

Armenian Churches of New Julfa (Isfahan): Architectural Typology and Characteristics in the Context of Armenian-Iranian Interactions

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Abstract

Founded in the early seventeenth century by Armenians forcibly relocated to Iran, New Julfa developed into a distinctive center of Armenian architectural and artistic culture within the Safavid urban environment of Isfahan. This article examines the typology and architectural characteristics of the Armenian churches of New Julfa, focusing on the adaptation of Armenian ecclesiastical traditions through interaction with Iranian architectural forms, construction techniques, and decorative practices. The study analyzes the churches' spatial organization, structural systems, dome compositions, building materials, urban setting, and interior decoration. Based on their architectural composition, the churches are classified into three principal typological groups: domed churches articulated by four wall piers, domed hall-type churches with various supporting systems, and summer-type churches characterized by open or semi-open apses. The analysis demonstrates that the churches of New Julfa preserve the fundamental principles of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture while incorporating elements of the Safavid architectural environment, thereby creating a distinctive regional architectural expression. These monuments constitute a remarkable example of Armenian diaspora architecture, reflecting the dynamic interaction between Armenian cultural identity and Iranian artistic and architectural traditions in early modern Iran.

Keywords: Safavid Iran, Isfahan, New Julfa, Armenian ecclesiastical architecture, Safavid architecture, architectural typology and characteristics, domed churches, domed hall-type churches, summer-type churches, Armenian-Iranian interaction, construction techniques

Introduction

Formation of New Julfa and the Development of an Armenian Architectural Environment: In the early seventeenth century, the forced deportation of the Armenian population to Isfahan by Shah Abbas I the Great (1588–1629) led not only to the establishment of a new Armenian community but also to the creation of a distinctive architectural and artistic environment in the settlement of New Julfa. Within this new setting, Armenian cultural and architectural traditions developed through close interaction with Iranian urban planning, construction practices, and artistic traditions. As a result, a unique architectural idiom emerged in which established principles of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture were combined with Iranian building techniques, decorative forms, and artistic influences, including elements introduced through contacts with Europe.

Throughout its historical development, Armenian ecclesiastical architecture evolved into a distinctive and multilayered tradition that preserved its fundamental characteristics while adapting to diverse political, cultural, and artistic environments. The churches of New Julfa represent one of the most significant manifestations of this process, having developed within the urban and cultural con-

text of Safavid Iran (1501–1722) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their architecture demonstrates the adaptation of Armenian ecclesiastical forms to a new geographical and cultural environment while maintaining their essential liturgical and symbolic identity.

The Churches of New Julfa: corpus, patrons, and cultural significance: Historical sources record the existence of more than twenty churches in New Julfa, thirteen of which, constructed between 1606 and 1728, have survived and remain functioning today. (Avagyan, 2000, p. 93) These churches were built primarily under the patronage of wealthy Armenian merchants (khojas) and, in some cases, through collective donations and community fundraising (Ter-Hovhanyants, 1880–1881; Aslanian, 2011, p.72–71). More than half of the surviving churches are located in the Great and Small Maydans, as well as in the quarters of Charsu, Yerevan, Tabriz (Davrezh), Kotcheri, Ghara-gel, and Hakobjans. (Minasyan, 1983) (Fig. 1).

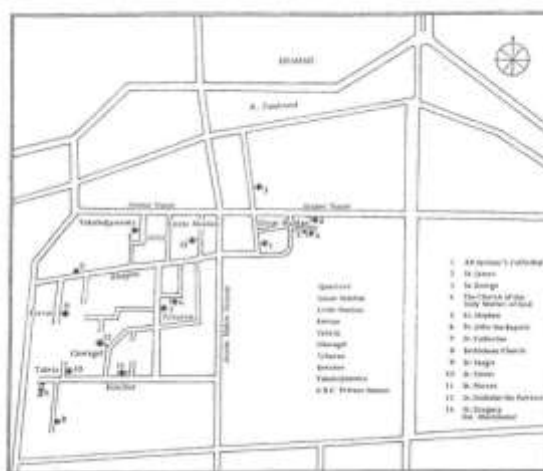


Figure 1. General plan of New Julfa: the positions of the 13 churches

Source: J. Carswell, 1968

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, New Julfa became the foremost center of Armenian, and particularly Iranian Armenian, culture. The settlement was home to numerous architects, painters, sculptors, manuscript illuminators, and scholars whose activities contributed to the development of a highly sophisticated artistic environment. (Honarfar, 1971) Today, as a historic district of Isfahan, New Julfa preserves an exceptional collection of religious, residential, public, and other buildings created by Armenian craftsmen. These monuments represent an important architectural heritage reflecting the interaction between Armenian and Iranian artistic traditions.

