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SHEIKH BAHAEI'S MASTERLY WORK IN COMBINING IRANIAN CRAFT AND ART IN IMAM ALI'S SHRINE

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ABSTRACT

In the past and present, Religious centers such as mosques and holy tombs, more than other buildings, have been the in the Iranians' center of attention. The reason for this attention is the sacredness lying at the heart of these religious centers and Shiites' respect for their Imams and their offspring. In addition, mosques and shrines are suitable places to observe religious rituals. Spiritual magnificence of these tombs and shrines, along with firm belief that people have in attending these places for spiritual yields, have provided Islamic thinkers with an opportunity to enhance the spiritual richness and exterior magnificence and glory these buildings, and make them the tribune for Iranian Shiites' art and creativity. Exquisite architecture found in tombs is exclusive of Iran and some Iraqi cities such as Karbala, Samera And Najaf, all of them are the product of Iranian patrons and masterly architects, examples of which are to be found nowhere in other Islamic countries.. Sheikh bahaei's masterly in using sun's position in the sky and astronomy, alongside spiritual atmosphere in yard and Saraye Hazrate Ali, has created a situation that gives a unique attraction to this complex. Like other Sheikh bahaei works, benefitting from scientific calculations, this building is a work of wonder, although hidden from the Architects' eyes due to spiritual atmosphere and grand personality of Imam Ali, and current work will try to look at the unique features of this complex and analyze it from an architectural point of view. Obviously, Muslim architects have tried to create a building that expresses the personality and saintly status of Imams, but their main attraction comes from the personality of grand people who are buried there, a the combination of these attractions provides a situation that every Shiite longs to attend Imam Ali's shrine.

Keywords: *Islamic Architecture, Imam Ali's Shrine, Sheikh Bahaei*

INTRODUCTION

In Iran, tombs belonging to religious leaders and religious, cultural or political figures are known as Haram (shrine), Imamzadeh, Boq'e, Mazar, Maqbareh (tomb), Borj (tower) and Gombad (dome), which hold a unique significance and credibility.

Religious centers such as mosques and tomes, more than any other architectural buildings in the past and present, have been in the center of Iranians' attention. The reason for this lies in the sanctity associated with this religious centers and Shiites' particular reverence for Imams and their offspring.

Mosques and shrines also make a suitable place to observe rituals.

Due to peoples' attention to these places on religious grounds, they have survived climatic damages, and whenever the need arises, people passionately try to restore them and in order to win popularity with their people, kings and rulers have always made attempts to revive and restore these buildings. Exquisite architecture found in tombs is exclusive of Iran and some Iraqi cities such as Karbala, Samera and Najaf, and all of them are the joint product of Iranian patrons and masterly architects, examples of which are to be found nowhere in other Islamic countries.

Before Islam, Iraq lay was within Sassanid territory. In 594 of the Christian era, Persian Empire was defeated by muslim army and Iraq was added to Islamic kingdom and from that time, owing to Islamic civilizations, has always been known as an Islamic country (Hillenbrund, 2004).

After Arab invasion and when Omavi and Abbasi rulers came to power, who didn't observe justice the way Mohammad prophet and Caliphates Did, Shiism was spread. Omavi and Abbasi rulers were unfamiliar with statecraft and therefore employed Iranians in the political system, and as a result, Iranian

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art and culture was vastly imitated, and its influences reached other Islamic countries (Mohammadi, 2001).

Sheikh Bahaei

Bahaoddin Mohammad Ibn Hossein Ameli, Known Sheikh bahaei was an eminent scientist in Safavid era; an era where architecture rose to the heights of elegance and precision. In the Iranian history of science and culture, Bahaii has always been known as a scientist, politician and religious figure who was greatly respected by people of different classes, but Bahaii as an architect is of particular significance. Many of existing works from Safavid era, especially those in Isfahan, are belied to be his, namely the architectural work of Imam mosque and the construction of Sheikh bahaei Garmabeh (a public place for people to take a bath), named after himself, which has been running on candle heat and also engineering Najaf Abad fence, and laying foundation for Najaf Abad, along with many other works of architecture.

