

The kutchee, the highway, and the city in Iran



by Neil Hart

In Iran, to date, city planners have followed a crude formula: beginning in the 1930's, they systematically stamped on every city across the country a pattern of perpendicular streets and traffic circles, linking those cities to a growing national highway system like beads on a string.

Though simple, the plan served its purpose, easing movement between Iranian cities, towns, and villages, encouraging the growth of privately-owned bus and truck lines, opening an ancient land to the twentieth century.

But the plan, such as it was, also changed the *image* of the Persian city, introducing wide streets and circles to what had been, by tradition, an organic settlement, and triggering a debate which would have been unthinkable one hundred years ago.

What, people now ask, *is* a Persian city?

The answer, I think, lies not in its outwardly changing form, but in the Persian way of life.

I watched ten store fronts go up in Hamadan one summer, ten identical cubicles, four by six meters. "How dull," I thought, "repetitive units plastered white." Two days after their occupation, the cubicles had been individualized, brightened by the Persian flair for color and contrast, neon lights and eclectic displays.

The new street, on which the cubicles had been built, also sprang to life. Iranians love to walk, and the street, built with buses and trucks in mind, provided them with a place to stroll, a place to see and be seen. At promenade time, it pulsated.

Unquestionably, such new streets and blocks have become vital implements of Persian public and commercial life.

But Persians are also a private people, a fact we have so often ignored. They live *behind* the streets and circles, along back alleys they call *kutchees*. If you have lived in Iran, that word is an evocative one. Leave the straight new street, and walk the winding alleys, and you will find the private world of Persia. It is a quiet, neighborhood-centered world. Here lie the homes, hidden behind the high mud walls that line the *kutchees*: private sanctuaries; the containers of family life.

That world is the heart of the Persian city.

From afar, a Persian city seems a tight, compact settlement, an orderly cluster of dwellings. From the inside, however, it is a labyrinth, a tumble of winding alleys, gardens, pools, courtyards, geraniums, southern sun and a blue sky.

Yet it has a clear order, an order based on the pattern of the Persian village. That order is readily apparent to the familiar eye in any urban area, regardless of magnitude.

A village is composed basically of *kutchees*, serving homes, and a central open space, residential in nature, but possibly containing a mosque, a bath, and a few stores.

A small city contains these same elements, but it is larger, and therefore there are more homes, more *kutchees*, and more open spaces. Often it is halved or quartered by streets and a traffic circle, an attempt to open it to outside commerce.

In larger cities, the same pattern is repeated again, on a still larger scale, many more neighborhoods, and, unlike smaller cities, many more streets, all radiating from a central traffic circle. Since modern businesses and services tend to locate along these newer, more open thoroughfares, they have, for many, become the image of the Persian city. In contrast, the *kutchees* and residential open spaces are often called "infill," as if they had somehow superseded the modern boulevards, like squatters on a vacant lot.

Only when we begin to understand that the streets and traffic circles meet the needs of only one side of Persian life will we be able to answer the question asked repeatedly here. "Why," ask many city dwellers, "aren't you building Persian cities?"

One could go further.

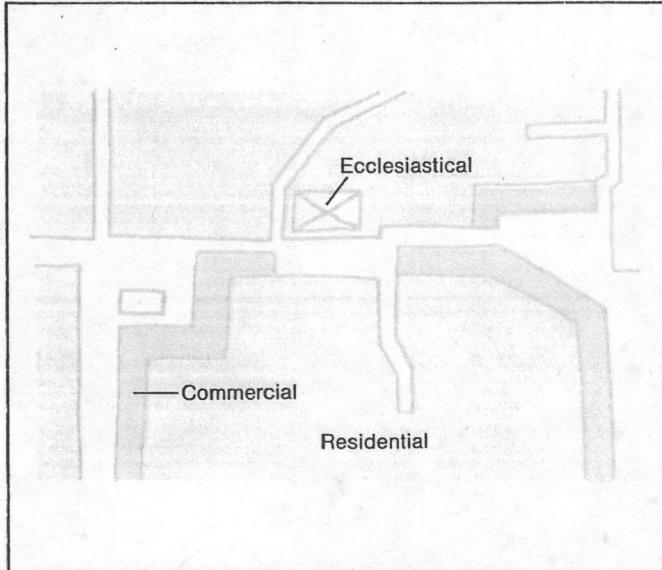
Why, one could ask, do we build streets and traffic circles to begin with?

And why must a Persian city be "planned?"

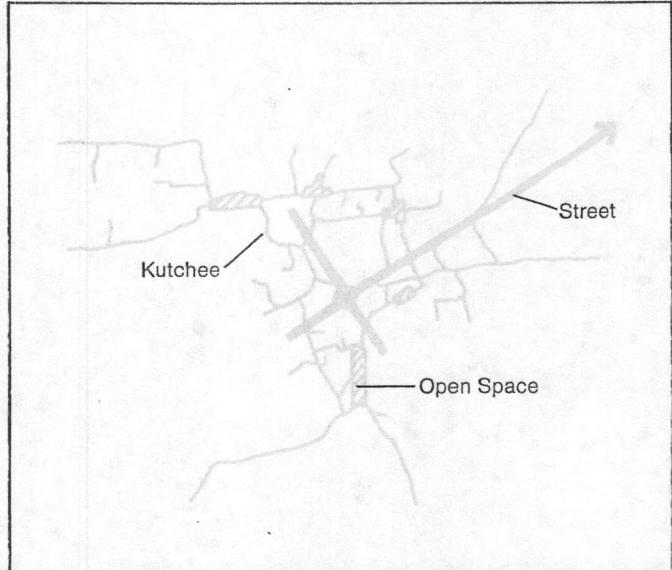
The principal reason for streets and traffic circles is to aid commerce and movement, enabling trucks and buses to move in, out and through cities, while joining them to a national system of communication.

