

The symbolic role of water in Iranian- Islamic architecture based on spirituality

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Abstract

The architecture of our traditional buildings in the Islamic era reached to the extent that the traditional architects of Islamic period due to their beliefs would see architecture beyond the body as well as considering its duty the induction of the symbolic and mysterious meanings. In their perspective, a building was a tool to induce spiritual concepts. One of the elements which was focused in The Holy book and mysticism is the element of the water. Water in Islamic traditional architecture reached to its higher spiritual position in a way that by investigating the buildings in this era we can find out the symbolic role of water through philosophy and theology. The term water was mentioned in The Holy book several times as well as great poets referring to it. That's why architects have tried to consider water as an important element in their buildings. This article is trying to study the symbol role of water in Iran - Islamic architectures based on spirituality as well as pointing to its importance for Muslim architects through examples. Research Methods are based on library studies as well as being descriptive analytic. The findings of the study show that in Islamic era water in architecture was to induce the belief and ideas which The Holy book has referred to and talked about. On the other hand, considering this dimension by traditional architects led to the creation of beauty in their architecture. It is hoped that by considering this approach we could pay more attention to present architecture and try to benefit Islamic values in our buildings.

Keywords: Water, spirituality, Iran, Islamic architecture,-symbol role

Introduction

Due to the Iran - Islamic culture, Muslim relationship with nature and natural elements are based on respect. Muslims consider natural elements as a sign of Supreme Being. At present, unlike past architecture history, Iran architecture is involved in spiritual crisis. The origin of this crisis can be a break between architecture and the origin of the sky (Memarian, 2005). Past architects were benefiting spirituality in architecture. These buildings have valuable and powerful tradition in terms of spiritual elements. Natural elements such as water are reflected in Iran - Islamic buildings. Muslims Architects used this element in their buildings according to The Holy book, mysticism perspective and poetry.

In the present study, in order to understand the function of water in Iran - Islam architecture, the researcher has tried to investigate Islamic beliefs as well as mystics and poets quotes about this sacred element. The study will also try to answer the following questions:

1. Is spiritual role of water in the Iran - Islamic architecture less paid attention than its function role by architects?
2. Does the spiritual dimension in architecture lead to beauty dimension in Iran - Islamic architecture?

This paper has tried to investigate The Holy book and spiritual interpretation through descriptive analytic approach. To better understand the application of spirituality in architecture, the spirituality dimension of architecture will be paid attention to as well as pointing to samples in

which water was used in the design of the buildings. It is worth mentioning that this study investigates the water use in Iran Islamic architecture through using library studies.

Spiritual art and architecture

Spirituality was paid attention to by researchers. Hindu, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, and Buddhism Art have been compared and studied differently. The spiritual architecture is divided into three groups:

- Spiritual architecture and theological thinking
- Spiritual architecture and mysticism
- Spiritual architecture and east world (Memarian, 2005)

In this type of architecture, the main sources of architects are the Holy books, religious leaders, scholars and philosophers' quotes. Traditional Architects in Islamic period were trying to connect the two materials and spiritual world. In fact the architects in this period were trying to deliver religious beliefs through their works (Memarian, 2005). In spirituality art and architecture can be defined as an environment in which men and women can find their primary dignity as well as their nature (Siavoshi, 2013)

Symbols in Islamic era

The architects of Iran – Islamic era would see beauty in spirituality. Therefore, one of the effective ways in creation of spiritual understanding in this period was through using "symbols" in architecture. Symbols in fact are signs which can be analyzed as well as having spiritual understanding that goes beyond its impact. In fact, Symbols are means to form a mental content (Greuther, 2011). In Islamic era water was given a symbolic feature which was used in Iran - Islamic architecture.

Man relationship with nature and natural elements

In many of eastern cultures there is a great relationship between Man and nature (Greuther, 2011). Man would see himself part of nature as well as being in multiple communication relationships with it. These close relationships would both give Man and nature the opportunity to live.

The architects of Iran – Islamic era would consider heart as a source of Supreme Being's beauty and glory as well as considering nature as their guidelines, so that the architect of this period was someone who could communicate with nature's hidden spirituality.

