

# The Environmental and Social Manifestation of Islamic-Iranian Urban and Architectural Configuration

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**ABSTRACT:** Recent increased Islamic awakening in many Muslim societies, have given a momentum to rise of contextual necessity for Islamic culture. As religion and way of life, Islam framed in city. City morphology according to Islamic ideology has brought interest to the discussion among the specialists and professionals involved in Muslim world for many decades, particularly in Iran. This goal can be achieved by experts and intellectuals and her particularity should be defined and illustrated. The present paper will attempt to synopsise and express some visions for contemporary and future urban form and architecture for Muslim cultures and societies principally for Iran. This research will try to pursue the main frameworks for the study of cultural fabrics reflecting on urban configuration, and also will delineate the qualities of spatial aspects, and make some recommendations at the end. This effort is a tentative rebirth which, it is hoped, will stimulate further discussion and research on the merits of the Islamicity.

**Keywords:** *Islamicity, Urban form, Architecture, Environmental, Social.*

## INTRODUCTION

Muslim history and culture is intertwined with concepts of urbanity and civilization, and in these regions the contemporary urban planning and architecture should be based on study of the Islamic city. "That initial model was supplanted by a series of models that were either adopted from the various cultures which Muslims came in contact with or developed in response to the ever-changing cultural, environmental, and social conditions." (Rabbat, 2010)

Taking the roads that connect the towns and villages of different regions of Iran, within a few days the observer would get an overall picture of the traditional life of their inhabitants and the morphology of their urban form and settings. Except for two strips in the northern and western sections of the country, Iran consists mostly of dry land and arid mountains, the dominating condition that has ruled the social structure and the physical form of the urban and rural centres.

The first glance discloses the aspect of the physical appearance of these communities. The urban and architectural patterns are fluid and plastic, and harmony with the surrounding nature,

gives the spectator the impression of observing similar features from different viewing angles. Due to many factors these communities, especially the smaller ones, have conserved their long-standing urban and architectural character which is in conformity with the private and social lives of their inhabitants. The overall homogeneity and integrity of external appearance are still preserved.

Investigation of the physical aspects would mainly necessitate on the first step, the study of cultural fabric and structure of the existing settlements. This would help to understand better the challenge of future urban form and settings in Iran.

### 1. Social Beliefs

When we look at religious influences on the social fabric in Iran, we find three major religious movements in Iran's history. Each has had an impact on the life-style, culture, and social organisation of the community and consequently civilisation's art, architecture and urban configuration.

Paganism gave way to Mithraism (worship of the sun-god) with the migration of Aryans. Theism was introduced by Zoroaster (600 BC) in the form of Dualism (the constant struggle

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between God and the devil) and the Zoroastrians worshipped the divinity in fire temples. Islam brought Monotheism and many other new concepts to Persia. Islam is pre-eminently the religion of unity on all levels; ontological, social and political. Islamic society is one in which every member is acknowledged as being equal in the eyes of God. The philosophy of Islam, its rituals, and the mosque itself became a part of the everyday life of the people. "In an "Islamic city" every phenomenon helps to promote an Islamic way of living and motion. Different sights and symbols in urban arteries, parks, gardens and everywhere else, while creating attractions, should prepare the citizens to have a tendency toward spirituality." (Khamenei,1996.)

It is interesting to see that in spite of the frequent struggles and the trying times, and in spite of inevitable problems resulting from cultural differences, the urban pattern and architecture inspire consistency and harmony, and reflect the material and non-material aspects of Iranian life.

## 2. Urban History

The history of the settlements in Iran goes back to the beginning of the known urban centres in the world and the region. The chain of urban centres in Iran continued to expand and as a result of centuries of building and rebuilding, these settlements have multiplied and gradually become important centres over thousands of years. By the time of the Achaemenidae (653 BC), tens of communities and cities were well established and according to the available inscriptions, they built their cities, "to stand forever". Their geographical situation in most regions helped the towns become, for many centuries, some of the main points for transactions between the different cultures of the East and West. This shows that from the beginning, there has been progressive and continuous development of Iranian urban civilisation.

The coming of Islam to Persia in 637 AD provided further opportunity for evolution. Islam encouraged new ideas and concepts that enriched architecture and urban elements everywhere. The urban centres, and as a result, civilisation continued to flourish, and in the early 13th Century its art reached a climax. During the Mongol invasion of Iran in 1220 AD, the country's finest cities were obliterated; their inhabitants slaughtered. But the urban culture of the Persians overcame the Mongols. Towns were rebuilt; by the time of the Safavid Dynasty (1499 to 1736), they had reached the height of their prosperity. By the mid-20th century fallacious industrialisation of the country and depopulation had precipitated the decline of the traditional urban form.

