The Theoretical Inapplicability of Regionalism to Analysing Architectural Aspects of Islamic Shrines in Iran in the Last Two Centuries

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Abstract

Regionalism, as a counter process to internationalism through which modernism was criticised, could have been an encompassing system in analysing architectural works, if the main theorists of regionalism had not limited the scope of this theory to only modern and abstract way of designing and thinking in architecture. Some of them, like Curtis, criticises Islamic ways of cultural expression in symbolic and popular architectural designs while the other, like Frampton, only count a modern expression of regional identity in architecture as ‘critical regionalism’. The major architectural characteristics of Islamic shrines in the Qajar and more recent periods, has undergone significant changes. The main role of the domes of the shrines, for example, became symbolic rather than functional.

This study examines the ways in which Western Orientalism, even in regionalist language, has failed to present a comprehensive image in analysing architectural works in developing countries, like Iran, in which internationalism did not change every aspect of architectural forms. Islamic shrines were of the places that their architectural elements persisted to change in confronting the Western cultural tsunami, which was accelerated in the last two hundred years. However, the main form of these shrines is not functional, as it was before, and this allows the interaction of Irano-Islamic and modern architecture to happen easily.

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The present study will discuss how theories and methodologies, which seem quite logical in analysing Western architecture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are not applicable to the study of the Islamic shrines in the same period in Iran.

Keywords: architecture, regionalism, Islamic shrines, Iran

Introduction

Early Qajar artists and architects mostly tended to Safavid revivalism in style, as they wanted to bring back the Iranian glory and strengthen the credibility of their government within the public by emphasising Iranian identity. Qajar architecture may look like a mere misinterpretation of European architecture, but the principles of the design of Qajar buildings were still Iranian, and in spite of some superficial mimicry of Western art and architecture, there were some valuable architectural and artistic works representing the transitional period from traditional Iranian architecture to modernism.

The derivative nature of Qajar painting, tilework and decoration have fostered the negative perception of Qajar architecture. Both Iranian critics and Western orientalists, like Pope, described Qajar architecture as inferior. This is one of the main reasons for the lack of a comprehensive study on the last two hundred years. The Safavid era is a golden age for both groups: Iranian and Western scholars. In their views, decoration, structure, and architecture as a whole were at their best during the Safavid dynasty. These critics have had a black and white view of Iranian architectural history. However, this is not the whole of the story. While some unsuccessful imitations are not deniable in Qajar architecture, there was a sort of logic, uniqueness and unity in the Qajar eclectic style. The dominant style during the Qajar era was still Islamic-Iranian. Decoration such as mirror work was quite professional, and the richly decorated mirrored ceilings and walls were made possible by flourishing mirror work in the Qajar era (Zandian: 2007: 16-17). Finally yet importantly, Qajar architecture truly represented Qajar society, which aspired to a Western appearance while it was ideologically traditional and even anti-Western. Islamic shrines during the last two centuries are the place that challenge between Irano-Islamic and Western culture in
architecture could have happened, but instead, what happened was the interaction of those.

Regionalism

In the middle of the twentieth century, the International Style of modern architecture exerted its influence all over the world. However, this style failed to meet human cultural demands, or to address the climatic and environmental issues, which became even more important in the late 1970s, when the price of energy increased significantly. The International Style was not a sustainable approach in architecture, but the process of Internationalisation continues. The international language and common architectural elements and motifs used even in postmodern architecture indicate the reasons why regionalism, as a counter process to internationalism, could still be in the focus of architectural and cultural discussions. Regionalism as a localised approach in architecture can be seen as a possibility to define the interaction of Iranian and Western architecture. There are several attitudes toward regionalism in architecture depending on the scholar views which are through either Western or local lens. A comparative analysis of Curtis’s ‘Towards an Authentic Regionalism’ and Ozkan’s ‘Regionalism within Modernism’ shows these two approaches to regionalism in architecture. Curtis belongs to the former, and Ozkan, who had a long experience in Agha Khan, belongs to the latter. Although these were published in 1985 and 1986 respectively, regionalism and internationalism are still two important approaches in defining or eliminating national and regional identities.
Ozkan, categorises regionalism into vernacularism and modern regionalism. He points out that vernacularists base their design on climate and culture (Ozkan: 1985: 8). In Ozkan’s view, vernacularism consists of a conservative attitude and an interpretative attitude. An architect who can be categorised in the former was Hassan Fathy, the vernacular Egyptian architect, who used local techniques and materials. Fathy’s works are clear examples of regional architecture in rural areas. Fathy believes that vernacular and traditional methods are in danger of extinction. Nader Khalili, an Iranian architect, takes the same approach as Fathy, using vernacular technology as a solution for the modern demands in architecture. On the other hand, the interpretative attitude refers to neo-vernacularism, applied mostly to situations architecture serves (cultural) tourism. Neo-vernacularism in architecture is more characterised by the use of regional shapes and local forms than by a cultural approach to design. There is no innovation in this approach to design. However, Ozkan categorises this sub-approach of vernacularism as regionalism (Ozkan: 1985: 8-12).

