

TRADITIONAL PRIVATE SPACES IN IRAN

Mehdi Vazifedoost

The spatial structure of cities is a reflection of the lifestyle of their population. Thus, any changes in lifestyle will lead to change in the urban structure of a certain place. In all Islamic cities in Iran there is a similar lifestyle, or at least certain elements of public life are similar, therefore it can be assumed that there are a number of similarities in terms of the character of cities and the quality of the townscape. In fact, some structural similarities have been found extending over the whole Islamic world.

Analysis of open spaces

Public open spaces are the most fascinating parts of historic cities in hot and dry climates. Open spaces in historic areas are based on the hierarchical movement from the central part of the city to the main streets and alleys which lead to neighbourhood centres, secondary alleys, 'Hashti' of the houses, entry halls and the court yards. This hierarchy is a movement from public space to private space. The needs of the people and function of these spaces determine their order and compositions. Main access and streets are wider whereas alleys, which terminate at houses, are very narrow. In this hierarchical system the most important urban spaces are the covered semi-private spaces between groups of houses called Hashti and the central square of the neighbourhood. The central space of the neighbourhood is the most excellent manifestation of urban design in a period of time by the people who used it.

Private spaces

Private open spaces have two main characteristics. Firstly they have a role as an active functional space in relation to the houses. Secondly there is the courtyard which includes a secondary kitchen, daily activities, play for children on one side and on the other side a solution for facing the hot and dry climate and changing the internal atmosphere of the houses to a pleasant environment. The courtyard

is a private space, which is a vital and basic element in houses in hot and dry climate. This traditional private space with its surrounding high walls is in fact, a free space for movement of family members mostly women. The absolute privacy of this space allows them to move and work without being observed by strangers.

Public and semi-private spaces

The traditional design system of historic cities in Iran never allowed for a direct connection of private and public spaces. There has always been a respectful separation between these two spaces. This separation could take different forms, but Hashti and covered entries are the usual ones. A combination of public and semi-public spaces includes a hierarchical system, which begins at the city gate and ends in the entry hall of houses. The traditional pedestrian system of the city is the main part of this system. After entering the bazaar through a gate, a quick and direct access to the neighbourhood centre is possible. Apart from this access, there are others which, based on the hierarchical division, are counted as second-class access routes and connect the attached neighbourhood centres to each other. The third group is the access which leads to the external gates of the city.

This spatial composition, completed with close ended alleys and Hashties (the traditional entry halls to several houses) provide private and semi-private access to this network. Traditionally, in Iran gates separate semi-private and private parts of the network from the public spaces. The door of the houses or the entrances of the Hashties form these barriers. Such a network today can be conserved and rehabilitated at least in small cities, where the modern wide streets do not have any place in the life of the city. Although this simple system has lost its meaning, it can still be rehabilitated as a historical-cultural organisation. Continuous relations with the bazaar from any part of the city have resulted in the development of a very rich social relationship. Damages to the pedestrian network resulting from the establishment of new streets have

affected historic relationships and traditional social links. Any kind of inter-ference with existing open spaces, or the development of new ones, should happen in view of the climatic dimensions and architectural criteria.

Semi private and semi public spaces in traditional Iranian Neighbourhoods

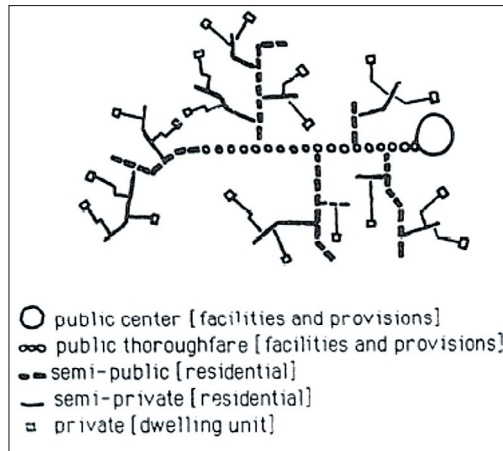
The form and structure of the traditional Iranian neighbourhood can be a pattern for creating a safe and secure residential unit. The religion, traditions, and culture of people are the most important factors in making the structure of the traditional Iranian neighbourhoods effective. On the other hand, consideration of climate is also important. In this paper we consider the characteristics of residential units in cities and towns of countries that bare similarity to Iran, such as Egypt and countries in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula (Syria, Jordan, and Iraq), in order to identify the private, semi private and semi public urban spaces. There are many characteristics in common in the traditional cities of the area. As Hourani writes, what is called the Islamic City is spread from Spain to Central Asia and Indian Sub-Continent can be categorised into three main parts (Hourani 1970):

- Mediterranean and the steppe or desert where the Arab tribesman lived.
- Iranian culture lying between the Indian Ocean and the steppe or desert where Turkic tribesman lived.
- Indian sub-continent.

