

The Hyphenated Architect

Armenians and Modernist Architecture in Pahlavi Iran

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Abstract In 2016, my initial question for my next book project began with a relatively simple question: Why did many of the indigenous modernist architects come from Iran's religious minorities at the height of Reza Shah's nationalist reign? Or rather, why did so many young professionals from Armenian, Assyrian, Baha'i, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities choose the field of architecture as their career and shape Iran's urban and middle-class environments? I propose that, unlike other nationalist states in the interwar period, the early Pahlavi pragmatic approach to industrialization relied on the segment of Iranian students who were educated in Western-style institutions founded and run by foreign, missionary, and minority private primary and secondary schools.

Keywords Armenian architects. Gabriel Guevrekian. Vardan Hovhannisian. Paul Apcar. Yougenia Aftandilians.

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1 Introduction

It is possible that it was during a warm summer afternoon, amid a sweaty, testosterone-filled basketball game between Le Corbusier, his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, and their friend Gabriel Guevrekian, that the radical idea of *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) was born. According to Guevrekian, these games were a bit awkward because Le Corbusier insisted on wearing his “little wire basket over his good eye” (Johnson, Plautz, Laing 1971, 10). Several years earlier, at age twenty-five, Guevrekian had served as the vice-president of the music section at the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris, where he won the Grand Prix for his Jardin d'Eau et de Lumière. This was followed, in 1926, by the design of his Cubist Garden to complement French architect Robert Mallet-Stevens' Villa Noailles (1928), in Hyeres, southern France (Curtis 1996, 290). His terrace garden for Villa Heim (1930) in Neuilly, for which he also designed the interior and furniture, was completed a year later. In June 1928, Guevrekian co-organized the first meeting of CIAM in the Chateau de la Sarraz, Switzerland, after having introduced the French Swiss patron of the Swiss Werkbund, Hélène de Mandrot, to Le Corbusier (Vitou, Des Houliers, Janneau 1987, 73-76; Mumford 2000, 12).

Twenty-eight architects, not all Europeans as claimed by canonical history, were her guests at the Château de la Sarraz, where they drafted CIAM's manifesto, which aimed to place the new architecture in its “true economic and social environment” (Conrads 1993, 109-13). La Sarraz Declaration outlined their stance on the relationship between architecture and the state. Manifesto point seven: “Architecture's new attitude, according to which it aims of its own volition to re-situate itself within economic reality, renders all claim to official patronage superfluous” (Conrads 1993, 112). Outwardly counterintuitive yet in line with the doctrine of modernism, these architects' determination to situate architecture within a socioeconomic context shaped the discourse that sought to separate design from politics. This call for the profession to divorce from the state, a deceptive rejection of and from politics, endowed political power, ‘of its own volition’, to the modernist architect. Subsequently, prominent architects appealed to heads of state to bring their projects to fruition. Le Corbusier, as Jean-Louis Cohen argues, “systematically tried to create a relationship with leaders above the political machine [...] considering democracy an obstacle to his projects, [preferring] other forms of power” (Cohen, unpublished). The Modern Movement thus mounted an autonomizing discourse, which handed architects the agency to redraft their relationship with political institutions.

From the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, Guevrekian was intensely busy advocating for the modern movement in Europe, seamlessly transcending its rigid and often racist national boundaries and forging connections. Then, as throughout his long and prolific career, he effortlessly shifted from being the francophone ‘Guévrekian’ to the anglophone ‘Guevrekian’, all the while maintaining intimate ties to his Armenian heritage, the ‘Գեվրեկեան’ (Gevrekian) or ‘Գեւրիկեան’ (Gevrikian) family, now rooted in Tehran as the ‘کوركیان’ (Gorkian) family.¹ In 1930, Guevrekian, Mallet-Stevens, Henri Sauvage, Auguste Perret, Francis Jourdain, Pierre Chareau, and André Lurçat cofounded the well-known French architectural journal *L’architecture d’Aujourd’hui*. Guevrekian then joined thirty-two architects in Vienna’s Werkbund exhibition under the direction of the Jewish Austrian and later Swedish architect, Josef Frank. Opened in June 1932, the exhibition received 100,000 visitors and was praised as “the greatest architectural exhibition in Europe.”² In a matter of a few years, Guevrekian had reached such status in the Modern Movement that his minimalist duplex dwelling, as he described as “deux maisons ‘Minimum’” (units 10, 12) was featured at the exhibition’s center with those designed by Richard Neutra (unit 9) and Adolf Loss (units 13, 15, 17, 19) (Guevrekian CV).

