The (unfinished) museum at Pasargadae

Citation:

©2014, The Authors

Reproduced with permission from Routledge.

Downloaded from DRO:
http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30084526
Chapter 9

The (Unfinished) Museum at Pasargadae

Ali Mozaffari and Nigel Westbrook

Introduction

In this chapter, we examine a little-known and still unfinished museum in the World Heritage Site of Pasargadae in southern Iran. Pasargadae was constructed as the capital of Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid dynasty in 550 BCE. Ancient sources have suggested that at this location Cyrus defeated Astyages, the last king of the Median Empire, uniting the Persians and the Medes and launching the multi-ethnic Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE) (Herodotus 1920). As discussed in other chapters in this book, Pasargadae has had multiple lives. While initially conceived as a royal citadel, it was, in the twentieth century, appropriated by the political aspirations of the Pahlavi dynasty, the last monarchy of Iran. In the early 1970s, a site museum was commissioned under that government. Construction commenced, but was unfinished at the time of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and the building has remained until recently in that state as a ‘modern ruin’. In 2004, the royal precinct of Pasargadae was listed as a World Heritage site on the basis of criteria that included its status as an origin for Perso-Islamic gardens as well as imperial Achaemenid architecture, and an exemplar of that civilization (Iranian Cultural heritage Organisation 2004). This chapter draws upon the historic context of the museum as well as an interview with its architect, Hossein Amanat (January 2011), in order to contextualize and historicize the building as an architectural fragment, and a monument commemorating and

---

1 The authors wish to thank Architect Mr. Hossein Amanat, for his generosity in discussing this project and sharing thoughts about his work and approach to architecture through our interview (long-distance phone) in January 2011. The Basic arguments of this of this chapter appeared in their short, preliminary form in Mozaffari and Westbrook (2011). This research was made possible in part through a generous Research Development Award granted by the University of Western Australia for the research entitled Revolutionary Built Environment? The Production of Architecture in the Islamic Republic of Iran (2012). Ali Mozaffari wishes to acknowledge the University and its Centre for Muslim States and Societies where he was based for that research.

2 Hossein Amanat is an -Iranian-Canadian architect. His was born in Iran in 1942 and studied architecture at the Faculty of the Fine Arts, Tehran University in the 60s. Amanat is the author the most renowned contemporary monument of Iran, the Shahyad Monument in Tehran (inaugurated 1971). He is an award-winning architect with an international profile of work raging from China to North America.
embodies a moment in the architectural history of Iran. Our theoretical analysis here suggests that while the museum in its unfinished state should have been considered as a fragment worthy of inclusion in the World Heritage zone, it could be given a special modern heritage status even if it is finished with sufficient care and in accordance with the original intent of the design.

This chapter’s account of the design, and cultural and political context of this Site Museum, draws upon our research into the establishment of this building and its relationship with the adjacent World Heritage site (Mozaffari and Westbrook 2011). The museum’s construction was abandoned in 1979 then recommenced in 2011 and continued until March 2013, when the final draft of this chapter was prepared. In 2011 we conducted an interview with Amanat on the genesis of the museum, which confirmed our speculation that the museum was not just another instance of a ‘nationalist’ design. In the Iranian context of the late 1970s, this term would designate the sanctioned works of state propaganda promoting a monarchical ideology in which the Shah (r. 1942–79) was positioned as the lynchpin of national identity, and both heir to ancient kings, Cyrus in particular, and protector of Shiite Islam – the majority religion of Iran. The museum, however, represents a more nuanced design process, with little direct relationship to state ideology. Instead, a study of Amanat’s design reveals that the project is a sensitive attempt to reconstruct ‘native cultural patterns’ and to reinvent ‘… the culture of reference [in this instance the Iranian tradition] that … had been sacked and emptied through the local Iranian encounter with modernity’ (Harootunian 2000, p. 49).

As other chapters in this book point out, in the second half of the twentieth century and particularly since the 1970s, the site of Pasargadae was embroiled in identity politics. Pahlavi nationalism was the dominant discourse of identity and indeed of modernism in twentieth-century Iran. This would cause reaction after the Islamic Revolution (1979) and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic, which espoused an official discourse of identity antipathetic to Pahlavi nationalism, thus rejecting the site’s previous importance as a symbol of political and cultural authenticity. Pasargadae became, and remains, a contested site of national origin, a place through which competing versions of national identity continue to be constructed, enacted and disseminated.

Nevertheless, it appears that in the 1970s, when the museum was being designed, identity politics and ideology were not a major concern in the design process. Rather, the site museum in Pasargadae appears as an attempt to reconcile traditional cultural patterns of the Iranian context with the more global aspects of modernity. Architecturally, given that Iran occupies a peripheral position in the history of modernism, issues of local identity within a global context were dealt with through local interpretation of architectural trends, and through developments of the same characteristics in architecture and architectural education. The site museum exemplifies this local process of adaptation and appropriation, and this merits its consideration as part of Pasargadae’s heritage. This is particularly significant because Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organisation (ICHHTO) has engaged developers to ‘finish’ Amanat’s design (Figure 9.1).
The Site of Pasargadae

As discussed at greater length elsewhere in this book by Boucharlat and Talebian, Pasargadae, a World Heritage site approximately 90 kilometres northeast of the city of Shiraz (Figure 9.2), is the location of the first royal residence built by Cyrus following his founding of the Achaemenid Empire in *circa* 550 BC (Wiesehofer 2004, p. 26). It was founded as a sacred district, a temple-palace complex surrounded by gardens and hunting grounds (Sami 1971, p. 12). Across its long history, the site has come to incorporate a multitude of historico-cultural layers, corresponding to both the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. Cyrus’ palace complex consisted of a series of pavilions within a geometrical garden setting which, it is argued, constituted the first Persian garden (Stronach 1978, p. 107, Sami 1971, pp. 13–14). These ‘paradise gardens’ followed a regular geometrical plan and were delineated by decorative water courses (Stronach 1978, pp. 107, 110), and would become the archetype for all later Achaemenid and Islamic gardens on the Iranian plateau.