Architectural characteristics (Armenian tradition and Safavid interaction): The churches of New Julfa provide the clearest architectural expression of this cultural synthesis. While preserving the essential principles of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture—including traditional liturgical planning, spatial organization, and symbolic concepts—they incorporate Iranian construction techniques, architectural forms, and decorative traditions. Rather than representing a simple combination of Armenian and Iranian elements, the churches of New Julfa constitute a distinctive regional development of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture shaped by the architectural environment of Safavid Iran. This synthesis is evident in their materials, structural systems, spatial organization, architectural expression, and decorative programs.

Materials and construction techniques: Compared with medieval churches in historic Armenia, which were predominantly constructed of stone and generally followed cruciform or domed-basilica plans, the churches of New Julfa were built mainly of brick and plaster due to the limited availability of stone in central Iran. This transformation of material conditions significantly influenced their structural and aesthetic character, resulting in thicker wall systems, lighter brick domes, and more restrained exterior articulation.

The extensive use of brick reflects the influence of Iranian construction traditions, particularly those developed in the monumental architecture of Safavid Isfahan. In several examples, the proportions and structural systems of the domes reveal affinities with Iranian mosque architecture, especially through the use of brick-based construction techniques and spatial solutions characteristic of Safavid buildings. (Carswell, 1968)

Spatial organization and Church complexes: In terms of spatial organization, most churches are based on rectangular plans with a single nave and a clearly defined eastern apse. Although the apse retains its central liturgical and symbolic function within the Armenian tradition, the overall spatial configuration demonstrates adaptation to local architectural conditions and construction practices. A significant characteristic of New Julfa's ecclesiastical architecture is the integration of churches into enclosed multifunctional complexes. These complexes typically include inner courtyards, clergy residences (cells), educational spaces, and auxiliary service rooms, and in some cases contain scriptoria or manuscript repositories. Additional structures may include assembly halls, kitchens, bakeries, storage rooms, wells, chapels, and burial spaces. Although this organization recalls the traditional Armenian monastic complex, it was reinterpreted within an urban environment influenced by the introverted courtyard-based planning characteristic of Iranian architecture.

Urban context and exterior expression: The urban integration of these complexes further defines their architectural character. Most churches are enclosed by high perimeter walls, and their volumes are largely absorbed into the dense urban fabric of New Julfa, with domes often representing the only visible external architectural elements. This condition reinforces their introverted spatial character and reflects their adaptation to the compact morphology of the settlement. The architectural expression of the churches is characterized by a clear contrast between exterior restraint and interior richness. Externally, façades are generally plain and lack the sculptural articulation typical of medieval Armenian ecclesiastical architecture. This simplicity reflects both material conditions and the sociopolitical context of Safavid Iran, where Christian religious buildings were not intended to compete visually with mosques and royal architecture. Exterior modesty therefore functioned as both a practical adaptation and a culturally conditioned architectural strategy.

Interior decoration and spatial experience: In contrast, the interiors of the churches form highly elaborate visual and symbolic environments. Wall paintings, ornamental stucco work, tile decoration, gilded elements, and complex iconographic programs are integrated into unified decorative systems in which architecture and visual art become inseparable. These interiors reflect the convergence of Armenian artistic traditions—particularly manuscript illumination—with Iranian decorative systems, while also incorporating stylistic influences derived from European painting (Candy, 2000, p. 156-159).

Light represents another essential component of spatial articulation. The controlled placement of relatively small windows produces gradual and diffused illumination that enhances the contemplative and sacred atmosphere of the interior. This carefully regulated lighting system reflects both Armenian liturgical symbolism and broader traditions of spatial perception in Islamic architecture.

Religious and social function: The multifunctional character of the church complexes reflects the communal organization of New Julfa and the broader sociopolitical circumstances of Armenians living within Safavid Iran. In certain cases, these complexes also fulfilled protective and semi-fortified functions during periods of insecurity, recalling the monastic-fortress complexes of seventeenth-century Armenia. Originally, most churches did not possess separate bell towers; these became more widespread only from the eighteenth century onward (Hasratyan, 2004, p.13). Despite these architectural transformations, the churches have retained their religious and institutional significance. Isfahan remains one of the dioceses of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Iran (operates by the Great House of Cilicia, Antelias), and the preserved churches continue to serve as active places of worship where the Divine Liturgy is celebrated regularly (Armenian Diocese of Isfahan).

