Design of Higher Education Learning Spaces in Iran; 
From the Qajar Period to the Present Time

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Abstract
By the mid-nineteenth century, art and architecture education in Iran had been based upon traditional apprenticeship. The architecture of the educational buildings in Iran has stylistically changed since the early 1850s, when the first European style technical college was established. Since then, not only have Westernism, nationalism, and modernism influenced the cultural and architectural taste of the Iranian society, but they also had an impact on that of the authorities, and consequently, on that of the university architects, who were commissioned by the westernising governments of the Qajars and the Pahlavis. This study explores the ways in which the traditional styles in designing higher education buildings in Iran have been transformed into modern and regionalist ones.

Keywords: design, educational spaces, Iran, Qajar, Pahlavi

Introduction
After the overthrow of the two-hundred year Safavid dynasty and a period of 70-year turmoil in the eighteenth century, Iran had still its rudimentary structure for governing the country at the beginning of the nineteenth century even though the rapid pace at which world around it changing made the neighbour countries much more powerful than Iran. Subsequently, in the several wars during the first half of the nineteenth century which have resulted vast parts of the country be separated, the experience of these consecutive defeats resulted in a more realistic understanding for Iranians of their situation in the new world. This was the predominant reason for interests of the Qajar kings in
turning to the West to get the ability needed for the next possible wars. However, their dreams were not coming to fruition until the reign of the second Pahlavi for near 150 years later when huge modern development of the military made it one of the most powerful militaries in the Middle East.

On 21 August 1851 in the *Vaghaye-ye Etefaghiyeh* (literally meaning ‘the events’) newspaper, it was reported that the government had decided to build a place for teaching modern science one year earlier (in 1850), and that the building had been under construction.\(^1\) On 8 December 1851, *Vaghaye-ye Etefaghiyeh* reported that the Dar Al-Fonun (literally means ‘the polytechnic institution’) had been built, and that the main aim of it was to train youth in engineering, military, medicine, surgery, mining, and science.\(^2\) A stone placed into one of the walls shows the date 1268 Hejri Ghamari (the lunar Islamic calendar) that may have been 1851 or 1852.

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2. *Vaghaye-ye Etefaghiyeh* Newspaper, 8 December 1851.
Modernising authorities

The mastermind behind building the first secular college in Persia was Mirza Taghi Khan Farahani titled as Amir Kabir (the grand minister), Amir Atabak, and Amir-e Nezam. Adamiat in *Amir Kabir and Iran*, 1975, describes his significant role in developing and modernising Persia.\(^3\)

Mirza Taghi Farahani had lived in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Tiflis for ten months and had visited technical schools and military facilities and training centres as well as a variety of other modern building types such as banks, factories and theatres.\(^4\)

When Mirza Taghi was appointed as the Grand Minister in 1848, he was ready to implement his dream of modernising the country. The grand minister sought to make the country independent from Europeans using a Western and European model for its development. It may be concluded that the distinctiveness of the Naseri period (during the reign of Neser Al-Din Shah, 1848-1896)) in art and architecture is due to Amir Kabir, who took first steps in the industrialisation, westernisation, and secularisation of the structure of the Persian society at the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Abbas Mirza, the Qajar prince, had a similar role in the pre-Naseri period at the beginning of the first half of the nineteenth century. It seems reasonable to categorise the first decades of the nineteenth century as a period of Safavid revivalism, not only because of clear similarities between Qajar and Safavid palaces but also in a more general aspects of art.\(^5\)

New educational system

The system of apprenticeship in both the Safavid and the early Qajar periods provided the required number of professional decorative artists, artisans, and traditional builders, especially for royal and official buildings. Traditional plasterers, architects, stonemasons, tilers, and brick layers were the main factors by which the continuity of Iranian architecture during centuries was achieved.

For the first time in 1862, academic discipline of painting in the Dar Al-Fonun (abode of arts and techniques) College replaced the traditional system of apprenticeship in which many Iranian artists had been taught over the centuries. The royal workshop system, which had been remained unrivalled, at least since the Safavid period, was integrated with the Dar Al-Fonun.

