

IRAN AND CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

In the first of a new series of regional reports, Darab Diba looks at the form and impact of recent architecture in Iran.

To understand and evaluate the contemporary architecture of Iran, it is necessary to look briefly at the evolution of socio-cultural phenomena over the last hundred years. Since the Qajar dynasty of the last century, a break with the long chain of traditional customs has emerged.

Iran, whose culture is based essentially on Islam and metaphysical concepts, is being confronted with new Western values: scientism, rationalism and new political and economic considerations.

This confrontation has, throughout history, led to an erosion and disintegration of traditional forms and customs. In the West the rationalization of knowledge, followed by demythologization, led to the secularization of thought and, consequently, the crumbling of metaphysical values. This movement in human thought, bolstered in the twentieth century by its scientific and economic supports, is becoming the reference, model and point of convergence for most third world countries.

The history of architecture in Iran over the last hundred years reflects the political viewpoints of a country which found wealth in oil and other resources, the desire for cultural and economic references and a cycle of international relations which have plunged the country into the most traditional form of colonialism, overshadowed by the importation of an inappropriate culture.

In 1941, following the abdication of Reza Shah in favour of his son, Mohammed Reza became the country's leader. Educated in Switzerland and instilled with new Western values, Mohammed Reza Shah sought to shape the image of Iran. A new modern Iran, with its strength in oil, became the goal of a monarch who was little versed in the social and cultural affairs of a country which, throughout its history, has been deeply impregnated with its own religious and metaphysical concepts, and during this same period (1955-1978) socio-cultural values began to change.

Modern Iran had to embrace modern architecture and the various movements tending in the same direction: functiona-

lism, constructivism, technological rationalism, speculation and site economy.

A cubic form of architecture with picture windows and travertine became predominant in the great cities. At a time of economic boom when Iran's frontiers were opening up to multinational companies, and oil was being exploited, property speculators made much use of this easy-to-build cubic architecture. With its light metal structure, flat roofs, and thin walls, this architecture became the powerful, reliable trade of a country in which property was becoming almost the only economic element of stability and investment. The *besaz-o-beforoush* (build and sell), a group of small-scale builders, became masters of the cities.

Architects were divided, out of their depth, overtaken by events and by the impact of a whole society that wanted to build mainly in order to secure its capital in a region where political tranquillity had

never been the order of the day. Organized into consulting architects' practices and others, they mostly attached themselves to the centres of economic power and became the professional tool of growing speculation. Only rarely did they produce anything innovative.

The Islamic Revolution is putting an end to a period of unbridled modernization and, in its initial phase, is seeking to dismantle everything dating from the Shah's time. Most individual architects and most of the major practices are being forced to abandon their work while it is under way and many site projects are in abeyance.

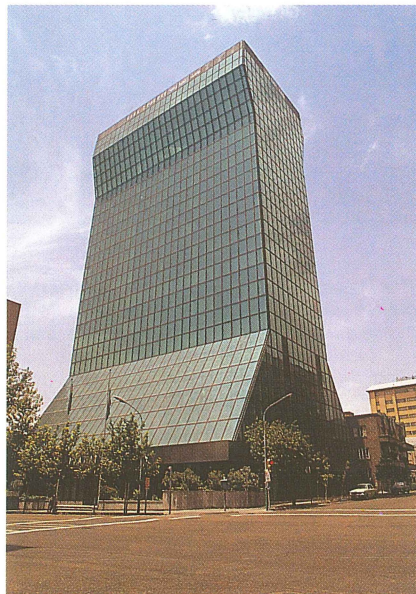
The Planning and Budgetary Organization is setting out new regulations to manage new architectural practices. These new regulations concern only the quantitative aspect of architectural production and do not in any way provide a response to the cultural and artistic aspirations of an evolving society.

Islamic architecture is being discussed and sought out, but its interpretation is usually in the form of a pastiche of Islamic elements such as the dome, the arch, the inner garden and the stained glass window.

In Tehran, the city has exploded in spatial terms. Initially, all the rules for controlling architectural production were eclipsed, and people took advantage of this period to build houses on plots without title deeds, making illegal use of urban infrastructure (water, electricity, gas, etc.). The *bazaris* (bazaar traders) took their revenge on the upper middle classes who had been linked with the imperial regime, by taking over trade and buying up the abandoned houses of former members of the Shah's regime, which were sold at knockdown prices.

