Mahan became the capital of Iran in 1587, following Tabriz and Qazvin. Isfahan is the scene of a counterplay between incremental growth and conscious planning. The city grew by accretion over the centuries. When Shah Abbas I (1587–1629) came to power, he introduced grand scale planning by building Maidan-I-Shah as a spectacular display of his power.

Years before, probably under Shah Ismail (1502–57), the Maidan was moved from its previous location near the Friday Mosque to its present location as an expression of the physical and symbolic separation between the clergy and the ruler. The "new" Maidan was located tangentially to the old trade route which ran from the north gate of the city to the river. Under Shah Abbas I (1587–1629) many new buildings were added to the Maidan complex, including a government complex. The Chahar Bagh (a major avenue similar in stature to the Champs Elysées) was planned formally leading from the Maidan area to the river and ultimately to the grand royal garden at the foot of the mountains.

**ASPECTS OF FORMAL STRUCTURE:**
From Left to Right: First, the city as a whole, with the ancient trade route leading from the north gate through the bazaar and over the river, contrasted with the formal gardens along Chahar Bagh, ending in the Great Royal Gardens. Second, the relationship between the old Maidan and the beginning of the bazaar. Third, expansion of the city by an act of will by "latching" the royal district, (a new Friday Mosque—the Shah Mosque—and the Shah's Bazaar) onto the old trade route. Fourth, the conceptual expansion of the previous "move" to incorporate it into the Avenue of Gardens. Accretion and intervention are the hallmark of Isfahan planning.
Plan of the Maidan-i-Shah and surrounding buildings. The Ali Kappu Gate (c. 1580) is the most prominent feature, and the heavy wall effectively served as a viewing stand, an open porch, and the main entrance into the larger area of government buildings. Directly opposite the Ali Kappu Gate, the Shir Khuchan Mosque (1602) is attached to the edge of the quarters of the Maskhad. Along the long side of the Maidan is a raised edge, in line with the entrance of the Shah Mosque to the south. The rectangle is torn from the Maskhad by 90 degrees, then divided toward the Masjed-i Jam'iye.
Isham, looking toward the southwest across the city with the Maidan-i-Shah embedded within its texture. Three principal monuments are attached to the Maidan's walls: The Shah Mosque at the southern end of the confined space; Sheikh Lutfallah's tomb to the eastern perimeter; and, directly facing it to the west, the Ali Qapu Palace.

Axonometric reconstruction of the Maidan and the surrounding buildings (government and royal district mainly after Kaempf, 1972). This drawing does what only a drawing can do: It combines different states of existence into one perception—showing a palace long burned down, fields still farmed in the 1930s, a traffic artery routed through in the 1940s, and the rest as it has been since the 17th century, and still is. The point is to demonstrate the organizational strength of a built open space on an urban scale (510 ft. × 1785 ft.). The walls of the Maidan have a strong identity. Anything could happen outside these walls, but the city would always have the same center. New York's Central Park is an illustration of the same principle in a Western context, and on a larger scale.
ABOVE: General Court of the Shah Mosque, with Maidan and city beyond, looking northeast at Prayer Porch (iwan). The two side porches mark entries into the two domed, chapel-like spaces. The axial organization of the Shah Mosque courtyard works according to the relationships found in the Maidan on a larger scale.

ABOVE: The western miwaraft of the entrance porch (iwan).

ASPECTS OF FORMAL STRUCTURE:
Shah Mosque with Maidan and Persian miniature, both Safavid period, 17th century. There is a possible exchange of similar formal structures between an architectural ensemble (Maidan/Shah Mosque in Isfahan, 1597–1630) and a painting composition (Persian miniature, 1520s). The comparison is compelling in that it suggests a similar mind-set for two different forms of art, resulting in an interplay between two-dimensional surface and three-dimensional mass and volume. The illusionistic possibilities are obvious, not only in this example but in much Iranian and Turkistanian architecture.
LEFT: Different perceptions of the Maidan by people of various positions: royalty, clergy, civil servants, citizens, and visitors. The meaning of the Maidan varies according to one’s life in the city.

RIGHT: Maidan (above) looking south, in 1840 (from Coste) Maidan (below) looking north towards the bazaar, in the 18th century (from Le Brun). These views show the confined public space when it is empty and when it is filled. The use of the Maidan varied from polo games to accommodation of entire caravans.

ASPECTS OF FORMAL STRUCTURE:
FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: First, public buildings imposing on the Maidan as experienced by a government office. Second, the Maidan as the focal space of the entire city as experienced by all (amni). Third, the Maidan as forecourt to the royal precincts as experienced by the nobility and citizens having business with the government.
Top Left: The Maidan with the Shah Mosque in the evening. In this light, the thin screen wall which defines the container is revealed. The profile of the mountains beyond is reflected in the agitated skyline of domes, minarets (monumental arched, niches, etc.), and minarets.

Below: The Maidan at 6:00 AM (left). As the morning light washes over all surfaces, the city fabric and the Maidan cannot be distinguished from one another. This is in contrast to the same view at 5:00 PM when the afternoon shadow is held in the container—the Maidan—making a plastic distinction between city fabric and open space. The experience is affected by temporal conditions, from time of day to time of year.

Above: The public view of the Shah Mosque from pedestrian level on the Maidan looking south past the Ali Kapu gate. East-west section of the Maidan and its adjacent bazaars, looking at the Shah Mosque.

Above: The privileged view of the Shah Mosque from the Ali Kapu porch looking south. An impression of repose is reinforced through the axial stability of the domes. The datum of the screen wall sets a visual base for the volumes of the domes rising behind it.

Below: Approach through the narrow streets of the city fabric to a minor entrance of the Shah Mosque's western courtyard. When "weaving" through the fabric, even a building as large as the Shah Mosque is experienced as part of the fabric. Just like the corridors of a house lead to a room, the streets of the city fabric lead to the public courtyard.