

Qom after Islamic Neoliberalism: A Narrative of the City in Limbo

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Despite its classically appreciated rank in the constellation of the Shia world and its key but contentious role in the politics of modern Iran, Qom has been one of the least-researched cities of the country. Especially taking into account the architectures of capitalist political economy and the undercurrents of middle-class consumerism, this study aims at building up a critical, materialist take on the neo-

liberal politics of Qom, particularly with regard to the developments of the last decade. It argues that recent trends in the urban formation and municipal policy of Qom betray the historical image they pretend to sustain and the ideological ideals they seem to pursue.

Keywords: Qom, Neoliberalism, Shia, Urbanism, Hedonism

“Church and morality say: ‘a generation, a people destroys itself through vice and luxury’. My *restored* reason says: when a people is destroyed and becomes physiologically degenerate, this *leads* to vice and luxury.” (Nietzsche 177)

Introduction

The British diplomat and traveler Sir Robert Ker Porter, who in the early 19th century had trekked through Iran, wrote of the city of Qom as “one of the most desolate-looking places... that imagination could have pictured” (374-375). In his inspection, “the most conspicuous objects” were “old houses falling into rubbish, crumbling mosques, and other edifices, all tumbled into heaps, or gradually mouldering down to that last stage of decay” (375). Qom, on the whole, would strike one as nothing but a “large straggling wilderness of ruins” (375). John Ussher, another Londoner who travelled through Iran around half a century later, this time “solely for purposes of pleasure and amusement” (v), found himself similarly unsettled by “devious and tortuous streets lined by half-ruined and dilapidated houses” (607) when visiting Qom. “A mass of ruins,” he expands on the description, where “the buildings, both public and private, were neglected, dilapidated,

and decayed" (608). Twenty years later, Edward Stack, an Englishman working for the British civil service in Bengal and traversing Iran in 1881, wrote of this town as "shrouded in a haze of heat and dust" (136-137). The colonial functionary observes, "no place in Persia left on me such a profound impression of loneliness and melancholy as Qum" (136).

The single spectacle that disrupted this disconsolate conception, the sole exception to the rule of the Orientalist deprecating Qom, was the *Haram*, the holy shrine of *Hazrat-e Ma'soumah*. Ussher writes that "its gilded dome was visible for a long distance" while approaching the city, "glittering brightly in the sunbeams" (607). The dome "shone bright in the morning sun" for Stack (135), too. It in fact caught the eyes of every other alien visitor (Price 26; Wills 387; Cresson 137). The shrine appeared to Ussher as "a modern building" (607), while William P. Cresson, an American architect and diplomat, called it "one of the finest specimens of religious architecture in Persia" (139).

Twenty years ago, when I was a ten-year-old boy living in Qom, although the city did not seem ruinous in the sense described by voyagers, it still had conserved its tone of monotony. It so far

seemed to offer, in the words of Edward Stack, "plenty of religion" (139). Yet, for a generation that in the utmost innocence of its childhood under traditionalism was abruptly exposed to the joys and glitz of modern lifestyles, mostly through soap operas and commercials newly disseminated by Iranian TV, Qom was beginning to look unsatisfactory. And the shrine of Hazrat-e Ma'soumah was actually a rare place where one could enjoy a variegation of sight, praying and purifying the soul under the infinite, refulgent exchange between chandeliers and mirrors encompassing the halls and the mausoleum.

Subsequently, I lived for fifteen years in Mashhad, another decidedly religious city in the country, and then moved to Tehran to study North American Studies for three years there. I returned to Qom three years ago and I found myself in a city that in many senses shared nothing but its name with the Qom I had left two decades ago. And it peculiarly began to present connotations that a graduate of American Studies could not help curiously noticing. What was it with the place that brought forth the offspring of the most anti-American revolution of the past half-century and now seemed so grotesquely Americanized? Why was a town historically treasured for religious traditionalism

and moral asceticism now, at least in part, in such a materialistic panic lest it lag behind the demeanors of cosmopolitan consumerism? How could Islam and capital be worked out so placidly next to one another?

