EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AFGHAN ADAPTATIONS OF EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE

Nancy Hatch Dupree

Nineteenth century expansionist ambitions of the Czarist Russians in Central Asia and the British in India twice brought British armies onto Afghan soil, in 1839-1842 and 1878-1880. Afghanistan was never colonised, but after the second incursion the British in India retained control over Afghan foreign affairs. For his part, Amir Abdur Rahman, who came to the throne in 1880 as the British armies departed, solidified his boundaries and began to unify the diverse, often openly antagonistic, peoples within these boundaries under his autocratic rule. Beyond them, he kept a wary eye upon his neighbours whose machinations continued to fester. To prevent either from infecting his sensitive internal affairs, the Amir restricted entrance of foreigners to those receiving his personal invitation and stringently regulated the introduction of all external influences; by the end of the 19th century outsiders dubbed Afghanistan a hermit nation.

Yet Amir Abdur Rahman was astute enough to realise that in order to maintain independence he must gain the respect of his contending neighbours. Programmes affecting all facets of the nation’s development were judiciously initiated according to the Amir’s intelligent, albeit dogmatic, personal dictates and prejudices. Architecture received special attention, for the Amir was intensely interested, and highly articulate, in this field.  

In this he differed from most of his predecessors who, with few exceptions, evidenced little interest in the subject. In fact, although the Afghan landscape is liberally dotted with architectural ruins epitomising periods of high artistic intensity, they largely represent the creative inspiration of such non-Afghan Islamic dynasties as the Samanids (9th c. AD), Ghaznavids (10-12th), and Timurids (15th), all of whom originated in Central Asia. Even the Moghuls (16-17th) were from Central Asia, although they developed their eclectic style in India. 

With the establishment of the first Afghan Empire by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747, large-scale monumental building projects ceased in Afghanistan, partly because political unrest precluded the building of grandiose structures, but also in good part because of an innate dislike of ostentatious display which is very much part of the Afghan character. In 1880, therefore, both public and domestic architecture exhibited the same forms for rich and poor alike. Even the capital city of Kabul could boast of not a single prepossessing building. Everywhere the basic characteristic was anonymity. Massive undorned mud-plastered walls pierced by single doorways presented blank faces to the outsider, in the countryside and in the cities. This architecture reflected an inward-looking, self-protecting, family/tribal society.

Beginning with Amir Abdur Rahman, new buildings proclaiming the growing dignity of the state and symbolising the aesthetic refinements of the culture were considered of paramount importance in creating the outward, progressive orientation necessary to hold respected membership in the comity of nations.

Once set in the new direction, however, the ruling elite became infected with a fervour for the outward manifestations of modernity, which intensified with such rapidity during the reigns of Amir Abdur Rahman’s son and grandson, that cultural realities were often obscured. The fever broke with the expulsion of this dynasty in 1929. Architecture serves well to illustrate the intellectual ferment of these crucial forty-nine years. Some say architecture helped precipitate the revolt.

AMIR ABDUR RAHMAN: 1880-1901

Amir Abdur Rahman designed all of his own palaces, favouring arcuated systems clearly derived from the Central Asian Islamic tradition. The most consistently employed plan was a square, free-standing, one-storey structure on a plinth, consisting of a central, high-domed octagonal hall with square rooms on each corner connected by colonnaded verandahs (Fig. 1). Occasionally, second-storey round or square rooms surmounted by small melon-domes were added above the corner rooms. Roofs were generally flat, or very slightly pitched in the case of verandahed pavilions in which a rectangular central hall replaced the domed hall. In cases where the plinth rose to a third of the height of the building, it contained cavernous underground apartments.

Exteriors were characteristically finished with glistening white lime or gypsum plaster. The surface ornamentation, either impressed or carved plasterwork, was classically Islamic, depicting arabesques and floral patterns of curling leaves, tendrils and foliated scrolls. Plastered brick columns rose from lotus bases with petals enclosing the capitals; arcades and blind arched niches using the four-centred Islamic arch, sometimes combined with round arches, alternated with coupled columns or engaged fluted pilasters; rose-petal patera ornamenting spandrels, acanthus blooming at the apices, and massive ribbed-coronets placed over doors.
and windows, were other frequent decorative motifs in the Islamic tradition. Large multiple-coursed fan-lights composed of brilliantly coloured petal-shaped glass were introduced in practically every structure. This diagnostic decorative element was imported from the subcontinent.

