

Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Fujan Fahmi, Myriam Uzor

An integral component in the history of landscape architecture, the Persian garden reveals a unique relationship between humankind and nature. Admirable landscapes have been conceived in the constant attempt to manipulate nature to rearrange and display it anew.

Mystical beauty and a poetic sense for eternal longing are intrinsic to the long tradition of the Persian garden as a reflection of Paradise. Deriving from the Zoroastrian culture, the Avestan word *pairidaēza* simply means “walled around”. Indeed, Persian artefacts are compelling testimonies of people’s remarkable ability to cultivate landscapes in hostile environments and transform them into artificial reveries.

In the spring of 2019, sixteen students from the Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich participated in the seminar week “Paradise Lost: Building a Dream between Mountains and Desert” in Iran organized by the Chair of Professor Christophe Girot. Under the guidance of local landscape architects, architects and many other experts, we had the opportunity to discover hidden treasures of Iranian history, culture and heritage, thus gaining a new awareness of contemporary Iranian society in a controversial era.

Composed of diverse micro-environments, Iran’s architectural landscape is entirely based on adaptive and resilient technical structures. We endeavored to capture the cultural behaviors, topographic sophistication, hydrological networks and botanical strategies in order to understand the inherently unique complexity of the Persian landscape, enhanced by the synergetic equilibrium between climate, resources and terrain. Indeed, Persian civilization is distinguished by a cultural, social and economic palimpsest conceived interdependently with technical water management constraints, which enable a sustainable interaction between people and their environment. In Persian mythology and religion, water is the most sacred, life-giving of elements.

Our comprehensive itinerary covered the most important historical and cultural sites of Iran and led us from the poems, gardens and flowers of Shiraz to the Acropolis of Persepolis and the ancient garden of Pasargadae, from the desert city of Yazd to Isfahan, the dazzling Safavid capital of seventeenth century Persia, finally culminating in the discovery of Kashan and the richly tended historical Bagh-e Fin (Fin Garden). We witnessed throughout the trip most fascinating convergences of nature and culture.

In this publication, the contributions of ten international authors form a reflective discussion on the conditions in which the Iranian landscape has been shaped from its origins to the present day.

In the desert city of Kashan, the Cheshmeh ye Soleiman fountain is said to have brought water from the nearby mountains to the area for thousands of years, as well as supplied the water to the Fin Garden. It is precisely the place where one can still find traces of a six-thousand-year-old civilization. Strolling through the prehistoric excavation site of Tepe Sialk with our students, we had the privilege of benefitting Dr. Javad Hoseinzadeh's extensive knowledge about the transformation of the Sialk's landscape, climate and vegetation over the millennia.

Looking at the origins of the garden, we were led to Pasargadae, the first capital of the Achaemenid Empire, located north east of Shiraz. Home to the oldest garden in the world, constructed by Cyrus the Great, Pasargadae bestowed a profound inheritance outside the borders of Iran, from Europe to Japan through China. Many of the most notable gardens in the world, such as the gardens of Versailles in France, may never have existed in their current forms if Cyrus hadn't established his royal garden in the form he chose. The influence of Persian gardens persists even in the present day as a source of inspiration for many designers. In his contribution, Dr. Ali Mousavi, archeologist and expert of the site, provides insights into the emergence of an eight-thousand-year-old garden and its rediscovery in the twentieth century.

Persian gardens leave a distinctive impression in the visitor's mind that is overwhelmingly pleasant; an atmosphere that awakens the senses. The simple perfume of nature—a dusty earthy scent, mixed with the fresh fragrance of roses and pines, bound with the fresh smell of groundwater from the mountains. The renowned art and landscape historian Dr. Annamarie Bucher immerses us in this landscape, exploring the role of senses in experiencing the Persian garden and its characteristic features. Drawing on her personal experience in the country, she literally leads the reader into the spatial perception of the Persian garden that one might encounter in these unexpected, enclosed ecosystems.

Can a garden whisper? Part of our activity at the Chair of Landscape Architecture of Professor Christophe Girot is dedicated to the understanding of acoustic phenomena in landscape architecture. The young composer and sound artist Siamak Anvari shares with us his acoustic

connection with the Persian Garden, an aural exploration that he has developed over years. His work and interest in composing music, first based on carpet features and now encompassing elements from the Persian garden, presents a fascinating case study. Initially used to give nomadic tribesmen protection from the arduous climate, the Persian carpet has since time immemorial been a unique narrator of the Iranian culture. His piece raises the question, To what extent can music be reunited with the physical Persian garden?

In order for the garden to be recognized as such, it is surrounded by a wall that protects plants and people. At the same time, the wall defines the isolated place and separates it from the outside, creating a space of contemplation where memory and longing are formed. Through its seclusion, the Persian garden functions as a kind of time capsule—a place where time stands still, where a momentary fleeting emotion can feel eternal. In their text, Dr. Saskia de Wit, an expert in the history and development of the *Hortus Conclusus*, and Dr. Azadeh Arjomand Kermani elaborate a portrait of the Shazdeh Garden (Bagh-e Shazdeh), located in the province of Kerman. This jewel in the desert embodies an explanatory garden in its immaculate essence, the specific characteristics of a *Hortus Conclusus*.

The tree of life, the *Sarv* (cypress), is an infallible central element of the Persian garden which stands for continuity and consistency. Through the centuries, people who lived in regions where the cypress tree grows have related it to the Garden of Eden. Innumerable painters, artists and poets adopted it as their favorite subject. As a symbol of eternity and as a bridge between Orient and Occident, the cypress and its symbol has been revived in many cultures across the world. With her intrinsic interest in the history of gardening and landscape architecture and with a focus on the trade and use of plants, the landscape architect and researcher Dunja Richter investigates the versatile role of the cypress and considers the significance of the sacred evergreen tree in Persian culture.

The Zayandehrud River, the “life-giving river” of Isfahan, has run dry in recent summers. The ancient city that has benefited from its waters for more than a thousand years is deeply shocked by the sight of its vast, arid riverbed. Not only does the Iranian government’s mismanagement of the natural resources have negative environmental

and economic impacts, it also has psychological repercussions on the population of the entire country. Based on her doctoral investigations, Mahroo Movahedi recounts how Iranian society is responding to the disappearance of the precious water of the Zayandehrud and how the inhabitants experience their greatest public spaces, the many bridges that span the river, without water.

Break or continuity? In Tehran, there has been a paradigm shift in the design of public gardens during the twentieth century. While water still plays a major role, the wall and the *chaharbagh* structure have lost their presence in modern designs for public gardens. Reihaneh Khorramrouei and Dr. Amin Mahan give an overview on how the perception of gardens in Tehran's society has changed during the twentieth century and which new design parameters have arisen instead.

Shirana Shabazi's artistic contribution is a fully emotional stimulus for the observer, the result of a fascinating investigation into the images associated with traditional gardens. The viewer is encouraged to abandon their habitual notions of a Persian garden and to conceptually approach the images with an open mind. In this, Shirana's work constantly awakens our curiosity and admiration.

Pamphlet 24 is a homage to a journey through time and an attempt to unfold several unique observations over and beyond the veils that often obscure this landscape. Although in recent decades it seems that political events in Iran have weakened the common consciousness of the heritage of ancient Persia, this many-thousand-year-old civilization has spawned universal values. Reading through these texts, you will find yourself inebriated by a land that leaves traces in the minds of all its visitors. After mentally inhabiting the endless spaces of the Great Salt Desert, what remains is a desire to be lost in paradise.