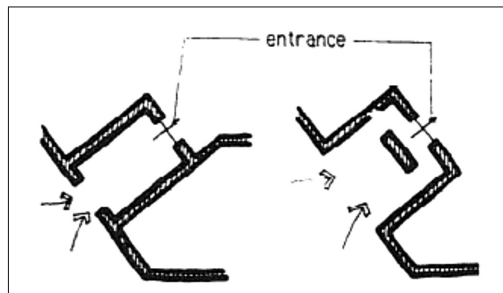
The target area in this paper is the second category and an element of the first category, in which the urban form is affected by similar cultures and religions. 'Privacy' is a notion which is in relationship with 'security'. Firstly, it is important to identify a general definition for privacy, which is a key concept in producing safety. Privacy is the avoidance of unwanted interaction with other people including information flow from person to person (Rapoport 1978). Rapoport writes that people have the following options as the mechanisms for avoiding the unwanted interactions:

- Rules (manners, avoidance, hierarchies etc).
 - Psychological means (internal withdrawal, dreaming, drugs, depersonalization, etc).
 - Behavioral cues.
 - Structuring activities in time so that particular individuals and groups do not meet.
 - Spatial separation.
 - Physical devices (walls, courts, doors, curtains, locks).
 - Private spaces; for example houses and house yards.
 - Semi private or semi public spaces; a hashti (small space in front of the entrance of the houses) or cul-de-sac with a few entries to houses.
 - Public spaces; like route and open spaces.
- Semi private and semi public spaces were snug, pleasant and cozy places which were used by the inhabitants of the houses and offered entry to the alley. People from other residential units rarely used the semi private spaces of other neighbourhoods, so the inhabitants knew each other as members of the same family or as very close neighbours. This made for a close human relationship between people, and gave the inhabitants the feeling of ownership. They knew these spaces as a commonly owned territory. The direct result of the existence of these spaces is safety and security. Women were usually supported by the inhabitants who knew them as family members. This is the natural result of the feeling of ownership. In periods of weakness of the central government, people defended their towns and neighbourhoods sometimes against external powers or usually against aggressors. So the neighbourhood alleys were built in a narrow and indirect way in order to slow down the enemy (Ra-vandi 1985).

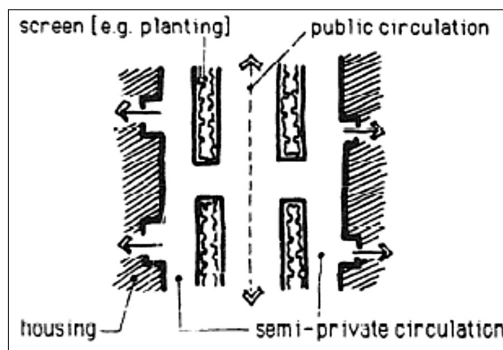
The first, most important and most effective means for creating safety and security in the neighbourhoods of the last decades in Iran, was the hierarchical structure of neighbourhoods. The form of the hierarchical structure of routes and alleys are easily recognisable in the traditional Iranian neighbourhood. The basis of the neighbourhood was a public street or



01 Hierarchy of privacy in Iranian urban spaces

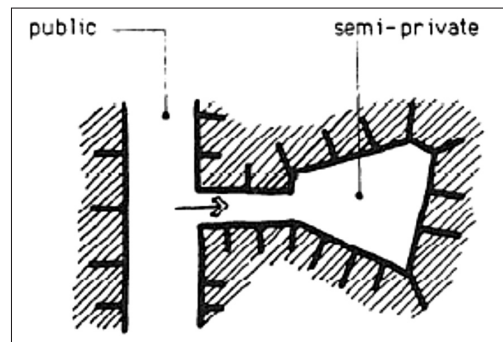


02 Two methods for limiting the view to the private space



03 A method for separating the public circulation from private and semi private spaces

thoroughfare which connected the residential units to each other and to the public centre. The public center was usually a mosque or a plaza and represented the public realm. Semi private and semi public alleys connected the houses to the thoroughfare (Germeraad 1993). Three distinct borders and boundaries



04 Narrowing of the entrance of the alleys and cul-de-sacs for indicating the level of privacy within a particular area

can be defined in relation to the hierarchy of privacy. The first border separates the public realm from semi public space. Then is the border between the semi public and semi private space and finally the border between semi private and private spaces. The borders between semi private, semi public spaces and public spaces were sometimes signed with arcs on the entrance of the alleys so that passengers were informed about the level of privacy (Tavassoli 1997).

