

Introduction

ISFAHAN AS URBAN EXPERIENCE

Sometime in the middle years of the seventeenth century, a young poet named Mir Rukn al-Din composed a letter to his friend and fellow poet Mir Muhammad Mansur Semnani (d. 1732–33). In ornate, rhymed prose interspersed with poems, Rukn al-Din wrote of his excruciating solitude since Semnani's departure from Isfahan, noting how strolling in gardens or sitting in coffeehouses evoked memories of their joint urban excursions. To entice his friend to return, Rukn al-Din also described the newest architectural addition to Isfahan's urban landscape: the Hasanabad Bridge (fig. 1). Spanning the Zayanda River, the bridge was inaugurated in the spring of 1659, when its arcaded galleries hosted a sumptuous royal ceremony followed by a month of communal feasting.¹ "If only a bit were written on the glory of the heavenly Hasanabad Bridge," Rukn al-Din wrote, "one would swiftly set off" for Isfahan.²

In response, Semnani composed a more substantial letter. In equally florid prose, he, too, complained about the "grief of leaving one's friends" and the "toil of separation." Yet unlike his friend, whose missive was imbued with melancholy and a yearning for reunion, Semnani confined his expressions of sorrow to a brief opening passage. In the rest of the letter, he offered a "guide" (*dastūr al-'amal*) for a one-day excursion (*sayr*) in Isfahan, adding that

his proposed itinerary, though only a sampling, must not be violated.

And yet, despite the claim of brevity, the "Guide for Strolling in Isfahan" (*Dastūr al-'amal-i sayr-i Iṣfahān*) offers an alluring urban experience.³ Alternating between prose and verse, it guides the reader through the city's markets, coffeehouses, plazas, and mosques and describes Isfahan's vendors, artisans, coffee servers, performers, and prostitutes. While the incessant flow of the prose conveys a kinetic experience through the city, the verses evoke moments of lingering in time and space.

Beginning at dawn, the recommended excursion encompasses a staggering array of urban pleasures. The venues to visit include several coffeehouses, a hookah stall, and a sherbet house, among other places; the daylong journey culminates in a nocturnal tryst with a courtesan in the pleasure district of Isfahan. The chief characters of the urban tour are the city's artisans and vendors—the desired objects of a wandering observer. Following the poetic convention known as *shahrāshūb*, or "city disturber," these characters are described through metaphors drawn from the commodities they sell or the crafts in which they are engaged. The itinerary also includes stops at architectural monuments such as a royal palace (Talar-i Tavila), Isfahan's new congregational mosque (Shah Mosque), and the



FIGURE 1 (opposite)
Hasanabad (Khvajū) Bridge, Isfahan,
ca. 1657–59. Photo: author.

shrine of the city's patron saint (Harun-i Vilayat). Despite the diversity of these locales, their sequence follows a fairly clear trajectory through the city; the itinerary of the tour can be traced on a map of seventeenth-century Isfahan.

The urban experience that informed Semnani's guide to the pleasures of Isfahan lies at the core of this book. What configuration of urban spaces, social institutions, and architectural monuments enabled and propelled this kind of engagement with the city? What historical forces, social ideals, and modes of urban design gave rise to a settlement where mosques, coffeehouses, and courtesans could be encountered and represented in this manner? How was seventeenth-century Isfahan perceived and imagined by contemporary individuals, and what can we learn about the city's image and culture through a study of embodied sensory encounters recorded in literary urban descriptions? And finally, what do literary representations of Isfahan reveal about the emerging conceptions of space and time, self and society, in early modern Iran?

The themes that underlie these questions—the city as a social setting, the multisensory perception of the urban landscape, and the linkage between urban experience and subject formation—have received only meager attention in the studies of Safavid architecture and urbanism. Except for brief remarks, architectural historians have primarily focused on patterns of planning and construction, the morphology of royal gardens and pavilions, and aspects of courtly conduct and patronage. This book, by contrast, shifts the analytical focus from formal concerns and imperial agendas to social and sensate experiences of the urban environment. Reading the cityscape in light of rarely studied literary descriptions and visual representations, I demonstrate how seventeenth-century

Isfahan—with its promenades, coffeehouses, gardens, and markets—spawned new urban experiences and engendered novel manners of perceiving and imagining the city. The integrated scrutiny of texts and spaces reveals an intricate world in which new civic identities were fashioned through a panoply of individual and communal experiences. Isfahan did not merely represent a grandiose imperial vision; it fostered new conceptions of urbanity and modes of civic existence, ones that were intimately bound up with the formal, natural, social, and sensual qualities of the urban environment.