Figure 9.1  The tomb of Cyrus from the main entry to the site

*Source:* Ali Mozaffari © 2011

---

3  Pasargadae is a cultural landscape of 20 × 15 kilometres (approx.), located in the Morghab Plain and comprising diverse geographical features such as mountain passes, riverbeds, agricultural and dry land, permanent village settlements (the *Mother of Solomon*, *Abolvardi*, and *Mobarakabad*), archaeological sites and annual nomadic (Arab and Baseri tribes), migration routes and an ancient highway that connected Shiraz and Isfahan (south-north direction) and was in use until the 1950s. See: David Stronach (1978, p. 11).

4  The gardens were developed intermittently between 535 and 500 BCE. Cyrus’ gardens followed a trajectory of planned landscapes as political statement – established before 900 BCE – positing garden as a sign of royal accomplishment, as affirmation of the cosmic position of the monarch, or a symbol of foreign conquest. See David Stronach (1990, pp. 171–2, 178–9). Currently, there are only traces of the gardens and fragments of watercourses on the dry earth. For a recent study of the Pasargadae see (Boucharlat 2009).

5  Stronach (1990) refers to them as royal emblem.
Figure 9.2
General layout of the World Heritage site (marked by the tomb) and the museum in relation to the village Madar-i Solaiman

Source: Adapted from an aerial photograph from National Cartographic Centre of Iran (1989)
Figure 9.3  Model of the museum in its unfinished state

Source: Model constructed by architecture students at the University of Western Australia, photograph by Ali Mozaffari © 2011

The architecture of the complex is syncretic, combining Eastern and Western building techniques and materials (Stronach 1978, p. 51). Two features of Pasargadae in particular, the Royal Gardens and the tomb of Cyrus are important in relation to the design of the site museum, both having informed the concept of the complex. The tomb of Cyrus, the focal point of the site, re-configured in the Pahlavi period (1925–79) as a monumental, isolated object forming a visual focus for both the visitors’ approach to the site, and indeed from most vantage-points within the site, was originally located within a walled garden (Sami 1971, p. 12, Stronach 1978, p. 24). The tomb, made of locally quarried white stone, resembles an archetypal house, with pitched roof and rectangular stereometry located atop a stepped plinth. In the Islamic period the tomb, later ascribed under

---

6 According to Stronach, this is the natural outcome of the expansion of the Persian Empire, which absorbed Ionian and Lydian construction techniques and Western Anatolian funerary practices. Politically, the eclectic style of structures was a deliberate decision on the part of Cyrus to designate the extent and uniqueness of the empire to visiting subjects. See Stronach (1990).

7 The origins of its typology are disputed with some attributing it to Mesopotamia, others, to Urartu, and still others to a combination of Mesopotamian and ‘traditional Iranian
Islamic narrative to the Mother of Solomon ‘the prophet’, was transformed into a mosque, and was surrounded by a portico constructed out of spoliated architectural material derived from the Achaemenid palaces. It remained in this state, as a site for religious pilgrimage (Curzon 1892, p. 78), into the modern period.

In the twentieth century, Pasargadae became one of the significant sites of putative origin in the state nationalist ideology of the Pahlavis (1925–79), who sought to establish links with an Iranian past that preceded the humiliation of the Arabian conquests, and the more recent Western humiliations. In 1971, the lavishly-staged Celebrations of the 2500th Anniversary of Persian Kingship were inaugurated in Pasargadae; these focused upon the site of Cyrus’ tomb, which as mentioned had been cleared, in anticipation of the ceremonies, of its Islamic period additions, thus both contravening modern heritage ‘best practice’, and annulling the traditional Islamic inscription of the site. This action contributed to an ideological hostility toward the site’s monuments – Islamist ideologues came to characterize them and similar edifices as symbols of an illegitimate dynasty. That the glorification of pre-Islamic kings and culture caused negative reactions is apparent in the pronouncements made by Sadeq Khalkhali, a ranking cleric, in The Fraudulent and Criminal Cyrus (1981). He dismissed the image painted of Cyrus the Great by various historians and through that attacked the idea of the Celebrations:

Cyrus was a young boy from Media who out of desperation had to behave like women and prostitute himself. In his youth, Cyrus engaged in lowly acts and was therefore frequently lashed … (p. 27)

Colonialism has existed for a long time in the world albeit its networks and webs and traps have been different … and today they occupy people under different guises … with cinema and theatre and cafeterias and cabarets and with mercenary periodicals and newspapers … and with sexy films and photographs and with novels and imaginary history and finally … with the 2500 Years Celebrations and the birthday of rat and dog and cat and or Cyrus the Great! (p. 37)

He finally rejected the authenticity of the tomb, rejecting it as an alibi for illegitimate kings (1981, p. 33):

[T]he fate of oppressors and world-conquering criminals is like so and they have died in nowhere and then monuments and memorials are made in their name so that their descendants through connections with their ancestor justify their domination and horrific reign under the pretence of lineage.

Today, there are signs of fire from burnt formwork within the museum shell, which may or may not be a ‘revolutionary’ reaction against a structure perceived as illegitimate or as symbols of Western cultural colonialism. The partially
completed museum, constructed out of the quintessentially modern material of massive, reinforced concrete, needless to say, survived (Figure 9.4).

