Reading Village Plans

Architecture and Social Change in Northeastern Iran

LEE HORNE
Architecture plays multiple roles in people's lives. Dwellings reflect not only how people live, but also how they think about life and how they choose, consciously or not, to represent themselves to others. Thus the domestic architecture of ancient sites offers much more than a spatial and chronological context for other kinds of artifacts.

Some excellent ethnoarchaeological studies have explored these multiple relationships between architecture and society; good examples are those of Kramer (1982) and Watson (1979) in Iran, and David (1971) in West Africa. My own ethnoarchaeological research on village architecture was carried out in the late 1970s in the Tauran region of northeastern Iran (Fig. 2). It also aimed to explain architectural spaces in terms of social and economic organization. Wilk, working among the Kekeji Maya of southern Belize, has shown how changes in architectural form can be used to track changes in economic organization and relations with the larger world (1983). In Tauran, a similar shift has taken place so rapidly and so recently that it can almost be caught in the act. Because floor plans may be all that remain of the architecture within an ancient site, I concentrate here on reading village plans for the social and economic information they contain.

The Case Study

Tauran comprises a group of 13 small, nucleated villages scattered on a semi-arid plain about 120 sq km in extent. The plain is bounded on the northeast by a sand sea, on the south by a mountain range, and elsewhere by foothills that separate it from other plains and from the immense salt basin of central Iran. The 1300 residents of Tauran are Persian speakers. Unlike villagers in some other parts of Iran, they are not tribally organized, although they do maintain relationships with kin from other parts of the country. In the basis of historical and archaeological evidence, the Tauran Plain has been settled, most likely intermittently, for at least two millennia. Abundant material evidence still stands in the form of abandoned mudbrick architecture preserved by the arid climate.

Ecologically, the Tauran Plain is well suited for grazing. It lies in a zone intermediate between winter and summer pasture and has traditionally been used in seasonal alternation by groups of pastoralists entering from the northern highlands in the winter and from the southern and eastern lowlands in the summer. Agriculturally based settlement in Tauran is possible only by means of investment in ground water irrigation systems in the form of man-made subterranean galleries known as qanats (Fig. 13). Dry-farming is risky, with crops frequently failing from lack of rain.

Nearly all Tauranis live directly or indirectly off the land as property-owning farmers and herders, or as wage-labor shepherds. Over the centuries, residents have been alternately drawn into and cut off from the world outside, depending on conditions over which they have little control. Today (by which I mean the "ethnographic present" of the late 1970s), they are relatively isolated and without services. There is neither piped water nor electricity on the plain. The nearest city is 120 km away (a seven-hour drive). In 1976 an extremely slow and unreliable bus, one local pickup truck, and a few motorcycles were the only motor transport available.

Baghestan village is located in the center of the plain (Fig. 1). It resembles the other villages in general appearance and in location relative to fields and water system. Baghestan has a population of about 150, living in 33 households of nuclear type (parents and unmarried children), occasionally extended by widowed or other unmarried adult relatives. Other villages on the plain range from 27 to 178 households.
The complete village site covers about 2.5 ha of land, divided into three discrete parts that were once separate settlements. Each area still has its own qanat and field system. Today, however, only the central section is occupied; the structures of the other two are used for storage and animal shelter.

The village is loosely organized as a community. The leadership positions that do exist (a kadhoda, or head man, and a village council) have been imposed by the central government for its own administrative purposes. The village as a whole maintains a communal bathhouse and a single-room religious structure called a hoseiniya (Fig. 3). Villagers also share a common cemetery and a government schoolhouse. In Tauran, the main rights obtained through residence are access to the small area of common pasture that surrounds each village. Rights and responsibilities with respect to field systems are acquired through private ownership of land and water, which does not require residence in the village.

The entire village gathers on special occasions of religious obligation, such as that of Ramadan or those commemorating the death of Hosein, the foremost martyr of the Shi'a sect of Islam. These services are held in the hoseiniya or at the village cemetery, depending on the particular event. Sponsored by one or another of the villagers, they usually involve the distribution of food or at least tea. The whole village also takes part in traditional Persian New Year celebrations and in feasts for deceased relatives.

