

Article

Gio Ponti and Villa Namazee: (De)listed Modern Heritage

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Abstract: This article studies the architectural design and cultural significance of Villa Namazee, a modernist building designed by Italian architect Gio Ponti in Tehran. The study explores how the building, once a symbol of modernity and progress, has been neglected, delisted from the national heritage, and fallen into disrepair. Focusing primarily on the case of Villa Namazee in Tehran, Iran, as an example of Ponti's projects in the Middle Eastern context, the second part of this paper aims to reconsider and re-narrate Gio Ponti's project in Tehran. In this context, the article sheds light on the nationally and internationally prominent concepts, ideas, collaborations, and design elements of Gio Ponti's project in Tehran. The paper argues for reevaluating our understanding of heritage and recognizing the importance of preserving modern architectural masterpieces such as Villa Namazee.

Keywords: Gio Ponti; (de)listed modern heritage; Italian architecture; Iranian modern history

1. Introduction

As an early example of an Italian international architect in 1950, Gio Ponti promoted transnational creativity to design the modern habitat. Ponti was a renowned Italian architect and designer known for his contributions to the modernist movement. He designed several notable buildings and projects throughout his career, including the Villa Namazee in Tehran, Iran. Villa Namazee in Tehran (1957–1964) is Gio Ponti's extraordinary masterpiece, designed for the Iranian Prime Minister Shafi Namazee and his wife, Vida Namazee. Celebrating his clients 'joie de vivre' and "the size of serenity", Villa Namazee was designed as an open construction with two main façades. Ponti designed Villa Namazee in the affluent district of Niavaran in the north of Tehran's foothills in collaboration with Fausto Melotti (1901–1986) and Paolo De Poli (1905–1996) [1] (p. 14).

In Tehran, shortly after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Villa Namazee in Tehran was possessed by the government and used as a local register office. Villa Namazee was then converted into a house and remained "wounded architecture" due to lack of attention, abandonment, and absurd renovations. For instance, the ceiling was covered by a thick layer of waterproofing. The central patio was suffocated by bizarre Plexiglas cupolas and the desolated interiors in which only a few built-in pieces of furniture survive. Instead, the interior spaces were redecorated with cheap and substituted materials [2]. After being sold to Ahmad Abrishami, a representative of Nokia in Iran, on the 13 November 2007, the building was registered as a national heritage building.

However, in 2017, this status was lifted so it could be sold to a state-led real-estate group. The new owner of Villa Namazee sadly removed this building from the list of national cultural heritage sites, paving the way for constructing a 20-storey luxury hotel.

When the national authorities decided to delist and remove modern buildings such as Villa Namazee in Tehran from the cultural heritage list due to real estate development, they threatened and ignored the cultural values and national identities [3–5]. While this Italian architectural modernist symbol in Tehran has recently survived demolition and raze due to several petitions and public outrage, many other endangered Iranian modern heritage and mid-century buildings exist.

The first part of this article, 'Gio Ponti's Typical Domuses' focuses on Gio Ponti's works, projects, and contributions in architecture, urban design, with a special focus on



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housing and residential projects. The second section of the article, 'Gio Ponti in Teheran: Villa Namazee' focuses on ideas, collaborations, and design elements of Gio Ponti's project in the context of Tehran, Iran.

Methodological Note

This paper uses analytical and archival studies to analyze Gio Ponti's architectural and design legacies through comparative and historical perspectives. Through analytical and archival studies, including historical documents, drawings, images, photographs, and plans, this article focuses on Gio Ponti's architectural and design legacies through his transnational projects, publications, and creative works. Historical and archival studies often involve the use of critical thinking, comparative research, and analytical skills to interpret and contextualize the materials being studied. It is an interdisciplinary field that often involves the study of history, sociology, planning, art, heritage, and other disciplines. Historical and archival studies involve the examination and interpretation of historical documents, plans, images, and other materials in order to understand and analyze Villa Namazee's project in Tehran. The author went through the primary sources through Gio Ponti's Archive (<https://www.gioponti.org/tool/home.php?s=0,49,58,73&l=en&dfa=do32990&diditem=6115>, accessed on 26 December 2022) such as letters, documents, plans, images, drawings and photographs, as well as secondary sources such as books and articles written by different historians.

