

SQUARES

The maidan (square) as a city space has existed in Iran from ancient times. In spite of differences of history and geography, Iran's squares have maintained their fundamental characteristics through time; they have an unmatched openness, decisive integration with city planning and centralisation, and as well as a distinctive geometrical shape and layout.

Historical evidence suggests that in its initial stages, the Iranian square took shape in association with the state authority and governmental headquarters. In the pre-Islamic period, particularly at the time of the Sasanians, squares were spaces allocated to religious rituals or official ceremonies. In certain cities they were positioned near royal palaces and royal gates, and chiefly used for military parades as in the Achaemenian city of Susa. Early historians describing Persepolis refer to a square for formal rituals and ceremonies. It appears that the square was considered a place for ceremonies, primarily in the service of the rulers, and for that reason it was nearly always built in the vicinity of royal palaces and important political centres.

It is worth noting that in planning formal and governmental squares, Iranian architects always considered the buildings and edifices surrounding a square as part of the overall plan. This structural arrangement of the square reflects the fact that it was a place where people gathered to be granted the royal presence; and the architects designed it in such a way that people would stand around, and view, a focal point: the main edifice, which was the symbol of religion or power of the state.

During the Sasanian era, the expansion of internal commerce and the development and growth of cities led to the creation of commercial trade centres. Such places attracted people of all ranks. This transformation can be regarded as one of the main factors which led to the appearance of public, as distinguished from royal, squares. In the circular Sasanian cities, the principal marketplaces were often constructed between the four gates of the city, so that they intersected to create a crossroads in the middle. The bazaars and associated streets therefore extended out from the centre in the shape of a cross. City squares were always in the centre and close to these crossroads.

A number of scholars have suggested that these city spaces, before they served an economic function, were places for the exchanging of news and the formal announcement of decisions made by the city authorities.

When Shi'ism spread throughout the country, public religious ceremonies such as Moharram (see Glossary) intensified the need for public places. *Tekkiyehs* and *Hosseiniyehs* (halls for religious and mourning ceremonies) began to be built, and local public centres in towns and cities were established to meet their needs (see Volume III, "Religious and Ritual Paraphernalia" and "Popular Religious Art in the Qajar Period"). Some traditions and rituals in the Moharram ceremonies, in which the people had active roles both as spectators and performers, were important factors in the development of the public city spaces required for performing these ceremonies.

Necessarily, special attention was given to the form of these squares to ensure that the layout was aesthetically pleasing. The Great Square in Isfahan provides a good example. The approach along the Āli Qāpu axis and from the Sheikh Lotfollāh Mosque to the Shah (Imam) Mosque draws the viewer as if through a stage set. Seeing the square from the entrance of the bazaar heightens the effect of the square's perspective. That is perhaps the reason why most of the illustrations executed by early European travellers are from this viewpoint.

The typical central courtyard prevalent in Mesopotamian and Iranian houses, with its own internal enclosed identity, was used in Iranian squares on a grand scale. In contrast to European squares, which exploit the contrast between interior and exterior spaces, Iranian squares form a roofless interior space which is an inseparable part of the surrounding buildings. Subsequently, the spatial organisation of the central courtyard determined the entire symmetrical plan of Iranian squares. This important architectural feature strengthens the visual harmony of the square and allows its boundaries to be seen at a glance. In most cases, this symmetrical configuration follows the form of the *four-aiwān* (portico) house or mosque, and is based on the longitudinal and transversal axes of the square.

In Islamic cities, particularly in Iran, from the fourteenth century, many squares were made near the gates and along the routes which led to bazaars. In this they were again different from European squares, which take their lead from the location of municipal buildings and cathedrals. Even within the Islamic world, striking differences exist between Iranian, Central Asian, and Indian squares, and those of North Africa and the rest of the Middle East. In the main city squares of the latter regions, monumental values and ceremonial and scenic qualities are para-

mount, and the square, by maintaining its independence, is an integral part of the overall city plan. In the Iranian square the internal space is a homogeneous one, and for this same reason the extent of the inner part of a square can be seen from every angle.

