

Temporary or contemporary¹

MEHDI KOWSAR²

Abstract: The forces that shaped the personality of Iranian cities included an understanding of nature, a precise feeling for climatic conditions. Changes in economic, social, as well as cultural conditions, also occurred very slowly and over long periods of time. Since the end of the 19th century social and economic conditions have been rapidly changing. In this period of time, the industrial model of Europe became the example for defining progress. These changes have been both negative and positive.

Keywords: Iranian cities, climate conditions, progress, technologies and materials.

Three centuries ago, in his book of travels Pietro Della Valle described Isfahan in the following way: «... Buildings of Isfahan are generally better than those of Constantinopol... the bazaars are large, beautiful and covered with arches and domes. All are similar, things, which are offered here and there. There are many caravansaries for the different visitors. They are very large, well structured, well decorated. It seems to me that both, the King and the craftsmen, have spent all their energy on buildings. The length of the public square is approximately 690 steps and the width is approximately 210 steps. It is enclosed by a unity of architectural order, uniform, perfect, an in the form of large closed porches, which are never broken by a street or any other thing. Under the porches are stores, placed in an orderly manner, next to one another and above them there are balconies and windows which are fully decorated. Around the public square on the four sides, large water channels are laid out excellently I straight lines. In the middle of these water channels are placed fine stone walkways. In front of there, and

1. Essay published in "Ekistics" 256, March 1977, pp. 144-148. At the origin this was the speech of the author at the International Congress: "Toward a quality of life" – Persepolis, Iran, 1974. Report of the Proceeding of the Second International Congress of Architects. Edited by Laleh Bakhtiar, pp.151-154 – published by the Iranian Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. The essay is re-published herby for the actuality and pertinence of the contents.

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Three centuries ago, in his book of travels Pietro Della Valle described Isfahan in the following way:

... buildings of Isfahan are generally better than those of Constantinopol... the bazaars are large, beautiful and are covered with arches and domes. All are similar, contain good architectural order and are full of various things, which are offered here and there. There are many caravansaries for the different visitors. They are very large, well structured, well decorated. It seems to me that both, the King and the craftsmen, have spent all their energy on buildings.

The length of the public square is approximately 690 steps and the width is approximately 210 steps. It is enclosed by a unity of architectural order, uniform, perfect, and in the form of large closed porches, which are never broken by a street or any other thing. Under the porches are stores, placed in an orderly manner, next to one another and above them there are balconies and windows which are fully decorated. Around the public square on the four sides, large water channels are laid out excellently in straight lines. In the middle of these water channels are placed fine stone walkways. In front of there, and parallel to them, is a tree plantation, full and uniform. In a few days, when the leaves of the trees become green, I think that it will be one of the most beautiful sights in the world.

This description holds true for most of the Iranian cities. Life and its manifestation, in the form of neighborhoods, bazaars, squares, mosques, schools or dwellings, contain a clear and simple order. Changes in economic, social, as well as cultural conditions, also occurred very slowly and over long periods of time. Most important of all, the existing order of economic and social conditions were accepted by the people as a kind of life. In this way, a city as a spatial projection of the life of the people expressed an outer harmony.

Up until the last century ready-made solutions to housing could not be acquired or easily transferred from abroad. It was necessary to understand the problem in its regional setting. Continuous centuries of development in keeping with the environment and culture created technical solutions and well-developed architecture (figs. 1 and 2).

The forces that shaped the personality of Iranian cities included an understanding of nature, a precise feeling for climatic conditions, a knowledge of materials and their relative limitations, an expertise in techniques and technology passed from generation to generation and, most important of all, the human scale. If we were to look at architectural complexes around the great desert of Iran, we would see the

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Fig. 1 – Yazd. 1. Remains of city; 2. Bazaar; 3. Kush-E-Now. The old part of the town of Yazd. The dotted line follows the old wall which formed the perimeter of the city in the 14th century. The town and the bazaar have been dramatically cut by many large arterial roads that have destroyed the continuity of the city.



Fig. 2 – Yazd. This detailed drawing of the portion numbered 3 in the air photo of Yazd / Fig. 1 shows how the 30 meter-wide avenue cut away a large strip of the town fabric.

parallel to them, is a tree plantation, full and uniform. In a few days, when the leaves of the trees become green, I think that it will be one of the most beautiful sights in the world» (*Travels in Persia, 1658*)³.