Science and art are two precious treasures that are closely linked and Sheikh Bahaei employed both in the service of religious ideals, and his architectural art was truly an epitome of committed art and could exert influences both inside Iran and beyond borders, namely Iraq.

In the following sections, the Iranian architecture in Imam Ali's Shrine will be examined in full details.

Examining Iranian architecture in Imam Ali's Shrine

The History of Imam Ali's Shrine

Up until 753 of the Christian era nobody knew of whereabouts of Imam Ali's Shrine, except for other Imams and their a few close followers. According to a narration, during a hunting session in Vadi Qaryin (Najaf), Haroon Al Rashid noticed that when antelopes seek refuge to a particular hill, hunting dogs would refrain to chase them. He inquired into the matter and found out that Imam Ali's grave lay there and therefore the first Heydariyh mansion of the shrine was constructed on the order of Haroon. According to Ershad Ol Qolub Dilami, the first Heydariyh mansion of shrine had four portals and the holy tombstone was made of white stone and a dome of roses carrying a green flag would cover its top (Taqyan, 2009).

After Da'ie alsaqir, descendant of Zayd, Imam Zayn Al Abedin's son in Tabarestan, the construction of the second Heydariyh mansion of the shrine stared magnificently and possessed seventy vaults.

The third mansion was built on the order of Azed O'dole Daylami and the construction finished in 805 of the Christian era. In addition to constructing Alavi Mansion, Azad O'dole erected the city of Najaf and constructed Houses, public baths and bazaars and encouraged Shiites to reside there and appointed servants to the shrine and gave away vast sums of money to it.

In 1333 of Christian era, a part of Heydareh shrine was caught by fire, especially the wall decorations of Saj wood, mirror work and excellent paintings and silk curtains and carpets, but fortunately the main Azad O'dole Buyee mansion escaped the damage.

None of researchers or historiographers ascribes the restoration of the Astaneh Alavi to any particular person.

After Safavid dynasty came to power in Iran and out of their rulers' unshakable belief in Imam Ali, restoration of the shrine was launched on the order of Shah Ismaeel Safavid in 1492 of Christian era and under Shah Abbas rule and with Sheikh Bahaei's design and engineering, the Haydariyh yard was completed, benefitting from the most precise mathematical and astronomical calculations, and all through Safavid rule, decorating, restoring and offerings continued uninterrupted.

In 1734 of Christian era and when Nader Shah managed to visit Astaneh Alavi as a pilgrim, ordered that the green tiles that adorned the Dome and the two minarets based on Sheikh Bahaei's design to be replaced by gold, and Ivan Ol Olama tile work on the side of portico to the north, known as Maqam Ol Olama which holds graves belonging to Shiite sages and Safavid rulers, is also attributed to him.

All Qajar Shahs have left traces in this Astaneh, such as silver shrine and renewal of the gold on the minarets, done respectively on the order of Aqa Mohammad Khan and Fath'Ali Shah.

Final restoration in Astaneh and mirror work in the shrine and porticos was carried out in 1948 of Christian era.

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Current Structure of Imam Ali's Shrine:

On the whole, shrines share common elements which distinguish them from other buildings. Common elements are patios, domes, minarets, porticos and yards (Pirnia, 2005).

