

LIFE LINE I

**Bazaar route:
Friday Mosque to the Maidan**

The Bazaar route from the Friday Mosque to the Maidan. Plan showing the interlocking courtyard pattern of the city through which the route runs. (This is omitted for clarity in the plan which follows on p261).



The image of a city, the picture carried in the mind's eye, has importance both for resident and visitor alike. For instance Paris may conjure up Notre Dame rising majestically above the Seine, Venice a marvellous conjunction of sea and architecture, Bologna the dramatic landmark of leaning towers reached through a majestic rhythm of arcaded streets—and so on. Nearly always it is a memorable relationship, the way things come together. For while a city may possess many fine individual buildings, if there is no easily perceived connection between them or the links have been broken, the image becomes a jumble—a series of mental picture postcards.

Isfahan itself is rich in such historic monuments which can be visited by taxi and admired in isolation, many buried like jewels in a maze of mud brick streets. But what makes a city really memorable is when buildings and spaces link together in a meaningful way—then you are no longer on the outside, a mere admirer, but become 'part of'—the spirits are lifted and your surroundings make sense—this is living tissue rather than mummified remains.

Instead of exclamation marks you have sentences, sentences containing exclamation, emphasis, punctuation, but all in the context of a whole rather than in isolation. To achieve such harmony should surely be the aim of town planning in the true sense, yet the bureaucratic substitute we know as planning today is mainly concerned with a so-called 'efficiency' which generally boils down to getting the traffic through at all costs while zoning human activities, with all their potential for vitality and variety, into stultifying but easily calculated chunks. This has little to do with the quality of experience, indeed usually acting against it.

Following European example despite the great differences in context, much of Isfahan's beauty has already been tarnished by such methods and it is imperative, if the unique qualities of the city are to survive, that more sensitive planning measures be adopted before it is too late. To understand what is at stake—the special quality of Isfahan—it is worthwhile first to examine its one supreme example of urban continuity—a demonstration of town design poetic in its humanity and logical simplicity. This is the bazaar route from the great Friday Mosque south to Shah Abbas I's great square, the Maidan, a distance of over a mile. One of the great spatial sequences of the world, it has to be experienced in movement and on foot. Beyond the charm of its romantic Arabian Nights' overtones, it is a revelation to any designer, especially a European, and its exploration an adventure in space at once striking in the simplicity of its concept and wonderfully elaborate in its execution. To adequately describe it requires a book or a film and here we can only sample it in the sequential series of images on the following pages.

The primary movement system of the bazaar* forms a central linear circulation space, splendidly domed throughout its length, parallel to which on both sides run the small and regular dependent spaces of the shops. Between them, at frequent intervals, arched entrances lead to the larger spaces—caravanserais, colleges, bath houses, shrines, mosques and stores, all tightly connected to the central spine yet each a separate, self-contained world. Each has its individual character—the 'hammams', or baths, enclosed, steamy, restful; the caravanserais each a busy square varying greatly in size and open to the sky and generally containing a central pool and trees with the merchants' accommodation ranged round the perimeter. The mosques, also with courts open to the air, provide havens of tranquillity and contemplation, a step away from the noisy barter of the tunnel-like bazaar. Connected to the main bazaar route on both sides is the secondary movement system of residential paths leading to tightly clustered houses between narrow streets flanked by high mud brick walls. With no street architecture as such, the houses are all inward looking, private worlds set around their own peaceful courtyards, interlocked and protected from the heat and noise of the city outside.

*The most extensive in the Middle East eg 'The Sense of Unity' by Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar (University of Chicago Press, 1973) to which the author is indebted for information on the bazaar.

LIFE LINE 1 **Bazaar route from Friday Mosque** **to the Maidan**

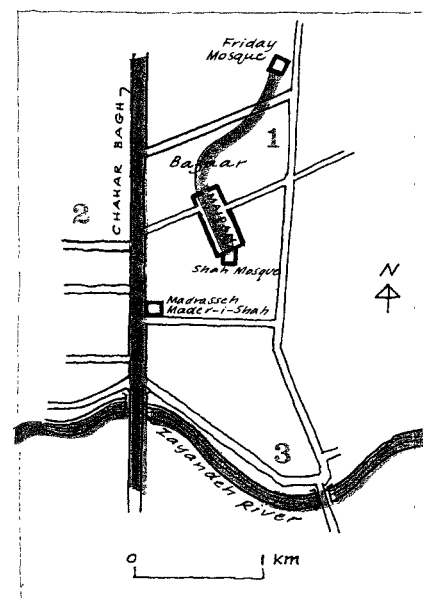
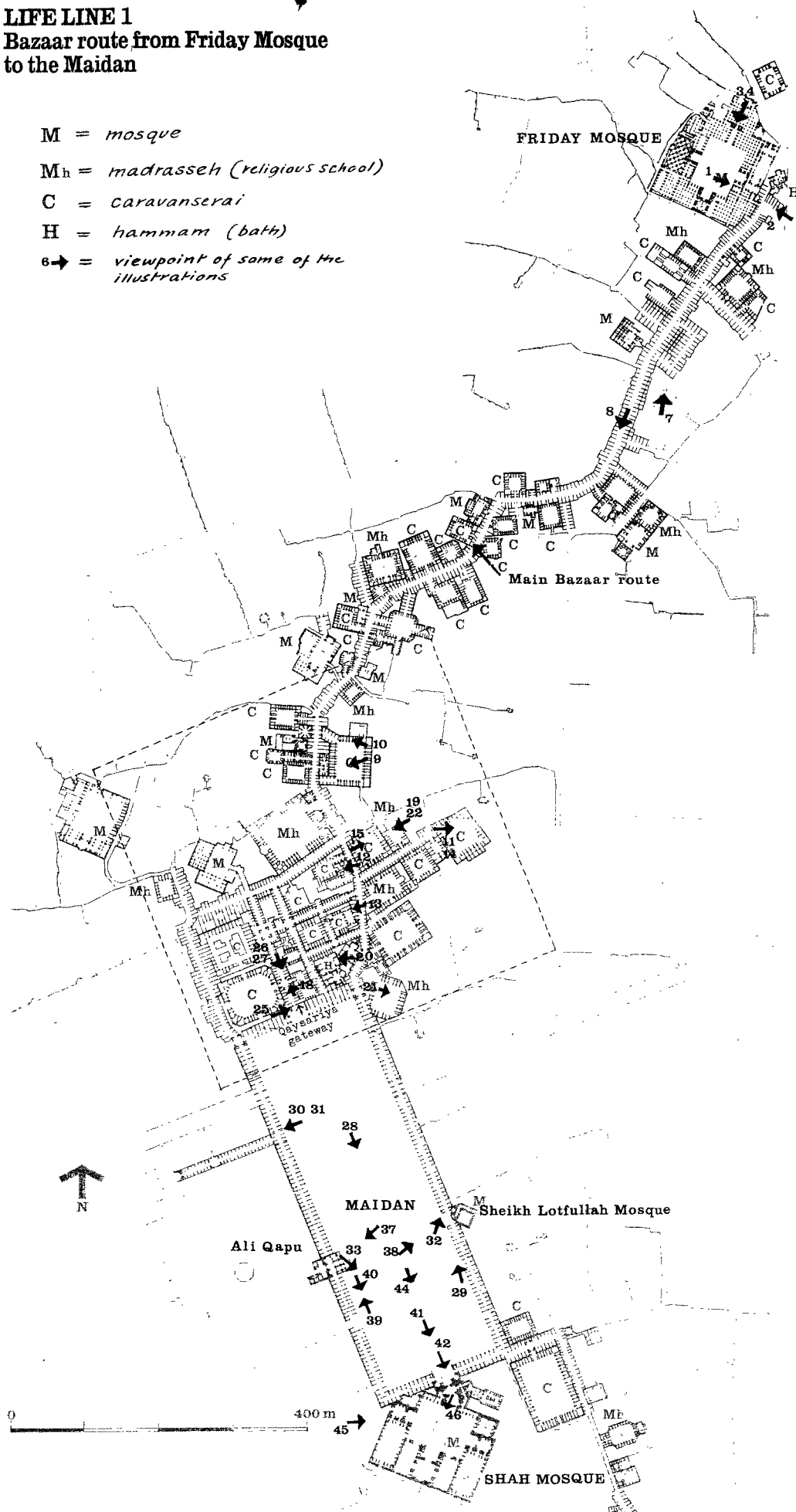
M = mosque

M_h = madrasseh (religious school)

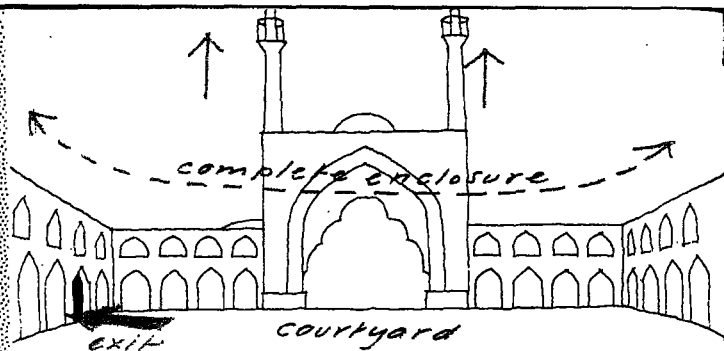
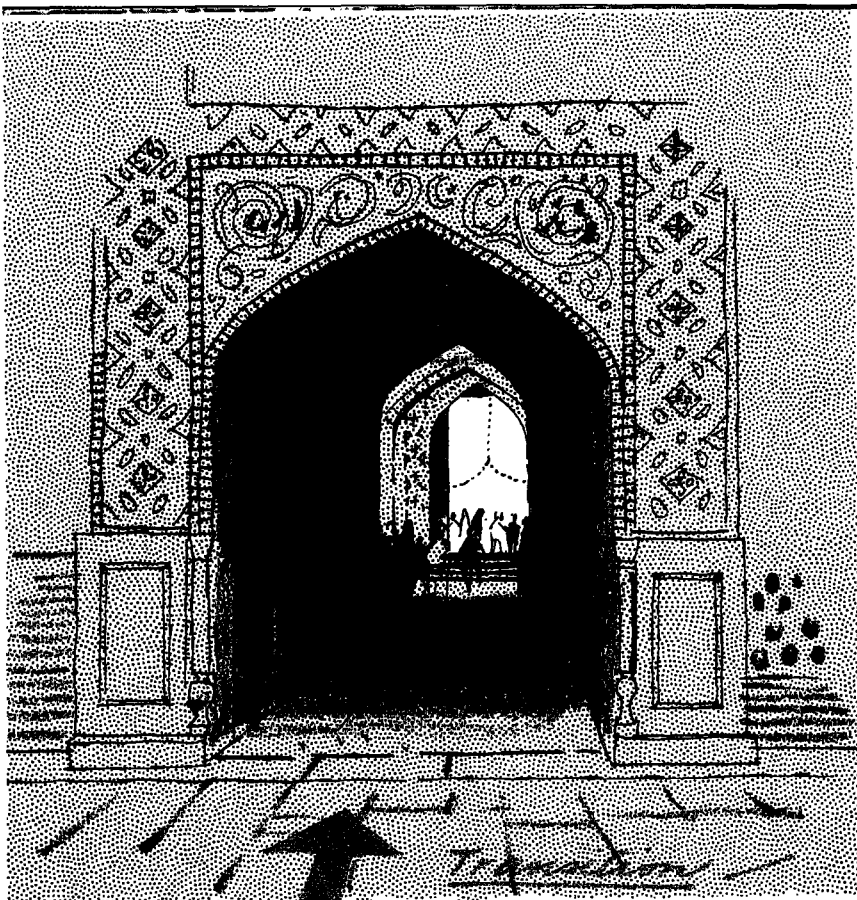
C = caravanserai

H = hammam (bath)

