

# A thinking, a philosophy, an idea for the city of Yazd

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Abstract: In 1977, at the end of the elaboration of the Master Plan for the city of Yazd, I asked Ludovico Quaroni to write an introduction to the Plan, to be published in synthesis in a short pamphlet that was meant to present the aims and a selection of the most significant reports [details]. The pamphlet would then be sent to journals and people of culture particularly sensible to the issue of the roots and the identity of the sites in those years of unbridled economic boom of the country. We, those responsible for the Plan, were well aware that its realization was not within the means of the Municipality of Yazd, which possessed neither the financial consistency nor the planning and technical skills to draw up the indispensable Detailed Plans for the realization and supervision. The organized intervention of the State would have been necessary. We presented some concrete proposals in this regard, included in the estimates of the Plan. But we felt the need for the support of a specialized, informed, and qualified opinion; and authoritative. Actually, Farah Pahlavi, Shahbanou of Iran, that is the queen, was our hoped for interlocutor. To her, who had studied architecture in Paris and by vocation and cultural preparation protected the arts, was entrusted also a sort of supervision of the management of Iran's cities and historical monuments. With Ludovico, therefore, we discussed thoroughly the orientation of the introduction to the Plan and decided on a title; on the base of the Quaroni wrote the essay that I myself translated into Persian. Unfortunately the original text. in Italian, has been lost. But there is still my translation in Farsi. To revive the memory of the thought expressed on that occasion by Ludovico Quaroni on the city, on the oriental city, and on the precious example represented by Yazd, I believed it appropriate then to re-translate from Persian to Italian Quaroni's text! I hope the reader, despite the ordeals suffered by the original text in its long voyage, will still be able to recognize in it the thought of our maestro. And to enjoy an unexpected return (M. Kowsar).

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The word city in all or almost all current languages may take on different meanings. In its simplest sense, the word conveys the idea

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of a large number of people who live together in a specific place. But the word city may also mean a society, formed by people who together, dedicated to various activities, obtain the wherewithal to live. At the same time, to the word city one immediately associates the physical image of the dwellings, the buildings, the spaces, and the routes at the service of its society, allowing an orderly organization both of its functions and of its sites which host the multiple forms of life.

In this context, the social city and the physical city have such a relationship that the existence of one is inseparable from the other; their sum gives form to the coexistence in which various groups of people organize together to work, feed, and defend themselves.

From the three preceding meanings (city as demographic concentration, as a social body, as a productive organization) is derived a single reality: the city. From their relationship comes to life what we today call urban structure: a set of variables with different weights, in which the substance and the liveliness of the whole depend on the rapport between these same variables, and where any change or alteration may arise in those relationships slowly or rapidly would lead to modifications in all the components of the city.

For example any change in the number of inhabitants, the number or quality of the workplaces, in the distribution of income, in the manner with which daily problems are dealt with, any political change or accidental event – an earthquake, a fire, a war – or like any change in the direction of construction investments or, again, any legislative variation regarding real estate or rules on renting or building regulations, all these – and any element of these, separately – affects and effects changes, even profound ones, both on the physical image of the city and the behavior of its inhabitants towards it.

Generally, in the continuity of the life of a city, opposing periods alternate: to short or long periods of demographic stability and, together, acceptable living conditions, and of thought and ideas, there follow periods of instability and social conflict that pose unresolved questions, open up to strong contrasts that determine easily discernible alterations even in the physical image of the city.

The mechanisms and reactions of a city are not comparable to those of a machine designed for a specific task, built intelligently

and with quality materials, and proper maintenance can long function without any problems.

In periods of relative stability, the inhabitants form an “idea of the city” that reflects their needs or perhaps better said: their personal “customs”. They act in such a way, thus, that the existing urban structure corresponds, with the necessary flexibility, to their “idea of a city”, that is to their idea of a society, the human relations that take place in it, and the physical reality in which those relationships have the possibility to proceed. On the contrary, in the times in which thinking and ideas are in motion or in which tragic events are unfolding, be they natural or military, or changes in the political or social order, every event that, apparently, provokes changes, even in only a single sector, physical or social, inevitably influences the whole. In those junctions, the survival becomes impossible for an “idea of the city” that by this time no longer has solid foundations nor can communicate certainties such that can arouse the necessary reactions to correct the defects of the present and propose new, vigorous and harmonious, solutions for the entire, physical and social, urban structure.

