



## **A Narration of Iranian Architect: A Survey on the Historical Evolution from Mason to Architect**

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## ABSTRACT:

Looking at the existing historic buildings as well as resources about Iranian architecture, it can be said that majority of the structures in Iran were built out of earthen materials. On the other hand, apart from the officials and governors, masons have as well contributed remarkably to the Iranian architecture. Similarly, masons and traditional restorers have played an important role in conserving earthen architecture over the past few decades. However, despite their important role in maintaining the historical Iranian architecture, masons have continuously been ignored in conservation strategies and policy-making, while their skills and capabilities are being overlooked in the conservation of the past architectural heritage. This paper aims to bring into attention the importance of the knowledge offered by traditional masons/builders and stress the significance of their skills for a better understanding of the past Iranian architecture. The paper highlights the factors that resulted in ignoring masons' knowledge in today's Iranian architecture. Discussing the roots of this situation, this paper employs qualitative and historical approach as the methodology of study. It is concluded that the introduction of modern architecture through academic architectural education in Iranian universities, along with the transitional conditions of the society had a negative impact on mason practice in architecture and conservation.

## 1- INTRODUCTION

Study on the history of Iranian architecture shows that the Iranian architecture has been always about continuation and evolution of space, form, materials and function. The continuity and evolution in addition to the impact of the environment, governors' influence, and society reflect the existing ability in the field of building technologies and traditional knowledge. These technologies and knowledge more than anything depended on the practice of builders, masons and architectural intervener in the repairing of Architecture. As well, documents and inscriptions also demonstrate that the history of conservation to be in line with the architecture of buildings, and that repair and restoration of monuments has been part of mason's practice in the past<sup>1</sup>.

Examining the history of architecture and the views of scholars<sup>2</sup>, it seems that conservation education, like many other professions, was based on verbal knowledge and direct relationship of teacher and student (or rather, master and apprentice). In fact, the old restorers of monuments were expert masons (craftsman) who have both knowledge and experience of the traditional system of education. Even to this day a lot of monuments repair have been done by the traditional masons and also at now done by the few survivors of the generation<sup>3</sup>. Historical texts and itineraries/travel writing show that before the Qajar period all architectural and repair work were conducted by masons and builders. They gradually and for different reasons, besides the actual loss of the traditional system of architectural education, were considered less in the recent practice of conservation in Iran (Kiani 1386, 104).

Therefore, it is necessary that the masons' professional practice is studied in the two periods (i.e. before and after the arrival of modern architectural education) with a diagnostic approach. This article studies the changes in the practice of traditional masons in Iran within three time periods: 1) Before 1192 SH or 1813 AD, 2) between 1192 -1357

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<sup>1</sup> . For example: repair of Hira temple by Darius in Behistun inscription (Sharp 1967, 39) and repairs of Isfahan grand mosque in Seljuq Empire (Honarfar 1334, 67-168).

<sup>2</sup> . For example look at (Nadimi, 1370; Hojjat 1391; Olya 1381; Mofid 1385).


<sup>3</sup> . For example repair and restoration for Mir-Emad mosque, Ardestan mosque, Natanz mosque by Gholamreza Farzaneh (SajjadiNaeeni 1385, 21) and restoration in Abbasid mosque and Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque by hoseinMarefi (Varjavand 1356, 1387).

SH or 1813 - 1978, and 3) after 1357 SH or 1978. The three periods will be discussed with focus on the introduction of modernism in architecture and modern architecture. Study of society conditions and masons response for them also have been considered.

## 2- METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

Besides describing the buildings, some historic documents and texts discuss about masons and their conditions. Therefore, to acquire proper recognition of traditional masons' practice (including their roles, activities and their position in past to recent times), the literature on traditional master-apprentice system of practice was reviewed. In the next stage, referred to as oral sources, interviews with masons and the last generation of traditional masons were conducted or their work was observed through field studies. This stage was considered as supplemental source for research. The studies showed three specific activities (build, design and supervision), that now in the ICEO (Iran Construction Engineering Organization) are known as the three major aspects of the profession of architects. As a result, their common features were consistent with historical documents.

For better understanding in results, the three specific activity shown in the four levels, no activity (0 unit), low activity (1 unit), moderate activity (2 unit) and high activity (3 unit) that presented in the charts (Figures 1 to 6).



