The Aesthetic Resistance of Iranian Architects and Artists During the Late Pahlavi Era

Niloofar Amini
PhD student, Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Ghent University, Belgium
Niloofar.amini@ugent.be

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Introduction

The military invasion in Iran during World War II (1939-1945) coincided with the abdication of the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty – Reza Shah (1925-1941) – and the succession of his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) with the help of the British government. From 1941 to 1946 the presence of foreign troops caused Iran to be politically unstable. Various political parties conflicted with each other, and in the resulting chaos the British government lost control over the region in 1947. The postcolonial states, that were then shaped in the Middle East, all somehow wanted to modernize.[1] The Pahlavi regime presented this modernization (*Tajaddod*) as a *renewal*. This has a different meaning than the Western understanding of modernization, linked to progress and a break with the past, that also refers to philosophical and political ideals. The regime's desire for *Tajaddod* originated in seeing Iran's lagging behind the Western countries; thus *Tajaddod* was intended to incorporate modern values and beliefs in the national culture.[2] The regime therefore encouraged the society to moderate reforms, while at the same time wanting to maintain a political status quo, and orienting the social, economic and architectural policies towards that goal.[3] The intention was to change the image of Iranian cities, particularly the capital Tehran, through "creative interventions."[4] However, the fact that modernization was considered primarily a process of image-building, and could be realized also through cultural reforms,[5] led to a *Labor Division* between the Shah and the Queen Farah. Much appreciated by the public, Queen Farah, who was seen as a non-threatening figure,[6] was assigned to guide the sphere of culture and the arts. She also represented the image of the modest Iranian women, and her public appearance "became a symbol of the modernity of the monarch and his progressive benevolence towards women."[7] The Queens public presence enabled Muhammad Reza Shah to maintain his rigid autocratic political regime, and suppress the opposition of the middle class, by embarking upon "a cultural transformation of society."[8]

The challenge for the cultural policy of the regime was to redefine what was *true Islam*. The Pahlavi agents and the pro-government architects claimed to understand the nature and

1 Ahmed Zaib Khan Mahsud, "Rethinking Doxiadis' Ekistical Urbanism," *Positions* no.1 (Spring 2010).

2 Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004).

3 April Summit, "For a White Revolution: John F. Kennedy and The Shah of Iran," *Middle East Journal* 58, no.4 (October 2004): 574.

4 Zohreh Soltani, "The transformation of public space: City squares as locations for power struggle - the case of Tehran (1934-2009)" (Master thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2011), 191, 210.

5 Sonia Livingstone, *Audiences and Publics: When Cultural Engagement Matters for The Public Sphere* (Oregon: Intellect Ltd, 2005).

6 Robert Hobbs, "Special report: Tehran Museum," *Art in America* (1981): 18.

7 Cited in Ibid., 38.

8 Shokrollah Hamdhaidari, "Education during the reign of the Pahlavi Dynasty in Iran (1941-1979)," *Teaching in Higher Education* 13, no.1 (February 2008): 20-21.

importance of the Iranian tradition in art and architecture the best, and architectural journals warned the Iranian architects that the Shah himself had often demanded "Iranian solutions to Iranian problems."[9] Thus, the nationalism that took shape during the first Pahlavi era, aiming at adapting the society to a universalized, international modernity, was replaced by stressing the necessity of regionalism in cultural development and other societal spheres, from the economy to the arts and architecture. The official policy nevertheless was met with resistance from architectural and artistic movements. A new generation of visual artists took over the role of the earlier poets who, in their quest for modernity, had mainly criticized the poor socio-political situation of the country and had asked for political reforms. Rather than focusing on making modern art in and for Persia, this new generation, aware of the politicization of Islam by the state, strived to neither continue nor reject the past. Their artistic work shows how exhibitions, art critique, and cultural events could educate the public,[10] by being innovative and new but at the same time inspired by symbols, archetypes and materials of the Persian culture, or "a quintessential cipher of Islamic tradition."[11]

In June 1962, Kamran Diba – the Iranian artist, architect and former director of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art – invited Iranian art critic Karim Emami (1930-2005) to present the new movement. Originally, Emami used the term *Saqqakhaneh*[12] to characterize the artistic approach that combined populist themes from Iranian Shiite folk art and modernist art. Diba called this Saqqakhaneh art "Spiritual Pop Art"[13], that enabled artists to explore "a new vocabulary of motifs"[14] in their works.

All artworks and architectural projects which we are about to discuss show how art and architecture mediate between the macro-level of politics and the micro-level or everyday life, and thereby reflect the repressed tensions in a changing society. The formal and material aspects of the design is less important here than the way these art works became part of the experience of everyday life. To tell the story we have tried an interdisciplinary approach, combined with a historical contextualization and morphological analysis. The source material has been collected from available history and art literature, Persian newspaper archives, and also Persian magazines. Visual material is particularly significant for our analysis, because in countries such as Iran, where freedom of speech has been restricted for centuries, illustrations often implicitly reveal the socio-political situation of the time. Their subtexts often contain are a criticism of autocratic governmental policies.