In those conditions of crisis, it would be necessary to tackle at once the restoration of the social fabric and the historical buildings, the elaboration of new morphologies and topologies suited to the social changes, the definition of a new system of the communication networks – therefore the transformation and improvement of the infrastructures and the reorganization of services – to be able to propose and realize a new and clear “idea of the city” that corresponds to the changes then underway; but this is an extremely difficult task to carry out especially in those critical moments when the objectives of society and the values that sustain them are transformed so rapidly that they change the variables of each issue we face almost instantaneously and which we really believe to have arrived at advancing a solution.

Moreover, it is possible to reflect on those cases – almost the opposite – of the cities that, though not undergoing rapid evolutionary processes of thoughts and ideas nor by radical political changes or tragic natural or military events, however, do not go forward on the golden wings of an advanced and harmonious society. This is the case in which an entire culture and its cities live through a period of

decadence, uncertainty, and decline on to immobility; and the result can be nothing other than a slow and inexorable decay that all witness resignedly and, concurrently, aversion. Under these circumstances, the city, though it may appear solid in its constructed fabric, resembles a living creature that, having gone beyond its time of growth, of glory, and its full realization now, inexorably, is destined to face the moment of its deterioration and its death.

When the body of a city enjoys a state of health all of its components work in harmony and its joyful image is the result of the delicate equilibrium in which its components are integrated. But when the city body is unhealthy, its components, though still able to express the glamour derived from its own past, betray their fragile state and, consequently, their inability to guarantee even the most basic levels of services for a population that in any case need them. A city devoid of any possibility of recovering through its internal mechanisms, to rise again it can only seek help from outside of itself. Nonetheless, in those periods in which rapid changes and profound alterations disrupt the natural relations on which social life and the assembled structure of the city and, thus, unveiled, in full display, the inability of the city to satisfy even the most minimal requests asked of it, it becomes necessary to intervene with the appropriate instruments to reduced insofar as possible the ravages – social and physical – of such a state, and, concurrently, prepare the groundwork for the solution to the problems. The appropriate instruments to that end are called Urban Development Plans.

The present historical conditions and the period we are living through represent a unique situation in the history of the world. We could, perhaps, compare it to the end of the Middle Ages in Europe and Islam entering the picture in the East. As in the past, today too the problems at the basis of life remain the same. But without a doubt, the methods and instruments to solve them, derived from the evolution of the ideas of “time” and “place” and the technological revolution, have changed. For the first time in the history of mankind, all parts of the world live in a tight and reciprocal relation. There are no longer insurmountable distances nor uncertain sea or land routes that separate, as they once did, the countries and continents of the globe. For some time now there

no longer exists any part of our world that is completely unknown. Regardless of the disparities among economies and the pronounced diversity of beliefs, customs, religion, a tendency is unfolding towards uniformity, which, when it becomes undifferentiation, together with its positive aspects produces a uniform and conformist culture. This tendency seems unrelenting and is threatening to impoverish the variety of stresses and tensions that constitute the foundations of human creativity in its diversity, that which distinguishes man from animals.

Urban Development Plans, a heritage of the Modern Movement in Europe, have fulfilled their task between the two World Wars. They were to be the instrument of control and corrective of the process of expansion of the European city; since the rhythm of change was slow, they did not encounter serious problems. The stagnating economy of Central European cities was indirectly the result of a crisis begun three centuries earlier that, as was finally understood, reached its peak at the end of the Second World War. And continues to this day. In those years it was believed possible to foresee the future of the city twenty or thirty years ahead and to be able to control and correct potential reactions of its social body to the new events. At the same time, it was thought that Urban Development Plans, with no help from the State, but only by the administrative and financial capabilities of local organs the could be implemented, as well as accepted and embraced by the citizens.

Today, things have changed completely; it is not possible to make reliable forecasts in the medium or long term; solutions adopted hurriedly run the risk of dissolving in the face of reality and the speed of the changes taking place, creating further damage to the city. For example: while it is relatively easy to establish, within a timeframe, the variations of the population due to births and deaths, it is absolutely not possible to foresee variations that depend on tendencies and developments of migrations.

