

Visual Language in Architectural Heritage: A Semiotic Analysis of the Fahadan Hotel in the Historic City of Yazd, Iran

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Abstract

This study delves into the intersection of semiotics and architecture through an analysis of the Fahadan Hotel, formerly known as the Tehrani-ha House. This significant property from the historic Qajar period is located in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Historic City of Yazd, Iran. Drawing upon semiotic theory, the research interprets the visual language of the heritage building as a cultural text composed of signs, symbols, and meanings embedded within its architectural elements. The study examines both the exterior and interior features of the house through denotative, connotative, metaphorical, and metonymic lenses. The findings reveal that architectural forms in Iranian heritage, such as domes, wind-catchers, symmetry, light manipulation, and material choices, function as a semiotic system that reflects spiritual, social, and environmental values. This paper posits that Iranian architecture extends beyond mere aesthetic and functional dimensions, serving as a medium for cultural communication. The semiotic analysis of the Fahadan House underscores the effectiveness of semiotic tools in deciphering the symbolic grammar of architectural heritage and contributes to broader discussions on space, identity, and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Architectural Semiotics, Symbolic Space, Cultural Sign System, Iranian Architecture, Qajar Architecture, Yazd, Fahadan House

1. Introduction

Semiotics, commonly defined as the science of signs, offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing the meanings embedded in diverse cultural expressions, including architecture. This analytical method originates in the foundational theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, who conceptualized the sign as a dyadic relationship between the 'signifier' and the 'signified' (Chandler, 2002), and Charles Sanders Peirce, who introduced a triadic model comprising icon, index, and symbol (Donougho, 1987). These early theories have since been expanded by scholars such as Barthes (1980), Algirdas Greimas (Juodinyte-Kuznetsova, 2011), and Eco (1984; Eco, 1986), who have demonstrated the applicability of semiotics to the visual arts and built environment.

In Islamic architectural contexts, where figural representation is often restricted due to religious tenets, architecture assumes an essential communicative function. Instead of literal iconography, Islamic architecture employs abstract visual elements to express spiritual and cosmological ideas inspired by the Quran and Hadith (Grabar, 1983; Hanachi, 2015). This symbolic mode of expression is particularly evident in Iranian architecture, which integrates forms such as domes, geometric ornamentation, and light manipulation to embody metaphysical concepts such as unity, order, and transcendence (Hejazi, 2009).

This paper employs a semiotic approach to investigate the architectural language of the Fahadan House, a notable Qajar-era residence located in the historic city of Yazd. Now functioning as the Fahadan Hotel, the house provides a rich case study for exploring how Iranian architecture utilized space, form, and material as symbolic media to communicate social, spiritual, and environmental values (Mehr Chain Hotels Group, n.d.).

The central aim of this study is to decode the semiotic dimensions of the Fahadan House by treating it as a cultural text composed of signs and symbols. This inquiry is guided by the following objectives:

1. Interpret the architectural features of the house as components of a meaningful sign system
2. Apply key semiotic tools to uncover latent meanings encoded in the house's spatial and visual grammar

By shifting the analytical focus from architectural form and function to symbolic meaning, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how architecture can serve as a medium for cultural memory and identity. Through interdisciplinary methods bridging architectural theory, semiotics, and cultural studies, it affirms the potential of semiotic analysis to reveal the intangible narratives embedded in Iran's architectural heritage.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Semiotics as a tool for architectural analysis

Semiotics, as introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, provides a methodological framework for decoding signs and sign systems embedded in various forms of cultural production, including architecture. Saussure conceptualized a sign as a binary structure consisting of the *signifier* (the physical form) and the *signified* (the conceptual meaning), bound by social convention (Chandler, 2002). In contrast, Peirce proposed a triadic model of the sign, comprising the *icon* (similarity), *index* (causal or existential connection), and *symbol* (arbitrary convention), which has proven highly effective in the analysis of visual media, including buildings and spatial configurations (Donougho, 1987).

The semiotic potential of architecture has been further explored by theorists such as Roland Barthes, who emphasized the cultural connotations embedded in architectural forms (Barthes, 1980), and Umberto Eco, who highlighted the interpretive plurality of built environments (Eco, 1986). Eco asserted that buildings communicate beyond their utilitarian purposes by acting as signifiers of power, status, and identity. This makes architectural analysis particularly amenable to semiotic interpretation, where space and form are treated as texts that can be read and decoded (Eco, 1984).