For the last ten years, social permutation on a huge scale has disrupted property speculation. Two councils often have control only over the surface area of plans proposed. No one discusses forms, façades or quality of the environment. Aesthetical problems are not tackled, for fear of getting into dialectics on equivocality, subjective taste and other intellectual speculation.

In the schools of architecture (there are four in Tehran), teaching is mainly



1. *Tejarat Bank, Tehran. Work began before the Revolution and was completed in 1979. Constructed in concrete and glass. One of the series of prestigious projects of international economic relations. This is the most modern bank in Tehran and the whole of Iran. (Photo: Darab Diba.)*

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theoretical and it is difficult to shake off the influence of modern architecture. In practices, different trends coexist: modernism, post-modernism, high-tech, traditionalism, and so on. There is a range of experience with differing views amongst teachers and students who, in spite of their talent, find it difficult to grasp or develop this eclecticism.

However, new programmes developed after the revolution are more appropriate to the country, the culture and society and to seeking to provide a framework for the country's identity that has not existed for the last 50 years.

Recent Buildings

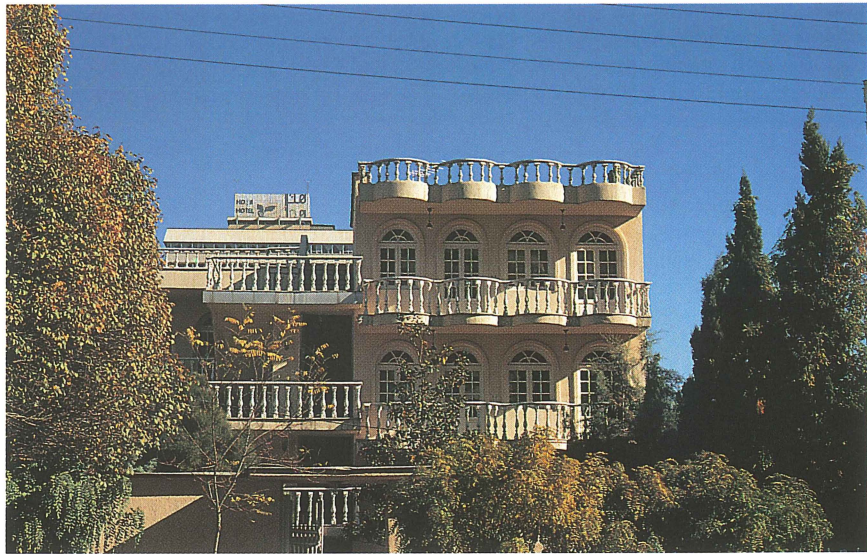
There is little recent architectural production of great quality. The problem lies both in socio-political factors and in the level of technical and labour skills. In common with many countries in the developing world, Iran is experiencing a rupture with the major traditions and achievements of the past.

Iradj Kalantari, a well-known Iranian architect, considers that the reasons for architectural disintegration lie in the fact that political instability has fractured the progress and evolution of techniques and technology. This weakness in the technical field and in our resources has, according to Kalantari, often obliged us to restrict ourselves to unchallenging and unambitious projects.

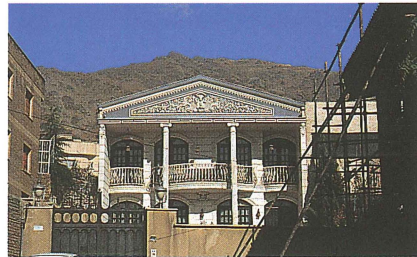
Building workers are, on the whole, peasants from the countryside and small towns. Both workers and foremen have learnt their trade from experience but have seldom been able to participate in major projects.

Kamran Safamanesh, whose house in Vanak has become a landmark, feels that only the architect's constant, committed presence on the site can produce an acceptable finished product. A site left in the hands of the workers, progresses by dint of patching and hybridization where the intermediate techniques and methods essential to harmonious completion are omitted. This desire to work fast and cut out the intermediate phases of construction techniques has, according to Safamanesh, led to a decline and real cheapness in our buildings. The problem of 'botching' ties in with the 'approximateness' that has permeated the work of contemporary Iranian architects, and militated against the skill that existed in the past and gave rise to the great monuments of our history.

