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Persian Bazaar and Its Impact on Evolution of Historic Urban Cores - the Case of Isfahan

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Abstract

The tourist usually prefers to visit a comfortable city but also do so because of its old monument. The study of urban history reveals that a variety of factors has influenced the development of ancient cities. Isfahan as one of these most significant historical cities plays a critical role in portraying the Social interactions and Islamic beliefs which has mainly drawn public attentions because of its distinct transformation of social structure by means of architecture and urbanization. By this means, Bazaar became known as a joint of social activities and cultural values, especially in Isfahan as a pre-capital city of Iran. As the most significant pedestrian network Bazaar plays an important role in the development and livability of Isfahan as an important traditional city. In this paper the historical development of the Bazaar of Isfahan will be explored based on its social context and subsequently the organization and the remarkable impact of this phenomenon on the formation of historical spots in Isfahan will be explained.

Keywords: *Bazaar, Traditional cities, Iran, Urbanization, Isfahan*

1. Introduction

Architecture and Urbanization in Greater Iran has a continuous history from at least 5000B.C. to the present, with characteristic examples distributed over a vast area from Syria to North India and the borders of China. Architecturally speaking Iran's history could be divided to two eras: Pre-Islamic era and After Islam. Since most of architecture and ancient buildings during this Pre-Islamic time were torn down and there are few remaining constructions from that period of history like Takht-e Jamshid(Persepolis) and Pasargad which are still exposed to destruction, the emphasis of this paper is mainly on the architecture and urbanization after Islam which could be deemed as a sudden alternation in design of buildings and also cities.

One of the most remarkable Islamic cities is Isfahan (also called Esfahan or Hispahan), today the third largest city in Iran. Isfahan was awarded UNESCO world heritage status both because of its architectural significance and as a reflection of the tangible link between its design and Islamic

belief and customs. This city is mainly known for its big Islamic quadrangle area called Naghsh-e Jahan which is surrounded by old mosques constructed after the entrance of Islam into Iran which is connected to the city center by some small alleys called Bazaar which comprises a long and narrow vaulted roof corridor surrounded by stores mainly made by bricks and wooden structure and also applying Islamic colored glaze tiles- which could be observed in Chinese Vernacular architecture either coming along the Silk Road- .

Bazaars in Isfahan in not only limited to Naghsh-e Jahan square, but also could be enormously seen as chains in different parts of the city in order to gather them all together.

This paper is aimed to discuss briefly about concept of Bazaar and its remarkable influence on the housing and urban development of Isfahan which is nowadays the most important city in Iran with respect to ancient buildings and also tourist attractions.

2. Bazaar from the Past to the Present

Bazaar as a traditional public space in Iranian cities has always accommodated a great section of commercial activities in urban life. As time passed, it became the inseparable part of each city and the place for exchange of commercial goods from near and far off places. The history of bazaar and urbanization are interrelated to each other and in fact, no city can be imagined without bazaar. The word “bazaar” is an old Persian word which has become an integrated part of Iranian culture. It has a very long and old history. Historical documents indicate that bazaar has existed in Iranian cities and towns since 3000 B.C. (Soltanzadeh, 2000).

The bazaars of Islamic cities are among the greatest products of the Islamic civilization which were without any counterpart in the ancient east, as well as in Greece, ancient Rome or the Europe of middle ages. At the time, Islam gained control over a large part of the world, and bazaar became a common feature of the cities under its government. It is clear that the uniqueness and originality of an Islamic city was in the commercial constructions which are gathered in a compressed space in a uniform and continuous form in the center of the city. Even today, despite the apparent changes in social and urban structure of cities, bazaar still brings to mind the uniqueness of an Islamic city. In this regard, economy and religion may be considered the two basic elements which, from the very beginning of the establishment of Islamic bazaars, have intervened together in the expansion of the bazaar. They still remain the basic element of difference between the operation of this kind of bazaar and other bazaars (luxury and modern markets in the Islamic countries and the markets of non-Islamic nations).

