

Reclaiming identity through rebuilding historical buildings

Iranica Desk

In recent days and weeks, following the destruction of several historic buildings during US and Israeli attacks on Iran, public debate has intensified over how to deal with damaged landmarks — including more recent structures that, while contemporary, were widely regarded as architecturally significant.

Some argue that whatever has been destroyed should remain as a symbol of foreign aggression and national resistance, transformed into museums or memorial sites. Others strongly disagree.

Among the latter is Behrouz Marbaghi, an architect, restoration expert and university professor who has worked extensively on the revival of Tehran's historic Oudlajan district. He says the ruins should be rebuilt — and made more beautiful than before — free from political symbolism.

Speaking to ISNA after publishing a new design proposal for the destroyed school in Minab, Marbaghi said the restoration of damaged historic buildings should follow three principles.

First, if part of an ancient or historic structure has been lost, any restoration should clearly show its own historical period rather than pretending to be original.

Second, restoration should



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not be fake. He said architects should not attempt to recreate buildings so perfectly that the new work becomes indistinguishable from the old.

Third, if a destroyed heritage building is replaced with a grander and more beautiful one, it should be unmistakably both Iranian and contemporary. "Contemporary is not the same as modern," he said, adding that he does not define modernity simply through glass and concrete. "A modern building can also be made of bamboo or adobe."

Marbaghi argued that a society becomes modern when the individuality of its citizens is recognized. At the same time, he said, modern people may voluntarily join institutions and collective structures without sacrificing

personal identity.

Asked how Tehran's historic and modern buildings damaged in the war should be treated, Marbaghi said cultural heritage falls into two categories: priceless landmarks and ordinary structures.

"When a landmark such as Golestan Palace is damaged, it is like damaging a national identity card," he said. "These sites must be restored with the highest degree of precision, using modern reinforcement techniques, and returned to their former state."

But for non-historic buildings — such as one near Sharif University of Technology that was heavily damaged — he said he would choose to build something even better.

Marbaghi also lamented the loss



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of several modern-era buildings. He said he was particularly saddened by the destruction of a former police building at the southern entrance to Kargar Street, once used by the gendarmerie and long considered architecturally distinguished.

He also cited damage to the former Senate Palace, describing it as one of the masterpieces of modern Iranian architecture.

Another building he highlighted was the glass headquarters of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, destroyed during the 12-day war. Designed by Abdolaziz Farmanfarman as his original office, Marbaghi described it as "the most complete and modern architecture in Iran."

"It reflected the transparency of the modern world while pre-

serving the hierarchy of traditional Iranian architecture," he said. "These buildings should be rebuilt, with even greater refinement, because they are part of this country's identity."

He questioned the idea of preserving wartime destruction as a permanent symbol. "Why should we memorialize war?" he asked. "Why should these ruins remain like scars on our face? We will rebuild — and build even better."

Marbaghi said he personally does not believe in preserving ruins merely to remember war. "Some respected colleagues believe these sites should teach lessons," he said. "But destruction alone teaches little. I tell my students: seek beauty. If you do not recognize beauty, you cannot fight ugliness."

Asked which damaged building affected him most deeply, Marbaghi pointed to the former Senate Palace (now the old parliament building), saying he was heartbroken and moved to tears by its destruction.

Built in 1956 and inspired in part by Si-o-Se-Pol, the structure was designed by Heydar Ghiai and Mohsen Foroughi. Marbaghi said its asymmetrical execution and stylistic innovation made it one of Iran's earliest postmodern works — even before postmodernism was formally declared as a movement internationally.

He also expressed concern over damage to Azadi Stadium, saying its elegant structural spans, built more than 50 years ago, might be difficult to reproduce even with today's technology.

"Some buildings," he said, "cannot truly be replaced, even if rebuilt more beautifully."

Marbaghi concluded by pointing to postwar reconstruction in Minsk after World War II. Today, he said, visitors may not realize the city had once been devastated because it was rebuilt on its original urban framework but adapted to modern scales and needs.

He urged Iranian municipal authorities not to make unilateral decisions about rebuilding damaged cities, not to politicize reconstruction, and to consult specialists in urban planning and architecture.

