

# editorial

Almost two decades after the Islamic revolution, we have virtually no information on the state of Iranian cities and architecture. The baffling news regarding the expansion and population of Tehran, does not correspond to analogous information on what is brewing in architectural offices or in the minds of the architects involved in defining the new face of the city.

Strangely enough, the information we have on Persian cities in the seventeenth century is more accurate than what we have on Tehran today. The drawings and accounts of Jean Chardin, Pietro della Valle, Adam Olearius or Engelbert Kaempfer inform us on the progress of the urban transformations of Safavid Isfahan. The dimension and relevance of the works were so outstanding that they were marveled at by travelers and visitors, whose interest was similarly aroused by comparable urban projects of the time, in Rome, London and Paris.

Today, in contrast, it is difficult to discern even the main lines of architectural trends in Iranian cities or to understand the significance of recent works in the complex urban panorama without the aid of specialized publications. The picture emerging from these publications is, however, a conventional one, since the different schools and trends cross geographic and cultural realities without undergoing significant changes. In addition, the circulation of images and information occurs only in those cultural milieus having easy access to the media and leaves out the contribution of other cultures, producing a largely homogenized and stereotyped picture.

To become familiar with the Iranian architecture means, in the first place, to bridge the information gap. Therefore we need to cast light on ideas and issues that, beyond Western architectural labels and definitions, should be understood as attempts to define a new identity.

This issue of Environmental Design looks at contemporary architectural research in Iran from two different points of view; though far from

covering all the aspects and themes regarding the issue, they are the key to understanding such a complex and evolving process.

The first point of view is represented in a series of essays on Tehran, considered as a symbol. This capital city concentrates in an enormous metropolitan area almost one fourth of the total population of Iran, huddled together, composed and colliding as in an immense colourful kaleidoscope the prevailing expressive images of contemporary Iran.

The second point of view focuses on some recent projects, interviews, and competitions, extracting from them the cultural approaches of Iranian architects towards what seems to be their most controversial issue: the role of the historical tradition and contemporary architectural trends in the conception of a project.

A general attitude, that may be observed in the projects, is the reluctance to accept without modification those concepts experienced elsewhere. Such an attitude reveals a somewhat emphasized awareness of the Iranian originality that has led, in time, to the assimilation and appropriation of stimuli from other cultures. The resulting identity is based on a strong sense of place, a *genius loci*, inspired by a severe nature and exalted by the artifice of human creativity. Such archetypes as *chaharbagh* and *iwan* express a sense of geometry, space and volumetric composition that is specifically Iranian.

It is legitimate to hope that Iranian architecture will contribute to the present architectural panorama, while still retaining its originality; otherwise it is bound to be swallowed up in the jumble of an undistinguishable contemporary architecture.

Does this mean that it is merely through reference to the memory of Iranian tradition that this originality can be attained? According to Aristotle there are two different types of memory: a static one that tries to retain the past unchanged, and an active one involving the capacity to re-member and therefore to

modify. Hence tradition goes along with innovation. The latin term traditio derives from tradere (to hand down something to posterity), which, through its Italian derivation tradire, conveys also the idea of betrayal. There is always some betrayal of the past in a reference to tradition. What is to be avoided in the process is the memory of a stereotyped past. Creativity admits of errors and misunderstandings.

Does it mean that the Iranian architecture should assume the image of an acknowledged and identifiable past mirrored in the present? Or should it disdainfully reject the present as "the world of rabble" in the words of Sadeq Hedayat? "On the interior wall of my room a mirror is hung, in which I scan my face; and in my circumscribed existence, that mirror is somewhat more important than the world of rabble that has nothing to do with me."

Is it then possible to discover in the mirror an image that is not only the one handed down through memory but a remembrance that can also reflect the future? Are the Iranian architects able to build such a fascinating and audacious image?

**Mahvash Alemi  
Ludovico Micara**

The conception of this issue started together with our beloved friend Paolo Cuneo, whose sudden death in 1995 has caused a great loss to the community of scholars in Islamic and Armenian Architecture.

The preparation of this issue has met a lot of difficulties in collecting the works of the Iranian architects, many of which are therefore missing. We apologize to our contributors for the delay and for the consequent impossibility of presenting the latest cultural production.

We wish to thank Taraneh Yalda for her precious contribution to the conception and the collection of the material for this issue. The Board of Iranian Architects has had a valuable active role in suggesting the principal issues and authors present in the architectural debate and panorama.

Faramarz Azadi has kindly allowed us to publish part of the material of his research on contemporary residential architecture in Iran for which we are grateful.

The transliteration of the Persian words is simplified, following the phonetics rather than the scientific method.