3. Bazaar in Urban Fabric of Isfahan

Each Bazaar has had different functions in different cities of Iran so that they vary based on their size, location and importance. Some of the cities which were located alongside trading routes (like Silk Way) had a greater bazaar, and the others which were distant from these routes had a weaker bazaar.

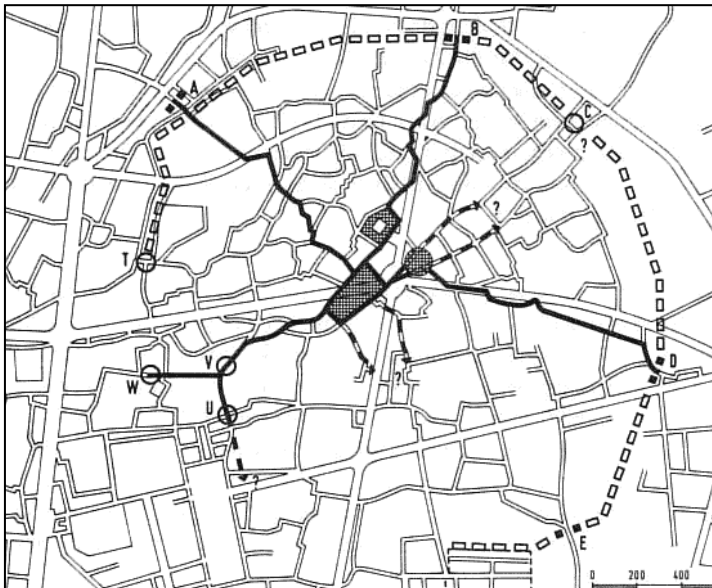
Bazaars in Iran generally categorized into three types;

- *“Periodic Bazaar”*; without any architectural space and totally scattered throughout the city intended to be a place for exchanging goods

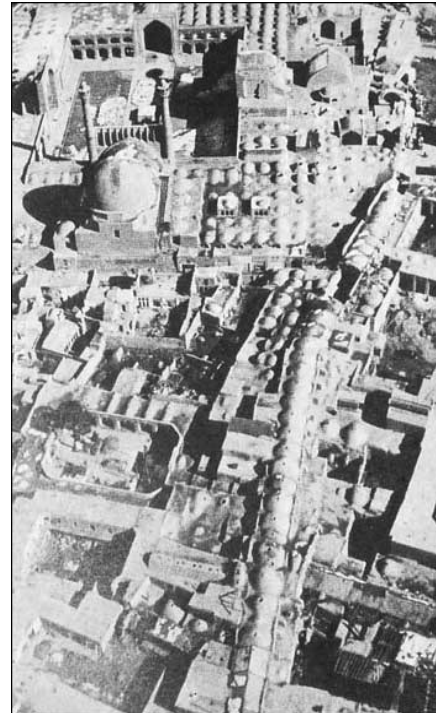
- *Urban Bazaar*; as a popular urban space which accommodated commercial activities along with social and cultural activities of people
- *Local Bazaar*; was a smaller type of urban bazaar with less importance which was allocated to a particular area or district of the city or town” (Moosavi, 2006).

Bazaars in Isfahan belong to the Urban Bazaar category which covered public passageway which is surrounded by shops and stores in two sides. It was, therefore, a place for shopping, walking, social dialog, and cultural interaction of people so that it could be deemed as the most important and influential public space in Isfahan and any other ancient cities and towns of Iran.

The Bazaar of Isfahan consisted of two parts, the old section, which started from the old square, close to the Friday mosque, and the new section, which started from Naghsh-e-Jahan square and connected to the old section. By the 11th century, after selecting Isfahan as the capital of Saljuqid era, the old square had become the center of the city. It had a castle, a drum house, a qaiseria and shops selling silk, brocade, materials, precious stones, ivory and many other goods. There were some peripheral markets along the main streets radiating from the old square from at least that time. The 1.5 Km (1,650-yard) shopping street is still the main street in the bazaar, the longest vaulted bazaar street in the world (Bakhtiari, 1974).