Figure 9.4 One of the unfinished courtyards of the museum

Source: Ali Mozaffari © 2011

The Genesis of the Site Museum

Hossein Amanat (b. 1942) was a recently-graduated architect when, in 1972, he was directly approached by Mehrdad Pahlbod, then Minister for Culture and the Arts (1964–78), to design both an archaeologists’ residence and research headquarters and, furthermore, a site museum for Pasargadae which would form an interpretational focus in support of the nascent tourist visitation to the site.8

He had already proven his capabilities in the competition-winning design for the iconic Shahyad (now Azadi = Freedom) Square in Tehran, which was commissioned on behalf of the Shah, and inaugurated in 1971.9 The Shahyad

---

8 This occurred concurrently with another project, the (now) Iranian Cultural Heritage Handicrafts and Tourism Organization HQ, which is located in Tehran and shares certain spatial scenarios with other large scale works of Amanat. However, the formalization of the contract was, according to Amanat, a slow bureaucratic process.

9 The monument represented an interpretation of geometrical relations and motifs of different historical periods of Iran in its form and, to the establishment; it symbolized
monument had originally been planned as a monumental entrance arch to the city, underneath which there was an interpretational museum, containing among an historical collection, a facsimile of the Cyrus Cylinder, described by the Shah as the first charter of human rights.\(^\text{10}\) In it, Amanat seems to have been experimenting with his own syncretic design strategy to which we shall return. Nevertheless, in the socio-political context of the time, that Museum and the *Shahyad (Azadi)* monument served both an historical and an ideological role in reinforcing the idea of national origin in the person, and absolute monarchy, of Cyrus the Great. Like the Pasargadae Museum, it combined ancient and Islamic-era building motifs, such as the Ayvan (*Iwan*) and pointed arch, while the tower marks the axial crossing point, in the tradition of the Persian garden.

The Pasargadae Museum has an added significance inasmuch as, unlike the corresponding building at Persepolis – the other most important Achaemenid site in the region – it represents one of the first site museums designed by a locally-trained Iranian architect. As such, it provides evidence for the influence of contemporary Western architectural discourses within the Iranian educational system, at a time when the prevailing ethos among leading local architects was the quest for a local and national identity.\(^\text{11}\)

### The Museum Design

When Amanat designed the Pasargadae Museum, there were no Iranian codes for museum design, and the architect had to invent a program through the study of other local museums, inspecting the laboratories and required spaces, interviewing people, perhaps looking up Western precedents and, probably, making some imaginative guesswork. The only restricting factor was the limited budget set by the ministry, which would have determined the scale, a relatively small gross area of 3600 m\(^2\), and the choice of materials of the building.

modern Iran under the Pahlavis. For one possible interpretation of this monument, see Grigor (2003).

\(^{10}\) The Cylinder was discovered in 1879 and is kept in the British museum. As the museum website informs: ‘This cylinder has sometimes been described as the “first charter of human rights”, but it in fact reflects a long tradition in Mesopotamia where, from as early as the third millennium BC, kings began their reigns with declarations of reforms’. The Shah’s speech is also available in Youtube at [http://youtu.be/n2BDjTpl7JM](http://youtu.be/n2BDjTpl7JM).

\(^{11}\) Although the idea of museums in Iran may be dated to the late nineteenth century, it was not until the first decades of the twentieth century that the country established an Act concerning the museum. The National Museum of Iran was inaugurated in 1937. The National Museum and the Persepolis site museum were designed by foreign experts, as the field of architecture in its modern form was only established in the 1930s after the establishment of Tehran University as the first modern higher education institution during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi. For Further reading on that museum see Mozaffari (2007).
Surviving design documents show a half-buried concrete structure organized around three courtyards (Figure 9.5). The site is located 500 meters northwest of the tomb of Cyrus, on the side of the road leading to the tomb and across the road from the present-day village of Madar-i Solaaiman (Mother of Solomon) (Figure 9.2). The axial alignment of the approach road with the tomb is paralleled by the museum’s orientation. In the original design, visitors would enter the museum from the south-west, down a long covered ramp that led below the ground and into an open central courtyard. Beyond the courtyard was a transversely-oriented reception hall that led axially, across its short side, into the main gallery, a volume within which stepped platforms ascended, spiralling around an enclosed courtyard that was intended to house the Achaemenid sculptural Fire Altar (Atashdan in Persian) that was used in investiture ceremonies and had been found on the site. This central, culminating space was capped with a roof in the form of a flattened ziggurat that recalled the steps at the base of Cyrus’ tomb.

The final drawings reveal only minor changes from the original design. The primary level of the museum was raised to ground level, presumably to reduce costs, and earth had been bermed up, preserving the chthonic character of the original design. Although fully designed and documented by the mid-1970s, the construction of the Pasargadae Museum was protracted, until coming to a halt during the political turmoil of the 1978–79 Islamic revolution (Figure 9.6).

For an understanding of the design we must rely, in the absence of published documentation, upon an interpretation of the historical context and the testimony of the architect, Amanat. The Pasargadae Museum was intended both to respond to the needs of archaeologists, and to leave a lasting experience on tourists, especially those from the native public. This was to be realized through the curatorial narrative – visitors were to proceed through a sequence which gradually introduced them to the museum, its collection, and the site. The design followed two general guiding principles – firstly, to inflict minimal disturbance upon the existing field of vision so as to preserve the site’s ‘magic’, as Amanat puts it, and secondly, to project a sense of belonging to the Iranian context in general and to Pasargadae, in particular. In response to the first principle, the initial design was sunken below ground level, and accessed by a descending ramp. The second principle was to be achieved using architectural elements that would be familiar to a local context. Rather than subscribing to a single typology or model, Amanat’s

---

12 Surviving drawings include some of the original presentation drawings, and design documentation drawings, which appear to correspond closely to the building as constructed. The presentation drawings are kept at the ICHHTO, Tehran, and the technical drawings are the property of the architect.