6➔ = viewpoint of some of the illustrations



Life lines of the city:
 1, Bazaar
 2, Chahar Bagh
 3, river



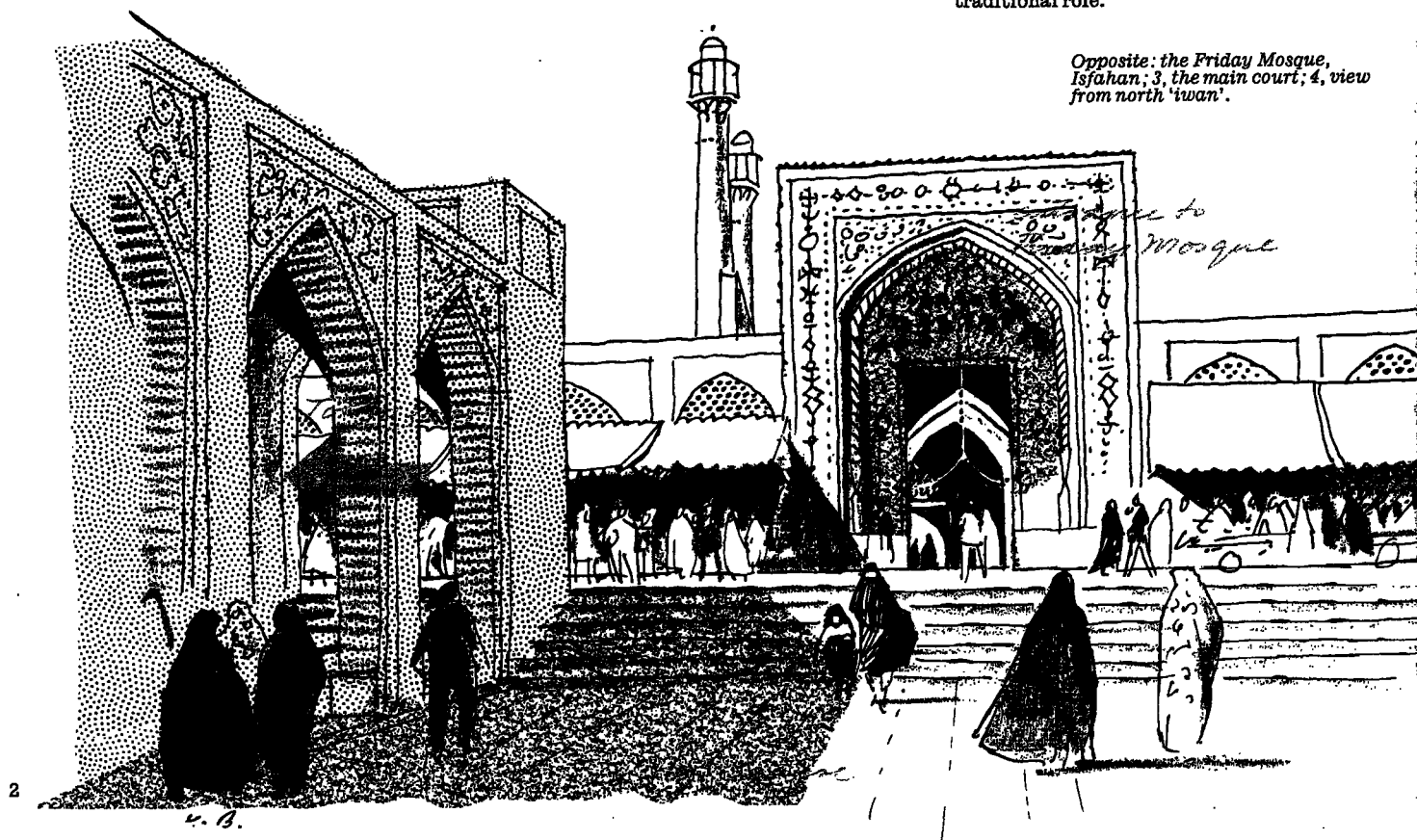
FRIDAY MOSQUE

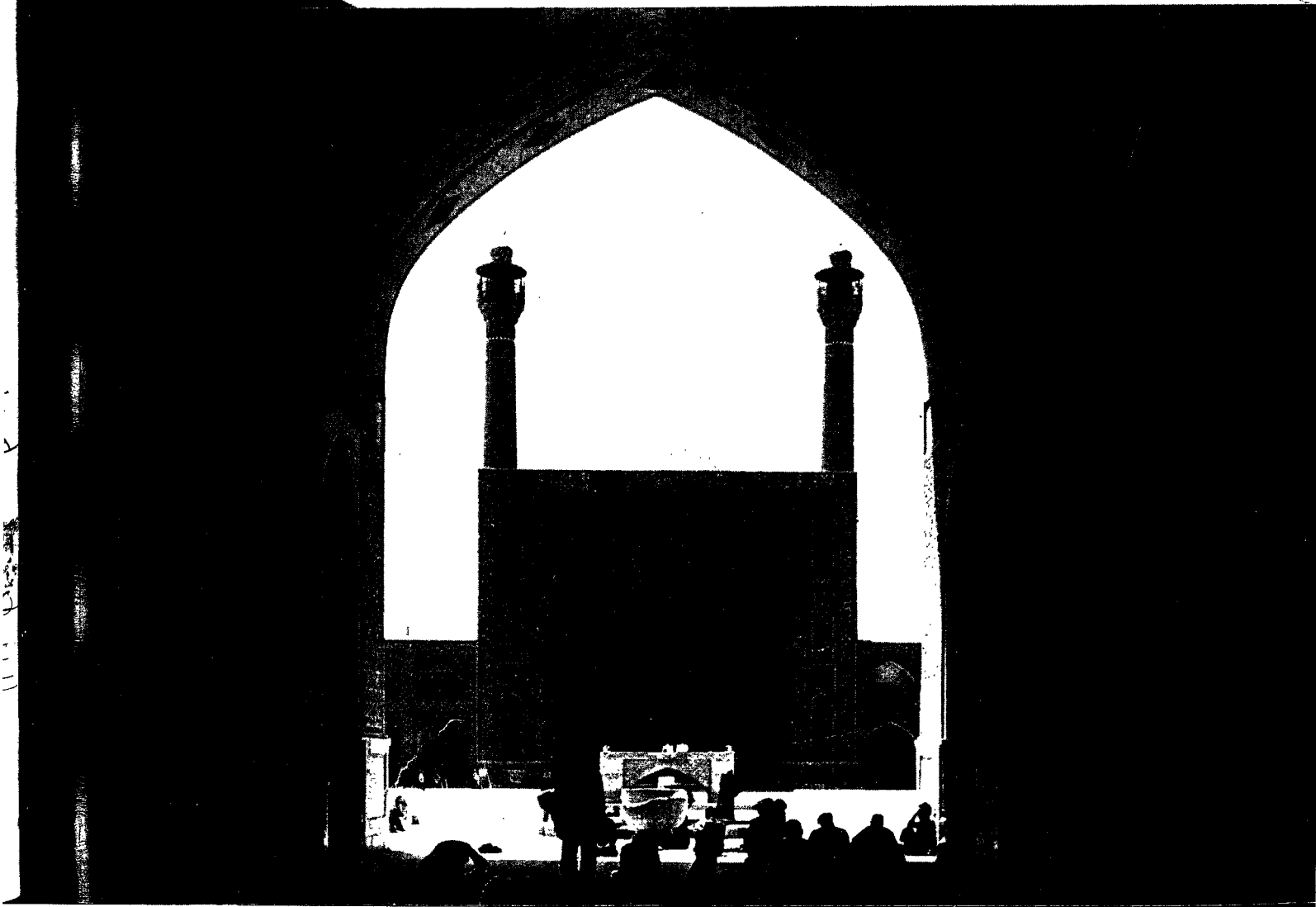
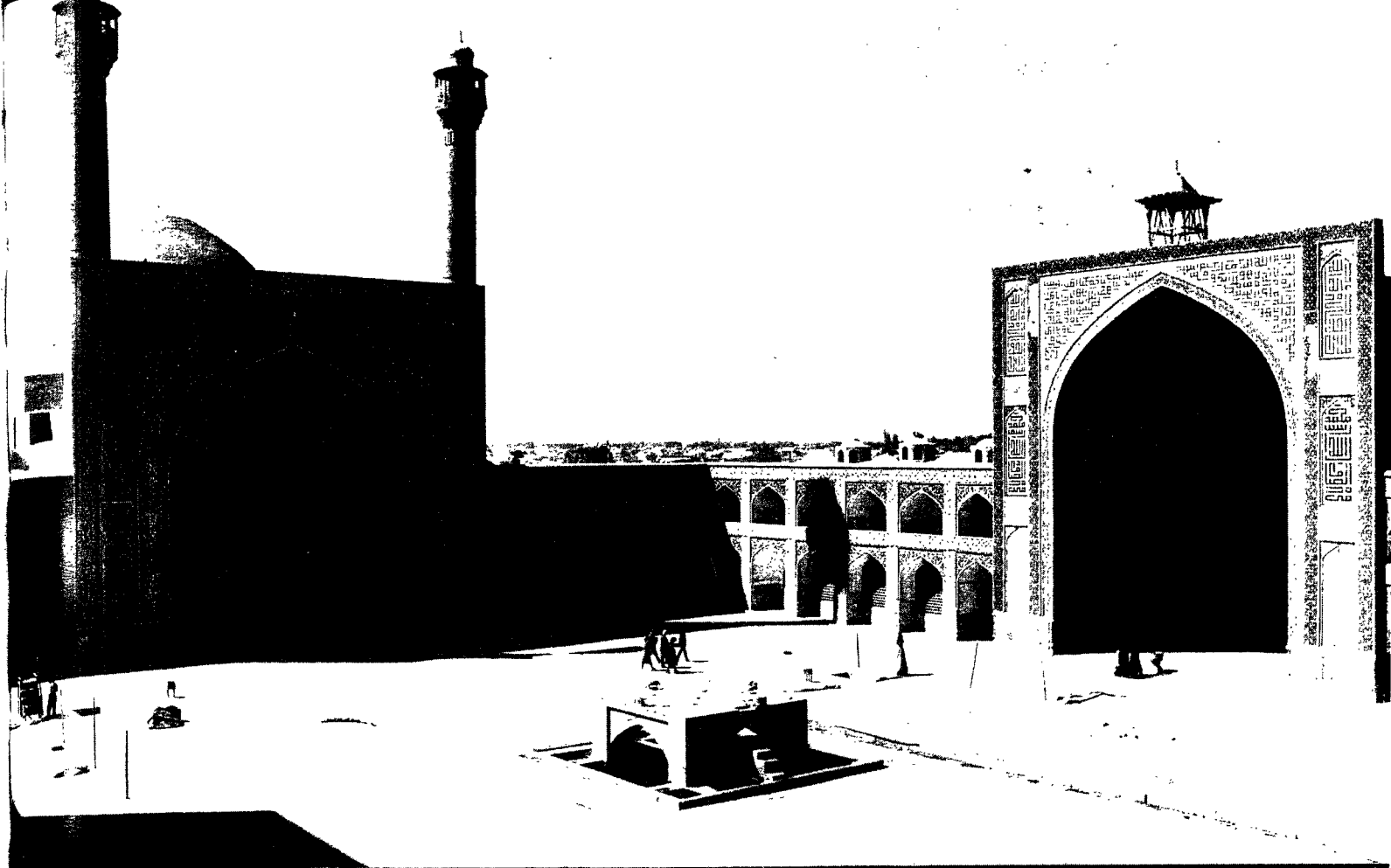
Our route begins at the Friday Mosque, 1-4, an appropriate starting place since this great monument, nearly a thousand years old, is perhaps the most memorable building in Isfahan. A spatial masterpiece in itself, its essence is a spacious open court flanked by walls of delicate blue tiling and abutting a maze of dimly lit earth-coloured prayer halls. These are roofed by splendid Seljuk brick domes on a forest of massive columns. Between the serene stillness of the mosque and the busy outside world, and clearly defining the transition, lies a dark, arched passageway, 1, striped by bands of sunlight and ending in a brightly lit archway. * Beyond is a small square lined with open stalls, a gathering place in front of the mosque, 2. Then at right angles an arched entrance funnels you straight into the north-south movement system of the

* Originally there were nine entrances to the mosque giving easy access from every direction in keeping with its role as the heart of the city. The present restriction to one entrance is linked with a visitor's admission charge—a sad negation of the traditional role.

*Passage to Outside World
from courtyard of
Friday Mosque — bran
chain at far end
defines threshold.*

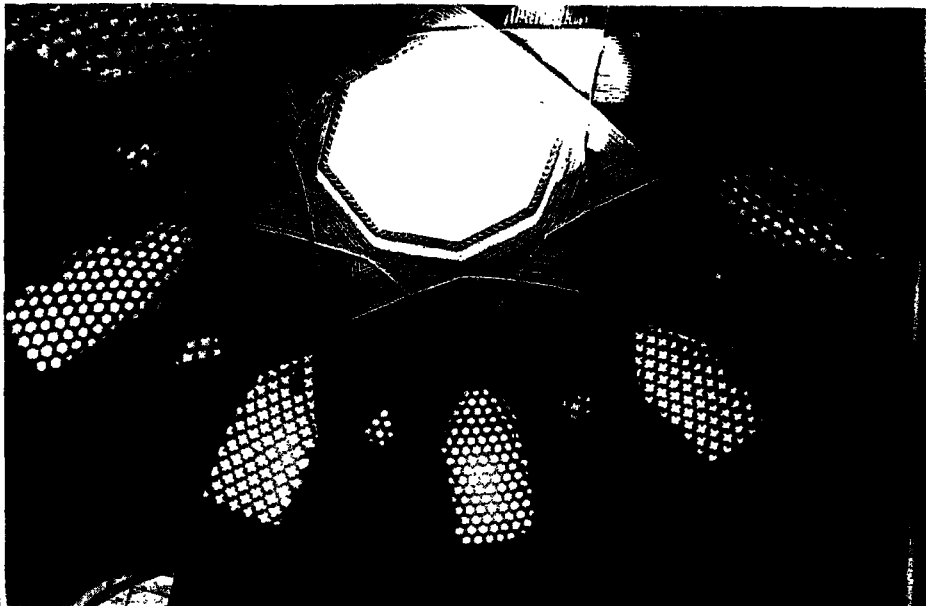
*Opposite: the Friday Mosque,
Isfahan; 3, the main court; 4, view
from north 'iwān'.*







5



6

BAZAAR VAULTING

Daylighting of bazaar is provided by shafts of sunlight through holes in the apex of the domes. 5 and 6 show the rich texture achieved in their brickwork construction.

7, looking north towards the Friday Mosque with the bazaar route (foreground) traced by the continuous line of brick domes.