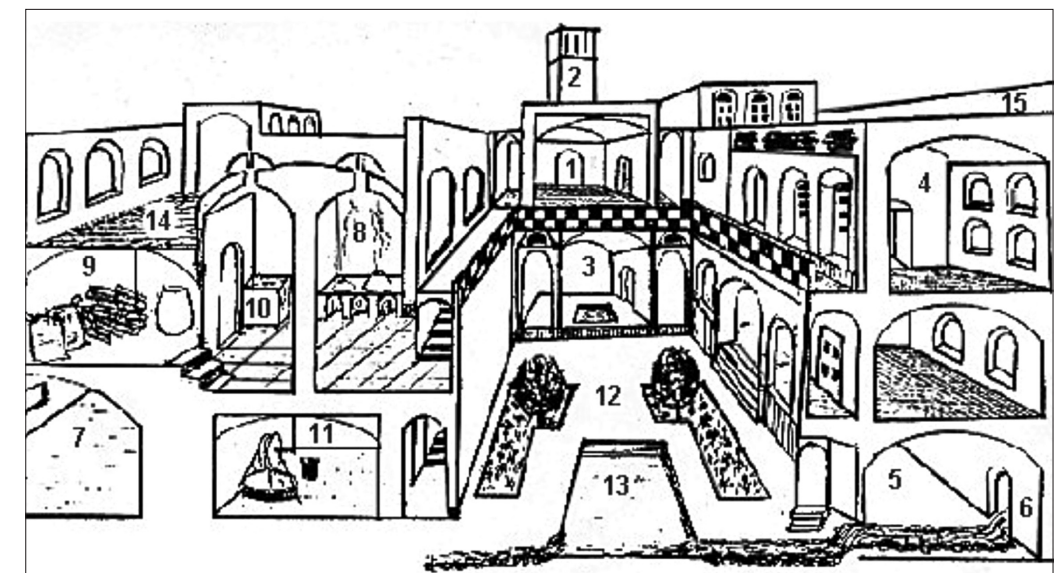
The highest level of privacy was found in the houses. They were often built according to the courtyard principles (Roberts, Hugh 1979: 39). These houses were the last barrier for protection of privacy. They were also a suitable mechanism against the harsh temperatures, wind, and dust. Courtyard houses were built up of rooms around a central yard. The rooms were built around the yard or on the two sides of it. Although courtyards were built in many countries such as Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Iran and even Morocco, the details of the structures were a little different (Bianca 2000). However, the main principles were almost the same. The houses of all these countries were inward-looking buildings which blocked the views from outside and provided the utmost privacy. In some areas, there were separate entrances for women (Roberts, Hugh 1979: 39). There were special rooms for the reception of guests. Therefore, even in the ultimate border of privacy there were methods for protecting the private space, including that belonging to women. In order to block

thoroughfare which connected the residential units to each other and to the public centre. The public center was usually a mosque or a plaza and represented the public realm. Semi private and semi public alleys connected the houses to the thoroughfare (Germeraad 1993). Three distinct borders and boundaries can be defined in relation to the hierarchy of privacy. The first border separates the public realm from semi public space. Then is the border between the semi public and semi private space and finally the border between semi private and private spaces. The borders between semi private, semi public spaces and public spaces were sometimes signed with arcs on the entrance of the alleys so that passengers were informed about the level of privacy (Tavassoli 1997).

The highest level of privacy was found in the houses. They were often built according to the courtyard principles (Roberts, Hugh 1979: 39). These houses were the last barrier for protection of privacy. They were also a suitable mechanism against the harsh temperatures, wind, and dust. Courtyard houses were built up of rooms around a central yard. The rooms were built around the yard or on the two sides of it. Although courtyards were built in many countries such as Syria, Iraq,

Egypt, Jordan, Iran and even Morocco, the details of the structures were a little different (Bianca 2000). However, the main principles were almost the same. The houses of all these countries were inward-looking buildings which blocked the views from outside and provided the utmost privacy. In some areas, there were separate entrances for women (Roberts, Hugh 1979: 39). There were special rooms for the reception of guests. Therefore, even in the ultimate border of privacy there were methods for protecting the private space, including that belonging to women. In order to block the view through the entrance of the houses, and therefore to protect privacy, the methods indicated in figure 2 were carried out.