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3. F. Gaeta e L. Lockhart (edited by), *Il Nuovo Ramusio VI - I Viaggi di Pietro della Valle. Lettere dalla Persia*, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato – Libreria dello Stato – MCMLXXII Lettera 19, p. 31; (English Translation by M.K.).

The forces that shaped the personality of Iranian cities included an understanding of nature, a precise feeling for climatic conditions, a knowledge of materials and their relative limitations, an expertness in techniques and technology passed from generation to generation and, most important of all, the human scale. If we were to look at architectural complexes around the great desert of Iran, we would see the earthen colored profile of a town which is essentially nothing more than an extension of nature, following the horizon, pausing occasionally to change direction and with an upward leap in the shape of a dome or a turquoise minaret defining the central features of the thoughts and beliefs of the society (Fig. 3). The unity and harmony of the townscape, in relationship to the above considerations, does not mean that life in this environment was quiet and void of problems. On the contrary, in the political, social and economic framework, injustice and class oppression existed (not unlike other societies). In the feudal system, a particular class ruled a much larger class which was unified through an inescapable fate of poverty. However, in the fabric of Iranian cities and its architectural elements, the class line between poverty and richness does not find architectural expression. In these cities, architectural elements such as palaces or castles do not exist, or at least not in an exaggerated form. It is only by penetrating the interior space and discovering its order, that the differences become apparent.

Iranian buildings, whether they are dwellings, schools or mosques, are inward looking. For the most part, it is not possible from the outside to know or sense in the interior of that which is surrounded by a wall. There is always a definite contrast between the interior and the exterior. Reasons for this include the arduous climate, the influence of religious beliefs, and a disinclination to know what is inside what is essentially private (Fig. 4).

Since the end of the 19th century social and economic conditions have been rapidly changing. In this period of time, the industrial model of Europe became the example for defining progress. These changes have been both negative and positive. Tehran, the capital, with an unbelievable rate of growth, has become the center of all sorts of activities, possibilities and attractions (Fig. 5).

Along with mass immigration from the rural districts and provincial cities to the capital, the affluent classes are also leaving their ancestral cities and, because of that, the greatest blow is struck to the economy of rural centers, and the way for their deterioration has been prepared. Up to now, what has taken place in Iran has been similar to what happened before in the West. The major difference is in the economic system which is dependent upon services and commerce instead of industry. It is at this stage that aspects and different manifestations of the Western mode of life become unquestioningly adopted, and continuity with the past is disrupted.

Alongside various imported industrial products, consumer goods, and new modes of life, the first contact with modern architecture is also devoid of the message of the Modern Movement and its valuable philosophical and historical content. For everyone, it has been accepted as something “new”, but has remained deeply unfamiliar.



Fig. 3 – The crude brick fabric of the small town of Ardestan at the edge of the central desert of Iran blends with the natural landscape.

Similarly, techniques technology and materials are also foreign. As a result, this architecture this technology and its materials, have been used in an entirely wrong manner because some of their aspects have been meaningful only within the social, cultural and historical contexts of the West.

Cutting off one's roots with the past, losing one's identity but not fully sharing Western culture, thought and science, could cause a mental stagnation the dangers of which are unimaginable. The more conscious members of society are aware of the extent of the problems and they are worried about the possible solutions available to them. But the solutions do not seem to be simple and straight forward.

With economic progress, there is a need for a reconsideration of the meaning of development and also of the quality of the future welfare society. There is no doubt that the social and psychological crisis of advanced industrialized nations and their reaction against the welfare consumer society confirm the above need. But the solutions, as yet remains intangible. The rush towards economic growth and development cannot, by any means, be delayed or stopped because to bring about social equity is in direct relationship with thesis development.

At the same time, attention must be paid to the new problems and difficulties that this headling growth will bring with it. Moving quickly on short-term problems, we temporarily solve them, lessening the pressure. However, at the same time, we give birth to other forces which create larger, long-term problems. The city, housing, central offices and retail areas, schools, hospitals and all the related infrastructure must be designed in a short period of time, leaving no room for experience.

