

The Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the Construction of Iranian National Identity in the Interwar Era: The Architecture of André Godard

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The story of new Iran started in 1921 when after a dark period of socio-political denigration, strong nationalist sentiments resulted in coup d'état by a charismatic military leader, Reza Shah, who became the new Iranian ruler in 1926. When Reza Shah seized power, motivated by the elite, he immediately embarked on constructing Iran's national identity and international prestige and called for intensive programs of reforms. For achieving his nationalistic goals, however, media of expression was needed, one of the most significant of those was indeed architecture. As a result, Western-educated architects started travelling to Iran and were officially employed by the Iranian government for construction purposes. They replaced the traditional Iranian architect (me'mar) and became agents of change in charge of modernizing the appearance of the country and instilling it with a desired national identity. Due to the long-lasting Franco-Iranian cultural relationship, Beaux-Arts diplômés became among the most significant architects of the state, among whom André Godard was the first Beaux-Arts architect who worked for the Iranian government for years and critically contributed to the revitalization of Iranian national identity through architecture as well as dissemination of Beaux-Arts ideas in Iran. This article, by referring to the interwar architecture of André Godard, will unveil the critical contribution of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, its architecture and architectural education, in the construction of Iranian national identity during the interwar era through architecture, and the way it was modified and transplanted in the Iranian context of that time.

Keywords: Iranian nationalism; architecture and identity; Iranian interwar architecture; Ecole des Beaux-Arts; Beaux-Arts education; André Godard

André Godard, a French architect and archeologist, was an influential graduate of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts who played an unforgettable role in bringing a Western-based architecture to Iran. However, his architecture was produced in an era of Iranian nationalism when most Western products were subjected to a nationalist modification. Recently, significant scholarly activity has given attention to André Godard's works or the connection between Iranian national identity and architecture, in which Godard's architecture is always an integral part. However, analysis of a significant aspect of his work, which vitally contributed to the creation of his architecture, is still unexplored in scholarly texts. That critical gap is, in fact, the agency of his education at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and the way the Beaux-Arts' design method and doctrine assisted him in the expression of Iranian national identity through architecture. This paper, therefore, aims at unearthing the significant influence of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Godard's architectural expression during the reign of Reza Shah (1926-41). However, before digging into Godard's architecture it is necessary to clarify the nature of Iranian interwar nationalism, the connection between nationalism and architecture, as well as the Beaux-Arts' design methods and the way it could establish connections to history and tradition.

History and Nationalism

Until the early nineteenth century, all golden ages in Iranian history were the product of natural growth of national sentiments rising from within Iran. From the nineteenth century on, however, European penetration into the Iranian lands caused a rupture in the natural evolution of the Iranian mind. While the Renaissance was directing Europe towards an uninterrupted path of modernization, Iran was experiencing an era of downfall and soon became a destination for the colonial ambitions of superpowers. As a result, Iranians gradually became conscious of their backward position in the world's equation and found themselves obliged to resort to learning Western science and technology in order to survive.

Meanwhile, from the early nineteenth century topics such as racism, national and historical consciousness received great attention by European scholars. From the beginning of discussions concerning these issues, Iran was at the centre of attention. The civilization of pre-Islamic Iran and the Aryan race of its people proved to be capable of aiding Europeans to invent an "ancient proto-European civilization."¹ The result was that

¹ Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 3.

Iranians gradually became aware of the grandeur of their past and reached the belief that they deserve equal respect as those people of the West.²

² Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964), 29.

The consequence of the events of the nineteenth century was the rise of Iranian nationalism, the first substantial manifestation of which was the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. However, the constitutional movement proved to be incapable of creating significant change. It lacked a strong social base and soon became the victim of more direct interference by European powers in Iranian affairs. The defeat of the first national movement of twentieth century Iran fired intellectuals' demands for the rise of a strong leader to unify Iran, revitalize its national identity, and direct the country towards Western modernity. That leader turned out to be Reza Shah, a military leader in the Persian army, who organized the Coup d'état of 1921, crowned himself monarch by 1926 and established a dictatorship. It was only during this new era that the nationalist demands of reform-minded Iranians could be materialized, the trends of which were based on two paradoxical notions: a desire for wholeheartedly borrowing from the West while also trying to revitalize their own identity by making a return to Iranian history.