7



BAZAAR

the older part (Friday Mosque end) twists and turns - roofed by a succession of brick domes varying in height and design -

bazaar, 8, and on entering this cavernous world, a majestic rhythm of brick vaulting takes over and never lets go throughout the whole route.* For the modern designer, the interest of the bazaar must lie particularly in its use of space and materials—nothing is wasted, everything has a purpose, yet the structural system never dictates. Instead it produces an essentially human environment with a sculptural plasticity and unity far removed from the fractured environments which result from modern town planning. To make a literary comparison, the bazaar presents

the story line—the continuity—which is enriched throughout its length by the events which occur along the way—some big and important, some small and delicate: all close knit to the main thread.

This is a dark, cool world lit only by shafts of sunlight from clerestory and rooflight, 5, 6. When seen from the roof, 7, its structural system and variety is concealed by an overall layer of sun-dried mud and straw plaster. Only a line of humps traces the twisting route of the vaulted bazaar beneath. Inside, the tunnel effect is softened by

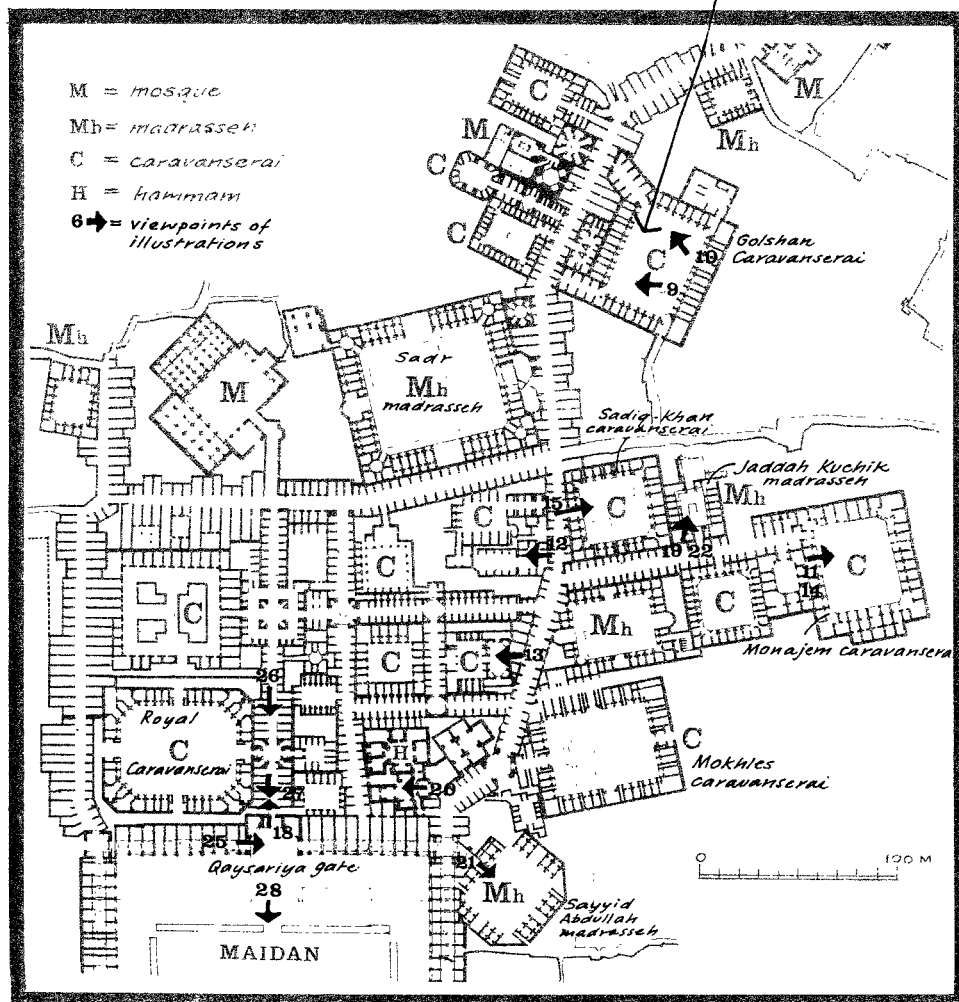
the merchandise displayed. Festoons of scarves are strung across and skeins of gorgeously coloured wools hang from great hooks, alongside piles of carpets and bales of brilliantly dyed cloth—regiments of brightly coloured shoes march up the shop walls, towers of bowls, cascades of oil lamps. It is a kaleidoscope of sights, sounds, smells with everywhere

* The continuity of this route has been ruthlessly severed recently by the cutting of Abdorrazzaq Avenue. Fast-moving traffic now makes this a dangerous crossing point and there is a strong case for continuing the bazaar under the road in a shop-lined underpass.



Golshan caravanserai — one of the largest in Isfahan

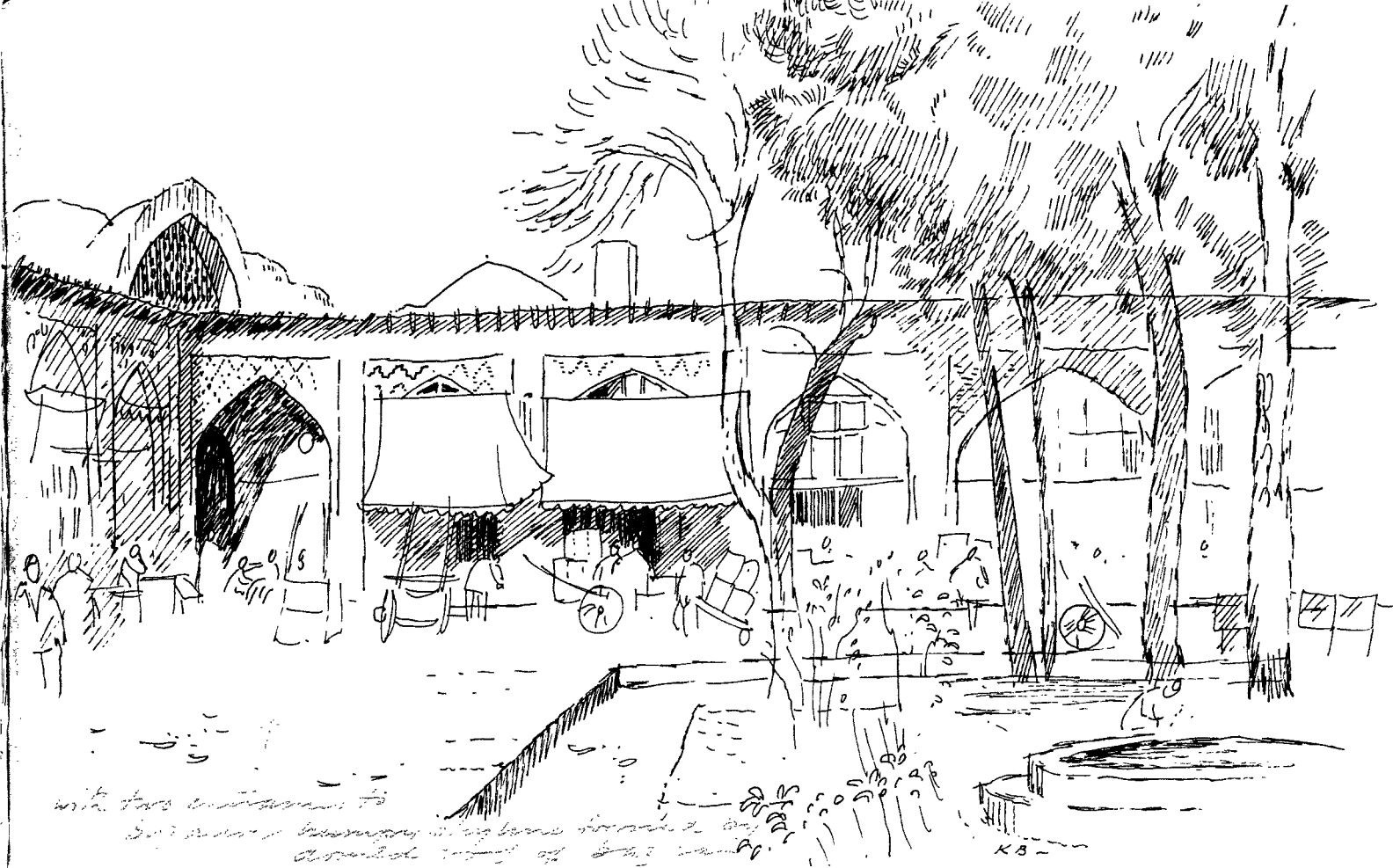
9



the aroma of spices, leather, baking bread, grilling meat. There are piles of scarlet pomegranates and shiny pink candy, magenta hookah pipes coiled like snakes and down a side alley dyeavats and lengths of fabric hung out to dry. The bazaar is an organism with a life of its own fed by supply routes extending far into the surrounding countryside. The handicrafts of distant desert villages, raw materials for manufacture in the bazaar—leather, cotton, wool, metal, skins—have for centuries arrived here in endless procession from as far away as the Caspian and Persian Gulf—they came by camel, donkey and mule train, following service roads built for their sole use between high blank walls of sun-dried brick leading direct to the serais or warehouses.

Branching from the central spine of the bazaar is an astounding variety of enclosed spaces, each a separate world perfectly adapted to its purpose yet all close bound to Moslem commercial

Plan of part of the Bazaar adjacent to the Maidan (see p261 for full plan).



10

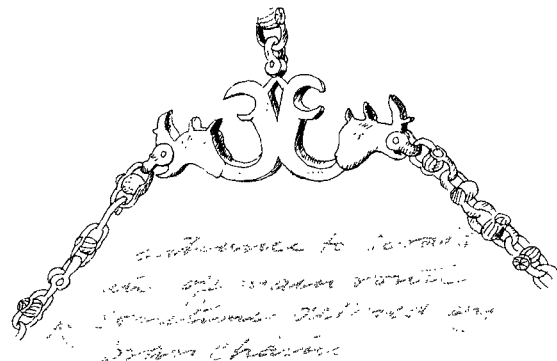


11

*typical corner divided
of 2 storey commercial*

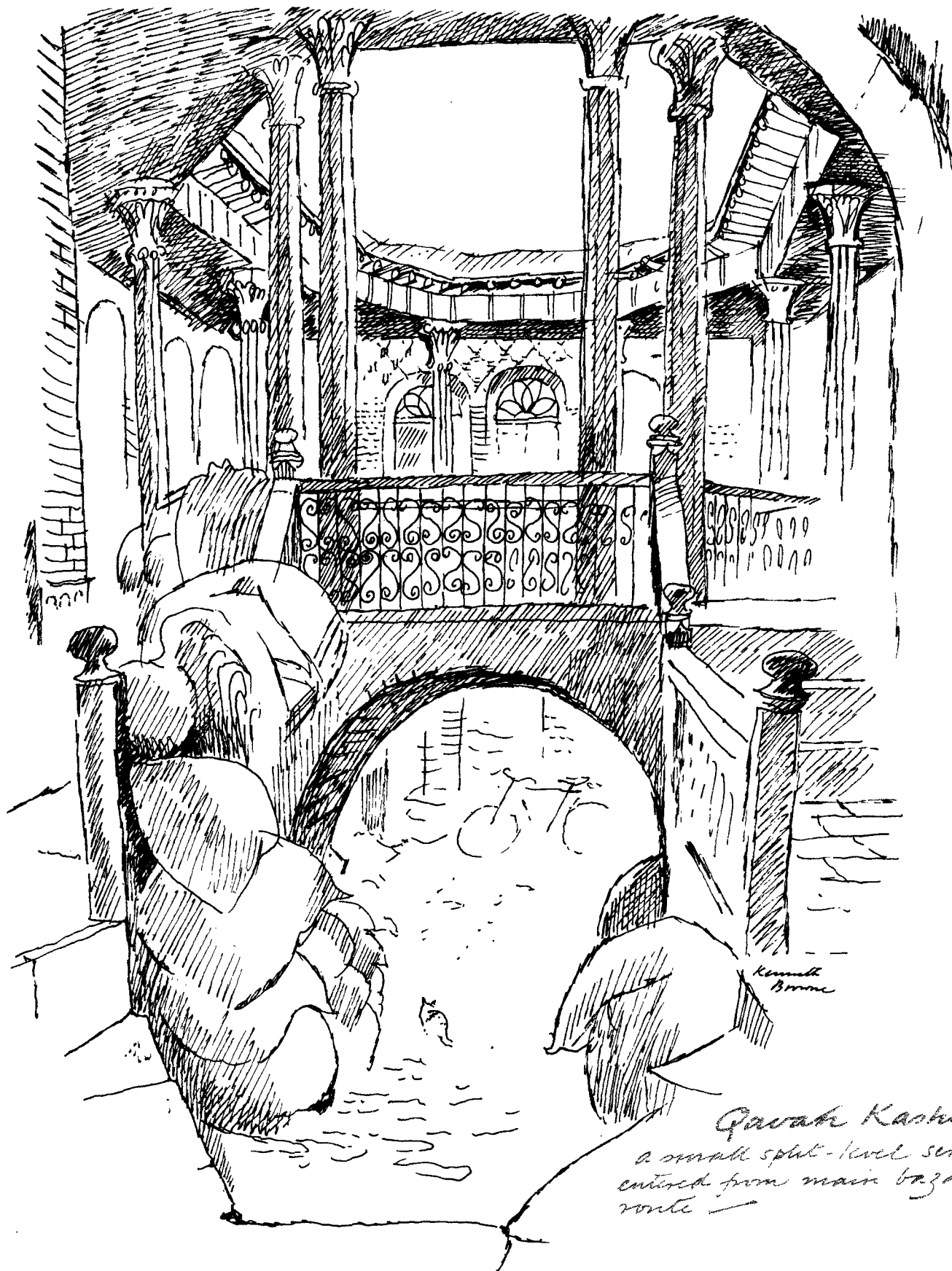
and religious life. Mosques, *madrassehs* (religious schools), *serais* (warehouses), *hammams* (baths)—the bustle and bargain of the market offset by the peace and unity of Islam.