While the village is not a corporate unit in an economic sense, it is coherent in other ways. Villagers may act individually and as household units, but a network of cooperation is also apparent. They are moreover all related to one another through kinship or marriage. Marriage tends to be village endogamous: in 63 percent of village couples, both members were from Baghestan; in only one case was neither member of the couple from the village. Residents speak well of the village in terms of its location, water quality, and soil quality, and prefer it over neighboring villages.
The villagers present a public face of unity and equality. In spite of this expressed stance, however, wealth and access to productive resources are not evenly distributed among village residents. The poorest household has neither irrigated land nor animals. The richest owns flocks in the hundreds and several dozen hours of water per irrigation cycle. These two kinds of holdings—animals and water—are good measures of traditional wealth in the Near East, and I will use them below in order to test correlations between wealth and domestic space in Baghestan. (It should be noted that in this case, "rich" is only a relative term; in absolute terms, no one is so rich that they can afford not to work on their land, tend their flocks, or process the resulting products. Farming and herding are precarious ways of making a living here, and holdings in productive resources tend to fluctuate, often dramatically.)

**Architectural Reflections of Village Society**

In a general way, Baghestan’s plan (Fig. 4) reflects well the social and economic life of village residents. Nothing about the layout suggests an imposed order, as might have been the case had the village been built all at once, as sometimes happens, for example, when nomads settle. Instead, construction in the village proceeds gradually and by individual decision. House sites are either inherited or bought from other individuals; so far they are easy to come by and inexpensive. In Tauran there is no intervening agent such as the state, a village-owning landlord, or a communal system of redivision and redistribution (all of which have been known elsewhere in Iran) to organize either fields or settlement.

The plan of the residential part of the village reflects present-day community organization. Baghestan’s nature as a cohesive settlement is shown in the nucleated layout and in the fact that it contains only one religious structure, one community bathhouse, one cemetery, and one schoolhouse, all of which are shared by the whole village. Three separate threshing floors and a number of milking sites reflect the presence of smaller groups that cooperate in productive activities.

The expression of similarities and differences at the household level, however, should be sought in individual houses and compounds. Householders own both their domestic dwellings and buildings for animals and storage. Frequently these have been owner-built, or at least supervised by the owner while under construction. Remodeling and reorienting doors or windows of older

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*Figure 5a,b. (a) Plan of two back-to-back household compounds. Each contains a courtyard, a living room (marked LR), and several storerooms (S). The two rooms on the left of the upper compound were built as a living room/storeroom pair and were inherited by the owner when his father died. (b) The photograph shows the facade of the lower compound.*
structures is a simple task with these mudbrick buildings, and is a common practice.

As mentioned earlier, households are nuclear in type, sometimes extended by unmarried adults. On average there are five persons per household, although there may be as few as one or as many as nine. The houses in which the members live are composed of single-room units that open onto a courtyard or outside space rather than communicating with one another (Fig. 5a, b). With the exception of the bathhouse (built underground to particular specifications) and the qal'a (discussed below), all these units are similar in construction technique and in plan: they are rectangular mudbrick buildings with a single door and perhaps a window or two. Most share common walls with at least one other unit, even though it is not possible to walk from one room to another without going outside.

But there are differences in house plans as well as similarities. The most obvious is a difference in scale. Walled courtyards differ both in area and in the number of rooms that open onto them. Individual rooms themselves differ in size. Are these differences significant, and if so, what do they signify?

Every household has a main dwelling room—the living room—where the whole family sleeps, eats, and entertains (Fig. 6). These rooms are similar in appearance. They vary in size (typically about 13 sq m, but ranging from 10 to 17.5 sq m); nevertheless, they are still all relatively small. It might be expected that this frequently used room would reflect economic differences among households. But living rooms are very much alike in architectural elaboration (niches, shelves), finish (plain plaster, clay wash), and furnishings (sparse, possessions kept out of sight in storerooms). Moreover, living room size and wealth correlate only slightly. In their architectural holdings, village households do not differ much, as befits an egalitarian ideology. Villagers succeed in expressing through their dwellings what they say verbally about their social relationships.

Courtyards are, in part, a kind of outdoor living room, especially in the hot seasons (Fig. 7). But courtyards are more public than are living rooms, and it might be thought that households wishing to show off their economic status would do so through the relative size of these spaces. Yet, although they vary greatly in dimensions, ranging from below 5 to over 200 sq m in area, courtyard size correlates only slightly with wealth. Like living room size, courtyard size here is not a good indicator of economic differences.

