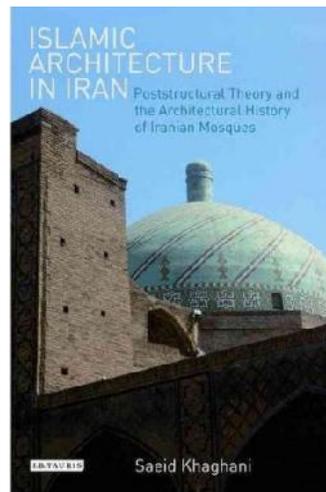


Book Reviews

Saeid Khaghani. *Islamic Architecture in Iran: Poststructural Theory and the Architectural History of Iranian Mosques*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2012. Illustrated. Pp. x + 245. ISBN 978–1–84885–729–2. Price: Not listed.

Addressing the history of Iranian architecture began in 19th century, and for more than one century it was dominated by archaeology and antiquarianism. It was in the mid-twentieth century that some scholars in architecture and conservation paid attention to it. Outside of Iran also, weight shift in the Iranian architectural history from archaeology to art history, although resulted in a drop of accuracy of the studies, invigorated them and augmented the element of thinking. Today together with the booming of critical theories in the humanities, history of architecture was more or less set aside from the impacts of these theories. This isolation and bereft of theoretical funds is an outcome the Iranian architectural historians' resistance to the theory-based researches. In return, prevalence of the traditionalism current in theoretical studies of Islamic architecture and art, and its deficiency of discursive and documental strength, has led to undermining and low credibility of theoretical activities in the field. Establishment of the MA program of "the Iranian Architectural Studies (IAS)" in Iran in the first decade of the present century¹ was the beginning of a new surge of theoretical attention to the history of Iranian architecture, and bringing up new or even entirely uncommon questions. Aside from publication of books and articles of graduates and professors of IAS program, publication of theory-based books and articles about history of Iranian architecture by Iranian and non-Iranian scholars—although numbered—should



¹ In Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, September 2005.

be considered as indications of this new and lively current. This book, *Islamic Architecture in Iran: Poststructural Theory and the Architectural History of Iranian Mosques* is among them.

The book has five chapters. The first two chapters are dedicated to contemplating and rearticulating the two attributions of 'Islamic' and 'Iranian' in the compositions 'Islamic architecture' and 'Iranian architecture.' Three other chapters comprise an effort to apply theory in writing Iranian architectural history. In the first chapter, 'Islam as an attribution,' author intends to explain the 'Islamic' attribution in the composition of 'Islamic architecture.' He begins with bringing up the question: "What does Islam have to do with the ordinary materials of Muslims' lives? In other words: How are these Islamic materials Islamic? (p. 15) These are valid questions for the book's goal. Nevertheless, in preparing the ground for their answer, two different categories are confused together: first, the prevalent orientalist idea that prohibition of iconography has a conclusive, causal, and thus explanatory role in Islamic culture; and second, that one cannot draw a decisive line between religious and non-religious matters in Islam as religion. The author has properly detected that discussing the nature of Islamic attribution depends on distinguishing between two meanings of Islam: Islam as a religion/faith, which is an unhistorical matter, and Islam as a manifestation of culture, which is historical. His aim is to show that "how 'visual images' reach a valuable position in the Islamic system" so that eventually "suggest an answer to the question 'in what sense are Iranian mosques Islamic?'"(p. 17) The author's emphasize on 'visual images' here and elsewhere in the book casts a doubt in mind that the idea of architecture in this book is under dominance of art-historical outlook, in which architecture is reduced to a visual art and its non-visual aspects are neglected. In any case, before discussing the quality of attributing a phenomenon to Islamic, he considers it necessary to acquaint the reader—typically western and unfamiliar with Islam—with Islamic worldview, so in the following he could demonstrate that how some aspects of this worldview has affected the material culture, especially the visual images. To this end, he dedicates a considerable part of the first chapter to introducing Islam; neglecting that the readers of this book are normally the professionals in the Islamic culture, art, and architecture, and the other readers with no such familiarity should be referred to other sources. Nevertheless, remarks of the chapter serve the book's purpose, in overall: Islam has two non-historical and historical concepts. In the non-historical sense, Islam is a 'normative' matter: "what Islam should be in Holy Qur'an and Sunnah." (p. 31) However, the historical Islam is a 'descriptive' matter, i.e. realized form of the metahistorical Islam. This realization is inevitably affected by the cultures of host lands. To

understand the relation between Islamic architecture and Islam, we must consider the realized form of Islam more—i.e. the cultural and historical Islam—rather than the metahistorical Islam. The historical Islam is unavoidably related to and influenced by the socio-cultural context and environmental conditions. Then he demonstrates that Islam has not necessitated any particular form for the mosque and its form is a child of Muslims' culture. In other words, in Islamic attitude, a mosque can be everywhere; what has been called 'mosque' in architecture, and those formal architectural qualities which are attributed to it and distinguish it from others are not emerged from Islam itself.