I approach Isfahan from the critical lens of “urban experience,” with which I examine an array of visual and literary depictions to craft a new narrative of the city as a dynamic living environment. I define urban experience as a phenomenon engaging the body and mind—visceral encounters with the city that are simultaneously affected by and interpreted through cultural habits and inherited mindsets. The study of urban experience from a range of analytical angles (vision, sound, time, pleasure, etc.) and at different spatial scales (the broader urban landscape and specific urban spaces) constitutes the basis on which the cityscape of Isfahan is here reconstructed and narrated. Ultimately, I hope, this book will lead to a fuller and more textured understanding of Safavid Isfahan as a metropolis that framed and shaped urban experiences peculiar to the early modern world.

THE SOCIAL CONTENT OF AN IMPERIAL PLAN

In the mid-seventeenth century, when Semnani penned his guide to the pleasures of Isfahan, the city was at the apogee of its prosperity and splendor. Although Isfahan had been a thriving urban settlement since earlier times, it was the

massive building campaign instigated by the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas I (r. 1588–1629) that set the stage for the urban experiences echoed in Semnani’s work, among other literary texts. Laid out in the south of the walled city, these new developments consisted of three major components: an enormous plaza called the Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan (Image-of-the-World Square), a monumental tree-lined promenade known as the Chaharbagh (Fourfold Garden), and a cluster of residential quarters and garden estates on the banks of the Zayanda River (fig. 2).

Bordered by commercial arcades, religious foundations, and imperial monuments, the Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan served as Isfahan’s principal civic center. Adjoining the palace complex, this immense urban plaza hosted communal ceremonies, equestrian sports, and the quotidian lives of the city’s inhabitants (fig. 3). Running from the palace complex to the Hizar Jarib (Thousand Acres) royal garden, the four-kilometer-long Chaharbagh functioned as a public venue for leisurely promenades and an urban thoroughfare linking the city center to extramural gardens and quarters. Settled by migrant communities, the major new neighborhoods of Isfahan were laid out on the western side of the Chaharbagh: the Abbasabad quarter was inhabited by long-distance traders who hailed from the city of Tabriz; New Julfa was home to a community of Armenian Christian merchants who had been forcibly relocated to Isfahan from their homeland in the Caucasus.

The foundation of these mercantile communities and the planning and construction of Isfahan as the seat of the Safavid throne (where the capital was established in the 1590s) were integral to the policies that Shah Abbas adopted with the aim of creating a centralized state and promoting commerce. A succession of military conquests paved the way for the enactment of these

reforms; over the course of the 1590s and early 1600s, as Isfahan’s urban plan was conceived and implemented, Safavid forces recaptured the domains seized by the Ottomans and Uzbeks in the preceding decades.⁴ Meanwhile, to curtail the influence of the Qizilbash tribesmen (Turkmen warriors who were instrumental in the rise of the Safavid state but had become increasingly factious), Shah Abbas raised the *ghulām* (converted military slaves of Caucasian origin who were loyal to the king) to key positions in the army and administration.⁵ At the same time, the shah set out to mobilize the productive forces and mercantile potential of the Safavid territory. An infrastructural network of caravanserais and roads was set up to facilitate the flow of commodities and merchants.

Isfahan’s role as an emporium of the early modern world—a hub for new materials and commercial communities, as well as for the social practices and institutions that emerged in the wake of heightened global interactions—was immensely influential in shaping new urban experiences. Crammed with an unprecedented array of merchandise, the city’s expansive mercantile arcades gave rise to novel manners and conceptions of leisure and consumption. As entirely new social institutions, coffeehouses engendered a distinct arena of civic existence, altered the rhythms of daily life, and transformed the meanings and uses of urban spaces. Above all, seventeenth-century Isfahan was a cosmopolitan city inhabited by an ethnically diverse, polyglot populace, and the mingling of peoples of various backgrounds transformed the perception and experience of the urban landscape.

The “Guide for Strolling in Isfahan” does not, however, portray the city from an all-encompassing viewpoint. Nor does it convey any sense of the overarching plan that integrated

FIGURE 2

Map of Isfahan, ca. mid-1600s, showing major Safavid developments south of the city's old core: (1) Old Maydan; (2) Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan; (3) Safavid palace complex (dawlatkhana); (4) Chahar-bagh; (5) Allahverdi Khan Bridge; (6) Hizar Jarib Garden; (7) quarter of Abbasabad; (8) New Julfa (Armenian quarter); (9) Hasanabad (Khvaju) Bridge; (10) Sa'adatabad Garden. Plan by author.