By then, Guevrekian was at home in five languages, geographies, and ecocultures, having been born into an Armenian Apostolic family in Istanbul, raised in Tehran, educated in Vienna, and trained in Paris. Guevrekian’s father, Simon, was an Istanbul-born Ottoman-Armenian diamantaire who married Mariam Boli Galstian Guevrekian (1878-1975), a Tehran-born Qajar-Armenian (Hakobian 1975, 3). In Istanbul, they started a family with the 1894 birth of Lyda, followed by that of Gabriel in 1900, in the shadows of Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s Hamidian Massacres (1894-97) in the Armenian-populated Eastern Provinces. The birth of their first son prompted Mariam and Simon to relocate to Tehran, adopt Iranian citizenship, and accept Mozaffar al-Din Shah Qajar’s (r. 1896-1907) invitation to serve as a jewelry expert and royal treasurer at the Golestan Palace in 1903 (Vitou, Des Houliers, Janneau 1987, 19). The Guevrekians counted among the 50,000 who eventually found a haven in Qajar Iran in the years that state violence intensified and culminated in the Armenian

1 Guévrekian, “Curriculum Vitae” (CV) in French in the Private Collection of Simon Guevrekian, Pasadena, California, updated, 2; Guevrekian, “Professional Record” in English in the Private Collection of Simon Guevrekian, Pasadena, California, updated, 1; Hakobian 1975, 3; Tehran’s AWBS 1975, 45-6, 52; Gabriel Guevrekian Papers, University Archives, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

2 The newspaper *Arbeiterzeitung* in particular; see Anna Stuhlpfarrer, Werkbundsiedlung Wien archives online, <http://www.werkbundsiedlung-wien.at/en/exhibition-1932/the-exhibition-as-media-event/>.

Genocide (1915-23), exterminating 1.5 million Ottoman Armenians, along with a comparable total number of Assyrians, Greeks, and other non-dominant communities.

In Tehran, Gabriel attended the Haykazian boys' school (est. 1870 and renamed Kushesh-Davtian in 1934).³ Although in his private papers Guevrekian remains silent on his primary schooling, we know that, as of 1905, Mariam served on the executive board of Tehran's Armenian Women's Benevolent Society (AWBS, est. 1905), a charitable organization whose main charge was to support Tehran's Armenian schools. Haykazian School was the top educational institution supported by AWBS, over which Mariam presided from 1910 to 1917.⁴ At age nine, Gabriel, accompanied by Lyda, was sent to Vienna to complete secondary education. Under Jewish-descent Austrian architect and designer Oskar Strad – a close collaborator of Josef Frank in establishing the Wiener Schule der Architektur (Vienna School of Architecture), Guevrekian began his architecture education in 1915. In 1919, he earned his "diploma" from, as he notes in his annotated curriculum vitae, "l'École d'Architecture et Arts Décoratifs de Vienne" or the "Academy of Applied Arts, Vienna" (Guevrekian CV). He apprenticed in the architectural firm of Strad, led by Austrian architect Alfred Keller and Austrian-Moravian architect Joseph Hoffmann, from 1919 to 1921, before settling in Paris in 1922 to practice in Sauvage's atelier and then partner with Mallet-Stevens.

In October 1933, the Nazi Party shut down the Bauhaus, while CIAM's fourth congress in Moscow, planned for the same year, was canceled. Despite the success of the 1932 exhibition, the Austrian Werkbund dissolved in 1934. The leading architects of the Modern Movement were fleeing Nazi-occupied Europe: Hans Meyer to the USSR in 1930, Josef Frank to Sweden in 1933, Walter Gropius to the UK in 1934 and then to the United States in 1937, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to the United States in 1937. "At the request of the Persian government, I went to Persia," Guevrekian writes, and "was appointed chief architect of the Municipality of Teheran [sic]" (Guevrekian Professional Record). Upon his arrival in April 1933, Tehran was amid a top-down construction boom, which must have seemed a modernist dream come true. Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-41) had demolished large portions of the nineteenth-century Qajar urban fabric, opening a modernist *tabula rasa*. If the tides had turned against

3 Vitou notes that Guevrekian attended "un collège arménien de Téhéran", which is misinterpreted by Khosravi as having attended "the Armenian Junior College in Tehran", an institution that did not exist. See Vitou, Des Houliers, Janneau 1987, 19; Khosravi 2020, 31.

4 On both the English and French version of his resume, Guevrekian skips the years between 1900 and 1919; see Guévrekian, "Curriculum Vitae," 1; and Guevrekian, "Professional Record", 1. On Mariam Boli Guevrekian, see Berberian, Grigor 2025, 101-2.

the avant-garde architects and artists of Europe, in Iran, the state had embarked on the task of industrializing its economy and creating the “modern middle class” (Abrahamian 1982, 33; Grigor 2025a). Iran, a country as large as France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy combined, and as rich as its vast oil reserves, was ruled by a heavy-handed monarch bent on top-down modernization. Iran of the 1930s was indeed a modernist architectural dream come true.