Title of the second chapter is 'Iranism.' To clarify the meaning of 'Iranian architecture,' the author explains the idea of 'Iran' and 'Iranian' as an attribution. He states that the concept of Iran as a 'nation' is something modern; nonetheless, Iran as an idea already existed throughout (in) Islamic Era, albeit not as a well-defined notion. (p. 54) Persian language, consciousness of—and attribution to—a [common] past heritage, and a semi-autonomous governmental administration (p. 54) in a more or less definite geographic area had been constituent to this. This is not a uniform, constant, and beyond time and place idea, however; rather it is a temporal, social, and cultural one. He illustrates this changing attribute of the identity, by focusing on three periods of Iranian history: first from the arriving of Islam in Iran until the Mongol era; second between the Mongol invasion and the dawn of the Ilkhanids; third the Safavid era in which Iran entered the modern age. (p. 55)

By investigating the variations of the concept of "Iranian" in the mentioned periods it becomes clear that 'Iranian' in 'Iranian Art,' as an affiliation with a given ethnic group or land is meaningless. The Timurid architecture of central Asia, the Persian poems of Mughal India, and the miniature paintings of the Ottomans (p. 68) all have a Persianate quality, without any attribution to Iranians or Iranian territories. What makes something Iranian, then? What is a constituent to 'Iranian' as an attribution, which unites all those diverse things? In author's view, despite Islam being the main ground for cultural production, (p. 68) the main source of inspiration and the unifying element for the 'Iranian Arts is Persian literature, which has dominated the public imagination.

Considering that the book focuses on Iranian mosques, the author drags the question of Iranian attribution into the Iranian mosque and asks what makes a mosque Iranian. Iranian mosque has a quality and since the quality of a place relates to the human understanding of the universe, the quality of Iranian mosque relates to the Iranians' understanding of the universe, likewise. This very relation is what attributes architecture of the mosque in Iran to be

Iranian. He regards the four-iwans pattern as the classic style of Iranian mosques, without referencing a source; and attempts to interpret it in terms of the notions of time and space in the ancient culture of Iran. The chapter's bottom line is that the Iranian attribution is an indication of the pattern of regulating time and space among Iranians; hence, it is a liquid concept, shaped by different elements such as race, geopolitical divisions, historical memory, language, and socio-political conventions. (p. 90)

The author has dedicated most of the arguments in the first two chapters to the criticism of common definitions of Islamic and Iranian attributions, and proposing alternative definitions for them, so that he can provide an opportunity to commence new debates, to reach a contextual understanding of these attributions. After these rudiments, we arrive at the third chapter 'The mosque as public space.' Is the mosque a public space or place? After explaining the ideas of 'individualism' and 'collectivism' within the context of Iranian culture, he describes the state of their determination, both in 'social' and 'formal' terms, in three levels of built environment: home, residential quarters (*mahallah*), and city. (p. 94) Through this, he investigates the differences between the private and individual arena and the public and common space, their lines of division, and the forms and patterns of transaction between these spaces, (p. 94) in the Islamic and Iranian culture. Now that mosque is a public place in this sense, what does Islam require of a mosque, with respect to its social concerns? (p. 93) How Iranians have responded to these requirements? To answer these questions, author addresses the location of mosque in city and its relation to other urban elements, and by this way, he attempts to provide a ground for developing a formal/social classification of Iranian mosques.

In the fourth chapter, 'Difference and the Iranian architectural discourse,' author is to prepare a basis for a theory-based study of the history of Iranian architecture. Islamic architecture of Iran is a part of Islamic art and therefore included in its prevalent interpretations. These interpretations have deficiencies; for instance, they are not connected socially to the everyday life of Muslims, or they are attached psychologically to the worldly desires of humankind, not just Muslims. (p. 124) He states that such views transform art into something not 'of this world' for people who only physically belong to this world. (p. 124) These interpretations make Iranian architectural historiography fall into abstract categories, which provide no room for addressing the quality of architectural changes. They have emptied the course of history of its sociopolitical content and converted it into a mere ground for seeking objectification of untimely concepts. He believes passing through this is possible by application of theory in writing the architectural history of Iran.

The first step is to show that the sociopolitical space of the Islamic Era is constructed by the simultaneous presence of some opposite factors. Therefore, the space on which theories are applied for interpretation is not a homogenous one, as is assumed by master interpreters of Islamic art and architecture, yet.

