

Embassy: Tale of Two Cultures

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Abstract

In the winter and spring of 1974, Christian Norberg-Schulz was guest professor of Architecture at MIT and I had the chance of taking the two courses he taught during that semester. One of them was entitled “The Meaning of Architecture” and its lectures formed the basis of his book, *Meaning in Western Architecture* (Praeger, New York, 1975). Christian Norberg-Schulz tried to do for architecture what Heidegger had done for language. His main thesis was that “Architecture shows” in a similar way to what Heidegger meant when he said, “Language speaks.” Heidegger implied that each language speaks of a specific culture which it serves and from which it evolved, and thus there is a dialectical relationship between language and culture—each culture speaks through a specific language which is never adequately translatable and each language speaks of that specific culture. In the same way, architecture reveals the modes of being of a specific culture, and can thus be read as a language. This was quite different from the semiological approach which was prevalent at the time and which also looked at architecture as a language where, roughly speaking, the materials could be seen as words, the structure as syntax, the resulting forms as text, and the spaces which are actually the voids in between the forms as the meaning which emerges from the text.

1. Introduction

As Heidegger said, “man dwells in language,” CNS would say “man dwells in architecture,” which he literally does. In fact there is an old German word—*buan*—which means both “being” and “dwelling.” For CNS, “to dwell is to belong to a place,” which again is very similar to Heidegger’s “*das Dasein ist raumlich*” (“Being-here is spatial”), and for him, the main task of architecture is to “make space become a system of places, and help protect a *genius loci* (spirit of place) which is a synthesis of natural and artificial elements.” Therefore the importance of the landscape from which and on which man builds. This concept of “building the land” was further developed by many theoreticians of architecture, namely Kenneth Frampton, but CNS spoke of it very poetically some twenty five years before when he referred to it as the “vocation” of the landscape.

He pointed out the archetypal *genius loci* in Nature: the harbor, the island, This *genius loci* or spirit of place, he called “character.” The character of a building emerges from those physical and spiritual concepts which make that building what it is and nothing else, and is perceived by men as a unique place. As we looked at the seminal buildings of Western architecture, it was amazing to see that a general consensus emerged from all students as to the “character” of each building.

This concept of character is very poetically stated in Heidegger’s definition of a jug in his essay on “The Thing”: “In the poured water dwells the source. In the source dwells the dark slumber of the earth, which receives the rain and the dew of the sky. In the water of the source dwells the wedding of sky and earth... The gift of the pouring is the jugness of the jug.” The character of the jug is not summed up in its definition of a container from and into which liquids are poured, its character is derived from the “gift of pouring.”

The “character” of buildings from which higher meanings are perceived by human beings, was always associated in my mind with Louis Kahn’s “wanting to be.” In his poetic aphoristic style Kahn says: “All that we desire to create has its meaning in feeling alone. This is true for the scientist; it is true for the artist. But to rely emotionally on feeling and to ignore thought would mean to make nothing.

When personal feeling transforms itself into religion (not a religion but the essence of religion) and thought becomes philosophy, the mind opens to realizations—realization let us say, of what the Existence Will of any particular vision of spaces may be. Realization of this nature is the merging of feeling and thought, when the mind is in closest rapport with the psyche, the source of what a thing wants to be.”² In his concluding talk at the 1956 Otterlo Congress of former CIAM members, he is even closer to Heidegger’s vision of things when he states that: “...what a thing wants to be is the most important act of an object. It is for the architect to derive from the very nature of things what a thing wants to be. A thing is unable to start unless it can contain all that can ever come from it.” In his emotional-rational prose, he stresses the fact that Nature never goes wrong: “a rose wants to be a rose,” and points at the generic importance of the beginning of a thing: “That is why it is good for the mind to go back to the beginning, because the beginning of any established human activity is its most wonderful moment,” and goes on to give the example of school, “schools began with a man under a tree, a man who didn’t know he was a teacher, discussing his realizations with a few others who didn’t know they were students.”

So here we are in the presence of two great architectural thinkers of the past century, one a philosophical theoretician, the other a great master-builder, and both are saying that architects must be aware of what a building wants to be, and it is this awareness which will give the building its character from which higher meanings will be perceived by men who will feel they are dwelling in an appropriate place.