Although traits of Iranian nationalism are usually compared by scholars to that of Turkey where Atatürk aimed at constructing a new capital with a new identity, the result was less successful. Iranian intellectuals had to provide an answer to one of the most complicated questions in the shortest period: to what extent should Iran absorb Western civilization and to what extent should the nation maintain its own? It was for the first time that this question required a concrete solution. However, a problem appeared when it became clear that in Iran "there was no general acquaintance with the West, no gradual preparation for modernization to make it easier and almost consistent, nor was there any possibility of a radical transformation, as in Japan."³ Therefore, the solution to the confluence of the West and the East in Iran remained an ambiguous one throughout the interwar period. The result was that most products of the era remained at a superficial level and could not establish a long-lasting influence on the mind of Iranians.⁴

³ William S. Haas, *Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), 174.

⁴ M. Reza Ghods, "Government and Society in Iran, 1926-34," *Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 2 (1991): 219-30.

Architecture and Identity

From the ancient period onward in Iranian history, architecture was an inseparable part of the identity of the land. Throughout different periods in Iranian history, Iranian architecture underwent a gradual path of progress along with culture,

religion, and traditions embedded in society. However, the unwanted events of the nineteenth century and the influence of the West gradually broke that continuous path. During Reza Shah's era, the rise of Iranian nationalism could once again lead to close links between architecture and identity. Architecture, which held a great portion of the identity of the past, was considered of vital potential for the state through which the grandeur of Iran's past and its ancient civilization could be remembered. However, the language of new architecture had not much in common with traditional Iranian architecture. Architecture became a means for fulfilling the desires of those reform-minded elites who were seeking modernization along Western lines. Traditional architects—who had learned architecture traditionally from a master—were conceived as incapable by the state and replaced by Western-educated architects (both foreigners and Iranians). Architecture, therefore, was not any more the manifestation of the mysteries of the land, but a profession the principles of which had to be learned from Europe.

The arrival of a Western-based architecture to Iran, accompanied by the ambiguous nationalism of the time, turned architecture into a sophisticated product of the era. Throughout the whole period, there existed neither a prescription for architects to follow, nor an architectural publication for the dissemination of architectural ideas, nor an agreement among architects over the best means for architectural modernization. As a result, a definite and homogeneous way of expressing identity through architecture could never be established. Architecture turned into an object of “shaky nature” which could jump from one style to the other depending on the aim and nature of each individual project. For instance, some architectural works of high cultural and national significance were mostly connected, at least symbolically, to history, a reminder of a memory from the past while the architecture of the bourgeoisie and highly secular institutions were competing with the avant-garde architectural movements of Europe.

However, the most important factor in determining the appearance and the depth of connection of a building to the Iranian past was the individual architect in charge. Those architects who were educated in Europe, each with a different knowledge of Iranian architecture and diverse educational background, could borrow concepts from Iranian architecture and elements from two poles of Islamic and pre-Islamic Iran (or both), or could ignore connections to Iranian architecture and imitate the West. The deeper the architect's knowledge

of Iranian architectural history and concepts, the better that architect would be able to juxtapose Western and Eastern ideas and establish connections to Iranian tradition.

The Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the Traditions of Other Lands

Even though the Ecole des Beaux-Arts was a European school of architecture based on a Western ideology, it provided students with possibilities to absorb and apply architectural traditions of other countries within their projects. The reason was that the Ecole did not aim at providing students with an architectural style. As Pai has highlighted, the Beaux-Arts system was not “local and specific” but a “method” through which the student could attack and study any design problem.⁵

