

Under the Shadow of Walls: Place, Meaning and Form in the Islamic Architecture and Urban Structure of Isfahan

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INTRODUCTION

The prevalent architectural uniformity and continuing desire of dissociation from the regional and local characters, of context, and culture, many cities represent images of inert environment that consume all sense of unique places. The cities of today are increasingly losing their individual stamina and rarely sparkle enthusiasm. They fit into the logic of elsewhere, a logic of displacement that does not serve primarily a dwelling purpose. (1) We are lost in a mono-culture of global marketplace and its political agenda. Today we can travel to any city in the world and can not be sure of their differences or the inherent myth of diversity once so unique and 'pride of place' that these cities were characterized.

The loss of quintessential image and philosophical myth of 'place' deeply ingrained in the traditional built environment of Moslem cities is not exceptional, and could not be granted immunity in this hasty process of change. These environments which pronouncedly been the source of authentic expression of cultural tradition, spiritual, and emotional identity, unique and particular to these societies are continually disappearing out of sight. The new mode of building and designing cities, adrift of their cultural meanings and values, created vague sense of 'place,' that are no match for their inherent life styles and sensitive cultural philosophies. Charles Correa, remarks: that the architect who builds a glass tower in the middle of the Arabian desert will justify the design with a hundred different reasons - except possibly the real one, which is the unconscious attempt to create the mythic imagery of what is perhaps the quintessential city of the twentieth century: Houston, Texas. (2)

Today, the effect of globalization and the appearance of a shrinking world, demand increased opportunity for cross-cultural interaction, which is raising broader questions of cultural and regional architectural modes yet to be recognized. We have lost the wisdom and the need of contact with other cultures and with its transcendent realities. The more a civilization becomes homogenized, the more internal lines of separation become apparent; and what is gained on one level are lost on another. (3) The common belief and codes of conduct enable us to reach access to knowledge of culture, which is not attainable to non-members, and this fact give rise to diverse differentiated world. Levi Straus, believes that, as a matter of fact, these differences are extremely fecund. It is only through difference that progress has been made. (4)

BACKGROUND

Immersed in the passionate beauties of culture, art and architecture, Isfahan maintains a poignant position and pride of traditional architectural legacy amongst traditional Islamic cities. Served as an important political and administrative center during *Seljuks* dynasty in the 11th century, *Khwarazm*, 12th cc and witnessed dismal misfortunes of war, distraction and massacres during Mongol and Timurid periods 13th and 14th centuries, Isfahan regained its splendid importance again during the *Safavids* in 16th century. Realizing its central strategic location in a time of power struggle between the rival forces of Ottomans from the northwest, Mesopotamia from the west and the Azerbaijan from the north and north east, *Shah Abas I* (1587 - 1629), established Isfahan his new capital. During his commend *Shah Abas*, planned and initiated ambitious building programs that created magnificent mosques, public gardens (*char-baghs*), bridges, caravansaries and urban plazas (*Maidan*). At its height Isfahan is reputed to have had over 160 mosques, nearly 50 *madrases*, 1,800 caravan series, 273 *hammams* and numerous glittering gardens and covered bazaars. (5) It is estimated that the population of Isfahan at this time have been 500,000 inhabitants. (6)

The urban structure of Isfahan is basically dominated by three qualities of enclosures. The linear order of thoroughfares, "*Kucha*," the centralized order of courtyards and "*Maidans*" and the dense clusters of residential districts, "*Mahala*" formed by means of propensity and attachment of courtyards. Depending on the degree of enclosuriness, each property offers specific spatial qualities that constitute points of departure for these settlements. The particularity of how these places are used is clearly the job of culture and is locally determined. Internally these places contain sub-places, which serve different purposes in the settlements. Here we find the essence of in-between with its artifacts that define the innermost goals, and their various structural properties and interrelationships that clearly emphasizes the form of life.