Most of the scholarly works on the second Pahlavi era focus on the role of the politics in architectural and urban policies of the Muhammad Reza Shah. We will highlight the political role of Queen Farah in the cultural sphere to support the regime. At the same time, we are going to divide our argument into two parts; first, we will look at Queen Farah's policies to patronage cultural activities that suited the regime. In this respect, we will illustrate that the Labor Division was intended to balance the capitalist vision of the Shah and the regionalist vision represented by the Queen. In the second part, we will discuss how Iranian artists and architects linked their art practice with ethical and political concerns.[15]

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9 Talinn Grigor, *Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture and national Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs* (New York: Periscope Publishing, 2009), 122.

10 Lynn Gumper, "Introduction," in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, eds. Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2002), 11, 15-16.

11 Fereshteh Daftari, "Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective," in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, eds. Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2002), 78.

12 Originally, a type of water-fountain shrine was called 'Saqqakhaneh'.

13 Shiva Balaghi, "Iranian Visual Arts in 'The Century of Machiner Speed, and the Atom': rethinking Modernity," in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, eds. Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2002), 27.

14 Ibid., 25.

15 "Aesthetic, Ethic and Politics," Durham University - Department of Philosophy, accessed March 26, 2020, https://www.dur.ac.uk/philosophy/research/researchclusters/aesthetics/ .

The Labor Division

To support artistic and architectural projects useful to the state, Queen Farah inaugurated a foundation called *the Queen Secretariat*. Seyyed Hossein Nasr,[16] a prominent political figure of that time, was chosen to advise the Queen. Later, he became the head of Queen Farah Special Bureau, the highest political and cultural position in Iran after the prime minister.[17] Nasr was well aware of the significant role of cultural activities on the public opinion and on the society. By emphasizing the concept of *unity*, and introducing it as a principle of Islam, Nasr claimed that no essential difference was to be made between the architecture of mosques, universities, private houses or cultural spaces, and that the modernist differentiation of functions and the modern city are incompatible with the vision of unity inherent in Islamic society.[18] He tried to redirect the modernist artists and architects of that time towards a kind of traditionalism. Grigor has argued that Nasr, more than the concept of the traditional society and the traditional man, promoted the (re)production of the *traditional space*.[19] In a conversation with Jahanbegloo, Nasr admitted indeed that architectural and urban design determined the everyday life of a society, and that they thus were essentially political.[20] The politicized, undemocratic approach of *the Queen Secretariat* provoked opposition from the local artists and architects, who were well aware that the regime wanted control and that their work was only meaningful and relevant if it could connect with the everyday life of the citizens. Architects like Diba (b. 1937) and Nader Ardalan (b. 1939) knew that the public arts were important to create common concerns and public discussion.[21] Since the majority of the Iranians did not receive an aesthetic education, and had no contact with the arts, they believed that their projects, rather than serve and entertain the cultural elite, should function as educational initiatives. They therefore were introduced to a contemporary architecture of Iran that combined aspects of modernity with the reinterpretation of some recognizable, familiar Persian archetypes.

The Concept of *Khalq-e Jadid*

In the late sixties, an Iranian architect, Ardalan, was commissioned to provide, in collaboration with Laleh Bakhtiar, a theoretical study for the traditionalist school of architecture. The study was ready in 1971 and it was delivered to William Polk in the Frank Lloyd Wright Robie House. In the *acknowledgments*, Ardalan, and his coauthor Bakhtiar, expressed their gratitude to Louis Kahn who reviewed and approved the manuscript.[22] The book, entitled *The Sense of Unity*, was published in 1973 on the occasion of the twenty-fifth centenary of the foundation of the Persian Empire with the assistance of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Iran in collaboration with the University of Chicago Press.[23]

As Shirazi noted, *The Sense of Unity* was an architectural interpretation of Nasr's political philosophy. Nasr wrote in 1973 in the *Introduction* of the book, "The present book is the first study to be made of the traditional architecture of Islam in its Persian setting from the point

16 Nasr graduated from the MIT with an undergraduate degree in Physics and Mathematics. At Harvard University, he studied Geology and Geophysics and completed a Ph.D. in the History of Science and Philosophy. In the late 1950s, he returned to Iran when the Shah named him Dean of Tehran University.

17 Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* (Oxford: PRAEGER, 2010), 128.

18 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Toward an Understanding of Architectural Symbolism," *Agha Khan Award for Architecture, Toward an architecture in the Spirit of Islam,* 1978, 3.