These spaces vary greatly in size but are nearly always planned around a central courtyard. A good example of a small



*reference to form
and style of the building
is sometimes different and
from others*

serai is the Qavah Kashi, 12, a charming split-level building used for trading in coffee beans. Wooden columns support an upper-storey arcade and balcony, with a tiny courtyard below. At the other extreme, large *serais* such as Mokhles and Golsham, 9, 10, are commercial complexes round a big central courtyard with trees and a central pool. There are several entrances. Through one caravans reach the warehouse where goods are examined, weighed, listed and stored. Through another the pack animals are fed and stabled, their food stored in haylofts, their drivers lodged in adjacent rooms. By yet another, merchants reach the shopping and administrative centre where goods can be examined by the wholesalers, distributors and shopkeepers. Display



Qavah Kashi
a small split-level serai
entered from main bazaar
route —

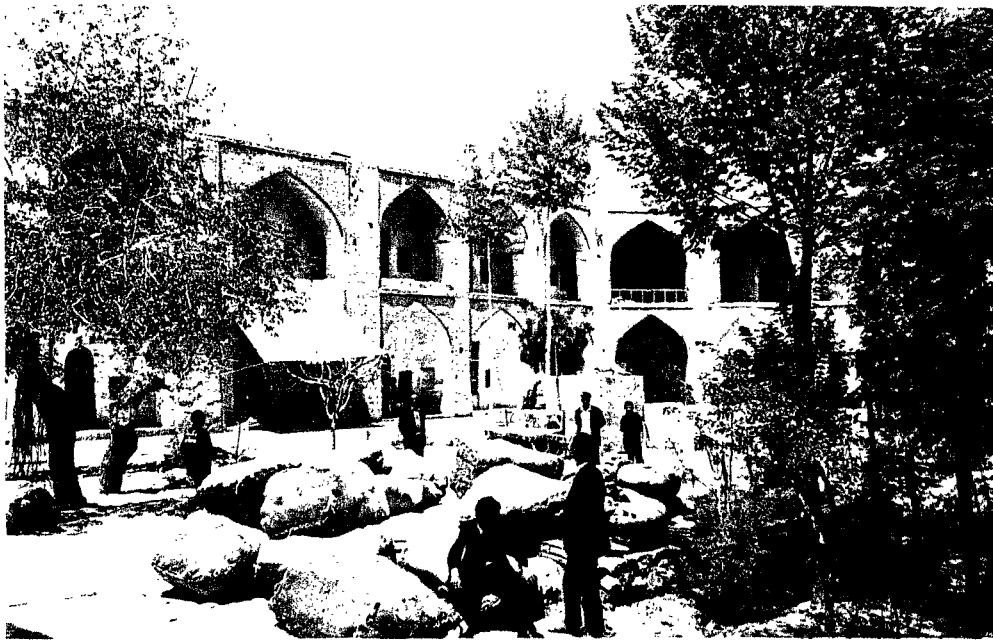
and sales take place in *timchahs* or shopping arcades, sometimes on two floors, with goods displayed below and stores and offices above. The members of one trade, say cobblers and leatherworkers, tend to group together, served by the same *serais*. The bazaar route is also punctuated by frequent mosques and *madrasseh*s where

the students are trained to become *mullas* or holy men. Despite some variation these schools are similar in plan to *serais* and mosques with four *iwans* off a central courtyard. A typical *madrasseh* is entered through an arched portal which, after descending a few steps past a massive studded wood door, leads to a dimly lit octagonal

space, the *hasht*. This in turn opens out into a courtyard some 25 m by 30 m and seeming larger after the restricted entrance. Around it are two-storey buildings with low arcading which provides shade from the noonday sun. A central 'mirror' pool keeps the air pleasant and cool and trees are planted in the four quadrants



13



14



15

CARAVANSERAIS

13, entrance to Malik.

14, Monajem.

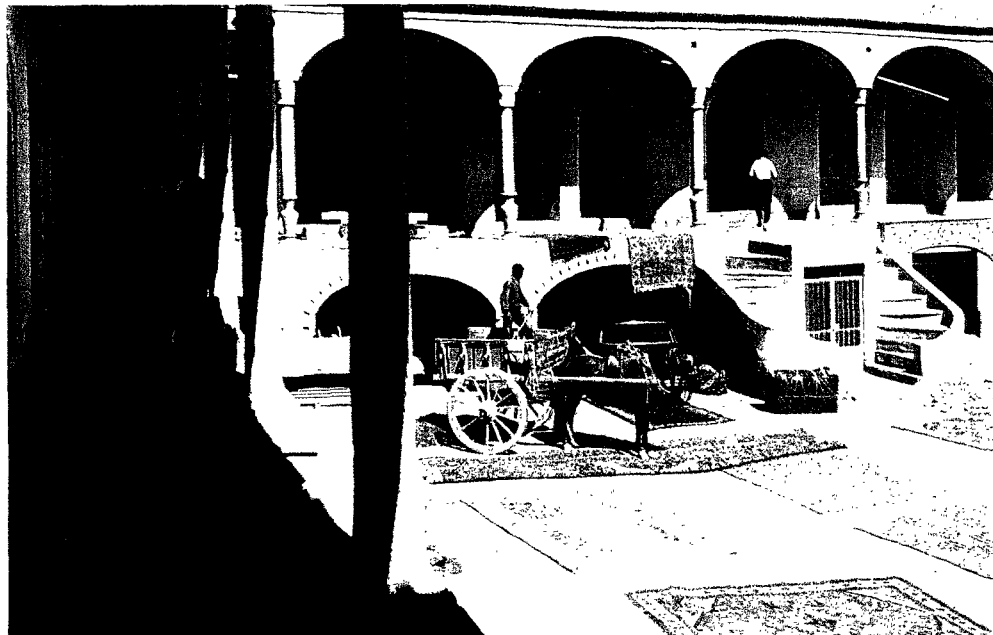
15, entrance to Sadiq Khan.

16, Lench (carpet 'serai' west of main bazaar).

BAZAAR

17, typical interior.

18, view from Qaysariya gate showing monumental scale near the Maidan.



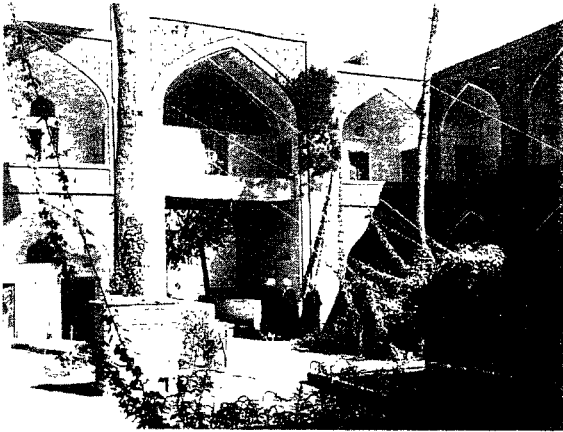
16



17



18



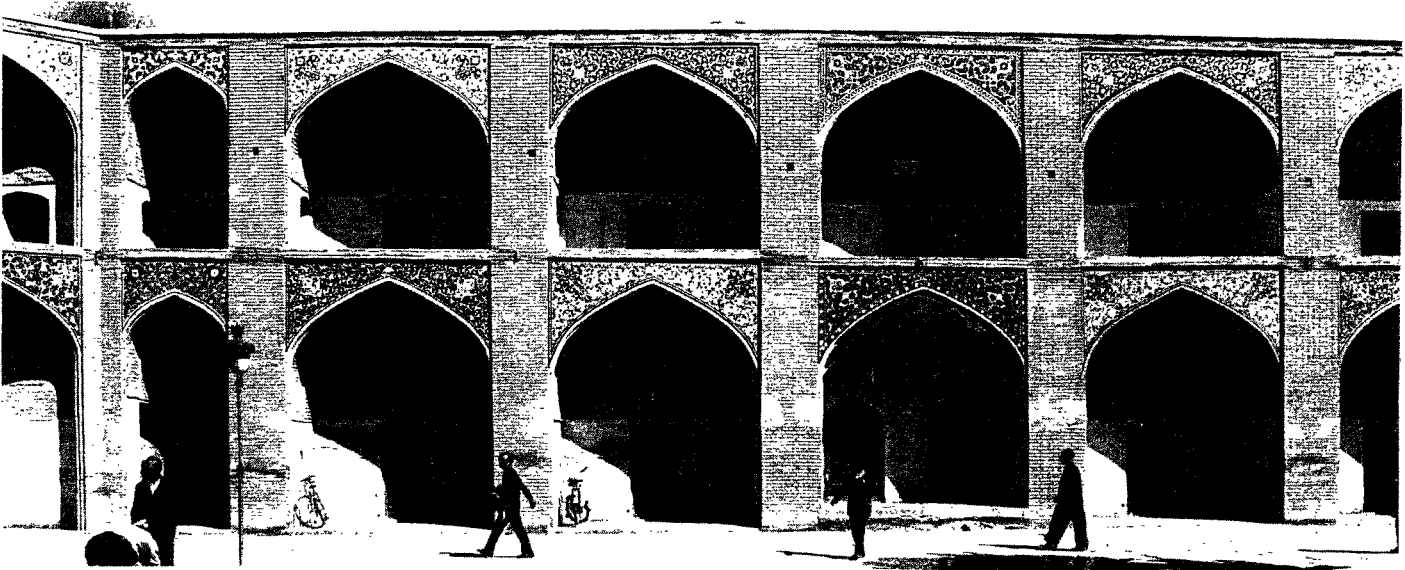
19



MADRASSEHS
19, 22. Jaddah Kuchik.
21. Sayyid Abdullah.

HAMMAM

20, interior of Hammam Shah (see plan on p272).



21



22

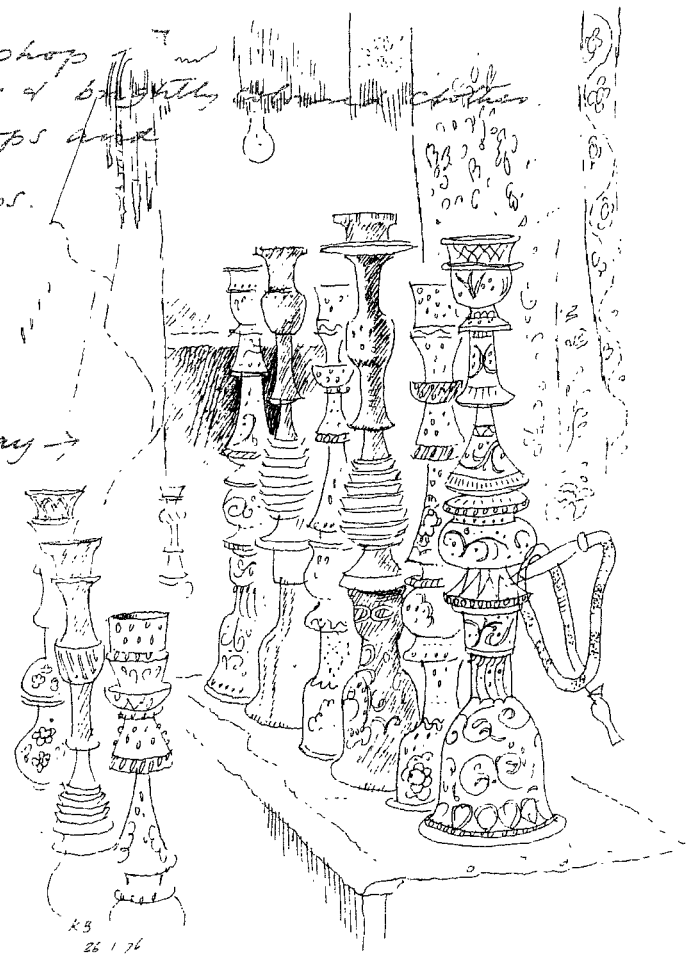


23

The bazaar route continues — wood turner's shop on right — festoons of flags & brightly fluorescent hoops and naked bulbs light the shops.