Water and Iranians

Water was considered as one of the sacred elements of nature in our culture since the ancient Iran until Islam emergence. In many of the architecture of these periods, there were both materialistic and spiritual uses. In another word, Iranian attitude toward water was always as something sacred and holy. Water for Iranian is not only to meet the particular needs, but it has also spiritual effect on them as well. This element with its different aspects such life, luminosity, cleanliness, boom, popularity, and stillness have had different effects on human psyche (Siavoshi, 2013).

Spiritual role of water in the Islamic era

Since the presence of these elements are of the special sanctity among Iranian Muslim, different effects of water was repeated in the traditional buildings based on The Holy book and Sufism principles (Hidari et al, 2008) . Water is the essence of life and that's why religious laws have made good use of it. Water which was used as an honor for community, in human patterns habitation, reached to an ultimate position (Ardalan et al, 2000). The Importance and value of water

is to the extent that Supreme Being himself has pointed to its value in holy book of The Holy book. Water is the source of life. In Islamic era, this important element was more paid attention to in Islamic religious concepts, the literature, art, culture and architecture of Iran. The architects of this period were quite consciously trying to dominate nature (Alamol Hoda, 2003).

Water and holy book

In the holy book, water plays an important role in lands and heavens creation. The term water was repeated 59 times in the holy book as well as being referred to several times:

- 1 - Supreme Being has placed its throne on water.
- 2 - Water as a rain fall and giving life to the earth
- 3 - Water Cleanliness
- 4 - Describing the water and flowing streams of the heaven.

Based on the Holy book concepts of heaven, the boiling springs and flowing streams the architects were inspired to place water in the center of the gardens, mosques, schools, buildings and houses. For example, the water element as stated in the Holy book was used by the architects in garden .

Water is considered as Allah's blessings which there should be a proper use for it. Supreme Being is the one who descends; he is the one who provides humans and animals with water. He refers to streams on earth as Supreme Being's signs, introduces heaven streams as a reward for those people who were the believers and those who did not come to believe Supreme Being are deprived from water in hell. Therefore, architects have used the spiritual aspects of water and tried to inspire these meanings through symbolisms as well as benefiting the different presence of water in their designs .

Iran - Islamic gardens turned into a vision of the people of Iran. Garden is a symbol of thought. The ancients always thought of gardens as paradise. In the garden of the traditional buildings of Iran's there is a diversity in unity as well as being a coordinated series of rationality, refreshing and eye-catching of the plant and water, light and shadow, space and landscape architecture which have been shaped based on geometry(Khosrowjerdi and Mahmoudi, 2014) .

Water and mysticism

Mystics and poets have pointed out to the holiness of water. Traditional Architects have tried to enrich Iran - Islamic buildings through considering these implications. In fact, the architects would consider these meanings in their designs in order to focus on holiness of these concepts. In the literature and mysticism water is defined as knowledge as life also means knowledge. The life-water is the source of love that gives eternity to one who drinks it (Alamol Hoda,2003).

The ponds located in the middle of the mosques' yards are based on spiritual symbolism of Shiat which considers mosques as a real entrance to the high world. Therefore, mosque is the spiritual agency of heaven and the pond inside its yard is a door to the other world.

Sacred water Following Iran - Islamic buildings

Water was mostly shaped in the middle of the palaces and gardens. Water-houses architecture and shelter were due to life giving feature of this element. In general, water storage and Water-houses which were created in dry or low water areas were always considered as an act of purchasing paradise Blessings (Khosravi, 1998). It can be said that both performance and the holiness aspects were presented together in order to create beauty.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the holiness which roots back in cultural and theological ideas were always the priority of the Iran - Islamic architects respectively. Architects were always bias on their specific culture as well as considering it as sacred and beauty aspect.

