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Conclusion

The monumental religious-ritual buildings and places in Iran reflect the spiritual life and key elements of its rich culture, confirming the aesthetic taste and sense of Iranian art in both ancient times and Islamic-Quranic era. These buildings, places, textures, and holy shrines are now exposed to damage, distortion, threat, and serious destruction. Recently they are going through a period of decline. Even if optimistically we succeed in preserving the form, structure, and facade of these buildings as they were (like Western societies with their logical principles of renovation) and keep their originality as if they are in museum, and if we cannot establish a lively, internal, and real relation with these places and spaces, sooner or later their backbone will be broken and they will disappear. There is no doubt that during the last two critical centuries our culture, life, and social relations have gone through serious changes. But, it is a significant, defining, and determinative matter to know to which direction and goal this change and reshaping heads, and rises from which territory, land, historical geography, civilization, and spirituality. The concept of religious-ritual architecture in Iran and the difficulties which afflict this kind of architecture as a holy and spiritual one, which is a reflection of divine and civilized life of people, represent a sample of numerous formal changes in our country. The post-revolution society in the recent four decades has claimed for the revival and expansion of religious perspective and belief and has also established a political-religious system. Still, in practice and experience, the dominant mentality

in this society has seriously damaged people's spiritual life and this damage is more tangible and spiritual in the realm of religious-spiritual architecture. The Qajars, willy-nilly, consciously or unconsciously were more successful in preserving religious buildings and places. Maybe in that time, the heavy pressures and earthquakes rooting in Western continent were not fully felt. At present, our society is fully and in total levels under the direct influence of these unavoidable earthquakes and historical pressures; this demands wise contemplation and management. The central argument of this research is that there is no wise calculation to contemplate on and manage the historical changes in the realm of architecture, particularly in the religious-ritual one. The procedure of the actions confirms the ignorance and unawareness of the new changes, emerging here and there in different ways and revealing their ugly appearance. Living in such complex situations and experiencing dynamic and changing world, the researchers kindly recommend the authorities not to sacrifice the cultural heritage of their nation in the altar of profit and business. They need to have plans for and invest in preserving the rich heritage of the country, avoiding playing with its religious sites as the lively reflections of the continuity of Iranians' spiritual and civilized life.

Recommendations: It is necessary for the authorities responsible for the art and cultural, historical, and religious heritage to think of protecting the precious treasure of this country and put an end on the rapid and irregular growth of abnormalities.

distortion in the identity of a buildings and the destruction of their originality, the imposing of the uncaring, profit-seeking authorities' stupidity and basic commercialism. Earlier, the form and color of Iranian architecture were in harmony with local elements and surrounding nature including water, tree, mountain, neighbor, and housemate. They had internal, original, and real connection to people, and were rich, alive, and full of soul, while now their existence depends on profit and benefit of dealers. The graves of *Imamzadehs* and great men of religion and those of exalted souls, which were buildings erected

from a spiritual soil and stood by clay, brick, and sometimes stone beside an old tree, stream, rock or hill (few of which are still continuing their life) have also lost their identity and originality. This is done via the pretext of renovating and buttressing the buildings and decorating them. These sites are distorted and destroyed because of the application of poor and improper materials which are not in harmony with the architecture, structure, and form of the buildings. As such, the sweet feeling of human being towards these sites has faded away.



Fig. 11. Imamzadeh Ismaeil Shrine , a distinguished sample of a cave temple lies between huge rocks and beside a running river. The current appearance present facade of this place, like those of the other religious places nowadays, is covered with common decorations. Firoozkooh, Mazandaran. A small part of rock seen between the mirrors; before mirroring (Aina-Kari), the holy shrine was in the middle of huge rocks and had created a splendid huge awewonder. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2017.

disharmonious elements to that extent to which there is no similarity in the history of Iranian architecture.