19 Grigor, *Building Iran.*

20 Nasr and Jahanbegloo, *Conversation,* xxviii, 156.

21 Jim McGuigan, *Culture and The Public Sphere* (London: Routledge, 1996), 7, 176.

22 Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity; the Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), xvii.

23 Ibid.

Fig.1: *Woman Without a Veil*, sculpture located at the plaza of the Garden and Cultural Center of Yousef' Abad

of view of the traditional principles involved."[24] Also, Nasr ended the *Foreword* admitting that authors had tried to apply his central doctrine of the *unity* on all levels, from the simplest architectural unit to the whole urban environment.[25] The book, fully supported by the state and particularly by Queen Farah, was representative for the quest for creative reinterpretations of traditionalism, discussed under "the concept of *Khalq-e Jadid* (New Creation)."[26] In a conversation with Shirazi, the architect Ardalan declared that since he had returned to Iran in 1964, he tried to promote a contextual architecture, and integrate new architecture with the traditional culture. He introduced the concept of *Khalq-e Jadid* at the International Conference of Architects in 1970.[27]

The correlation between tradition, modernization and developing technology was the main topic of the first conference that was organized by Nasr in the historical city of Isfahan. The conference showed "interest on the part of the organizers to generate discussion on questions of regionalism, place, and identity."[28] Political and economic considerations were intertwined with cultural aspects. For the Pahlavi regime, regionalism was interesting as the cultural complement of "[neoliberal] capitalism."[29] The regime's approach to regionalism was selective and instrumentalized: cultural traditionalism to secure the status quo in politics supported the capitalist vision in the economics.[30] The Shah accepted regionalism as a kind of postmodernism, useful to symbolize and visualize a distance to the West and a sign of the country's identity.[31] The state's superficial interpretation of regionalism was contested by the critical approach of Ardalan and his contemporaries.[32] These architects applied a critical version of regionalism against "the Western capitalist basis of the Pahlavi regime."[33] Ardalan also believed that the *Khalq-e Jadid* was in line with Critical Regionalism. This school of thought was named and defined only in the 1980s by Alexander Tzonis and Kenneth Frampton, but the participation of Louis Kahn and Hassan Fathy in several conferences of the 1970s in Iran influenced Ardalan and his contemporaries already in a similar line of thinking. Their interventions taught Iranian architects to re-interpret the universal modernity in their local context and tradition.[34] The inherent contradiction of 'localizing' modern architecture's universal language, and combining its abstract principles with specific traditions is the core of the project of Critical Regionalism. According to Frampton, a "hybrid world culture" can bridge the gap between universal and regional discussions.[35] This hybrid culture is nevertheless different from the populism and vernacularism of postmodern culture that concentrates on visual effects only.[36] Although it is difficult to decide where the 'oppositional force in 'regionalism' exactly comes from, as Frampton wrote in *Towards a Critical Regionalism:* "[T]his raises the question of whether or not *region* or some more universal criteria of artistic quality – craftsmanship, detail, quality of materials – are the source of their *resistant* qualities."[37] In the next section, we will approach this question by analyzing one of the best examples of the critical regional architecture in Iran: the Tehran Contemporary Art Museum.

24 Cited in Shirazi, *Contemporary Architecture*, 55.

25 Ardalan and Bakhtiar, *Unity,* xi.

26 Shirazi, *Contemporary Architecture*, 55.

27 Ibid., 148.

28 Nigel Westbrook, "The Regionalist Debate in the Context of the 1970s International Architecture Forums in Iran," *Society of Architectural Historians* 31, (2014): 389.

29 Ana Jeinić and Anselm Wagner, *Is There (Anti-)Neoliberal Architecture?* (Berlin: Jovis, 2013), 15; Leon Wolcott, "Regionalism: Political Implement," *The American Economic Review* 35, no. 2, (1945): 368.

30 Hooshang Amirahmadi, "Regional Planning in Iran: A Survey of Problems and Policies," *The Journal of Developing Areas 20*, (1986): 501-30.

31 Wolcott, "Regionalism," 371.

32 Shirazi, *Contemporary Architecture*, 192.

33 Westbrook, "Regionalist," 393.

34 Shirazi, *Contemporary Architecture*, 132, 147.

35 Ibid., 28-29.

36 Mary Mcleod, "Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism," *Assemblage,* no.8 (1989).

37 Ibid., 36.

The Tehran Contemporary Art Museum

Since several scholars have already researched the TCAM, the aim of this study is not to repeat these discussions. We aim to link this project to some other projects Diba was involved with between the late sixties and the late seventies. Through these projects, we will illustrate the social and ethical responsibilities of the architect in relation to his works. For Diba, cultural projects in particular were a unique opportunity to provide antagonistic architecture. For him this was a way to introduce a new concept of an educational institution that would encourage critical thinking. The Tehran Contemporary Art Museum is one of the best examples. Although this project was only realized at the end of the Pahlavi regime, it was designed a decade earlier, and was based on his first commission for the Garden and Cultural Center of Yousef' Abad (1966 – 1969). We therefore first briefly discuss this project.

