

Field Report

Resurrecting Tradition, Rewriting Modernity: Experiments in Contemporary Iranian Architecture under Economic Recession

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This report studies debates on modernity and tradition as they have unfolded during the recent experience of economic recession in Iran. To this end, it challenges the conventional meaning of recession as an economic downturn, extending it to encompass an experience that is politically produced and professionally reconstructed. In Iran, the recent recession has created opportunities for experimental architectural practices. It has also generated a new politics of tradition, which has been entangled with an urge to reinvent the local-global dynamic of “Iranian identity.” The report further argues that the dialectic of tradition and modernity has become a tool through which architects are attempting to boost their reputations and garner both local and transnational credibility.

On the second-largest plot in the Venice Art Biennale of 2015, the national exhibition of Iran hosted an installation designed and narrated by the prominent architect Nashid Nabian. Concerning the installation, titled “The Little Game of Architecture,” Nabian offered the following terse commentary on what could be interpreted as the isolated situation of “real architecture” in Iran:

Hundreds of thousands of square meters are built in Iran each year. A very small fraction of this massive construction can be called real architecture! Little Game is an individual performance, collaboratively performed by the audience, to experience the awkward role that architecture plays in the mainstream construction industry [emphasis added].¹

According to the exhibition’s director, from the pool of applicants vying to participate in the installation, 64 projects had been selected, and each successful applicant had then been allowed to represent their project through an “artistic” image and a caption that might offer “a glimpse into the contemporary architecture of Iran.”² The installation had then been assembled in the form of sixteen floating white cubes, elevated one and a half meters above the ground (FIG. 1). According to Nabian, each cube thus housed photographs of “four celebrated architecture pieces, which [were to] be experienced in an immersive fashion” (FIG. 2).

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FIGURE 1. “The Little Game of Architecture,” Nashid Nabian’s architecture installation at Iran’s pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 2015. Courtesy of Mehrdad Zavareh Mohammadi.

As Nabian further elaborated in her description of the cubes in the exhibition booklet:

*A limiting set of dimensions allows for a different corporeal understanding of these pieces. This involves [a] certain visual intimacy with the fourfold. Trapped within the box, celebrate them as isolated text, independent of the context of their conception [emphasis added].*³

Standing within the boundaries of the cubes, viewers were thus urged to understand “real” Iranian architecture as being “trapped within the box.” The box functioned as a visual device, operating simultaneously on multiple levels of imagination. It cleaved the viewer from the larger exhibit, and at the same time it separated architecture from the world, making it an autonomous object and thus part of a rarefied field of practice. The box also separated Iran from the rest of the world.

On first glance, one might conclude that context did not seem to matter to Nabian, and that its absence as part of the very form of the installation spoke to a “Pevsnerian” dichotomy between architecture and mere building.⁴ Urban background had simply been erased from the scene of the installation. Perhaps, ordinary buildings and ordinary people were too chaotic and disorderly to be displayed here, and they had been Orientalized (in a manner of speaking) for the sake of global and disciplinary consumption. But on second glance, one could read the installation as a satirical commentary on the situation of Iranian architects. The white cubes thus represented the isolated colonies of architects in Iran — their bounded circles detached from the wider context of commercial construction.⁵ Viewed in this fashion, the limited dimension of the boxes represented the limited power of architects within society (their white surfaces perhaps also alluding to Iranian architects’ love of modernist aesthetics).

Another of the architects involved in organizing the event, however, told me the projects displayed within the boxes



FIGURE 2. “The Little Game of Architecture,” view from below the installation’s white cubes. Courtesy of Mehrdad Zavareh Mohammadi.

had actually been selected based on their ability to create a “dialogue between tradition and modernity.” Thus, “only those projects that looked to the local were able to go global. In other words, those that created a conversation between the past and the present, were able to access the world of architecture.”⁶

Ironically, such a view was being presented at an exposition whose grand theme was “All the World’s Futures.” Under the politics of globalization and the forces that have contoured the recent history of Iran, the past, present and future seemed to have collapsed into one another for these architects — and so had tradition and modernity. In 2015, when the installation was being designed, these temporalities had further coincided both with the economic and political realities of international sanctions against the Iranian government and an ongoing recession in the construction industry that was making architects conscious more than ever of their professional position, locally and globally. If architects’ isolated colonies from the construction market had become the main narrative for introducing Iran’s contemporary architecture in a global gathering on “All the World’s Futures,” then something was indeed spilling out from the white boxes of Nabian — something that responded to the very specific economic and political situation in Iran.

Interestingly, Nabian’s installation was also not disassembled after it left Venice. It was restaged three more times — in Yerevan, Armenia, and in Tehran and Isfahan in Iran. Mehrdad Zavareh Mohammadi, the exhibition’s director, hosted the events in Tehran and Yerevan, in October 2015 and September 2016 respectively, as a way to present the accomplishments of contemporary Iranian architects (FIG. 3). And Ehsan Hosseini, an architect practicing in Isfahan, who had also been involved in the Venice installation, re-presented it in Isfahan in November 2015, advertising it as the “Iranian Pavilion in the Venice Biennale of 2015” (FIG. 4).

With the reexhibition of the installation inside the country, however, the represented image of Iranian architecture was consumed locally as evidence of international acclaim.



FIGURE 3. Poster advertising the restaging of “The Little Game of Architecture” in Yerevan in September 2016. Courtesy of Mehrdad Zavareh Mohammadi.

Indeed, in consuming what Shawhin Roudbari has called a “spectacle of transnationalism,” the exhibition of Iranian architecture for the other became more important than the work itself. Thus “transnational credibility” became a new resource with which to promote local architectural authority.⁷

The installation, as performed inside and outside its original context, thus offered a glimpse into how the local and global, as well as the modern and the traditional, merge into one another in contemporary Iranian architecture. And in this report I will examine this dialectic further to explore how Iranian architects have recently invested in new professional venues and new discursive platforms to redefine the boundaries of their practice under influence of sanctions and economic recession.