Interiors were composed of a few commodious rooms with arched openings, over which hangings substituted for doors. Unadorned white plaster walls highlighted ornate ceilings composed of tin panels stencilled with gilded geometrical designs or floral bouquets of many colours, another imported feature probably also from the subcontinent. Ceilings, doors and windows were bordered with bands of carved painted wood using vine and grape, or egg and half-moon motifs. In the Amir's favourite palace at Baghi-Bala, "High Garden", built on a high hill just outside the capital in 1893, the interior arches were surrounded with stucco foliated scrolls and patera painted in bold colours were set with mirrors.

All Amir Abdur Rahman's palaces stood behind high walls in the middle of park-like landscaped gardens replete with reflecting pools and fountains, which became permanent features in the subsequent periods. In this they departed significantly from the traditional Afghan architecture which ordinarily exposed only one façade while the rest of the structure formed part of the blank outer wall closely surrounding the enclosed space onto which the building faced.

The Amir's most far-reaching innovation, however, was his insistence on durability. Concerned over the impermanence of the traditional construction usage of sun-dried brick covered with a coating of mud mixed with straw (kağel), he established several kilns for the production of baked-brick and processing of lime and gypsum for stucco plaster (gach), and workshops for cutting stone flooring to replace pressed mud. For the first time, imported iron and tin were used for rain gutters, roofing, and chimneystacks. These same basic building materials were used throughout the periods under discussion.

In addition, the Amir established a Public Works Department which included Indian Muslim surveyors and draughtsmen previously employed by the British Indian government. They were commanded to hold classes in architectural drawing for Kabul's leading masons and builders who had hitherto learned simply through apprenticeship. Though the Amir continued to design his own buildings, issuing specifications verbally or as crude sketches, the builders frequently added external and internal refinements from their own repertoire of designs.

The introduction of colonial architectural styles from the subcontinent was a natural result of these processes. Because there were never any large bodies of British colonial administrators or commercial entrepreneurs settled in the country, however, architectural styles evolved along unique lines, peculiar to Afghanistan. The Amir's last palace, built in 1899 at Shahrara in Kabul, is a curious, yet somehow pleasing, combination of a high-domed hall with a pitched-roof verandahed bungalow (Fig. 2).

The first European-styled structure built in Afghanistan, however, was directly inspired by Dorchester House, Park Lane, London. This Italian Renaissance mansion built in 1850 had been put at the disposal of the Amir's second son, Sardar Nasrullah Khan, during his visit to Queen Victoria in 1895. Impressed with his accommodations, the Sardar had plans drawn up and identical fittings purchased. Construction of the Zain ul-Emorat, "Beautiful Building", was undertaken on his return to Kabul at the end of the same year (Fig. 3).

The Indian architects employed by the Sardar altered the original plans most notably by adding a pediment and gables which converted the roof form to the colonial style. They also dispensed with the one-storey rusticated plinth of the prototype, supporting the two-storey building on a low platform, an element which was widely adopted later. Like its model, Zain ul-Emorat was dominated by glass doors and windows, a startling innovation in Afghanistan, and the fine stone carving of the original was reproduced in moulded stucco including quoins, pediments and engaged pilasters in the tradition of classicism. Balconies on wide brackets and the three round arches in the centre of the north façade were true to the original, as was the protruding porticochère on the south, features also introduced to Afghanistan for the first time.

Zain ul-Emorat was the harbinger: Islamic architectural traditions disappeared except for religious institutions.

**AMIR HABIBULLAH: 1901-1919**

Amir Abdur Rahman's eldest son and successor was not to be outdone by his younger brother. Less than a year before his father died of gout, he contracted with an English architect from India who designed the Dilkusha, "Heart's Delight", a stolid, cube-like two-storey palace of large dimensions which in detail and general architectural features followed the Zain ul-Emorat. Here, however, the roof was crowned with a spacious lantern roof illuminating an elaborate coffered ceiling of carved wood over a monumental staircase rising from an entrance foyer. The plan, clearly arranged with large halls lying uniformly above one another, was one he employed consistently throughout his reign. From this time onward the principal reception rooms were generally located on the upper floor. The carving on the wooden dadoes, doors, and over-lintels combined western festoons with the egg and half-moon motif from the previous period. Monochromatic embossed tin panelling imported from India replaced the gilded stencilled panelling which disappears entirely during this period.

Amir Habibullah's predilection for the colonial style was very marked and may be detected in all of
the buildings designed by himself, and is particularly noticeable in his penchant for remodelling his father's palaces.

A prime example was Chihlsitoon, a rectangular one-storey flat-roof structure gently bowed on the western front which was gracefully surrounded by a verandah of many columns (Chihlsitoon). Opposite each arch on the verandah there was a double door with a four-course petal fanlight. Chihlsitoon stood on the summit of a high hill some six kilometres south of Kabul and was visible from a far distance, looking not unlike a Greek temple.

