THE STORY OF “ONE-STORY-NESS.”

Mohammad Reza Shirazi

Abstract
This article focuses on the old houses of Tabriz, northwest of Iran, and studies their structural transformation during the Qajar and early Pahlavi period (18th and early 20th centuries). Here, these dwellings are studied as some already written texts with hidden narratives concealed in the lines of the buildings in order to reveal their syntactic as well as semantic implications. In this regard, ideas of some leading thinkers—such as Heidegger, Bachelard, Bollnow, Norberg-Schulz and Pallasmaa—about home and non-physical, spiritual, and existential aspects of dwelling will be reviewed to show how a house narrates us about its multidimensionality. Then, considering the traditional houses of Tabriz it will be shown that how the structure of the houses and consequently their existential and ontological implications have been transformed into a kind of “typelessness” and thus narrate the storey of contemporary “one-storey-ness.”

Keywords
Dwelling; house; home; narrative; Tabriz.

Architecture as a Narrative
Architecture is full of sayings. Every window, every stone, every wall and all the elements of a building tell us a story. As Baillie-Scott puts it “few things are indeed so strange as this thaumaturgic art of the builder, he places stones in certain positions—cuts them in certain ways, and behold, they begin to speak with tongues—a language of their own, with meanings too deep for words” (cited in: Norberg-Schulz, 1985, p. 111). The buildings speak, but to hear them it is necessary to be open to them and listen carefully. “Over and over again those who have been open to listen, have beheld the ‘saying’ of works of architecture” (Ibid.). A building is an honest narration. If we are open to it, it will communicate with us. As Mark Rakatansky says, “There is no mute architecture. All architects, all buildings ‘tell stories’ with varying degrees of consciousness. Architecture is permeated with narratives because it is constituted within a field of discourses and economics (formal, psychological, and ideological), to any one aspect of which it cannot be reduced, from any one of which it cannot be removed” (Rakatansky, 1992, p. 199).
A work of architecture, thus, tells us both structural and spiritual stories. For example, a traditional building not only tells us how it has been built (tectonics, structure, methods of construction, etc.), but also it narrates about the world inside (the relationship between the occupants, their mentality, etc.) and also the world outside (which means the social, economical, and cultural characteristics of the society). In sum, architecture is always rhetorical and story telling.

In this context, a house is a multidimensional narrative. It is not simply a shelter for preserving the inhabitants, but also an ontological being full of existential connotations. From the phenomenological point of view, the house has been investigated and considered by different scholars.

**House and the Question of Dwelling**

In his seminal work “Building Dwelling Thinking” Martin Heidegger points to the ontological aspects of building and explains the essence of dwelling. He states that although every building provides a shelter for us, it does not necessarily allow for dwelling. Bridges and stadiums are buildings, but not dwellings; “These buildings house man. He inhabits them and yet does not dwell in them” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 4). In order to find the essence of building and dwelling, Heidegger listens to the language.

According to him, the world “bauen” (building) means to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, in the sense of preserving and nurturing, or cultivating. On the other hand, the word “wohnen” (dwelling) means to be at peace and remain in peace, and the word for peace, “Friede,” designates preserving from harm, to spare. Thus, “To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving” (Ibid., p. 5). Thus, building and dwelling have similar implications and connotations; they refer to the existential aspects of human life manifested in the house as the first and intimate dwelling-place of human beings. We build and dwell in the house, and thus preserve, cultivate, and remain in peace.

As an example, Heidegger refers to a farmhouse in the Black Forest, built some two hundred years ago, and explains how the peasants used to dwell in that house in an authentic way. His explanation reveals that, to dwell in a authentic way is not only rooted in building according to the material implications of the place, such as topography and climate, but is also based on the spiritual needs and existential feelings of the inhabitants, such as birth and death.

**Oneiric House, House as the Center**

Gaston Bachelard believes that the house is our corner of the world, our first universe. According to him, the chief benefit of the house is sheltering the daydreams. He writes that “the house shelters daydreams, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (Bachelard, 1969, p. 6). Moreover, the house is related to the existential behaviors and actions of the human beings. The house shelters all the physical and spiritual aspects of the life and makes the universe understandable: “Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens
and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being’s first world” (Ibid.).

In a similar way, Bollnow understands the house as the center of the world. He talks about the necessity of a “reference point,” a center of lived space, without which man is not able to live. This “foothold” is the place to which we human beings return and from which we departure. “Man needs such a center, in which he rooted in the space and all his relationships are related to it” (Bollnow, 1963, p. 8). A house provides us such a center.

