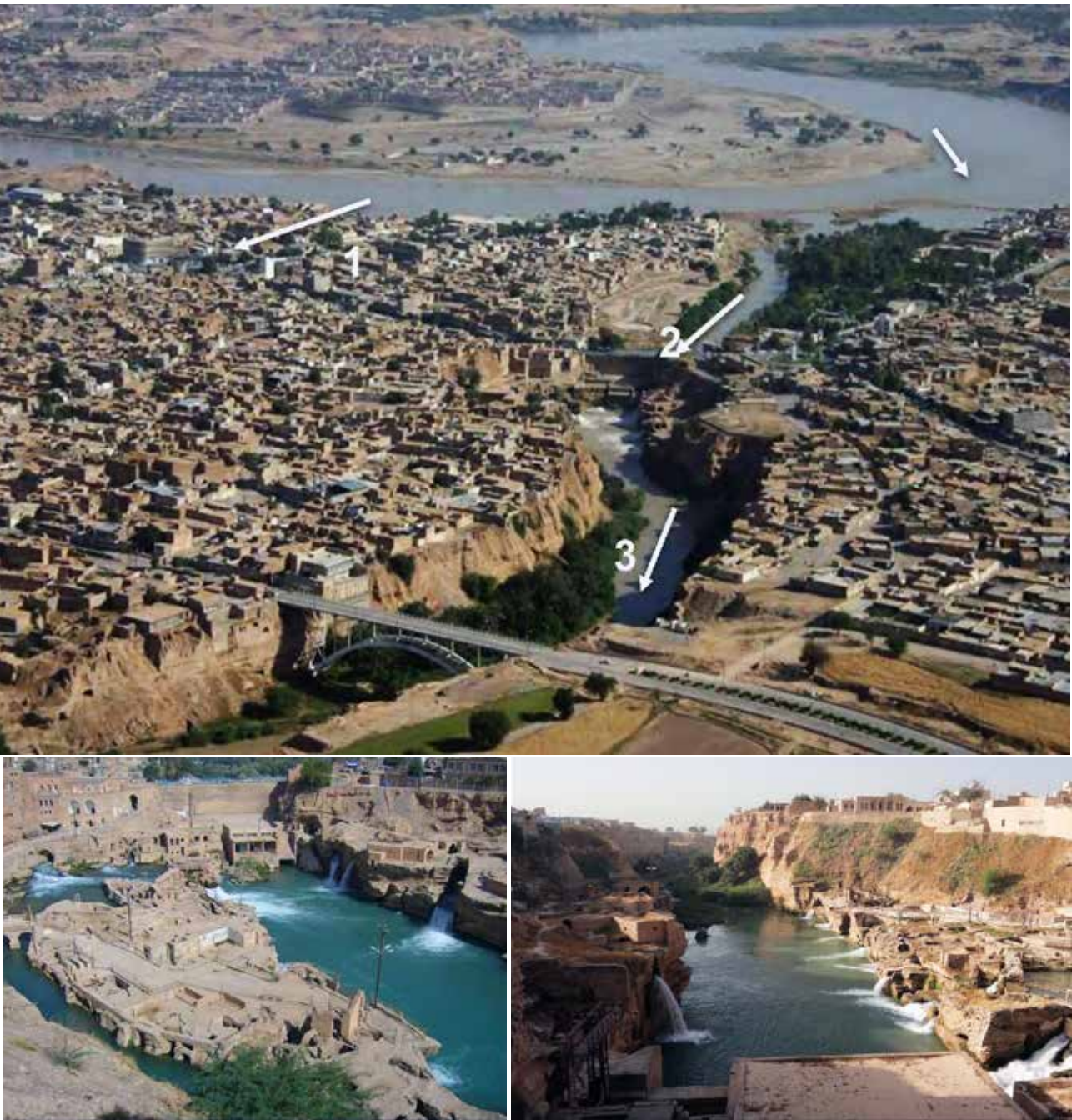


Fig. 2. Old Shushtar.

2. 1. The eye-bird view of the historical hydraulic system derived from the Kârun; River and through the city of Shushtar; (ICOMOS 2009, p. 260); 2. 2. Gargar Dam and the area of mills. (ICOMOS 2009, p. 264); 2. 3. View of the Gargar Canal.

(*qanat*) and mills, has also encouraged the development of agricultural crops, especially sugarcane sugar. In 1974, the Karoun agro-industry decides to exploit the natural and artificial resources of the region with a sugar cane processing plant and, in connection with it, build a new residential and urban complex, New Shushtar, near Shushtar, to house workers, technicians and employees of the new industry. Initially they had to be housed in the new 6,500 family settlement, corresponding to 30,000 inhabitants, which would be connected by railway to the factory and the offices, approximately 18 km from the new center. The houses were to be rented out to the workers and the Karoun staff for a modest sum, one twelfth of their salary. The project was entrusted to Kamran Diba with D.A.Z. Architects and Planners. Construction of the complex which began in 1976, was to be completed by 1985. The first of the five stages was completed in 1980. In 1986, only 700 of the planned 6,500 families had settled in. Because of the Islamic Revolution (1979) and the Iran-Iraq war, many houses were occupied by refugees, from neighboring territories destroyed by war and by squatters. Despite these unforeseen problems, the project was conferred the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1986.

Kamran Diba is one of the most important living Iranian architects. Born in Tehran in 1937, he studied architecture, like many young Iranians, abroad, in the United States.

I was educated as architect at the Howard University in Washington D.C. but my formation is a little bit autodidactic, because I started to study sociology on postgraduate level and then worked with town-planners. I was influenced by Morton Hoppenfeld and had courses in Urban Design with him. He was a town planner, an intellectual very much interested in social philosophy. Later on, when Morton Hoppenfeld was doing a project for a new town called Columbia, between Baltimore and Washington D.C., I worked with the design team. But I also studied psychology and philosophy on my own, especially existentialism. This was my cultural vision. As an architect I became a generalist, because I did from cultural buildings to housing for the poor; I refused to do villas for rich people. I was interested very much in the social problems - thinking architecture has to do with people and town planning; in fact I was quite interested in building communities. My idea was that mass housing is meaningless if not thinking in terms of a community. What I mean by community is that you have to think about the people living in a certain place; the ideal situation is that people work there, they educate their children there, they go to church or

not, they socialize there. It is a reaction to the American suburban living, which is a bedroom community. As you know, people abandon the American cities for a suburban living. They have a community just for sleeping and everybody commutes to towns for working. My idea is totally against it, thinking in terms of living and working being physically related. I was also very much concerned with a socially integrated housing, because housing just for poor people creates ghettos. I tried in some ways to use this experience and to implement it in my planning for Shushtar New Town. By the way, my thesis in graduate sociology department was Social Distance. I had only one chance, late in my career, after twelve years of working in Iran; the project of Shushtar came to me in the last four-five years of my career in Iran. So I could not complete it. The first phase is completed just about ninety-five per cent. The houses were done, as far as the park, the green spaces; we started also the schools. And then for the second phase we did about maybe thirty-five, forty per cent, and for the third phase we just did the foundations. I was not able to build all the schools there at that phase, but the work was abandoned because of the revolution and Islamic Republic; they didn't want me to finish....

In fact, because of political unrest due to the Islamic revolution, the project and its construction were interrupted in 1978 and resumed, very slowly, until 1979.

... The revolution in Iran was not just about social-political change; it was a total upside-down situation, a total reversal. All revolutionaries were not educated; eventually the revolution was a very popular phenomenon, and Iran was a Third World developing country. There were many educated people, but they were considered as elite, even university-educated people were eventually pushed out of their job and position. The young were mostly fascinated by communist radical ideologies and masses were seeking religious identity, which translated into becoming religiously against America, a reaction towards the Western values. The communists wanted of course to overthrow the regime. The funny part was the ideals of Pol Pot in Cambodia, who now is considered one of the biggest criminals of the political history, with his idea of totally pushing everybody out of the cities, destroying the bourgeoisie and all the past vintages of civilisation, was popular among the young. They wanted to restart on the base. So many believed in this extreme form of Marxism and then this ideological cocktail called Islamic Marxism was created. There were several factions: there were some Islamists, which were not very educated. The intelligentsia and university people mostly were Marxist-Islamists; the socio-economic ideology was Marxism, but most of them were religious at the same time. And then, of course, we had pure atheist, none believers in god. The Islamic religious section was very popular and of course they wanted change. None of them accepted Western bourgeois values. So when these people came to power, the Islamic sector, which covered the larger population and was most popular, overcame the Marxist., They were eventually cleaned off from the political life. Masses came from the rural areas, from small towns, and basically were not very educated. So when they took over, even the Islamic student belonging to the university, were mostly technically educated. They studied mathematics, the engineers

maybe could build a bridge, but they didn't know about the social-political system, and the physical development of the country. They just were thinking how to take money from where there was money, nationalizing everything, and destroying the bourgeoisie and the captains of industry. This is a disastrous scenario, because the progressive segments of the society are totally excluded from the future construction of the country; and even the bureaucrats and the technocrats were identified as the collaborators of the regime. A lot of migrants from villages and small towns to capital were intellectually and culturally impoverished, and they constituted a new social class and order.

After this first anticipation of the themes that will render the relationship between the Islamic revolution and the project for Shushtar New Town stormy, we follow Kamran Diba during his return to Iran, with his first professional experiences and the cultural atmosphere that characterized the development of Iran in the late 60s and 70s.

I came back to Iran in 1965, after the assassination of Kennedy... When I arrived in Iran the atmosphere was very quiet and I was very frustrated because I wanted to do more, but nobody gave me a chance... I opened my first office in a basement in 1966 and later I got a job, from the Municipality of Tehran, to do a small park in a middle class neighbourhood. It was named Park Shafagh or Park of Yousef-Abad by me. This was the first project given to my office. Of course I did a guesthouse, with few rooms, for one of my relatives before; but basically my first project was Park Shafagh (Fig. 3). I forgot, before that I also did a playground for children; I used the children to build the playground. It was a collaborative kind of relationship with children who participated in the project; it belonged to an orphanage. Going back to the park, in Iran they used to destroy all buildings that were not historical. But I wanted to preserve the existing old building, I kept the façade and changed the inside. At that time this was the first project to do so; the ideas I learned in the West, I practiced there. I built a community centre and art centre for children with a playground; and what we did in this park, which was in the middle of several housing blocks, was to make multiple connections to the park. So from the east and west and south people walked to and through the park, and in the intersections I created a piazza, with buildings around it. I was very much influenced by the Italian piazzas. I kept the old building, and I built two new buildings there, they architecturally looked totally different. Because I noticed that, in Italy for example, you have a piazza and the buildings around the piazza are not similar, because different people build them at different times. It shows the element of time and continuity. It is not like a fast food, it means it is cooked historically. So I used the same idea, I designed two totally different styles. And then made a bridge in the middle of the playground for the children. The idea of the bridge came from Isfahan or Ponte Vecchio of Florence, which also connects two parts of the town, but this one is only pedestrian. I tried to build a bridge, because the playground was sunken, below the level of the main ground providing shade. I was so much excited by these ideas!

The 70s in Iran is a particularly important moment determining the country's future. The prevailing themes in the debate are the approach and the answers to the problems of the tumultuous growth of cities, especially Tehran, due to the impetuous economic development and boost from oil revenues. But controversial and adversarial is also the dialectical relationship with tradition, from which the country was rapidly emerging. The Isfahan (1970)⁴ and Persepolis (1974)⁵ congresses, attended by the most important international architects and urban planners, confirmed, among countries in the developing world, Iran as the leader in the search for innovative solutions to emerging urban issues.

The point is that at the time the country was for development, and looked at architecture as building. So what me and some other people tried to do was to say: architecture is more than a building, architecture should be aesthetically and historically significant. And you should try to build quality, not just rooms, offices... The ideals that you have mentioned were distorted in the mid Seventies, but we didn't have very much time left: four years later we had the revolution.

