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A Quest for Identity: Remembering Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA)

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Abstract

This article examines the historical background of the establishment and realization of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA), initiated through the vision and connections of Iran's former queen and architect Farah Pahlavi and designed by Iranian artist and architect Kamran Diba. The museum skillfully integrates traditional architectural elements with modern materials and forms, creating a bridge between historical traditions and contemporary sensibilities. Reflecting Diba's explorations of Iranian architectural identity in the late 1970s, the design respects Iran's cultural heritage while addressing the functional needs of modern society, serving as an intermediary space that functions as a cultural platform fostering social and artistic interactions in the city. Adopting a historical and biographical approach, this study situates the museum within the context of pre-revolutionary Iranian art and architecture, focusing on Pahlavi's vision for a Western-oriented contemporary art museum and Diba's reinterpretation of this vision through hybrid architectural forms. The research analyzes the dynamic relationship between the museum and its surroundings, particularly emphasizing its spatial dialogue with Laleh Park, one of Tehran's most significant public spaces. Drawing on international and Iranian literature, oral histories, and collective memory, this study explores the museum's legacy and future, offering a perspective on TMoCA's critical role at the intersection of art, architecture, and society.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA), inaugurated in 1977, has been a landmark of Iran's pre-revolutionary modernism and cultural aspirations. Conceived under the patronage of Shahbanu Farah Pahlavi and designed by the Iranian architect and planner Kamran Diba, TMoCA embodies a unique intersection of Iran's historical architectural heritage and the modernist ethos that shaped the late 20th century. Positioned on the edge of Laleh Park, one of Tehran's most significant urban public spaces, the museum offers not only a venue for art exhibitions but also an architectural narrative that engages with its sociopolitical and cultural milieu.

Diba's design for TMoCA reflects a deliberate negotiation between tradition and modernity. Drawing on Iranian vernacular forms and spatial configurations, such as courtyards and windcatchers, he reimagined them through modern materials and techniques. This synthesis mirrors broader efforts in the late 1970s to articulate an Iranian identity that resonates with both the past and contemporary global trends. Shahbanu Farah Pahlavi's vision of a contemporary art museum was similarly ambitious, aiming to place Iran at the forefront of the international scene of art and culture.

This study examines the intertwined narratives of TMoCA's architectural design, cultural positioning, and its broader historical and political context. It explores how the museum's spatial and symbolic gestures engage with its environment and community, acting as a cultural bridge between historical continuity and

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modern innovation. The study also considers TMoCA's enduring legacy and its place within ongoing discussions of heritage, memory, and contemporary Iranian identity.
The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA), founded in 1977, at the turn of the Islamic revolution of 1979, remains one of Iran's most iconic cultural and architectural achievements of the 1970s. This project exemplifies a deliberate effort to harmonize traditional Iranian architectural elements with the ideals of global modernism, achieving a cohesive and innovative synthesis of the two.

Inspired by Iran's vernacular architecture, Diba integrated features such as windcatchers, central courtyards, and forms characteristic of desert structures to create a space that both honors Iran's cultural heritage and aligns with the aesthetic and functional demands of modern architecture. As Ardalan and Bakhtiar (1973) highlight in their seminal work *The Sense of Unity*, traditional Iranian architecture inherently embodies spiritual and unifying principles—a philosophy that resonates strongly in the design of the TMoCA.

Guided by traditional Iranian architectural principles such as the *hashti* [1] and *chaharsoo*[2], Kamran Diba crafted a space that invited visitors to engage with contemporary art while remaining deeply rooted in Iranian cultural heritage. These design elements have elevated the TMoCA into a symbol of the interplay between past and present, significantly contributing to Iran's cultural and social prominence. By seamlessly integrating tradition with modernity, the museum serves as a dynamic platform for contemporary audiences to connect with a revitalized expression of Iranian cultural identity.

TMoCA is among the rare architectural projects that successfully merge social and cultural concepts with modern aesthetics. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) underscores the importance of designing spaces that elevate human experience. Aligning with this principle, Kamran Diba incorporated open and flexible spaces into the museum's design, fostering an ideal environment for cultural and artistic interactions. With a deliberate focus on simplicity and innovative spatial organization in terms of the circulation, transparency and open spaces, Diba envisioned the museum not only as a center for art but also as a vibrant hub for cultural and social engagement.

The museum has undergone notable transformations, particularly in the tumultuous years following the 1979 Revolution. During the period from 1978 to 1980, architectural and cultural development were largely neglected as revolutionary ideals took precedence. Art was redefined through the lens of divine and revolutionary values, sidelining themes that did not align with this framework. As a result, the museum witnessed and was subject to substantial political and cultural shifts. Many Western artworks were removed from public display due to their perceived incongruity with revolutionary principles. Furthermore, the museum temporarily ceased its activities, with greater focus placed on Islamic and traditional Iranian art.
During the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, the museum played an unconventional role, serving as a shelter for the families of its staff. Its valuable art collection was secured in the basement, while employees' families took refuge in a separate section. In 1999, the museum marked a pivotal moment in its history by hosting its first exhibition of Western art since the revolution. This pop art exhibition featured renowned artists such as David Hockney, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol, symbolizing a significant cultural shift and a re-engagement with global art.

This research examines the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art as both an artistic and social hub within Iranian society, focusing on two significant figures in its realization: Farah Pahlavi and Kamran Diba. It

[1] *Hashti* refers to a space at the threshold and entrance of a building. This space is designed as a transitional and functional element in the main passageways.
[2] *Chaharsoo* refers to a spacious area with a circular arch at the intersection of two or more corridors.

highlights the museum's architectural evolution and the cultural impact it has generated throughout its history.

2. METHOD

This research adopts a historical, architectural, and biographical lens to analyze the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art as both an artifact and a cultural phenomenon. The methodology integrates qualitative approaches, focusing on the following key dimensions: Primary and secondary sources are examined, including architectural drawings, and historical photographs related to TMoCA's foundation. Iranian and international publications from the late 20th century provided critical perspectives on the art and architectural scene of pre-revolutionary Iran. A detailed study of the museum's design elements, materials, spatial organization, and its relationship to Laleh Park is conducted. This analysis explores how Diba's architectural language mediates between local traditions and modernist aesthetics, reflecting broader cultural and spatial narratives.

The roles of Shahbanu Farah Pahlavi and Kamran Diba are analyzed through biographical accounts, interviews evident in the literature that documented their visions for the museum. This aspect highlights the interplay of political aspirations and artistic innovation in TMoCA's conception. The study incorporates oral histories, capturing personal recollections of those involved in the museum's establishment and its visitors. These narratives provide insight into the museum's social and cultural significance, both historically and in contemporary times.

This study aims to situate itself within existing scholarship on Iranian modernism, museum studies, and architectural history, synthesizing these fields to contextualize TMoCA within its broader cultural and historical framework. The research takes a commemorative stance, reflecting on the museum's legacy and its potential role in shaping Iran's cultural future. This approach underscores the importance of heritage preservation and the evolving dialogue between past and present. Drawing upon these methodological tools, this study aims to demonstrate a holistic understanding of TMoCA's significance as an architectural, cultural, and historical landmark. It aims to contribute to broader discussions on the intersections of architecture, politics, and identity in the context of Iran and beyond.

