AN ARCHITECTURAL ANALYSIS: THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, TEHRAN, IRAN

Kambiz Navai

Abstract

Kamran Tabatabai Diba is one of Iranian Architects, whose works during 60's and 70's are well-known among architects and scholars. His works are mostly considered as examples of Modern Style, scented by Iranian Architecture. His efforts on creating public, socio-cultural centers in Iran was a result of his concern about social matters, as well as seeking for a national, contemporary Architecture.

Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art is one of the most popular and well-known Diba's works. In this article an effort has been made to get a better understanding of this remarkable piece of work, and to light up the Architect's intents and the architectural methods he used to express them. The critique is concentrated mostly on two mentioned aspects of Diba's works: "Integrating Modern Style and traditional Iranian Architecture", and "Creating socio-cultural centers and institutions well related to society".

The Analysis is based on the most important features of every work of Architecture: "Space" and "Form". The author seeks for the meaning by "watching" the whole complex carefully, "giving descriptive information" about it, and in the meantime "analyzing data" with the help of "basic design methods" together with the knowledge of "Modern Style", "Characteristics of Late Modern Movement" and "Traditional Iranian Architecture".

Text is accompanied by drawings and figures, which help for better knowing the complex. The effort is made to use a simple language, understandable not only by Architects or scholars, but by every other interested non-specialist reader.

Keywords

Museum of Contemporary Art; Kamran Tabatabai Diba; museum design; late modern era in Iran; architectural criticism

Project Title: Museum of Contemporary Art
Design: DAZ Architects, Planners and Engineers
Date of Completion: 1967 – 1977
Commissioner: Farah Diba's Bureau, Tehran
Architects: Kamran Tabatabai Diba, Anthony J. Major, P. Gupta
Construction: RAS Construction Co.
Location: Tehran
Site Area: 16000 m2
Floor Area: 5000 m2

Introduction

The Museum of Contemporary Art is located east of North Kargar Ave., bordering Laleh Park. Neighboring Arts and Crafts Bazaar is on its north;

and Laleh Park on its east (Figure 1). The building has two entrances. The main entrance leads from N.Kargar Ave. from west of the site, while the secondary entrance (service entrance) opens from Laleh Park. The museum is located south of the land plot, lying inside a vast green field occupying the northern side, called the Sculpture Garden. The building is composed of several low structures that have a 45˚ turn from the axis of the main avenue. All these structures are capped with identical skylights which look toward the Northeast, except from the four on top of the main entrance. The museum includes a central foyer, exhibition areas, an auditorium, a library, a bookstore, canteen, office space, documentation center and store, plus service and support areas. The idea of establishing a museum to house contemporary art for public exhibition was first put forth by architect Kamran T.Diba in 1967. He worked on and developed this idea through a long time until finally in 1976-77 it was realized, and afterwards he accepted to be director at the museum for some time after its inauguration.

Exterior Appearance

Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art is located west of Laleh Park, next to N.Kargar Ave. The main entrance faces the avenue ignoring the adjacent park. The secondary entrance which opens from the park serves particularly as a service entrance. The building mass stretches toward the avenue only to contain the main entrance, yet, its volumes could well be seen standing on the street side. By walking down the North-South axis along the avenue, one can enjoy the pleasant and diverse views that the museum's architecture provides (Figure 2&3). The connection with the avenue on the west is stronger than its connection with the park. It is as though the adjacent park acts as a green context into which the building is incorporated to pose a stronger impact on the street façade (Figure 4). The facades on the park side are not meant as important (Figure 5).

In terms of urban land-use, the museum fits well with the adjacent elements, yet with no clear connection between them. A linear socio-cultural land-use scheme is apparent, although the layout of different functions tells of a disconnected sequence that avoids the creation of an integrated, socio-cultural/ recreational urban district. The presence of neighboring Carpet Museum, Arts and Crafts bazaar, and Laleh Park indicate that even if it were intended to be, the urban complex is not functioning in reality.

