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From Abadan to Shushtar New Town: The Heritage of Company Towns in Iran

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It was only in the early years of the twentieth century when industry and urbanization arrived in Iran coincided with the discovery of oil in the country's southwest. The emergence and expansion of oil cities such as Abadan and Masjid-Suleiman mark an epoch in urban modernization in Iran, where the Modernization of Oil and industry shaped a cosmopolitan built environment.

The essay discusses the evolution of the company towns of Abadan (in the 1920s) as the first thoroughly modern city in Iran under the influence of British Petroleum and Shushtar New Town, a government-funded workers' town (1975–85). Through the lens of the critical history of company towns, the paper contributes to the discourse of urban modernization as a physical expression of a society in transition between imported modernism and local modernism. From Abadan, as an absolute virtual creation of the oil industry without any pre-existence of urban infrastructure, to Shushtar New Town as an extension to the dwelling areas accommodating labor forces in enlarging agriculture industry, spans nearly 70 years of practicing the universal logic of modernization in a local field of development. While both these cases have been criticized either for their successes or failures, the essay aims to unfold the weight and the impact of initial and prominent divergent attitudes involved in the establishment and extension of the towns which cause the diversity from the western-based Utopia of "green oasis of Abadan" to Shushtar New Town with influences of vernacular architectural and Iranian tradition of inhabiting.

1. INTRODUCTION

In company towns, as a term that first appeared in Europe and North America with the industrial revolution, working and spatial arrangements followed the logic of production. Still, they were always influenced by power relations, socio-occupational hierarchies, and the ethnic, racial, and gender composition of managers and the working population.¹

In Iran, modern urbanization started with the emergence of the first company towns in the country's south. This initial episode of modernization is inextricably tied to the activities of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC). The oil cities of Abadan, Masjed-Soleyman, were the first modern and industrial towns in Iran and the Middle East. Over time, these cities came to occupy a special place as a model and inspirations for this type of urbanization. Other large industrial conglomerates (primarily state-owned) replicated this segregated and hierarchic urban design in the company towns they built.²

The essay discusses the history and experience of the two company towns of Iran, both located in the southern province of Khuzestan, Abadan (the oil city established by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in the 1920s) and Shushtar new town (a government-funded Agro-industrial Company town built during 1975–85). Narrating the cases of these two company towns investigates the divergent attitudes toward modernization of a developing country. Moreover, it would lay the foundations of a comprehensive perspective on a never-stopping tension between “Global” and “Local.”

2. ABADAN, MODRENIZATION OF OIL

It was only in the early years of the twentieth century when industry and urbanization arrived in Iran when large quantities of oil were struck in Khouzeestan. The emergence and expansion of oil cities such as Abadan and Masjid-Suleiman marked an epoch in urban modernization in Iran, and oil shaped a cosmopolitan built environment.

Indeed, the oil refinery was the pre-eminent fact of life in Abadan and the reason why urbanism had come to this salty infertile and by the late 1940s turned it into the largest refinery in the world.³

From the 1920s until 1951, Abadan might best be described as a collection of urban forms gathered around an oil refinery. Early maps show a simple dis-



FIGURE 1. Abadan, Iran, 1951, Aerial view of urban districts and the refinery. (The Illustrated London News, London, September 8, 1951)

tribution pattern with the refinery as the heart of the physical development at the side of the River. Labourers lived in tents and mud huts in the barrack-like 'coolie lines' located to the southeast. The 'bungalow area,' also known as Braim for senior European staff, bordered the refinery to its southwest. By the early 1920s, Braim had developed from a sprinkling of buildings to an extendable pattern of roads, including a specialist bachelor barrack. These maps illustrate the aggregative logic in spatial development. The "town," a compact area in the east, was separated from "Barim" by the refinery as a curtain or cordon sanitaire in the middle. The only contact between these ill-matched twins was made via servant intermediaries.⁴

