URBAN SPACES AS THE SCENE FOR THE CEREMONIES AND PASTIMES OF THE SAFAVID COURT

Urban spaces are today considered as the core of primary institutions of the city or elements of transition between these. Accordingly, a public place or an avenue is generally associated with those functions such as traffic and commerce, while their hedonistic use is often understated or considered as secondary. In fact, the role of urban spaces as the scene for games and feasts was extremely significant. The hedonistic component of the activities of the court was considerable and due to the great participation of the citizens these performances constituted a relevant aspect of the urban life. From the chronicles of the Safavid period we can deduce that the ceremonies of the court took place generally in the royal palaces and gardens, but these were not the only scene for such performances. Other spaces, with public functions, such as the bazaar, the maidan, khiaban, or even a bridge, were often the theatre for ceremonies and pastimes of the court. The hedonistic use of these spaces had a determining role in their design. This essay deals with the analysis of the typological features of some of these urban spaces leading to the conclusion that architectural elements related to their hedonistic use were persistent and concurred in the definition of their models.

The maidan and khiaban were two urban spaces closely related to the complex of the royal gardens. Their function as the elements of transition between the royal gardens and the city affected their morphological and typological features, thereby defining their situation.

The maidan was a rectangular space surrounded by bazaars that served as a forecourt to the royal palaces, gardens and mosques. It thus embraced activities related both to the court and the public. In order to delineate the main features of the maidan we may refer to Maidan-i Shah (Naqsh-i Jahan) in Isfahan, which represents the most outstanding example of the Safavid period. That it was built according to a traditional model may be discerned from records showing that other maidsans, now vanished or drastically changed, such as Maidan-i Sa’adat in Qazvin or Maidan-i Sahebabad in Tabriz, had similar features. A drawing by Pietro della Valle is one of the first images we have of Maidan-i Shah. According to this document, the maidan constituted the core of the addition of Shah Abbas to the city of Isfahan. The porticoes of the bazaars define a rectangular space whe-

![SKETCH PLAN OF MAIDAN-I SHAH IN ISFAHAN BY PIETRO DELLA VALLE](image_url)
caravanserais and well designed timchehs and baths and other caravanserais on the sides of the bazaar ..."6 The author emphasises the close relationship of the maidan with the bazaar. It is true that all maidans were related to bazaars, but their role as the open space between the royal palaces and the city was more complex. It was the centre of those activities of the court which were extended outside the walls of the dowlat khane. The word maidan was originally referred to a hypodrome.6 In fact, it was used by the Shah for one of his main pastimes: the game with chowgan. This royal sport of Persian origin was in vogue long before the Safavid reign. The Shahnama of Firdowsi (AD 1010) abounds with accounts of chowgan in the legends and history of the pre-Islamic Iranian dynasties. Matches of chowgan are described as a test in which a hero proves his ability and strength.7 A miniature in the Shahnama conserved in the Biblioteca Medica Laurenziana in Florence (fig. 2)8 depicts Garshap playing Chawgan in the presence of Zahhak. The naqarah Khane with the musicians, above the gate of the garden, behind the walls, suggests that the game was played in a maidan in front of the royal gardens. Shah Abbas was so fond of the game that he gave instructions to his diggers to destroy a garden in order to make a maidan for chowgan bazi: "the bil- daran did according to his order and all that land of embellishing paradise was destroyed and the trees, flowers and khiaban-s were levelled to the ground with no sign left and almost 2000 jarib-s of land, today famous as Sabz-i Maidan, was arranged for chowgan bazi and the pole of qabaq was installed for qabaq andazi".9 Pietro della Valle gives a detailed description of the game,10 that shah Abbas enjoyed playing in the maidan-s in front of his palaces all over the kingdom.11 He reports that during the game music was played in the naqarah khane12. The royal music pavilion was in fact a typical structure in all maidan-s, and was located above the gates to the qaysariyye, the royal bazaars. The accompaniment of drums and trumpets likened the game to a battle with the beating of the drums, the shouts of the players and the neighing of the horses.
I believe that the use of the maidan as a field
for the game of chowgan effected its form, proportions and size. In fact the measures given by Pietro della Valle (690 X 230 passi) for Maidan-i Shah are similar to those of the Maidan-i Sa‘dat in Qazvin, and the proportions of 3:1 are confirmed in other cases. Della Valle gives a description of the great maidan in Qazvin, confirming that it was similar to the one in Isfahan and elsewhere, that there were two goal-posts for the game of chowgan installed both ends. In his sketch of Maidan-i Shah in Isfahan the goal-posts are marked (n. 17). He also mentions that in Qazvin these spectacles could be watched from balconies.