Water Representation in Iran - Islamic architecture

Water was represented in three ways in Iran - Islamic architecture: flowing, eruptions and stagnant which each has different symbols and meaning that is elaborated below:

Flowing state

One of the examples that can be cited for this case is Iranian gardens. Water in the gardens of Iran - Islamic period not only was used to water the trees but also brought freshness, vitality, and movement for the garden as well (Johnson, 1929, 71-3). In fact, the movement of water in the garden was a sign of this transient world. To display water, they used to flow it through the garden like one in Kashan Fin Garden as well as given it a stair like flow like one in Shahzadeh Mahan Garden (Figure 1). In general, this type of water streams used to represent the concept of streams in paradise. One of the other symbols which architects used to represent was moving from nothing to everything which was presented in ponds in which all of the streams used to return (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Shahzadeh Mahan Garden



Figure 2: Kashan Fin Garden

Eruptions state

This state of water could be seen in traditional houses and palaces. Water fountain would represent light, cleanliness as well as purity (Khosrowjerdi and Mahmoudi, 2014). In this case, which there would be a reflection of sunlight on the turbulent pond, it was always challenging the battle of light and darkness (Figure 3). The best location of this pool was in the south of the porch or in front of the palace which would represent the battle of light and darkness in the praying time (Khoshnevis, 2001). Thus, the role of water in this case is not to reflect the building but to the spiritual sense as well as spiritual dimension. At prayer times, which Muslims stand to pray,

darkness return to light and Muslims wait for the appearance of the savior (Khoshnevis, 2001). In fact, light is the most important characteristic of Iranian architecture as well as being the symbol of heavenly wisdom. Therefore, this light reflection by the water which is an important element is valued (Figure 4). The sanctity of nature and the natural elements is shown in Iran's Islamic houses through the battle of light and darkness. Muslim architects believed that light is a manifestation of Supreme Being's presence in Islamic architecture.



Figure 3: Light's Reflection in water



Figure 4: Light and water in traditional buildings

Stagnant state

Traditional architects would use the stagnant state of water for different purposes which included reflection, silence and peace

- *Reflection state*

The aim of the architects was not just reflect the buildings' architecture in the water but to reflect the spirituality as well as their firm belief. For example, the front pond of Chehel Soton (forty pillars) was intended to reflect the 20 pillars in the water and finally represent forty pillars (with the ones reflected in the pond and the real 20 ones) which the number forty is considered sacred in Islamic beliefs (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Isfahan Chehel garden and the front pool

• *Silence and peace*

The architects try to reflect silence and peace in this state which is commonly seen in mosques. For example, in Imam Mosque's pond in Esfahan there is a reflection of sky on the ground that indicates the connection between the material world and the spiritual world by depicting heaven on earth. It is as if worshipers step into the heaven and sky by entering the mosque. Water, as a manifestation of Supreme Being's holiness, is located in the middle of the yard as a symbol of purity, brightness, and light.

As noted earlier symbols are the most important characteristics of Iran - Islamic architecture, particularly for the mosques. For example, the large pool in the forecourt of the mosques rooted back in peoples' belief. Water in the center of the mosque was a symbol of spiritual cleansing and purity of Muslim's inside.

The water pool in the courtyard of the mosque is having critical importance: 1- Air conditioning, 2- washing the hands and sometimes washing up, 1- the presence of water and sky reflection (Figure 6).



Figure 6: The reflection of sky in the pond, Imam Mosque in Isfahan

The most important spiritual aspects of water are to reflect the other world which is all pure, clear, and transparent. This light use in the architect makes everyone to benefit the architecture according to his/her status (Siavoshi, 2013). In the traditional houses the yards would also represent paradise (Figure 7).



Figure 7: The importance of centralism in traditional architecture

The following characteristics can be included in Iran - Islamic architecture:

- The beautiful perspective of the yard along with the water, plants, and the architecture
- The Landscape, cool air and the emotion through using water in Iran traditional houses
- Putting water in the yard of the house

In Iranian architecture there was also an attention to the sunlight's radiation in summer and winter (Khoshnevis, 2001). Summer Light is shed vertically to the pond which results in light

reflection in the porch (Figure 7). Since most of these porches included mirror work they would duplicate light presence in the porch. But in the winter, the light is shed differently and as a result there is a great representation of light at noon (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Mirrored ceiling, Golestan Palace



Figure 9: Colorful Mirrored ceiling

Conclusion

Builders and architects would always use their spiritual and intellectual mind to design and maybe that is the reason behind beauty dimension as well as spiritual dimension of the Iranian Islamic architectures. In fact, they did not consider the appearance of the building but the mental and spiritual dimension of it. Beauty can be depicted on the appearance which usually does not last long but when the spiritual beauties as well as water are paid attention to, there can be a hope for a great architecture which beautifies both appearance as well as the spirit of the buildings.

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