And it is from this standpoint, which has nothing to do with the functional typology of buildings, that the fundamental question of this article is raised: what is an embassy? Or in many other paraphrases, what does an embassy want to be? What does it show? What is its character? What kind of place is it? And of course this place which an embassy wants to become has also a lot to do with the landscape on which it is built. The most coherent answer is that an embassy wants to join two nations, it wants to show the dialogical relationship which exists between two countries. If it has high walls around it and seems like an impenetrable fortress, the dialogical relationship is full of mistrust. If it is open and inviting, there must be a good level of trust and dialogue going on.

Now let us go to the beginning of this human activity as Kahn suggests. Who were the first ambassadors in human history? The word “ambassador” comes from the Latin ambactus which means “slave”, but it also has a Celtic root which means “messenger”, and this is much closer to the Persian word safir which comes from safar; a traveller or a messenger of very high rank, who goes to a faraway territory to deliver a message from his King. Sir Banister Fletcher notes that in the city of Khorsabad, built by the Assyrian King Sargon II (722-705 BC), the palace of Sargon had “...state chambers which had their own court and which could be approached from an independent gateway. Here foreign dignitaries would be impressively received.”⁴ This is the first time that the reception of foreign dignitaries is mentioned in architectural history, and this concept of a dignified reception space for foreigners, or outsiders in general, meaning not from the royal family, is preserved up to the Safavid period. This concept is also very close to the traditional Iranian Qajar house with its division of birouni/andarouni, and its equivalence at the house level would be the formal living room reserved for distinguished guests. So one aspect of the “character” of an embassy, which is raised here and maintained throughout history, is that it must be a dignified space worthy of receiving kings and presidents or their representatives.

Throughout the Safavid period there are many records of foreign ambassadors coming to the royal palaces, especially during the reign of Shah ‘Abbas, but there is no evidence that there was a special residence built for them. The first time a foreign delegation asked to build a place of residence occurred in 1602, when three Augustinian brothers from Portugal arrived from Goa in Esfahan and decided to settle a mission there.

Shah ‘Abbas gave them permission to build a monastery as well as a church, and he even helped them in the construction costs.⁵ Similarly, a good many ambassadors were sent to foreign courts, and these were mostly great merchants or messengers of the king, but the first time a full-fledged diplomatic mission from Iran felt the necessity of building an embassy in a foreign land, as opposed to renting an existing building or even buying one, occurred in 1890 when the first Iranian embassy was built in Tiflis, Georgia, by Prince Arfa‘ (fig. 1).⁶ Here we have for the first time the desire to build something which is “Iranian” and different from the local architecture, as though this building would be a small entity in itself representative of Iran. The building was a Qajar house with all the decorative elements fashionable at the time, mirror-work that was uniquely Iranian, slender columns and stucco-work, all details which would give a foretaste of what it would be like to be in a Persian palace.

In diplomatic terms, an embassy is considered to be an extension of the territory of the invited country, and within its enclosures all the laws of that country prevail. One could say that an embassy is a gateway to the country which it represents. Nowadays, when millions of people travel to visit faraway lands and have to obtain visas for the countries they wish to go to, the embassy and consulate buildings should give them a vision of what that country is going to be like. Throughout the world, when you walk into Swiss embassies you see these beautiful posters of the Alps, but aren’t there more subtle and more architectural ways of giving a foretaste of this “Swiss” character? This is the second aspect of the “character” of an embassy, that it should give an appropriate image of the country it represents, and also act as a place of refuge for the nationals of that country who reside in foreign lands, so that they actually feel at home when they walk into their embassy. Think of the thousands of Iranian students who study abroad and for practical matters have to visit their consulates which in the past have not been the most inviting places.

The third characteristic an embassy must possess is giving a sort of architectural homage, or as Kahn would say, a wink, to the host country in which it is built. Since the nationals of the host country are the ones who would actually most use this place, it must also look familiar and feel “homey” to them. The architecture resulting from a synthesis of two countries, which are more or less akin to each other, is bound to be unique. And since there are almost 200 nations in the world, the various combinations would lead to 40000 unique embassies in the world.