3. BETWEEN MODERNITY AND TRADITION: PRE-REVOLUTION IRAN IN CONTEXT

In contemporary Iranian history, the tension between tradition and modernity has emerged as a defining theme in architecture and urban planning. As Kenneth Frampton, in his seminal article "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", quotes from the French thinker Paul Ricoeur, this challenge stems from a fundamental duality: the necessity of engaging with global civilization and scientific rationality while simultaneously preserving cultural and historical identity. Ricoeur encapsulates this paradox with the question: *"How to become modern and return to sources; How to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization."* (Ricoeur, 1965, as cited in Frampton, 1983)
This duality is particularly pronounced in Iran's modern history, spanning over 150 years, and is especially evident in the architectural and urban development of Tehran. The city has served as a focal point where the confrontation and interaction between these contrasting forces have shaped its identity, reflecting broader societal struggles and aspirations.

Since the Qajar era (1789-1925), Tehran has served as the epicenter of architectural and urban transformations in Iran, embodying the coexistence of tradition and modernity. Initially, the city's urban fabric was rooted in traditional patterns, but the growing influence of Western lifestyles and architectural styles gradually introduced significant changes. This shift began during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah and intensified during the Pahlavi era, when modernization was often equated with the wholesale adoption of Western models. Under Reza Shah (Pahlavi I), Tehran underwent radical urban modernization, including the construction of railways, wide boulevards, and modern governmental buildings, which profoundly reshaped the urban landscape. These efforts aimed to project a modern image of Tehran but often marginalized its traditional elements, fostering the tension between preserving cultural heritage and advancing toward a more globalized, modern identity.

During the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah (Pahlavi II), Iran's urban planning and architecture experienced a period of transformation fueled by increased oil revenues and the contributions of domestic and international experts. Efforts during this era, including the Tehran Master Plan (1968) and various contemporary architectural projects, aimed to integrate global modernist principles with Iran's cultural heritage. However, these initiatives were often criticized for failing to adequately reflect the local social and cultural context, leading to a disconnect between modern architectural practices and Iranian identity.
In response to these challenges, which Iran exemplified, the theory of critical regionalism emerged as a potential solution for bridging the divide between tradition and modernity. Originally formulated by architectural theorists Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in 1981 and subsequently developed further by Kenneth Frampton in 1983, critical regionalism provides an analytical framework aimed at harmonizing the universal principles of modernity with the cultural and contextual specificity of tradition. (Zoghi Hosseini, 2021, as cited in Frampton, 1983; Tzonis & Lefaivre, 1981)

Frampton's approach emphasizes the interplay of dualities such as "place versus space", "tectonics versus scenography", and the "local versus the global." Rather than framing tradition and modernity as oppositional forces, critical regionalism advocates for their interaction and redefinition, proposing a mediating approach that respects both global advancements and local identity. This theory provides a valuable perspective for understanding the challenges and opportunities in Iranian architecture and urban planning during this pivotal period.

Frampton argues that architecture should steer clear of both superficial imitation of historical forms and the erosion of identity brought about by globalization. As he states, *"*[c]ritical regionalism opposes the sentimental replication of local elements and instead seeks to redefine them. It may also draw those elements from external sources" (Frampton, 1983: 327).

In this context, critical regionalism redefines the concept of place by harmonizing cultural and historical elements with modern innovations. It emphasizes a thoughtful reinterpretation of local features, integrating them with contemporary advancements to create architecture that is both contextually rooted and globally relevant. This approach allows for the preservation of identity while embracing the opportunities presented by modernity.

The goal of critical regionalism is to develop architecture that integrates the distinct characteristics of each region with the innovations of modern architecture. This approach goes beyond the superficial use of visual or symbolic elements, focusing instead on the underlying concepts that shape architectural creation. By addressing regional architectural needs while reinterpreting traditional principles in a fresh and innovative way, critical regionalism ensures that each project preserves its local identity while adopting a modern expression. The result is architecture that harmonizes place-specific qualities with contemporary advancements, endowing each location with a unique and modern identity.

This theory provides a practical framework for addressing the "placelessness" often associated with modernity by fostering a dialogue between tradition and modernity. As Zoghi Hosseini (2021) explains, Kenneth Frampton extends the ideas of Zonis and Lefebvre in critical regionalism, emphasizing its urgent role in counteracting the uniformity of placelessness. Frampton (1983) elaborates on this issue in his article "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance". It seeks not only to revive historical authenticity but also to use modern tools to enhance it, creating a "space-in-between" as referred in this study, where tradition and modernity interact and find reconciliation.

Critical regionalism emerged in Iran during the 1960s and 1970s, a period marked by rapid modernization and globalization. During this time, the concept of the "space-in-between" gained traction as architects sought to bridge tradition and modernity cohesively and creatively. This movement, rooted in a deep contextual awareness, emphasized cultural continuity and resisted dominant globalized modes of spatial production while fostering international exchange and dialogue.

Pioneering architects like Houshang Seyhoun, Kamran Diba, Nader Ardalan, and Hossein Amanat advanced this approach. Their works—Seyhoun's Mausoleum of Avicenna, Diba's Tehran Museum of

Contemporary Art, and Amanat's Azadi Tower—demonstrate this synthesis by utilizing local materials and techniques, integrating modern forms with the geometry and principles of traditional Iranian architecture and prioritizing social needs and human interactions in spatial design.

Notably, while these architects innovatively fused tradition with modernity, they largely refrained from engaging with postmodern discourse. Ironically, the figures who influenced them, such as Louis Kahn and Mies van der Rohe, were rooted in modernist traditions or, in Kahn's case, represented critical evolutions within modernism.

4. THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY: KAMRAN DIBA AND HIS ARCHITECTURAL (DIS)POSITIONS

Kamran Diba, one of Iran's most prominent modernist architects with a historical perspective, has made a lasting impact through his significant contributions to architecture. Born in Tehran in 1934, Diba graduated in architecture from Harvard University in Washington, D.C., in 1964, and returned to Iran the following year. Between 1962 and 1970, he also served as a faculty member at the University of Tehran.



Figure 1. *The renowned Iranian architect and designer of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art*

Diba is best known for his innovative approach, which integrates modernist principles with Iran's cultural and historical context. His notable works include the design and execution of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Shafagh Park and Cultural Center, Niavaran Park and Cultural Center, the prayer hall adjacent to the Carpet Museum, Shushtar New Town, Jundi Shapur Mosque, and numerous projects in Iran, Europe, and the United States (Banimasoud, 2015: 313). These works highlight his commitment to creating spaces that balance tradition with modernity while addressing social and cultural needs.

Kamran Diba seamlessly bridged the realms of art and architecture, distinguishing himself not only as a painter and architect but also as a visionary who established cultural and artistic institutions to promote the arts and elevate the status of artists in Iran.