Early applications of semiotics in architectural theory emerged prominently in the work of Donald Preziosi, Charles Jencks, and George Baird. Their collective writings, including the seminal volume *Meaning and Architecture* (1969), framed architecture as a semiotic system reflective of cultural ideologies (Hale, 2000). Algirdas Greimas's structuralist approach, particularly as adapted by the Paris School, emphasized the socio-cultural codes that underpin architectural expression (Juodinyte-Kuznetsova, 2011). Despite the growing body of literature, the application of semiotics to Islamic and Iranian architecture remains limited. Notable contributions include Rudi Paret's distinction between primary and secondary symbols in Islamic design (Paret, 1958) and Oleg Grabar's differentiation between *signs* and *symbols*, noting that while a minaret functions as a sign for prayer, it may also operate symbolically by evoking broader cultural or religious associations (Grabar, 1983).

This research builds upon these foundational theories to explore the visual language of the Fahadan House in Yazd, employing a semiotic methodology that includes denotation, connotation, metaphor, metonymy, and sign typologies (Chandler, 2002; Hayward, 1996). The purpose is to decode how various architectural elements serve as communicative tools, conveying meanings shaped by their historical and cultural contexts.

2.2 Linguistic properties of architecture

The analogy between architecture and language has long been a subject of theoretical discourse. Architecture, like language, comprises a syntax (structure), vocabulary (forms), and semantics (meanings), enabling it to convey messages both explicitly and implicitly. As Claflen (1992) argues, architects can be seen as authors of a visual language, inventing new dialects of spatial and formal expression (Claflen, 1992).

Eco (1984) suggests that buildings serve as cultural artifacts that communicate ideas such as property, authority, and identity, independent of their practical functions (Eco, 1984). This interpretive openness is further reinforced by Jencks's (1980) reading of Gaudí's *Casa Batlló*, where formal elements yield multiple interpretations based on the viewer's cultural background (Jencks, 1980).

Taurens (2008) proposes two semantic approaches to architectural meaning. The first dissects the building into meaningful units, treating each component as part of a broader architectural "language." The second emphasizes contextual interpretation, asserting that meaning arises from the relationship between architectural elements and their societal, spatial, and temporal contexts (Taurens, 2008).

From a historical perspective, early circular settlements were associated with dynamism and nomadic lifestyles, while later rectangular or square urban plans reflected permanence and societal structure (Barabanov, 2002). These patterns underscore the semiotic nature of spatial forms and their evolution over time. As Jencks (1980) notes, meanings attributed to architectural features such as white walls or ribbon windows can signify specific stylistic movements (e.g., the International Style), demonstrating that architectural signs are subject to cultural encoding and decoding.

2.3 Sampling, data collection, and evaluation procedure

This study uses the Fahadan House in Yazd, Iran, as a case study for semiotic analysis. Built in the late 18th century during the Qajar period, and later converted into a hotel. This historic residence serves as a rich text for examining the interplay of sign systems within traditional Iranian architecture (Mehr Chain Hotels Group, n.d.).

The sampling strategy involved a purposive selection of architectural elements deemed symbolically and culturally significant, including structural features and decorative components.

Data collection was conducted through photographic documentation, textual information from publicly accessible web sources, architectural plans, and historical records provided by the Yazd Cultural Heritage Administration.

The evaluation employed a semiotic framework grounded in the models proposed by Peirce, Saussure, and Eco, supplemented by the typologies of denotation/connotation and metaphor/metonymy (Chandler, 2002; Eco, 1986; Hayward, 1996). Each architectural element was analyzed in terms of its function, form, and symbolic meaning, and categorized using a matrix of sign types. This systematic approach allowed for the identification of recurring patterns of meaning and the cultural codes that structure them.

Table 1. Semiotic framework for interpreting architectural elements in Fahadan House.

Semiotic Framework for Interpreting Architectural Elements in Fahadan House		
Semiotic Concept	Definition	Architectural Application
Icon	A sign that resembles or imitates the signified through form or appearance.	Arches in Iranian architecture resemble early shelters, symbolizing security and protection.
Index	A sign is directly connected to the signified through a causal or existential link.	Wind-catchers index the desert climate; central courtyards indicate the social need for privacy and microclimatic control.
Symbol	A sign whose relationship with the signified is based on social convention or agreement, not resemblance.	Domes symbolize the heavens; colorful glass represents spiritual illumination.
Denotation	The literal or primary meaning of a sign.	A pointed arch denotes a structural element supporting loads.
Connotation	The cultural or emotional meanings associated with a sign, shaped by context.	A dome may connote spirituality; the pool connotes purity and calm.
Metaphor	A figure of speech in which a concept is described in terms of another, based on resemblance or analogy.	A throne used as a symbol of authority, not merely furniture.
Metonymy	A sign in which something is represented or invoked through association rather than resemblance.	A crown invokes the monarchy; in architecture, wind-catchers invoke ascension or air flow.