The ugly landscapes, wrong interferences, and the disharmonious and inappropriate elements imposed on the structure and form of religious-ritual buildings are seen all over Iran in recent decades, and most sorrowfully in sites and buildings of the northern parts¹. In the north of Iran once green and white domes with brick and

white chalk were prevalent and its architects and artists were skillful in the application of brick and wood, and their artistic, harmonious constructions were shining in the heart of nature and natural geography. They are now covered with golden disharmonious decorations and, sometimes, odd minarets and strange and improper tiling in the cases of color and shape. The disharmony is in such a way that a person will be shocked with the amount of



Fig. 10. Charity boxes. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2016.

life, culture, and existence of people. In the internal space of these buildings and sites and under the roofs of these holy shrines, a believer had a feeling of integration with the source of his existence. This rope of divine connection and the ring of the original, and not whimsical, internal and spiritual linking are broken in the recent times. It seems that human kind no more has any pretext for an original and meaningful life in this world, and he has stood on the debris of the past traditions and religious, spiritual orders. The reflections and symbols of human being's wandering and his internal collapse are seen, felt, and experienced every where. The other problem is not limited to the decline in the importance of the ritual and sacred architecture; it includes the domain of the urban and rural architecture, geometry of building, and the engineering of the spaces and architectural buildings. This is a reality which ugly face is more evident in the third world countries. Of course, human being's internal collapse is evident and felt every where either in the countries of the third world or those of the developed world (Shaygan, 2014: 87). Even our definitions of the functional aspects of these buildings, spaces, and textures are not correct and precise. Shall a space be functional?



Fig. 9. The entrance of a graveyard, Shirghah, Mazandaran. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2016.

If the answer is positive, on whose service and for what goal? ... an unavoidable ugliness which surrounds us from totally ... (ibid: 87). Ugliness is not just a subject of appearance, but a real violation (ibid: 88, cited in Juan dela Paul). To the same extent that architecture can be effective and determinative in keeping the social memory and identity of people active, it can lead to forgetfulness, lack of identity, and negligence in an unpredictable, unimaginable, and vastly destructive level.

It must be confessed that we are in a difficult, considerably complicated, and worrying situation. The government authorities, members of parliament, judiciary, military men, architects, engineers, and, in one word, the designers and planners of development in our recent after-revolutionary society are still disregarding the complexities, difficulties, hard situations, and heavy challenges afflicting our new society. The planners, architects and engineers of the spaces of our urban society are free to construct what they want and destroy what they can. The practical style and function of the planners, engineers, and architects of our recent society are subjects of argument. Their theoretical ground is fundamentally loose, unacceptable, undefined, and unjustifiable. In a universal scale, the the works of such architects is based on the prevalent forms and beliefs which are incessantly getting unpleasant for people (Allsopp, 1992: 16). These anxieties refer to recent, modern art which is distancing from the past original and functional art and, therefore, is disconnecting from people. More sorrowful and disastrous is that the past architecture, particularly religious and ritual buildings and places, many of which up to now were shining like brilliant jewel in our country's different parts and acting as resort for people, presenting a beautiful, exalted face of art, aesthetic taste, and civil and spiritual life of Iranians through the solid body of architecture, wise geometry of buildings, and intelligent engineering of spaces, are now destroyed and overloaded with the weight of ugly and

ancient Iranian, Egyptian, Elamite, Greek, Roman Indian, and Chinese art popular after centuries and making them exciting for our aesthetic taste is their origin in our root and existential principles: common existential principles.

Monumental buildings have been like four-dimensional books and texts in their time, which have been created for people at a particular time, place, and geography. A pilgrim's deeds in the transcendent and spiritual atmosphere of a ritual building, or in a holy shrine or on a blessed grave is based on his belief. The words and the reciter, the shrine and the pilgrim, the memory and identity, the material and meaning, text and reading of the text, and in one word everything, are experienced as a lively and active reality (ibid: 71). Human nature seeks serenity and spirituality; these are present in the predecessors' creation of what they considered as beauty.