During his 12 years of practice in Iran, the intellectual and theoretical foundation of Diba's work reflected a profound commitment to the social dimensions of architecture, which he termed "humanistic architecture." This approach emphasized creating meaningful and socially engaged projects that served society and addressed the needs of the people.

Diba's passion for urban design, urban planning, and landscaping was deeply rooted in this humanistic ethos. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he showed little interest in private buildings, dedicating his

efforts to public and cultural projects that had a broader social impact. In these endeavors, he often took on multiple roles, acting as both the conceptualizer and planner, ensuring that his vision extended from the initial idea to its realization. Through this holistic approach, Diba's work stands as a testament to architecture's potential to foster community engagement and cultural enrichment, demonstrating his unwavering dedication to the greater good.

Kamran Diba views architecture as fundamentally intertwined with human interaction, famously defining a building as *"*a social event.*"* In his philosophy, the physical reality of a space is inseparable from the social dynamics it fosters. "I deliberately attempt to build an environment which multiplies and enhances the quality of interaction," he asserts (Diba, 1981: 8). For Diba, the role of the architect extends beyond addressing functional requirements. It includes the responsibility to design spaces that actively encourage and facilitate social engagement. He encapsulates this approach in what he terms the "human interaction intensification program," which focuses on "enhancing the quality and quantity of human interaction by means of physical and spatial organization" (Diba, 1981: 54).

This philosophy underscores Diba's dedication to creating environments that prioritize meaningful connections, aligning his work with broader social and cultural objectives. By designing spaces that go beyond utility, Diba emphasizes the potential of architecture to enrich human relationships and community life. Kamran Diba extends his architectural philosophy by emphasizing the importance of community over mere housing. He critiques modern housing projects for their incompatibility with the lifestyle of Muslim communities, advocating instead for a focus on "community development, rather than on housing" (Diba, 1980a: 40).

Despite his relatively brief career in Iran, Diba is recognized as a pivotal figure in contemporary Iranian architecture, leaving behind a legacy of valuable and memorable works. As a modernist architect deeply committed to regionalism and historicism, Diba's designs reflect his passion for Iranian architecture and culture, often evoking familiar concepts and forms rooted in Iran's architectural traditions.

Diba repeatedly highlighted the cultural responsibility of architecture, stating:
"The architecture of any era is always a response to the culture of its time. The role of architecture is to establish and enrich the culture of its era through innovation and the introduction of challenging ideas. This process allows architects and artists to document and preserve the state of their time for future generations." (Tabatabai Diba, 2006: 13).

While acknowledging the necessity of progress, Diba warned against blindly replicating past styles, instead advocating for learning from historical design principles, environmental awareness, and social practices. His vision extended beyond the creation of individual buildings to the cultivation of socially connected communities. He believed that merely scattering aesthetically pleasing buildings within a chaotic urban environment would not suffice. For Diba, true architectural success lies in fostering collective, socially vibrant spaces that reflect and advance the culture of their time.

One of the hallmarks of Kamran Diba's architectural approach is his authentic and innovative use of Iranian architectural patterns. Rather than relying on decorative motifs, Diba focuses on the underlying principles of spatial organization and typology inherent in traditional Iranian architecture. This is particularly evident in his emphasis on axial alignments, a recurring feature in both his urban planning projects and architectural designs. His work, most notably the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, showcases how enriching the spatial experience within a three-dimensional framework can enhance the interior's depth and appeal.

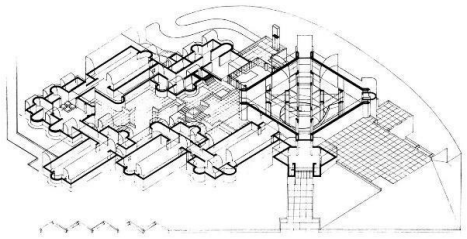


Figure 2. *Spatial organization of traditional Iranian architecture - TMoCA.*

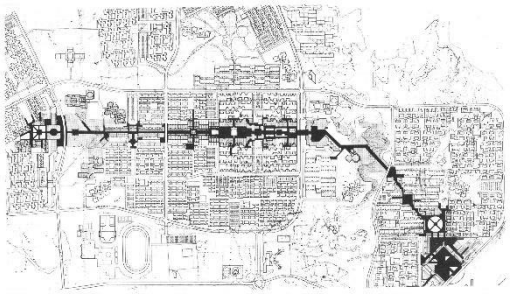


Figure 3*. Emphasis on axes in Diba's architectural and urban planning designs- Original Master Plan of Shushtar New Town*

Diba occupies a unique position as both a proponent and a critic of modernism. While firmly rooted in its framework, he critiques it from within, offering a nuanced perspective that balances modernist ideals with cultural and historical awareness. His interpretations of history and tradition are distinctly modern, avoiding the semiotic, symbolic reinterpretations characteristic of postmodernism. Instead, Diba's work reflects a deeply contextual and forward-thinking approach, bridging the past and present in ways that are innovative yet respectful of Iran's architectural legacy.

In an interview with Mohammadreza Shirazi, Kamran Diba reflects on his engagement with postmodernism, noting that the movement caught his attention only after his professional career in Iran ended following the 1979 revolution. He emphasizes that his "search for identity" was fundamentally distinct from the superficial tendencies he observed in American postmodernism. This perspective was shaped in the mid-1970s during his tenure at Cornell University's Graduate School of Architecture, where he taught at the invitation of Mathias Ungers.

Diba observes that by the time postmodernism was taking hold, most of his major projects in Iran had already been completed. While he recognized that postmodernism broke the rigid constraints of modernism and offered a degree of liberation, he ultimately rejected it as a valid design approach. For Diba, its commercialization and superficiality undermined its potential, and he remained committed to a deeper, more meaningful exploration of identity and tradition within a modern architectural framework.

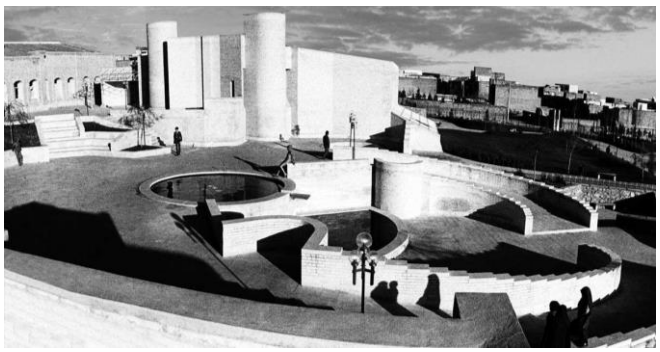


Figure 4. Park-e Shafagh (Garden of Yousef-Abad).

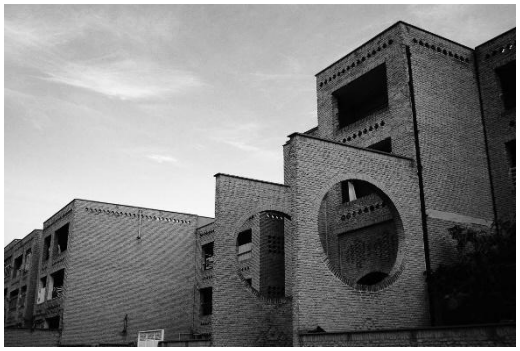


Figure 5. Shushtar New Town.

