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Culture and life-style: The effect of cultural, political, and social factors on the structure of traditional houses of Isfahan City of Iran

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ABSTRACT

There are many studies on the relationship between geographical features and the design of houses but few studies have investigated the role of culture and social factors in people's decisions on how to build their houses. This paper investigates the cultural, political, and social factors affecting the structures of traditional houses of Isfahan, Iran. First, a short introduction to Isfahan is presented, then the structure of traditional houses is analyzed, and finally the environmental and humanistic factors affecting the design of Isfahan traditional houses are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Culture exerts its effect not only on the way people live but also on the place they live. Leach (1997) believes that culture, evident in architecture, is going through a crisis with its foundations being undermined. This belief pinpoints the importance of keeping traditional features in architecture. Cultural as well as environmental factors and the life-styles of inhabitants affect the regional design of different countries (Kultur, 2012) and studying the traditional and modern architectural features of buildings of different cities and countries gives interesting insights about people's culture and life-style and the reasons for change in the design of buildings nowadays. Isfahan, as the cultural capital of Iran, is worth being studied in this regard.

2. About Isfahan

"Isfahan" is the Arabic equivalent for the word "Ispahan". During Alexandria's era this city was called "Aspa" and Moses Khoren has talked about the city as "Ispahan" in the 5th century. (Minassiyani, 2009). It is situated between 51°35' East longitude and 32°40' North latitude and its altitude is 1475 to 1520 meters. The magnificence and flourishing of the city is dependent on a river called "Zayande Rood" which means a river that brings productivity. The residential areas of the city are located on the eastern bank of the river. The river is also called "Zendeh Rood" nowadays meaning a river which is alive (Lestrange, 1999). This river originating from "Zardkooch" Mountain and flowing into "Gavkhooni Swamp" makes Isfahan a great centre for growing summer crops, grains and garden fruits. Destructive earthquakes, rainfalls and thunderbolts rarely occur in this city. Its soil keeps crops for a long time and grains and other things remain safe in Isfahan for years. Chronic illnesses and Cholera rarely occur and you'll obtain water after drilling for 5 meters. The seeds of all plants grow very well in this city (Mostoufi, 1989). Nasser

Khosrow (1952), the great Iranian writer and traveller describes the city as this: "I didn't ever find a city better and more comprehensive than Isfahan in the Persian-Speaking territory." Farms are irrigated by branches of water called "Madi".

Isfahan was a city of great importance during Pre-Islamic era. In Sasanid Empire it remained an important city and in Seljuq Dynasty it became the capital of Iran. Some historical buildings have remained from the Seljuq time. Although it was not the capital in Mongol and Timurid Dynasties, it was considered an important city because of its economical and strategic role. Since 1590, Isfahan was the capital of Safavid Dynasty and about 150 years it was a flourishing city. But in Qajar Dynasty it was ignored and its population decreased from 700,000 to 170,000 and a lot of palaces were ruined. Isfahan has a strategic condition in Iran Plateau because of being located in the Silk Road and being in the route of travellers, merchants, and pilgrims.

3. The structure of native and traditional houses in Isfahan

These houses have been built with accordance to particular methods, technical restrictions, and regional conditions using unmixed materials. They contained two parts: "andarooni" or the internal part and "birooni" or the external section. Both sections were built in a style to meet the requirements of the society at that time and the culture of Iranian people whose main concern was security and privacy of the family and especially women and children.

Some of the characteristics of traditional houses in Isfahan were as follows:

- _ The houses were without any frontage toward outside to keep the family and especially women secure.
- _ The entrances of the houses were built so that it is impossible to see inside the house while entering it.
- _ Different parts of the house got light via the yard.

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- _ The yard was located at the centre of the house.
- _ Sitting rooms surrounded the yard.
- _ Porticos were complements to the sitting rooms.
- _ Service rooms were located at the corners of the house.
- _ The size and the capacity of the main parts of the house were more distinctive than that of other parts.
- _ Some houses had both internal and external yards used by the family and strangers respectively.
- _ Some sitting rooms called "sedari" and "panjdari" had specific uses during summer and winter.
- _ Symmetry was observed in building the outward appearance of the house.
- _ The house had a terrace.
- _ There was a basin and a garden in the yard; the yard was the symbol of paradise.
- _ A vestibule was used to enter the house directly.