2. Gio Ponti's Typical Domuses

Gio Ponti left a deep trace of different segments in architecture, urban design, teaching, publishing, decoration, and scenography [5] (p. 7). Ponti's architectural debates and theories were part of the pages in his magazines: *Domus* and *Stile*. In *Praise of Architecture*, his most eloquent book, Ponti addresses the history of twentieth-century Italian architecture, a century that the architect lived through almost entirely, and his activities ranging from design to the everyday object, to the invention of spatial solutions for the modern house, to the realization of complex projects situated in the urban context, always holding on to the architecture—"the scenarios and assistance of our life"—at the core of his research and creative works. On a broader scale, in 1968, on the occasion of "EuroDomus 2", Ponti proposed ideas for the visionary city he called 'Autilia'. This was a system of continuous vehicular traffic with eliminated crossroads, a Utopia recapturing the principles of American parkways and those of Le Corbusier, the aim of which was to restore harmony between roads (space for movement), traffic (the social life), and the home (nature) [6] (p. 321).

Although Gio Ponti was undisputedly the man of his age who accompanied the passing of the decades of the twentieth century while always closely adhering to and participating in what was taking place and being considered and realized all around him, thanks to the coherence of his ideas, he knew how to prefigure architectural space and foreshadow design themes that in the last part of the twentieth century and our day and age are surprisingly close to the themes of contemporary research [5] (p. 8). For Ponti, references to the antique were "entirely moral", as a motif, for example, of grandeur, not as a repertoire of motifs to be stolen and corrupted [7].

Ponti wrote in *Domus* in 1962, "if we consider what extraordinary means, what immense possibilities, what civilizing tasks, what participation in human aspirations are entrusted to architecture, which not only interprets and promotes them but also gives them their 'beautiful form'" [6] (p. 321). In his book, *Clouds Are Images*, Ponti used drawings as the means of expression used to communicate instantly to a large public. The graphic symbol returns to being light, simple, and transparent as in the days of Ponti as "exceptional decorator" [8].

The catalyzing element in Ponti's work is not the work itself but the "inhabitants", its relationship with people and their senses. Ponti's houses were the expression of modernity inspired by the forms and character of the Italian tradition. On the one hand, he was studying a unified urban plan around the idea of the "garden street", and on the other hand,

the design of facades with playful variations on the theme of the same element. Enhanced by balconies, terraces, and windows, these condominiums reveal in the configuration of their interior spaces as well, the inspiration of the “Italian-style house” that Ponti wrote of in the editorial of the first issue of *Domus* in the late 1920s [9].

Entering through the “rendering” of the façade we leave behind at once its two-dimensional geometry, discovering the three-dimensional mastery of Ponti. As Ponti suggests: “rigorous organisms locked outside and surprisingly played with within”, but these organisms also constitute the equipment of a lively and varied domestic life [10] (p. 7). We at once encounter a domestic theater in which one can participate or observe as a spectator. The project plays with the container and the contained. In Ponti’s terms, “Let home not be a stage set, but let it be made up of the elements in our own lives. The elements of the home are not a collection of furniture, but must be justified by responding to the needs of a happy, cozy, and restful life” [10] (p. 7). Among them, the critical features include but are not limited to the aspiration to verticality and lightness by dematerializing the facades, the conception of a green city in which the newly built architecture is discreet and concentrated, the flexible and changing interior space, and the capability of adapting to the needs of the user [5] (p. 9).

3. Gio Ponti in the Middle East

Iran’s modernization and urbanization process have coincided with that of many in the Middle East, such as Iraq, Egypt, and Turkey. Villa Namazee is one of the only two works performed in the Middle East by Gio Ponti. Villa Namazee is one of only three residential projects (the other two being in Venezuela, Latin America) designed by Gio’ Ponti, existing outside of Europe. It is considered a significant example of modernist architecture in the Middle East, and it has been featured in several architectural publications.

