Jaap Bakema Study Centre

STAYING WITH MODERNITY? (Dis)Entangling Coloniality and Architecture

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Staying with Modernity? (Dis)Entangling Coloniality and Architecture

Introduction 9

Welfare State Projections 15

Paulista Architecture and Ambivalent Modernity:
Brazilian Dictatorship and National Representation in Osaka, 1970
Victor Próspero (University of São Paulo, Princeton University) 17

Western-based or Decolonised Welfare Planning?
Ulrik Plesner's Town Design for the Mahaweli Development Programme in Sri Lanka, 1982–1987
Dorian Bianco (Centre André Chastel, Sorbonne Université) 25

Architecture of the 'Property State':
Public Ownership of Land and the Production of the Modern Built Environment in Postindependence Singapore
Jacob Meyers (Delft University of Technology) 33

Subverting the University Archive:
A Decolonial Revision of Miesian Modernism
Leen Katrib (University of Kentucky) 41

Coloniality at Home 49

Dissecting the Colonial House
Paoletta Holst (Ghent University) 51

Writing Domesticity:
Historicising Two Silenced Stories of Modernisation by Iranian Women Writers
Ehssan Hanif (Cornell University) 59

The Elephant in the Room:
Sourcing the Planter's Chair
Rachel Lee (Delft University of Technology)
and Sarita Sundar (Hanno) 67

Haik-scape:
An Urban 'Fabric' to Unveil Eastern and Western Colonisation of the Feminine Space and Intimacy in Algiers
Yasmine Dahim and Cansu Curgen-Gurpinar
(Loughborough University School of Architecture) 75

Education as Mission 83

Yarning and the Country Sphere:
Modernity and Decolonising Architectural Education in Australia 85
Michael Mossman, Genevieve Murray, Abraham Bradfield
and Jennifer Barrett (University of Sydney)

Euclid in Ivory Coast:
Architecture and Modern Education as Swiss Export, 1975–1976 93
Sebastiaan Loosen (ETH Zürich)

Disentangling Modernity and Colonialism:
The St. Joseph Mission School in Ngasobil, Senegal 101
Alican Taylan (Cornell University)

'What Holland Can Offer':
Samuel van Embden and the Knowledge Exchange
on University Campus Designs, 1947–1976 109
Esther Gramsbergen and Yağız Söylev
(Delft University of Technology)

Neocolonial Practices 117

Town & City Properties:
From Colonial Rubber Plantation to the World's Largest
Property Developer 119
Alistair Kefford (Leiden University)

OMA 199X:
Neo-Avant-Garde and the Afterlives of the Development Era 125
Romain David (Harvard University)

Planners Get Their Way—and Newry?
The Persistence of Colonial Attitudes in the North of Ireland 127
Colm mac Aoidh (Hasselt University)

Towards a Planetary History of Architecture:
Notes from Goleczewo and Kamĩrĩĩthũ 133
Kenny Cupers (University of Basel)

Extraction Infrastructures 139

Sweetened Territories:
The Umbgrove Commissie and the Impact of the Dutch Colonial
Sugar Industry on the Javanese Countryside, 1808–1930 141
Sandro Armanda (KU Leuven)

'Filling' and 'Enactment' Drainage and Conservancy Schemes:
Discourse of Contained Waters in Dacca, Colonial East Bengal 149
Labib Hossain (Cornell University)

The Architect + The Farmer:
Disentangling Expertise as a Mechanism of South Asian Migration 157
Priyanka Sen (Cornell University)

Growing for Gold:
Colonial Tree Planting on the Witwatersrand Goldfields, 1892–1923 159
Serah Calitz (Delft University of Technology)

Heritage Stories 165

Monument of Public Memory:
Rereading the Uganda National Cultural Centre and Theatre 167
Anna Kintsurashvili (Independent Scholar)

Reassessing the Architectural Heritage of Banda Aceh:
Colonial Legacies and Modernist Narratives 171
Azhiemi Iqbal (Umeå University)