## 3. Traditional Setting

Iran's deepest concerns and most significant ideals are incorporated in her art. For instance, the most important factors influencing, motivating, and supporting Persian art in general and Persian urban form in particular are belief, the natural environment, and political and economic issues. Each of these has somehow been reflected in the major characteristic

of Persian art, traditionalism.

The Mongol invasion proved the survival of Persian tradition; although libraries were destroyed, methods of thinking were cherished by a handful of scholars who had escaped the mass murder, and passed from one generation to another. No matter who was governing, the traditional way of living proceeded as before. Continuity and conservatism are the other major characteristics of Persian art and provide a common thread through all the changes. Arthur Pope, a famous British archaeologist, says: "Persian history witnessed different courses of philosophy, different religions, invasions, domination's, and catastrophes, but no matter how great a shock may have been, the course of Iranian art and tradition continued."(Pope, 1969).

## 4. Socio-economic Factors

Before the invention of modern transportation, Iran was on the silk route which connected the East and the West. This route was one of the most important economic bases, as well as a cultural exchange median.

With the arrival of Islam new components like the mosque and bazaar, had a special socio-economic meaning relative to the specific socio-spatial locations and inter-relationship of these elements within the city. Small local centres served as a neighbourhood, while the main and largest complex in the town included the bazaar which served the entire town, region, or in special cases, the nation or the world. The distribution of complexes within the town was based on neighbourhood divisions. Towns and cities were visually divided into different neighbourhoods comprised of different handicraft procedures, different religious groups, and different social classes. These quarters were not based on the income of their inhabitants and included a mixture of rich and poor, young and old.

## 5. Spatial Aspects

The city is viewed as a sequence of spatial elements which change from manifest to hidden as they are viewed from different vantage points. The contrast between that which is hidden and that which is manifest is found in virtually all levels of spatial hierarchy. That which is hidden at one level of hierarchy becomes manifest at a lower level. Similarly, that which is manifest at any given level becomes hidden as one ascends to a larger scale. The organisation of urban spaces into a hierarchy of manifest and hidden space establishes a unique perception of the city. As one proceeds through major public spaces there are glimpses of previously hidden areas of the city. The relationship of macrocosm to microcosm is expressed by the spatial contrasts at all scales, from the regional to the personal.

Finally at the scale of dwelling units, this distinction between spaces is one of outer pedestrian space and private residential courtyards or gardens. In Iran the garden's open space within the dwelling is perceived as place, in contrast to the Western perception of the building as place.

### 5-1. Urban Elements and Setting

The arrival of Islam marked an important addition to the city; the mosque. One definition of a mosque could be a building erected over an invisible axis, which is none the less the principle determinant of its design. The Muslim world is spread out like a gigantic wheel with Mecca as the hub, with lines drawn from all the mosques in the world forming the spokes. These invisible lines converge on a city and within that city on a point. The city is Mecca and the point is the Kaba at its centre.

Looking at most traditional settlements, from the mosque radiate streets which branch off into cul-de-sacs, and some of the streets occasionally lead to the outside of the town. In a word, a radio-centric arrangement and theological deviation seem to rule the design and life in a classic Islamic city.

From the very first word of the first revelation to the prophet, Islam had the character of a literary, and therefore learned civilisation. Many schools of theology were attached to the mosques, and Muslims showed great enthusiasm in building schools and universities. In such a context the acquisition of knowledge and its transmission were paramount. Of these twin aims, the madrase or university was the instrument and a network of madrase was soon established, providing higher education in almost every urban area.

In the city, people are classified principally by their function rather than by their kinship. Men of religious science, large and small businessmen, artisans and labourers are recruited indiscriminately from every family. A well-balanced descent line of town dwellers will place its representative in each of the three sectors. Just as every identifiable quarter can be recognised by its mosque. It also contains commercial streets, bazaars where shops and workshops divided by type crowd together.

Iranian urban organisation is the physical manifestation of the equilibrium between social homogeneity and heterogeneity from regional to personal level. In the Islamic social system which requires both segregation of domestic life and participation in the cultural, economic and pious life of the community, an individual is extensively associated with the life of both societies. The right and obligation of the family to live enclosed in its house has led to a clear separation between public, semi-private and private life, perhaps the most significant social characteristic of Islamic culture which is directly reflected in the spatial form and design of the Islamic city.

