


Perishable Traces: Reconstructing the History of Iranian Women Architects

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How to cite: Mehan, Asma. (2024). *Perishable Traces: Reconstructing the History of Iranian Women Architects*. In proceedings book: *ICAG 2023 - VI International Conference on Architecture and Gender*. Valencia, 3-6 October 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4995/ICAG2023.2023.16528>

Abstract

In this paper, I seek to address the underrepresentation of Iranian women architects in historical narratives, exploring the perishable traces of their work and contributions to the field of architecture. Inspired by Carla Lonzi's call for women to consider their narrative incomplete and the International Archive of Women in Architecture (IAWA), I delve into the unique challenges Iranian women architects face and their impact on architectural history. I examine the historiographical review of Iranian women architects, their work, and their contributions to the field, highlighting the importance of preserving and disseminating this often-overlooked knowledge. By investigating the current editorial challenges, I explore how archived material should be disseminated and the agency of such material in shaping a more inclusive and accurate historical narrative.

Furthermore, I discuss the role of resources, archives, and new technologies in preserving and accessing the work of Iranian women architects. Considering data feminism and information visualization, I consider the implications of algorithms and digital technologies on accessing archived information and the potential for a more inclusive historical narrative.

Through the lens of Iranian women architects, this paper contributes to the broader discussion on the representation and history of women in architecture by unearthing and preserving the perishable traces of their work.

Keywords: *Iranian women architects, Historical narratives, Perishable traces, Underrepresentation, Architectural history, Women in architecture*

1. Introduction

This research intricately weaves a narrative that seeks to resurrect the often-overlooked role of Iranian women architects within the broader tapestry of architectural history.¹ At the forefront of this endeavor is the aspiration to unearth the intricate web of socio-political and cultural paradigms that have, either overtly or subtly, sidelined Iranian women architects from mainstream architectural dialogues.² Further, this research endeavors to chronicle and underscore the luminous architectural innovations and transformative contributions from the early 20th century to the contemporary epoch. An additional objective rests on harnessing the vanguard of technological tools—specifically digital archiving and data visualization—to encapsulate, preserve, and disseminate their rich architectural legacies.³ Lastly, this study ponders the overarching implications of these rediscoveries on the global fabric of women's representation within architectural spheres, critically evaluating its potential metamorphic impacts on architectural pedagogies and praxes.⁴

2. Revisiting Shadows: Unearthing the Narrative of Iranian Women Architects

Historically, Iranian architectural ingenuity, with its antiquated roots deeply embedded in ancient civilizations, has often been acclaimed for its monumental grandeur and intricate designs.⁵ However, the gendered narratives within this historical recounting have palpably

¹ Ahmed, Sophia. *Women Architects in the Modern Movement*. London: Routledge, 2015; Alfordy, Sandra, and Janice Helland. *Craft, Space, and Interior Design, 1855–2005*. Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008; Allaback, Sarah. *The First American Women Architects*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

² Hayden, Dolores, and Jim Wark. *A Field Guide to Sprawl*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006; Bertrand, Wendy. *Enamored with Place: As Woman + As Architect*. San Francisco, CA: Eyeonplace Press, 2012.

³ Espegel Alonso, Carmen, and Angela Giral. *Women Architects in the Modern Movement*. New York and London: Routledge, 2018; Cole, Doris. *Candid Reflections: Letters from Women in Architecture 1972 & 2004*. New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2007.

⁴ Mostafavi, Sina, and Asma Mehan. 2023. "De-Coding Visual Clichés and Verbal Biases: Hybrid Intelligence and Data Justice." In *Diffusions in Architecture: Artificial Intelligence and Image Generators*, 320. Wiley; Brown, Lori A. *Feminist Practices: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Women in Architecture*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011.

⁵ Mehan, Asma. "Tehran: From Sacred to Radical." (2022); Mehan, Asma, Mehan, Mahziar. "Housing as Politics: The case of Tehran." In *Housing as Politics: The case of Tehran*, pp. 56–65. Lettera Ventidue Edizioni, 2020; Mehan, Asma. "Manifestation of Power: Toopkhaneh Square, Tehran." *Spaces & Flows: An International Journal of Urban & Extra Urban Studies* 8, no. 2 (2017); Mehan, Asma. "MANIFESTATION OF MODERNITY IN IRANIAN PUBLIC SQUARES: BAHARESTAN SQUARE (1826–1978)." *International Journal of Heritage Architecture* 1, no. 3 (2017): 411–420.

marginalized the contributions of women, rendering them often as footnotes rather than primary contributors.⁶

Leila Araghian stands out as a shining example of the profound impact Iranian women architects have on the global scene. A graduate from UBC and co-founder of Diba Tensile Architecture, she is notable for her design of Tehran's award-winning Tabiat Bridge. Complementing her achievements is Nasrine Seraji-Bozorgzad, an Iranian-origin French-British architect who is currently enriching young minds at University College Dublin. With impressive projects such as the Paris-Saclay Campus, she brings a unique blend of Iranian and Western sensibilities to architectural design.

