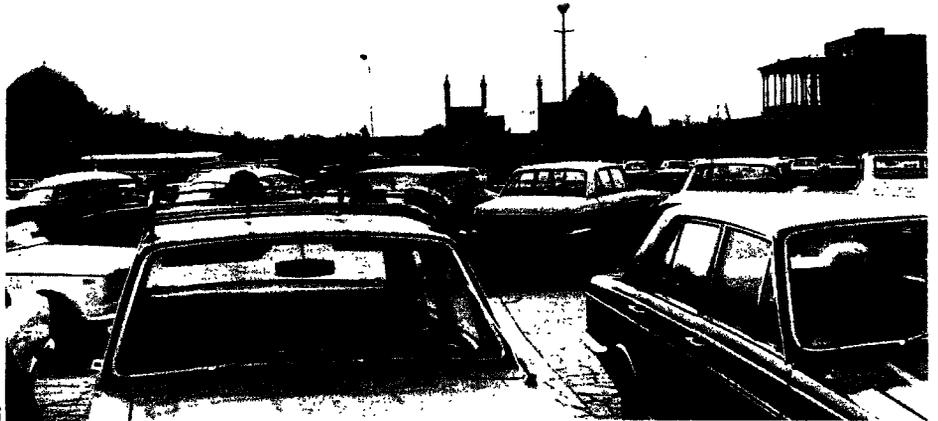


1

The same view of the Maidan looking south in 1840, 1, (from Coste's 'Monuments Modernes de la Perse' 1867) and today, 2. From left to right the Lutfullah Mosque, the Shah Mosque and Ali Qapu. By the time Coste visited Isfahan the plane trees had disappeared, but the water channel was still in place.

The same view of the Maidan looking north towards the entrance of the bazaar early in the eighteenth century, 3, (from le Bruyn's 'Travels' and today, 4 (facing page). The wrong kind of planting, unsympathetic street furniture and the sea of cars destroy the sense of space.



