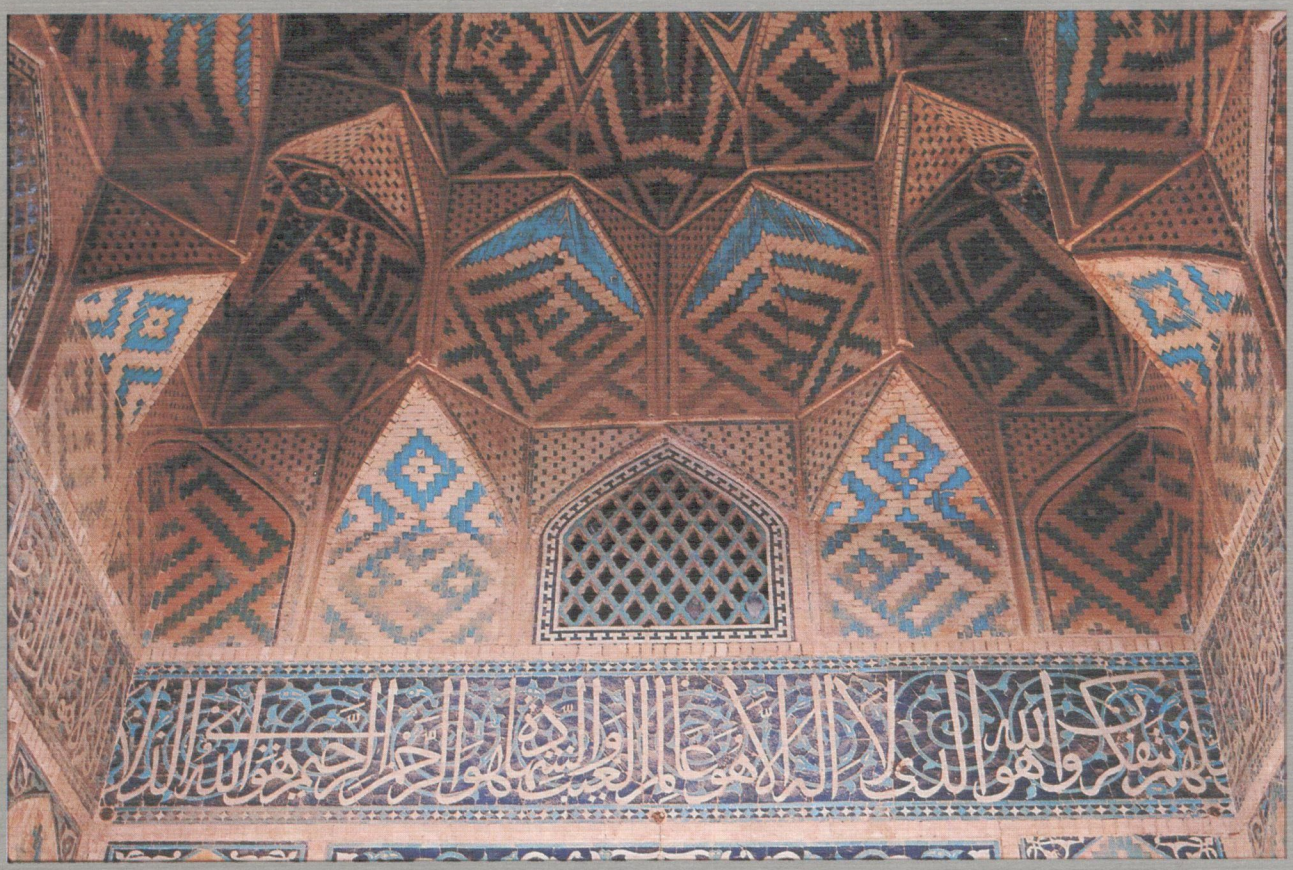
ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN

IRANIAN ARCHITECTURE
in search for a new identity



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Ali - Akbar Saremi in Conversation with Faryar Javaheriyan Mehrjui

Extracts of the conversation between two outstanding architects, Faryar Javaherian and Ali Saremi, focus on issues that are the core of the debate involving the contemporary generation of Iranian architects: the role of the historical tradition and contemporary architectural trends in the conception of a project.