In those years the Iranian government's major investments in housing established in the building sector of new houses and new neighborhoods a "frenzied pace which proved to be culturally and architecturally disastrous. The economic frenzy, due to the suddenly increased oil revenues and ambitious political leadership, opened the way for the emergence of a breed of achievement-oriented super-technocrats ... In such an environment, the unorthodox idea of importing houses (in the same manner as capital goods or automobiles) seemed credible. The magic solution was prefabricated or industrial housing, which also sounded suitably in tune with an industrially-aspiring nation".⁶ Many New Towns were built in Iran following to these criteria, merely quantitative, which produced a lack of cultural identity and social alienation. And research in housing solutions with values and very different contexts from those of the West was discouraged or sidelined by Iranian architects. Even in the case of Shushtar New Town the developer did not resist interfering in the project by suggesting technocratic solutions involving prefabricated and industrial habitats. But the designers have also been successful in designing and building a New Town in continuity with the values of society and the Iranian cultural tradition. In this sense the idea of the house is fundamental.

About the Iranian house, we have two traditions. One is the rural primitive mud house, with few rooms usually located in the villages and the other is the bourgeois house. These houses ideally had two parts: one part was oriented towards the street, and the other part was oriented toward the interior, which was not visible from the street. Usually the house had a cover, like the concept of chador, the Islamic cover of

4. BAKHTIAR, FARHAD 1970.

5. BAKHTIAR 1974.

6. DIBA 1979.

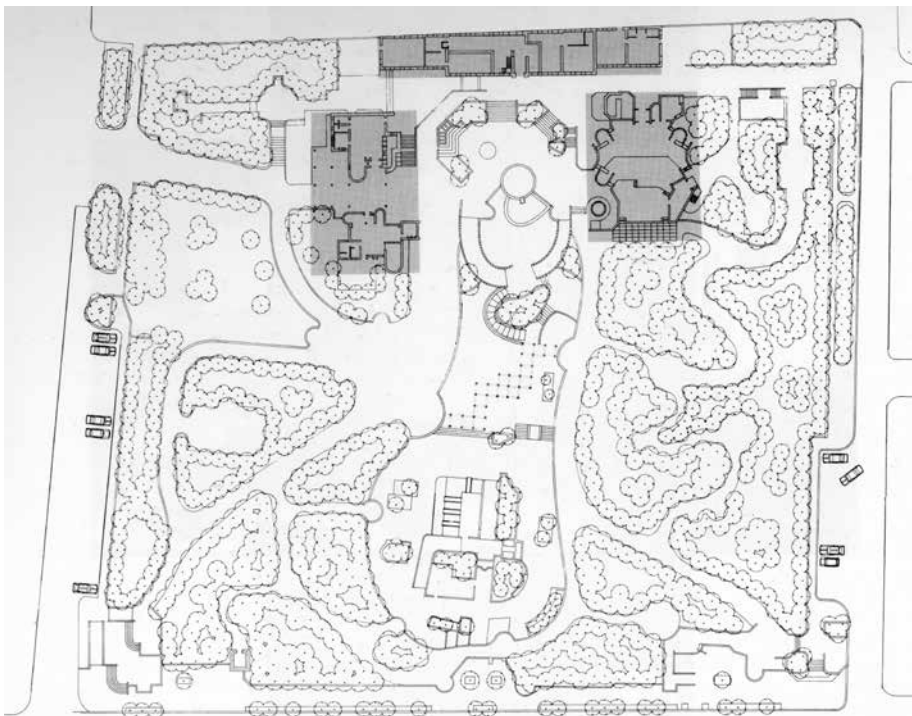


Fig. 3. Tehran, Park Shafagh. 3. 1. General view of the park. Centre: existing old building; left: libraries; right: community hall. (DIBA 1981, p. 17). 3. 2. Plan of the park. (DIBA 1981, p. 15).

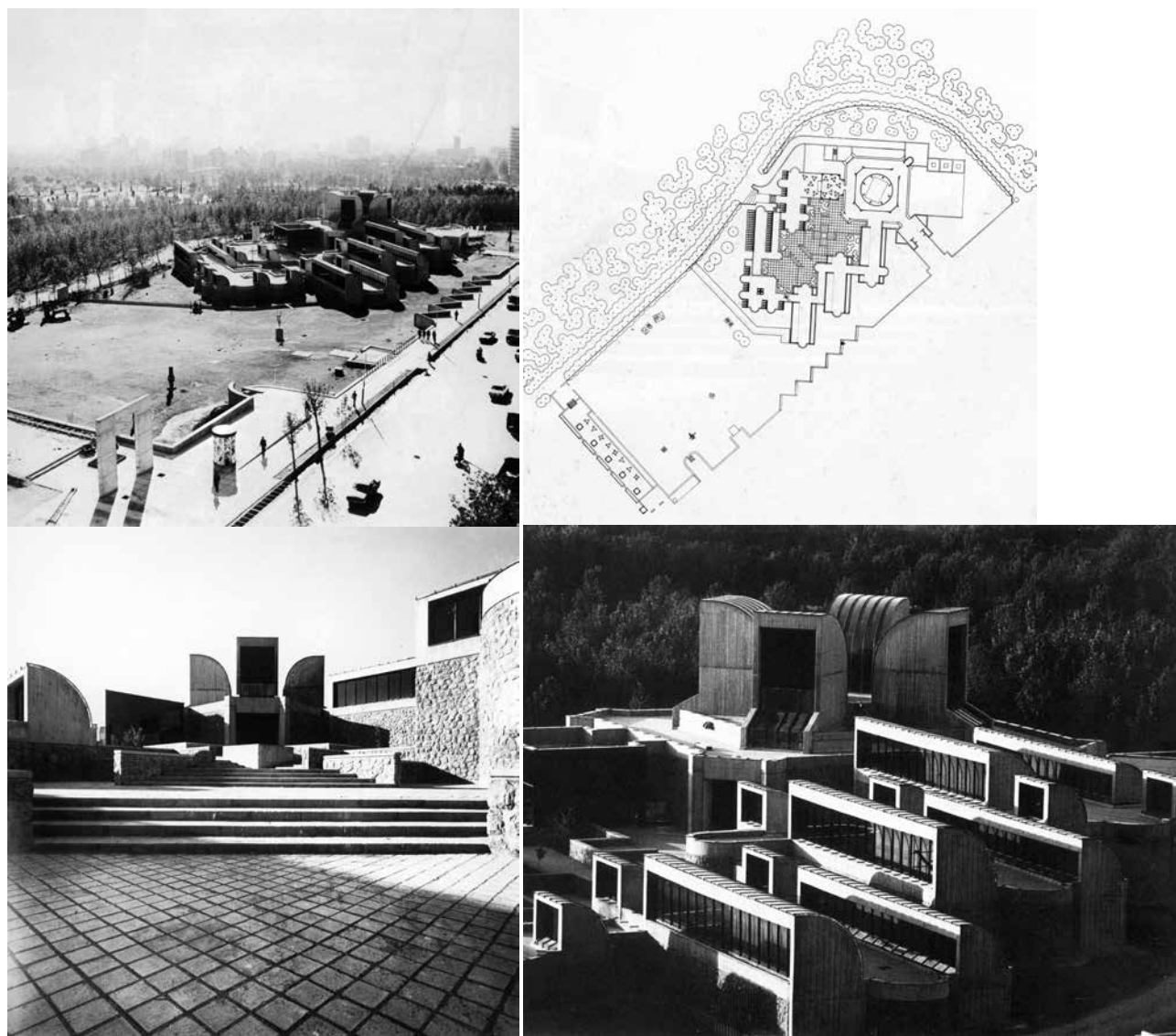


Fig. 4. Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

4. 1. General view of the Museum and the park. (DIBA 1981, p. 37).

4. 2. Plan of the Museum and the park. (DIBA 1981, p. 36).

4. 3. The sculpture court. (DIBA 1981, p. 35).

4. 4. Light catchers and windows lighting the entrance hall and the galleries. (DIBA 1981, p. 33).

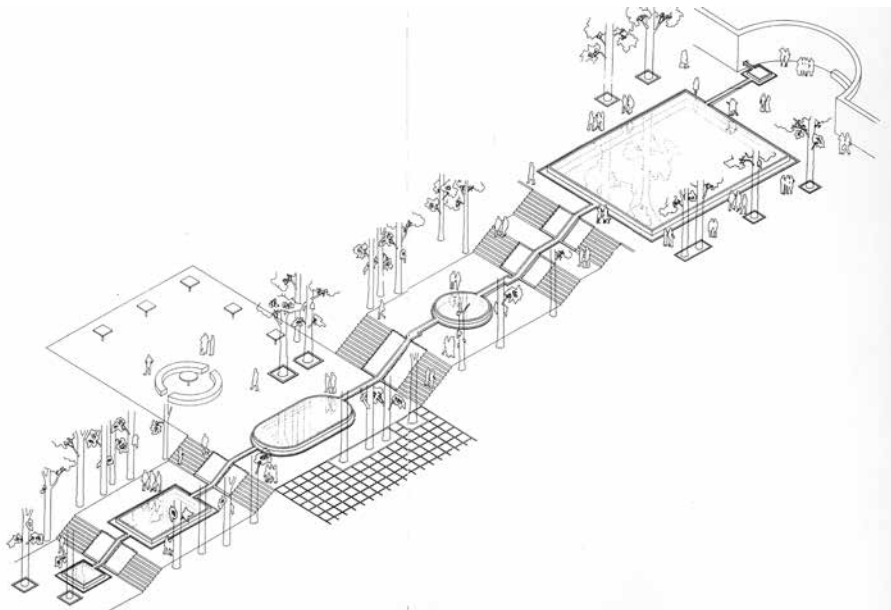
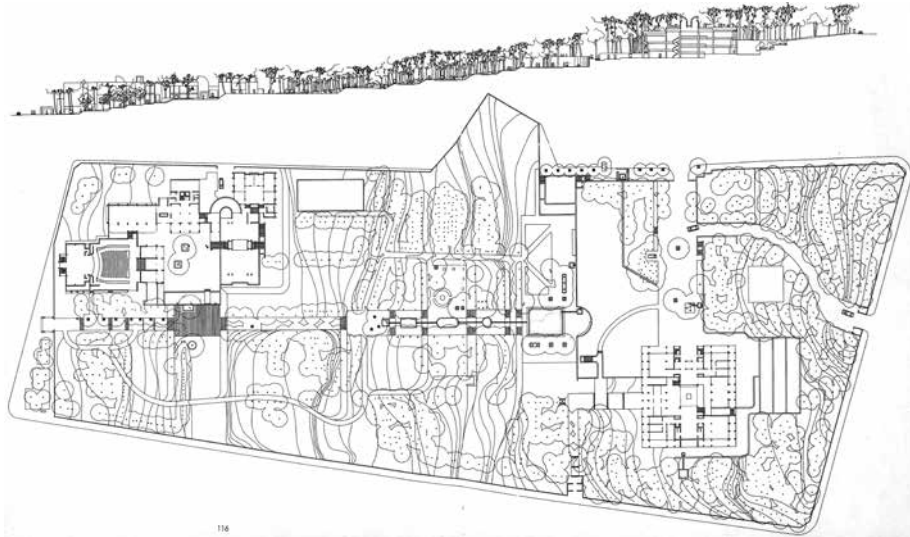
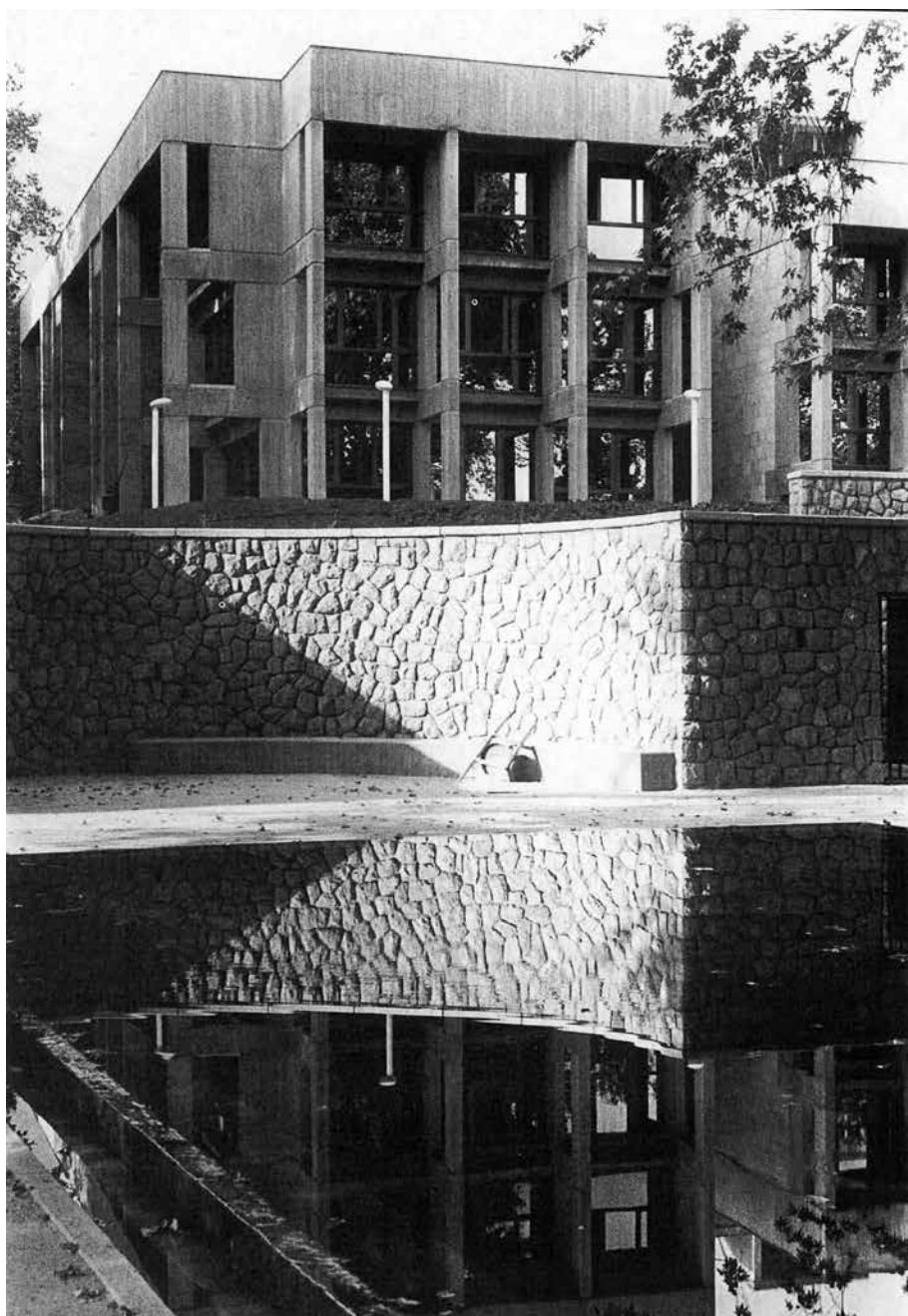