BETWEEN SANCTIONS AND RECESSION

From 2006 onward, Iranians have faced a political and economic crisis as a result of United Nations embargoes aimed at curtailing the country’s nuclear program. The period, shaped by the economic ups and downs of different presidential administrations, is often narrated as the time of sanctions — a sense of time rooted in political memory of the past few decades and the uncertainty for the future. However, the imposition of sanctions also caused the housing market in Iranian cities to experience an unprecedented boom, as ordinary people sought to invest their savings in construction as a refuge from inflation. Streets in big Iranian cities were thus



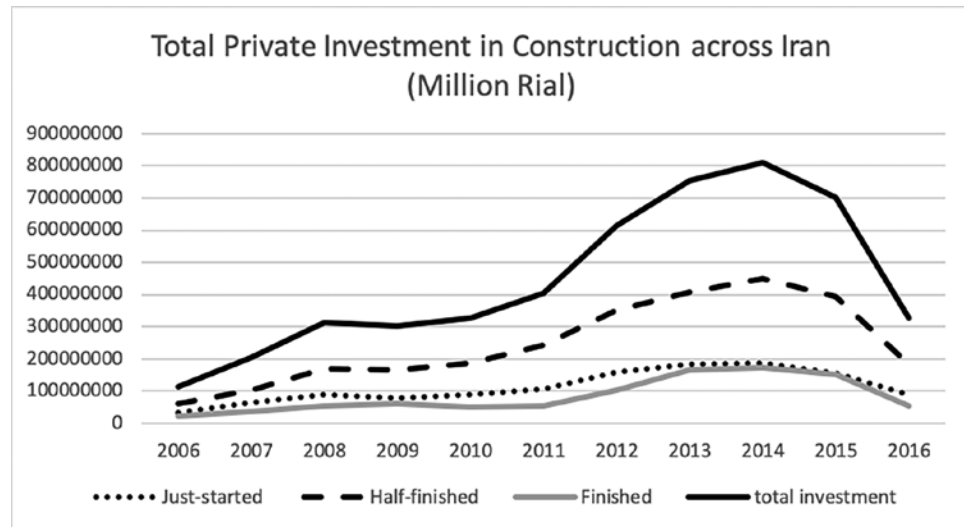
FIGURE 4. Poster announcing the reexhibition of “The Little Game of Architecture” in Isfahan. Courtesy of Mehrdad Zavareh Mohammadi.

filled with construction noise, and household dusting became an everyday practice reflecting the impact of nonstop excavation and demolition.

In 2012 Bloomberg News thus noted that “Iranians are turning to real estate to protect savings, helping fuel a building boom in the capital, as international sanctions weaken the rial.”⁸ However, two years later, CNN reported the outcome of the resultant overinvestment was “a Tehran skyline full of empty apartments — and investors still looking to buy and build despite very little demand.”⁹ As a result of a rush to the housing market, by 2017 Tehran had become a city of “spectral housing” (to use Arjun Appadurai’s term in a different context), with more than 500,000 empty apartments sitting dormant as investment capital.¹⁰

In 2013 the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed as a provisional agreement between Iran and the U.N. Security Council’s P5+1 countries as a first step toward limiting the country’s nuclear program. And almost two years later, in July 2015, the Iranian government reached a final nuclear deal with the international community. Based on the deal, the United States and other P5+1 countries agreed to remove many of the sanctions on Iran in return for Iran scaling down its nuclear activities.¹¹ But, despite the promise of JCPOA, economic grievances continued in Iran as a result of political and economic mismanagement. In particular, the national government under Hassan Rouhani forcefully reduced inflation to a single-digit rate of 9 percent — at the cost of a prolonged episode of economic recession. The effect on the construction sector was particularly harsh. Between 2014

FIGURE 5. Private investment in construction (millions of rials) across the country between 2006 and 2016. Source: The Department of Economic Statistics, “The results of a Study on the Construction Practices of the Private Sector in Various Districts of Various Provinces in Iran,” 2006-2016, Central Bank of Iran, <https://www.cbi.ir/simplelist/4300.aspx>.



and 2016, total investment in building construction, which had until then been driven mainly by investment in private housing, experienced a steep decline, as an atmosphere of uncertainty around sanctions and other internal policies scared investors out of the housing market (FIG. 5).¹²

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word recession as “a period of temporary economic decline during which trade and industrial activity are reduced, generally identified by a fall in GDP in two successive quarters.”¹³ For my purposes here, however, it will be understood as a broader experience of cultural, political and economic uncertainty produced on the basis of everyday encounters within various political-economic realms. I thus see recession as not just involving quantitative engagement with the economy, but according to the performance of personal memories, politics, emotions, calculations and longings in everyday life.

Through interviews with a group of architects in Tehran and Isfahan, I will trace how, as professional designers, they have attempted to transform the recent recession into a productive platform for competition and experimentation, and how they have sought to enact it as an opportunity for reworking the local-global dynamics of “Iranian identity.” These architects have thus viewed the recession as a space of recovery from “threatening” forces — whether these derived from market-driven construction, incomplete modernization, or global isolation. Within this situation, I will argue, they have used the dialectics of tradition and modernity to boost their reputations and enhance their local and transnational credibility. In other words, they have used the recession to challenge the constructed binary of *tradition* and *modernity* and so revise the constructed binary of Iran versus the world.

Interestingly, in my interviews, these architects largely avoided Persian words such as *sonnat* [handed down from the past] and *bed’at* [invention], which typically serve as translations for the words “tradition” and “modernity,” respectively.

They see such words, which emanated from nineteenth-century encounters between Iran and the European world, as embodying a constructed opposition between the two concepts, and, as such, no longer capable of expressing the architects’ political frame of thinking. New concepts such as *mo’aseriyat* [contemporariness] were instead circulating among professional circles during the time of my interviews as a way to open new discursive space for architectural reciprocations between modernity and tradition.¹⁴ Arguably, it had also been the disruption of the recession that had provided these architects with the time and the ethos to ruminate on new disciplinary and professional dialogues through which they might not only redefine their position within Iranian society, but also their status in a global community.

Of course, the focus in this report is not on mainstream commercial building design. It is rather on offices in contemporary Iran that could be characterized for their “architectural activism” — *talash-gari memaraneh*, as one local architect termed it in Farsi.¹⁵ Often small-scale practices, but ones that are renowned among the professional community, these firms are generally more concerned with the relationship between the discipline and the profession of architecture. Accordingly, they could afford the opportunity to experiment with new ideas and verbalize these as specific to the persona of their practices. To use Magali Sarfatti Larson’s term, these were the “professional elite.”¹⁶ And in many cases they have had the opportunity to write about and represent their ideas through architectural magazines, websites, installations, exhibitions, symposiums, and other engagements. Through ethnographic interviews and observations between January 2017 and December 2018, I studied some of these architectural practices to offer a glimpse into their present desires and dilemmas.

THE CITY, THE RECESSION, AND THE CULTURE OF CRITIQUE AMONG IRANIAN ARCHITECTS

The housing recession that took place between 2013 and 2018 created a rather long pause within the construction boom that has rapidly reshaped big cities in Iran. During these years the spectacle of half-finished apartment buildings in Tehran, specifically, invoked laments and nostalgia for the lost environmental qualities of the city.¹⁷ In words, paintings, photographs, films and novels, the city has been circulated as a spectacle of construction madness and architectural dystopia. Milad Mahmoudi's paintings and Sasan Abri's photographic collages are just two examples of such representations. They depict the city as a ruinous landscape — a space occupied by the skeletons of apartments under construction, speaking to the temporality of the recession (FIGS. 6, 7).

