

Bazaar and its role in the development of Iranian traditional cities

Mir Saeed Moosavi

Tabriz Azad University, Faculty of Art & Architecture, Iran

The study of urban history reveals that a variety of factors have influenced the development of ancient cities. Among the most important factors, economy has always occupied an important role in development of cities and in fact, survival of a city was highly dependent on its economic power. It has also played an important role in development process of Iranian cities, and among the diverse public spaces allocated to economic and commercial activities, bazaar is considered to be the most important one. Bazaar, a traditional public space in Iranian cities, has always accommodated a great section of commercial activities in urban life. 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.

Bazaar of Iranian ancient city is comparable to plaza in cities of pre-industrial Europe. In traditional city of Iran, bazaar was also a place for social, political, cultural and civic activities of people. In this regard, it was similar to forum and agora in ancient Roman and Greek cities. Besides the mentioned similarities of bazaar to plaza, forum and agora, they had some substantial differences too. The public spaces of Europe, Rome and Greece were always constructed as open and outdoor places, but bazaar of ancient Iranian cities were all covered.

Architectural and spatial nature of bazaar was highly dependent on climate, culture and economic power of the city. It was undoubtedly the most prestigious and influential place in the urban life of people and in fact, those who worked in bazaar were considered to be among the high-ranking members of the society.

In other words, bazaar was the heart of the city and most of the important and prestigious buildings as well as governmental ones were always constructed adjacent to it. In addition, bazaar has always defined the major street of urban fabric, connecting two major entrances of the city.

Bazaars of different cities were not equally important. 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. As a consequence, different aspects of bazaar have always had a very significant impact on urban structure and townscape.

In this paper, the intention is to explore the architectural typology of bazaar as an urban space and to analyze the historical interactions between formal, spatial and social qualities of it and planning ideals and the urban structure and development of diverse Iranian cities.

Introduction

The study of urban history reveals that a variety of factors have influenced the development of ancient cities. Among the most important factors, economy has always occupied an important role in development of cities and in fact, survival of a city was highly dependent on its economical power. A survey of the major and influential cities of the ancient world is indicative of the fact that their urban welfare and power could not be achieved without economical power. Economy, as an essential feature of human life, has also played an important role in development process of Iranian cities and among the diverse public spaces allocated to economical and commercial activities, bazaar is considered to be the most important one. In traditional city of Iran, bazaar was a place for economical, social, political, cultural and civic activities of people.

As a consequence, different characters and peculiarities of bazaar, the most important urban space of Iranian cities, have always had a very significant impact on urban structure and townscape.

In this paper, the intention is to explore the architectural typology of bazaar as an urban space and to analyze the historical interactions between formal, spatial and social qualities of it and planning ideals and the urban structure and development of diverse Iranian cities.

Bazaar as a relic of the past

The rise of city and the advent of urbanization in the eastern world has a very long history and, in certain regions, it dates back to the Neolithic age. It is obvious that the creation of cities was based not only on the growth of population but also on the increase of production which brought about the growth of trade and accumulation of wealth. In Iran, together with the growth of population and development of villages, in the fourth millennium B.C., urbanization took shape, and thereafter, we have witnessed economic growth and trade even with far away lands.

Specialization of occupations and the requirement of the primary societies brought about transactions and by the passage of time, a special place was established for this purpose that eventually formed bazaar. Bazaar, a traditional public space in Iranian cities, has always accommodated a great section of commercial activities in urban life. Then, 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. During the 4th and 3rd millenniums B.C., major cities of Iran and Mesopotamia were highly dependent on economical activities. Archaeological discoveries provide reliable evidence of the remnants of the districts of tradesmen of two thousand years ago at Shoush. There are many authoritative documents confirming the fact that the cities and towns of the mentioned period (4th and 3rd millenniums B.C.) had some zoning policies so that economical and trading activities were carried out in a particular district of the city. Following the Muslim conquest and formation of Islamic Caliphate, very expansive lands with diverse races were governed by a single government. Thereafter, the new and dynamic period of Islam commenced. Upon commencement of this period the motives for urban growth and the new arts of city planning found more efficiency in the new combination of urban growth in Iran, Egypt and Anatolia with the spirituality of Islam.

Experts studying the characteristics of the Islamic cities, in trying to present an ideal pattern, have compared these cities with the pre-Islamic examples or the cities that were built up contemporaneously with Islam, and have pointed to characteristics common among them which show the identity and uniqueness of these cities. 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).