Materials and methods

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of the Armenian churches of New Julfa (Isfahan) using architectural surveys, historical sources, published literature, church archival materials, and visual documentation. A comparative typological approach was employed to classify the churches according to their spatial organization, structural systems, and architectural elements, including both exterior and interior features. Particular attention was given to the churches' plans, domes, façades, decorative features in both the exterior and interior, and construction techniques in order to identify their main typological and architectural characteristics.

Typological analysis and classification: The architectural characteristics discussed above demonstrate that, although the churches of New Julfa share a common historical, cultural, and religious background, they are not uniform in their spatial organization, structural systems, or volumetric compositions. While all reflect the adaptation of Armenian ecclesiastical traditions within the architectural environment of Safavid Iran, they exhibit significant variation in the configuration of their plans, the organization of their central spaces, the arrangement of structural supports, and the composition of their dome systems. These variations provide the basis for a typological classification of the churches.

The classification proposed in this study is based primarily on three architectural criteria: the organization of the domed space, the arrangement of the supporting structural elements, and the relationship between the longitudinal axis of the church and its central spatial unit. According to these criteria, the churches of New Julfa can be classified into three principal architectural types:

1. Four-wall-pier domed churches: The first group comprises churches in which the central domed space is defined by four internal supports formed by wall piers. This type demonstrates the closest relationship with the traditional Armenian domed church model, in which the dome constitutes the dominant structural and spatial element. The arrangement of the supports creates a centralized composition and emphasizes the vertical relationship between the sanctuary, the dome, and the interior volume.

The domed churches articulated by four wall piers in New Julfa include the churches of St. Stephen (1614), St. John the Baptist (1621), St. Sargis (second half of the seventeenth century), and St. Minas. Among these monuments, the church of St. Minas (Fig. 2), built between 1659 and 1663 in the Tabriz (Davrezh) quarter, occupies a unique position not only within New Julfa but also within the broader context of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture.

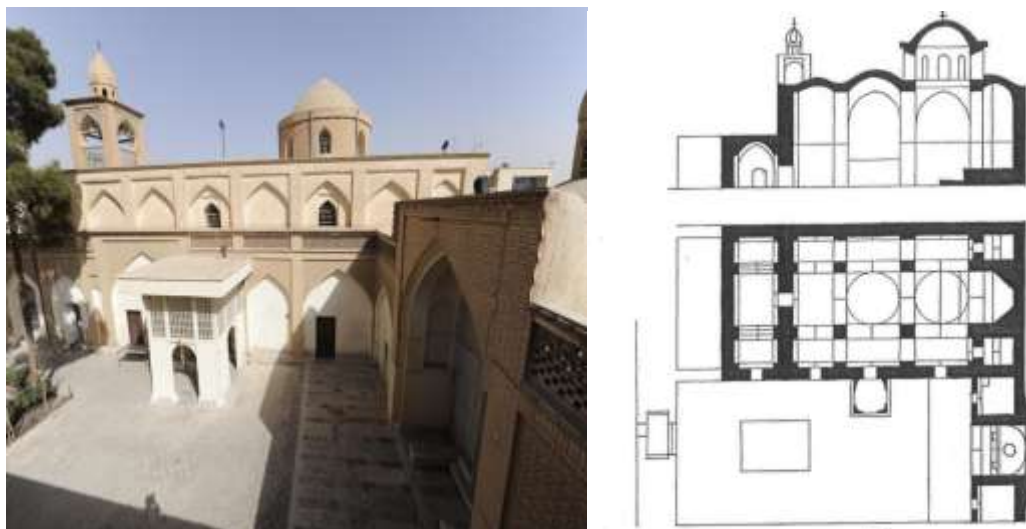


Figure 2. St. Minas church (exterior view and plan)

Although St. Minas church follows the basic ground plan of the four-wall-pier type, its volumetric organization differs significantly from other monuments belonging to the same group. In plan the church consists of two squares, with piers linked by pointed arches, and a rectangular vault to the west. The east square is covered by a dome resting on a drum supported on pendentives. The raised chancel, with a step in front, is surrounded by a semi-octagonal apse covered by a half-dome. The chancel is flanked by vestries to the north and south. Two side aisles are covered with vaults on pendentives. On the south side of the church are three doors, and there is a single door in the middle of the west side. At the east end of the courtyard to the south of the church is an annexe chapel, consisting of a triple arched façade, with a small raised altar at the centre. This chapel is flanked by a vestry to the north and a small storehouse to the south.