Likewise, architectural critique and critical writing gained more prominence among architects during the recession years, and central to this work has been discussion of the boom years as a time of uncontrolled speculation and haphazard urbanization. Recently, however, by investing in an oppositional binary of “architecture versus building for investment,” architects have invoked new tropes such as architectural activism and alternative architecture to reshape their position within the city and establish alternative pedagogical institutions.¹⁸ Ali Ata's newspaper articles critiquing architecture and the city are a fine example of such a form of alternative practice, by which architects have tried to create new lines of communication to the public.¹⁹

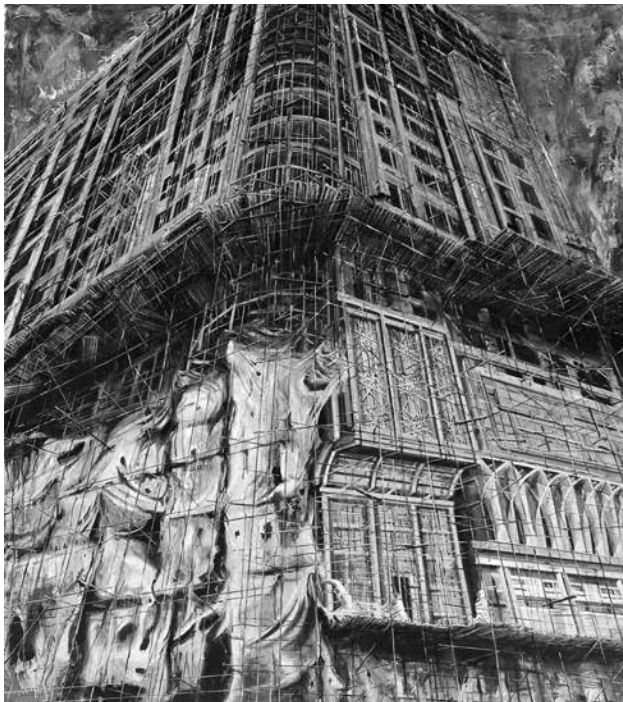


FIGURE 6. “Incompleteness,” painting by Milad Mahmoudi (2015), oil on canvas. Courtesy of Milad Mahmoudi.

The path of alternative architecture has also been explored by those interested in defining new critical design territories for architectural practice in Iran. For example, there has been new attention given by a younger generation of architects to restoration and architectural installations, giving rise to new cultural platforms that have challenged the speculative building practices of builders and developers.²⁰ These projects — mostly in the form of cafés, restaurants, galleries, houses, and temporary exhibitions — have been loosely categorized as projects of “return.” And in Tehran, specifically, they have involved the possibility of revitalizing the central city through a spirit of “inhabiting the city,” as an alternative to the culture of investment and speculation in the city's northern districts.²¹ Ali Shakeri's restoration projects for the Argo [Factory] Gallery, and his installation projects in Minoo Alley in central Tehran are two significant examples of these efforts.²²

In parallel, new private institutions such as the Contemporary Architects Association (ARCHCA), the Center for Contemporary Architects of Iran (CCAI), and the Tehran Urban Innovative Center (TUIC) have been established in recent years by practitioners looking for alternative pedagogical models with which to reclaim and repair the professional and the disciplinary status of architecture in Iran. Such institutions, born on the boundary between individual action and organizational settings, are now operating through a wide network of formal and informal practices carried out by prominent members of the architecture community.²³ Some like TUIC (established in 2016) have been more concerned with the relation between research and design, trying to expand the scope of spatial practices as these relate to the transforming urbanism of Iranian cities.²⁴ Others like ARCHCA (established in 2014) and CCAI (established in 2016) have been more focused on offering new design, theory and technical courses to open the professional and academic space of architecture in Iran to the international arena.

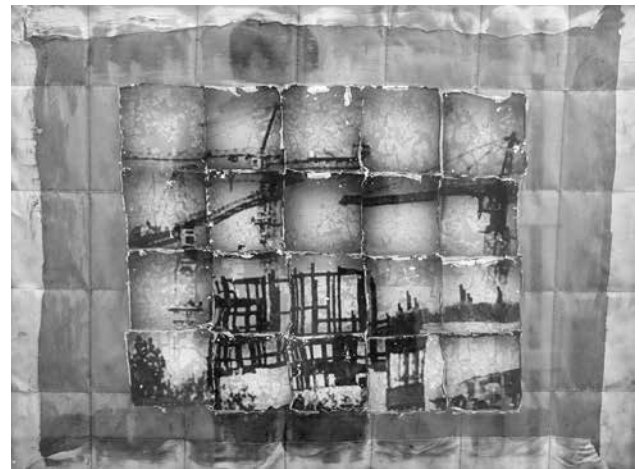


FIGURE 7. “Exposed,” photographic collage by Sasan Abri (2017). Photo by author with permission of the artist, 2018.

Through workshops, magazines, symposia and lectures, these institutions and individuals have been working with university students and graduates to shape a new culture of architecture through investigations of new business models for architecture on the one hand, and new transnational theoretical explorations on the other. In the past few years, they have also been attentive to general concern about the position and the identity of Iranian architects, both within Iran and as part of a transnational community.²⁵ Within such a space of critique, these institutions and individuals have more than ever been investing in a discourse of modernity and tradition, as issues of identity and subjecthood in the global era have become timelier under the politics of sanctions on Iran.²⁶

TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE

Iranian architects, especially in the past few decades, have experimented widely with the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity through actual built projects. A project like Tribe House, an apartment designed and built in Tehran by Nashid Nabian and her partner Rambod Eilkhani, is a fine example of a critical approach toward the interplay of modern and traditional tropes (FIG. 8). According to the architects, the house seeks to revitalize “the intrinsic complexity of interior spaces that were the product of well-crafted sectional and planar connections” in traditional Iranian domestic spaces, and it looks into “the possibility of designing for real homes within the framework of erecting an infill apartment.”²⁷ Unlike the typical flats being built every day by developers in Tehran, the Tribe House tries to invent a new, complex spatial relationship between plan and section; standing against a culture of square-meter calculations, it thus seeks to invoke new spatial possibilities within the building codes of the city.²⁸

Particular moments stand out in the building, like the cooking oven tucked into the staircase of the living room, or the staircase itself, which is cut in half, one part sitting on the ground and one part floating from the ceiling to create a shelf space in the middle (FIG. 9). Another instance of critique involves the kitchen counter, designed to be at the same level as the floor of the living room (FIG. 10). Such details can be seen as reflecting “defamiliarization,” to use James Holston’s term for the practice in modern architecture of making space strange through transformations that challenge expectations.²⁹ The cooking oven, the floating staircase, and the kitchen counter are all very modern gestures aimed at inventing new spatial relationships within a building by upsetting the norms and the habits of everyday life, challenging unquestioned values, and reinventing traditional qualities.