Bazaars of different cities were not equally important. 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. Tabriz, the Turkish city in the northwest of Iran, is a precious example of such cities. Its bazaar was a part of the Silk Way, the oldest and most important trading way in the eastern civilization. Therefore, it could act as an international bazaar. Among the oldest and most precious bazaars of Iranian cities, bazaars of the following cities are of greater importance: Tabriz, Kerman, Isfahan, Shiraz, Sabzvar, Hamedan, Kashan, and Yazd.

There has been three types of bazaar in the cities of ancient Iran:

- a) Periodic bazaar
- b) Urban bazaar
- c) Local bazaar

Periodic bazaar had no special architectural space. It could be organized everywhere. In fact, it was a kind of commercial gathering to exchange goods (agricultural crops, handicrafts, clothing and foodstuff) which was organized in known intervals (weekly, monthly etc.) and could be done in every part of the city or village. It was usually an outdoor space. This kind of bazaar has lost its importance by the passage of time and the change of social conditions.

Urban bazaar was a popular urban space which could accommodate commercial activities as well as social and cultural activities of people. Architecturally speaking, urban bazaar is a 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. It has acted as the most important and influential public space in ancient cities and towns of Iran. This paper will focus on different aspects of urban bazaar and its interaction with urban life and local culture.

Local bazaar was a smaller type of urban bazaar which was allocated to a particular area or district of the city or town. It's architectural characteristics were similar to urban bazaar. The local bazaar was composed of fewer shops and stores and was of less importance.

Social and cultural aspects of bazaar

As mentioned, urban bazaar has always accommodated a great section of commercial activities in a city or town. Besides, it was a place for social, political, cultural and civic activities of people. Therefore, it has acted as the most important urban space of Iranian cities and towns throughout history. It was undoubtedly the most prestigious and influential place in the urban life of people and in fact, those who worked in bazaar were considered to be among the high-ranking members of the society and most of the important and prestigious buildings as well as governmental ones were always constructed adjacent to it.

The urban bazaar historically has been the heart of the Iranian town. In virtually all towns the bazaar is a covered street, or series of streets and alleyways, lined with small shops grouped by service or product. One part of the bazaar contains the shops of cloth and apparel dealers; another section those of carpet makers and merchants; and still another, the workshops of artisans making goods of copper, brass, or other metals, leather, cotton, and wool. In small towns the bazaar might be the equivalent of a narrow, block-long street; in the largest cities, such as Tehran, Isfahan, Mashad, Tabriz, and Shiraz, the bazaar is a warren of streets that contains warehouses, restaurants, baths, mosques, schools, and gardens in addition to hundreds and hundreds of shops.

The zoning policy of ancient Iranian cities was to separate different functions and professions and among the diverse zones of the city, the bazaar (the district allocated to economical activities) was the most prestigious one and the guild house of this profession (trading) was the most powerful and influential one. Hence, the people who were engaged in economical and trading activities were considered to be one of the high classes of the society. Bazaar of Iranian ancient city is comparable to plaza in cities of pre-industrial Europe because both were used for public activities of people. In traditional city of Iran, bazaar was a place for social, political, cultural and civic activities of people. In this regard, it was also similar to agora and forum in ancient Greek and Roman cities. During holidays and particular ceremonies, people used to decorate the walls and roof of bazaar with colorful lights and flowers. The type of decoration was a manifestation of public feeling. During mourning ceremonies, it was decorated by black cloths to show the grief of people.

Bazaar has always defined the major street of the urban fabric, connecting two major entrances of the city (illustration 1). It was the first place to be visited by anyone who entered the city for first time. Thus, it was accessible from all parts of the city and most of the public and governmental buildings of the city were constructed adjacent to it (illustration 2). The function of bazaar as an urban way had reinforced its public nature and could boost interaction among different classes of the society. Therefore, it was a place for interchange of news and information.

Spatial and architectural characteristics of bazaar

Architecturally speaking, bazaar is a 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. By the passage of time and advent of social and cultural changes, its importance has decreased and its architectural and spatial characters has changed.

Architectural and spatial nature of bazaar was highly dependent on climate, culture and economical power of the city. In all of the Iranian cities the bazaar is a covered street, or series of streets and alleyways, lined with small shops grouped by service or product.