Iran's Holy places at current situation

Religious-ritual buildings and places in different parts all over Iran, like those in other cultures and societies in the world, have undergone simple and sometimes serious changes. In Iran, particularly in the recent two centuries, these holy buildings and places are imposed to change or particular conditions. During the Qajar dynasty such sites were of great importance to people. Even they have been among the distinguished and defining criteria of art and architecture in this period through their exclusive style. Unfortunately, during the recent years, due to disregarding climatic and aesthetic conditions, some changes have appeared in the architectural material and decoration of buildings, which are not acceptable at all. This disharmony is observable in the improper landscaping of original and nonlocal trees and plants. In many cases, the change in the rout of natural waters such as streams, aqueducts, and rivers has led to changes in ritual elements such as water, tree, and holy building (Chartaq). These once were arranged beside each other with smart, conscious, and artistic care. This change separates them from each other and

destroys their particular, original, and real role, rendering them distorted and disharmonious in front of our eyes. More boring and sorrowful is that these buildings no more raise any feeling of human experience of sacred and holy entity in our thought and behavior. Unfortunately, hasty actions and renovations of the buildings, with no professional analysis on their background, have seriously damaged their identity, reality, and originality in both form and content, that is to say, appearance and meaning. The application of the material which is not in harmony with the form and structure of these buildings, such as marble stones with poor quality in the reconstruction of the buildings which were originally built with wood and brick, is a sample of these excessive renovations and ugly, untidy, improper, and disharmonious reconstructions. The history of these holy buildings goes back to Iran's pre-Islamic era. They are seen in different parts of the country, in accordance with principles, values, belief system and religious teachings of Iranian people; numerous evidences affirm this. During Islamic period, these buildings and places are reflected in people's cultural and daily life, in accordance with their new religion, culture, and dominant belief system. The previous holy sites are replaced by the new religion, spirituality, and system of belief, with new forms and structures. Many of *Imamzadehs*, as before, are on the top of mountains and hills or inside the huge, rocky caves, beside rivers, streams, fountains, and ancient trees (Fig9). Even big grave gardens which sanctity roots in an integrated world of spiritual life and deep divine experiences of exalted orders of life and, in one word, the world of holiness, continue their life under the name of this or that *dervish*, mystic, *Imamzadeh*, Imam, or an old man. The figures represent persons avoiding material belongings and enjoying good name, being venerated by people and having their graves decorated. Before the events of the recent century, in all over the world including Iran, holy and ritual places and buildings have had fundamental and deep role in the spiritual



Fig. 7. A mosque in Firoozkooh, Mazandaran.
Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2016.



Fig. 8. Imamzadeh Salih. Tajrish, Tehran.
photo: Shohre Javadi, 2016.

sacrificed for business and profit, even the sacred heritage of a nation that is traded by dealers in the vanity fair of desire and gain. The ritual buildings, texture, spaces, and places of our country are threatened by damages, distortions, and serious pests more than any time. This precious heritage in its time was a live manifestation of a rich culture and lifestyle from politeness, decency, spirituality, and cleanness. Nowadays the entire of principal and common virtues and values of human societies and the world are disappearing. Every monumental construction at its historical time and situation along with the cultural, social, spiritual, economic, and political necessities of the time has been a lively and active reality on the scene of history, culture, and social life for the people who created it, affecting them. The influences of these monumental buildings and places on the soul, behavior, wisdom and mind, and taste of the people of the very period have been direct and immediate. Yet, the people coming in the next centuries and millenniums developed another understanding of these monuments. This understanding is termed as rereading, representation, and rethought (Mollasalehi, 2014:69).