Fig. 5. Tehran, Garden of Niavaran, Shemran.

5. 1. Plan and section of the garden. (DIBA 1981, p. 116).

5. 2. Axo of water pools and channels linear system. (DIBA 1981, p. 115).



*Fig. 5. Tehran, Garden of Niavaran, Shemran.
5. 3. View of the cultural centre. (DIBA 1981, p. 125).*

the body, so you could not see the inside. So the point is, as women cover themselves with the chador, in the same way people architecturally covered the house. In order to get to the women and the children, you had to go beyond the part that was designated to men; the part that belonged to the men faced the street, and it was like a protection buffer zone before you can go inside. This kind of architectural solution is expensive; it is not for apartment living. When I was young only the Christian in Tehran lived in apartments. The Muslims always lived in a house, maybe it was not as I explained and not divided in two parts anymore, the street part and the inside part, like traditional houses. But basically the front part of the house had the courtyard and a big tall wall, and the wall was like a chador for the privacy of women. In Shushtar what I tried to do, in order to create vernacular identity, was that every house has a small garden, like a patio, to replicate this idea of traditional home...

The Shushtar New Town project is the last major project Kamran Diba was commissioned before the revolution. It is, in a way, the end of a very intense but brief professional résumé full of success.

I had a relationship with the family of Farah Diba; I have more or less the same age. But she didn't want to help the family for political reasons. I did two projects for her. One was the Museum, which was my idea. I went to her and I said I'd like to design a Museum. She liked the idea (Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 1967-1976, before Shushtar) (Fig. 4). She said ok, it is a good idea but you need some money. But I didn't have enough budgets to travel to see other museums in the world, because there was a very small fee. I had to invent the museum with my personal past experience of visiting western museums. As the time passed and I didn't have any work in my office, I went to her and said: "Nobody gives me any work. Because everybody gets help from family to get jobs, do you know what I mean? People say if you are good, your family should help you. If your family doesn't help, it means you are not good. Besides government agencies do not hire me because they could not ask for favour or kick backs from me due to my relationship with you. So I am in a very difficult situation; I want to go back to America". After my consultation with the queen, she told me they were planning an office building for her. Later her secretariat gave me a program. The program was ambitiously big, offices, auditoriums, galleries, library, restaurant etc. I thought she does not need all this for an office. If she has this budget from the government we should do two projects, a cultural centre and an office building. And she could then give the cultural centre to the people; the public could use it and she would be doing a good humane gesture. So these are the two projects I did in a beautiful old garden, preserving the traditional waterway and mature vegetation. The cultural centre was opened in 1978 Niavaran Farhang-Sera, Shemiran, Tehran, 1970-1978, with theatre, gallery, library and restaurant, facing a common courtyard; the office building in the north of the garden was the Empress Farah's Secretariat (Fig. 5). But for the rest of my career I didn't have problems in getting jobs.

In the late 70s Kamran Diba is an accomplished Iranian architect. His works are

published in major international journals.⁷ But for the project of Shushtar New Town Diba undertook an urban theme, much broader than those tackled so far, and highly relevant to the progressive development of Iranian society.

The project of Shushtar New Town (Fig. 6) was not given to me. It came to me because I was the master planner of old Shushtar. When the Karoun agro-industry decided to do houses for their workers and employees in Shushtar, they had to come to me to get permission to do the houses, because I was the master planner of old Shushtar and the land around it. They said: we want to build a town for the workers, but we want to build it next to the sugar fields. I said to build a satellite town of Shushtar next to the fields is something ridiculous. Shushtar is not a big enough town to have a satellite. You come close to the town and there is a lot of land at the north side of the river close to the old town, because tomorrow if you need a hairdresser or a barber, or you need to buy something, you go to Shushtar. And if you need an electrician you call Shushtar to send you an electrician. I don't want you to hire an electrician for your employees. In short I don't want a company town. I want to make a town, which is integrated into the old Shushtar. They said: ok this is a good idea. And then the Minister of Housing told them they should give the job to us because we did the master plan and we should design the new town... What I wanted to do was to stop destroying the old town. That was my main concept, because there was not development pressure there. The only development that was going to happen was this project, the new town. So I suggested to them they should make eight per cent of these houses available to the town. That helped integration of the two towns; and then I wanted to build a pedestrian bridge over the river that was very unusual at the time in Iran, because in Iran everything was for cars, and there was no money for pedestrian bridge. But anyhow, I proposed a pedestrian bridge; and then I knew that when I make the bridge there, people go from the old town to the new one. If you have a big mosque here, because I wanted to build a big mosque, people from the old town go to the mosque. If I have a cultural centre (which they didn't build because they gave the land to the university) with classes for performing arts and so on, people go from the old town to the cultural centre, the children go there. I knew that I could have interaction, integration of these two towns. We were thinking to develop Shushtar along the river. In Iran they don't know generally how to use a river. In Europe to be close to the river is good for transport. But they don't use the river for that. Anyhow it is a pleasant thing to have a river in the middle of a town like in many European cities.

Kamran Diba did not link back to the experience of the new foundation cities built in the 50s such as the English New Towns, the Italian borough La Martella by Ludovico Quaroni (1952-54), or Chandigarh, in Punjab in India (1952-65) by Jeanneret le

7. "Architectural Review", Vol. CLXII, No. 965, July 1977; "Progressive Architecture", January 1978; "Domus", n. 579, February 1978; "Architecture d'Aujourd'hui", February 1978, Vol. 195; "Progressive Architecture", May 1978; "Architecture d'Aujourd'hui", October 1979, Vol. 205; "Progressive Architecture", October 1979.

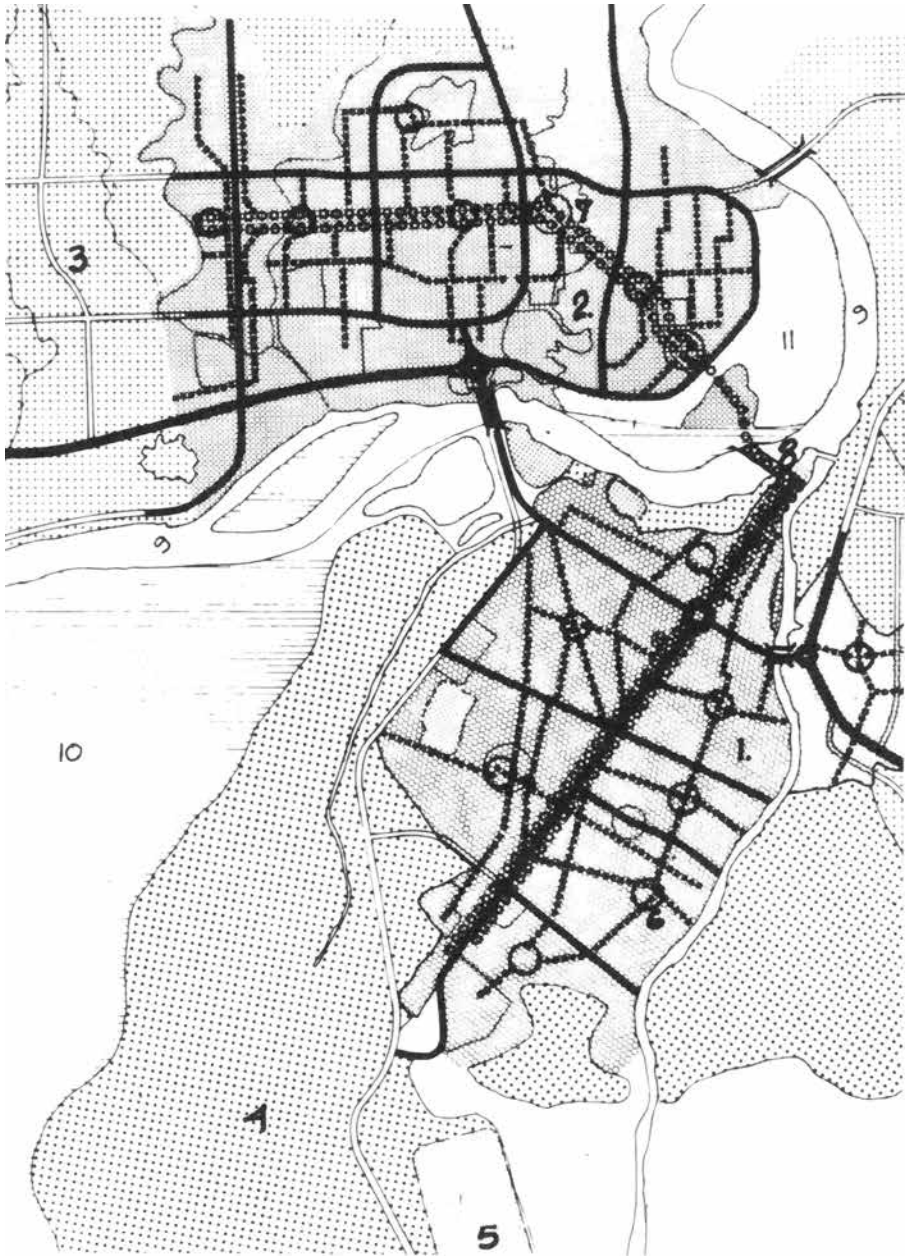


Fig. 6. Shushtar New Town.

