

Trends in Modern Iranian Architecture

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A new age in Iranian architecture began with the rise of the Safavid dynasty. Economically robust and politically stable, this period saw a flourishing growth of theological sciences. Traditional architecture evolved in its patterns and methods leaving its impact on the architecture of the following periods.

The appearance of new patterns based on geometrical networks in the development of cities gave order to open urban spaces, and took into account the conservation of natural elements (water and plants) within cities. The establishment of distinctive public spaces is one of the most important urban features of the Safavid period, as manifested for example in Naghsh-e Jahan Square, Chahar Bagh and the royal gardens of Isfahan.

Distinctive monuments like the Sheikh Lotfollah (1603), Hasht Behesht (Eight Paradise Palace) (1699; pl. 1) and the Chahar Bagh School (1714) appeared in Isfahan and other cities. This extensive development of architecture was rooted in Persian culture and took form in the design of schools, baths, houses, caravanserai and other urban spaces such as bazaars and squares. It continued until the end of the Qajar reign.

The confrontation of Iran with western civilisation that began with the Qajar reign brought political and social modernisation to Iran during the period stretching from 1800 to 1979. This upheaval naturally engendered a transformation of architecture, and, eventually, the rise of a novel architecture in Iran. The spaces that Iranians are presently living in today were born of this process that we propose to review in relation to trends in the contemporary architecture of Iran.

THE QAJAR ERA (1800-1925)

The first stage of Iran's modern architectural development took place during the Qajar period. It happened as a result of the reforms enacted by the princesses and authorities such as Abbas Mirza, Mirza Taghi Khan Amir Kabir and intellectuals like Mirza Malcolm Khan, Mirza Fathali Khan Akhondzadeh and those who pursued the rational rule of law and the development of public education and welfare. With economic independence as their real aim these authorities laid the groundwork for the appearance of a new Persian architecture. The increase in communications between

Iran and Europe allowed increasing acquaintance with European art and architecture, which became apparent in the design of government monuments like the Shams al-Emareh (1861) and the Golestan Palace (1870).

THE PAHLAVI ERA (1925-1979)

With the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty, architecture was modernised in a new way. Socio-political planning under the authoritative rule of government with the aid of westerners was the style of the period. During the rule of Reza Shah (1925-1941) the industrialisation of the country began to take place; road and rail networks were built, in conjunction with a marked Europeanisation of social behaviour. Education, the economy, and culture all figured on the agenda of Reza Shah under the influence of the West, while the reconstruction efforts in Turkey headed by Mustafa Atatürk led to imitation and rivalry. During the two decades of Reza Shah's rule, the government played an active role in the execution of civil projects. Western architects were invited to design new buildings for the first time, and the reconstruction plans were executed with great speed. As a result the traditional design of many cities changed significantly.

This period also saw the development of factories, government offices and universities, and the use of new building materials like steel, cement and glass. New construction techniques brought with them a variety of styles or trends of European and Iranian origin.

'ECLECTIC FUSION' WITH AN EMPHASIS ON IRANIAN ARCHITECTURE

This trend embodied nationalistic and progressive goals and looked back to the example of pre-Islamic architecture. It was also strongly influenced by nineteenth-century Neoclassical European architecture. This style was applied to the design of governmental buildings or schools and banks and its influence was particularly felt in the plans of the buildings through an application of symmetry, hierarchy and geometric forms: buildings like the National Police Headquarters (1933) are a good example. The combination of these two approaches – European and Iranian – was such that European architecture, and especially the Neoclassical style, found a specific expression of its own. The entry gateways of Maidan Mashgh (1931) and Hassan Abad Square (1935) are superior examples of this trend.

PURELY EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE

This tendency developed as a result of the progressive aims of certain intellectuals. In this type of architecture there was no sign or influence of Persian forms. It was often brought to Iran without any adjustments. Tehran Railway Station (1937), the Ministry of Justice (1938), the University Departments of Medicine and Law, and Tehran University's Campus (1934) are examples of this trend under the reign of the first Pahlavi. Mohsen Foroughi, Vartan Hovanesian, Ali Sadegh, Kayghobad Zafar Bakhtiar, Paul Abkar, Gabriel Gevorkian, and Iraj Moshiri were the proponents of this process.

MOHAMMAD REZA SHAH (1941-1979)

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi rose to power in 1941, but from that year to 1953 a limited amount of development occurred due to political conditions in the country. After 1953, and especially from 1969 to 1979 with the aid of substantial oil income, important strides were made in economics, education, health and medicine. Because of the economic consequences of the government's policies, development became equivalent to investment. The cultural dimension of this work was less well considered, and one of its consequences was the hurried and uncalculated importation of western ways.

