



# The Impact of Evolution Period on the Natural Landscape of Tehran \*

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**Abstract** | Green accessible public spaces that could induce social and cultural interactions has long existed in the form of the holy shrine of Imamzadehs, pilgrimage-promenade places in Iran. The two elements of water and plants that are considered sacred and respectable in Iranian beliefs were sanctified due to adjacency to the holy shrines of the Imamzadehs. However, the green public space during the transition period from tradition to modernity in Pahlavi era, was designed in form of new urban parks similar to that of western countries. In spite of providing vaster green space, their estrangement with Iranian thoughts and beliefs led to their detachment from people. This paper aims at reviewing and comparing various features of green public space in traditional and modern periods, in order to scrutinize and analyze the reasons for detachment of the contemporary green spaces despite their increased per capita in urban spaces.

**Keywords** | public green space, Imamzadeh, urban park, evolution period.

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**Introduction** | For many years, the green public spaces in Iran were closely related to people's daily life at local micro scales. These small spaces were comprised of a tree and water stream in different neighborhoods at disperse locations in the city, which induced social and cultural interactions. Nevertheless, creating green public spaces at a larger scale and increasing the green urban space per capita during the evolution period did not increase the people's affiliation with nature. These spaces differed from daily life of people and were seen only as a promenade and a recreational space. They did not offer the past identifying functions and led to defacement of people from modern green spaces. During the past epochs of time, the nature and natural elements were highly respected and sanctified. Various functions such as pilgrimages, social and cultural interactions took place within small green spaces in every neighborhood that attracted people to nature, which is a fundamental requisite in human life. As religious approaches recommend, the spiritual and sacristy aspect of nature should be restored in human beliefs; because, the human belief that is shaped from the beliefs of the past generations, can affect the human interaction with natural environment. If valuing and honoring nature roots in people's thoughts and beliefs, presence of nature in daily lives will be assured culturally and mentally.

### Hypothesis

Green public spaces with trees, water resources and sacred monuments have long been a place of promenade and pilgrimage for Iranians. Considering the changes in Pahlavi period, which was a transition from tradition to modernity, urban parks were proposed as public green spaces, with the presence of trees and plants on a large scale but separate from the activities of daily life, which led to a decrease in affiliation of people with green space.

#### Research Methodology

This study was conducted through descriptive-analytical method in which the information and data were collected using library resources, documents and maps. Thereafter, the different criteria in making a distinction between modern and traditional green spaces in Tehran was made based on the space function, architectural form and shape, relation with urban texture and the role and character of trees.

#### Green space during traditional era

Paying respect and attention to nature and doing pilgrimage alongside enjoying nature, or even visiting a tree as a sacred natural element has a long history in Iranian culture. "A part of the culture of sanctifying the plants in general, or a tree in particular, are observed in naturalistic religions of ancient Iran and the world. The concept of the Holy Tree as the first living being and the symbol of life and immortality is perceived in most ancient cultures" (Mansouri & Javadi, in print). Many of the holy places that are located near existing or dried water resources, springs and trees are reminders of ancient

beliefs that root in naturalism and believing in the gods of Mehr and Anahita (Javadi, 2007). According to Islam, nature and trees are respectable elements that are introduced as the signs of the one and only God. The holy shrines of Imamzadehs were always located alongside natural elements regarding their sanctity. Moreover, the existence of natural elements such as water and trees turned these places into recreational promenades. Therefore, the green public spaces during continues epochs of time in Iran were designed in form of pilgrimage spaces where social and cultural interactions were prompted.

