

# Aestheticization by Nature

## The Role of Nature in Aestheticizing Interventions in Tehran through the Lens of “Valuation Theory”\*

**Abstract** | There is a broad consensus on bringing nature back to cities. Environmental issues and their rising challenges in the world have encouraged theorists and practitioners to adopt a broader perspective to “City in Nature”<sup>1</sup> and consider it as an entity. In this respect, three general objectives are pursued: a) the protection of resources that nature provides human with; b) responding to aesthetic ideals of citizens; and c) accreditation of urban spaces. The natural resources of Tehran have been the issue of much debate and bringing nature back to the cities are of great importance. To this purpose, the urban management has taken some measurements. Though the approaches for the interventions impact the aestheticization of urban areas, our knowledge about the issue is scanty. This paper is an attempt to address this gap and contribute to our knowledge of nature-based aestheticization.

**Keywords** | Aestheticizing intervention, Valuation, Nature, Tehran.

Maryam-al-Sadat Mansouri  
Ph.D. researcher in Landscape  
Architecture, University of Paris  
Ouest Nanterre La Défense,  
France.  
[maryamansouri@gmail.com](mailto:maryamansouri@gmail.com)

**Introduction** | The relation between nature and city has been well discussed in three approaches. The first approach aims at protecting the ecosystem and is recognized as green city.

The second approach or sustainable city prioritizes creating breathing spaces in city for its citizens and gives rises to issues such as natural energy, campaigns for environmental pollution and unpolluted air. The third approach which is the focus of this study, concentrate on how cities can receive accreditation with nature. The extent to which the third approach has been practiced will be investigated by analyzing three following cases: “Bâgh-e Irani garden”, “Bam-e Tehran” and “Nahj olbalagheh Park”. The analysis is carried out by quantifying some criteria, derived from the philosophical theory of valuation, and presenting them as measurable indicators.

**Hypothesis** | Given that Tehran enjoy rich natural resources, the types of approach adopted by the urban management make nature- based interventions more or less aligned with “aestheticizing” aim. If we conceptualize the perfection of beauty semantically and as a construct, which depends on the observer’s perception, we can hypothesize as follows: The more the semantic approach is emphasized, the more the aestheticizing intervention would be effective. However, if we focus more on form-based aspects, it is more likely that our nature-based interventions fail in fulfilling the aestheticizing aim.

**Methodology** | To address the research question, this paper first explains the place of nature in Iran and in the world then analyzes three urban intervention

cases in Tehran through the lens of valuation theory and show to what extent they have been succeeded.

## City and Nature

- Contemporary approaches to the cities and nature in western experience.

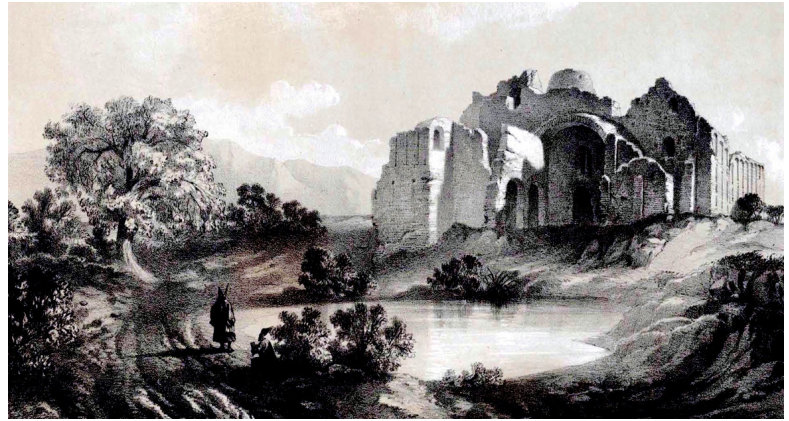
**Green City:** Cities and especially major metropolises in the world are being accused of: emitting greenhouse gas and increasing degradation of the environmental resources due to excessive activities and mechanism. Green city is an attempt to exculpate cities and change this prevalent view by seeking a solution for having a healthier environment. Green city is also looking for a practical method to green urban spaces such as buildings, interior and exterior spaces (Mallet, 2012: 3). Besides developing urban green spaces known as classical, having green roofs, green facades and green spaces even within workplace became imperative. In so doing, the idea of “green building” emerged. Green building is defined as a building capable of incorporating greening in its design - to preserve mental and physical wellbeing of its residents. New York, Singapore, Montreal and Toronto were among the first cities practiced the idea of green cities. To realize this dream, they proposed different strategies such as “urban agriculture” outlining the development of green roofs (<http://apisurbanica.com/paris-ville-verte>).