Redrawing Narratives of Modernist Architecture in India:
A Tryst in the Courtroom 177
Elizabeth Thomas and Neelakantan Keshavan
(Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad)

Reframing the Indian-Modern Vision: Post the Colossal Loss
of the Hall of Nations and Other Modern Icons that Wait Their End 185
Shruti Hussain (Independent Scholar)

Archiving Ethics 191

‘*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly’:*
Colonial Hybridities in the gta Archive Collections 193
Irina Davidovici and Sabine Straüli (gta Archive, ETH Zürich)

In (Dis)Use:
Nigerian Modernism in Retrospect 201
Abdulah Ogunsetan (Omi Collective, University of Lagos)

Against Colonial Architectural Logic:
Reading ‘Unformalisation’ from Archives of Formalisation 207
Kuukuwa Manful (Taubman College of Architecture
and Urban Planning, University of Michigan)

Digging and Processing:
Addressing Archival Justice in Global South Research 213
Hannah le Roux (Sheffield University)
and Nokubekezela Mchunu (Independent Scholar)

Appendix 221

Keynote speaker:
In Conversation with Rolando Vázquez Melken 223

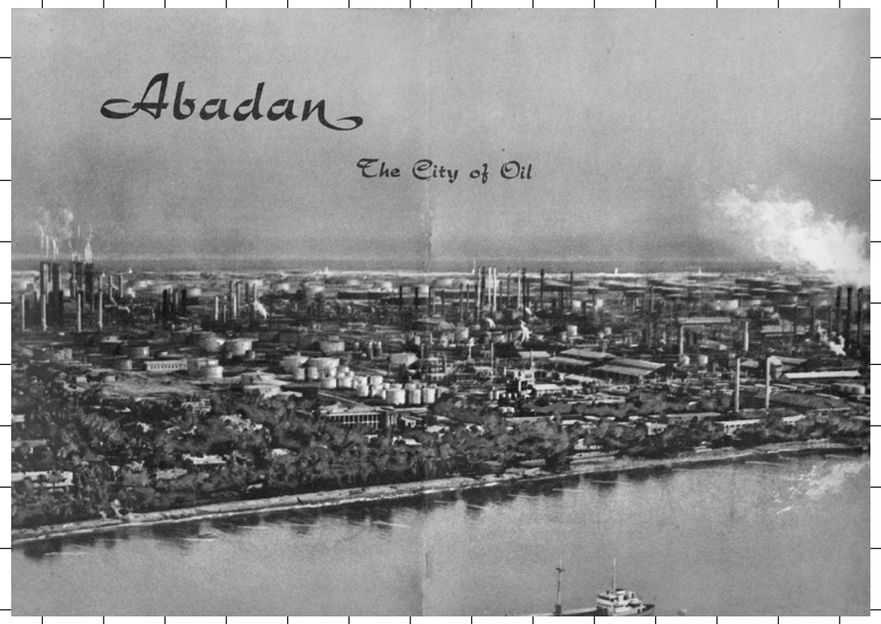
Working with the Dutch National Architecture Collection 225
Hetty Berens and Setareh Noorani (Nieuwe Instituut)

Exhibitions on View in Delft:
Virtual Architecture Museum, Marina Tabassum 227

Exhibitions on View in Rotterdam:
Built Homecoming, New Planter's Chair, GUD Instituut Living Room 231

Biographies 235

Programme 249



Aerial view of Abadan in 1960. Image source: Iranian Department of Publication and Broadcasting.