The building's volume is mainly composed of a plain, massive base upon which sit a multitude of skylights. The base is made of orange sawn stone blocks, and the top is made of creamish concrete that also shapes the skylight protrusions as the volume's points of termination. The curve of the skylights is copper-clad, and its openings have dark-colored glass. The stone base moves back and forth, creating rectangular solids that are headed with half-cylinders and capped with two rows of skylights (Figure 6).

The back-and-forth placement of similar volumes at the base breaks up the exterior appearance of the building. The façade fragments are clearly visible from outside the building, making it a 'lavish composition . However, harmony is created by the similar shape and' material of the base units among the diversity seen in the exterior. Moreover, the consistent arc form used in the section of skylights unifies the otherwise

shattered appearance of the building. Among the multitude of skylights, the four rising on top of the main entrance are thoroughly distinct in size and arrangement, and lead all other similar members in concert (Figure 7).

All of the skylights face the north-east, like a whole crowd who is watching enthusiastically an interesting display at the far distance. The orientation of the skylights plus the positioning of the rectilinear galleries makes the building seem as being rotated towards the North-east. This rotation implies turning from, or backing the main avenue on the west. The western neighbor of the museum—the avenue, or the 'symbol of the city and society'—is thus ignored in spite of serving the museum better than the park. The building lies unlearned to its adjacencies, looking toward an indeterminate location in the distance.

The walls of the museum are closed off, mainly without openings, suggestive of bulky and massive walls of a fortress. This gives it a tone of impenetrability, strength, mystery and introversion. Like many of our traditional introvert buildings, the connection of the museum to the urban passageway is only via its main entrance. However, the position of the building inside a vast, open area make it inaccessible, as the contiguous outer walls of the traditional building merged with that of its neighbors to close it off. To access the main entrance, one shall walk down the main avenue long way heading south along the western border. Once in front of the entrance space, the four skylights on top of the main foyer direct the way, yet do not seem as vigorously inviting the visitor. This is different from traditional buildings that dress up and show a smiling face to the visitors upon entering (Figure 8).

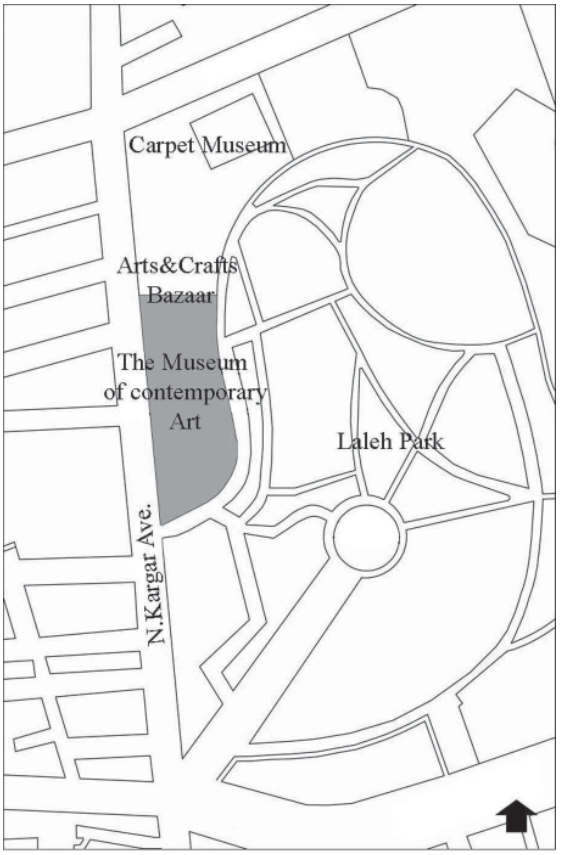

Figure 1: Site Location in Tehran (Source: Author).

Figure 2: View from the Southwest (Source: Author).

