

# Defining place : the garden of Bagh-e Shazdeh

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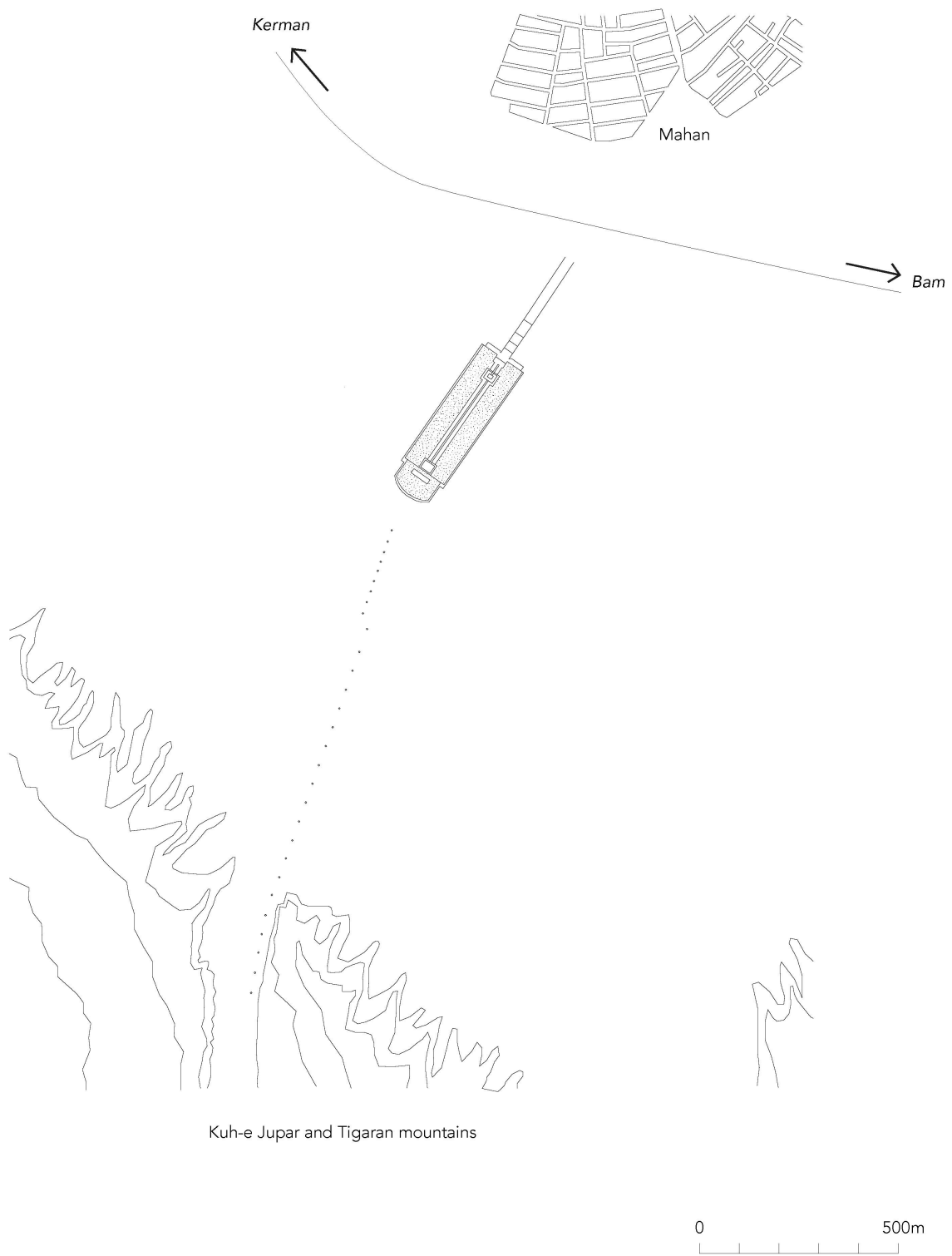
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The Garden of Shazdeh, located in the desert near Mahan, Kerman Province

## DEFINING PLACE: THE GARDEN OF BAGH-E SHAZDEH

Azadeh Arjomand Kermani, Saskia de Wit

“How can man withdraw himself from the fields? Where will he go, since the earth is one huge, unbounded field? Quite simply; he will mark off a portion of this field by means of walls, which set up an enclosed finite space over against amorphous, limitless space.”<sup>1</sup>