Ehssan Hanif (Cornell University)

Writing Domesticity: Historicising Two Silenced Stories of Modernisation by Iranian Women Writers

From the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, the architectural history of Iran became closely linked with oil, which introduced new technologies, actors, and spaces. A key event occurred in 1901 when English businessman William D'Arcy secured exclusive rights from the Iranian monarchy, to explore, extract, and export oil.[1] By 1914, D'Arcy sold a major share to the British government, ushering in a new era of British colonial influence in Iran.[2] To establish their presence and efficiently exploit Iranian oil, the British built 'modern' company towns, including Bawardeh in Abadan, designed by architect James M. Wilson and based on the Garden City concept. According to architectural historian Mark Crinson, this design aimed to address racial segregation issues but was rooted in colonial assumptions that European lifestyles were superior and only Iranians educated abroad were 'civilised' enough to live there.[3] These assumptions significantly impacted domestic life in these houses. Part of my paper aims to explore these impacts.

Concurrently, the new Iranian king, Reza Shah, influenced by European colonial ideas of 'modernity', began his modernisation efforts with a focus on state-building and centralisation, particularly through creating a modern army, as noted by historian Stephanie Cronin.[4] Reza Shah's modernisation blended colonial notions of 'progress' and 'civilisation' with a patriarchal nationalism centred around the 'new' figure of the crowned father.[5] Although Reza Shah did not complete any mass-housing projects, he significantly impacted domestic life by passing laws, like the unveiling law, and infrastructural projects, like widening streets, bringing pipelines to homes, and establishing the Rahni Bank for giving housing loans.[6] His

1 "D'Arcy 1901 Concession," Archive of Research Institute of Petroleum Industry, 0474440–47447.
2 Leonardo Davoudi, Persian Petroleum: Oil, Empire and Revolution in Late Qajar Iran (I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2020), 145.
3 Mark Crinson, "Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company," *Planning Perspectives* 12, no. 3 (January 1997): 341–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/026654397364681.; Sirus Bavar, Naft: Tamadon-e Sanati va Memari Dar Khuzestan [Oil: Industrial Civilization and Architecture in Khuzestan, Iran] (Mirdashti Publishing, 2022), 389
4 Stephanie Cronin, ed., *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah 1921–1941* (Routledge Curzon, 2003), 1.
5 Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (Palgrave, 2001), 113.
6 Ashraf Zahedi, "Contested Meaning of the Veil and Political Ideologies of Iranian Regimes," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no. 3 (2007): 75–98, https://doi.org/10.2979/mew.2007.3.3.75; and Ali Zangiabadi and Rahman Alihosseini, "Tarikh-e Bankdari az Aqaz ta Emruz [The History of Banking since the Begining till now]," *Bank va Eqtesad*, no. 110 (2010): 17–27.

top-down modernisation was responded to by women's resistance within their homes, which I will explore further in this paper.

The two discourses of modernity with their associated processes of 'modernisation' profoundly impacted residents' domestic experiences, particularly affecting women who, constrained by the patriarchal nature of the traditional family in Iran, had to spend the majority of their time at home.[7] The official archives of both Iran and Britain, shaped by colonial and patriarchal ideologies, largely overlook women's experiences of these 'modernisations'. As Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have argued, archives can be institutions where power is exerted through the selection and conservation of information.[8] In this context, the influence of patriarchal and colonial systems is evident: British archives from this period were collected by colonial powers, while Iranian archives, with the brief exception of Farah Pahlavi, Fatemeh Soudavar Farmanfarmaian and Donna Stein, at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, were never from women.[9]

Nevertheless, as bell hooks has argued, 'the home has always been a site of resistance for women'.[10] Therefore, to study domesticity in this colonial and patriarchal context, we could seek archives beyond institutional ones. Women have employed various methods to preserve their experiences, notably through storytelling, which provides historians with a valuable archive for this silent aspect of history. In my paper, which aims to reread colonialism and modernisation in Iran through the lens of Iranian women from this period, I would focus on two novels written by Iranian women as my primary archive: 'Cherghaha ra Man Khamoosh Mikonam' [The Lights, I Will Turn Off] by Zoya Pirzad, and 'Tooba Va Manaye Shab' [Tooba and the Meaning of the Night] by Shahrnoosh Parsipur.[11] My aim is to highlight an alternative archive for understanding colonial contexts and to emphasise the intersection of gender and colonial issues.