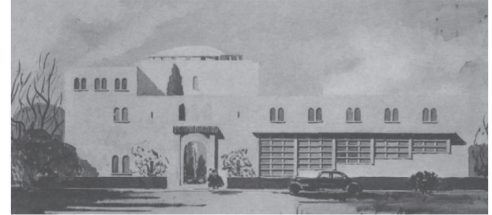
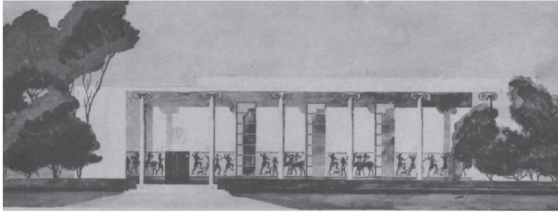
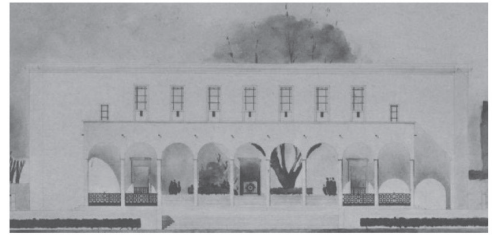
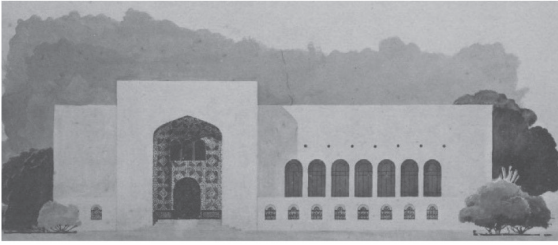
5 Hyungmin Pai, *The Portfolio and the Diagram* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 71-72.

The Beaux-Arts architectural education aimed at teaching students principles of composition. Most architectural problems at the Ecole were mere exercises of composition initiated with an *esquisse en loge* (sketch executed in small cubicles) where the preliminary ideas of composition would be generated. The preliminary ideas executed *en loge* were called *parti* (choices/ to make a choice), a figure or diagram that highlighted “the main characteristics of a program’s distribution of an ensemble and the axes of composition.”⁶ At the Ecole, a symmetrical *parti* was preferred over an asymmetrical one. The axes that the *parti* generated played a key role in arranging various elements of design as well as determining the dominant element, the focal point, located along the principal axis.⁷ The aim was to single out an appropriate composition that could address all practical and aesthetical requirements of a given program. However, there was a relative freedom on the kind of spaces to be located along those axes, which made it possible to instil into a design, while following the Beaux-Arts’ principles, some spatial characters linked to the traditions of a country.

6 Jacques Lucan, *Composition, Non-Composition* (Lausanne: EPLF Press, 2012), 184.

7 Lucan, *Composition, Non-Composition*, 181-83.

The style, or the character of a building, however, came after composition. Conceiving the Beaux-Arts system as a method left the Beaux-Arts architect with a freedom to shape the exterior facades according to the given program and its assumed location. This approach was apparent in design projects with topics related to the East, in that most award-winning projects were the ones who had applied oriental decorations and elements in their designs (fig. 1). Moreover, by the 1930s the acceptability of modern materials, particularly reinforced concrete, encouraged students to eliminate decorative elements from both interior and exterior and rid their projects more than ever before of



the burden of Western history. This provided plain surfaces which could be embellished with architectural elements and decorations of those countries seeking to construct their national identity. The Beaux-Arts' principles were, therefore, well-suited to the character of Iranian nationalism in the interwar era. A building's outer appearance could jump from one character to the other, and unique architectural spaces could be implemented in a design project, without losing the sense of the Beaux-Arts.

André Godard in Iran

The propagation of Beaux-Arts ideas in Iran was highly indebted to Godard.⁸ Godard studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts from 1901 to 1909. There, he showed a great interest in decorative designs and small-scale projects. Perhaps this was the first motive that persuaded him in 1910 to embark on his career as an archeologist. With the East an archeological hub for the Westerners, Godard departed from Paris in 1910 first to Iraq, then to Egypt and in 1922 to Afghanistan where he became the director of Institut française d'archéologie.⁹ Godard's next destination was Iran, to which he travelled as the result of both Iranian nationalism and a long-lasting Franco-Iranian cultural relationship.

The Franco-Iranian cultural relationship was initiated in the early nineteenth century first through education and was later intensified through the travel of French archeologists to Iran. By the start of Reza Shah's reign, nationalist sentiments changed Iran's foreign policies which fired reactions against

Figure 1. Expression of different characters by students of different nationalities for the same design project: A School of Oriental Language (1935). *Les médailles des concours d'architecture de l'École Nationale des Beaux-Arts de l'Année Scolaire 1935-36* (Paris: A. Vincent, 1936), pl 107-11.