Amir Habibullah enlarged Chihlsitoon and enclosed all but six columns in the centre of the north face (Fig. 4). Heavy lateral stairs with iron railings replaced fan-shaped flights of shallow steps, and a double roof system took the place of the delicate balustrade running round the original flat roof. The double roof system, to which the Amir was very partial, consisted of a higher pitched roof above adjoining wings; series of small attic windows inevitably pierced the wall surface between the two roofs, to provide light and ventilation to the central high-ceilinged hall. Both these features, ubiquitous throughout British cantonments, were eminently suited to combat the sultry heat of the subcontinent. Amir Habibullah's attachment to them and their subsequent popularity in Afghanistan would appear to have been the result of fashionable, rather than functional, consideration, however, for the temperature of high, dry Kabul never rises to subcontinental extremes.

The Amir counselled his court against excessive outer splendour in dress, considering it to be against the tenets of Islam. He carried this over into his buildings on which he preferred to leave large blank wall spaces, broken only by stucco quoins and angular mouldings over doors and windows, representing baseless pediments. Four-course fanlights were replaced by more modest models and a profusion of tall, spindly iron chimneystacks became hallmarks (Fig. 4).

The Amir personally designed a large new palace constructed during the winter of 1910-1911 in the winter resort town of Jalalabad, in eastern Afghanistan (Fig. 5). Though the Seraj ul-Emorat, "Torch of Buildings", contained features present in his other structures, new experiments produced his most charming architectural contribution. Pitched roofs were dispensed with in favour of a multiplicity of flat-roof levels crowned with balustrades studded at intervals with extended conical-capped piers. These balustrades provide a graceful note countering the severity of the lower façade. A typically Indian portico was surmounted by a verandah with slender columns, and flanking round-arched upstairs verandahs further enlivened the façade. A single-storey audience hall adjoined to the western end of the two-storey palace was provided with a clerestory and dominated by a series of six plastered-brick columns spaced along each side of the central aisle, in the manner of Calcutta's grand Marble Hall already adopted by Amir Abdur Rahman in his Salaam Khana or Durbar Hall in Kabul. This proved so pleasing that Amir Habibullah subsequently added similar halls to a number of his buildings.

Amir Habibullah's building programmes were beset with enormous difficulties. Dilkusha, for instance, was under construction for thirteen years and cost exceeded estimates 30 fold, because of extraordinary graft and duplicity on the part of both European suppliers and Afghan supervisors. In addition, public opinion censured the Amir for his all too infrequent occupancy of his palatial residences so richly appointed with imported gadgetry and finery, including expensive wallpaperings and stunningly huge crystal chandeliers. They felt he spent an inordinate amount of time in tents pursuing his favourite pastime of hunting.

Political disillusionment over the Amir's refusal to join the Axis Powers against the British during World War I was the immediate cause of his assassination, but the fact that his buildings were regarded as monuments to personal indulgence, rather than symbols of progressive nation-building, contributed measurably to the general dissatisfaction of certain factions within the intelligentsia and social elite. There was no rush from court or populace to heed his example in building European-style housing; only two from amongst his score of sons did so.

KING AMANULLAH: 1919-1929

Sardar Amanullah, third son and successor to Amir Habibullah, indicated his eclectic interest in architecture when he constructed a two-building complex in Kabul called the Ain ul-Emorat, "Eyes of Buildings", in 1911-1912. The one-storey building intended for official receptions, designed in typical cantonment bungalow style along the lines of the remodelled Chihlsitoon, was unadorned on its exterior except for the baseless pediments familiar to his father's structures. In the garden next to this building, he constructed a two-storey haremserai for the ladies of the household (Fig. 6). In marked contrast, the form and decoration of this building was clearly derived from his uncle's Zain ul-Emorat. Innovations such as the columns on pedestals supporting an open balustraded verandah over the portico, heavily pronounced quoins, curved pediments, and festoons garlanding his personal insignia in the central gable pediment were early indicators of the prince's more flamboyant style. The inevitable inclusion of two attic windows under the pediment which gave light to the lofty principal reception room was a curious disruption of the otherwise attractive façade design.

After the assassination of his father, Amir Amanullah rapidly gained the upper hand over internal factions and waged a three-week war in 1919 with the British in India whereby he gained the right to conduct his own foreign affairs. In 1923, he changed his title from Amir to King to more closely identify with his
European colleagues. This settled, the King let loose a whirlwind of economic, social and political reforms in a headlong dash towards instant modernisation. That buildings were promoted as symbols of modernity is evidenced by the fact that souvenir postcard booklets printed in Paris to publicise modern Afghanistan predominately depicted buildings in European style.

