

Case Study

Re-reading Two Competing Discourses in the Representation of Isfahan's Urban Image during the 1960s and 1970s*

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Abstract | Problem statement: In the 1960s and 1970s, Isfahan became a major center for debates on architectural identity in Iran. A series of urban projects and architectural interventions-both within historic settings and in new development areas- created a context in which two contrasting approaches to the past, tradition, and the idea of "Iranian architectural identity" emerged. The key question of this study is how these approaches were represented in official media and professional sources, and what role they played in shaping Isfahan's architectural image during this period. Focusing on three news-related cases and several key architectural projects, this study examines the tension between two discourses: the "official-touristic" discourse and the "professional-critical" discourse. Each offers a different understanding of the past, the role of tradition, and the prospects of Iranian architecture in the modern era. The aim is to show how these discourses influenced media representations and design decisions related to Isfahan's architectural identity. The study employs Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. Data were collected through a systematic review of news and reports in the Ettela'at daily index cards, the Bulletin of the Society of Iranian Architects, and Honar va Memari magazine. These sources allow comparison between the approaches of official institutions and the professional architectural community toward major urban projects in Isfahan. Findings indicate that the official-touristic discourse emphasized historical representation and cultural symbolism to present an "authentic" and appealing image of Isfahan, while the professional-critical discourse stressed architectural interpretation of the past, creativity, and careful engagement with tradition. The analysis of three cases shows that the interaction of these discourses shaped Isfahan's architectural identity in a multilayered and non-linear way. The study contributes an integrated discursive framework that reveals how differing narratives of tradition and modernity influenced the representation of Isfahan's architecture.

Keywords | *Isfahan urban image, National identity, National architecture, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, Official-touristic discourse, Professional-critical discourse*

Introduction | During the 1960s and 1970s, Isfahan became one of the main centers of urban and architectural transformation in Iran-a period in which urban modernization, the expansion of tourism, and state cultural policies aimed at representing "Iranian identity" advanced simultaneously. This convergence of past and modernity turned Isfahan, on the one hand, into a site of physical interventions and, on the other, into a stage for the redefinition of identity narratives. Historical spaces, urban areas, and new architectural projects became points of intersection where Safavid heritage, the needs of the modern city, and dominant

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cultural discourses were rearticulated. Within this context, urban transformations in Isfahan did not follow a unified trajectory; rather, they led to the formation of two distinct identity discourses: one that sought to fix a touristic image of Iranian identity through the spectacular representation of the past and the formal continuity of "authenticity," and another that understood the past as a source for contemporary reinterpretation and attempted to establish a new relationship between tradition and modernity.

Accordingly, the main research question asks how these two discourses were represented in media outlets and professional architectural sources related to urban projects in Isfahan during the 1960s and 1970s, and how such representations produced divergent meanings of "authenticity," "Iran," and "historical place," ultimately turning Isfahan into a contested field for the formation of national identity.

Literature Review

Despite the expansion of studies on Iranian national identity in the fields of history, sociology, and political science, research that specifically addresses the relationship between national identity and place remains limited and fragmented. Most existing works either focus on theoretical aspects of identity or examine macro-level processes of identity formation, while paying less attention to the role of place, spatial interventions, and spatial organization in the production of identity.

Within this body of scholarship, however, several notable studies approach national identity from the perspective of place and space. For example, Ali Mozaffari (2007), in "Modernity and Identity: The National Museum of Iran," demonstrates how the pre-Islamic and Islamic sections of the National Museum each convey a distinct narrative of national identity, and how spatial transformations reflect two different identity-building projects in modern Iran. Talinn Grigor (2002, 2003) shows that public monuments and symbolic places in Iran-from Pahlavi-era buildings to Shahyad/Azadi-are continually reinterpreted, and even socially reclaimed, through political change and shifts in collective memory, without substantial physical alteration, thereby actively contributing to the reproduction of national identity narratives. Pamela Karimi (2013) traces a similar process at the scale of everyday spaces and interior architecture, demonstrating that the role of place in identity formation extends beyond official and monumental. Likewise, Sussan Babaie's (2008) analysis of Isfahan's urban spaces and architecture reveals that places in the Iranian city have long carried political, ritual, and identity meanings, functioning as mechanisms for organizing collective memory and displaying power.

Nevertheless, the relationship between national identity and place-examined through a discursive analysis of architectural projects in a historic city and their representation in media and professional texts- has rarely been studied in a systematic manner. This study addresses this gap by focusing on Isfahan in the 1960s and 1970s.