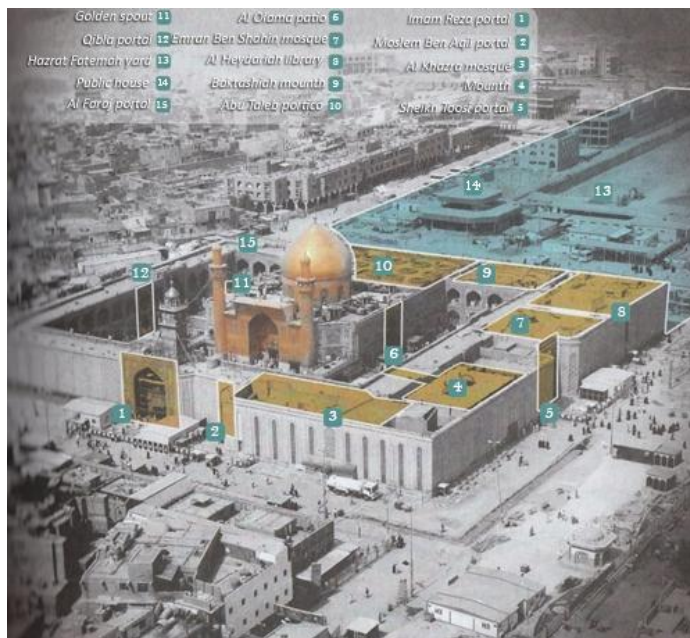


Figure 1: Current structure of Imam Ali's shrine

Imam Ali's shrine which is located in the center of Najaf (figure 1) is no exception: Golden patio in Astaneh Alavi is rectangular and is located on the east side of the shrine. Different from all other patios in Iraqi shrines, this patio is roofless and features a unique elegance, grandeur and intimacy (figure 2).



Figure 2: Golden patio on the east side of Imam Ali's shrine

Inside the shrine lies a magnificent silver Zarih (Metal structure that encloses the space above the grave), and houses graves belonging to Imam Ali, Adam and Noah (figure 3).

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Figure 3: Holy Zarih; Holy graves belonging to Imam Ali, Adam and Noah

The dome hangs above the Zarih 42 meters above the ground, and the base circumference is 50 meters and the vertical distance from the base to the top of the dome is 35 meters.

The first sanguine dome was built on the order of Haroon, and then Azad O'dole put up a white dome and in Safavid era, benefiting Sheikh bahaei design and execution, a green dome was erected and later, on the order of Nader Shah, the dome was made golden and it left intact to this day (figure 4).

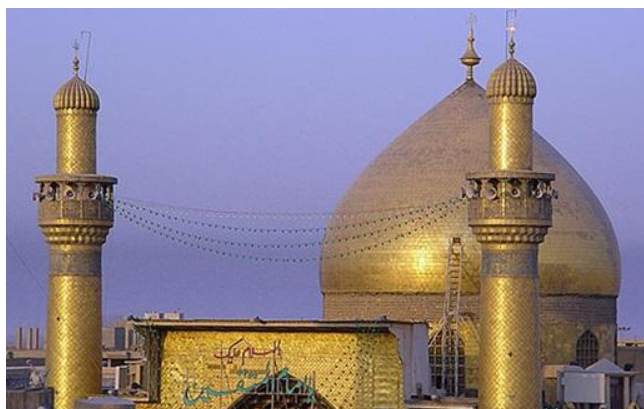


Figure 4: Astaneh Alavi golden dome

Two golden minarets, half cylinder in shape from the bottom, rise up to 35 meters on the either side of patio and stand in such harmony with the domes and patio that expose Astaneh in greatness and magnificence (figure 5).



Figure 5: Astaneh minarets in magnificent combination with a dome and patio

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The top of both minarets lean toward Qibla (the direction pointing to Kaaba) in such a way that will not go unnoticed even to a minimum attention. Verses from Jom'e surah are inscribed on top of the minarets and in the center of golden patio on the side of entrance to the portico an ode praising Imam Ali by Persian poet Araf Shirazi in gold and in Mohammad Jafar Isfahani's calligraphy is seen, dating from 1577 of Christian era.

Tile work and mirror work by Iranian artists enclose the shrine and the portico on four sides (figure 6). These porticos on three directions of north, south and east, connect entrances to shrine to exits. North and south porticos connect the yard to the shrine. East porticos open onto the golden patio.



Figure 6: patios; around the yard

Holy shrine sits in the center of the yard and divides it to south, north and east yard. Southern yard which looks to the direction of Qibla has a golden spout which is inspired by golden spouts in Kaaba, and exactly across from it in Alavi shrine, on the opposite you have to say daily prayer with your back to the spout (in the direction of Qibla) (figure 7).