Thus, rather than positioning the dome centrally above four wall piers within the nave, the structural composition is formed by arches springing from the eastern pair of wall piers and the corners of the apse. This arrangement creates a distinctive spatial solution in which the domed area is more closely integrated with the sanctuary. The interior architectural elements, including niches, wall piers, and the altar area, are richly decorated, creating a unified ornamental environment. It is noteworthy that this architectural solution has not been identified among the churches of historic Armenia. However, comparable spatial arrangements can be observed in several Armenian churches of Tbilisi, another major center of Armenian diaspora architecture (Hasratyan, 2004).

The church contains a stone altar, Qajar-period (1794-1925) tiles, and numerous wall paintings depicting biblical scenes, saints, and the symbols of the four Evangelists. The most important artwork is the 'Last Judgement', a large composition showing Christ, angels, the resurrection of the faithful, and the punishment of the damned. Though partly crude, it is one of New Julfa's finest paintings and may reflect foreign artistic influence. The annexe contains Qajar tiles, simple Julfa-school paintings, inscriptions, stone crosses, and etc. The church was repaired in 1827 (by Agha Hovsep Amirian) and underwent another restoration in 1853. (Ter-Hovhanyants, 1881, vol. 2, p. 211, 215-216)

2. Domed hall-type churches: The second typological group comprises domed hall-type churches, a spatial composition that occupies an important position in the development of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture. The type emerged in Armenia during the sixth century, with an early

example represented by the Church of Sts. Paul and Peter in Zovuni, and reached its classical expression in seventh-century monuments such as Ptghnavank and the Church of St. Gregory at Aruch. (Hasratyan, 2004, p. 13-14) Characterized by a longitudinal hall-like space combined with a dominant domed unit, this type demonstrates a different spatial organization from the centralized domed church model.

In New Julfa, domed hall-type churches can be divided into two subtypes according to the arrangement of their supporting elements: churches articulated by two pairs of wall piers and churches articulated by a single pair of wall piers.

a) Domed hall-type churches with two pairs of wall piers: This subtype is represented by the churches of St. Gevorg, the Holy Mother of God, and St. Gregory the Illuminator.

The church of St. Gevorg, located in the Small Meydan quarter and built in 1610/1611 with the financial support of Khoja Nazar, is one of the largest and most significant churches of New Julfa (Fig.3). The nave consists of three arms linked by pointed arches, each supporting a dome on pendentives. The eastern dome is slightly higher than the other two and is pierced by an octagonal opening supporting a lantern surmounted by a pear-shaped dome, while the other domes are topped with smaller lanterns. A bell tower stands on the northwest roof. The raised chancel and altar are enclosed by a semi-octagonal apse with a half-dome above. Beneath the chancel, steps descend to a chamber under the altar roofed with double barrel vaults supported by a central pier. Vestries lie to the north and south of the chancel, accessed from the nave. A later porch, flanked by smaller rooms with external entrances, stands before the west door. A second door at the northeast corner of the nave opens into a covered court roofed with shallow domes on pendentives and containing a collection of stone architectural fragments.



Figure 3. St. Gevorg church (exterior view and plan)

North of the church is an annexe with a central domed space flanked by pairs of smaller rooms, originally open to the western courtyard. The central room has been enclosed and converted into a chapel entered from the south. The northern part of the annexe has been obscured by later additions, leaving only part of the original façade visible above the roof. The façade is divided into five arches with spandrels decorated in tile mosaic, now in poor condition. The thrust of the eastern dome and apse appears to have been underestimated, requiring massive buttresses along the outer south wall; the plan also indicates reinforcement of the north wall. Numerous inscribed stones are preserved in the courtyard, mainly along the north and west sides of the church.