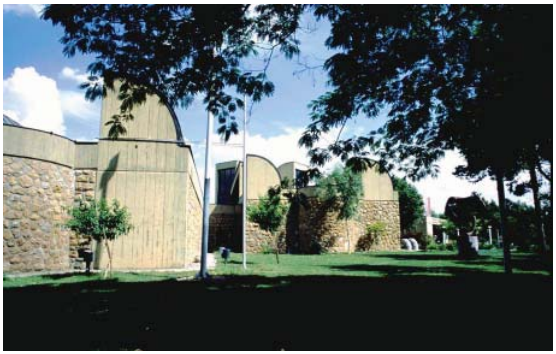

Figure 3: View from the Northwest (Source: Author).

Figure 4: General view of the museum--N.Kargar Ave. in front, and Laleh Park at the background (Source: Author).

Figure 5: View from Laleh Park (Source: Author).

Figure 6: General view of the side bordering the Sculpture Garden (Source: Author).

Figure 7: View of the museum and the Sculpture Garden from the North--Among the assets used to create unity in the composition of external volumes, the most important is employing skylights of the same shape and orientation. The four capping the main foyer, however, bring them all into harmony and meaningfulness (Source: Author).

Figure 8: View of the jelokhan and the main entrance--In spite of the emphasized space of the jelokhan and the four skylights, this entrance does not appear very impressive, rather ignorant to entering visitors.(Source: Author).

The composition of skylights and diverse volumes makes the museum building show off, attracting everyone's eyes. Even the closed off walls which give the impression of a fortress can be considered a deliberate act of design to fix up the exterior .

The shape of the skylights reminds one of the wind towers in traditional Iranian towns. The gradual sinking of the building into the ground—that actually happens in towns in the hot and arid climate of kavir—makes a gradation of volumes and their topping skylights, reminiscent of building clusters in traditional towns or the traditional urban fabric (Figure 9). Their composition, nevertheless, follows a strict order. The façade materials and their composition add to this traditional image.

The exterior walls of the building are made of orange sawn stone blocks. The upper part of the walls is made of creamish concrete that extends onto the container shape of the skylights. The curved part of the skylights is clad with copper

plates, and the openings are of dark-colored glass. The sawn stone facing makes the building seem bulky like traditional ones, raising historical implications. The framing of stones in concrete softens its normal appearance—given the care and precision in its execution. The material of modern architecture is colored cream and laid out with boulders to echo the sounds of past Iranian architecture and the ambience of Shemiran verdant alleys. Using copper and toned glass creates a pleasant composition in contrast with that of stone and concrete.

What calls for special attention is the rejection facing stone cladding, cement finishing or ceramic tiles as facing material that are merely used to clothe the walls. This type of design delineates the architect's inclination to employ a dual functionality of façade elements, both face-treating and load-bearing.

The Sculpture Garden is a vast grass field sloping from the northwest to the southeast. Featured inside this green space are a few of sculpture works of famous contemporary artists such as English Henry Moore. This garden can be accessed from the jelokhan (the space in front of the entrance). Past the jelokhan, one can go to the west of galleries via a green passageway at the back of projecting volumes of the galleries. This minor path is like backyard access ways; nevertheless, it is a piece of open located in front of the building, which also leads to the Sculpture Garden. The considerable difference of grade levels of the Sculpture Garden with the western avenue further dissects any connection. There is not an access way to the garden from the inside of the museum. The water canal in between the building and the garden—seemingly a ditch running west to east—cuts them apart further emphasizing their disconnection (Figure 10). The surface of the garden lacks any hard landscaping or paving with stone, gravel, or similar masonry materials, thus void of any area that could be used as a passageway or a sitting retreat (Figure 11).

As stated above, the Sculpture Garden is an abridged green space that disapproves of people entering it. It only calls to be 'watched', and its sculptures to be observed from 'the distance', as if it is house to sculptures and not to people. It constitutes a green background against which the modern sculptures stand out as mythical figures.

The Sculpture Garden includes very few trees. Therefore, the museum building can be well perceived from the garden side (though not actually a garden) displaying all its details and extravagant play of volumes. We could have called the whole site a sculpture garden provided the building was smaller or the open field larger. The building could have counted as one piece of sculpture inside the garden—the largest and the most remarkable. This effect, though to a lesser degree, can still be attributed to the museum building (Figure 7).

