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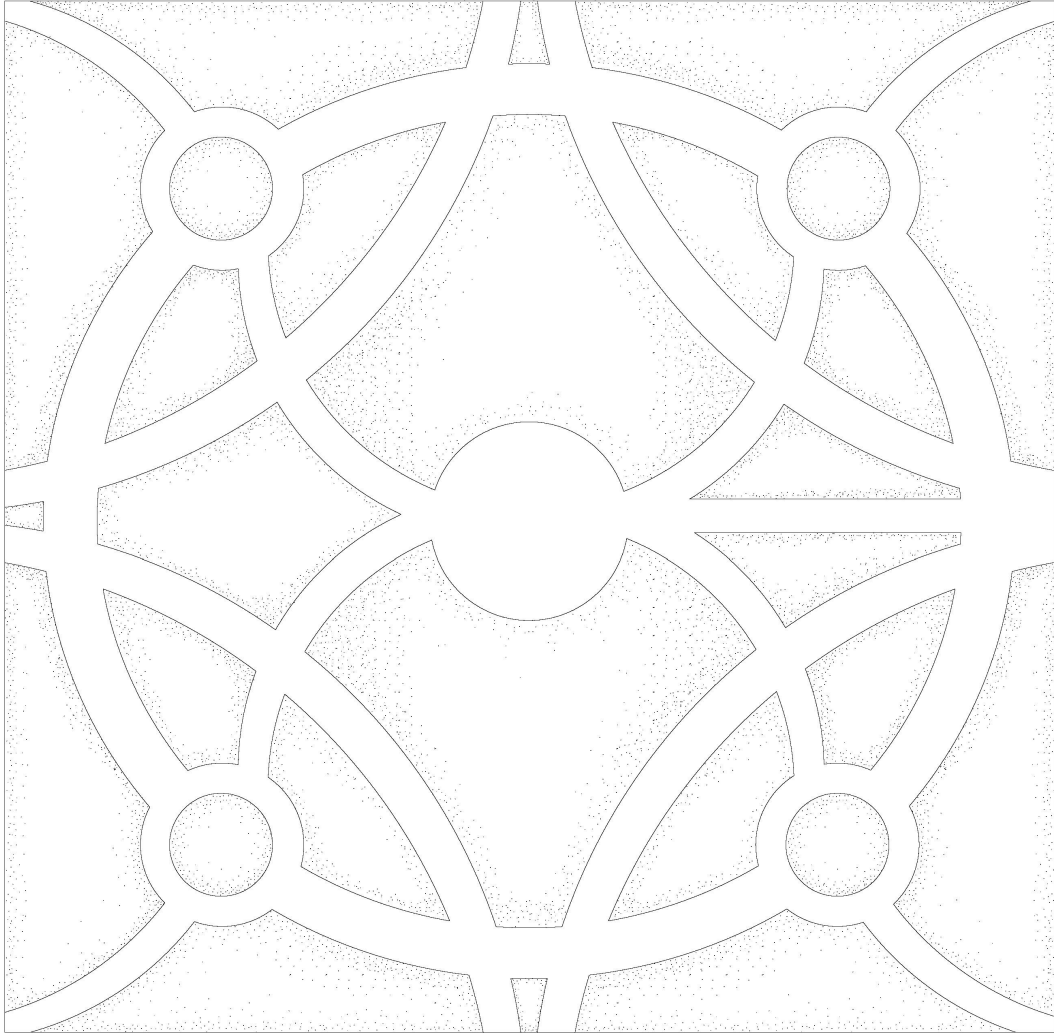
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National Garden, Bagh-e Melli, Teheran

FROM GARDEN TO PARK  
THE UNFOLDING OF A MODERN LANDSCAPE

Amin Mahan, Reihaneh Khorramrouei

In its long history in Iran, the art of gardening has been used to create beautiful and productive environments in the heart of deserts, on hillsides and in urban contexts. In the Safavid period (1501–1736), the garden served as a formative element of the physical structure of the city and, for a long time, the integration of gardens within the city enhanced the visual quality of Iranian urban landscapes. Subsequently, the shift from tradition to modernity caused a great deal of conflict in traditional societies, and their lifestyles and led to much change in architecture, urban planning, and landscape design. In this historic process, slowly, public parks were designed in modern cities, replacing traditional gardens. This paper traces the process of changing from garden to park in modern Iran.

