

# A vision of Zayanderood

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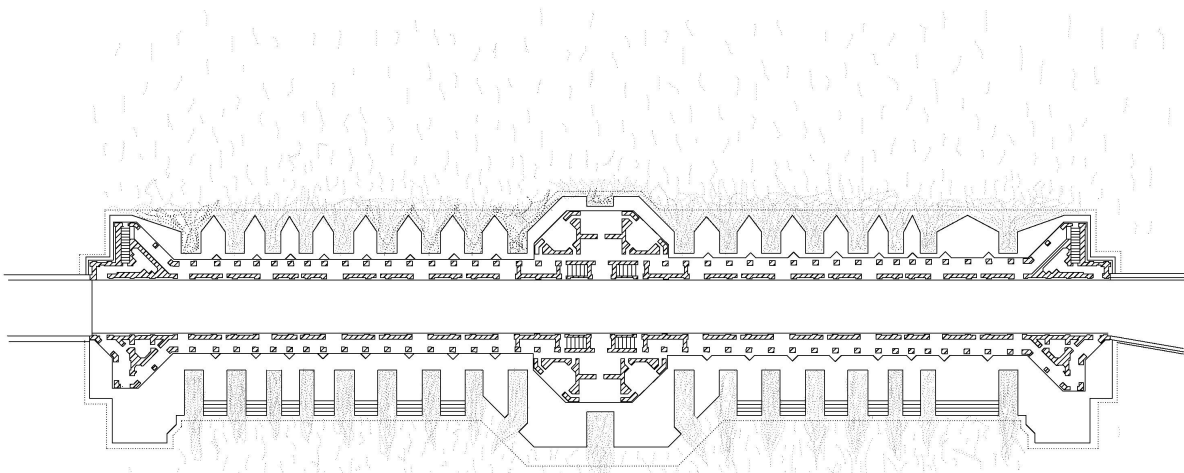
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First floor of the Khaju Bridge, Zayanderood, Isfahan

## A VISION OF ZAYANDEROOD

Mahroo Movahedi

Located in the heart of Iran, Isfahan is perhaps Iran's most historically important city, filled with unparalleled examples of Persian art and architecture. The city is located in the lush plain of the Zayanderood, the largest river in the central Iran, whose name literally means "the life-giving river". It is this river that makes the land around Isfahan fertile, and it is essential to the life of the province, providing water for households and institutions, industry and agriculture.

The river flows down from the Zagros mountains, located to the west and south of Isfahan. It runs through the city, dividing it into northern and southern parts, which are connected by numerous bridges built in different periods. The most notable are the Khaju (1501–1722), Si-o-pol (1599–1602), Marnan, Shahrestan, and Zaman Khan bridges.

In the past decade, the Zayanderood has experienced drought conditions largely as a result of climate change, which has been exacerbated by the way in which this ongoing crisis has been addressed: the decision to dam and divert the Zayanderood to provide water for drier provinces has arguably made the droughts more severe.

The Zayanderood is a symbol of vitality in Isfahan, an essential part of the identity of the people that live in the city. It is an intrinsic part of the local economy, and much of social life in the city revolves around the river. It is not just a recreational space, but also holds a unique place in the urban character of Isfahan, creating a public sphere which brings an expansion of social interactions of people with one another, as well as economic and cultural benefits.

In understanding people's relationship with their environment, anthropologists have studied the ways in which the environment helps determine and guide our patterns of behavior. Water, of course, is a central element of our environment—its presence or absence is hugely significant to any human environment.

According to the sociologist Richard C. Stedman, the symbolic relationship formed by people to particular spaces can be defined as "place attachment."<sup>1</sup> In this process of attachment, cultu-

1 This is just one dimension of so-called "place sensitivity". See: Brehm, Joan M.; Eisenhauer, Brian W.; Stedman, Richard C.: "Environmental Concern: Examining the Role of Place Meaning and Place

Attachment". In: *Society & Natural Resources. An International Journal*, 26 (2012), no. 5.

rally shared affective meanings provide a way for people to understand and be in relation to their environment. Although this is a shared experience, it goes beyond the individual's experience and memory of every day. The cultural practices and habitual bodies in the environment create significant meaning and a sense of place<sup>2</sup> for the inhabitants.

Many factors shape the way people live in cities. Water is perhaps the most essential, since it brings with it sanitation, production and pleasure. A river also can shape the image of the city in the minds of the people. Though rivers may form a deeply pragmatic heart of cities, they also shape the multisensory experience that people have in the city, through visual, auditory or tactile experiences of the water.

When the river is high, it is a wonderful thing to behold. The views of the river in the city attract not just tourists but also Isfahan's own citizens, for whom the river is still enchanting, especially at night, lit by the lamps on the bridges.

A river as a source of water plays a fundamental role, not only in human health and living conditions, but also for those of a wider ecology of plants and animals. In the ancient culture of Persia, water was the symbol of freshness, brightness and life; innocence and water was the link between earth and sky.

In Persian culture, water is still a symbol of purity and the key element in traditional architecture in order to show the calmness and cleanness that water possesses. Light and water play a significant role in traditional Iranian architecture; the combination of the two enhances the sense of grand spaces, particularly in buildings such as mosques. The bridges over the Zayanderood unquestionably bring a mystic experience to Isfahan. The visionary structure of the Khaju bridge is significant for Isfahan's landscape, both as a conduit across the river, but also as a place in itself. Set over two levels, the bridge houses many amenities, including coffee shops and restaurants, and also features an octagonal pavilion.

Water itself is essentially shapeless, but takes on myriad forms and appearances, offering almost an unlimited range of visual phenomena.

2 Kyle, Gerard T. et al.: "Linking place preferences with place meaning: An examination of the relationship between place motivation and place

attachment". In: *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 24 (2004), no. 4, pp. 439–454.

As a scene, water in a landscape is characterized predominantly by curvilinear forms rather than regular, straight lines. In the Zayanderood there is a rich variety of different visual experiences to be had. Where the water assumes many kinds of appearances, in different colors and surface textures, which even affects how the volume of the river is perceived.

The river flows, constantly in motion; a state of unceasing transformation, against which the bridges stand poetically motionless and unwavering. The almost animistic nature of the landscape of water provides a refreshing contrast to the solidity of the built environment. Water, together with vegetation, helps to create sensory balance and comfort in a public space. This balance is also auditory: the intensity of the sound of water influences our perception of a place. Such a soundscape is a fundamental element in the environment of Zayanderood: when you stand on a bridge by the river and close your eyes, you start to hear things that you only subliminally were aware of before.

The conditions of an environment determine the ways in which and the extent to which we form attachments with it. The drought experienced by the Zayanderood impoverishes Isfahan as a place-making environment, and makes it less able to support ongoing formations of positive emotional attachments on the basis of sensory experiences of the river. As is yet to unfold, the river's retreat threatens that the social life of the river will slowly fade away, in people's minds and then also in practice. As the river runs ever shallower, people will fail to gather along its banks.