Among the new guard of architects integrating technology into their craft, Marziah Zad emerges at the forefront. Serving as the Academic Coordinator for IAAC's Master program, her design prowess shines through in projects like the Atlas Medical Office Building in Hamedan. Not far behind in terms of innovation and design elegance is Mahsa Majidi, a Tehran University alumna who founded "Persian Garden". Her portfolio, which boasts of designs like the Ghobadian Office, speaks of her innate ability to combine aesthetic appeal with functional utility.

The architectural landscape of Iran also features the remarkable Shiva Aghababaei. As a co-founder of Tarh Va Afarinesh, she has left an indelible mark over two decades with her design work, crafting landmarks such as the South Tower and Esteghlal Hotel. Her contemporary, Habibeh Madjdabadi, is another force to reckon with. Having set up her office in Tehran in 2003, Madjdabadi's designs, including the 70 Peaks Multipurpose Complex, have garnered acclaim both nationally and internationally.

⁶ Rjendran, Lakshmi, Fariba Molki, Sara Mahdizadeh, and Asma Mehan. "FRAMING SPATIALITY AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL PARADIGM: EXAMINING THE IRANIAN HOUSING CULTURE AND PROCESSES." *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 45, issue 2 (2021); Mehan, Asma. "'Tabula Rasa' planning: creative destruction and building a new urban identity in Tehran." *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 41, no. 3 (2017): 210-220; Mehan, Asma. "Blank Slate: squares and political order of city." *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 40, no. 4 (2016): 311-321.



Fig. 1 "Inspiring Iranian Women Architects". Source © Serra Utkim Ikiz (September 23, 2022)

Finally, the duo Catherine Spiridonoff and Sara Kalantary represents the synthesis of academic excellence and practical brilliance. Spiridonoff, apart from her teaching at the University of Tehran, has projects like the Tehran World Trade Center under her belt, symbolizing her design approach that intertwines psychology and nature. Kalantary, on the other hand, co-founded TDC Office and has reimagined urban architecture with projects like House No. 6. Together, these architects embody the rich tapestry of Iranian architectural heritage while pushing the boundaries of contemporary design.

3. Digital Renaissance: Archiving Iranian Women's Architectural Legacies

In the age of information, the digital realm offers vast potentialities to shine a light on underrepresented narratives, particularly those of Iranian women architects.⁷ Contemporary

⁷ Mehan, Asma. "The Role of Digital Technologies in Building Resilient Communities." *Bhumi, The Planning Research Journal* (2023b): 33-40; Johnson, Patricia. *Women in Architecture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010; International Archive of Women in Architecture (IAWA). *Archives of Women Architects*. Blacksburg: Virginia Tech, 1990; D'Ignazio, Catherine, and Lauren F. Klein. *Data Feminism*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020; Darling, Elizabeth, and Nathaniel Robert Walker, eds. *Suffragette City: Women, Politics, and the Built Environment*. Abington, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2020.

archival technologies are not just tools for storage but instruments for advocacy, enabling these narratives to be foregrounded.⁸

Databases and virtual repositories can potentially allow for the dynamic presentation of architectural plans, 3D renderings, and immersive virtual tours of structures designed by Iranian women architects.⁹ Additionally, AI-powered algorithms can cross-reference different data sets, allowing researchers to identify patterns, collaborations, and influences that might have been overlooked in a traditional review.¹⁰

The interactivity offered by digital platforms also facilitates a more collaborative approach to history, enabling contributions from various stakeholders. Those who have firsthand experience with these architects' works can share anecdotes, photographs, and even previously unseen designs. This crowdsourcing approach not only enriches the archive but also democratizes the historiographical process.¹¹

However, it's essential to ensure that these digital tools are accessible. This means ensuring compatibility across different devices and platforms and accommodating those with disabilities. Moreover, these archives should be multilingual, recognizing the global interest in Iranian architecture and making these contributions accessible to all.

4. Unveiling Narratives: Implications and Findings

The exploration into the lives and works of Iranian women architects paints a vivid tableau of resilience, innovation, and passion. These architects, while deeply rooted in their cultural and

⁸ Mehan, Asma. "The Iranian Architects in Exile: Hossein Amanat." In *The Iranian Architects in Exile: Hossein Amanat*, pp. 24-26. Thymos Books, 2023; Mehan, Asma. "Decolonizing the notion of 'Urban Commons' to mitigate the fragility of contemporary cities." In *Decolonizing the notion of 'Urban Commons' to mitigate the fragility of contemporary cities*, pp. 94-97. Counterarchitecture, in collaboration with UEL and Arup, 2023; Mehan, Asma, and Krzysztof Nawratek. "The City as the (Anti) Structure: Urban space, Violence and Fearscales." In *The City as the (Anti) Structure: Urban space, Violence and Fearscales*, pp. 78-79. Colonial and Post-Colonial Landscapes: Architecture, Colonialism, War-II International Congress, 2023.

