

A comparison of "identity" in vernacular (traditional) and contemporary (modern) houses

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Abstract: Ethnic diversity and cultural multiplicity of Iran is due to its different climates. This climactic and cultural diversity can give rise to some symbols which have different interpretations and identities in various cultures and climates. Therefore, it is clear that the place is the most significant criterion to measure human identity. Also, human identity determines the identity of each building, the architecture of that particular time, climate and place. Based on the existing evidences, form and decorations of a house significantly affect moods and behavior of residents. Therefore, the present paper attempts to investigate traditional and modern identity of houses to clarify their distinctions. The present study which applies a comparative-historical research approach, firstly, aims to consider the concept of identity in the traditional and modern houses, and secondly to understand the difference or distinction of these two with each other. The hypothesis of the study revolves around the fact that the traditional houses identity can significantly contribute to physical and mental comfort of their residents.

Key words: Identity; Traditional Houses; Modern Houses; Comfort

1. Introduction

The issue of "identity in architecture" is one of the most debatable issues in the area of architecture which has affected architectural thinking in the recent years and has occupied the mind of scholars in this area. This trend consequently has motivated experts and especially critics of this area to develop an identity-based architecture.

However, what are the factors of architecture with a rich identity? What is the status of architecture's identity in the area of architecture? Architecture with a rich identity belongs to what era and place? Does personal identity play a significant role in architectural identity? Is there any relationship between civil identification and architectural identification?

It is clear that identity is not a straightforward issue and its roots dates back to different historical layers either in terms of time and place. Factors such as personal identity, life spiritual identity and also the physical identity of building materials play some roles in the identity of architecture and provide

2. Identity

What is identity? First of all, identity is a process rather than something "observable". It could be regarded as a foot step left by civilization during history. This foot step is the same culture or identity of a civilization.

Secondly, as identity is a process, it could not be formed immediately or in a short period of time. Man forms its identity when facing its real problems. For example, without any concern with their identity, the Europeans initiated industrial revolution, although they were able to obtain a huge amount of wealth in that process, remained still French, English and Germanic.

Thirdly, the identity is not self-conscious. Understanding our self and environment, we are able to find our identity. Any attempt to abridge, manipulate and fake the identity is finally disadvantageous to us. This is a type of trickery, mask and presenting some signs. There is distinct difference between sign and symbol, because it entails a reaction from a Pavlov type, i.e. it is a passive reaction. For example, a person who shakes a flag and others rise up and show their respect, has done a passive reaction. If an architect who lives in a foreign country, then come back to its original land and construct a glass building same as the one in the countries which he visited, the only work he has done is the transfer of signs. However, if the same architect learn the architectural principles and apply them to a very different series of material, climactic situations, customs and traditions, it is probable that he construct a building which is not completely made of glass but it is so proportionate to the status and thus the identity of that particular place. The climactic situations in this process are very determining (Coria, 2003).

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3. The lexical meaning of "identity" based on the view of scholars, architectures and civil engineers

In Dehkhoda Persian Dictionary, identity means dignity, and the same meaning is common among scholars and professionals (Dehkhoda, 1925). In Amid Persian Dictionary, identity means the reality of an object or person which entails its natural characteristics. The verbal meaning of the word "identity" is character, nature and existence (Amid, 1984). Oxford Dictionary defines "identity" as who or what somebody/something is (Oxford, 2008).

Stewart Hall regards identity as a process of becoming which the main factor is being identified (Ghotbi, 2008). The identity is the main factor to make a distinction between person and persons, an object and objects, and a group and groups. Charles Jenkes believes that "the identity is the classification and relating oneself to another thing or another person" (Tajic, 2004).

Christopher Alexander regards identity as physical embodiment of anonymous qualities in buildings, the qualities which are the basics of life and soul in each person, city, building and pure nature, and it is not possible to appoint a name to them (Alexander, 2005). Rappaport presents a smart solution regarding the issue of identity. He categorizes identity into public and private and believes that it is necessary to make a distinction between two main identity instruments (Van Mais, 2004).

1-Private identity: solidifying identity for self and close acquaintances and the only persons who are able to recognize such symbols are knowledgeable ones.

2-Public identity: the symptoms of this instrument must be clear and identifiable.