FIGURE 3
Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan, Isfahan,
ca. 1590–1602. Photo by Georg
Gerster, 1976. Photo © Estate
Georg Gerster, Switzerland,
www.GeorgGerster.com.

these material, social, and human components into a regimented built environment. Rather, it represents Isfahan from the perspective of a sensing human subject. In place of the planned arrangement of architectural and urban elements, here it is the act of uninterrupted bodily perception that imparts coherence to the city and its components. The visual devices that unify the constructed environment of Safavid Isfahan—the monumental axes and geometric uniformity of grand urban ensembles—play a marginal role in this multisensorial urban experience; instead of an imposing spectacle, the city appears to be a swirl of senses, places, and persons. Seemingly incongruous urban elements—mosques, palaces, coffeehouses—coalesce into a whole as perceived by an individual observer. Seen this way, Semnani's composition does not merely cast the urban scenes of Isfahan in a lyrical literary form; it reveals how the city's variegated components registered as a continuous sociospatial reality in the mind of a feeling human subject.

Understanding the ways in which new perceptions of self and society were fashioned through urban experiences is the main concern of this study. Rather than conceive Safavid Isfahan as a monocentric setting, wherein meaning emanates from a single imposing, immutable core—be it the ruling household, the royal palace, or the imperial mind—I analyze the urban structure in dialectic relation to the embodied social experiences that the city nurtured and accommodated. Expanding the scope of historical investigation to modes of engagement with the built environment leads to a holistic account of urbanism and architecture in Safavid Isfahan, a narrative that considers royal plans in tandem with solitary and collective forms of urban existence. By placing perceptual and experiential dimensions of the city at the center of

the inquiry, this interpretive approach does not discount the agency of monarchical agendas and actions. Instead, it illuminates the crucial role Isfahan's constructed spaces played in fashioning new urban identities, revealing how the city was deliberately planned, built, and embellished to elicit certain receptions and engender novel social behaviors. A nuanced comprehension of the architecture and urban form of Safavid Isfahan entails scrutiny of the perceiving human subject in conjunction with the city's spatial structure and the material and social realities that informed its experience and perception.

NARRATIVES OF ISFAHAN: FORMAL, ROYAL, AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES

Although much has been written about the architecture and urbanism of Safavid Isfahan, the lived experiences of its urban spaces have not been subject to sustained scholarly analysis. A strain of purely architectural studies has long concerned itself with establishing formal typologies and stylistic genealogies. Severing the built environment from its historical context, these works portray the city as an agglomeration of sterile geometric compositions. From the 1970s onward, many such formalist studies, inspired by mystically minded modern scholars such as Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, have commonly been coupled with ahistorical interpretations.⁶ In this essentialist approach, Isfahan is construed as the material manifestation of mystical concepts, representing the culmination of what is assumed to be a monolithic and timeless Islamic or Persian culture.

A fairly similar notion underlies the accounts of Safavid Isfahan in traditional art-historical surveys. These sweeping narratives typically cast Safavid architecture as the last great achievement of a long-standing tradition, a final florescence before the decline of a native architectural

idiom that was set to lose its vitality and presumed authenticity in the face of mounting European influence. In these surveys and other urban studies, the novelty of Safavid architecture and urbanism, particularly that of Isfahan, is commonly seen in the creation of colossal urban complexes or the deployment of an elaborate lexicon of urban design rather than in the genesis of new civic experiences.⁷

Only since the late 1980s—and based on the foundational work of Iranian scholars such as Lutfullah Hunarfar—have scholars of Safavid architecture and urbanism begun to employ historically grounded approaches.⁸ The monographic study by the historian Stephen Blake was the first English-language book to offer a thorough survey of Isfahan's seventeenth-century topography and urban functions.⁹ Expanding on Robert McChesney's groundbreaking study of Persian written sources, Blake also drew attention to an initial phase of Isfahan's construction that had gone unnoticed in earlier studies.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the book's approach to "social architecture," which uncritically employs the Weberian notion of the patrimonial-bureaucratic state as its overarching theoretical framework, overlooks the shifting character of state and society in the early modern period. The typological analysis of the urban environment in accordance with rigid functional categories, furthermore, reduces the city to an inventory of discrete components and does not account for fluid urban experiences echoed in the "Guide for Strolling" and other literary descriptions examined here.