M: "Historical continuity" is a phrase that often recurs in your writing. In that connection, I want to talk about the meaning of patrimony in our culture. In Europe a lot of old buildings are still being used. Europeans have a very respectful attitude towards their inherited patrimony. "Restoration" is a rather new activity in Iran, whereas in Europe if people have a family house to inherit, they usually preserve it from one generation to the next. In Iran, as soon as the father dies, the property is sold and the house is often torn down. I am amazed to find that there is'nt a single little short street inTehran that does'nt have some kind of construction going on. It looks like a bombed city because of these buildings constantly being torn down and rebuilt over. How can one insure historical continuity in such a society?

S: The difference between Iran and Europe is that Iranian architecture, especially domestic architecture, has never been built for permanence. As Abbas Gharib says, "our houses are like flowers that are meant to wither". Our public buildings, our mosques, are a different case – then it is frequently earthquakes or invasions that cause their destruction. But in either case stability in space is not one of our strong points.

M: Anyway, how do you envisage historical continuity in our society?

S: We are part of a world community, so preservation of the past is affecting us along with everyone else. It is a relatively new trend in Europe as well. The Modern Movement did not allow this sort of thinking; it was only thirty years or so ago that Europe set the trend we now follow and are by now ever more conscious about preserving our past.

M: Like Rob Krier, you are an advocate of reconstruction. You have spent a considerable time studying the classical and traditional architecture of Iran. Do you think we can learn from our past paradigms?

S: We can learn from the values of past architecture, and learn how to see its beauty. But we can't learn directly from it. Today's techniques have solved a lot of the complex problems the past had to deal with. Perceiving the quality of past forms and spaces can enrich our vision, but it is not something to be directly transformed into new architecture.

M: And yet this is what Nader Ardalan has done in the Management Center, in Tehran, which is based on the model of madrasa Chaharbagh in Isfahan: the same space organization, the same principles at work in a modernized expression of past forms.

S: I think the problem-solving of past architecture is irrelevant to us. The paradigms are all changeable. If we take the paradigms too literally, they won't give us a thing. I used to think that courtyard architecture is very specific to Iran and has a special meaning. Now I don't want to be tied down to any past pattern. Take poetry for instance: there is a lot of difference between our classical and our modern poetry, but there is sometimes an echo of the past in some modern poems, in Akhavan's for instance, or Shamlou's, and suddenly there is a connection to our classic epic poems.

M: Poetry is made up of words and our vocabulary has not changed very much; it is the syntax that has changed a lot. So what about architecture?

S: There is no guarantee that if you use past forms, you'll connect to the past. That's exatly the problem with Post-Modernism: by overusing classical elements, by repeating itself, it lent itself to consumerism, and it's over now. You can't use old architecture and create new architecture. There must be an intuitive connection to the values of the past. It doesn't matter if you're a poet, a musician or an architect. First you must digest your heritage, and then in a way forget it when creating something new. If you consciously use the past or imitate it, it has no value.

M: I think you have a hermeneutic approach to the past. Could you expound on the essence of the book *Enduring Values of Iranian Architecture* which you wrote with Taqi Radmard and on which you worked for a decade?

S: In this book we tried to delineate those values that are constant in our architecture throughout time and space.

M: By "values" do you also mean a set of rules?

S: No, not rules or guiding principles. Rather we witnessed certain facts. You see, we compared two different architectures: the very monumental, symmetrical architecture of Isfahan, and the non-monumental, asymmetrical architecture of Dezful. Although the styles, the materials, the scales were very different, we detected a lot of similarities. We researched the nature of the geometry being used and we found out that each geometry had its own rules. For instance, if the square was used, everywhere the square had a simple treatment along its sides and a complex treatment at the corners. Exactly as Khan had said, the joint is the beginning of ornament. Actually the joint is the beginning of art. There, the artist has to make a choice. So we approached the geometry in a very abstract way.

M: I assume that your theory of architecture lies behind this method by which you analyzed our architectural precedents.

