Shushtar No’w: urban image and fabrication of place in an Iranian new town, and its relation to the international discourse on Regionalism

Citation:
Mozaffari, Ali and Westbrook, Nigel 2015, Shushtar No’w: urban image and fabrication of place in an Iranian new town, and its relation to the international discourse on Regionalism, Fusion, no. 6, pp. 1-15.

©2015, SCCI, Charles Sturt University

Reproduced by Deakin University under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No-Derivatives Licence


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30084540
Shushtar No’w: Urban Image and fabrication of place in an Iranian New Town, and its relation to the international discourse on Regionalism

Author: Dr Ali Mozaffari, Curtin University and Associate Professor Nigel Westbrook, University of Western Australia

Heidegger sees the essence of the ‘modern’ in the world’s becoming an image and in man’s becoming subjectum: ‘it is not surprising that humanism imposes itself only there, where the world has become image’.” (Tafuri Venice and the Renaissance x)

The idea of the world transmuted and reprojected as image to the modern subject lies at the heart of this paper, which addresses the relation between international debates on housing and cultural identity in the early 1970s, and the project for a new town at Shushtar, Iran. We position this paper in relation to the origins of the discourse of ‘critical regionalism’, a ‘leftist’ reaction to the homogenising effects of global capital on local communities, and a discourse through which certain architectural theorists sought to position place, identity and region as significant factors in the reformation of a modern, and ethically motivated architectural practice (this became known as critical regionalism with its main proponents being Tzonis and Lefaivre (Die Frage des Regionalismus; The Grid and the Pathway; Critical Regionalism), Kenneth Frampton (Towards a Critical Regionalism; Prospects for a Critical Regionalism), and William Curtis (Modern Architecture; Towards an Authentic Regionalism) and its critics include Alan Colquhoun (Kritik am Regionalismus; Critique of Regionalism; The Concept of Regionalism) and Keith Eggener (Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism). Evolving from a Gramscian project of transforming institutions from within, its most recent forms are focused on the impossible challenge of transmitting authenticity through the individual creative act (Hartoonian, Critical Regionalism: Whatever Happened to Autonomy?). Preceding this discourse were several strands of counter-critique within architectural theory and practice, notably la Tendenze in Italy, Ungers’ theorization of an urbanism of meaningful fragments, or ‘urban islands’, and members of the Team X group’s assertion of the rights of urban residents to a culturally meaningful network of buildings and urban spaces. Reconstructing the city through the establishment of an organic relation between individual dwelling and community was a critical concept in the theorization of a socially-relevant architecture in the 1960s to the 1970s in the form of both treatises like Rossi’s The Architecture of the City, and in speculative and actual projects, notably Gregotti’s Quartier Zen in Palermo (1970), Ungers’ Roosevelt Island project (1975), Aymonino’s Gallaratese Quarter (1967-74) and Siza’s Quinta da Malagueira settlement (1973). Underpinning all these projects was both a dismissal of the subjugation of the housing complex to larger abstract planning structures (or ‘naive functionalism’ (Rossi, 46 ff.), in which building form was secondary to abstract zoning diagrams, and an apparent belief in the ability of architectural typologies to provide the scaffolding for authentic forms of social life to develop. Social housing was to be the constructive material out of which emplaced communities could evolve. Inherent to this project was the projection of images of authenticity. In the Second International Congress of Architects held in Persepolis Iran in 1974, entitled Towards a Quality of Life- the Role of Industrialization in the Architecture and Urban Planning of Developing Countries, this project of authenticity informed the agenda – many of the leading international theorists and practitioners debated the issues pertaining to regional culture, social identity, human habitat, and the internal economic migration then being faced in Iran. In his presentation Leonardo Benevolo, the eminent Italian post-war architectural and urban historian, discussed the current situation in Iranian towns, where the poor are not visible, as in the South American Favelas, but are hidden in the old historic cores. He noted that with increased migration to cities, this situation could not continue indefinitely, and a longer term solution needed to be found, both in relation to housing standards, and preservation of historic heritage (Benevolo 249). This position accorded with that of the Iranian delegate and leading local architect Kamran Diba,
whose practice had already undertaken a series of urban design projects for regional cities (Mozaffari, interview), and would be commissioned in the following year to design a new town adjacent to the historic town of Shushtar, in Khuzestan province, South-Western Iran. This ‘model project’ will form the focus of this paper.