The Ministry of Planning building in Baghdad was designed by Ponti (1957–1958) with its enormous climatic portico and greyish-blue ceramic tiles, which were partially destroyed due to the Iraq war. However, in 2004, UNESCO and the Fondazione Politecnico di Milano established a joint program for the conservation and rehabilitation of the building.

4. Villa Namazee in Tehran: Similar Projects, Influential Paradigms and Inspirations

Villa Namazee was completed in 1963 and is considered one of Ponti’s most important works in the Middle East. The villa is located in the northern suburbs of Tehran and is known for its distinctive modernist design, which incorporates elements of traditional Persian architecture. Villa Namazee project in Tehran has roots in the general definition of Mediterranean architecture defined by Bernardo Rudofsky linked to the definition of ‘Casa all’ Italiana’ [11] (p. 25). This ‘Mediterranean character’ inspired by Rudofsky’s works was the theme in many Gio Ponti’s works from the 1930s onwards. According to Michele Porcu and Attilio Stocchi villa Namazee in Tehran was one of the three villas in which Ponti was given complete freedom of inventions based on the architect-client relationship [12].

Ponti described his residential housing projects as “constructions that are truly non-existence as an architecture, “in which he clarifies: “I overlooked outside them for the form I had to lend them, seeking it out among the acceptable forms of a certain pseudo-stylistic repertoire. The fate of my earliest constructions . . . was to receive their form ‘from a form’. So, they were born . . . beautiful and dead, even if the author did not believe them to be such” [13] (p. 53). So, the boundary between harmony and pretentiousness is reiterated in “La Casa all’ Italiana”: “The Italian-Style house is uncomplicated inside and out. It houses furnishings and beautiful artworks and demands order and space between them, not crowding or jumbling. It achieves richness through greatness, not purely means of fineness . . . In the Italian-style house, so-called ‘comfort’ does not just lie in how things respond to necessities, the needs, the conveniences of our lives, and the organization of services. Its ‘comfort’ lies in something greater, in the way its architecture gives us a measure for our very thoughts, offering us a possibility for healthy habits in simplicity, giving us a sense of confiding life with its broad welcome. Lastly, it lies in how it’s easy, cheerful decoration

opens up outside. It communicates with nature how the Italian-style house invites us to restore our spirit in restful visions of peace. This is what ‘conforto’ (Italian term means comfort) consists of, in the full sense of the beautiful Italian word” [7] (p. 10).

Inspiring by Wagner’s definition of Gesamtkunstwerk, Villa Namazee project has been described as the ‘total art work’, merged with “the democratic and industrial taste of the 1950s” [14] (p. 40). To describe the relationship between inside-outside, Ponti clarified: “In the Italian home, there is no big distinction between outdoors and in (. . .). With us, the outside architecture penetrates the inside and does not avoid using stone, plaster and murals. (. . .) From inside, the Italian home reaches out to the open with porticoes, terraces, pergolas and verandas, with loggias and balconies, with ‘altane’ (Italian term means roof decks) and belvederes, all extremely comfortable inventions for serene living and so Italian as to be called in every language by the names they have here” [7] (p. 18). Villa Namazee in Tehran had a seemingly reassuring decorative tone and a bright, comfortable fan-shaped open-plan layout, blending it perfectly with an area of the city experiencing widespread gentrification at that time (See Figures 1 and 2).