Poles apart from a naïve nostalgia, I was genuinely touched by the urgency of the matter, as I faced it throughout as a Qomi citizen, an insider living it and hoping to delve behind the bizarre surface in order to realize the situation and its inconsistencies. Therein lay the rub: despite its classically appreciated rank in the constellation of the Shia world, its key role in the turbulences that led to the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, and its contentious relevance since the establishment of Islamic Republic, Qom was one of the least-examined cities of modern Iran. Aside from some quantitative studies of narrowly defined cases and historical surveys pertinent to theological, juristic movements or particular personalities and places, no thought seemed to be given to the way the materiality of Qomis' way of life and the immaterial hermeneutics of their unconscious could be connected to, most significantly, the arch-structures of the capitalist political economy and the undercurrents of middle-class consumerism.

Indeed, neither these examples nor other inquiries that have addressed Qom in their introductions or, have sought to deal with *matters* before or beyond ideas, with materialities preceding or even circumventing mindful beliefs and ideational dynamics, but rather have mostly striven to find out and reveal how reformists, conservatives, modernists, reactionaries, etc. have evolved through chains and networks of *ideas* (Axworthy; Dabashi; Rajaei). So, besides my three years of lived experiences and field observations, I had no one by my side but Alexis de Tocqueville, Lewis Mumford, and Fredric Jameson. To the degree that materiality is given priority, odds are higher that orientalist exoticizations around ideas and beliefs that are so natural to the local consciousness but peculiar to the other's mind can be avoided. As much as Qom looked American, a critical discussion of its material spaces seemed sensible and seemed more plausible to be made sensible to the non-Iranian audience. Dichotomies such as Western vs. Islamic, or modern vs. traditional, no longer apply to the situation: one is sociologically enthused to divulge the traditional within the modern and the American within the Iranian, to decipher the Islamic capital and untangle neoliberal Shi'ism. This is perhaps the first attempt to adopt a subjec-

tive-interpretive methodology and the first materialist treatment of Qom: scrutinizing what Pierre Bourdieu determines to be "the material of a social psychoanalysis", whereby "ordinary choices of everyday existence, such as furniture, clothing or cooking" can reveal "deep-rooted and long-standing dispositions" (*Judgement of Taste* 77).

Islamicized Neoliberalism: Unfolding of a Gilded Age

For the last ten years, two sets of economic upheaval have shaken things in Qom up: first, the general surrender to neoliberal capitalism on the level of central government, marked by "liberalization, deregulation, privatization, depoliticization and monetarism", universalizing "a new market-centric 'politics'" by shrinking the state's responsibilities and unleashing "market forces wherever possible" (Mudge 704-705). This can be seen, in the most primary approach, where poorer parts of Qom are municipally abandoned to their urban adversity, while richer areas egregiously prosper on a daily basis. Second, and very much in a causal relation with the former factor, the recent proliferation of new-rich and super-rich publics and correspondingly their idiosyncrasies of consumption, which have colonized the attention and enflamed the desires of the

masses, making upward growth exclusively a matter of commodity coquetry (Forrest, Koh and Wissink). The money that has been channeled into the hands of these neo-plutocrats, particularly in Qom, came from "waves of speculative bubbles" (Kotz and McDonough 112), most significantly in the real estate market. The latter aspect is manifested in the accretion of shopping/consuming means and places anywhere riches have been accumulated. As a predictable result of these two strands, gentrification is the urban strategy ruling over Qom's development and therefore the "consummate expression" (Smith, "Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy" 446) of its neoliberal urbanism. As much as the material junction between Qom and capitalist cities is concerned, Neil Smith in fact deserves reference in deeming this phenomenon "a thread of convergence between urban experiences in the larger cities of what used to be called the First and Third Worlds" (441).

Distinctive of Qom in this pattern is the way religion, i.e., Shiite Islam, as both an element of socio-cultural identity rooted in history and a project politically defined, developed, and deployed by the nation-state, has complicated and mystified the state of affairs. In this regard, the city constantly holds those in charge of it, or influ-

ential in its policies, in a dilemma of dualism: although being the last bastion of religious purism entails exertions to keep specific elements near their past, traditional status, the need to market the city for the global tourist/consumerist taste, and hence the urge to modernize, prettify, and gentrify in accordance with the latest standards of urbanism makes “all that is solid melt into the air, all that is holy profaned”. The result being an implicit spiritualization, or as Cihan Tuğal observes, “molecular Islamization” of the neoliberal economic discourse ruling over urban policies, without which the latter could not be sustained (55). The message is sent *nolens volens* that “Islam is compatible with a Western-influenced, consumption-driven lifestyle” (Atia 64), in which “Islamic knowledge, performances, and selves are more and more mediated through increasingly commoditized cultural forms and spaces” (Gökariksel and McLarney quoted in Atia 95). One may assume that the development of Islamic research institutes paralleling the proliferation of shopping centers and leisure places, mostly in central parts of the city, and their shared practitioners and practices despite their contradictions, is a manifestation of this tendency.