The desire to create a magnificent and well-ordered city space integrated with the city finds its perfect expression in the Iranian square. Monumentality is an integral feature of squares which has led them into perfectly unified configurations. Naturally, the more a square tends to assume the function of an open city space and a public spot, the more complicated its pattern of use. Consequently, the way in which its sub-spaces are used would become more complex, and the perfection of its shape might be distorted. However where a square possesses a solid monumental entity, its architectural features become better defined, and its function becomes more harmonious with its architectural forms.

In present-day Uzbekistan, during the Timurid and Shaibānid reigns, a special type of monumental square appeared, which has been termed *kush*. This style is characterised by three monuments which stand on two axes which cross each other at right angles. The three complexes of Rigestān and Gur-Amir in Samarkand, and Lab-e Howz in Bukhara belong to this category. The ratio of the height of the buildings to the width of the square is much higher in Rigestān than in normal squares, and for this reason the spaces within it make a deep impression on the viewer. In the Iranian enclosed square, interior spaces are made so visible by its characteristic plan and features, that no need has been felt to increase the height of the buildings.

In Iran, no square was envisaged other than in the traditional four-sided, often rectangular, form. Perhaps one of the reasons for applying this perfectly geometrical plan is the tradition of utilising the rhythm of arches and vaulted spaces along the longitudinal structures of the square, which would not be possible around the circumference of a circle or an ellipse.

This common characteristic of Iranian squares contributes to their distinctive internal solidity. The Khān Square in Yazd, Ganj-Ali Khān Square in Kermān, and the Great Square in Isfahan are typical examples. In contrast to most European squares, which may have statues or architectural elements in their centre, there has never been any tradition of erecting permanent structures or sacred buildings in the central sections. The one exception is the *alowgāh* (place for fire) found in certain small squares of towns such as Yazd and Nā'in. These places were

reserved for making and preserving fire and are evidently the remains of the pre-Islamic cults and traditions which have lapsed over time. Since most Iranian squares were not constructed for a specific purpose and, like many interior spaces in Iranian architecture, have always been used for a variety of functions, their planning has been relaxed and liberal. Drawings depicting the Great Square in Isfahan in the Safavid period show that no special interior design was made. It was used for a wide range of activities, including parading and reviewing the army, playing polo, for people to gather, and sometimes as the site for temporary stalls and tents set up by hawkers and peddlars. However, no part was allocated to the traffic of carriages and horse riders, so the surface of the square was unbroken.

Green spaces and trees were not common in squares because the presence of large trees might distort the rhythmical mass and solidity of the buildings and cramp the vast perspective. In addition, the need for green areas felt in cities today was not so strong in the past, as people lived in closer contact with nature.

The fundamental design of Iranian squares was founded on enduring principles of formality, openness, unity, symmetry and perspective, all set within an inevitable rectangular layout and quadrangular structure. The Great Square in Isfahan is an ideal example of the perfect Iranian square. It has a rectangular plan in which the ingenious arrangement of public buildings and establishments on the four sides has created a magnificent but agreeable civic assemblage which brought together religious, political, social, commercial, athletic and leisure activities, all in remarkably convenient proximity.

The rhythmical openings, which form shallow, independent façades along the length and breadth of the square, create the unity and solidity of its outer part. The use of panels of coloured tiles and the emphasis on concave spaces rather than the prominent structures so characteristic of the architecture of this period, are all evident in this square. Decorative geometrical and floral designs emphasise the architectural qualities of the façades. No wonder that this monumental prototype of the Persian square has, over the centuries, been regarded as an unparalleled architectural marvel, which in the eyes of the seventeenth century Italian traveller Pietro della Valle (1652) was superior even to Rome's Piazza Navona in its magnificence, composition and overall harmony.