Maidan : The United Schema. (*the square*)

The construction of the new city during *Sha Abas's* reign begins around Great Square, (*Maidan-i-Imam*) to the southwest of the old city. The new *Maidan* functioned as a polo ground, a public square for caravans and an open market place for the villagers. *Sha Abas* established his center to the lower West Side of the *Maidan*, which already had a *Timurid* gatehouse, the *Ali-Qapu*, or the high gate and constructed palaces

and gardens scattered behind it to the west of square. *Ali kapu*, the symbolic point of contact between the privacy of the palace and the outside world of public, consists of a very elaborate structure of six stories high served as principle reception pavilion where *Sha Abas* received the notables, courtiers and dignitaries and attended banquets. The eastern facade adjoining the great *Maidan* on the public side consists of a monumental gateway, which also permitted passage to the bazaar encircling the entire square built in the same period. On the upper floor above the gate stood the elaborate platform, (*talar*), or loggia with sumptuous ornamentation. From here the king would attend and observe military parades, civil and religious activities accustomed of the time. Elsewhere the building consisted of many rooms, alcoves and corridors with spiral staircases distributed throughout the rest of the six floors. Probably the most important room in the building is the vast winter throne hall on the same level as the grand *talar* and extended as high as the *Talar* roof. This room consist a clerestory for light from the above decorated with rich patterns of stucco and *Muqaranas*, elegantly cut out in the shapes of flasks and vases decorated delicate frescoes. The rich pattern of natural light that penetrate through the arched clerestory windows admitted from the above cast playful interplay and mosaic of shade and shadows create the perception of a sublime mystical spatial quality that is peculiar to both secular and religious architectural features of this period.

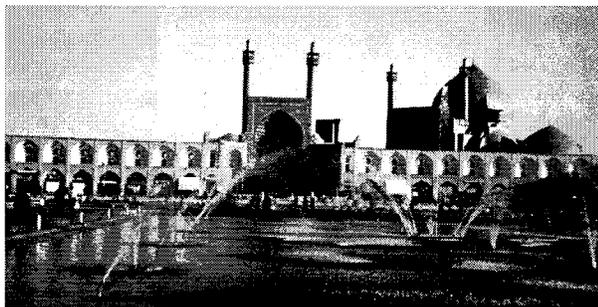


Fig. 1: Panoramic view of the Maidan, facing the south wall

Named after *Sha-Abbas's* father in law, *Masjid-i-Shaykh Lutfullah* is situated directly opposite to the *Ali Qabu* palace and to the lower east perimeter of the *Maidan*. The most unusual features of the mosque are the lack of minarets and central courtyard in direct contrast to that of *Masjid-i-Sha*. Entering the *Masjid* from a recessed open patio taking out from *maidan*, a half domed portal entry *Aiwan* decorated with magnificently mosaic tiles and *muqaranas* lead to an entry vestibule and a long corridor bring the worshippers to the entry of the main praying hall facing the *Qibla* and *Mihrab*. The principal praying hall is brilliantly decorated and covered with magnificent dome that sets on a well-lit drum. The light enters through sixteen double grilled windows positioned proportionately around the drum diffuses the light upon its entry and cast patterns on the colored tile surfaces create an extraordinary perceptual experience.

In 1611 *Shah Abas* authorized the construction of the great mosque *Masjid Sha* and it took 28 years to entirely complete the building. A grand entry portal allows passage to the mosque stands about 90 feet tall recessed deeply from the perimeter of south wall of *Maidan* invites the worshipers inside the mosque. Richly decorated with mosaic and patterns of *moqaranas* the portal provides remarkable sense of refinement and verticality.

Entering through the gateway there appear long passageways, vestibules and elaborated *Dahalans* and canopies supported by intricate structures of arches and vaulted ceiling inundates the imagination. These sequences of spaces and passageways gradually unfold and open up to the great central four *Aiwan* courtyard of the mosque. The four-aiwan

courtyard is a classical prototype, which have been in use since the architecture of *Timurad period* and culminated a thousand years of evolution. (10).



Fig. 2: Masjid-i-Shah, viewing the courtyard and west Aiwan through the entry vestibule

The courtyard a place of tranquillity and sensation complemented and embellished by blue colored surrounding walls which is totally encrusted with colored tiles amazes the observer and suggest a powerful mystic ambiance. As John D. Hoag remarks, "if the goal of Islamic Architectural ornament is the dissolution of the solid mass, it reaches perfection here." (11)

The surface quality of walls around the courtyard is accentuated by a hierarchy of recessed and continuous series of arches interrupted by *Aiwans*. These impressive half dome structures on four sides attest an apparent expansive quality that invite gradual participation to the further destination points of interiors; the praying halls. To the southwest, which is the direction of *Mecca* stands, the main *Aiwan* flanked by two minarets and the great dome over the main praying chamber. As the observer enters through the main *Aiwan* to the interiors experiences powerful sense of enclosures and yet serene and peaceful.