3 Unit  
2 Unit  
1 Unit  
0 Unit

## 3- BACKGROUND

As for the study on the changing activities of masons over the time, the different approaches of researchers on Iranian masons is investigated in this part. These approaches can be classified in several major groups. However, all cannot be explained here<sup>4</sup> and the main approaches will be reviewed as follows.

### 3-1- Documenting Masons Names

This approach is one of the most common approaches toward studying masons. Although the names of all masons in this approach are not documented, some of them were recorded in building inscription on monuments, literature, texts or historical documents. Some of them were also recorded by later researchers according to the abovementioned sources (i.e. inscription on monuments, texts and historical documents) and at least the name of the masons come up in a variety of sources<sup>5</sup>.

### 3-2- Description of Building Practice or Guild Conditions

Description of mason construction practice and their guild conditions, the social history and the architectural history approaches are another category of studies on the masons' profession. This could be seen in the past context, with the goal of documenting and recording of the past events. Historical texts<sup>6</sup>, prose and poetry in Persian<sup>7</sup> and itinerary<sup>8</sup> are important parts of these resources.

<sup>4</sup> . The different approaches discussed in the first author's thesis.

<sup>5</sup> . For example look at (Bozorgnia 1383; Setoodeh 1385) in Persian and (Wilber 1954, 37-41, O'Kane 1982, 37-41, 371-382, Blair 1986, Golombek, Wilber, and Allen 1988, 65-69, 458-462) in other languages.

<sup>6</sup> . For example look at: Karaji and experiences in Qanat (Karaji 1373), Attention to masons and their titles (Shamse-Monshi 1390) etc.

<sup>7</sup> . Description architect crafts (Afshar 1378), describes the architectural activity in Shahnameh (Soltanzadeh 1377, 132-138), describe the architect and architecture in The Seven Beauties (Tabasi 1379, 92-93).

<sup>8</sup> . For example look at (Smith 1953; Holster 1975, 39-40)

### 3-3- Documenting Experiences and the Theoretical–Technical Knowledge:

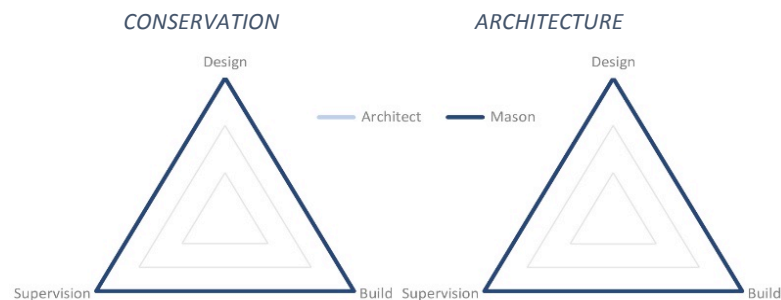
Recording the masons' experiences as the conservation knowledge are studies that constitute this category of research. The researchers' studies about the masons on this issue can be divided into four general categories. The first group would be those who "document masons' work", describing their daily professional endeavors<sup>9</sup>. The second group would make a full "introduction of craftsmen and masons," (through their works), which most often can be seen in magazine articles in the field of culture and cultural heritage. The third group focus on the "technical knowledge" of traditional architects/masons, looking for lessons from experiences and seeking technical know-how<sup>10</sup>. The fourth group of research revolves around "theoretical knowledge" of the architects/masons, and include relatively fewer literature.

## 4- THE EVOLUTION OF IRANIAN ARCHITECTS OVER THE TIME

Iranian architects' professional activities in building and repair have been in a historical evolution over the course of centuries, with dramatic changes in the past 100 years. This subject could be reviewed at an evolution from Mason to architect. It seems that a variety of reasons have contributed to this transition, the review of which is the main goal of this research. In this regard, the paper studies the changes in three main historical periods, as follows.

### 4-1- First Period (Before 1192 HS / 1813 AD):

According to the texts and inscriptions on monuments<sup>11</sup> it can be concluded that in the period preceding Abbas Mirza<sup>12</sup> in the field of architecture the architecture profession and its education were all organized by the master-apprentice system. Reaching the rank of craftsman (master) in architecture involved spending many years of hands-on experience, leading to the title of craftsman (Master) being awarded to the apprentice. Evidence suggests that during the Abbasid caliphate, and after that, all guilds were organized in a system of Chivalry organizations<sup>13</sup> and craftsman played an important role in professional training (Nadimi 1385, 19-20). Masons activities in this period are mainly design, build and supervision. They are the sole practitioners of construction, architecture and conservation practice in this period (Fig 1).



