



# The institutionalization of modern middle class neighborhoods in 1940s Tehran – Case of Chaharsad Dastgah



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 January 2016

Received in revised form 5 July 2016

Accepted 24 July 2016

Available online xxxx

### Keywords:

Modern Iranian neighborhood

Middle class

Low-cost housing

Chaharsad Dastgah

Tehran

1940s

## ABSTRACT

In the 1940s, Iran experienced dramatic changes in urban form, as worldwide modernization movements were embodied in new 'modern' neighborhood units in Tehran. Proposals for these neighborhoods, like those in other countries, not only included new housing typologies, but also aimed to alter existing social structures and facilitate nation building. Discussions and proposals regarding new neighborhoods centered on creating healthy, suitable, low-cost housing for new government employees – a group emblematic of Iran's newly established, modern middle class.

However, the traditional lifestyle was an undeniable fact of society. Facing the modern socio-urban policies and socially traditional way of living led to both cultural change and landscape transformation. This paper discusses: how do regional architectural traditions transform the global modernity? How are Western conventions of how to be modern transformed by regional tradition and a different lifestyle? How does the institutionalization of modern neighborhoods, based on the lifestyles of its people, create an indigenous modernity?

This paper illustrates how urban and social reformation practices towards modernization in the early twentieth century were embodied by Tehran's first modern neighborhood, *Chaharsad Dastgah*, as well as how domestic Iranian lifestyles influenced this neighborhood and distinguished it from its contemporaries.

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## 1. Introduction

The institutionalization of the middle-class through housing and neighborhood construction was the first step in nation building, and directly contributed to the spread of modernism. This paper illustrates how modernist Iranian architects and rulers came together to establish the first modernist neighborhood in Tehran in an effort to appeal to and produce a modern middle class, and translate modern elements and integrate them with the Iranian lifestyle. The institutionalization of middle class housing and modern neighborhoods was created in moments of chaos, between what was familiar and embedded in culture, and what was known as modern and unknown. In other words, the institutionalization of middle class housing was based on social modernization by utilizing modern laws and rules, however, in the process of realization, the cultural and indigenous elements of region hold the main role. As Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar explains clearly in "On Alternative Modernities"<sup>1</sup>, social modernization refers to the emergence and institutionalization of market-driven industrial economies, bureaucratically-administered states, rule of law and increased urbanization, however, cultural modernity rose in opposition to this. Cultural modernity permeates everyday life. Everyday life is a cultural practice

of life-world symbolic structures, such as the traditions of religion, philosophy, myth, and art in disarray which emerges from the shadow of symbol.<sup>2</sup> In other words, cultural modernity is a self-exploration and self-realization of what is new and unknown. The practicalities of everyday life influenced the institutionalization and social modernization and finally transformed the top-down modernization into a cultural modernity.

In many non-Western countries, social modernization included urban laws and regulations copied by local government or by Western representatives. However, the interpretation of Western modernity is very dissimilar in different regions. Ironically, modernity in non-Western countries is defined by context and locality. As Jyoti Hosagrahar points out in her book *Indigenous Modernity*, in the tumultuous experience of modernity, when all inherited categories are called into question, as the strange becomes familiar and the familiar becomes distant, the boundaries of 'place' and 'locale' become elusive and ephemeral, as do the regional interpretations and forms of modernity.<sup>3</sup> Against the rigid opposition and monolithic identities of 'traditional' and 'modern', the concept of indigenous modernities celebrate their simultaneity and engagement.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pameshwar Gaonkar, D. (2001) On Alternative Modernities. In Pameshwar Gaonkar, D. (Ed.). *Alternative Modernities*. London: Duke University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Hosagrahar, J. (2005) *Indigenous Modernity*. London: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

The phenomenon of indigenous modernity, or alternative modernity, is a world-wide experience. Examples include the new imperial capital of New Delhi during 1911 and 1931, Turkey in the Ataturk period, Iraq and many other Asian and African cities. In the case of Iraq, as a “new entity on the world stage<sup>5</sup>”, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1921, the primary desire of the state was the search for nationhood. The Iraq Development Board which sought to accelerate the program of national modernization in the young nation of Iraq solicited the assistance of Greek architect and planner Constantinos A. Doxiadis, asking him to work with new Iraqi architects to create a new, ambitious national housing program.<sup>6</sup> The *ekistical* – the science of human settlements – concept proposed by Doxiadis included the desire for a nationalistic Iraqi movement by interpreting the traditional, urban elements like scale, hierarchy of squares and gathering spaces, such as the *hammam*, mosque and so on, and translating them into the vocabulary of modern urbanism. The internal and external institutions came together to make a modern national identity for Iraqi citizens in the form of new neighborhood and living spaces.

In the following pages, this paper will discuss how the creation of a modern neighborhood built the base of the institutionalization of new urbanity in Tehran and how the realization of this urban reformation was woven into the everyday life of the Iranian people. As pilot project, *Chaharsad Dastgah* will be defined as a case study and example. This is the first neighborhood in Tehran to be architecturally based on modern urban regulations for 400 middle class families. The case of *Chaharsad Dastgah* shows the process of housing institutionalization in Iran, and it also illustrates how Iranian modernization was based on everyday life.

## 2. Growth of the middle class, the question of modern collective housing, and the birth of Tehran's first modern neighborhood

The discourse and discussions on mass housing construction furthered the spread and publication of ideas on a new, modern way of living and dwelling among greater segments of the population. The use of housing as an instrument of extensive national modernization was an approach that only came into the action in Iran in the 1940s, following World War Two. The process of modernization in Iran had already begun in the nineteenth century (specifically by Nasir-al-Din Shah Qajar, in 1846) and the country was vastly transformed by Reza Shah from 1921 till 1941. In this period, however, the modernization concerned only specific social classes, which were largely elites. Architecturally, modernization was limited to governmental buildings, monuments and villas for the elites. It was only after the formation of new neighborhoods for the middle class that the structure and image of Tehran dramatically changed and a new, modern lifestyle spread among citizens. The Pahlavi's attempt after World War Two to diffuse the notion of modern living was a noticeable force behind Iran's modern political will.