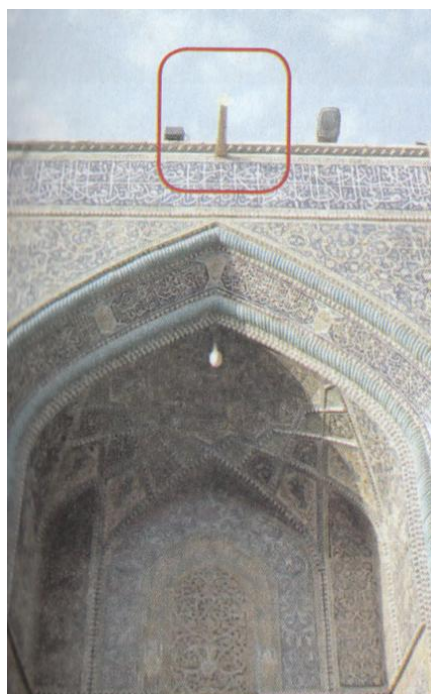
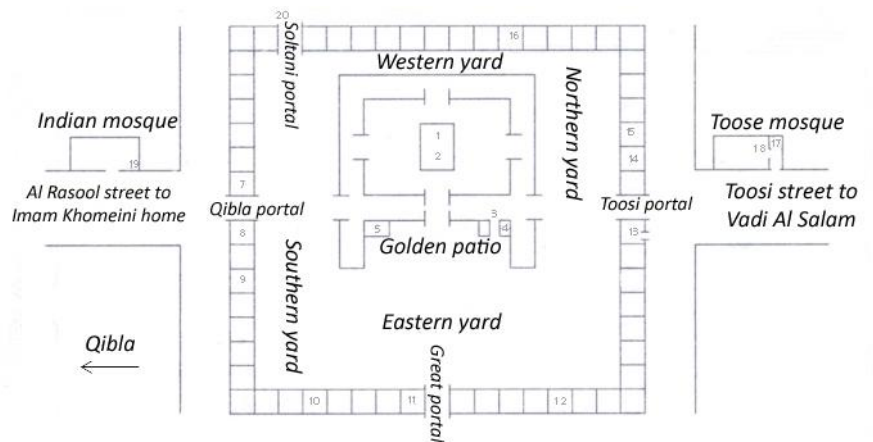


Figure 7: Golden spout; in the southern yard

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This yard has 14 porticos. Northern and eastern yards, each has 15 porticos. On the west side, shrine is connected to the yard via a top-covered passageway. West yard which sits above, holds 14 porticos. Porticos around the yard each has a chamber which houses graves belonging to eminent and religious figures (figure 8).



- 1.grave of Imam Ali – 2.graves of Adam and Noah – 3.grave of Allameh Helli
- 4.graves of Shahid Mostafa Khomeini and Kompani – 5.grave of Moqadas Ardabili
- 6.grave of Molla Ahmad Naraqji – 7.grave of Sheikh Ansari – 8.grave of Seyed Shafti
- 9.graves of Sheikh Abbas Qomi and Mohades Noori – 10.grave of Mirzaye Na’ini
- 11.graves of Seyed Abol Hasan Isfahani, Akhond Khorasani and Mirza Habibollah Rashti
- 12.graves of Ayatollah Khoori and his three sons – 13.grave of Mirzaye Shirazi Bozorg
- 14.grave of Seyed Mohamad Kazem Yazdi – 15.grave of Allameh Sharaf Al Din
- 16.graves of Sheikh Shooshtari and Seyed Mahmood Shahroodi
- 17.grave of Seyed Mahdi Bahr Ol Oloom -18.grave of Sheikh Toosi
- 19.grave of Seyed Mohsen Hakim
- 20.to Imam Sajad Maqam, Safi Safa and graves of Kashef Ol Gheta and Saheb’e Javaher

Figure 8: Tombs belonging to eminent and religious figures; chambers on patios around the yard

Holy yard opens on to the neighboring streets through five portals:
 Qibla portal (on the south looking toward Qibla), Babolfaraj or Soltani Portal (on the west), Toosi portal (on the north), Babolzahab or Babolkabir (great portal) (on the east and across from bazaar), and Babolmoslem (on the same side) (Taleqani, 2003).