The game of chowgan was however one of the many spectacles that were performed in the maidan. Indeed it operated as a great theatre in which numerous public performances of the court took place. Here the king would give audience and receive ambassadors, or watch the parade of his men or the fight between montons. Pietro della Valle accounts a spectacle where a wolf was the main attraction. The author of alam aray-e Abbassi reports that Shah Abbas enjoyed the games chowgan and Qabaq andazi in the Maidan-i Naqsh-i Jahan in Isfahan. The miniature in shows the game of qabaq that was equally popular. The pole topped with a gourd (qabaq), used as a target for the archery contests, was another constant element of recreation in all maidan-s. The Shah also delighted “watching the fireworks some of which were arranged on an elephant... and the maidan was filled with spectators all around, and later he went to see the luminaries of the chahar bazaar and the qaysariyyeh. Thus the maidan operated also as a great theatre, where the king could watch the spectacle from an elevated talar above the Ali Qapu. The maidans had in fact always an elevated talar from the top of which the king could enjoy different spectacles. This was an architectural type designed artfully to respond to its function as the appropriate look-out for the Shah. The public could use the second order of niches above the porticoes of the bazar for watching the spectacles as we may assume from this passage of Della Valle: “The king played ...and the
court and nobles attended around on horseback and innumerable people, men and women, on foot, from above the balconies around."

An elevated talar existed in all the maidans of the period, as in Maidan-i Sa'adat in Qazvin, and Maidan-i Sahebabad in Tabriz. The picture by Nasuh representing Tabriz shows clearly the site of the Maidan-i Sahebabad across the river, with the goal-posts for the game of chowgan, the pole for qabaq andazi, the elevated talar above the entrance to the vast royal gardens on one side of the maidan, and the Mosque of Saheb-al Amr on the opposite side.

We can therefore conclude that the use of the maidan as a theatre for the ceremonies and pastimes of the court introduced certain architectural types, such as the talar above the gate of the dowlat khaneh and the naqarah khaneh for the music. We may also speculate that its proportions and form derived from the game of chowgan.

Along with the permanent architectural types, ephemeral elements were also introduced on the occasions of the feasts for the cheraghan, or luminaries. Della Valle accounts that the luminaries of the bazaars and porticoes of the Maidan in Isfahan made a beautiful vista as the shops were decorated with matching wooden partitions and arches, covered with red and white striped paper, holding the lights. Major ephemeral architectures were made for the fireworks. "...four qal'eh-s were made and the fireworks battle started and they made a cartoon minar..."

Another urban space with hedonistic functions was the khiaban. An avenue lined with trees, it was the element of connection between the royal gardens and the dowlat khaneh. The khiaban in Tabriz ran for half farsakh outside the city, linking the dowlat khaneh to the Jahanshahi garden. A major occasion for feasting was the arrival of the king to a city. The ceremonies for the welcoming included invariably the luminaries, music and the shouts of greetings, that would often terminate with a banquet. The khiaban, which permitted the presence of many people along it, was a perfect scene for this ceremony.