In 2016, my initial question for my current book project was relatively simple: Why did many of the indigenous modernist architects, such as Guevrekian, come from Iran’s religious minorities at the height of Reza Shah’s nationalist regime? Or rather, why did so many young professionals from Armenian, Assyrian, Baha’i, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities choose the field of architecture as their career and shape Iran’s urban and middle-class environments (Grigor 2017)? I propose that, unlike other nationalisms led by autocratic heads of state in the interwar period, the early Pahlavi pragmatic approach to industrialization in the 1920s relied on the segment of Iranian students who were educated in Western-style institutions founded and run by foreign, missionary, and minority private primary and secondary schools. Alongside the children of Qajar aristocracy, the majority of these came from Iran’s religious minorities. This early Pahlavi push for modernization, which embraced the ‘minor’ architects, often women from religious minorities, created an inadvertent affirmative action ecology in which professionals advocated modernist architecture.

2 Interwar Modernists: Guevrekian and Hovhannisian

The forces of reform and resistance to it had earnestly begun during Naser al-Din Shah Qajar’s (r. 1848-1896) long reign. His ambivalent attitude towards the processes of modernization both fueled political instability and laid the institutional structures upon which Pahlavi modernity would expand. In the 1930s, the agendas of the top-down and bottom-up were aligned. Parsi, Armenian, French Catholic, and American missionary primary schools from the 1880s on, the archeological negations of the 1900s that handed digging rights to the French, the 1935 establishment of Tehran University, the construction boom of the interwar period, the Pahlavi state’s aspiration to a modernist bourgeois taste that would foster the secular middle class, and the demand for professional architects by the state bureaucracy and major industries created a unique historical condition conducive to the expansion of the Modern Movement in Iran. The professional Iranian architect, who emerged as the modernist protagonist, was the first to benefit from and shape this unique historical moment. That the ideology of the Modern Movement – represented by the

manifestos of CIAM and the Bauhaus – was founded upon a *discursive* distance from politics, despite its overwhelming dependence on men of power, further advanced the influential, yet seemingly apolitical, stance of these architects in early Pahlavi Iran.

Despite Naserid reforms, Western-style education in Qajar Iran was introduced by foreign missionaries and philanthropic entities, and it remained the preferred form of schooling until the 1970s (Birašk 1997). Active since the nineteenth century, American missionaries had been unsuccessful in converting Muslims. Instead, they managed to attract other religious minorities through Western-style elementary schools. The first five graduates of the American Presbyterian school in 1891 included three Armenians and two Jews. To prevent conversion, the Jewish, Armenian, and Zoroastrian communities established their own private schools during the Constitutional period, which began to compete with Islamic schools in terms of numbers and standards. In March 1922, the Supreme Council on Education “issued forty-eight licenses for Islamic, forty-nine for Armenian, seven for Zoroastrian, and thirty for Jewish schools” (Birašk 1997). In 1879, the first Armenian elementary school was established in Tabriz, which was expanded in 1909 to become the Armenian Central High School. Starting in 1898, the Alliance Israelite Universelle opened a series of Jewish schools in various cities throughout Iran. Wealthy Parsi philanthropists sponsored the Zoroastrian Firuz Bahram (boys/1932 by Jafar Khan Kashiani) and Anushirvan Dadgar (girls/ca. 1935) schools in Tehran.

Starting in December 1934 with Baha’i schools, Reza Shah’s government shut down missionary and minority schools, including Haykazian, in November 1936 (Berberian 2025, 308; Rostam-Kolayi 2008, 2013). Once nationalized and reopened, most of these schools were legislated to enroll all children regardless of religious affiliation. The missionary schools were excellent in strengthening their national reputation among Iran’s middle-class population and began to attract excellent students from secular-leaning families of all backgrounds. Samuel Jordan’s American Presbyterian school was bought by the Iranian government in 1940 to become the famed Alborz College. Others, such as the French Catholic and lay schools, including St. Louis, Alliance Française, Jeanne d’Arc, Institute Maryam, and Lycée Razi, similarly reorganized and continued to operate as top private schools (Hadidi 2000). Most of the Pahlavi political and cultural elite, including almost all the architects presented here, began their education in these minority or missionary schools, where they mingled and formed shared worldviews. By the time Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941-79) took the throne, a new generation of a professional class was emerging.

State violence in the Ottoman and Romanov empires, as well as the gradual influx of Armenian architects into Qajar Iran, meant that by

the time Reza Shah embarked on his massive infrastructural reforms, many Armenian architects were already enlisted in state and private projects as leading architects and engineers. Tabriz welcomed several prominent Western-classical-trained Armenian architects, including the graduate of the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts and chief architect of Yerevan, Alexander Tamanian (1878-1936) and Avetis Ohanianian (1882-1950), after their mass exile, freeing Yerevan with the Bolshevik takeover of the First Republic of Armenia (1918-1920). Ohanianian, a Tomsk Polytechnic University-trained architect-engineer and the former Armenian Minister of Urban Planning, designed Tabriz's main avenue, the Golestan green urban area, and the City Hall [fig. 1].



