Cities 45 (2015) 29–40

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Cities

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/cities

# Architects and 'Architecture without Architects': Modernization of Iranian housing and the birth of a new urban form Narmak (Tehran, 1952) ☆

Rana Habibi *, Bruno De Meulder

*OSA, Department of Architecture, Urbanism & Planning, KU Leuven, Kasteelpark Arenberg 1, Box 2431, 3001 Heverlee, Belgium*

ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*
Received 11 August 2014
Received in revised form 20 February 2015
Accepted 5 March 2015
Available online 24 March 2015

*Keywords:*
Tehran modernization
Middle-class neighborhood
Narmak
Alternative modernity

ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the Iranian encounter with and influence on the international modernist movement. The reception of international modernist discourses and their weaving into Iranian housing- and city-building practices contributed to the formation of a peculiar, alternative, and indigenous version of modernism that took hold in the 1950s. While such practices were clearly part of the international modern movement, they were simultaneously definable as uniquely Iranian. By analyzing the Narmak quarter in Tehran, this paper explores how the production of a middle-class neighborhood became part of a nation-building strategy. Through processes of moderation and appropriation, the idealistic modernist version was made more practical based on pre-existing socio-cultural characteristics and typological elements. Ultimately, this local version of modernism led to the acceptance of modernism, provoked an urban reaction and produced some unexpected social consequences.



## Introduction

Iran, similar to other non-Western countries, underwent a unique modernization process. In contrast to many neighboring countries in the Middle East,[1] however, Iran's push for modernization arose from internal pressures. This autonomous period of modernization—in the context of law and centralized government—originated within Reza Shah's dynasty in 1921. The central government was formed at a time when radical Iranian reformists pushed for a modern country and a modern society (Abrahamian, 2008; Habibi, 1999; Mirsepassi, 2000). In 1920, Reza Khan (who, one year later, became Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty) declared his position on Iranian modernism to *Farangestan* Magazine (Aryanpour, 1979):

> Iran should resume her life again and everything should be renewed. We want to have a 'modern Iran' and a 'modern nation'. We (as the central government) want to convert Iran into a European country. Tehran will be the first modern city in Iran and then it will be used as a model for other Iranian cities. In keeping with the morality of Iran, let us hold this sentence in our minds as our instruction: Iran should be mentally and somatically, outwardly and inwardly European-oriented.

Shah's suggestion is not unlike Baudelaire's famous exclamation—*il faut être absolument moderne* (we must be absolutely modern).

Planning for urban modernization, however, had already been underway for a long time before 1920. As Madanipour (2006) explains, the first phase of modern planning in Tehran refers to the period before the Second World War, which was preceded by at least three major efforts that set the framework for the city's growth and development: walling the city (1550s); expanding the walled city (1870s) and building new urban infrastructure (1930s). These initiatives all arose from the government's ability and desire to instigate change and to shape the city through large-scale infrastructure projects (Madanipour, 2006, s. 433).

Tehran's 'regional' modernization act of 1930 superimposed a grid of Hausmannian boulevards on top of its vernacular urban fabric. Most of Tehran's physical modernization concerned the establishment of boulevards and the construction of two- and

☆ The title is taken from the book *Architecture without Architect* by Bernard Rudofsky. The exhibition of the same name, hosted at Tehran's Museum of Modern Art (November 9, 1964 to February 7, 1965) was commissioned by the Department of Rotating Exhibitions under the auspices of the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art. Both the exhibition and the accompanying publication were prepared and designed by Bernard Rudofsky, consultant to the Department of Architecture and Design, Rudofsky (1964).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +32 16 321339.
*E-mail address:* rana.habibi@asro.kuleuven.be (R. Habibi).