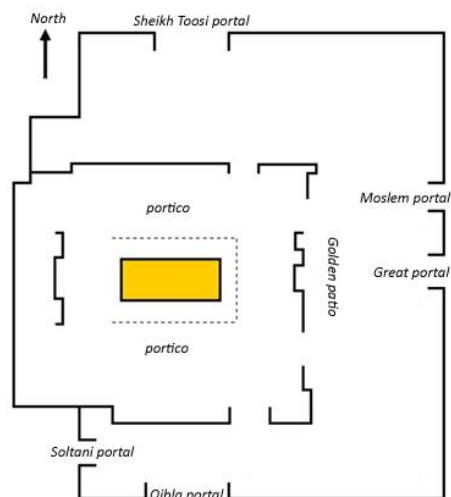


Figure 9: Position of portals

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Characteristics of Imam Ali's Holy Yard with Sheik Bahaei's Design (the Great Safavid Architect):

- a) Entrance in other shrines is back to Qibla and in the direction of south, but Imam Alie's is the only shrine where portico and main entrance are in such a way that pilgrims from below, that is from eastern direction, enter the holy dome. It was Sheik Bahaei's intention to pay a particular respect to Imam Ali (Alavi, 2010).
- b) All seasons, when the sun reaches below the eastern wall (golden patio), it is noon, the moment this wing, which is the main wing and the entrance from the bazaar has access to that, develops a shadow it is the high noon and it is said that Najaf's noon is declining.
- c) All seasons, first rays of the sun at the dawn from Babolzahab which looks to the bazaar, shine directly at the Zarih. Also above this same portal, Sheikh Bahaei has worked a convex mirror (figure 10) looking to the west, in a way that last rays of the sun in the evening, in all seasons shine at the Zarih.

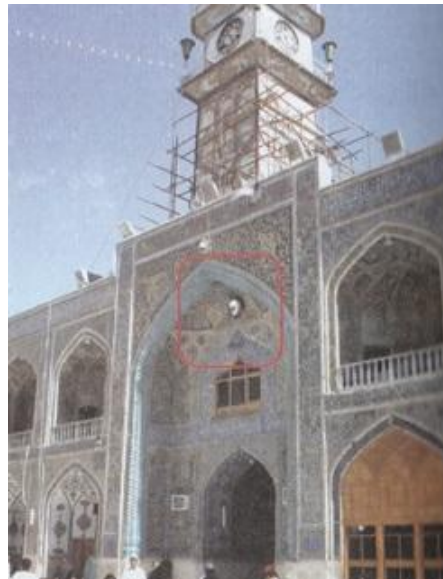


Figure 10: A view of Babolzahab or Babolkabir (great portal) from the yard and convex mirror worked in it based on Sheikh Bahaei design

- d) Around the holy yard, there are chambers on two floors (figure 11) and in front of each chamber there is a small patio which used to house Imamieh religious figures and the holy yard was the center of great university in Shiite world.



Figure 11: Chambers on two floors around the holy yard

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Sheikh Bahaei set each chamber with a star, and he believed that according to Islamic astronomy, each star is an instructor of one of the sciences. For instance, a chamber is in front of the star that is the math instructor, and the student who is engaged with that science in the chamber will soon improve in that skill (Mehri Kermanshahi, 2008).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, respect, firm belief and passion that people hold for religious figures present themselves in the form of shrines, Imamzadeh (a shrine that houses the grave belonging to Imams; offspring) in the cities and villages, which were originally simple tombs turned into magnificent pilgrim destinations over time.

“Cultural and artistic legacy of Islamic Iran” is teeming with sciences, skills and crafts, emotion, beauty and art, which can be instructive and inspirational to our thoughts, art and craft now and in the future, and help us in the way to new scientific and artistic ideas and works.

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