⁸ Godard's role in disseminating Beaux-Arts ideas culminated in 1940 when he contributed to the foundation of a school of fine arts in Iran modelled after the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and became its director.

⁹ Victor Daniel, et al., *Memari-ye André Godard* [Architecture of André Godard] (Tehran: Victor Daniel., 2015), 16-23.

French archeological rights in Iran. The key event that led to the flow of the Beaux-Arts graduates to Iran happened in 1927 when to compensate the French for the cancellation of the 1900 archeological convention between the Iranian and the French governments—which granted to the French the exclusive right of archeological excavation throughout Iran—the Iranians agreed on the employment of a French citizen as the first director of the “Antiquities Service of Iran.”¹⁰ That nominated Frenchman, chosen by the French government, was André Godard.¹¹ He travelled to Iran in 1928, remained in his post until 1953 and returned to France in 1960.

Godard’s arrival in Iran was welcomed by Iranian nationalists who were enthusiastically in favour of recovering Iran’s cultural identity. He travelled to Iran with a twenty-year contract on November 19, 1928, as an archeologist, but soon became known as an expert of the history of Iranian art and architecture. Besides his archeological responsibilities, Godard became in charge for the restoration and documentation of many historical buildings, the results of which were published in books and various articles. Years of studying Iranian art also made him believe that “Iranian architecture is the greatest and most representative of Iranian arts.”¹² Gradually, he also developed a feeling for Iranian architecture. He even settled in a traditionally designed Iranian house surrounded by an Iranian garden and wrote an article about it.¹³ Within the article he expressed his respect for and adherence to traditional Iranian architecture:

*Eventually, a day will come that our houses will traverse a path to perfection ... If one day, our miserable world could retrieve its lost peace, the beauty, peace and comfort of the past will be recognized. At that moment, this small house of Jamal Abad will regain its fame [...].*¹⁴

Godard’s historical knowledge of Iranian architecture made him an architect capable of addressing challenging and sudden confluence of Iranian nationalism and demands for Western modernity and, therefore, working towards the creation of a new architecture suitable for the Iranian context of the time.

The Architecture of André Godard

Even though Godard’s primary reason to travel to Iran was not to practice architecture, by the early 1930s, when the Iranian economy flourished and the State’s involvement in cultural affairs increased, he became in charge of some of the greatest

10 Kamyar Abdi, “Nationalism, Politics, and the Development of Archaeology in Iran,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, no. 1 (2001): 51-76.

11 Following Godard, three other influential Beaux-Arts graduates, two Frenchmen and one Iranian travelled, to Iran during the 1930s.

12 André Godard, *The Art of Iran*, trans. Michael Rogers (New York, Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), translator’s note on book cover.

13 André Godard, et al., *Athar-e Iran* [Iranian heritage], trans. Abolhassan Moghadam, (Mashhad: Astan-e Qods-e Razavi, 1992), 251-61.

14 Godard, et al., *Athar-e Iran*, 255.

architectural projects. However, the main factor that led Godard to extend his career beyond archeology and scholarly activities was indeed the new Minister of Education, Ali Asghar Hekmat (in office from 1933 to 1938), with whom Godard could establish a close relationship.¹⁵ It was during Hekmat's tenure as the Minister of Education that Godard was appointed as the chief architect of three of the most sensitive cultural and national projects of the state, namely the National Museum of Iran, the University of Tehran, and Hafez Mausoleum.

As specified before, there was no architectural movement, or what in Europe was called “style,” existing in Iran. The relative freedom of architectural expression in Iran left Godard with a challenging question: what must be his approach towards creating a new architecture in Iran? The answer to this question was embedded in his education at the Ecole. In all Godard's designs in Iran, the character of buildings greatly matches the function, purpose, as well as cultural and national values embedded in that particular project.