In the following discussion, focusing on the theme of social housing as urban project, one that emerged from the 1974 congress, we examine how an architecture of the local is instituted through the exchanges of global ideas, styles, and technologies within a local context, in order to understand and examine the various conceptual mechanisms for emplacement in architecture, and the ambivalent and multiple meanings this conveys to architects as well as to users. What are the mechanisms through which the idea of the local is instituted within architectural discourse, and a unitary semblance is projected? In this respect, it is necessary to consider the actual architectural production and design processes as well as the social, ideological and economic context within which they were conceived (Roudbari).

In the period from the 1960s, Iran, like other peripheral architectural cultures sought to position herself both in relation to globalized techniques of planning, technology and design, and to reconnect to a perceived ‘authentic’ cultural ground – in order to effect a re-foundation of cultural meaning within the modern condition (Nabavi). This cultural project took place both in relation to institutional architecture – government health and educational buildings – but also in the area of mass architecture and public housing. The raft of changes were introduced under the banner of the White Revolution, an ambitious campaign of infrastructural reform in areas such as new industries, tertiary education, and cultural bodies, intended to bring the rural population of Iran into the modern age and simultaneously to modernize the state (Hooglund; Ramazani; Ansari). The 1970s petro-economy of Iran, which fuelled rapid modernization, had the negative consequence of a population displacement from rural villages to larger industrial cities and towns (Mahdavy). This, as Diba observed, caused the growth of squatter housing and rise in socioeconomic problems in the urban slums (1980, 38). Faced with this crisis, the government initiated a centrally planned housing programme, considering a range of potential solutions, including the importation of factory-made, pre-fabricated housing, which was to be a subject of the 1970 Congress in Isfahan (Westbrook). In this respect, the most paradigmatic project within this context of government-funded model housing communities is the company housing complex *Shushtar No’w* (*'New Shushtar'*), near the historic city of Shushtar in Khuzestan. The commission was awarded in 1975, a year after the Second International Congress of Architects, to DAZ Architects, Planners, and Engineers, within which Kamran Diba was the design director (Shirazi; Mozaffari).
The outcome was one of the most celebrated and publicized examples of new town design in the developing world, as reflected in numerous publications in journals – for example it featured on the cover of the 1990 volume of the Aga Khan Awards Foundation: *The Architecture of Housing* (Powell) – and an Aga Khan commendation award was given to the architects in 1986, the first stage design having been approved by 1977 and completed in 1980 (Fig. 1). By the time of its receipt of the award, the project was being understood in relation to the then-current theory of Critical Regionalism (Shushtar was featured in an article by Kamran Diba in *Lotus International*) – indeed Diba’s practice is specifically labelled ‘Critical Regionalist’ by Shirazi (24). The project’s actual provenance and conceptual basis is rather different, and can be understood more in relation to what Tafuri once defined, in relation to Louis Kahn, as the substitution of order and universality for historical perspective (*Theories and History of Architecture*, 7-8). That is to say, like Kahn’s projects at Ahmedabad and Dacca, *Shushtar No’w* appears as an intentionally unified cultural project, in which a continuity with traditional local vernacular architecture is implied. Indeed, while the story of *Shushtar No’w* is relatively well-known, less documented is its origin in the intellectual nexus in the 1974 Congress, a conjunction between progressive Western architects and traditionally-inclined Iranian architects.

The design for *Shushtar No’w*, the concept for which was entirely the work of Diba himself (Mozaffari, interview), was based on an attempt to reinterpret the appearance and structure of traditional towns in the region and specifically the old towns of Shushtar and Dezful, using narrow alleyways (Fig. 2) that would provide shade, and habitable roofs to
permit sleeping on the roofs during hot summer nights. Old Shushtar is an ancient pre-Islamic town and agricultural district situated on the Karoun and GarGar rivers, where remains of Achaemenid and Sassanid irrigation structures are situated (UNESCO). Together with nearby towns such as Dezful, it has a surviving and clearly identifiable regional building tradition. By the late 1960s Shushtar was one of the areas addressed by the Pahlavi modernization projects aimed at combining modern technology and industry with the preservation of traditional culture (Ansari). In this context the company housing project was commissioned by the Karoun Agro-Industries Corporation that had been established to develop a mechanized sugar-cane industry in the area, in concert with the Iran Housing Corporation, a government agency established to manage issues of population displacement arising from industrialization (Diba Shushtar New Town).