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Architecture of Dar Al-Fonun

Mirza Reza⁶ and Mirza Jafar⁷ were the first two Iranian modern engineers, who studied in the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich in London from 1815 to 1819. They were two of the five students, who had been sent out by Qajar Prince, Abbas Mirza, to Britain for strengthening and modernising the national military. Even though neither of them had studied architecture, they were involved in designing or leading a construction project for the government because of their acquired technical knowledge in Britain about constructing fortifications. Mohammad Taghi Khan Memar Bashi was the chief traditional builder of the college, and Shahzadeh Bahram Mirza was probably the supervisor from the royal court.⁸ The first design for the building of the Dar Al-Fonun was by Mirza Reza, which was inspired by the design of the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich in Britain, the academy in which they had studied. All the educational rooms were arranged around a central courtyard.⁹ This was also a common way of organising space in Irano-Islamic design. The main European influence was in the means of access to the rooms from the corridor behind,¹⁰ whereas, in Irano-Islamic architecture, access was usually directly from the central courtyard. This may be the first direct influence of western educational spaces on an Iranian-built school. An old aerial view of the Dar Al-Fonun during the Naseri period, before it was reconstructed, shows Qajar architectural character in the gables, arches and openings.

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⁶ Also Known as: Mirza Reza Soltan Topkhane, Mirza Reza Mohandes Bashi, Mohammad Reza Tabrizi, Mohammad Reza Mohandes Tabrizi, Mohammad Reza Mohandes Topchi Tabrizi, Mohammad Mirza Mohandes, Mohandes Bashi, Reza Khan Mohandes, Mirza Reza Mohandes, Mirza Reza Sarabi
⁹ Karimian, میرزا رضا مهندس باشی; [Mirza Reza Mohandes Bashi: One of the First Engineers in the Qajar Era’], Ganjineh Asnad, 44 (11) (Winter 2002), pp 44-57.
¹⁰ مدرسه دارالفنون; [The Dar Al-Fonun School’], Madreseh Nu [literally meaning ‘new school’], p 32.
Nikolai Markov, a Russian architect, and Teherzadeh Behzad seem to have been the only architecture teachers at the Dar Al-Fonun College at the time of the first intake of Iranian students in architecture in 1927, according to an announcement in the Etelaat Newspaper. Markov diverged from Qajar architectural characteristics in his work during the reconstruction and renovation of the Dar Al-Fonun in 1929. Here, he had no opportunity to blend a European plan with an Islamic elevation, as in his other works, but the combination of different Irano-Islamic architectural elements, ranging from the pre-Islamic to the Safavid period, is characteristic of his eclectic style.

Western architecture

Not only have westernism, nationalism, and modernism influenced the cultural and architectural taste of Iranian society, but they also had an impact on that of the authorities, and consequently, on that of the university architects, who were commissioned by the westernising governments of the Qajars and the Pahlavis.

The first Iranian university, the University of Tehran, which was designed by a number of European-trained architects, was architecturally an example of the Beaux Arts in style which had no decoration. Function was the main concern of the modern university architects, and functionalism, minimalism and westernisation were the dominant approaches upon which the architects’ designs were based. In the second half of the twentieth century, the enthusiasm toward international styles gradually gave the way to regionalism.
Diagram showing the various architectural styles in Iran. Faramarz Hassan Pour.
Localisation

Two buildings next to each other in the University of Esfahan, one of which was embellished with a new localised façade in the Islamic revolutionary period, like many other examples, indicate how localisation became prominent in the official agenda after 1979. The minimalist character of the old building contrasts with tile-and-brick-worked façade of its newly decorated counterpart across the street.
The Library building of the University of Esfahan represents the localised modern architecture of this period. A vernacular style building in the University also resembles traditional buildings in Yazd, a neighbouring city, showing interest in the use of regional architectural language.
The Faculty of Science of the University of Zabol and that of the University of Bushehr built in the new century exemplify the stabilisation of regional architectural styles in recent Iranian university buildings. The use of brick, as the dominant material in these buildings, emphasises on the sense of locality. Nonetheless, the geometrical arrangement of the architectural elements in the façades of these buildings follows the aesthetical principles of post-modern architecture, and apparently, there are no traditional local motifs in the design of the building.

Conclusion

The building of the first Iranian college Dar Al-Fonun in the mid-nineteenth century was the first step toward European styles, followed by the University of Tehran, which exemplifies the use of the Beaux-Arts principles in design of the first Iranian university.

The recent regional tendencies in Iranian higher education architecture represent localised approaches in designing this specific building type, and these approaches may be applicable to
similar conditions in other semi-traditional societies, in which tradition and modernity are
challenging to appropriate modern universal principles, material and technology to local conditions
as the result of this cultural hybridity.

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