13 The archaeologists’ residence was even further removed to avoid disturbing the field of vision. Amanat had to find a balance between his tendency to build close to the tomb (note how the tomb is uniquely central to the conception of this project) and the practical necessities of building on an architectural site. As a reassuring measure for this distance, the Mother of Solomon Village was and remains already closer to the tomb structure.
design approach – apparent in others of his works – consists of an intuitive compilation of abstracted motifs originating from different local sources and intended to induce certain experiences, in this case impressing the visitor with the grandeur of the site and the history it symbolized. The syncretic basis of the original Achaemenid complex is thus paralleled in the modern work.

Figure 9.5  Longitudinal section through the main gallery of the museum

Source: Parsa-Pasargadæ Research Foundation with the permission of architect Hossein Amanat

Amanat (2011) describes his method thus:

I control people when they come to space. I see a man in a space, moving. … let’s say, I control the music of space around this [person]; the proportions. I bring him from that ramp into a kind of covered area or hashti (the transitional entry space in traditional Iranian architecture) … I want to say … that … you control the [person] to come in, to feel his scale and then be impressed by a higher level, a higher space or an open space. … It is the essence of this language that comes in, versus me deciding to have a courtyard or hashti [entry hall to a traditional Persian house].

14 Other examples of Amanat’s work that demonstrate a same syncretic design tendency to various degrees include the already mentioned Shahyad or Azadi Square (completed 1971), which combines ancient motifs with advanced parabolic concrete design, and the head office of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHHTO, completion 1989) which references traditional Iranian houses in its central courtyard and deep, Iwan-like open recesses, within an overall Kahnian formalist abstraction.
Figure 9.6
Plan of the museum at level -4.00

Source: Parsa-Pasargadæ Research Foundation with the permission of architect Hossein Amanat
This approach allows Amanat to negotiate his interpretation of local architectural qualities with an international context of modern architecture (discussed later) by means of three mimetic strategies: the production of a spatial scenario, stylization of traditional typologies and use of local traditional materials.

As noted above, the spatial scenario begins with a descent into the earth – evocative of death as well as of mystery – and from there, unfolds around three courtyards, a familiar organizing spatial device in traditional Iranian architecture. Amanat notes that the core of his design was the sunken, square courtyard capped with a stepped lantern that was described above. The roof, inspired by the Cyrus tomb, metaphorically reproduces the effect of dome lights in the structures of the Islamic Period. From the architect’s perspective then, the Iranian identity of the architecture was imparted through a dramatic recreation of the experience of traditional architectural spaces, rather than through the reproduction of traditional decorative and structural motifs. In Amanat’s words (2011):

You know, that is, you look at it, it appears as a kind of Greek or Roman architecture, but if you move in that, the spaces are completely Iranian or Persian because in terms of the control of space and the proportions of what is happening between these spaces, I think it … it intuitively came from there, it is inspired by that principle.

Notwithstanding the use of a courtyard typology, the second mimetic strategy of the Pasargadae Museum derives from Amanat’s interpretation of tradition. Traditional Iranian architecture, Amanat argues, can be associated with the non-figurative surface decorations and domical and arcuated structures of the architecture of the Islamic period. That Islamic tradition, he asserts, is, however, rooted in the pre-Islamic ideas and achievements of Iran (Amanat 2011). Thus, in seeking an expression of the archetypal roots of Iranian architecture, Amanat avoided figurative references that invoked the specific architecture of the Islamic period.

In its spatial development, the building gradually unfolds before the eyes and experience of the viewer. In such a scenario – which resonates with some of the exemplary structures of traditional Iranian architecture and is replicated in other Amanat works of the period – there is a sequence of ‘stations’ from entry to courtyard, and from there to other spaces. In each ‘station’ there is a change in scale and atmospheric qualities (enclosure, light and materiality). The spatial narrative would have culminated in a striking psychological effect produced by the building’s monumental scale, formal sequence and dramatic revelation of light in the central space housing the fire altar exhibit, clad with stones sourced from the tomb’s quarry. This use of a stone that was sourced from the same quarry from which Cyrus’ tomb was constructed almost 2500 years ago, constitutes the final mimetic strategy. For this purpose, Amanat visited the site – one of two site visits he made specifically for this project – and located and requested the
reopening of the original quarry in the nearby mountains used for the Achaemenid palace complex.

Returning to the third mimetic strategy, spatial narrative, Amanat describes the significance of this spatial sequence:

I thought this should be the centrepiece of my square hall … and it is right at the very centre of the square … and that is the main hall, and when you enter from that landing of the main, you know, you come from the courtyard, the square courtyard in the centre and think of it to be clad with the same stone, [the] beige stone of Cyrus the Great’s tomb … and then you move on to this vestibule area or the small hall … and then you move into the main hall and then you move into the hall and you see the first space and from there down you can see the square void with the masterpiece in the middle. And then you go step by step, I think every time 80 centimetres when I remember that, step down 80, 80 and 80, until you come down full level and you see this masterpiece and you exit through a very wide staircase that on your left and right you have some exhibits of pottery and other pieces that they had in their inventory. (Amanat 2011)

The four surrounding walls of this culminating space sloped inwards, again extending the reference to ancient pyramidal forms, and conveying the idea of the weight of a dome thrust into the ground, notwithstanding the reinforced concrete structure not requiring such buttressing (Figures 9.7 and 9.8). The motif has a purely psychological purpose, conveying a sense of weight, and exaggerating the vertical perspective. Amanat acknowledges that the battered walls were intended to evoke ‘ … the impression of heavy, old walls’ (Amanat 2011).