The second trend in Ozkan’s analysis is modern regionalism or regional modernism, which is not obviously an internationalist approach to design. He suggests that modern regionalism consists of two approaches: concrete regionalism and abstract regionalism. The postmodernist architectural elements and historical motives used in this style are the examples of concrete regionalism, which sometimes
seems to be a thoughtful eclectic design, but conversely may look like worthless imitation. In Ozkan’s view, even these buildings can be categorised as regionalist works. The latter approach, abstract regionalism, instead focuses on the principles of traditional and local architecture. Regional culture shapes these principles and the qualities of buildings. Therefore, the abstract approach is cultural rather than superficial, as in the other previously mentioned approaches of regionalism from Ozkan’s perspective (Ozkan: 1985: 12-14).

In ‘Towards an Authentic Regionalism’, Curtis attempted to differentiate regionalism from other local, national or religious tendencies, which are, from his perspective, worthless. He insists that regionalism is not the superficial uses of national cultural clichés. Curtis defines regionalism based on materials, climate, geography and architectural patterns. He emphasises that these factors existed before Islam, and he attempts to exclude Islamic architecture from regionalism. His attitude toward Islam is quite negative, and he describes pan-Islamic architecture as a devalued version of regionalism (Curtis: 1985: 24-26). He also refuses to accept national symbolism in architecture as regionalism. He claims that extreme climatic conditions are the main reasons for the lack of an aboriginal architectural heritage in Western Europe and the United States (Curtis: 1985: 28). Curtis’s definition of regionalism is mainly limited to vernacular tendencies in architecture rather than, for example, historicism in postmodern architecture.

Curtis attempts to distinguish between real regionalism and casual vernacularism. Curtis does not accept all these different approaches as regionalism, so his definition of regionalism is not encompassing enough to cover all aspects of it. Conversely, Ozkan clearly categorises all of these reactions to internationalism as regionalism. Ozkan’s stance is more persuasive than Curtis’s, which seems quite subjective. Ozkan’s unbiased attitude toward regionalism is reflected in his student Abel’s book Architecture and Identity. Abel explains the theoretical background upon which regionalism and globalisation are based. Abel distinguishes between these two different approaches by contrasting their philosophical bases: new versus old, empirical versus intuitive, rational versus romantic, universal versus particular,
mechanistic versus organic and objective versus relative (Abel: 2000: 123-5). Abel challenges Descartes’s scientific view of culture by referring to Vico and Herder, who suggest that the culture and history of each nation are unique (Abel: 2000: 28). A detached observer is not likely to be able to understand a different culture by classifying, generalising and comparing it to other cultures and architecture, as ‘the production of cultural artefacts could never be understood by a detached process of a rational analysis’ (Abel: 2000: 28-30). Curtis’s opposition to modernity, nationalism, Islam, and historicism seems more personal than academic. He uses the tendentious words like ‘ludicrous’, ‘shabbily’, ‘hackneyed’, ‘devalued’, ‘pointless’, ‘folly’, ‘blatant’, ‘bogus’, and ‘phony’ to express his disagreement with non-authentic regionalism, whereas Ozkan is more objective.