Here flowers and plants, the free shapes of nature, contrast with the formal architecture of man, unlike the mosque courts which are devoid of planting. The softening effect is well shown in the Jaddah Kuchik, 19, 22, in which flowering plants climb trailing cords to form cool leafy canopies beneath which *mullas* and students can sit to teach and study. The students' rooms repeat around the courtyard, interrupted only by the deep recessed double-height *iwans* in the centre of each wall. Recessed entrances to each room are raised a convenient sitting height above the courtyard and provide a place for rest, contemplation and conversation. The private room behind has a vaulted ceiling, white-painted walls with niches and a tile floor of simple geometric design. Furniture is limited to cushions, a Koran stand, a *narghile* (water pipe) and a samovar. Usually connected with specific mosques these buildings provide convenient sanctuary for daily prayer,

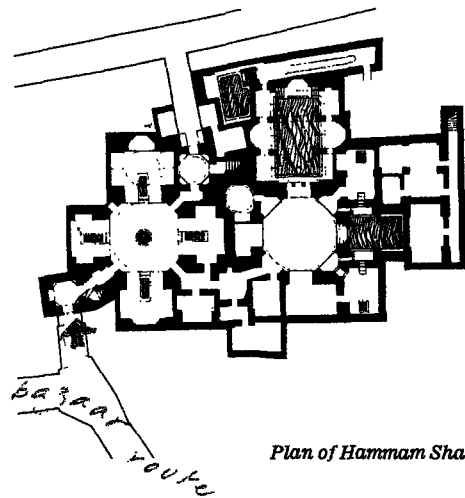
Narghile display →



23
26.1.76

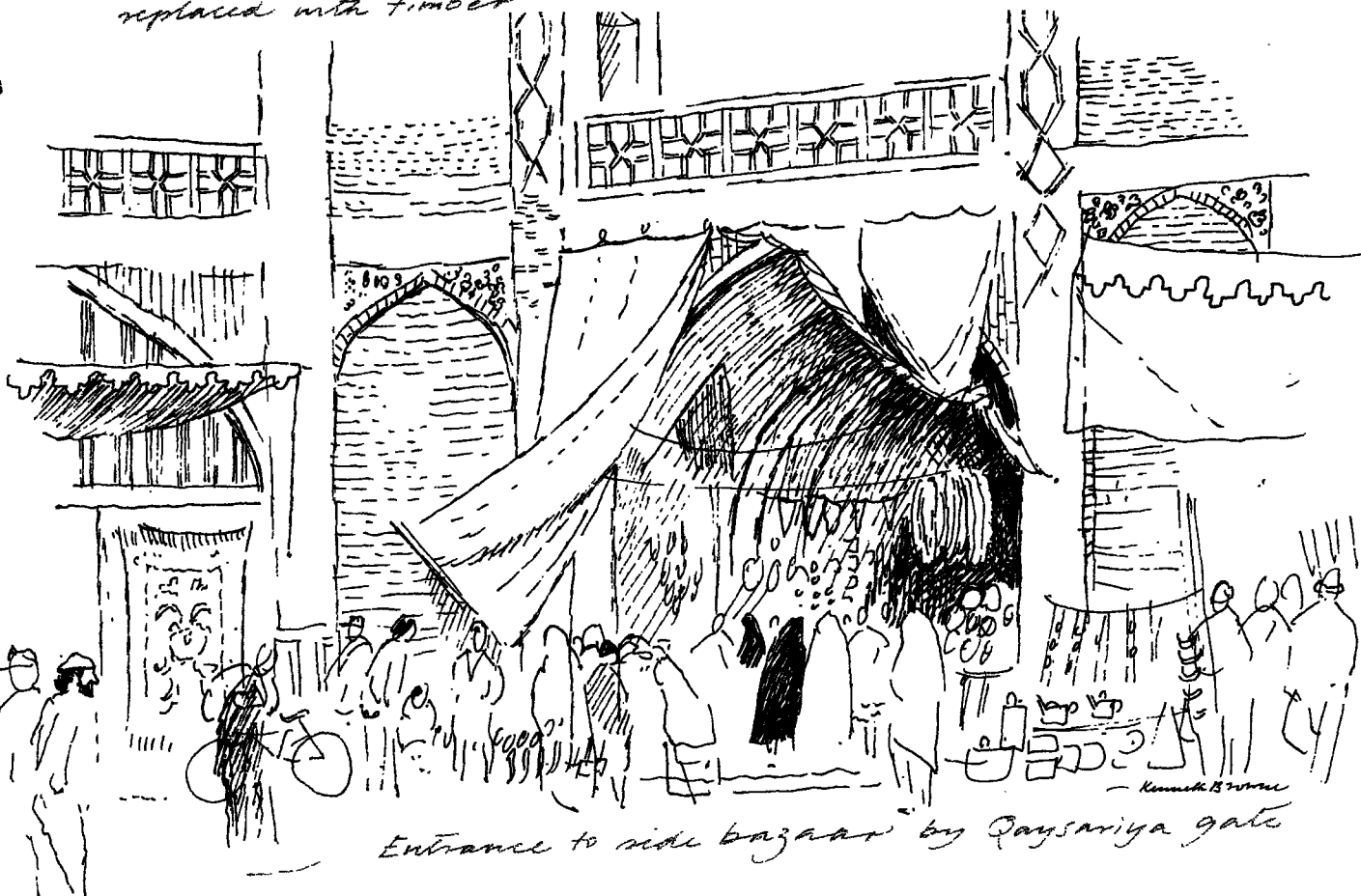


Bazaar in this curving section the domed roof has been replaced with timber

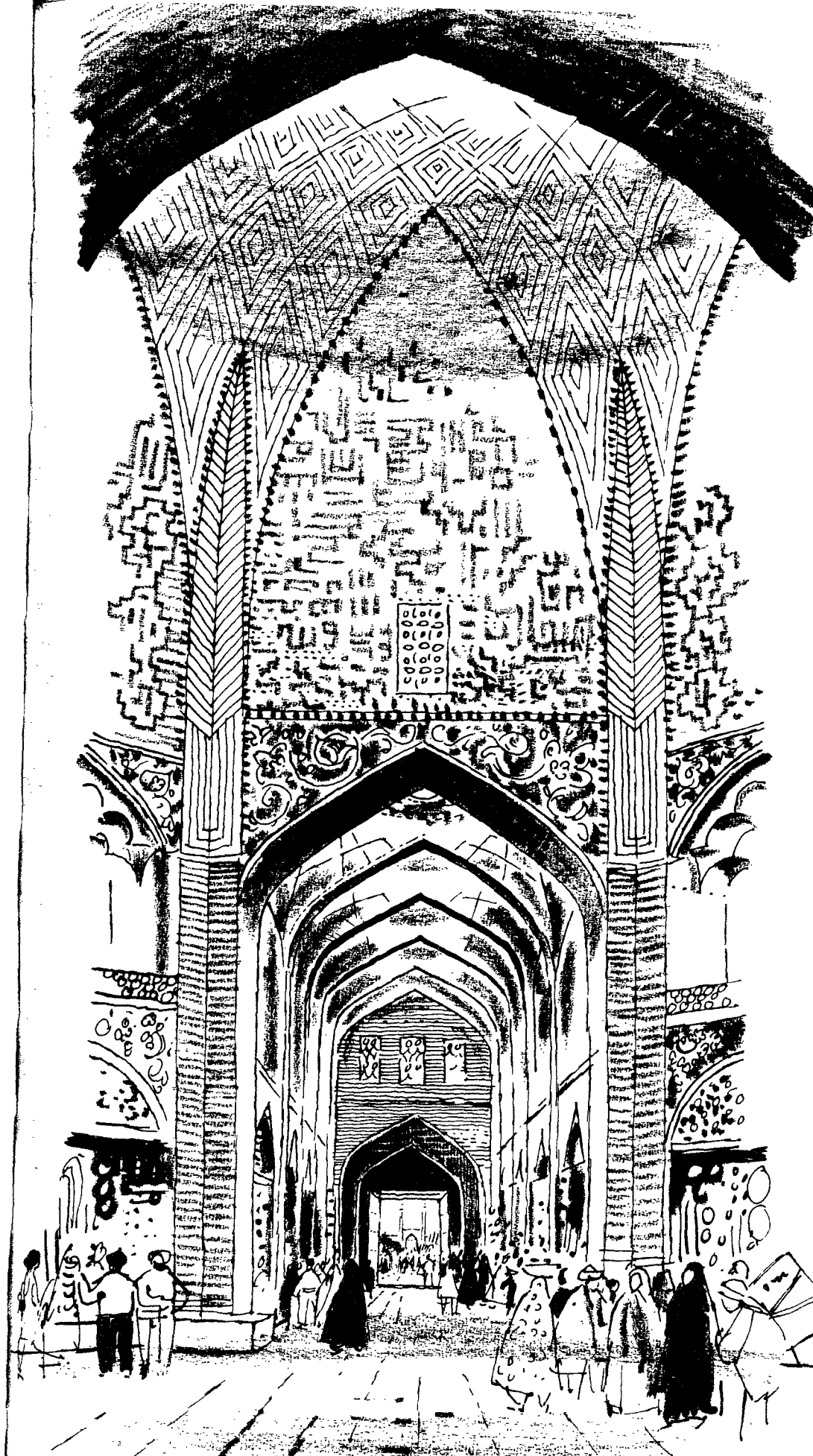


Plan of Hammam Shah.

members of guilds frequently praying together and so reinforcing the sense of communal identity. Mosques also are usually related to the guilds and shops are quite often incorporated in them showing the close link existing between the religious and commercial life of the city. The *hammams* or public baths consist of a complex of hot rooms, steam rooms, and rooms with pools of hot and cold water, the walls often hung with brightly coloured towels from the bazaar. There is a private section for wealthy patrons where in earlier years feasts were held on a floor scattered with rose petals. Eventually near its southern end, the bazaar fans out into a vast interlocking system of magnificently domed streets

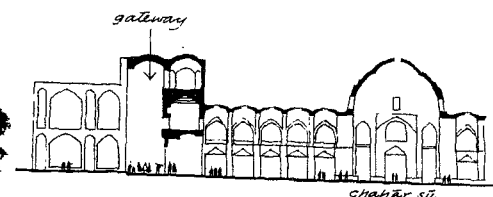


Entrance to side bazaar by Qaysariya gate



Kamali Basmali

Chahar Su - street crossing emphasized by dome of exceptional height.

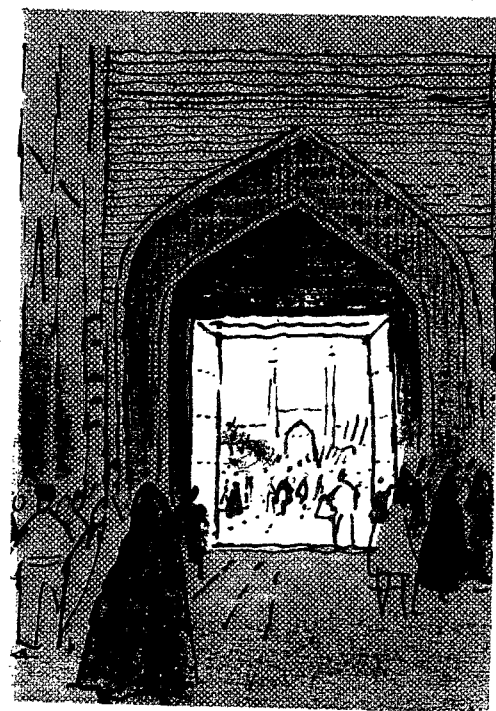


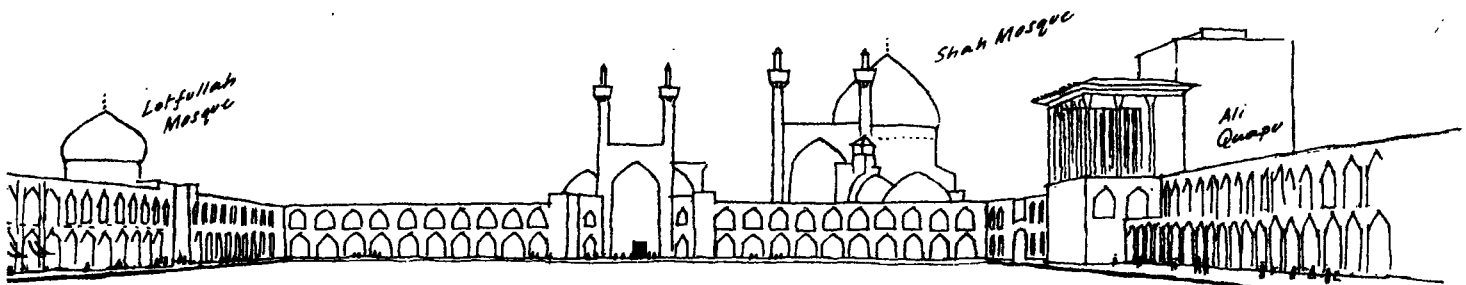
Section through bazaar and Qaysariya gateway

(plan p266), the Qaysariya. This section was built by Shah Abbas the Great and its scale and spatial organisation reflects his desire for grand architecture in keeping with his new capital city. Over each street crossing, or *chahar su*, rises a dome of exceptional height often above a central fountain pool. These occur at about 40 m intervals and the different crafts, goldsmiths, coppersmiths, tanners and so on are grouped together each giving its name to a special section of bazaar defined by its own gateway. Finally the route passes under the last lofty dome, 26, marking the entry to one of the largest caravanserais* before the route explodes into the vast space of the square, Maidan-e-Shah. A view of the square and the Shah Mosque at its far end is framed by the arched doorway, 27. This is the symbolic threshold between darkness and light, captivity and release, and the drama is emphasised by the 'eye-of-a-needle' exit through which you pass.

* The Royal Caravanserai, built to house important guests of the Shah and linked to a suite of rooms above the bazaar gateway and overlooking the great square.