The National Museum of Iran

The foundation of a national museum was one of the oldest demands of Iranian elites: a project of national significance, to restore and exhibit Iran's ancient grandeur and civilization. The idea of establishing a museum first appeared in 1922. It was among the objectives of a group of nationalist Iranians who had founded the Society of National Heritage, aimed at protecting Iran's cultural heritage, restoring historical buildings, as well as venerating cultural figures of Iranian history. However, first

¹⁵ At first, in September 1933, Hekmat was appointed as the acting minister of education, and was promoted in March 1935 to the Minister of Education. With regard to their relationship, in Hekmat's account of his trips—published in 2004 by the society of Cultural Heritage—Godard's name appears frequently as the one accompanying Hekmat in most of his trips to different provinces for the inauguration of new schools or site inspections for those under construction.

Figure 2. André Godard, National Museum of Iran. Southern elevation. (Photograph by author.)



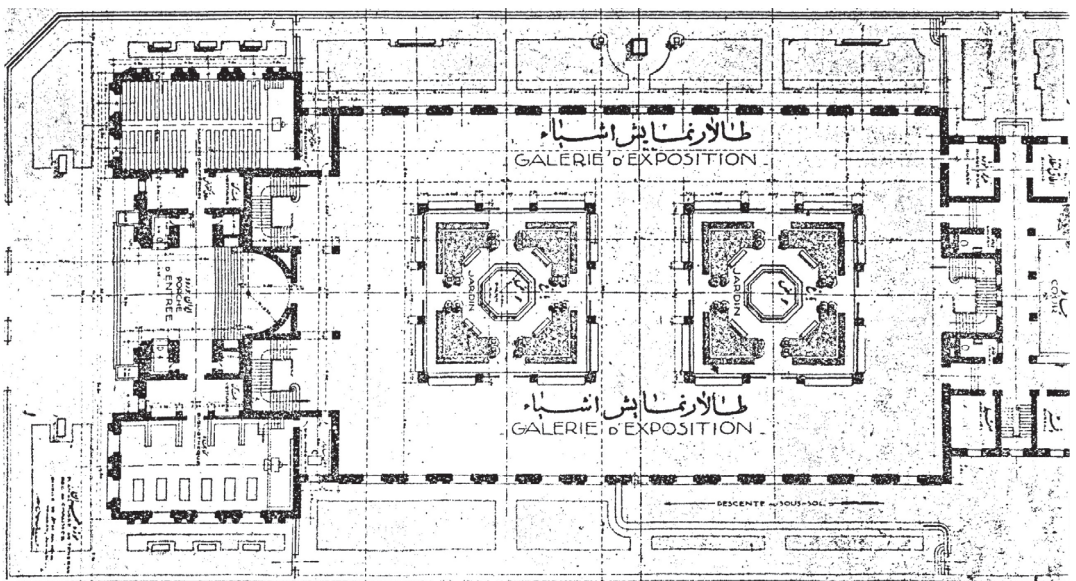
steps towards its materialization were postponed until 1933, only a few days after Hekmat's new post in the Ministry of education, when Godard was appointed as the architect in charge of designing a national museum, this time as an asset of the Ministry of Education.¹⁶

16 Daniel, et al., *Memari-ye André Godard*, 267.

The national importance of the museum had made its Iranian character almost an inevitable aspect of its architecture. The main architectural character of this project was the direct result of Godard's knowledge of Iranian architecture as well as the function of the museum itself. The museum was to be a modern building mostly for exhibiting archeological findings related to the pre-Islamic period; a driver for Godard to make dominant a pre-Islamic character in the design of the museum. In many other projects of the state, such as Iran's national bank, architectural elements were taken from the Achaemenid era (550 BC to 330 BC)—an era in pre-Islamic Iran, when Iran was one of the biggest empires of the world praised by many Western scholars and archeologists. In this project, Godard made a direct return to the Sasanian (224 AD to 651 AD) architecture, to the main elevation of Ctesiphon palace, as he believed it was from the Sassanid era that Iranian architecture revitalized and the continuous path of architectural development began (fig. 2).¹⁷ In the plan, while following the symmetry and axiality rooted in the Beaux-Arts, spaces of Iranian character were also included. Placing two courtyards designed with small pools and gardens, and entrance *ivan* (a vaulted space that opens on one side) on the central axis (where according to the Beaux-Arts' principles the dominant element of design is located), as well as the limited

17 Godard, *Art of Iran*, 179-95.

Figure 3. Plan of the National Museum with two courtyards and a monumental entrance along the central axes. Reproduced plan from *Talim va Tarbiat* magazine (Tehran: Ministry of Education, 1934), 337.



brick decorations on the outer elevations, was an endeavor to instill into his design an Iranian spirit (fig. 3).

