

## THE PROBLEM OF THE HISTORICAL CENTRES OF IRAN

Our very gathering here and discussing the question of adapting the old urban tissues, and also the ever-increasing attention that is given to this complex problem in the contemporary world, indicates how this question has become one of the prime subjects of our time.

Utilizing past urban spaces and adapting it to the existing demands, is a problem that has always existed; and the cities, as long as they are living bodies have a constant need for changes in their cells and tissues. In order to survive they have necessarily adapted themselves to the prevailing conditions.

So, our cities have not "instantly born cities", but have mostly grown around or beside the historical nucleus. But in the past, due to the slow economic and demographic growth of society, the cities could absorb new functions with suitable expansion, and meantime the changes were so slow that they seemed very natural. Some of our remote towns that have not been exposed to modern technology, have easily kept their organic structures.

Basically, the idea of intervention in the past urban tissues arises when it is ascertained that they can no longer fulfill the new functions. Now, if the new functions are heterogeneous with the old ones, the changes are nothing but the defacing and spoiling of the old tissues.

Our experience especially in the last decades, has demonstrated the fact that attention has been centred on giving new and completely foreign functions to these kind of tissues, or a predetermined and not necessarily suited scheme is forced on them. (e. g. Hamadan, Isfahan...). Seldom can one find an example of an intervention in our old cities, where a critical view is used to assess historical and cultural values (Kashan, Isfahan...).

In fact, due to the vertigo that we experienced in the

intensive friction with the industrialized world, we have never had the chance to try and make an analytical assessment of values and possibilities. And what we have done has been more like destruction than some kind of city planning in its real sense.

Merely for putting up a show or for a momentary feeling of a particular problem, we have incurably injured our old towns in the name of streets and squares.

Even at the present, as far as I know, usually the evaluation of historical-artistical values in treating the old tissues is as follows : the city planner usually having secured a list of individual monuments, gives himself the right to go about plugging in the inflexible so-called standards as long as the enlisted monuments remain untouched.

Fortunately, the upheavals that have occurred to our historical centres are not on a vast scale, and as a last chance, before the "master plans" (now being prepared) are laid down for execution, we may be able to save many of the old cities values.

Our behavior towards historical centers so far indicates that, "if many of our old city tissues are left intact, it is because the conditions for destruction have not all been available, and not because we wanted to conserve them", (probably the municipalities have no money for executing their projects).

Today, although it seems that we are able to bestow a greater beauty and significance on the environment in which we live, we must openly admit that we still do not clearly know which one of the possible paths will lead us to have a more beautiful and constructive environment. In fact, it means that, either we have not yet distinguished the paths, or "we have failed to comprehend and fulfill the necessities of our society".

If it is so, how can we, for example, understand that the historical centres can furnish means to answer many particular cultural needs, or possibly offer clues to our modern urban spaces ?

In any way, there are many possibilities and potentialities at our disposal and we are not well aware of their size and quality.

A proper use of all these (of course after complete awareness of them) for answering our existing needs requires a conscious plan, which means : "an attempt to guide all possible and existing abilities in order to resolve the problem of necessities and oblige them to co-ordinate their actions".

When our plan is based on a continued enquiry and promoted by it, it assumes a dynamic aspect, hence it will be responsive to our ever-changing demands.

Since this plan takes in consideration all possible aspects, and tries to use all potentialities it can not and should not neglect the possibilities that the historical centres offer in different circumstances, and never will such a matter be forgotten so as to appear a strange problem in the future. In other words, our plan will operate on our whole living environment and will be executed for a space in which the "cultural unity" is presumed; the meeting of old and new is a concept quite different from separation of old and new. So the old is always alive and forms a part of modern life.

If by historical centre we mean that part of the city which cannot support all the new functions, we will consider it as a part of the whole which can carry out only a part of today's city functions.

Having considered the above, "the historical center will never be assumed as a separate unit from the new city, but will continue its life on the side of it" and will carry out its share. Of course it must be brought to attention that "the structure of the old city is only suitable for some of modern life's needs, and the organism of the new city will be so arranged that only the appropriate functions would be carried out by the old tissues".

Certainly the old city while achieving its new success in every step of the plan must accept some changes. "These changes are merely in the direction of preserving and not overturning it, and we should note that the reason behind preserving the old tissues is not merely for the historical-artistical values; its practical values also must be seriously considered". Because in most cases using the practical values is what secures the upkeep of other values.

In any case, at the present time, many of the old tissues of our towns have still preserved their attracting abilities, and as long as these abilities exist one can hope for the conservation of historical-artistical values adherent to them. Usually, such abilities are due to a religious, economic or social - cultural incentive. For example, the "bazars", due to the attracting ability and the influence which they possess over their field of action, are to be considered extra special economic incentives, and still as an important artery they can give life and activity to most old Persian cities. It is along and around the bazar strip that the most interesting monuments of old Persian cities have grown (e.g. the bazars of Isfahan, Kashan...). Certainly one can not

hope for conservation of the tissue around the bazar if the economic life moves away from it. In fact, the bazars in order to continue their life need some rather rigid necessities; especially when it concerns the location and accessibility. Naturally one cannot neglect such needs, since the neglect of these needs is what has caused the bazar activity to move mostly to the streets where transportation and accessibility are more easily attained. Therefore if no attempt is made to conserve the practical values that the bazars offer, how can one expect the conservation of other historical-artistical values of the tissues around them.

Unfortunately, the most valuable parts of our historical cities are being deserted, and it is because no attempt was made to adapt them to the conditions and a consequent loss of all living facilities.

To leave these parts in their present condition leaves them no alternative but deterioration and early death.

Since we believe that conservation is neither mummification of a historical centre, nor leaving it to deteriorate, before losing every chance, we must initiate effectively and promptly in the direction of assessing the exact position and the role of the urban cultural heritage in our national economic and social-cultural plan. By understanding the objective realities and proper evaluation, without neglecting the cultural values, we should start with harmony using adequate caution in manipulating our historical centres, and assessing those values that must be defended and improved.

In this process we must utilize all possibilities in a vast field. The universities which have not so far shown enough interest in this field, must play the main role. Also to find a solution for this puzzling problem, contacts like this convention on the international level can be quite productive, provided that, they do not end as intellectual communication, between individuals, but continue as progressive collaboration, between cultural institutions and groups in their most active and constructive form.

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