6. 1. Unified structure plan showing old and new town and environs. (D.A.Z. 1979, p. 41).

1 – Shushtar Old Town; 2 – Shushtar New town; 3 – Future extension; 4 – Agricultural land;

5 – Archaeological site; 6 – Neighbourhood centres along pedestrian routes; 7 – Civic;

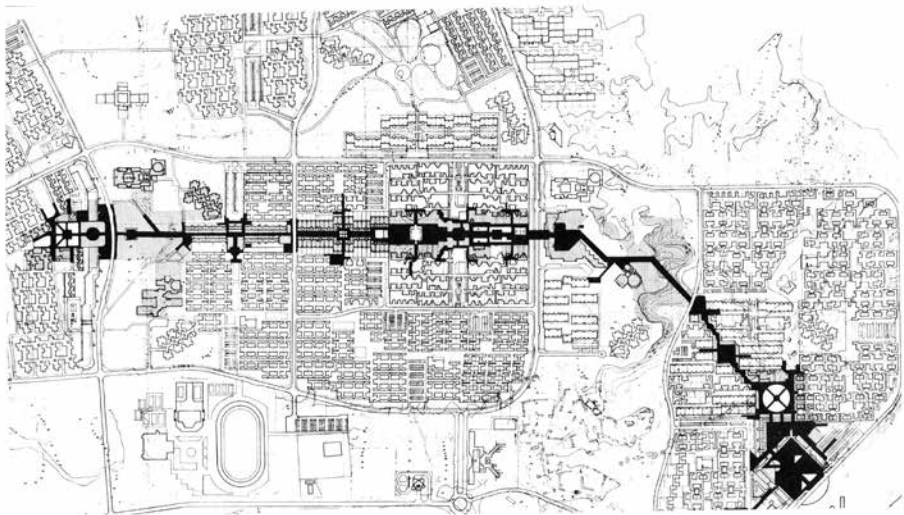
centre; 8 – Pedestrian Bridge; 9 – Karun River; 10 – Low-lying land; 11 – Wooded area.



Fig. 6. Shushtar New Town.

6. 2. New Town plan. (DIBA 1981, p. 172-173).

1 – Shopping centre; 2 – Bazaar; 3 – Mosque; 4 – Town square; 5 – Community and cultural centre; 6 – School; 7 – Sports; 8 – Park; 9 – Existing; 10 – Bus station; 11 – Bridge to old town.



6. 3. The pedestrian central spine. (2015, p. 3).

Corbusier, or the Italian neighborhoods Gallarate in Milan by Carlo Aymonino (1967-74), Zen in Palermo by Vittorio Gregotti (1970) or the Quinta de Malagueira by Alvaro Siza in Portugal (1977). And maybe Shushtar New Town is not comprehensible within the international theme of regionalism.⁸ Kamran Diba is fascinated by the historical Italian cities, as may be also seen in the project for Park Shafagh.

I liked the Italian towns, the square, the piazza... I have been in Italy many times, the first time perhaps in 1960, or 1959; I travelled with car; I just went there as a tourist, visiting the historical centres.

But above all Diba is driven by the idea that a new urban center must express an idea of urban community. This is the cornerstone of his philosophy for the Shushtar New Town project.

*I have this idea about the way to approach the problem of housing; especially addressing the development in the non-western world, let us say in the third and the developing world. We usually have an organization called Ministry of Housing. I think this is a misleading name or concept. We have to go beyond that, because the housing is not just many houses. We have to reframe the concept of housing, within the frame of building a community. Because practically the country X, which has the Ministry of Housing, allocates budget for houses. They build let us say 2000 units of houses and then somebody else has to think of the education of children, somebody else has to think of the transport of people, or reflect upon the problem of where people are going to work, and others have to think of community clinics, shops and so on. I believe that, what we should do is, to repackage and rename this idea of only housing and to call it a "**community development**". When we talk about the new community it means that we have everything: we have from the bakery shop, to vegetable shop, clinics, schools and the houses. In case you don't do the total package simultaneously perhaps at the end there is no money left to do the civic facilities. What I tried to do in Shushtar was to convince my client to do everything at one time. So I started building houses, schools, mosque, and public bathhouse, Hammam, I did not get the chance to build the cultural centre and the green areas. All ideas were about building a model progressive community in Iran, in Shushtar New Town. I want to emphasize that, if you do just housing some other organization has to do the transport, another has to do the school system and another organization has to do the health care system. You have to bring all these sectors together and make them allocate budget to the same project at the same time. I had to develop overall authority to do everything at the same time. So as you can see just building houses may not guaranty a successful project. I wanted to make this statement to show the philosophy and my approach to this project.*

This idea of a city made up not only of houses, but rich in services and public spaces

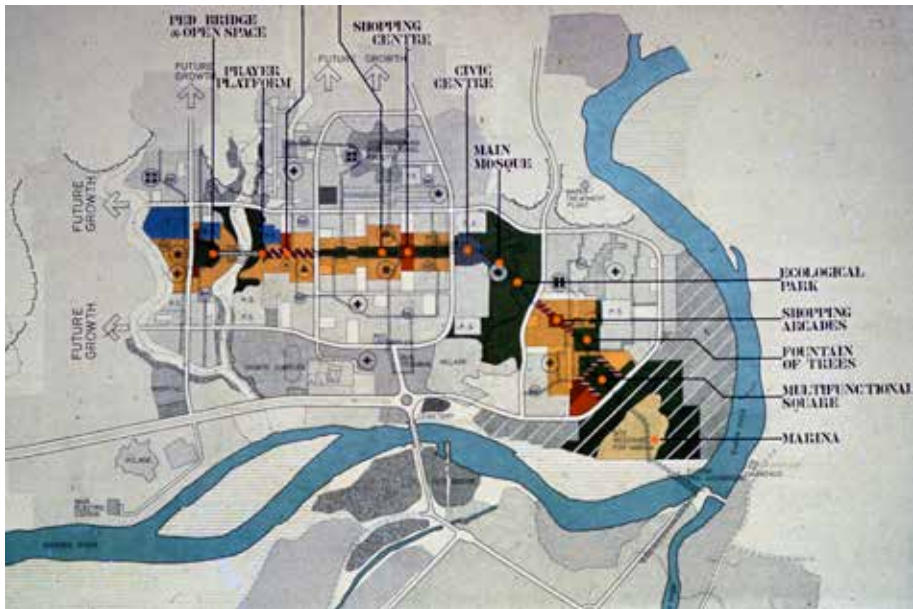
8. MOZZAFFARI, WESTBROOK 2015.

that foster the formation of an urban community, is also bound to a new way of managing these urban projects.

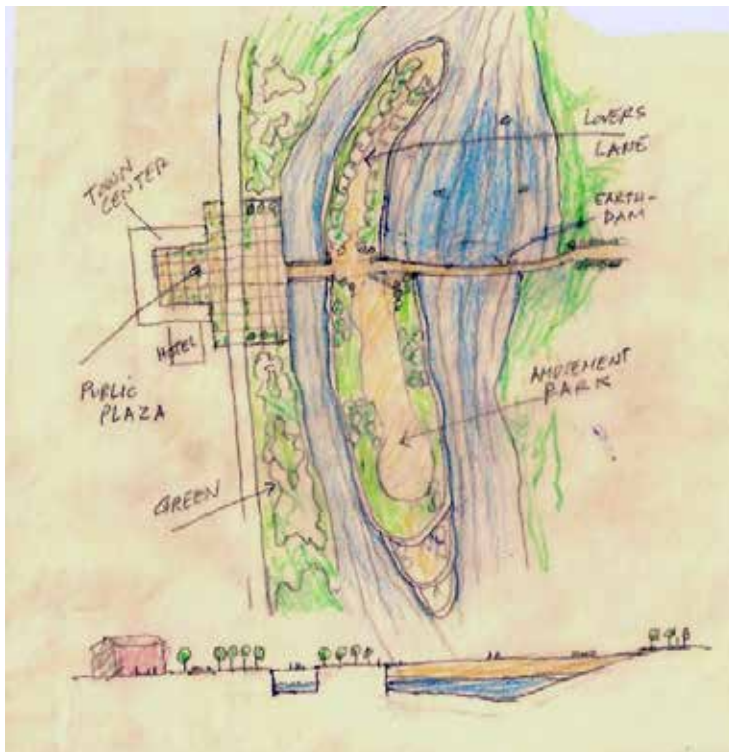
To do all of the above, it is necessary to make governmental planning; I think it should be a total package. In Iran very recently a lot of houses have been built, but hasn't been thought of how people had to go to work. There is no Public transport, no other facilities, no schools; they just built many units of houses. There are two elements, one is town and community planning, and the other is architectural plan. All of this is related to our profession. On the other hand you need organization and management to allocate money for every specific project and see if the architects do their job properly and be able to control the development. The administration matter has to be put into play by a kind of management authority, because a management authority decides which people go to this community and how to go about it. The architect and the community planners also know how they want to do it socially, if there is the social idea of integrating people of different ethnic groups. You cannot just let another agency give all the houses to one ethnic, class, or professional group and then create a ghetto. The point is that you need to integrate diverse groups and make sure that all the children go and play in the same playgrounds and attend the same schools; so you have to have a mix, and this mix is part of the planning or typology of architecture. I think this is an extension of the architectural work. But the management authority has to make a selection, has to decide what kind of people go to this community, what things they can or cannot do. That's collaboration; it is a relationship between the managing company and the architect planners.

From an architectural point of view the idea of an urban community in the Shushtar New Town project translates into the proposal of a large pedestrian boulevard oriented east-west, articulated in gardens, squares and resting spaces, porticoes, bazaars and water pools.⁹ The boulevard, built in the first phase of the project, was to be part of a much grander system of pedestrian paths, public spaces and services. In fact, the Master Plan envisaged a bridge, also pedestrian, over the Kharoun river which would connect the new town to the old town. A large square, Meidan-e-Shahr, creating a new town square. Approaching the bridge from the old town, this vast plateau of the north bank of the river constituted the main point of integration, accessible from the two cities. From it, a studied series of public services such as shopping facilities, parks, hotel, schools, sport facilities, the great mosque and cultural center emerge while rising along the gentle slope leading to the central boulevard. The urban fabric of the neighborhoods around the pedestrian boulevard is designed to facilitate pedestrian movements and routes, in both directions, between the latter and the residential areas with their services, shopping centers, schools, bazaars and neighborhood mosques. The narrow streets of the dense urban fabric repeat the character of Iran's historical

9. Besides the interview, much of the information on the Shushtar New Town is from the monograph: DIBA 1981, dedicated to Diba's complete works. See also: DIBA 1982; THE AGA KHAN AWARD FOR ARCHITECTURE 1986; DIBA 1989; KOWSAR 1996; AMIRJANI, ZARGHAMI 2013.



6. 4. Master Plan.



6. 5. Sketch of the Shushtar water front.

