



Abadan¹: A Case Study in Pseudo Colonial Architecture

Parham Karimi ¹ Master of Architecture, University of Toronto (Corresponding Author)

Hamid Afshar ² Master of Archeology, Tarbiat Modares University

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The built environment constructed around oil fields are important on many levels. They have influenced the lifestyle of many people who have worked and lived in these areas since the British discovered oil in the late-nineteenth century. However, it is only recently that architectural historians have begun to pay attention to these settlements. Abadan is one of these oil cities, in which oil was discovered and excavated by the British almost before than any other oil-rich region in the Middle East. Abadan is located in the southernmost part of Iran, facing a narrow body of water (Arvand Rud in Farsi or Shatt al-Arab in Arabic), annexed from the Persian Gulf. This narrow body of water defines the border between Iran and Iraq and is strategically significant. In fact, a struggle over its ownership led to the eight-year war between the two countries throughout the 1980s.

¹ Abadan is an oil city that sits 60 km north of the Persian Gulf shoreline.

The excavation of oil in Abadan brought in workers and specialist from all regions of Iran as well as countries as varied as Great Britain to India and the United States. With the varied and global population came a diverse and global material culture and architecture. Not surprisingly, these developments did not happen homogeneously. High-ranked Western specialists were given better, gated neighborhoods while the local unskilled workers from Iran lived in shantytowns. Meanwhile, those from India and Bangladesh lived in accommodations that were far better than those of the locals and poorer than those of their Western counterparts. In this sense, a new lifestyle and “new notions of class-based communities based on European models were introduced” (Karimi 2013). For example, as architecture historian Mark Crinson asserts, “In the garden suburb of Bawarda James M. Wilson² created a model solution that used planning and housing form to represent ethnic and social harmony under the discreet paternal benevolence of the ‘BP’ Company” (Crinson 1997). Continuing to build on the same logic, by 1970, thousands of houses were designed and built in Abadan. The city, as a whole, exuded characteristics of a semi-colonial city (Crinson 1997).

Abadan is also an excellent example of what Homi Bhabha, in his widely cited book, *The Location of Culture*, described as a model indicating that the colonizer and the colonized are not dialectally opposed, but rather linked in a relationship of difference and repetition (Bahaba 1991). Abadan has always been famous regarding its oil reservoirs and strategic location, but rarely regarding its architecture. What lessons can be learned from the architectural developments in oil cities such as Abadan? How did the inhabitants adapt to the rapid

² James M. Wilson and his associates (British Architects) were hired by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company to study and design a new model for the modern Abadan and suburban areas such as Bawarda and Braim.

development of these regions (in the case of Abadan, transforming from a small, poor village to a prosperous city, almost overnight)? How did the transformation of Abadan under the management of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company³ influence the life of local residents? Above all, how did architecture become a prime designator of the identity of those who lived in this cosmopolitan, yet strictly separated built environments? This paper will introduce a lesser-known aspect of architecture in Abadan and investigates the question of architectural form within a pseudo-colonial context. Furthermore, unlike some colonial cities (e.g., Algiers), in Abadan's built environment the boundaries between high and low, foreign and local were more permeable. The architecture of different neighborhoods reflected this phenomenon. Although architectural styles were carefully separated depending on the nationality and the rank of those who occupied them (see index images), there were also many overlapping themes. Numerous homes were designed based on Western styles; however, their decorative program included Persian tile works (*Kashikari*) and brickworks (*Ajorkari*), others were distinguished by a traditional Persian architectural style that included flat roofs with belvederes, and high-ceilinged rooms (figure 1).

³ The Anglo-Iranian oil refinery was known as the largest world refinery between 1903 and 1950 under the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran. In 1951 by nationalization of Iran's oil supplies the name of the Anglo-Iranian oil refinery was changed to the Abadan Refinery Company. In 1954, the name of Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was also changed to British Petroleum or BP in Britain.

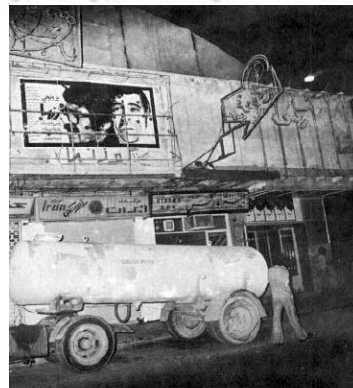
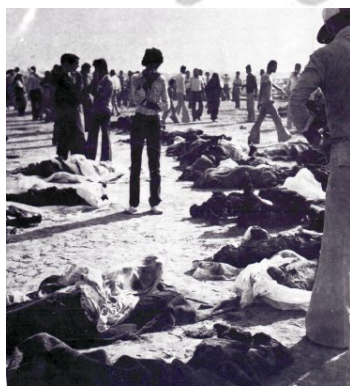


Figure 1. The Exterior detail (stair-case shaft) from a house in Abadan. Image scanned from the book: “Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran: Interior Revolutions of the Modern Era.”