Terminology

Traditional gardens in Iran have been built since ancient times. Most were enclosed by walls and used privately. Symmetry was used in their design and most often followed a certain archetype: the garden was usually divided into four sections, and the so-called “kiosk” was at the intersection of the two axes. The stream of water itself formed one axis, and along either side, paths and rows of trees were set out. As an archetype, such gardens are still referred to as Iranian or Persian gardens.

In Iran, most gardens were private before the modern period and belonged to one person or family. Not all of them had this rigid structure and some were particularly used to plant fruit trees.

There were no public gardens in Iran until the late nineteenth century. The term “public garden” started to be used on maps in the Qajar period (1789–1925) to indicate empty or unplanned green spaces in cities. The term also popped up in travelogues by Iranian tourists such as Hajj Sayyah<sup>1</sup> and Mirza Ali Amin al-Dawlah<sup>2</sup> in the Qajar period.

<sup>1</sup> Hajj Sayyah (1836–1925) was an Iranian American world traveler and political activist.

<sup>2</sup> Mirza Ali Amin al-Dawlah (1843–1904) was a member of the Qajar dynasty and Chancellor of Iran.

In the Pahlavi<sup>3</sup> period, a “park” referred to a public green space. Opened in 1949, City Park (Park-e Shahr) was the first public park in Tehran with a modern layout. Around the same time Parade Square, a space used as a shooting range during the Qajar period, was transformed and made open to the public as the National Garden (*Bagh-e Melli*), the first public open space in the city.

### The beginning of modernization in Iran

As a result of the social, economic and urban developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the city walls of Tehran<sup>4</sup> were taken down and administration buildings such as banks and factories were built in their place.

In the society of the Qajar period further developments took place; as an increasing number of Iranians started studying in Europe and as the Iranian royalty made journeys to the West, a general Western influence was felt on the Iranian lifestyle. The impact of public landscape parks in Europe (such as the English Landscape Garden) on Iranian gardens started in 1870 in the mid-Qajar period and is attributed to the expansion of Iran’s relations with the West. That some private gardens in Iran were referred to as “parks” was a result of two specific reasons. First, the presence of European advisers in Iran led it to become a prevalent foreign phrase among Iranians. Second, journeys of Iranian explorers such as Hajj Sayyah and Hajj Amin al-Dawlah to the West had influenced the way of looking at such spaces.<sup>5</sup> In their tours to many European cities, most of them refer to public gardens used by people for recreation. They also described some unfamiliar uses, such as the zoo or the botanical garden.

The presence of foreign gardeners and designers in Iran in this period led to the further influence of Western gardening in Iran. Some

<sup>3</sup> The Pahlavi dynasty was the last Imperial State of Iran, from 1925 until 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Many of Iran’s cities were enclosed by the city wall before modern developments began. The wall marked the city’s boundaries, protecting the city from invaders and allowing to control people entering.

<sup>5</sup> Habib, Farah; Etesam, Iraj; Ghoddusifar, Seyed Hadi: “Formation and Features of Tehran Urban Parks during the Reign of First Pahlavi Period, Case Study: Tehran National Garden (*Bagh-E-Melli*)”. In: *Armanshahr Architecture & Urban Development*, 6 (2014), no. 11, pp. 61–73.

of the gardens of the Qajar period experienced a variety of new plants and elements imported from western public landscape parks of that time, such as curved and asymmetrical lines, artificial hills, rhombic and oval shapes, artificial lakes and sculptures.

Furthermore, changes took place in the traditional urban structures and residential buildings of the late Qajar period (after 1900). Land came to be seen as a valuable source of wealth. Therefore, privately used yards—green open spaces between buildings, with trees and pools of water—gradually became smaller as land was increasingly sold or built upon. Most of them were dedicated to new housing.

As a result of this infill, city-dwellers felt a greater need for public green spaces. Although during the Qajar period, the green spaces of holy places<sup>6</sup> like mosques and tombs played the role of public green spaces, none of them had been built as a garden or park. These green spaces, which symbolize the *Jannah*,<sup>7</sup> generally took the form of courtyards within a complex of religious buildings.