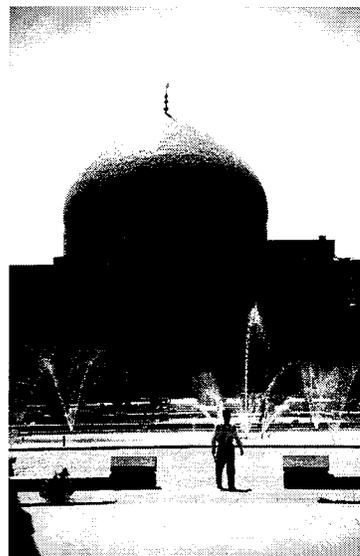


Fig. 3: Masjid-i-Shaykh Lutfullah, viewing the east wall

The gradual transition from open courtyard to the interior sanctuary provides a structured and rhythmic transition. All chambers are of square plan rising from the base on majestic piers arching at the top and form an octagon, from which subsequently through arching mechanism and the use of *Muqarnas* form the basic resolution of the circular base of the great dome. The circular band of the base of dome is embellished with colorful floral patterns, and *Quraanic* calligraphy. (12)

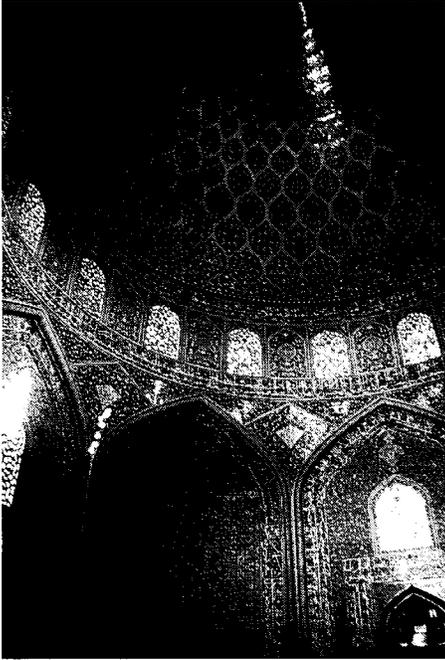


Fig. 4: Interior of the praying hall of Masjid-I-Shaikh Lutfullah

The bazaar represents the primary movement system and commerce activity for the entire city. It commenced from the north gate and passed through the old *maidan*, built during *Suljuq* period, and continued to expand during 16th. century *Safavide* to the south even further and terminated at *Pul-Khwaju* built over the *Zenda Rud* river. The Bazaar along its course encompasses major nodal points and become a linking element for the important urban commercial, religious and political activities of the city.

The bazaar is perhaps the more active stretch of these public spaces that accommodates commercial and artisan activities. Engaging in artisanship and commerce is predominantly a male activity, with the exception of weaving and sewing that are done by women in the house and presented to bazaar for trade. Men who dominate the life of the bazaar run workshops (*karkhana*) and commercial stores/shops (*dukan*). It is in the bazaar that the larger social interaction and commercial exchange between different social groups occur. The tea house (*chaikhana*), where men sit around to discuss the business, in this respect, plays an additional important social role. The interaction of the bazaar often centrally located forms the Town Square (*chouk*). Here major business transactions and social deals are made in the more prestigious shops, which cluster around it.

Bazaars represent the primary moving system in the hierarchy of linear circulation and links open booths, *carvanseries*, *hammams* and associated mosques together to the physiognomy of the city. In the Bazaar the traffic ways are sheltered from the sun and rain by being completely covered. These partly or completely covered ways, however functional in the physical sense, also emphasizes the atmosphere of enclosure and seclusion to welcome the citizens. (13).



Fig. 5: View of the covered bazaar encircling the entire Maidan

Entering the bazaar with its hustle and bustle of shopping and interaction with shoppers and sellers is one entering an extraordinary emotional and perceptual experience and discovery. An experience of mystery, in which both men and things play a strong role, only partly defined through their specific functions of selling and making or of being and waiting to be bought. By its skillful utilization of light and the built surfaces this architecture seeks to attract and to fascinate, together with the noises, the smell, and the visual festival of colorful items on display it proclaims the complexity of life and something of its illusory quality. (14)



Fig. 6: Ali-Kapu palace, looking to the west wall

In conclusion *Maidan* is the ultimate language of enclosure that plays a significant role in the supremacy and power of this urban place. The dialectic of its symbolic and pragmatic functions of religious, political, commerce, and cultural requirements of the time represent a totality of context, continuity, and special sequence that help to understand the true nature of this place.

Mahala: Center and Sacred.