Figure 1 Avetis Ohanianian and contractor Haj Mohammad, Municipality Building or the City Hall. 1935-39. Tabriz, Iran. Source: private collection of Emmanuel Ohanianian and courtesy of Aida Ohanianian

His children, Victoria (1929-2023) and Emmanuel (1921-2015), later joined other Irano-Armenian architects with their prolific careers. The history of several other early Pahlavi era Irano-Armenian architects - including Royal College of Art-trained architect Margar Galstian (1888-1965, Central Post Office with Tiflis-born Russian architect Nikolai Markov, 1934); Hovhannes Onik Gharibian (Reza Shah's Marble Palace, 1937 in Ramsar, Mazandaran [fig. 2]); the Tiflis-born Christofer Tadevosian (1905-1992); Université de Paris-trained urban planner Ervand Budaghian (b. 1908); and Ghalitch Baqian (n/d), who collaborated with French-trained engineer Levon Tadevosian (1898-1980) to erect the four buildings

of the Hasanabad Square (1920-30s), as well as later the Police Headquarters (1933) – remains unrecorded (Lazaryan 2012, 234-42; Grigor 2021, 200-5; Zanicchkah, Razeghi 2022, 365). Most of these architects designed and built in the neoclassical style, compelled by both their training and the state-societal taste of the first three decades of the twentieth century.



Figure 2 Hovhannes Onik Gharibian, Marble (marmar) Palace for Reza Shah. 1937. Ramsar, Mazandaran, Iran. Source: Talinn Grigor, 2006

Therefore, upon his 1933 return to Iran, Guevrekian was the first Iranian architect with direct ties and experience with Europe's Modern Movement, and remained one of its few representatives until Vardan Hovhannisian's return from Paris two years later. They brought with them not only the aesthetic and socio-economic tenets of the International Style but also CIAM's discourse, which separated architecture from political patronage. They, thus, later found themselves in a conundrum under the iron fist of Reza Shah. The reformist ministers enlisted Guevrekian in their undertakings, where he took charge of the projects of the Tehran municipality. The mastermind of the 1928 Civil Code, Justice Minister Ali Akbar Davar, was an advocate of rapid economic growth. In an editorial of his own newspaper, *Mard-e azad* (Free man), he had argued in 1923, "We have 6,000 years of history, but that will not translate into factories, railroads, hospitals or schools" (Ghani 1998, 296). In 1935, he appointed Guevrekian as head of the technical department of his finance ministry to oversee state construction in Tehran.

Within four short but decisive years, Guevrekian erected some two-dozen structures in Tehran, almost all on the principles of the Modern Movements. As of his arrival in 1933, he completed a model of a new state theatre (1933 model). The following year, he proposed an elongated, multi-part structure for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with two proposals in 1934 and 1936, which was constructed on a modified scheme between March 1934 and May 1939 [fig. 3]. Lifted on concrete *pilotis*, his proposal for the Ministry of Industries (1936) rose to seven stories of horizontal openings on its impressive façade. In the design of the justice ministry (1937 drawings), also attributed to Guevrekian, we witness an uneasy negotiation between Guevrekian's avant-garde tenets, and a neoclassical aesthetic preferred by the state. The austere modernist façade and the symmetrical body, flanked by two courtyards, were reluctantly decorated with duplicates of Sassanian reliefs.



Figure 3 Gabriel Guevrekian with Roland Dubulle, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 1934-39. Tehran, Iran.
Source: Ali Khadem Collection, courtesy of Farrokh Khadem and Cyrus Samii

Unlike state projects, Guevrekian willed the greatest freedom during the design of the upper-middle-class villas, as he had done in France and Austria. These were the spaces of avant-garde experimentation, commissioned by patrons who insisted on showcasing their own modernity. One for each year that he worked in Iran: Villa Panahi (1934), Villa Siassi (1935), Villa Malak Aslani (1935), Villa Khosravani (1936), and Villa Firuz (1937) (Vitou, Des Houliers, Janneau 1987, 6-11; Guevrekian Papers; Karimi 2013, 60-66). The Modern Movement

rematerialized in the suburbs of northern Tehran, characterized by open plans, large minimalist openings, *pilotis* supporting balconies and cantilevers, and white walls. Each was also in an intimate dialogue with the gardens that he must have also designed. Like the Justice Ministry, Guevrekian's Officers' Club must not have been what the architect wanted; it seems to have been a compromise between the sovereignty of modern architecture and its reliance on the state. After objecting to the heavy-handed demands of the state, Guevrekian's final departure from Iran coincided with the suspicious suicide of Davar in 1937. When Guevrekian returned to Europe in the same year, Hovhannisian took over the completion of the Officers' Club (1934-39) [fig. 4].