The project, as described in the Aga Khan Technical Review Summary for its award, was a “residential community for 25-30,000 people” (D. Diba Technical Review Summary: Shushtar New Town, IV A., K. Diba, Design Concepts of Shushtar New Town, 41). Construction began in 1976, and the first stage was completed in 1980. However by the time of the Aga Khan report in 1986, only 700 of the planned 6500 families had been settled there. Furthermore, amidst the confusion caused by the Revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq war, war refugees and illegal squatters from outside the area had occupied some of the houses (10-12). Thus, the ongoing problem of internal migration had overtaken the scale of implementation of a project aimed toward remedying it. Despite these unforeseen (and unforeseeable) problems, the project was praised in the 1986 Aga Khan Award panel technical review for its “[remaining] faithful to the tradition, customs, ambitions and needs of the people of a region through an architecture expressing these aspirations and engendering balance and harmony”, for creating and facilitating a sense of community through its spatial network, and for establishing a meaningful formal and spatial dialogue with the old city of Shushtar. The judges, in awarding it a commendation, noted that:

Shushtar New Town is relevant to the cultural values of Iran and maintains a continuity with the past, allowing cultural expression. Its example of urban housing is unique as a large scale new town conceived and produced by local designers and builders attempting to satisfy indigenous lifestyles and contemporary goals of industrial development. (Serageldin 165)

The project was understood sympathetically in relation to the Jury Chairman’s statement that,

Housing may now be the most important of the problems that architects in Islamic societies have to face: it challenges them not simply to emulate the standards by which professionals in the First World operate in working for the modern sector, but forces them to be critical of influences from the industrial world, and to face the issue of dealing with indigenous materials, the indigenous capacity for creativity and the special values of traditional societies” (Serageldin 69)

This emphasis on respect for continuity recalls the Second Congress’ Persepolis Declaration for an International Code of Human Habitat in which the delegates proposed that there should be the creation of a “wholesome, balanced and equitable habitat”, while responding to the desirable diversity of perceptions and means inherent in “the shaping of the human habitat in time and place” (Bakhtiar 360), principles which were incorporated into the 1976 Vancouver Habitat Bill of Rights (Ardalan et al).
In hindsight it does appear that indeed in many respects the design is responsive to its local context. Thus, the layout of apartments, rather than the modern functional program of a house, is derived from spatial units of rooms, which are all of a larger than typical size, permitting functional flexibility, akin to the traditional diurnal and seasonal variations in spatial use within the house, as well as consisting of two zones separating private family area from external and
socializing areas. Secondly, the complex has a hierarchy of courtyards, from individual, to community and to urban scale (Fig. 4). The internally-oriented openings shield against the harsh sunlight and privilege the courtyard garden, akin to traditional courtyard houses, while providing a culturally-appropriate social seclusion. Finally, the design was consciously based upon a study of the way in which people in nearby towns interacted in public and private space (Shirazi 36). The construction also reflects a modification of traditional construction – thus the thick walls are labour-intensively constructed of local brickwork, while the roofs are constructed of beams supporting brick vaults (39).