Ozkan, like Frampton and many others, defines regionalism in terms of cultural factors, whereas Curtis’s definition is climatic. Curtis regards regionalism as a response to climate and culture, and repeatedly condemns cultural approaches. Nevertheless, both Ozkan and Curtis, like other researchers, define regionalism as a reaction to the failure of internationalism in architecture.

There are a number of similarities to the situations of other traditional cultures such as Chinese, Indian and Islamic (in general) confronting the modernist reforms or challenges to the whole structure of society, but there are a variety of differences, which make Iran a unique case for study. The characteristics of these changes are likely to be differentiated according to whether the agents of change have been their own governments or western colonialism.

Colonial contexts

There are considerable differences between Iran and colonised countries, like India, in which Orientalism has resulted in shaping a specific combination of Western and Eastern architecture. For instance, in India, the transmutation of the Western architectural types had started by using strictly European styles of architecture. Gomez claims that the European type of architecture is the symbolic representation of the idea of superiority of one person over another.
because the British were in a distinctive higher position in social, political and economic terms than that of the Indians. In his view, this differentiation was most prevalent in classical styles of architecture, which implicitly reflects the socio-cultural differences between the holders of power and Indians (Gomez: 2013: 2-3). Metcalf also claims that this European architecture more than anything reflects the symbolic representation of British presence in India and their interest in their native art and architecture (Metcalf: 1984: 37).

However, the British, who used these European styles, did not go to India for cultural purposes, but mainly for commercial purposes (Crinson: 1996: 16), which supported by their military and diplomatic presence as well. Therefore, the idea that the use of European styles were for the symbolic purposes, as Gomez and Metcalf claim, does not seem logical. The British chose European architectural styles because they were familiar with them. The European classical styles (incorporating Greek and Roman features such as columns and triangular pediments), which were followed for the public and other buildings during their earlier period of colonial rule, gradually gave way to Indo-Saracenic designs (Jeyara: 2010: 111-2). This style is more comparable to Qajar architecture rather than colonial architecture in the same developing countries. British architects used different architectural features, motifs and elements, taken from the Hindu, Islamic, and Byzantine styles in creating an Indo-Saracenic style (Jeyara: 2010: 113). Some French architects such as André Godard and Maxime Siroux attempted something similar but based on the background of Iranian architecture. However, in Iran, the first step of this evolution was not as dramatic as in India or the other colonised countries. The main reason is that intensive colonialism in Iran did not exist as in neighbouring countries, and the political situation and the system of power can be regarded as semi-colonialism.

Islamic countries

There are also factors that make Iran a special case amongst Islamic countries. In Iranian Cities: Formation & Development, Masoud Kheirabadi argues that Iranian culture, history and geography have made Iranian cities distinctive in spite of their similarity to cities like Damascus or Baghdad, in other Islamic countries. Shia Islam, as
the official religion of the country since the sixteenth century, and Persian-Zoroastrian heritage have shaped Iranian cities (Faghfoory: 2000: 107-110). In architecture, there are also a number of characteristics, which make a Shi’ite religious building distinctive from the buildings for the other sects of Islam, like Sunni. Not only are there a variety of religious buildings, which are specific to the Shia, such as Imamzadehs, Hosseiniehs and tekiehs, and mazars, but also the main cores of main Iranian religious cities, like Mashhad and Qom, are the holy shrines (Kheirabadi: 2000: 68-75). The paths for procession in particular times of the lunar year beside special public spaces for aggregation of mourners of Imam Hossein are other important factors in shaping the urban fabric of traditional cities in Iran. However, by the mid twentieth century, the historic cores of Iranian cities have no longer compatible with modern requirements (Azimzadeh: 2003: 1), and recent urban development plans failed to present an appropriate solution to preserve and revitalise them.