Bollnow gives a deep explanation about the ontological and anthropological implications of the house, and describes how a house grants us security by means of separating interior and exterior: “[The space of the house] is the realm of peace and calmness in which man is able to give up his continuous attention to the possible threats. It is a space to which man returns and can relax in it” (Ibid., p. 9).

Phenomenology of Home

Juhani Pallasmaa argues that a home is not merely a manifestation of an architectural work or an aesthetic object, but a psychological, psychoanalytical, and social phenomenon. Differentiating between home and house he writes that “Home is an individualized dwelling, and the means of this subtle personalization seem to be outside our notion of architecture. Dwelling, a house, is the container, the shell for home. The substance of home is secreted, as it were, upon the framework of the dwelling by the dweller. Home is an expression of personality and family and their very unique patterns of life. Consequently, the essence of home is closer to life itself than to artifact” (Pallasmaa, 2007).

Thus, house is a frame, shell, and protector for the home, which is the multi-dimensional atmosphere and realm of the existential lived space of the dwellers within the house. Home is not an object and a simple building, but a complex multi-layered condition that integrates memories and images, desires and fears, the past and the present. Home makes us to remember all the warmth, protection and love of our childhood as well as the distress and fear
that we may have experienced. “Home is a staging of personal memory. It functions as a two-way mediator - personal space expresses the personality to the outside world, but, equally important, it strengthens the dweller’s self-image and concretizes his world order. Home is also a mediator between intimacy and public life” (Ibid.). Home is the realm of our private personality, the treasury of secrets and private self. The nooks and corners of the home are the comfortable places for us. Everyone has his own intimate corner at home.

Four Narratives of Tabriz Old Houses

This study intends to read the already written text of the Tabriz old houses and reveal the hidden narratives concealed in the lines of the texts by means of listening to its words. Unfortunately, Tabriz old houses have never been investigated exactly and deeply. Despite this inattention and neglect, they have survived during the time and still live within the old texture of the city. This study concentrates on more than 20 old houses built at Qajar and first Pahlavi dynasties, from mid 19th century till early 20th century. Here, I would like to be a good listener and report their narratives carefully.

First Narrative: Transparency

Transparency is a significant concept in Iranian architecture. Spatial transparency means extending depth of the space and broadening its dimensions. To achieve a more transparent space necessitates dematerialization; reducing materiality and enhancing spatiality. As a prominent example, we can refer to the Shazdeh Garden in Mahan and Aga Khan Mosque in Kashan. In the latter, the harmony of light, water, underground garden (Godal-Bagche), verandas, etc. intensifies the transparency of the building and creates a complex full of dignity and lightness.

Early Qajar houses, following the rules and principles of traditional Iranian houses were organized according to the interior/exterior axiom. Thus, they possessed a high degree of transparency following the special arrangement of the traditional architecture.

In fact, the narrative of transparency is narrated through following sub-narratives:

Courtyard. Courtyard is an emptiness within the house which calls, invites and admits. As a subtle microcosm, it gathers all the surrounding elements—natural as well as architectural—in its emptiness; water, wind, earth, greenery, sky, rain, sound, and reflections. So, a courtyard may appear empty, but is full of presence (Figure 1).

As a “full empty” at the heart of the building, a courtyard lightens the materiality of the house and makes it transparent; all the rooms look at the natural vista of the interior. On the other hand, the courtyard is the realm of the family activities and collective memories: childhood plays, stories of grandmother under the shade of a tree in summer evenings, the access to the mysterious cellar, etc.

In Mojtahedi house, there is a terrace (Mahtabi) at the center of the house, in north of the main hall (Tanabi) flanked by two siding rooms, which makes it more transparent, a true microcosm within the microcosm of the house.

Water. Water is the principle factor of the gathering character of the courtyard. It reflects all the natural and architectural elements and thus enlarges the dimensions of the courtyard;
columns of the Ivan, colors of the Orosi, trunk of the tree, and the tired face of the father.

Water grants happiness and pleasure to the underground spaces of the house through the pool-house. Different in the shape and the size—cruciform, quadrangular, etc.—it is located at the basement (Salmasi, Haj Sheikh, Mojtahedi, Gadaki, Heidarzadeh) or even at the ground floor (Mashrootiat).

Orosi. Orosi, the huge window with stained glasses, is mostly used in the main hall of the houses. It is a colorful designed window at the southern side of the rooms which grants variety to the interior. The atmosphere of the interior is changed due to the various reflections of the sunshine. It disputes radiations of the sun into the space and awakens us to the happenings of the exterior. Sliding its tiles up in summertime, nature comes into the room and the separation...
of the interior and exterior fades. (Figure 2).