Recent scholarship on Safavid art and architecture has of course adopted a range of new critical approaches, laying the groundwork for the present study by exploring Safavid Isfahan and its architectural monuments as settings for court ceremonies and imperial representations.

Gülru Necipoğlu, in a pioneering comparative essay, has interpreted Isfahan and its palace complex in relation to Shah Abbas's informal mode of rule, which can be contrasted with Ottoman and Mughal courtly practices and hence their palaces.¹¹ More recently, Sus-san Babaie has also examined Safavid Isfahan through the lens of royal feasts and ceremonies, analyzing the ways in which Isfahan's palaces and urban spaces reflected and accommodated a specifically "Perso-Shi'i" discourse of kingship. In this account, it is ultimately the synthesis of the civilizational heritage (Persian kingship) and the adopted sectarian creed of the Safavid household (Twelver Shi'ism) that bestowed an exceptional character on the palace architecture and urban form of seventeenth-century Isfahan.¹²

Analyses of Safavid Isfahan in relation to the political ideology of the ruling dynasty and strategies of representing power are warranted. Planned and built as the seat of a centralized state at a watershed moment in the course of its imperial expansion, Isfahan was undoubtedly intended to represent and shape the emergent sociopolitical order. The absolutist mode of rule practiced by Shah Abbas and his successors—bolstered by an expansive bureaucracy and state mercantilism—afforded the necessary framework and resources for the planning and swift implementation of large-scale building projects emanating from an imperial vision. Shah Abbas's direct engagement in the shaping of the built environment is amply recorded in the sources; court chroniclers extol the monarch's "exquisite taste in architecture" (*salīqa-yi 'ālī dar 'imārat*), attribute new architectural inventions to him (*tālār dar 'imārat*), and portray him as a ruler personally involved in the design and execution of building projects.¹³ Certainly the study of Isfahan's architecture and urban

form in light of royal agendas has been a fruitful line of research, and recent contributions have enriched our understanding of the city.

To fully appreciate the historical character of seventeenth-century Isfahan, however, an analysis of the kingly ethos must be complemented by a rigorously critical investigation of a wider range of factors that were instrumental in the formation, experience, and reception of the city and its monuments. The court-centered paradigm has assumed that the built environment of Isfahan projected state power primarily by creating transparent, accessible architectural settings and urban ensembles that made sovereignty palpable through ceremonies choreographed by the court. But this provides only a partial account of the nature of royal power and mechanisms of establishing authority in Safavid Isfahan, which also strove to craft new urban subjectivities through a careful arrangement of visual, spatial, and social elements in the cityscape. For instance, coffeehouses were not haphazard additions to the urban landscape but instead planned components of the city's grand urban spaces such as the Chaharbagh and the Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan.¹⁴ These urban spaces were also configured in ways that prompted specific modes of viewing the cityscape, manipulating visual and bodily access to different areas of the city while situating individuals in particular viewing positions. Similarly, the figural murals and tile panels that adorned Isfahan's monuments were clearly intended to induce a leisurely, sensual ambience in urban spaces (figs. 47 and 87). Equally influential were the monumental inscriptions that graced religious edifices, which engaged urban viewers through not only their semiotic signification but also their aesthetic appearance and glittering materiality.¹⁵ In short, the city's visual structure, pictorial program, public texts, and social institutions operated in

unison to enact an array of attitudes, moods, sensations, and sociocultural behaviors. State power was not merely made manifest through the public performance of kingship; it relied equally on the fashioning of new subjectivities.

And yet, while imperial plans provided the setting for the rise of these urban subjectivities, they did not issue from state initiatives alone. Rather, new senses of selfhood were formed through a dialectical relation between physical spaces and the human subjects who inhabited them and interacted with them. As in any society, the residents and visitors of Safavid Isfahan were active, not passive, participants in the cityscape; they constantly reinforced, altered, and undermined the meanings and uses of buildings and urban spaces through their daily routines, communal actions, and literary imaginations. Tellingly, in the "Guide for Strolling," as in several other literary descriptions of Isfahan, one can find hardly any hint of a royal presence. Nor do the peregrinations of the imagined visitor follow the patterns of movement dictated by the city's monumental visual axes. As such, these literary works represent what Michel de Certeau has called "spatial stories," unique trajectories that each individual can take within the possibilities that a city offers; these tactics and strategies for "walking in the city," de Certeau argues, subvert the dominant structures of gaze and power.¹⁶ Seen in this light, the kinetic urban experiences expressed in the literary descriptions of Safavid Isfahan were at once a consequence of and a reaction to the planned sociospatial structure of the city; they simultaneously complemented, appropriated, and transformed the city's perception and meaning as an imperial project. Excluding users/viewers from scholarly inquiry has obscured the unique character and significance of the urban form and architecture of Safavid Isfahan.