In 1966, for the first time in the history of modern Iran, the Tehran municipality commissioned an architect to design a public park. The chosen site used to be a garbage dump. However, Diba changed his commission, and wanted to serve the neighborhood, by integrating public arts and social institutions, such as libraries and the Women's NGO, in the design proposal.[38] The secret (walled and secluded) Persian garden was one archetype of Iranian architecture that Diba modernized in this garden. However, the inclusion of the wall, accompanied by an "architectural promenade," acted as a "theatrical dichotomy," and not as a barrier or veil.[39] The park served as a meeting place and provided a cultural courtyard and plaza and a meeting point for the neighborhood.[40]

A seemingly minor aspect of the park was the commission of three life-size figurative bronze sculptures. In contrast with the past, when public sculptures were placed on pedestals and represented official people, these new sculptures were placed at eye-level, where they could be touched by the passers-by. The sculptor was Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937). As public sculpture was not common, artists like Tanavoli tried to integrate their art in architectural environments.[41] The sculptures include *Sitting Man*, representing a man sitting to take off his shoes, and was modeled after an assistant in Tanavoli's atelier, and *Standing Man*, for which a university student modeled. The generic figures and their presence on the plaza expressed everybody's right to be everywhere. Significantly, the third sculpture on the plaza was a figure of a woman, modeled after the wife of Tanavoli's assistant. The inclusion of a woman in the group of anonymous, ordinary people dwelling on the plaza lent an air of normalcy to the presence of women in public space. (Fig. 1) The *Woman Without a Veil* was the first and last public representation of a modern woman in the history of Iranian public art.

Woman Without a Veil most likely alluded to the presence of the first independent women's NGO in the park, situated in what Diba called the *Women's House*. The NGO was established by three intellectual women, a lawyer and Diba himself. However, the political New Iran Party, afraid of establishing a kind of Women's Party that might militate for equal rights, sabotaged the NGO.[42]

The sculpture and the NGO can both be understood as an attempt of the artist and architect to defend the right of citizens to the city, regardless of their gender. For the regime, however, the ideal image of Iranian women was that of a modern but modest woman, with the Queen's picture besides the Shah and secondary in the happy royal couple as the best example.

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38 Reza Daneshvar, *A Garden Between Two Streets: 4001 days of the life of Kamran Diba* (Paris, Alborz, 2010), 16, 86.

39 Shirazi, *Contemporary Architecture*, 59, 115.

40 Daneshvar, *Garden,* 16.

41 Daftari, "Another Modernism," 77.

42 Haggai Ram, "Multiple Iconographies: Political Posters in the Iranian Revolution," in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, eds. Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2002), 89, 92.

Fig. 2: Two babies entitled Public schools and Private Schools, 1968

Even when a woman did take on a public role, she was contained in her motherhood and her duty to support her family. This is beautifully illustrated by an image of the Minister of education in 1968 in the national press. The caption reads: "This time the Minister of Education is a *mother*." (Fig. 2)

Diba's subtle resistance against the official policy shows from his garden and cultural center of Yousef' Abad. This park was one of several public parks that were constructed in Tehran during the late sixties. The state focused on redesigning the Tehran landscape rather than providing the city with necessary facilities. The main intention was to transforme the urban space of Tehran into a clean bourgeois space as soon as possible, by constructing numerous large parks. One of the best examples is the 28 hectares park which was named after Queen Farah. It was built

in 1966 on a former army horserace track.[43] The project was nevertheless criticized. The 14th issue of the Journal *Art and Architecture* stated that, rather than recreational facilities and the gigantic Farah Park, as the monument in downtown Tehran, the city needed several small-scaled green areas or parks:

"We need parks integrated with other community facilities such as the Yousef' Abad Park in Tehran which included a library, and also happens to be designed for use by pedestrians, a rare consideration in Iran."[44]

In the same issue, Diba wrote that the regime, instead of building monumental projects to make an impressive image for the capital, should be improving the quality of the living environment. Also, the state should give architects more authority to take care of the urban environment. Diba believed that the state's reluctance to stimulate citizenship by providing enough spaces for cultural activities, was the prominent reason for the increasing dissatisfaction in Iranian society. He argued that the ultimate aim of architects was not to build isolated, luxury and spectacular monuments around the city, but to give form to the social and cultural spheres.[45] As an alternative to the transformation of the city into elite districts, he presented in 1967 a design proposal for a museum located at the edge of the Farah Park.