Greencities are defined as cities that host communities, without exceeding the capacity of the ecosystem either quantitatively or qualitatively (Jepson & Edwards, 2005). Green City is a holistic approach to management, environment, industrial ecology, social needs, culture and city ([ecocitybuilders.org](http://ecocitybuilders.org)); (Pic. 1).



Pic 1: The proposed project of Paris green city in «Paris Smart City 2050», the design is presented in the 14th district. It attempts to introduce high rise buildings which send positive energy waves, polluted air n and are in harmony with the neighborhoods. The idea consists of an ecological 23- meter corridor located on the old railroad of Paris (Petite Ceinture de Paris). Source: <http://www.challenges.fr/economie/les-videos-de-l-essec/20151130.CHA2153/cop21-c-est-quoi-une-ville-verte.html>.

Pic 3: Ardeshir Palace in Firuzabad. Sketch by Eugene Flandin. The sketch of a palace in front of a pond and with a tree which is more marked than others in the picture. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palace\\_of\\_Ardashir\\_by\\_Eug%C3%A8ne\\_Flandin.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palace_of_Ardashir_by_Eug%C3%A8ne_Flandin.jpg).



**Sustainable City:** In 1992, an agreement was signed between the countries participating in Rio de Janeiro's conference<sup>2</sup> as "Agenda 21". The agenda is a non-binding, voluntarily implemented action plan developed by the United Nations for sustainable development. The concept of sustainable city moderates the previous thinking. A sustainable city stands for a city or urban units designed with respect to the principles of sustainable development and ecological urbanism. The principles include the social, economic, environmental, cultural aspects associated with urban development. It focuses on saving energy and using natural and replaceable resources. The idea has been supported by the United Nations and Europe which signed an agreement on this issue in 2012. The concept that can be modified with respect to the geographical features of the context

for example, general issues of global warming, energy, manmade wastes, transportation systems, land features such as air, water and biodiversity. The main idea behind sustainable city is that in the global and local environmental issues, the negative contribution cities should reach to its minimum level. The manifestation of such thinking can be seen in the concepts sustainable neighborhoods (Pic. 2).

**Accrediting urban spaces with nature:** Compared the two previous approaches which are more focused on functional dimensions, forms and materials, this new born view prioritizes nature in urban space managing.

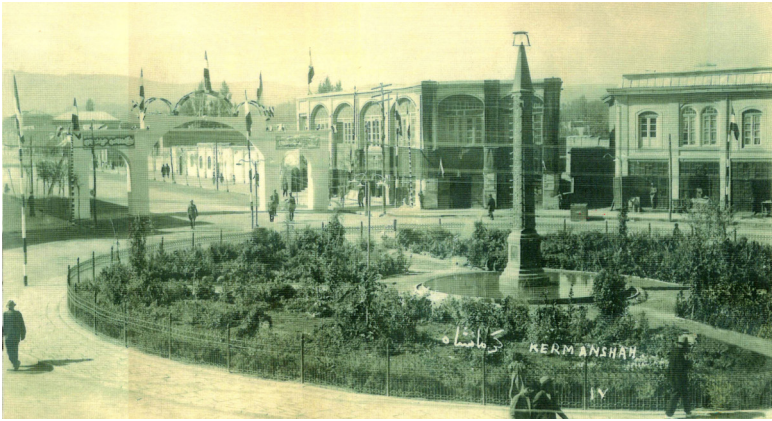
- The place of nature in Iranian thoughts

**Ancient period; symbolic role:** Because of Iranian culture, Iranian cities are based on a symbolic view



Pic 2: Stockholm, sustainable city. It proposes a sustainable neighborhood in Stockholm, Sweden. In the picture, all the architectural principles of sustainable urbanization have been met. For example the use of solar cells, rain water collection channels, markets for local products, natural system for garbage collection, health services optimizing water use, building with natural materials and green roofs as well as replacing spaces for drivers and riders with sidewalks and bike spaces. Source: <http://projets-architecte-urbanisme.fr/images-archi/ecoquartier-stockholm-ville-durable-environnement-grenelle-suede-700x269.jpg>.