Regarding the use of literature for history, I align with Allan Pasco's view that 'when handled judiciously, and in answer to appropriate questions, literature can provide a reliable window on the past'.[12] In other words, although literature may not directly mirror real life, it offers valuable insights into socio-cultural history, particularly in cases where power through controlling archives has suppressed certain perspectives. Thus, literature can enrich historical studies by revealing a deeper understanding of oppressed experiences.

7 Vida Nassehi-Behnam, "Change and the Iranian Family," *Current Anthropology* 26, no. 5 (1985): 557–62.
8 Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, [1st American ed.] (Pantheon Books, 1972); and Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9–63, https://doi.org/10.2307/465144.
9 Mohammadtaghi Poorahmad-Jaktaji, Tarikh-e Ketabkhaneh Melli [The History of the National Library] (Iranian National Library, 1979); Reza Daneshvar and Kamran Diba, Baqi Mian-e Do Khiaban [A Garden Between Two Streets] (Bongah Press, 2010), 149. Reza Daneshvar and Kamran Diba, 149.
10 bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (South End Press, 1990), 41–49.
11 Zoya Pirzad, *Cheraghha Ra Man Khamush Mikonam* [I Will Turn Off the Lights] (Markaz, 2002).; Shahrnoosh Parsipur, *Tooba Va Manay-e Shab* [Tooba and the Meaning of the Night] (Esparak, 1990).
12 Allan H. Pasco, "Literature as Historical Archive," *New Literary History* 35, no. 3 (2004): 373–94.

STORIES AND WRITERS

My two selected stories are in correspondence with the two aforementioned modernities: Shahrnoosh Parsipur's 'Tooba and The Meaning of the Night', which depicts domestic life in a central courtyard house and centres on a Muslim woman resisting Reza Shah's modernisation; and Zoya Pirzad's 'I Will Turn Off the Lights', which is set in an oil company town and portrays a Christian Armenian woman's anxieties in the colonial context of Abadan. Both authors draw on firsthand experiences of two modernities gained from their childhoods in the cities they write about. Parsipur is well known as a writer who 'portrays her resistance to gender problems in Iran by adopting fiction' and her 'feminist narratives question Iran's patriarchal discourse and power structure'.[13] Likewise, Pirzad has earned acclaim for 'her superb characterisation, ingenious representation of the conflicting emotions of a woman, and creating suspense through the deconstruction of everyday life'.[14]

REZA SHAH'S MODERNISATION IN 'TOOBA AND THE MEANING OF THE NIGHT'

In the early twentieth century, the middle class in Tehran typically lived in traditional houses with central courtyards, much like the house in Parsipur's story.[15] These homes featured two residential sections facing each other across the courtyard, with service areas in one corner and an underground floor on one side. The entrance was indirect, and the design was introverted, centred around a courtyard with a small pool and garden. Often, the house was divided into *Andarooni* [inner] and *Birooni* [outer] sections to ensure women's privacy. Domestic life within these homes was shrouded in secrecy, with women often bearing the burden of keeping secrets. As in the story, Tooba helps conceal all the secrets, including the murder committed by a father, which highlights the deep-rooted influence of patriarchy.

This act of keeping secrets, considered crucial for preserving the house, echoes Freud's theory on the *Heimlich*: 'What takes place within the four walls of a house remains a mystery to those shut out from it'.[16] Accordingly, the heroine, having spent her childhood in the same house, does not find the uncanny[17] unsettling, as past secrets are now her present reality. For her, protecting these secrets and the past equates to defending her life. For this reason, she fiercely resists the changes men, as symbols of patriarchal