Bagh-e Shazdeh (The Prince’s Garden) lies within a expanse of rocky desert, flanked by tall mountains to the north and south that are snow-capped even in summer. Enclosed by massive perimeter walls, the garden holds an abundance of impressions, full of reflections, light, shade, sounds, coolness, floral aromas and the sweetness of fruits. A greater contrast to the arid landscape is hardly imaginable. Over a century ago, it made a deep impression on the English traveler Ella Sykes, who wrote of “a dazzling glancing stream of water, broken up by dashing cascades and adorned with fountains rising high into the air, while the August sun, gleaming on their foam, tinted them with all the colors of the rainbow.”<sup>2</sup>

Bagh-e Shazdeh is a place outside: it maintains a distance from the realm of daily life, set apart in the landscape, while at the same time making the landscape manifest. Persian gardens are invariably enclosed,<sup>3</sup> their walls serving as a container for the collection of flora and fauna gathered within them. This being enclosed means Persian gardens belong to the same timeless garden tradition as the Japanese tea garden, the Roman peristyle and the medieval European *hortus conclusus*, a tradition still developing. On the one hand, the enclosed garden develops into new landscape architectural types that open up towards the horizon, while on the other contemporary enclosed gardens emerge, giving expression to a changing landscape.

The *hortus conclusus*, influenced by both the Persian garden and the Roman peristyle, gave rise to three further sub-types that developed independently from one another. Each expresses a different aspect of our relationship to landscape. The *hortus ludi* is about the perception of the landscape: a garden of delights in which sensory experiences

1 Ortega y Gasset, José: *The Revolt of the Masses*, New York 1930.

2 Sykes, Ella: *Persia and its people*, New York 1910.

3 The Avestan word *pairidaēza* literally means “walled around”. See, for instance, Nasr, Tahereh: *The manifestation of wisdom in Persian gardens*, Shiraz 2006.

are gathered, bestowing the landscape qualities that go beyond the purely visual, be it sound, smell, taste or touch. The *hortus catalogi* is about the understanding of nature: its grid-like layout organizes plant species, marshalling the complexity of nature into recognizable entities. The *hortus contemplationis* is the setting for reflection on our relationship to nature and landscape: the unity of space and time and the unified central organization of walls and center present a representation of the basic coordinates of the infinite space of landscape.<sup>4</sup> In Persian gardens these three kinds of enclosed garden exist all at once and undivided, as can be seen most strikingly in Bagh-e Shazdeh.

#### An oasis in the desert

The Iranian Plateau is ruled by harsh winds and fierce dust storms, and water is scarce. Bagh-e Shazdeh lies in the foothills of the Kuh-e Jupar and Tigarán mountains, strategically sited near the small town of Mahan, on the route south of Kerman heading towards the citadel of Bam. It was created in the late nineteenth century for the governor of the Kerman province, Naser ad-Douleh, and was built upon an older garden structure.

The garden is roughly 407 meters long and 122 meters wide, with a drop of twenty meters along its length negotiated by a series of terraces. One enters the garden at its lower end, where a summer pavilion is located. From here, there is a view along the long axis of the garden with its ascending terraces. At the top of the garden stands what was the governor's two-story seasonal residence. Stretching between the two buildings is a watercourse that cascades down the terraces, which is articulated as a system of channels, fountains and pools that determines the arrangement of paths and walkways, smaller pavilions, flower beds and orchards of pear and pomegranate trees. The network of waterways irrigates the garden, but its longitudinal orientation is highly symbolic, considered as representing the axis of existence, along which a person's soul might rise towards the supreme soul and immortality.

<sup>4</sup> Aben, Rob; de Wit, Saskia: The enclosed garden. History and Development of the Hortus

Conclusus and its Reintroduction into the Present-day Urban Landscape, Rotterdam 1998, pp. 37–56.

Persian gardens are known to take advantage of their natural settings and Bagh-e Shazdeh is typical in this regard. Its collection of pine, cedar, elm, sycamore and fruit trees benefit from the way the garden took advantage of its topography, its good soil, the light winds in the valley and the *qanat* system. The main axis of the garden follows the path of a rivulet of snowmelt water that flows down from the mountains, but which is dry most of the year. Underneath the path of the watercourse, a *qanat* was built to transport water from the aquifer in the mountainside to the garden without it evaporating in the sweltering summer heat. A series of structures mark where vertical shafts rise up from the *qanat* to the ground, revealing the straight path the aqueduct takes in the landscape. Before entering the top of the garden, the water is gathered in a vast underground cistern from which it is allowed to flow down through the garden, irrigating the trees and plants along its way, and down through a series of cascades and pools from which fountains erupt.

