

## In Response to the Contentious: From Past Roots to Future Bridges

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*Next Office*

Nextoffice's first project was commissioned by a friend. Being considered a religious minority, the client desired a house with a perfect view while being concerned with his privacy being compromised as the price of opening up to the desired vistas.

The phobia of being "gazed at", by the unwanted eyes on the one hand, and the desire for being the unobstructed gazer on the other hand, created a contentious situation for the project. Desiring a view without risking one's privacy; the client wanted an eye whose pupil could not be seen. Wanting to see without being seen is contradictory in nature. Although in the peculiar case of this very first project, the client's being a member of a religious minority was exacerbating the situation, this desire reveals certain sensitivity towards the relationship between outside and inside, which is not uncommon amongst us Iranians. We shall even go so far as to say that it is a token, within the discipline of architecture, of something historically prevailing in Iranian society. Iran has always been a milieu of opposing and even conflicting agendas of different classes, religions, and races. Although the 1979 revolution gave validity to a single formal voice, its imposed and artificial homogeneity instigated certain resistance in the public, particularly in people's dual lifestyles

The dominance of the official voice meant the withdrawal of all the others behind closed walls, from outside to inside. The informal retreated in order to survive. While abiding by the

formal and publicly accepted decorum within the public realm, those individuals that did not sympathize with the official ideology, adopted a different private lifestyle in parallel. As such the accepted public life and the perhaps not-accepted private one goes hand-in-hand in every-day-practice of life for Iranians.

In such context, architecture goes beyond spatial negotiations of inside and outside, or that which is owned privately and that which is a part of the common wealth. In order to address the schizophrenic duality of the public and the private, architecture both in its spatial formation and the configuration of its thresholds is problematized. Interestingly, Iranian architectural traditions have explored the issues of inside and outside and their relationships, extensively. Some architecture types are established entirely extroverted and in relation to the outside and some rely on the potentials of the inside manifesting characteristics of an extremely introverted space. Although, these types came about in response to various climatic and socio-cultural contexts in different regions in Iran nevertheless, they can be used as a reference point in the contemporary state of matters. As an example, in our *Safadasht Dual* project, introvert and extrovert architectures are adjacent in paired villas situated in the center of a garden, enclosed within high walls. In our *Sharifi-ha House* project, an operatable space results in a building of dual configurations, where different relationships and gradients of public and private can be



Figure 1. Sharifi-ha House (2013) | Dynamic Façade

achieved between the outside and the inside through the balconies and building's interior void. In *Guyim House* project, introverted and extroverted half domes, whether facing each other or facing away, create different qualities of space on differing and yet juxtaposed levels of the house. Furthermore, the study of material traditions of Iranian architecture and how it contributes to spatial formations and socio-cultural configurations, has been constructive to our practice. On the one hand, some of our projects are informed by examples of small-scale mud-straw (cob) structures. These structures are flexible and do not have very refined and precise geometries, hence, in their construction, it is possible to rely on local masons and unskilled workforce. At the same time, through repetition and variation, they can function as the base genome of urban or vernacular fabric. On the other hand, other projects of our office built on the tradition of Iranian large-scale iconic structures with precise and complex geometries that are only made possible with the skill of master artisans of the trade. In the *Sadra Civic Centre* project, a multi-functional complex of residential, cultural, and commercial programs is formed around the central courtyards, using mud-straw as the material of choice, creating a platform to host improve artistic interventions and performances of the intended public, that is, the artists and the artisans. This project creates a diverse alternative; a flow of connecting public spaces alongside the deprived social housing of the area, suggesting

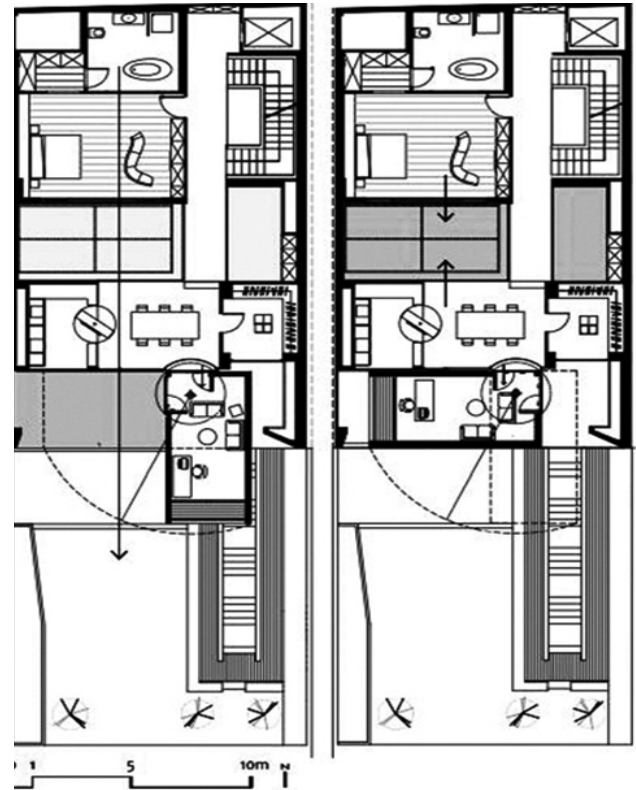


Figure 2. Left: Sharifi-ha House

other ways of life and construction as well. Another example is the *Sadra Artists Forum* project, where various public spaces have been divided with complex geometries. The geometries are initially constructed as brick vaults, yet the vaults are conceived as vanishing mediators of construction, functioning as temporary casts for concrete shells and will be removed – their bricks being recycled- leaving traces of brick texture on the final finish. Similarly, in *Guyim House* project, we have transformed the traditional precise geometry of quadruple vaults - *Chartaqi*, as we call them in the Iranian tradition of architecture - and their load transfer mechanism, in order to create half domes that in their relative positioning against each other, create a contemporary hybrid space. In Iran's current complex situation, we try to carefully observe our historical, social, and political condition to see where we stand and what our architectural precedents hold and how they can be a valuable source in order to arrive at valid solutions for the current context.

This knowledge is either typological, technical, or conceptual. To recognize what is relevant and to marry it with contemporary issues, resources, and technology is a challenge we set for ourselves in our practice. At the same time, engaging in architecture always concerns the future as well as the past. Recent developments in the socio-political and economic-cultural landscape of both Iran and its greater context (Middle East) has been and will be rendering the future less predictable and more

contentious. Under such circumstances, Architecture, as a discipline and with a capital A, has great potential and instrumentality to engage with this complex situation and the conflicting forces within it. As well as building upon the past practices, understanding and pushing against the limits of Architecture's potentials and instrumentality in dealing with exacerbated dualities in the future is a crucial part of Nextoffice's practice. That is, we resist being passive towards the ever becoming complicated context of our practice, trying to proactively author architectural responses that are informed by past practices, yet, looking at the contemporary state of things and their future trends.