Family security and relaxation was at the focus of people's attention at that time forcing people to have as many distinct parts as possible, so these houses contained different parts: an entrance portal, an entrance door, an entrance vestibule, an entrance corridor, a portico, a yard, the surrounding rooms, a basin, a basement and the bath. The entrance portal was built to play as a shade against the rain, snow and sunshine. Some verses of holy Koran or other religious sources were written on the portal of the house because of the belief that they protected people who passed under them. The entrance doors of Isfahan old houses usually had two wooden leaves and two kinds of knockers. A ring knocker for women and a hammer-like one for men; people at home could understand who is at the door through the sound of these different knockers, so men opened the door for men and women opened the door for women. The vestibule was usually octagon and there were some platforms to sit. The entrance corridor was a narrow passage which connected the vestibule to the yard; this passage also was built to provide more security and allowed for better defence in case of any attack by strangers. Also, the purpose of making the meanders was to keep the family of being watched by strangers.

The yard was the centre of house chores and connected different parts of the house. The basin and the garden in the architecture of that time were of great importance. The saloon, which was used for special guests, was a magnificent space with very prominent decorations of plaster, drawing on wood and plaster, decorations with mirror and vaulted decorations. Sitting rooms were less important than the saloon but more important than other rooms. Family members and very close friends and intimate relatives used to gather in the sitting room and it was very simple in appearance. Service rooms including kitchen, bath and depot were usually built with specific geometrical features and were prevented from getting light and being at reach.

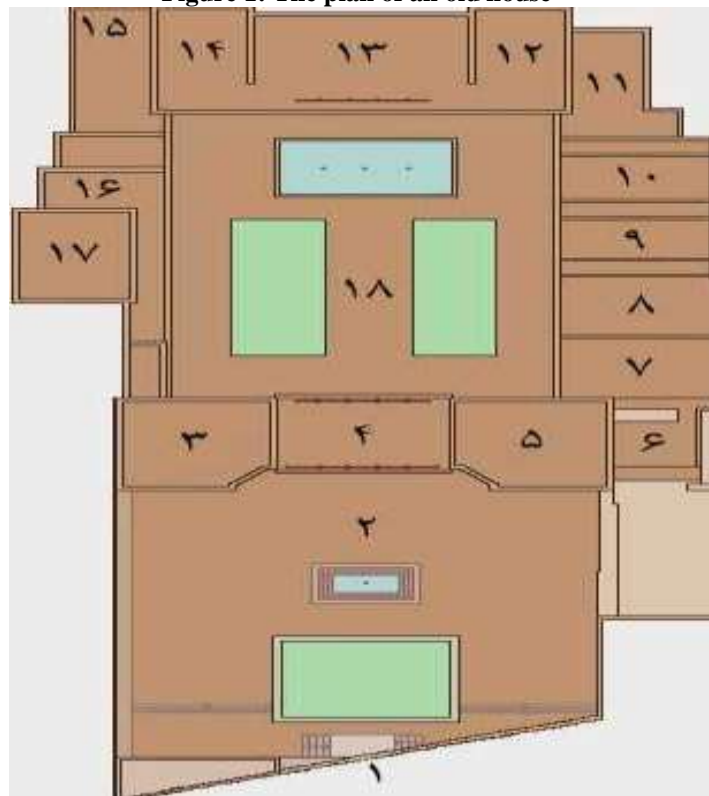
4. Direction of houses

Majority of the houses were built in the north/south direction and main places were located in the direction while less important parts were in the south/east direction. Figure 1 shows the plan of the house of "Haaj Agha Noorollah" who was a clergyman of Qajar; the parts numbered are as follows: 1. alley, 2. yard and basin, 3 and 5 rooms, 4. birooni, 7 to 10 sitting rooms, 13. saloon, 18. interior yard, basin and garden.