The interior hall is divided by two pairs of large wall piers into three nearly equal sections. Each section is covered by a hemispherical vault with a central oculus (clerestory opening), while a dome with a small drum rises above the eastern section of the roof. This roofing system distinguishes the church from the domed hall-type churches of seventeenth-century Armenia. Among Armenian churches, a comparable solution has been identified only in the St. Gregory church in the village of Dznaberd near Nakhijevan, located in the region adjacent to Iran and attributed to a similar period. (Hasratyan, 2004)

The church interior is distinguished by finely decorated groined pendentives outlined with painted bands. The altar consists of three inscribed stone capitals supporting a horizontal stone slab, the front of which is usually concealed by a modern silver-covered wooden screen. Beneath the altar is a vaulted chamber containing several inscribed marble crosses. Although the church walls are unpainted, the altar is surmounted by an impressive oil painting of the 'Assumption', possibly of Italian or Spanish origin. The chancel front is decorated with finely crafted cuerda seca tiles featuring floral motifs, while the arch above the central opening is ornamented with tiles depicting two angels' heads and a bird. The church's artistic significance is further enhanced by two large cuerda seca ceramic tile panels above the western and northern entrances. The west entrance is framed by brick and tile mosaic and surmounted by an eleven-tile panel depicting the 'Annunciation' accompanied by an Armenian commemorative inscription (dates back to the beginning of the 18th century). Chinese cloud-scroll motifs and a Persian inscription on the depicted book reflect the multicultural artistic influences incorporated into the church's decoration. The north entrance is similarly framed and crowned by a twenty-eight-tile panel depicting the 'Adoration of the Magi' (1619), the earliest dated pictorial cuerda seca tile composition of its kind. (Carswell, 1968, p. 38; Avagyan, 2000, p. 91-101; Babayan, 2006)

The courtyard north of the church contains numerous carved architectural fragments, including an altar slab, a supporting pier, and decorated capitals. According to Armenian tradition, several of these stones, including the three capitals beneath the altar, were brought from Etchmiadzin by order of Shah Abbas I, enhancing the church's significance as a pilgrimage center. This tradition is also documented by Arakel Davrijeci. (Davrijeci, 1978)

Built in 1613 by Khoja Avetik in the Great Meydan quarter, the church of the Holy Mother of God (Fig. 4) represents another significant example of this subtype. Its domed hall composition is characterized by an enlarged central bay, measuring approximately twice the size of the eastern and western bays. This central space is covered by a large ovoid dome without a drum, while the western bay incorporates a gallery. A small bell tower rises above the two-story, three-arched portico attached to the western façade. The pronounced ovoid dome above the apse further distinguishes the architectural composition of the church.



Figure 4. The church of Holy Mother of God (exterior view and plan)

Thus, this church is distinguished by an unusual plan organized around four massive piers, externally reinforced by buttresses on the north and south sides. Recessed arches support groined pendentives, which carry a windowed drum crowned by a pointed dome. The western section is arranged on two levels: a domed ground floor supports an upper domed gallery accessed by a staircase within the south wall. The western entrance opens onto a paved platform covered by a wooden canopy supported by a stone colonnade extending along the north, west, and south sides of the church. East of the central space, the nave rises by a step toward the elevated chancel. The north and south arms are covered by barrel vaults, while the intermediate bays are domed. The chancel terminates in a semi-octagonal apse covered by a dome with an elaborate groined interior. The north and south entrances appear to be later additions, as they interrupt the original tile frieze extending around the lower walls. Blocked windows further indicate modifications to the original openings. The church preserves a continuous ceramic tile frieze decorated with Armenian inscriptions, floral patterns, and animal motifs, while the chancel front features one of the finest cuerda seca tile ensembles in New Julfa. (Pope, 1938, p. 1350)

The interior decoration (1651-1666) of the Holy Mother of God church is comparatively restrained in relation to its architectural complexity, yet it reflects the artistic synthesis characteristic of New Julfa. The lower sections of the walls, reaching approximately 1.35 meters in height, are covered with decorative ceramic tiles typical of seventeenth-century Persian ornamentation, while the upper walls, piers, and arches are adorned with frescoes and ornamental motifs. These paintings demonstrate strong Western European influences, particularly those associated with seventeenth-century Italian art (Babayan, 2006). The altar consists of a large inscribed stone slab, and traces of stucco remain in the apse. Several oil paintings and wall paintings depicting saints and biblical scenes survive on the walls and within the dome drum, although many have undergone restoration or remain fragmentary. (Haghnazarian, 1992)

b) Domed hall-type churches with a single pair of wall piers: The second subtype consists of domed hall-type churches articulated by a single pair of wall piers. This group includes the churches of St. Catherine (1623), St. Nerses (1666-1671), St. Nicholas (about 1630-1644), St. Bethlehem (1627-1628), and etc.. The single-pair wall pier subtype represents a significant stage in the adaptation of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture within the Safavid Iranian environment. Compared with earlier examples of the domed hall tradition, these churches demonstrate a greater

integration of Iranian architectural concepts, particularly through the development of large external ovoid domes, double-shell dome construction, and prominent vertical elements that contributed to the urban silhouette of New Julfa. Their richly decorated interiors, characterized by extensive use of glazed ceramic tiles and fresco cycles, further reveal the synthesis of Armenian artistic traditions with Safavid decorative practices (Babayan, 2006, p. 5-9). Among these monuments, the church of St. Bethlehem represents an early and particularly direct expression of this architectural type. It demonstrates how the single-pair wall pier configuration became a distinctive manifestation of the interaction between Armenian ecclesiastical planning and the architectural language of Safavid Iran.