Developed by the author based on (Chandler, 2002; Barthes, 1980; Eco, 1986; Hejazi, 2009; Hayward, 1996; Zomarshidi, 2008; Chidaneh, n.d.; Civilica, n.d.; Hoviat Shahr, n.d.; Islamic Artz, n.d.; SID, n.d.)

3. Case study: Fahadan House

The Historic City of Yazd was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2017. It preserves its traditional districts, the Qanat irrigation system, historic houses, bazaars, baths, mosques, synagogues, Zoroastrian temples, and gardens. The Fahadan House is situated in the heart of one of Yazd's oldest districts, the Fahadan district, next to a

repurposed ancient prison and a millennia-old monument. As one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, Yazd values its significant heritage buildings, which reflect the tradition of the region's architecture and are vital for maintaining the area's identity (Municipality of Yazd, n.d.).



Figure 1. Location of Fahadan House in Fahadan District, Historic City of Yazd, Yazd Province, Central Iran (Google Maps, n.d.).

The Fahadan House, formerly known as the Tehrani-ha House, an architectural relic from the Qajar period (1794 – 1925), is referred to as the Fahadan Museum Hotel in Iranian sources. This building was constructed over 200 years ago by Sheikh Mehdi Arab, a prominent carpet and rug merchant. Over time, the Arab family adopted the surname "Tehrani," which contributed to the building's name, and the house became well-regarded among the local community for its hospitality. Finally, it has evolved into a significant lodging establishment for travelers, a significant cultural and historical landmark within the realm of Iranian heritage hospitality as part of the Mehr Chain Hotels in Yazd (Mehr Chain Hotels Group, n.d.).



Figure 2. A view of Fahadan House and its southern porch and wind-catcher, Yazd, Iran (Mehr Chain Hotels Group, n.d.).

The architectural design of the house features a variety of remarkable spaces. Notable areas include the entrance, a hallway, the main courtyard with its distinctive view, a vestibule, a cellar, the porch, and the ‘shah-neshin’ room (king room), which is marked by its wind-catchers. The entrance to the house is characterized by a visually appealing entrance hall, a vestibule, and a hallway located in the northwest corner of the structure. This pathway leads to the courtyard, which serves as the centerpiece of the house. The courtyard is rectangular and extends in a north-south orientation, bordered by elevated spaces that rise to nearly two stories. Notably, the fountain is placed in front of the porch rather than at the center, with the main area of the courtyard primarily covered in greenery. The porch, hall, and doorways are essential components of the main spatial layout, strategically designed to enhance the relationship between these areas and the courtyard. Smaller chambers adjacent to the courtyard are intentionally positioned to take advantage of their views. The corners of the courtyard feature covered, independent spaces that rely solely on natural light and are connected to the courtyard through a series of corridors. The service area, accessed via a separate entrance, is situated to the south of the house, behind the spaces adjoining the central courtyard, clearly distinguishing it from the primary living areas. Among the various spaces within the house, the cellars are particularly notable; these are located at the eastern and southern fronts, as well as the southwestern corner. The eastern cellar contains a staircase that leads down to an area with an underground stream, while the southern cellar connects to the main wind-catcher room (GoToYazd, n.d.-a; GoToYazd, n.d.-b; Iran Traditional Hotels, n.d.).

This complex of spaces serves not only functional purposes but also reflects the architectural creativity and cultural context of its time. A distinctive feature of the Fahadan House is its collection of historical artifacts, which complements the architectural grandeur that underscores its historical importance. The building has also served as the economic

consulate for several European nations, including France and Germany, further solidifying its status as a registered historical monument (Mehr Chain Hotels Group, n.d.).

The architectural layout of the Fahadan House and various aesthetically pleasing elements showcase the sophisticated traditional architecture of the region, preserving intricate vaulted ceilings, a historical entrance, a corridor, and a vestibule, all contributing to an ambiance that reflects the traditional lifestyle associated with Yazd's earthen architecture.

The semiotic analysis of Fahadan House is divided into two sections: the exterior and interior of the building.

