Reconstructing the city through the establishment of an organic relation between individual dwelling and community was a critical concept in the theorisation of a socially-relevant architecture in the 1960s to 1970s both in the form of treatises, and in speculative and actual projects. Underpinning all these projects was both a dismissal of the subjugation of the housing complex to larger abstract planning structures, and an apparent belief in the ability of architectural typologies to provide the scaffolding for authentic forms of social life to develop. In the Second International Congress of Architects held in Persepolis, Iran, in 1974, entitled 'Towards a Quality of Life', many leading international architectural theorists and practitioners debated issues pertaining to the problems inherent to social identity, human habitat, and the internal economic migration then being faced in Iran, but also familiar to Europeans since the early post-war period, and previously addressed in 'Realist' projects such as Ridolfi and Quaroni’s Tiburtino estate outside Rome (1949-54). Growing out of this conference was the Persepolis Declaration, a formulation of principles to underlie human settlement that was to form the basis for the 1976 Vancouver Declaration on Habitat. Among the recommendations of the Congress was the design and construction of several exemplary settlements that would form models for future housing, notably the Aga Kahn prize-winning Shushtar-No’w (Shushtar New Town), designed by the Queen’s cousin, Kamran Diba. In this paper we will examine this project in relation to the conference principles and will interrogate the following questions: can it be understood as a local search for cultural traditions and essences, or for international precedents and narratives that can be reshaped in a local context? How are the two negotiated?
Reconstructing the city through the establishment of an organic relation between individual dwelling and community was a critical concept in the theorisation of a socially-relevant architecture in the 1960s to 1970s both in the form of treatises and speculative and actual projects. Underpinning these projects was a rejection of abstract planning structures (‘naive functionalism’, as Rossi put it), and an apparent belief in the ability of architectural typologies to provide the scaffolding for forms of communal life to develop. Inherent to this project was the projection of images of authenticity. Concurrently in Iran in 1974 there was an International Congress of Architects held in Persepolis entitled ‘Towards a Quality of Life’, this quest for authenticity informed the agenda – many of the leading international theorists and practitioners debated the issues pertaining to regional culture, social identity, human habitat, and the internal economic migration in the country. In this paper, focusing on the theme of social housing as urban project, emerging out of the 1974 congress, we examine how an architecture of the local is instituted through the exchanges of global ideas, styles, and technologies which within a local context led to the production of architectural images. We have elsewhere noted that pre-revolutionary Iran was the setting for several major international architectural congresses, 1970-76, sponsored by the Empress Farah Diba and aimed at increasing the local architectural expertise – the organisers, Kamran Diba the protagonist of this paper, and others, invited architects they considered to be world leaders in urban design and housing.

Emerging out of the decade of the 1960s, Iran, like other peripheral architectural cultures sought to position herself both in relation to globalised techniques of planning, technology and design, and to reconnect to a perceived ‘authentic’ cultural ground – in order to effect a re-foundation of cultural meaning within the modern condition. This cultural project took place both in relation to institutional architecture – government health and educational buildings – but also in the area of mass architecture and public housing, where there were earlier experiments by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in southern Iran.

The 1970s petro-economy of Iran which supported a rapid modernisation project caused a population displacement from rural areas to larger industrial cities and towns. This, as leading architect Kamran Diba observed, caused the growth of squatter housing and rise in socio-economic problems in the urban slums. Faced with this crisis, the government initiated a centrally planned housing programme. Various solutions were entertained, including imported pre-fabricated housing, a subject of the 1970 Congress in Isfahan. In this respect, the most paradigmatic project within this context of government-funded model housing communities is the company housing complex New Shushtar, near the historic city of Shushtar in Khuzestan. The commission was awarded in 1975, a year after the Second Congress, to DAZ Architects, Planners, and Engineers, for which Kamran Diba was the design director.

The outcome was an outstanding example of new town design in the developing world, its significance reflected in numerous journal publications and an Aga Khan award citation in 1986. By this time, the project was being understood in relation to the then-current theory
of Critical Regionalism.\(^\text{11}\) The project’s actual provenance and conceptual basis is rather different, and can be understood more in relation to what Manfredo Tafuri once defined, in relation to Louis Kahn, as the substitution of order and universality for historical perspective.\(^\text{12}\)

Indeed, while the story of New Shushtar is relatively well-known, less documented is its origin in the intellectual nexus in the 1974 Congress, a conjunction between certain ideas of progressive Western architects and attitudes to traditional settlements among certain leading Iranian architects.