Urban experience offers a promising conceptual tool with which to fill this interpretive lacuna in the study of Isfahan's architecture and urbanism while also revealing a fuller picture of the city's links and affinities to contemporaneous early modern cities, especially those in West and South Asia.¹⁷ In this analytical approach, I primarily draw on the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which could be defined in "simplest terms" as "the interpretive study of human experience."¹⁸ The unmediated perception of the physical world by a sentient body-subject was underscored particularly by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), who notes that "one's own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism: it continuously breathes life into the visible spectacle, animates it and nourishes it from within, and forms a system with it."¹⁹ In modern architectural theory, August Schmarsow (1853–1936) was one of the first to adopt a phenomenological approach: the subjective perception of the observer, he argued, is the "kernel . . . on which architectural creation is based." For Schmarsow, the human perception of space is more than visual: it is fully embodied, consisting of "the residues of sensory experience to which the muscular sensations of our body, the sensitivity of our skin, and the structure of our body all contribute."²⁰

At the most basic level, a human-centered analysis of Isfahan discloses the variegated modalities of sensorial engagement with the city. Vision certainly was a fundamental sensory mode of urban experience: with its expansive vistas, rhythmic harmonies, and glittering facades, Isfahan's cityscape and architecture were clearly intended to please and dazzle the eye. Theories of vision and concepts of the gaze provide a rich analytical prism for understanding the diverse ways of seeing that the

city environment enabled and harbored.²¹ Particularly, a thorough study of the urban manners of viewing reveals how vision operated as not only an instrument of power but a social practice, one that relied on public participation in its meaning making. Yet intimating the phenomenology of urban experience requires attending to the whole range of sensory interactions with the built environment, beyond mere visual perception; the distinct smells, tastes, and sounds of early modern Isfahan—and the ways in which they were fused and arrayed in the city—were equally important in shaping urban experiences.²²

Sensate, embodied experiences did not operate in isolation from the sociocultural context; rather, they mingled with thoughts, habits, and notions formed through previous experiences or inherited from the past. It is thus equally crucial to scrutinize the cultural basis of urban experience and model "the period eye," to borrow a phrase coined by the art historian Michael Baxandall, who employed this concept to examine the "stock of patterns, categories, habits of inference and analogy" that the contemporary mind brought to the experience of visual arts.²³ An examination of "the period eye" uncovers how urban experiences and sensory perceptions were occasioned by and interpreted in relation to the mental habits, modes of cultural cognition, and rhetorical expressions unique to the contemporary society. Likewise, it is important to note that in a diverse, stratified urban society such as the one hosted in seventeenth-century Isfahan, urban spaces were not equally accessible to all urbanites irrespective of their social status, gender, ethnicity, or faith. Nor were public spaces experienced by all strata of society in a similar fashion. At the same time, Safavid Isfahan was marked by an unprecedented degree of intermingling among previously discrete

sociocultural groups. This diversity not only led to new urban encounters between persons of different ethnic and confessional backgrounds but also resulted in the loosening of entrenched social hierarchies. The city indeed abounded with characters, like the wandering persona of the “Guide for Strolling,” who breached—socially, spatially, and discursively—the established boundaries of class and culture, often to the ire of the elite. In seventeenth-century Isfahan, urban experience was at once informed by and constitutive of this reconfiguration of social norms and hierarchies.

The analysis of embodied urban experiences in their contemporary sociocultural context, then, composes the interpretive prism through which this book examines the built environment of Safavid Isfahan. My basic premise is that the city and the experience thereof are mutually constitutive; just as urban spaces were influential in shaping social behaviors, so too were human experiences influential in shaping the city.²⁴ As an intermediary concept, experience thus enables us to conceptualize the relationship between the subjective and objective perceptions of space in a dynamic, nonbinary manner.²⁵ This approach is particularly illuminating in the study of Safavid Isfahan, for it facilitates a shift of the analytical focus toward uses and perceptions of urban spaces without diminishing the significance of imperial aspirations; probing urban experiences reveals that the city was not merely laid out as an objective reality—an abstract representation of imperial order to be read and decoded by viewers—but also perceived and animated by way of subjective encounters. Ultimately, through this inquiry, there emerges a sensing human subject, one that is constituted in an intermediary zone continuously (re)shaped by the state agendas and by individual modes of fashioning the self.