Unlike his predecessors, King Amanullah launched his building programmes with the publication in 1922 and 1923 of four detailed laws (nizamnamah), governing both public and private construction. Several inducements to encourage wide participation and rapid, extensive, durable construction were put forward, including free model plans, easy credit and materials at cost to those who built entirely of the best materials; free land was allotted to those who guaranteed to build within a year of the publication of the laws. European housing was no longer to be the sole preserve of royalty.

Consciously turning his back on the styles of the subcontinent, the King employed architects from France (Fig. 10), Germany, Austria; Italy (Fig. 8), Turkey and Poland. Their plans were as usual modified by local masons working under minimum supervision. Some individuals drew up plans of their own, based on pictures in magazines; other members of court acquired respected reputations as architects. Hybrid designs evolved.

Though twenty-two German architects and engineers sent by the Mayor of Berlin at the express request of the Amir arrived in Kabul in May 1922 with a completed plan for the construction of a new capital at Darulaman near Chihil Silton, its stolid 1920s Germanic design failed to appeal to the Amir. Except for individual commissions, the Germans were largely relegated to designing bridges and installing sanitation systems, to which every domicile was required to be connected according to the specifications of the nizamnamah. Turning to the French, the monumental Palais du Gouvernement and its near-by companion Palais Royal (Fig. 10) were built in the grand style of 18th century European palaces. Elsewhere, particularly in the summer resort town of Paghman in the hills above Kabul where the majority of private villas were constructed, structures were most commonly twostoreyed. Porches over porticos and balconies were popular; bay (Fig. 9) and oriel windows made their first appearance. A tower form first introduced in 1918 in Kabul by Austrians who sought asylum in Afghanistan during World War I, was utilised on numbers of occasions, often in combination with bargeboards, acroteria, and metal spires and penants (Fig. 7).

The Amir's strictures against mud walls emphasised in each of the nizamnamah with the stipulation that every house must be visible from the street, caused great attention to be paid to exterior surface decoration. The designs were an eclectic mixture of neo-classical and pseudo-rococo motifs. Pseudo-Ionic and Corinthian capitals, fluted pilasters, denticulated triangular and curved pediments and entablatures, festoon-filled shaped pediments, stucco framed oval, rectangular and square windows, bows, wings, and scrolls were exuberantly combined indiscriminately; quoins were enlarged and their rusticated effect made more pronounced by mixing small pebbles with the stucco (Fig. 7). Pyramidal hood-molds made of heavy, rectangular stucco slabs were provided with floral label-stops repeated throughout the façade; large surfaces were at times scored with punctuated diamonds; and stucco clapboards occasionally appeared (Fig. 9). All this wealth of design executed in gleaming white moulded stucco was made even more prominent by the underlying pastel colours: washes then in vogue.

Interiors were sometimes wallpapered, or daubed with paint to resemble papering with stencilled borders or geometrical bands and panels; "marble" dados and balustrades were also painted.

In spite of the Amir's enthusiastic urgings and inducements, the building programmes never gained popularity outside the immediate royal family and certain few members of the social elite. Expenses mounted and one foreign observer estimated that out of the total government annual income of roughly five million dollars, almost one million was spent on Darulaman alone in 1928.5

More significantly, these houses in European style failed to provide the impetus for an attitudinal acceptance of modernisation. They stood instead as all too visible ostentatious symbols of the social, economic and political reforms conservative elements within the society found repugnant. During the revolt by Shinwari tribesmen in November 1928, the Seraj ul-Emarat, which King Amanullah and his Queen used as their private palace, was a primary target. The revolt spread quickly and on 15 January 1929, rebel forces occupied Kajju.5 King Amanullah and practically all the builders of these European structures fled into exile leaving many of the structures unfinished, including the Palais du Gouvernement. Moreover, many of the completed buildings stood untenanted for decades, monuments to modernisation reforms, hastily designed and insensitively imposed.
NOTES

This article summarises research to be published in East and West, IsMEQ, Rome.


3. ibid., pp 248-251 discuss the inward-looking society.


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Photographs by Robert Vincent, Jnr. except 2, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9 by Louis Dupree. Fig. 2 copied from Angus Hamilton, Afghanistan, London, 1906: 455. Figs. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9 copied from Souvenir Afghanistan, postcard booklets printed in Paris in 1922, 1926, 1928.

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