⁹ Mehan, Asma. "Re-Narrating Radical Cities over Time and through Space: Imagining Urban Activism through Critical Pedagogical Practices." *Architecture* 3, no. 1 (2023): 92-103; Desai, Madhavi. *Women Architects and Modernism in India: Narratives and Contemporary Practices*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017; Lonzi, Carla. *Let's Spit on Hegel*. Milan: Rivolta Femminile, 1980.

¹⁰ Varış Husar, Sıla Ceren, Asma Mehan, Rüya Erkan, Tjark Gall, Ledio Allkja, Milan Husar, and Mennatullah Hendawy. "What's next? Some priorities for young planning scholars to tackle tomorrow's complex challenges." *European Planning Studies* (2023): 1-17.

¹¹ Mehan, Asma. "Gio Ponti and Villa Namazee:(De) listed Modern Heritage." *Heritage* 6, no. 2 (2023): 789-801; Mehan, Asma, Krzysztof Nawratek, and Farouq Tahar. "Beyond Community Inclusivity through Spatial Interventions." *Writingplace* 6 (2022): 136-147.

historical contexts, navigated the terrains of modernity with finesse, molding Iran's architectural landscape in nuanced ways.

The patriarchal structures of Iranian society, coupled with the tumultuous political landscape, posed unique challenges for women architects. However, our findings suggest that these challenges often became fertile ground for innovation. Restrictive societal norms sometimes translated into architectural constraints, pushing these architects to devise creative solutions that neither a traditionalist nor a complete modernist might consider.

Furthermore, their dual identity – as both women and architects – equipped them with a unique lens to address issues like public vs. private spaces, family dynamics, and the fluidity of indoor-outdoor spaces in their designs.

In essence, the socio-political environment of Iran did not just serve as a backdrop to their architectural endeavors but actively shaped them. Whether in resisting, embracing, or negotiating with these forces, Iranian women architects carved out a distinct space for themselves, pushing the boundaries of both architectural practice and societal norms.¹² It is important to highlight that the rich tapestry of Iranian architecture is incomplete without recognizing the invaluable contributions of its women architects. Their legacies, preserved and championed through digital tools, invite us to revisit and reimagine the annals of architectural history.

5. Towards a Reimagined Horizon: Concluding Reflections

The exploration into the intricate landscapes forged by Iranian women architects provides an undeniable testament to their profound influence on the architectural realm, both within Iran and on the global stage. Their works, while deeply infused with the historical and cultural narratives of Iran, also signal a bold move towards a cosmopolitan architectural dialogue that effortlessly traverses regional boundaries.¹³

¹² Mehan, Asma, and Rowena Abdul Razak. "Oil Heritage in Iran and Malaysia: The Future Energy Legacy in the Persian Gulf and the South China Sea." In *INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM: New Metropolitan Perspectives*, pp. 2607-2616. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022; Mehan, Asma, and Rowena Abdul Razak. "After oil: what Malaysia and Iran may look like in a post-fossil-fuel future." *The Conversation (France)* (2022): 1-6.

¹³ Boodaghi, Omid, Zohreh Fanni, and Asma Mehan. "Regulation and policy-making for urban cultural heritage preservation: A comparison between Iran and Italy." *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development* (2022); Bazazzadeh, Hassan, and Asma Mehan. "Heritage Impact Assessment Method in the Production of Cultural Heritage. Iranian Cases." In *Heritage Impact Assessment Method in the Production of Cultural Heritage. Iranian Cases*, pp. 171-182. Sidestone Press, 2022.

However, this journey of recognition is marred with hurdles. The systemic sidelining of their contributions is not just an omission of historical fact but a reflection of broader gender disparities in the fields of design, architecture, and beyond. As such, the drive to acknowledge their legacies becomes not just an academic endeavor but a socio-political movement in its own right.

Moreover, it's pivotal to recognize that these legacies aren't just frozen monuments of the past. They continue to influence and inspire budding architects, especially women, providing them with the language to articulate their architectural visions. In bringing forth these narratives, we are not just rectifying historical inaccuracies but laying the groundwork for a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable future for architecture.

Furthermore, technology, with its promise of democratization, plays a crucial role in this process. The potential of digital archives, virtual exhibitions, and interactive repositories ensures that these narratives remain accessible to all, irrespective of geographical, socio-economic, or political barriers. This global engagement, in turn, fosters a more holistic and interconnected understanding of architectural evolution.

In conclusion, as we stand on the cusp of architectural historiography, it's essential to be guided by a vision that champions inclusivity and diversity. The stories of Iranian women architects, teeming with passion, resilience, and innovation, beckon us to move beyond traditional historiographical boundaries. Their stories are not just additions to the existing narrative, but forceful reminders that the realm of architecture, in its truest essence, thrives on a mosaic of diverse voices and visions.

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