Reading Room

Foundation of Iranian identity



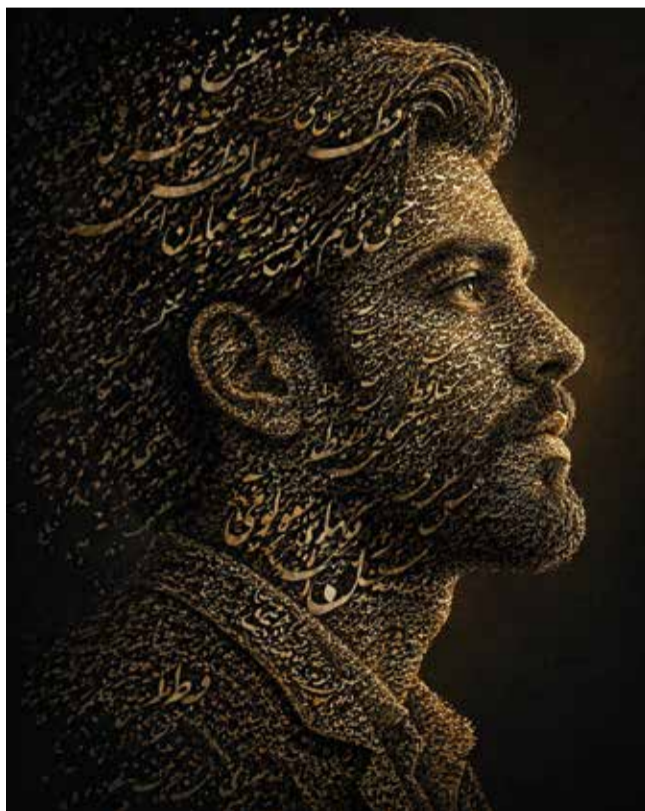
By Mahshid Razavi Rezvani

Director of Mahshide Kherad Institute

In a time when Iran's confrontation with the US and Israel and the country's resilience have become central topics in global media coverage, drawing widespread international attention, it is more important than ever to understand Iran and its people more deeply.

The study of Iranian society and civilization over centuries has long fascinated scholars and travelers alike, appealing to a wide range of interests. Such a comprehensive understanding requires a proper grasp of Iran's geography, its history shaped by that geography, and its climatic and environmental conditions — all of which have influenced the formation of Iranian identity.

Anthropologist William Beeman considers the understanding of Iran to be closely tied to the Persian language. In his book *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*, he emphasizes the role and multiple functions of Persian in shaping interpersonal social relations in Iran and reflecting political interactions. From his perspective, Persian is a language with significant complexity and nuance, possessing a strong aesthetic dimension. This aesthetic qual-



ity is reflected in the finest Iranian carpets, works of art, music, and poetry. According to Beeman, this linguistic capacity reflects two prominent characteristics of Iranians: on one hand, an enduring spirit of resistance and defense, and on the other, historical and civilizational continuity and resilience.

These two characteristics — still visible today in various

parts of Iran, whether on battlefields or in urban spaces through poetry and rhetorical expressions — combine elements of Iranian and Islamic civilization. In this synthesis, ancient Iranian identity merges with religious tradition, producing a distinct cultural narrative.

However, in the preservation of these foundational elements of Iranian identity, a

third factor has emerged over the past century: modernity in the contemporary world. This new element seeks engagement with Iran's younger generation and brings with it the importance of science, technology, knowledge, and energy within the borderless world of modern disciplines, once again presenting Iran with new challenges.

Just as in past centuries Iran embraced a new religion while preserving the roots of its civilization, so too did it respond to changing historical conditions. With the opening of its borders, Persian language and culture reasserted themselves through works such as the *Shahnameh*, forming a symbolic and invisible protective boundary around Iran. Today, Iran stands at a crossroads where it continues to express its identity through its language, as if striving to integrate these three elements — tradition, religion, and modernity — into a unified cultural strength that speaks to the world.

In his book *What Does Iran Have to Say?*, Mohammad-Ali Eslami Nodushan, after describing the Iranian reception of Islam and the country's capacity to absorb diverse peoples and cultures, highlights Iranians' inclination toward mysticism and Sufism. He argues that although this inclination may have initial-

ly emerged from necessity in its historical context, it later led to the flourishing of major Persian literary and spiritual figures such as Rumi, Hafez, and Khayyam, producing some of the greatest masterpieces of Persian literature and the emergence of a distinct Iranian mystical tradition.

The understanding of Iranian identity and character cannot be separated from language. In analytical approaches to national character and collective psychology, philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan considers language structure fundamental to identity formation and cultural assimilation. He views each individual as being shaped within the linguistic framework of their society.

Lacan has influenced many contemporary critiques of Western modernity. He reinterprets Freud's concept of the unconscious, rejecting biological explanations and instead arguing that the unconscious is structured like a language.

In this view, the structure of language shapes how individuals become culturally defined subjects. In other words, by learning the language of their society, individuals are already embedded within it. From this perspective, each person becomes what their linguistic structure allows them to be: an Iranian

becomes Iranian, a German becomes German, and an American becomes American, because they exist within the linguistic and cultural structure of their society.

Lacan does not see the subject as independent from language or society; rather, he considers the formation of the self to be socially constructed.

The "Real," in Lacanian theory, refers to that which exists both within and beyond the subject. It is something that resists symbolic representation, yet remains within us. In the Real, everything is simply itself. Human beings, however, are inevitably placed within the symbolic order.

Lacan offers no clear hope for a complete escape from this structure. This raises the question: can the Iranian subject find a way beyond "the Other" and external definitions of identity?

Throughout Iran's long history, the Iranian subject has repeatedly responded to encounters with "the Other" by turning to the language of mysticism and Sufism — opening pathways of meaning, abundance, and transcendence beyond imposed boundaries and global orders. In this sense, language in Iran remains alive and dynamic, continuously carrying messages of meaning and renewal for humanity in today's fragmented world.