Pic 5: The Municipality square in the city of Kermanshah. Plant species in the square (which are the imitation of European squares since there has been no example in Iranian cities before) are different from the Iranian species. Audience can only watch the nature and the landscape and is not allowed to touch it. Nature, in fact, next to the vertical statue in the center, is a decoration here. Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/fa/4/4e/Kermanshah-1317.jpg>.

of nature. Though our knowledge about the number of natural cities which are similar to today's cities in Iranian history is scarce, the proximity of holy trees and water sources or fountains in the ancient city centers or governmental buildings, reflects the symbolic value of nature in giving meaning to the city.

#### **Middle (traditional) period; urbanistic role:**

During this period, nature has closer ties to the city and contributes to its spatial organization. The nature plays a role in functional and aesthetic aspects of urban to fulfill its role. Streets and landscapes designs of urban spaces are inspired by Iranian garden. An old example is the city of Herat in Timurid period and the recent one is Qazvin in Safavid period. The best manifestation of this period is the city of Isfahan (Pic. 3) where the term "street" is introduced. The Iranian garden receives so much attention that the "street" is nothing but basically a gardening word. The word has entered into the urbanism and stayed as a genuine urban element even until now (Pic. 4).

#### **Contemporary (modern) period; decorative role:**

In this period, the presence of foreign counselors in Iran westernizes the image of cities. Its manifestations in city are the parks and landscape designs of nature inspired from patterns very different from the

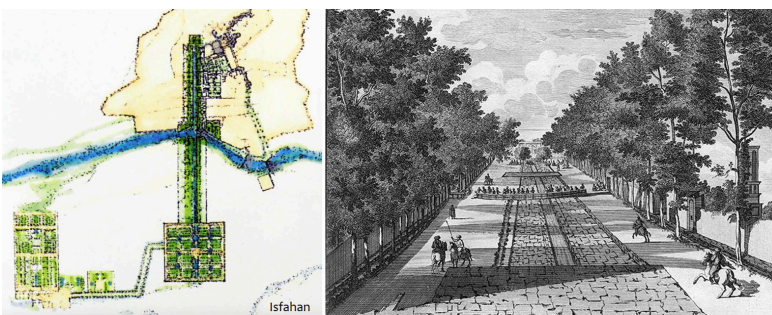
aesthetic of Persian garden. Nature, for example untypical plant species which are not matched with the features of environment, or manipulated plants, are used for the decoration of the urban spaces and buildings. Scale, plant species, location, and other aspects of nature, impact the urban spaces and make them different from the typical Persian garden (Pic. 5). The Keshavarz Boulevard and Park-e-Shahr (City Park) are some examples of this period.

#### • The relationship between city and nature in Tehran

**Safavid period:** Tehran is a garden-city, a natural environment with many gardens to which King Tahmasb is attracted and he orders the place to be hedged (Pic. 6). This marks the early stage of urbanization. This period is characterized by Tehran's rural and pristine nature, good weather, plenty of fruit berry and pomegranate gardens.

**Qajar period:** The reign of Qajars in Iran is contemporary to the beginning of exchanges with the West as mentioned in the previous section; nature with its Westernized patterns contributes to the decoration and ornamentation of urban areas (Pic. 7).

**Pahlavi period:** Like Qajar period, in Pahlavi period



Pic 4: Isfahan, the Safavid period. Zayandeh-rood (Zayande River) as a main natural element of the city has not a major role in its development but the human-made natural axis "Chahar Bagh Avenue is seen in the sketch. The vertical orientation of urban development rather the riverbed has been preferred for the city development. Source (from right to left respectively): [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5e/Isfahan\\_Chaharbagh\\_3\\_by\\_Cornelis\\_de\\_Bruyn.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5e/Isfahan_Chaharbagh_3_by_Cornelis_de_Bruyn.jpg); <http://studiolum.com/wang/persian/norjulfac/citymap.jpg>.



adopt the same approach to nature in the city. The only difference is that, the decorative role changes to an art creating role in the city. Nature and urban arts used in architecture and adopted by urban space management are in their peak conditions (Pic. 8).