Figure 4 Gabriel Guevrekian with Vardan Hovhannisian, Officers' Club. 1934-39. Tehran, Iran.
Source: Ali Khadem Collection, courtesy of Farrokh Khadem and Cyrus Samii

Guevrekian and Hovhannisian first met in Henri Sauvage's atelier in 1922. A few years later, Hovhannisian visited Guevrekian's first prominent work, the Jardin d'Eau et de Lumière, at the exposition of 1925, where he also saw Le Corbusier's *Esprit Nouveau* and Konstantin Mel'nikov's Soviet Pavilion. Considered one of the most prolific architects of the interwar period, he spent sixteen years in Paris, first at the École des Beaux Arts, and then switching to architecture at the École Spéciale d'Architecture in 1919. In 1923, he began working for Sauvage before opening his own firm. Much of his design effort went into post-war reconstruction, but he stayed active within the Iranian community as a founding member of the Society of Iranians Living in France (Hovhannisian 1946, 4-9). The second

architect who had advocated the Modern Movement and had returned from Paris in June 1935, Hovhannisian shared with Guevrekian his commitment to the Modern Movement, though he was far more adaptable in his practice to Iran and its apolitical discourse. Due no doubt to Europe's crumbling economy and a looming war, in June 1935, Hovhannisian wrote to Ala, then Iran's ambassador in London, and expressed his wish to return to Iran and work as an architect (Soroushiani, Daniel, Shafei 2008). On July 6 of the following month, Ala assured Hovhannisian that introduction letters had been sent to Tehran's Mayor, Education Minister Hakimi, and Prime Minister Forughi, whose son must have been friends with Hovhannisian in Paris. While he was offered a governmental post in the technical department of the National Police, like all the other architects who would return after him, Hovhannisian also submitted proposals for various competitions for public and private projects.



Figure 5 Vardan Hovhannisian, Girls' Art College. 1935-38. Tehran, Iran. Source: Soroushiani, S.; Daniel, V; Shafei, B. (2008). *Vartan Hovanesian Architecture: Architecture of Changing Times in Iran*. Tehran: Did Publications, 45

Hovhannisian was well prepared for his first project, the Girls' Art College (*honarestan-e dokhtaran*, 1935-38) [fig. 5], as he had paid for his own education by teaching in Armenian schools before leaving for Paris. Here, he designed a structure that served the needs of secular education for the advancement of women. He employed modernist language, characterized by elongated horizontal openings that intersected with façade-length vertical windows at the corners, cantilevered staircases that appeared to sit on strips of glass, classrooms that extended into balconies, and concrete bands protruding from windows and rooflines.

The façade, although designed on a symmetrical plan, was given a volumetric distinction through a skillful, balanced interplay between positive and negative components.

In the issues of the first professional journal, *Architecte*, owned by Iraj Moshiri, Hovhannisian published “Issues Related to Architecture in Iran,” advocating modernism in opposition to the Reza Shah-era Persian revivalism (Hovhannisian 1946, 4-9; Grigor 2021). He also proposed his seven points for Iranian modern architecture:

1. Horizontal and corner openings;
2. Vertical openings wrapping around staircases;
3. Concrete projections on façade;
4. Cantilever staircases;
5. Concrete projections above openings;
6. Concrete projections above the roofline;
7. Wooden doors for interior.



Figure 6 Vardan Hovhannisian, renderings of the Train Station and Cinema Diana. Tehran, Iran.
Source: *Peydayesh me' mari-ye modern dar Iran: Yadnameh-ye Vartan Hovanesian 1275-1361*.
Tehran: Nashrie-ye Jam'e-ye Moshaveran-e Iran, no. 1, Spring 1983, 10-11

In 1935, Reza Shah commissioned Hotel Darband (1938) on the slopes of the Alborz Mountains in northern Tehran, which was “to strike a new note of elegance with its accommodations, restaurant, and casino” (Wilber 1986). As I have argued elsewhere, this set of commissions was a part of the broader Pahlavi middle-class architecture of leisure and tourism (Grigor 2009; 2025a). Hotel Darband remained “a favorite of Tehran’s high society” until the revolution (Kadivar 2001). This was followed by a series of hotels and motels in the heart of the capital:

Railway Hotel (1940), Laleh Motel (1945), and Ferdowsi Hotel (1949). Flanking these modernist structures were his Cinema Diana (1940s), Cinema Crystal (1945), and Cinema Metropole (1946) [fig. 6]. They represented a society in transition, one where technology and leisure were housed in explicitly modernistic yet informal public architecture.

3 Postwar Modernists: Aftandilians, Apcar, and Others

With a solid architectural education and often a long residency in Europe, Guevrekian and Hovhannisian were followed by a number of young architects who returned to Iran in the late-1930s and after to partake in two conflicting agendas: bottom-up – to establish a sovereign architectural profession on the principles of the Modern Movement, including its apolitical discourse – and top-down – to join the state structures to build the spaces of the rising secular bourgeoisie. As the protagonists of the modern middle class, these architects often found themselves in the precarious position between a heavy-handed government, with which they often shared ideology and method of implementation, and their own avant-garde spirit to practice without authoritarian interference. While relying on state patronage for state projects, they tried to maintain aloofness by developing an architectural discourse that divorced their craft from political plots and intrigues. As did Mies during his leadership of the Bauhaus, they insisted that their work had nothing to do with politics. In the first editorial of the first Iranian architectural journal, Iraj Moshiri, proclaimed in September 1946, “The *Architecte* is purely a technological and aesthetic publication, which cannot and does not wish to have the slightest involvement with the world of politics” (Iradj Moshiri, *Architecte* 1 1946): 1-3). This ambivalent position of architects was crucial to the survival of the architectural profession as an independent practice, pivotal not only to their livelihood but also to the nation-building project. It was an anxiety felt by many and articulated by others.