The establishment of modern educational institutions like the School of Fine Arts encouraged a vogue for modern western architecture. Meanwhile socio-political reasoning pushed Iran towards industrialisation, and led to the speedy growth of urban areas. In this respect two trends can be analysed here.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCHOOL OF MODERNISM AND THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE IN ARCHITECTURE (1941-1979)

This process, which occurred in the design of some structures from 1953 to 1963, was now applied to almost all buildings. During this period numerous governmental and commercial buildings were erected and many residences were built without consideration for local characteristics or climatic conditions, in Tehran and in other cities like Tabriz, Yazd, Mashhad and Kashan.

It is worth noting that during these decades a profit-making attitude aimed at faster, cheaper construction led to the exclusion of all ornamental elements and the use of a minimum variety of materials (brick, steel and glass), and paved the way for developers to build and sell increasingly uniform structures regardless of location. Unfortunately, the problems that this method entailed continue to have an impact in contemporary Iran.

Nevertheless, well beyond the range of the developers, monuments like the Senate (Islamic parliament, Mohsen Foroughi and Heydar Ghiaï, 1959) and the Ministry of Oil building (Yahya Etehadieh and Abdolaziz Farmanfarmaian, 1969) were built under the influence of advanced international Modernism, and are cited today as distinct examples of modern Iranian architecture.

This distinct presence of international Modernism continued until 1979, and we can see its influence in buildings such as the Takhti (Amjadieh Stadium, 1966), the City Theatre (1971), the Azadi Sports Compound (1974), and the Ministry of Agriculture (1975), all designed by reputable architects such as Jahanguir Darvish, Ali Sardar Afkhami and Abdolaziz Farmanfarmaian.

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNISM (1965-1979)

Although the International Style and the school of Modernism were strongly promoted by architectural schools and firms like Abdolaziz Farmanfarmaian, efforts to achieve a cultural identity in Iranian architecture advanced through the work of architects like Houshang Seyhoun, Kamran Diba, Hossein Amanat and Nader Ardalan.

By designing tombs for famous scientific and literary figures, like Avicenna's tomb in the city of Hamedan, or Khayam's tomb in the city of Neyshabur, Houshang Seyhoun was one of the first architects during the period 1950 to 1965 who took a step beyond international architecture and created a common language linking modern architecture and traditional Iranian designs. Paying attention to pure geometrical volumes he achieved a metaphoric expression.

In the middle of the 1960s new discourses were gradually introduced in professional and educational gatherings through the presence of individuals like Nader Ardalan and Kamran Diba in which history and tradition were considered as indispensable parts of the Iranian architectural identity. Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar's research for the book *The Sense of Unity* was also influential and, as a result, some exemplary buildings related to this trend came into existence, such as the Iran Centre for Management Studies (today the Imam Sadegh University) designed by Nader Ardalan (pl. 26); the University of Jondi Shapour (Ahvaz, 1968); the new city of Shushtar (1974; pls. 4, 5) and the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art designed by Kamran Diba (pl. 25). The Iran Centre of Management in particular was designed with the inspiration of universal principles and reference to a specifically Iranian relation of space with nature. The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art employs introversion in its principles of organisation and the design of spatial elements, with tall light wells to remind visitors of desert wind catchers, a clear reference to Iranian architecture. The design of the Shushtar residential compounds was inspired by the principles of organisation and typology of traditional Iranian cities and the use of local material adjusted to the climate.

In short, what appeared at the end of the Pahlavi era in cities was an inharmonious combination of the developers' build-and-sell architecture and western modern designs. Nevertheless, efforts had been made to affirm Iranian cultural identity during the early Pahlavi era. During the second Pahlavi reign individual tendencies, manifested in the works of Ardalan or Diba, did not develop into stable trends permitting the emergence of a genuinely Iranian modern architecture.

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC (1974-TO DATE)

The political and social events of 1979 created a rupture between architecture before and after the Revolution. New viewpoints related to cultural, national or religious ideals emerged. The eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war created many social and economic disturbances that influenced architecture and urban planning. Amongst these were changes in the educational system, the halt in many

of the investments in civil affairs, and the closing of many architectural firms. The emigration of a number of university professors and architects also had an impact during the years after the Revolution. The effort to create an Islamic identity became a dominant concern.

A certain pluralism and a variety of points of views are a special feature of architecture during the two decades after the Revolution, and especially during the 1990s. On the one hand, creating architecture and urban planning to correspond with the values and ideals of Islamic society was an essential element in this period. On the other hand, western-influenced trends like Post-Modernism and Deconstructivism, also played a role in Iranian architecture. Several trends can be distinguished.