Ivan (Veranda). Ivans intensify vertical and horizontal transparency of the houses. In early Qajar houses, overall Ivans play a vital role in configuration of the buildings. They appear in the main façade of the house, embrace interior rooms including Tanabi (mail hall) and siding rooms (Kallei), and preserve them from the rain, snow, and intensive sunshine. Thus, direct contact of the built and natural environment is mediated by the semi-close, semi-open space of the veranda.

All the above-mentioned factors lose their dignity during the time and consequently the houses become more and more opaque and heavy. Introverted structure of the houses changes to extroverted one, and the interior courtyard as the focal microcosm of the house is transformed to a surrounding yard around the massive volume of the building. Consequently, water of the courtyard loses its gathering character and is reduced to a superficial surface of the
water. Pool-house is no longer at the center of the house: it is either omitted or put out of the range of the main axis. Orosis are converted to multiple simple windows devoid of letting the outside to come into the inside. They are mostly for separating than inviting and uniting. Overall Ivans are divided to single, projected Ivans. Thus, all the necessary factors for transparency are weakened and thus the houses become more and more massive.

**Second Narrative: Hierarchy**

In Iranian architecture, the goal is always suspended and postponed; there are a number of mediatory spaces between the beginning and the goal. To catch the interior, to understand the within, and to feel the inside, one should pass through mediatory rooms and spaces. This hierarchy highlights the separation between interior and exterior, guaranties the privacy of the house, makes it more protected and secure, increases the mystery of the interior, and intensifies the cosmic character of the house.

In the Qajari Tabriz houses, like other typical traditional edifices, the approach to the main space (main hall, Tanabi) is through a hierarchy of spaces: threshold, door, Hashti, exterior courtyard, corridor, and finally Tanabi. In Salmasi house, one should pass through the entrance gate, then an octagonal Hashti, and then via a corridor to the courtyard. Access to the main hall is through another corridor and room. (Figure 3: Salmasi House, approach to the main hall) In Behnam and Gadaki houses the hierarchy of approach is more complicated. There is a joint entrance gate and Hashti for both of them. From the Hashti, there is a direct access to the exterior courtyard of the Gadaki house, but the access to the Behnam is through a long open passage which leads to another entrance gate, and then via a Hashti to the exterior courtyard. To reach the main hall one should walk along the courtyard and enter into the Tanabi through a corridor.

In the late Qajar and Pahlavi era, together with the transformation of the typology of the houses from introverted to extroverted, the hierarchy of approach is neglected and the distinction between within and without fades. In Segat-ol-Islam and Ordoobadi houses there is no entrance gate and Hashti, but a direct visual and physical access to the building. This fact weakens privacy of the interior and opens it to the exterior.

![Figure 3: Salmasi House, approach to the main hall](Source: Author)
Third Narrative: Privacy

Privacy is based on the differentiation between inside and outside; it delineates two distinct realms of interior and exterior, within and without. What is running outside remains out of the door, and what is happening inside is kept within the house. The story of privacy, which points to the existential behavior of Iranian society, has affected the spatial structure and configuration of the Iranian houses. In other words, Iranian houses allow privacy and preserve it. Within the Iranian house there is a clear hierarchy of privacy formed by a sequence of architectural spaces.

The narrative of privacy is rooted in the arrangement of the neighborhoods. In Qajar era, most of the houses are enclosed by three sides except the side of entrance. (Salmasi, Ganjeii Zade, Haj Sheikh, Qadaki, Sharbat Ogloo). This fact strengthens the interiority of the houses and makes them completely protected. Moreover, the entrance space is located out of the range of the main and secondary axes of the house and this blocks the straight access and view to the interior.

The first manifestation of privacy is the threshold, the entrance space. Insider and outsider, male and female are distinguished at the gate; they should announce themselves differently by knocking ‘koobe’ or ‘halge’ of the door. The excess to the house is not immediate; there is a hierarchy of approach. Hashti plays a significant role in this procedure as the mediatory room between exterior and interior. In Qajar houses the existence of Hashti is prominent. Different in size and shape – octagonal, semi-octagonal or quadrangular – they provide access to the outer courtyard or other nearby rooms.

In late Qajar and Pahlavi eras, entrances are located in the range of the main and secondary axes, and thus the introverted character of the house is reduced. Pahlavi houses are more extroverted and the façades are highly important. For example, in the Ordoobadi house, which is completely extroverted, main and secondary gates are highlighted by the stairway and veranda. A similar character is visible in Rastegar house. Moreover, the importance of the Hashti is reduced, so that in the extroverted houses there is an immediate access to the courtyard. (Segat-ol-Islam, Ordoobadi).