The church of St. Bethlehem (Fig. 5), located in the Great Meydan quarter, was built in 1627–1628 under the patronage of Khoja Petros Velijanian. It represents a classical example of the domed hall-type with a single pair of wall piers. The central space consists of a square defined by four recessed pointed arches, interconnected by groined pendentives that support the dome. The most remarkable architectural feature of the church is its large central dome, the largest among the domes of the New Julfa churches, with an interior diameter of approximately 12.5 meters. Constructed as a hollow double-shell structure, it consists of an inner and outer shell connected by a wooden and brick framework. The inner nearly hemispherical dome reflects the traditional principles of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture, while the external onion-shaped dome, with its pronounced ovoid profile, demonstrates clear affinities with the domes of Safavid Iranian mosques. Resting on a low cylindrical drum, this outer shell reflects the influence of Iranian architectural traditions while adapting them to the Armenian church context. (Pope, 1938) Through this double-shell construction, the dome of St. Bethlehem became not only the tallest among the churches of New Julfa but also one of the most prominent vertical elements in the settlement's skyline.



Figure 5. St. Bethlehem church (exterior view and plan)

The raised chancel is roofed with cross vaults and terminates in a semi-octagonal apse covered by a half-dome to the east. Small vestries open from the nave at the foot of the chancel steps. At the western end of the church are vaulted recesses on the north and south sides, above which is a gallery covered by a shallow dome. Externally, the buttresses are connected by transverse vaults. The main entrance is located in the western wall. A secondary doorway in the southern wall, leading into a covered passage, is a later addition, as it interrupts both the tile frieze and the painted

decoration. The main altar has a stone core with several architectural fragments preserved beneath it. (Carswell, 1968, p. 50-51)

Thus, the interior organization of the church further reflects the spatial principles characteristic of New Julfa ecclesiastical architecture. The western part of the hall is divided into two levels, with the upper gallery traditionally designated for women. A two-story, three-arched portico is attached to the western façade, above which a small bell tower was added in 1897.

The interior decoration of St. Bethlehem represents the characteristic artistic synthesis of New Julfa, combining Armenian artistic traditions with Safavid decorative influences. The lower sections of the walls are covered with decorative ceramic tiles, while the upper walls, wall piers, apse, and dome drum are entirely covered with frescoes. (Babayan, 2006, p. 7) The decorative program consists of an eclectic combination of gilt stucco, painted plaster, wall paintings, and cuerda seca tiles. Numerous Armenian inscriptions are preserved throughout the interior, while the plasterwork remains generally intact despite some areas of deterioration and flaking.

The dome is particularly distinguished by its finely executed gilt stucco decoration and painted ornament. The frescoes vary in stylistic quality and appear to have been produced by local workshops. Although some compositions demonstrate significant iconographic interest, their execution differs in refinement and treatment, with strong color contrasts and limited tonal variation that create a visual distinction between the painted surfaces and the surrounding stucco ornament. Nevertheless, the lower painted bands preserve valuable representations of seventeenth-century textiles, costumes, and headgear, providing important evidence for the study of contemporary material culture. The paintings around the chancel walls are executed in a more restrained style and consist mainly of standing figures of saints.

The western wall beneath the gallery contains a series of paintings depicting the Martyrdom of St. Gregory the Illuminator, together with representations of St. Sargis, St. Mercurius, and St. Theodore. A vivid depiction of 'Hell' is located near the western entrance. Apart from the dome decoration, the frieze of cuerda seca tiles represents one of the most significant decorative elements of the church. These panels are exceptional examples of Julfa tile production, featuring elaborate floral and animal motifs. The exterior tiled panel above the western entrance, dated 1899, further contributes to the decorative richness of the monument. The complexity and richness of its interior decoration place St. Bethlehem among the most elaborately ornamented churches of New Julfa, comparable in artistic significance with the Church of the Holy Saviour.