How can growth and rapid economic progress be achieved alongside a better healthier and more human environment? How can we realize conditions in which our cities can be the expression of the history of man and not of the speculation of land and buildings? Architecture gives space to people, so that they can live a life of higher quality, not spaces where one is forced or obliges to live (Fig. 6).

The architects and planners have to believe in their professional duty to respect the civilization and progress of their nation and also an understanding of the society which influences them and which they influence. And finally architects and planners need to make a distinction

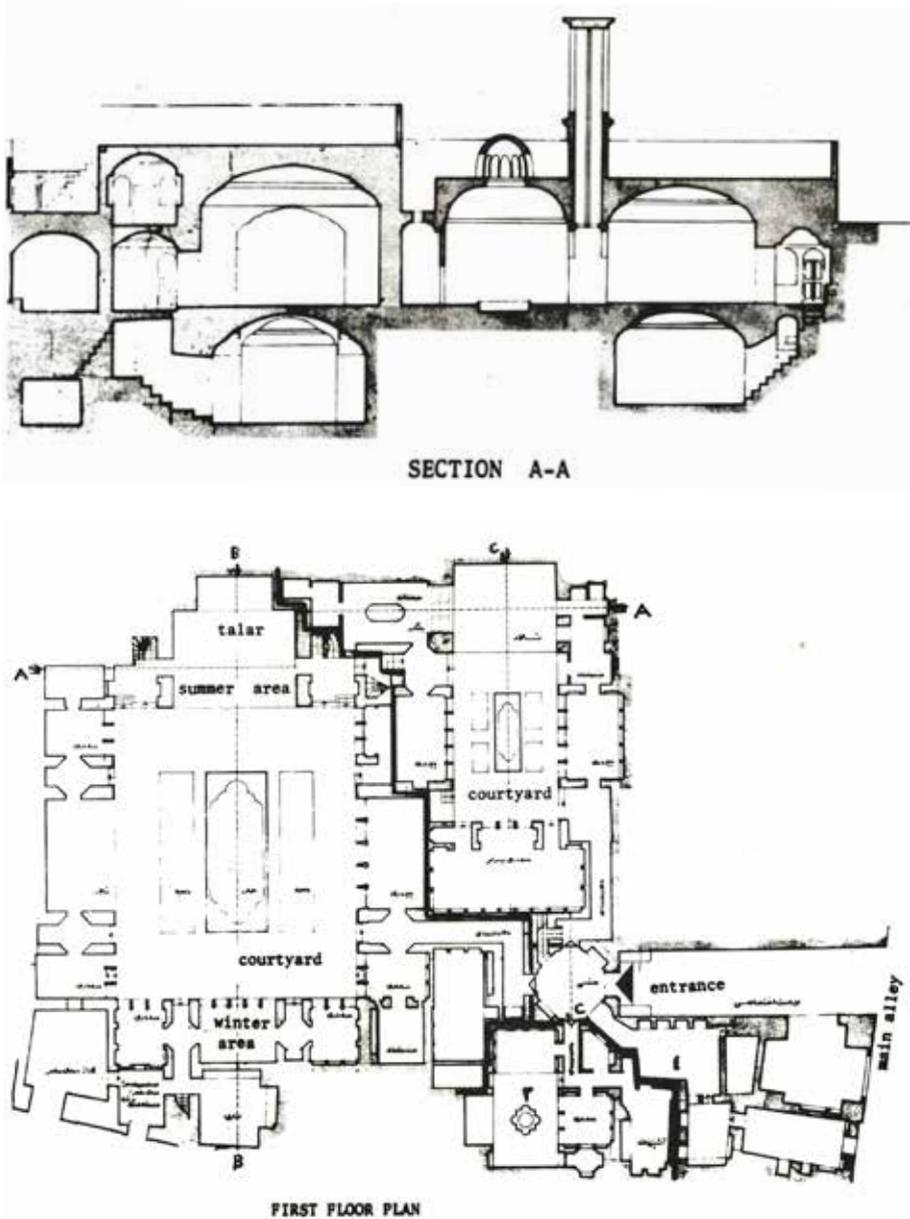


Fig. 4 – In a residential cluster for a group of patriarchal families, the interior spaces form a continuity with very limited interaction with the public street. The elements of the cluster respond both to climate and to culture.

between being contemporary and not merely temporary: therefore they need not only a clear notion of an international culture, but full awareness of local history.