Such gestures resemble the kinds of juxtapositions evident in landmarks of modern architecture. Among these one might point to the entrance to Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye,



FIGURE 8. Exterior view of the Tribe House, designed and built by Nashid Nabian and Rambod Eilkhani. Source: Parham Taghioff, “Eilkkhaneh,” *shiftprocesspractice*, 2012, <https://www.shiftprocesspractice.ir/projects/eilkkhaneh/>.

where the choreography of an out-of-place sink, a column, and a lamp together form an unfamiliar spatial assemblage (FIG. 11). This space, as Michael Hays has put it, “is the most modern space” in this iconic structure, created through the collaboration of the column and the lamp in highlighting the location of the sink.³⁰ Thus Le Corbusier monumentalized the act of washing hands, giving form to a whole new conscious experience of everyday life, with issues like sanitation being a big part of it. Perhaps, Nabian’s strange oven in the staircase of the living room is likewise a monument to modernity’s attitude of critique toward the social and cultural norms that govern practices of everyday life, as well as the conventions of design and construction in Iran today.

Within recent Iranian architecture, the Tribe House is just one example among many of a project that beautifully expresses a dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity. Yet, what is missing today in disciplinary and professional practices is a discursive platform through which the spectrum of meanings for both tradition and modernity could be explored — both in relation to the global discourse



FIGURE 9. *The Tribe House: interior view of the first-floor apartment showing the oven and the floating staircase. Source: Parham Taghioff, “Eilkkhaneh,”* *shiftprocesspractice*, 2012, <https://www.shiftprocesspractice.ir/projects/eilkkhaneh/>.



FIGURE 10. *The Tribe House: interior view of the kitchen counter on the first floor apartment. Source: Parham Taghioff, “Eilkkhaneh,”* *shiftprocesspractice*, 2012, <https://www.shiftprocesspractice.ir/projects/eilkkhaneh/>.

on modernity and tradition and in relation to the geopolitical specificities of Iran. As Parsa Khalili has argued, “Instead of asking the old question of ‘is this modern?’ we should now be asking ‘how is this modern?’”³¹ And this question should in turn be understood within a combination of relations and events that together form the history of modernization in Iran.

One problem is that architectural writings on the topic of tradition and modernity in Iran have traditionally been circumscribed within a narrow ontological understanding of the terms. Most histories of architecture and urbanism in Iran thus define modernity as an unquestionably Western phenomenon, and most continue to equate the notion of tradition with *gozashte* [the past].³² At the same time, the majority of accounts of architecture and modernity focus on the canonical narrative of modernism as studied through certain architectural forms, or through state urban intervention in early twentieth century, and they pay less attention to the experience of modernity in small, everyday architectural interventions.³³ The same canonical lens also dominates histories of “traditional” buildings — as seen, for example, in the writings



FIGURE 11. *View of the entrance, depicting the wash basin at the Villa Savoye, as designed by Le Corbusier. Source: Archivision Library, “Villa Savoye,”* *Artstor*, August 1, 2001, https://library.artstor.org/asset/ARCHIVISION_105110221348.

of Mohammad Pirniya in the 1980s and 90s, which continue to serve as major textbooks in Iranian architecture schools.³⁴

Despite the existing boundedness of architectural writings on modernity and tradition, Iranian scholars in the social sciences and humanities, in dialogue with scholars of postcolonial modernity, have offered valuable frameworks for understanding these tropes through a historical imaginary particular to the region. Although Iran was never officially colonized by the West, postcolonial theory has thus been applied to Iran as “a critical theory of subjectivity and power.”³⁵ This, in turn, has allowed the question of modernity to be explored as an outgrowth of power relations imposed on Iran through the hegemonic device of international sanctions.

Postcolonial theory has thus succeeded in decentering, relativizing and pluralizing modernity in recent years through idioms such as “alternative modernities,” “indigenous modernities,” and “third world modernities.”³⁶ Arjun Appadurai has, for instance, put forward the idea of “modernity at large” — invoking modernity as a fact of everyday life, rather than a theoretical and disciplinary discourse.³⁷ He has also suggested that mass media and mass migration have allowed “modernity to be rewritten more as a vernacular globalization and less as a concession to large-scale national and international policies.”³⁸ Meanwhile, Dipesh Chakrabarty has famously “provincialized Europe” as a project of dislocating modernity from its invariably Western history. And in so doing he has questioned the uniqueness of European modernity as a historical event and called for rupturing its historicism through a new focus on modernities in the rest of the world.³⁹

Along similar lines, Dilip Gaonkar has proposed the perspective of “alternative modernities.” Although emphasizing the Western origins of modernity, he has called for a dialogue of engagement with it. As he has written, “Whoever elects to think in terms of alternative modernities must think with and against the tradition of reflection that stretches from Marx and Weber through Baudelaire and Benjamin to Habermas, Foucault, and many other Western thinkers.”⁴⁰ Viewing modernity as “a form of discourse that interrogates the present,” Gaonkar has given new political agency to various modernities — mimicked, appropriated, invented or otherwise.⁴¹ And he has concluded that “everywhere, at every national/cultural site, modernity is not one but many; modernity is not new but old and familiar; modernity is incomplete and necessarily so.”⁴²

In conversation with these scholars, Iranian historians like Ramin Jahanbeglu, Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, Hamid Dabashi, and Ali Paya have written specifically on the cultural-political tension between modernity and tradition in contemporary Iran.⁴³ These authors have all tried to offer frameworks through which the interplay of tradition and modernity can be operationalized as a method for understanding the larger social, cultural and political questions of the Iranian society.

Jahanbeglu, for example, has theorized the tension between tradition and modernity as a productive factor in the

political and cultural development of Iranian society.⁴⁴ Yet he does not view this tension as a clash, but as “a series of ontological and anthropological encounters between the two.”⁴⁵ He has also argued that “semi-colonized” modernity, rooted deeply within Iranian heritage, can only be juxtaposed with tradition through a “deeply ambiguous” attitude.⁴⁶ For Jahanbeglu, such a state of ambiguity allows for the formation of a questioning mind and an attitude of uncertainty about both historic and contemporary *truth*.⁴⁷

Building on this idea, Tavakoli-Targhi has theorized the tension between tradition and modernity in Iran as a “heterotopic experience” — a historical imagination formed on the basis of the “us versus them” power relations. Intellectual debates on Iranian modernity have thus always taken form in relation to European history, without acknowledging an autonomous Iranian experience of modernity.⁴⁸