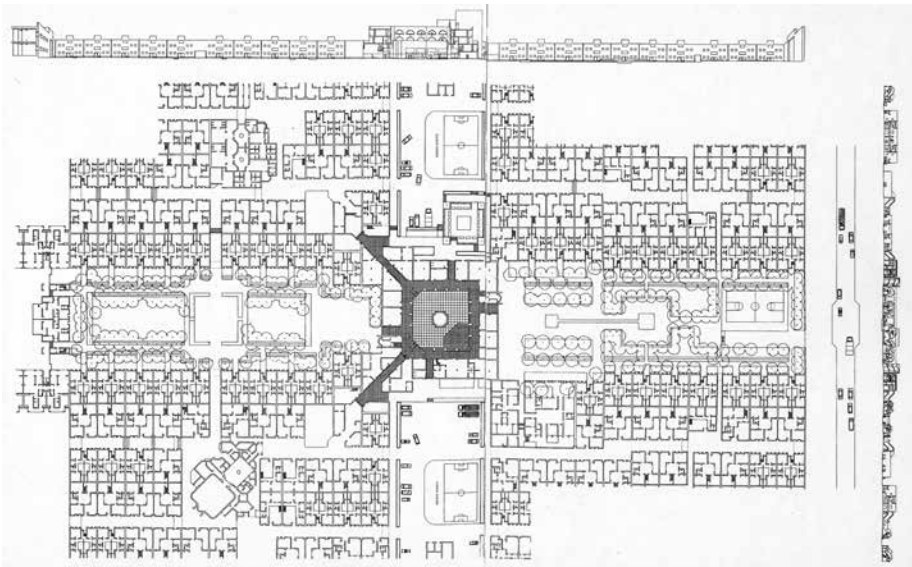
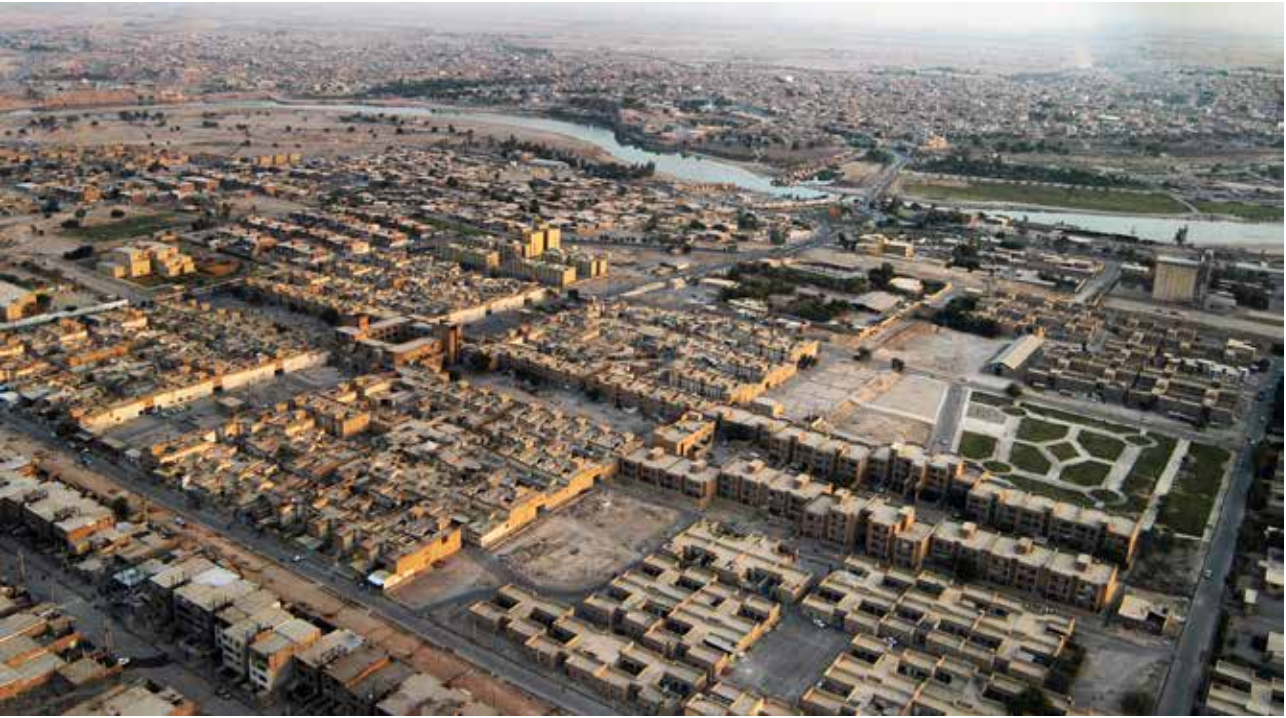


Fig. 7. Shushtar New Town: first phase.
7. 1. Aerial view of the first phase with recent expansions.
7. 2. Plan of the first phase. (DIBA 1981, p. 182-183).

cities, where the space of the walk is also an enclosed space, yet alive, shaded by walls and vegetation of the courtyards of the houses, where it is possible for children to play, the inhabitants to meet and communicate, and sit on the steps of the entrances to the houses. The strategy of using the vegetation in the courtyards to shade the space of the walks, thus avoiding the cost and maintenance of public parks, was used extensively in the central boulevard, even though, as we shall see, it has suffered due to progressive transformation of the courtyards into parking space. The project in fact foresaw a clear separation between pedestrian and transportations roads with parking areas concentrated in strategic points on the outside of the boulevard. Due to the disorganized occupation of the new city during the Iran-Iraq war, absent of municipality, educational poverty of local authorities and proper control, most of the ideas of original design was ignored and abandoned. The project of the residential fabric, and design of individual housing units, ignores the Western idea of the house as a set of specialized spaces, living-room, dining-room and bed-room, to obtain flexible spaces suitable for various uses, as was traditional in Persian homes.

In Iran people, especially a certain class of people sit on the floor and then eat around a cloth, which is on the floor; then they roll it up and take it away. They put also mattresses on the floor and use the floor for sleeping, just like Japanese people. What I was thinking was that instead of giving small units for working people, I designed rooms not less than five by five. Of course they have some separate spaces as kitchen and bathroom, but the other rooms are multi purpose spaces. I made basically three room houses and the outer courtyard protected with a wall and then side-to-side to another three-room house. If you get the wall away you have a six-room house; so I thought you could expand your house in relation to the family size, and you could have certain flexibility.

Houses therefore, not apartments! 90% of residences are one or two floor houses, and all units have a garden, a patio, planned as an open-air room. “The new town is planned to integrate different income categories. To further reduce the institutional character (Company Town) of the new community, a percentage (8%) of the houses built were planned to be offered on the open market to attract and integrate into the new town the natural expansion of the adjacent Old Shushtar”.¹⁰ The first phase of the project, designed simultaneously with the Master Plan and then built, is designed as an architectural unit complete in all its elements (Fig. 7). The streets of the residential fabric serve only a limited number of houses and, as already seen, are thought of as a domestic extension of the houses where children play and parents talk to each other. The central square of the neighborhood (Fig. 8), quadrilateral, is located at the intersection of the east-west green pedestrian boulevard and the orthogonal north-south axis dedicated to the spaces for sports and parking accessed by cars. The tall structure that contains the paved square, emerges from the low profile of the houses

10. DIBA 1981, p. 169.

to create shadows internally, and is defined around the public space by porticoes with shops, a tea house and pools and water channels. A hostel is on the upper floors. From the terraces one has a view of the entire new town and beyond, across the river, of the ancient Shushtar. From this central space two oblique paths branch off and link the network of streets and relative services, the neighborhood mosque, the hammam ... (Fig. 9) The image of the new town is dominated by brick, the material used to build all the walls of the houses and public services and in part the floors.

They were calling some Americans to do something prefab. I told them it was ridiculous to use prefab, when you could produce bricks there, creating work for Iranian workers... They didn't have enough material. I wanted to do everything in bricks, but then we did parts in brick and part in cement blocks that we rendered in white; I think it worked better, because it created more variety.

The architecture of Shushtar New Town does not yield much to the fashion prevalent in the 70s. Some parts, in the mall, may perhaps recall the contemporary Indian School of Management, in Ahmedabad, by Louis Khan (1974) or the Iranian Center for Management Studies by then emerging Nader Ardalan in Tehran (1976). But Kamran Diba does not share these influences.

I was interested in vernacular architecture and especially in the architecture for the lower-middle class in Iran. I was doing basically houses for the workers, which were peasants; they were people from the land, and I tried to make urban citizens out of the country people. So basically I tried to learn from their lifestyle, looking at the villages, looking at the vernacular. I saw that we were not in twentieth century with these people: basically they wanted to have few rooms to live, with kitchen and bathroom. So I was looking at lower-income group housing in Iran. And then the architectural vocabulary was very simple, not sophisticated.

Although perhaps “vernacular” is not the most appropriate term for an architecture like Shushtar New Town, not folk, nor naively romantic, rather more abstract, certainly tied to Persian tradition, but reviewed in general terms.

I was not Hassan Fathy. I didn't want to do some romantic architecture. I liked the work of Louis Khan but basically I was interested in urban design, and the design of open spaces. I learned a lot of lessons from the Italian old towns, San Gimignano, Assisi... places I visited. But I was not making a kind of modern metropolitan area with grid systems, where everybody has a car, because in those days all those people didn't have a car.

Can Shushtar New Town be considered a successful urban experience? Even though the architect had no control during the crucial phase of the project which, in Diba's words: “*the people move in and architect lives*”?

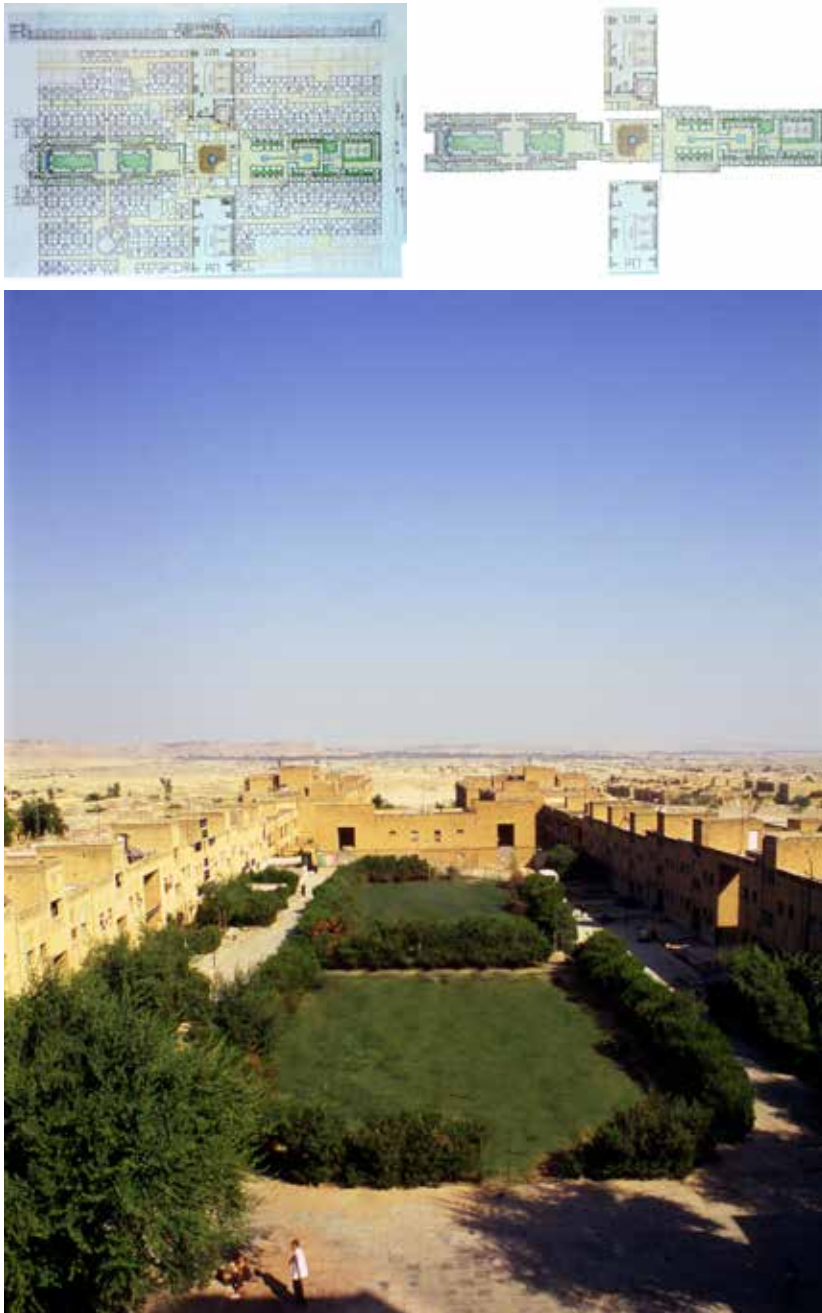


Fig. 7. Shushtar New Town: first phase.