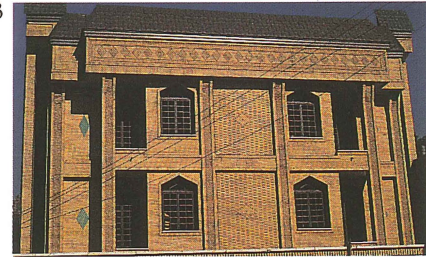
Hossein Sheikh Zeyneddin, a highly talented theoretician and architect who runs the best-known architectural practice in Tehran, feels that the decline of today's architecture is due to a cultural transformation and economic chaos. According to him, there are two essential



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elements to a harmonious concept of architecture: order and discipline. Without discipline in thought and execution, there can be no work of quality, and professional discipline and accuracy are factors which have almost completely disappeared from our culture. To achieve something of value therefore requires a constant struggle on the part of designers, at all levels and all degrees of execution. The Iranian architect works in an atmosphere of constraint which is incomprehensible to a Westerner. Architectural plans, even the best drawn and most explicit, are followed and understood only very approximately on site.

In recent construction, the most frequently used materials are metal and concrete for the structure with brick cladding. The metal structure is usually chosen because it can be erected fast and because, in comparison with concrete structures, it is possible to make a saving in the area envisaged on the plans, giving greater profits from the space. The production of metal structures is often poor and does not comply with international building standards. Metal structures are erected on site and require no specialist workers or any special skill. Joints made by a welding process (*djoush*) make the buildings vulnerable.

Concrete structures are better constructed but require more detailed site planning and extra precautions. The quality of finish of concrete very rarely

2. Housing block with 3 apartments, Tehran. Completed in 1987. The style is bourgeois/nouveau riche. The architecture is mock oriental. (Photo: Darab Diba.)

3. Block of 2 apartments, Tehran, started before the Revolution and completed after the Revolution. The project was carried out by Memar Saz/Besaz-e-beforush, builders and speculators (see text). (Photo: Darab Diba.)

4. Housing block. This is the great fashion in Tehran and other towns in Iran: 3cm beige/light brick on the façade. These buildings could be housing blocks or offices. The structure is usually metal or concrete. In the travertine/stone style of the 1940s-1970s one can see that the brick imitates traditional techniques even in its finishing. It is well received by the various social classes. (Photo: Darab Diba.)

allows us to expose this material on a façade; usually it is covered with brick or stone.

After the vogue for stone and travertine between the 1940s and the 1970s, we have now moved on to a fashion for brick. The most fashionable cladding material is pale (light beige) brick which gives buildings a link with traditional architecture.

An important phenomenon in the housing field is the construction of small, three or four-storey housing complexes, each for three to four families, designed

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under the auspices of government-supported co-operatives. In the typology of their plans, these apartments generally reproduce a modern Western concept that is fairly close to the low-rent building constructed in Europe after the Second World War. Façades are generally no more than functional. This co-operative housing is designed to a standard plan, made to fit the plot. Uniform, repetitive apartment blocks have begun to destroy the general appearance of the city and overshadow any landmarks and individuality.

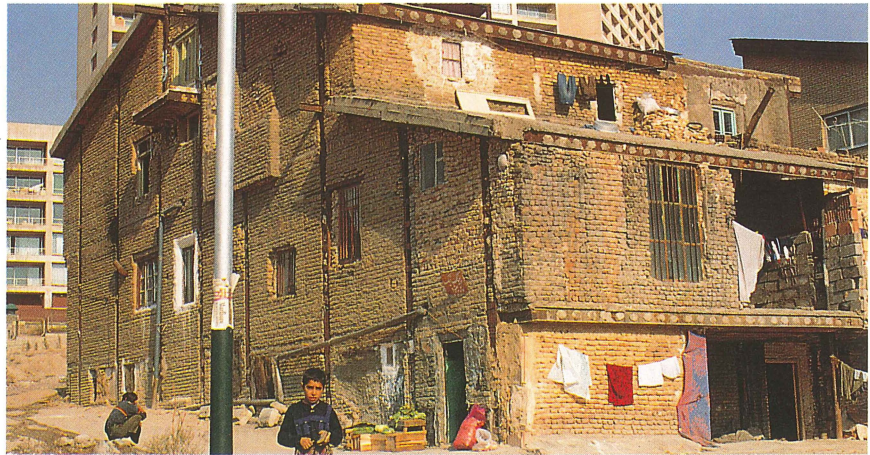
Public buildings are undergoing a similar process. Structures are of concrete or metal with cladding materials. Although the government might desire buildings whose level of construction and quality is high, the existing technical resources, labour and local technology allow only for simple construction methods.