Iranian governments, like other Middle East peers, “used public-housing projects as an instrument of nation-building in an attempt to gain the allegiance of the new citizenry”.<sup>7</sup> Hence, mass housing projects were not only matters of urban development, and economic responses to a housing crisis and pressures from rural-urban migration, they were part of a larger framework that provided ideological justification for Iran's place in the network of modern nations and made them a

part of the ‘civilized world’. The mass housing constructed was not only part of new, modern neighborhoods, it represented a new, modern nation and a new middle-class. In short, a product of the new central government (1921–1941) and its nation-building process, the emergence of a modern middle class expedited Iranian modernization.<sup>8</sup>

Members of the Iranian middle class were well-educated and succeeded despite state-vested interest in the upper classes and the inertia of tradition-bound peasant populations.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the appearance of the middle class led to changes in Iranian urban development through the formation of ‘modern neighborhoods’. The social reproduction of the modern middle class was the literal ‘unveiling reformation’ in 1933. In approving this law, Reza Shah set out to standardize and Europeanize the appearance of the nation.<sup>10</sup> The reformation outlawed tribal and traditional apparel, and required all adult men (with the exception of state-registered clergymen) to wear Western-style trousers, coats, and ‘Pahlavi caps’ (hats like the French *chapeaux*), and prohibited women from being veiled.<sup>11</sup> By the mid-1930s, there were at least 4000 women – almost all in Tehran – who ventured into public places without veils or, at least, without wearing the full-length covering known as the *chadour*.<sup>12</sup> Unveiling in urban and social terms was the most pronounced sign of modernization in Iran. From 1921 to 1941, modernization concentrated on developing and defining concepts such as ‘middle class’, ‘civilized citizens’, and ‘urbanity’.

Between 1941 and 1953, the principal doctrine of urbanism was the production of state housing for the modern middle class. The modern middle class included many government officials, smaller landowners, teachers, and non-bazaar merchants.<sup>13</sup> Tehran grew rapidly, from 362,000 in 1921 to 1,205,000 in 1941.<sup>14</sup> By 1950, 70%<sup>15</sup> of Tehran's working population was comprised of government employees,<sup>16</sup> including administrative officials and teachers.<sup>17</sup> The majority of these government employees immigrated to Tehran from other cities. Prior to the coup of September 1941, the State had focused solely on the development of Tehran while neglecting all other areas. With new factories, expanding governmental sectors, and the establishment of the university and colleges, Tehran experienced the highest level of immigration in the country. Furthermore, as all foreign trade was funneled through the capital, traders from other cities were encouraged to immigrate to Tehran.<sup>18</sup> During the Allied occupation of Iran (after September

<sup>8</sup> Gastil, R.D. (1958) Middle Class Impediments to Iranian Modernization, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Special Issue on Attitude Research in Modernizing Areas, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 325–329.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Chehabi, H.E. (1993) Staging the Emperor's New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building Under Reza Shah, *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3/4, p. 209.

<sup>11</sup> Local authorities around the country were instructed to arrest and punish anyone openly protesting the policy, and to prevent veiled women from entering shops, cinemas, public bath houses, or from riding in horse-drawn carriages and cars, effectively making everyday activities impossible. For more information, see: Chehabi, H.E. (1993) Staging the Emperor's New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building Under Reza Shah, in: *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3/4, pp. 209–229.

<sup>12</sup> These women were mostly Western-educated, upper-class daughters, the foreign wives of recent returnees from Europe, and middle-class women of religious minority groups.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Habibi, S.M. & Hourcade, B. (2005) *Atlas of Tehran Metropolis*, Tehran: Pardazesh va Barnamerizi-e Shahri Publications, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> 120,000 out of 180,000 employed people.

<sup>16</sup> Naraghi, E. (1962) Social Studies and Research (*Motaleat va Tahghighat-e Ejtemaie*), in: *Investigation of Social Problems of Tehran (Bar-resi Masael-e Ejtemaie-ye Shahr-e Tehran)*, Mehdi Motameni, Majid Haghsheho, Mahmoud Hekami (eds.), Tehran: Tehran University Press, pp. 9–12.

<sup>17</sup> Gastil, R.D. (1958) Middle Class Impediments to Iranian Modernization, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Special Issue on Attitude Research in Modernizing Areas, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 325.

<sup>18</sup> Adjdari, A. (1946) Housing Issues in Tehran and Other Cities (*Masale-ye maskan dar tehran va shahrestanha*), *Architecte*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Bernhardtson, M.T. (2008) Visions of Iraq - Modernizing the Past in 1950s Baghdad. In Isestadt, S. & Rizvi, K. (eds.). *Modernism and the Middle East - Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century*. Washington: The University of Washington Press. pp. 81–96.

<sup>6</sup> Pyla, P. I. (2008) Baghdad's Urban Restructuring 1958 - Aesthetics and Politics of Nation Building, in Isestadt, S. & Rizvi, K. (eds.). *Modernism and the Middle East - Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century*. Washington: The University of Washington Press.

<sup>7</sup> Alsayyad, N. (2008) From Modernism to Globalization, The Middle East Context. In Isestadt, S. & Rizvi, K. (eds.). *Modernism and the Middle East - Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century*. P. 257.

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