#### Imamzadeh Shah Abdul Azim Hasani

The shrine of Shah Abdul Azim is located in Rey city, south of Tehran. The construction of this shrine dates back to Ilkhanate, Safavid, and Qajar periods. As Dieulafoy has noted, in Qajar era, there were many adobe walled gardens in the north of Rey city, which were appropriate for the rest of female pilgrims due to being adjacent to the shrine. The golden dome of this shrine shined magnificently from a distance, and the ancient plane and elm trees had reached the sky (Diolafo & Denver, 1992). One of these gardens was actually a cemetery, known as the parrot garden, located on the western side of the shrine of Shah Abdul Azim, neighboring the shrine's courtyard from one side and the bazaar from the other side. Many celebrities are buried in this garden that was once known as a recreational space for people who came for pilgrimage (Pic. 1).

#### Imamzadeh Saleh

The shrine of Imamzadeh Saleh located in Tajrish neighborhood in the northern part of Tehran. There existed an 800-year-old famous plane tree in this place. According to Iranian beliefs, the existence of a tree and natural elements sanctified the place and made it a suitable candidate for a pilgrimage space; a multifunctional space offering recreation, pilgrimage and social interactions simultaneously. In Dieulafoy's travelogue, the old plane tree and people activities are described as follows. "There is a strange plane tree in the mosque (Imamzadeh Saleh's tomb) of Tajrish, which is not common in the world. The tree's diameter cannot be exactly estimated and its perimeter is almost fifteen meters. Each of its branches are as wide as a tree's truck spanning over the mosque and reaching the sky. This tree shelters many people under its shadow. The Muslims say their prayers under the tree. The teacher gathers the schoolboys and teaches the children there. The coffee man has put his samovar, cups and dishes over there. The water seller has placed his watery jars in the corners of its trunk" (Ibid.); (Pic. 2).

#### Major developments in Pahlavi era

The beginning of Pahlavi regime was accompanied by the development of modernism and the dominance of Western



Pic 1. Shah Abdul Azim shrine and the surrounding gardens.  
Source: [www.seratnews.ir](http://www.seratnews.ir)

culture over Iranian urban community. In this period, urban politics in Iran had these conditions: dependent on oil revenues in terms of income, dependent on central government in terms of authority and management, and imitators of European methods in terms of beliefs (Kamrava, 2012). In practice, the goal and the realm of these policies encompassed the cities and urban social classes. Thus, on the one hand, there are civilian measures and activities to modernize the cities, such as the destruction of old neighborhoods, the construction of new streets and national gardens, and on the other hand, the state bureaucracy is expanded as a means to dominate and rule the central government and the daily activities of people (Katouzian, 2007).

Pahlavi's urban policy is criticized due to reduced public participation. "These policies declined public participation in urban politics, and all municipality affairs were dependent on the government that actually induced centralization. The government policy for centralization in this period is also evident in other periods. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that the urban space was evolved through extensive political interventions, independent of social transformations and movements" (Shabani & Kamyab, 2012). Therefore, centralized urban parks in western styles were common green urban spaces in

Pahlavi period; while traditional Iranian cities, were mostly formed of decentralized green spaces created in micro-scale by public participation.

The urban planning and design patterns are the continuation and repetition of simple physical patterns confined to streets and visual indicators such as the square, the national garden, and the significant government buildings. These indicators were emulations of Europe's Baroque urbanism in Europe on the scale of a third world country occupied by the Allied forces and administrated by oil companies.

Urban renovation during Pahlavi period was aimed at confronting the undeveloped city which was not significantly urbanized due to iniquitous governors of the in Qajar era. These renovations imitated Western principles and practices, regardless of Iranian traditional urbanism values. Neglecting Iranian principles, culture, and history resulted in a mental detachment of people from the new spaces and isolation from so-called modern spaces.

"Therefore, the determination of the first Pahlavi government in emulating the West and the absence of the real community representatives in decision-making led development of modernity and rebirth and emergences of a new crisis as a result of solving an existing crisis during Pahlavi period" (Ibid.). The



Pic. 2. An old plane tree near Imamzadeh Saleh.  
Source: www.goftogoonews.com

intellectual influences of the Constitutional Movement and the presence of the new class of Western graduates alongside the governmental class, who believed in transformation of the political society from traditional to modern, is in fact the perspectives of the cultural policies in this period. Intellectuals of this period believed that avoiding the traditions and religious culture ruling the Iranian community is the key to achieve Western civilization (Alam, Dashti & Mirzai, 2014).