Transition from bazaar to Maidan

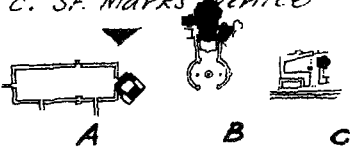




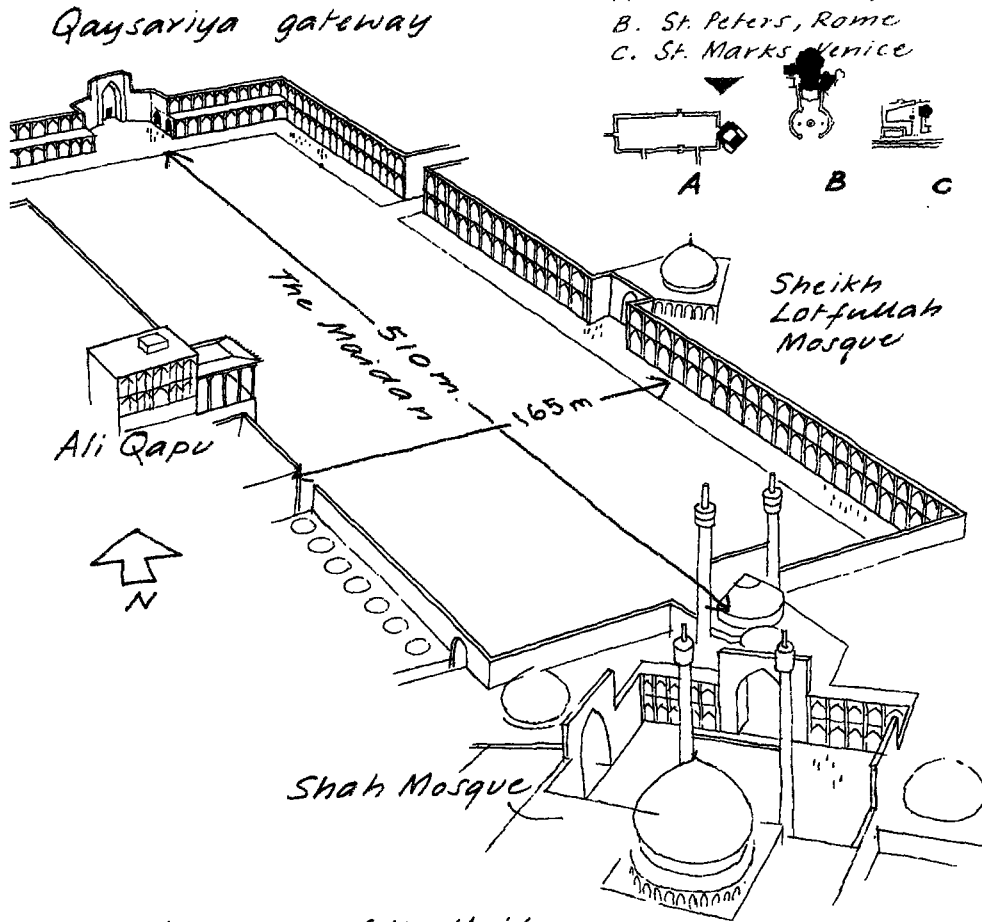
The Maidan looking south : space defined by 2 storey arcaded wall

THE MAIDAN

Spatial comparison:
 A. The Maidan, Isfahan
 B. St. Peters, Rome
 C. St. Marks, Venice



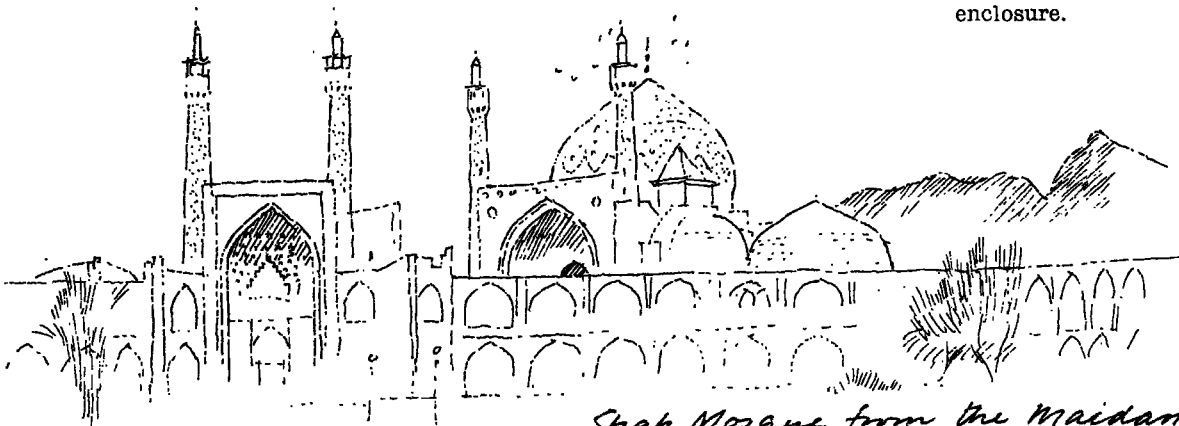
Outside, the transition space of the gateway is recessed in plan, and spreads gently into the main space of the square. In the catacomb world of the bazaar there was no hint of this tremendous civic space—the focal point of the city—510 m long and 165 m wide, seven times the size of the Piazza San Marco at Venice. Built 500 years ago by Shah Abbas the Great as the meeting place of ruler and subjects it was designed as a place for ceremony and tournament, as a market and a polo field. The first sight of it is breathtaking, and it is so powerful a statement that it stays in the memory long after you leave the city. After the sinuous world of the bazaar with all its variety of experiences, the severe order of this great civic gesture, which elsewhere could be too dictatorial, comes as a great relief. The magic lies in the immediate confrontation of the two worlds. Like a vast barrack square, the Maidan is rectangular, its perimeter defined by a continuous flat-topped wall of buff brick in double arcades, with shops below and white plaster niches above. It is a splendidly restrained architectural statement, 29, impressive in its serial rhythms and simplicity, against which is played off an urban drama of minarets and domes. A distant backcloth of jagged red-brown hills rises above the level wall



Bird's eye view of the Maidan



top, further increasing the sense of urban protection provided by the enclosure.



Shah Mosque from the Maidan



29

MAIDAN

29, looking north from the promenade round the square with the entrance to the Lotfullah mosque on the right. 30, 31, street of metalworkers on the west side of the square. 32, entrance to Lotfullah Mosque.

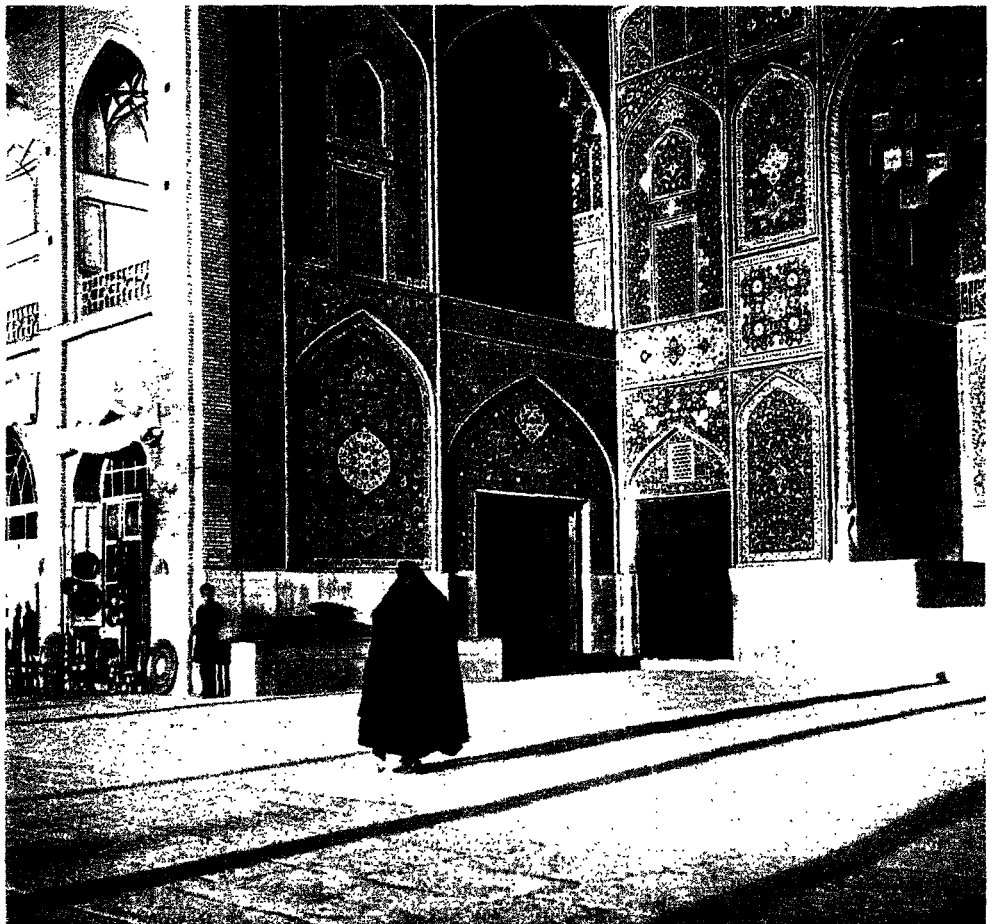
30

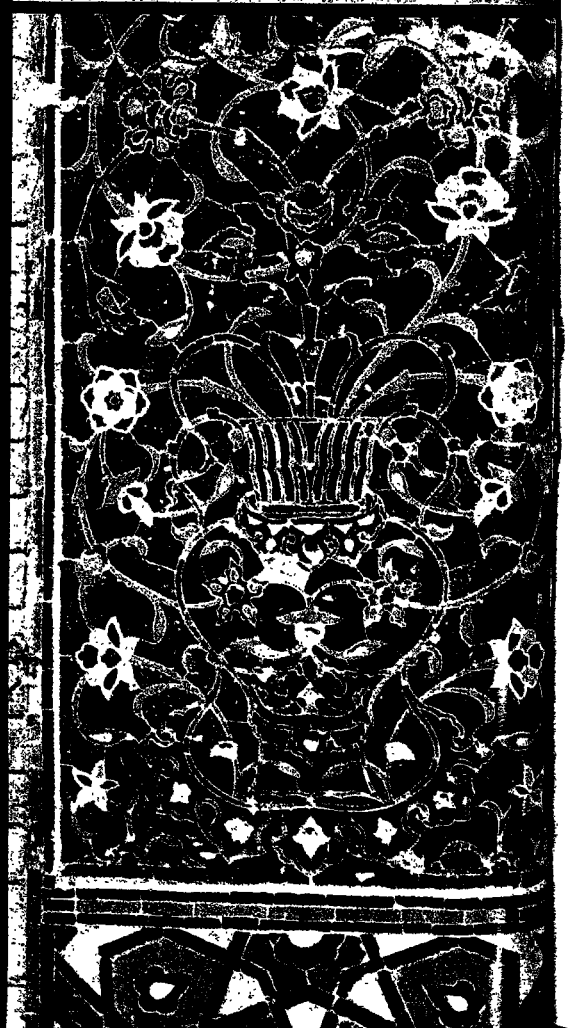
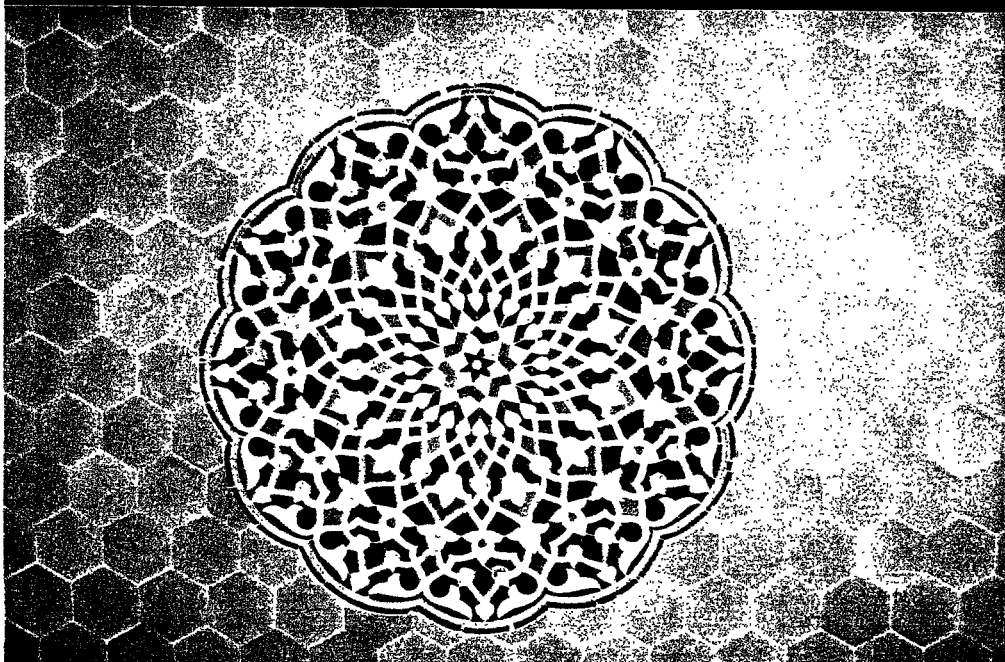