Additionally, as the religious capital of the country, Qom is too close to Tehran, the secular capital of Iran. However, until ten years ago, the former was disallowed from growing like the latter. This began to change a decade ago: an explosion of pleasure-taking Mammonism allowed Qomis who could afford it to imitate Tehran: Qom was exposed to Tehranization, so to speak, as its window to the cosmopolitan, neoliberal experience of urban life. Inspected from this angle, recent developments in Qom can be contextualized in the broad-spectrum trend branded and vastly scrutinized as the neoliberalization of Muslim and Persian Gulf cities. Pathologically quite analogous to the Cairo’s upper-class arousal after the *Infitah* (openness) policy, in which an “increasing infatuation and fantasy with Western, particularly American, ways of life, an urban Occidentalism” (Adham 135) has led to “the construction of a new hybrid, globalized Americano Mediterranean lifestyle” (Denis 49), to “McFalafel” as “a metaphor for the neoliberal promise in Egypt” (Peterson 196). Akin to Amman under neoliberalism, in which the city has been “obliged to create the right milieu, a competitive business climate, and first-class tourist attractions in order to lure people to live, invest, and be entertained in them”

(Daher 46) aThings are similar in the Arab arena all around.

The accumulation of these processes has resulted in a Gilded Age, resembling physiognomies of *fin-de-siècle* American metropolitan areas. Virtually, two “dangerous classes”, the very poor and the very rich have been engendered and established (White 793), with a newcomer, *petit-bourgeois* middle class in between, whose main objective is to demarcate itself “as sharply as possible from the working classes” (Hobsbawm 181).

Rich and Poor across Spaces: The Miracle of the Withered River

Geographically, the segregation of classes inside Qom seems seamless. A channel, historically known as the river of Qom but now turned into motorways, cuts through the city from the northeast, touches the shrine at the midpoint, and leads the way to the southwest. It has practically facilitated this spatial segregation. The upper side of the river, generally known as *Niroogāh* (the power plant) but encompassing much greater areas than the historical region called Niroogāh, houses the poor, precarious population, most of whom are immigrants, and is ever expanding as a result of new waves of immigration. It displays the least refined infrastruc-

tural, environmental, municipal features of the city: a pathetic quasi-urban, semi-rural landscape, “occupied by sub-proletarian dwellers who arrived from the villages but never quite made it into the town” (Derlugian 57).

On the lower part, from the middle areas toward the southeast, including the *Bājak*, *Ammār-e Yassir*, *Somayyeh*, and *Resālat* neighborhoods, the population belongs to the old middle class and newer lower middle class, although mostly consisting of native Qomis. From *Payāambar-e A'zam Boulevard* toward *Jomhuri-e Eslāmi Boulevard*, down to *Ensejām Street* and *Shahrak-e Shahid Zeynoddin* (also known as the *Bonyād* region), multistory, mass-produced apartment buildings mushrooming everywhere signify the existence of a newly fledged middle class. And last in this inquiry, the neighborhoods of *Attārān*, *Shahid Sadouqi* (also known as *Zanbil-Ābād*), *Muhammad-e Amin Boulevard*, and *Sālārieh* epitomize the wealth of the nation.

Complying with the global fabric of “our neoliberal urban age”, Qom has pathologically been spatially split into two halves: a parasitic half, comprised of the two upper economic strata, ruled by “a non-working yet... consuming elite”

(Merrifield 110), “where the most rabid activity is the activity of rabidly extorting land rent, of making land pay anyway it can”, whereas most non-parasitic, generative activities have been dispatched to the other half, involving “dirt and grime... dirty and grimy people” (111). Even a random walk in the city reveals that the most perceptible basis of difference between *Sālārieh* and *Niroogāh* lies in what Pierre Bourdieu calls “the opposition between the tastes of luxury (or freedom) and the tastes of necessity” (*Judgement of Taste* 177). Jobs in the poor neighborhoods of the upper side, i.e., *Qal'e Kāmkār*, *Shād-Qoli Khān*, and *Sheikh-Ābād*, are mostly excruciating, like well-digging, construction labor, waste-collecting, and scrap metal working, auto garages and repairing, window frame and sash construction, and so on. Homes in this region are typically limited to two- or single-story buildings, presenting unrefined, sketchy architectures, and all too often lacking any façade. Everything there has stopped at the pre-luxury, pre-show-off level. The middle class of the lower middle parts live in multistory condominium buildings that, although they sometimes present design extravagance on their façade, provide nothing inside but a kind of dormitory suburban life. Most of the people who live here are small shopkeepers, teachers, civil

servants, bureaucrats, and white-collar workers.