Theoretical Framework

National identity is a historical and constructed phenomenon that takes shape within political, cultural, and narrative transformations and acquires different meanings across periods. No fixed or predetermined set of elements-such as race, language, religion, or tradition- can serve as a universal criterion for defining national identity, since it is continually produced in relation to collective memories and imaginaries and is reconstructed or revived over time in response to historical needs (Ashraf, 2022).

While scholars such as Eric Hobsbawm regard concepts related to national identity as relatively recent historical inventions that emerged mainly during the era of nation-states to legitimize modern governments over the past

two centuries, Hobsbawm nonetheless argues that in certain historical societies, such as Iran, forms of "proto-nationalism" existed earlier. He suggests that a "Zoroastrian-Iranian identity" in the pre-Islamic period and a "*Shi'i*-Iranian identity" in the Islamic era contributed to such formations. In his view, the Iranian case illustrates how deep historical layers of identity intertwine with modern nation-building processes, granting the past an active role in shaping contemporary identity (Hobsbawm, 1990).

By foregrounding the role of place, Ali Mozaffari (2021) further demonstrates that identity is not a stable essence but a dynamic and continuously reproduced narrative formed through encounters with the Other and through lived experience and social practice. From this perspective, urban places are themselves products of historical, fluid, and "inscribed" processes; that is, place acquires meaning through historical narratives, rituals, spatial interventions, and conscious politicization, becoming stabilized within collective memory.

Relying on the pre-Islamic past and the creation of new spatial inscriptions, the first Pahlavi state sought to establish a form of cultural nationalism within urban spaces and monumental architecture (*ibid.*, 49). This trajectory continued under the second Pahlavi, though in a more hybrid form that simultaneously drew upon ancient elements, *Shi'i* symbols, and modernist narratives. Through architectural and urban interventions, this composite identity was represented as both legitimizing and authoritative (*ibid.*).

From this vantage point, urban places-including the historical spaces of Isfahan- are not merely physical settings but arenas in which identity narratives are formed and contested. Accordingly, urban development projects in Isfahan during the 1960s and 1970s can be understood as part of a broader process of reinterpreting the past and constructing new images of "authenticity" and "national identity," whether through the reorganization of historical spaces or the introduction of modern elements into the urban fabric. These transformations were not simply material changes but meaning-producing practices in which state institutions, architects, and media participated in generating divergent narratives about the relationship between tradition, history, and modernity.

Research Method

Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis provides a well-established theoretical framework for examining processes of meaning production across texts, discursive practices, and social structures (Fairclough, 1995/2019). In this model, analysis operates across three interrelated levels: (1) the textual level, addressing linguistic features and modes of representation; (2) the level of discursive practice, concerned with the production, distribution,

and consumption of texts; and (3) the level of social practice, encompassing relations of power, policy-making, economic conditions, and ideology that shape discourse (Fairclough, 1995/2019, 1989; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Given the nature of the present study's data-drawing on press documents, project descriptions, professional critiques, and urban policies from the 1960s and 1970s- the three primary levels of Fairclough's model have been further differentiated into more specific analytical components to reveal the semantic and structural layers of architectural discourses with greater precision. At the textual level, analysis focuses on language and keywords, modes of media representation, and discursive tone. The level of discursive practice is examined through the position of the architect, the principal actors involved, and the type and objectives of projects. Finally, the level of social practice is reconstructed through approaches to tradition and modernity, as well as the broader ideological atmosphere of the discourse.

This three-level, eight-layer framework enables the study to render visible the differences and tensions between the "official-touristic" and the "professional-critical" discourses within a clear analytical matrix. The study's table number1-juxtaposing the values, concepts, actors, language, and underlying logics of these two discourses- is the outcome of this process and serves as a tool for the comparative analysis of key architectural projects in Isfahan during the period under study.

Discussion

This section is based on the systematic collection of news items and documents related to architectural and urban transformations in Isfahan during the 1960s and 1970s. The archive of the daily index cards of Ettela'at newspaper-compiled by the "Architecture of the Period of Transformation" group- served as the primary source for tracking events and contemporary architectural debates. The Bulletin of the Association of Iranian Architects (from 1968 onward) reflected professional viewpoints and reactions to urban policies and discussions on "national architecture." In addition, Honar va Me'mari magazine (1969 to early 1978) articulated the professional architectural milieu of the period, including projects and theoretical critiques.