### Specific place

In Bagh-e Shazdeh opposites meet: between the garden and the surrounding landscape, as well as within the garden itself. The lush body of trees in the garden serves as a dramatic counterpoint to the desert. The palpable presence of water, nourishment and shade affords a welcome escape from the oppressive heat and the harsh sunlight in the desert, an essential aspect of the Persian garden.<sup>5</sup> But beyond its practical role in providing shade and protection, the garden is an architectural expression of abundance in a landscape of want.<sup>6</sup> The built structure of the garden—its vertical walls and horizontal channels and rills—contrasts with the delicate shapes of the trees and the shadows they cast and the endless patterns of flowers and leaves. As a whole, the garden can be seen as a precise

5 As the English gardener and historian Penelope Hobhouse noted, “in a land of harsh light and with a climate too hot for exertion, shade and protection—from wind as well as sun—were essential elements of the Persian garden.” Hobhouse, Penelope: Gardens of Persia, London 2003, p. 9.

6 “The space inside the enclosure was deliberately glorified in contrast to the hostile world without, confirming the Persian’s in-built attitude towards nature in a land where habitation depends on the availability of water.” Ibid., p. 9.

orchestration of water, light and shade, plants, and fragrances that together delight all the senses.

The garden may be regarded as a place of ritual, partly removed from society: a place differentiated from everyday places and customs that enables its visitors “to establish a sense of locality for themselves, thus metaphorically rooting their own identity in a well-defined part of the material world.”<sup>7</sup> As visitors respond to such an environment by becoming more attentive and engaged with nature, the living world itself becomes a sacred space in which the visitors can “fuse a sense of self and of supernatural identity,”<sup>8</sup> irrespective of the kind of wider social structures in which they participate. Such a garden “in effect [generates] the most permanent communion we can make with a piece of the world,”<sup>9</sup> or, one could argue, the most explicit expression of “place”: the intimate and specific basis for how we connect with the world.<sup>10</sup> The enclosure, which offers both physical and psychological protection, supports and evokes this tension between opposites and the role of multi-sensorial experience in this, and the resulting definition of place.

### Confinement and freedom

Bagh-e Shazdeh is surrounded by mud-brick walls, made from the heavy clay that is so readily available on the Iranian plateau. The upper boundary wall of the garden curves outwards, in a defensive gesture against the mountains behind it. At the bottom of the garden, a filigree entrance pavilion is incorporated in the walls, slightly set back, opening up the garden towards the axis that connects the garden to the town below. The entrance pavilion is flanked by smaller functional spaces, including guards’ quarters and store rooms. A series of service entrances connect the garden to the outside. As much as the walls shelter the garden and its visitors from the surrounding heat and winds, they also define the place and separate it from

7 Conan, Michel: *Sacred Gardens and Landscapes. Ritual and Agency*, Washington D.C. 2007, p. 7.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

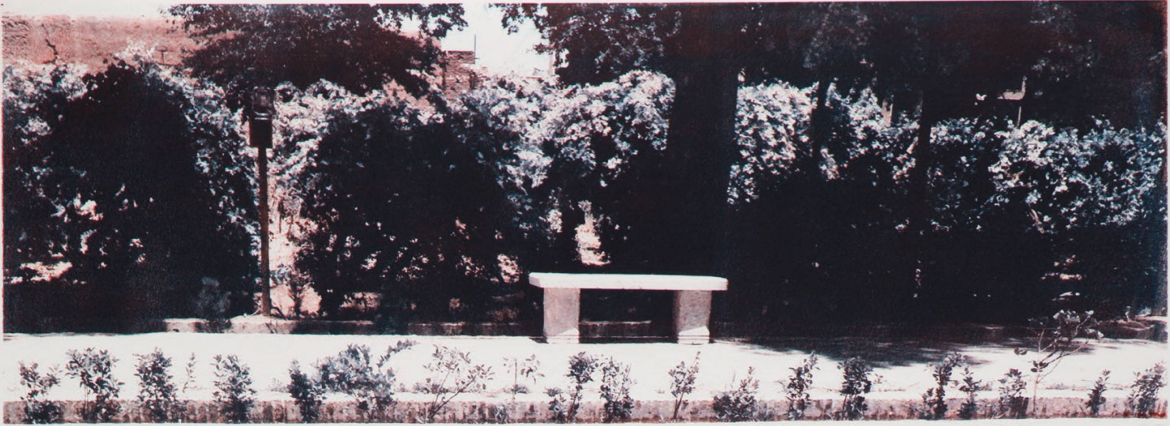
9 Kullmann, Karl: “De/framed Visions”. In: *Studies*

in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes, 32 (2012), no. 3, p. 182.