When asked if he identifies as an Iranian postmodernist, Kamran Diba responds unequivocally: "No, I don't consider myself anything. The truth was, I was in searching setting into context the national identity and, above all, making my personal mark." In response to comparisons with architects like Jørn Utzon, Henning Larsen, and the later Alvar Aalto—known for their sensitivity to the "specificity of place"—Diba candidly remarks: "Why not?" (Shirazi, 2018: 105).

Despite the brevity of his architectural career, Diba's body of work is remarkably diverse. His designs often feature simple yet sharply sculpted forms, characterized by prominent openings and robust columns that make bold architectural statements. This distinctive style draws from the traditions of Iranian architecture while reflecting the influence of English neo-Brutalism.

Diba's designs frequently incorporate traditional Iranian elements such as domes, windcatchers, courtyards, pools, and porticos, reinterpreted in innovative ways. Roofs play a pivotal role in his work, often defining the exterior form, as seen in the TMoCA. These elements are not mere ornamentation but are abstracted into volumetric features that evoke a metaphysical atmosphere, bridging the past and present while reflecting Diba's pursuit of a timeless and culturally resonant architectural language.

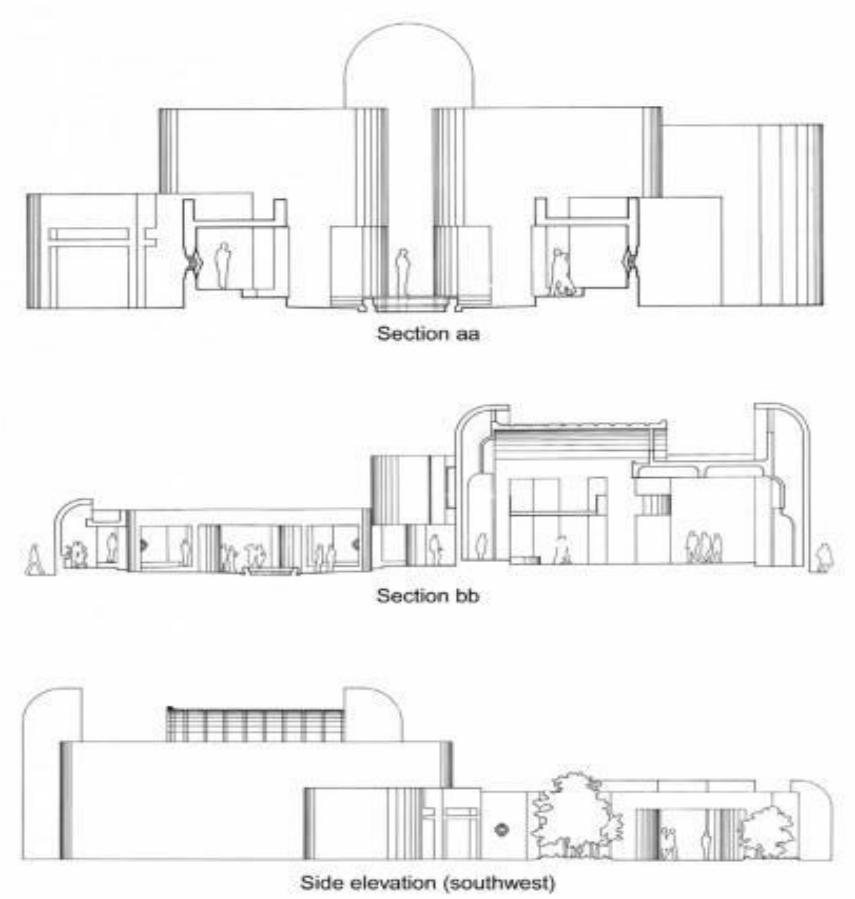


Figure 6. *The Role of Roofs and Traditional Iranian Architectural Elements in Shaping Form-Mosque of Shahid Chamran University.*

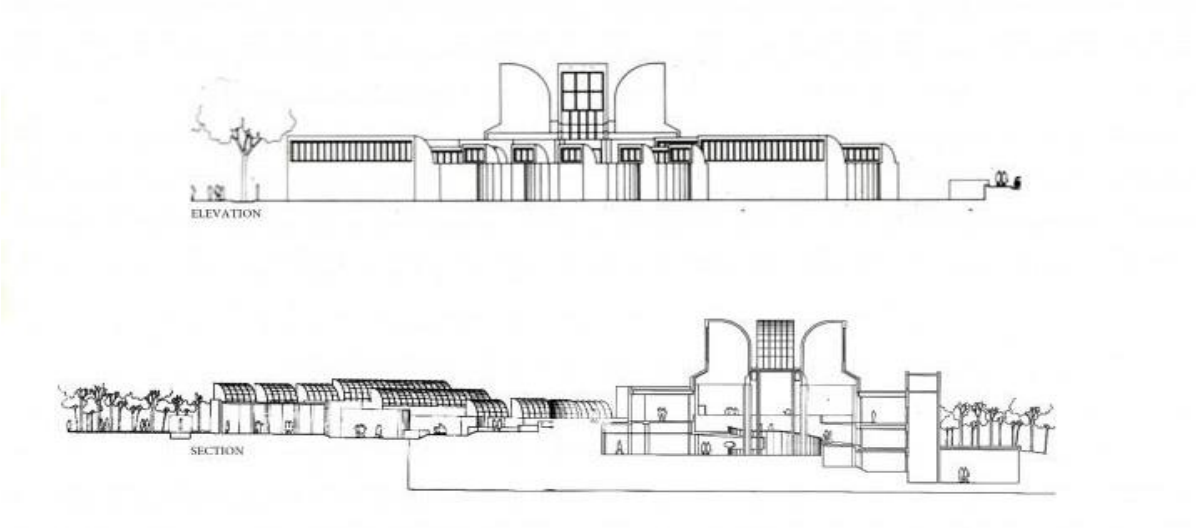


Figure 7. *The Role of Roofs and Traditional Iranian Architectural Elements in Shaping Form-TmoCA.*

In analyzing the architectural elements in Kamran Diba's works, light is not treated as unrestrained brightness but as a refined and deliberate presence. Natural light is controlled and filtered through architectural elements, creating a harmonious interaction with the built environment. A notable example is the skylights of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, where the traditional windcatcher is reimagined as a skylight. These features allow light to enter the interior in a controlled manner, often diffused to interplay with shadows, amplifying the light's presence and imbuing the space with an air of mystery and ambiguity.

The wall is another defining element in Diba's architecture. In Diba's designs, walls transcend their functional role as mere barriers; they simultaneously embrace and exclude, keeping observers at a distance while inviting exploration. What sets Diba's walls apart is their unapologetic simplicity and their emphasis on "wall-ness." Free from ornamentation, they exist in their pure, tectonic form, as Diba himself emphasizes: *"*Walls do not dazzle; they create ambiguity" (Diba, 2010: 133). He praises the architectural potential of the wall, describing it as a meticulous creation:
"A simple wall embodies separation, character, security, and ownership. Ultimately, a wall is what orients us and prepares us to enter the realm of architecture. I'm crazy about building a simple wall!" (Diba, 2001: 22).