Spatial Configuration

The building can be generally divided into two parts, closed spaces, and the inner courtyard. The closed spaces of the museum have a spiral design including seven main areas. These spaces are chained together. The first link in the chain is the main foyer called 'gallery no. 1'. The visitors' path starts from this point on the entrance level. The path goes on, gradually sinking into the ground until it reaches the lower level of gallery no. 1, where it ends. This sequence resembles

a chain that is thrown out into the Sculpture Garden, and retrieved back to the same place but on another floor level (Figure 12).

Galleries are much alike in terms of design. However, the design of galleries no. 1 and 5 which define the main axis of the museum building differ.

Figure 9: View from the West--The shape and composition of the skylights implies the old traditional fabric of Iranian desert towns..(Source: Author).

Figure 10: View from the West--The trench running between the Sculpture Garden and the museum building dissects their connection and denies any link to be established between the two. (Source: Author).

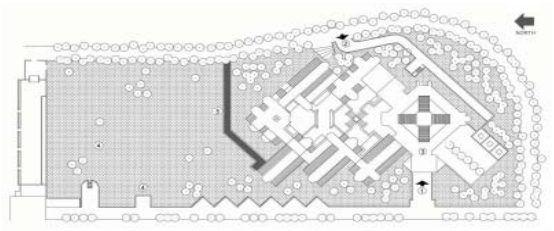

Figure 11: Plan of the museum - 1. Jelokhan and the main entrance, 2. Service entrance, 3. Museum building, 4. Sculpture Garden, 5.Trench (Source: Author).

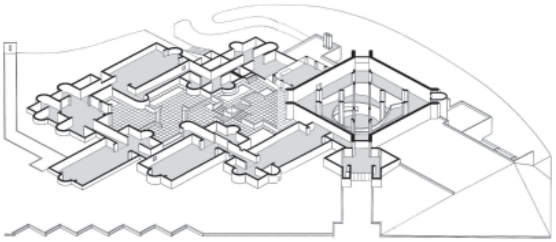

Figure 12: Section through the three-dimensional projection of the museum (Diba Kamran. (1981). Kamran Diba - Buildings and Projects, Hatje, pp.46&47. The closed areas are set in a chain that starts from the main foyer, passes through galleries, and reaches the underground level below the main foyer.

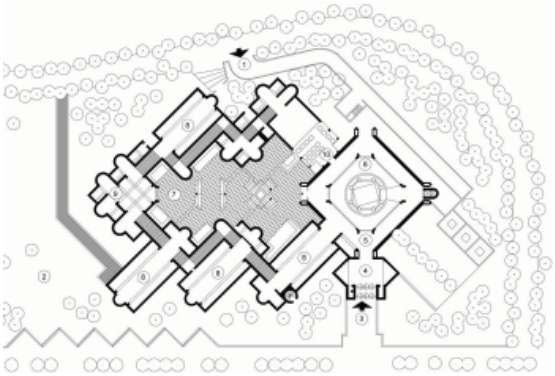

Figure 13: Ground Floor Plan (Source: Author).

The galleries are arranged at some points like a wide path to move in such as in passageways, and at others like spaces lying beside the main path and connected to it. Galleries no. 2 and 3 are examples of such arrangements. Corridors constitute some of exhibition areas, which open onto the inner courtyard by small windows in two or three instances. These corridors are ramps that create 'movement' inside the museum space. The succession of galleries and the connecting ramps encourage the visitor to move constantly onward. The space attracts people, and does not encourage returning or leaving the exhibition while only partly visited. In other words, the chained galleries are linked together in a labyrinth that has only limited contact with open space (Figures 13&14).

The Inner Courtyard

The inner courtyard has an irregular shape. Its longitudinal axis lies in the north-south direction, perpendicular to that of the entrance. Its shape is the result of recessions and projections of the volumes housing the galleries. Two glass doors provide access to this yard from galleries no. 1 and 5. In harmony with the sinking rhythm of the mass of the building, the courtyard also has different sinking levels that are connected by stairways. A rectangular pool sits in the middle, within the stairway on the main axis of the courtyard (Figures 17&18).