All of the urban bazaars were covered to provide protection against unpleasant climatic

conditions. In hot climate, the roof would provide shadow and in cold climate it would protect from snow and rain. The natural light could penetrate to interior space through skylights which could also provide natural ventilation. The roofscape of most bazaars were similar but the number and size of the openings of roof differed due to climatic conditions as well as security considerations. In cold climate, the opening of roof was smaller than those of hot climate. The height of interior space was another feature which differed due to climatic conditions. Bazaars of hot climate were taller to provide better ventilation while those of cold climate were shorter to keep the warm weather inside.

Combination of dome and vault was the most common structural system in construction of roof. In most cases, the internal surface of ceiling was decorated by moldings of geometric patterns and even some colors were applied. The kind of decoration and materials was highly dependent on local culture and climate. In early times, adobe and sun-dried brick was the most common material for the construction of bazaar. Brick remains the most dominant material for construction of bazaar, but in some areas combination of brick, timber and stone has been used.

Iranian bazaar was designed due to a linear geometry and the linear passageway surrounded by shops and stores was the primary space of it. The major reason is that it used act as a public passageway in urban fabric.

From the viewpoint of design, bazaars of Iranian cities fell into two categories: organic and planned. The organic ones were those bazaars which had 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. In some cases, the direction of bazaar has changed to provide access to the major and public buildings of the city. After the formation of it, new buildings were usually constructed adjacent to it. bazaar of Tehran is the great example. Some sections in bazaar of Isfahan, Yazd and Kerman are also classified into this category. The opposite category includes planned ones. They were rationally planned configurations set down in new terrain and were intended to form the major street of the city. They were usually constructed during the periods of great economical growth and welfare. The Vakil Bazaar of Shiraz is the great example.

As mentioned, bazaar of Iranian cities was a place for economical, social, cultural and political activities of people. Therefore, it is comparable to Greek agora and Roman forum. But from the viewpoint of architecture, the differences are profound. The first difference is that forum and agora were open-air spaces but bazaar was a covered space. The second difference is related to their geometric organization. Bazaar of ancient Iranian cities were always designed in linear organization, but forum and agora had centralized form.

Position of Bazaar in urban fabric

For Iranians, man was a profoundly social creature, and although this attitude can be found in the writings of poets and intellectuals, it is nowhere expressed more explicitly than in their architecture and their city planning. Iranian city planning is based on the idea that the form of cities, the shape of streets and spaces, reflected the people who inhabited them as well as their culture, religion and interests. Thus, public spaces of the city were of great importance for Iranian city planners. The most important of these was the bazaar, which housed many activities.

As discussed in the previous sections of the paper, bazaar has always acted as the most important public space in the history of Iranian cities and towns. It was a place for economical, cultural, social, and political activities of people. Therefore, its importance in urban fabric and urban life can not be ignored. The urban bazaar historically has been the heart of the Iranian

town (illustration 3). It has also played a basic role in the development of urban fabric. For instance, in organic cities which have grown in an unplanned manner, location of fundamental buildings of the city and the direction of urban streets have gradually changed to become more compatible with location and direction of bazaar. The other category includes planned cities, in which the bazaar was located as the major street of the city. In this case, it was a urban axis which would connect the major gates of the city physically and visually.

Conclusion

Local research, based on scientific methods in the conditions of the present bazaars in the cities which have adopted very little from the western cities and have further preserved the method of their past and their traditional form of economy, will very probably identify the conditions of the bazaars after the 13th (19th Century). The architecture and form of buildings in these bazaars today scarcely go back beyond the 10th/17th Century. Nevertheless, it is certain that the perfected form of the bazaars in the 13th/19th century is the outcome of long and gradual development and evolution over several centuries ago. However, our knowledge of the physical and functional particularities of the bazaars prior to these centuries is very little and depends somewhat on archaeological evidence and a little more on historical and geographical references and literary texts.

The modernization policies of the Pahlavi shahs both preserved and transformed all of these aspects Iranian urban society. This process also led to the rapid growth of the urban population. The extension of central government authority throughout the country fostered the expansion of administrative apparatuses in all major provincial centers. By the 1970s, such cities were sites not just of the principal political and security offices but also of the local branches of diverse government offices such as education, justice, taxation, and telecommunications.