Mosque building is the exception to this rule; both in design and construction, special attention is given to the building of mosques. Styles are fairly diversified: from modern interpretations of traditional concepts to the faithful reproduction of models from our heritage. In terms of types of plan, similarity seems to be dictated by the precepts and imperatives of religion but in terms of form, although the dome is still universally used, the rest of the building shows great diversity in spatial composition. In the construction of domes, we find metal or concrete structures, and new mosques use a variety of modern technologies.

The Hazrat Amir mosque, built in the 1960s by the architect Hossain Tehrani, reproduces the strong modern forms of the modern Western architectural movement. Often criticized, it is one of the only mosques which reflects the modern trend in the design of mosques in Iran. The Al-Ghadir mosque, designed by the architect Djahanguir Mazloum, in the centre of Tehran, is one of the new mosques, fairly successful in that it contains the major characteristics of traditional architecture allied to a modern constructive view. The Aazam mosque in Ghom, and the Aazam mosque in Tehran are examples of traditional style mosques that are also worthy of attention.

Directions

In its architecture, is Iran just another third world country involved in a maze of bureaucratic procedures preventing the harmonious flow and blossoming of architecture of true quality? Is this really a question of culture and discipline or are we in fact in need of a completely new standpoint and vision?



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5. Illegal constructions without deeds of ownership, using the urban infrastructure (see text). The scale of these buildings varies. In this example the construction provides a home for several people. The city is not yet in a position to solve this problem. (Photo: Darab Diba.)

6. Concrete construction, Tehran. This usually follows a simple pattern which is repeated. The function of the building overrides cultural or other considerations. Work began in 1990. The building is intended for the Telecommunications Company. Designed by architectural consultants Atec. (Photo: Darab Diba.)

7. These are the housing construction co-operatives intended for employees and members of government institutions on a 15 year loan. Each minister and institution forms its own co-operative (Taavoni Maskan) and chooses from amongst its members the people who are to receive a home. Rents are unaffordable and buying a house has become impossible because of rising prices. For economic reasons and because of building deadlines a standard design will continue to be used. (Photo: Darab Diba.)

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8. The Cultural Centre of the town of Kerman. Architect: Darab Diba. The plan began with the restoration of an old doorway which remains the main entrance of the Centre and which has become the dominant feature. The different functions come together at this doorway, creating an interior garden which is becoming a cultural park. The museum/exhibition hall is situated symmetrically at the entrance/doorway, annexing the neighbouring orphanage. The walls are structural, the design is simple and follows the style of traditional architecture in the Kerman region. (Photo: Darab Diba.)



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9. Tehran. Complex of 17 dwellings. Concrete structure. Covering: brick and mortar. Work began in 1987 and was completed in 1989. Area of land: 2,853 sq m. Area of building: 4,130 sq m. Architects: Parviz Hatamzadeh, Faramarz Moradian. This project is an innovation for Iran, breaking with the usual production. The 17 units are centred round an interior courtyard/garden, following an organic typology which lends each dwelling an identity of its own. Parviz Hatamzadeh is an architect with culture and experience who has blended modern life with elements of traditional architecture. The complex has been well received by the occupants. (Photo: Darab Diba.)



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10. Tehran. Apartment complex/unit of housing for six families. Completed 1988. Architect: Kamran Safamanesh, a researcher and historian of Iranian contemporary architecture. He is also professor of architecture at the University of Elmo-Sanat and Azad, Tehran. His compositions have a strict and carefully defined outline and the spaces are minutely studied. This complex has become a model for students. (Photo: Saman Assadi.)



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11. Gazvin. Polytechnic Faculty of the University of Dehkoda, Ministry of Culture. Building commenced 1985 and was completed in 1990. Total area: 10,000 sq m. Cost: US\$12,000. Project supervisor: University of Dehkoda. Architects: Iradj Kalantari, Hossein Sheikh Zeyneddin, Majid Zendieh. Iradj Kalantari and Hossein Sheikh Zeyneddin are two of the most famous architects in Iran. The design of this faculty is based on the principles of traditional architecture. An interior garden accommodates the different functions of the faculty. The order and geometric outline is of great importance. Local technology has been used and no complex construction support was required. The mode of construction also follows traditional architectural methods. The key material used is brick. (Photo: Saman Assadi.)