<sup>9</sup> . Some of the researchers such as Sharbaf, Pirnia, Pournaderi fall into this group.

<sup>10</sup> . Some of the sources by Memarian, Bozorgmehri, Zomorshidi and Tehrani focus on this subject.

<sup>11</sup> . For more information look at (Laleh 1375, 40-41).

<sup>12</sup> . Abbas Mirza (1789–1833 AD) was a Qajar crown prince of Persia. He is furthermore noted as an early modernizer of Persia's armed forces and institutions.

<sup>13</sup> . It was also a name of ethical urban organizations or "guilds" in medieval Muslim realms that emphasized honesty, peacefulness, gentleness, generosity, avoidance of complaint and hospitality in life. For more information look at (Hasan & Hill 1992, 357).

#### 4-2- The Second Period (1192 - 1357 HS / 1813 - 1978 AD):

The second period corresponds to the increase in the relationship between Iran and the West. In this period, due to extensive socio-political changes in Iran, caused by cultural changes in society, changes in the activities of most of the masons (traditional architects) can be seen. Because of the importance of this period of time is discussed in four sub-categories.

##### 4-2-1- Relations with the West (Abbas Mirza):

The transformation of Iranian architecture, and subsequently changes in the scope of masons' activities came along with the increased relationship between Iran and Europe. At first, this relationship enhancement that began at Abbas Mirza's period was military-based, but gradually spread into other disciplines as well<sup>14</sup>. Since the Western influence was not deep at the time, and was limited mainly to the higher social ranks and the government itself, not much of change can be spotted in the role of masons/traditional architects, and they continue to effectively perform as the main authorities in the conservation profession (Fig 2).

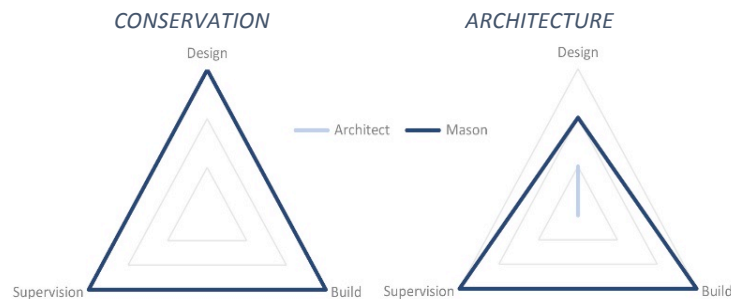


Figure 2: Masons and Architects activity in second Period (Abbas Mirza)

##### 4-2-2- Modernity in Iranian Architecture:

Modernity in architecture is the impact of Europe classical architecture that began after Fath-Ali-Shah as a result of increasing the relationship between Iran and Europe<sup>15</sup>. Increasing communications with Europe caused some elements of traditional architecture being replaced with new forms<sup>16</sup>. In this period the Dar ul-Funun (modern institution of higher learning in Iran) by AmirKabir, both in terms "design and build "as well as " teaching courses" came to existence, causing the basis of change in the culture and in the architecture as well<sup>17</sup>.

Furthermore, when Mehdi-Khane-Shaghaghi returned to Iran as the first architect that was academically educated abroad, the first opposition between mason with new architecture and architect was emerged. This encounter eventually led to challenges that particularly Mehdi Khan Shaghaghi talked about<sup>18</sup>. Because of his interest in traditional architecture and also friendship with a traditional mason (namely Hassan Qomi<sup>19</sup>), gradually he could continue his architectural work and as he points out<sup>20</sup> he worked as designer or supervisor beside the masons (Jahanbagloo 1380, 78; BaniMasoud 1390, 180).

<sup>14</sup> . For more information look at (BaniMasoud 1390, 11; Jahanbaglou 1380, 76).

<sup>15</sup> . Influence of the new tastes in Iranian architecture done by Russia and the Caucasus, and enter to Iran with Bushehr on the Persian Gulf (Jahanbagloo 1380, 75).

<sup>16</sup> . For more information look at (Jhanbaglou 1380, 79)

<sup>17</sup> . For more information look at (Jhanbaglou 1380, 76-77; Habibi&Ahari 1389, 19-26)

<sup>18</sup> . For more information look at (Jhanbaglou 1380, 77)

<sup>19</sup> . Hasan Ghomi (13 Century) one of the Iranian mason's that built Sepahsalar mosque in Qajar period.