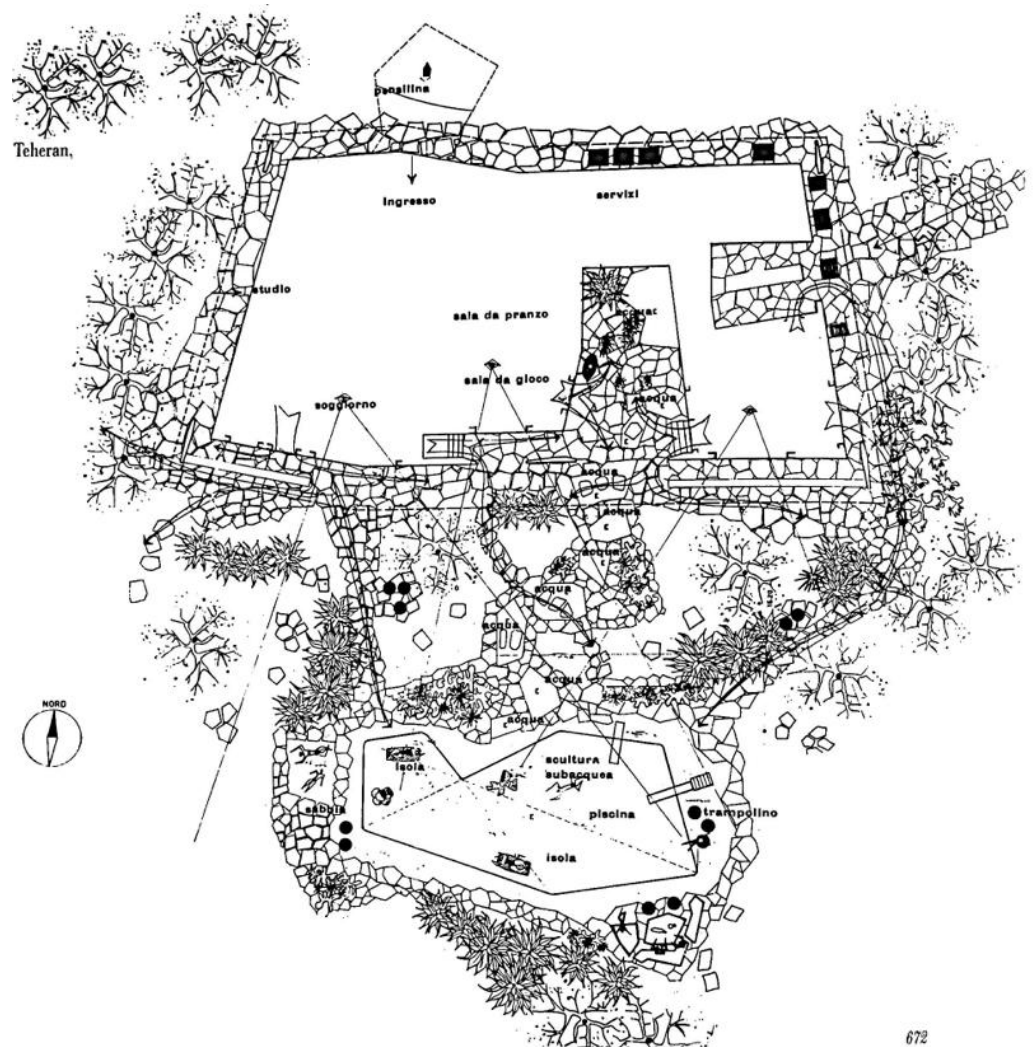


Figure 1. Plan of the Villa Namazee in Tehran, 1960. Source: [1] (pp. 14–19) also seen in [6] (p. 322).