The border between the private space and the semi private space was strengthened by particular architectural designs figure 3 and figure 4 shows how these strategies were achieved.



05 Structure of a traditional house in a hot and dry climate





Introversion – the sanctification of the interior

The private space of family life is, to some extent, sacred and must be respected by strangers. The sphere of privacy should not be violated and the family shrine must be closed to outsider. It is important to note that the 'inside' and 'outside' must be clearly distinguished. The interior is, as far as possible, protected from the outside world via doors, windows and roof terraces. The design functions in such a way that the interior of a house is protected from inspection. The interior spaces contain the most intimate aspects of family life to the borders of the square and often even overhanging space in the alleys. Public spaces, particularly the street network, are determined by the extent of these independent inner cores which are pushed into the remaining available spaces.

The majority of buildings in Islamic cities can be described based on the principle of the space vessel. In this case, each building is centered around a private courtyard. The horizontal viewing directions intersect each other in the middle of the court and are deflected by the vertical axis of the house upstairs.

Distinction between the private and public – desirable forms of segregation

Blind alleys (dead-ends), based on the high degree of privacy that is required in Islam, is considered in the plan of each district. In fact, the blind alleys respond to the need for privacy and seclusion of a family and clan, but also for their security. The entry and exit gates of some of this district are closed at night. In this manner, only those who actually live there could gain access for entrance to this area. The cities of Maghreb seem to be good examples which are settled by the private and partly public habitat (Wirth 2000: 325-327). There are also special rules of access for individual districts in Maghreb. Wirth (2000) has studied the city of Fez in Morocco as an example by putting emphasis on the number of (privacy/access features? –You would usually identify what the features are of) features. He also explains that these rules are considered for the mosques,

Quran-schools, and religious cemeteries. Free access to the houses is also denied. If the streets are used as thoroughfares or business locations, they are used for public purposes. Transport systems and businesses are therefore required to have public access, in all other areas there is no requirement for this. In fact, people living in areas without obligatory public access have easier access to their own properties. (Please check the previous sentence- I think this is the correct meaning?) This dichotomy between public and private space is also manifested in Islamic jurisprudence. To consider thoroughfares, and economical and religious centers as 'public spaces', all the other areas (as well as streets and alleys in the various districts) are allocated to the private properties.

In accordance with the need for privacy at the urban level, the city plan considers streets with required driveways. One of these private driveways is the blind alley (dead-ends).

The complex system of residential roads and dead-ends may well be interpreted as a further protective measure. It protects residents against strangers. Therefore, a woman with traditional clothing can move comfortably in a neighbourhood, whose system has been developed in such a way (Abu-Lughod 1987: 155-176). The Hellenistic-Roman city foundations (e.g. Damascus), which were designed based on the original checkerboard patterns are now dominated by dead-end systems. They are considered a typical element of the Islamic-Oriental cultural group (Dettmann 1969).

Involvement of transitions between separate areas of life (separation and connection) The Islamic lifestyle is dependent upon spaces which are, in turn, both independent from each other and closely related to each other, or are strung together in succession. On the one hand inhabitants of an Islamic city escape from the bustle of everyday life, but on the other, they still want to have quick and easy access to the facilities of public life such as the mosque, the bath, the market and commercial buildings. The transition from one zone to another has never been made directly.

The preliminary connection of the number of buffer spaces which has several steps is used to overcome this gap.

Traditional residential streets

Dead-end plan: In general, as only residents and their visitors enter into a blind alley and it therefore maintains the privacy of the interior space, there is a high demand for this kind of plan (Wirth 1975). A dead-end is considered for only one ethnic group in each developed city block. The residents can be prevented from the outside offence or inner city conflicts (for example, between Sunnis and Shiites) often by closing the gates (Wirth 1975).

The precise rules which are considered for the development of an individual house in a traditional Islamic residential area are hardly immediately manageable by a stranger. Based on these rules, the connection between a house and a street or main street starts from the outer edge of the residential areas. The main streets expand gradually into the side streets which are increasingly narrow and eventually lead to a dead-end. The degree of 'publicness' is reduced the more one moves into the depths of the living areas. The residential roads are grown organically and their structure is hardly influenced by geometric patterns.