The emergence of a great industrial complex or a new port is sufficient to move a large number of people who until then lived in a region rich in its history and traditions, but now underdeveloped, towards a place maybe once desert-like but suddenly thrust towards industrial development; the search for jobs and the ease of means of transportation inexorably compel large multitudes to leave their families, their cities,

their memories and their language behind following the thread of hope to find a better standard of living in some distant land.

Furthermore, apart from uncontrollable migratory phenomena, it is difficult to believe that by means of accurate Development Plans it would be possible to propose physical models that can be graciously and stably by the population. Habits change rapidly and even faster customs and fashions. What today the public opinion considers beautiful and acceptable, in the course of a few years may be rejected as old, outdated, or unacceptable; that is why to base the development plan of a city on detailed and complex calculations regarding the ongoing changes and the urban development is no guarantee of success. Rather, the more probable are the changes the less reliable will the numbers regarding them be; this phenomenon emerges with great clarity in the recent history of those countries where the population wishes to rapidly assume lifestyles better than their own. Or which seem better than their own. Rushing towards economic conditions deemed to be better and that seem to offer all the possibilities bestowed by consumerism, with the mirage of being able to enjoy the services and infrastructures within everyone's reach, trying, this way, to conform ever more to international ways of life and... all this at the cost of giving up what could still well survive of the preexisting urban model to continue living with, not giving up on a life made up also of moments of calm and some serenity, like that offered by the life which flowed with human rhythms, from the past.

Regarding Yazd, due to its geographic location, the set of these problems is present in its greatest criticality. The city, located at the border of the desert, probably for reasons of defense, for three centuries it has been remained outside of events and advances of the country; only in the last thirty or forty years, it seems to have begun to perceive the changes around it. In few Iranian cities, like in Yazd, is it still possible to discover a historical center so little changed in which traditional models of civil and religious life survive almost intact. Nonetheless, today, alongside these models and adjacent to the ancient city which, despite some urbanistic demolitions, still preserves almost intact its fabric and still expresses its splendid and ideal architectural image, a new urban reality is emerging, a confused image of spaces

and buildings inspired by the so-called “Tehran style”, derived from the modern capital, Tehran. The houses are being built without the refined attention which the traditional morphology and typology reserved for the climactic conditions, while the streets are filled with motorcycles, car, trucks, and young people parading Western clothing – ni which Jeans dominate – think they seem or are more “Tehran” or better yet “Farangi”, that is. directly, European. It could be that these fashions and tendencies are only passing; it could be that today or tomorrow, in a near or distant future, even in Yazd the need, already present in much of the world, arises to focus once more the center of collective attention on the questions regarding the quality of life following the way of thinking convinced that it is possible to take advantage of much of the scientific and technological progress enriching one’s own culture in contact with the other cultures, yet merging them with common sense with that portion of their own tradition that from a social, cultural, and psychological point of view may reasonably survive.

We, designers of the Development Plan for Yazd, are convinced, then, that it is possible and necessary to direct towards a new and genuine culture that is not simply bound to the consumeristic aspects of Western civilization, but neither immersed in itself, that does not settle of the memories and shadows of the past and does not cry over what will never be possible to go back and live as it was once. Whether we want it or not, the world of today, from a functional point of view is a unified organism; only geographic diversity, the forms and colors of nature, and the cultural characteristics of populations will prevent absolute uniformity. Thought, philosophy, and the ideas for a Development Plan cannot be the same for every Iranian city. The climactic conditions, the distance from the capital Tehran, the generational characteristics and practices are not the same in all the cities.

The Plan, bearing all this in mind, must focus its attention towards the specific possibilities of employment and work present there. Should they prove to be insufficient, the Plan should attempt to favor strengthening them as indispensable factors for the economic and cultural evolution of the city. It should be conceived according to an optimistic vision and applied, in the service of the city, with all effective instruments to improve the quality of life of the inhabitants while

taking into account, in the background [on the horizon], the models and especially the international standards to attain. At the same time, a Development Plan should act courageously to protect and preserve all that is left of the urban complex, the buildings, and the monuments that represent the identity of the place, and the memory still alive of the city and of its people.

In Yazd, the Plan wants to constitute the best solution to integrate the “past” and the “present”, “west” and “east”. Certainly, it is not possible to forego modern technology, also since, today, its use is a source of pride for all peoples. But it is necessary to clear from our mind the idea that the use of technology and participation in a consumer culture could possibly substitute the cultural and historical depth that makes of any people a precious human identity because it differs from others in its conduct and its thinking. The technological, commercial, or consumptive dimensions of society are not the instruments with which man can build the history of his identity. It is necessary, then to abstain from the simplistic manner of thinking that economic and technological possibilities by themselves could be synonymous with civilization and culture.