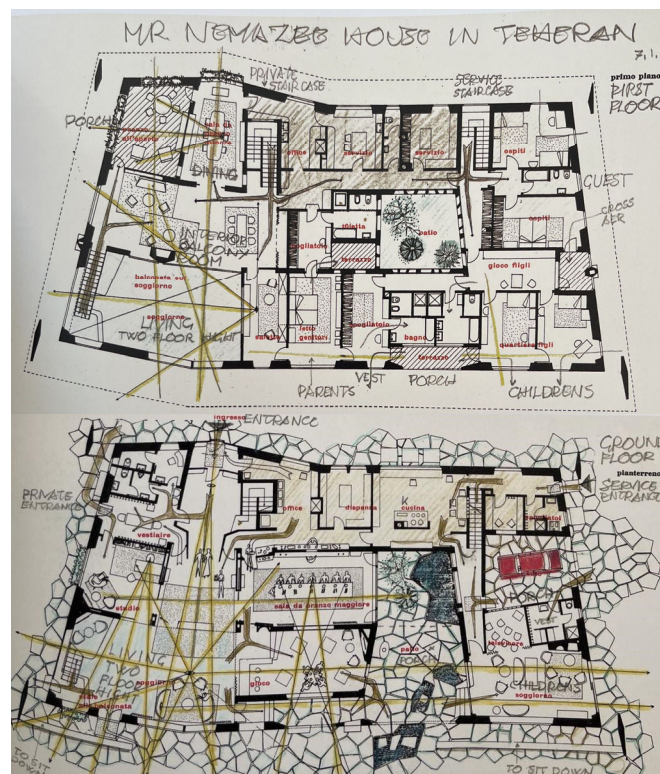


Figure 2. Two floor plans with Ponti's annotations in English. Above: the first-floor plan with private reception rooms, guest quarters, and family bedrooms. Below: the ground-floor plan with reception rooms, service areas, interior and outer patio spaces. Both plans include Ponti's method of complex sight lines that reveal, through the yellow diagonals, all the visual interpenetrations among the interior and exterior rooms. Source: [1] (pp. 14–19) also, seen in [6] (p. 323) and [9] (p. 473).

5. Villa Namazee in Tehran: Architectural Elements, Details and Precedents

Villa Namazee project is a three-dimension translation of the world of imaginative shapes and architecture that, with the same sacrilegious spirit, bedecked the ceramics of the same period inhabitants, which interpreted the upward movement in the designer object, that sense of graphic clarity, that capacity for trans-temporal synthesis that generates new imagery [15] (pp. 62–63). The main architectural elements, such as two-color schemes (blue and white) and the use of materials such as ceramic tiles, are the same as the projects Ponti completed between the 1960s and 1965s, the hotels in Sorrento and Rome, and the Alitalia Air Terminal in Milan. Using ceramic tiles to demonstrate the validity of choice is suitable for playing with light and shadow. The artistic tiles, such as those of Fausto Melotti, were combined with simple geometric patterns to connect in an infinite variety of ways (URL 1) (See Figures 3 and 4).

The walls that Ponti had emptied out with large asymmetrical cuts were populated by Melotti with figures, plates, colors, signs, and symbols. In this interior/exterior collaboration the two achieved their greatest and most poetic creation of building-painting-sculpture [9] (p. 469). This promising cooperation between Ponti and Melotti, in Postwar Italian design, with its close relationship to acceptable art practice and craftsmanship, frequently created projects such as Villa Planchart (1953–1957), a single-family house in Caracas with elaborate ceramic schemes, Alitalia ticket office in New York (1958), which Melotti blanketed with thousands of unique glazed-ceramic tiles as well as with significant ceramic figures and vases and Villa Namazee in Tehran (See Figure 5).



Figure 3. Living room, with the internal balcony and the large two-story window opening into the garden, photo by Licitra. Source: [9] (p. 471).



Figure 4. The main interior courtyard with Ponti's irregular-shaped windows, a "negative" playing against the "positive" of Fausto Melotti's polychromic ceramic panels. Source: [1] (pp. 14–19) also, seen in [6] (p. 325).



Figure 5. Spired Ceiling covered in ceramic pebbles from Ceramica Joo, photo by Licitra. Source: [1] (pp. 14–19) also, seen in [6] (p. 324).

Ponti's theories of "finite form", "organized walls" and "composite furnishings" interventions found exemplary applications in his remarkable villas of the early 1950s: Villa Planchart and Villa Arreaza in Caracas; Villa Namazee in Teheran. As Ponti manifested in other projects, he organized the interior designs of the house to showcase the complex relationship between inside and outside spaces through patios, terraces, and other areas fitted out to make the gardens surrounding the house as enjoyable as landscapes (See Figure 6). As an example, in the design of the house of Doctor T. in Sao Paolo, Ponti suggested a Pompeian 'introverted' house for which reason the external did not exist, and all the rooms opened onto the central courtyard. According to Ponti, "The view was perfect, including two elements, the architecture and the sky, without any intrusions" [6] (p. 321).