Conclusions

The concept of privacy is closely related to the concept of security. Privacy, as Rapoport (1978) explains, is the avoidance of unwanted interaction with other people including information flow from person to person. Tavassoli (1997) shows that there are three types of urban spaces in Iranian traditional towns: (a) Private spaces such as houses and house yards; (b) semi private or semi public spaces, a Hashti (small space in front of the entrance of the houses) or cul-de-sac with a few entries to houses; and (c) public spaces like routes and plaza. Semi private and semi public spaces are rarely used by people from other residential units, thus these spaces are safe and secure. From a historical standpoint, Ravandi (1985) explains that the neighbourhood alleys were built in a narrow and indi-

rect way in order to slow down the external powers or usually aggressors in periods of weakness of the central government. Three distinct borders and boundaries can be defined in considering the hierarchy of privacy in Iran (see Tavassoli 1997). A good example of the recent research on the morphology of the Iranian Islamic neighbourhoods, especially concerning semi private spaces has been done on Dakhleh in central Egypt and in the Western Libyan desert. A discernible effect of the Islamic rules about the segregation of men and women can be seen in relation to the privacy of the houses and the semi private alley formation (Balbo 2006). The houses of a unit can be reached though semi private alleys called 'Darb' which were signed with a lintel which showed the transition of the spaces. Darb was a one-family alley. On the occasion where Darb was used by several families, it was called 'Hara' which provided a semi private space (De Filippi 2006).

In contrast to the Iranian Islamic neighbourhoods, the mechanism of providing security via the production of privacy in the traditional western neighbourhoods, produces a similar consequence to that of the fortification of modern neighbourhoods using the Gated Communities (GCs) or as some call it, the Gated Residential Developments (GRDs) concept. Some of the best examples of these can be seen in London in the 18th and 19th century, and Mexico in the early 20th century. However, the new generation of GRDs emerged during the 1960's in the USA (Smith-Bowers and Manzi 2006). The main reason is that people normally think that gating is effective in reducing crime and securitization (Blakely and Snyder 1997).



References

- Abu-Lughod, J. (1969): *Migrant Adjustment to City Life: the Egyptian Case*. In Breese, G. (ed.), *The City in Newly Developing Countries*.: Princeton: 376-388
- Abu-Lughod, J. (1971): *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious*. Princeton
- Balbo, R. (2006): *Shape, culture and environment: a lesson of urban design from Dakhleh oasis, Egypt*, PLEA 2006 - The 23rd Conference on Passive and Low Energy Architecture. Geneva
- Bianca, S. (2000): *Urban Form in the Arab World, Past and Present*, Institute für Orts-, Regional- und Landesplanung. Zürich
- Blakely, E. J.; Snyder, M. G. (1997): *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States*, Brookings Institution Press and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. Washington DC
- De Filippi, F. (2006): *Traditional architecture in the Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt: Space, form and building systems*. 23rd Conference on Passive and Low Energy Architecture. Geneva
- Ferdowsian, F. (2001): *Modern and Traditional Urban Design Concepts and Principles in Iran*. Stuttgart
- Germeraad, P. W. (1993): "Islamic traditions and contemporary open space design in Arab-Muslim settlements in the Middle East", *Landscape and Urban Planning*: 97-106
- Hourani, A. H. (1970): *The Islamic City in the Light of Recent Research*. In Hourani, A. H.; Stern, S. M. (eds.) *The Islamic City*
- Kheirabadi, M. (2000): *Iranian Cities, Formation und Development*
- Rapoport, A. (1977): *Human Aspects of Urban Form: Towards a Man-Environment Approach to Urban Form and Design*. New York
- Ravandi, M. (1985): *Social History of Iran: Vol. 5. (in Persian)*. Tehran
- Roberts, M.; Hugh, P. (1979): *An Urban Profile of the Middle East*. London
- Smith-Bowers, B.; Manzi, T. (2006): *Private Security and Public Space: New Approaches to the Theory and Practice of Gated Communities*. *European Journal of Spatial Development*
- Tavassoli, M. (1997): *Fundamentals and Methods of Urban Design and Residential Spaces in Middle East (in Persian)*, Center for Architecture and Urbanism Studies. Tehran
- United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) (2007): *Enhancing Urban Safety and Security, Global Report on Human Settlements 2007*. London; www.unhabitat.org/

