

Supplementary Architectural Elements in Safavid Architecture: Reinterpreting Their Role in the Formation of Privacy Based on Persian Paintings and Travel Accounts

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Detailed abstract

Introduction

Privacy is one of the fundamental concepts in traditional Iranian architecture, playing a significant role in organizing spatial relationships and regulating interactions between people, space, and the built environment. In traditional Iranian architecture, privacy was not established solely through permanent architectural elements such as walls, courtyards, iwans, or the overall building layout. Rather, a range of supplementary and flexible elements also played an essential role in regulating the relationship between public, semi-private, and private domains. By controlling visibility, directing access, defining territories, and creating temporary boundaries, these elements enabled different degrees of privacy and seclusion while organizing spatial quality according to functional, social, and cultural needs.

A considerable number of supplementary architectural elements from the Safavid period—including curtains, tents, canopies, pavilions, wooden screens (*tārmī*), window shutters, and lattice screens—have disappeared over time because they were constructed from lightweight materials such as textiles, wood, and natural fibers. Consequently, their functions and architectural significance cannot be fully understood through surviving buildings alone, making visual and historical sources indispensable for their reconstruction.

Safavid miniature paintings constitute one of the most valuable sources for identifying these architectural elements and understanding their spatial organization. Beyond illustrating literary and historical narratives, Safavid painters carefully depicted architectural settings, the arrangement of architectural components, and the ways in which spaces were used. Likewise, travel accounts by Chardin, Clavijo, Pietro della Valle, Kaempfer, Tavernier, Olearius, Sanson, and Figueroa provide valuable descriptions of these elements and their practical applications, allowing visual evidence to be compared with historical documentation.

A review of previous studies indicates that most research has examined the concept of privacy primarily through permanent architectural components and the overall spatial organization of buildings. By contrast, the role of supplementary and flexible architectural elements in creating and regulating different forms of privacy—particularly in Safavid architecture—has rarely been investigated independently. Accordingly, this study aims to clarify the role of supplementary architectural elements in the formation of privacy and seclusion in the architectural spaces represented in Safavid miniature paintings and addresses how these elements contributed to visual, access, and spatial privacy.

Materials and Methods

This study is fundamental in purpose and employs a descriptive–analytical methodology based on library research, historical documents, and qualitative content analysis. Safavid miniature paintings constitute the primary research material, while contemporary travel accounts serve as complementary textual sources for interpreting, validating, and enriching the findings derived from the visual analysis.

The research corpus consists of architectural illustrations found in major illustrated Safavid manuscripts, including the *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp, *Khamsa* of Nizami, *Haft Awrang* of Jami, and other contemporary works. In the first stage, all paintings were examined for the presence of architectural elements. Paintings lacking architectural settings or supplementary elements relevant to the formation and regulation of privacy were excluded. Subsequently, twenty-three paintings containing clearly identifiable supplementary elements suitable for analysis were purposively selected. The selection criteria included the clarity of architectural representation, the recognizability of supplementary elements, the diversity of open, semi-open, and enclosed spaces, and the potential for analyzing the role of these elements in the formation of privacy and seclusion.

During the analytical phase, supplementary architectural elements depicted in the selected paintings were identified, documented, and classified according to their physical characteristics, spatial arrangement, and functional role. Based on theoretical concepts of privacy and spatial organization in Iranian architecture (Pirnia, 2002; Memarian, 1996), these elements were categorized into three principal groups: elements controlling visual privacy, elements organizing access and spatial separation, and elements defining spatial territories. Their respective contributions to visual privacy, access privacy, and spatial privacy were then examined.

Because many paintings exhibited similar functional characteristics, six representative examples displaying the greatest clarity and functional diversity were selected for detailed discussion. Finally, the analytical findings were compared with descriptions recorded by Safavid-period travelers—including Chardin, Clavijo, Pietro della Valle, Olearius, Tavernier, and Kaempfer—to evaluate the correspondence between pictorial representations and historical evidence.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that supplementary architectural elements represented in Safavid miniature paintings were not merely decorative or functional additions but constituted an integral component of the architectural spatial system, actively contributing to the formation and regulation of privacy and seclusion. Through the creation of flexible spatial boundaries, these elements regulated relationships between people, space, and different territorial domains, often performing functions that are commonly attributed only to permanent architectural components.

Curtains, window shutters, and lattice screens emerged as the principal elements responsible for establishing visual privacy. By restricting or directing lines of sight without completely interrupting spatial relationships, these elements created varying degrees of visual seclusion while maintaining continuity between interior and exterior spaces. This interpretation is consistent with descriptions

provided by Chardin, Pietro della Valle, and Olearius, all of whom emphasize the extensive use of such elements for controlling visibility and preserving privacy.

Regarding access privacy, entrance curtains, door leaves, wooden screens, and certain forms of tents were found to play significant roles in guiding movement, regulating circulation, and organizing hierarchical access. These elements distinguished public, semi-private, and private domains while controlling entry according to the social status of users and the function of spaces. Similar spatial arrangements are documented in the travel accounts of Clavijo, Chardin, and Sanson concerning royal palaces, gardens, and ceremonial encampments.

The analysis further revealed that tents, pavilions, and canopies played a fundamental role in defining spatial privacy. Without relying on permanent architectural structures, these elements established autonomous territories within open spaces while simultaneously providing climatic comfort and expressing social hierarchy. In numerous paintings, rulers or principal figures occupy these temporary enclosed domains, whereas other individuals remain outside them, demonstrating the simultaneous articulation of spatial organization and social order.

Comparison between the miniature paintings and contemporary travel accounts confirms a substantial correspondence between visual representations and historical descriptions. This consistency suggests that Safavid miniature paintings constitute reliable sources not only for artistic interpretation but also for reconstructing architectural organization and identifying ephemeral architectural elements that have largely disappeared from the surviving monuments.

Overall, the findings indicate that privacy in Safavid architecture resulted from the interaction between permanent architectural structures and supplementary architectural elements. Owing to their mobility, adaptability, and temporary character, supplementary elements enabled the continuous adjustment of spatial boundaries and therefore constituted a fundamental component of Safavid spatial organization.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that supplementary architectural elements represented in Safavid miniature paintings should not be regarded merely as temporary or secondary components; rather, they formed an essential part of the architectural spatial system responsible for establishing and regulating privacy and seclusion. By controlling visibility, organizing access, and defining spatial territories, these elements created flexible boundaries between public, semi-private, and private domains. Consequently, privacy in Safavid architecture emerged not solely from permanent architectural structures but through the interaction between permanent and supplementary elements.

From a theoretical perspective, the study suggests that prevailing interpretations of privacy in Iranian architecture, which primarily emphasize permanent architectural components, require reconsideration. Neglecting supplementary elements leads to an incomplete understanding of spatial organization and the mechanisms through which privacy was established in Safavid architecture, since these elements frequently played the principal role in regulating spatial and social relationships.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates that combining the analysis of Safavid miniature paintings with contemporary travel accounts provides an effective approach for reconstructing architectural

elements that have disappeared because of their short-lived materials. Thus, Persian miniature paintings should be regarded not only as artistic productions but also as reliable historical sources for investigating spatial organization and reconstructing lost architectural features.

In conclusion, this research highlights the necessity of considering both permanent and supplementary architectural elements when interpreting Safavid architecture. Such an integrated perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of privacy in historical Iranian architecture and provides a methodological framework for future studies on supplementary architectural elements in other historical periods, garden architecture, temporary structures, and courtly environments.

Keywords: Supplementary architectural elements; Privacy; Safavid architecture; Persian paintings; Spatial organization.