However, the Queen Secretariat gave priority to projects related to archaeology and traditional art and crafts,[46] and the project of the TCAM was only funded in the late seventies. As an introverted and mysterious museum along the public green area, the TCAM was characterized by a wall.[47] Looking at informal architecture, Diba perceptively noticed the prominent role of a wall.[48] He wrote, "[o]ne aspect of Persian culture is the censoring and suppression of visual life around us, originated by fanatical religious beliefs prohibiting figurative art, and by physical means of veils, screens and walls."[49] Visitors roamed around Diba's projects, as *movement* was another essential feature in his designs.[50] Consequently, the museum was designed as a sequence of seven semi-modular galleries that were arranged as a loop, and the bodily movement made it possible to perceive the entire space of the museum. The galleries were linked to each other by a continuous ramp-passage and eventually ended around a central core. The visitors descended gradually and the designed light catchers and the subtle openings that enlightened these galleries were opened to the small-scale and fragmented courtyards around the main building (Fig.3).[51]

Designing the Sculpture Garden as an "event-space"[52] on the site of the TCAM also enabled the museum to welcome unexpected events and changes.[53] It was a vast green area sloping from the northwest to the southeast, which extended the museum's accessibility to the street and boulevard next to it. Sculptures of well-known contemporary artists (such as Henry Moore) were placed on this grass field. The garden was accessible from the *Jelokhan* (the space in front of the main entrance of the Contemporary Art Museum). Passing the *Jelokhan,* visitors

43 Azam Khatam, "Tehran Urban Reforms Between Two Revolutions: Developmentalism, Worlding Urbanism and Neoliberalism" (PhD Diss., York University, 2015), 106,108.

44 Abdolhamid Eshragh and E. Nader Khalili, "Untitled," *Journal Art and Architecture*, no. 14.

45 Ibid.

46 John Morris Dixon, "Cultural hybrid. Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran, Iran; Architects: DAZ Consulting Architects and Engineers, Kamran Diba and Nader Ardalan," *Progressive Architecture* 59, no.5 (1978): 68.

47 Kambiz Navai, "An Architectural Analysis: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran, Iran," *International Journal of Architectural Research* 4, no. 1 (2010), 196.

48 Ibid., 77-79.

49 Kamran Diba, *Kamran Diba Buildings and Projects* (Stuttgart: HATJE, 1981), 11.

50 Ibid., 9.

51 Shirazi, *Contemporary Architecture*, 71.

52 Cathy Turner, *Dramaturgy and architecture: theatre, utopia and the built environment* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2.

53 Malgorzata Dymnicka, "Fragmentation of Public Space. An Attempt at Recomposition," *Regional and Local Studies*, (2009): 67.