The interior is a construction of psychological effects, the light and materiality contributing to an empathetic connection between the viewer and the historical artifacts. This was, from the start, the intention of the architect:

You know, for example, this darkness of the space, which gives it a kind of mystery. I knew it will be dark inside this museum and in fact, I knew that for the protection of museum objects you should not have too much light. But not for stone and things that you find, you know, I wanted this kind of darkness and ambiguity in that space. (Amanat 2011)

‘Darkness and ambiguity … ’ here there appears an almost alchemical approach to the revelation of the meaningful essence embodied in ancient objects, and in the surrounding place of Pasargadae. Such a concern for the psychological effects of materiality, form and light, a form of Architecture parlante, recalls the very similar preoccupations in the writings and projects of the American architect Louis Kahn in the 1950s onwards. A possible connection between Amanat’s design and the architectural philosophy of Kahn will be explored below.
Figure 9.7
Section across the main gallery showing the inclining walls and ‘domed’ roof structure

Source: Courtesy of architect Hossein Amanat
The Cultural Context of Amanat’s Design Strategy

Amanat’s design attitude is a local manifestation of international trends in education and practice in the period of post-war reconstruction, when the focus was upon ‘authenticity’ and local identity. Thus, to understand the design of this museum, it is useful to situate it in a broader context comprising both the architectural and cultural milieu of 1960s and 1970s Iran and corresponding international discourses of architecture.

In the 1960s, after almost two decades of instability, including foreign (Western) intervention to influence the position of Iran during the Cold War, the domestic political climate became relatively stable, and was accompanied by the increased prosperity resulting from rising oil revenues.15 This new wealth

---

In the 1940s, the allied invasion of Iran had led to the abdication of Reza Shah leading the country under allied occupation. In the 1950s, the Movement for Nationalisation of Oil, which was aimed at terminating the British monopoly led to the young Shah’s flight from the country. The Shah would only return to Iran after an American sponsored coup in 1953. It was only in the 1960s that the Pahlavi state found an opportunity for consolidating its power. Also in 1960, the Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) was established by Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela.
enabled the development of a modernization plan that introduced educational, land, agricultural and industrial reforms,16 and a growing number of infrastructure programs that provided opportunities for national and regional architectural and urban projects.17

Throughout the Pahlavi era, the state promoted an idea of the modern Iranian nation through a cultural policy that juxtaposed traditional and modern aspects. This may be understood from the perspective of the adaptation of ‘peripheral’ cultures to processes of modernity. This adaptation reveals itself as a juxtaposition of the residual aspects of traditional culture and modernity, which produce echoes of ‘rediscovered histories’ (Parry 2006, p. 21). The Pahlavi policy was an attempt to recover or reinvent ‘authentic’ Iranian culture and then to realize it in place. The tangible effect of this cultural agenda in infrastructural and architectural projects came through, firstly, an increasing collaboration between Iranian firms and their international counterparts and secondly, the proliferation of state public monuments and cultural spaces, such as the Shahyad monument and museum, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (est. 1977, designed by Kamran Diba), and the Pasargadae museum. This kind of cross-cultural exchange and transfer of knowledge, which may be seen as an inevitable part of the modernization program, was actively promoted by the state and was personally supported by the Queen.18 Beyond fostering business collaborations, this approach also influenced the education sector through the establishment of courses, academic exchanges, and establishment of new universities.

On a larger scale, development programs that were written for the country envisaged its trajectory of growth in five year intervals in many areas, including infrastructure and building. Part of the program envisaged the drafting of master plans and structure plans for capital cities. In order to ensure the quality of the produced work, Iranian firms were required to adopt an international partner with a good profile. Such collaborations played an important part in forming the local culture of architecture and urbanism. Firstly, they became a conduit for the transfer

---

16 For a reading on the Pahlavi reforms of the 60s, see Ansari (2001).

17 In this period, there was also a flurry of state sponsored artistic theatrical, poetic, cinematic, and painterly productions that attempted to combine the local with the modern international (Saremi 2010, p. 132). Such projects were often underpinned by a social conscience and intellectual (often leftist) awareness and were made possible mainly because of rising oil revenues and relative stability of the state.

18 Between 1970 and 1976, there were a succession of international congresses of architects held in various locations in Iran, including Isfahan and Persepolis which have historical and heritage significance. The congresses, which were patronised by the Queen, had an educational and practical purpose: while locals were exposed to and participated in discussions with leading international figures, in the course of the events ideas about the problems facing a rapidly developing and urbanising Iran were workshopped. The ideas of the celebrated American architect Louis Kahn, a participant at the Isfahan congress, were particularly influential. The authors are currently exploring this topic in greater depth in a forthcoming work.
of technology and knowledge. Secondly, they led to a growing awareness of the need for local cultural and environmental adaptations, an awareness that also arose in other countries at the fringe of Western Europe. Such an awareness of the local, which was intertwined with the rise of regional nationalisms, focussed on the necessity of considering the specificities of local cultural settings in development, that is, of responding to the national Iranian context.

Influential international firms and individuals worked in Iran in this period, notably Alvar Aalto, Kenzo Tange, Hans Hollein and Doxiadis Associates. The latter firm, which had an extensive practice in the Middle East, was invited to collaborate with local firms in the production of a number of master- and structure-plans for different capital cities in Iran. Furthermore, local architects became aware of the work of their internationally-connected regional colleagues in Arabic countries and the Indian sub-continent such as Balkrishna Doshi, who had collaborated with Le Corbusier at Ahmadabad. While Amanat’s key works were executed solely by himself, without such international collaborators, it must be presumed that the cultural climate of international collaboration encouraged an openness to international ideas.

_Tehran University’s Fine Arts Faculty in the 1960s_

As previously noted, Amanat’s generation of architects were trained under a Beaux Arts-influenced curriculum, at Tehran University’s Fine Arts Faculty where architecture was the dominant department. The university had been created as part of the modernization agenda of Reza Shah in 1935 and the Faculty and its architecture department had been set up by the French architect-archaeologist, Andre Godard. Godard’s program would become a determining factor in the shaping of the architectural milieu of Iran. It reflected his interest in the study of Iranian and Islamic art and architecture, and his Beaux Arts training. Thus, aside from the drawing of Classical (Greek) orders, the design of building and interior projects with contemporary briefs, and through one or two construction projects, there was a strong tendency in the new architecture programme at Tehran University to use the pre-existing context of traditional architecture in pedagogy. As the curriculum evolved, it involved frequent group or individual trips – travelling studios – to visit exemplars of Islamic and pre-Islamic Iranian architecture. In addition to promoting solidarity and a social structure among students – who often came from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds – these travelling studios provided a first-hand experience of traditional structures. The direct encounter and recording of those exemplars incorporated them within the students’ architectural

---


20 For a brief biography of Godard, see Gran-Aymerich and Marefat (2001).
vocabulary and spatial-aesthetic sensibilities.\(^{21}\) This influence would often be revealed in their renderings and even in their modern design projects.