3.1 Exterior of Fahadan House

The exterior of Fahadan House showcases numerous significant characteristics of Iranian architecture. Plato posited that the square embodies beauty in its purest form. The square symbolizes the earth, in contrast to the circle, which represents the sky. The equal sides and angles of Fahadan House evoke a sense of stasis and balance, while the cubic form conveys stability more profoundly. As the quintessential representation of a house, the cubic form is predominantly employed by Iranian architects (ICivil.ir, n.d.).



Figure 3. Views of the cubic form of Fahadan House, its central courtyard, southern porch, and wind-catchers (YazdFarda, n.d.).

Iranian architecture is inherently sustainable. The central courtyard serves as an effective solution to the needs for privacy, tranquility, and connection to nature, particularly in desert areas (Civilica, n.d.). Additionally, the wind-catcher exemplifies a remarkable aspect of sustainable design in hot climates, functioning as a static cooling and ventilation system. Historical texts from the 8th and 9th centuries that describe the city of Yazd reference wind-catchers as tall structures with multiple openings (Hoviat Shahr, n.d.).



Figure 4. Views of the wind-catchers, domes, and the tent covering of the central courtyard of Fahadan House (Mehr Chain Hotels Group, n.d.).

The dome is a significant element of Islamic Iranian architecture, evoking a strong sense of belonging. The cubic structure is intricately linked to the dome, symbolizing the connection between the earth and sky present in numerous architectural designs (Islamic Artz, n.d.). Additionally, the colorful glass panels in the dome transform sunlight into vibrant hues, providing various functional advantages in addition to their symbolic design purpose (SID, n.d.).



Figure 5. Domed spaces of Fahadan House (Mehr Chain Hotels Group, n.d.).

Arches serve as a poignant reminder of the earliest stone constructions that protected nomadic peoples, thereby symbolizing safety and security (Zomarshidi, 2008). In a different context, arches in Iranian architecture play a crucial role in mitigating redundancy and monotony within design, contributing to a richer architectural vocabulary (Noandishaan Forums, n.d.).



Figure 6. Arched entrance of Fahadan House (TripAdvisor, n.d.).

Symmetry, representing a perfect image of equivalency, is a fundamental principle of design in Iranian architecture. Beyond its aesthetic allure, symmetry emphasizes a static quality that contributes to the overall visual harmony. Additionally, it eliminates preference among different elements and components, promoting a sense of balance and uniformity (Mag-Iran, n.d.).



Figure 7. Fahadan House, Yazd, Iran (Mehr Chain Hotels Group, n.d.).

3.2 Interior of Fahadan House

Iranian architects have consistently focused on the details that infuse life into a space. This section explores some of the factors that influence the interior of Fahadan House. Proportions play a significant role in the creation of shapes and forms found in nature. These proportions are often associated with sacred geometry, embodying spiritual principles and symbolic features. In line with the architectural styles of the past, Iranian architecture integrates squares, rectangles, triangles, circles, and regular polygons (Hejazi, 2009).