Along the khiaban of Tabriz a great crowd was gathered to welcome the king: "on the
two sides on foot or on horse were aligned in groups who came forth and performed the custom of greeting and saluting... first the public feast occurred in Bagh-i Jahanshahi where in the area of the mentioned garden a piece of land like a maidan was levelled for the tents "and pavilions to be set properly and coloured carpets were laid to seat 2,000 persons". The Chaharbagh Avenue in Isfahan is again the example that offers the most complete information regarding the design of a khia-ban. It was part of the great addition of Shah Abbas to the city, and its construction is reported in the Tarikh-i Abbassi. This promenade, that connected the royal complex of palaces to the Hezar Jarib garden across the river Zayande, is depicted in a section and plan surveyed by Pascal Coste, in the proximity of the entrance to the Madrase Shah Sultan Hwsayn. The drawing shows the water course in the middle, and the lines of chinar trees on the sides. It was a great promenade where people could stroll in the shade of the trees. Pascal Coste accounts that it was 3,000 m. long and 33 m. wide: "the two passages on the side are not paved, and are used for riding horses, the passage in the middle is paved with stone, divided in the middle by a small water channel and is for people on foot. The parts in between the three passages are covered with green and flowers of all species. From distance to distance there are channels and basins of different forms and dimensions receiving the water from Zenderoud. At the beginning of this promenade there is the pavilion of Shah Abbas the Great, built for the women of Haram, so that seated there without being seen, they can enjoy at one sight the feasts given along the Chaharbagh. At the other end, the southern one across Zenderoud, is elevated another pavilion that precedes the immense and beautiful garden named Hizar Jarib... the twenty pavilions which are still seen along the two sides of chaharbagh are no more inhabited..."

The promenade was a great attraction and at times it would be used only by the women. It was a spectacle in itself, and the king and his women could enjoy it also from a pavilion built to this end.

On both sides of the avenue were the entrances to the gardens of the noblemen of the court, with bala khanehs, elevated loggias above the gates (fig. 8) as can be observed in the view by Corneille le Brun. These would also offer a pleasant view of the great promenade. There are news regarding khia-ban-s in other capital cities. It is possible to speculate that these were designed likewise. Although they do not exist today, we may gather from the descriptions of the one in Qazvin that it was also planted with chinar trees and had a watercourse. Here too a pavilion elevated above a gate could be used as a lookout. A traditional feast took place in the Khiaban-i Chaharbagh, that was very amusing for the people, as well as for the Shah and his guests: "in the beginnings of coming of cancer that is in the tradition of ajam... the day of Ab-pashan, together in the chaharbagh of Isfahan they watched the Abpashan and on that day more than 100,000 people... gathered in the Khiaban-i Chaharbagh, throwing water to eachother... and it was truly a wonderful spectacle".

The feast of Ab-Pashan is also reported by Pietro della Valle, he mentions that it took place in the promenade and also in the river Zayandeh and that the Shah watched the spectacle seated in the pavilion in the middle of the bridge where he dined together with his guests. The pavilion on the bridge, the royal one in the beginning of Chaharbagh promenade, the many smaller ones along the same avenue for the noblemen and the great talar in the Maidan are all structures related to the pastimes of the court and show how the hedonistic use of these spaces effected their design.

It is notable that all these elements were architectural types with a particular feature, they were covered, but open on one or three sides. The different types of loggias are described in a manuscript in the Indian Office Library that is titled "In knowing the imarat and its design". The type used on the bridge and also in the bala khare is called an ivan, it was a vaulted loggia. It was also called tanabi or yurd. The greater ones, as prescribed in the above document, would have a mugarnas or stepped vault with squinches (fil gush) and niches (taq-che). It would be supported on the walls (jerz), and, in the case of the royal imarat-s, had to be worked with intarsed wood (monabbat kari).

While the talar with its flat ceiling supported on columns was in front of an ivan. This was the case in the Maidan-i Shah, as already observed, and in the famous Chehel Sutun pavilion and many similar ones in the royal
gardens. Being open on three sides it could offer a perfect lookout, and at the same time could be seen from the maidan by the public offering the most appropriate framework for the king.