Finally this new embassy architecture must emerge from a site which is uniquely set in a unique cityscape, with all due reverence to what is built around it. Analyzing the site and discovering what its best potentials are is an art unto itself, which Kevin Lynch attempted to theorize in his book Site Planning. This aspect of architecture has always been intuitively known throughout history but is now becoming a more and more conscious process, and famous architects such as Mario Botta refer to architecture as the “building of the site”.

It is with this theoretical background in mind that the sixteen new embassy projects will be reviewed. This is an unprecedented event in the history of Iran, and it is partly due to the vigilance of Mr. Nikkar, former mayor of Esfahan under the governorship of Mr. Karbaschi, who went on a tour of all the Iranian embassies around the world and deplored the conditions in which he found them or their sheer absence in many cases. A nation which builds embassies at such scale must have a vision of its own importance, if not outright grandeur in the world.

The sixteen following Embassy projects are being reviewed by order of their geographic proximity to Iran which also somehow coincides with their cultural affinities with Persian culture.

Iranian Embassy in Pretoria, South Africa

Comprising Consulate and Embassy, designed by Behrooz Pakdaman, Mehrazan Consultants.

The concept here again is an enclosed Persian garden, flanked on the northern and southern edges by two buildings, but this time divided into two gardens by a colonnade (fig. 36, 37). The buildings make use of the existing mild winds to aerate indoor spaces. This is the only scheme where passive mechanical systems are being suggested. The buildings are made of light materials and are generally light and transparent.

Iranian Embassy in Brasilia , Brazil

Comprising Consulate and Embassy, designed by Bahram Shirdel, Shirdel Associates Consultants.

The Iranian Embassy is the first lot of a diplomatic zone which begins with a large public park and the building has been conceived as the main pavilion or palace defining the end view when approached from the park, based on an analysis of the descriptive geometry of the Fin Garden in Kashan. Once this building has been crossed, the public park now extends into the huge semi-private garden of the Embassy—25000 sqm—and for the first time one is tempted to name it Bagh-e Sefarat, in a similar way to the large compounds many European nations have in our country.

This is one of the projects which situates itself in the urbanscape and makes use of the land's potential on a city scale. The building is conceived as a transparent rectangular block with a large void into which penetrate two different ramps, conceived as landscaped forms. One of these ramps is a ceremonial thoroughfare, the other a pedestrian one. Brasilia is a man-made capital built from scratch some fifty years ago; a showcase of modern architecture into which this new building, which reminds of Zaha Hadid and Daniel Libeskind's architecture, will be quite at home. Across the street is the Italian Embassy built by Nervi.

Iranian Embassy in Abuja, Nigeria,

comprising Embassy and Consulate, designed by Mohammad Reza Qane'i, Polshir Consultants.

This is a semi-open lightweight structure whose slender proportions reminds us of Nigerian statuettes. The considerations of climate were instrumental in the design concept.

Iranian Embassy in Dakar, Senegal,

comprising Embassy, Consulate and Ambassador's Residence, designed by Naqsh Consultants.

The main concept of the design is a Persian garden with the vista of a pavilion at its end. The odd shape of the land has been cut off in order to create a semi-private space for the Ambassador's Residence complete with its own enclosed garden. The gardens are landscaped in a traditional Persian style.

Iranian Chancery in Seoul, South Korea

Designed by Farhad Ahmadi.

Four towers are situated on each corner of a central garden and the main part of the chancery is on top of them. The limitations of the site and the designer's belief in the ontological meanings hidden in traditional Persian architectural paradigms have led to this solution which also somehow recalls the main lines of Buddhist temples and Chinese imperial buildings. This building is now completed and being used. The Ambassador's Residence is also part of this complex and has been executed with interior spaces which have a strong Iranian character.

Iranian Embassy in Tokyo, Japan

comprising the Embassy and Consulate building, and the Ambassador's Residence, designed by Hossein Sheikh-Zeinnedin, Bavand Consultants.

The project consists of two pieces of land, a large one for the Embassy compound and a small one, across a six-meter street for the Ambassador's Residence. The building spans across the street and creates a bridge which joins the two functions. A ceremonial Ivan marks the entrance, and a central courtyard orders all spaces around it. The main light pours down from the ceiling.