In *Zanbil-Ābād*, *Amin Boulevard*, and *Sālārieh*, there are plenty of banks, language schools, beauty parlors, cosmetic stores, health clubs, chic restaurants, interior design and decoration services, bedding and wedding and layette emporiums, and dozens of malls encompassing mostly boutiques, lifestyle, and bric-à-brac shops. They belong to a class of landowners, high-profile businessmen, doctors, lawyers, dealers and smugglers, etc. The area accommodates a new middle class, a *nouveau riche bourgeoisie*, that seems to be distinguishing “itself more by its spending than its saving”, and “much of its claim to culture rests on the conspicuous display of good taste, whether in the form of kitchenware, ‘continental’ food, or weekend sailing and cottages” (Samuel quoted in Smith, *Gentrification and the Revanchist City* 90). Had Alexis de Tocqueville Tocqueville visited Qom in recent days, he would have repeated his observation about the “men whose fortune is upon the increase, but whose desires grow much faster than their fortunes: and who gloat upon the gifts of wealth in anticipation” and therefore are “very willing to take up with imperfect satisfaction, rather than abandon the object of their desires alto-

gether" (58). Qom, now in contrast to its past, proves to present much more "hypocrisy of luxury" than "hypocrisy of virtue" (60). Seemingly in a reversal of religio-cultural enrichment, no week passes in Qom unless a new restaurant or shopping center announces its opening, exploiting every advertisement opportunity possible, from social media channels to billboards and banners.

The aestheticization of the lower left side of the city, in Amin Boulevard and Sālārieh, is predictably "cultivated and maintained through spatial exclusion that acts to protect the pristine and beautiful landscape from the urban poor in the city" (Pow 373). One significant manifestation of this urge to aestheticize is the proliferation of bourgeois Romanesque buildings in middle- and upper-middle-class neighborhoods. Conspicuous neoclassical buildings "in the midst of unpaved streets and rudimentary infrastructure" reveal "the contradictions of urban development" (Leontidou 48).

White Houses Galore on Every Avenue: The nouveau riche Neo-Classicism

"Of all the arts", maintains Fredric Jameson, "architecture is the closest constitutively to the economic" (5). Now in Qom, Neoclassical architecture is bur-

dened with all the claims of wealth and economic omnipotence. Façades are pathetically pressured to parade a resemblance to the Parthenon, sometimes merely minimally through a sculpted, abstract arch at the top of the building or a pair of carved column-like shapes beside the entrance. It is almost as if Qom is under an aesthetic assault launched by City Beautiful, Beaux Arts neoclassicism, a non-heritage industry, postmodernly disengaged from its secular roots in Western civilization, yet to reinforce the recent function of fringing class supremacism and new-rich mannerism.

Quite remarkably, the façades of almost no two buildings look alike, and still they all look alike in one way or another. Almost no aesthetic rule is observed when designing and executing façades for buildings. Architects, thus, are left uninhibited to gratify the ostentatious desires of their clients in lucrative ways. Stone does the miracle while arbitrarily employed to make the owner feel flush and the designer creative. Now, the hastiest, simplest way this new upper middle class has found to express abundance, "to indicate stability and the dignity of wealth" (Joedicke 9), would be to appropriate and assemble Western classical traditions of architecture. A replication of what Nan Ellin refers

to as "drag and drop forms from other places and other times" (quoted in Knox 103): an ironic reproduction of American "Vulgarias" in the heartland of anti-Americanism, while the overall effect is "an outlandish brashness of contrived spectacle, serial repetition, and over-the-top pretension" (Knox 163).

