

Preface and Acknowledgments

Iran has a cultural attitude all its own. It is Persian, but not as a matter of ethnicity. And it is predominantly Muslim, but with an entirely different experience of Islam than its brethren in faith. For all its seeming marginality in the world today, this is a place painfully alert to the world; it is where new cultural schemes are born in the wake of unimaginable human calamities, where world religions are hatched, and where people have always found a way to make convivial and compelling lives. This book is my attempt to understand precisely such an Iran through the lens of a particularly pregnant moment in its history.

Those who know Isfahan know it to be one of the most glorious cities ever built. But many have never even heard of it. In the early modern age of travel, trade and diplomacy, it was known to be unrivaled in the elegance of its public spaces, its park-like avenues, magnificent mosques and madrasas, bazaars and palaces. Some of that luster has been clouded by the encroachment of commercialization and tourism; and a great deal has been demolished to make room for modern roads, plumbing, apartment towers, and now possibly a subway system. Still, "walking in the city" as de Certeau would have us do, yields glimpses of those everyday experiences that the architectonics of urban space must have activated in the denizens of the Safavid city. Isfahan is more than a Safavid city but it is its Safavid history, with its dramas in architecture and in rituals of conviviality, that I could not shake off.

Slow gestation of this book has allowed me to explore new ways of thinking about Isfahan and about its urban spaces, architecture, and rhythms of life. I started with the palaces but have been roaming the Safavid city, peeling away at the houses, at the city's "artistic" café culture, at the echoes of its forms and functions in other urban centers in Iran, or elsewhere. I return to the architectural and urban expressions of authority, despite the general disdain for empires, because the experience of Isfahan is so closely braided with the building of the city as the embodiment of the first and only empire that was Persian and Imami Shi'i. Compelled by their self-proclaimed link with the family of the Prophet Mohammad, and a mandate to uphold

justice, the Safavids, in enunciating their particular form of kingship, incorporated ritual performances of conviviality into the daily life of the city. Feasting was paramount among the ceremonials of the Safavids and for those rituals I noticed they built special buildings. Those palaces are truly extraordinary and those convivial gatherings most exceptional when we call to mind how the early modern surge in imperial absolutism usually came with aloofness, god-like transcendence and the forbidding distances created inside and around palaces. To get an intimation of the uniquely Perso-Shi'i kingship model that the Safavids fostered and for which they built a capital city and many palaces, I learned a great deal from the ways in which the social anthropology of space and of art have allowed for imagining the conceptual and historical clusters of action, activation, and actors. At the end of this venture, I have learned how much more there is to do. And I am certain the history of Isfahan and its palaces can be recast in more ways than this book does.

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