The location of the courtyard inside of the mass of the building reminds one of traditional architecture in which courtyards constitute the main element at the heart of the design, surrounded by closed spaces. The closed spaces in such works take their cue from the open space, and the vividness and identity of open space owes to the closed spaces facing it. This composition takes another form in The Museum of Contemporary Art associating other meanings. The sidewalls protrude and recess in different directions as if playfully located volumes give shape to the courtyard. In clearer words, although being symmetrical, the courtyard has minimum identity, being spontaneous and 'randomly' shaped as if it were the remainder of the space taken away by volumes housing the galleries. On the other hand, the galleries' sidewalls intrude into this inner space with invasive corners and angles. This intrusion weakens one's inclination to sit down and rest in the courtyard. The sidewalls are void of any large opening except for the two glass doors on the north and south sides. The stone bases appear totally solid (Figure 19). In other words, the closed spaces in the museum do not turn to the inner courtyard. Moreover, the position of the topping skylights is in discord with the courtyard space (Figure 20). All these factors make one inside the courtyard feel as though s/he were 'outside'. The architecture of the ground surface featuring different levels and stairways is not encouraging to sit down, but rather inclines one to walk along the length of the yard. The pool in this design is relatively small, and because surrounded with stairs lacks its traditional quality of indulging silence and serenity .

The Main Foyer

The main foyer constitutes both the start and end point of the path of visitors inside the museum. Therefore, it can tolerantly be considered the central space in the museum, although not geometrically located in the center (Figure 21). Its plan is shaped like a slightly irregular octagon, with a high dome above. The large skylight opening located above the void inside

the spiral ramp shows the importance of the central space, and consecutively, all the foyer space in consecutively, all the foyer space in the architect's mind. Highlighting this central area forms it a special identity and independence, making it a place of pause and contemplation. All this contribute to evoking a traditional image of space, translating the main foyer to the old version of vestibules in past Iranian buildings. They serve as introductory spaces to the visitor, leading through to the main areas. Other exhibition areas, although all remarkable, do not compare with the main foyer architecturally, standing at a lower rank. As stated earlier, not even the central courtyard is as commanding as the closed spaces. The foyer, therefore, serves as both the 'introduction' and the 'subject' of the composition, evolving into the climax in the architectural story of the complex—an early occurring one that, however, somewhat dims the rest of the story yet to come.

Figure 14: Underground Level Plan (Source: Author).

Figure 16: Interior view of a gallery (Source: Author).

Figure 15: Interior view of a gallery (Source: Author).

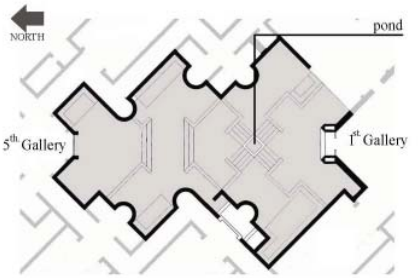

Figure 17: Courtyard Plan--shape of the courtyard is the result of recessions and projections of the volumes housing the galleries, as if it were the remainder of the space they had taken away. (Source: Author).

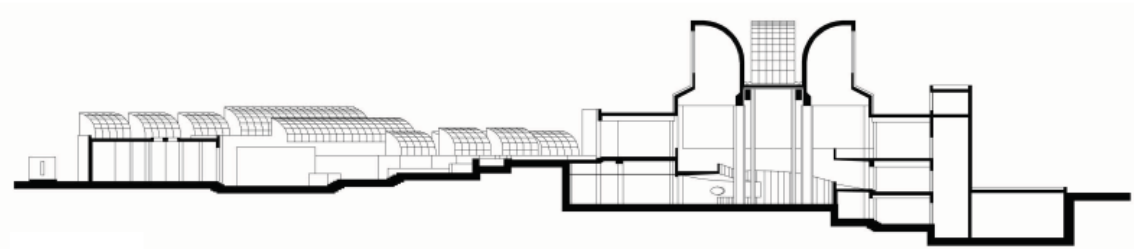

Figure 18: Section of the museum, through the main foyer and the courtyard (Kamran Diba - Buildings and Projects, Diba Kamran, Hatje, 1981, p.41).