#### Green space in Tehran during the first Pahlavi period

Contemporary urban parks were resultants of social life and gardening evolutions started along architecture and urbanism evolutions during Qajar era; however, manifested in urban areas after fifty years of delay (Soltani, 2007). National Garden, located in Mashgh Square, and City Park, located in Sangelaj neighborhood, are among the first green public spaces. The modern and traditional green spaces will be introduced and compared in the following.

#### National Garden

National garden, Located in Mashgh square, is the first public garden built in Tehran during Pahlavi period (Pics. 3 & 4). The Mashgh Military Foundation, which was the site for

military practices, was established at Fath Ali Shah's time, and then restored in the course of Nasir al-Din Shah. In 1278 AH, this field was shaped into a square-shaped square with surrounding arched brick walls. In the following years, a building known as Qazaqkhaneh was built in Russian-style in the north of the square. This square was renovated by Mirza Mohammad Khan Sepahsalar.

According to Jackson, this square was rarely used at the end of Qajar era, and it was turned into a recreational space during Pahlavi period. National Garden is actually the first public park in Tehran, whose construction began in March 1306 AH. On March 9, 1306, the daily newspaper announced the transformation of the square into a national public garden. On April 4, 1928, the construction beginning of this square was also declared in this newspaper, and in September 1307 this public park was opened to public (Habib, Etesam and Qodoosifar, 2013).

#### City Park

City Park is one of the contemporary parks, located in Sangelaj district of Tehran, and built in 1339 AH (Pic. 5). The park covers an area of 25 hectares and has eight entrances. The designer of this park, Dr. Pullen, was the mayor's adviser of that time. "The City Park was designed to create a natural ambience and provide a place for strolling and walking in natural environment and could not meet the cultural needs of the people of that time" (Soltani, 2007). Because, the function of the green space was detached from the daily life of people in terms of function. This green public space was planned for creating a vast area covered with trees and natural elements, detached from other urban activities and, merely acting as a recreational place. Therefore, despite raising the per capita level of green space, the spaces of the parks were degraded in quality for not being with daily lives of people.

#### Analyzing the criteria of traditional and modern green space Functions and spatial planning

The shrines of Imamzadehs, with respect to their sanctity, were always located near natural elements of water and tree that were considered respectable and sacred in Iranian beliefs. People who came to visit Imamzadeh Saleh or Shah Abdul Azim s, relaxed under the shade of the trees in courtyards, by the trees and water. The children played under the trees. sometimes religious sessions were held under the shades of trees where people used to say their prayers. In fact, the green urban space would interconnect the green meaningful micro-scaled space with daily life of people. Various religious, social and cultural functions were integrated with leisure and interaction with nature in daily life of people.

However, the policy of Pahlavi regime in urban planning, was aimed at transforming the function of urban spaces. Mashgh Square, which was previously a military place, was turned into a public park due the significance of green public space at that time. "Before completing the construction of National

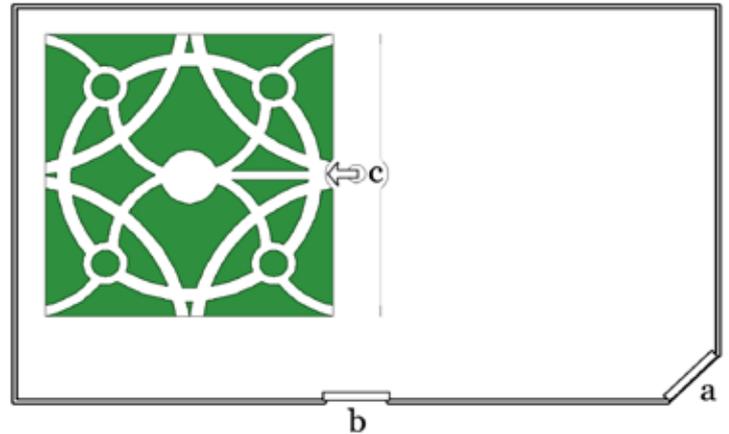
Garden, the field was turned into a land where young people played the Alak-Dolak game, or played with bicycles and motorbikes. They also sent balloons from this place to be observed by public, and they flew an airplane from the square for the first time" (Shah Riban from Habib, 2013). In fact, before turning this square into a green public urban area, its new functions were defined by citizens and its identity was formed according to its functions. Thereafter, the municipality began to design a part of it as an urban park.