As the result of the deformation of hierarchy in the houses, the importance of privacy fades. The lack of doorway and Hashti opens the house to the exterior, and the transformation of the structure of the building weakens interiority of the house. The story of transformation of the privacy is obviously visible in the case of Amimezam house, built in the late Qajar era. Unlike other houses, an Orosi located at the middle of the main hall (Tanabi) divides the space into two northern and southern parts so that opening the Orosi changes the Tanabi into an integrated space for collective ceremonies and traditions. It can be said that the siding-rooms (Kalleii), which were normally located on the upper floor of the house dedicated to women, have been transferred to the ground floor, but isolated with a sliding window. Thus, women could participate directly in the happenings of the main hall. This fact was either the result of the social changes in the upper class of the society and cultural revolutions, or because of providing a more flexible space; the southern part is served in the winter and the northern one in the summer.

Fourth Narrative: Axis

Iranian architecture is an axial architecture; axes play a vital role in the composition and configuration of the buildings. In fact, the story
of Iranian architecture is already a story of axes. Iranian houses, like other buildings, have been organized according to main and secondary axes. Qajar houses are not an exception.

In most of the early Qajar houses, the principle spaces are along with the main axis; Tanabi, southern and northern verandas, siding-rooms (Kallei) and pool-houses are all in the range of the main axis (Salmasi, Behnam, Haj Sheikh, Alavi, Mojtahedi, Gadaki, Heidarzadeh, Amimezam).

In late Qajar and Pahlavi the importance of the abovementioned spaces is reduced and consequently, their position is changed. (Ordoobadi, Rastegar, Segat-ol-Islam, Lalei). Moreover, some new elements such as stairways—which did not exist in early Qajar houses—are located as a significant architectural element alongside the main axis. The absence of the stairway in early Qajar houses and its immediate presence in late Qajar and Pahlavi implies that it has been borrowed from European styles. This kind of stairway appears in different characters in Sharbat-Ogloo, Heidarzadeh, Ordoobadi, Segat-ol-Islam and Sehhati houses.

In addition, in late Qajar and Pahlavi eras overall Ivans are substituted by the small, single projected Ivans. These single Ivans concentrate the attention to the exterior façade. (Rastegar, Ordoobadi, Segat-ol-Islam, Lalei) Thus, axial configuration of the houses is transformed; stairways are located in line of the main axis but Tanabi as the center of the house is put away and pool-house is dislocated or even disappeared.

Narrative of Narrative

These four narratives narrate a grand narrative: narrative of deformation. Whatever the reason of this deformation is, its existence is undeniable. To understand this deformation, it is not necessary to make a scientific study; rather, it is perceivable even through walking in the city. There is an obvious “typelessness” in the contemporary architecture of Tabriz, and consequently in the architecture of new houses, which narrate a sense of “disorder” and “hubbub.” The current text of the Tabriz city does not narrate something. It is an amalgamation of different sources, old, new, alien, and foreign, written in different languages and scripts. The more we listen, the more we get blind. Tabriz new houses do not let dwelling. They prepare “one-storey” shelters for “one-storey” persons. They are incapable of building a home; they are some “homeless” covers. Bachelard and Paul Claudel’s explanation of Paris is completely valid in the case of today Tabriz and prescribe this inarticulate situation in a proper way:

“The houses are fastened to the ground with asphalt, in order not to sink into the earth. They have no roots and, what is quite unthinkable for a dreamer of houses, sky-scarpers have no cellars. From the street to the roof, the rooms pile up one on top of the other, while the tent of a horizonless sky encloses the entire city... Home has become mere horizontality. The different rooms that compose living quarters jammed into one floor all lack one of the fundamental principles for distinguishing and classifying the values of intimacy” (Bachelard, 1969, p. 15).

References


Mohammad Reza Shirazi

M. Reza SHIRAZI is an Alexander von Humboldt postdoctoral fellow and works as a guest researcher at Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Technical University of Berlin. He is an Iranian architect who taught and practiced in his home country for five years. From fall 2005 to summer 2009 he did his PhD in BTU Cottbus, Germany. Shirazi’s dissertation is entitled, “Architectural Theory and Practice and the Question of Phenomenology: The Contribution of Tadao Ando to the Phenomenological Discourse.” His postdoctoral research focuses on the idea of ‘Sustainable Critical Regionalism’ to propose a more ‘place-specific’ and ‘situational’ interpretation of Sustainability in the context of Middle Eastern cities. Shirazi is co-editor of Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, an international journal of architectural theory. Currently he works on a ‘Phenomenological Series’ in Farsi. The first book entitled ‘Architecture of the Senses and the Fragile Phenomenology of Juhani Pallasmaa’ is now under publication. He can be contacted at m.shirazi@mail.tu-berlin.de