Having a private identity means an extra-group difference, while public identity means having an intra-group identity. Therefore, having identity entails simultaneous possession of different and similar qualities.

4. The relationship between identity and environment

Environment is composed of a series of interrelated behavioral connections which have some common similarities. The main elements of such connections include behavior index pattern and physical environment. Following a short analysis of "an anonymous quality" which plays role in the survival of cities and buildings, Alexander explains that "for defining such quality in these buildings and cities, it must be first noted that the identity of each space results from repetitions of a particular patterns of the events happened in that place" (Alexander, 2006).

Rappaport considers the environment as the result of the establishment of a meaningful relationship. Based on his view, "environment may be regarded as a series of relationships between

objects and objects, objects and people, people and people. Such relationships have an orderly nature, and take advantage of a pattern and structure" (Rappaport, 2005).

5. Identity and architecture

What is architecture? Is this a new question regarding life and thinking of men? Have the questions man ask oneself regarding self and place changed during time? A brief look at the history of human indicates that the main preoccupation of man as a creature capable of thinking and deciding on his situation has been settlement and finding a house. Man has experienced a long way since the selection of a cave to live to construct the most sophisticated settlements. However, the question is that whether its human nature has changed due to change in demands, questions and innovations or not? Elaborating on this issue from the perspective of the nature of architecture as an issue which is always merged with the existence of humanity can uncover different aspects of identity and architecture (Nadieh Imani, 1999).

6. Definitions and interpretations of a house

Although entire world seems has the same form and meaning, different cultures and communities regard differently the family institution and the concept of house has changed throughout the history. Nowadays, frequent analysis of issues such as construction of mass housing projects, industrial housing and home economy as the consequences of modern architecture has distanced us from the real meaning of a house and nobody either considers the philosophical meaning and nature of a house. Man constructs a house for its own sake. Sometimes house construction becomes a profitable consumable commodity and eyes are closed to the actual meaning of house as a place to achieve comfort, values, personal and family identities (Barati, 2003).

7. The concept of house in Persian language

The word "house" maybe is regarded as the most significant word to understand the concept of living and it must be evaluated at different cultures. In the conundrum of culture and at different ages, this word denotes common concepts and sometimes multiplied; until today, which this word is applied has become devoid of its main concepts. Understanding meaning of this word and its antonyms can be an open door to know better the architectural culture of Iran regarding house and settlement, and elaborate discussion on this issue is out of the scope of this study. However, it must be added that the diversity of meaning and concept of the house shows the extreme significance of house in Iranian culture (Barati, 2003).

8. Main identity-making spaces in traditional houses

Space is the essence of architecture in Iran. The definition of space in architecture is defined as its amount of occupation. The degree of occupation or enclosure depends on the presence of ceiling, floor and walls. Based on this, in all Iranian buildings and cities constructed in pre-Islamic and Islamic era, three types of buildings are used in different forms and dimensions including open spaces, semi-open spaces and closed spaces. These three types of space were always formed simultaneously and adjacent to each other. Typical of room, corridor and courtyard are open, semi-open and closed spaces.

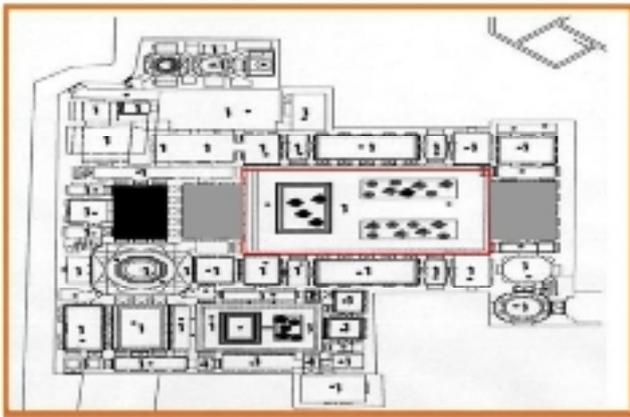


Fig. 1: Open, semi-open and closed spaces

Of these three spaces, open space in Islam and Iranian culture and thereby in Iranian traditional architecture has found a distinguished position and has demonstrated itself in different elements. In Iranian traditional architecture, open space is regarded as a complement to life space in an enclosed part and generates a special coordination in

space. In addition, the presence of open spaces in housing would demand another area to improve the relationship between open and closed spaces. Therefore, semi-open spaces were regarded as one of the most critical elements of Iranian traditional housing. The courtyard as the heart of residential spaces was the most significant and favorite space in a house in which family members were congregated, different feasts and celebrations held, people could use it as a place for night sleep especially in desert regions, children could play there and women could fulfill their daily activities, etc.