Through this approach, Diba elevates the wall from a structural necessity to an architectural statement, a vessel of both functionality and profound spatial meaning.

5. A SPACE-IN-BETWEEN: TEHRAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART (TMoCA)

5.1. Imagining A Contemporary Art Museum In Tehran: Farah Pahlavi And The Foundations Of TMoCA

Farah Diba (born October 24, 1938), the wife of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, served as the last Empress of Iran from December 20, 1959, to February 11, 1979. During her tenure, she played a pivotal role in advancing cultural and social initiatives, leaving a lasting impact on Iran's artistic and architectural landscape.



Figure 8. *Farah Pahlavi, the last Empress of Iran and wife of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.*

Before her marriage, Farah Pahlavi studied in Iran and pursued architecture in France, where she became fluent in English and French. It was during her studies abroad that she met Mohammad Reza Shah, marrying him on November 21, 1959. Following her coronation, she assumed the roles of Queen Consort and Vice-Regent of Iran, becoming an influential figure in the country's cultural affairs.

In the latter decades of the Pahlavi dynasty, Empress Farah prioritized the preservation and restoration of Iran's architectural and artistic heritage. Her efforts aimed to counter the effects of rapid urban modernization, which often resulted in the neglect or destruction of traditional and Islamic architecture. While figures like Jalal Al-e-Ahmad and Ali Shariati criticized excessive Westernization, emphasizing the need to safeguard Iran's national identity, Farah sought to create a balance by reviving traditional arts and architecture while embracing modernity.

Since Reza Shah's reign, urban development often came at the expense of historical structures, with a focus on pre-Islamic heritage while neglecting Islamic historical sites. In contrast, Empress Farah championed the restoration and conservation of Islamic and traditional architecture, emphasizing its importance in reflecting Iran's rich history and cultural identity. She believed that architecture should draw from the past while addressing climatic, geographical, and societal needs, asserting that it could serve as a powerful tool for improving quality of life and driving social and cultural reform. In her memoirs, she reflected on her vision: "I had such high hopes for the preservation of my country's heritage and Iran's emergence as a contemporary cultural force." (Stein, 2013, as cited in Tabibi, 2014, p. 113)

One of her most notable contributions was supporting the creation of the TMoCA. The concept of a venue for contemporary Iranian and international art was first proposed by Kamran Diba—an architect, painter, and Farah Pahlavi's cousin—during discussions with the Empress. Diba later recounted:

*"After returning from my studies abroad, I spoke with the Empress several times about this issue because, in my view, no institution in the country was seriously collecting art. [...] The idea took shape in 1966 (1345), but it took years to complete the project." (*Daftari & Diba, 2013: 80)

Farah Pahlavi remarked:
"Why couldn't Iran have a museum for [modern] art?" the shahbanu once indicated and continued, "I thought we should, and include it with Western art. We couldn't afford to go back to art from centuries before, so we focused more on the contemporary." (Ayad, 2011: 47)

Farah Pahlavi's interest in modern art also shaped her cultural policies. She encouraged government agencies and private collectors to allocate more resources toward acquiring and exhibiting modern works, complementing the nation's traditional art and emphasizing Iran's presence in the global art scene.

During the 1970s, a dramatic surge in oil prices, culminating in 1975 (1354), brought unprecedented wealth to Iran's treasury. Empress Farah Pahlavi sought to capitalize on this financial boom as part of the "Great Civilization" program, aiming to modernize Iran's cultural landscape and elevate its global standing. She first discussed the idea of building a museum for contemporary art with the Shah and then-Prime Minister Amir-Abbas Hoveyda, proposing that the country's newfound wealth provided a unique opportunity to acquire a diverse collection of modern, traditional, and ancient artworks. This vision led to the decision to construct two museums in Farah Park (now Laleh Park): one for modern art—the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art—and another for traditional Iranian handwoven artifacts—the Carpet Museum.

To expand the reach of these initiatives, Pahlavi also engaged Alvar Aalto, the famed Finnish architect, to design a branch of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in Shiraz. Explaining this choice, the Empress stated:
"We chose Alvar Aalto as the architect, because he was such a famous international figure. We thought his building would be a work of art. He came to Iran and loved Shiraz where he chose a special site for the museum" Unfortunately, the project faced delays and remained incomplete due to the 1979 revolution. (Stein, 2013, as cited in Tabibi, 2014: 123)

These initiatives reflected her ambition to present Iran as a cultural and artistic powerhouse, blending its rich heritage with contemporary global influences. TMoCA, established in 1976, was the first and only institution created under the Farah Pahlavi Foundation. Its inception marked a turning point in the cultural policies of the Pahlavi era, symbolizing a shift in the management of art and culture from royal patronage to a more nationally oriented framework. The museum aimed to bridge Iran's cultural heritage with the global contemporary art scene, reflecting the broader ambitions of the Pahlavi dynasty to modernize Iran's cultural identity.

The TMoCA project was developed over four years under the leadership of Kamran Diba, with significant contributions from Iranian architect Nader Ardalan and foreign experts Anthony J. Major and Priyank Guptan. The museum was officially inaugurated on October 14, 1977, coinciding with Empress Farah Pahlavi's 39th birthday. The event was attended by prominent figures, including Mohammad Reza Shah, Empress Farah, Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller (then Vice President of the United States), Thomas Messer (Director of the Guggenheim Museum), and Edy de Wilde (Director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam).

At the ceremony, Nelson Rockefeller praised the museum, describing it as "one of the most beautiful museums in the world" and likening it to an extension and completion of the Guggenheim Museum. (Daneshvar, 2010: 152) This international recognition underscored the museum's importance as a cultural landmark, positioning it as a symbol of Iran's aspirations to merge tradition with modernity on a global scale.



Figure 9. *Farah Pahlavi and Andy Warhol standing before Warhol's portraits, taken by Alain Nogues.*

5.2. Re-Imagining the Museum: Kamran Diba and Architecture of TMoCA

Before Tehran became overwhelmed by pollution and congestion, it held the potential to be a city shaped by thoughtful visual and environmental qualities, fostering meaningful interaction with its inhabitants. The architectural identity of Tehran relied on the construction of buildings designed and executed by architects—professionals whose concerns extended beyond mere functionality. Architecture, when detached from the prevailing artistic, cultural, and local contexts, risks becoming hollow. For construction to contribute meaningfully to a society's national and cultural identity, it must address practical needs while resonating with the emotions, beliefs, and spiritual understanding of a city's residents and a nation's people. In the 1960s (1340s SH), a series of iconic buildings emerged in Tehran, shaping the city's cultural character. Among these, the TMoCA stands as a beacon of cultural and artistic significance, attracting attention on an international scale. At its inception, the museum embodied the city's aspirations to engage with global art movements while preserving its local essence. Located on the western edge of Laleh Park along Amirabad Street, the museum also played a pivotal role in defining the identity of its surrounding neighborhood. However, it catered to a specific audience—those with interests beyond the routine of daily life. It appealed to a segment of society eager to explore the cultural and artistic essence of modern Iranian society, which was finding its voice and carving out a platform for expression in a rapidly changing world.