The design for *Shushtar-No’w*, the concept for which was entirely the work of Diba himself,\(^\text{13}\) was based on an attempt to reinterpret the appearance and structure of traditional towns in the region and specifically the old town of Shushtar, using narrow alleyways that would provide shade, and habitable roofs to permit sleeping on the roofs during hot summer nights. Old Shushtar is an ancient town of pre-Islamic origin at the heart of an agricultural district. By the late 1960s it was one of the areas addressed by the Pahlavi modernisation projects aimed at combining modern technology and industry with the preservation of traditional culture.\(^\text{14}\) In this context, the company housing project was commissioned by the Karoun Agribusiness Corporation, established to develop a mechanised sugar-cane industry in the area, in concert with the Iran Housing Corporation, a government agency established

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**Fig. 1** Master plan of Shushtar New Town, Khuzestan Iran, 1976. Drawing by Nigel Westbrook and Ali Mozaffari after Kamran Diba and DAZ.

**Fig. 2** Aerial view of Shushtar New Town, Stage 1. Photograph by Ali Mozaffari, 1990.
to manage issues of population displacement arising from industrialisation, and the state Housing and Development Company.

The project, as described in the Aga Khan technical report for its award, was a “residential community for 25-30,000 people, adjoining the old city.” Construction began in 1976, and the first stage was completed in 1980. However, by the time of the Aga Khan report in 1986, only 700 of the planned 6500 families had been settled there. Furthermore, amidst the confusion caused by the Revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq war, war refugees and illegal squatters from outside the area had occupied some of the houses. Thus the on-going problem of internal migration had overtaken the scale of implementation of a project aimed toward its mitigation. Despite these unforeseeable problems, the project was praised by the Aga Khan Award panel for its faithfulness to the tradition of the region, balance, harmony and design for community. This endorsement recalls the Second Congress’ ‘Persepolis Declaration for an International Code of Human Habitat’ in which the delegates proposed that there should be the creation of a “wholesome, balanced and equitable habitat” and a response to the desirable diversity of perceptions and means inherent in “the shaping of the human habitat in time and place”, principles which were incorporated into the 1976 Vancouver Habitat Bill of Rights.

Indeed in many respects the design is responsive to its local context. Thus, the layout of apartments, rather than the modern functional program of a house, is derived from spatial units of rooms, which are all of a larger than typical size, permitting functional flexibility, akin to the traditional diurnal and seasonal variations in spatial use within the house. Secondly, the complex has a hierarchy of courtyards, from individual, to community and to urban scale. The internally-oriented openings shield against the harsh sunlight, maintain privacy and privilege the courtyard garden, akin to traditional houses. Finally, the design was consciously based upon a study of the way in which local people interacted in public and private space. The construction also reflects a modification of traditional mud-brick construction of the region- thus the thick walls are of local brickwork, while the roofs are constructed of beams supporting brick vaults.
But the most noticeable aspect of the project is its citation of selected *images* of traditional architecture. The urban configuration is based, in Diba’s words, on the concept of a fire temple courtyard occupying the highest part of the hill, and forming an axial centre for two broad spines of open space at right angles to each other, thus forming a configuration similar to that of a traditional Persian garden, or *Chahar Bagh* (fourfold gardens). In the original design, it was the axial spines that were extensively landscaped as a series of shady garden rooms. In each of the four resultant quadrants, narrow, shaded pedestrian streets connect to local neighbourhood courtyards, and are abutted by blocks of courtyard houses separated by lanes stepping down the hill. Other, non-Islamic sources may have contributed to the image through sharing a similar layout. Nonetheless as evident in the official photographs supplied by the architect, the built project conveys an image of Middle-Eastern and by implication ‘Islamic’ architecture. Notably, lattice-brickwork bridges frame the residential streets at points adjacent to neighbourhood courtyards, forming an image that is reminiscent of the nearby town of Dezful where Diba had undertaken a master plan, but which also recall the similarly bridged and shaded pedestrian streets in Kahn’s Indian School of Management (1962-74). However unlike the vernacular analogues, here the composition is contrived to construct such a view.