High motion and visual penetrability, visual proportions, sensual richness and the color of belonging are some of the main features of traditional courtyards. In the other word, central court in the past architecture had all the qualifications of an effective and responsive environment.

The removal of such space from residential houses has led to the decreased spatial quality of houses and has brought about adverse consequences in terms of physical health, mental comfort of people, growth of children, etc. Increase in energy consumption due to climactic function of open spaces and full time application of closed spaces is another adverse economic consequence of this critical issue.

Fig. 2 shows some plans of contemporary houses in three cities Yazd, Kurdistan and Gorgan which are located in three different climactic regions in Iran. Regardless of climactic and cultural effects, the ratio of mass to empty spaces of plans at each three cities is completely similar and is of an extrovert type. This indicates that Iranian contemporary architecture, regardless of its place and components has a ratio of mass to empty spaces of similar plans in the most Iranian cities (Rahmani, 2001).



Fig. 2: A home in Kurdistan, *fruit preservation mid-house of Barbod*, Gorgan after the Revolution, *Chapkhaneh Atlasi* in Yazd

In the traditional houses, the design of external and internal spaces was done in a way that the communication of outer courtyard from main alley, bazaar and street is provided, and interior part of

alley has a separate lane. Usually, door of court (back door and back alley) would connect interior part into another passing alley. This link provided people with the opportunity that if they needed to come and go

outside the home, use back door and do not use exit door of outer part of main alley.

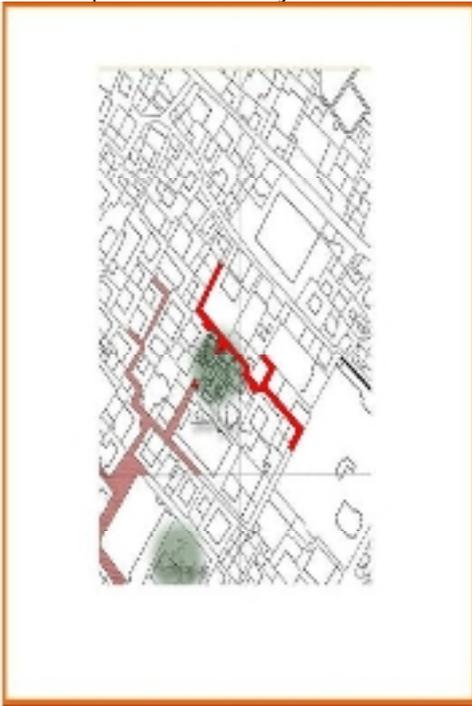


Fig. 3: The main entrance to exterior courtyard and secondary entrance to interior courtyard

In fact, such thinking has secured family members in all directions, because in external parts of a house, people, non-private acquaintances and family members would live and family members were able to exit another door without any contact with them. In general, interior and exterior buildings, in addition to their specific design, would take advantage of main spaces and different measures (Zamrashidi, 2011).

9. Traditional houses

Not so far past, house and city belong to each civilization would show its identity and constructive culture with its specific characteristics (Naghizadeh). The reasonable and organized relations of spaces (entrance, vestibule (*Hashty*), exterior and interior court yard, *Shahneshin* and *Khadamati*) with each other and the partition of private and public domains and keeping the privacy in such Iranian-Islamic houses has created a sense of dependency and belonging in such houses and such perceptions and emotions form the personal and social identity of each family. Daily behaviors and activities which are done voluntarily and involuntarily for house residents are justified based on the definition of spaces function defined at the heart of traditional houses. The reasons for the occurrence of such events in traditional houses include 1- creating some spaces in accordance with the needs of residents 2- organization of spaces based on routine activities 3- creation of a multi-function space (corridor) 4- segregation of spaces based on the principle of privacy in Iranian houses 5- activity in one space does not disturb activity in another space.