City Park was also located in Sangelaj neighborhood where brick and adobe houses survived until World War II. This neighborhood was one of the major political centers in Tehran, which went into ruins after a course of time. In 1939, on the orders of Reza Khan, the houses of the neighborhood were ruined by the municipality to be replaced by stock exchange building, whose construction postponed due to the outbreak of the World War II. Prior to 1949, half of it was administered by the municipality of Tehran. In 1953, the city park design and construction was under supervision on the order of the mayor of the time. The park was opened in 1960 and it was called the city park for being the only recreational space in Tehran (Zafarianpour & Qaraeeni, 2015).

#### Architectural form and shape

Gardens and courtyards around Imamzadeh Shah Abdul Azim, are shaped in rectangular geometry prevalent in Persian garden. The courtyard in Persian architecture is created in the form of a perfect geometric shape where the two elements of tree and water exist (Mansoori and Javadi, in print). These elements were considered respectable in Iranian beliefs since the ancient time and they were used in the courtyards of Imamzadehs. However, these elements in urban parks of the evolution period were used differently in combination with western styles that were strange to the thousand-year-old mentality of people.

Despite the rectangular geometry of Mashgh Square and its potential to be designed according to rectangular geometry of Persian garden, only a part of the land is symmetrically designed in rectangular shape which admits the influence of European style on Iranian architecture. In addition, curved European-style lines are used in designing the greenery in National Garden, with no use of orthogonal Iranian geometry. "Also, a statue of Reza Khan was installed in the park, similar to the western-style gardens" (Habib, Etesam & Qodoosifar, 2013). Avoiding the use of water in National Garden is also contrary to the principles of Persian gardening and the creation of traditional green spaces in Imamzadehs. The presence of kiosk at the central point of National Garden also reminds Baroque gardening period. In Persian gardens, a pavilion is constructed in the highest place of the garden, while the kiosk constructed in the national garden reminds the gazebos of the English, Baroque and Renaissance gardens. "National garden is closely associated with the methods of western gardening, including the parks of the Enlightenment and the



Pic. 3. Tehran National Garden Plan. a) The old entrance gated of Mashgh Square- b) The new entrance of Mashgh Square- c) National Garden entrance. Source: Habib, Etesam and Qodoosifar, 2013.

Baroque period" (Ibid).

City Park is designed through combining the principles used in Persian and European gardening. The park structure is formed of straight and curved lines; and the extended waterfront along the main axis of the garden with plane and pine trees by its sides reminds the Persian gardens. The cross shaped geometry of Persian gardens is implemented using the water element in the center and creating a central square; using curved lines in the garden plan. Creating an artificial lake in the part of the park represents the influence of the western gardens. Also, the use of elements such as the statue of Reza Khan on the main road, metal fences and the existence of a bridge on the lake are the signs of western influence that was made prevalent since the late Qajar period.

#### Connotation with urban texture and complementary functions

The green spaces adjacent to Imamzadehs were related to daily activities of people. Imamzadeh Saleh in Tajrish and King Abdul Azim Shrines were both adjacent to the market and associated with daily activities of pilgrims who came to recreate and pay a visit. Nevertheless, the urban parks of modern period were considered as separate places detached from other urban functions, used only for recreation. According to their functional aims, the modernism attitude considered each space in relation to its function and disjointed it from other functions. Considering the influence of modernism on urbanism during Pahlavi period in Iran, green space was considered as part of a recreational functions.