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The current context of regulations, trafficking of influence, quantity-based evaluations, property speculation, excessive cost of sites, lack of labour and supporting technology, all act against the appearance of human, healthy, high-quality architecture.

This state of affairs, deplored by students and by responsible architects, turns round on itself like a closed circuit with no access point and no openings to artists and sensitive people who still hope for fair competition where they can bring to fruition the ideas and sketches that are at present still on the drawing board.


There is no institute or union of architects, and professional lobbying only very rarely find its way into legal channels where it can be followed through. Proposals to restore the built-up environment are quickly dismissed as idealism and fall into Kafkaesque procedures which no-one really wants to take up.

And yet, at the very heart of a system that seems fairly complex, we can see the idealism and endeavours of isolated people who are seeking to restore these artistic qualities within their institutions and ministries. This is true of Hadi Nadimi, Rector of Beheshti University, Bagher Shirazi, in charge of preserving historical sites, Mehdi Hodjat, Deputy Minister of Culture, Seyed Reza Hashemi, Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Housing and Town Planning and, of course, many other people who are motivated towards restoring and reconstructing a country with some of the greatest cultural riches of the world.

The complexity of the procedure of architectural production is such that understanding it and restoring its importance doubtless require a giant structure operating in several scales and at several parallel levels.

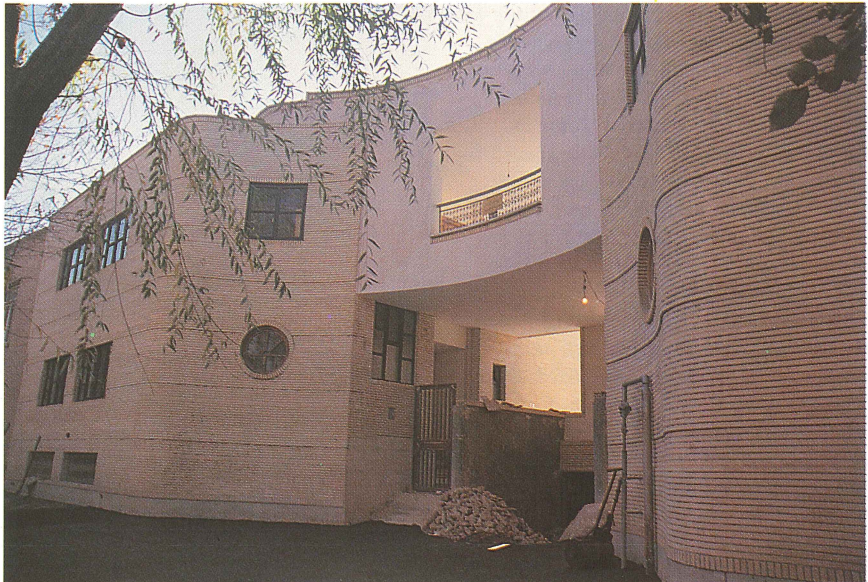
Working groups need to be formed, first to analyse the consequences of these various parameters and then to move and transform this tainted, dusty bureaucratic legacy which, sad to say, restricts us most of the time to minor projects.

In a country whose culture produced Hafez and Mowlavi, who built Isfahan, where water from the rivulets of the garden of Fin in Kachan still murmurs in the hearts of all Iranians, I feel it is up to us to look seriously at our social responsibility and restructure our job as architects using whatever pockets of intelligence and sensitivity we have.

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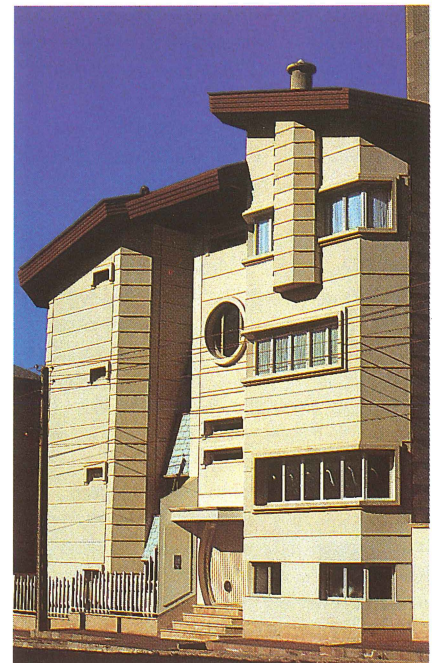


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12. Tehran. The teaching faculty (Tarbiat-e-Modaress) for the retraining of teachers. Built in 1989. Architect: Hossein Amanat. (Photo: Darab Diba.)