Residential quarters fed by narrow and labyrinth of pathways that links the residential and private domain of courtyards to that of major network of bazaars and essential nodal activities. The narrow pathways abutting the courtyards are getting wider as they are leaving the residential precinct. Small shops, local mosques, and bathhouses are dispersed throughout the network of the pathway. These narrow networks as shaded by the masses of courtyards and walls provide condition of comfort for its user, which is very vital in the dry arid climate of Isfahan. Street intersections are small activity nodes where a small shop or a local mosque may be seen. A wider pocket in the corner may add to this communal and public function where male adults and elderly get together and socialize.

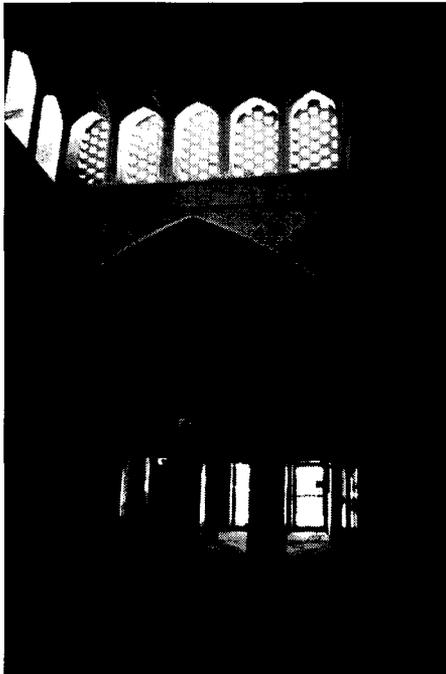


Fig. 7: Interior of the Ali-Kapu palace

The intricate and compact orders of streets, which tend to show sub-places, are the outgrowth of practical necessities. Street is more than a path on the ground moving along. Its complex territories are intensely three-dimensional and at every interval bordered by adjacent walls that add properties of verticality. The monotonous linearity of the thoroughfare is broken into smaller intimate sequences of spatial continuity that acquire a sense of individuality and place identity in every level.

The penetrated doors, *Dahlans*, underpasses, and building projections from second stories make the theme of *kocha* continues as unbroken container. The three dimensionality of container and its power of directional and thematic qualities accomplish something equal to the quality of interior. For the moment the wanderer feels the intimacy and security of dwelling and exhilarating extension of their actions into the surrounding space. The effect of verticality is explicitly spelled out through narrow and continuous massing indicated by the gateways surmounted by projection from upper stories. An over pass "*Dahlan*", the minaret and elevated dome of the mosque each of them counterpoint and adds vertical accent to the horizontally of "*Kucha*'

Entry to the houses is normally indirect and exaggerated - entering this realm visitors find themselves first in a small entrance hall - but than has to traverse sometimes-long corridors (*Dahlan*) before entering the courtyard. These entry halls provide access to several neighboring

courtyards. The house gateway is often emphasized by the construction of monumental and sometimes highly decorated features. Metal and brass decoration and inscriptions, skeletal and bulkiness of doorway is considered usual features and the door is often important indicator of the family status.

The door serves to conceptualize the relationship of inside and outside and its position in the continuity of the massive walls, give emphasis to enclosure of the interior. This relationship create an atmosphere of spirituality which makes it meaningful and having direct contact with the earthly substance. The doorway offers us entry to the house but at the same time stops us to pause and think which is a temporary suspension of our passage inside.

Passing the entry "*Dahlia*" at the center stands "*Haweli*", the courtyard - the heart and the locus of the domestic life. *Haweli* makes the total amalgamation of in-between places possible. Once we are inside *Haweli*, we are between the entire experiences of in-between - situated between entire groups of interiority. Visually connected to the whole sequence of the interior spaces, running like a thread. Here, moving everywhere in both horizontal and vertical directions, one finds all dimensions of place real and tangible. The facade on all sides punctuated with verandahs, porches, *Sakoonchas*, and *Aiwans* and what even lies behind it, circumambulate and linger alongside the center of *Haweli* - dark deep shaded windows of interior rooms and the lures of interiority attract us in a seductive way. The lure of inner spaces drew us into the secrecy of interior rooms, *Khana*.

Courtyard is where all diversities of life come together; it is the center, which constitute the ultimate 'inside'. The character of the inside is vivid and warm. Family activities populate this place and provide an architectural counterpart. Being familiar with its ambiance, there is an intense feeling of belonging, not because being there for the moment - but because being so much with the place - and the place is so much with us. - that we seem to belong to each other.