Fig. 4: Reasonable relations in traditional houses

10. Architectural training in contemporary era

In Pahlavi era, the residential building construction utilized traditional architecture somehow similar to that of Qajarieh era and then *Tarki Sazi* designs (by designing a pre-corridor and level difference to ground surface and having stairs from one, two or three directions). In this type of architecture, there were wooden, circular, brick or multi-dimensional columns, or plastering and beautiful views in houses which were connected mostly in a "labyrinth-like" and interconnected style (Zamrashidi, 2011).



Fig. 5: The underground plan of Ahmad Ghavam House, the early era of first Pahlavi (Source: *Abgineh* Museum)

Since this era, Iranian architecture and residential houses adopted a misleading way and lost their identity and importing, and foreign elements found their way into Iranian architecture irrespective of Iranian original climate, culture and traditions.

11. The impact of rootless architecture in contemporary building construction

In the middle era of the first Pahlavi and especially second Pahlavi, building construction particularly residential buildings in Iran lost their identity. The westernization of Iranian first rank official authorities and their tendency to western thought and life gave rise to the development of the

westernization among people. This phenomenon directly affected building construction, particularly residential buildings, to the point that design principle and privacy of external and internal spaces, tarki sazi designs and var korsir surrounding court were forgotten and they were replaced by westernized criteria.

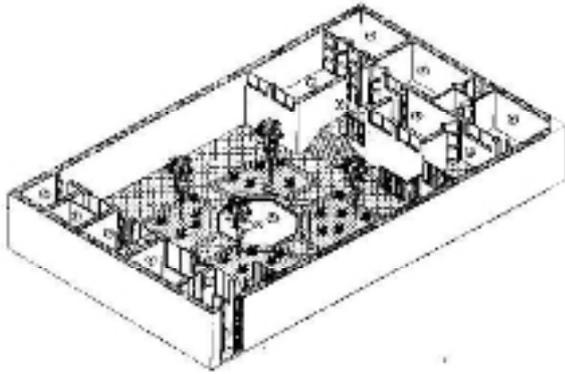


Fig. 6: A building by the method of Varkorsi (source: *Abgineh Museum*)

Finally, the design of residential spaces tended toward the neglect of people demands and attitudes and generally toward loss of identity and authenticity (Zamrashi, 2011).

In Pahlavi era, although the dominant pattern of Iranian buildings shifted from extroversion into introversion, and lost its spiritual value of courtyard, security, privacy, sanctity and climatic meaning and function, the function of courtyard was still vaguely survived and the relationship between residents was maintained. Because most of the buildings in neighborhood were two-story ones, and other neighbors could not almost observe internal spaces of such extrovert courtyards. However, in this era, the meaning of courtyard shifted toward its contemporary meaning, i.e. an open area located between building and Share'e.

The relation between internal spaces with courtyard (physical and visual relation) which was possible from four aspects in Qajar era, in this era was possible only from one front or sometimes from two northern and southern fronts. Extroversion phenomenon which was observed only in one plan in Pahlavi era entered the third aspect following Islamic Revolution in Iran. With the increasing residence of people in apartments, it could be observed that the sexual function of house as a place for providing women with protection has changed due to the shift of women position in modern society, and it is almost impossible to create a visual connection with facing apartments. In addition, the dimensions and size of such courtyards were also decreased compared to the Pahlavi and Qajar era due to some factors such as weakening the function of courtyards, the confining regulations for construction imposed by municipality, rise in the price of land or sometimes owners' violation of allowable occupation area. Although in the past

there was only one courtyard for one family, nowadays there is only one smaller courtyard for several residential units. Joint spaces of courtyard in such houses, view and dominance of facing apartments toward the inner spaces have obliterated any privacy, identity and veiling. The northern houses' courtyards maybe act as a simple traffic passage, and the northern houses courtyards do not have even such relational function. The function of courtyard in contemporary apartment houses has been so weakened that even if courtyard is deleted inside these apartments, no special even happens (Rahmani, 2011).