These overlapping themes, however, did not mean that a Jeffersonian architecture was created, indeed, by no means was this an indication that spatial boundaries were necessarily porous and permeable. Undeniably, the porousness in architectural forms did not necessarily allow communities to merge more freely. For instance, in the Braim neighborhood, in one end of Abadan Island, the British staffs were spending time in stylish Bungalow, cricket clubs, gardens, and at the tea parties. However, on the other side of the Abadan Island, Iranian staffs and workers were lived in crime, diseases, and disorders (When Iran’s Abadan was Capital of the World 2015). Also, the semi-colonial atmosphere of the city highlighted the unusual social relationship among foreigners, Iranians and the local Arabs, which was showcased the social boundaries within the city borders which caused due to the segregation of the land.

In fact, the new architectural design (based on the segregation of land and people) was created a new dynamic atmosphere in the social sphere of the city which led to such political activities (in the city) in support of revolutionary accomplishments such as nationalisation of the oil industry in 1951 (by Mohammad Mossadegh) and massive waves of demonstrations against the Pahlavi dynasty in the 1979 revolution (by Ayatollah Khomeini) (Figure 2).

In many colonial contexts, one faced the stark contrasts between the local and the colonizer's architecture. In Algeria, for example, with the mid-nineteenth century French domination, a new chapter in architecture began that carefully divided the colonized from the colonizers. While the French lived in prosperous neo-classical buildings, the Algerians were pushed into their ghettos' neighborhood known as the Casbah (Figure 3). In her widely quoted article, "Le Corbusier, Orientalism, Colonialism," architectural historian Zeynep Celik shows how over the years, the French separated themselves from the locals and divisions became broader and broader, culminating in a civil war, (as seen in Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film, *The Battle of Algiers*).



Iranian Historical Photographs Gallery : www.fouman.com

Figure 2. The Photo of the Cinema Rex fire (in Abadan) on August 19th, 1978. In this incident, 377 people were burned in the fire; it was considered as one of the most suspicious incidents in the Iranian revolution of 1979. Source: Left) <http://bachehayedirooz.blogspotsky.com> Right) <https://iranletts.wordpress.com/2016/01/26/cinema-rex-fire/>



Figure 3. Still from the film showing the blockage of the Casbah ghetto by the French police forces. Image in the public domain.

The Casbah (or the traditional town that housed the local population) was indeed in stark contrast to the rest of the city that looked modern and French (Celik 1992). In the process of his unbuilt project for Algiers Le Corbusier emphasized the essential separation of two settlements: “This artery will be separated entirely from the indigenous town, using a level difference” (Celik 1992). Le Corbusier’s dramatic segregation of the Casbah has been commonly interpreted by architectural historians such as Manfredo Tafuri as a symbolic gesture rather than a tool for controlling the colony. However, as Celik asserts, “Le Corbusier’s plan established constant visual supervision over the local population and marked the hierarchical social order onto the urban image, with the dominating above and the dominated below” (Celik 1992) (Figure 4).

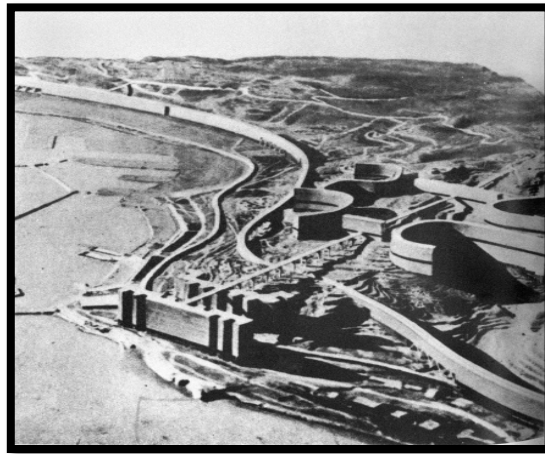


Figure 4. Le Corbusier's Obus Plan for Algeria. Image in the public domain.