31

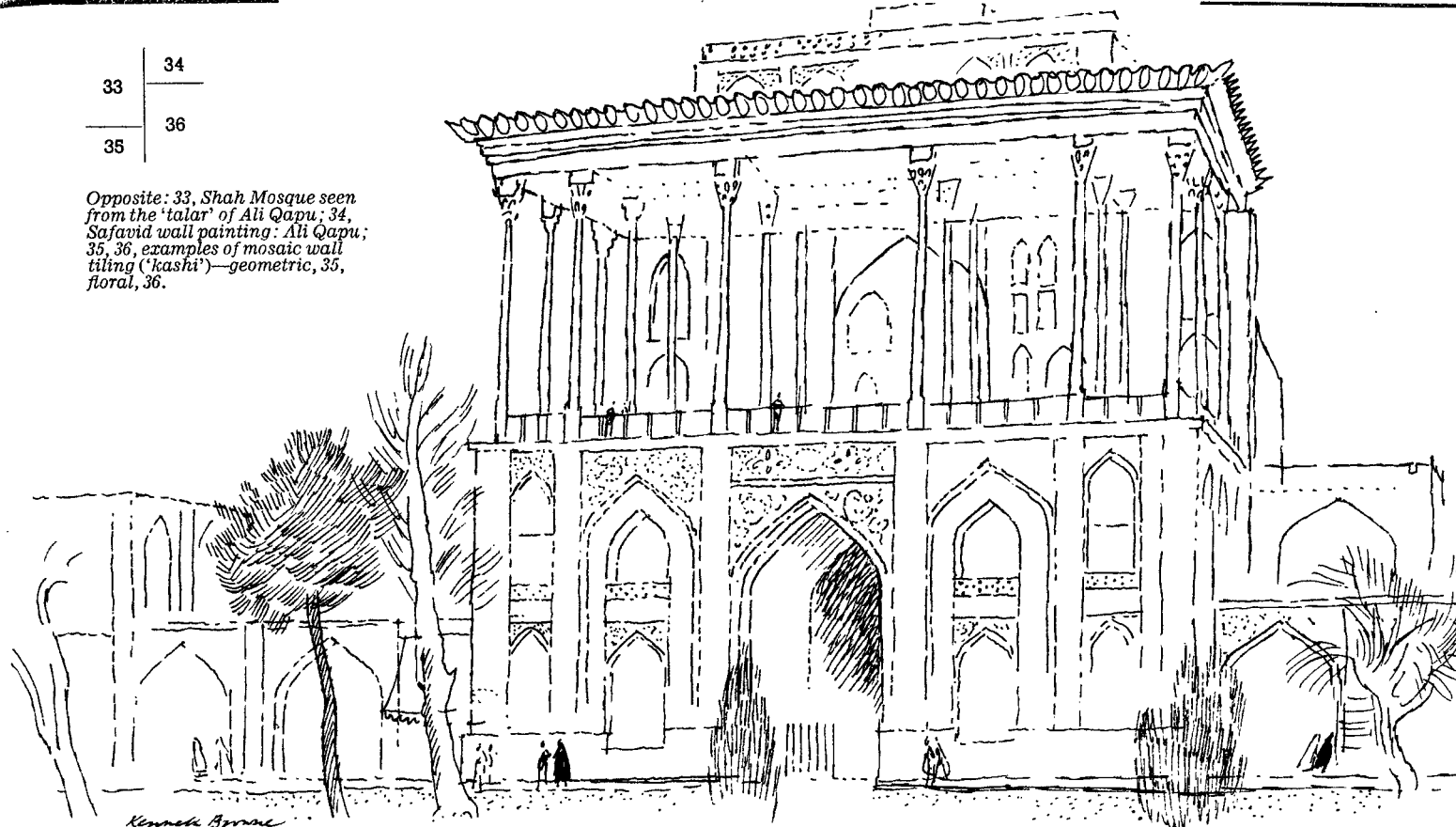


32





Opposite: 33, Shah Mosque seen from the 'talar' of Ali Qapu; 34, Safavid wall painting: Ali Qapu; 35, 36, examples of mosaic wall tiling ('kashi')—geometric, 35, floral, 36.



Ali Qapu — monumental gateway to the palace of Shah Abbas I and royal grandstand overlooking the Maidan —

37

enclosure. Besides the Qaysariya gateway* to the bazaar through which we have just come, there are three special buildings which claim attention, rising from the even, repetitive wall of the

* Above it is a musicians' gallery where music was played at sunrise and sunset every day the Shah was in residence—a Zoroastrian tradition surviving the Arab Conquest.

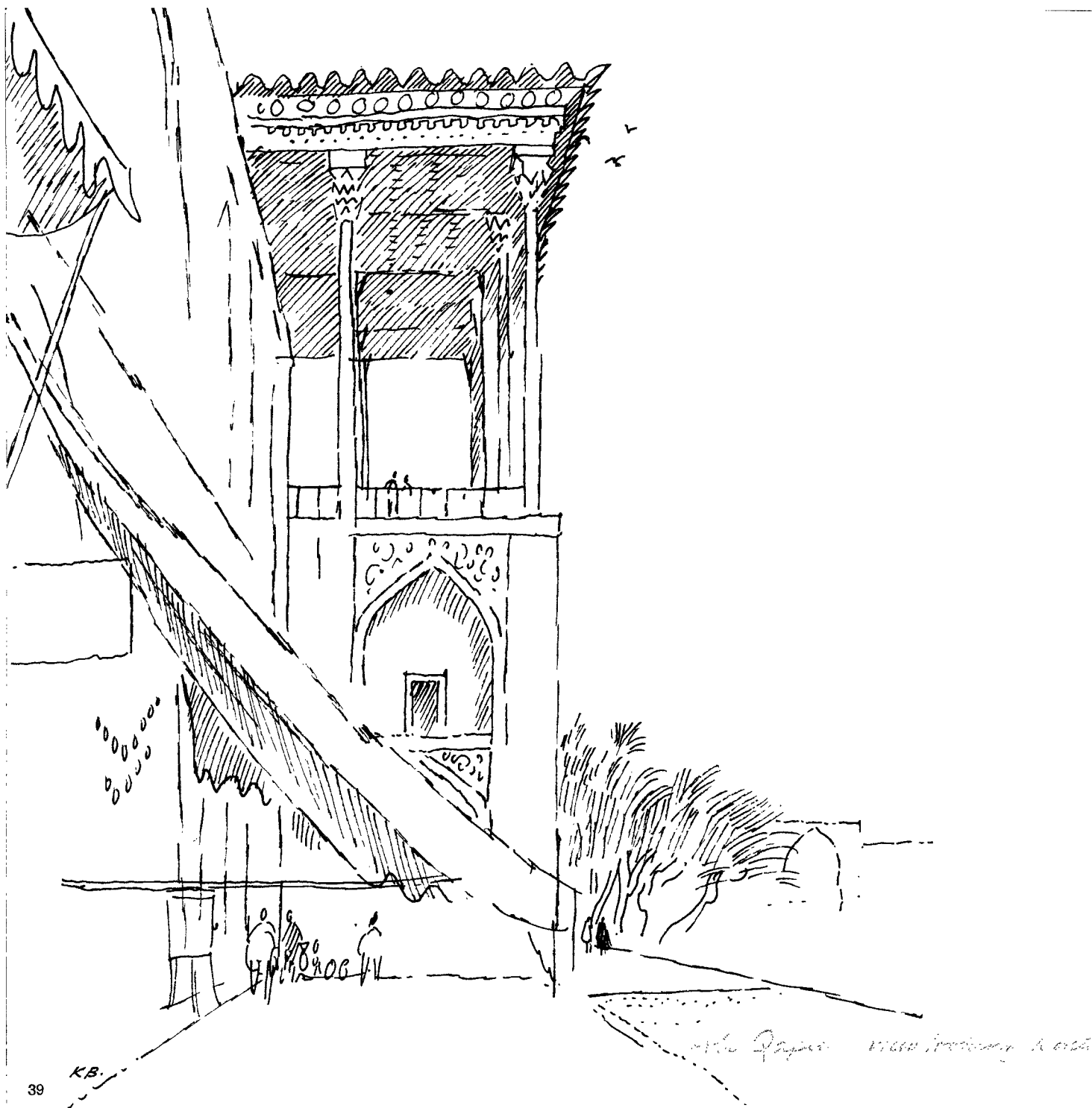
square: one to each of its remaining sides. At the south end gleam the four minarets and blue tiled dome of the great Shah Mosque, 44; to the west the royal palace of Ali Qapu, 37, 39, and on the east side facing it the smaller mosque of Sheikh Lotfullah, 38. Each confronts the square in a different manner with the

Shah Mosque as the dominant element in the scene, its giant minaret-flanked portal inviting entry and answering the lesser bazaar gateway at the other end, like opposing goals (see p274). By contrast, the Lotfullah Mosque is reticent in its stance—no courtyard, no minarets—only a superbly shaped and



Mosque of Sheikh Lotfullah —

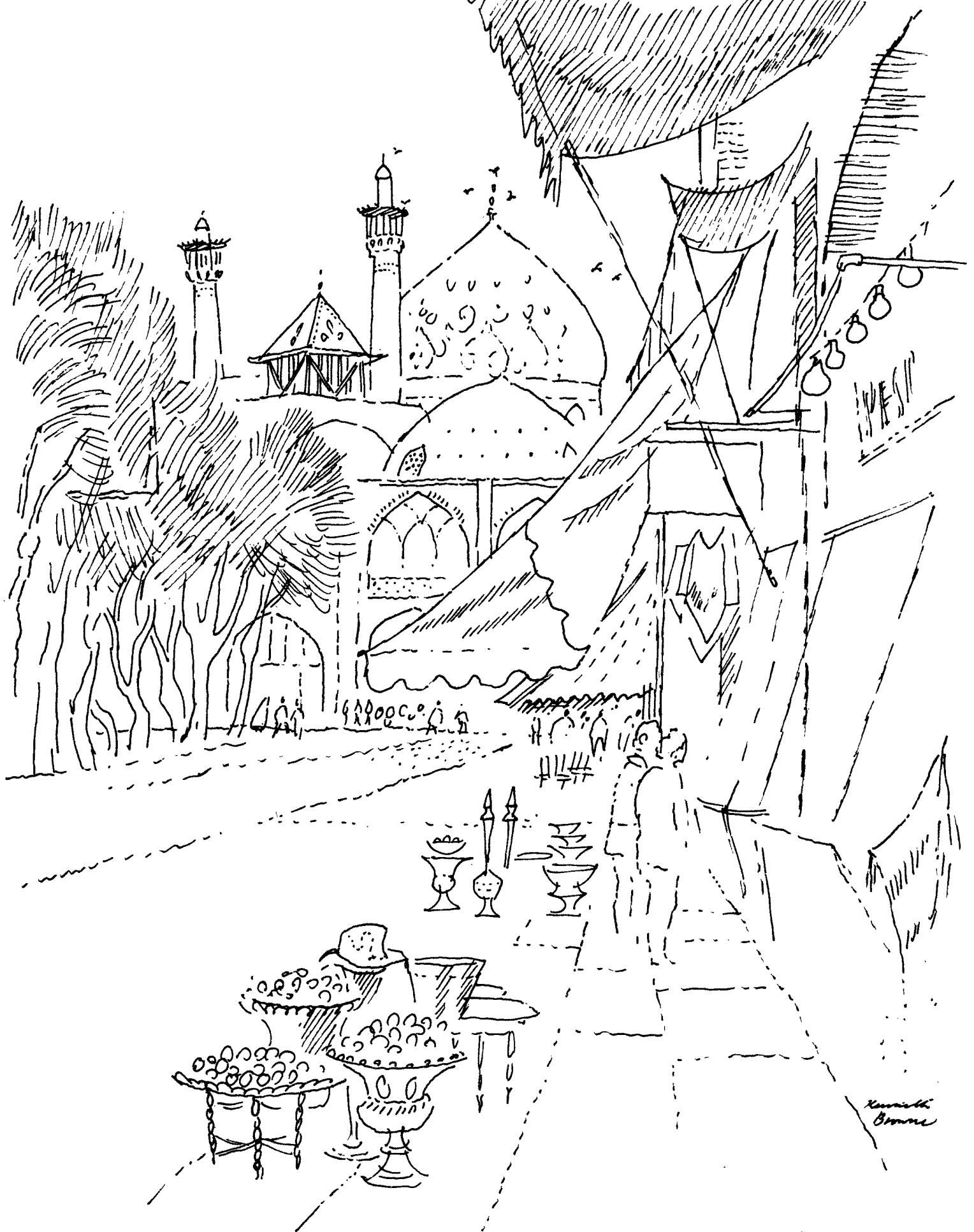
38



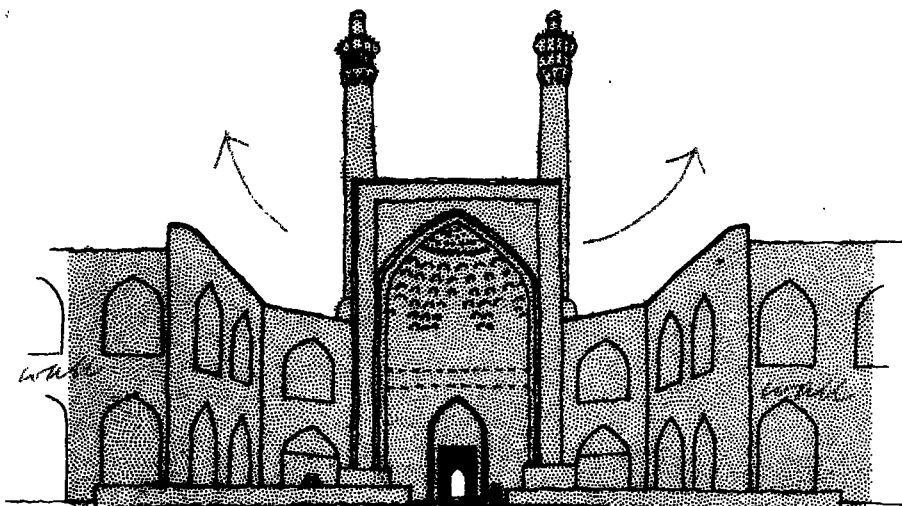
decorated dome rising above the square's arcading, with its richly tiled entrance and arabesques set back from the line of shops, 32. Walking past the shops you come upon this entrance quite unexpectedly—a sudden eyeful of colour. The domed central chamber is only reached after a twice-cranked passageway which, deliberately dark and disorientating from the outside world, releases you suddenly and symbolically beneath the exquisite dome and its vision of paradise. A fine instance of suspense in visual planning, this devious approach has the function, since the square is not so orientated, of bringing the mosque into alignment with Mecca. Around the square runs a raised promenade lined with oriental plane trees, echoed originally by water