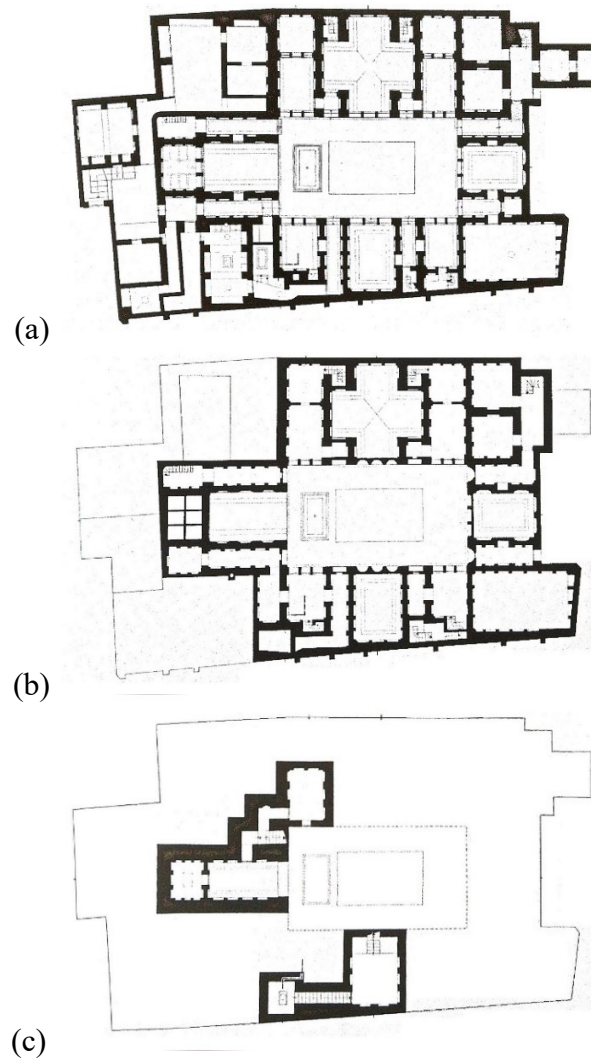


Figure 8. (a) Ground level, (b) above ground level, and (c) below ground level plans of Fahadan House from the archives of the Yazd Cultural Heritage Administration (Yazd Cultural Heritage Administration Archive).

The pool serves as the heart of Iranian architecture, commonly found in square, rectangular, or circular shapes. It represents the splendor of Iranian gardens and, in desert environments, fulfills the essential need for greenery. Typically located in the main courtyard of Iranian homes, it is not uncommon to find multiple pools within a single residence. These pools serve various purposes, including beautification, washing, drinking, and even religious practices. Moreover, they symbolize purity and act as mirrors, reflecting the home, its inhabitants, and the events that take place within its bounds (Chidaneh, n.d.).

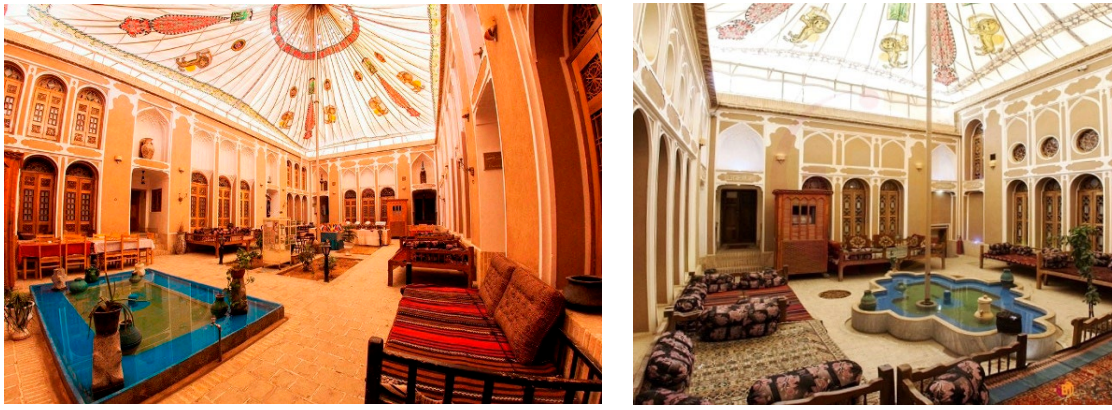


Figure 9. Pools in the main (left) and second (right) courtyards of Fahadan House (Mehr Chain Hotels Group, n.d.).

The ‘shah-neshin’ room is a designated area within an Iranian house, characterized by its exquisite decoration and ornate features, including intricate mirror work and plaster designs. This elevated space, situated above ground level, boasts a high arch-shaped ceiling and is reserved for the elder male resident of higher status among the household members (IranMemari, n.d.).



Figure 10. A view of Shah-Neshin room in Fahadan House (TripAdvisor, n.d.).

Iranian architecture has always been influenced by environmental conditions, with light emerging as a key factor that guides and shapes it. In hotter regions, light plays a particularly significant role in determining architectural spaces. Additionally, the interplay of light and shadow serves as a decorative aim within the design (Hanachi, 2015).



Figure 11. Light/Shadow in interior spaces of Fahadan House (Mehr Chain Hotels Group, n.d.).

One of the key features of Iranian architecture is the 'orosi,' which refers to a door or window that opens onto a courtyard, characterized by its wooden frame and colorful glass panels. In the hot and arid regions, Orosi openings were utilized to filter and soften harsh sunlight. Additionally, the various colors served multiple purposes, including deterring insects (Memarnet, n.d.).



Figure 12. Orosi doors opening to the courtyard in Fahadan House (TripAdvisor, n.d.).

The principles of sufficiency, minimalism, and the use of local materials are key aspects of Iranian architecture, particularly due to the significance of environmental considerations. In Iran, some of the most artistic architectural creations can be found in desert regions, such as Yazd, where clay and bricks emerge as the most suitable building materials (Mortazavi & Mirzade, 2014).