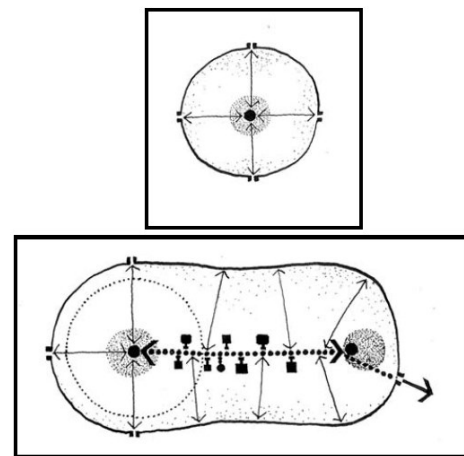
*Bazaar in Isfahan in 11th century (left)
The old Bazaar, which starts from Friday mosque (right)*



4. Structure and organization

Isfahan's economy, as one of the biggest and most important cities in Iran, was highly dependent on the existence of Bazaar as a heart of the city which was considered as a place to bring together all the people. These Bazaars have developed in an unplanned manner and over the centuries to form complex, organic entities into which, from time to time, accents of rational order were injected. Their growth was dependent upon economical needs of the city. The direction of bazaars has normally changed to provide access to the major and public buildings of Isfahan. Hence, the location of fundamental buildings of the city and the direction of urban streets has gradually changed to become more compatible with location and direction of bazaar. In this case, it was an urban axis which would connect the major gates of the city physically and visually (Gharipour, 2003).

As already mentioned there are new and old parts of Bazaar in Isfahan which are characterized by two important zones; the old square and Naghsh-e Jahan square. The most important difference between the old and the new Bazaar is the organic growth of the old section in a linear form and the radial growth of the new bazaar. The old Bazaar was developed based on meeting the needs of the society and providing the best accessibility for people in the neighborhood residential quarters, called *Mahalleh*. These residential buildings surrounded the Bazaar as if the buildings are stretching out their arms to embrace the Bazaar as a heart of the neighborhood. On the other side, the new Bazaar plays a role as joint to connect the Naghsh-e Jahan square to the old part of the city- including the old Bazaar. Since Naghsh-e Jahan square nowadays became known as the main part of the city, the new Bazaar plays a significant role in the connection of the city and the square. The square is anchored on its four sides with the establishment of the Jamé Mosque on the south end, the Lutfallah Mosque on the east, the Ali Qapu Palace on the west, and a grand bazaar on the north end. The architecture of the square is highly dependent on the surrounding mosques and the core area which enrolls as a courtyard and also Bazaar which could be regarded as the main part. This narrow-long corridor surrounded by stores plays a key role in the formation of Naghsh-e Jahan because on one hand it gathers all the mosques together- as a chain- and on the other it makes it possible to the square to be joined to the city center and old also old Bazaar so that it could be called a director of the square to different part of the city by different junctions called *Raste* which connects neighborhood residential areas to the bazaar. Through these residential alleys the bazaar is connected to the main streets of the city. The number of these routes (*Raste*) depends on the development of trade at different areas.