13 Leila Sadegh Beigi, "Simin Daneshvar and Shahrnush Parsipur in Translation: The Risk of Erasure of Domestic Violence in Iranian Women's Fiction," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 16, no. 2 (July 2020): 124–43, https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-8238146.
14 Amir Mohammad Reza Taheri and V. A. Rankhambe, "Marital Incompatibility in Things We Left Unsaid by Zoya Pirzad and Cry the Peacock by Anita Desai," *International Journal of Multifaceted and Multilingual Studies* II, no. VI (2015): 16–23.
15 Hossein Zomorshidi, "Amuzehay-e Memari-e Irani va Sakhtemansazi-e Maskuni az Doreye Qajary-e Ta Emruz," *Motaleat-e Shahr Irani va Eslami* 1, no. 3 (2011): 1–10.
16 Maria M. Tatar, "The Houses of Fiction: Toward a Definition of the Uncanny," *Comparative Literature* 33, no. 2 (1981): 167–82, https://doi.org/10.2307/1770438.
17 As something 'connected to the reappearance of something familiar from childhood of an individual.' See Tatar, 1981.

modernisation, try to impose on the house. This sense of protecting the house appears multiple times in the story, notably when the heroine's husband wants to bring a gardener to 'take care of the garden', and we read:

> 'Tooba believed that if a gardener, a construction worker (banna), a pitman (for digging or cleaning the water well), or anyone familiar with the house's hidden corners were to come to the house, they would discover the body. The house could not conceal its secrets from such people and would inevitably reveal them.'[18]

Likewise, years later, when her son-in-law attempts to 'modernise' the house by installing water pipelines and a private bathroom, Tooba resists. She views these 'modern' phenomena as a threat that could expose the secrets she is determined to keep hidden, so she refuses to allow any of these 'new' changes into the house.

This resistance underscores the failures of Reza Shah's modernisation, which, rooted in strong patriarchal and cultural norms, excluding women's agency, failed to improve women's status.[19] The exclusion of women from these processes leads the heroine to favour stability over abrupt change. In fact, she does not reject 'newness' itself but resists a social transformation that marginalises her—a resistance that can take the form of inertia, as we see in the part of the story when Tooba, seeking divorce, resorts to doing nothing or going a hunger strike.

When women can establish their control over domestic space, the inertia may transform into heightened activity. Pauline Hunt suggests that women in England maintain tidy homes to create a 'welcoming' space for their family members.[20] Similarly, in Tooba's story, the heroine obsessively cleans the house. However, this obsession is not to welcome her husband but to assert control over the last remaining female territory: the domestic space. Using Stephen Vider's framework, this can be described as 'domesticity as performance', where repetitive acts of cleaning embody the practice of claiming the home.[21] Judith Butler also echoes this, noting that identity is formed through the repetition of acts.[22]

The significance of this point is magnified when placed in the historical context of Reza Shah's unveiling law. As part of his modernisation efforts, Reza Shah aimed to 'secularise' the country by imposing a law that enforced a European-inspired dress code for women. As a result, many Iranian women

18 Shahrnoosh Parsipur, *Tooba Va Manay-e Shab*, 99.
19 Armaghan Ziaee, "On Contradictions: The Architecture of Women's Resistance and Emancipation in Early Twentieth-Century Iran," *ABE Journal. Architecture beyond Europe*, no. 16 (December 2019), https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.7059.
20 Pauline Hunt, "Gender and the Construction of Home Life," in Home and Family: Creating the Domestic Sphere, ed. Graham Allan and Graham Crow (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989), 66–81, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-20386-4_5.1989
21 Stephen Vider, *The Queerness of Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Domesticity after World War II* (The University of Chicago Press, 2021): 7.
22 Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31, https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893.

who still valued the hijab avoided public spaces altogether, staying at home. Parsipur's story reflects this law and its resulting problems for women, too.