Figure 6. (A) The South-facing villa façade seen from the pool, showing double height reception window at the left, and entrance to the interior courtyard on the right. (B) Photo of the front façade with the elongated canopy entrance supported by a diamond-shaped pier. The villa was covered in Ponti's "Diamanti" tiles made by Ceramica Joo. Source: [1] (pp. 14–19) also, seen in [6] (p. 324).

6. Villa Namazee in Tehran: Architect-Client Relationship

In an article titled 'A villa in Tehran' which published in 1965 in *Domus*, Gio Ponti writes: "This one in Teheran is my third large home, after those I designed for Anala and Amanda Planchart and for Blanca Arreza in Venezuela, homes to which I wanted to bring those who had commissioned them from me that measure of serenity that a house can represent for those who live in it. In my opinion, this should be the human test of architectural design: no recognition could be more desired by an architect than hearing from the inhabitants of that they are happy in the house he designed for them. No praise of the critical, aesthetics, or cultural levels could equal this which, on a human plane, is

superior. And within these walls, I insisted on a fidelity to what I think leads to ‘*joie de vivre*’ within the limits of human possibilities. I wanted a design that was as solicitous as possible of what would occur in the house—and one that was also solicitous of the ‘spectacle’ (architecture is a spectacle) that the spaces offer and that is offered through them—a spectacle that comes from convincing of bare architectonic fact in itself, and then from imagining it animated. That’s what the highest room, which characterizes all my villas, is for. It is that which allows for beautiful views from different levels, and lends to support to the need for a larger space. It is for the visual opening (the series of rooms) between one room and another, in order to simultaneously see more of the parts, with the possibility, however, of isolating each room. And all this is done while listening to and understanding intuitively, with affectionate friendship, those for whom you are making the house, and their decedents” [6] (p. 322) (See Figure 7).



Figure 7. View from entrance foyer looking to the main reception room. The Coffee Table was made by Cassina, 1954, and was placed on an antique Persian carpet illuminated by a Pavone chandelier made by Arredoluce, 1961. Ponti designed a glass and brass diamond-shaped room divider that also functioned as a vitrine for the Namazee’s ancient Persian earthenware collection. Source: [9] (p. 470).

Ponti added: “For this reason, on each occasion a friendship has been born between the family for whom I designed a house and my own family, and these friendships have remained strong, even though the work was done in far-off lands, beautiful and dear, which bring to mind the place and the affability of the people, although distance decreases those contacts that were so close and all-encompassing during the actual work. There were friends here in Tehran too, Vida and Shafi Namazee, and they remain very dear to us (See Figure 8). Inspired by their affability, we asked them to allow us to number them among other families in our affection, those whom we remember from their houses: that of Bouilherts in Paris, that of Anala and Armando Planchart in Caracas, and that of Blanca Arreaza, also in Caracas. But in Tehran, close to Vida and Shafi Namazee, are Mohsen and Lolo Foroughi. Foroughi is the architect to whom I am indebted for truly exceptional opportunity of being asked to work on this building, in which he assisted in every possible way. An architect enamored of his noble country and a cultivated collector of art works from the ancient Persian civilization, he introduced me to cities (Isfahan!), monuments and museums, and his house was a humanly hospitable place for me” [6] (p. 323).



Figure 8. Shafi and Vida Namazee, seated center, at a dinner in Ponti's Via Dezza apartment. Source: [9] (p. 470).

7. Villa Namazee in Tehran: Interior Design, Details and Furniture

The Villa Namazee is a two-story building with a flat roof and a rectangular floor plan. It is constructed of reinforced concrete and has a simple, functional layout. The villa is surrounded by gardens and features many outdoor terraces and a swimming pool. The villa's interior is characterized by an open, vast layout with large windows allowing plenty of natural light. The villa also includes many distinctive design elements, such as curved walls, ceilings, and colorful mosaic tiles.