Thus, the size of a particular
space, such as a living room or a courtyard, does not correlate well with economic status. But household sizes comprise other kinds of structures as well, in particular storage rooms and stables. Do wealthier people have larger houses in the overall sense? In Baghestan, every household has one living room, two at the most when a storeroom is converted for temporary winter use. But the total number of rooms per household shows a wide variation, ranging from 2 to 10; total amount of roofed space varies from 18.5 to 134.8 sq m. Unlike the previous comparisons, however, total number of rooms and wealth show a relatively strong positive correlation. That is, wealthier households do tend to have more house space. This fact appears to have little to do with display, however. The extra rooms are not luxury items but tools of production for which the wealthier have a greater need. They are used to house animals, shelter food-processing tasks, and store equipment, agricultural produce, fodder, and firewood, which the rich have more of.

Of course, more rooms could serve to signal economic differences to others. But to do so they would need to be clearly identifiable with their owner—for example, by being placed within the owner’s compound. Here, however, these additional utility rooms tend to be separated from their owner’s living quarters, located in other parts of the village, a dispersal made possible, but not determined, by inheritance and ownership patterns (Horne 1982). Neither by walking through the village nor by reading its plan could one securely identify all the rooms that belong to any given village household.

**Reflections of the Past**

So far the viewpoint has been what archaeologists call synchronic, that is, it falls within a single time period—in this case the present. But archaeologists are also concerned with diachronic analyses in which the viewpoint is through time rather than across space at one point in time. This approach enables them not only to study and explain variation within settlements or a society, but also the ways in which settlements and society change. Such an approach applies here as well. In spite of the persistence of many characteristics of rural life and architecture, Middle Eastern villages are not timeless entities, unchanged in form and organization over the centuries. If we leave the village of the 1970s and look back to the turn of the century and earlier, we find in Tauran a strikingly different settlement pattern and village morphology from that found today.

Figure 8. Asbkeshan qa’a. Towered, fortified multi-residence dwellings once dominated the landscape throughout the Iranian Plateau. This one, like the one in Baghestan village, is still occupied. In the past, it formed a self-contained settlement with its own water system, fields, and pasture nearby. Today, settlements are more dependent on the services and products of a regionally organized government.

Figure 9. Distribution of past qa’a and present-day village settlements. Each present-day village has at least one qa’a from an earlier period.

Fortified multi-residence dwellings dominated the landscape, one or more at each irrigated field system. Each settlement was smaller, but there were perhaps twice as many of them (Fig. 9). These imposing residences are called qa’a (Fig. 8). Nearly every village on the plain still has at least one or two in various stages of disrepair. They were once widespread throughout the Iranian Plateau, from Khorassan and Central Asia to Afghanistan. In Tauran, as far as we can reconstruct from oral history, most qa’a were built and occupied by elite tribal
families (Fig. 10). These powerful land and flock owners commanded labor and support in return for jobs and protection, probably in both kin and patron-client relationships (Martin 1982).

In plan a qal‘a is a rectangle of rooms, usually double-storied, that open onto a common central courtyard (Fig. 11). A thick outer wall, one or more circular watchtowers, and a substantial wooden gate defended the dwellers within. Ordinary mudbrick dwellings sometimes stood nearby, housing landless families who worked for the owners of the qal‘a.

A qal‘a did not just grow, the way a village and its compounds do today; it had a coherent symmetrical architectural plan. Even if some rooms were added later, the essential exterior walls, towers, gates, and sufficient interior facilities to run the operation had to be completed before the structure could be occupied. (In contrast, village compounds today tend to be built piecemeal, and the courtyard wall and the gate are always the last to be added, sometimes years later.) Rooms inside a qal‘a varied in their finish. All living rooms appear to have been decorated, and some were extremely fine, with carved plaster moldings, fireplaces, and walls that were painted and polished till they shone like marble (Fig. 12).