Examination of these sources shows that the question of architectural identity in Isfahan was largely articulated through urban projects, managerial decisions, and the actions of official and professional institutions.

Following the initial collection of data from the main sources, three news subjects were selected from among projects and issues related to Isfahan's urban development during the period under study. Complementary sources related to each subject were then reviewed to identify additional discursive markers, clarify their historical and discursive dimensions, and provide sufficient context for engaging with the three main case studies of the research.

• First subject: Yesterday's caravanserai, today's hotel

The revitalization of the Abbasid caravanserai into the Shah Abbas the Great Hotel was among the most significant architectural and urban interventions in Isfahan in the mid-twentieth century. From the outset, the project stood at the intersection of safeguarding Safavid heritage and responding to the needs of modern tourism, and over the course of a decade, it became a site for the confrontation of two opposing conceptions of "contemporary Iranian architecture."

By the mid-1950s, the lack of adequate hotel facilities in Isfahan led the Iran Insurance Company- at the suggestion of André Godard- to approve the conversion of the caravanserai into a hotel. Construction began in 1958, and Maxime Siroux prepared the project's initial design, which approached completion by 1966. In this scheme, the central courtyard was reconfigured according to the model of the Persian garden, and the interior façades were restored in continuity with Safavid architectural language, while the main façade facing the southern street adopted a modern expression influenced by the International Style, characterized by simple lines and horizontal bands. This juxtaposition turned the project into an early attempt to reconcile modern and traditional architecture and was later recognized as one of Iran's first experiences in the restoration and adaptive reuse of historic buildings (Daniel & Tajdar, 2021, 302 & 308) (Fig. 1).

As the project progressed, its approach gradually shifted. The initial scheme- based on a controlled synthesis of the historic fabric and contemporary needs- gave way to the idea of transforming the building not merely into a restored



Fig. 1. Initial design of the Shah Abbasi Hotel prior to the spatial interventions of the 1970s. Source: Archive of the Architecture of the Period of Transformation group.

monument, but into a showcase of Isfahan's "authentic arts." In this shift, the role of designers and traditional craftsmen became more prominent, and interior decoration-drawing on surface references to Seljuk, Safavid, and Qajar artistic layers- emerged as the most decisive component of the hotel's final identity (در مهمانسرای ... 1966, 6).

The growing emphasis on the display of "authentic arts" within interior spaces indicates a move away from an architectural reading of history toward a scenographic and consumable representation of the past-a change that prompted critical reactions among professional architects. Architect Vartan Hovanessian (1969, 35), who likely visited the building around 1969, described the outcome of this hybrid approach in a critical article:

"Iranian architecture at the crossroads of the national or the modern style-... A question may arise here: can we, without blindly imitating the old style, achieve good results in architecture by modernizing it? ... The answer is that taking the old style and making it appear modern through excessive ornamentation is like an elderly man or woman applying heavy makeup to appear young, merely to conceal deep wrinkles. This was the very question posed to me last year- when, on Nowruz night in Isfahan, as I walked through the lavish yet exhausting interior decoration of the halls of the Shah Abbas Hotel, several longtime patrons approached me and said: 'Engineer, see how beautiful it is; you should abandon the modern style and build this way, or at least modernize this style...'"

Hovanessian's viewpoint in the late 1960s-when he was nearly fifty years old- appears not to have aligned with prevailing architectural trends. Such a position found limited support not only among urban decision-makers but even within the professional architectural community. Evidence of this shift can be traced in the jury process and execution of the architectural competition for the "square and bazaar in front of the Abbasi Hotel."

Held in the final months of 1970 by the Association of Iranian Architects, this competition reflected the inclination of urban authorities and the professional community to redesign the hotel's surroundings. Criticism published in local and national outlets regarding the hotel's hybrid approach, alongside the growing tendency toward

traditional architecture in the early 1970s, created the conditions for further changes.

These interventions included the eastward expansion of the hotel, the creation of a square and bazaar south of the street facing the hotel, and the redesign of the exterior façade in 1972. The recessed square enhanced the hotel's urban presence, while the new façade-featuring brickwork, brick ornamentation, and tiled surfaces- established greater visual continuity with traditional architecture and the adjacent bazaar, rendering the initial modernist façade far less visible. The design of this façade was undertaken by Iranian architect Elias Gabbay, the competition's winner (Daniel & Tajdar, 2021, 309) (Fig. 2).