Figure 19: View to the inner courtyard--The design of enclosing walls, stairs, and the pool in relation with the skylights sets the courtyard apart from the traditional architectural models. (Source: Author).

Figure 20: View of the inner courtyard--The design of the enclosing walls does not communicate with the courtyard, making one standing inside it feel as though s/he were 'outside' of the building. (Source: Author).

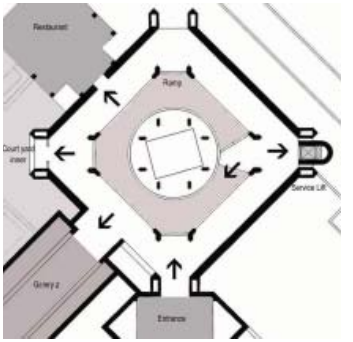

Figure 21: Main Foyer's Plan--The main foyer, besides serving as a connection point, functions as a gallery. The ramp inside which leads to the underground is another feature of this space. All this make the foyer a busy node right at the start. (Source: Author).

Figure 22: View into the main foyer. (Source: Author).

As noted earlier, the main foyer is also functioning as gallery no. 1 (Figure 22). It constitutes an important node in linking spaces; besides having direct contact with the entrance and chain of galleries, it is connected to the level below, to the bookshop, to the courtyard, and to the restaurant. The connection with the lower level, made through a central void and an imposing ramp, is worth considering. The grandeur of the ramp owes to its particular shape and width, to the void inside, to the eight columns, to the high rising skylights above, and to the light that permeates through. Thus, the ramp becomes the first role in the story of the foyer, reminding us of the architect's intimate focus on the 'principle of movement' in his traditional, resting architectural figure. It also reinstates that while binding with traditional models, he is fond of modern architecture as well—an architecture in which stairways and ramps hold important roles inside the main spaces of monuments. It is not an exaggeration to claim that the ramp in the interior compares with the museum building in the Sculpture Garden, as the most important interior sculpture (Figure 23).

Figure 23: View towards the ramp and the main foyer from one level below the entrance. (Source: Author).

The function of the museum's central space calls for special attention. On one hand, it functions as a foyer; while on the other hand, it acts as an exhibition space. This shows the architect's intention in taking full advantage of every space inside the museum, regulating functions and guiding the visitors' behavior through. Spatial arrangement of galleries shows them as separate fragments that the architect has carefully set up, connected with paths that are carefully planned yet mixed with the exhibition activity also. In other words, the Museum's plan resembles a "tailored" composition in which placing of every segment has been thought out and all set for visiting.

This brings us to one important point in the functional order of this thought-out sequence. The architect has placed spaces such as the auditorium, the library, lavatories and etc. on the level below the central space. This causes the visitor, who has been carefully guided through the galleries, to suddenly face a myriad of non-exhibition areas, and then return to one of the galleries again—the largest of them. This placement actually means an interruption in the functional sequence inside the museum, which nevertheless, is due to the multi-functionality of the central space. If we consider the central space as gallery no. 1, then the plan lacks legibility in the way just described. If we assume the central space as housing the entrance foyer, then there is the question of its unusually large size. Even naming the central space as the 'entrance foyer' and disregarding its inappropriate size wouldn't justify the issue, as there is the grandiose ramp spiraling down to the underground. The position of this ramp at the center of the space takes away from it the atmosphere of a Gallery,

representing it more as a node of connection. The character of the ramp is also worthwhile in another way, in seducing any visitor to step on it and descend. This temptation disrupts the intended line of the story in the sequence of galleries for the visitor to tread. The condition of this ramp induces a descending movement rather than an ascending one, seeming a little odd to spare all the grandeur only to lift up the leaving visitor at the end of the exhibition course to the main foyer. It is as though the architect's intention in selecting and using gentle forms and compositions has superseded an effective design of correct functionality, leaving the latter in favor of the former.