Thus, this church demonstrates the architectural potential of the single-pair wall pier subtype, representing a high degree of integration between Armenian ecclesiastical traditions and Safavid architectural influences. Through the development of large external ovoid domes, double-shell dome construction, enhanced skyline visibility, and extensive glazed tile decoration, this subtype reflects the adaptation of Armenian architectural principles within the Safavid Iranian environment. Together with its complex interior decorative program, St. Bethlehem represents one of the most accomplished expressions of New Julfa ecclesiastical architecture (Ter-Hovhanyants, 1881, vol. 2, p. 159). Compared with the previous subtype, St. Bethlehem-type churches represent a more simplified structural solution, in which the relationship between the longitudinal hall and the domed unit is achieved through a reduced number of internal supports. Nevertheless, they retain the fundamental principles of Armenian domed hall architecture while incorporating local adaptations in spatial proportions, constructional methods, and decorative expression.

3. Summer-type churches: The third group consists of the so-called "summer-type" churches, distinguished by their open or semi-open apses and more permeable spatial organization. Representing one of the most distinctive developments within the ecclesiastical tradition of New

Julfa, these churches differ from the enclosed spatial compositions of the previous types through their closer relationship between interior space and the surrounding environment. Their emergence is closely associated with the climatic conditions of Isfahan, particularly the need to adapt religious architecture to the intense summer heat of the region. Constructed mainly during the eighteenth century, open-apse churches were typically built as additions attached to, or located near, existing churches in New Julfa (Hasratyan, 2004). Their architectural composition combines the fundamental principles of Armenian ecclesiastical planning with a spatial arrangement adapted to local environmental conditions, demonstrating the flexibility of Armenian architectural traditions within the Safavid Iranian context.

The earliest example of an open apse was constructed on the southern side of the church of St. Sargis (or Ohana vank, 1661) in the Yerevan quarter of New Julfa (Fig. 6). Aligned with the church's eastern façade and dedicated to St. Stephen, it consists of a rectangular interior space with chambers functioning as repositories (in Arm.: *avandatun*) on both sides. The structure is crowned by a dome resting on a cylindrical drum (Carswell, 1968, Hasratyan, 2004).



Figure 6. St. Sargis church (exterior view and plan)

St. Sargis church is situated on the north side of a courtyard accessed from the street through a gate in the southwest corner. At the eastern end of the courtyard is an annex attached to the church, with a five-arched façade; the central and largest arch contains a small chapel. A veranda occupies the southern side of the courtyard, its roof supported by two wooden pillars. The church follows the domed hall tradition, with a central dome resting on a drum supported by groined pendentives rising from pointed arches that connect four piers. The nave extends to the east and west, where it is covered by curved vaults supported on pendentives. The eastern vault is pierced and crowned by an octagonal lantern with a conical roof. The side aisles are similarly covered with pendentive-supported vaults. The raised chancel and altar are enclosed within a semi-octagonal apse surmounted by a half-dome. The altar consists of a roughly cut stone slab resting on a stone pedestal, while the chancel is flanked by vestries entered through doors at the eastern ends of the aisles (Haghnazarian, 1992).

The interior decorative program of St. Sargis reflects the artistic synthesis characteristic of New Julfa. Above the altar is a painting of 'The Madonna Surrounded by Angels and Saints', dated 1725 and inscribed in Armenian, while the apse half-dome is decorated with a representation of 'Christ in Glory' accompanied by God the Father, the Evangelists, saints, and angels. Additional wall paintings beside the chancel steps, including 'The Visitation' and 'The Annunciation', belong

to the Julfa school tradition and suggest the existence of a more extensive original decorative cycle (Carswell, 1968, p. 54). The church also preserves a high-quality cuerda seca tile program, particularly in the eastern section and along the north wall. Some tiles appear to have been rearranged or transferred from other churches, while inscribed fragments preserve Armenian texts. The decorative compositions include floral and animal motifs, landscape scenes, phoenixes, cloud scrolls, and vase designs influenced by Chinese prototypes. These elements demonstrate the multicultural character of New Julfa's artistic environment and the integration of Armenian, Persian, and East Asian decorative traditions.