This is a closed Embassy, but once the visitor is admitted he experiences lightness and transparency and resting places with a distinct Persian flavor.

This Embassy has been built and the interiors' detailing, carried out by Japanese craftsmen, is of utmost precision. The various layers of transparencies give its Iranian character to the building.

Iranian Embassy in Stockholm, Sweden,

comprising Embassy and Consulate, designed by Farhad Ahmadi.

This design projects one of the strongest architectural images and vaguely resembles a Viking ship. The use of native wood and light materials make it quite Swedish in appearance, but the concepts of design are from traditional Iranian architecture: a central courtyard, the negative space or void inside has now become a positive space—covered up—broken at various angles, and is the main source of light and determines the organization of spaces.

Iranian Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand

comprising Embassy and Ambassador's Residence, designed by Seyyed Hadi Mirmiran, Naqsh-e Jahan–Pars Consultants.

This is a rather closed Embassy. The concept of an Iranian garden has been stretched here to accommodate the Consulate building in a wall-like and gateway manner. The interior garden is mostly made of a large pool which penetrates into the building where water and mirror planes combine and eat up the volumes from inside. The Embassy and Ambassador's Residence are located inside this second building which is deconstructed by water, mirror and light, in order to create a non-space or perhaps a Utopia. This building has very recently been completed and no photos are yet available.

Iranian Consulate in Frankfurt, Germany

designed by Seyyed Hadi Mirmiran, Naqsh-e Jahan–Pars Consultants.

This is a scheme which seeks to place itself in the urbanscape and the most important point in the design is the opening of a public pedestrian path through the building going from Raimund street, crossing a public park and leading to the Main Telecom Tower, which is an urban landmark. The architect has named this pedestrian path "The Gallery of Dialogue among Civilizations.

" On one side of this gallery is the public sector of the Consulate—the visa section—and on the other side are the more private administrative functions. The building has the chance of being bordered by a park on two sides and the city codes dictated a triangular open space in that corner, but the angle has been much more dramatically sketched and a water element which runs all along the southern edge penetrates into the Consulate. The whole building and pedestrian path are topped by a glass roof. This is an open Consulate which invites even strollers to walk through and have a glimpse of what it is like to be Iranian.

The building has been executed and a replica of the Fin Garden added to its outdoors.

Iranian Embassy in Berlin, Germany

comprising Embassy and Consulate, designed by Darab Diba and Associates.

This is a semi-open building based on an interior courtyard design. The building is set in a residential district with stringent city codes and assumes a rather low profile in order not to disturb the peace of this very chic neighborhood.

Iranian Cultural Mission in Dacca, Bangladesh

which houses the Department of Persian Language of the University of Dacca, designed by Kamran Safamanesh.

This is a special case where an embassy compound in good shape had already been built in the host country, and because of the existing roots of Persian language in the country, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided on building a cultural and educational facility there.

The concept of design here is borrowed from Persian mysticism and the whole building is meant to represent the idea of flying. The building is composed of two layers, the covering one which is very light and transparent and has no connecting point to the ground, the internal one which is a steeped volume which seems to soar to the sky. The whole building sits on a plane of water. The interior volume is made up of a Bengali bungalow while the roofing skin is high-tech glass. Two languages of architecture interact here while the elements of water, light and sky are brought together to give a mystic image of flight.

Iranian Embassy in Tirana, Albania

comprising the Embassy and Consulate, designed by Ali Akbar Saremi and Javad Bonakdar, Tajeer Consultants.

The Embassy is situated in the diplomatic zone of Tirana, which means a high quality neighborhood. The building has been conceived as a Persian pavilion set within a garden. Its main entrance has been designed as a monumental ivan, and the whole building has been set on a promontory and can be approached from all sides. The ceiling seems to be floating above the building. The ivan paradigm and the slender columns supporting the roof, the promontory and the wide stairs leading up to it all evoke the grandeur of our past heritage in the mold of modern architecture which is transparent and light and welcomes everyone into this open building.

This building was also one of the earliest ones to be executed and is quite faithful to its original project.