<sup>20</sup> . To build the mosque Sepahsalar (1291), that was entrusted to him, he used Hassan Qomi experiences. In his memoirs, says: "I like the design engineer has supervision the building" (Jhanbaglou 1380, 78; Bani-Masoud 1390, 180).

As Homaei (1375, 343) mentions, new professional structure (modern architecture) failed to win the confidence of the public at first, and in most cases people showed more confidence in the traditional organization and its traditional architects. While in this period it is still the responsibility of masons to build and/or repair the traditional architecture, the academically educated architects gradually spread out their area of work. The design and supervision was gradually entrusted to the architects, but the masons' position as the main people in charge of building and repair was, to a large extent, maintained (Fig 3).

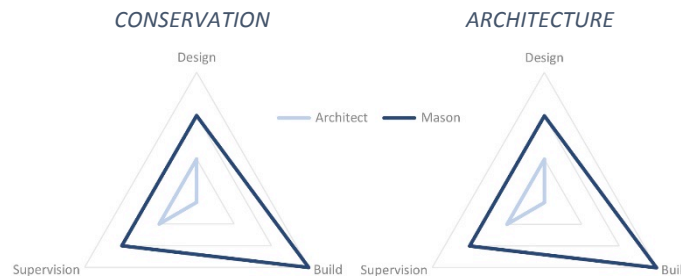


Figure 3: Masons and Architects activity in second Period (Modernity)

#### 4-2-3- Attention to the Importance of Archeology and Antiques

The establishment of "the Bureau of Antiques" is seen as a beginning to more attention to artefacts<sup>21</sup>. From the year 1300HS (1922 AD), attention to and action towards conservation and repairing cultural objects and monuments gradually began (Mostafavi 1334, 13). One of the first endeavors in this field was the establishment of the National Monuments Council in 1301 HS (1923 AD) proposed by Zeka-ol-Molke Foroughi. Ferdowsi's tomb is one of the first of such works that is still available (Hodjat 1380, 234-237; Habibi&Ahari 1389, 37). A study of the activities of the National Monuments Council at this time illustrates some of the architects who had studied abroad and worked as implementing major projects were in fact involved in the design and construction of architectural projects. After Ferdowsi's tomb building plan was not approved by the National Monuments Council and problems arose, a traditional mason (namely Lorzadeh<sup>22</sup>) was invited to finish the work (Raeeszade&Mofid 1383, 18). Another example would be the repair work for the porch of the Abbasid mosque in Isfahan, conducted by a traditional mason (namely Moarefi<sup>23</sup>) after André Godard seemed unable to perform the job (Negahban 1385, 31). These examples demonstrate that in the beginning the trust and preference was given to the new architects while masons' commissions to architectural jobs have been gradually reduced. During this period - which started with the beginning of the first Pahlavi and with the advent of modern architecture reached a peak (after 1320 HS / 1941 AD) - architects were divided into two main groups. Their status was replaced by the new generation of academic architects (Kiani 1386, 230; Jahanbagloo 1380, 86; Bani-Masoud 1390, 203). The three main groups of architects take on architectural jobs in this period: masons (traditional architects), Iranian architect who were educated in the West, and foreign architects<sup>24</sup>.

Masons (Traditional architects) were mostly active in the construction of public structures, mosques, and religious sites (Kiani 1386, 211-231). Iranian architects educated in foreign countries as well as foreign architects were given a large portion of the architecture in Iran. The establishment of cultural development and the protection and conservation of

<sup>21</sup> . For more information look at (Mostafavi 1334, 23-24; Negahban 1385, 58 & 62).

<sup>22</sup> . HosseinLorzadeh (1907- 2005 AD) one of the Iranian traditional architect (mason) in Qajar period.

<sup>23</sup> . HosseinMaarefi (1894-1976 AD) one of the Iranian traditional architect (mason) in Isfahan.

<sup>24</sup> . For more information look at chapter eight in (Kiani1383).

antiquities and cultural heritage was made more specialized. This approach also led to a new spin to the masons' activities that is illustrated in fig 4.