**Contemporary period:** This part, the main focus of the article, raises the main question such as: What approach is being employed by Tehran's urban management for nature-based interventions nowadays and what is its source of inspiration?

To address this question, our field study has recognized three approaches - to nature –based interventions in Tehran. Three samples employing the identified three approaches are analyzed. The first approach to the nature is creating a spatial experience. This approach is adopted in Bagh-e Irani Park (the Iranian Garden of Tehran); the second approach targets a visual experience. It is employed in Bam-e-Tehran (Tehran's Roof) site. The last approach focuses on creating a spatial-visual experience. Its example is Nahj olbalagheh Park. It should be noted that none of the three approaches are superior to another. The selected samples are analyzed through the lens of valuation theory.

### Theoretical Concepts

#### • The Philosophical theory of "Valuation" and "Accreditation"

This philosophical theory proposed by the contemporary American pragmatist philosopher "John Dewey"<sup>3</sup>, refers to a process by which human



Pic 6: Tehran Map in Safavid period, drawn by Iliya Nikolayevitch Berezin, a Russian orientalist who visited Tehran in 1842. The city is surrounded by King Tahmasb's walls. The Royal Citadel area in the northern part of the city is marked. Source: [http://www.aamahmoodian.com/tehran\\_berezin\\_large.htm](http://www.aamahmoodian.com/tehran_berezin_large.htm).

Table 1: Analysis of the aestheticizing interventions in the theoretical framework valuation based on the criteria and quantitative indicators. Source: author.

Indicator	Criteria
Continuity in history	Being process-based
Permanent functionality	Having a desired condition
Importance given to nature	Valuation



Pic 9: Tehran Persian Garden Iran, Tehran. Photo: Maryam-al-Sadat Mansouri, 2015.





Pic 7: Tehran, Bob Humayoun's streets. Identical views, single- point based perspective facing an outstanding building and trimmed trees in the both sides of the street which evoke westernized resorts such as the Champs-Élysées or Avenue de l'Opéra in Paris. In the picture, plants and trees that characterize the nature-based environment Tehran are untouched and are observed in the landscape around the city (backyards, alleys and even in one case, the street). King Naser al-Din of the Qajars ordered the construction of this street on 1871. Source: [http://images.lib.eshia.ir/images/books/23019/madkhal\\_66\\_1\\_1249619103.jpg](http://images.lib.eshia.ir/images/books/23019/madkhal_66_1_1249619103.jpg).



Pic 8: Tehran, Valiasr Square. 1352. Source: [http://setavin.com/assets/images/files/setavin\\_1212\\_1448740640.jpg](http://setavin.com/assets/images/files/setavin_1212_1448740640.jpg).



Pic 10: Tehran's Roof. Photo: Maryam-al-Sadat Mansouri, 2015.

beings always try to address the shortcomings and needs to create a more satisfactory and desirable situation condition, than he is in now, . To fulfill this objective, human employs different methods and are “accredited” with the facilities in the context.

#### • The aestheticizing intervention

In this paper, “the aestheticizing intervention” in city is conceptualized as a process through which the urban management, accredited with cultural, economic or natural features of the city, attempts to improve the quality of its services to citizens, in so doing, this intervention would be a source of sustainable development.

To analyze aestheticizing interventions in the framework of theory of John Dewey, it is necessary to have quantitative indicators. The corresponding criteria and indicators have been introduced in Table 1.

**The first Case; Tehran Persian Garden:** the project is process-based because the footprint of the history can be traced in the project by observing the Iranian gardening tradition. This issue is discernible in the design of the garden axes, the use of water, and the organized array of planting, the old sycamore trees as well as even the shape and materials of the architectural spaces (Pic. 9). The designed spaces are often occupied by middle-aged and elderly people in the mornings and by the other social groups (youth, children, family) in the afternoon while they are being involved in different activities (e.g. walking, exercising , resting , friendly gatherings, doing picnics, or playing games).







Pic 11: Nahjolbalagheh Park. Photo: Maryam-al-Sadat Mansouri, 2015.