Anyway the main event which has happened is that in the contemporary Iranian housing, there are not either identity-making spaces and spatial hierarchies present in traditional housing, which lack of such critical elements leads to an unpleasant atmosphere in the structure of life, mental discomfort of people and delayed growth and development of children.

12. A confused architecture

Unfortunately, a country like Iran which is the cradle of art and architecture in the world and also a usual innovator and pioneer of beauties and creativities in building construction industry, and also has always acted as the source of artistic and architectural inspiration and influence for different countries and civilizations has been now forgotten and neglected by Iranian people, and they have overlooked such rich and dignified history of artistic and architectural designs and have tended to a trend of building constructions devoid of any identity, beauty and meaning (Zamarshidi, 2011).

13. Architectural identity of house in a climate

One example: While vernacular traditional architecture in Northern Iran has been increasingly neglected, it has always taken advantage of special beauties and magnificence in Iran.

Nowadays, vernacular and traditional architecture could not be seen either in this area, and it has been replaced by the buildings with concrete or metal structures, brick covers and steep ceilings having so called artistic forms and partitioned indoor spaces completely affected by foreign architecture. These factors have led to the loss of identity of vernacular architecture in proportion to environment which is one major consequence of new trend of architecture, high cost of construction and increased use of un-renewable or fossil energies for obtaining heating or cooling mainly due to the non-application of local materials.

Housing topology in Iran has formed the architecture in line with cultural and social factors of identity, an identity which despite climatic similarities of Gilan province to other regions in the world, is unique. The most common form of traditional house in Northern Iran is called *Galipoush Khane*.

Having a comfortable place to live in this rainy and wet region is a problem which traditional buildings have been able to overcome it. The most common form of traditional house in Northern Iran is called Galipoush Khane which its ceiling is made of Gali and has a wooden storage under the building (Mehr News Agency, 2011, 2-29).



Fig. 7: Galipoush Houses
Source: Mehr News Agency

This trend has progressed in the vernacular and traditional architecture of other lands in the same way, and has affected and somehow undermined architecture of such lands. Also, the mentioned trend has converted the popular, local, tangible, perceivable and beautiful architecture of these lands into an intangible and copied one.

Whereas, the construction of seemingly modern houses in different climates and progress of modern thinking regardless of climate, identity and Islamic-Iranian culture can lead to the obliteration of our past experiences and history, and in turn, destruction of our inner self. Now, the best practice is to utilize an efficient strategy so as to revive dignity and beauty of Iranian magnificent architecture.

14. Conclusion

Development and summation of the examples and elements of Iranian architecture in different historical eras has caused that such elements achieve an identity independent from their time and find an abstract value. Such foundations and elements must not directly undergo a spatial creativity and convert into an architectural work; rather they must pass through an abstract stage and convert into an architectural idea or expression.

In contemporary era, there are a few architects with such architectural expression. Most of the contemporary architects either have merely imitated past or mixed architectural expression with modern elements in an eclectic manner. Unfortunately, in scarce cases where there is an appropriate relation between modern and traditional architecture, the design (architecture) has been converted into a single building and has lost its identity-making characteristic.

The house symbols such as open spaces (courtyard, etc.), semi-open spaces (corridor) and closed ones (*Shah Neshin*, etc.) are a part of house soul which not only solidify the identity of a house

but also create a sense of belonging and are a sign of a common beliefs between all people in such houses. The lack of these elements in the formation and linking of house symbols and contemporary architecture, not only elicits a sense of separation from the past but also discontinues the identity-based trend of Iranian houses architecture, which has acted as an example for western architecture throughout the history.

Table 1: Traditional Houses
Contemporary Houses

Family Disintegration	Unity in House
Identity Disintegration	Manifestation of Identity
Lack of Belonging	Sense of Belonging
International	Climactic
Modern	Tradition
Divergence	Concentration
Irrational Interaction	Visual Balance
Foreign Identity	Iranian Identity

(Source: the author)

In spite of usual preoccupation of Iranian architectures so as to establish a link with the past architecture and to promote its constancy, most of these efforts are unsuccessful mostly due to the management incapacity of relevant organizations and lack of coordination between cultural layers. To find out some solutions for the problems which has deprived contemporary Iranian architecture of content and concepts and has led to the loss of its identity is the only alternative to overcome such crisis.

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