However, the theory he is paving the way to use in Iranian architectural historiography is Michael Foucault's theory/methodology of studying history mentioned in *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. (p. 12) After explaining the concept of 'spatial history' for Foucault, and relying on his epistemic divisions in history, the author suggests a pattern for division of Iranian architectural history, in order to deconstruct the prevalence of notion of continuity in history, and to create the forms as subjects of theory-based interpretation. (p. 12) For him, approaching to 'spatial history' rather than 'time-based analysis of history,' and utilizing spatio-temporal division, breaks the predominance of linear view towards time, and turns the space into a mirror for seeing cultural characteristics of Islamic period of Iranian history, that would be out of sight by adopting the linear view. At the end of this chapter, in a section entitled 'The semiotics of Islamic Iranian art,' the author deals with the semiotics of Islamic art, as it should be. Although he claims that has not provided an answer, he has valuable considerations. The gist of his words is that semiotics should devote itself not only to seeking the significance of the signs, but also to the study of cultural mechanisms of their production. Signification of the signs, emerged from Islamic culture, should be sought in the cultures in which these concepts are woven, rather than the religion of Islam.

In the fifth chapter, 'Difference and particularity,' the author is to contemplate the nature of categorization of Iranian architectural history, employing thoughts of Gilles Deleuze. First, he questions the notion of style, as a conceptual tool for applying general frameworks to history of art and architecture, to clarify the 'particularity' of individuals of a style versus the 'generality' of style in the history of art and architecture. He believes that to understand the meaning of 'particularity,' first we should question the quality/forms of connections between individual elements and general categories through which generalizations are formed: (p. 159) what links a single building with a period, class, or style? Is it some sort of relation as between species and genus in logic? Then, in the section 'The formal language of Iranian architecture,' he attempts to provide a new basis for periodization, regionalism, and morphology of the history of Iranian architecture, by explaining the theoretical apparatus of Deleuze and Guattari. He tries to demonstrate that the formal divisions imposed on Iranian architectural history so far, such as those based on interiority and exteriority, or those based on

time, space, and style, are inappropriate for Iranian art and architecture, and we should reconsider the foundation of categorization in Iranian architectural historiography.

The 'Conclusion' chapter begins with the elucidation of the problems we are facing Iranian architectural historiography. The author addresses the importance of considering 'spatial history' and opportunities that this outlook can open up for historiography of Iranian architecture. Then he discusses his method in writing the book and its features, and makes remarks about his book's position in the discourse of Iranian architectural historiography.

The book explicitly concentrates on problems and challenges of architectural historiography, hence would belong to a field we can call 'critical philosophy of architectural history.' The author advances his theoretical contemplations in this field in the context of Islamic architecture of Iran; and from this aspect, the book is well organized, alas the title is not a true representative of the content. He begins the discussion of historiography of Iranian architecture by criticizing the status quo. In his opinion, there are two opposing tendencies in Iranian architectural historiography. (p. 2) First are physical, formalistic, or objective studies of buildings, bound to archaeological findings, with a common methodology of examining similarities and differences, which eventually arrive at causal or evolutionary explanations on a larger scale, (p. 2) and are less interested in the context and socio-political and cultural life of the subject. Second are anachronistic studies of Iranian architecture. This current, despite the claim to study Iranian architecture based upon an Islamic or Iranian basis, is actually reactionary response to propose of cultural definitions in order to build non-modern identity, that even its remarks relies on modern terms like Islamic, Iranian, eastern, or traditional. (p. 2) In his view, we would not reach a basis for establishing cultural dialogue with history through this, and the shared difficulty for both of them is inattention or neglect of the political, social, and cultural contexts of architecture. From one end, his criticism is mainly concerned with traditionalist studies of Islamic art, which has dominated the field for decades. Conscious or unconscious accompaniment of traditionalist thoughts about Islamic art with the dominant ideological demands and dispositions caused clumsy and second-hand exploitations of their outlook, and crippled the study of Islamic art in Iran, and perhaps in some other Islamic countries. From the other end, his criticism is dealing with formalistic studies, in which addressing different contexts is evaded deliberately, and considering the context in knowing architecture is regarded as peripheral. Given this pathology, the author believes in relying on poststructural and postmodernist theories, as a solution, and attempts to establish a theoretical apparatus on this basis;

nevertheless he does not specify that where and how and based on what documentary evidences this pathological study is done. In such a general categorization, scattered but contextual studies of Mohammad-Karim Pirnia are placed in a category together with the works of others like A. U. Pope and A. Godard, which their relation to context is restricted to the formal and austere political history. Besides that he has not made a mention of the combination of formalistic and traditionalistic studies, as can be seen in *Khesht-o-Khiyāl*,² and this is not clear where does such a mixture belong in the spectrum.