Foreigners visiting traditional houses of Isfahan are stunned by their beauty. James (1985) has a comprehensive report of his visit of such a house in 1870. Here is a summary of his report: "After entering the building we got to the exterior yard where

some people were busy writing or taking a rest. Then we got to the interior yard when a person stopped us to inform the family.

Figure 1: The plan of an old house



After entering there we saw a large building with a very beautiful basin with colourful fish in it and a couple of ducks. The sound of water pouring around was very interesting. There were little gardens with beautiful and fragrant flowers. Then there was a room that looked like Crystal house of London." (James, 1985, P. 150).

5. Effective factors in the architecture of houses

There are various factors dealing with the structure of introversive houses in Isfahan. The factors can be classified into two categories: environmental and humanistic.

5.1. Environmental factors

The residents of central areas of Iran gradually found that they should use a kind of architecture that fits the environment and the specific kind of material in construction to cope with their residence conditions. Because of their special geographical situation, very high and very low temperature during days and nights, hot and dry climate, and hot winds with sand and dust (Pirniya, 1991) caused them to use sun-dried brick, brick and plaster of clay and straw that were suitable materials for these conditions. In order to keep the rooms cooler, they usually built the yard lower than the alley. On the other hand, because of high temperature and lack of entertainment centres out of houses they made a nice garden and basin in the yard to use for entertainment.

5.2. Humanistic factors

In addition to environmental factors, humanistic factors were very decisive in Iranian architecture. Among humanistic factors, security, political, and cultural factors are the most important.

Security plays a very important role in characteristics and features of the people of Iran plateau. The location of Iran in the international transit and the situation of Isfahan in the interior transportation shows the importance of this metropolis in the centre of Iran. Being invaded by invaders of the Eastern parts

and mountain men, the people of Isfahan created a general introversion and special manner in their daily interactions and even the structure of their houses. Attributing characteristics like "economical" and even "stingy" to people of Isfahan by other Iranians is closely related to this introversion. Preventing the problems caused by paupers and beggars who used to come to the houses of the rich and the noble in special occasions was another reason for this introversion. All these measures of caution were taken by ordinary people but princes, rulers, and governors, because of security situations of their houses and the presence of guards around their houses, didn't have to follow such measures; accordingly, there are some palaces and mansions with exterior porticos emboldening out the wealth of the owners. Other people of lower ranks tried to hide the beautiful scenes of their houses so as not to be attacked by the thieves and tax collectors (Soltanzadeh, 1984).

This feeling of insecurity sometimes brought about interesting results. For example, because of this atmosphere, especially since Qajar time, merchants started to be united with the clergymen to ensure their earthy and unearthly (spiritual) life. In Fat'h Ali Shah time, an Isfahani merchant named Seyyed Mohammad Tabatabayee tried to transfer Seyyed Mohammad Bagher Shafti from Iraq to Isfahan to secure himself against governors (Tabatabayi, 1989). This clergyman could build a mosque in "Bid Abad" neighbourhood with the financial support of merchants, a mosque called "Seyyed Mosque" which is an important site for tourists to visit nowadays. The cooperation of merchants and clergymen showed its prominent role in such movements and revolutions in Iran as "Tobacco Movement", "Mashrooteh" or constitutional revolution, and Islamic Revolution of Iran.

6. Conclusion

Culture and beliefs of people has a great influence in the structure and plans of houses in different parts of Iran including Isfahan. Because of hijab (Islamic covering) and beliefs of people of this city, beautiful parts of the houses were built at the centre of the house and the building of the interior yard was closely related to this issue. As the time passed and the social motives and conditions changed, we saw changes in the structure of Iranian buildings. The public security provided by later governments, in addition to the extroversion thought advocated by intellectuals visiting foreign countries, caused a shift toward extroversion in architecture in Iran; the buildings were made with beautiful appearance, higher than the earth surface and with windows opening outward (Kiyani, 2008) and "ideological architecture" was replaced by "scientific architecture".

Appendices

Figure 2: The exterior design of houses



Figure 3: The garden of the yard



Figure 4: The door of the saloon



Figure 5: Different doors and corridors



Figure 6: The yard and the basin



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