

The Cultural Transformation of the Bazaar of Isfahan from the Advent of  
Photography until the Islamic Revolution

**Dissertation**

zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades  
Doktor der Philosophie (Dr. Phil.)

an der Fakultät Architektur und Urbanistik  
der Bauhaus-Universität Weimar

vorgelegt von  
Mehran Mojtahedzadeh  
Geboren am 29.07.1985 in Sari, Iran

Weimar, 2023

Gutachter/Gutachterin

.....

.....

Tag der Disputation

.....

## **The Cultural Transformation of the Bazaar of Isfahan from the Advent of Photography until the Islamic Revolution**

The dissertation seeks to unravel the transformation of the bazaar of Isfahan through its changing perception from the West and Persia/Iran, fueled by the introduction of photography in Persia. The advent of photography in Persia presented a shift in the way the space of the bazaar was perceived by the West as well as by the Persians themselves. This perception, or rather projection of the bazaar, undergoes transformations over time. Parallel to these fluid transformations, the physical space of the bazaar also changes accordingly. While in the beginning, photography functions as a documenting tool attaining a scientific status, over time, the art of image making and its dissemination becomes entangled with politics, ultimately, albeit gradually, affecting the built environment of the bazaar. The thesis seeks to shed light on these processes by taking apart the various agents and factors that have contributed to the said transformations. In doing so, each chapter focuses on a set of photographs that symbolize and capture this transformation in a given era. The photographs are then put into context and linked to a history that brings together seemingly desolate protagonists into a common narrative. In chronological order, these photographs anchor the narrative that unfolds the thesis. Organized in three main chapters, each chapter ends with conceptually framing the bazaar as a physical site; the three frames work like snapshots that represent the three phases of the bazaar's transformation in their respective eras. By tracing the transformation, the dissertation attempts to answer the following questions among others: Why were certain parts of the bazaar renovated while others were left in ruins? How did the Persians and the Europeans perceive the bazaar? How did the representation and perception of the bazaar affect its physical space?

The thesis covers a time frame from the introduction of photography in Persia until the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The starting point is the mid-Qajar era, specifically in 1848, as the reign of Mohamad Shah (Reign 1834-1848) comes to an end and his successor Naser al-Din Shah (Reign 1848-1896) is crowned. This date is particularly significant as it coincides with the introduction of photography in Persia, as well as marking increased exchanges with the West, which contributed greatly to a series of transformations

within Persian society and the built environment in the following decades. The study continues into the first Pahlavi era with the reign of Reza Shah (Reign 1925-1941) when the so-called modernism project in Iran took off. The final era of the thesis comprises the second Pahlavi period with the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah (Reign 1941-1979), when the modernism project was developed further and came to fruition. The research culminates at the end of the Pahlavi era with the Islamic Revolution, which closed the doors of the country towards the West and marked a radical shift in the politics of the country, resulting in sweeping transformations in the Iranian society that last to this day.

As mentioned above, the introduction of photography in Persia coincides with increasing exchanges with the West. Like so many other areas, these exchanges started to leave their traces on the architectural and urban settings of the country as well. With the development of photography, the private and seemingly inaccessible aspects of Persian society began to be exposed to Western viewers, which were gradually followed by transformations at an urban scale. This process of exposure had a double function. On the one hand, it contributed to and shaped the Western perception of the subject, namely the bazaar of Isfahan in this case. Up until this point, the West, in particular eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, had relied on travelogues and drawings of the bazaar for its understanding of it, fueled by exotic tales of the Orient such as the *Arabian Nights* tales. With the advent of photography and increasing relations with the West, a new chapter began. One that was more scientific and meticulous compared to imaginative and surreal. As time went by and the science of photography advanced, its publication, dissemination, and use by ordinary travelers flourished. With increasing travels and visits between Persia and the West, the so-called veil slowly began to fall, on both sides. The mysterious East was less enigmatic and could now be carefully documented, cataloged, visited, and in a way measured. At the same time, the West, or *Farang* as it was called by Persians, became more accessible, and images of this “other” world became all too familiar for Persians. This exchange established a dialogue between these two poles that did not exist before at this scale. The resulting exchange functioned as a dynamic cycle. As more Europeans traveled to Persia, whether for archeological excavations or diplomatic missions, or simply for leisure, they began to write about their experiences and publish their journeys. These travelogues, at times

accompanied by drawings and later photographs, opened the window wider and wider into the previously enigmatic Persia. Over time, these texts were read and, in some cases, translated into Farsi by Persians who had, by the time, learned European languages such as French and English.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, these writings had completed a cycle, reaching their place of origin. On the other hand, the image and its effect of exposure worked as a mirror for Persian society. Persians began to see themselves within these images, effectively seeing how they were being seen. This act of seeing was not only limited to photographs but written text as well. As mentioned above, the publication and dissemination of European travelogues portrayed an image of Persia and Persians as well. This cycle was accelerated when documentation and its dissemination came from the top downwards. If in Persia, at first only the Shah and his court were privileged to have access to travelogues and photographs, by the end of the 19th century, with advancements in printing/publishing technologies and the propagation of photography, it gradually spread to the society and the masses. In the West, a somewhat similar process was taking place, while initially only the upper class could afford the long and rather hazardous trips to Persia, by the beginning of the 20th century, and with the developments of easier and faster modes of travel, the ordinary Western citizen could visit Persia and journal his stay. This very process, or rather revelation, resulted in reactions and reverberations that ultimately shaped the built environment and its perception from the West as well as from the Persians themselves.