Elaborating on this postcolonial lens, Hamid Dabashi has offered an alternative framework for giving agency to a specifically Iranian modernity.⁴⁹ For Dabashi, “anticolonial modernity,” which developed from the humanist ethos of Persian culture and from two decades of encounter with colonialism, allows Iranians to imagine themselves as contemporary beings with the power to critique and resist colonialism and Western imperialism.⁵⁰ Yet, Dabashi’s anticolonial modernity also offers a critique of nationalism. Questioning the nation as a constructed reality, he has argued that “what holds Iranians together is a literary humanism that by its very nature is diffused, disperse, disparate and itinerant.”⁵¹

In the following sections, the ethnographic observations elicited during my interviews with Iranian architects show how vocabularies of architecture are starting to be informed by the above intellectual debates. The engagement of Iranian architects with particular economic and political conditions in the past few years has invoked new modes of operation and new intellectual pathways within the profession. Not surprisingly, as in other contexts around the world, Iranian architects are investing in new strategies to sustain and rework their practices.⁵² And, through the period of sanctions and the recession, some of these nascent efforts are producing intriguing new dialogues. Ethnography, I argue, is the quintessential way through which the cultural and political layers of this discursive production may be delaminated, precisely because there is often a discrepancy between what architects do and what they say.

THE RECESSION AS RETHINKING ARCHITECTURE

Ali Basiri pins a small picture on the mounted map of the globe (FIG. 12). “This is the network of our global partners,” he says. “They once worked in this office, but each has ended up somewhere on this map.”³³ Before the recession, Basiri was an active architect, working and teaching in the city of Isfahan. His projects were published in acclaimed architectural journals, and he had a wide network of clients who took pride in projects that were both designed and built by his firm. But in 2012 and 2013 Basiri’s practice began to experience serious financial problems. When sanctions were imposed on Iranian oil, construction prices skyrocketed. And in 2013 the U.S. dollar jumped from roughly IR 10,000 to IR 30,000 in the free market. As he recalls, prices of construction materials increased hourly: “We bought flooring material for 40 toman per meter, but the next day it was 60. We lost over 70 thousand dollars then. The sanctions cut us in half.”

It took Basiri a while to recover from that loss. But after the shock, he realized that to survive Iran’s instable economy, he needed to fuel his firm with foreign income and transnational work. He started to familiarize himself with globalization theories and transnational cultures, and he invested in learning about their sense of aesthetics and vocabularies. The global network map of his friends was produced around the same time — when Basiri sensed that he could use the influence of his old employees to expand the audience for his office. As he says now: “I started to think about tourism, and came up with the idea of creating professional architectural tours for foreign tourists. I called it Iran Architours and began to advertise it through my people on the map.”

Basiri recounts the political and economic events that enriched the potential of Architours. BARJAM (the local

acronym used to reference the JCPOA) and the final nuclear agreement negotiated in 2015 during Rouhani’s presidency, “reestablished a sense of trust in Iran.” As he says, “It started to stimulate a dialogue with the world.” One result was that “tourists are returning to Iran, and they seem to be especially interested in the vernacular and indigenous landscapes of the country.” According to Basiri’s analysis, the recession in housing also pushed many developers to withdraw from shaky real estate investments, and many of them turned to tourism as an alternative. All of this, in his view, made Architours a culturally relevant project for the time — a project also “capable of redrawing the established conventions of architectural practice.”

Although Architours was the product of economic urgency, it eventually came to embody Basiri’s dreams about architecture as a profession.

The recession in the housing market and the lack of money for public projects, have made us architects think about the top of our Maslow Pyramid. Some people migrate to the West. Some turn to luxury building for the elite. Those in the middle, like us, use the luxury of the recession to invest in our beliefs. When the bottom of the pyramid doesn't work, you start thinking creatively about the top: things you never had the time to work on. We start connecting to the rest of the world to make our dreams.

For Basiri, “The rest of the world” clearly means both the world outside Iran’s national borders and the world outside the conventional field of architectural practice. And through the tours, he has been able to reconnect to a third outside world — the vernacular context, the pastoral setting, what he



FIGURE 12. Ali Basiri’s global map of partners. Photo by author with permission of the architect, 2017.

calls “an entire field inaccessible to the everyday life of a conventional design firm in Iran.” Such fields, usually ignored by the locals, are nonetheless being revitalized through the attention of foreigners, he notes.

For Basiri, the *baft* — the vernacular context — was the reason he became an architect to begin with. But before the recession, the everyday work of his office occupied him with urban projects for wealthy clients. But at the time of my interview with him, in 2017, he was already working in three historic villages in Isfahan to map historic sites suitable for traditional hotels. He was also planning new cultural activities within those villages, such as establishing a summer nature school for children. Basiri had also purchased 50 percent of an online travel agency, which sold tours, hotels, and airline tickets, as a way to tie his activities together. With a wide vision of the potential expansion of Architours, he had also contacted several American hotel owners, inviting them to invest in his projects. “The sanctions in a way, put us in closer contact with the world,” he laughs.

Hamid, a young architect working in Tehran, sensed similar dilemmas. His office had not been able to sustain itself through design work in the early years of the recession. But Hamid saw the downturn as a form of blessing, providing him the opportunity to finally focus on what he had always cared about: “people’s architecture — architecture concerned with social problems and spatial justice.”⁵⁴ For years, his studio in Tehran had worked on reinventing vernacular ideas through experimental architectural projects. But these were marginal interventions compared to his present design work. The recession gave Hamid the courage to close his studio and start a new humanitarian architectural practice.

This has also allowed him to connect with humanitarian organizations around the world and globalize the scope of his charitable visions.

From the perspective of these architects, the recession has appeared as a productive disruption in the life of architecture in Iran. Lamenting the rapid urbanization of cities, architects like Basiri have since worked toward a return to the city as a site that demands a different body of architectural interventions. Several other architects also referred in interviews to the dualities of rural and urban, tradition and modernity, as a fruitful lens through which to contemplate the current state of architecture and urbanism. But Basiri has even returned to the rural as a way of reconstructing urban conditions. He thus says his favorite project is a family villa on his father’s horse farm on the periphery of Isfahan (FIG. 13).

Built on the arid outskirts of Isfahan in 2014, the project allowed Basiri’s firm to combine “a modern design with a traditional construction system to create a sustainable structure.” The traditional system allowed for the “passive functioning” of the villa, using masonry walls, a pair of wind catchers, and a thick mass of soil on the northern edge of the building to facilitate a natural adjustment of temperature and humidity. As he emphasizes, the villa was also built by local workers using only local materials. In plan, it consists of a minimal array of rooms arranged side by side in a narrow rectangle. But in section, its logic of organization went beyond modernist aesthetics, functioning like a traditional cooling system. It is “a truly sustainable architecture, that combined modernity with tradition,” he says.