It is clear that the aesthetic taste has been overlooked in this procedure. Beauty has always been subject of attraction, standing beyond the limits of time. That is why the classics all over the world have preserved their popularity. Though the modern world and art have reflected deconstructive attitudes and perspectives, which reflect changes in aesthetic understanding, and in some transient cases the unity of artistic aesthetic with wonder and renovation, yet the lasting classic products have never been denied but referred to by people. The transcendent entity is the same in its nature. It means that whatever that has awakened the sense of excellence in us and taken us away from the common reality to the other side or been a representation of it, has attracted human being's full interest from the bottom of heart.

Among the aesthetic reasons, what renders



Fig.3. Imamzadeh Ali Shrine, Farouj, North Khorasan. Photo: the archive of Nazar Research Center.

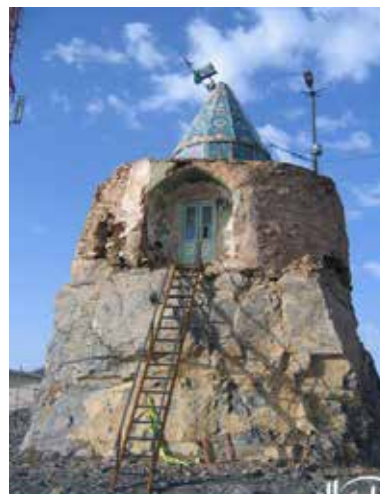


fig.4. Imamzadeh Abdullah Shrine, Tar village, Natanz. Photo: the archive of Nazar Research Center.



Fig.5. A mosque beside the Firoozkooch-Shirgah road. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2016.



Fig.6. A mosque in Mazandaran Province. Photo: Shohre Javadi, 2016.



covered many of religious buildings and places all over the country.

Due to the continuation of the local governments of Sasanid princes up to the fourth century of the Hijri calendar, Mazandaran province constitutes a strong background for Iran's religious-ritual architecture. Accordingly, nowadays there are numerous evidences of these places and ancient Iranian traditions. In addition to numerous *Imamzadehs* in this province, "another element named *Saghanghar* (Rahimzadeh, 2004) is seen in urban and rural areas of Mazandaran." Some of them are very simple and some others are renovated by new material. The places and the elements and symbols related to them reflect people's ancient belief in Anahita, the goddess of productivity and clean waters. Over the Islamic era, this belief has turned to resorting to, vowing, and expressing need to the water carrier of Karbala, Hz. Abbas (Javadi, 2008).

Many of these *Saghanghars*, like the graves of great religious people, which represent the ritual-religious heritage of the region and other parts of Iran, are destroyed. The few lasting ones are renovated by nonlocal materials which are not in harmony with the original buildings. They are decorated with metal domes and *minarets* which are covered with gold and silver. These embody distorted and fake combinations

which no more suggest any feeling either from past or from present, except inconsistency and chaos! It is obvious that if the place physically is not protected, the beliefs will fade away in a short time. Therefore, the primary principles underlying the holy buildings and places should guide the repair, renovation, and preservation of these buildings and textures. The aesthetic taste, spiritual sense, and religious belief are not the things to be manipulated. The preservation of the spiritual heritage hidden in the buildings and shaping their spiritual, sacred, and ritual identity is not apart from their physical preservation. Physical protection preserves spiritual identity, and the protection of spiritual identity results in the preservation of their appearance.

Many of the clay and brick *chartaqs* which are built beside sacred waters such as rivers, springs and in the vicinity of a bushy tree, or even sometimes on a hill or the peak of a mountain (Figs 1-4), are nowadays decorated with domes and minarets with, occasionally, strange, ugly, and bizarre forms. They are covered with layers of gold and silver with occasional luxurious tiling, deprived of artistic taste and inconsistent with the buildings (Figs 5-8).

Some of the rivers flowing beside the trees are dried or are surrounded by garbage! Everything is



Fig.1. The shrine of prophet Salihin Abarkooh, Yazd. Photo: the archive of Nazar Research Center.