7. 3. The neighbourhood plaza and shopping centre at the crossroad of vehicular and pedestrian access. 7. 4. The linear pedestrian boulevard.

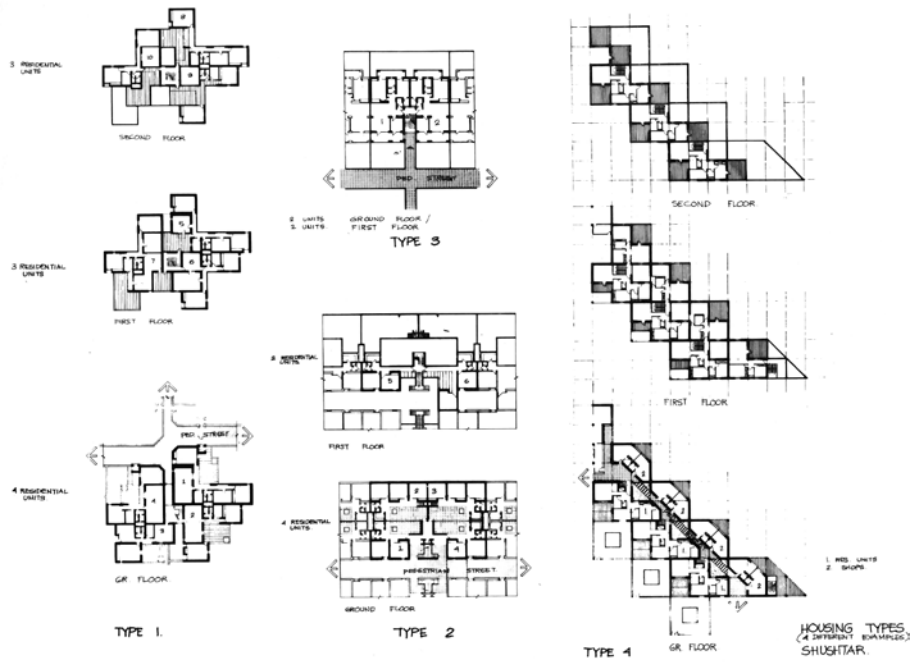
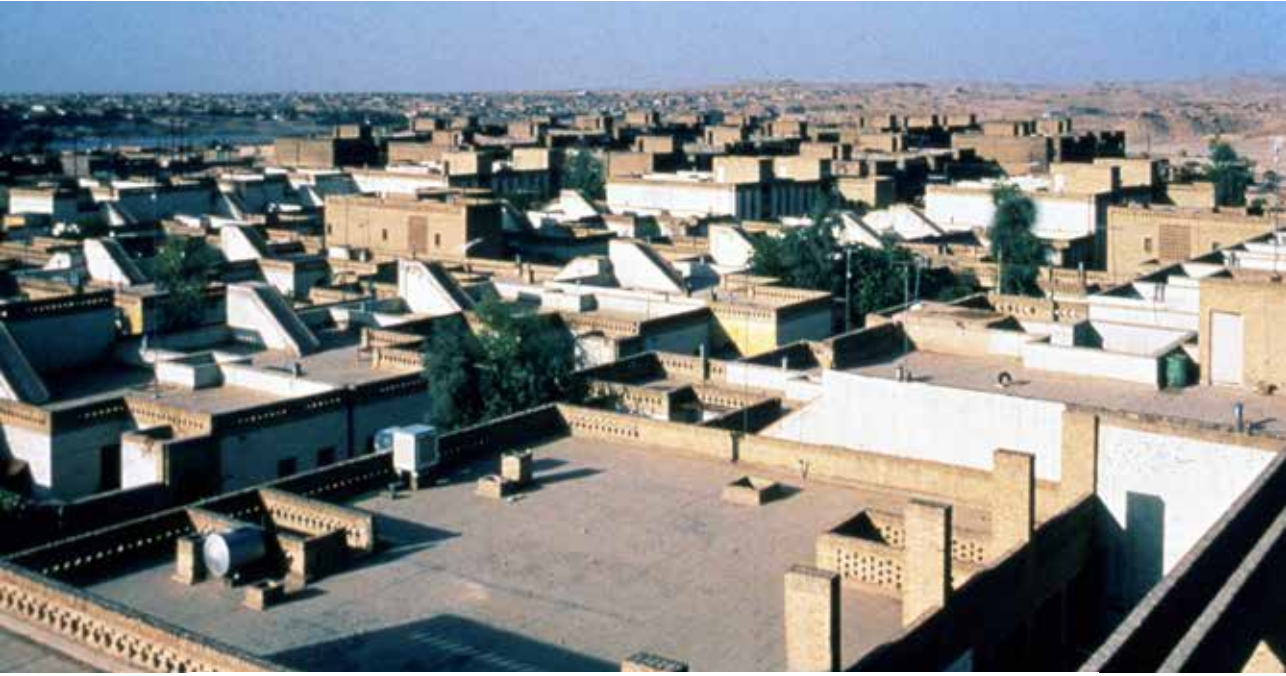
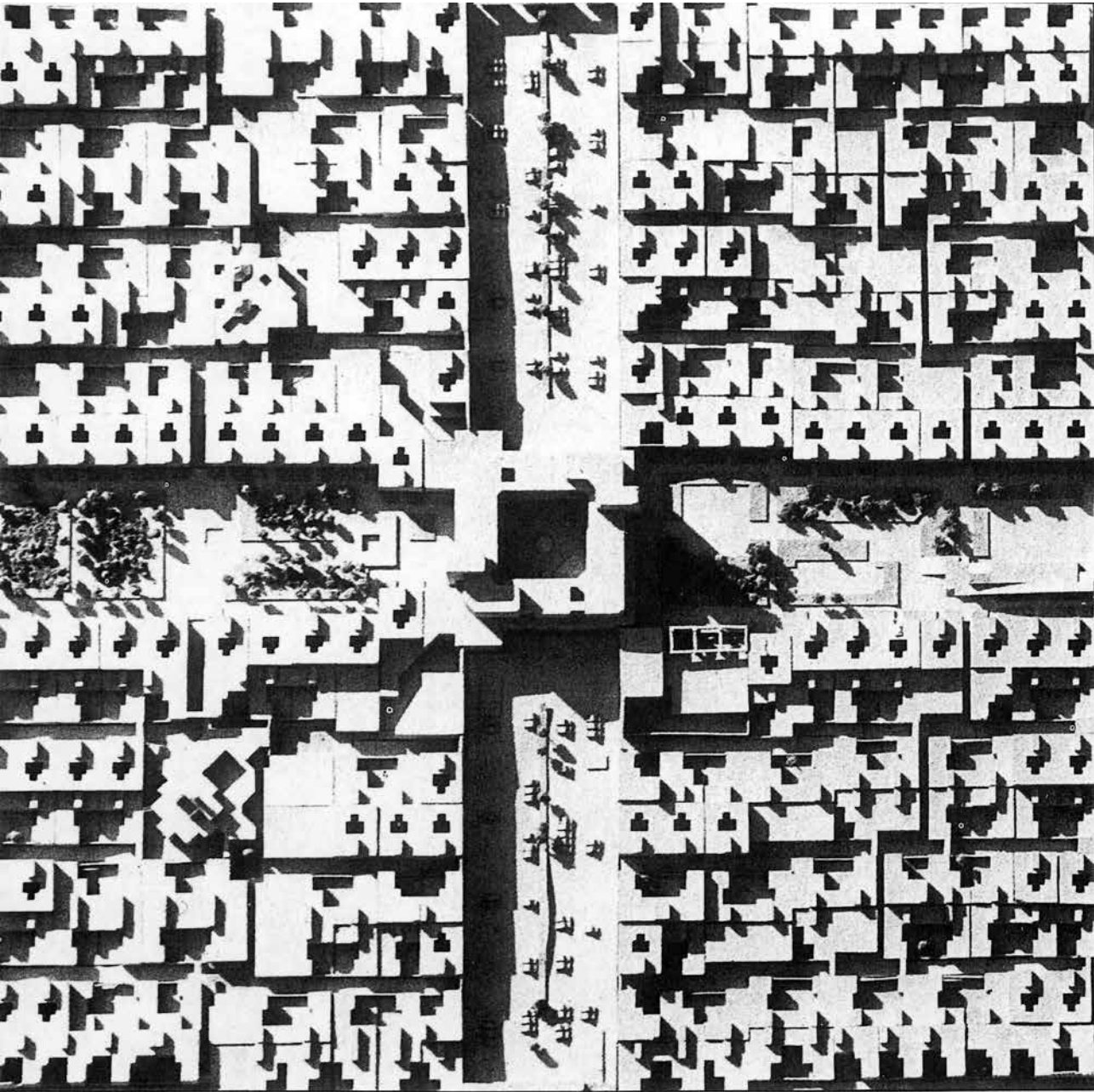


Fig. 7. Shushtar New Town: first phase.

7. 5. View of the first phase from above. 7. 6. Housing types. (D.A.Z. 1979, p. 42).



*Fig. 8. Neighbourhood plaza and commercial centre.
8. 1. View of the model. (DIBA 1981, p. 181).*



*Fig. 8. Neighbourhood plaza and commercial centre.
8. 2. View of the building from outside. (DIBA 1981, p. 201).*