**The second Case; Tehran's Roof:** In this project, the natural capacity of space has been accredited with its scenery. In addition, the cultural landscape has been influenced by the emphasis on hiking path in the mountains to the Cable Car Station. It is because hiking is an old habit of Tehran habitants. This is another feature of the space which contributes to its symbolic-name, Tehran's Roof. These features than formal organization has not determined the name (Pic. 10).

**The third Case; Nahjolbalagheh Park:** With the primary goal of reviving Farahzad River, the project was started and its focus was on a landscape design

green space. However, the place has not been accredited with nature; in other word using nature has been a low priority. Therefore, the continuity of the natural flow of water and known landscape in Tehran has been overlooked and the role of nature and its capacity, in the landscape design has also been ignored. In this project, water and valley are missing in the designed spaces and are out of the vision of the citizens. In addition, the spaces that the citizens attend are devoid of nature. The locations of spaces in places called "garden", are the reason why they have been visited on some special occasions such as Sizdah-be-dar (the Iranian nature's day); (Pic. 11).

**Result |** The common principle in the three cases discussed above is accrediting the space with the nature. The aestheticizing interventions in Tehran

were made with respect to the geographical, topographical and cultural features of the city. Their emphasis was especially on "landscap-ing",

Table 2: Analysis of the aestheticizing interventions in the case studies through the lens of valuation theory. Source: author.

	Nahjolbalagheh Park	Tehran's Roof	Tehran Persian Garden
Process: continuity in history	[lack of] restoration of the valley	Tehran's viewpoint	gardening tradition
Desired condition: permanent functions	occasional	all time of the year	all time of the year
Accreditation with nature	form-based	organic	symbolic

or the nature-based aestheticizing interventions are accredited with nature. In Tehran Persian Garden, the adopted approach, which is inspired by the nature, is symbolic. In the case of Tehran's Roof, the nature is

rather organic and is almost untouched. However, in the project of Nahj olbalagheh park, the nature is much influenced and a form-based approach is adopted and nature has not been the source of inspiration (Table 2).

**Conclusion** | The aestheticizing interventions in Tehran have been accredited with nature. The interventions have been influenced by the approach and inspiration sources and vary from one another in terms of impact and sustainability. Based on the

analysis, we conclude, that Tehran Persian Garden is an effective aestheticizing intervention. Tehran's roof is rather a successful sample. However, designing Nahj olbalagheh Park is just an urban intervention in which the aesthetics has no place in its design.

## Endnotes

\* This article is part of the doctoral research of the author and had been presented at the Eighth Conference of Urban Landscape Phenomenology in Tehran on September 2016, held by NAZAR Research Center. The conference was sponsored by Tehran Beautification Organization.

1. See: (AUDIAR, 2008).
2. See: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/about.html> (Accessed 29 September 2016).
3. See: (Dewey, 2011).

## Reference list

- Agence d'Urbanisme et de Développement Intercommunal de l'Agglomération Rennaise (AUDIAR). (2008). *De la nature en ville à la ville-nature*. Available from: [http://www.audiar.org/sites/default/files/documents/editeur/etudes/fu\\_ville\\_nature.pdf](http://www.audiar.org/sites/default/files/documents/editeur/etudes/fu_ville_nature.pdf) (Accessed 29 September 2016).
- Dewey, J. (2011). *La formation des valeurs*, traduit et présenté par A. Bidet, L. Quéré, G. Truc. Paris: La Découverte.
- Jepson Jr, E.J. & Edwards, M.M. (2005). How possible is sustainable urban development? An analysis of planner's perceptions about new urbanism, smart growth and the ecological city. *Planning Practices & Research*, 25(4): 417-437.
- Mallet, J. (2012). *Les villes vertes: analyse de leurs réalisations et proposition de recommandations pour leur développement*. Doctoral dissertation. Quebec: Université de Sherbrooke, Available from: [https://www.usherbrooke.ca/environnement/fileadmin/sites/environnement/documents/Essais2012/Mallet\\_J\\_\\_04-04-2012\\_.pdf](https://www.usherbrooke.ca/environnement/fileadmin/sites/environnement/documents/Essais2012/Mallet_J__04-04-2012_.pdf) (Accessed 29 September 2016).
- [Http://apisurbanica.com/paris-ville-verte](http://apisurbanica.com/paris-ville-verte) (Accessed 29 September 2016).
- <http://www.ecocitybuilders.org> (Accessed 29 September 2016).