10 Relph, Edward: *Place and Placelessness*, London 1976.

Shirana Shahbazi

Lithographs  
Iran, 2014



Im Pool  
Two-colored lithograph on Zerkall Bütten Paper  
122 x 94 cm





Disco  
Two-colored lithograph on Zerkall Bütten Paper  
87 x 67 cm



Qazvin/Teheran  
Two-colored lithograph on Zerkall Bütten Paper  
87 x 67 cm



its surroundings, and serve as a vessel for the scents, sounds and images contained within the garden. However, the shelteredness felt in the garden is mostly provided by the abundant trees: evergreen trees (such as pine and cypress) that serve as windbreaks, shady and broad-leaved trees (such as elm, rowan, sycamore, aspen), ornamental trees (such as cedars, juniper and firethorn), and fruit trees that fill the orchards on the terraces right up to the garden walls. The walls and trees together create an enclosed space in which one feels contained but not trapped. The space is like a shell that provides shelter and refuge, setting the place apart from its surroundings.

The walls add the third dimension of space to the two dimensions of the territory. And what used to be nondescript desert land is transformed into a place by the act of being enclosed as a garden—somewhere with definite form and definite boundaries.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps in the ancient Iranian imagination, walls were a wishful sign that the devil could not find what lay within them. When everything has its place in the divine order of things, demarcating a defined space is a way of warding off evil and making the world comprehensible, or, as Alexander Tzonis writes, “giving back to the man-made environment the missing ‘limit, species and order’.”<sup>12</sup>

The sheltered quality of gardens makes them places for dwelling. Christian Norberg-Schulz argued that dwelling is related to the notion of “gathering”: to condense and concretize the world as a real object. The archetypal act of gathering is through enclosure.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the enclosure that is in the root of the Avestan word for gardens, *pairidaēza* (walled-around), not only refers to their walls, but just as much to what these walls do: gather a specific selection of natural elements as an idealized expression of the larger world around them. To be at peace, to be free and protected from harm and danger is achieved by means of an enclosure. Paradoxically, it is enclosure that provides freedom.

11 “Man’s first architecturally important intrusion into his environment—dominated by magical forces—was the definition and enclosure of a domain, the *temenos*, and by this very act of definition the domain obtained a special relationship to these forces. Here they should dwell or be kept out.” Bandmann, Günter: *Mittelalterliche Archi-*

*tektur als Bedeutungsträger*, Berlin 1951, p. 133.

12 Tzonis, Alexander: *Towards a Non-oppressive Environment. An Essay*, Boston 1972, p. 21.

13 Norberg-Schulz, Christian: *Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, New York 1980, p. 23.

On the other hand, the boundary is the condition that determines the connection to the surroundings and unites culture and nature “the function of these walls was not only to create a boundary, but also to act as an interface between the dry hot outer area and the green, shady and semi-paradise inner area.”<sup>14</sup> They enable the control of water, wind and light in order to cultivate a selected set of natural elements into a pleasurable environment of shade, coolness, sound, color, and sweet fruits. Order is necessary to unite nature and culture, and so we establish boundaries.<sup>15</sup> The garden is as much an otherworldly space outside of—even contrary to—its social and physical context, as it is a very real space relating to its surroundings. Thus, the enclosure is as much a quality of the garden it encloses as of the surroundings it reflects. However impenetrable the boundary, physically and visually, there is always “an infection by one side of the border of the other, there is a becoming otherwise of each of the terms thus bounded.”<sup>16</sup>

In Bagh-e Shazdeh, boundaries enable communication and separation: as mediators they articulate inside as well as outside, garden as well as surrounding landscape. They are the expression of a place that is both autonomous and contextual: the essential character of a garden.<sup>17</sup> Enclosure is an ambivalent phenomenon: to enclose also means to exclude or to be captured; to divide is also a means to order and thus to connect. The boundary is there to be traversed, offering a choice between protection and exposure. Bagh-e Shazdeh exemplifies how a dialogue between confinement and freedom, outside and inside, accessibility and seclusion can give landscape spaces meaning as both part and counterpart of their geographical and social context.

**14** Masoudi, Abbas: *Acquaintance with Iranian Gardens Bagh-e Shazdeh*, Tehran 2009.

**15** Aben; de Wit (1998).

**16** Grosz, Elizabeth: *Architecture from the outside. Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, Cambridge/London 2001.

**17** De Wit, Saskia: *Hidden Landscapes. The metropolitan garden as a multi-sensory expression of place*, Amsterdam 2018, p. 396.