
Contemporary Architecture and Urbanism in Iran: Tradition, Modernity, and the Production of ‘Space-in-Between’. Oxford: Springer, 2018; 193 pp.: ISBN 978-3-319-72184-2, \$82

Maryam Abdollahpour

Graduated from Seraj Higher Education Institute, Iran. She is a freelance architect and Journalist.

Reza Shirazi's *Contemporary Architecture and Urbanism in Iran* provides an accessible and significant contribution to the literature of Iranian urbanism and architecture. He believes that it is important to take into account a new perspective of “space-in-between” when it comes to talk about Iran's current and future architecture and urbanism. Furthermore, Shirazi directs our attention to the unique Iranian architecture and urbanism which is the amalgamation of Iranian poetry and history. The author resorts to the theory of Critical Regionalism to explore the works of three distinguished Iranian architects, namely, Kamran Diba, Nader Ardalan and Hossein Amanat. The writer believes that these architects create their authentic works within the framework of “space-in-between”. They seek to understand the values and characterizations of their past, at the same time, they are influenced by the unique features of modernization and aim to incorporate them in their works.

What the writer essentially argues is that how Iranian architects and urban planners approach to modernism and traditionalism in order to create their works. The author's suggested solution for this challenge is to consider “space-in-between” framework (p.v). He identifies such feature in the architecture and urbanism of late 1960s and 1970s, which coincided with the Revolution of Islamic Republic of Iran.

The book is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter the author argues that how Iranian urban planning and architecture oscillate between traditionalism and modernism. He highlights the role of “space-in-between” framework in narrowing the gap between modernization and traditionalism. Furthermore, Shirazi traces back the historical aspects and backgrounds of Iranian urbanism and architecture.

Likewise, he seeks to provide “a detailed overview of the history of architecture and urban transformation in the city of Tehran” to illustrate “different trends of Westernization, Modernization and Universalization” (p.1).

In the second chapter the author delineates the theory of Critical Regionalism. He believes that Critical Regionalism theory “resists the universal approach of Modernism towards the artificial”. Shirazi directs our attention to the significance of this theory, which, he maintains, underlines “the natural characteristics of the site and avoids the imposition of artificial features at the expense of the existing forces of the environment” (p.38). The writer discusses extensively the central concepts of Critical Regionalism and concludes that this theory manifests itself as “the theory in-between” which helps us to understand “the never-ending process of reinterpretation or new creation” (p.27).

In the third chapter the writer places the works of aforementioned architects in the context of Critical Regionalism theory, and argues that how Iranian architecture resists against prevalent style of era, namely, modernization and universalization. Furthermore, he points out to amalgamation of Iranian-Islamic culture and modernity. He states that these architects identify an identity crisis in Islamic societies that caused by western values and precepts. Thus they seek to inject indigenous features to their works which suggest their rich tradition and Iranian way of life. Based upon these innovative characteristics purposed by Iranian architects, he condemns modern architecture implicitly for its “homogenous, monotonous, characterless city scape” (p.98).

In the next chapter, Shirazi conducts interviews with these architects which allow author to illustrate his theoretical framework from various perspectives. Referring to one of the Iranian architect, Shirazi poses one of the fundamental questions in the world of architecture: what is the task of an architect?

He believes that the architect should not seek “to meet functional needs, but to provide space for social activities and interactions” (p.58).

The last chapter provides an overview of post-revolutionary architecture and urbanism in Iran which as writer states “continued to take place within two extremes of modernity and Tradition” (p.vi). The author analyzes the post-revolutionary architecture and urbanism in Iran and reiterates that the juxtaposition of traditionalism and modernism is ubiquitous in this era. Further, Shirazi believes that what distinguishes Tehran from other cities in Asia and Europe is that, it is neither a traditional city nor a modern European one; rather, it is something between two spectrum of tradition and modernity. Another significant point in this Chapter is that, Shirazi underlines the responsibilities of Iranian authorities to purpose a unique style in contemporary architecture. Since he believes that “post- revolutionary approach to Urban Planning and development was a blind reaction to the pre-revolutionary urban development schemes which were modern in nature” (p. 171).

Overall, the book has a cohesive theme which allows the author to associate the main arguments with his pivotal device- “space-in- between” framework. He provides an interesting overview of Iranian urbanism throughout the history of Iran up until now.

Another strength of the book lies in its interdisciplinary approach. For instance, its treatment on phenomenological thoughts of Heidegger and his interpretation of technology, appeal to philosophy, or its depiction of Iran’s political and historical incidents would appeal to the worlds of politics and history. Taking a series of examples from the history of Iran up until now, Shirazi charts the evolutionary process of Iran’s Urbanism and Architecture promised in the title of the book.

The book is an indispensable read for those who conduct research on issues related to architecture and urbanism. Moreover, the book is intended not only for an academic audience but for anyone interested in Iranian history, architecture and urbanism.