[1] At this time, most countries in the Middle East were protectorates of France or England. Iran and Turkey were the only exceptions, where modernization was a choice and was not imposed by the Western (colonial) countries (Isenstadt & Rizvi, 2008).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.03.005
0264-2751/

**Fig. 1.** Some members of the Association of Iranian Architects Diploma and Parliament representatives at the grand opening of Narmak. *Source*: Journal of Bank-e-Sakhtemani (1955): 1-1.

three-story, single-family houses for elites inside the old city of Tehran (Habibi, 1999; Marefat, 1988; Mokhtari, 2011). However, the most significant part of the modernization process, which took place between 1921 and 1941, focused on institutional renewal, the establishment of a new bureaucratic system, and the introduction of new habits, industries, etc. Examples of such changes include: the obligatory registration of documents and properties (1926); the establishment of a uniform dress code for men (1929); the demolition of the city's old fortifications and westward urban expansion (1932)[2]; the opening of a cement and textile factory in Rey (1933); the building of *Bank-e Melli* (the National Bank) and Tehran University (1934); and one of the most radical shifts in local customs—the 'unveiling' of women (1935) (Habibi, 1999).

The actual emergence of modernization in its physical form and the development of the city beyond its old walls occurred during the 1940s, when new middle-class neighborhoods were designed and constructed. The modern middle class included government officials, small landowners, teachers, and non-bazaar merchants (Gastil, 1958). The development of new (sub)urban neighborhoods in Tehran through the Seven-Year Urban Development Plan, which included experiments with low-cost housing, was partly due to a clear desire by the new middle class for new type of housing. These fully equipped, low-cost neighborhoods generally offered an improved standard of living to residents; they signaled the start of an urban development policy for Iran (NY: OC inc report, 1949).

The Iranian variation on modernism became particularly articulated in the decade that followed, when significant programs for the construction of middle-class housing were initiated. These programs were clearly a strategic element in Iran's nation-state (re)building and modernization projects. Similar to Turkey, Egypt, and others, Iran's rebuilding of the Iranian nation-state was expected to result in a modern nation (see Bozdogan, 2001; Chahichian, 2009), and its ambition was to become the equivalent of model European nations, such as France and Germany. Turkey had also taken a similar approach to urban development, with the introduction of large middle-class neighborhood projects. The Levent neighborhood in Istanbul, for example, designed by Kemal Ahmet Aru, was constructed in the 1950s,[3] and it bears resemblance to Namrak in Tehran.

Housing had become a tool for social and urban modernization—an agent of change for Yousef Abad, Nazi-Abad and Kuy-e-Kan (Shahr-e-Ziba), and as such, it was high priority on reformists' agendas. Iranian architects, like "most modernist architects in the world, shared the moral pretension of advancing social and political goals through practices ranging from the design of the house and the street to the planning of the whole city" (Lu, 2012). In Iran, like in many countries, the desire for innovation by architects and the desire to rebel against tradition were a reflection of and intertwined with political movements, in which housing was a central issue. In this way, modern housing projects marked clear ruptures with conventional housing production and were instrumental in the creation of Iran's modern middle-class society.

Beginning in 1952, the Narmak quarters were the second of the housing initiatives in Tehran (the first being Chaharsad Dastgah in 1946). While there were other neighborhood housing projects built in the 1950s, including Yousef Abad, Nazi-Abad and Kuy-e-Kan (Shahr-e-Ziba), Narmak was the first to apply contemporary ideas regarding neighborhood amenities and new housing-construction technologies. In terms of scale, Namrak was also the first large-scale, new neighborhood in Tehran; it was called Narmak—'the new city'—for this reason (see: *Bank-e-Sakhtemani Journal*, 1954).

A close examination of the Narmak case demonstrates how modernization, as a global process put into practice locally, was subject to social, cultural and geographical realities. The 'pure' concept of modernization became contextualized and moderated by the existing social structure, architectural elements and realities. At the same time, the Iranian urban modernization process, as in the case of Narmak, was similar to the modernization process experienced by other non-Western countries. These processes often "include both an 'internationalism from below' and an extension of the enlightened cosmopolitanism of multiplicity" (Crinson,

[2] By 1932, the population density had doubled to 105 persons per hectare, and one-third of the population lived outside the walls. In addition to demographic pressure, the arrival of motor vehicles and the regime's desire to control the urban population and to modernize urban infrastructure led to a substantial transformation of the capital, in which it was "radically re-planned and re-built." (see Madanipour, 2006, s. 433).

[3] Architect and planner Kemal Ahmet Aru used the model of the Garden City as an inspiration while building new neighborhoods for middle-class families. He and his team looked for standard household sizes suitable for raising families in lush, green areas. See: Arefi (2014) Deconstructing Placemaking – Needs, Opportunities and Assets, New York: Routledge.