The author's proposed theoretical apparatus has two key functions: one, to offer a 'formation' for the so-called formless architectural history of Iran. Apparently, he means categorization by formation and believes that the absence of an appropriate formation in Iranian architectural history has permitted intangible generalizations. Another function of his desired way is to form a basis for connecting micro-scale studies to a higher level of cultural debate. (p. 2-3) Nevertheless, is the main function of 'every' theoretical apparatus for Iranian architectural historiography to propose a basis for categorization? Architectural historiography is an effort to know the architecture as realized in history. An appropriate theoretical apparatus for this is an epistemic one, which firstly defines the subject matter; secondly, defines the purpose of knowing it; thirdly, explains the mode(s) of knowing the subject. Furthermore, this is right that categorization is a tool for knowledge; nevertheless determining a suitable categorization, demands an undifferentiated knowledge of the subject. There is no mention of this undifferentiated knowledge and its sources and the way of obtaining it in the book. If the relation between architecture and culture and society and politics is not clear, how can we propose a cultural, social, or political basis for categorization? Inattention to this brings proposed divisions for Iranian architectural history about to be based on stereotypes or patterns borrowed from western architectural history. Unjust and intangible generalizations, contrary to the author's opinion, are not results of formlessness of architectural history; rather are results of not recognizing the components and inability to define wholes based on identifying essential properties shared among components.

The theoretical apparatus that the author is to introduce has two deconstructive and structuralist or quasi-structuralist methodological aspects. The deconstructive aspect is for breaking the dominance of deficient assumptions and the structuralist aspect is for localizing the concepts. With

² Kāmbiz Navā'i and Kāmbiz Hāji Qāssemi, *Khesht-o Khiāl: Sharḥ Mi'mārī Islāmī Irān* [An Interpretation of Iranian Islamic Architecture] (Tehran: Soroush Press, 2012).

this methodological strategy, we can employ both poststructuralist critiques of structuralism and postmodern theories, and at the same time avoid accepting or rejecting each one of them exclusively. Gathering structuralist and poststructuralist ideas together in a theoretical apparatus, if not impossible, is very difficult. Moreover, author's description his methodological strategy is concerned with the problem of division in architectural history; and the same has made his remarks hard to understand.

Two key terms for understanding the theoretical apparatus of the author are 'identity' and 'difference.' He has an inclination to the historical categorization even in the explaining these two terms. He defines identity as relative understanding of the self (p. 4) and believes that the notion of 'difference' plays a central role (p. 5) in its construction. Then he frankly calls difference a tool for time-space categorization, and states that it can be used as a conceptual apparatus in the Iranian context to create lines of categorization in a history which is lacking form. (p. 6) This is an evidence of his endless concern with the problem of categorization in historiography; a concern that has removed the other issues in from his sight. He devotes a considerable part of the introduction to explaining these two notions, especially the 'difference'; however finally is unable to explain its nature, and cannot make the reader understand what he means by it. To explain the notion of difference, he addresses to the relativity, binary oppositions, and dualism, and resorts to theories of structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and thoughts of G. W. F. Hegel; but eventually fails to explain it. This point, i.e. author's continuous theoretical displacement among various and sometimes opposing theoretical currents, (p. 10) together with his evasion of adopting a single theory and his little success in explaining his own theoretical apparatus, causes most of the subjects in the introduction and thereby author's purpose of writing the book and his method to remain unknown and obscure.

In the book's introduction, Khaghani explains why he has employed poststructural theories for an analysis of the notion of difference, instead of feminist or Marxist studies, Ibn Khaldūn social division, and Heideggerian or Nietzschean divisions. Aside from the fact that these are not of the same kind or level, this explanation is not helpful in understanding what he meant by the difference, at all. To quote the author, idea of difference is of the pillars of the book and the aim of its writing is to look at Iranian architecture and architectural historiography (p. 10) through this notion; nevertheless, it remains ambiguous to the end.

Low accuracy in using terms is another problem; for example, he uses different terms for a single referent alternately; or misuses terms like 'architectural historiography,' 'architectural history' and 'history of

architecture' in various instances. Besides that repeated mention of theoretical apparatuses or perspectives, that we are not about to use them, confuses the text and perplexes the reader. It is obvious that the author has valuable remarks to make. So why does he need to such a verbiage and unclearness?

Apart from all of this, the book contains some worthwhile remarks for understanding Iranian architecture. The author attempts to demonstrate that our general understanding of Iranian culture is based on weak assumptions, and by criticizing these assumptions, he wants to open up the field for new debates. In order to envision new horizons in understanding Iranian architectural history for the reader, he practices applying theory in it, and through this calls the reader to adopt theory. He speaks about the importance of sociopolitical contexts of architecture and the consequences of their overlooking, everywhere, and invites the reader to consider these contexts. In addition, subjects addressed in the book, such as categorization, periodization, stylistics, and theory-based historiography, are more or less neglected subjects in Iranian architectural historiography, and drawing scholars' attentions to them is a befitting practice.

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