Today these rooms, if they are still in use, have mostly been demoted to utility rooms (Fig. 14). In all the qal‘a that I visited, present-day occupants are living in renovated or newly built rooms that follow the unpretentious contemporary decorative style. Herein lies both a problem and the key to its solution. If future archaeologists were to excavate a present-day village in Tauran, they would find both qal‘a and ordinary village houses occupied side by side in the same settlement. How could they avoid concluding that in the late 1970s the rich lived in qal‘as and their poorer neighbors in simpler dwellings? By observing that in every case, the qal‘a shows signs of recycling and reoccupation (Horne 1983). Its previous history remains beneath the signs of alteration that proper excavation and attention to architectural and artifact detail can reveal. Especially where change has been swift, without intervening abandonment and resettling, a building holds the memory of its history within its own walls.

Both scholars and Taurani resi-
students emphasize defense when they speak of qal’a settlement. And indeed, only very recently can Tauran be said to have become a safe place to live. The 19th and early 20th centuries were particularly insecure times for the area. Until the early 20th century, settlements were threatened by Turkman tribesmen who mounted raids from hundreds of kilometers to the north, seizing slaves and flocks to carry back. Local khans warred with each other over water holes and field systems. Even as recently as the turbulent 1950s, local brigands wandered the area, and a group of Basseri tribesmen actually took control of Baghestan village and installed themselves in the qal’a.

To view the qal’a only as a fort, however, is to miss out on much of what else was happening in Tauran socially and economically at that time. Qal’a are also overt expressions of power and wealth that make clear the social differences between tribal elite and poorer relations or landless clients. Furthermore, what the elite had could be flaunted because they could defend it; perhaps flaunting it sometimes made actual defense unnecessary. (In contrast, villagers told us that during recent times, when lawlessness was the rule and there was neither local nor centralized control, people would not transport or display anything valuable for fear of attracting thieves.)

Although the modern villages are inhabited for the most part by descendants of those who lived in the area at the turn of the century, the contrast between past and present is dramatic. There is indeed variation in wealth today, compared to more stratified societies and to their own past, but Baghestan’s villagers are not far off when they emphasize their similarities rather than their differences. Some of the descendants of the tribal elite have sold their holdings and left for the city; others have stayed in the area, but without control over the now nationalized rangeland, they have lost much of their basis for economic success. The descendants of the agricultural workers who depended on the qal’a have, largely through wage shepherding, been able to buy animals of their own and land as it becomes available. Thus differences in wealth are not as pronounced as they used to be; both groups live in a single community and have begun to intermarry. In spite of their integration into the national economy, these isolated villagers must still depend on

Figure 12. Qal’a Baghestan interior. This abandoned living room has a carved and painted fireplace wall. The plaster on the lower part of the walls was polished with a stone until it shone like marble.
one another for welfare, risk sharing, and most of their everyday needs. Instead of contrasting themselves with their neighbors a class above or below as they might have done in the past, they contrast themselves and their lifestyles with their urban counterparts, and laugh at the idea that someone would put on urban airs in a rural village.

Conclusion

When viewed in historical perspective, village settlement reveals two "eras" of life in Tauran, very different in economic and social organization. Qal'a—large, fortified dwellings, elaborately decorated, housing multiple households in shared quarters, and closed to the outside—contrast with village dwellings—smaller, undecorated living rooms housing single nuclear households within low compound walls. An historical perspective also shows that there is not always a direct relationship between architecture and social or economic status. Like other forms of material culture, architecture can be used to hide as well as reveal differences between households.

Nevertheless, these two "eras" have clear correlations in the material side of settlement and can be read in the village plan. The speed with which these changes have occurred should be of particular methodological interest to archaeologists, whose chronological sieves are not always fine enough to capture periods of such rapid transition. Architecture, however, when meticulously excavated and recorded, may provide excellent evidence for social and economic change.

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Acknowledgments

The field research on which this study is based was funded in part by the UNESCO Secretariat (Paris) as part of its MAB Project 11: Integrated Ecological Studies on Human Settlements. It formed one component of the Turan Programme, a multidisciplinary study of arid land adaptations directed by Brian Spooner. I am especially grateful to Dr. Spooner and to co-worker Mary Martin for sharing their data and ideas so freely.

Figure 13. Permanent settlement in Tauran is made possible by irrigation from artificial underground water sources called qanats. Here a young man redirects an irrigation channel onto his father's cotton fields.

Figure 14. Recycled storeroom in Qal'a Reza Qoli. The age and condition of qal'a have reduced their utility as dwellings, and today many are used primarily for storage and animal shelter. Reuse explains the presence of well-built niches, shelves, and a fireplace.