Hovhannisian advocated the Modern Movement and its apolitical design principle by criticizing the historicist “national” style designed by European architects and *me’mars*. In *Architecte*, he asked, “Should we imitate the past and renew the valuable works of the past, or should we look to the future and adapt architecture to the new way of life?” (Hovhannisian 1946, 6). Fervently rejecting any kind of revivalism and eclecticism, including André Godard’s Iran-bastan Museum, Maxime Siroux’s National Library, H. Heinrich’s National Bank, Markov’s Alborz College and post office with Galstian, Karim Taherzadeh Behzad’s northern façade of the Parliament (1935) and Ferdowsi’s mausoleum (1934) design in cooperation with Godard (Soroushiani, Daniel, Shafei 2005; Grigor 2021). To an avant-garde architect like Hovhannisian, all these attempts at being modern yet Iranian were

dubious. He poked fun at the neo-Achaemenid facades rhetorically asking, “Stop it, don’t you want to turn Tehran into a zoo? What is the point of so many statues of lions, cows, etc.?” (Hovhannisian 1946, 6).

What made the modern Iranian architect a sovereign professional personage possible was a sovereign national education system, the foundations of which were already set in the late Qajar period. Architectural education in Pahlavi Iran has its roots in the diplomatic negotiations between various Qajar monarchs and European powers at the turn of the century. Those regarding archaeological excavations were particularly significant to the eventual development of the architectural profession in the 1950s. In August 1890, Naser al-Din Shah signed a treaty that “conceded to the French Republic the exclusive and perpetual right to excavate in the entire expanse of the empire”.⁵ The agreement laid the grounds for the French monopoly not only over Iran’s archaeological excavations but also over the education of archeologists, artists, and architects. In 1927, when Reza Shah’s government renegotiated with the agreement, the French Republic appointed Godard to the Antiquities Services, who also directed Tehran University’s Faculty of Fine Arts from 1935 to 1949 (Grigor 2009). Despite the modernist campus, the first decade of the university was unsuccessful. Education Minister Ali Asghar Hekmat, who had presented the idea to the *majles* in May 1934, had faced objections on the basis that “Iran was still not adequately endowed with primary and secondary institutions” to support such an institution (Catanzaro 2013, 43). Many of the first students had matriculated in missionary or minority private schools, particularly those in the field of art and architecture.

For individual young members of these religious minorities, like those Parsis of the British Raj at the end of the nineteenth century, to be a religious minority within the larger matrix of a nation-state was to have found themselves in a historical position that enabled turning marginality into privilege. By removing themselves from local identity politics, they participated in the Modern Movement’s universal apolitics. A secular primary and secondary education at home had shaped their bilingual and multi-perspectival outlook towards the world, which naturally led to Europe and later to the United States. Once schooled in Europe, these architects eagerly returned to Iran where they found, so to speak, the best of both worlds: economic prosperity, supportive communities, rich and often healthy social lives, comfortable material lives, favorable social mobility, a functioning patriarchy, and abundant and secure sources of income – in short, a unique historical moment that was also produced in some degree

⁵ Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Direction des Affaires politiques et commerciales Asie-Océanie 1919-1929, Perse 66, Fouilles archéologiques, E387-3, 17, 11, dated August 1900, Paris, France.

of their own agency. The conditions of modernity were social spaces of intervention and interaction that they had helped create. The demand for these young professionals was immense in all the sectors of the rapidly developing economy: the technical departments of the governmental ministries, the powerful National Iranian Oil Company, the shah's vast Plan Organization with its five-year programs, the numerous engineering and contracting firms, the oil and gas industries, the petrochemical industry, not to mention the various urban renewal and utopian schemes of the late Mohammad Reza Shah period.

Paul Apcar (1909-1970), who attended Tehran's St. Louis primary school before leaving for Orléans to complete his high school education and graduate from École Saint-Luc Supérieure des Arts in Brussels, was an advocate of the Modern Movement, like Guevrekian and Hovhannisian. After his return to Iran in 1937, he designed the Radio Station (1940) [fig. 7], Niagara Cinema (1959), and numerous finance ministry offices, commercial buildings, and private residences, where many of his clients were Armenians, including Babajanian, Muradian, Sarkisian, Stepanian, and Shatikian (Shafi'i, Surushiyan, Daniel 2015).

