

Boundlessness

The Coexistence of Architecture and Nature in The Villages of Pālangān and Āvihang

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Abstract | Pālangān houses are located on Shahu Mountains so collaboratively that it is difficult to say where the village ends or where the mountainous begin. The rocks have reached the houses as if the arms reach the elbow; they are similar to living limbs of "one" body; consanguineous and interdependent. This paper describes the boundless companionship and poetic co-existence of the village of Pālangān and Āvihang in a literary language and a poetic narration. It investigates the elaborate joints between the mountains and the village: it depicts the presence of the mountains in the village and the village in the mountains.

Keywords | Mountain, Kurdistan, Pālangān, Āvihang.



Pic 1: The architecture and nature have shaped, refined, ruined, and overwrote each other during their coexistence over the years in Pālangān.

Photo: Seyed Amir Mansouri, 2015.

Introduction | In the village of Pālangān, houses are neither alienated nor imposed on the body of the mountain. Here, nature is not added for the sake of the architectural beautification¹. Architecture in this village has occurred in the continuity of nature. The architecture and nature have shaped, refined, ruined, and overwrote each other during their coexistence over the years (pic. 1). Stairs, roofs, roads, bridges, and the environment are so interconnected as if they have appeared from a long time ago, along with the crinkling of the layers of the earth and the emergence of the Zagros Mountains; yet, they seem to still grow along². It can be seen that the essence of the village and the mountain, the house and the tree, the wall and the cliff, the creek and the path, the roof and the sky are so close that it's difficult to speak of borders and edges. It is the conjunction of architecture and nature; it is about "boundlessness".

This article is adapted from a part in a doctoral thesis which is being completed by the author³. It has been rewritten

regarding the subject of this issue of the magazine. In the first section, the affiliation of Kurdish culture to nature and the role of the mountains in the culture of Kurd people is described. The second part consists of a collection of photo notes from the villages of Pālangān and Āvihang, which seeks to find architectural representations of human-nature association, and discusses the implications of nature and the reason of this conjunction. These pictorial writings are based on architectural perceptions during the visit to these two villages. Diagrams and images are used as a means of perception in addition to the writing. They try to reveal the hidden spatial ideas behind each of the chosen positions by description, imagination, depiction and conscious exaggeration of the existing situation. The approach of this research to this historic villages is beyond the common approaches of conservation and modernization in the cultural heritage. This article tries to enrich the hidden layers of daily life on the basis of a dynamic and vibrant look.

Poetic coexistence

Nature and mountains in their entirety can be considered the soul mate of the Kurd people. Human being and the natural environment are inseparably interlinked in the mentality and culture of Kurd people. "The rocks, waterfalls, animals, plants, and the spirit and personality of life within every being compose the totality of nature that is reflected in the mirrors of Kurdish hearts". (Izadi, 1992).

The most prominent geophysical feature of Kurdistan is the mountainousness. Even in the regions outside of Kurdistan where Kurdish people live (Rivand Heights in the Eastern Alborz, Khorasan, Highlands of Balochistan, etc.), mountains have always been the most significant natural phenomenon in the region. They have created the history, culture, and traditions of the Kurdish people (Ibid). They say: "Flatten the mountain to see how Kurdish people



Pic 2: A view to the village of Pālangān.
Photo: Seyed MOhammad Bagher Manzouri-2015.

will disappear in one day." For them, the mountains are nothing less than God's incarnation; the mountains are their mother, their refuge, their supporter, their house, their cult, their market, their sweetheart, and their only friend. [...] Alike a genuine creature that only survives in the desert, or like wild flowers that only flourish in the unconditional liberty of virgin nature, Kurds only "exist" to embrace the cool, sunny weather of the mountain. [...] For a Kurd person, the flat terrains are the ends of the existing boundaries (Siaband, 1988); (Pic. 2).

The relation of Kurd people to nature is a long-standing and complex one replete with solidarity, affinity, fear, respect, affection, care, admiration, imitation and praise. The significance of such contemplating can be perceived better in the current environment that stems from the modern thinking of dominance over nature.