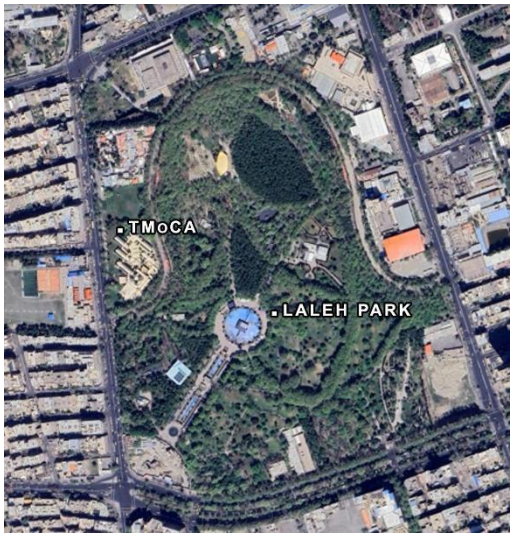


Figure 10. Location of Laleh Park and TmoCA.

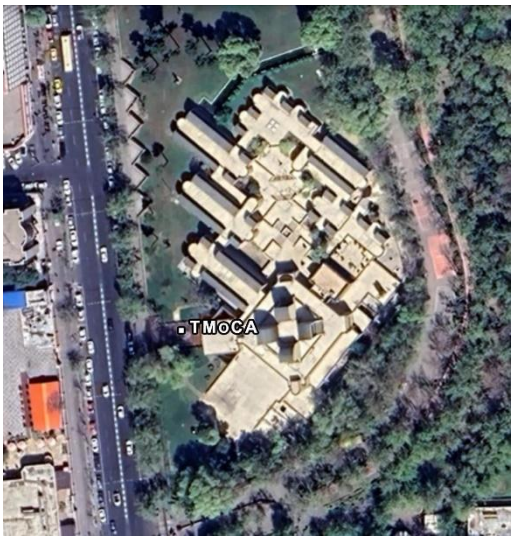


Figure 11. Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

The TMoCA, founded in 1977 (1356 SH), stands as one of the most distinguished cultural and artistic institutions in Iran and the Middle East. Dedicated to preserving and expanding its art collections, the museum hosts permanent and temporary exhibitions, intimate galleries, and curated aesthetic installations, catering to both the general public and specialized audiences (Nadalian, Ahmad, 8611).

The TMoCA, housing a rich collection of works by prominent global and Iranian artists, has secured a unique position in the art world. Its collection includes over 3,000 pieces by artists such as Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock, Francis Bacon, and Salvador Dalí. Additionally, works by renowned Iranian artists like Parviz Tanavoli, Bahman Mohasses, and Massoud Arabshahi are also featured in the museum's collection.

The TMoCA, located on North Kargar Street (Amirabad) near Laleh Park, is one of the key cultural and artistic hubs of Tehran. Positioned between Hejab Street and Keshavarz Boulevard, and adjacent to the Carpet Museum, its strategic location makes it one of the most attractive and accessible cultural destinations in the city. Amirabad Street, serving as a major thoroughfare in Tehran, connects various neighborhoods, while the proximity to the Tehran Carpet Museum and the bazaars around Laleh Park further enhances the appeal and visitor traffic of the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Laleh Park, spanning 35 hectares, is one of Tehran's largest parks, established in 1966 (1345 SH). Previously known as Jalalieh Garden, it was used for equestrian activities and military parades. The park features a variety of plant species, including plane trees, acacias, and pines. In addition to its green spaces and sports facilities such as basketball and volleyball courts, the park houses a puppet theater center, a library, and a mosque. The southeastern section of the park is designed in the style of Japanese gardens, complete with fountains and meandering streams.

Surrounded by dense trees, Laleh Park offers not only a serene and reflective atmosphere but also an artistic charm, enhanced by the presence of the TMoCA. Over the years, the museum's exhibitions, cultural events, and the movement of artists have lent a cultural identity to the area, imbuing the surrounding streets with a sense of significance and respect for art and creativity.

The vicinity of the museum has become a hub for art enthusiasts and students, where art serves as the defining theme. Informal gatherings often transform the space into a vibrant meeting point for sharing ideas, displaying works, and engaging in friendly critiques and discussions. These activities underscore the unique character of the area, which has been shaped by a community dedicated to fostering creativity and cultural exchange. This collective engagement has endowed the surroundings of the museum with a distinctive sense of prestige and identity, making it a focal point for Tehran's artistic community.

The combination of diverse public spaces and seamless pedestrian flow, coupled with the captivating architecture of the TMoCA, attracts a wide array of visitors.

In response to criticisms regarding insufficient interaction between the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art and Laleh Park, Kamran Diba clarified that the museum was originally conceived with the park's environment and context in mind. He explained that the rooflines of the museum were intentionally sloped downward to establish a harmonious visual connection with the park's greenery, especially from the west and north sides. Diba emphasized that during the museum's construction, a deliberate functional and visual relationship between the building and the park was achieved. However, post-construction environmental changes and poor management disrupted this connection. (Shirazi, 2018: 106*).* Issues such as converting parts of the park into rest areas, picnic spots, and parking lots, as well as the loss of numerous original trees due to inadequate maintenance, undermined the visual and functional integration initially envisioned. Diba stressed that these problems emerged after the museum's completion and were unrelated to its design.

His explanation underscores that fostering interaction between the museum and Laleh Park was a fundamental goal of the project. The museum's architecture was thoughtfully planned to complement its surroundings, but subsequent alterations and neglect weakened the intended connection between the two

spaces. This highlights the importance of consistent environmental stewardship to preserve the synergy between cultural institutions and their natural settings.

Art and architecture have always been pivotal in shaping identity and driving societal transformations, serving as powerful tools for conveying cultural messages and influencing communities. In the contemporary era, museum architecture has become a vital platform for connecting art and society, profoundly shaping cultural narratives and enriching human experience. Within this framework, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, designed by the renowned architect Kamran Diba, stands as a remarkable example of the intricate relationship between art and contemporary architecture.

The museum is a quintessential representation of critical regionalism, making it one of the most distinguished examples of this architectural approach in Iran and the Middle East. Its design exemplifies the potential and relevance of critical regionalism, showcasing its ability to bridge cultural heritage with modernist innovation while affirming its feasibility and necessity.

This building offers an indirect yet profound interpretation of the past, weaving traditional elements into a modern composition. While the overall design is distinctly contemporary, it is deeply rooted in the geometry of Iranian architectural traditions. The light catchers reinterpret the traditional *badgirs* (windcatchers) of central Iran, while the use of exposed concrete and roof patterns evokes the monolithic textures of adobe bricks and roofing found in historic Iranian cities. At its core lies a central courtyard—a reimagined version of the archetypal Iranian courtyard—serving as the heart of the complex and organizing all surrounding spaces into an introverted microcosm, distinct from its external environment.

