

Memory and Ideas: the Master Plan of Yazd

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Abstract: This essay describes Ludovico Quaroni's approach to Persian culture, his first visits to Persia and his first contacts with the academic environment of Tehran. Then, the text introduces the sequence of events which lead to the elaboration of the Yazd Masterplan by the "Design Atelier" of the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Tehran, established in 1962, and lead by Mehdi Kowsar, dean of the Faculty of Tehran, who involved Ludovico Quaroni for some consultancy and advisorship activities.

Keywords: Yazd Master Plan, Ludovico Quaroni, University of Tehran.

I met Ludovico Quaroni as a student, here in Rome, at a time when he held the chair of *Architectural Composition* in the early 1960s. This happened a short time before I took my last Architectural Composition exam. Upon my graduation, he invited me to go and see him to talk about my country, Iran. He made an appointment. The man, with those intense blue eyes, with that indecipherable gaze that let nothing of his thoughts shine through, aroused awe, even more so on a newly graduated and novice student. I showed up for the appointment, awkward and intimidated.

We began to talk. He told me that I came from a country the architectural and urban heritage of which was of rare beauty. That country, unfortunately, he had not had the opportunity to visit. However,

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he knew it through the diaries and drawings of Europeans who had traveled to Persia from the 17th century onwards. He told me that there was – in Venice's San Marco – a painting depicting the ambassadors of the Shah Abbas, as they offer their gifts to the Doge Grimaldi. That was one of the many encounters between the Safavid dynasty of Persia and the Serenissima, the Republic of Venice.

He then questioned me about the current condition of Persian buildings and cities, citing them precisely. With great embarrassment I explained that I did not know, I had not had the opportunity to visit much of what he was showing me. I had left my country immediately after high school. During my studies in Rome I had developed a passion for the history of architecture. But then no course I had followed as a university student had ever mentioned architecture outside the West. After a long pause he said «you must know that many of us Westerners have the presumption of considering own culture as universal, we confuse our small world with the whole universe, not to mention that some of our historians of architecture, somehow provincial, have never looked beyond the Aegean. I recommend you work in the future to fill this academic void».

A few years later, in 1969, Ludovico Quaroni came to visit Iran. That journey to Persia exerted a particular fascination on him. He did not express it directly, but it transpired from the infinite curiosity that animated him, from his careful observations and his reflections so full of wit.

Back in Tehran after visiting the cities of Isfahan, Kashan and Shiraz, he told me: «You know, here, if you wish to, you can still find that soul, that spirit of the past that has been lost in our cities». That soul and that spirit, he would describe them later, in 1982, in a fascinating essay that appeared in the catalog of the Venice Architecture Biennale, entitled *A thousand and one cities, the pleasure of the East*. From that moment on, his visits to Tehran became frequent, up to three or four times a year. I invited him to participate in lectures or conferences at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Tehran, of which I had by then become dean.

Of those visits to Tehran, the dearest memories for me and my wife Silvana, were and are those of the evening hours, when Ludovico

conversation ranged from architecture to the city, from art to music, from history to philosophy and to peoples of whom he had studied habits and customs. He described everything with precision, with great abundance of details: musical instruments, clothes, costumes, dishes but also the ingredients used to prepare them. In short, his conversation covered all such expressions that constitute a civilization, a universality.

At the International Congress of Architects that was held in Isfahan in 1970, entitled *The Interaction of Tradition and Technology*, Quaroni, in his speech, said: «we are all architects here, and among us there are many amongst the most famous names of contemporary architecture. But what is the work of a hundred architects compared to our cities? While our cities are growing ever larger, the idea of the city as a tangible expression of cultural heritage is becoming weaker, more limited and incomplete every day. Cities have become an utter confusion of men and things. They seem to lack any inherent political, sociological or physical structure when compared to some historic cities, such as Isfahan».²

Allow me now to come to the masterplan of Yazd. In 1975, I was commissioned to prepare the masterplan of the town of Yazd, now recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Work for this was carried out at the “Design Atelier” of the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Tehran, which had been established in 1962. This had been created because full-time professors, by law, could not practice as architects except within the faculty itself, in an organization involving both colleagues and students.

I then formed a group of four architects, colleagues from the Faculty of Tehran. In the following year, upon the conclusion of the first phase of research and studies on the state of the city that had allowed the formation of the first ideas for the future of the city, I proposed to Ludovico Quaroni to intervene as a consultant. He accepted with enthusiasm. Later Ludovico Micara, Roman architect and friend, also in love with Persia, joined the group.

The city of Yazd is located on the edge of the central desert of

2. The interaction of “Tradition and Tecnology” Proceeding of the first International Congress of Architects – Esfahan – Iran 1970 – Organized by the Ministry of Housing and Development of the Imperial Government of Iran – Edited by Laleh Bakhtiar and Leila Farhad. p. 52.

the Iranian plateau. Being far from the borders of the old empire and not presenting a strategic interest, it is one of the best preserved traditional cities in Iran, despite the tragic – but limited in number – demolitions carried out in the past to open thoroughfares.

What struck us about the traditional city was the continuity of its fabric: a *continuum*, whether it be houses, schools, mosques, caravanserais. Everywhere the internal courtyard scheme where the built volume envelops, surrounding it, the empty volume, could be observed. These architectural voids, these jealously enclosed and hidden spaces, represent the very essence of the architectural spirit and suggest the extension of nature within a dense and compact urban fabric.

The architectural spaces thus conceived, multiplying and grouping together, form the district, the sector, and the city as a whole. The continuum of the fabric, as it rises, demonstrates an order generated by the dimensional uniformity between the urban components that enhance the spatial unity. The unity is also achieved by the other color of the architecture that makes the city look like a gemmation of the desert itself.