The University of Tehran

Education transformations in the Reza Shah era mark the beginning of a systematic attempt to counter traditional Iranian schooling governed by the clergy, in favour of a secular and Western-based educational program and curriculum to be modelled after European schools and universities. The establishment of a university was the culmination of Iranian intellectuals' attempts to further the development of higher education in Iran. From the rise of Reza Shah to power, the establishment of a university was on the elites' agenda but was postponed until early 1934 when the proposal for the foundation of a university was presented to the Shah by Hekmat and approved. The arrangement and educational programs of the university were mostly modelled after French systems and academic staff consisted of both Western-educated Iranians and foreigners.¹⁸

When the proposal of a university was approved by the Shah, Godard was immediately entrusted by Hekmat as its architect. Godard's occupation with other responsibilities did not allow him to go further than the design of the site plan and a minor building attached to the School of Medicine, but he was the one who determined the configuration of the campus buildings and, more importantly, their character. The Western spirit of the university as a centre for spreading Western science and a hub of Westernized intellectuals had convinced Godard that

18 An example of the French influence was the Faculty of Fine-Arts established in 1940, directed by Godard and modelled after the architectural education of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

Figure 4. The School of Medicine, general configuration defined by Godard, designed by Maxime Siroux, a Beaux-Arts graduate. (Photograph courtesy of the Central Library of Tehran University, Section of Digital Archive.)



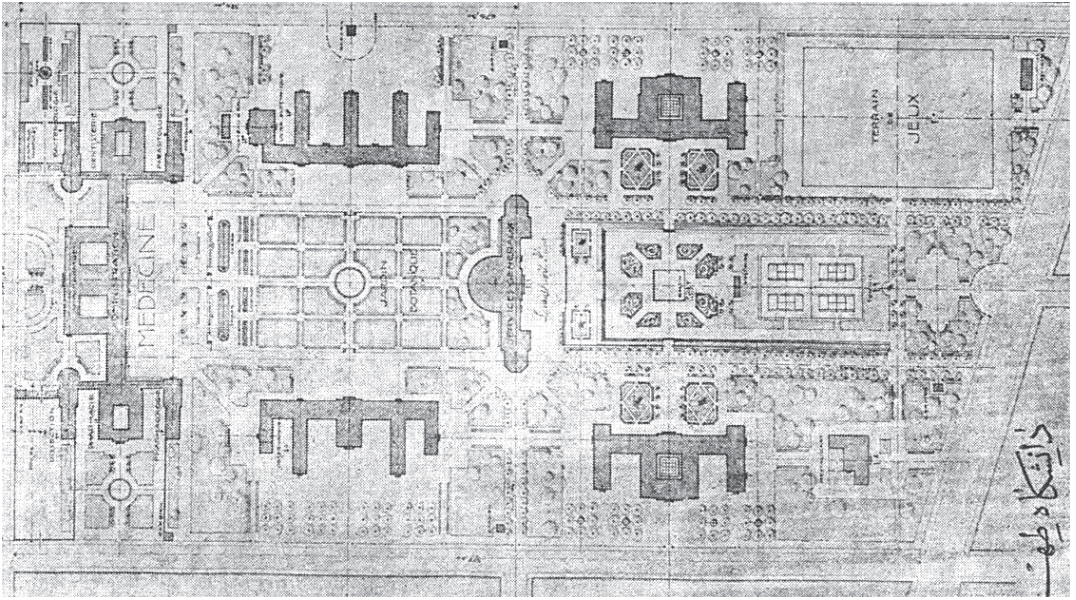


Figure 5. The site plan of the University of Tehran designed by Godard (Courtesy of the Central Library of Tehran University, Section of Digital Archive.)

the University must be of a European character: monumental, but undecorated classicism, with cement facades. This was an architectural approach propagated by the Ecole during the 1930s without any explicit references to Iranian architecture (fig. 4).¹⁹ However, this did not mean that the University was completely deprived of spaces familiar to Iranians. The design of the University campus as a garden, the implementation of courtyards and semi-enclosed yards wherever possible, as well as limited water pools, were all limited returns to Iranian tradition (fig. 5).