In the late Qajar and early Pahlavi periods, some prominent gardens in Tehran, along with their buildings, were converted to new governmental and institutional areas without changes to the garden structure. Masoudieh Palace became the Ministry of Education, Negarestan Gardens and its buildings were transformed into the Department of Fine Arts, and Kamranieh Gardens became the Officers College. Many other gardens such as Eshrat-Abad Gardens and Saltanat-Abad Gardens were converted into military sites.<sup>8</sup>

### Qajar-period gardens

Qajar-period gardens generally had a long axis between the porch and the main building or were constructed on terraces on the slopes of the Alborz mountains to the north of Tehran. Most were private and

<sup>6</sup> Holy sites in Iran have historically been seen as places of paradise and have always included areas where natural elements such as trees and water can be found. Such spaces are used for worship and rest.

<sup>7</sup> *Jannah* is often compared to Christian concepts of heaven.

<sup>8</sup> Soltani, Mehrdad: "Formation Process in Iranian Contemporary: from Garden to Park, the 'Case study of Tehran'". In: *The Monthly Scientific Journal of Bagh- E Nazar*, 4 (2007), no. 8, pp. 48–58.

had high walls. The walls formed the outer form and geometry of the garden, implying the concept of an alleyway that continues to this day.

At that time in private gardens, tall and shady trees were planted and the main pond was the focal point. The *qanat*, or aqueduct, played an important role in the gardens' geometrical organization and manifested itself in various forms such as pools and creeks. Private gardens made with terraced structures also used waterfalls, sloping surfaces and tall fountains that worked with gravity.

During the Qajar period, new and imported species became popular, such as honeysuckle,<sup>9</sup> pineapple<sup>10</sup> and some ornamental trees such as *Albizia lebbeck*, *Viburnum opulus*, and willow.<sup>11</sup> Cypress,<sup>12</sup> Oriental plane<sup>13</sup> and pine<sup>14</sup> trees were the main trees in Qajar gardens, and fruit trees<sup>15</sup> were planted in plots.

Given the shift in Western attitudes and the emphasis on the visitor to a garden being an observer of a landscape, attention to distant landscapes also became important in the Qajar gardens.

Usually the main building was built at the end of the main axis and partly to the taste of a garden's owner. The early Qajar gardens (1789–1870) were generally subjected to Iranian geometry and were perfectly symmetrical. Towards the late Qajar period, they began to imitate European styles, and the Iranian traditional kiosk increasingly made use of European architectural idioms.<sup>16</sup> The other buildings in garden complexes, however, including the residence buildings, still were within Iranian architectural traditions. Decorative elements and extensions were the easiest way to add Western effects to the gardens of the Qajar period. These elements included bridges, alcoves, statues, and even the clock towers that one can see at Golestan Palace.<sup>17</sup>

**9** *Lonicera caprifolium*.

**10** *Ananas comosus*.

**11** *Salix babylonica*.

**12** *Cupressus sempervirens*.

**13** *Platanus orientalis*.

**14** *Pinus elderica*.

**15** *Malus domestica*, *Punica granatum*, *Morus alba*, *Juglans regia*.

**16** The use of circular and semicircular forms in the design of the kiosk, angel painting in interior decoration, circular windows, semicircular arcs, sloping roofs.

**17** The Golestan Palace is the former royal Qajar complex in Tehran: One of the oldest historic monuments in the city and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

### Transformation from garden to park

As Iranians were influenced by the technical developments of the nineteenth century and the Industrial Revolution, the city of Tehran slowly became a semi-modern city and grew. Under Nasser al-Din Shah<sup>18</sup> (1831–1896), an expansion plan of Tehran was drawn up by the French polytechnic engineer Alexandre Buhler in 1867 and the word “park” was used for first time in Iran.