Wanting to trace the profile of the city, we noticed above all the almost continuous flow of a horizontal line that touches the upper part of the small domes of soft geometry, bending gently upwards to mark the wind towers and then again with great momentum towards the sky, now describing the glazed domes and minarets and thus indicating the focal points of the city. The convex surface of the dome, made up of airy tones of color, removes all drasticity as the direction of the profile changes and the vertical slenderness of the minaret challenges the horizontality of the urban scene.

In few Persian cities it was so easy to find an urban center without major upheaval. At the same time, we noticed that the habits, customs and religious beliefs of the inhabitants seemed to retain their traditional rhythm.

But the problem was that around this urban reality, another city could be seen: confused and insignificant. From introverted houses to extroverted ones, the new modern streets were places where people, spaces and buildings coexisted without ever merging harmoniously. However, while the old fabric was enthralling, certainly the aim of the plan we were to work on was not to freeze a city in its past.

On the contrary, Yazd's Plan was based on the idea that this city's two distinct realities should be considered, the traditional city and the modern city. These two realities, although different from each other from a quantitative and qualitative point of view, had to become complementary.

Ludovico Quaroni suggested that this had been achieved in many European cities and that therefore these two realities could be brought together, even here in Yazd.

But first and foremost, our commitment was to protect the historic center, the true and precious identity of Yazd, and prevent it from slowly drowning in the kitsch that surrounded it, already pressing on its borders. The masterplan then had to focus primarily on the conservation, restoration, redevelopment and renewal of the historic center, not only through the instruments provided by the masterplan itself, certainly not sufficient on their own, but also with the organized and economic contribution and commitment of the State. We had presented concrete proposals in this regard, included in the forecasts of the Plan.

The continuum of the fabric and the physical image of Yazd testified to the history, culture and creativity of a people, their nameless architects, their masters and their craftsmen, over the centuries. We also wanted to prevent the historic neighborhood from becoming the poor suburb of a new city which, as I mentioned, was advancing in disorder and overwhelmingly all around.

The proposals of the Plan seemed to us objectively achievable considering also the dimensions of the unbridled economic boom of the country in those years. The state would make possible the rebirth of the city of Yazd, cultural heritage of our country while its recognition by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site was underway.

A series of precise guidelines and regulations were established for the conservation of the existing outline of the historic center, taking into consideration its texture and color, both at the level of the individual buildings and the complex itself.

A special design office was proposed to provide assistance to the local population for the restoration and the renovation works, to be made by a facilitated credit. Founding would be made available

via low interest loans, while the inclusion of cultural and community organizations, such as the University, in the old fabric, would help to restore the prestige now lost. Small public gardens and shaded spaces (3.000 to 4.000 square meters) were planned near the services of the district, whose size was dictated by the voids created by the existing ruins in the dense urban fabric.

On the border between the historic center and the new part of the city, four important sector centers with related services and infrastructure were planned. They were to be the real hinge between the old and the new city.

The old main routes of the center, closed to automobile traffic, were to be revitalized by the relocation of the various services along them.

Particular care was given to the arrangement of the road disembowelments that in some cases (the most recent ones) had left in sight the ruins of the adjacent houses cut with the bulldozer. A new landscape design was proposed that ensured continuity with the road itself and the arrangement, with parking, services for residents and gardens, of the strip created by the recent destruction.

The North-East part of the ancient city, leaving way to the slow but continuous progress of the desert, was to be protected by a deep belt of woods. Communication between the historic center and the rest of the city was guaranteed by a ring, outside the perimeter of the center, which would distribute the flow of cars along the main existing roads. For the rest, the communication network was set up at different levels and scales.

A second road network, consisting of narrow paths in the historic center, was to be reserved for public services of adequate size, while private car traffic was to be directed to special parking lots, adjacent to the residential districts.

In addition, the thirteen villages and related agricultural areas located on the outskirts of the city were integrated in the plan. Same rules as defined for the historic center would apply here. The protection of these areas was important not only for their importance as part of the architectural and urban heritage, but also for the quality of the air itself, for the humidity and for the coolness, so precious to a city on the borders of the desert.

The urban population, at the time of the definitive drafting of the plan, in 1977, was 135.000 inhabitants with an expected growth of up to 184 000 inhabitants in a decade.

The Plan provided for future urban growth in the southern part of the city, where a special area was planned for the future business center, not far from the historic center and well connected to it. The business center had to meet the modern needs of the city. The construction of this center, in the second five-year period of the Plan, had to take place exclusively following the design of a planovolumetric plan, for which precise rules to be respected were established.

For the new residential areas to be established through *Detailed implementation* according to the indications and rules of the Plan, a series of drawings were presented. These were designed specifically for residential areas of future expansion, as guide models for the *Detailed Plans* of the Municipality of Yazd and for the architectural design of new areas.

With regard to the detailed plans, I did not wish to seek the assignment but, with Ludovico Quaroni, we thought for a small part of the historic city, it would be interesting to experiment on a real scale the many ideas expressed in the Plan. In this way the small realized part would become binding, to serve as a model for those who would realize the complete *Detailed plans*. Ludovico loved to say that if we had succeeded in executing this idea, we would have achieved a small victory in a world – that of urban planning – marked by many defeats. Shortly afterwards, in February 1979, the revolution came and even this Plan – meeting the turmoil of history on its way – turned into a defeat for urban planning.

A few months later I left my country forever. I have heard nothing more about Yazd's plan. The "search for the continuum" is now only a fond memory.

At Christmas of that year, Quaroni gave me a book entitled *The Pope's Comics*. In the dedication he wrote: "In sha allah! Perhaps it would be time to end it with these spiritual "leaders"! With best wishes for a better future, Ludovico".