Mahvash Alemi

1 A Pahlavi word today referred to as a public place, it denoted a vast piece of land for horse riding and polo games; it was also a measure of distance equal to 1/3 of a mile.
2 An avenue in a garden or city planted with trees on the sides and decorated with a water course.
3 The choice of these maidan-s for comparison relies on the fact that they all belonged to the capital cities of the Safavid period.
4 Pietro della Valle: Vatican Archives, fol. 127 v. Cod. Ottob. Lat 3382: 1 — meidan cioè due terzi della sua lunghezza; 2 — portici del bazar coperti in volta attorno al meidan; 3 — case del cahe in detti portici; 4 — bazar delle calzette di panno di detti portici; 5 — bazar della seta lavorata, cinte, fasci con loro galanterie; 6 — bazar delle droghe et altre cose; 7 — porta del Re; 8 — porta della cassaria verso il meidan; 9 — cassaria dove si vendono telari, panni, drappi et altro et è pur coperta in volta; 10 — porta della cassaria verso altra strada; 11 — loco da sedere alto in mezzo nella cassaria; 12 — casa della zecca; 13 — Caravanserai de lezdi cioè della gente di lez; 14 — caravanserai di Lala Beig; 15 — strada coperta in volta che va dal meidan per dentro alla città. Il meidan come ho scritto altrove è largo un terzo della sua lunghezza e la porta del Re son altri due terzi della lunghezza. La misura l’ho scritto altrove i portici coperti girano attorno attorno egualissimi. 16 — Meschita incontro alla porta del Re; 17 — colonne basse o Termini plantati per lo gioco del pallamaggio a cavallo; 18 — strada.
6 Gaube, Heinz, «Iranian Cities», New York, 1979, p. 83: The word is of Iranian origin and has a Persian synonym in aspezes. In the compound form, maidan aspes can be found in medieval Arabic literature as the name of the Old Maidan of Isfahan.
8 Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana Ms. Or. 5 fol. 665v
9 Abdul Fattah Fumery, [Tarikh-i Gilan]: «Geschichte von Gilan in den jahren 923 (1517) bis 1038 (1628)», pp. 103-04.
10 Pietro della Valle, fol. 102 v. Cod. Ottob. Lat. 3382: Il giuoco del pallamaggio alla Persiana è a punto il medesimo del Calcio, che fanno i Fiorentini in Italia, c’è solo questa differenza, che i Fiorentini giuocano a piedi balzando in aria un pallone gonfio di vento con le mani...
i Persiani giuocano più nobilmente, a cavallo, agitando per terra una palla di legno, con pallamiggi lunghi alquanto e leggeri da potersi con una mano maneggiare a cavallo, il maglio de quali non è dritto come quello che usano noi in Italia.... ma è inartoc, e non pestono essi la palla, come noi, con la testa del maglio, ma col fianco... i Persiani ancora contendono come quelli, divisi in due parti, di far passar la palla nella parte avversa di là da i segni della vittoria, che son due pilastri, che dissi, piantati, come mette in ciascuno de i capi della piazza, poco lontano dal confine di quella. La parte addossata verso il pad. è di là da i pilastri della parte aversa, ha vinto.

11 Tarikh-i Abbassi, p. 234: ... descended to kashan and five days passed in chowgan bazi and conversation and very days were done on the roofs and bazaars. Iskandar Munshi, Tarikh-i Alam Araf-ye Abbassi, p. 100: The people of Tabriz decorated the city the qasariyyeh and bazaars as a bride and with appropriate decor and beauty welcomed the king, and in the Maidan-i Sahebaad in the sight of that noble king performed chowgan bazi and different games and shrinirikah: Tarikh-i Alam Araf-ye Abbassi, p. 853: he entered Qazvin and settled in its Rowdlkhane ... and spent some time in imarat-i no ... and in the Maidan-i Sa'adat, had fun with chowgan bazi and qabaq andazi.

Pietro della Valle, fol. 102 v. Cod. Ottob. Lat. 3382: Mentre si giocavano non cesseran mai le lacrime, et i pifferi del Re di suonare, stando in certe alte logge fatte a posta in capo al Meidan, dove come anco in Spahan e nelle altre città principali usano di suonare ogni sera all’ora del passeggiamento, nel medesimo modo, che si fa in Italia in Napoli, et in Sicilia.

13 Gaube, Heinz, op. cit., p. 83. In the eleventh century when Isfahan was the capital of the Saljuqids, the Old Maidan’s original functions as a sports and commercial site were supplemented by a third function. It became the religious and administrative centre of the city. The Old Maidan had a ratio between its length and width of about 3:1; lanes through the bazaars ran around it; the main thoroughfare through the bazar was tangential to it; bazaars were situated at its narrow sides; near the royal bazar, the qasariyyeh, there was the Bagh-e Khanah, the royal music pavilion. The Jam mosque was adjacent to the Old Maidan, next to it were other mosques and madrasahs; in addition to this there was a royal palace at the Maidan.