In the first map of the expansion plan for Tehran made by Abdul Ghafar Khan Najm al-Molk in 1889, the word “park” was mentioned and the distinction was made between parks, gardens and public gardens. In this map, both the park and the garden were used privately and are distinguishable only by the structure and variety of plants. The parks on the map have curved paths and even a natural lake that evoke the style of public English landscape parks. It is this structural imitation that is perhaps the main reason “park” was used to refer to traditional gardens of this period.<sup>19</sup> However, according to the surviving texts of the Qajar period, these early parks, much like older traditional gardens, were enclosed and not open to the public. Therefore, the most important characteristic of Qajar gardening is the influence of European styles on the Iranian style, which was only imitated superficially at this stage.

### Pahlavi-period parks

Although in the Qajar period the Iranian tradition of garden-making encountered European traditions, the creation of public green space only began in the first Pahlavi period (1925–1941). The first series of public gardens were part of the project for the National Gardens (*Bagh-e Melli*) that were designed and built by municipalities in major cities, including Tehran and Qazvin, in response to a newly perceived need for public green space.

<sup>18</sup> The fourth king of the Qajar Dynasty.

<sup>19</sup> Majlessi, Aboozar et al. (Ed.): “Features of Earliest Park in Tehran: Amin-o-Dolleh Park”. In:

The Monthly Scientific Journal of Bagh- E Nazar, 10 (2013), no. 25, pp. 3–16.

Only in the Pahlavi period was fencing introduced in public parks. By studying the geometry of the National Garden in Tehran, the obvious structural difference between it and the traditional garden can be seen: curved and circular lines were widely used in the design, along with modern urban elements such as statues, benches, and gas lamps.<sup>20</sup> Unlike in traditional gardens that depended on water supplied by a *qanat* and were filled with water features, the National Garden did not make special use of waters and its location did not depend on a *qanat*. However, in some respects, its gardens echo the layouts of traditional Iranian gardens: its kiosk was located in the center of the square ground. The entrance gate and its path to the kiosk form the symmetrical structure in the space.

The decline of private gardens during the second Pahlavi period made the need for public green spaces in cities more acute. As a result, from 1949 onwards the construction of modern public parks in Tehran began with the construction of the City Park. The public parks that were since created can be divided into two categories. The first includes those that were built on sites of traditional gardens and were later changed into public landscape parks. The second category includes public parks that were located in new urban designs, abandoned land or old cemeteries and had a completely new structure. They were built without regard to the *qanat*. City Park, the first of this type of new public parks in Tehran, was followed by others: Laleh Park (1966), which was built on the terrain of a former racecourse, Mellat Park (1968), Bassat Park (1973), and Taleghani Forest Park, designed by European designers in 1977.<sup>21</sup>

### The use of public parks

The most important difference between traditional gardens and the new public parks is how they were used. Unlike the older gardens the parks were from the outset intended to be used by the public. Previously, such spaces were not used in the structure of Iranian cities because of the abundance of gardens and large yards of private houses.

<sup>20</sup> Habib; Etesam; Ghoddusifar (2014), pp. 61–73.

<sup>21</sup> Hamzenejad, Mahdi; Gorji, Fateme: "Genealogy of Recent Parks of Tehran and Analyzing their

Forming Background". In: The Monthly Scientific Journal of Bagh- E Nazar, 14 (2017), no. 5, pp. 29–46.



The range of plant species used in parks also differed from the ones found in traditional gardens, particularly in the absence of fruit trees. Unlike traditional gardens, the use of public parks was not limited to one specific segment of the community, so anyone could use them. People tended to use the parks in their leisure time and for weekend picnics; the parks were free to enter and were popular, attracting large crowds.

### The unfolding of a modern landscape

Over the course of a century, many private gardens gradually became public parks. Walls were no longer present in these parks, but still played an important role in the gardens that remained. The main axis and the kiosk lost their role. Non-fruiting plants took precedence and a different structure of geometry emerged. The concept of the “park” was introduced to Iran in a form of new publically accessible gardens, which to some extent imitated the European model of the park but without radically altering the traditional garden structures. Some private gardens also used European architectural and landscape elements in their garden structure. With the advent of new urban plans, public green spaces were formed in major Iranian cities that became known as the National Gardens (*Bagh-e Melli*). These gardens partially preserved the structure of traditional gardens, while introducing modern elements. Today, their legacy is felt in designs for new public parks, in which one finds stronger influences of currents found in the global culture of landscape design.