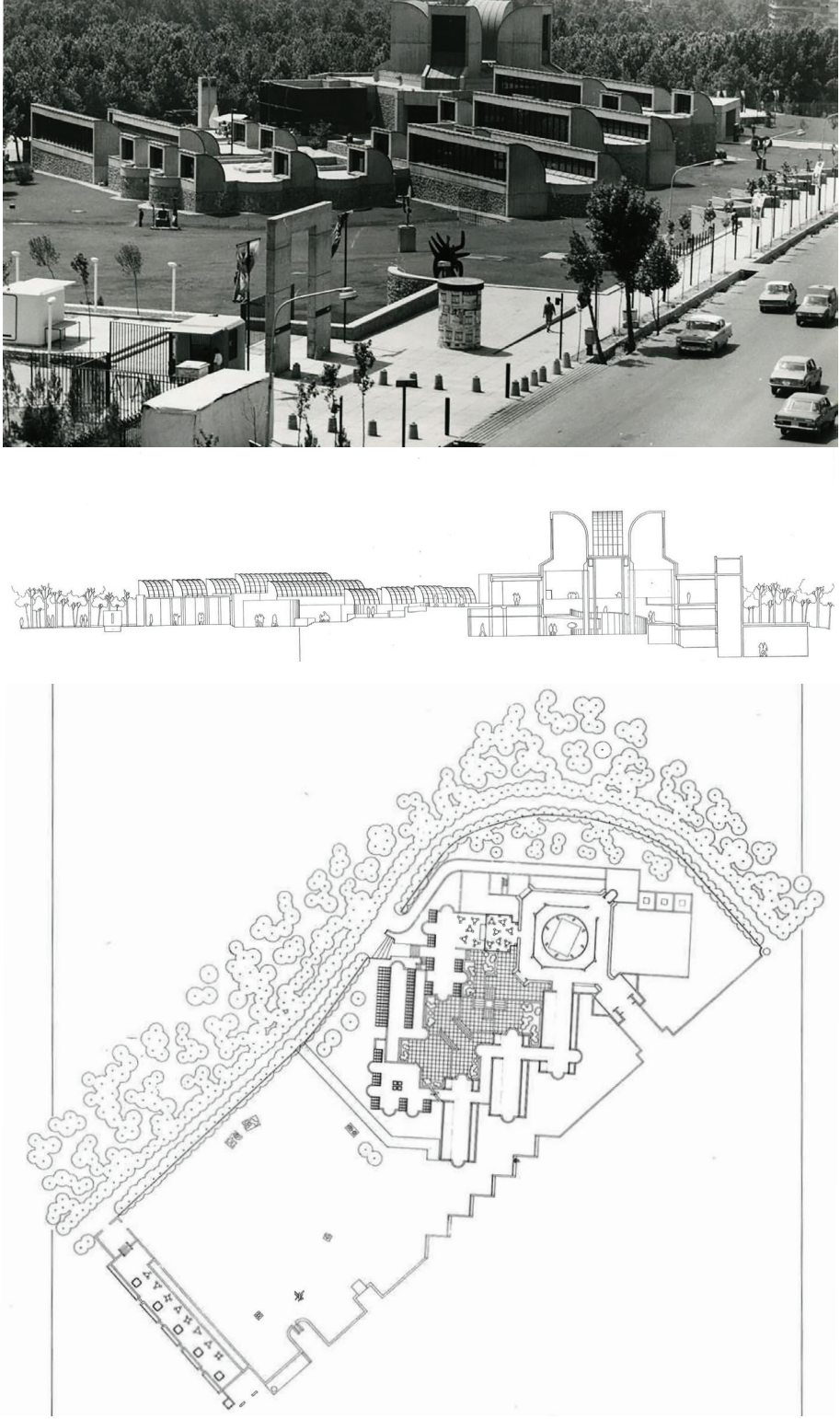

Fig. 3: Tehran Contemporary Art Museum

Fig. 4: The Sculpture Garden and several courtyards of the museum

could walk to the west side of the galleries via a green passageway that links the *Jelokhan* with both the Sculpture Garden at the front of the museum and the small-scaled and fragmented backyards at the back of the complex.[54] (Fig. 4) Indeed, we can claim that the Sculpture Garden was designed for the *common man* who could not frequently see modern and contemporary art. By placing artworks in the public space, Diba had begun to challenge the supremacy of (monumental and the elite-oriented) architecture within society. In a conversation with Reza Daneshvar, he explained that looking at artworks provides society with various ideas about aesthetic and cultural tastes and visions.[55]