Analyzed through the lens of critical discourse analysis and Fairclough's three-level framework, the Shah Abbasi Hotel emerges as a site of intersection and confrontation between two opposing discursive logics. At the textual level, a spectrum of representations-from journalistic praise of the "revival of authentic arts" and the emphasis on traditional ornament, to Hovanessian's professional critique of excessive decoration- reveals two distinct modes of meaning-making: the past as a performative and consumable object versus the past as a source for architectural interpretation and creation. At the level of discursive practice, the project's changing trajectory -from Siroux's initial design based on controlled synthesis to the growing role of craft groups and, subsequently, the architectural competition-signals shifts in actors, decision-making mechanisms, and the logic of meaning production and circulation. At the level of social practice, these transformations-linked to state cultural-tourism policies, the tourism market, and reactions from the professional architectural community- turn the hotel into a field of tension between an official-touristic discourse and a professional-critical discourse, within which the architectural identity of Isfahan in the 1960s and 1970s takes shape as a contested and constructed process.

• Subject two: Development plus the preservation of identity

The growing prominence of tourism in Isfahan, together with the experience of revitalizing the Shah Abbasi Caravanserai, turned the city into one of the main arenas of tension between the past and urban development during



Fig. 2. Final modifications to the southern façade of the Abbasi Hotel and its coordination with the square and bazaar opposite the hotel, designed by Elias Gabbay. Source: Rajabi, 1976, 86 & 144.

the 1960s and 1970s. By the mid-1960s, this tension was reflected in official policies, most notably when the Municipality of Isfahan ruled in 1968 that building permits would be issued only to constructions designed in the “authentic traditional architectural style.” This policy represented a direct intervention in defining the city’s “architectural identity” and provoked strong reactions from the architectural community.

These criticisms were clearly articulated in the article “National Architecture,” republished in the Bulletin of the Association of Iranian Architects, which emphasized the incompatibility of copying historical forms with the technical and functional requirements of the contemporary city. Referring to physical constraints, technology, and modern ways of life, the authors warned that imposing past styles was neither feasible nor desirable (معماری ملی، 1969، 29 & 30).

A few years later, the same controversy re-emerged at a different scale and within a technical-urbanistic context, this time concerning the construction of new bridges over the Zayandeh-Rud. This infrastructural necessity raised serious questions about the relationship between new structures and the historical Safavid bridges. A review of official reports and professional journals reveals a clear divergence between the perspectives of urban authorities and those of the professional architectural community (مسابقه طرح احداث ...، 1973، 9 & 10).

Ultimately, two bridges-Azar and Vahid- were constructed in accordance with the recommendations of the Association of Iranian Architects. Built as steel-concrete structures alongside the Safavid bridges, they demonstrated that urban development-even in proximity to historic heritage- could proceed through professional competition and without formal imitation of the past (اولین کلنگ ...، 1973، 5).

Alongside these disputes between the municipality and the professional community, there were also signs of sensitivity at higher levels of governance toward Isfahan’s built environment. In this context, the role of Farah Pahlavi-despite her position within the power structure-differed from municipal executive policies. Rather than imposing architectural preferences, her interventions emphasized professional participation and design quality, functioning primarily in a supportive and regulatory capacity.

Examples such as the construction of the Isfahan Children’s Library (کتابخانه کودک اصفهان، 1969، 3-8) or the decision to organize architectural competitions for new projects at the University of Isfahan (ساختمان های آینده ...، 1973، 4) indicate that her role was defined through the establishment of professional mechanisms-such as competitions and expert juries. These measures sought to guide the relationship between new architecture and the city’s historical identity through professional processes.

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis and Fairclough’s three-level framework, the subject of “development plus the preservation of identity” constitutes a clear arena of discursive struggle over the legitimate definition of the city’s architectural identity. At the textual level, the prescriptive language of municipal policies-emphasizing the “authentic traditional style”- stands in opposition to professional critical texts that challenge formal imitation of the past through technical, functional, and social arguments. At the level of discursive practice, this confrontation is expressed in divergent modes of intervention: from municipal directives to professional tools such as architectural competitions, expert juries, and the active role of the Association of Iranian Architects in projects like the Zayandeh-Rud bridges. At the level of social practice, this struggle gains meaning within the pressures of urban development, the protection of historical heritage, and interventions by different levels of power-including the regulatory role of the royal court- revealing that Isfahan’s architectural identity was not the product of a single policy, but the outcome of negotiation among official institutions, the professional community, and the demands of the modern city.

