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In razing its modernist buildings, Iran is erasing its past Western influence

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A view of Tehran, with its mix of traditional and modern design. Jørn Eriksson/Flick, CC BY-ND

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Hassan Rouhani's re-election as Iran's president has rekindled hope for liberals in the country. During his first term, Iran began edging closer to the West, and his positions on both international and domestic affairs indicate further openness to its influence.

Current battleground issues in Iran include not just social and economic policy but also cultural concerns. Specifically, say architects and historians, Iran must take action to protect its modern architectural heritage before it's too late.

Iran is known for its magnificent Persian design but, in the late 19th and 20th century, its capital Tehran saw renowned Western architects, including prominent modernists such as Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), build some of the city's iconic structures.

Today, some have been razed and many more are in danger of demolition or collapse. Without protection, these buildings, which bear testament to Iran's historic openness to the West, will be reduced to dust, beams and concrete blocks.

A disappearing modern heritage

On January 19 2017, the Plasco Tower, a 17-story high-rise, collapsed in the centre of Tehran killing more than 20 firefighters and injuring dozens.

Collapse of Plasco Tower.

The iconic building was designed by American architects – Benjamin Brown and Spero Daltas – who set up shop in Tehran in 1957 during the rule of King Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979). The Shah had made it his mission to construct in Iran a “great civilisation”. To do so, Tehran had to become a modern globalised city, with vast avenues and planned design.

Iran’s 20th-century modernisation process coincided with that of many other Middle Eastern countries. Nations such as Egypt Turkey and Iran felt a need to infuse their ancient civilisations with new ideas and influence, including Western infrastructure and educational models.



Tehran's American-designed master plan called for a series of residential and commercial areas linked by highways.
Self/Wikimedia, CC BY-ND

In Iran, the process was fuelled by increasing oil revenue, which helped finance massive new developments that would turn its capital into a modern metropolis. For these ambitious plans, the government hired Western architects, urban planners and other experts to come work in Tehran.

The American planner Victor Gruen devised the city’s 1968 master plan, conceiving of an expansive Tehran with commercial centres and residential neighbourhoods connected by highways.

This golden age of urban development also saw wealthy parts of Tehran bloom with privately financed construction.

That all changed in 1979. After the Iranian Revolution, Tehran turned inward, closing its gates to the West.

Tehran's short memory

Today, Iranian scholars, architects and intellectuals – including Parshia Qaregozloo, who curated Iran's pavilion at the 2016 Venice biennial and Leila Araghian, architect of Tehran's new high-tech Tabiat bridge and Ali Mozaffari, founding co-editor of the Berghahn Explorations in Heritage Studies book series – are raising concerns that the nation may have too short a cultural memory.

Many notable mid-century buildings have been neglected in the past decade, including the ornate Sabet Pasa mansion in Tehran, known as Iran's Palace of Versailles, which narrowly avoided being demolished in 2015. And the 1966 Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Morvarid (Pearl) Palace, in the city of Karaj, which once belonged to the Shah's sister, Shams Pahlavi.



The Pearl Palace in Karaj, Iran. Ararat-tehran/Wikimedia, CC BY-NC

Important private residences in Tehran are also at risk of destruction. In the affluent Zaferanieh neighbourhood, these include the former home of Queen Turan, the wife of Reza Shah (father of Iran's last shah), and a villa frequented by Forough Farrokhzad, an Iranian poetess and film director of the 1960s, as well as the Panahi House, which was designed by the French architect Roland Dubrulle.

Villa Namazee

Villa Namazee is probably the most iconic of all the endangered contemporary structures. Designed by Milan-based architect and industrial designer Giovanni Ponti (1891-1979), one of the leading figures of Postwar Italian modernism (and the founder of *Domus* magazine), the villa has an open plan, a suspended roof and external openings protected by wide overhanging eaves.



View of the internal courtyard at Villa Namazee. © Gio Ponti Archive

Ponti, who built Italy's first skyscraper, was known for his value of classical order, integrity of building materials, new production techniques and sensitivity to designing around both human need and environmental conditions.

In 1957, he was commissioned by the wealthy Namazee family to design a residence in the affluent Niavaran district to the north of Tehran's foothills, in collaboration with Fausto Melotti (1901-1986) and Paolo De Poli (1905-1996). The house has sliding doors and internal windows that offer full cross-views, and it demonstrates the same inventive *joie de vivre* style as Ponti's projects in Caracas, Venezuela (the Villa Planchart and the Villa Arreaza).