13. Isfahan. Complex of dwellings/8 units. Work began in 1986 and was completed 1989/90. Structure: bearing walls in brick; concrete girders for the roof. Total construction area: 1,400 sq m. Architect: Ali Saremi. A pupil of Louis Kahn, Saremi has been director of the department of architecture at the University of Farabi and is currently professor at the University of Tehran. He has an extensive knowledge of traditional architecture. (Photo: Darab Diba.)

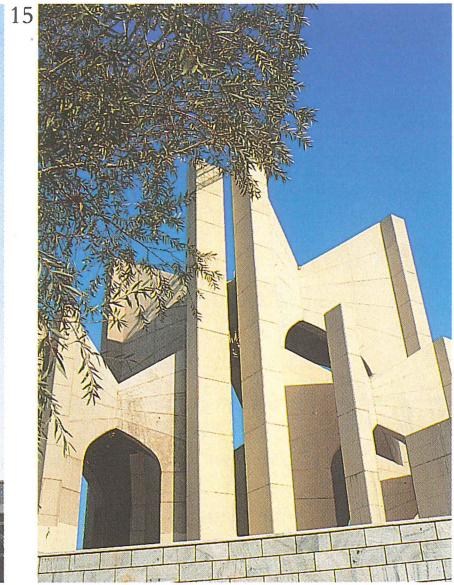
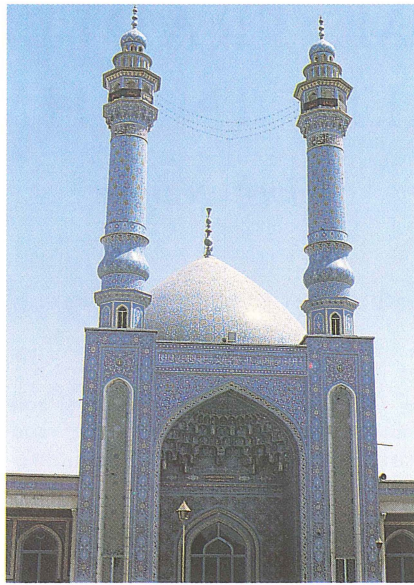
14. Complex of apartments, Tehran. Completed 1990. Shows imported post-modern influences. (Photo: Darab Diba.)



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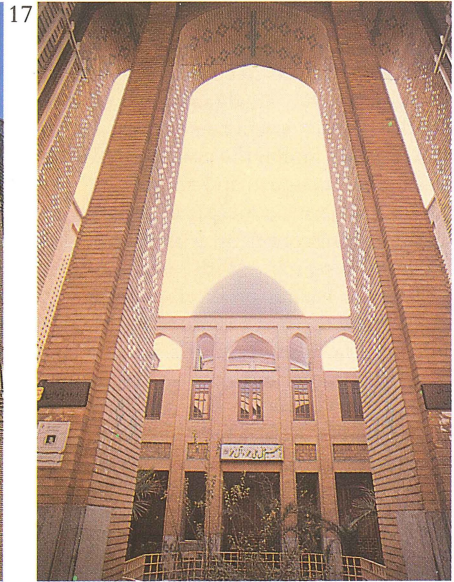
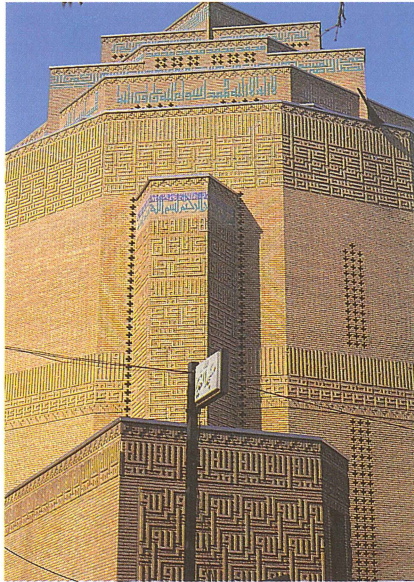
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15. Ghom, Aazam Mosque. Architect: Lorzadeh. The Aazam Mosque echoes, in its outline, the general shape of the great classical mosques of Isfahan. Lorzadeh wants to be faithful to that tradition of religious buildings. The exact date of the mosque's construction is not known but work probably began about 30 years ago, and construction was spread over a long period. (Photo: Darab Diba.)