The re-publication in the 1960s of Arthur Upham Pope’s 1930s work, *Survey of Persian Art*, which was met with enthusiasm, which is indexical of this milieu of attention to traditional Iranian architecture. Concurrent with a strong focus on traditional exemplars as the basis for a local Iranian expression, the teaching system, partly in keeping with Beaux Arts pedagogy, demanded an understanding, albeit superficial, of rational and functional aspects of architecture.\(^{22}\) This pedagogical program coincided with international discourses that, after the perceived failure of modernist mass-reconstruction projects in post-World War II Europe, now called for a ‘new monumentality’ and the preferencing of local motifs, building techniques and spatial planning (Mumford 2000, pp. 150–52). Students were exposed to developments in contemporary modern architecture in the West, both through the teaching of their professors and through reading or viewing professional journals. Each studio had a small library containing foreign journals, including *l’Architecture d’Aujourd’Hui*, *Architecture Française*, and *Progressive Architecture*, together with *Planches* – a folio of student drawings published by the École de Beaux Arts in Paris – that were kept as educational resources.\(^{23}\) Amanat joined the faculty of Fine Arts as an undergraduate student in the early 1960s at the height of this system, and under the tutelage of Houshang Seyhoun, another talented Beaux Arts graduate.\(^{24}\) He was, according to his cohorts, an extremely talented and highly regarded member of the design studio.

Through this indirect exposure and a syncretic program, students would search for localized versions of prevalent international discourses in their own designs. The result was a heterogeneous design approach that resonated with internationally-prevalent (Western) ideas about design while incorporating local, often Islamic, motifs and patterns of space. A new generation of domestic and international architectural graduates, including Amanat, the older Nader Ardalan, and Kamran Diba, pursued this direction in their ensuing careers. While for some, this quest had a quasi-ideological dimension – some might argue Ardalan, a follower of Nasr the proponent of Islamic Sufism and his Traditionalist ideas is an example for

\(^{21}\) Recording happened often through freehand sketches and watercolour paintings. Students were also required to produce and render as-built drawings of masterpieces of traditional architecture.

\(^{22}\) Ali-Akbar Saremi (2010, pp. 80–81) describes his own experience of the educational system and points out this lack of deep understanding.

\(^{23}\) Around this time, there was also an influential Iranian journal, *honar va memari* (Art and Architecture) under the editorial guidance of Abdol-Hamid Eshragh, a Beaux Arts educated architect and art enthusiast. This journal became another source for students of architecture.

\(^{24}\) The system would later move away from the French Beaux Arts and toward an American credit system in the mid-60s, until the former was totally relinquished in 1969–70 with the resignation of Seyhoun. This, however, would take place after Amanat’s graduation. For one narrative of the system see Saremi (2010, p. 115).
The (Unfinished) Museum at Pasargadae

215

this – for others like Amanat, this syncretic approach was simply an expression both of their Iranian identity, and of an openness to international ideas. Either case suggests a significant concern for authentic identity and traditional culture.

The Museum’s Contemporary Architectural Culture and its Possible Architectural Precedents

The architectural education provided at this time by the Faculty of Fine Arts in Tehran University gave a prominent position to the leading modernist architect Le Corbusier – Amanat refers to Le Corbusier as being regarded as an architectural ‘god’ at the school. Although Amanat considers his project to constitute a deviation from the norms of his student period – particularly as it deploys an essentially symmetrical pattern of design – his work resonates in a fascinating way with certain civic projects by Le Corbusier, notably the Mundaneum (1929) and Museum of Contemporary Art for Paris (1931) (Figure 9.9). More directly, the rotational motif of the central gallery spaces may be compared to Le Corbusier’s late projects for the Ahmedabad museum (1951) and more abstractly, with the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo (1959). All these projects deploy a centrifugal spiral, perhaps based upon Le Corbusier’s study of naturally-occurring spiral forms but also surely a metaphor for an evolutionary concept of cultural progress, and thus of a form of cultural Darwinism as the product of Enlightenment rationality.

The parallels between the design of the Pasargadae Museum and these Corbusian examples sheds new light on the old debate over monumentality within the discourse of Western modernism, notably the well-known exchange between the Czech *neues bauen* critic Karel Teige, and Le Corbusier, over the apparent monumentalism of Le Corbusier’s design for the Mundaneum, a kind of world museum, to be constructed in Geneva (Baird 1998). The World Museum within the Mundaneum is characterized by Von Moos (1979, p. 243) as a ‘sacred precinct’. The form of the World Museum within the Mundaneum complex was criticized by Teige, who likened its form to ‘… an archaeological site – Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian, ancient American (Mayan and Aztec) or Peruvian’. Teige described the character of the museum as ‘metaphysical’ and monumental (Baird 1998, p. 594). The implication here is that the form is associated with pre-Enlightenment, anti-rational superstition. Baird (1998, p. 594) characterizes Teige’s criticisms as an attack on ‘a reactionary formalism’ which he felt threatened the future course of modern architecture, and which was based on a belief that monuments ‘oppress men’. In his defence of the project, Le Corbusier had emphasized its rationality, and the functionality of the ramping ziggurat, which housed descending exhibition halls, while he argued for the need for spatial and formal composition, for purity and beauty.