SPACES, SELVES, AND TEXTS

All cities, whether historic or contemporary, play host to myriad personal and communal experiences. Yet the formation of full-fledged civic identities through subjective urban experiences has primarily been explored in the context of nineteenth-century European cities, as famously depicted in the poems and essays about Paris by the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) and later conceptualized by the German literary critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940).²⁶ A key figure in these works is the flâneur, an aimless wanderer who winds his way through the metropolis as an anonymous observer. Inspired by the works of Baudelaire and Benjamin, scholars have developed different conceptual models for analyzing the relations between the city, the self, and literary representations.²⁷ A nuanced consideration of these studies promises to offer a set of interpretive models and critical concepts for examining urban experience in Safavid Isfahan through an integrated scrutiny of physical spaces and literary representations.

In engaging with these concepts and models, one must of course take account of the differences between seventeenth-century Isfahan and nineteenth-century European megalopolises. The swiftly expanding industrial cities of nineteenth-century Europe not only were far more populous than their early modern predecessors but also contained elements that propelled a host of unprecedented urban experiences. Still, often too stark a demarcation is drawn between modern and premodern periods and especially between European and “other” experiences. The metropolises of early modern Eurasia contained multiple components—most notably consumables such as coffee and tobacco—that would become more commonplace in nineteenth-century cities. And like its contemporaneous cities across the globe,

Isfahan, too, saw the rise of distinct forms of urban subjectivity that were closely entangled with the city's novel characteristics as an early modern metropolis.

In Safavid Isfahan, urban experience was articulated through literary frameworks such as *shahrashub*, poems that traditionally focused on male youths engaged in crafts and trades in the marketplace. During the mid-seventeenth century, Isfahan witnessed a surge in the production of *shahrashub* and other forms of “urban topographical” literature.²⁸ By expanding, blending, and manipulating established literary themes and genres, these works created new ways of expressing urban impressions and experiences. Collectively, this body of urban literature bespeaks the formation of a novel domain of cultural production and consumption in seventeenth-century Isfahan—a social terrain nurtured by the city and largely independent of courtly circles.

This study draws particularly on this little-known corpus of literary descriptions to analyze aspects of urban experience in Isfahan.²⁹ Combining spatial and literary methods of analysis, I explore how the city shaped their contents and formats and how their dissemination in written and oral forms in turn affected the perception of the city. Complementing these works is a related set of materials dispersed in anthologies of poems (*dīvān*, *jang*, *saḥīḥ*), biographical compendia of poets (*tazkīra*), episodic compendia (*munshā'āt*), and miscellany collections (*majmū'a*).³⁰ Although these source materials yield a wealth of new information on Isfahan's historical topography and chronology of construction, I do not mine them solely for documentary data. Poems are, after all, condensed forms of speech and thought, infused with multiple layers of meaning and association. More than any other form of language, poetic

expressions provide insights into the mental structures and shared sensibilities of a society, especially in a context such as the Persianate cultural sphere, where poetry had long been the epitome of cultural production.

A rigorous scrutiny of this largely untapped corpus of literary works can also help counter the overreliance of the existing scholarship on court chronicles and published European travelogues. Indeed, if one eschews the binary view that regards European accounts as objective representations and Persian-language literary sources as cliché-ridden verbal exercises, it becomes clear that these two types of texts share several basic traits. Seen in this light, the travel narratives of Pietro Della Valle (1586–1652), Jean Chardin (1643–1713), and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1689) are also culturally colored accounts that were penned for the European reading public of the time.³¹ Another fruitful approach is to use these European descriptions not merely as sources of factual information but also as records of phenomenological encounters with the city, perceived through the physiological sensorium shared by all human beings.³² Though filtered through an external cultural outlook, travel narratives, too, offer vivid glimpses into urban experiences.

VISUAL IMPRESSIONS OF URBAN EXPERIENCE

A literary work consists of an intricate system of signs operating at several registers. But descriptive works that engage with a visual or spatial entity display an additional layer of significance. Merging rhetorical and referential forms of discourse, such as ekphrastic works carry meanings and connotations that cannot be fully appreciated without considering the spatial reality to which they refer, a context that would have been familiar to their contemporary audiences.