REVITALISATION / REJUVENATION

During the 1980s and 1990s efforts to rejuvenate Islamic culture were a priority. The use of materials like brickwork and tiles, and ornamental elements like moulding and calligraphy, were part of the effort to give Islamic spirit to buildings. This approach was not confined to specifically Islamic architectural types, and forms like central gardens, domes, or arches were frequently seen.

Many of the residential and governmental buildings in Tehran and other cities were built under this influence. The shrine of Imam Khomeini (1991), the Organisation of the Hajj (1988) and the Sharif University Mosque (2000) in Tehran are distinct examples of this style. It is reasonable to say that this trend, essentially a superficial imitation of past patterns and forms detached from time and place, cannot have a lasting place in contemporary Iranian architecture.

ECLECTICISM RELATED TO WESTERN POST-MODERN ARCHITECTURE

In the mid-1980s under the influence of western architecture an eclectic architecture came into existence with a number of architects taking elements of Iranian architecture and combining them eclectically with the western Post-Modern style. Certain buildings displayed influences ranging from Post-Modern architecture to Neoclassicism and Iranian architecture, especially from the Qajar era. Architectural elements from both cultures were applied to façades and plans were designed to orderly geometrical forms and systems. The Bureau for Members of Parliament (1990), the Allame Dehkhoda University in Qazvin (1993; pl. 27), the Honarestan in Karaj (1991-1993), the Social Hall of the Pasture Institute (1989) and the dormitories of the University of Yazd are particular examples of this trend.

In some buildings a fusion of modern and contemporary architecture was attempted. The result was the creation of buildings like the Cultural Centre of Kerman and the Jolfa residential complex in Isfahan. Sometimes these structures included the repetition of traditional Iranian elements like arches, wind catchers, domes and half-domes and the use of variations of brickwork next to space frames. As such it was an attempt to create a variegated and Iranian spirit, but at the cost of

a surprisingly eclectic fusion. A number of buildings managed only to reflect western Post-Modernism in Iran: in this category, the Armita Tower for offices can be mentioned (pl. 29).

This architecture became very popular in the developers' build-and-sell scheme, due to a lack of evolution in building technology and a lack of rules and regulations. Its eclectic language became an instrument for the false, profit-worshipping attitude of the property and housing construction market in cities. The result was the flourishing of a glittering, worthless architecture, which made clumsy copies of most of the world architectural styles. Many residential buildings, especially of the high-rise variety, fall into this category.

In the Post-Modern style some works nonetheless have special importance. The Sports Complex of the city of Rafsanjan (2001; pl. 35) designed by S. Hadi Mirmiran is an example of a design that has been developed on the basis of old Iranian architecture while attempting to create architecture with a Persian identity.

THE PERMANENCE OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE

The western school of modern architecture has been the most influential force from the outset of the Pahlavi era until today. It is still a significant factor in contemporary Iranian architecture. Modern architecture since the Revolution has been formed in response to economic trends, and construction rules and regulations. These buildings follow the fundamental principles of western modern architecture such as pragmatic functionalism, in favour of simplicity (exclusion of ornaments), a generous use of glass for cladding, and a use of construction materials that makes them different from their predecessors.

With respect to this trend the following buildings can be mentioned: the Telecommunications building located on Yousef Abad Avenue in Tehran (1994; pl. 28) which has an appropriate functionalism; the Iranian National Library (1996) and many commercial structures in Tehran such as the office building by Mr Maghzi.

THE APPEARANCE OF SPECIAL TRENDS

Defining the correct position of Iranian Islamic architecture in the post-modern world elicits various points of view. The increasing importance of literature related to linguistic philosophy, post-constructivism, cultural relativism, and the 'end of ideology' has instigated a sort of mental inflammation in the community of Iranian architects. A pragmatism abstracted from the environment is one of the trends that has developed in this respect and its most important specifications are as follows.

SCIENTIFIC-FUNCTIONAL (ABSTRACTED FROM THE ENVIRONMENT)

This view, inspired by literary, philosophical and mathematical theories for explaining the 'concept' in the creation of works originated from the Deconstructivist movement and the developments

inspired by computers in western architectural literature. Architectural space has been reduced to scientific mathematical space. Environmental comparisons, including history and local tradition are not considered by these theories. At the utmost, despite discussions and literature that explain the 'Iranian-ness' of the projects, they are mere repetitions of the work of well-known western architects such as Zaha Hadid, Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, and others. Due to the limitations of construction technology and implementation in Iran, these works have remained three dimensional computer images.