Persian cities must be planned because their inhabitants are now demanding basic amenities unheard of when those cities first evolved centuries ago. Iranians want paving, drain-

Village



Small City



age and sewage facilities, and utilities. They do not want to move their homes to new locations, since they value their neighborhoods, their land and home ownership. And the traditional layout of residential quarters cannot accommodate such improvements without considerable modification.

So city planning and development in Iran has two objectives: first, to upgrade residential areas without disrupting the traditional relationships of urban Persian life; and second, to integrate these traditional areas with the burgeoning new street systems, axes of so much that is modern in Iran.

The first problem is a matter for both government and self-help schemes.

Attempts are being made throughout the country to pave and widen *kutchees*. They are seas of mud in the winter and deserts of sand in the summer, and their width is highly irregular.

In "dead end" *kutchees*, it is relatively easy to get community action projects underway. Neighbors seem willing to contribute time and money to pave them without government support. Moreover, the government has found that when it takes steps to upgrade a *kutchee* or cover a drainage ditch, local residents will often upgrade their own homes in conjunction with the project, replacing mud walls with brick, and wooden doors with metal.

More important "connecting" *kutchees*—from which "dead end," private *kutchees* branch—seem less amenable to self-help. Here it usually takes municipal action to bring neighbors together. One way the municipality does this is by offering to pay half the costs of paving, provided residents contribute the remaining half. So far, such incentives have met with only moderate success.

But there is a new factor in the equation: the automobile. There are more than ever before in Iran, and as more residents buy them, there will be even greater pressure to pave and widen the *kutchees*, linking them finally to the street system from which they are presently isolated.

Somehow this must be done without destroying the residential districts themselves, so vital to the unity of the Persian city.

How?

In the Hamadan Engineering Office, where we are stationed, we have been drawing plans and searching for answers to that question.

One of the first we ever attempted was done for Bahar. In it we tried to link the various streets and *kutchees* of the city together, building a new image based on existing circulation patterns.

The plan has two thrusts: it calls for an effort to upgrade the existing city; and it also outlines a program to extend that city beyond its present limits. It calls for the paving of existing *kutchees*, and urges the opening of new *kutchees* and streets. The plan seeks to link up the various centers of activity in the city: the residential open spaces, and the major streets.

To date that plan has not been implemented. Only one open water channel running through one area of the city has been covered. None of the *kutchees* we recommended for paving have been paved, and the existing graded rights of way for the extension of city streets have not been paved.

The failure of the plan is the result of the hard realities which face any planner in a developing country: lack of funds, and limited authority to carry out long-range schemes.

Bahar is a small city in an agricultural area without a steady source of revenue. We could propose an economic program for the city, but the structure of existing ministries gives planners—whether foreign or Iranian—little control over implementation.

If a budget were available, another question would arise over the allocation of funds, and the setting of priorities. Municipalities, concerned with their own prestige, would rather put their money into "show" projects, a new boulevard, another traffic circle.

So in our planning for two other cities—Nahavand and Asabad—we are trying a different approach.

To overcome some of the problems of implementation we are drawing a five year plan and a twenty year plan for each city. The five year plans will go to the municipal authorities of each city. Each will recognize projects currently underway in the two cities—both "show" projects and "development" projects—and show how they could be integrated into a long-range, twenty year plan.

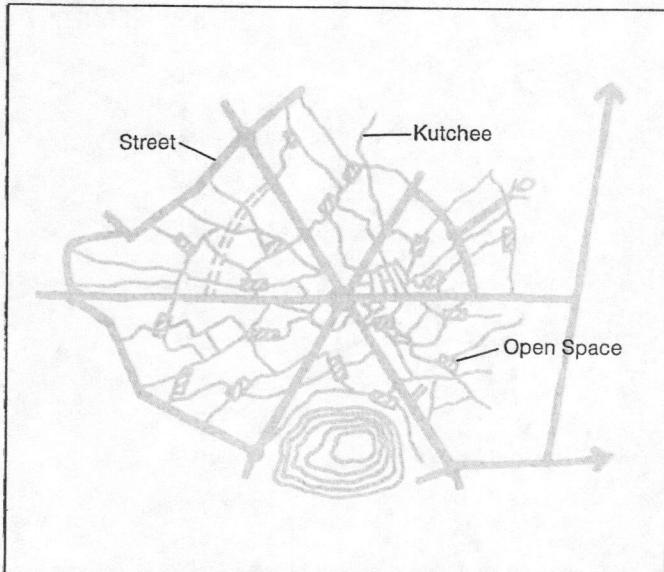
Each five year plan will also outline a number of actions that the mayor and city council of each city could execute in a limited period of time. They will suggest which *kutchees* should be paved, where new streets should be opened, where the city could grow, and where subdivisions could be established.

The twenty year plans will be sent to the Ministry of Interior, containing our ideas for the future extension of each city. These plans will be open to revision, to account for changes initiated and completed under the five year plan which might have a major effect on city growth.

Our hope, of course, is that the two cities will attempt to implement the rather moderate proposals of the five year plan.

All of this, however, is only a beginning. We must continue to grow in understanding, to find ways of modernizing Persian cities without destroying the thread of Persian life that weaves them together. For that life is the city, and it must be preserved.

Large City



Neil Hart is a third-year extendee assigned to the Municipal Engineering Office in Hamadan, a small city in Western Iran. Neil, a graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, holds bachelor's degrees in architecture and building construction.