Ponti's work in Villa Namazee, was directed at designing public and private spaces, and interior decorations (See Figures 9 and 10). At "EuroDomus 1" (1966), Ponti presented new ideas for furniture such as lamps called "luminous paintings" that were miniaturized versions of the earlier "furnished windows" which were armchairs and sofas that were more and more stylized in the direction of a natural, functional, comfortable and almost organic form [6] (p. 321). For ceiling lamps of the bathroom, Ponti used pointed nicked brass supports and Murano glass shades having irregular patches of yellow and blue 'murines' that Ponti refers to as "Macchie" made by Venini in 1961 [16] (p. 470).

For designing the facades, since they were borne and not bearing walls, Ponti had the idea of creating the visual scenery. Ponti studied the "dynamic" day-time effect and the "self-illuminating" impression at night. The previous examples in Ponti's works were Shui-Hing department stores, the IND office building in Milan, and the square in Eindhoven [6] (p. 321). Ponti intended to create a volume that would always be different depending on the observation point and the time of the day. Examples of this volume in facades are the diamond shape of projects such as the Pirelli skyscraper, Ponti's house in Arenzano, and the Church of the San Carlo Hospital in Milan. However, Ponti developed an interest in anthropomorphic and naturalistic forms in his projects. The examples include but are not limited to Daniel Koo's house, which seems to suggest the involutions in the brain folds, or the case of 'beetle house' in which the large covering is shaped like a leaf [6] (p. 321). Focusing on Villa Namazee's project, the west entrance to the reception room screened by a subtle hexagonal-shaped concrete pier. There were four such piers placed at the four corners of the villa, engaging the wide overhanging eaves and creating small portico spaces at the same time [16] (p. 477) (See Figures 10 and 11).



Figure 9. Private family reception room with all seating designed by Ico and Luisa Parisi, together with a costume table by Ponti, all made by Cassina, 1958–1960. Ponti created an angular-shaped fireplace covered with blue- and silver-leaf enameled tiles that were executed by Paolo De Poli, 1959. The polyhedral chandelier and sconce were made by Venini, 1961. Source: [9] (p. 475).



Figure 10. Study model with folded roof design, interior courtyard, and garden-facing façade. Source: [9] (p. 472).

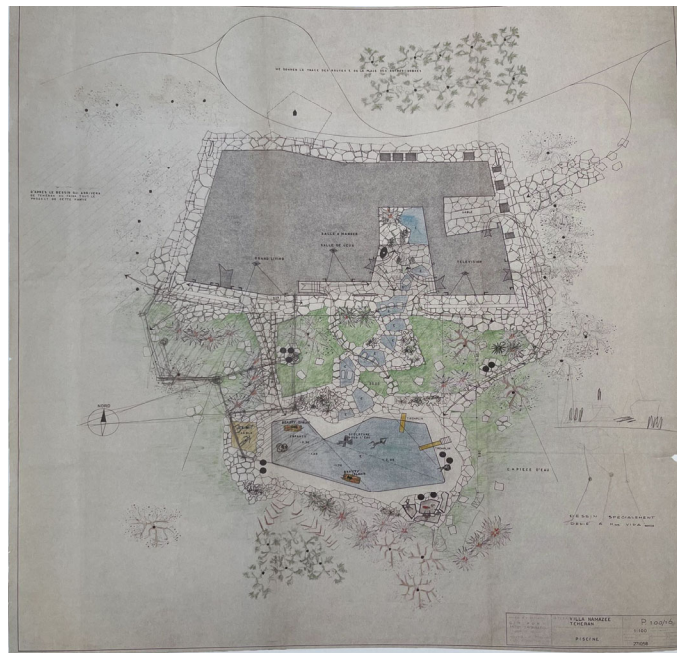


Figure 11. Colored plan of the villa in its garden setting, with Ponti's notations about the pool that was to include two "Beauty Islands" and one underwater sculpture. Source: Source: [9] (p. 469).