Likewise, in many early architectural examples of colonial India, imperialism was the sole guiding force. However, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, a mixture of local and European styles emerged. In Calcutta's Victoria Memorial, for instance, the architect William Emerson strived to mimic the Taj Mahal in both material and form. Indeed, this was an indication of "Indo-Saracenic" hybridization and was also used elsewhere in India (figure 5).



Figure 5. Victoria Memorial; Kolkata, India. Image in the public domain.

A similar hybrid style surfaced the architecture of Abadan is no coincidence. Many of the architects who worked in late-nineteenth-century colonial India were assigned the task of building Abadan. Among them was the architect James Mollison Wilson. Once he wrote, “In all my considerations on this matter, I have assumed that the *Purdah* (Harem) system will be abandoned and the houses in the new area will be designed along the lines of European houses with such modification as climatic conditions impose.” (Crinson 2001). While restricting aspects of the tradition are deemed unnecessary, climactic issues are taken seriously. Therefore, the architect tried to both modernize and adapt to local architectural techniques. Abadan thus epitomized both the semi-colonial plans of Westerners and their desire to adjust to local contexts (figure 6). Architectural historian Esra Akcan’s new book on housing and the exchange of architectural ideas between Germany and Turkey after 1923 (the start of the Turkish Republic) shows how architecture discloses the pressures between varied colonial or postcolonial welfares. Using theories of translation, Akcan argues that the exchange of architectural ideas is more than anything else a form of translation. She writes: “translation, as it is conceptualized in this book, takes place under any condition where there is a cultural flow from one place to another. It is the process of transformation during the act of transportation” (Akcan 2012). However later, she concludes that these exchanges of architectural concepts did not necessarily lead to cosmopolitan ethics.

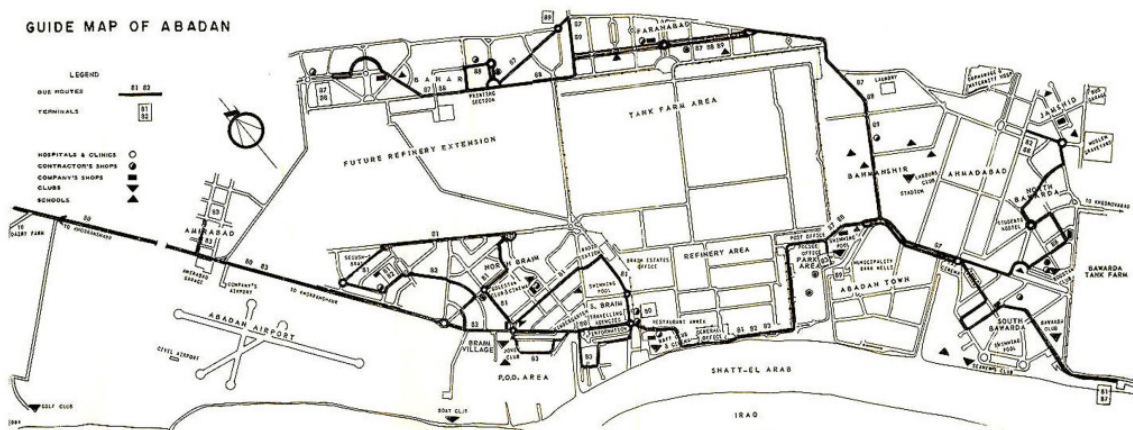


Figure 6. Map of Abadan, showing its segregated neighborhoods.

Source: <https://ajammc.com/2015/02/18/abadan-capital-of-the-world/>

Indeed, one of the most important aspects of home design in Abadan was that it embodied new modes of class divisions that did not exist before. In its overall plan, Abadan took the shape of a segregated city. For example, in Braim (the predominantly British neighborhood) some houses included several rooms that were meant for servants' quarters. They were often pushed to the back of the house, and they were poorly designed (in comparison to the actual house used by the British employee of the Oil refinery and his family). These were also known as “boy rooms,” a term that supposedly inspired the British to refer to their neighborhoods as such. Later, the term was changed to “Braim”—which “boy room” is presumably as pronounced by the locals (Karimi 2013). Architectural historian Mona Damluji has shown that this problem was not limited to architecture itself. The representations of architecture also played an essential role in creating such divides between different groups of people or censoring the problematic aspects of these segregated places. Accordingly, cinematic devices were used to highlight or hide spaces selectively. (Damluji 2012).