The Mundaneum, like the Pasargadae Museum, does have a resemblance in both plan and form to the archaeological reconstructions of certain ancient sites like a Babylonian ziggurat, or an Egyptian Mastaba tomb (Figures 9.10 and 9.11).
In Corbusier’s later museum for Paris, there is a similar parti: here the pyramid and spiral ramps are flattened into two dimensions, but again, the plan reveals a resemblance to ancient monumental sites. Both the Mundaneum and the Paris Museum projects were widely published at the time, and reproduced in compilations after the architect’s death.

Figure 9.10  Entry to the unfinished museum

Source: Ali Mozaffari © 2011

Figure 9.11  View toward the corner of the central gallery at the heart of the structure

Source: Ali Mozaffari © 2011
By the 1960s, and subsequent to the shift in the rhetoric of the Congrès Internationale d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) evident at its congresses of 1948 and 1951, there was a renewed interest in the use of architectural form and monumentality to stimulate among the public a sense of community and identity. As Goldhagen has noted, from the 1950s onwards certain American architects like Louis Kahn and Philip Johnson had come to advocate the necessity for significant form and monumentality, particularly in relation to public buildings (Goldhagen and Kahn 2001, p. 6). The theme had been explored in the CIAM conferences at Bridgewater, England in 1947, and at Hoddesdon, England in 1951, and a modern form of monumentality was advocated by the CIAM member and historian Siegfried Giedion, who published two significant essays on the theme: Nine Points on Monumentality (1943) and The Need for a New Monumentality (1944) (Goldhagen and Kahn 2001, p. 27). Louis Kahn had himself published on the need for a sense of monumentality in contemporary architecture in an essay entitled The Problem of Monumentality (1944) (Goldhagen and Kahn 2001, p. 26). He further pursued his ideas on monumentality in certain key projects in the 1950s and 1960s, notably the Trenton Jewish community centre project of 1954–55 and the Dominican Mother House project, of 1965–69, and at an urban scale in the master plan for down-town Philadelphia by himself and Ann Tyng of 1952–57 (McCarter 2005 pp. 82–3).

Certain widely published key projects by Kahn are comparable, in their axiality and simple monumentality, to the Pasargadae Museum. The First Unitarian Church temple and school complex at Rochester (1961) for example, references ancient mud-brick monuments in its architectural expression, and reveals in its planning an emphasis on an axial passage sequence leading to a monumental, centralized core, that parallels the spatial sequence in the Iranian museum (Figure 9.12). Significantly, Kahn’s work was published in the journals Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, Architecture Française and Progressive Architecture, held in the library of the architecture department at Tehran University. Kahn’s professed return to universally meaningful symbolic form was, in the West, counterposed to the placeless instrumentality of Late Modernism, exemplified in America by the corporate modernism of Skidmore Owings and Merrill, who followed the example of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in their machine-like Lever House in New York, of 1952 (Moholy-Nagy 1964).

Monumentality and the Reinterpretation of Tradition in the Pasargadae Museum

From the Iranian standpoint, where traditional beliefs, structures and practices still exerted a considerable influence on the flavour of its relatively recent modernity, the use of axiality and monumental, archetypal forms was less ambiguous, traditional
and more grounded in its meaning. In Amanat’s design methodology, there is an openness to traditional and ancient building forms. However, they cannot, unlike Le Corbusier and Kahn, be explained away as pure forms or universal symbols, but in this local context are, arguably, meaningful and capable of resonating with the current conditions of the Iranian culture. While here the adoption of certain formal motifs and compositional devices from international exemplars appears to have taken place, these have been syncretically combined into a novel work that is directed towards a local audience.

Such a trend may be traced back to the 1940s, and is exemplified elsewhere in the Middle East by the works of the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, whose work was seized upon by Western critics as a model of ‘authentic’ regional architecture and the Iraqi architect Rif’at Chadirchi amongst others. This trend was articulated by critics, prominent among them, Kenneth Frampton (1985), as

---

27 The case of Fathy is rather problematic, because of both his personal vacillations in political positions and the different readings and appropriations of his work by others. His work can be associated with romanticism, traditionalism, and essentialist propositions, all of which are presumably contrary to the agenda of regionalist architecture. For a useful examination of his work see I. Panayiota Pyla (2007).

28 The ‘ur-text’ of regionalism according Eggner (2002) is Mumford’s 1941 text, The South in Architecture.
Critical Regionalism. This theory of the recent past, which may be formulated as the revival of the local while remaining within and participating in the global, is predicated upon a binary tension between local (regional) and universal. As such, while misinterpreting the local – as we know it – as an entity in itself, rather than as the product of the global (=universal), proponents of Critical Regionalism arguably misidentified acts of juxtaposition as subversive resistance. Perhaps a more useful explanation is provided by Harootunian’s notion of ‘peripheral modernity’, which explains the encounter between a global modernity under the aegis of capitalism, and local cultures with traditional relations, patterns and practices that continue to maintain a residual existence. In Iran, as in similar contexts, the ‘… intersection between the new and the residual stemming from a different time, histories, and cultural conventions … ’ produced peripheral, rather than alternative and thus resistant, modernities. In this respect, manifestations of modernity reflected differences of temporality and place, while modern procedures and processes remained putatively similar across the board. The result is a kind of ‘coexistence’, as Parry (2006, p. 20) has identified in the realm of literature, ‘… of realities from radically different moments in history … ’ where conventions of modern architecture of the west are joined with familiar local patterns of spatial-architectural arrangement and their associated structures of feeling. In other words, the design makes the modern patterns of architecture legible to a local audience by rendering them in familiar experiences and patterns, and this is the point where traditional patterns of architecture, Amanat’s mimetic strategies, are employed.