8. Villa Namazee in Tehran: Current State

In 2017, hundreds of Iranian and international architects, urban planners, and journalists in the field of urban and cultural heritage, in a spontaneous and coordinated movement, formed a campaign to demonstrate their satisfaction and preserve Villa Namazee as an influential and important work of Gio Ponti's architecture in Tehran. Thanks to the unprecedented support of the local and international architectural community, Villa Namazee was saved from the danger of demolition. It remains a unique model of an 'Italian house' merged with Iranian culture in the Nivaran neighborhood north of Tehran (See Figure 12).



Figure 12. Villa Namazee's images shortly after being saved from the danger of demolition in Tehran, 2018. Source: Villa Magazine, photographer: Sanaz Khodadad.

In November 2021, the Italian Embassy in Tehran produced a monographic supplement to the November issue of *Domus Magazine*, which was held in Gio Ponti's Villa Namazee. This project comprises ten documentaries and related articles produced by the Italian Embassy in Tehran to emphasize the role of Iranian and Italian architects' collaborations in the modern era. The tenth episode of the 'Domus Eyes in Iran' series, dedicated to Villa Namazee and in collaboration with Salvatore Licitra, Ponti's grandson and curator of Ponti's archive, was

screened during the ceremony. Organizing these cultural events between Iran and Italy was another critical step in raising public and international awareness of the preservation significance of Ponti's Villa Namazee in Tehran (https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/retediplomatica/2021/11/monografia-su-domus-eyes-on-iran-dellambasciata-a-teheran/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CDmus%20Eyes%20on%20Iran%E2%80%9D%20is,the%20role%20of%20Italian%20,https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/466686/The-last-episode-of-Domus-Eyes-on-Iran-at-Villa-Namazee-by, accessed on 26 December 2022) (See Figure 13).



Figure 13. The last episode of “Domus Eyes on Iran” by the Italian Embassy at Villa Namazee in Tehran, 5 November 2021. Source: Tehran Times, Siavash Soufinejad.

9. Further Discussions: De-Listed Heritage, Short Memory, Long History

De-listing modern heritage from an official heritage list can happen for various reasons, including changes in ownership, changes in the condition of the site, or changes in the surrounding context. For example, if the site is no longer considered to be of cultural or historical significance, it may be removed from the list. Additionally, it may also be delisted if the site is no longer in good condition or has undergone significant changes that have altered its original design or character. In some cases, a modern heritage site may be delisted due to changes in ownership or the surrounding context. For example, if the site is no longer used for its original purpose or if it is located in an area that has undergone significant development or redevelopment, it may be removed from the list.

If a modern heritage site is delisted, it may no longer be eligible for protection or preservation under heritage laws or regulations. This can make it more vulnerable to demolition or alteration, and it may be lost forever. It is essential to ensure that modern heritage sites are protected and preserved for future generations to appreciate and learn from. When the national authorities decided to delist and remove modern buildings such as Villa Namazee in Tehran from the cultural heritage list due to real estate development, they threatened and ignored the cultural values and national identities [17–20]. While this Italian architectural modernist symbol in Tehran has recently survived demolition and raze due to several petitions and public outrage, many other endangered modern heritage and mid-century buildings exist.

The fact that demolishing the tangible cultural heritage of a society—buildings, monuments, and physical symbols of culture that speak of shared roots—will directly affect the sense of identity and belonging to the community. In times of war and conflict, shared identity and cultural heritage become more significant. Another vital factor is the active participation of international organizations such as UNESCO, DOCOMOMO, TICCIH, and other community-based NGOs in saving the heritage in countries where the modern heritage is threatened by demolition, real estate development, or war [21–23]. The main question which still needs to be answered here is: when the complex heritage policies in

countries such as Iran delisted buildings from the national heritage, is there a legal way to protect them in the time of conflict by international organs? Can we stop this vicious circle of demolishing heritage with new policies on a national and international scale?

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