A Kurd person is in need of nature to survive - as a modern urban man - in the difficult conditions of the Zagros mountainous. The difference, however, is that a Kurd person has long recognized this need consciously and instinctively, and he has set the nature as the basis of all his behaviors - including his architectural construction. He considers the mountains as his mother- his origin- and therefore his house architecture is derived from the mountain nature. The architecture in the region is not imposed on the environment, but rather as part of it; like the Kurdish belief in which man is recognized as a part of nature in a single system.

The effect of this magnificent human-nature relationship is obvious in Kurdish literature, folklore, children's naming, rituals, and ultimately in the way of constructing their habitats.

For instance, in the Kurdish Timeline the names of months indicate the weather and natural conditions as well as their impact on the conditions of their life. In fact, it is the nature that regulates the rhythm of their life, agriculture and livestock. In return, it is the process of life that brings meaning to the natural events and makes the natural phenomena interpretable in their own way (Salimi, 2002).

Another example, which indicates the close relationship of Kurdish people and nature, is the Gurani. Gurani or Kurdish folk songs "is an important part in the music of Kurdish people whose verbal and rhythmicity represent a

picture of the national culture of these people with a great spiritual value." (Salimi, 2013).

Abu Fayan, a well-known Armenian thinker, says:

"All Kurds, even the illiterate old people, have a poetic spirit and are very adept in singing songs. They sing very simply about the valleys, the plains, the waterfalls, the rivers, the flowers, the weapons, the courage, and about the young girls; the songs that are arisen from their sensational feelings inside." (ibid.).

These people are blended with nature so delicately that they know when to address a plane tree or a new sapling or an apple tree grafted with a quince tree in complementing the body of their sweethearts.

Gardeners believe that a garden is a land that has to be served rather than a capital to be exploited.

I am a gardener

You know well

I am captured by the kingdom of weaved hair

And I am the servant of tall trees

As long as I can " (ibid)

Kurds do not enliven the wind and rain and gardens through the archetypes of poetry, they actually consider them alive:

He gives water to garden flowers

Tired, with pain in his hands

Oh, Zaryan wind, shame on you

That you tarnish my love's neck with dust as you blow

Write a letter with rain drops

Give it to the "north" wind for delivering it to your sweetheart." (ibid)

Therefore, a Kurd man is engaged with nature since his birthday. Living with its calendar, and being involved in the surroundings is a feature of Kurdish life as they fall in love, work, and die. Nature is never eliminated from their mentality and rationality, poetry, economy, beliefs, and customs. How can one imagine their habitation separate from the mountainous surrounding nature?

In the following, some illustrations describe the representations of this human-nature unity in the architecture of the village of Āvihang and Pālangān⁴.



The Rain Alley

Listen! It rains, but not as usual in every place, not as always!

Here in Āvīhang, the spectacular narrative about the water landing from the sky and flowing down the village is magnificent; it is an audible play...

Listen! This hill chants the poem of rain, and every roof, porch, and gutter play the rhymes of this poem out loud. Listen! As the sound of rain showers rise in the middle of the hill and dwindles under the slender shadow of the porches as a delicate silk.

Proceed! Passing here is the experience of simultaneous strolling under the rain and going through the midst of a storm.

...

Now, imagine a dancing wind moving the curtains of clouds.

...

Or imagine a sudden sun shining on the grazed scattered streams of water.

Aren't these hills, streams, edges, porches, and loud, tall, short, or inclined gutters extended to the hill neck and arranged in this way to make the raining more fanciful and to praise the delicacy, texture, movement, and sound of water.



The Dead Ends Anchored to the Mountains

There are dead end alleys in Āvīhang which do not end up in a closed wall, but to the mountains

Here is where the air and the sky flow down the mountain to the village, as the blood flows from the heart to the veins!

Here, the path for rain water and passersby is one. This path is shaped through man-made meeting of man and nature.

A hand-made path, worn down by water.

The path that has been shaped during a long time of water wearing off the stone and has been completed by the man-made effort of a person who has loved this place by heart. The Earth is the mother of man and the Kurd people treat their old mother as if they were to take care of a child.

They have built stairs where the path is difficult to pass and they have added a stone bench at their doorsteps.

This affection, long affinity and, uniting with nature is evident in the careful artistic arrangement of stones and utilization of wood and mortar for cohesion in one place and dry-stone in another.