Sālārieh is the high tide of this architectural exhibitionism: a mélange of kitsch and pastiche that, thanks to the ceaseless importation of travertine stone, has partially satisfied the plutocrat class's desire for luxury and panache. My spontaneous observation of the phenomenon is perhaps best explicable by engaging Lewis Mumford and his ruthless dissection of New York City during the Gilded Age of the early 20th century America. He links this trend to "the shift from industry to finance" and consequently to "a shift from the producing towns to the spending towns: architecture came to dwell in the stock exchanges, the banks, the shops, and the clubs of the metropolis..." The keys to this period are opulence and magnitude: "money to burn" (125). The result is an architecture that is nothing but "a pompous blare of meaningless sounds" (151). Making matters even more grotesque, there are now seminaries in Qom, for instance the ones newly constructed in

Mo'alleh street, whose appearance of curtain walls and modernist architecture utterly reveals similar propensities of ornateness, fundamentally in contrast with the pious, apathetic identity the people of religious institutions are traditionally known to claim. "Given the fact that a majority of seminary students live a lower-middle-class life and a majority of seminaries in Qom are of ordinary or outdated edifice, the new developments of elite architectural taste somewhat reveal the way class disparities exist also within the religious establishment."

Thousands of Qom inhabitants, day after day, have to pass by the emblems of wealth, whether extravagant homes, luxurious cars, or splendid brand shops, and unconsciously undergo the agony of lack. Occasionally eating at the restaurants of Sālārieh or Amin Boulevard, some can afford to compensate. This only deepens the agony: the conspicuous accumulation/consumption of capital on one side of the city accompanies the amassing of antipathies on the other side. Small wonder that the city of Qom, which is naturally expected to be an island of stability, has witnessed several eruptions of street turmoil during the past year.

Paul L. Knox has called these cityscapes *Vulgaria* and believes they naturalize "the neoliberal ideology of competitive consumption and disengagement from notions of social justice and civil society" (163). "The landscapes of *Vulgaria*," he adds, "are an embodiment of neoliberalism as well as a setting for its maintenance and development" (173). An inherent element of *Vulgaria*, the postmodern kitsch is linked to the middle-class hedonistic mentality. Resisting "the 'terror' of change and the meaninglessness of chronological time flowing from an unreal past into an equally unreal future" (Calinescu 248), the bourgeoisie employs it in order to fight the nihilism both rooted in and bearing the fruit of their poor-afflicting pomposities. It was this very Romanesque, genteel culture that best served to justify and disguise the brutality of the Gilded Age in the American city (Fairfield 54) and most likely does so in Qom. A city once anticipated to overcome Washington, D.C. is now overwhelmed by dozens of White House simulacra on every avenue. "All roads," unfortunately even in Qom, "lead literally to Rome" (Mumford 138).

Branding Like the State

Writing on Iran in 1908, William P. Cresson observed, "It would be hard to find a more desolate stretch of country than that lying

between Teheran and the Holy City of Kum" (136). Presently, the strategic road between the secular capital and the religious one not only accommodates travelers with one of the most refined freeways in the whole country, the *Khalij-e Fārs* (Persian Gulf) freeway, it also features a variety of fashionable rest areas, namely the *Mehr-o-Māh* (Sun & Moon) tourist service center, publicizing itself in advertising outlets as *the most modern one* of the like that can be found in Iran. At *Mehr-o-Māh*, one is provided with every sort of facility fit for a joyful, cosmopolitan halt along the way: a fuel station; public toilets that make you feel like you are taking a rest in a tropical garden; classy cafés, restaurants, and fast food parlors; and luxurious stores that stock consumer goods from global brands. Occupying an area of forty thousand square meters, the center was opened in 2016 with a special event attended by high-ranking officials, such as the speaker of the Iranian parliament, who is also a representative of Qom. Notwithstanding, the way the place is branded exposes much about the discursive strategies at work around the branding of Qom itself.

Mehr-o-Māh, in fact, is erected and sustained by a food company named after its founder *Muhammad-e Sā'edi-Niā*. The

firm specifically produces a traditional toffee called *Sohān* that originally comes from Qom. *Sohān* is, in a way, the only food product known in Iran and the world as belonging to Qom. Yet *Sohān-e Sā'edi-Niā* has managed to rebrand the product, making it into a distinctive object of modern, cosmopolitan consumerism. For instance, for the first time, it produces *Sohāns* whose idiosyncratic packaging presents world maps drawn by 18th-century European explorers. Its marketing strategies are definitely in line with the branding strategies it has employed for Mehr-o-Māh: located six kilometers from Qom, the modern exterior view of the building absorbs sightseers at night with three huge, completely lit business signs featuring the logos of *Sohān-e Sā'edi-Niā*, LC Waikiki, and Adidas.