The establishment of modern factories displaced the numerous artisan workshops. Parts of old bazaars were destroyed to create wide streets. Merchants were encouraged to locate retail shops along these new streets rather than in the bazaars. Many of the stores that opened to meet the increased demand for commerce and services from the rapidly expanding urban population were in the new streets. The political elite in the last years of the Pahlavi dynasty spoke of the bazaars as symbols of backwardness and viewed the bazaar as an impediment to the modern society, therefore, they tried to impose plans to replace some of them with modern shopping malls.

Today, the role of bazaar has declined because great and fast changes in Iranian society has decreased its importance as a public space. In order to keep its importance and memory a powerful revitalization is necessary.

Bibliography:

- ASHRAF, A. (1973). *The History of Urbanization in Iran*, Tehran, Social Studies Press
MAJIDZADEH, Y.(1990). *Beginning of Urbanization in Iran*, Tehran, University Press
PIRNIA, M. K. (2001).*The Islamic Architecture of Iran*, Tehran, University press
SULTANZADEH, H. (2000). *Iranian Bazaars*, Tehran, Cultural Research Bureau

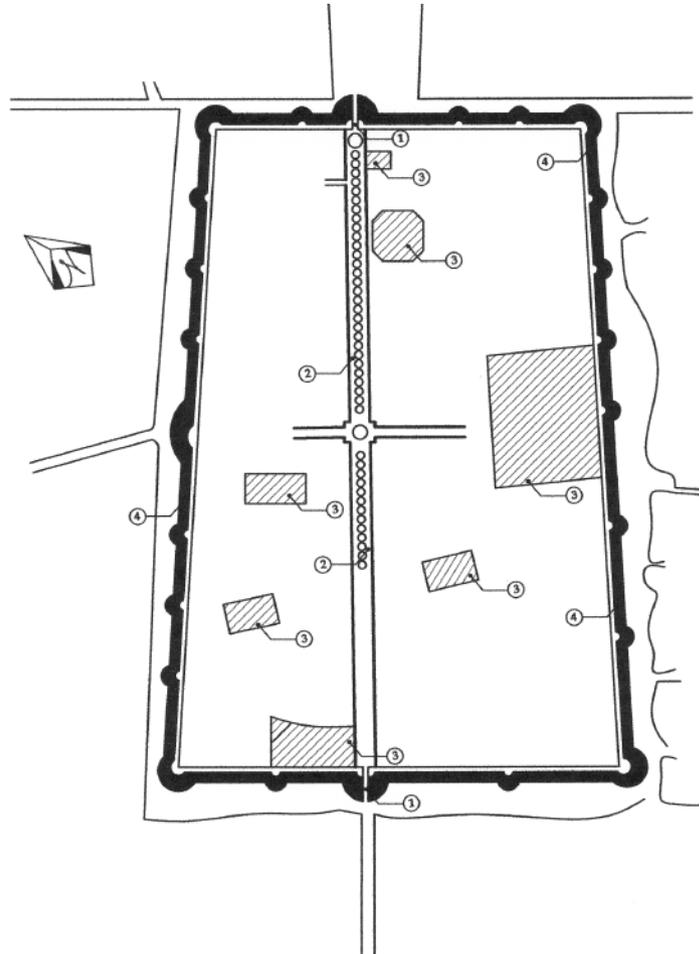


Figure 1, Bazaar of Tabas in older fabric

- 1- Gates of the city
- 2- Bazaar, connecting the gates
- 3- Public and governmental buildings of city
- 4- City wall