But the most noticeable aspect of the project is its citation of selected images of traditional architecture. The urban configuration is based, in Diba’s words, on the concept of a fire temple courtyard occupying the highest part of the hill (D. Diba Aga Khan Technical Review, Annexure III, p 4 ), and forming an axial centre for two broad spines of open space at right angles to each other, thus forming a configuration similar to that of a traditional Persian garden, or Chahar Bagh (fourfold gardens). In the original design, the axial spines were extensively landscaped as a series of shady garden rooms (Fig. 3). In each of the four resultant quadrants, narrow, shaded pedestrian streets connect to local neighbourhood courtyards, and are abutted by blocks of courtyard houses separated by lanes stepping down the hill. Other, non-Islamic sources may have contributed to the image – for example, several urban schemes by the Krier brothers in the early 1970s share a similar layout, for example, Rob Krier’s project for Stuttgart/Leinfelden of 1971, his Tower Bridge housing scheme of 1974, and his brother Leon Krier’s housing project for Royal Mint Square of the same year (Delevoy et al.).
Nonetheless, the built project conveys an image of Middle-Eastern and by implication ‘Islamic’ architecture (Fig. 5). Notably, lattice-brickwork bridges frame the residential streets at points adjacent to neighbourhood courtyards, forming an image that is reminiscent of the nearby town of Dezful where Diba had undertaken a master plan, but which also indirectly recall the similarly bridged and shaded pedestrian streets connecting the residential quarters in Kahn’s Indian School of Management (1962-74). However unlike the vernacular analogues, here the composition is contrived to construct such a view. Similarly, the geometrically distributed network of courtyards and the 45° diagonal pathways countering the overall rectilinear geometry recall Kahn’s network of local courtyards and the large central great court at Ahmedabad. Despite this apparent similarity, several of Diba’s former collaborators who we interviewed, while not discounting the possibility of a connection with Kahn, were unaware of any direct influence on the design of Shushtar No’w (Mozaffari, interview).

One important planning feature of the design of New Shushtar was for a separation of cars and pedestrians, in common with a number of English and American precedents. For example, Clarence Stein’s Radburn garden suburb, New Jersey, begun in 1928, and Cumbernauld New Town, Scotland, of 1955 to 1996. In both cases, separation of pedestrian areas and vehicular traffic was a priority. In the original plan, cars were kept to the periphery of the complex, and the public spaces were reserved for pedestrian traffic, as in a traditional town like Old Shushtar. However, in the realized settlement, following the Islamic Revolution and during the economic and social disruption of the Iran-Iraq war (1981-88) the policy of separating cars and residential areas was abandoned through neglect, and as a result the original design for the pedestrian precinct has been compromised. This was to the considerable detriment of the complex – the original pedestrian network is a remarkable conception that resembles Diba’s design for the initial stage of Jondishapur University campus in Ahvaz. In both cases, a pedestrian spine of rectilinear and oblique orientation connects islands of dense built form. In the Shushtar master plan, from West to East, this route was to connect a shopping centre, a bazaar, the central court with shops, adjacent mosque, a community and cultural centre, a Friday mosque, a new town square for the overall city of Shushtar, and via a new bridge, the old town (Fig. 1). But comparison can also be made to Kahn and Ungers’ use of geometric figures collaged together to create a spatial montage – an image of unity. However, with the exception of Stage 1, entirely built in brick, the realized new town lacked the rich synthesis of local and exotic influences evident in the master plan. Beyond the inevitable disruption caused by the Revolution and Iran-Iraq war, Shirazi notes, there has been a “gap between the ‘vision’ and ‘reality’” (46). The judging panel had noted that, “this complex follows the norms and standards of architectural production prevailing in the Third World. After eight years, ageing is average whilst maintenance and cleaning are mediocre.” (Serageldin 165). After the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, social disruption had led to a situation where the intended landscape elements had not been created, and poor squatters and refugees had come to make up 20% of the population, with a consequent fall in upkeep. Perhaps more significantly, the design’s author Diba had to flee Iran for his life, and in his absence the subsequent additions did not live up to the ambitions of the master plan.

This perception of the original plan as an ‘image’, or more correctly a montage of images, raises a further question as to the ‘origin’ of the project. In this respect, it is proposed that, rather than constituting a continuity with tradition, the project is, rather, a product of modern techniques, in which aspects of traditional buildings and towns (notably the Grand Bazaar at Isfahan) have been cited, while figures and images have been appropriated from Western sources, most evidently the subcontinental work of Louis Kahn. In this respect, while Diba was American-trained, the work presented at the 1970s Architectural Congresses was the most likely immediate influence upon the design of the project. In our interview, Kashanjoo noted that the intention was to design a ‘total environment’, a notable theme of the 1970 and 1974 Congresses, inspired by the influence of Kahn.

