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Monumental Invention

The ever-changing architecture of Hossein Amanat

You know who Hossein Amanat is, even if you don't know his name. You know him because of a building he designed when he was 24, the Shahyad monument in Tehran – symbol of the city and of the nation, and physical locus of Iran's two major political upheavals over the last several decades.

Amanat won the tender in 1971 to build a monument in commemoration of the Persian Empire's 2,500th anniversary. His winning design, a swooping 50-meter-high marble-clad figure, is a curious melding of cultural influences and forms – “combining arch, tower, gate, and obelisk,” in the words of writer Benjamin Tiven. It was dubbed “Shahyad” tower, or “Kings’ Memorial”, intelligently harking back to a lineage of ancient rulers at a particularly intense turning point for Iran. Drawing clear influences from Iranian architecture, it nonetheless has a feel of 1970s swagger. At its inauguration ceremony, the guest list included everyone from Spiro Agnew to Haile Selassie to Imelda Marcos.

Amanat refers to this period in Iran as something like a cultural renaissance; artists and architects were at once enamored by Western culture and inclined to re-investigate their own cultural heritage. It was this very climate of progressive thinking coupled with renewed interest in tradition that set the stage for Amanat’s experimental architecture. But, as the events staged on the site of the building would soon indicate, “the fledgling society was blinded to the unwitting fostering of a traditional religious movement,” as journalist Morteza Baharloo has written.

In 1979 Shahyad Monument was renamed Azadi – “freedom” – Tower, after the revolution led by anti-royal religious. At that time the monument was used as a *bast*, a medieval practice in which a religious or national building can be used as sanctuary from political oppression. It was during this violent revolution that Amanat left Iran. Three decades later, in his absence, the monument was again appropriated as a symbol of political discontent, becoming emblematic in international memory as the site of the Iranian Green Movement.

It’s an obvious question – why hasn’t the monument been destroyed rather than re-appropriated each time political tides shifted, as so many monuments of its kind around the world? It is tempting to attribute the structure’s endurance at least in part to the success of the design, in particular to its sensitive employment of traditional Iranian architectural elements.

As Amanat explains, interpreting the past is not a literal endeavor. “In architecture school we used to make fun of people who would use arches to make something ‘Iranian.’ They’d design a typical western building, and then they’d draw some arches over the windows...this was how they imagined going back to tradition.” Instead, he says, accurate interpretation has to do with the sequencing of spaces in proportion to the human figure; creating a choreography of movement throughout the building as a whole. “In all your travel throughout the building, you experience different intensities of light, different perspectives, different materials. It’s like music.”

This is an attitude that the architect has carried throughout his career; whether building temples or high-rise towers, the sensitive sequencing of spaces and attention to the human scale are principle driving factors. “Style” doesn’t matter – he refers to Frank Lloyd Wright as a master of these skills. And in the series of structures Amanat may be best known for after the Shahyad Tower, his Arc Complex in Haifa, Israel, this understanding that spatial principles can be applied to a building of any stylistic category is the most starkly observable.

The Arc Complex is the international administrative center of the Bahá’í Faith, located on Israel’s Mediterranean coast. Bahá’í is a monotheistic religion founded in the nineteenth century in modern-day Iran, whose principle belief is worldwide religious unity. Its premise is that throughout history there have been several prophets, each bringing forth a religion relevant to that time – but that all these religions have the same roots in the same god. The Bahá’í prophet, Bahá'u'lláh, born in 1817, ushered in an era in which he believed we are finally ready to embrace religious unity. Today, with the prevalence of worldwide travel and the internet, Bahá’ís think perhaps the time is finally right.

Amanat was born into a family of several generations of Bahá’ís, his faith being one of the main reasons he was forced to flee Iran in the late 1970s. Given his monumental success with Shahyad he was a natural choice to build the religion’s administrative home in Haifa. When he was commissioned to build three buildings on-site in 1982, one building was already standing, which set a rather rigid precedent: the International Archives dates from 1957, and is essentially a scale replica of the Parthenon (with minor discrepancies). The Bahá’í leader at that time, Shoghi Effendi, held strong beliefs about the enduring beauty of classical forms.

Amanat built the next three buildings in the site, which is as a whole known as the Arc Complex, each mirroring the classical style of the Parthenon-replica. However, inside the structures are highly contemporary and built for flexible use. While the outside of the Universal House of Justice, the largest of the three, harmonizes with its surroundings, inside it’s completely new. “Within the shell, everything is designed so you can reorganize the interior space; the poetry of modern technology and structural design.”

Though it may be unusual for an architect today to talk about form separate from function, or of façade divorced from internal program, when Amanat compares the shell of these buildings to “clothing,” he doesn’t mean that the classical façade is arbitrary. “Someone’s clothing is dictated by the shape of the body of the person wearing it,” he explains. The exact style of the columns, the capitals – these may be ornamental elements, but they are not at all irrelevant towards the experience of the building as a whole.

It’s a general rule of cultural criticism not to harp on the personal qualities or biographical information of an architect or an artist in order to “explain” his or her work – but Amanat’s religion provides perhaps the clearest lens through which to interpret and understand his stylistically-diverse oeuvre. As he puts it, “the Bahá’í faith gives great importance to the intellect of human beings. It relies on human beings as the managers of their own affairs, not the clergy...you connect to the spiritual world directly yourself; you don’t need an intermediate person like a priest.” That is, human beings and their creations have agency – and yet spirituality is not posited in opposition with intellect.

But how do you *invent* an architecture for one of the world's newest (and fastest-growing) religions? As opposed to mosques or churches, whose architectural history is so formally-laden as to be potentially oppressive, the formal setting of worship in Bahá'í could theoretically be anything – or everything. There's an inherent conundrum in trying to forge a cultural identity for a religion that is supposed to incorporate and unify all the world's religions. How to handle this without combining a multitude of references into historical pastiche?

It's important to note that the Arc Complex is an administrative hub, not a spiritual center, and that Amanat's approach to creating spiritual architecture is highly site-specific, such as the Bahá'í house of worship in Apia, Western Samoa (1984). With its conical roof and symmetrical open plan, the building is unassuming and melts into its lush surroundings, yet its light airiness is also reminiscent of the billowing winged form of the Shahyad Monument. Amanat's other Bahá'í centers like those in Plano, TX (Plano Regional Center, 2007), and Bellevue, WA (Eastside Bahá'í Community Centre, 2006) – are also carefully suited to their context and climate, less monumental but accurate and appropriate. He often incorporates local elements; as in the wavy façade of ceramic silk-screened patterned glass of the Sichuan University Central Library (2005), which refers to the patterning of Chinese weaving.

Amanat emigrated to Canada in 1980, and his offices are currently in Vancouver. Most recently he's worked on several high-rise residential towers in North America, plus a tender for the contest to build the Ottawa Holocaust Monument. He says, "the Tehran monument was about historical continuity; this one transmits another message, a more explicitly hopeful one." Perhaps it's time, as the Bahá'í scripture says, for history to come full circle. At the very least, it's time for Amanat to build another monument – for what has happened and what is to come.

- Elvia Wilk