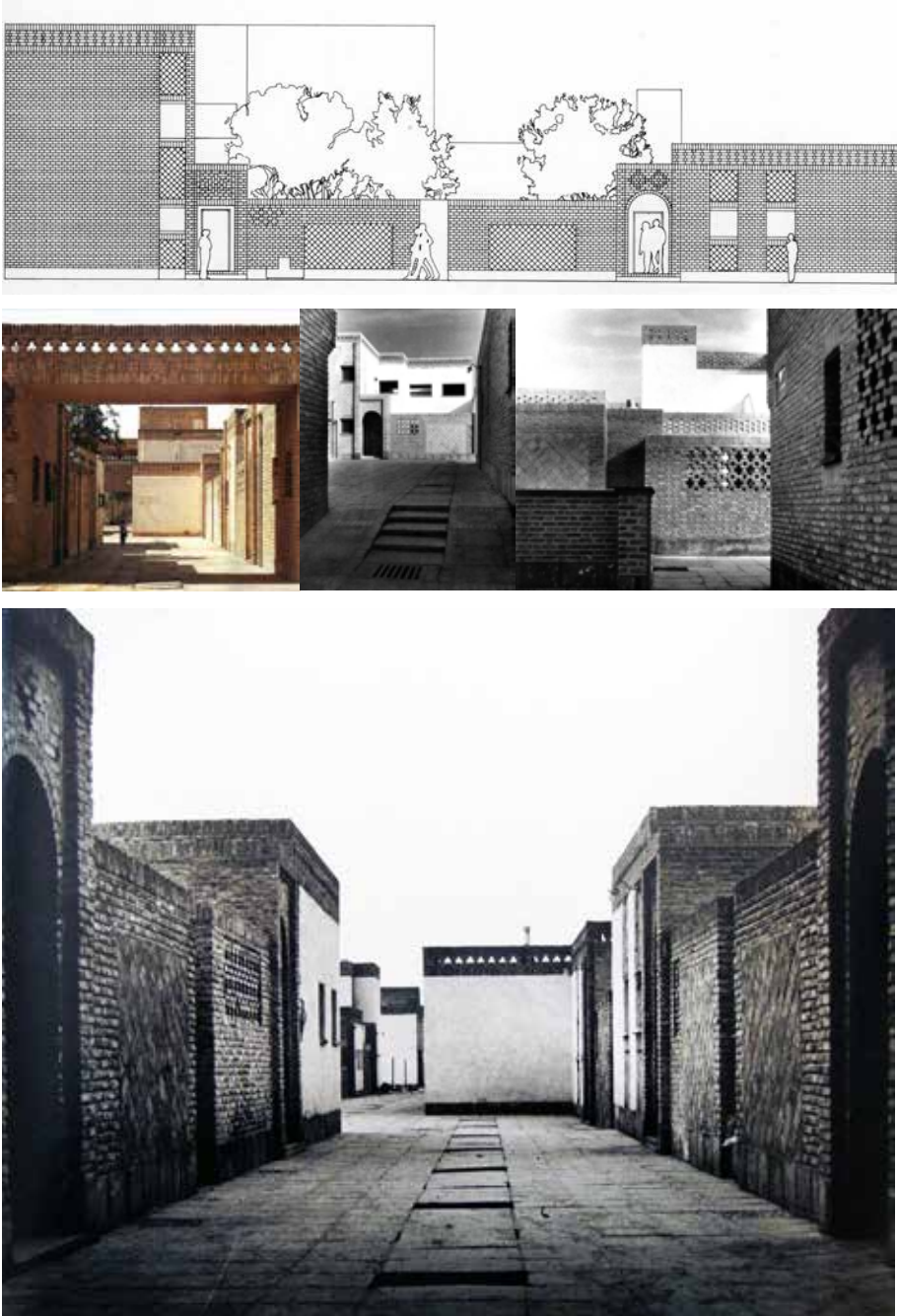


Fig. 9. Streets and public spaces.
9. 1. Internal street elevation. (DIBA 1981, p. 188). 9. 2-11. Views of streets and public spaces. (next)

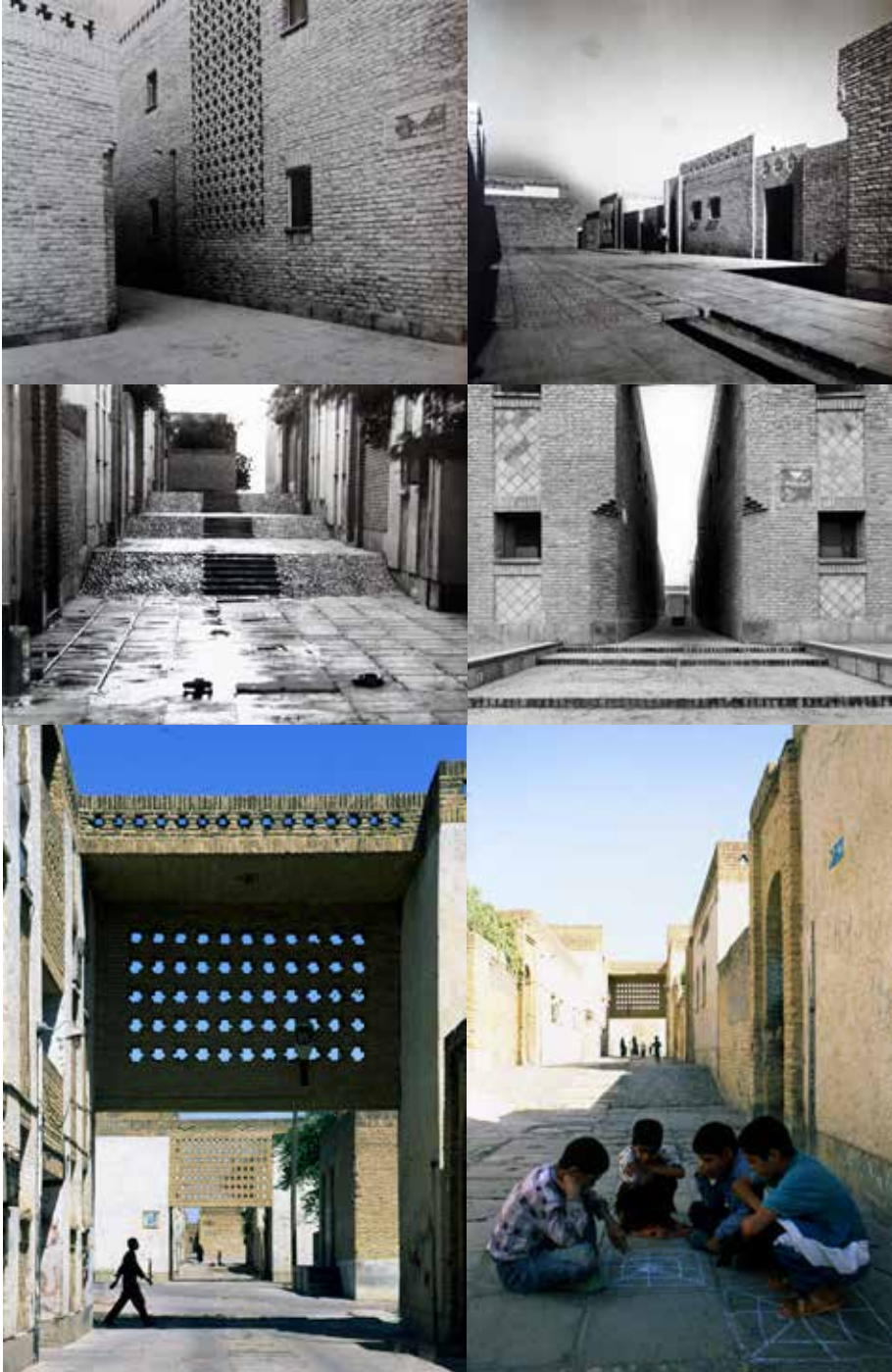


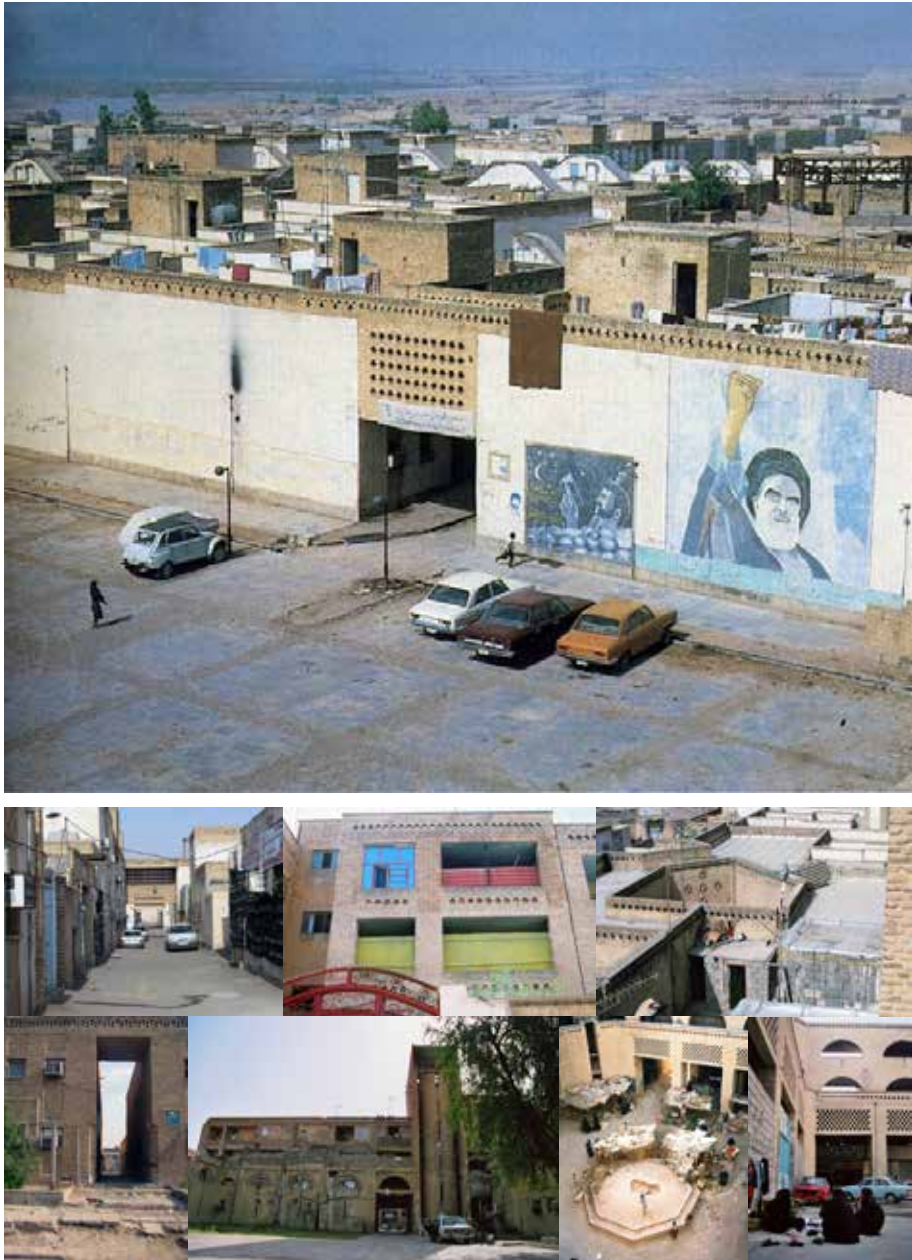


Fig. 9. Streets and public spaces.
9. 12. View of streets and public spaces.

