



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

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## **Abstract**

The recent increase in Islamic awakening in many Muslim societies have created a momentum to the rise of contextual necessity for Islamic culture. Islam framed in cities as a religion and lifestyle. City morphology based on Islamic ideology has brought interest to the discussion among the specialists and professionals in Muslim world for many decades particularly in Iran. This goal can be achieved by experts and intellectuals and its particularity should be defined and illustrated. The present paper attempts to synopsise and express some visions of contemporary and future urban form and architecture for Muslim cultures and societies particularly Iran. This research attempts to pursue the main frameworks for the study of cultural fabrics reflecting on urban configuration, and also delineates 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.

**Keyword:** *Islamic city, Urban form, Architecture, Environmental, Social.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Muslim history and culture is intertwined with the concepts of urbanity and civilization and the contemporary urban planning and architecture in these regions should be based on the studies 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 in Iran, the observer would get an overall picture of the traditional life of their inhabitants and the morphology of their urban form and settings within a few days. Except for two strips in the northern and western regions of Iran, the country mostly consists of dry lands 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 flexible, and the 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 the external appearance are still preserved. Investigation of the physical aspects would mainly necessitate on the first step studying the cultural fabric and structure of the existing settlements. This would help to understand better the challenge of future urban form and settings in Iran.

### **a. 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 between God and the devil) and the Zoroastrians worshipped the divinity in fire temples. Islam brought Monotheism and many other new concepts to the land of Persia. Islam is pre-eminently considered the religion of unity at all levels; ontological, social and political. Islamic society is the 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 lifestyle of the people. "In an "Islamic city", every phenomenon helps to promote an Islamic lifestyle and motion. Different sights and symbols in urban arteries, parks, gardens and everywhere else while

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creating attractions should prepare the citizens to have a tendency toward spirituality.” (Khamenei, 1996.) It is interesting to see that despite the frequent struggles and attempts, and the 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.

### **b. 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 the urban centres in Iran continued to expand and as a result of centuries of building and rebuilding, these settlements have multiplied and gradually gained importance over thousands of years. By the time of Achaemenid Empire (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 some of the main points for transactions between the different cultures of the East and West for many centuries. This shows that there has been progressive and continuous development of Iranian urban civilisation from the beginning. The arriving of Islam in 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, the civilisation continued to flourish and the art reached its climax in the early 13th Century. During the Mongol invasion of Iran in 1220 AD, the country's finest cities were demolished and their inhabitants slaughtered. But Persians' urban culture 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.

### **c. Traditional Setting**

Iranians' deepest concerns and most significant ideals are incorporated in their art. For instance, the most important factors influencing, motivating, and supporting Persian art in general and Persian urban form in particular are beliefs, the natural environment, and political and economic issues. Each of these has somehow been reflected in the major characteristic of Persian art traditionally. The Mongol invasion proved the survival of Persian tradition; although libraries were destroyed, Intellectual styles were cherished by a handful of scholars who had escaped the mass murder, and passed from one generation to another. Irrespective of who was governing, the traditional lifestyle proceeded as before. Durability and conservatism are the other major characteristics of Persian art which 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).

### **d. Socio economic Factors**

Before the invention of modern transportation, Iran land was located on the silk Road 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 the 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 serving 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 operated based on the income of their inhabitants and they included a mixture of rich and poor, young and old.

## **2. SPATIAL ASPECTS**

The city is viewed as a sequence of spatial elements which change from manifest state to hidden as they are viewed from different vantage points. The contrast between what is hidden and what is manifest is virtually found in all levels of spatial hierarchy. What is hidden at one level of hierarchy becomes manifest at a lower level. Similarly, what 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 with microcosm is expressed by the spatial contrasts at all scales from the regional to the personal. Finally, at the scale of residential units, this distinction between spaces is one of outer pedestrian spaces and private residential courtyards or gardens. In Iran, the garden's open space within the residential unit is perceived as place, in contrast to the Western perception of the building as place.

### **a. Urban Elements and Setting**

The arrival of Islam marked an important addition to the city; the mosque. One definition of the 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 then a point within that city. The city is Mecca and the point is the Kaba at its centre. Looking at the most traditional settlements, from the mosque's 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 been characterized by a literary and thus 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 "madrasah" or university was the instrument and a network of madrasahs were soon established providing higher education in almost every urban area. In the city, people are principally classified by their function rather than 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 residents 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 and bazaars where shops and workshops divided by all types of 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.

#### **b. 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.

### **3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE "ISLAMIC CITY"**

Considering the case of a new settlement being planned and developed for occupancy with respect to today's needs, the following primary views could be considered

helpful in proposing an appropriate domestic solution from the macro-scale down to the micro-scale.

#### **a. 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 the 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 spaces 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 certain 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. Airstream 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 lifestyle must be a key factor.

#### **b. 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, mankind is the supreme goal 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 both 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. Creating the quality of space and the spirituality of requires 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 forms, but the symmetry, unity, harmony, and durability of space which should be the objective. Prefabrication techniques using precast concrete or simply concrete block construction should be used with caution in a flexible manner 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.

#### 4. EPILOGUE

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 lifestyle. 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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