14 Pietro della Valle, fol. 102 r. Cod. Ottob. Lat. 3382: Piazza asseai grande (bene come tanto quanto quello di Spahan) uguale e bella, quadraglia, ma con balconi attorno di piccola e poco buona fabbrica. In mezzo da una parte, e dall’altra, ci sono due piccole case del Re, fatte solo per aitar estar da trattenimento, et in balconi a veder spettacoli, una a i balconi aperti per huomini, et l’altra a i balconi serrati con gelosie per le donne dell’thamah... Da capo e da piedi ci son piantate le due mete, o pilastrae da ogni banda, come in Spahan e altrove, per lo giuoco, che diro, del paingang.

15 Pietro della Valle, fol. 128 r. Cod. Ottob. Lat. 3382: La sera al tardo il Re fece uscir li piade nel meidan, et li loro stuarderi, tamburi et altri suoni... dopo haver il Re passeggiasse in tutte le parti e tratto, inanzi alla porta e quivi venuti molti fanciulli con lume, perche era gia sera si trattenne fin quasi ad una hora di notte vedendo lottare certi montoni.

16 Pietro della Valle, fol. 102 v. Cod. Ottob. Lat. 3382: La sera poi al tramonto del sole venne il re secondo il solito nel Meidan quale ogni sera a adacqua tutto più volte da quantità di huomini destinati a questo che portano l’acqua con altri ... e cosi non c’è mai polvere) e fatta pur sgombrar la piazza, stando egli come suole verso il mezzo di quella a cavallo. e noi altri tutti all’incontri, una quantità di popolo a piedi fece un certo giuoco, che chiamano del lupo, et è che conducono un lupo vivo e sciolto nella piazza irrandolando con gridi, e con altro, li fanno correre addosso alle genti, le quali parte fuggono e corrono ad inconciarlo, e ben aspettandolo con le mani e con certi panni che scuotono in aria.


18 Tarikh-i Alam Araf-ye Abbasi, op. cit., p. 858: Western side with a dokhan where every kind of delicious food was ready ...and another on the left side at a dokhan with all kinds of sweets ... and gilded balakhanes where decorators had outlined pattern.


29 Pietro della Valle, fol. 71 r. Cod. Ottob. Lat. 3382: Nel bel principio inanzi alla porta della città c’è in mezzo alla strada una casa piccola ma alta alquanto et ornata da tutte le bande di molte pitture e galanterie e piena di balconi e finestre fatte solo in quel luogo per scoprirvi da lontano tutta la lunghezza della strada, e il Re suole trattenervisi spesso quando vuol goder di tal vista e così anco le sue donne.

30 Baia khanah literally "top house" was probably the origin for the word balcony.


32 Pietro della Valle, fol. 128 r. Cod. Ottob. Lat. 3382: 5 Luglio fu una certa festa che Persiani chiamano Ab pashan cioè acqua spruzzante o spruzzi d’acqua, nella quale a Cihar bag che la strada son tutte perene d’acqua et anco giu al fiume uscire sogliono scherzando buttando acqua adosso l’uno all’altro msolo il Re dalla mattina a buon hora al ponte del fiume, che sta nella strada di Cihar bag e assisi quivi all’ombra, il popolo della città, che era quivi adunato diede principio allo spruzzamento dell’acqua et alla festa, che durò poi fino all’ora di compieo vanno tutti, e fin i più grandi della città in habito succito con messi poco buone e molti senza turbanti, ma con solo berettini di quei che usano in casa..., e portano vasi da spruzzar acqua e dato che e il segno dal Re, cominciano a spruzzarsela adosso l’u l’altro con tanto tiripiu e folla che in questa dell’anno io resoconto dicono che morissero cinque persone... la sera verso l’hora di compiuto verso il fine della festa, chiama il Re alla festa gli ambasciatori et ospiti soli ragionando e dando loro colazione pur sopra la ponte all’ombra.

33 Bibl. Sloan 4095.