Figure 13. Clay ornaments and bricks in Fahadan House (TripAdvisor, n.d.)

4. Results and discussions

The semiotic analysis of the Fahadan House reveals that its architectural language operates as a coherent system of signs, encompassing all three Peircean categories: icons, indices, and symbols, alongside the linguistic structures articulated by Saussure and further explored by Barthes and Eco. The building's form, spatial organization, and decorative elements serve not only utilitarian or aesthetic purposes but also communicate complex cultural, spiritual, and environmental meanings. Table 2 synthesizes the semiotic modes present in selected elements of both the exterior and interior architecture. Many components exhibit a layered sign structure; for instance, the wind-catchers function as indexical signs linked to environmental needs while simultaneously evoking metaphorical connotations of ascension. Similarly, the dome, though structurally significant, acts as a symbolic bridge between the earthly and celestial realms, conveying a metaphysical narrative.

Table 2: Summary of the semiotic system included in Fahadan House.

Summary of the Semiotic System Included in Fahadan House							
	Signifier	Signified	Mode of Sign	Denotation	Connotation	Metaphor	Metonymy
Exterior	Cubical form of the building	Stability	Indexical	✓	-	-	-
	Central courtyards, porches, and patios	Privacy	Indexical	✓	-	-	-
	Wind-catchers and vertical axis elements	Ascension	Indexical	✓	-	-	✓
	Domes with colorful glasses	Diversity/ Spiritual elevation	Symbolic	✓	✓	✓	-
	Arches	Security	Iconic	✓	✓	-	-
	Symmetrical openings	Equality	Indexical	✓	✓	-	-
Interior	Square shapes in plans	Harmony	Indexical	✓	✓	-	-
	Pools	Life, Clarity, Purity	Symbolic	✓	✓	-	✓
	Defined Shah-Neshin (elevated king room)	Dignity, Social status	Symbolic	✓	✓	-	✓
	Light and shadow interplay	Calmness, Spiritual contemplation	Iconic	✓	✓	-	-
	Small colorful glasses	Diversity, Illumination	Symbolic	✓	✓	✓	-
	Use of clay, brick, and wood	Modesty, Unity with nature	Iconic	✓	✓	-	-

The findings indicate that connotative meanings predominate in the sign system of the Fahadan House. Features such as domes, pools, symmetry, and the interplay of light and shadow operate beyond their denotative meanings, encoding deeper cultural values like spirituality, purity, harmony, and divine order. The presence of metaphoric and metonymic signs further highlights the building's richness as a semiotic artifact. For example, the 'shah-neshin' room signifies dignity through its metonymic association with the social hierarchy, while the colorful 'orosi' doors and windows metaphorically transform natural light into spiritual illumination. The symbolic structure of the house articulates a worldview grounded in Islamic-Iranian cosmology and traditional environmental adaptation. The building encapsulates a comprehensive cultural narrative encoded in its architectural language, with its grammar defined by form, material, and symbolic codes. This reinforces the hypothesis that Iranian architecture functions as a cultural text, where semiotic tools are essential for deciphering its deeper communicative layers.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights that architectural heritage, particularly within the framework of Iranian-Islamic traditions, conveys a rich tapestry of cultural meanings through its visual and spatial language. The Fahadan House serves as a compelling case study, illustrating how architecture can be interpreted as a semiotic text, where forms, materials, and spatial arrangements act as signs within a broader cultural lexicon. By applying semiotic tools such as denotation, connotation, metaphor, metonymy, and typologies of signs, the research reveals the latent meanings embedded in the architectural elements of the Fahadan House. These meanings transcend mere structural or aesthetic considerations, uncovering layers of spiritual symbolism, environmental adaptation, and social representation. Architectural features are not simply stylistic choices; they signify deeper values. The coexistence of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs within a single structure emphasizes the architectural richness of this heritage site and affirms its ability to serve as a vessel for cultural memory and identity. Furthermore, the study underscores the value of semiotics in architectural analysis, particularly when examining traditional buildings, where contemporary interpretive frameworks may overlook symbolic dimensions. Engaging with such buildings through a semiotic lens enables modern audiences to connect with the intangible narratives they encode, preserving their communicative function across time. The Fahadan House is not merely a historical monument; it is a syntactic composition of meanings, constructed through an architectural language shaped by cultural and environmental imperatives. This analysis contributes to larger discourses on architectural semiotics and heritage interpretation, reinforcing the notion that architecture serves as a medium of cultural communication as much as it is a tangible artifact.

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