Moreover, compared with literary descriptions of two-dimensional art objects, the interconnections of literature and architecture are far more complex, involving distinct notions of narrativity, temporality, and memory. Whether one proceeds from physical spaces or literary works, an inquiry into topographical literature is inherently interdisciplinary; it requires a critical appreciation of both textual and spatial systems and of the range of meanings produced when they intersect.

For instance, to better grasp why literary portrayals of Isfahan almost invariably evoke a dynamic spatial trajectory, it is essential to consider the ways in which kinetic experiences were propelled by the city's spatial structure. The seamless integration of urban spaces, markets, and monuments through elaborate liminal zones—a hallmark of Safavid urban design in Isfahan—created a flowing circulatory network that enabled uninterrupted movement through city spaces. This kinetic spatial quality can be seen in the arcades that surround the Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan and the pavilions that lined the Chaharbagh; these and other urban spaces were marked by a pronounced sense of fluidity and rhythm that could only be appreciated over time by an itinerant observer. To a large extent, then, the centrality of bodily movement in urban experience issued from the peculiarities of Isfahan's visual and spatial structure. The texts pulsate with the cadence of urban experience.

The analysis of literary sources as expressions of urban experience thus entails a critical appreciation of architecture and urban spaces as sophisticated three-dimensional entities that are encountered through a wide range of human senses and engage various modes of cognition. Put simply, such an inquiry requires spatial analysis—a careful examination of architectural and urban forms.³³ Yet as in other continuously

inhabited cities, the physical fabric of Safavid Isfahan has disappeared, and its traces are buried beneath modern construction: the restored standing monuments constitute only a fraction of the carefully planned urban reality that shaped the seventeenth-century city experience.

In addition to engaging with extant structures, this book reconstructs Isfahan's vanished urban spaces and reimagines their embodied experiences, drawing particularly on surveys and sketches made by the German physician and botanist Engelbert Kaempfer (1651–1716),³⁴ who spent around twenty months in Isfahan in 1684–85, and the drawings by the French architect Pascal Coste (1787–1879), who visited the city in 1840.³⁵ I approach these materials not just as evidentiary representations of now-lost monuments and gardens but as visual traces of unmediated encounters with the city environment. Unlike many other European representations of Isfahan, which were produced from memory, Kaempfer's sketches and Coste's drawings were made on site while their creators walked the city and sensorially engaged with edifices and gardens. These representations are certainly mediated by specific graphic conventions—Kaempfer was adept at mensuration but had no formal training in drawing, whereas Coste was a Beaux-Arts-educated architect—but in the core experiences that shaped them, these visual impressions bear close affinities to textual representations of Isfahan.

Besides this corpus of drawings, late nineteenth-century photographs also depict scores of Safavid buildings that have since disappeared. It is one of the peculiarities of Isfahan that the introduction of photography in the late 1800s coincided with the wholesale demolition of Safavid monuments; several buildings were recorded in photographs shortly before their disappearance.³⁶ Upon the fall of Isfahan

in 1722 and the subsequent collapse of the Safavid dynasty, the city's size and population plunged drastically, and the decline continued during the tumultuous eighteenth century. Some renovations were made during the 1800s under the Qajar dynasty (1794–1925), but by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Safavid buildings had fallen into disuse and disrepair; the abandoned edifices, scattered in withered gardens and deserted neighborhoods, began to provide a quarry of building materials for new structures.³⁷

Old photographs (a major understudied source for the study of Safavid architecture) are obviously inflected with later viewers' understanding of the monuments, but they also convey an indexical trace of architecture, providing clues to tactile encounters with the built environment. Rather than as static images, then, I analyze photographic representations as snapshots of broader spatial and visual experiences. Likewise, the plans and architectural renderings offered in this book (many of which were prepared for this study) do not aim to represent the city in an ideal frozen status or to convey an "authentic" view of vanished edifices and urban spaces. Instead, they strive merely to present yet another form of interpretation; together with other pieces of evidence, they enable an approximation of a now-lost physical reality and its visual experience.

Finally, in analyzing urban experience, this book also engages figural representations made in Safavid Isfahan, either as stand-alone images on paper (single-page paintings and drawings, which were typically collected in albums) or as adornments to public monuments (murals and painted tiles). As scholars of Persianate painting have noted, the medium of single-page painting, which flourished in the seventeenth century, was intimately linked to Isfahan's social milieu.³⁸

These works depict real individuals or idealized social types that one would have encountered across the city, while the participation of urban elites in the patronage and consumption of artworks was instrumental in the rise of single-sheet compositions as the major form of artistic expression. The study of these images in conjunction with literary representations and reconstructed urban spaces casts further light on the ways these single-page paintings and drawings were entangled with the social experiences peculiar to early modern Isfahan.