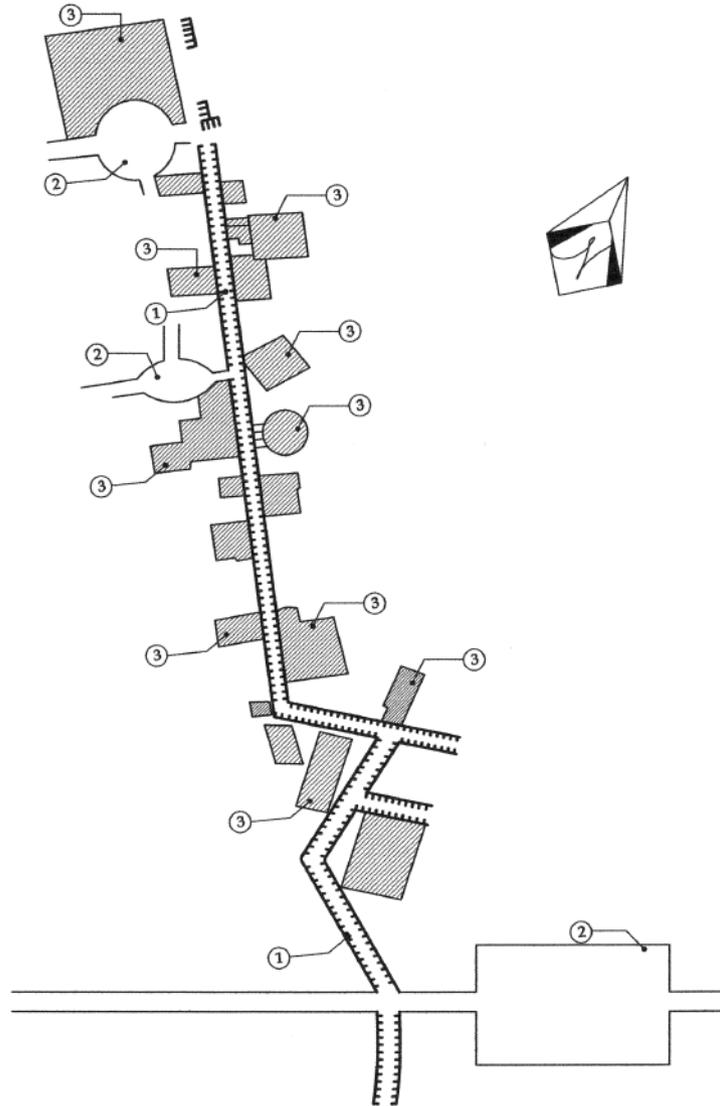


Figure 2, Bazaar of Kashan

- 1- Bazaar as the major street of city
- 2- Major squares of the city
- 3- Public and governmental buildings of city

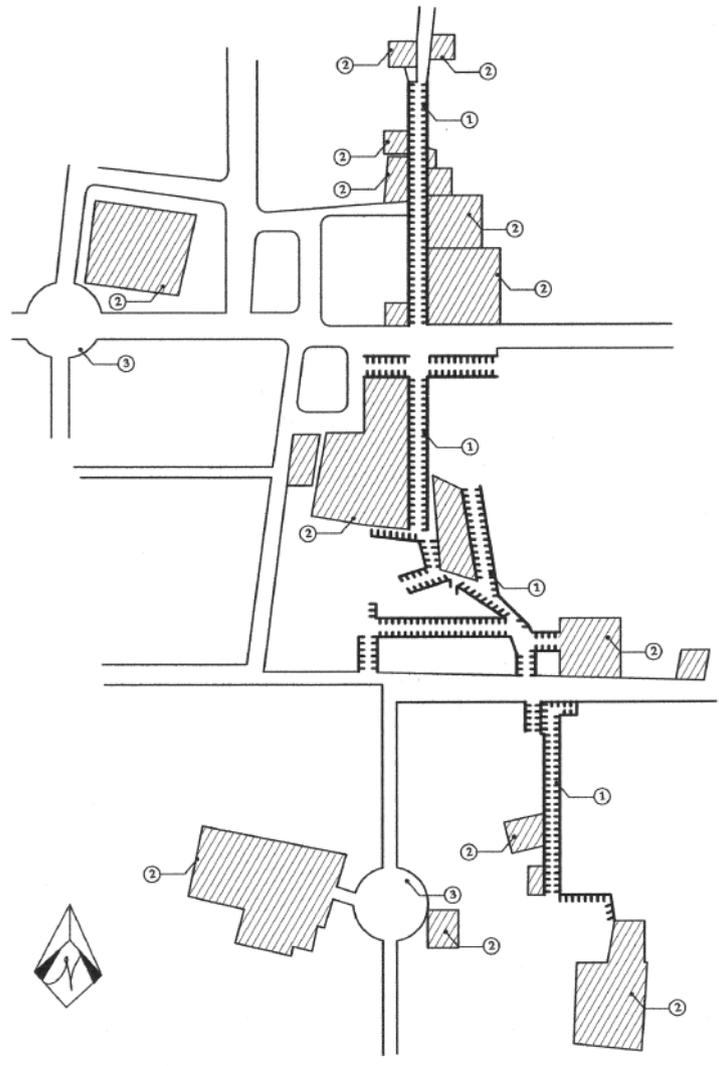


Figure 3, Bazaar of Shiraz

- 1- Bazaar as a linear element in urban fabric
- 2- Major buildings of the city
- 3- Public squares of the city