Courtyard as archetypal form of building visualizes the concept of center. Which appear in booth senses of cosmic and temporal meanings. The center is via-sacra, meaning the virtual re-enactment of cosmic events. (7) The center postulate that there is a hidden meaning in all things - each thing has an inner as well as outer meaning. The path to the hidden "self" begins at the center of a person by his intellect, which is veiled by his ego. It is only by piercing through the veil that the Gnostic will be able to find the "self", the inward or the absolute nature of pure intelligence, known only through discernment and concentration. (8).

The center is the powerful focal point of the courtyard and is often explicitly marked by a fountain, a pool, or flower boxes. This create an accent not only to conform the geometrical form of the symmetrical yard, but it also supplies a tangible site and centrally based field of forces that help actualize the yard as an autonomous visual object.

Pul-I-Khuaju: Metaphoric Bond. (the bridge)

The metaphor of bridge is symbolic and it is a representation and means of bringing together the heaven and the earth. In its constitution the bridge is equal to a medium that contemplate the spiritual journey and unites the world of things to the that of hidden reality which is the ultimate pinnacle Gnostic may seek. A place of noblest dwelling, the utopia of man and the finite center of place (*makan-i-mukadas*). In contrast to pathways (*Raah*) which is uncertain, and ambiguous in its sitting and the wanderer is totally lift out to the hands of chance and the inexperience wanderer may be deceived and lost in the tortuous labyrinth of dark mazes. The bridge is on the other hand self-assuring and certain to take one, to true final goal. It is not only closer to destination but also an extent of the destination. The travelers approaching and discovering this place may be assured and removed from the anxiety of being lost. The bridge inaugurates success, happy tiding and welcoming abode before the ultimate prize is won. A place

of celebration to be paused and tarry for moment. The victorious traveler may be met half way through the bridge by friendly companions who already gone through similar experience.



Fig. 8: Pul-i-Khaju bridge, notice the park-like setting and picnicking areas under the bridge

Pul-i Khaju in Esfahan precisely symbolize this cosmic association. The octagonal pavilion half way through the bridge provides such a meeting place. Here where the pavilions provides a peak of both worlds, the world of (*Zahir*) just left behind and the world of promise (*Batin*), and the noble paradise. *Pul-i-Khaju* built in 1650 over *Zendarude* for pedestrian and equestrian transportation popular of the time. The bridge is engineered to control and monitor the flow of water upstream so that the reserves can be used for irrigation. The overflow is cascading over stepped buttresses down stream provide a dramatic experience and favorite park like place to be used and enjoyed by people. The presence of water, deep shadows cast by the arcade and specially the lower pavilion, provide cosmic environment in which the *Koranic* joys of Paradise, with pavilions beneath which rivers flow, is prefigured on earth. (15) The structure of the bridge is supported by 23 arches is 39 feet wide and runs 436 feet in length. (16) The powerful rhythm of arches and vaults provide a cool and deeply shaded passageways and places beneath the bridge to be enjoyed by public in hot summer noons. Midway through the length two galleries on each side is decorated with color tiles to watch the view. The bridge is not only a means to cross the river but it is a true experience by its own virtue and yet another cultural myth and dialogue between the spiritual and the manifest.

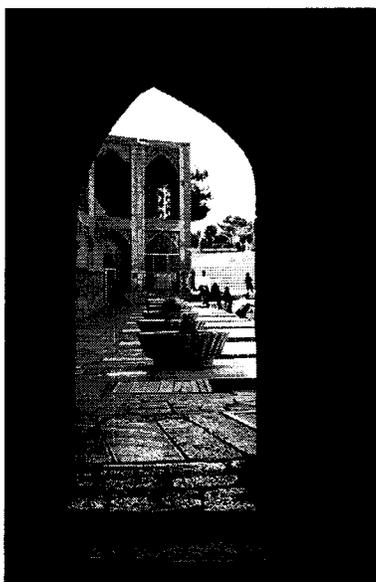


Fig. 9: Pul-i-Khaju, viewing the archways under the bridge

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of changing world and continued loss of traditional built environments, demand new modes of thinking and increased cross-cultural interaction, to understand about cultural-sensitive modes of architecture and concept of "place" in Moslem cities.

Isfahan echoes the unique concept of "place"; meaning and spatial order that is the result of evolving tradition and building process. It has been the source of many wonderful Islamic architecture and urban trait that are still extant and operative. The concept of 'place' in its physical and metaphysical context has given rise to its architecture and urban structure. These meanings are still accessible not just in the archaic architecture, but more immediately in the various current constitutions of its urban and architectural setting. Here we find a combination of palpable cosmic and cultural patterns of use in time and space, giving meaning to the total entity, and experience of "Place".

NOTES

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