In some schools of architecture this visually very attractive trend has been disseminated, albeit without any deep comprehension of this type of western architecture. Those who defend this kind of thought resort to special rationalisations by linking the theoretical aspects of the trend to some philosophical, religious Iranian grounds. They thus try to give legitimacy and credibility to contemporary Iranian architecture.

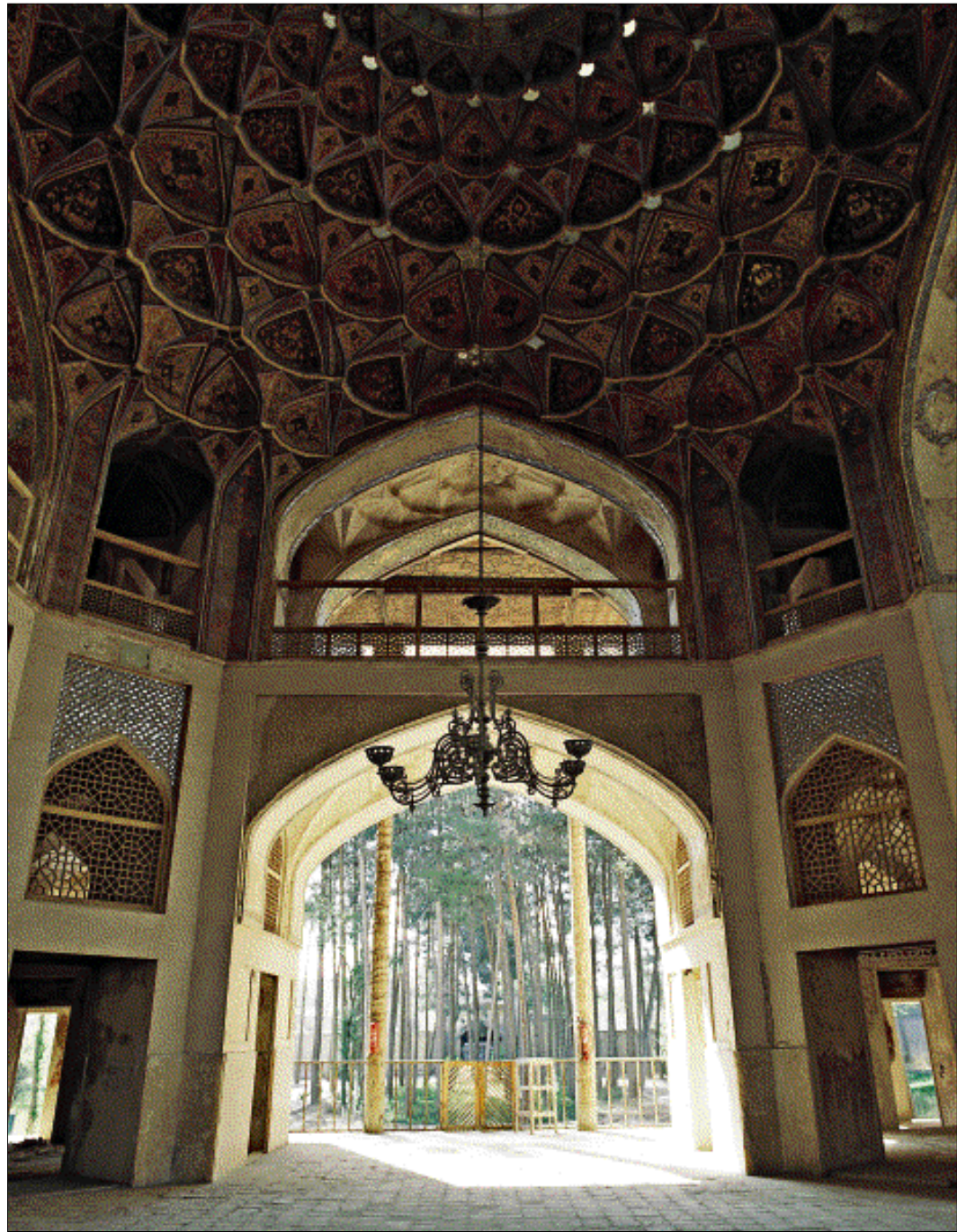
CREATING A DIALOGUE BETWEEN IRANIAN ARCHITECTURE AND WORLD ARCHITECTURE

If, during the Pahlavi era, Iranians regarded the achievements of western civilisation as a model and pursued total imitation of western designs, this was merely a special feature of progressive Iranian architecture. During the years that have followed the Revolution, in the struggle to achieve cultural identity, Iranian architects have turned towards revitalisation/rejuvenation and fusion or eclecticism. Presently, the trend that is emerging among architects is one accompanied by wide analysis and precise criticism. They are taking strides towards recognising 'real' cultures, and see solutions in the opening of minds towards the world at large.