Fig.2. The shrine of Sheykh Andarabi, Kish. Photo: the archive of Nazar Research Center.

hit. It has affected our cultural heritage as well as spiritual-civilizational background. These sanctums, places, textures and ritual spaces, which served as shining centers of religious life and spiritual behavior of Iranian and non-Iranian visitors, are, unfortunately, turned to centers preaching superstition and stupefying the minds and thoughts of social groups.

The religious-ritual pilgrimage sites in Iran can be investigated and analyzed from different aspects their aesthetic aspect and, then, accessibility and their people's natural attitude. This means that the tradition and cultural-artistic and spiritual heritage, due to their connection to and relation with people, particularly the middle class and the rural people with their simplicity and avoidance of luxurious life, can be examined and criticized. Another point to be observed is the preservation of this spiritual heritage with its simultaneously Iranian, Islamic, and universal aspects. More importantly, because Iran, with no exaggeration, is a center for one of the richest, most diverse, active, stable, and liveliest traditions and religious-ritual architectural heritage, it is necessary for those in charge to invest in this spiritual heritage. They have to arrange their plans with more sensitivity, attention, and wisdom, avoiding the commercial, vulgar, personal, and superficial-mass expansion beside preservation.

Hypothesis

Over the last decades, the religious-ritual places and buildings have been seriously damaged. In this way, the carelessness and occasional non-specialized interferences in the expansion and renovation of the buildings, and arranging landscape with nonlocal ingredients and materials have weakened the spiritual dimension of the sites. This has and dissociated them from their previous simplicity and sanctity or sacred, original, and ritual identity.

Monumental Sacred Places

Among the common experiences of all cultures and societies are the prominence, solemnity, and glory of a natural event, phenomenon, fact or the advantage that natural elements and species have had for people. The category includes the myths which were created about these natural elements under the title of gods or transcendent entity or distinguished spiritual figures who were the subject of people's respect and devotion and were commemorated by some buildings. These elements were not limited to east, west, north, south, Roman or non-Roman of the historical geography of our human society and world. A pilgrim experiences transcendent and high entities in a direct, lively, and exciting way. The buildings, places, and spaces which he creates are reflections of his experiences, relations, and beliefs about the high stance of existence. Origin, root, and source are from the very essence of the appearance, reflection and colorful brightness and diversity of ritual places; either in Iran, Greece, India or native America. This research considers a particular kind of religious-ritual buildings, places, and spaces in Iran which are threatened by serious damages from both inside and outside.

In their own time, some of these monumental buildings have been like three dimensional texts in three or, more precisely, four dimensional spaces of specific times, places, and geographical locations, which the people of that era wrote according to their artistic taste, creative and aesthetic sense, spiritual, political, social and epistemological systems (Mollasalehi, 2014: 71). These buildings have two types: The simple and small ones made by people, and the splendid ones made by kings' orders. This is mostly seen in the buildings from the Safavid era when the shrines of Imams and Prophet's progeny were embellished. Same is about the ones from Qajar time. Since then, this way of embellishment, which is against the way of Imams and their depended ones, has widely been practiced. It is quite a while that this prevalent tradition has

Introduction

A Critical Reconsideration of Some Active Structures, Textures, Space, and Religious-Ritual Sanctums in Iran

These sacred structures and sanctums include geography, sites of ritual ceremonies in nature, architecture, texture, and the spaces constructed by devotees' mastery. The existing active religious-ritual sanctums, places, and structures in communities include mountains, caves, sacred chartaqs, mosques, and the holy shrines of Prophet Mohammad's progeny and those of the leaders of religion as well as churches and burial towers in the sites within nature beside rivers, streams, ponds, and aqueducts. They are respected and sanctified by people, serving as their sanctuary, meeting their desires and wishes, and encompassing a variety of religious-ritual ceremonies which are usually spiritual. It might have been like that these places and their natural geography, due to the presence of symbolic natural elements (water and three), have been subject of respect in the old times and, then, at different phases or historical periods have been attributed with new meaning and sacred identity. As such, they have preserved their sanctity and holiness for the believers of the new rituals and religious beliefs; these embody the facts and the truth which root in the human culture and history and are not limited to Iranian world. It even can be argued that these places are the lively reflections of the permanence of a rudimentary principal. is the principle is related to the human experience of a holy entity and his relation to a transcendent being. These are always reflected through the religious beliefs, experience, rituals, teachings and life of human beings. Nevertheless, the current world is experiencing a fall of this religious experience of holy and transcendental entity. From this perspective, Iranian pint of view, particularly the one related to its Islamic identity, is still one of the liveliest, most active and exciting centers of ritual and heritage understanding; the ritual and heritage related to holy and transcendent