A similar composition is found in the summer church built in 1713 on the southern side of the church of St. Minas and dedicated to the Holy Mother of God. This structure consists of a rectangular interior space with a vaulted open apse. A further variation of the type is represented by the summer church (1714) attached to the southern side of the church of St. Gregory the Illuminator (built in 1633, Small meydan) (Fig. 7). It features a pentagonal interior, two-story repository chambers on either side, and a dome with an octagonal drum rising above the apse. The same architectural principle is evident in the summer church built in 1774 on the northeastern side of the church of St. Nicholas (built in 1633 in Gharagel quarter; Fig. 8), dedicated to St. Stephen. A further example from the same year is the pentagonal-apse church attached to the northern side of the church of St. John the Baptist. Due to the limited dimensions of the site, this structure lacks the adjoining chambers commonly found in other summer-type churches, demonstrating the flexibility of the type in response to spatial constraints.



Figure 7. St. Gregory the Illuminator church (exterior view)



Figure 8. St. Nicholas church (exterior view)

Thus, the summer-type churches of New Julfa represent a distinctive regional development within Armenian ecclesiastical architecture. Their open or semi-open spatial organization reflects a creative response to the climatic conditions of Isfahan while maintaining the essential principles of Armenian liturgical and architectural traditions. Although this type has no widely recognized direct parallels among the churches of historic Armenia or other Armenian diaspora communities, it demonstrates the capacity of New Julfa architecture to develop new spatial solutions through the interaction of inherited Armenian traditions and the local Iranian environment (Hasratyan, 2004).

Results and Discussion

The three typological groups identified in this study demonstrate both the unity and diversity of the Armenian churches of New Julfa. Although these monuments share common historical ori-

gins, religious functions, and fundamental architectural principles, they reveal different approaches to the organization of sacred space and the adaptation of Armenian ecclesiastical traditions within the material, climatic, and cultural environment of Safavid Iran. So, the typological diversity of New Julfa churches indicates that they should not be understood merely as Armenian churches constructed outside the homeland. Rather, they represent a regional transformation of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture, in which inherited architectural principles were preserved while being modified in response to local conditions (climatic, architectural, cultural) and new artistic influences.

Beyond their typological differences, many churches of New Julfa share recurring architectural features, including pentagonal apses flanked by rectangular side chambers or sacristies, double-shell domes, elaborate decorative programs, and courtyard-based architectural complexes. The development of the pentagonal interior apse represents an important seventeenth-century evolution within Armenian ecclesiastical architecture. This feature is also documented in the Nakhichevan architectural tradition, which maintained close historical and artistic connections with the architectural development of New Julfa. Together, these shared characteristics demonstrate that New Julfa architecture developed through both continuity and innovation. The churches retained essential elements of Armenian spatial organization while incorporating new structural, decorative, and environmental responses shaped by their Iranian context.

Conclusion

The churches of New Julfa represent a significant stage in the evolution of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture, characterized by the preservation of medieval Armenian principles alongside the development of new regional solutions. While maintaining fundamental architectural traditions, including the domed hall type and four-wall-pier domed compositions, these churches introduced new approaches to spatial organization, volumetric expression, and decorative treatment.

One of the most distinctive developments was the emergence of the summer-type open-apse churches, which provided a regional response to the climatic conditions of Isfahan. Similarly, the large external ovoid domes and, in some cases, double-shell dome systems transformed the external appearance of Armenian churches and contributed to their prominence within the urban landscape of New Julfa. These features reflect the influence of Safavid architectural aesthetics while remaining rooted in Armenian ecclesiastical traditions.

Iranian influence is also evident in several constructional and decorative features, including the use of pointed arches, specific roofing techniques, glazed ceramic decoration, and ornamental systems associated with Safavid artistic culture. At the same time, the interior fresco programs demonstrate connections with Western European artistic traditions, particularly seventeenth-century Italian painting, while Armenian artists of New Julfa actively contributed to the wider cultural environment of Safavid Iran.

The architectural and artistic development of New Julfa represents a distinctive phenomenon within the history of Armenian diaspora architecture. Unlike many other Armenian communities, New Julfa developed within the specific economic, cultural, and architectural environment of Safavid Isfahan, where Armenian traditions interacted with Iranian construction practices, Islamic architectural aesthetics, and international artistic influences.

The extensive commercial networks of the Armenian community further strengthened this cultural exchange. Connections with European centers such as Venice and Amsterdam, as well as trade relations with India, China, and other regions, facilitated the movement of artistic ideas, materials, and decorative traditions. These interactions enriched the architectural character of New Julfa while preserving Armenian cultural identity. Therefore, the churches of New Julfa should be

understood as a distinctive regional expression of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture. They embody the ability of Armenian architectural traditions to preserve their identity while creatively adapting to new social, environmental, and cultural contexts.

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