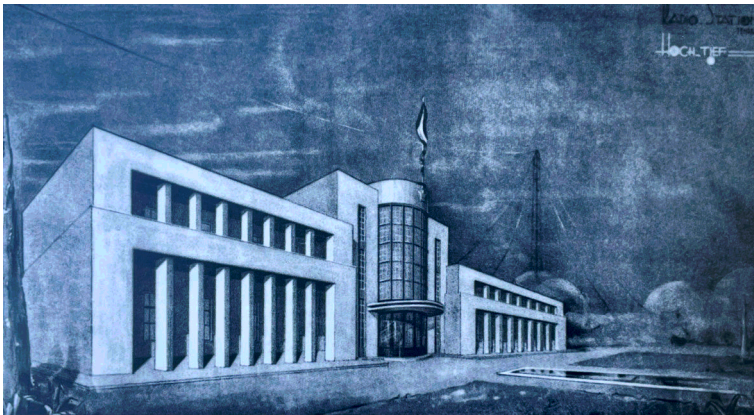


Figure 7 Paul Apcar, isometric drawing of the principal elevation of Radio Station. 1940. Tehran, Iran.
Source: Shafei, B.; Soroushiani, S.; Daniel, V. (2015). *Me'mari-e Pul Abkar / Paul Apcar: Architecture*.
Tehran: Sazman-e Asnad va Ketabkhaneh-ye Milli-e Jomhuri-e Islami-e Iran, 99

One of the leading heads of Tehran University's architectural atelier, Tabriz- or Astrakhan-born architect from a Russo-Armenian family, Yougenia (Eugene) 'Zhenia' Aftandilians (1914-1998) was the prolific architect of some of the major state and private commissions in Iran. His principal edifices in Tehran included the Rudaki "Opera House" (1967), the Russian Hospital (1969) along with three other major hospitals, Museum of Anthropology (1965), Saint Sarkis Armenian Apostolic Cathedral (1963), Hosayniyeh Ershad Mosque (1968),

Golden City Cinema (1969), and Ministry of Arts and Culture's galleries and the amphitheater (1977) [fig. 8].⁶

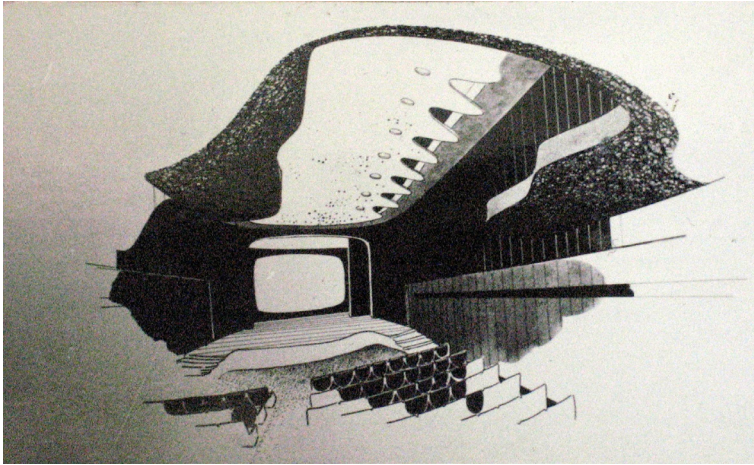


Figure 8 Yougenia (Eugene) Aftandilians, renderings of the Ministry of Arts and Culture's galleries and the amphitheater. 1977. Tehran, Iran. Source: Grigor Nazarian private collection and courtesy

More than any other Irano-Armenian architect, Aftandilians' most significant contribution to Iranian modern architecture was as the atelier head at the flagship architectural faculty at Tehran University. Starting in 1958, he trained multiple generations of Iranian architects, among whom were many Armenians, including Grigor Nazarian (b. 1937), Lucy Mnatsakanian Nazarian (b. 1938), and Aspet Davidian (b. 1940) (Nazarians interview 2024; Davidian interview 2024).

By the mid-1950s, an influential community of modernist intelligentsia emerged from within the margins of Iranian society. The new organizational sensibility, within the Iranian bureaucracy and education, had recalibrated the ethical and aesthetic values of the new elite. Among those who left their distinct mark on Iran's modern art and architecture during this period, a disproportionate number came from religious minorities. Pioneers of modernism in Iranian art, Marcos Grigorian (1925-2007) and Hannibal Alkhas (1930-2010), were Armenian and Assyrian, respectively. Directing Tehran University's architectural faculty, Irano-Baha'i architect Hushang Seyhun (1920-2014) designed a network of national mausolea, including those of Ibn Sina/Avicenna in Hamadan (1952), Nader Shah in Mashhad (1959), Kamal al-Molk and

⁶ In the resume, it is listed as "Principle Building, Ministry of Art and Culture", Yougenia Aftandilians, "Personal Resume", in the Private Collection of Roubik Aftandilians, Glendale, California, undated, 1-2.