The building also highlights the craftsmanship of its construction. Exposed façades reveal the construction techniques, while the layered elevations showcase a hierarchy of materials, transitioning from stonework to concrete and glass. The structure engages the body and senses profoundly, encouraging visitors to experience its design through movement—walking through galleries, navigating ramps, and perceiving the subtle interplay of sound, texture, and light.

The spatial experience of this modern building, functioning as a gallery for contemporary art, propels visitors forward into a modern context while grounding them in a dialogue with tradition. It bridges the old and the new, demonstrating the enduring relevance of traditional architectural principles in a contemporary framework.

Having evident references to the works of renowned architects Louis Kahn, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright, with particular emphasis on Josep Lluís Sert,, these modernist influences are harmoniously blended with the traditional rooftop designs characteristic of Iran’s desert cities, creating a unique architectural language. Diba describes its modern design as unparalleled in Arab and Muslim countries. The museum’s layout and functional elements were also inspired by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, which informed its structure and organization. (Khani-Zadeh, 2013: 104)

The TMoCA has two entrances: the main entrance from Kargar Street and a secondary entrance from Laleh Park, which is designated for service purposes. The museum’s layout includes a central hall, exhibition spaces, a meeting hall, a library, a bookshop, a dining area, as well as administrative and service sections. The museum is divided into two main areas: the enclosed spaces and the central courtyard. The enclosed area is designed in a circular layout with seven main spaces. The galleries are designed to ensure that visitors can engage with the artworks in the most effective way possible.

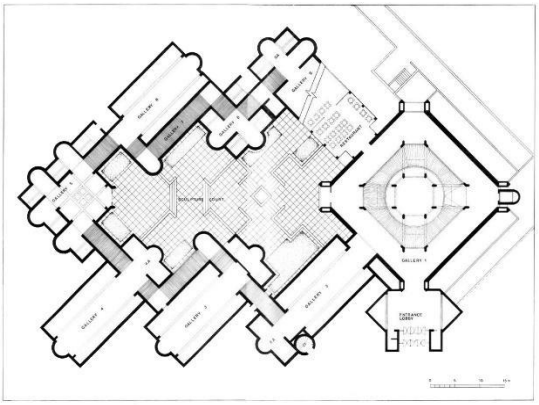


Figure 12. *Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art plan.*

The main hall of the museum, which serves as the starting and ending point for visitors, is octagonal and features a tall vaulted ceiling with large skylights. This hall is connected to various spaces within the museum, including the entrance, galleries, lower floor, library, restaurant, and other areas. At the center of the museum, at the lowest point, there is a space designed similar to traditional Iranian vestibules (hashtis), with a pool in the center, styled after Iranian courtyard ponds .

The central courtyard of the museum has an irregular shape and is connected to Galleries 1 and 5 through glass doors. At the end of the visitor route in the museum, there is a large, shining oil pool, which serves as the symbol of the TMoCA. This pool, a legacy of Japanese artist Noriyuki Haraguchi, is filled with 5,000 liters of used oil and has been permanently displayed in the museum since its opening in 1977 (1356 SH).

Over the years, it has become a symbolic element of the museum and a shared memory for all who visit.
The design of the museum reflects a deep engagement with Iranian cultural traditions, offering a platform for continuous reinterpretation of the past through modern forms and methods. This approach fosters what can be described as a "dialectic of presence,"(Shirazi, 2018: 87) where elements of the old and new, the specific and the universal, and place and space coexist in a balanced and dynamic relationship.

Gallery One exemplifies this dialectic. Its design draws inspiration from the traditional Iranian *chaharsoo* (a four-sided bazaar intersection), creating a sense of movement and interaction akin to the flow of people in these historic spaces. By seamlessly blending cultural memory with contemporary design, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art serves as a space where tradition and innovation are harmoniously intertwined, inviting visitors to experience a dialogue between the past and the present.

In this dialectic, a continuous interaction unfolds between two opposing poles—tradition and modernity—neither of which fully dominates the other. Instead of fostering tension or passivity, the design creates a space for dialogue and active participation, inviting users to reflect and engage. This reconciliation generates a space-in-between" (Shirazi: 2018) that simultaneously preserves the memory of tradition while emphasizing the presence of contemporary elements in a fresh and innovative manner.

Diba describes this simultaneous presence as a dialectical process. He explains that his architecture consistently aims to merge tradition and modernism through a dynamic interaction (Diba, 2010: 68). According to Diba, tradition on its own risks stifling creativity, while unchecked progressivism threatens to sever ties with cultural roots. In Iran, he argues, the key is to harmonize these two modes of existence. The resulting fusion generates a dynamic tension between old and new, perceptible to visitors as they experience the memory of the past reimagined in a contemporary environment.

According to Diba, the interior spaces of the museum enhance the connection between humans and their activities. (Moieni, Roazbeh, Biglari & Peyhani, 2016: 4) The open spaces and corridors, which gently curve through the museum and lead to the galleries, have effectively created such an environment.

These concepts are also reflected in the museum's exterior and facade. The permanent collection of the TMoCA includes beautiful and unique sculptures in the Sculpture Garden, which attract the attention of visitors and art enthusiasts, sparking their curiosity. The Sculpture Garden features valuable and beautiful sculptures by contemporary artists such as Henry Moore, Alberto Giacometti, and Parviz Tanavoli, transforming the surrounding green space into a sculpture park.



Figure 13. *Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art(TMoCA)-1970.*

The form of the TMoCA is a blend of traditional and modern architecture, with a unique identity that creates a captivating and beautiful urban image in the viewer's mind. The museum building is designed at a 45-degree angle to the main street, and the skylights are oriented toward the northeast to reduce direct sunlight exposure. The design of the structure is inspired by traditional buildings from Iran's hot and dry regions, with the skylights resembling Iranian wind catchers, and the building slightly recessed into the ground, showcasing a representation of Iran's desert architecture (Khani-Zadeh & Ehsani-Moayed, 2014: 96).

The materials used in the building's facade include rough-cut orange stones and light-colored concrete, which, in combination with the skylights, give the museum a traditional and solid appearance. These materials evoke the adobe architecture of Iran's desert regions. The choice of coarse stones and the use of circular forms in the facade are inspired by the works of prominent 20th-century architects such as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright (Khani-Zadeh & Ehsani-Moayed, 2014: 98). Diba has aimed to create a balance between traditions and innovations that is both connected to Iranian identity and modernity.



Figure 14. Materials used in the TMoCA's façade.

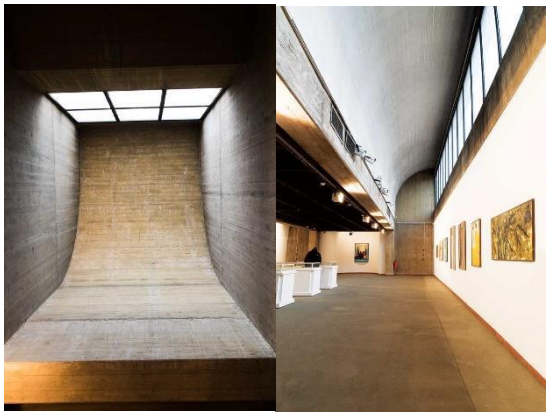


Figure 15. Skylights are oriented toward the northeast to reduce direct sunlight exposure-TmoCA.