entity. In other words, sacred and religious-ritual places and buildings are real, tangible, and objective reflection of the continuity of cultural-religious and spiritual life of human beings from ancient millenniums up to now, and they continue to their effect, though not as impressive as before. The current world, especially from the last century, has been obsessed with material benefit and interest. It is also afflicted with the expansion of a quantitatively restricting culture and life style, with a deep Machiavellist and materialist tradition and heritage. Modern life has been critically affected by these materialistic traditions. The decline of religious beliefs has led to the decline of religious-ritual architecture in the current culture and society. The penetration of superstitious beliefs has turned these places and sanctums to the centers of superstition and populism. Unfortunately, in art and architecture, superficial decoration and bad and chaotic taste have deposed high and original art and artistic sense. The way human being lives in the world, the reflection of his deeds in the material culture, art, architecture and aesthetics will be clear. There were structures, places, textures, spaces, and sanctums which were built inside the nature and natural geography in the ancient times. During history these sites appeared in different areas of big and small cities, accepting visitors at the highest level of beauty, simplicity, harmony, external coherence and internal harmony away from imbalance and decorations. They are now afflicted with such materialism and benefit-seeking interests that have lost their past sense of sanctity, blessing, and meaning. The unprincipled and hasty renovation along with the commercial expansion of the ritual and sacred spaces which the authorities *in Oghaf* have been through in the recent decades, without consulting the organizations, sections, authorities in charge and engineers and experts of renovation from the sections of cultural heritage, handicrafts, and tourism organization all over the country, with noisy and deceptive propaganda, was a destructive

A Criticism of Iran's Religious- Ritual Places : an Analytical Perspective Focusing on Historical background

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Abstract

Available evidence shows that religious-ritual places, textures, and sanctums have been subject to attention, respect, and sanctification of religious groups of society and those who preserve religious codes, particularly in Iran, and generally in other societies. Referring to the history of architecture in different societies, with no exaggeration, we face one of the richest, liveliest, and most exciting reflections of architecture, creative and aesthetic taste, and artistic soul in relation to society and the human world in Iran. From this historical perspective, it can frankly be argued that Iran is one of the most significant, richest, and oldest centers of ritual-religious architecture in the history and culture. Most wonderful, in a time when ritual places in many societies are turned in to museum or have lost their ritual popularity and force as well as effective and attractive sacred power, ritual places in Iran still continue to actively affect millions of visitors. This research does not aim at exploring, criticizing, analyzing, and defining these places, their structure, texture, space and religious-ritual sanctum in the geography of Iranian world from historical, philosophical, and architectural history. The aim of this research is to provide a concise Figure and not a very detailed and deep analysis, but a short description and introduction of some religious-ritual buildings and structures in recent Iran. , To this end, the relation of these buildings and structures with the concept of identity—not as the common and recent understanding of it, but as the reflection of a world of values and believes – is considered. This is a cultural understanding of being in the world and a style of life; a treasure of common heritage and spiritual wealth running in our soul. This embodies our understanding of religious-ritual architecture and its relation to identity; an architecture which is in strong affiliation with our other civilizational and spiritual heritage.

Keywords

Religious, Ritual, Nature, Aesthetics, Cultural heritage.