One intention behind the design of New Shushtar was to separate cars and pedestrians. In the original plan, cars were kept to the periphery of the complex, and the public spaces were reserved for pedestrian traffic, as in a traditional town like Old Shushtar. However, in the realised settlement, this was abandoned through neglect, and the pedestrian precinct has been compromised. The original pedestrian network is a remarkable conception: from West to East, this route was to connect a shopping centre, a bazaar, the central court with shops, adjacent mosque, a community and cultural centre, a Friday mosque, a new town square for the overall city of Shushtar, and via a new bridge, the old town. But comparison can also be made to Kahn and Ungers’ use of geometric figures collaged together to create a spatial montage – an image of unity.

This perception of the plan as an ‘image’, or more correctly a montage of images, raises a further question as to the ‘origin’ of the project. In this respect, it is proposed that, rather
than constituting a continuity with tradition, the project is a product of modern techniques, in which aspects of traditional buildings and towns have been cited, while figures and images have been appropriated from Western sources, most evidently the subcontinental work of Louis Kahn. In this respect, while Diba was American-trained, the work presented at the 1970s Architectural Congresses was the most likely immediate influence upon the design of the project. In our interview, Kashanjoo noted that the intention was to design a ‘total environment’, a notable theme of the 1970 and 1974 Congresses, inspired by the influence of Kahn.23

As previously noted, the organisers of the 1974 conference invited architects they considered to be world leaders in urban and housing design. Among these, Diba recently singled out Derek Walker, the urban designer of Milton Keynes (1966-7) and the German architect and theoretician Oswald M. Ungers.24 The first International Congress of Architects in Isfahan, held in 1970, had focused upon the issue of how to introduce modern techniques and processes into architecture without destroying traditional culture and values. The Iranian architect Nader Ardalan, supported by Louis Kahn, had called for the conscious embrace of a unitary concept of culture, in which material and spiritual worlds were in harmony.25 This idea of an authentic culture found its image in the form of the traditional village or town, for which Isfahan served as a spectacular model.

The second International Congress of Architects took place four years later in 1974 at Persepolis, a year after the oil crisis that had sent the Western world into recession. It was, from the start, much more pragmatic in the concerns raised, notably how to meet the challenges to traditional habitats posed by rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and internal migration spurred on by industrial development. In the preface to the proceedings, the Minister for Housing and Development, Houshang Ansari, noted that: “Societies grow and change, yet seek to maintain relevance, continuity and a sense of cultural identity.”26 In the congress, it was the issue of appropriate habitat that received the greatest attention – the provision of housing that not only met specified technical standards, but should also be culturally appropriate. The modernist goal of industrialised mass housing was not enough – instead, delegates like Fathy and Hartman argued that industrialisation and standardisation would not solve the problem of housing the poor in their countries, Egypt and Mexico.27 The structure and appearance of new housing settlements, unlike such generic industrialised estates, it was argued, should be based upon an understanding of the traditional house, village and city.28

Delegates also called for inhabitants to have agency in the shaping of their environments – this was discussed in relation to the recent competition for Peruvian favela housing, for which James Stirling had contributed an entry, presented to the Congress, which bears some resemblance in its courtyard structure to the later Shushtar project, combining the capacity for self-modification with an overall integration.29 The idea that both architecture and the city should possess an organic unity, rather than being the result of bureaucratic machinations, was stressed by both Iranians and European progressives alike.30 Thus, Ungers argued that there was a necessary interdependence between architecture and the
city,31 and the Gallo-Greek architect Candilis argued for the necessity of designing a total social environment.32 He emphasised the need to not just build housing, but to create a habitat – this of course being the title of Safdie’s Montreal Expo housing of 1967. Candilis discussed, as an exemplary model, the Peru housing competition for which among the delegates he, Stirling and Maki had submitted entries, but also raised the contradictions that arose from its process.

These Western architects were in essence arguing that architecture needs a social context, and is necessarily bound to economic and indeed political conditions. In a significant seminar session, Sert and Unger referred to the possibility of an Urban Bill of Rights that would establish the basic standards for all urban dwellers, and address the problems in housing associated with migrating villagers. Here, Diba noted the challenge of how to positively impact upon the lives of the people through new housing communities.33 One response to this problem, he argued, was the design of model communities that would form paradigmatic examples for future projects. He called on delegates to use the intellectual moral force of the congress to “give force and direction to the future development of [habitat], towards a more positive response to ... human needs.”34 It was Diba who would attempt to reconcile modern planning with this concern for organic unity in his project for company housing at Shushtar-No’w, surely a direct consequence of the resolutions of the 1974 Congress.