### 5-2. Architectural Expression

Iranian Islamic architecture is more than just a spectacle of domes and minarets, perfumed pleasure palaces and exquisite turquoise tiles; it is a true expression of a rich culture and its belief in Islam that has unified countries as far apart as Spain and China, Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, over some thousand years and more. Iranian buildings express the religious beliefs, social and economic structure, political

motivation and visual sensibility of a pervasive and unified tradition.

## 6. Recommendations for the "Islamic City"

If one takes the case of a new settlement being planned and developed for occupancy for today's needs, the following primary views could be considered for the objectives that would help to evolve an appropriate domestic solution from the macro-scale down to the micro-scale.

### 6-1. Planning the City

In developing the master plan, the planners should remember that the "Islamic city" is an organic process of human growth and, as such, should not be laid out immediately on a methodical grid just because it is very easy to keep track of the location of buildings and the construction of services.

Manifested or hidden spaces whether public or semi-public should be planned and designed so as to be defensible. Defensibility, in the sense of secure spaces, should be a primary strategy in the design of Islamic settlements as it has been a major principle throughout the history of city planning in Muslim lands. "In the Islamic system nobody in their diurnal life should feel vulnerable. The uniqueness of the Islamic city is that followers of faith and piety would feel secure everywhere, and immoral people would find nowhere safe to commit corruption and devilry." Total attention should be paid to this vital issue, in all of the environments under the municipality's jurisdiction, including parks and cultural centres." (Khamenei, 1996.)

If possible, large areas should be kept free from automobiles. Pedestrian ways should be free of vehicles except under special conditions for emergency vehicles only. Indiscriminate planning of multi-lane roads and streets with sidewalks within the urban cores are useless especially in the arid regions. Flow of air and shading of sun should be considered in developing roads and public spaces. Landscaping should be used only where it is realistic in terms of available water, and life style must be a key factor.

### 6-2. Architectural Qualities

The mosques and more ceremonial buildings, government or institutional, should evoke a sense of space as necessary, but this should never be developed as artificial forms directly copied from the past just to create an impact. Mosques in conjunction with community centres should be located throughout the town, but not at a definite pattern of spacing.

"According to Islamic tradition, man is the high aim or object of creation, .... with the responsibility of constructing a beautiful world, almost a reflection of Paradise. So, in Islam, a work of art can be regarded as the product of human will and effort, individual and collective, to make the world beautiful. That is one of the reasons why architecture has been prominent among other fine arts in Islamic societies." (Ibrahim, 2009)

Facade architecture must be rejected in any form, Classical

Islamic domes, vaults, or arches that were natural solutions to the material technology of the historical past should not be reproduced indiscriminately, remembering that the materials of today's technology do not require those earlier forms and shapes to perform their structural purposes. The quality of space and the spirituality of volume must be created by understanding the meaning of these values, and then utilising technology and construction methods. It is not the exact copy of classical Iranian proportions or even of form, but the symmetry, unity, harmony, and continuity of space which should be the objective. Prefabrication techniques using precast concrete or simply concrete block construction should be used with caution and in a flexible manner and only in the regions where it is climatically appropriate. Prefabricated materials should also allow some level of individuality and uniqueness for each dwelling, perhaps by encouraging each occupant to expand and add according to his own needs. Appropriate local material should be used as much as possible in a manner that allows full expression of Islamic-Iranian architecture. To provide individuality, monotony of exterior walls or interior courts should be avoided. Traditional construction materials should be re-evaluated and technologically upgraded.

## CONCLUSION

Islam has carried its unifying philosophy of many cultures, including Iranian culture, over the last fourteen hundred years. Iranian urban morphology and architecture has responded to historical, cultural and economic factors, and to the natural environment while maintaining the fundamentals of the Islamic way of life. In an Islamic-Iranian urban centre an individual is closely identified with the life of his quarter, he also belongs to another unit; the family, the basic irreducible unit of social life. The city characteristically comprises a tripartite system of public, semi-public and private spaces, varying in degree of

accessibility and enclosure. It is in this spirit of the past that we must look to the future of Iranian architecture and urban form, which should be the mirror image of a united social life. In other words the Islamic city's concepts should express a sense of unity within multiplicity and complexity within simplicity. The Islamicity is by choice a city of purity and piety.

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