

Public Buildings in Iran: 1920 to the Present

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This paper deals with contemporary Iranian architecture, with a focus on public buildings, and briefly looks at different periods of Iran's new architecture and the significant works that have emerged during these periods.

The new movement in Iranian architecture began about eighty years ago, during the 1920s. At that time, following the political transformations in the country and along with changes in social and economic conditions, the image of its cities changed. In response to the requirements of modern living, new building types such as banks, universities and factory buildings emerged. This time span of eighty years can be divided into four distinct periods:

- from about 1920 to 1940;
- from about 1940 to 1970;
- from about 1970 to 1979;
- from 1979 to date.

During the first period, from 1920 to 1940, the most important buildings were built under the patronage of the government and by foreign architects. These buildings were massive, voluminous and monumental and were intended to renew the old Iranian architecture, but this intention was limited to a superficial repetition of architectural forms, elements and motives particularly those of Achaemenid and Sassanid periods. Except for a few buildings such as the Iran Bastan Museum by André Godard with Maxim Siroux (pl. 24), the University of Tehran Campus by André Godard and the Palace of Justice by Gabriel Gevorkian, the buildings of this period lack any significant architectural value.

The next period began in 1940 and continued until 1970. The prominent buildings of this period were created in compliance with the principles of modern architecture by Iranian architects who were trained abroad such as Mohsen Foroughi, Houshang Seyhoun and Abdolaziz Farmanfarmaian. Although their buildings follow the principles of modern architecture their reference to old Iranian architecture presents a much higher quality using the patterns and architectural geometry of Iran. However, this period was unable to create any world-class modern architecture, nor was it completely successful in the use of Iranian architectural principles and ideas.

The third period began in 1970 and coincided with an era when the Modern Movement faced serious confrontations, and a historicist approach towards architecture was taking shape within the Modern Movement. In the meanwhile, several Iranian architects attempted to engender stronger ties with tradition in their works. Compared to the works of past periods, these are more accomplished insofar as their relationship with tradition is concerned.

After the emergence of the Post-Modern movement in world architecture, which was almost synchronous with the Islamic Revolution in Iran, two equally important factors gave birth to a new era of Iranian architecture. On the one hand, Iranian architects attempted to create an independent identity derived from Iran's architectural heritage while, on the other, Post-Modern architecture had a serious interest in traditional architecture of different nations. The union of these two factors resulted in an architecture of a Post-Modern style that indulged in traditional, particularly Islamic, motifs and elements. But then again this approach towards traditional architecture remained on the surface and Post-Modern clichés had an overwhelming presence in these works.

During the last decade, following the failure of various architects of these periods both in creating works on a global scale and in creative deployment of traditional principles, a group of Iranian architects initiated a new search based on past efforts that has shaped a progressive new movement in Iranian architecture today. Unfortunately, due to a lack of proper communication and intellectual interaction between the architects of the newly born movement, despite many common themes in their approaches and methods, this trend is not yet well defined and has no clear architectural agenda. Therefore, I have chosen some examples of this movement to comment on.

These works can be subdivided into three groups. The first group consists of works that offer a new interpretation of traditional patterns. Outstanding examples are the three proposals for the Islamic Republic of Iran Academies' Complex by S. Hadi Mirmiran, Ali Akbar Saremi and Darab Diba, and a proposal for the History Museum of Khurasan by M. A. Mirfendereski.

The second group includes works where the use of architectural heritage is not restricted to principles and prototypes of traditional architecture, but addresses Iranian culture on a broader scale with its myths, concepts, cultural contents and memories. These works have benefited from other artistic fields such as poetry and literature for intellectual innovation in architecture. Outstanding examples of this group are the proposals for the Iranian National Library competition by S. Hadi Mirmiran, Kamran Safamanesh (pl. 31) and Farhad Ahmadi; the Imam Khomeini International Airport Terminal by Bahram Shirdel, and the National Museum of Water by S. Hadi Mirmiran.

The third group consists of projects designed during the last five years (1997-2002). These projects have attempted to comply with new global paradigms and to confront the world's progressive architectural discourse, while at the same time deeply benefiting from traditional architecture. Some significant examples of this group are the Tehran BAR Association building in Tehran by S. Hadi Mirmiran (pl. 30); the Department of Persian Language in Daka by Kamran Safamanesh; the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Albania by Ali Akbar Saremi; the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Sweden by Farhad Ahmadi; the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Brazil by Bahram Shirdel; the Presidential Bureau of Technological Collaborations by Bahram Shirdel, and the General Consulate of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Frankfurt by S. Hadi Mirmiran.

In this brief review of the architecture of this eighty-year period, four main issues stand out:

- during the past eighty years, Iranian architecture has lagged behind in the footsteps of modern and Post-Modern architecture without enough knowledge about these movements;
- all architects of this period have been more or less concerned that their architecture should have a serious orientation towards the historical and architectural heritage of Iran;
- the ideal of presenting projects at a global level and contributing to the progress of world architecture has been intensified during the past three decades;
- a large number of contemporary Iranian architects believe that merely relying on the great architectural heritage of this country and developing its principles will be enough to engender an architectural movement, which could have a global role. The superficial use of past forms and typologies has now been changed to a more abstract and deeper presence in their works and today Iranian architects try not only to place themselves with the world's innovative architectural movements but also to preserve the essence of Iranian culture in their works.

For illustrations of this article, the reader is referred to pls. 24 and 30-35.



23.

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



24.

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



25.

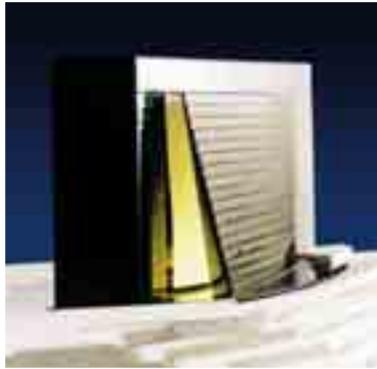
25. Kamran Diba, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran, Iran, 1976.



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.