Even Fathy, whose buildings are undoubtedly of the best architectural examples of regionalism in an Islamic country, in his writings limits his explanation of Islamic architecture only to Arab countries, and there is no sign of the significant contribution of Iranian civilisation in Islamic art and architecture. His works show how he had designed to revive his own Arab Egyptian culture at which his architectural approach looks like a westerner’s looking. Orientalism in this situation becomes quite complicated as the object and the subject both belong to the same socio-cultural conditions of Arab Egypt. He also attempts to draw a new definition of vernacular architecture for undeveloped and poor countries, in which the use of modern technology costs too much. Fathy presents a notable solution to severe climatic issues by using traditional techniques and materials along with modern architectural knowledge. His environmental approach can be used as a successful pattern for many other hot arid regions across the world, but his cultural approach in designing buildings is most likely to be bounded to ancient Egyptian and Arab architecture (Steele: 1997: 6-20). In his attitude toward Islamic architecture, Fathy also more focused on the use of Arabic architectural elements than of non-Arabic architectural heritage, like Iranian or Indian Islamic architecture. Steele in his book An
Architecture for People: the Complete Works of Hassan Fathy, does not mention whether Fathy was affected by Pan-Arabism or not, while the subjective analyses were partly used in this book.

Regionalism and the analysis of Islamic shrines in Iran

Architecture, like culture, varies from a place to another place and from one time to another time. Foucault in ‘of the Other Space’ in 1986 also differentiates space and time. He believed the dominant interest during the nineteenth century had been time rather than space, which is shaping our present day relations. He defines time as history, and space as a factor shaping today’s theory, systems, and concerns while space itself involves the combination of time and space in its Western experience. Foucault believes that structuralism is a form of analysis based on time or history, which is different from post-structuralism within which both space and time (history) are considered (Foucault: 1986: 1-2). The former is the basis of regionalism and the latter is the basis of historicism in architecture (Torre & Fox: 2007: 4-5). Frampton also defines architecture as ‘culture politics’, and he puts regionalism between the two main groups of post-modernism: neo-historicism and neo-avant-gardism. He emphasises the necessity of noticing place instead of space in regional architecture in which there should be sensitivity to the environment and history (Frampton: 1987: 375-85). Frampton’s admiration of site-specific and climatic approaches in regional architecture is not as ambiguous as his attitude toward the expression of culture and regional identity in regionalism. Frampton highlights a modern way of the reflection of culture in architecture to define his critical regionalism, and instead criticises the direct use of historical elements in architectural historicism.

Frampton emphasises the considerable potential of regionalism in developing countries, but he illustrates critical regionalism mainly by the use of buildings designed by architects of developed countries rather than numerous popular buildings in developing countries. Frampton limits the scope of critical regionalism to abstract and metaphorical architecture, which comes to follow modernism but with considering its failures, which was the result of neglecting the site, climate and regional culture. Frampton’s attitude toward modernism
and its achievements in the twentieth century is not negative. In his view, modernism created a situation within which critical thinking and freedom for modern architects were achieved, and some modern architects, like Wright, successfully responded to regional necessities.

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<td>The affrism by which regionalism reduced to a set of aesthetic preferences</td>
<td>“…Critical regionalism is a recuperative, self-conscious, critical endeavor.”</td>
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<td>Information and experience</td>
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Frampton, like Curtis and Ozkan, tries to limit the definition of regionalism to cultural and environmental aspects of architecture, while acknowledging that regionalism is an anti-International Style. If these critics had not defined regionalism as deriving from tradition, they would have not ignored the historical and political tendencies by which popular architecture has formed in opposition of the International Style.

Frampton criticises the commercialism in architecture that formed Las Vegas (Jencks: 2002: 57), whereas Charles Jencks admires this kind of popular architecture. In Jencks’s view, the semiotic significance of the buildings makes them important as the subject of study. In Language of Post-Modern Architecture, Jencks emphasises how people become alienated by the ways in which modern architects design buildings, which are only meaningful to themselves (Groat: 1981: 77). However, long before Jencks’s book was published, Venturi, Brown, and Izenour in Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form, published in 1977, began the argument as to why industrialised boxes designed in the International Style should be perceived as better than symbolic architectural forms in which historical motifs, garish elements, or signage are used (Venturi: 1977). The authors contend that this sort of popular architecture is more interesting even for architects themselves than box-like abstract designs of modern architects.