The Single Bench Facing the Horizon

The breadth of his home may not be more than forty square meters, yet, his heart is as wide as the mountains, and the horizons of the sky are all his.

The facilities of the house include a "horizon",

A bench on the edge of the roof,

A roof and

Some walls.

The house enclosure is simple and brief,

In return, the opportunity to watch the mountains, valleys and rivers, and the garden and the sky is endless.

Here in Pālangān, you can sit on a bench and praise the world.

You can sit on a bench and hug the mountain.

You can sit on a bench, and delve into the village's life, as a theater scene opposite the mountains, from dawn to the last dimming lights of the farthest house.

Beyond being a shelter; home is a place for solitude,

For delving into life

For thinking and contemplating.



Roommate

In Āvihang, we saw an old man living on the highest hill in the village with a great noble rock as his companion.

He laid his bed by the rock and leaned on it.

He certainly must have been young when he built his house. He must have been vigorous to pull the rock up the hills, paint it and glaze it. However, he could not put it behind a wall, build a niche instead and put a vase of artificial flowers on it.

The old man, who has built this house, was surely young when he built and let the mountain into his home. He opened the door, the wall and the entire room to the rock, he embraced the mountain with his big heart, and let the mountains be his home.

In Pālangān, we saw an old woman who gave us doogh - a cool drink made from milk - in the hot summer noon and told us about her children who had left the village with great dreams. She was now alone with the house facing the mountain and the sky, and shadows of the cliffs as the kitchen. She was left alone with the largest cliff in the middle of the village as her companion. She sang of her pains, griefs and hopes in Gurani as she cooked and made doogh and the rock was listening patiently, and making his tight body an embrace for the poor soul and the strong spirit of the old woman



Lady Blue

I do not know her name; it may be "Landscape", or perhaps "horizon". Her name may even be "sky". I have named her "Lady Blue".

Lady Blue has made tea. She is standing on the roof of her house and watching the return of the herds of sheep at the sunset and greets the women living down the alleys. She might be talking about us, the strangers with the cameras.

As we grasp, the "roof" where she stands might be the borderline between human and nature: where the buildings of the village come to their end and the sky begins. However, she is the connector of these two. She unites with the mountains and the sunset as she speaks to her neighbors. She is the one who has brought the sky to the ground in her long flounce skirt. Her look links

The sky to the mountain,
The mountain to the roof,
The roof to the wall,
The wall to the cliff and the water pouring down the stream
The stream to the alley
The alley to the sheep moving in the path,
And the path to the neighboring women.

Lady blue stands on the edge of her roof, where the mountain is detached from the sky, unaware of the fact that she links the nature, home, and the society altogether.

Conclusion | Architects who are educated in the modern era may find it difficult to analyze architecture without drawing lines, organization, division, and identifying of spaces, and without comprehending this uncertainty, unity, and blending with nature that a Kurd person has vividly in life.

Moreover, this limited number of photos and illustrations cannot be a criterion for concluding, generalizing, or clinching.

However, the close and serene relationship of Kurds with nature as a living and existing phenomenon is undeniable.

They consider themselves as a limb of this living being rather than as the conquerors of nature. This concept is also explicit in their architectural construction so that it would be difficult to imagine their habitats apart from the mountains and the sky. In their beliefs, a roof is not the physical boundary separating the house from the sky; a roof is a place where a person meets the sky. Alleyways are not paths to connect the village to the mountain and vice versa; the alleyways are mountains themselves, which have taken the shape of human, animal, and water steps over the years.

Endnotes

1- Alike an ornamental flower pot near the window, which is added in the final stage of the project modification to please the employer.

2- Kurdistan region is geologically active and the Zagros Mountains, which are the result of the tectonic encounter between Eurasia and Africa from fifteen million years ago, are still affected by the pressure between the two continents and their heights are increased by a few inches annually (Izadi, 1992).

3- "La ville étagée : réflexions sur l'intensité urbaine à partir des villages de la région montagneuse de Zagros (Kurdistan, Iran)", Nafiseh MOUSAVIAN, sous la direction de Xavier BONNAUD, ED PTS Paris VIII, ENSAPLV.

4- All photos are taken by Seyed Mohammad Bagher Mansouri, edited and illustrated by Seyedeh Nafiseh Mousavian.

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