FIGURE 31. *The farm villa designed and built by Ali Basiri’s firm. Source: Farshid Nasrabadi, “Shahrashb Villa & Farm,” greenvolumegroup, 2014, <https://www.greenvolumegroup.com/gallery/shahrashb-villa-farm/>.*



“REFINDING, RECYCLING, AND RETURNING”

Mohammad Arab’s words echo a similar nostalgic view, but one nonetheless accompanied by a sense of agency both in terms of the resurrection and reinvention of tradition. An acclaimed young architect, Arab won the prestigious Memar Award for one of his early residential projects. But he opened his architecture office in 2014, right in the middle of the recession. He is nevertheless happy his practice was born during the recession as opposed to during the boom. He notes that the recession allowed him to talk to clients about things like space and spatial qualities.⁵⁵

Arab believes the boom damaged not just Iranian cities, but also Iranian culture and humanity. “Everyone saw the boom, everyone was unhappy about it, but everyone participated in it because it was profitable. The boom changed us as humans.” As he explains,

I often contemplate on Safavid ruins. There was a spatial quality to architecture in those eras that allowed it to work as a living space. Architecture was entangled with everyday life of the people. But in the 1930s, the project of modernity in Iran turned architecture into a commodity. We began to see everything within the constructed duality of the modern and the traditional: a system of valuation that only operated through demolition and reconstruction. Our architecture has been emptied of quality since then; it has become surface, calculated by developers’ speculative formulas. In the past few years, fortunately, the construction recession has cut down on the speculative behavior and we can now reevaluate architecture through the lens of everyday life. This very small office was a practice of “refinding” those lost qualities for me.

Arab is particularly upset by the use of the term *kolangi* [something that deserves to be demolished with a pickax]. In Iran, *kolangi* is commonly used to refer to houses that are more than twenty years old — implying a sense of forced ruination, despite the fact that many of these houses can be easily renovated and reused. By engaging with both historic and contemporary ruins within the city, he has tried to reinvent a more humanistic relationship with the past, one that jettisons the constructed duality of tradition and modernity.

Arab also refuses to use the word *sonnat* [handed down from the past] as a translation for “tradition,” or *bed’at* [invention] as a translation for “modernity.” He believes these words are overused in Iran and have lost their anthropological and theoretical importance. Instead, he uses the prefix of “re” to make new terms like “refinding,” “recycling,” and “returning” to emphasize present action toward the past. “Such words engage with the duality of the modern and traditional in a more operative way,” he argues. “They are verbs, rather than nouns; they put the emphasis on the creative process,

rather than on things. They make you ask: redefining what? Recycling what? Returning to where?” Arab’s words echo the arguments of Dabashi and Jahanbeglu on the relationship between the modern and the traditional.⁵⁶ Especially, his emphasis on the act of asking questions shows an attitude of *ambiguity* — something that also appeared in conversations with other architects. Through these three verbs, Arab seemed to be trying to reimagine the relationship between tradition and modernity as a dialectical relationship rather than a clash of opposites.

The building in which Arab has located his office embodies just such a dialectical relationship (FIG. 14). He calls its design a project of “refinding living space, within a modern infrastructural cut.” His concept of living space is similar in this regard to Henri Lefebvre’s space of habitation — space that seeks to revitalize use value.⁵⁷ Such space does not establish itself through the logic of exchange value and commodification. It is rather created in protest against the capitalist politics of modernization — in protest against the clash of tradition and modernity.

The most important feature of Arab’s office is its “unfamilarly tiny size” within an ordinary housing block. In fact, it represents an anomaly within the master plan of the city, built on a 40-square-meter property that is a remnant from a bigger property cut through by a modern road extension. According to Arab,



FIGURE 14. Mohammad Arab’s office, designed and built by the architect in Isfahan. Photo by author with permission of the architect, 2017.

other people would not have built anything in this cut of land. Iranians do not even consider this land a property — they call it a leftover. To make it worthy of building, they would wait until they could profitably attach it to the adjacent property.

Arab's impetus to "recycle" this leftover land was, however, shaped as a response to the city's current urban planning mentality. He thus mentions that "the most recent master plan of Isfahan notes that any residential unit built under 60 square meters lacks proper living qualities." And he recalls that when he was in the process of building the tiny office, his friends and the employees of the municipality ridiculed him for acting irrationally.

I told them then that I can sell this office any time I desire; I can sell it better than a piece designed for investment. Just last year, someone offered me a blank check for this office. He said he loved the building so much he wanted to gift it to his son who lived abroad.

By diverging from conventional investment logic, Arab succeeded in creating a space whose value could be measured in architectural terms rather than square meters. In plan and section, it offered surprising variations from Neufert standards, offering unconventionally narrow, small spaces (FIG. 15).⁵⁸ On paper, evaluated by the rulers and calculators of city professionals, it did not make much sense as an office building. Yet, an old neighbor had mentioned to Basiri that "strangers ask us about the architect of the building." And, for Arab, this is "a form of refinding quality and space within the mentality of modernity in Iran's housing industry." Although aspects of the building's form referenced traditional building techniques and materials, the real resurrection of tradition for him is about the resurrection of new economies of envisioning architecture. The recession has thus allowed Arab to not just build this office but to create a new discourse through it.

"A THEORY FOR ENTERING THE PAST"

Reza and Banoo, two young architects practicing in Tehran, were excited to show me the magazine which had published their award-winning villa project.⁵⁹ The villa was among their first design projects in 2013, after they had transformed their architectural practice from serving large construction firms to designing for small private clients. As a result of the construction boom, Reza and Banoo had lost a great deal of money. During the boom several big developers had offered them relatively sizable construction projects, but when the market went down in 2013, these same developers had refused to pay them. By contrast, the modest villa, which had brought them national and international fame, had provided



FIGURE 15. The narrow entrance hallway in Mohammad Arab's office. Photo by author with permission of the architect, 2017.

an opportunity to recharacterize their practice as "slow-walkers."⁶⁰ By eliminating the real estate market as a factor in their practice, the recession had thus allowed them to spend more time on fundamental questions of architecture.

Reza and Banoo also believe the recession was an outcome of the state's politics of global isolation: "of being sanctioned and sanctioning itself from the world." Reza thus criticizes the previous national administration for overinvesting the country's oil money in massive local projects without a broader global imaginary. "We have so many foreign investment opportunities like the market of Afghanistan and Iraq; but we have made ourselves isolated and disconnected from even the regional world outside," Reza says. He argues that oil money has been used on grand local infrastructure projects to portray the state as a powerful agent of modernization and development. And he criticizes this effort as an attempt to manipulate public opinion. "Big projects represent a big state," he claims.

Reza instead believes that the time for development and modernization has passed, and that the country should now invest in spatial qualities and small architectural interventions. Reza's voice immediately transforms as he begins to discuss the Rouhani administration.