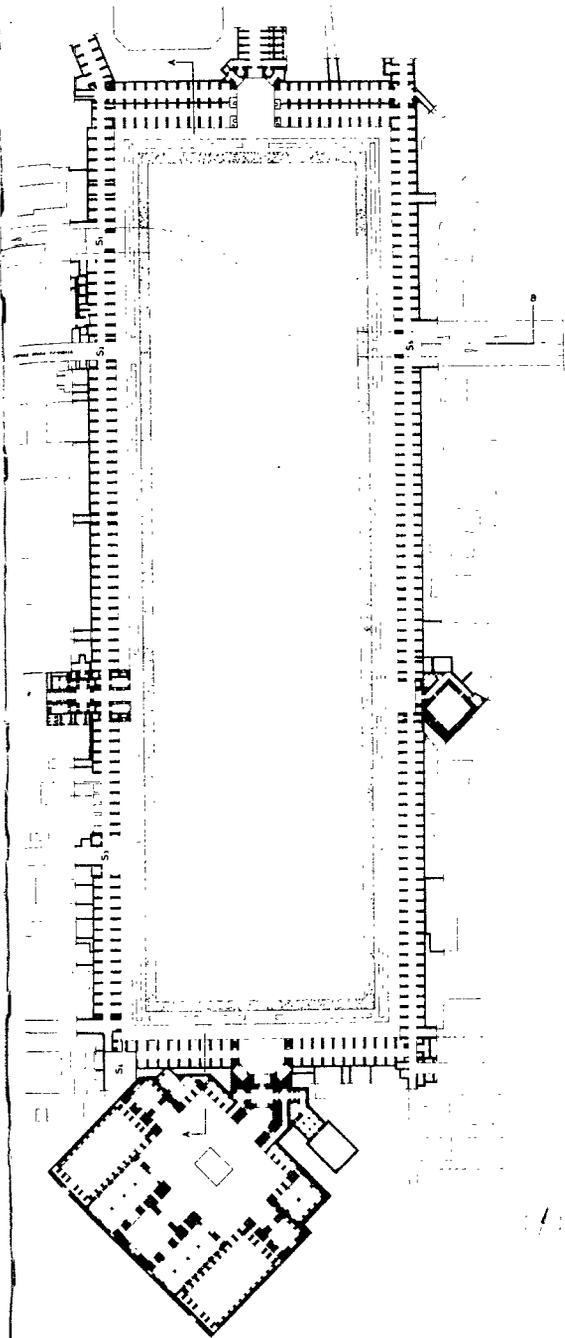
2

MAIDAN

PROBLEM AND REMEDY



3



A, IsMEO's plan for the rehabilitation of the Maidan showing the proposed tunnel for through traffic. The internal bazaar route surrounding the Maidan is to be restored, the water channel reinstated and the existing gardens in the middle removed. The problem of how to treat the vast ground surface remains unsolved.

B, section through the tunnel with the entrance gate to the bazaar behind. The first-floor rooms over the internal bazaar route will be restored.



Despite all the glorious qualities of the Maidan, there is much that is wrong with it. It is a major traffic thoroughfare and the northern end is used as a car park, 2 and 4. Its commercial activity, no longer at the centre but at the tail end of the bazaar route, is in serious decline. The modern municipal gardens and pool, which fill the central area, are a Western import and alien to the character and function of the space. They break it up and make it impossible to appreciate its extraordinary scale: instead of the uninterrupted horizontal line of the ground, which provided a simple visual link between opposite sides of the square, 1, there is now the equivalent of a street between the gardens and the pavement which encircles the square. Until recently planting and high railings blocked the view of the bazaar entrance gate. Their removal is part of a gradual rehabilitation of the Maidan to something like its original state. The project was studied by IsMEO¹ and will be carried out (when full approval is granted) by the Isfahan office of the Ministry of Culture under the direction of Bagher Shirazi. Early European travellers, like Chardin² and Le Bruyn,³ have left detailed descriptions of the Maidan. All round the edge ran a water channel, 3.50 m wide by 2 m deep. Alongside, a row of Asiatic plane trees gave shade to promenaders. Today's trees are a poor substitute, and the water channel has been filled in and part of it used as a conduit for services. The IsMEO team had no difficulty in tracing its remains. Their proposals, A and B, include its reinstatement, so that all along the perimeter route 'it will be possible to admire the monuments, that look out on to the square and note the thousand reflections in the canal waters . . .'. Having in mind the revolting state of the existing water channels in the city, they are concerned that the water should flow and that cleansing operations should be made as easy as possible by means of collecting tanks or similar devices.

The remainder of the proposals fall into two principal categories: to remove all except emergency vehicular traffic from the square, and to regenerate its commercial life. The first would be achieved by the construction of a tunnel to maintain the all-important link between Sepah Avenue and Hafez Street. The second would come about through the restoration and re-opening of the internal bazaar route (much of which is now blocked or in ruins); through the reconstruction of the first-floor rooms to provide both additional space for the shops below and a useful facility on the occasion of public festivals, when the arcades on the upper level are used like boxes in a theatre; and through the restitution of the terraces flanking the entrance to the bazaar (now encroached on by illicit commercial development), for the use of the restaurants, bars and cafes which will be housed in the buildings behind. This will surely be welcome by both Iranians and foreigners for, despite the increase in tourism, it is still impossible to sit down at a table in the Maidan and order a simple cup of tea. To these admirable proposals one must add also the necessity to revive the southern leg of the old bazaar, so that the Maidan will once again be at the centre of commercial activities.

With this regeneration of commerce there is a possibility that the vast central area of the Maidan will again be used as a market place, 3. Certainly the shops, facing both in the bazaar and on to the Maidan, will be encouraged to spread outwards. With the cumbersome gardens gone, public festivals of dance and theatre could become a regular attraction as they already are in the Piazza San Marco in Venice. And, after all, why not polo and archery again?

¹ *Progetto di Sistemazione del Maydan-i Shah* by Eugenio Galdieri and Roberto Orazi. Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente. Roma 1969.

² Jean Chardin, *op cit.*

³ *Travels into Muscovy, Persia and Part of the East Indies* by Cornelius Le Bruyn. London 1737.