After centuries of difficulty and drowsiness, today the country is trying to make up for lost opportunities and, with technology, reach the more advanced countries. But often the more progressed standard of living cannot be assimilated rapidly or directly, also because the countries we consider to be more advanced models are not at all similar to each other. Each has its own specific characteristics, which make them distinguishable one from the other; almost a memento [reminder] as confirmation that identity and the permanent dose of autonomy of thinking and lifestyle constitute the motor to produce variety, therefore the cultural wealth of humanity.

The relationship between the international tendencies and the drive towards new autochthonous models, in a more or less conscious manner, constitutes the topic of the day in every country in the world. There is no doubt that the path is long and the results are neither simple nor immediate. But even here, in this country, as in many others, it is certainly positive to note the great awareness of cultural environments of these fundamental issues.

The functions and technologies used to construct a building may be the same all over the world, but the character and the cultural meanings of the work will vary depending on the location for which it is conceived and built. Today the means of communication and the media in general, rapidly and at any distance, offer everyone the sight and the knowledge of the phenomena that manifest themselves anywhere in the world, in different areas of culture: cinema, literature, music, art, and architecture. All this will help us understand the cultural variations coexisting in our time, to understand their importance, and to become familiar with them.

We believe it is everyone's duty to reread the history of our country through the documents which, besides Ferdosi's poem, the poems by Khaïam, by Attar, by Hafez, by Saadi, by Rumi, and by others, also include the more ancient works in bronze and copper, ceramics, the rugs, the art of miniature, and more, the architecture of the great mosques, the caravanserais, the madâres, the bazaars, and the fabric of minor architecture in which these masterpieces emerge and where the refined poetics of the monuments that over centuries have created the literature of Persian architecture. Beyond the city, then, we must not forget the villages which may still be saved from destruction by creating new functions for them, because they are examples of fabrics so architectonically fascinating to constitute timeless models, such as to unleash the imagination for whoever seeks new sites to realize new ways of life, only apparently unrelated to ancient ways.

The Development Plans, conceived in the manner in which urbanists of the 1920s tried to plan the city, that is, following abstract models accompanied by detailed and rigid standards, are no longer viable. Today the Development Plan should act by closely monitoring the city in which it intervenes paying close attention to the reactions of the urban body – both physical and social – regarding the planned interventions progressively as they are implemented, exactly as a doctor suggests should be done with a patient, checking their health during the therapy via continuous and complete check-ups. But it is also important to bear in mind that the problems – for a city as in nature – are not as simple as the biologists and physicists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century believed: the atom that seems a simple indivisible entity, we now know that in itself

is an immensely complex world in which the forces contained in each of its constituent particles and in the whole, influence one another, as what happens in the life of a city, where various, countless, and not immediately perceptible factors inextricably act on each other while it is given to us to recognize only a few at first sight, inevitably too few.

The skill of the urbanist consists in identifying those factors that have the greatest capacity to influence the others, such that, by checking with the appropriate steps of the Plan, the physical space of the city may be modeled and remodeled to ensure a better and healthier life for its inhabitants.

If we examine the city Yazd from the point of view of economic activities – agriculture, industry, and services – the first of these does not seem to have a future with great developments since its growth depends on water [resources]. Yazd, a city that borders on the desert, is supplied by the ancient and precious system of water distribution that keeps its historic centers, its orchards, and its gardens alive. In this framework, even considering an inevitable population growth, it is not possible to imagine significantly increasing the amount of water available for agricultural production. Consequently, the hope for future development of the city will be based on the success of the other two activities: industry and services. Industrial activities – called activities of the secondary sector – in Yazd are represented above all by the textile industry and artisan tradition that currently show a continuing contraction; they must be protected and, if possible, reinforced. But the activity on which to base the greatest part of the economic development of the city is certainly that represented by the provision of services – that is, the tertiary sector – seemingly not directly productive. It can play a decisive role in the economic growth of the city: the development of tourism.