> 'When the rumours about the unveiling law turned out to be true […] a week passed without Tooba leaving the house. She heard that everything in the city had changed […] The women looked strange. Many wore their husbands' hats over their scarves and donned men's long coats.'[23]

COLONISERS' MODERNISATION IN 'I WILL TURN OFF THE LIGHTS'

Unlike Tooba's house, the colonisers' designs for Bawardeh lack the *Andarooni / Birooni* division, with kitchens open to everyone, sometimes even serving as the house entrance. The heroine, Claris, humorously remarks, 'Why is the whole city in my kitchen today?' This openness leads to a lack of privacy for women, a point Claris often criticises throughout the story.[24]

> 'I entered the house and locked it behind me. Nobody in Abadan locks their house door in the middle of the day. I only lock it when I want to be certain that I am alone in the house.'[25]

The failure of the colonisers' design lay in their excessive openness to the public, ignoring the social changes required before physical changes. Women's roles within the family remained unchanged, and they were still confined to the kitchen. What made things worse was that they now lost control over their last private spaces. This sparked a longing for 'traditional' homes like the one in Parsipur's story. When the heroine locks herself indoors to escape her present life, she nostalgically recalls her childhood home in Tehran with its small courtyards, and long corridors—a place she associates with her father who, unlike other men, never imposed his will on anyone.

However, a positive aspect of colonial domesticity is that by blurring the boundaries between inside and outside, women started to explore beyond the home's walls. Historically, public spaces in Iran were seen as masculine, confining women indoors.[26] However, in Bawardeh, the domestic space extends into the public realm; and Claris, representing women who challenge societal norms and domestic restrictions, begins doubting her life, signalling a transitional stage.

These doubts created anxiety for women. In Pirzad's story, Claris reflects, 'I think what a peaceful life I had before Emily and her grandmother moved in.'[27] Emily, the attractive young man who has just arrived in the neighbourhood, symbolises Claris's father and acts as an uncanny presence

23 Shahrnoosh Parsipur, *Tooba Va Manay-e Shab*, 121.
24 Zoya Pirzad, *Cheraghha Ra Man Khamush Mikonam*, 158.
25 Zoya Pirzad, *Cheraghha Ra Man Khamush Mikonam,* 64.
26 Ziaee, "On Contradictions."
27 Zoya Pirzad, *Cheraghha Ra Man Khamush Mikonam*, 192.

that raises Claris's doubts about her marriage. By the end of the story, as Claris resolves her inner conflict, changes her view of the old traditional house, and a dream reveals that this no longer holds any interest for her:

> 'I found myself in a large house with maze-like corridors and rooms, filled with unfamiliar people coming and going. Holding my twin children's hands, I tried to leave but could not find the exit. A tall priest approached and said, 'If you cannot answer my riddle, I would not let you go.' He then took the twins' hands and led them away. I chased after them into a vast courtyard surrounded by rooms, with a small blue pool at its centre. Crying and calling for the twins, I saw a woman enter the courtyard, holding a baby.'[28]

Later in the story, Claris visits Namgard, a small, marginal town inhabited by those labelled 'mad,' and encounters the same building from her childhood and dream. By situating Claris's childhood home—she, an Armenian woman—in a marginalised area, Pirzad underscores the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and religion within a colonial context. The story contains 'intersectionality's insistence on examining the dynamics of difference and sameness,' emphasising how this 'plays a major role in facilitating consideration of gender, race, and other axes of power in the wide range of political discussions and academic disciplines.'[29]

The colonial 'modern' house in this story represents a transitional phase for Iranian women. As changes in the built environment emerged, women started questioning their former lifestyles. Eventually, they accepted the new reality, resolving their internal conflicts. While these spaces provided more freedom and access to public life, the lack of privacy—stemming from women's limited involvement in these changes—led to contradictory outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Modernisation, whether driven by the colonial presence or Reza Shah's nationalist policies, imposed new architectural and social structures that ostensibly aimed to bring progress and welfare to Iranian society. However, both forms of modernisation were rooted in patriarchal and colonial assumptions that disregarded women's agency, privacy, and traditional roles in domestic spaces.

28 Ibid., 216.
29 Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785–810, https://doi.org/10.1086/669608.