• Subject three: Isfahan as an exportable model

In the early 1970s, “historic Isfahan” went beyond being a tourist destination and became a reproducible cultural commodity-an off-the-shelf model for public consumption, and even a form of architectural branding. The “Safavid style” extended beyond Naqsh-e Jahan Square and acquired a spectacular, market-oriented presence in the capital: a representation of “authenticity” no longer tied to place. A prominent example was the opening of a bazaar in the heart of Tehran that promised the experience of “Safavid Isfahan” without leaving the capital (بازار «شاه عباسی» ...، 1972، 15) (Fig. 3).

This reconstruction of a “portable Safavid” style was not limited to commercial spaces and was quickly generalized to public buildings as well, including the construction of state schools in Tehran based on Safavid architectural models (هفتاد مدرسه ...، 1972، 13).

Conclusion

The examination of three architectural subjects related to Isfahan in the 1960s and 1970s shows that, at the textual level, “Iranian identity” did not carry the same meaning in official discourse and professional discourse. Mass media tended to frame it through the formal and spectacular revival of the past, whereas professional journals and critical writings understood it as a dynamic and time-bound concept. These two modes of representation-one based on visual reproduction of the past and the other on its critical reinterpretation- formed the foundation of two competing discourses, distinguished in the article’s Table 1.

At the level of discursive practice, these discourses differed not only in language but also in the roles they assigned to architects and decision-making institutions. The official–touristic discourse positioned the architect as an executor who stabilized the city's “authentic image,” while the professional–critical discourse emphasized the architect's independent judgment, the rejection of historical imitation, and the necessity of adapting designs to contemporary

needs. Projects such as the square in front of the Shah Abbasi Hotel or the Zayandeh-Rud bridge competition demonstrate how professional agency could redirect projects even within official frameworks.

At the level of social practice, the tension between “tradition” and “modernity” appears not as a fixed binary but as the very arena in which these two discourses confronted one another. The official discourse, by constructing the past as a



Fig. 3. Media representation of the Shah Abbasi Bazaar in Tehran in official newspapers. Source: ... بازار شاه عباسی، 1972، 15.

Table 1. Comparison of two competing discourses in the representation of the urban identity of Isfahan, using Critical Discourse Analysis (Norman Fairclough). Source: The authors.

Axis of Contrast		Official–Touristic Discourse	Professional–Critical Discourse
Text	Language and Keywords	“Authentic,” “Safavid,” “tourist attraction,” “heritage.”	“Time-bound,” “function,” “reinterpretation of tradition,” “contemporary architecture,” “professional autonomy.”
	Mode of Media Representation	Glossy news items, promotional reports, emphasis on visual and decorative aspects.	Analytical reports and technical critiques in professional bulletins and journals; specialized and argumentative language.
	Discursive Tone	Descriptive, promotional, enthusiastic, nostalgic.	Cautionary and analytical; emphasis on the technical and conceptual limits of historical imitation.
Discursive Practice	Position of the Architect	Executor of symbolic and urban policies; subordinate to power structures and official taste.	Reflective and critical designer; independent agent in redefining architectural value.
	Main Actors	Municipality of Isfahan, tourism-related private sector, market-oriented investors, and mass media.	Association of Iranian Architects, independent architects (e.g., Vartan), professional journals (with the Queen's role as mediator through professional mechanisms).
	Type and Aim of Projects	Reconstruction and formal imitation of historical forms to attract tourists and display national authenticity (e.g., gradual interior and façade transformations of the Shah Abbasi Hotel; the Safavid Bazaar in Tehran).	Creation of new spaces inspired conceptually by tradition, responding to contemporary urban needs (e.g., the square in front of the Shah Abbasi Hotel; Azar and Vahid bridges).
Social Practice	Approach to Tradition / Modernity	Tradition as a fixed model for reproduction; modernity perceived as a threat to authenticity.	Tradition as a conceptual source of inspiration; modernity as an opportunity for reinterpreting identity.
	Overall Discursive Horizon	Isfahan is a showcase of history and a symbol of national grandeur; a city for displaying the past within controlled development.	Isfahan is a field of contemporary architectural experimentation; a site for creative engagement between past and present.

cultural commodity and a reproducible model (such as the Safavid bazaar in Tehran), sought identity at a symbolic and representational level. In contrast, the professional discourse understood tradition as a resource for meaning-making in the present. Thus, architecture in Isfahan during the second Pahlavi period was not a site of passive reproduction of the past, but a field in which identity was produced through the interaction of political, media, and professional forces, gaining its meaning through the competition between these two readings.

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