This may be the time of housing recession, yet it is the time of economic prosperity. The oil money does not reach the real estate market because the state no longer wants to be the sole carrier of civic projects at grand scales. The new state wants the private market to be the activator of qualitative architecture. Among these private actors are a generation of young architects who are not interested in grand, manipulative projects, but in small, urban-architectural interventions. The market is also following these architects. They search us through magazines, websites, and competitions.

The acclaimed villa designed by Reza and Banoo is one example of such a small intervention. They describe it through a narrative mainly focused on the relation between the modern and the traditional. Reza mentions that at the time they were designing the project, they tried to approach the foreign typology of the villa through the spatial language of the traditional *kooshk* — a palatial Persian architectural type. “This was a theoretical challenge for us: of creating a dialogue with an architectural tradition,” Reza says. And when I ask why this dialogue is important, he responds:

Our culture is a culture clogged in between modernity and tradition. A society with no history does not have this dilemma. Modernity is a European event, which has never grown from inside of us. In the realm of architecture, likewise, European architects decided for us.

For Reza and Banoo, this history of modernity in Iran is connected to the very experience of “being Iranian.” “Who is the contemporary Iranian? A contemporary Iranian is someone who is standing in the breach between modernity and tradition. Having this dilemma and having the concern to talk about this is a contemporary thing,” Reza explains. By defining modernity as a Western experience, Reza characterizes the contemporary Iranian identity as “caught in the friction between here and there.” For him, the architect possesses the power to come to terms with this distance and invent new experience out of it. He operationalizes this gap, in a sense: he neither rejects it, nor takes it for granted. And he intentionally politicizes it as a cultural-historical friction, charged with various political events like the 1979 Islamic revolution. This friction also allows him to criticize the present through the language of tradition.

Reza’s words echo Jahanbeglu’s argument on the ontological productivity of the tension between tradition and modernity.⁶¹ Reza and Banoo animate this tension architecturally. And the ambiguity that Jahanbeglu has proposed as the right attitude to enact this tension is also present in their words. They were not nostalgically copying the past, but “entering it with a theory.”

What matters though, is how you approach the past. With what theory you enter a conversation with history? With which part of it do you engage? Via Ardalan and Nasr’s theory of unity? Or with other theories? We are all experiencing this breach now and are practicing ways of engaging with it. We are experimenting.

Approaching tradition through theory allows Reza to turn the project of the past into an ambiguous realm of interpretation. Theory thus enables the architect to enter the past through a critical lens. And it allows the architect to distinguish between what Ananya Roy has categorized as dwelling versus the performance of tradition.⁶² Reza has not heard of Roy, but he distinguishes his use of tradition from state practices of consuming selective traditions. He mentions that “having a theory to approach tradition is different from the ideological practices of nation-building.”

To approach tradition through theory allows tradition to be a performative space — a personal realm invented by the architect’s modern lens. Interestingly, Reza, and many others, believe the modern cannot be made without the work of the traditional. Thus, when I ask Reza and Banoo if they are comfortable with the binary of traditional and modern, they say, “there is no binary for us. It’s all part of a continuous history.”

The breach which Reza and Banoo’s architecture is struggling to resolve as a continuous history was repeatedly mentioned to me by other architects I interviewed. In another interview, Farbod, a practicing architect in Tehran refers to it as “a sudden escape in history.” In fact, he argues, “we were modernized overnight, but we didn’t know where to go with it. No, let’s put it this way: we were modernized without becoming modern.”⁶³

The rupture may also be theorized as a space of cultural confusion — an unresolved historical interruption having to do with how Iranians could have proceeded from their past to their present. Within the rhetoric of rupture, there is thus an embedded sense of nostalgia about what Iranians have been and what Iranians could have been. For these architects, only architecture can make sense of the contemporary anxiety over this breach. Only architecture can be “original.” Isn’t this precisely an Iranian experience of modernity? An experience so entangled with the culture of architecture and the culture of sanctions today?

CONSTITUTING IRANIAN MODERNITY

By examining the words and projects of several Iranian architects during the economic recession of 2013–2018, I have tried in this report to offer a glimpse into the contemporary culture of architecture in Iran. This has involved looking at how architects describe and have managed the temporary recession through personal experiences that are entangled with political and cultural visions. I have also traced how

they have engaged with tradition and modernity within the context of the current political situation in Iran, as well as in conversation with the global architecture community.

Perhaps, being preoccupied with the disciplinary rhetoric on modernity, these architects are overlooking the experience of modernity that has unfolded within their own everyday professional practices amid a particular political-economic episode in Iran. As Roy has suggested, modernity may be defined as a “simultaneous transcendence and valuation of tradition.”⁶⁴ If so, the anxieties over identity and contemporariness among Iranian architects may be seen as manifestations of an Iranian modernity — an experience which, to use Roy’s words, inevitably “belonged to the very real cartography of postcolonialism and its web of flows, fantasies, and figments.”⁶⁵ Here, Parsa Khalili’s polemic on alternative regional modernity is useful to think about. He has invited Iranian architects to unpack modernity as a broader network of relations within the historical and contemporary context of the Iranian society.⁶⁶ In this approach, modernity is problematized as a wide spectrum of experiences within the region rather than a particular event or a moment of time.

At the time of this research, intellectual writings and thoughts on modernity by Iranian architects were still very circumscribed within a certain canonical understanding of modernity as a Western phenomenon. There was no agency imagined for a more everyday modernity — for a kitsch, for example — which was not treated as architecture by architects.⁶⁷ At the same time, the use of words like “incomplete modernity” or “copycat modernity” were frequent among the architects I interviewed. This was usually theorized as an experience of “modernity without going through complete modernization” — an argument similar to that Marshall Berman used to describe the “modernity of underdevelopment” in St. Petersburg.⁶⁸ In describing “Tehran’s modernity,” Hani Abtahi, for example, has written that “Tehran has been always looking to the West from the time that it wanted to become like the Paris of Haussmann. . . . Even efforts for the Islamization of the city couldn’t prevent the city’s construction frenzy and a desire for an imported modernity.”⁶⁹ Such interpretations are important because they “cast the question of being modern in the universalist idiom of Western reforms,” as Roy has put it in a different context.⁷⁰

The global intellectual discourse on modernity and tradition, however, is quite diverse and hybrid today, and this calls for a broader analytical and anthropological encounter with the built environment of Iranian cities. A Foucauldian definition of modernity, for instance, would invite greater attention to personal agency and everyday practices of critique and self-invention.⁷¹ And this critical framework of thinking could introduce the profession to broader political and economic imaginaries.