19 The character of the buildings of the University greatly matches the simplified classicism propagated from the Ecole during the interwar era in France. Examples are the *Musée d'Art Moderne* and the *Palais de Chaillot* both designed in 1935 in Paris.

The Mausoleum of Hafez

Hafez was one of the greatest and most loved Iranian poets of the Islamic era, who did not stand only as an essential figure in the Iranian history, but his poems were of profound religious and spiritual value to many Iranians. The construction of his mausoleum was a part of the project for venerating Iranian cultural figures initiated by the Society of National Heritage. In 1934, however, the society was dismissed by the Shah, and most of its projects were handed to the Ministry of Education directed by Hekmat.

Hekmat entrusted the design of the mausoleum to Godard in around mid-1935. In this project, Godard, in constructing a character for a mausoleum representing an Islamic poet of a divine character, referred mostly to Islamic elements such as a dome decorated with geometrical tile-work and the muqarnas



Figure 6. The central construction at the Mausoleum of Hafez under which the tomb of Hafez is located. (Photograph by author.)

decoration of column capitals (fig. 6). More important than that is the spiritual atmosphere of the place, which for Godard seems to have been a significant factor in the design of the mausoleum. Godard's conception of the mausoleum was not only in line with Beaux-Arts principles but had a lot in common with Iranian gardens as "representative of paradise on earth." The entrance to the mausoleum would lead the spectator to a garden of Iranian character with two linear pools surrounded by a profusion of trees and flowers. Passing through the garden, one would face a linear *ivan* (porch) composed of twenty decorated columns. The next space is the courtyard, decorated with small gardens, at the centre of which the building of mausoleum and the tomb is located.

Conclusion

Interwar Iran, from the time Reza Shah took power, marked a new era in which nationalist demands materialized that borrowed concepts from Europe. However, the quick pace

of change, as well as the ambiguity that existed in Iranian nationalism, did not allow the creation of a coherent architectural style or movement towards modernity. On the other hand, the Ecole did not offer an architectural style and expression of character in architectural design that was the matter of personal preferences defined according to the function and location of a design project. Godard was the first influential Beaux-Arts graduate that travelled to Iran, in an era which a new architectural language was demanded. The Beaux-Arts education and knowledge of Iranian architecture allowed Godard to express an Iranian identity in his projects while jumping from one style to the other, considering the function and national significance of each project. Godard's endeavours were indeed the beginning of a new path towards creating an architecture categorized as both modern and Iranian. A path which attracted greater attention in the next decades and which has continued up until today.

Shortening Distances: Spanish Architectural Modernity in International Architecture Journals

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At the end of the 1930s, Spain suffered a Civil War which led to the establishment of a dictatorship that lasted about forty years and whose ideology separated it from the main powers in the West. At the same time, the war had devastated the country's economy and culture, thus further widening the gap between Spain and other developed countries. In the realm of architecture, the Civil War extinguished the budding modernity that had begun to develop in Spain in the 1920s and some of its significant figures, such as Josep Lluís Sert or Antonio Bonet went into exile. In spite of this complex situation, during the 1950s, a new generation of young Spanish architects, aware of their estrangement from European culture, embarked on a search for the modernity that had been denied to them. The results of their efforts started to be manifest even beyond national boundaries, as various international journals began to cover Spanish architecture. For instance, in 1959 L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui applauded "the praiseworthy effort of various architects in the country to reach for an architecture with a contemporary spirit." Spain's presence in the international architecture media continued to grow into the 1960s, with special issues in such journals as Zodiac, Baumeister, Werk, L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, Architectural Review, etc. And by the 1980s, architecture criticism was enthralled by contemporary Spanish architecture. The initial gap appeared to have been bridged. It is important to highlight the role played in this process by some Spanish architects, who, desiring to build bridges and to show Spanish architecture to the world, served as critics or commentators for a variety of international publications. The goal of this paper is to analyze the role played by architecture journals as a means of disseminating and bringing closer together architectural realities that were distant or peripheral, as documented by the Spanish experience between the 1950s and 1980s.

Keywords: Architecture journals; modern Spanish architecture; diffusion; twentieth century