In the course of time, the image attained more and more importance, both for the Iranian state as well as the Iranian people. For the state, its importance was nothing short of constructing a face—authentic or not—for the entire nation. The image had to be controlled, and what better way of cementing this image than to construct or demolish it in architecture? At this point, the so-called image had traveled from the paper into built space. The built environment would, in turn, offer a permanence that would mold the desired face. The bazaar complex and its monuments were not only the

---

<sup>1</sup> Until the Second World War, French was the dominant language that was translated into Farsi; afterward, English took over as the preferred foreign language. Although not a travelogue, an interesting example is the 1905 Farsi translation of the satirical novel *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* by James Justinian Morier from French by Myrzā Habyb Işfihānī. Filled with Oriental clichés and racial underpinnings, the novel was seen as a critical look at the Persian culture of the time inside Persia.

face of Isfahan but the whole nation. The reason and the specific mechanisms of this control and what it meant for the architecture of the bazaar and its physical space is the theme that this thesis explores.

The present dissertation establishes the role of image-making in the cultural and physical transformation of the bazaar of Isfahan from the mid-19th century until the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The research furthermore elucidates the fact that the aforesaid transformation was by no means a coincidence but a carefully planned and executed agenda, involving native and foreign agencies in a web of connections and influences that span the globe.

## **Research Methods**

The presented research is the result of investigating a variety of sources used throughout its course. Existing literature has been explored extensively, quoted, and reviewed. The literature sources broadly encompass the fields of architecture, photography, archeology, fashion, orientalism, and history. The sources in question have been written in English, Farsi, German, and French. The literature includes books, essays, papers, and reports, some of which date back to the 19th century, while others are very recent works. The aforementioned literature was studied and obtained in several libraries. The Goethe Library in Frankfurt am Main, the State Library, and the Lipperheide Costume Library in Berlin were used extensively in Germany; in Iran, the National Library in Tehran provided several valuable sources in Farsi. Various other sources were obtained through interlibrary loans in Germany or acquired personally by the author.

Archives have been a crucial source of information for the thesis. A total of eleven archives were used, located in Iran, Germany, Switzerland, France, England, and the United States. The archives provided research material in the form of letters, photographs, and maps that have been analyzed and used in the work. Digital archives have also facilitated the research in providing archival images, specifically in terms of openness and accessibility, which has been a major advantage in carrying out the study since so many of the sources are scattered in various locations across the globe.

Another important source has been multiple visits to the bazaar of Isfahan with a collection of photographs and video recordings that have been taken on-site. The personal observation of the space and on-site data collection has been a valuable tool in the development of the work and understanding the subject.

### **The Gap in Existing Research**

There has been substantial research about the purely physical facets of the bazaar; in contrast, the more non-physical aspects have been harder to grasp. Moreover, the relation between the physical and non-physical aspects has been explored to a lesser degree. In other words, the external factors that have contributed to shaping the physical space of the bazaar, as well as the space of the bazaar that has informed these non-physical aspects, have been largely left out of the research field.

At first glance, it may seem that the vast and complex space of the bazaar evolves by chance and without any preexisting plans and intentions whatsoever. Even stepping inside the bazaar and navigating through its space can be an overwhelming experience, as the many pathways and connections that comprise its structure seem to have a rhizome-like quality that eludes any sense of imposed planning. While an unplanned growth of the bazaar is to a certain extent true, the physical space of the bazaar has in fact, been heavily informed by a variety of external factors that have contributed greatly to shaping its architecture. These external factors are discussed in the thesis and include legislation, urban planning, state interventions, and even the personal whims of the monarchs, just to name a few. It is indeed these factors and their importance that have been overlooked in the existing research field. This research addresses these aspects and uses this as a point of departure from preexisting studies.

It is critical to understand that the spatial and non-spatial complexity of the bazaar avoids having a singular perspective on the subject. While this presents its own set of challenges, it also opens up an immense potential for exploring alternative perspectives and approaches in research. Like pieces of a never-ending puzzle, each approach can contribute to understanding its complexity. As a network of paths that connect religious, social, political, and economic functions, the bazaar is a combination of all of the things that it connects and yet more. In this sense, describing the bazaar and its

architecture requires delving into a much larger context that governs its architectural and physical form. The vastness and unique architecture of the bazaar make it impossible for one to grasp it in its totality in one singular image or description. That is, its representation as a singular reading is both reductive and rather impossible. In this sense, the current dissertation celebrates this inherent multiplicity and proposes alternative ways of exploring the subject.

Although in existing literature, it has often been stated that the bazaar is a dynamic and ever-evolving space, it has not been demonstrated what this dynamism has resulted in and how and why this dynamism is present. Current research has portrayed a rather static view of the bazaar by leaving out the histories and transformations that this space has been through and continues to go through over time. This research focuses precisely on such neglected aspects, namely the transformation and perception of the bazaar through a certain period. By stepping out of the research norm, the unexplored histories of the bazaar can come to light and establish an alternative narrative for this space. In this sense, archives and research material that has not been to this date associated with the bazaar have been explored. Alternative fields such as photography, fashion, and archeology have been brought into the research, and new links and narratives are established that offer a new reading of the subject.

It is vital to uncover stories and archives that have long been overlooked or associated with specific expert fields and audiences and to introduce these sources into a new narrative, a re-reading of the bazaar so to speak. By uncovering these sources, we can enrich the history of the bazaar and contribute to the understanding of this space. The present research hopes to demonstrate that the study of the bazaar can and should incorporate diverse disciplines and should not be limited to a traditional reading of this space which repeats preexisting approaches.