The call for an organic unity and continuity between the individual dwelling and the community as a whole, can be associated with a similarly shared narrative of loss, which, Tafuri noted, was common to both radical and conservative modernist and anti-modernist cultural commentators. So the situation is one of a lack of historicity, in which the protagonists substitute order and universality for historical perspective. In relation to this tendency, Tafuri notes, for example, Kahn’s ‘de-historified’ resolution of “oppositions and contrasts in messianic appeasement”. Tafuri’s critique places Kahn, and by implication all his followers and emulators, squarely within the modern condition of loss and estrangement.35 Tafuri drew upon Weber’s characterisation of modern culture as being characterised by rationalisation and ‘disenchantment’– the meaning of which is ambiguous – both ridding our eyes of ‘stardust’, or demythologisation, but also disillusionment, discontent. There is both a sense of liberation, and of loss. Disenchantment strips our culture of its grounding narrative – it creates a ‘crisis of values’ in reaction to which the avant-garde and derrière-garde constructed their progressive and regressive utopias.

In his work, “On the Concept of History” (1940), Benjamin rejected the myth of progress inherent to historicism, and instead argued that the past can only be comprehended as a fleeting image: “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.”36 This idea of the past that resurfaces as a memory that flashes up momentarily at an historical point of crisis may be juxtaposed with the citation of the past within a new construct. Here, the image, or montage of images is carefully constructed in support of a cultural or political objective. This contrast between the past as a fleeting image and the past given new agency through citation may go towards explaining the operation of image and the experience of
imageability in Diba’s housing scheme at Shushtar-No’w. Here image acquires a ‘thickness’ that is qualitatively different from a contemporary semiotic reading of image. Image as citation entails the construction of place through recollection of fragment, through their exploding montage. Such an imageability, rather than being understood as a stable representation of the power structure, in Heidegger’s words a “world epoch placed in an image”, may be distinguished from what Benjamin termed ‘Phantasmagoria’ – the distracting effect of modern mass-media on the individual’s capacity to connect in a meaningful way with the collective. However such an imageability is just as likely to refer to a collective that has already disappeared, or is yet to appear, as recognised by Aldo Rossi in his self-evaluation of his Gallaratese housing project. In this respect, Tafuri argues for an abandonment of the illusion that the architectural image may in itself be liberative.

This imaging of the disappearing or absent collectivity or community can also characterise the situation in Iran and the Middle East. AlSayyad argues that the notion of tradition in Islamic architecture and urbanism has come to an end in these disciplines. That it is the victim of a globally uneven capitalist economy, and the commodification of traditions and their authentic image through reliance on tourism as an economic resource. The case of Shushtar-No’w, however, can provide interesting insights into this analysis. At the time when Shushtar was conceived and constructed, this idea of an authentic architecture was at its height while, arguably, local architects attempted it through an eclectic appropriation of exotic fragments. In this respect can Shushtar-No’w be considered authentic in the sense of embodying a specific cultural meaning through its ‘thick’, that is to say embedded, images that could resonate with a population for which such images were still part of everyday life? However as with Fathy’s traditionalist New Gourna, and indeed Rossi’s neo-Rationalist Gallaratese housing, the subsequent history of the complex has been in part one of conflict and neglect. Shushtar-No’w makes apparent through its constellation of images the crisis of social dislocation that accompanied the White Revolution. In this sense, it can be compared with Ridolfi and Quaroni’s INA Casa complex at Tiburtino, outside Rome, which according to Tafuri was “neither a city nor a suburb, the complex strictly speaking was also not a ‘town’, but rather an affirmation of both rage and hope, even if the mythologies that sustained it made its rage impotent and its hope ambiguous.” Like Shushtar-No’w, Tiburtino was meant to transcend narrow functionalism, but also the hollow expression of state power, to create a social and spatial organic unity. These post war INA-Casa projects have been described as expressing an ‘invented tradition’. However, we have argued here that Shushtar-No’w may be better understood as an agonistic montage of ‘thick’, that is embedded, images that could resonate with a population for which such images were still part of everyday life. Diba and others attempted to reproduce the architectural image of a traditional community. However, to project a sense of the authentic, architecture requires to be located, in both the corporeal, social and cultural senses, and to be temporally oriented, in the sense of successive relationality. Such a cultural organicity was already impossible by the time of the inception of the Shushtar project. Millward, in 1971 had already noted the “moral ambivalence” of an Iranian society undergoing a partial secularisation and modernisation, in which there was lacking a forum for discussing the implications of such change.
In summary, the contradictions resulting from the attempt to improve the human environment through housing projects without resolving the existing economic and political stresses and conflicts are apparent in both the Shushtar project and the final resolutions of the 1974 Persepolis congress. In Persepolis, delegates led by Sert proposed that housing should no longer be considered at the individual level but should extend to the community level, and that the process of reforming housing should be accelerated through the development of model communities in which individuals and cooperatives should work in concert. In the case of Shushtar, the cooperation between various levels was missing, instead, there was a managed relationship between the project sponsors. Nevertheless, the project architect attempted to instil a sense of community through the planning scheme but this was attempted through construction of a montage of reassuring images from a disappearing world. No doubt, there is an element of nostalgia in this process. But it is perhaps the tactile and corporeal experience created by the architect through his attempt at hybridising diachronic urban ideas that has worked for Shushtar-No’w. There is an ambivalence in the image of this project which defies singular categorisation. The place is now historicised – although it ended up only housing a minority of the intended inhabitants and thus failed to fulfil its original role as a company town and model community, one might venture that, nonetheless, the image somehow works, in an ambivalent way, as a trace of something fleetingly familiar, recalling Ungers’ statement at the 1970 Isfahan Congress that “tradition was a dialectical process”. The contemporary architect might wish to embrace it, but remains uncertain of it – Tradition contains an otherness – there is [in] this an inevitability of formal and theoretical transmutation.45