Traditional ways of thinking about tradition have likewise been challenged recently.⁷² Thus, scholars of the built environment have advocated thinking about tradition “less

as an entity than as a process through which new ideas and practices are integrated into, rather than sweeping away, older ones.”⁷³ This way of thinking about tradition allows the built environment to be explored as an “assemblage” of adaptable and changeable practices rather than as aesthetic images and romanticized reified forms.⁷⁴

The “resurrection of tradition” and the “rewriting of modernity,” as they appear in the title of this report, precisely point to this need to reexamine historical understandings of both modernity and tradition by accepting their ontological connectivity and exploring their trajectories in everyday life. As Dell Upton has argued, the attention to the everyday practices of building, as well as the everyday life of the profession of architecture, encourages examination of “the cultural landscape without recourse to the hierarchies and oppositions of high and low that impede understanding and have fragmented the field” through dichotomous categories such as “Architecture” and “building,” or “modern” and “traditional.”⁷⁵

Architecture here could serve as an important arena for exploring what could be called an Iranian modernity, as sought within the ordinary practices of the city — the ordinary space outside of the “white boxes” of Nabian in the Venice Biennale installation. Modernity as an experience is not just a theoretical concept; it is a politics of encountering the world.

REFERENCE NOTES

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In this report, the names of interviewed individuals currently active in the architectural profession in Iran have been anonymized, except where the content of interviews dealt with specific statements already mentioned in public venues.

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2. Mehrdad Zavareh Mohammadi, interviewed by Razieh Ghorbani, Tehran, December 20, 2018.
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11. On May 8, 2018, Donald Trump announced the removal of the United States from the JCPOA, arguing that “we cannot prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb under the decaying and rotten structure of the current agreement.” He then reactivated U.S. sanctions on November 4, 2018 — a date charged with a history of hostilities between Iran and the United States.
12. Banking policies, for example, aggravated the recession by offering highly profitable interest rates (as high as 25 percent) on savings deposits, thus draining money from the housing market.
13. “Recession,” *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
14. A professional seminar, for instance, was organized in April 2018 by Tarbiat Moadares University on “Rethinking the Possibility of Contemporariness in the Architecture of Iran Today.” Mohammad Musapour, Alireza Taghaboni, and Arash Basirat were the three main speakers.
15. A. Kermanian, “Who is Afraid of Architectural Activism” (in Farsi), *Memar*, No.101 (spring 2017), p.92.
16. M.S. Larson, *Behind the Postmodern Facade: Architectural Change in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
17. See, for instance, this journalist’s description of the city. “Our Tehran has caught a *housing syndrome*: an incurable disease that spreads its body like a beast across the land and finds its way in every corner. The syndrome like an earthquake destroys everything: gardens, ponds, alleys, neighborhoods, shadows, corners, birds, water, and silence. Houses, houses, houses; this mold-like growth of houses! Nothing can stop them from spreading — neither the letters of the city council, nor the ancient trees, or the narrow alleys, or the historical topography.” R. Behboodi, “Shahr-i-ma Sandrom-i Khaneh Gerefte Ast” [“Our City Has Caught the Housing Syndrome”], *Tabnak News*, 2014, accessed December 11, 2014 at <http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/398603/نگاه-شما-شهر-ما-سندرم-خانه-گرفته-است>.
18. See, for instance, A. Basirat, “Who is Afraid of Critical Thinking” (in Farsi), *Memar*, No.101 (February 2017); and Kermanian, “Who is Afraid of Architectural Activism.” Along similar lines, a symposium was held at Tehran University in May 2018 on “Alternative Architecture in Iran,” at which several prominent architects discussed the relationship between discourse, alternative practice, and pedagogy.
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20. F. Ahmadi, “Identity, Modernism, and Postmodernism” (in Farsi), *Memari va Farhang*, Vol.16 No.55 (2018), pp.3–5.
21. L. Khodabakhsh, “An Escape to the Center” (in Farsi), *Memari va Farhang*, Vol.16 No.55 (2018), p.43.
22. For more examples of emerging restorative architecture within the central city, see *Memari va Farhang*, Vol.16 No.55 (2018). For more information on the Argo [Factory] Gallery, see E. Nasehi and G. Razazi, “Argo [Factory] Gallery” (in Farsi), *Memari va Farhang*, Vol.16 No.55 (2018), pp.50–54. It should be noted, however, that what may seem like an activist gesture in these projects of return can in fact lead to an eventual process of cultural gentrification — hence, the flow of speculative construction in the central city. This question shall be studied by the author in future research.
23. See Roudbari, “The Transnational Transformation of Architecture Practice,” p.124, for further analysis of how individual architects in Iran mobilize institutional power in a climate of weak government regulations. This has helped them gain individual agency through these institutions under the watchful eye of the state.
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25. See, for instance, *Memar*, No.99 (October 2016) and *Memar*, No.84 (April 2014), which critiqued the absence of architects from the trajectories of the city. Indeed, *Memar* 99 centered on the theme of “a return to the city” and how architects could revitalize their practices through new projects within the previously abandoned central districts of Tehran. The same theme — i.e., a return to the central city and alternative architecture — is evident in *Memari va Farhang*, Vol.16 No.55 (2018).
26. See K. Afsharnaderi, “A Dialogue with the World” (in Farsi), *Memar*, No.105 (November 2017), p.2, for further analysis of the relationship between sanctions and the discourse of modernity and tradition in Iran. Attention to the discourse of modernity and tradition could also be observed in the series of reading workshops offered by CCAI on “the city and the experience of modernity in literature” held in the winter and spring of 2018. A symposium was also held in April 2018, by Tarbiat Modarres University, in collaboration with some of the founders of CCAI on “Re-thinking the Possibility of Contemporariness in the Architecture of Iran Today,” which focused on the cultural translation of modernity in Iranian architecture.
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30. M. Hays, “Aesthetic,” Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning Lecture Series, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, October 22, 2012.

31. P. Khalili, "Regional Modernism in Iran: An Alternative Suggestion" (in Farsi), *Sharestan*, No.43–42 (Spring 2015), p.11.
32. See, for instance, S.M. Habibi, *Intellectual Trends in the Contemporary Iranian Architecture and Urbanism* (1979–2003) (in Farsi) (Tehran: Cultural Research Bureau, 2006); H. Abtahi, "What Do We Consume and What Do We Borrow?" (in Farsi), *Memar*, No.99 (November 2016), pp.64–67; and I. Hojjat, *Tradition and Modernity in Architectural Education* (in Farsi) (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 2010).
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70. Roy, "Nostalgias of the Modern," p.68.
71. Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities*, pp.11–12.
72. See, for instance, AlSayyad, ed., *The End of Tradition?*; and N. AlSayyad, M. Gillem, and D. Moffat, eds., *Whose Tradition?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).
73. D. Upton, "Process and Polemic," in AlSayyad, Gillem, and Moffat, eds., *Whose Tradition?*, p.304.
74. *Ibid.*, pp.304, 308.
75. D. Upton, "Architecture in Everyday Life," *New Literary History*, Vol.3 No.4 (Autumn 2002), p.721.

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