Notes:

1. This fragmentation of volumes brings to mind the works of famous architect Louis Kahn, such as Erdman Hall Dormitories at Bryn Mawr College, Richards Medical Center (both in Pennsylvania), National Assembly in Dacca (Bangladesh), and most notably Institute of Public Administration at Ahmadabad (India).

2. As a matter of fact, the skylights have a greater impact on the elaboration of the composition of exterior volumes of the building rather than their function for interior spaces. Walking inside galleries assures us of the little light that these provide, sometimes even disturbing as regards the maintenance of featured works, for which they are covered by dark cloths during some hours of the day.

3. A large district lain in the slopes of Alborz at north of Tehran, part of the city nowadays. Families used to move temporarily in the gardens at Shemiran to enjoy cool and nice summers.

4. The same color tones of façade materials, especially in contrast with the green background, represent it as a single-colored complex, emphasizing its resemblance to traditional town fabric.

5. The application of this modern theory can also be observed in the interior of the museum. The architect's knowledge of materials, as evident in the composition of wood and concrete, the paving, and the false ceilings shows that without being lavish, the materials are appropriate and befitting. Proper care in selection of materials and in execution of construction details has assured the integrity and freshness of the building a quarter-century after its erection.

6. The courtyard can be entered from galleries no. 1 and 5. However, since they are meant to house works on exhibition, their doors shall be kept closed. This suggests that no effort has been made in attracting visitors to the courtyard, and no preparations been made to create a warm and inviting atmosphere inside it.

7. Some have pointed out similarities between Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts with the building of The Juan Mirò Foundation--Center for the Study of Contemporary Art in Barcelona, which is the work of architect Josep Lluís Sert. The shape of the skylights plus the façade material—exposed concrete—are among the most important similarities. The Spanish architect has asserted borrowing elements of oriental architecture for his design. The composition of volumes and the cream-colored concrete of Tehran Museum, however, provide a more attractive facing and a stronger link with Iranian architecture of the past. Beside these formal similarities, the 'Sculpture Garden' and 'inner courtyards' are elements found in both. A comparison of the spatial configuration and design of the two buildings can be truly helpful in the current analysis. The Mirò Foundation's Sculpture Garden is an enclosed green space with pedestrian access and multiple benches. The inner courtyards are surrounded on all sides by overlooking terraces and large windows of galleries opening onto them. This creates a totally different quality than what happens in the Sculpture Garden and the inner courtyard of Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts. Surprisingly, the work of the non-Iranian architect evokes more of the meaning and spirit of place found in Iranian architecture.

8. Despite having four large skylights, the main foyer is relatively dark. The light penetrating through the skylights, except when from the south, is not intense. As a matter of fact, it is only one of the southern skylights that passes an adequate amount of light into the foyer. It can thus be said that the shape of the skylights has been of more importance to the architect than their functionality.

9. The main foyer, as described here, exposes a centralized configuration. All details are strictly arranged towards the center, which sinks to the underground level and forms a void. A square pool on the ground floor level inside this void attracts all eyes. These features are reminiscent of traditional architectural models. Yet, the architect has selected a metal pool containing dark oil—in total contrast with the master mason in selecting pure water in a turquoise pool that associates with a deeply different meaning. Perhaps, it is only the introductory phases of design in which the architect involves himself with traditional Iranian architecture, and draws back when attempting to develop and realize the design. The oil pool is the work of contemporary Japanese artist, Noriyuki Haraguchi, and is the highlight of the museum owing to its location inside the important central foyer. The use of oil in it has always been a controversial issue. Some have depicted it as the necessary medium for turning wheels of industry and technology, thus putting 'science' central to 'art', a logical composition in the modern scientific world of today. Others have viewed it like the treasure fluid that comes out from the earth, is sold vehemently, brings about a fortune, and vitalizes arts and crafts. It is in this kind of circumstances that museums are born, and art promoted.

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