Omar Khayyam in Nishapur (1962-63), along with a long list of other modernists edifices, including Asia Cinema (1958) (Seyhun interview 2000; Amanat interview 2000; Grigor 2009, 2025a). Davoud Oshana (1929-2014), with several modernist villas in northern Tehran as well as two Assyrian churches, was an Assyrian. Commissioned by Alborz-graduate Harmik Hovnanian, the Hovnanian House on Vozara Avenue (1970, mistakenly known as Rafizadeh house) [fig. 9] was designed by Levon Babayan (1927-2014) and completed by Norair Pishtofjian (1931-2020) (Hovnanian Der Grigorian interview 2025; and Pishtofjian interview 2025). Rostom Voskanian (1932-2013), the architect of the 10,000-seat Ararat Sports and Cultural Complex (1971-76) [fig. 10] in Vanak, northern Tehran, along with a dozen other works, was a Tabriz-born Armenian (Voskanian interviews; Grigor 2014). In 1975, Armenian-Italian architect Armen Gurekian (b. 1938), the grandson of Ottoman Armenian architect and activist Léon Gurekian (1871-1950), won the bid to design the Tochal Ski Resort (1975-77), on the Tehran side of the Alborz Mountain range (Gurekian interview 2022). Intended to attract European winter tourists, this megaproject allocated the ground floor to all-pedestrian circulation, concealing mechanized transportation underground [fig. 11]. In preparation for the proposal's presentation to Empress Farah and the Shah, Gurekian called on Voskanian's assistance. Yet, like many other Pahlavi future-facing large schemes, it was aborted in 1977 due to the advent of the Iranian Revolution.



Figure 9 Levon Babayan and Norair Pishtofjian, Hovnanian House on Vozara Avenue. 1970. Tehran, Iran. Source: Moneh Hovnanian Der Grigorian private collection and courtesy

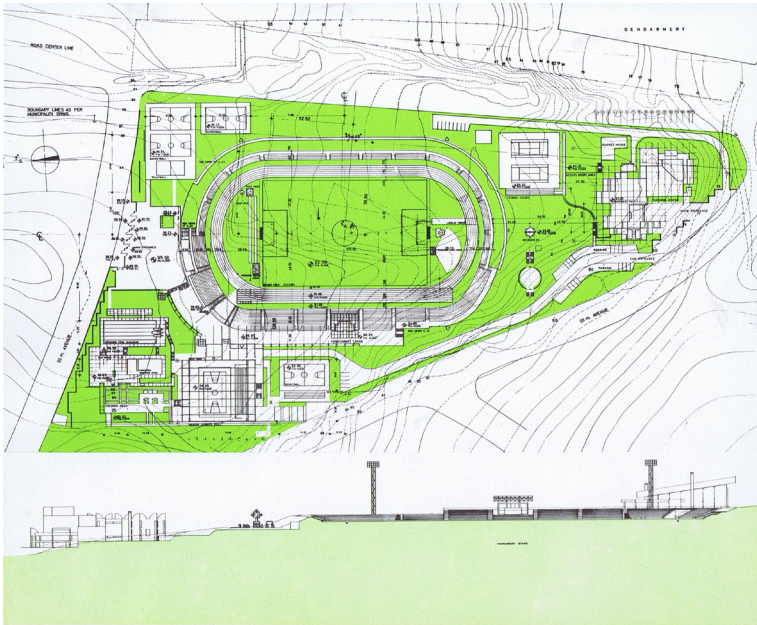


Figure 10 Rostom Voskanian, master plan of Ararat Sport Stadium. 1977. Northern Tehran, Iran.
Source: Greg Der Grigorian private collection and courtesy



Figure 11 Armen Gurekian, rendering for Tochal Ski Resort proposal. 1975-77. Velenjak, Iran.
Source: Armen Gurekian private collection and courtesy

Many more women, including poet and film director Forugh Farrokhzad (1934-1967), artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (1922-2019), and artist and gallery owner Massumeh Noushin Seyhun (1934-2010), were prominent figures among the advocates of modernist artistic expressions. Alongside Armenian diasporic global networks and missionary activities in Iran, Armenian women's organizations had been champions of girls' Western-style education since 1871, when the first Armenian women's organization was founded in Tehran (Berberian, Grigor 2025). The pioneering forgotten history of Irano-Armenian women architects, among whom the first female graduate of Tehran University, Nectar Papazian Andreeff (1924-2020), followed by Victoria Ohanjaian-Fard (1929-2023), Rosa Mirzayan (1931-2012), Emma Toulou Hacıopians Grigorian (1930-2025), Veronik Vardanian Saginian (1930-2015), and Mnatsakanian Nazarian, is an essential part of not only my current book project but also the Pahlavi story of modernization and these pioneering, hyphenated architects (Grigor 2025b, 2025c, 2027).

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Interviews and Documentations

* Private archives and photographs from the family collections were documented during the interviews listed below in various periods since my dissertation research. The list excludes the interviews and collections related to Irano-Armenian women architects, which represent an essential part of this book project. The interview and archives on Irano-Armenian women architects are not listed here due to word limit constraints.

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