As historian Elton discusses, cinematic devices were used as a consistent style by oil companies to represent their responsibility towards consumers. For instance,

“The aim of the shell Petroleum Company is to have a film machine not only equipped to meet local needs, but also so consistent in style and interest as to present, throughout the world, a picture of a great and progressive industrial undertaking with a vast fund of knowledge and skills and a lively sense of international responsibility towards the peoples of the world who are its customers.” (Elton 1956, page 348)

In fact, there was no sense of responsibility by petroleum companies regarding thinking about the quality of living in oil cities such as Abadan. They have only strategized the environment according to their economic policies as well as the picture they wished to present to the public affair or in the media. In the case of Abadan, this policy was utterly portrayed in the video clip recorded by the British Petroleum (figure 7).



Figure 7. A single shot of the *Persian Story* video recorded by the British Petroleum Company, An Iranian servant providing service to the British residents in Abadan.
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=83&v=ctfK5BRE07k>

European and American oil companies were investing a significant budget in the production of prestigious films to represent the companies' political and economic visions of and for the

region (Damluji 2012). In this regard, the architectural style of the constructed regions was played the leading role to showcase, the ethical and political visions of the oil companies such as BP. So that creating a very similar European environment (in the Middle East) has become a certain stylistic approach to the design of the new-constructed oil regions such as Abadan. This new approach was created a very similar colonial setting (i.e., in Abadan) alike the case of Algeria.

To conclude, Abadan did capture the atmosphere of a colonial city, albeit not regarding architectural form. Despite the efforts of the architects to merge their foreign views with local architectural styles, gated communities and segregated neighborhoods continued to develop until the last decades of the 1970s. Not only did Abadan remain as such until the Islamic Revolution of 1979, but it also set a model for other cities inside Iran. There are scores of publications on Iranian cities, in which scholars of modern Iran draw attention to the “housing problem.” Many scholars have argued that one of the primary reasons for the Islamic Revolution was the problem of inequality between classes of people as materialized in their houses and neighborhoods. Poor people lived in distinguishable shanties, while the rich enjoyed better designs (Figure 8).



Figure8. Left) An Iranian worker and his family in Kaghazabad (paper city) shanty town, Abadan, 1950. Right) New European settlers in a luxury villa house, Braim region, 1950. The image received from the article: “when Iran’s Abadan was Capital of the world.”

Iran was never an official colony of a Western power. It is therefore misleading to present Abadan as a colonial case (despite its affinity with India). However, a brief study of its architectural landscape shows that it was not that different from all the other colonial examples that are better known in the field of architectural history. While certainly not as restrictive as the Casbah in Algiers, it did exude an air of inequality along class and ethnic lines. To reiterate, then, this paper has attempted to show that the merging of architectural styles does not necessarily lead to what Akcan calls “cosmopolitan ethics.” Considering that oil cities in the Gulf region are now experiencing similar problems regarding social divisions, the more in-depth study of Abadan deems significant. Consider how cheap laborers from South Asia are working around the clock in deplorable conditions to build a glamorous city for a wealthy minority and Western expats. It is hoped that contemporary architects can learn from the experience of past and aim for a true cosmopolitan ethic as opposed to a city that only gives an impression of being cosmopolitan, without being genuinely ethical.

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The modernity and tradition played a leading role in the design of the city of Abadan-- the distinction between races, poor and rich made the city of Abadan as a battlefield for cultural conflict. The regular pattern of housing of the British workers within the city fabric and the shantytown(s) for Persian workers in addition to constructing of the physical and environmental border such as building the refinery in the middle of the city, was prearranged the environment to separate Iranian workers (on the south) from the British staffs (on the north). This issue was manifested the cultural differences and a deep sociological gap between the two fellow nations. The policies of Anglo Iranian Oil Company also influenced on creating a pseudo-colonial environment in the late colonial period by classifying the small society of Abadan into high, middle and low workers class. Source: Image is the courtesy of Iranology Foundation's central library in Tehran, 2017.



A House in Bawarda Abadan, 1950. The Dutch style indicates that it was perhaps meant for European settlers other than the British. This house designed the stepped gables of some artisan housing. Housing in Bawarda deployed dormitory zones affecting the “dispersal and discipline of social pathologies” and an imaginary picture to visitors. These type of houses were designed in small and in different variation in the layering of brickworks. Image Scanned from the article: “Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, 1997.” Author: Mark Crinson.



A House in 'Bahmanshir' Abadan, 1949. Designed exclusively for Iranian specialist. The brick-work is exclusively Persian. Image in the public domain.



A movie theatre in Braim (the prosperous Western neighborhood) built in Art Deco style in the 1930s. Image in the public domain.



The Indian Mosque in Abadan. Built-in Indian Mughal Style. Image in the public domain.

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