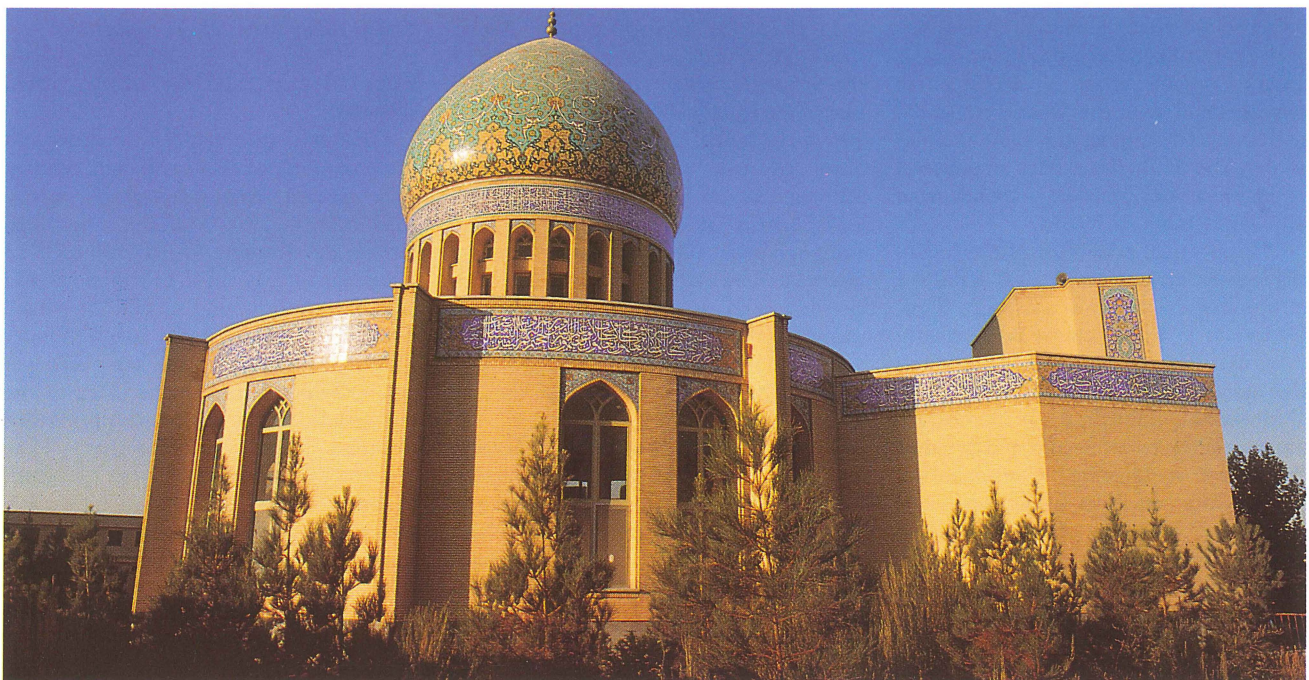
16. Tabriz. The Mausoleum of the Poet (Magbarat-ol-Shoarah). Mausoleum of 16 poets of Azerbaydjan. Built 1990. Metal structure with white stone and mortar covering. (Photo: Shahriar Yaghini.)

17. Al-Ghadir Mosque, Tehran. Completed 1988. Architect: Djahanguir Mazloum. Djahanguir Mazloum is one of the country's experienced architects who has recently devoted himself to the sacred work of mosques. He is known in Iran for his meticulousness and attention to detail. Brick, the traditional material, has been used here. The structure is of metal and the foundations are concrete. (Photo: Darab Diba.)



18. Aazam Mosque, Golhak, Tehran. Built in 1984. This building follows the layout of traditional mosques in retaining proven symbolism and form. (Photo: Mehdi Mohamad Mohamadi.)

19. Isfahan. Mosque. Built 1985. (Photo: Rahman Eghbali.)



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