The museum's short stairs are designed in accordance with the principles of Iranian architecture, with movement between them gradually guiding the viewer's gaze toward the ceiling and architectural details, creating harmony and proportions in the exterior space that convey a sense of grandeur and magnificence. Even the museum's exterior, with its sculpture garden and statues, promotes cultural and artistic values while attracting the attention of passersby.

The TMoCA has become a cultural and artistic space that introduces the audience to the history of Iranian architecture and contemporary global architecture, while also showcasing a sense of belonging to a space with Iranian identity (Khani-Zadeh & Ehsani-Moayed, 2014: 103).

The TMoCA, while recognized as one of the symbols of modern architecture in Iran, has faced criticism regarding the authenticity and creativity of its design. Some parts of the building, particularly the curved towers, resemble global modern architectural works more than they reflect traditional Iranian wind catchers.

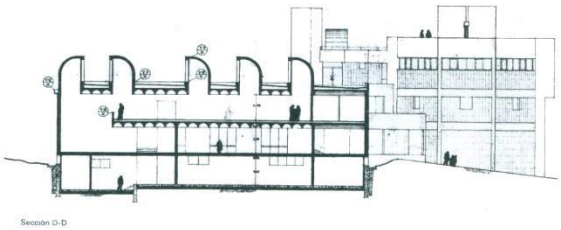


Figure 16. *Curved towers in TMoCA's section.*

These towers were primarily designed to provide natural light and, rather than functioning like wind catchers, they serve only as a poetic interpretation of them. Additionally, similarities can be observed between the design of this museum and famous works such as the Joan Miró Foundation in Barcelona and the Fondation Maeght in Nice, France, further highlighting the influence of global architectural trends.

While some traditional elements are visible in the museum's design, these efforts resemble more of a superficial symbolism rather than an innovative reinterpretation of traditional Iranian architecture. As a result, instead of creating a native architectural language, the building has become a version of global modern architecture with local influences.(Borbor,personal interview,April 22,2018)

Another criticism of the architecture during the Pahlavi era is the excessive focus on elites and the neglect of public needs. In the case of the TMoCA, the emphasis on elites seems logical, as the museum specifically focuses on showcasing modern art, and its design is intended to attract artists and a particular audience. However, this focus on a specific group of society may lead the general public to feel that the space is not for them, preventing them from fully benefiting from its cultural opportunities.

From a functional perspective, the TMoCA faces challenges that impact its exhibition and artistic interactions. One such challenge is the lack of flexibility in its interior space. The design of the space is not suitable for displaying modern and contemporary artworks with unconventional dimensions or large installations. Fixed walls and predetermined pathways create limitations in adjusting the space. The absence of modular or adaptable spaces, which are essential for experimental or multimedia exhibitions, is considered a functional weakness of the museum. Furthermore, the museum's architecture lacks sufficient space for social interaction. Today, creating spaces for social interaction, such as cafes and multipurpose halls, is essential in contemporary museums. In the TMoCA, these spaces are notably absent, which could reduce opportunities for idea exchange and interaction among visitors.

Regarding the choice of materials, the TMoCA is generally compatible with the climatic conditions of Iran, and its design aligns with the characteristics of modern art. However, the building's design could have embraced a more modern atmosphere by incorporating a greater use of newer materials or techniques. Such an approach could have been more in harmony with the nature of contemporary art and the museum's goal of showcasing this art, providing a more innovative appearance to the building.

Ultimately, despite all these criticisms, the TMoCA has managed to create a distinctive and influential space in the world of art as an important cultural and artistic center. With its unique approach, the museum has been able to meet modern requirements while maintaining loyalty to Iran's indigenous identity. However, in terms of functionality, there are still potential areas for improvement in certain aspects.

6. EPILOGUE

Contemporary Iranian architecture often navigates the delicate balance between tradition and modernity. While preserving cultural and historical identity remains a priority, meeting the evolving demands of modern society presents an ongoing challenge for architects and urban planners. In addressing this duality, concepts like "space-in-between" and the theory of critical regionalism offer valuable frameworks for creating architecture that harmonizes these contrasting needs.

TMoCA, envisioned by Farah Pahlavi and designed by Kamran Diba, exemplifies this approach. By establishing a symbolic connection between the past and present, the museum functions as a "space-in-between", inviting visitors and passersby to engage with the rich dimensions of Iranian culture alongside contemporary art.

The museum's strategic location and innovative design have established it as more than just a venue for contemporary art—it is a space that encourages social and cultural interaction. Serving as a "space-in-between," it exemplifies how architecture can be a powerful medium for redefining cultural identity in an increasingly globalized world. Through the principles of critical regionalism, Diba created a space where tradition and modernity engage in a meaningful dialogue, offering visitors a profound and multifaceted experience that blends nostalgia with renewal.

In recent decades, Iranian architecture and urban planning have faced challenges such as placelessness and a growing detachment from local identity. These issues highlight the critical need to revisit the concept of "place." Critical regionalism, with its focus on creatively reinterpreting local elements within a modern framework, still provides an effective response. Enhancing local and historical features while incorporating modern technologies intelligently offers a balanced approach to contemporary Iranian architecture. By avoiding the extremes of imitating traditional forms or unconditionally adopting modernism, this strategy creates spaces that address the needs of contemporary society while maintaining a strong connection to cultural and historical roots.

Despite challenges such as globalization and rapid social transformation, contemporary Iranian architectural heritage retains significant potential for creating "space-in-between." These spaces bridge the past and future, tradition and modernity, and the local and global, offering a renewed vision for Iranian design in the modern era.

TMoCA redefines cultural identity within a global framework. Recent restoration efforts have focused on preserving the building's architecture and safeguarding its invaluable collections, reflecting a commitment to Iran's cultural heritage. However, constraints such as limited budgets, management issues, and socio-political influences have occasionally disrupted the museum's programs.

The museum continues to reinforce its role as a bridge between Iranian and global art. The 2024 exhibition *Eye to Eye*, centered on portraiture in modern and contemporary art, is one prime example. Featuring over 120 works by renowned artists such as Francis Bacon, Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, and Andy Warhol alongside Iranian masters like Kamal-ol-Molk and Bahman Mohassess, the exhibition has drawn unprecedented interest, resulting in long queues and extended viewing dates.

With its rich history and unparalleled collection, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art holds immense potential to become a leading art hub in the Middle East. Through strategic planning, modern technologies, and global collaborations, the museum can further bridge traditional and contemporary Iranian art with the

art of the wider world. By blending memory with inspiration, the museum creates a timeless dialogue that continues to inspire and connect diverse audiences, serving as a cultural and architectural landmark in Iran and beyond.

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