A number of historical centers in our country are in such a state of preservation to be able to be easily restored and protected. They form a great geographical and historical system, composed of cities and villages in a ring around the central deserts, along the west border: a system that includes the historical centers of Kashan, Natanz, Nain, Ardestan, Zavareh, Yazd, Kerman, and the citadel Bam. Yazd is

about halfway from Tehran to Bam on the road, ancient and romantic dormant, located at the southeast extremity of the system. This road, of great naturalistic interest, with a 160-kilometer detour detached from Nain, which reaches Isfahan and thus includes also the ancient imperial city of the historical and geographic order that saw Yazd as its midpoint.

Now, if we consider the reality of modern transport technology and, with it, the cultural tendencies alive in many countries and that drive thousands and thousands of young people to travel in their thirst to know ancient populations, ancient cultures, their cities, their architecture, and their art, we can deduce that the system of Iranian cities located around the central deserts, could become, once well organized, a great international touristic itinerary. That system offers a continuous sight of cities and villages with the color of the desert, of an architecture that seems to have been directly extruded from the earth and from which necklaces of small cupolas and the large azure domes, detached and monumental, that contrast with the horizontal lines of the buildings together with the geometric forms and the decisive cut of the windcatchers – or “Badgir” – while the mountains, they too, the color of the earth, with their plastic values enclose the scenario that in a miracle of harmony represents a people, their culture, their faith, and their continuity throughout their history.

The existing buildings in Yazd can be transformed into excellent facilities for tourism services. The visitors with greater economic means and less time at their disposal could use the existing hotels and those that in the future will be built according to demand, but the national and international tourism of young people and those passionate travelers that will move in large numbers could use the many residential buildings of the historic center which can be adapted to the new functions skilled restoration and small internal variations.

The ancient fabric of Yazd an enormous housing wealth, well suited for a comfortable cultural tourism which, besides cleanliness and hygiene, does not demand much of the sites of temporary residence, other than the possibility of living, albeit briefly, in a fascinating setting. Tourism, furthermore, will, as always, have a positive effect on the growth and expansion of artisan industry; for the future economic life of the city, therefore tourism will constitute one of the fundamental

bases to save the historic center, its life, and its economy. But not only foreign visitors should be attracted to learn the great cultural heritage of the city; it will also be important to organize tourism for young Iranians in the certainty that for students of high schools, secondary schools, and university the visit to the ancient city system extended around the desert will be the most efficient means to realize not to forget the memories and historical identity of their own country. In this framework, founding in Yazd university institutes and professional schools at the service of the entire region will greatly contribute to further qualify the historical center for a better future for the entire city.

The Plan for Yazd is based on the assumption that for this city, unlike that of many others, it is necessary to consider two distinct realities: the historical city and the modern one that in quality and quantity remain solidly connected, so that one may compensate the shortcomings of the other as the coexist on the same plane [level].

In Europe, this experience is already ongoing in many cities of varying origin and development. Among them are included cities that – as in other parts of the world – were formed spontaneously, with no planning, following the natural demands of life, of tastes, and the free choice of one or more generations, as in the case of many Italian and German cities founded and formed between the tenth and 17<sup>th</sup> century. But among those there are many other cities, differing from those because they were born following a precise plan, in general, and in detail, such as those of ancient Greece, some in early Medieval Europe, in Baroque in Germany, or in Georgian England. And, again, among them, we witness cities created or profoundly transformed by the thinking and the vivid imagination of great architects, like Rome, Florence, and Paris. Cities all that, whatever their origin, base their hope of survival on the ideas and technical proposals and prescriptions of their Development Plans.

The Development Plan for Yazd envisages a modern positive growth of the city, to pursue together with the rebirth of the ancient urban fabric; here, the following will be explained, in synthesis, by the presentation of some of its projects [drawings]. But, in the conclusion of this introduction, the planners feel the need to emphasize that, in case it were not possible to create the conditions to fully realize the

Plan, not only will no problem of the many that afflict the city would be resolved, but the Plan itself would be transformed into a potent expedient in the hands of local speculators who would lay the blame on the Development Plan for their own responsibilities, thus hiding – perhaps with the complicity of others – the damage they will continue to cause to the image and future of this noble city.



*Fig. 3 – Università di Tehran 1977. In occasione della visita della Regina Farah Diba alla mostra “Le Opere di James Stirling”. Mehdi Kowsar presenta Ludovico Quaroni alla Regina.*