Architecture for people, or popular architecture, has been forgotten by both modern architects and main thinkers of regionalist architecture, and both of these groups failed to cover populist architecture, like national style or eclectic styles which can be categorised as anti-internationalism in architecture. This negligence has existed in the literature about Iranian architecture in the past two centuries as well. Qajar architecture in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, and all other eclectic styles during these two hundred years, belong to this branch of architectural studies persistently ignored by architectural historians and critics. The Islamic shrines in Iran after the Qajar period, despite the religious theme that they have, underwent considerable changes in originality and style as well.
One of the best representative buildings of Islamic shrines in Iran during the Qajar period is Imamzadeh Hossein (Also known as Shahzadeh Hossein ) in Qazvin. Some parts of this building dates back to the Safavid era, but most of architectural elements, tilework and decorations were built in the Qajar period. The Islamic-Iranian Qajar character of this building is dominant. An important element, which may not be of Iranian origin, is the curvilinear gables at the top of the main porch and portal. The function of these sorts of gables in European architecture is to cover the gap between the two sloping sides of roofs. While curvilinear gables in European architecture were for covering the front side of sloping roofs in the façades of buildings, traditional builders in the Qajar period used these curvilinear panels as non-functional elements. In Qajar architecture, these curved panels were more decorative rather than functional. The reason why the gable in Qajar architecture was not triangular is that the curved shape is more aesthetically compatible with the arches usually used in Irano-Islamic architecture. While the Baroque origin of these gables seems quite logical, the strong similarity between these gables and the patterns used in Persian carpets strengthens the possibility of an aesthetic connection between Iranian architecture and Iranian art in carpet patterns.
There are several European scenes in the tilework used in the portal building of Shazdah (the local abbreviation of Shahzadeh) Hossein. In the Qajar epoch, painting and tilework were the ways through which Westernism expressed in the architecture of buildings. There are several ideas about the sources of these European patterns. Postcards, the patterns printed on the covers of imported fabric, and even the wrappings of imported soaps could have been the source for traditional designers. The interesting thing about these European scenes is that they look quite irrelevant to the religious buildings in which they are used. These patterns with European style decorated Tekiehs, Imamzadehs and other religious Qajar buildings.

There are also other changes in architectural elements after Qajar period. The Thuluth calligraphy style in the inscriptions of religious buildings since the Qajar has replaced with Nastaliq script (Makkinejad: 2000: 29-30). The inscription used in the portal of the Sardar School-Mosque built during the Qajar period in Qazvin is an
example of this replacement. Since the Qajar era, the domes of
Imamzadehs have also gone a notable change, and they have become
thinner and higher in comparison with those of earlier Iranian styles.
Various traditional Iranian artisans with different tastes have intended
to voluntarily participate in the process of building Imamzadehs, so
the decorations have become eclectic rather than professional, as it
was before the Qajar era.

These popular and eclectic styles have shaped the architecture of
Imamzadehs in recent 200 years. While these buildings, conveying
religious meanings, are important building for common people,
regionalists underestimate their semiotic functions, their importance
and they only look for modern ways of expressing traditional
principles in architecture.

Conclusion
Despite the argument that some of these buildings may not be
designed professionally enough to merit analysis, the semiotic
function of the decorations and architectural elements used in the
Iranian Islamic shrines have made them distinguishable amongst
other buildings in colonial and Islamic countries. These buildings
represent cultural hybridity, fusion or interaction in the form of
architecture. Following Ozkan’s categorisation, both modernising
Iranian architecture and Iranianising modern architecture are
considered as regionalism because the regional identity in these
approaches can be seen in spite of internationalisation, by which a
universal model replicates itself throughout the world.

The interaction of Iranian architecture with the West resulted in
two approaches: First, by modernising local architecture, which was
admired by Frampton and Curtis in their definition of critical and
authentic regionalism, respectively; second, by localising modern
architecture, which is implicitly accepted as anti-internationalism.
Many regionalist theorists, like Frampton and Curtis, are reluctant to
accept this tendency important enough to be placed in their definition
of regionalism while postmodernist architectural theorists, like Jencks
and Venturi, count all of these tendencies important because of the
meanings such buildings convey.
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