I do not want to have high walls around my home and all of its opening closed, I want the breeze from all civilizations of the world to blow freely around my house while, at the same time, I do not want the breeze to sweep me away with it. (Mahatma Ghandi)



Fig. 5 – By the time the first master plan for Tehran was drawn up, in 1968, the city already had three million inhabitants and land speculation was out of hand. The result is that the city has been built on an irrational and culturally misconceived basis.

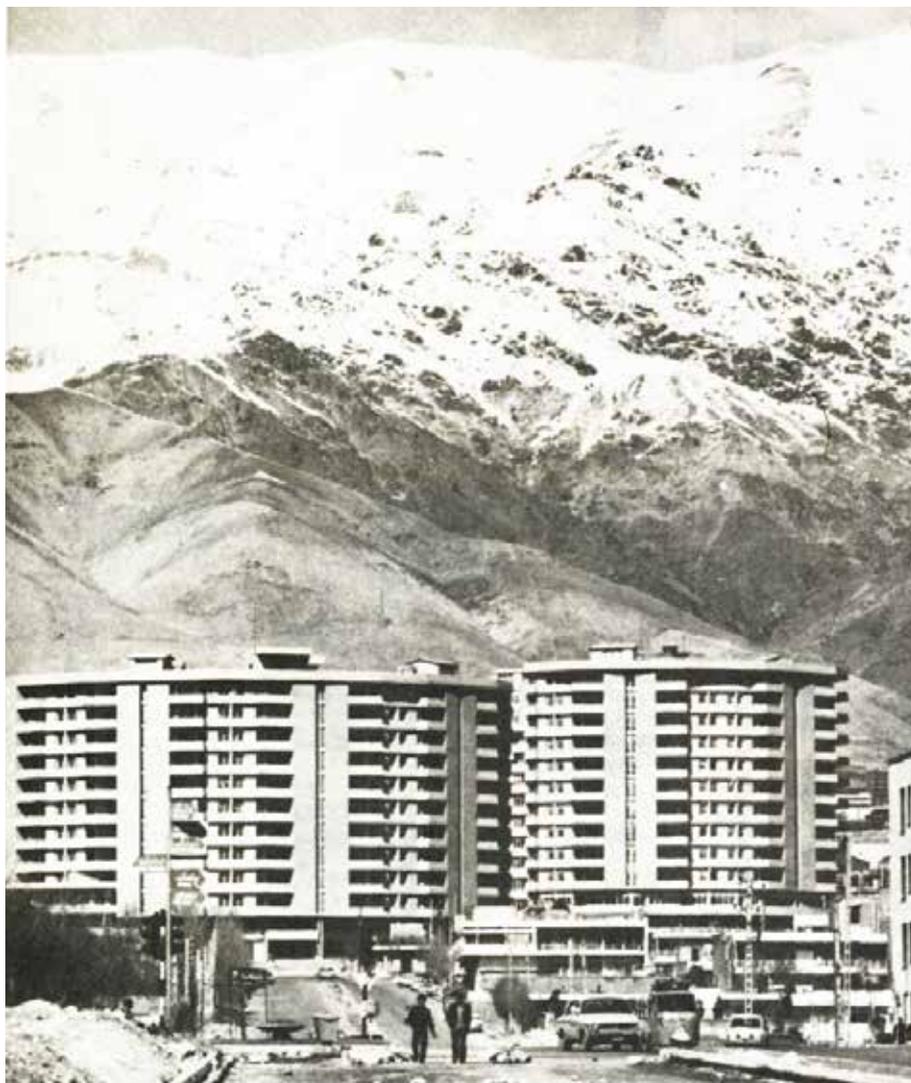


Fig. 6 – Luxury high-rise residences are conceived as the most “profitable” kind of housing by builders. In a matter of a few years the tradition of single-family low-rise living had been substituted by the tendency to high-rise apartment living motivated by financial rather than cultural interests.