We have elsewhere (Westbrook) discussed that pre-revolutionary Iran was the setting for several major international architectural congresses in 1970, 1974 and 1976, sponsored by the Empress Farah Diba and aimed at increasing the local architectural expertise – the organisers, Kamran Diba, Ardalan and others, invited architects they considered to be world leaders in urban design and housing. In a recent interview, Diba singles out among these Derek Walker, the urban designer of Milton Keynes (1966-67) and the German architect and theoretician Oswald M. Ungers (Daneshvar 194-95). The First International Congress of Architects in Isfahan, held in 1970, had focused upon the issue of how to introduce modern techniques and processes into architecture without destroying traditional culture and values. The Iranian architect Nader Ardalan, supported by Louis Kahn, had called for the conscious embrace of a unitary concept
of culture, in which material and spiritual worlds were in harmony (see Ardalan’s talk in Bakhtiar 31-44). This idea of an authentic culture found its image in the form of the traditional village or town, for which Isfahan served as a spectacular model.

The Second International Congress of Architects took place four years later in 1974 at Persepolis, a year after the oil crisis that had sent the Western world into recession. At this time, the US government was entering into various discussions with the Iranian government to ease the impact of the oil shortage on its economy. It was, from the start, much more pragmatic in the concerns raised, notably how to meet the challenges to traditional habitats posed by rapid industrialization, urbanization and internal migration spurred on by industrial development. In the preface to the proceedings, the Minister for Housing and Development, Houshang Ansari, noted that: “Societies grow and change, yet seek to maintain relevance, continuity and a sense of cultural identity.” (Bakhtiar ix.) At the congress, the issue of appropriate habitat received the greatest attention – the provision of housing that not only met specified technical standards, but should also be culturally appropriate. The modernist goal of industrialized mass housing was not enough – instead, delegates like Fathy and Hartman argued, industrialization and standardization would not solve the problem of housing the poor in their countries, Egypt and Mexico (Ai Camp 285). The structure and appearance of new housing settlements, unlike such generic industrialized estates, it was argued, should be based upon an understanding of the traditional house, village and city (Bakhtiar xvii). The Swiss architect Dolf Schnebli, for example, argued that, “to study history, to reflect our doing [sic] in the mirror of history and tradition, will help us to find new coherent ways [of building]” (56).

Delegates also called for inhabitants to have agency in the shaping of their environments – this was discussed in relation to the recent competition for Peruvian favela housing, for which James Stirling had contributed an entry which he presented to the Congress (Bakhtiar 309-310). This project bears some resemblance in its courtyard structure to the later Shushtar project, and combines capacity for self-modification with an overall integrated whole. The idea that both architecture and the city should possess an organic unity was stressed in the 1970 conference both by both Iranians and European architects (Bakhtiar and Farhad 81-94). Here Unger argues that there was a necessary interdependence between architecture and the city: “The concept of a house as a singular autonomous work of art and the concept of a city as an economically and sociologically self-sufficient unit are equally irrelevant. The basic question is whether new quantities can produce new qualities” (Bakhtiar xiv, 140).

Similarly to Ungers, who had argued at the Congress for the maintenance of an organic connection and quality, the Greek architect Candilis insisted on the necessity of designing a total environment:

> We are little by little understanding that to build a house alone, without creating the appropriate conditions around it, does not signify much. So I think that the notion of house isolated from everything cannot endure. It must be seen in its totality, in a total environment (Bakhtiar 237).

He emphasized the need to not just build housing, but to create a habitat – this of course being the title of Safdie’s Montreal Expo housing of 1967. Candilis discussed, as an exemplary model, the Peru housing competition for which he, along with others including Stirling and Maki, had produced designs, but also raised the contradictions that arose from its process. These Western architects were, in essence, arguing that architecture needs a social context, and is necessarily bound to economic and indeed political conditions. It cannot be understood merely in terms of technique or form. For Candilis, at this time, the idea of a total environment had led him, like Rudolph, Tange and others, towards the proposition for megastructures that could bridge between the scale of the individual building and that of the city (Avermaete). At the conference, however, the idea of a total environment was constructed around the structure and image of the traditional organically growing village – thus village as quasi-urban architectural megastructure.