In this paper, our purpose has been to examine the conceptual mechanisms for emplacement in architecture, and the ambivalent and multiple meanings this conveys to architects as well as to users. In this respect, it is necessary to consider the actual architectural production and design processes as well as the social, ideological and economic context within which they were conceived, a subject that will be developed in a larger project.

2 See, in particular, V. Gregotti, *Zen Palermo* (1968), Ungers Roosevelt Island project (1975), Aymonino and Rossi, Monte Amiato (1967-74) and Siza, Quinta da Malagueira, Evora (1973).
8 Diba, “The Recent Housing Boom in Iran,” 38.
13 Diba’s ex-collaborator/partner Ahmad Kashanijoo, interviewed in November-December 2014 by A. Mozaffari.
16 Diba, Shushtar New Town.
19 Shirazi, “From ‘Shushtar-No’ to ‘Shahre Javan Community’,” 36.
22 Ali Mozaffari, interviews conducted November-December 2014 with architects Ahmad Kashanijoo and Hamid Noorkeyhani.
23 For the 1970-76 architectural congresses in Iran, see Westbrook, “The Regionalist Debate in the Context of the 1970s Architectural Forums in Iran,” 385-396.
25 Nader Ardalan et al., Habitat Bill of Rights, National Committee for Human Settlements Presented by Iran (Tehran: Hamdami Foundation, 1976), 31-44.
26 Houshang Ansari in Bakhhtiar, ed., Towards a Quality of Life, ix.
28 Bakhhtiar, Towards a Quality of Life, xvii.
29 Bakhhtiar, Towards a Quality of Life, 309-10.
30 Participants calling for organic unity in social housing in the 1974 Congress and recorded in the proceedings were Kamran Diba, cited on pp. 8, 88; Nader Ardalan cited on pp. 31 ff., 108, 190; Nasr Badi cited on p. 23, and Oswald Ungers cited on pp. 87, 89, 189, in Bakhhtiar, Towards a Quality of Life.
31 Bakhhtiar, Towards a Quality of Life, 140.
32 Bakhhtiar, Towards a Quality of Life, 237 ff.
33 Bakhhtiar, Towards a Quality of Life, 204.
34 Bakhhtiar, Towards a Quality of Life, 201, 204.
43 Stephanie Zeier Pilat, “Reconstructing Italy: The Ina-Casa Neighbourhoods of the Postwar Era” (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2009), 114. See also Stephanie Zeier Pilat, Reconstructing Italy: The Ina-Casa Neighbourhoods of the Postwar Era (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington Vt.: Ashgate, 2014).