54 Navai, "Architectural Analysis," 200.

55 Daneshvar, *Garden,* 127.

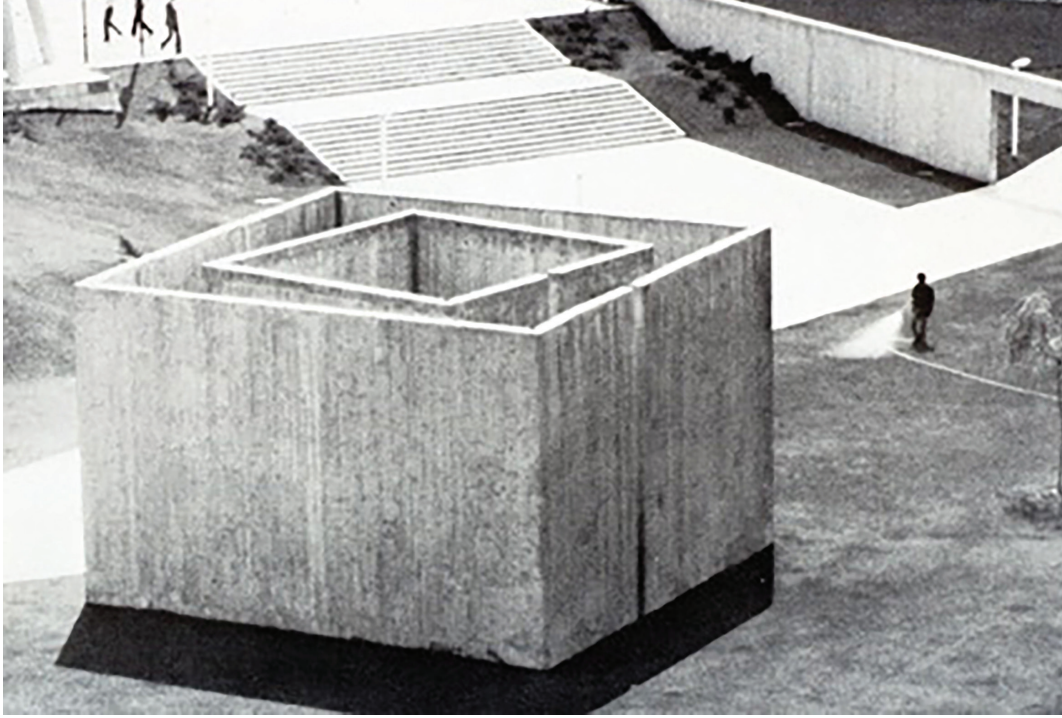

Fig. 5: *Namaz Khaneh.* Issue, 2014

This empty space around the museum not only rejected the visual suppression of Iranian tradition and culture, but also provided spatial opportunity for ordinary people to shape an event. Observing people in their everyday context inspired Diba to design an important sculptural environment, entitled *Namaz Khaneh* (literally the *Praying Room*, 1977-1978). The *Praying Room* consists of a small-scaled open-to-sky room which is shielded by an outer shell. The inner room is rotated within the outer shell to adjust to the axial orientation toward *Ghebbleh* (the holy direction that Muslims should face during their pray). Also, two parallel, vertical and narrow openings on the walls open the cube toward the same direction. On the other hand, non-parallel and slanted corridor walls express a tense and dynamic atmosphere.[56] (Fig. 5) In 1999, Mohammad Al-Asad claimed that complete rejection of the traditional morphology of the mosque was extremely rare, however, it had occurred in 1978 through the design of the *Praying Room*.[57] Although the *Praying Room* challenged the Islamic iconography and morphology, as a cubic design located on an open lawn, it was also similar to the Ka'bah. As Grigor put it:

> "modernism was not a state-imposed taste, but a true modernism; simple in form, honest in structure, pure in material, and unornamented […] In the *Praying Room*, these architectural elements were abstracted to the extent that the traditional dialogue between human and building became impossible without the imagination of *modern citizens*. The formal abstraction killed the traditional function."[58]

Diba observed that the workers of the museum prayed every day on the surrounding lawn. Subsequently, he designed this environmental installation in the same area where those workers did their daily prayers.[59] Although for lower-income families, the high art institution of the TCAM was an unfamiliar and threatening architectural phenomenon, a decent *Praying Room* was able to provide more common ground.[60]

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56 Diba, *Buildings,* 236.

57 Mohammad Al-Asad, "The Mosque of the Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara: Breaking with Tradition," *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World*, no. XVI (1999): 162.

58 Talin Der-Grigorian, "Construction of History: Mohammad Reza Shah Revivalism, Nationalism and Monumental architecture of Tehran" (Master Thesis, MIT, 1998), 175-177.

59 Daneshvar, *Garden,* 182, 185.

60 Der-Grigorian, "History," 176.

Locating the *Praying Room* in a well-off district of Tehran and next to the Farah Park was a intrepid decision. We suggest that this *earth sculpture* is the best example of embodying Nasr's concept of *unity*; not through transforming a modern city into a sacred (better to say traditional) space, but through integrating the holy domain into the aesthetical and ethical aspects of Modernism.

The Saghakhaneh Art School

During his studies in the United States, several visits to the multidisciplinary Museum of Modern Art, MoMA, changed Diba's opinion about the definition of the museum. Rather than a place to keep artworks, a museum functioned as public space and educational institution that is accessible to the public. Diba located an open and accessible library inside the museum and added an architectural archive and a collection of classic movies of the 20th century to the museum's permanent collection. Diba said that before inaugurating the TCAM, museums neither supported artists or gave them insights into different schools of art, nor created awareness or educated the public, and eventually addressed issues that affected the society. It is said sometimes that Diba's ambitious projects could not have taken shape without the support of his cousin Queen Farah. However, Diba and his colleges frequently admitted that this project, among many others, was eventually built because of the architect's perseverance and resistance.[61] During the project's suspension, for instance,[62] Diba and some of his contemporaries inaugurated an independent club to support young Iranian artists. The former clubs – the Mehregan and the Farhangian Clubs – were only accessible to men artists. In 1967, Diba, Tanavoli, and Roxana Saba – daughter of a famous musician – inaugurated a new club that was also accessible to women artists. In this club, different lectures on modern art, art critique, and the socio-political role of artists were given. These discussions led to shaping the idea of the first Iranian modern art school entitled '*Saqqakhaneh*'. The first exhibition of the Saqqakhaneh artworks was held at the TCAM, and it was introduced in the *Keyhan* Newspaper by the review of Emami.[63]

In her article entitled *Another Modernist: An Iranian Perspective*, Freshteh Daftari – who curated at the MoMA the first major exhibition on Modern Iranian Art – noted that localizing the imported concept of modernity in Iran led to creating a different movement from its (Western) origins. Daftari wrote that the origins of the modern Persian painting originated at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, when the Western-trained Iranian artists returned to the country and established the first professional art schools in Iran. However, their attempt went far beyond replication and led to localizing the modern art and ideology. They were accompanied by an effervescent milieu for critical debates that was provided independently by artists and architects like Diba.[64] How modern artworks might expand the public understanding of modernity itself was the main question of the Saqqakhaneh artists. Among other countries, Iranian artists also lived in the industrial period and realized the necessity of new forms of cultural production that could affect and alter the realities of that era:

> "Recasting tropes of classical literature into a vernacular visual language, infusing the symbols of Shiism with worldly concerns, and subverting the order of 'the art of the book' with its highly ritualized calligraphy and miniature paintings, these artists imagined ways to exist as Iranians within a modern consumer society."[65]

These artists looked at pre-existing symbols, archetypes and visual representations of the Persian culture and reinterpreted them as new constellations of meaning. In terms of Diba,

61 For further information see: Daneshvar, *Garden*, 141-142, and, Hobbs, "Special report," 18, 23.

62 Between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s.

63 Daneshvar, *Garden.*

64 Gumpert, "Introduction," 15.

65 Balaghi, "Iranian Visual Arts," 25.

Saqqakhaneh can also be seen as "Spiritual Pop Art."[66] He explained that, similar to Pop Art, that alludes to symbols and tools of mass consumer society in the West, Saqqakhaneh is also shaped by using the inner belief and popular symbols that were part of the religion and culture of the country, and perhaps, consumed similarly to industrial products in the West.[67]

In order to illustrate the situation, let us take a look at Tanavoli's critical artwork entitled *'Oh! Nightingale'*. (Fig. 6) Tanavoli is considered one of the leading practitioners of Saqqakhaneh art. 'Oh! Nightingale' truly recalls the words of Lefebvre who argued that: "The beginning might then appear at the end, and the outcome might emerge at the outset."[68] This lithograph clearly draws on the popular symbols of Iranian culture from 1974. It is a complex layering of symbolism and technique that suggests a connection between modern robots and tribal Persian designs. The work depicts an angular robotic figure in a kneeling position and holding a nightingale. His mouth forms a grid, with two large red locks sealing his lips shut. The interplay of word and image is central, with one abstract calligraphic notion hinting at the name of God, another depicting the name of Ali (a descendant of the Prophet Mohammad). The nightingale is celebrated in Persian literature for its passionate song; here, the robotic figure holding the bird is unable to speak.[69]

Fig. 6: Parviz Tanavoli, *Oh! Nightingle*, 1974

66 Ibid., 27.

67 Ibid.

68 Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (London: Blackwell, 2007), 66.

69 Balaghi, "Iranian Visual Arts," 27.

Conclusion

From an interdisciplinary view on space, our discourse combines art and architecture with the socio-political space of Tehran, something that Rosalyn Deutsche called "urban-aesthetic, or spatial-cultural discourse."[70] We hypothesize that encouraging regionalism and introducing the city and its citizens as images can be categorized as the postmodern movement of the Pahlavi regime. Nasr's doctrine and his effort to reinforce the concept of *unity* in architectural and urban designs are good examples to recall one of David Harvey's arguments. Harvey criticized postmodern architecture for making use of history in order to herald unity. Postmodern aesthetics, by linking economy and culture, enable capitalism to establish a hidden system of suppression. Harvey accused postmodernism of highlighting aesthetics rather than ethics.[71]

While the power of the regime was embodied in the cultural sphere, Diba changed his commissions as to disturb the monarchial power. He believed that through establishing a new society in which agents of power would be no longer invested from a transcendent source, agency would be transfered to the people. In other words, from the moment that the power belongs to no one in particular, the necessity of social unity, which is represented by one ruler, disappears. It is then, starting from this *negativity,* that the public space and political identities may become visible. Their identities are shaped in an empty space.[72] The importance of such a place was visualized in different ways in the scholarly book of Ardalan's, design projects of Diba, and artworks of Tanavoli. Diba claimed that the new aesthetic language inspired him and his contemporaries with new visions, including revolutions and democracy.[73]

We would conclude our discussion by mentioning the collection of sculptures by Tanavoli from the seventies. These sculptures symbolized the Persian word *Heech*, literally *nothing*. The interpretation of this collection is beyond the aim of this argument. However, these poetic artworks emphasize the importance of the concept of emptiness by referring to the Sufic vision that God creates the universe out of nothing.

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70 Deutsche, *Evictions*, xi

71 Ibid., 204, 218, 220.

72 Rosalyn Deutsche, "Art and Public space: Question of Democracy," *social Text*, no. 33 (1992): 51.

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Fig. 1: http://www.caoi.ir/en/projects/item/62-shafagh-park.html, last accessed October 17, 2019.

Fig. 2: Tavakoli-Targhi, “Private Collection.”

Fig. 3: Kamran Diba, *Kamran Diba Buildings and Projects* (Hatje, 1981): 36-37, 40-41.

Fig. 4: http://www.caoi.ir/en/projects/item/53-tehran-museum-of-contemporary-art-kamran-diba.html, last accessed May 31, 2020.

Fig. 5: http://issuu.com/aarangallery/docs/kamran_diba-_news_clippings-_catalo?e=1208183/9679984, last accessed February 16, 2019.

Fig. 6: https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/artworks/oh-nightingale-design-for-rug-2/, last accessed May 23, 2020.