In the sense that they view the achievements of western civilisation not as a model but as part of human heritage and seek to be contemporary with the people of their own times this is an interesting path. By benefiting from their thinking, by incorporating the technological facilities of today, together with inspirations from universal Iranian architecture as an abstract expression, architects may indeed be able to create a truly Iranian contemporary architecture.

It seems that with this new process of Iranian contemporary architecture, which is searching for the gist of universal art, it might be possible to create more distinctive works than in the past. Maybe enumerating a few examples, such as the Sports Complex of the city of Rafsanjan (pl. 35), the Jamshidieh Park, the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Berlin (pl. 33), the Hafezieh residences in the Sadabad palace complex (pl. 34), the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Australia and the Jolfa residential compound of Isfahan might reveal evidence of the beginnings of this trend. It is a process that is expected to become one of the main trends in contemporary Iranian architecture.

For illustrations of this article, the reader is referred to pls. 1, 4, 5, 23-29 and 33-35.





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4.

4, 5. DAZ/Kamran Diba,
Shushtar New Town,
Shushtar, Iran, 1974-1978.

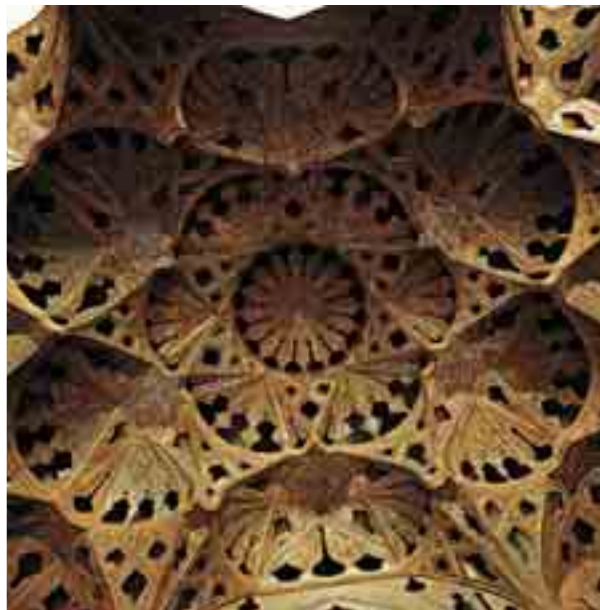
1-3. Italian Institute for the Middle
and Far East (ISMEC; Eugenio Galdieri)
and the National Organisation
for the Conservation of Historic Monuments
of Iran (NOCHMI; Bagher Shirazi),
restoration of Hasht Behesht, Chehel Sutun
and Ali Qapu, Isfahan, Iran, 1977.

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1. Hasht Behesht (1699), Isfahan, Iran,
restored in 1977.

2. Chehel Sutun (1667), Isfahan, Iran,
restored in 1977.

3. Ali Qapu (1660), Isfahan, Iran,
restored in 1977.



3.



5.



23.

23. Hossein Amanat, Azadi Monument, Tehran, Iran, 1974.



24.

24. André Godard with Maxim Siroux, Iran Bastan Museum, Tehran, Iran, 1931-1936.



25.

25. Kamran Diba, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran, Iran, 1976.



26.

26. Mandala Consultants/Nader Ardalan,
Iran Centre for Management Studies, Tehran, Iran, 1974.

27. Bavand Consultants, Allame Dehkoda
University, Qazvin, Iran, 1989.

28. Atec Consultants, Telecommunications Building,
Tehran, Iran, 1994.

29. Sharestan Consultants, Armita Tower,
Tehran, Iran, 1997.



27.



28.



29.



30.



31.



32.



33.



34.



35.

30. S. Hadi Mirmiran, Tehran BAR Association, Tehran, Iran, 2000.

31. Kamran Safamanesh, Iranian National Library competition, Tehran, design 1995.

32. S. Hadi Mirmiran, Export Development Bank of Iran, Tehran, design 1997.

33. Darab Diba/Safaverdi Associates, Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Berlin, Germany, 2004.

34. Bavand Consultants/Hossein Zeineddin, Hafezieh Complex, Tehran, Iran, 1998.

35. S. Hadi Mirmiran, Sports Complex, Rafsanjan, Iran, 2001.