This was bound up in the pressing issue of housing for the internally displaced villagers to big cities in search of work in the new industries. In a significant seminar session, Sert and Ungers referred to the possibility of an Urban Bill of
Rights that would establish the basic standards for all urban dwellers, and address the problems in housing associated with migrating villagers. Here, Diba noted that:

> The fact is that we are now experiencing a transition of a socio-economic dimension and a great number of immigrants come from the rural areas to the city. The bureaucrats are not capable of controlling and having a positive impact upon the formation of the new community which houses these people (Bakhtiar 204).

One response to this problem, he argued, was the design of model communities that would form paradigmatic examples for future projects:

> After the talk of Professor Sert and the idea of... urban human rights, Nader Ardalan and I and some of the other delegates thought that perhaps this was a unique opportunity for us to come up with a resolution of a primary body of people whose main objective would be urban human rights. Whatever we could do to support all sorts of activities, professional and otherwise, to bring this about, a constructive result of the ideas of the experts of the professionals with experience from different parts of the world. If you think that it is a good idea and, supposing, the Iranian government gave us the necessary financial aid to set up such an organization, such an organization could implement some model communities [our emphasis]. Do we feel it appropriate to address ourselves to the problems of urban development and urbanization and human development? If you all agree as participants, we could concentrate on this (Bakhtiar 201).

He called on delegates to use the intellectual moral force of the congress to “give force and direction to the future development of [habitat], towards a more positive response to ... human needs” (204). It was Diba who would attempt to reconcile modern planning with this concern for organic unity in his project for company housing at Shushtar New Town, surely a direct consequence of the resolutions of the 1974 Congress.

The call for an organic unity and continuity between the individual dwelling and the community as a whole, was common both to Iranian architects such as Diba and Ardalan, and as we have seen, to several of the leading Western modernist architects. It remains to place such tendencies into a theoretical framework. Such calls can be associated with a similarly shared narrative of loss associated with the modern city, which, Tafuri noted, was common to both radical and conservative modernist and anti-modernist cultural commentators, in which the protagonists substitute order and universality for historical perspective. Thus, for Tafuri, Louis Kahn, seen together with Dada and de Stijl as universalizing and anti-historical, has replaced historical mutability and crisis with ‘messianic appeasement’. This is interesting, as it places Kahn, and by implication all the ‘isms’ analogous to his thought, or influenced by it, squarely within the modern condition of loss and estrangement (Tafuri Theories and History of Architecture 7-8; Vidler 180-183).

Tafuri drew upon Weber’s characterization of modern culture as rationalizing and ‘disenchanted’– the meaning of which is ambiguous – perhaps denoting both having rid our eyes of ‘stardust’, or demythologizing, but also prone to disillusionment, discontent. There is both a sense of liberation, and of loss. Disenchantment strips our culture of its grounding narrative- it creates a ‘crisis of values’ in reaction to which the avant-garde and derrière-garde constructed their progressive and regressive utopias. In his work, Über den Begriff der Geschichte (On the Concept of History) (1940), Benjamin rejects the myth of progress inherent to historicism, the placing of history in service to the present status quo. Instead he argues that the past can only be comprehended as a fleeting image: “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Benjamin 255).

This idea of the past that resurfaces as a memory that flashes up momentarily at an historical point of crisis may be juxtaposed with that of the citation of the past within a new construct. Here, the image, or montage of images is
carefully constructed in support of a cultural or political objective – in support of a power structure or in rejection of it (Schenklunh). This contrast between the past as a fleeting image and the past given new agency through citation may go towards explaining the operation of image and the experience of imageability in Diba’s housing scheme at Shushtar No’w, as well as the contemporary projects by Siza in Portugal, which have been extensively cited in support of a regionalist architectural perspective (Frampton, Alvaro Siza; Testa; Mota). Here image acquires something of the ‘thickness’ that it had for Kevin Lynch, whose theory has been consistently misunderstood and yet its potentials are apparent in the works of Jameson (49) and Favro (1 ff.). It is qualitatively different from the contemporary theorization of cultural thinness, which derives from Barthes and Venturi. Image as citation entails the construction of place through recollection of fragment, through the exploding montage of fragments. Such an imageability, rather than being understood as a stable representation of the power structure is, as described by Heidegger, a “world epoch placed in an image” (Tafuri Interpreting the Renaissance 21) and may be distinguished from what Benjamin termed ‘Phantasmagoria’ – the distracting effect of modernity (modern mass-media) on the individual’s capacity to connect in a meaningful way with the collective, as opposed to the false mass identity of fascism (Kester 42).