The first professional design skills in both architectural scale and urban planning were used in Abadan after 1933. The architect who became involved in town planning and design of numerous public and residential buildings was the British architect James Mollison Wilson (1887–1965). Wilson designed the master plan, including housing for British employees and refinery workers and urban facilities such as hospitals, schools, restaurants, clubs, and sports fields in an abstracted or absorptive version of local styles. His master plan relied on the principles of the British Garden City organized around an urban centre and creating outward-looking facades with windows toward the streets.⁵

Braim consisted of large villas and bungalows on green lawns and surrounded by parks and gardens lined with English hedges. Workers' neighborhoods



FIGURE 2. Abadan, Iran, 1950's. Staff Quarters in Barim Neighborhood. (Image courtesy of Abadan Times)

were row houses with high walls and tiny courtyards, built in straight lines and wall to wall. Indeed, racial segregation was exerted through habitation patterns.

Besides the urban segregation, the formal public space of Abadan differed from the historical models in several important respects. Each house was distinct from its neighbours and separated from the neighbourhood, intimate street life, and ultimately, workers' society. Abadan's neighbourhoods were built apart and separated by vast stretches of open terrain, wide roads, pipelines, administrative and industrial facilities, and the enormous bulk of the refinery.⁶

Abadan witnessed the introduction of the first western category of urban public area to the Iranian society.⁷ The segmentation approach of the wide boulevards and the grid pattern that characterized the formal space of Abadan distinguished it from other Iranian cities at the time.

Later Abadan inspired many Iranian modernist architects, although the modernity of Abadan was the modernity of division and alienation translated to urban forms and orders. With little history of urbanism, built to create a settlement for assorted immigrant workers, and based on design ideas imported from elsewhere, the company town seemed incapable of making an integrated sense of place even if the modernity of Abadan established its unique tradition into an outstanding quality of place consist of borders, zones, and gated communities.

3. SHUSHTAR NEW TOWN, TOWARD A REGIONAL MODERNISM

After The White Revolution (the modernization program implemented in Iran in 1963 and continued until 1979), the emergence of new company towns was a consequence of population displacement from rural villages to larger cities and towns in industrial regions.

Meanwhile, as modernization escalated over more cities in the country, the western approach to architecture and urban planning dominated Iran's new architecture and urban planning. At the same time, the emergence of new debates focused on the paradigmatic shift in the approach to housing and dwelling, and new towns were the inevitable trends.⁸ These debates, which were driven by tensions between the universalizing ambitions of high modernism and the comprehensible resistance of local traditions, mainly concerned the local aspects of the context manifested in two significant events as consequences of the White Revelation within the Iranian architectural society. First, The International Congress of Architects was inaugurated in 1970 in Isfahan to exchange perspectives between local and international architects and theorists concerning the relationship between tradition and modernity. The second event was 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. in which authenticity practitioners debated the issues on regional culture, social identity, human habitat, and internal economic migration.⁹



FIGURE 2. Abadan, Iran, 1950's. Staff Quarters in Barim Neighborhood. (Image courtesy of Abadan Times)

Addressing this paradigmatic shift, the company town of Shushtar New Town was the most prototypal project within the context of government-funded communities. The project synthesizes the two modes of tradition and modernity in quest of a 'local style' and to promote a "social agenda".¹⁰

In 1974 Karun Agro-industrial Company decided to build a satellite city; Located only a few kilometers from the old town of Shushtar and connected by the bridge over a river in between, Shushtar New, unlike Abadan, the had significant consideration on the connection to the pre-existing old city as the origin of the identity of the place. The architect in charge of the project was the Iranian Architect Kamran Diba. Diba belongs to the second generation of Iranian students educated in the West and brought their knowledge of "modernism" to Iran. He is notable for the way he understands the West, observes the Iranian culture, thinks about the human dimension of the built environment, and resists the wishes of the dominant technocrats and officials.¹¹

Referencing Kenneth Frampton and the fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place¹² (Frampton 1983), Shushtar New Town was an attempt to reinterpret the appearance and structure of traditional towns in the region and, specifically, the old city of Shushtar. The central idea of this regional attitude was the notion of "community." Opposite to Abadan, as a semi-colonial company town, the core concept in the design and development of Shushtar New Town was place and continuity with the

old city in terms of both urban forms and concepts. The architect stated later: "In short, I don't want a company town. I want to make a town that is integrated into the old Shushtar."¹³

In designing the new town of Shushtar, as a reaction to the homogenizing effects of globalizing attitude in Modern architecture and urban planning on local communities, in an attempt to position place, identity, and the region as significant factors in the reformation of a modern, and ethically motivated architectural practice.