In the condition of peripheral modernity as theorized by Harootunian, past and present are juxtaposed (Harootunian 2000, p. 49). It is in this context that Amanat’s description of the immediate everyday experience of his space (noted above) is revealing. The conscious use of traditional patterns in the spatial scenario of the museum, in particular the emphasis upon a spatial narrative constructed upon a sequence of courtyards and shaded, peripheral movement patterns, and which amounts to an appeal to native culture – an appeal that also coincides with adapted forms of canonical architectures of Le Corbusier and Kahn – represents Amanat’s search for genuine historical difference. More than a ‘healing praxis for that which it [modernity] had injured’, (Harootunian 2000, pp. 60, 63) from among traditions, practices and values, this represented the complex conditions of being Iranian that had developed from the early decades of the nineteenth century.

29 For a critique of critical regionalism see Eggener (2002).
30 The ‘peripheral’ is understood here in comparison to the centres of capitalism before World War II. See Harootunian (2000, p. 63).
31 This is arguably the period when Iran for the first time is firmly and irrevocably placed in the periphery of the capitalist world centred in Europe and endures a state of dependency.
Conclusion

The condition of peripheral modernity in Amanat’s museum project is particularly amplified because of its context, the World heritage site of Pasargadae. Our examination of this design and our interview with its architect Amanat highlights the still current problem of how architecture can communicate with its local audience. Amanat’s response in the Pasargadae Museum is one possible solution – an architecture that establishes its modern subject within the limits of the everyday experience of its local audience. It consciously juxtaposes canonical modern forms with traditional spatial strategies. The outcome may resemble a work of the centre – that of Le Corbusier or Kahn – but it is experienced differently. And, it is this difference of experience, the ‘not quite the same’, 32 that makes the project worthy of attention. Amanat’s still-incomplete work registers a moment in the international discourse of architecture, when locality, place and authentic identity were paramount. In its unfinished state, it is also a modernist critique of capitalist modernization’s deterritorialization of local traditional values, registering the trauma of modernity at that specific time and place. In this context, the question of the heritage value of the museum is worthy of consideration in itself and as another evidence of the multiple history that is in operation at the World Heritage site of Pasargadae.

In the post World War II period, a global cultural shift occurred during which there was a return and appeal to the apparent certainties of form, and away from what was perceived to be the nihilistic effects of modernist transformation. Through the frame of peripheral modernity, it can be seen that the appeal to Pasargadae as a site of Iranian cultural and political origin has been a local manifestation of that global shift. This putative site of origin has, however, been defined and redefined through time – it is, in other words, an historical construct. The ‘modern ruin’ that is the Pasargadae Museum is an allegory of that historical moment and, in its context, possesses a unique historical value. It would remain to be seen whether that value is best maintained by its completion, or its preservation as fragment. 33 It would in this respect seem to be essential that any subsequent completion of Amanat’s museum should respond to the new local and global

32 Harootunian (2000, pp. 60, 63) paraphrasing Homi Bhaba.
33 There are different sets of problems faced by this unfinished structure, which has deteriorated over time. Precedents from around the world suggest, however, that the unfinished and fragmented nature of the museum is not in itself an impediment to finishing the structure either for its original function or as something else. For example, the church at Firminy was only recently completed, as a cultural monument, even though it cannot be used as a church. Similarly, Mies Van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion was entirely reconstructed as a national monument which for 60 years had a virtual existence. The question that needs to be addressed is whether the response to this fragment of the past should be through contrast, analogy, or simulation. Technically, the Pasargadae museum is designed for its time, the 60s and 70s. As Amanat himself acknowledges, to suit the current demographic composition and tourist conditions of the country as well as contemporary functional and
contexts, a point that seems thus far lost on those ‘completing’ the structure. Amanat, himself, has argued against a faithful completion of the original design, given the time-lapse since its design, and subsequent changing expectations of contemporary museums. That museum was the product of a particular cultural moment, and of a developing understanding of both museological theory, cultural landscape and archaeological methodology. It is therefore arguably ironic, if pragmatically expedient, that the ICHHTO has indeed decided to complete the building approximately in accordance with the original design. Its forms, with their use of a universalizing language of archetypes, and appeal to an Iranian self-recognition, through both formal motifs, such as the stepped pyramid and familiar courtyard spaces, and haptic experience – spatial progression, closed and open spaces, light and darkness – will arguably have been rendered more uncertain and precarious by the succeeding narratives of national and religious identity in the decades following their gestation. Thus the finished edifice may risk representing an abstract modernist approach cloaked in traditional gestures, leading to the lack of a critical dialectical property. This possibility further strengthens the argument for keeping the museum as an unfinished fragment; an argument that is already lost, given the developments on the ground.

From another perspective, the design of the museum draws upon a certain reconstructed everyday experience. Even at the time of its conception, the museum was creating snapshots of the experience of spatial patterns that existed in exemplary works of traditional architecture. In this respect, it was not addressing a specific site. That had little to do with the local, if understood as close geographical proximity; its dialogue with the tomb by formal analogy notwithstanding. Even so, such patterns, their spatial relations and the social structure that bestowed them with meaning were already withering with the comprehensive modernization of the country. This could render the mimetic strategies of the design problematic as they tend to produce a unified image, a simulation that in being universal could undermine historical specificity. The nature of that architecture was, therefore, inevitably nostalgic, a nostalgia that resonated (and perhaps still resonates) with the Pasargadae site itself. Both the site and the museum were and still are extra-territorial, perhaps even, extra-national. The site-museum analogy is thus at once present in the architecture and in the impact upon the visitor. The architecture of the museum reflects and influences the experience of the site – a relationship present, albeit inadequately articulated in, all site museums. Both the museum and the site vacillate between past and present, old and new, modern and ancient, paralleling the condition of modernity in Iran.

Furthermore, there are difficulties associated with expanding older structures. For example, the Whitney and Kimball Museums have encountered significant heritage problems in their plans to expand their building capacity. Such issues suggest that the case of this museum is much more complex than the completion of an unfinished structure.
References