channels, with subsidiary bazaars continuing behind the sides of the square. Standing in it, you can feel the authority with which this great square fulfils the need for urban identity, for something to which you can belong. Opposite, on the south side, stands a strikingly different kind of structure, Ali Qapu, 37, 39, both ceremonial gateway to the royal palace of the Safavid shahs and grandstand from which to view activities in the square below. It juts forward with regal authority, unlike the entries to the other major buildings which are recessed, standing proudly as an active shape in space. Its solid cube-like base does not invite entry but regally restricts it and contrasts strikingly with the hollow form of the royal viewing platform—the *talar*—

above it. This great grandstand raised 40ft above the general level of the square gave an unobstructed view of the polo, archery and other events taking place below. A magic effect is produced by making the visitor climb through the solid form of the great base, blindfolded from any but minor views, twisting and turning, to arrive suddenly on the elevated viewing platform raised high above the square, 33, his eyes no longer contained by its walls but free to range over the whole prospect of the city and the mountains beyond. The experience is enhanced yet further by seeing these through a forest of primitive wooden columns which support the flat red ceiling high above, slender tree trunks soaring upwards and trapping space between them.



View of the Mosque from an open garden which surrounds the Maidan



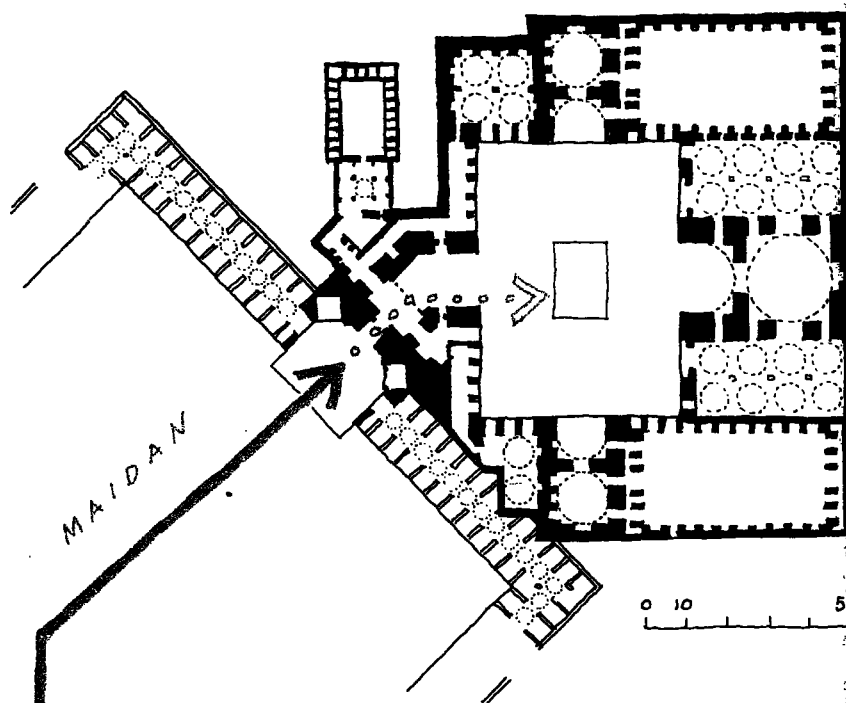
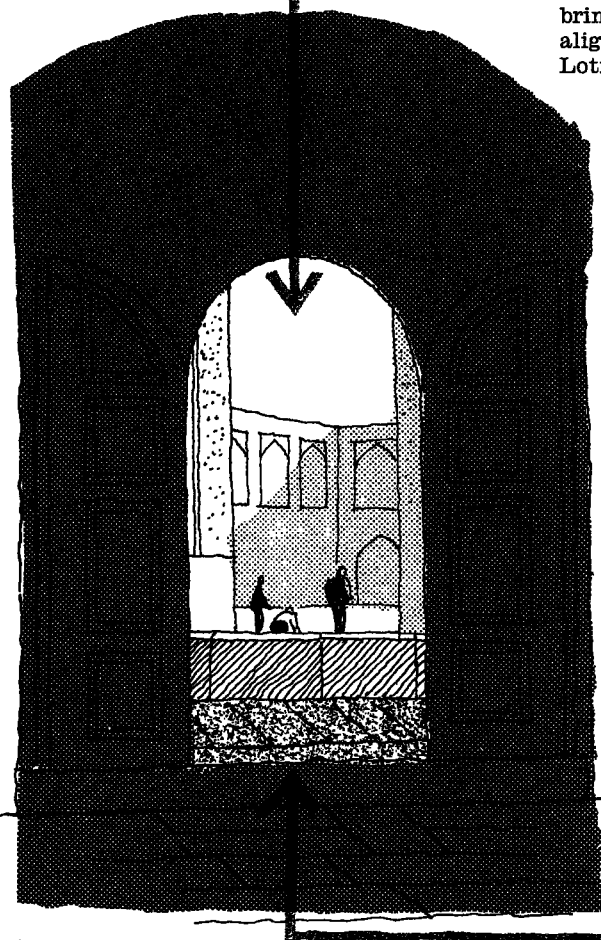
41

*Invitation
entrance portal
to Shah Mosque.*

Finally at the far south end the Shah Mosque welcomes with open arms, 41. The entry to this great building is a spatial *tour-de-force*. Flank walls of glistening polychrome tiles provide the horizontal transition, while the high portal arch with its flanking minarets defines the vertical. Always seen against the sun, only the doorway in the centre of the portal is illuminated. As you enter it you expect to confront the central courtyard—instead you are surprised to find yourself behind and to one side of the worshippers, 42. This happens because bringing the whole composition into alignment with Mecca, as with the Lotfullah Mosque, requires a 45-degree

swing in axis; and to accomplish this the domed vestibule acts as a spatial pivot, interlocking the forecourt with the great interior courtyard beyond, 46. This difficult manoeuvre is handled so brilliantly (see plan below) that it in no way appears as a planning defect, but instead adds spice to what might otherwise be a rather obvious axial ending to the square. It is an outstanding example of a designer turning an awkward situation to advantage*.

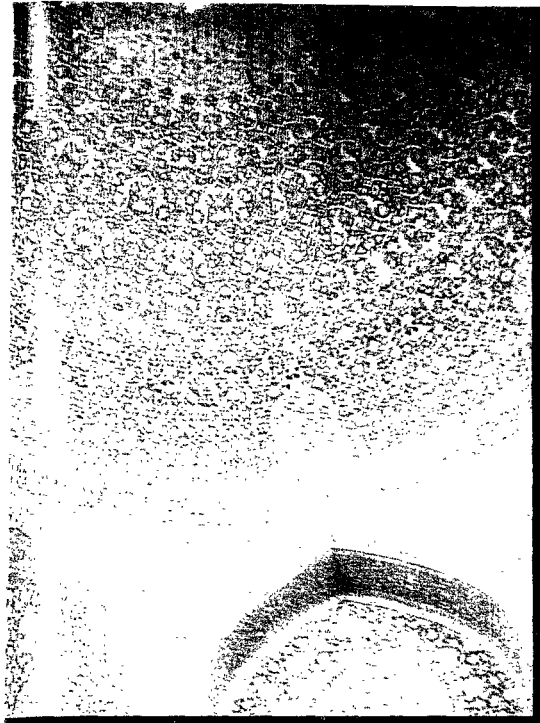
*To be fair, this opinion was not shared by the French archaeologist, Marcel Dieulafoy when he and his wife Jane visited Isfahan in 1887. To him the change of alignment was an aesthetic howler.



Plan of Shah Mosque

42

280



43
44



45

SHAH MOSQUE

43, interior of dome.

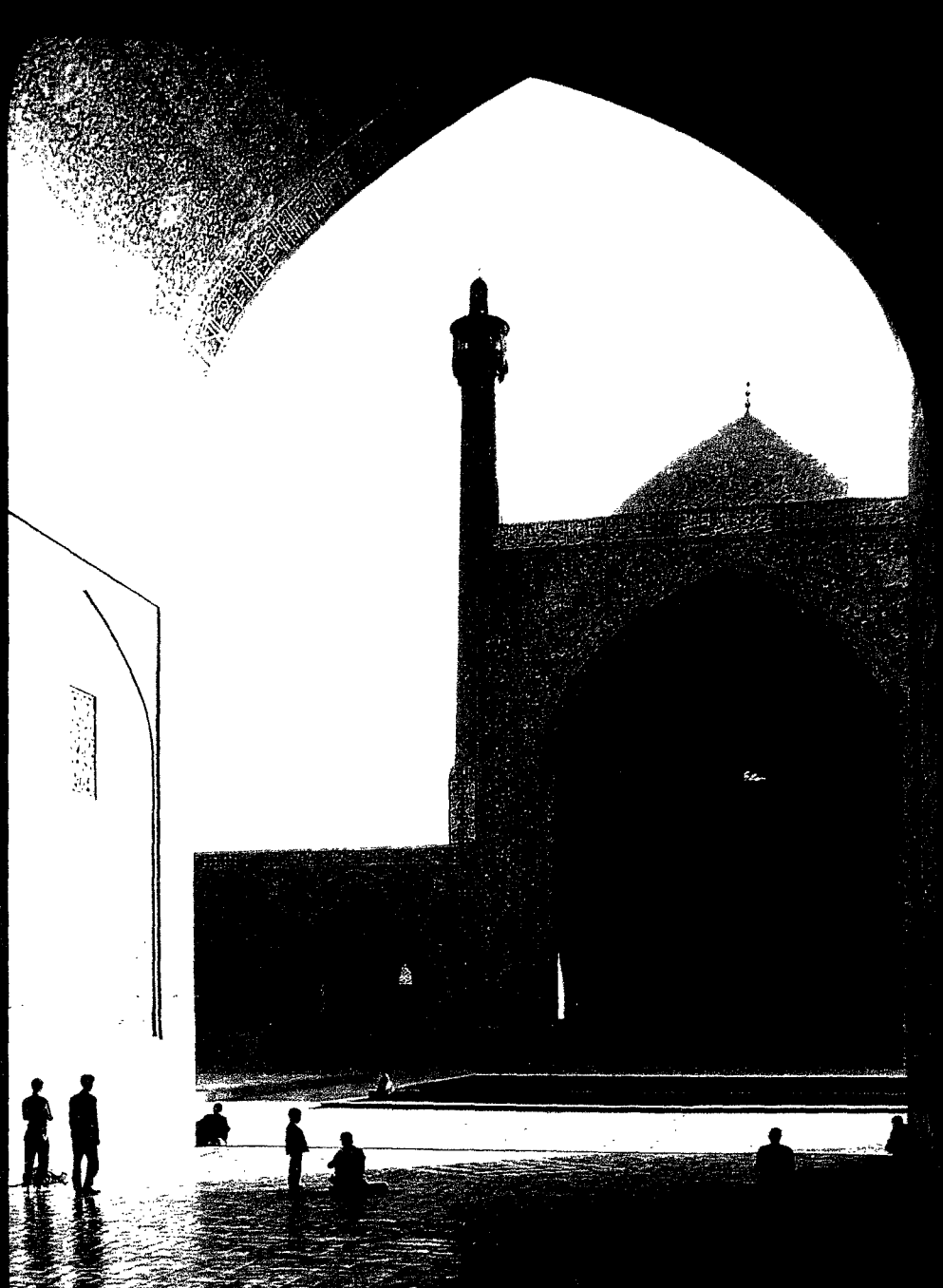
44, view from the Maidan.

45, rooftop view.

46, courtyard from north 'iwan'.

47, tiling: left, 'haft-rang' (seven colour tile)

right, 'kashi' (tile mosaic).



47



46