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Formalism and the Myth of Supremacy:
Epistemic Impasse in Contemporary Traditionalism of Islamic Architecture

Saeed Hagir
Associate Professor, Faculty of Architecture, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

In moments when a tradition loses its capacity to generate living meaning, a tendency emerges that, rather than confronting this deficiency, resorts to the fixation and reproduction of its outward forms. While this tendency positions itself as the custodian of authenticity, it is, in fact, indicative of a rupture from the very tradition it purports to defend. Neo-traditionalism in Iranian architecture embodies precisely this predicament: it represents not the continuity of tradition, but a dualistic construct wherein tradition is simultaneously reduced to mere form and elevated to a superior, unquestionable status. Formalism serves as the primary mechanism for this reduction. Architectural elements—the dome, the arch, geometry, and recurring patterns—are divorced from their historical and epistemological contexts, mutating into self-sufficient signs. Tradition is no longer comprehended as a system of meanings and modes of thought; rather, it is reduced to a repository of imitable forms. Under these circumstances, form, instead of manifesting meaning, supplants it, and architecture is relegated from the sphere of meaning production to the mere reproduction of imagery.

A profounder layer of this crisis resides in the presupposition that posits tradition as epistemologically superior to modernity. Within neo-traditionalism, tradition is delineated as a coherent, complete, and inherently valid totality. However, such an image is predicated on a form of mythologization. What is represented under the guise of tradition is, in reality, a selective construct that eradicates historical tensions, ruptures, and limitations, thereby transmuting it into a harmonious and superior whole. Consequently, tradition is elevated

Email: saeed.hagir@ut.ac.ir

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from a contingent historical condition to an absolute, transhistorical horizon. At this juncture, traditionalism transitions from a theoretical stance into an ideology—one that establishes the past as the ultimate and binding point of reference.

Within such a framework, even discourse concerning the evolution or transformation of tradition fails to open new horizons. Modifications occur exclusively at the level of articulation, while the underlying logic of the traditional apparatus remains entirely intact. This paradigm lacks the disruptive capacity necessary to interrogate its own presuppositions. Genuine transformation necessitates a critical distance from foundational assumptions and the opportunity to redefine underlying principles—a possibility that is neither generated nor tolerated within the paradigm of new traditionalism.

The consequence of this deadlock is evident in contemporary architecture. Spaces are generated that, on the surface, are replete with familiar signs of the past, yet in depth, possess no meaningful relationship with contemporary life. This architecture is neither a continuation of tradition nor a viable response to the issues of the present; rather, it exists in a state of suspension between the two. Instead of resolving a spatial or social problem, this architecture seeks to validate a theoretical presupposition that has already located the answer in the past, thereby reducing the present to a mere stage for its representation.

The fundamental issue lies in the relationship between traditionalism and the possibility of critique. Critique necessitates a condition wherein one can establish a critical distance from presuppositions and subject them to rigorous questioning. Within the traditional structure—as represented and mobilized by neo-traditionalism—such an internal capacity does not exist. While evaluations and modifications may occur, they never reach a threshold where they interrogate their own foundational premises. What is absent is not the act of critique itself, but the possibility of critique as a structural condition.

By disregarding this distinction, neo-traditionalism attempts to present itself as possessing a critical capacity, while simultaneously positing foundations that are placed strictly beyond the realm of questioning. This inherent contradiction results in the language of critique being employed merely to corroborate predetermined presuppositions. Consequently, not only is the capacity to critically reflect upon tradition severely restricted, but the ability to conceptualize and engage with the present is also profoundly undermined.

Therefore, any discourse surrounding the "revival" of Iranian-Islamic architecture without a rigorous critique of these underlying foundations will inevitably lead to the perpetuation of the same impasse. True revival acquires meaning only when tradition is understood not as a closed, superior, and untouchable totality, but as an open problematic subject to continuous inquiry and reinterpretation. Otherwise, what is reproduced is merely a simulacrum of tradition—a simulation that, through the sterile repetition of forms, increasingly alienates itself from any genuine possibility of comprehension and living meaning.

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