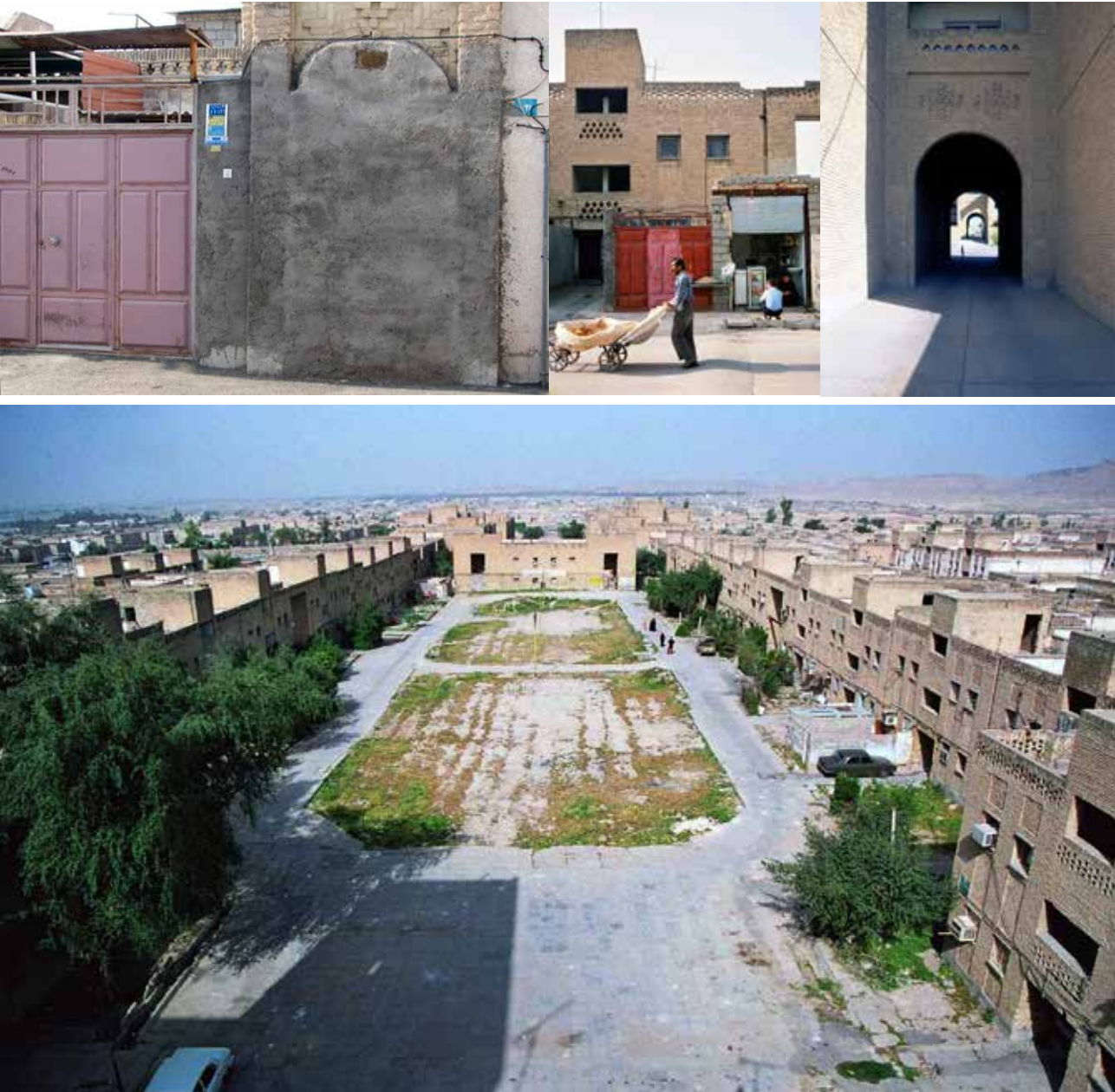
For me it has been successful. But the reality is that, on the one hand, we started the project and did not have time to finish it; when they took over they did not continue and the master plan was aborted. On the other hand, they did not know what the master plan was; as a result they did it without a general land use plan. If you don't understand the concept, you don't know what to do. If you do not have educated people in control, you end up in a chaos... But the first phase of New Shushtar was not yet finished. I never gave the keys of the houses to anyone. Before the revolution nobody was there. It was only when the war with Iraq began immediately after the revolution that the refugees started to occupy the finished and unfinished houses (Fig. 10). If we had the possibility to finish part of it and have the right people move in, we would have created some order, some responsible Management and eventually citizens would have protected the place. If the grand green spine was meant to be a pedestrian square you were not permitted to bring the cars there; the car park was there but people were not told or directed to it. Unfortunately we didn't finish the project. But everybody liked it as it was. Everybody came there and said it was a functioning and beautiful town. At the beginning it was very pretty (Fig. 11). Even with the wrong people living there, people that had not yet had time to destroy it. But later they would take a car and go to the street where it was not designed to go with cars, and destroy the garden wall to make a garage. Could you imagine? Everybody had a patio; if all those patios become garages, could you imagine what would happen to the street? Because I had a collective garage, I had a collective parking. My argument to people was to say: imagine you are living in your apartment, do you take the car in your apartment? You put your car in a collective parking area and you walk to your apartment and don't go to the corridors with your car. So these streets I designed are like the corridors of the apartments. And some ill informed architect said: "Diba is not sensitive to the needs of people; people want to bring the car to their house". But this was exactly not what I intended; The intention was: the children can play in the street, and people sit by the door and talk with the neighbour, like in the old days in the small towns. This was the idea!

Diba equally does not appreciate too much flexibility, and the user's willingness to change, beyond what is already allowed by typological arrangement adopted for the house.

The contribution of people is good, within a limit. They could expand, the house is flexible, and they could enlarge it. But the problem is an excessive contribution by the users. Many users take the car where it is not supposed to be - they destroy the garden, which I designed as a small kind of patio, and they make a garage in the place of the patio. I think this intervention is negative because my streets are made for pedestrians, and cars are not supposed to go there. My streets are made for children to play with their neighbours, for the community; people could come to the street and talk to each other, play games with each other. I don't want the cars coming there creating a different environment, a parking area instead of a pedestrian street. So basically too much contribution is bad...



*Fig. 10. Transformations and destructions.
10. 1-7. The main destructions are due to the access of cars into the pedestrian areas, and to the resulting transformation of gardens of the houses in garages.*



*Fig. 10. Transformations and destructions.
10. 8-11. The main destructions are due to the access of cars into the pedestrian areas, and to the resulting transformation of gardens of the houses in garages.*

Regarding the user's creative involvement:

I like the idea. It is fascinating to do that, to allow creativity for the users. Therefore that was not the case of Shushtar. In Shushtar New Town people were not the owners, they were renting. There, low-rent houses were given to them by the agro-industry. So they could go planting roses or looking after the trees. But they were not permitted to intervene and change a façade, because tomorrow one could be moved to another unit. But in case of ownership if you make the houses and you give them to the people, I agree on that; you can consign unfinished areas. If you leave unfinished areas they may not have money to finish it. It is also complicated to decide where to leave unfinished. People could use junkyard left over or plastics to cover areas. In case of shanty-towns you may have different approach. Do not forget that the people living there intended to have employment and better living conditions, after all Iran was a rich country. In Shushtar when I was doing the entrances of the houses, above the doorways I told to all the masons: you do your own brickwork. So in each entrance, in the wall above the lintel of the doorways they made different design; I told all the masons: you do that and we decide which one is the best!

You could go even further; but you need the owner, because he may not be interested in being creative. To be creative means to spend money. So it is not a very simple question, but the idea is fascinating.

Today, analyzing the urban situation on Google Map, Shushtar New Town can be seen to be much larger than the original nucleus designed by Diba. Not only that: the urban whole created in the period from the 80s to today is composed of at least four urban realities (Old Shushtar, spontaneous growth of Old Shushtar, Shushtar New Town, expansion of Shushtar New Town) juxtaposed almost randomly, with no structuring system to bind them together. Is it possible to find instruments to control this incoherent process? Is it possible to find a strategy to plan an innovative urban development? And if the Mayor of Shushtar were to call Diba and ask: what can we do in this situation?

Sometimes they do, not the Mayor; but the interested citizens and local people call me asking what they should do. I tell them in detail, but nobody does anything! When they wanted to give ownership paper to people, I said: "this is a mistake, you should give it with certain conditions. And the major condition would be that you park your car in the parking area; the small garden is not a garage; this is a pedestrian street and you cannot take your car there. Before I had metal protection, so you are going to put back the metal protections and you cannot bring the car there. And then, the second condition is that you cannot build another storey on top of the building. The third condition is that you cannot change the façade of your house; but I don't want to go to details. The fourth condition is that you should plant trees in your garden, so the houses and narrow streets have some vegetation" Above all they should have a copy of the master plan of the new town and try to follow it. They didn't answer me back; I was willing to help without any pay.

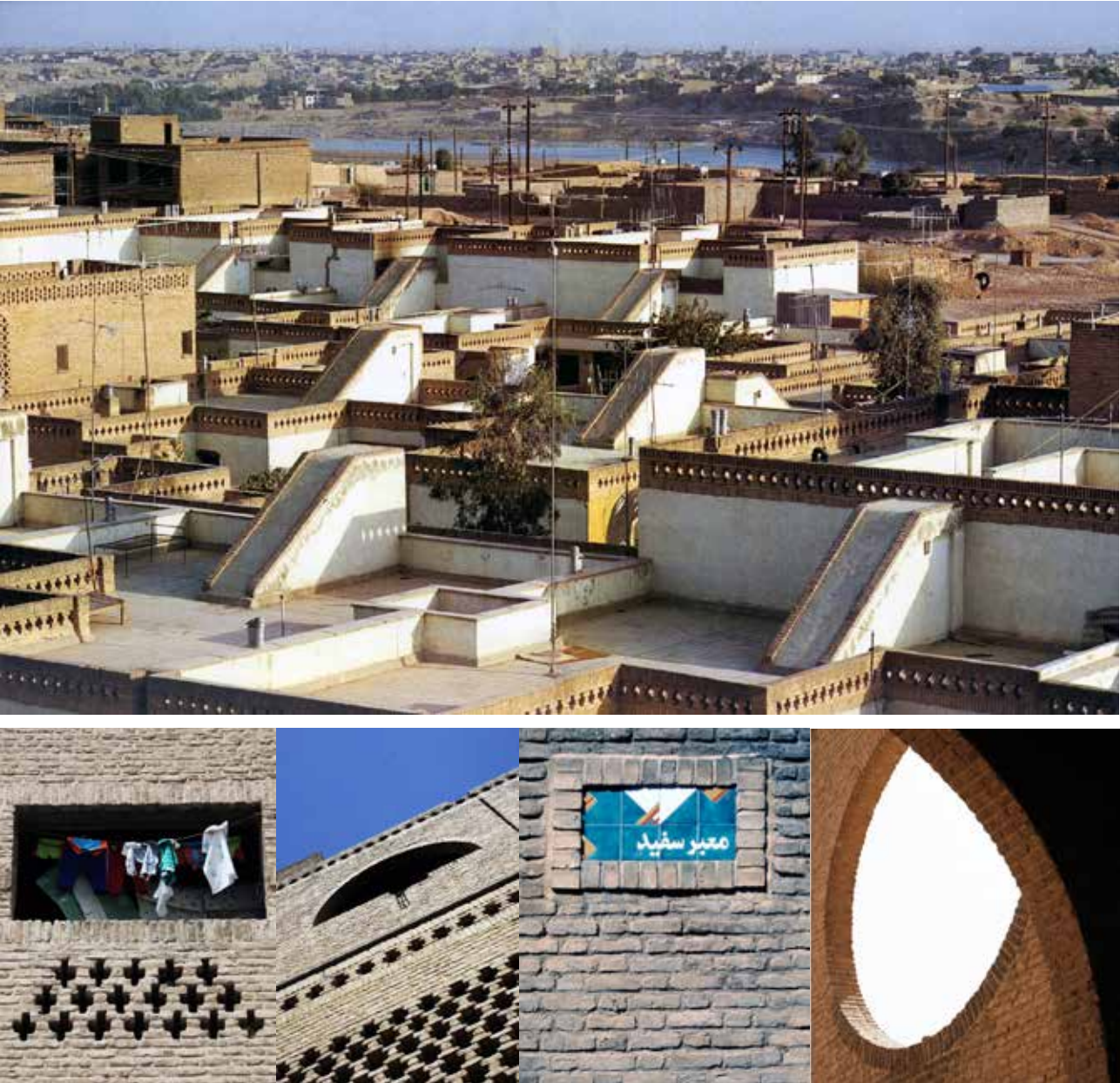


Fig. 11. A pretty town: materials and details. 11. 1-5. Views

The problem of course applies also to the original client, the Karoun Agro-industry.

I tried to contact them. But nobody was responding. They are not the owners of the project. At my time, the owner was the National Pension Fund. One time I asked what they wanted to do with this new situation. I said: "Why don't you appoint a manager for the new town? Put all the information and available land in a package and make somebody responsible for it. Then, with this manager and his team we can study to see what we could do. I don't care about the architecture, or changing of the façades, it doesn't matter. You should try to take ownership of public spaces". This was my proposal. But I don't know who is going to manage it, the Ministry of Housing, The Regional Government, the Municipality...

When asked to communicate an image, an expressive vision of his ideas for the design of Shushtar New Town, Kamran Diba, coherently with his direct and dry expression responded:

No. The ideas I had for this people, for this city, are reflected here, in this project.

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