An extensive archaeology of words and images, then, forms the basis of this study. My interpretations rest upon a synthesis of visual and textual evidence: matching words with images, images with drawings, and mapping them all onto the city's topography. The primary source of this work is indeed the urban form of Isfahan itself, which is here reconstructed alongside its ecological, sensory, and social contents.³⁹ Pieced together from a diverse array of sources, the result is a dynamic picture of Safavid Isfahan, one that brings us closer, I hope, to understanding the city as a total life-world encompassing human experiences, physical spaces, material objects, natural elements, and social relations.

Considering spaces and experiences as a whole, the narrative of the following chapters, divided into three parts, unfolds across the full arc from the conception and construction of the city to its sensory experiences and literary representations. Laying the groundwork for the core discussions of the book, part 1 explores Isfahan's history, planning trajectory, and urban configuration. Focusing on the pre-Safavid history of Isfahan, chapter 1 outlines the urban structure of the medieval city and the notions that it came to embody over the ages. This chapter also examines early Safavid urban interventions

in Isfahan, which laid the foundation for seventeenth-century imperial projects. Chapter 2 investigates the process of planning and constructing Isfahan during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Particularly, the chapter reexamines the chronology of the city's development under Shah Abbas, discussing Isfahan's urban image as the capital of an early modern empire. Turning to the Safavid master plan, chapter 3 outlines the modes of eco-urban design that lent Isfahan a verdant cityscape and a pronounced sense of spatial coherence.

The three chapters that constitute part 2 consider aspects of urban experience in the major constituent parts of the new Isfahan: the Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan, the Chaharbagh, and extramural quarters. The aural and temporal dimensions of urban experience are the main concerns of chapter 4, which concentrates on the acoustic environment of the Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan and its time-indicating and audiovisual components. I specifically demonstrate that, contrary to the common assumption, the mechanical clock installed on the north side of the square was an integral part of its design from the outset. Together with other elements such as the *naqqāra-khāna* (kettledrum hall) and coffeehouses, this mechanical clock and another clock pavilion built in the 1640s created a distinctive soundscape, punctuated the flow of time, and regulated the rhythms of civic life in the plaza and beyond. The socio-aesthetics of visual experience is the subject of chapter 5, which investigates the optical structure of the Chaharbagh. This chapter recreates the embodied, sensory experience of the promenade through the gaze of a mobile beholder, reconstructing its bordering pavilions, landscape elements, and social establishments. Finally, the urban form and lived experiences of the extramural quarters (Abbasabad, New Julfa,

Gabrabad) are addressed in chapter 6. Built on a rectilinear pattern and accessed by tree-lined avenues, these verdant, spacious districts contrasted with the age-old compact urban fabric of the pre-Safavid walled town. I contend that Isfahan's new developments constituted a unified cluster of planned quarters closely bound up with the new civic identities that the city fashioned and contained.

Focusing on the lyric imaginaries of poets, part 3 explores urban experience in the broader cityscape. Poetic descriptions of Isfahan date primarily from the mid-1600s, a period of dynamic urban expansion and literary efflorescence. Chapter 7 outlines these concurrent urban and literary developments before analyzing their interrelations and charting the modes of visual and verbal engagement with the built environment, the subject of chapter 8. This discussion lays the groundwork for the final chapter, which is devoted to an in-depth scrutiny of the "Guide for Strolling in Isfahan." After matching its itinerary with the city's topography, the chapter examines the text's import and effect as a literary artifice and spatial representation. Along with other sources, the guide hints at the emergence of a novel form of solitary urban experience that was closely entangled with Isfahan's material and social spaces.

In the conclusion, I reflect on the implications of my inquiry for understanding the place of Safavid Isfahan in a global context. Seen through the lens of urban experience, what Isfahan shared with contemporaneous early modern cities was not its status as the seat of a centralized state or the erection of iconic monuments as emblems of imperial authority. Rather, like its counterparts across the globe, Isfahan constituted a metropolitan setting that nurtured new modalities of living and experience. Here not only was the silver of the new world exchanged

for silk, but vibrant social and material spaces were formed around the consumption of novel substances, and new perceptions of the self and the world were fashioned through embodied, subjective, and multisensory interactions with the built environment. The analysis of urban experience thus offers a unique prism for comparative studies of early modern cities, revealing how the circulation of materials and people engendered comparable experiences across the early modern world.