Facade of the Villa Namazee. © Gio Ponti Archive.



Interior of the Villa Namazee. © Gio Ponti Archive.

In 2007, Villa Namazee was registered as national heritage, but it was acquired by a new owner four years ago and removed from the list, paving the way for the construction of a 20-storey luxury hotel.

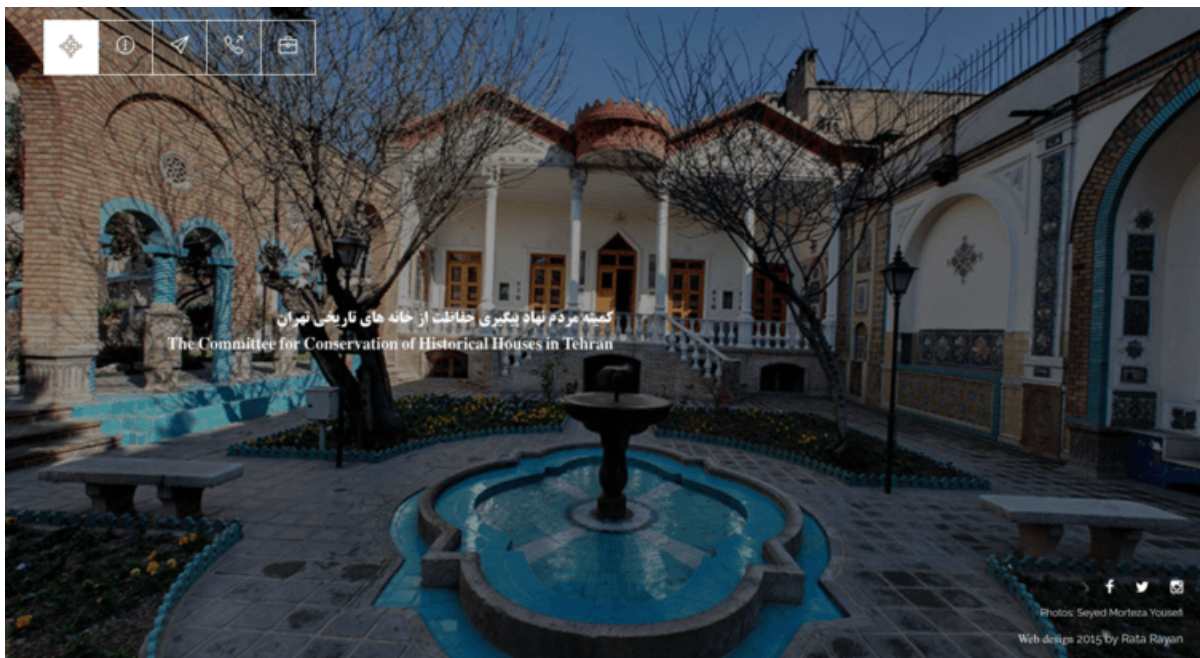
Porti's other work in the Middle East was the office of the ministry of planning in Baghdad, built in 1957. Its enormous outdoors portico and greyish blue ceramic tiles were partly destroyed in the Iraq war.

Why do we need to save modern heritage?

When the government removes historic structures such as the Villa Namazee from its national heritage list, it demonstrates a worrisome privileging of certain moments in its past over others that also have cultural value.

Many Iranians remain attached to these modernist symbols, and there have been significant efforts to save them in recent years. Some Iranian activists, calling themselves the People's Committee for Conservation of Historical Houses in Tehran, have launched a website defending Tehran's landmarks.

Public outcry against the plan to raze the Villa Namazee has been fierce. Petitions to save it were circulated globally and supported by UNESCO and the Germany-based International Committee for Documentation, and the Conservation of Buildings and Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement, among other international organisations. This well-publicised case may also help save other modern buildings in the future.



An anonymous group has started a conservation effort to protect historic homes in Tehran. THHC

The destruction of such structures erases all signs of contemporary Tehran's modernist heritage. Mid-century residences and office buildings are not only physical links to a time when Iran opened its doors to the West, they are also memories of the aristocrats of the past regime, and of radical poets and writers and intellectuals, whose ways of life are much less visible in Iran today.

Architecture **Heritage** **Italy** **Iran** **West** **Modernism** **houses**