Iranian Consulate in Hyderabad, India

comprising Consulate and Consul's Residence, designed by Sharif Tehrani.

Here again the paradigm of the Persian garden has been put to use, but is intersected by elongated walls, covered with reliefs and symbolizing the dialogue between two civilizations. The visitor is taken into this garden through several flights of wide stairs, along a bridge which crosses a vast pool, in between the two walls which hide and then reveal the actual building of the Consulate. A grand and ancient tree at one end of the garden is a reminder of the ancientness of both civilizations, and the geometric order of the landscaping belongs to both Iranian and Indian gardens.

Iranian Embassy in Tbilisi, Georgia,

comprising Embassy, Consulate and Ambassador's Residence, designed by Iraj Kalantari, Bavand Consultants.

The design of this building is the result of combining the program's demands with the potentials of the site. There is no reference to either Persian architecture or the vernacular architecture of Tbilisi. It is meant to be a monumental statement of modern architecture, quite functional and very elegant.

Iranian Embassy in Dushanbe, Tajikistan

new compound comprising the Consulate, the Ambassador's Residence and a school building, designed by Hossein Sheikh-Zeinnehdin, Bavand Consultants.

The concept of an enclosed Persian garden dominated on one end by a pavilion is the key to this project's design. The creation of large voids inside the building has made it into a light, transparent mass, which allows the garden to penetrate within. Instead of the traditional four-ivan typology, the design of the building is based on a three-ivan scheme with a new interpretation of the window configurations, windowsills and orsi windows. In the center of the pavilion is a pool—hose-khaneh—from which water flows down to the end of the garden. The Ambassador's Residence is a typical Iranian court-house, in which all spaces are linked through the central courtyard.

The concept for the school building is a reversal of the traditional Persian garden plan, this time the building fills almost the entire site and is surrounded by a small garden all around. Undoubtedly the limitations of a small site and the demands of a large program have led to this solution. Very wide steps, reminiscent of the Persepolis stairway of the Tripylon, lead to the school courtyard.

We can clearly see that the everlasting paradigms of Persian architecture have been used here, but their crystallization is modern international architecture. These buildings will not blend into Dushanbe's architecture, they are rather meant to be outstanding unique monuments.

For a long time third-world intellectuals tended to have a complex of inferiority towards the West, and in fact the domination of Western philosophy and modes of being annihilated the possibility of a real dialogue. But the cultural pluralism which marks the end of the twentieth century has allowed all peripheral artists to express themselves and their local values.

This new phenomenon is beautifully analyzed by Dariush Shayegan in his two introductions for the Iranian Contemporary Art show in the Barbican center and the Iranian Photography show in the Espace Elektra in Paris. There is evidence of abundant energy in both of these exhibitions, and both demonstrate that in spite of all the instabilities that plague Iranian life on a daily basis, Iranian artists have kept faith in their creativity, and tapped resources that are absolutely unique to their region and culture. And yet for the past 30 years, not a single Iranian architectural project has been published in a major architectural magazine.

The present article is an attempt to show that Iranian architecture is well and alive and full of energy, and hopefully the realization of these projects will show the Persianness of their character. If architecture is a language, as Iranian architects, it is our duty to know our architectural vocabulary, and grammar and syntax; but just as not everyone who is literate necessarily becomes a poet, not every architect is able to create poetry with spaces. Most of the projects reviewed here show that their designers have dug into their own garden for the real treasure, and that whatever they have added from outside sources always remains borrowed, gifts which have enriched their vision of space but which cannot define its character.

Reference

1 *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Martin Heidegger, New York, Harper, 1971, p. 172.

2 *The Notebooks and Drawings of Louis I. Kahn*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1973, unnumbered pages.

3 *CIAM 59*, O. Newman, Stuttgart, 1961, p. 205.

4 *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, Sir Banister Fletcher, Robert Maclehose, Glasgow, 1896, p. 73.

5 *Iran-e 'Asr-e Safavi*, Roger Savory, translated by Kambiz 'Azizi, Tehran, Nashr-e Markaz, 1372/1993, p. 103.

6 *Chahryar Adle*, from a conversation with the author.