The urban texture of Tehran and other cities of Iran in this period were in accordance with traditional Iranian patterns. Since gardens and green courtyards with large trees existed all over the city, the need to create a green public space, as it was

in Europe, did not seem essential (Soltani, 2007). However, the detachment of functions from the modern green spaces that only focused on leisure activities and neglected the traditional functions were obvious in the early green spaces including National Garden and City Park. These spaces were not shaped according to the needs of urban community, and were the resultants of imitations from Europe.

#### The role and character of the plant

One of the trees that are commonly planted in courtyards of the shrines is the plane tree; especially the old ones. In terms of mythology, the sacredness of an old plane tree is not due to its magnitude, greatness, and longevity; it is the rebirth of this tree that gives it a magical and praiseworthy condition (Bahar, 2005). There existed an old Plane tree in the shrine of Imamzadeh Saleh, under which various activities took place. The single tree had a special character and grandeur. The pilgrims who came to visit the tree, knitted a piece of cloth called *Dakhil* to the branches of the tree and believed that this would make their wishes come true. It can be said that the sanctity of trees and knitting cloths roots in the ancient Iranian culture (Mansoori & Javadi, in print).

The proximity of the tree to the shrine and its singularity added to its sanctity. The tree is also sanctified in terms of life-af-

fection and fertility. In general, religious beliefs have greatly influenced the beliefs of the ancient people in sanctifying trees. They have considered a number of plants and trees as heavenly, and have given them the property of invigorating, healing, and poisoning (Mobin & Shafeyi, 2015). The sanctity of water, plants, springs and trees has existed in the ceremonies of Mehr and Anahita and was accompanied by prayers and sacrifices. Some of these traditions and rituals have influenced the Zoroastrian beliefs and then Islamic traditions and have been transformed to the point where they have been combined to Islamic beliefs (Javadi, 2007).

Today, trees and plants are used as merely decorative objects due to the influence of culture and beliefs that have imposed their theoretical view on human societies (Zamani et al., 2009). In modern urban parks, a large number of trees are planted that are separated from daily activities of people. As seen in its early examples in National Gardens and City Park, the trees are centered in a specific area and the people can walk along the specified paths in the park. In fact, the trees in the park do not have individual identities. Therefore, in this new type of green public spaces, the plants have lost their sense of holiness and the people's mentality of the trees is changed toward urban parks.



Pic 4: Aerial Photography of Tehran National Garden.  
Source: Habib, Etesam and Qodoosifar, 2013.

Pic. 5. City Park Plan. Source: Atlas of Tehran parks, 2007.



**Summary and conclusion** | Regarding the evolutions during Pahlavi period and their influence on the formation of green public spaces in form of modern parks, it can be concluded that increasing the per capita of green space without considering the quality and the traditional background of green space patterns in Iran, will not result in favorable outcomes. Parks and green spaces were emulated during Pahlavi period. The table below compares the green space with

traditional pattern in Imamzadehs and the green space with modern pattern in the form of urban parks. The formation of green contemporary public space requires a revision in design pattern and consideration of Iranian prototypes for acquiring a mental and perceptual bond along with physical use of green space, to achieve more social and cultural interactions and connection of daily activities of people with the green public space. (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of green public space in traditional and modern styles.

Source: authors.

Green public space	Functions and spatial planning	Architectural form and shape	Connection with urban texture	The role and character of the plant
The traditional green space	Multi-functional	The combination of three elements of :plant, water, and the sacred building Use of Iranian rectangular geometry according to Iranian beliefs of ancient times	Linked to the context of urban life	Single tree: respectful and valuable
The modern green space	Single-function	:Influence from Western Gardening Use of curved lines in design Using of western elements	Separated from the context of urban life	Numerous trees: ignoring the sanctity of trees

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