S: Yes. We analyzed all sorts of precedents and it was rather simple to detect order in the Isfahan monuments, but when we analyzed the non-monumental structures of Dezful, we found the same underlying order. In Dezful it just happened that the elements were more loosely joined, and so at first it seemed that the geometry was lost. But there was a chain that linked all the elements, and sometimes the chain was created by the use of a certain form, sometimes a material, sometimes a color. You find this kind of loose order in Kahn's works, in the Dominican Sisters' Convent for instance, or in Stirling's work. This is the sort of order I am trying to achieve in my new projects.

M: I have the impression that you know your "vocabulary" so well that you take the liberty of being playful with it. You juggle with the past.

S: "Playful" is not the right word, I would rather say "lively" or better still "alive". I feel the freedom to use certain elements of the past that have an archetypal weight, things which are part of our collective unconscious. For instance certain colors like turquoise or lapis-lazuli have special meanings in our culture. These elements are the spice to one's work. But the chain that links all the elements together, the order, must be created anew every time.

M: I remember for instance that in the Yazd project you set a dome in the middle of a pool, with water sprinkling down its ceramics. You actually reversed the paradigm of the dome as heaven. Wasn't that playful?

S: No, I took the form and made it into something else. We are used to looking up at the cavity of a dome from below, so I wanted to see its roundness from up above, set on the ground and floating in water. There are no eternal paradigms. Everything is changeable.

M: So when you studied our past you never looked for "recipes" or "how to do it now"?

S: No, there is no recipe. What you can do is to extend the "life" of past elements by keeping their connotative meaning alive or by giving them new meanings, sometimes just by placing these elements into a new context.

M: You have a very liberated attitude towards the contents conveyed by forms, and functionalism does not seem to be a priority in your concerns. Wouldn't you say that identity in architecture was sacrificed to function?

S: Function is the ABC of architecture. If you want to write you have to know the alphabet, the grammar etc., but just knowing those things does'nt make you a writer. We can't live like cavemen, there are certain requirements that architecture must satisfy. But they cover a bare minimum.

M: In other words function can never be the aim. But remember how Kahn used to talk about what a building "wants to be". A library wants to be a library, a theater wants to be a theater, etc. Can function be the essence of identity?

S: In Persian architecture the problem of function was viewed in a more complex manner. Spaces didn't have functional denominations. Spaces were named according to their architectural composition; for instance we never had "bedroom" or "living room", instead we had a "four-vaulted room" or a "five-door room" or a " column hall", etc.

M: In other words form was created out of architectural identity and not out of functional content.

S: Exactly, and the spaces which have identity always function as multi-purpose spaces. The proof is that a lot of old residential buildings in Isfahan now function quite well as administrative buildings or schools. So function was never a priority.

M: What are your priorities when you begin designing? Don't you think about function at all?

S: I don't literally think about the use of a building. If it's a library, I think about a place where people gather and study together; if it's an office building, I think about a place where people gather and work together. So function is not the beginning for me.

M: So what is the beginning?

S: It's not clear. Design is a happening that makes certain elements match. Before drawing anything, I try to see my design. The human mind is so complex that you can't define the steps of this seeing process. Most of the time I see a total image, the inside spaces and the outside forms. Sometimes I walk through the spaces in my mind and then I try to draw them. When it becomes lines on paper, I think about its elements.

M: I would now like to talk about your work. I see two broad categories in it, and these are defined according to your special relationship with history, so let me start by asking how you became so involved with the past?

S: This I owe to Houshang Seyhoun who taught at the University of Tehran and was one of my best teachers. He would take us on field trips to visit old buildings and forbid us to take photographs; instead he made us draw complicated interior and exterior perspectives, because he believed that through patience, contemplation and the slow process of drawing we would certainly take in all the qualities of the spaces, their proportions, their smallest details, their beauty.

M: Did he also encourage using this knowledge in your designs?

S: No, because we were then at the apogee of Modernism. Academic architecture was Modern architecture, and it would have been counter-historic in those days to use historic forms. And then Seyhoun had a romantic view of the past, not an objective methodological approach to it. It was when I went to the States and through Kahn's teachings that I connected to my own past. You see, American Architecture is very ordered and simple – European and Oriental architectures are less so – and Kahn analyzed this order unto sickness! As a Beaux-Arts trainee, I had little notion of this sort of order. This I owe to Kahn. Nader Ardalan who is well acquainted with Kahn's works is also very conscious of this order and you can see it in all his works.