However such an imageability is just as likely to refer to a collective that has already disappeared, or is yet to appear, as recognised by Aldo Rossi in his self-evaluation of his Gallaratese housing project:

Architecture becomes the vehicle for an event we desire, whether or not it actually occurs: and in our desiring it, the event becomes something “progressive” in the Hegelian sense … But it for this reason that the dimensions of a table or a house are very important not as the functionalist thought, because they carry out a determined function, but because they permit other functions. Finally because they permit everything that is unforeseeable in life (Rossi A Scientific Autobiography, 3).

However, Tafuri argues for an abandonment of the illusion that,

By means of the image alone, tries to anticipate the conditions of an architecture ‘for a liberated society’. Who proposes such a slogan avoids asking himself if, its obvious utopianism aside, this objective is pursuable without a revolution of architectural language, method and structure which goes far beyond simple subjective will or the simple updating of a syntax (Tafuri Architecture 179).

The irrevocable rupture fragmenting a society undergoing modernization and secularization was characterized by Hannah Arendt as a ‘loss of tradition’. Indeed, the ‘gap between past and future’, as Arendt called it, seemed irreparable,

Since the modern era changed the perception, and later on the conception, of the two major axes for apprehending the world: space and time… The change of the perception of space and time, compounded by changes in the way they were apprehended, engendered a loss of references (Arendt 191-92).

Alsayyad argues that the notion of tradition, once understood as “a repository of authentic and hence valuable ideas that have been handed down from one generation to another” (Alsayyad 155) has now come to an end in the disciplines of architecture and urbanism, the victim of a globally uneven capitalist economy, and the commodification of traditions and their authentic image through reliance on tourism as an economic resource. The case of Shushtar No’w can, however, provide an interesting insight into this analysis. At the time when Shushtar was conceived and constructed, this idea of an authentic repository was at its height while, arguably, local architects addressed a desire
for the authentic through an eclectic appropriation of exotic architecture. The question in this work is that of authenticity. Can such work be considered authentic in the sense of embodying a specific cultural meaning through its ‘thick’ images? Like Fathy’s New Gourna, and indeed Rossi’s Gallaretese housing, the subsequent history of the complex of *Shushtar No’w* has been in part one of conflict and neglect. Perhaps it may be better appreciated through an interpretation of it as making apparent through its constellation of images the crisis of social dislocation that accompanied the White Revolution. In this respect it can again be compared with Ridolfi and Quaroni’s INA Casa complex at Tiburtino, outside Rome. Tiburtino, according to Manfredo Tafuri, was “neither a city nor a suburb, the complex strictly speaking was also not a ‘town’, but rather an affirmation of both rage and hope, even if the mythologies that sustained it made its rage impotent and its hope ambiguous” (Tafuri *History of Italian Architecture*, 17). Like Diba, the designer of *Shushtar No’w*, the designers of Tiburtino – Ridolfi, Quaroni, and Aymonino – had attempted to transcend narrow functionalism, but also the hollow expression of state power, to create a social and spatial organic unity. In such post war INA-Casa projects, Zeier Pilat notes: “The appropriations of the traditions of rural and small town geographies combined with the glorification of its lower class inhabitants reveals a utopian nostalgia for a lost past, as well as anxieties about the metropolis and modernity” (114). But against Zeier Pilat’s characterization of Tiburtino, after Hobsbawm, as being based upon an ‘invented tradition’, we have argued here that *Shushtar No’w* may be better understood as an agonistic montage of ‘thick’, that is embedded, images that could resonate with a population for which such images were still part of everyday life. The attempt on the part of Diba and others to reproduce the architectural image of a traditional community has been characterized here in relation to Benjamin’s concept of ‘loss of aura’, associated within modernity with the loss of place, the separation of the artwork (here the architectural image) from its place of production. In a sense, to project a sense of the authentic, architecture requires to be located, in both the corporal, social and cultural senses, and to be temporally oriented, meaning a sense of successive relationality. Such a cultural organicity was already impossible by the time of the inception of the Shushtar project. Millward, in 1971 had noted:

*Under present conditions, the moral ambivalence of the society is likely to continue and become more exacerbated. Secularism is advancing steadily with the spread of present educational facilities and the heavy stress on science and technology. No one expects a society facing the kind of change presently taking place in Iran to be able to maintain a stable value structure and a balanced moral climate…*  
*Where those attempts to discuss the whole problem of changing values in a changing society, from whatever angle, are stifled or prohibited, where no forum for discussion and exchange of views on these implications of social change exists, tension and dislocation are bound to increase and the process of modernization curtailed accordingly (29-30).*

In summary, the contradictions resulting from the attempt to improve the human environment through public housing projects, without resolving the existing economic and political stresses and conflicts that have been noted in relation to the Tiburtino project, can again be discerned both in respect of the Shushtar project and the final resolutions of the 1974 Persepolis congress. In *Persepolis*, under the leadership of Sert, delegates proposed that housing should no longer be considered at the scale of the individual dwelling but should extend to the community level, and that the process of reforming housing should be accelerated through the development of model communities – for which Shushtar was to be the model – in which individuals and cooperatives should work in concert. In the case of Shushtar, the cooperation between various levels was missing, instead, there was a managed relationship between project sponsors, namely the Housing and Development Company, the Ministry for Agriculture and the Karoun Agribusiness Corporation. Nevertheless, the project architect attempted to sow the seeds of a community through the planning scheme but specifically through construction of an image. The reality, as at Tiburtino, was that the projected community identity was synthesized through the montage of reassuring images from a disappearing world. No doubt, there is an element of nostalgia in this process, but it is perhaps the tactile and corporeal experience created by the architect through his attempt at hybridizing diachronic urban ideas that has proven successful at *Shushtar No’w* – indeed, the image of this project defies singular categorization. The place is now historicised – although it ended up only housing a minority of the intended inhabitants and thus failed to fulfil its original role as a company town and
model community, one might venture that, nonetheless, the image somehow works, in an ambivalent way, as a trace of something familiar and fleeting. In this respect, it recalls Unger’s statement, incidentally expressed at another congress of architects in Iran – the 1970 Isfahan Congress – that tradition was a dialectical process. The contemporary architect might wish to embrace it, but remains uncertain of it – tradition contains an otherness – there is this an inevitability of formal and theoretical transmutation (Bakhtiar and Farhad 63).

Lists of Works Cited


Mozaffari, Ali. Interviews conducted online during November-December 2014 with architects Ahmad Kashanijoo and Hamid Noorkeyhani.


**About the Authors**

Dr Ali Mozaffari obtained his Master of Architecture from Tehran University’s Faculty of the Fine Arts in 1995 and finished his PhD at the University of Western Australia (2011). His research has focused on the constructions of homeland, as an instance of place, and its representation in Iran in light of the country’s ideological and cultural transformations in the twentieth century. Ali’s research is across the disciplines of anthropology, museology and architecture. Ali’s current and developing research interests include: the anthropology of place, Traditionalism and
Islamism and their role in conceptions of place, ambiguity in ritual and place, urban aesthetics, Illuminationism (the philosophical school) and the Islamic city, contested heritage, museums and war memorials. Ali has over fifteen years of experience in the practice of architecture and urban design, gained through individual and collaborative work in Iran and Australia and has gained recognition in competitions and professional publications. Ali’s other outputs include experimental films and photographic works.

Nigel Westbrook is Associate Professor and Associate Dean (Research) at the University of Western Australia, lecturing in the areas of architecture and urban design, architectural history and urban studies. Research interests include the 16th century Lorichs panorama of Istanbul, the Byzantine Great Palace and its urban context in Constantinople, and modern Iranian architecture.

Email: nigel.westbrook@uwa.edu.au

Copyright © SCCI, Charles Sturt University