In an interview after its inauguration, the founder expressed his motivation for building the center, interspersing religious, national, political, and economic motifs with one another in less than a paragraph. "This city," he claims, "has always been one of the most dynamic foci of Shi'as, and every year receives millions of pilgrims who come to visit this sanctum of the Prophet's holy family, and hence, the current dearth of suitable tourist centers seems unbecoming on the city." He then

adds, "This year has been named by the sage leader of the revolution as The Year of the Economy of Resistance: Action and Implementation, so we regard the opening of Mehr-o-Māh as conducive to the development of the tourist industry, making jobs in the private sector, and the government's efforts for advancing the economy of resistance." Concluding his thoughts, he maintains, "What incited [me] to construct this building was rooted in our passion for the prosperity of our dear Islamic homeland" (Golden Business Magazine). Neoliberal entrepreneurialism in a package decorated by Islamic nationalism: as sweet, edible, and pleasurable to the Qomi taste as a piece of *Sohān*. No matter that the haven of comfort and convenience is ordinarily affordable only to middle- and upper-middle-class customers, who are commonsensically either passengers traversing the motorway and making no stop at Qom for pilgrimage, or the *nouveau riche* Qomis who visit there and find themselves for a few hours at a home of dream.

It is as though Mehr-o-Māh has exploited a psychological niche, as it were, in the market of Qom: secular Iranians are known to be avoiding Qom for its seemingly politico-religious unpleasantness; so a stopover so close to Qom yet supplying

whatever signifies the opposite of their perception of Qom, is tantalizing. On the other hand, for the new rich consumers of Qom who yearn to enjoy Tehrani lifestyles, the center on the way to the capital yet attached to Qom provides a desirable destination. Isn't the naming of the place itself, i.e., Sun & Moon, laden with a connotation on the way the relationship between Tehran and Qom is preferred to be developed?

Caught between the old holy town of Qom and the modern metropolis of Tehran, between asceticism and hedonism, between aspired ideals of religious tradition and banalities of consumer society, and between the Islamic Republic and the United States, Qom is indeed a microcosm of the whole state.

Concluding Remarks

The urban field of Qom's main street is, in Bourdieuan terms, mostly mobilized by a consumerist or escapist habitus, making the distribution of capital and the stability of inequalities, and thus representations, actions, and tastes deeply embodied, internalized, naturalized, and unconscious (Christoforou and Lainé 38). At the insistence of the municipalities and other authorities inside and outside of Qom, building up the middle-class appeal of the

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city is held to be a strategic factor in the project of rebranding the religiosity of Qom on a global scale. Quite contrarily, nevertheless, the very existence and expansion of the bourgeois middle class, "whose practice and whose thought, whatever its formal religious belief, are *fundamentally* irreligious... and totally alien to the category of the sacred" (Goldmann 55), hinders religiosity in Qom.

Through namings and brandings, through installing elements publicizing spiritual ideals of the past, the municipal authorities of Qom aspire to conserve the religious identity of a city long pillaged by materialistic hedonism. But the frustrated endeavors only mystify the horrendous essence of the inequalities observable throughout Qom and render more efficient the assimilation of the religious strata of the middle class into consumerist urbanscapes. What would, for instance, a huge mural of the late *Ayatullah Muhammad-Taqi Bahjat*, a clerico-theological giant famed in all his profiles for asceticism and abstinence, in the middle of a street inundated by beauty salons and fast food restaurants, function other than by suppressing unconscious displeasures peculiar to traditional families? The reality is, Qom, in its contemporary look, betrays on every corner and from every angle

both the historical image of its divine quiddity it has attempted to preserve and the branding campaign that has recently been set out to modernize that historical identity. It is as if a constant enterprise of embalming kept the departed from disappearance by way of ornamentation, yet, concomitantly, subliminally accentuated the fact that the dead has no lifeblood but death.

Let's imagine taking refuge for a moment in the shrine: it, notwithstanding, rests there in the middle of the town, at the isthmian junction of the old and the new, isolated from and enduring urban vicissitudes, remaining a last vestige of Shiite sacrosanctity. "It stands," William Cresson noticed a century ago, "among miserable dwellings that encompass it on every side, seeming strangely out of keeping with their squalor and decay" (139). Now trespassed by modern hotels and shopping centers, it still appears to be the only place providing moments of defiance.

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