"Palimpsest planning" featured Diba's design practice for creating new residential communities. For Diba, context, terrain, and pre-existing elements were central sources of inspiration for his architectural interventions.¹⁴

He also proposed building a cultural centre in the new town as an attraction to the settlers of the old city to create meaningful commuting traffic between the two towns. He even allocated some open space to provide local farmers the opportunity of selling their vegetables to overcome the city's aggregation from the small villages surrounding agricultural zones.

The idea of an integrated urban community translated into an extensive pedestrian boulevard oriented east-west, articulated in gardens, squares and resting spaces, porticoes, bazaars, and water pools in a horizontal density.

A covered street bazaar culminates in green public space as the heart of the central residential quarter. A commercial centre is located in the middle, with spaces arranged around a courtyard. This neighbourhood has its local bath as well as its local mosque. The main axis continues with the community and cultural centre and continues with a pedestrian square and then a park, and finally culminates in the town square, with dimensions of 100×100 m, connected to the old city through a pedestrian bridge and working as the principle urban space unifying old and new town.¹⁵

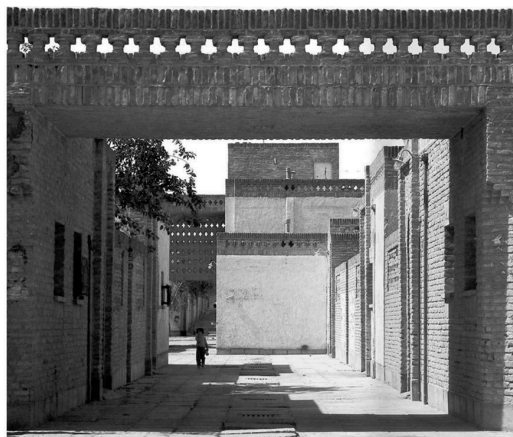


FIGURE 4. *Shushtar New Town*, Kamran Diba, Shushtar, Iran, 1975, (Diba and DAZ Architects).

The region's traditional and vernacular architecture was the main inspiration source for the architect.

The narrow streets of the dense urban fabric repeat the character of Iran's historic cities, where the space of the walk is also an enclosed space, yet alive, shaded by walls and vegetation of the courtyards of the houses, where children can play, the inhabitants to meet and communicate, and sit on the steps of the entrances to the houses. The project foresaw a clear separation between pedestrian and transportation roads with parking areas concentrated at strategic points outside the boulevard.

Although Shushtar New Town ended up only housing a minority of the intended inhabitants and thus failed to fulfill its original role as a company town and model community¹⁶, in an ambivalent way, the project succeeded in pursuing what Diba tried to obtain: the concept of a new community corresponded to the existing cultural spectrum.¹⁷

4. CONCLUSION

Company towns of Abadan and Shushtar New Town are the epoch points that mark seventy years of Iranian Modernization. These cases illustrate how the notion of society and place through a regional critic substituted the notions of the company's benefits and segregations. As a town treated like a fragmented place divided by race, Abadan was the first Modern town in Iran, consisting of several segregated neighbourhoods. Unlike Abadan, the high sense of belonging to a unique community in the formal and social structure made the company town of Shushtar not merely an exiled satellite town but the continuation of the adjacent old town. Besides any discourse of styles, the emergence and development of these towns reflect the driving thoughts in architecture and urban design of the time. Later both juxtaposed neighbourhood of racial islands of Abadan and the integrated spatial structure of Diba's design (with traces of a Nostalgic mentality toward the idea of the place) left their heritage of success or failure for future architectural experiences in Iran as a country in transition between tradition and modernity.

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