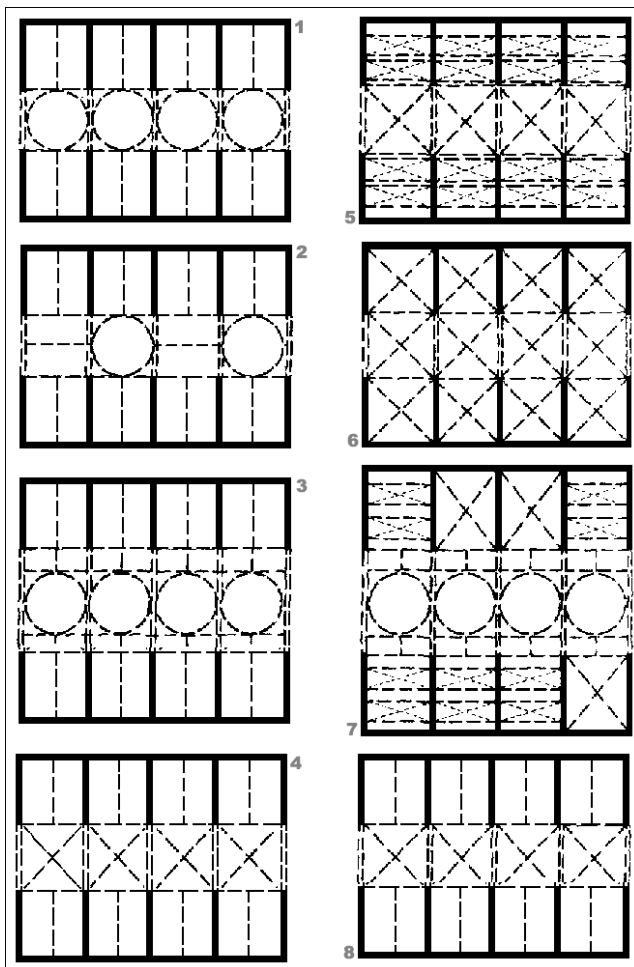


The concept of point and line; The center as a single point in space moves in time and creates the line or the linear concept of the Bazaar

The Bazaar of Isfahan, like other bazaars in Islamic cities, can be divided into three parts:

- “*Raste and Dehliz*, which are the main and peripheral streets and corridors inside the bazaar.
- *Caravansarais*, which are the economic complexes with stores and places for (residing) housing merchants.
- *Qaisarya, timce and sarai*, which are economic complexes without any residential possibilities” (Mohammad Gharipour, 2003)

The value of shops is related to their distance from the main street of bazaar. Closer to the main Raste, the value of the shop is higher. But in general, the most expensive shops in the bazaar of Isfahan are located around the Naghsh-e-Jahan Square (Kiani, 1985). Architecturally speaking, Rastes have been designed in different manners in the old and new Bazaars, in an organic and unplanned way in the former and in a designed form in the latter. While the space of the organic Bazaar is irregular in all directions, the second is characterized by domed structural bays, which are rhythmically organized. Although the whole pattern of Bazaars in Isfahan shaped in an organic and unplanned manner, the organization of these well-designed



Rastes in the new Bazaar somewhat harmonizes this commercial-social-cultural complex.

5. Conclusion

Cities, like any other kind of man made creature undergo transformation and develop during the time. This phenomenon is much more tangible in some cities with a significant history in spite of the fact that all of these ancient cities or towns nowadays have been too many efforts into maintaining their valuable heritages.

Isfahan, the city honored as UNESCO world heritage status, became known because of its architectural significance and urban phenomenon which make this city completely distinguishable from the other cities in Iran.

Among all architectural and urban elements, historical Bazaars in Isfahan play significant roles in formation of the city so that the ancient urban cores of Isfahan are highly dependent on the orientation of Bazaars which function as local, social and also cultural cores of the whole city.

As all Bazaars of ancient Iranian cities were designed in linear -along with peripheral junctions- organization, these ancient urban areas including Isfahan as one of the Persian mega cities have been organized base on the physical and spatial influence of Bazaars.

Unfortunately, modernization trends in Iranian cities- mostly in a wrong way- only attempt to find a place for automobiles and subsequently no public place or pedestrian pathway are designed or restored in this process. The result is that our cities die on the inside like the current circumstance of Naghsh-e Jahan square in Isfahan. There is no longer any social or cultural activity in the historical parts of the city, and only a few important monuments operate as museums for the visitors and tourists which don't play a role in the social life of local residents.

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Page 68: Raste and Dehliz (right), a long and narrow corridor covered with vaulted roof. The different type of Rastes (left): the middle horizontal row consist of Circles and Squares represent the Different shape of Rastes, some covered with the vaulted roofs and some are totally open.