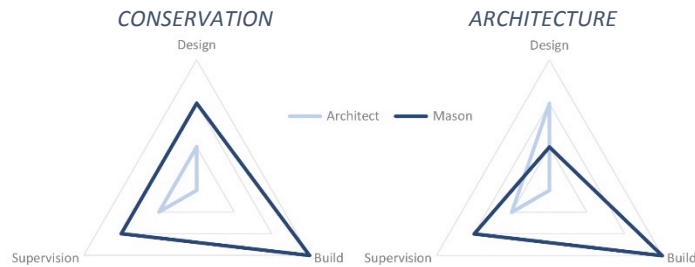


Figure 4: Masons and Architects activity in second Period (Archeology)

#### 4-2-4- Modern Architecture

The remarkable change in education style in architecture came along with the establishment of Tehran University, Faculty of Fine Arts (1319 HS / 1940 AD), which in turn led to the replacement of education system of traditional architecture with academic education (Eslami & Naghdbishi 1391, 3-4). As pointed out by Habibi & Ahari (1389, 27-33), this new approach also witnessed many changes during this period, which seemed to be a result of diversity in architects' education system. New approaches were used in this course of time, including: Qajar style architecture with indigenous as well as western architectural elements, national architecture, and architecture influenced by the international style and classic style of Europe-based architecture. The first two groups took advantage of experienced masons, while the other two groups, mason's role as builder or architect was no more applicable. With the arrival of new education system in architecture, masons were not involved in the design process, and the design was done and approved by formal architects. In this period the use of traditional architect in Archaeology departments across the country was highlighted (fig 5).

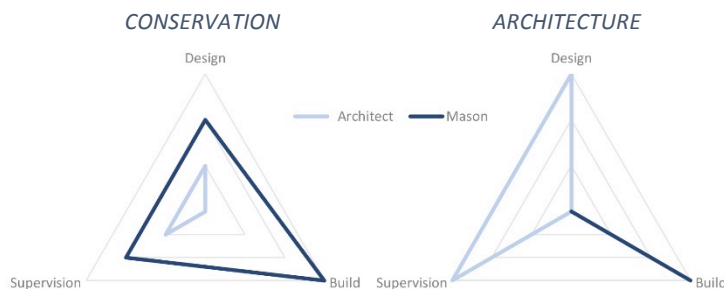


Figure 5: Masons and Architects activity in second Period (Modern)

#### 4-3- Third Period (After 1357 HS):

In the years following the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the dramatic changes in the government, Iranian architects sought for a vernacular architecture as well as Iranian architecture. Architectural approaches in this era can be identified in three groups: Culturalism, modernism and Postmodernism<sup>25</sup>. In each of these approaches the role of masons may be different and in some of them there might be none. Although one can see interest in returning to the vernacular architecture, but this interest in the past was not necessarily associated with a return to the masons (traditional architects), but again the academic architects sought to learn lessons of the past knowledge mainly through academia. Publications, interviews, awards, conferences and lectures that subject about

<sup>25</sup> . For more information look at (Habibi&Ahari 1389, 49-67).



mason (traditional architect), show the same trend. In terms of building practice, the masons (traditional architects) did not return to their previous status (fig 6), but as a source of the knowledge of past architecture, they are, to a certain extent, are regarded valuable.

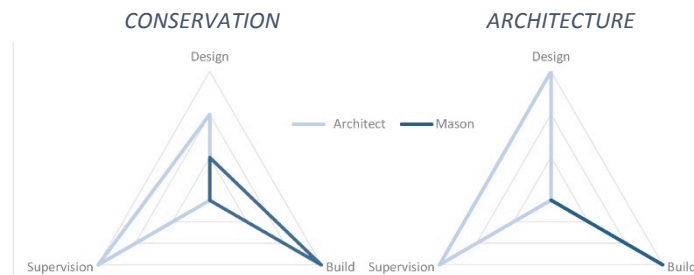


Figure 6: Masons and Architects activity in Third Period (After 1357 HS)

## 5- CONCLUSION:

In summing up the historical approach to the Iranian architect and their activities over the time, it could be argued that the traditional pre-modern masons represented all of the architectural and repair activities. With the arrival of cultural developments, "Craftsman" (Memar-bashi) was assigned by the governor, and was given full authority in architectural activities. Design, build and supervision were parts of his tasks. "Architect" appeared later in time, although less dependence on the government, and was doing all the craftsman's tasks. At this time, "Mason" was merely seen as the builder of architect's design. This historical evolution was changed by the arrival of academic Architects who were educated at the universities abroad. Traditional architects (Craftsman or mason) only were regarded as "builders", except in the conservation and restoration of the traditional structures, where their experience and knowledge were deemed useful.

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## Biography

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