

Discreet Austerity

Notes on Gabriel Guevrekian's Gardens

In spring 1925 Gabriel Guevrekian, a young unknown artist-architect was invited to participate in the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris with a project called *Jardin d'Eau et de Lumière*. His contribution became one of the most noticed and criticized installations of the exhibition, and by the end, won the *Grand Prix* by the jurors. The garden was simply a stylized triangular walled space; a piece of landscape captured within a boundary made of concrete and colored glass. At the center of the plot was placed a tiered triangular fountain on top of which an electrically-propelled glass ball — a sculpture made by Louis Barillet, the French glass artist — was revolving. The space between the fountain and walls was geometrically patterned with triangular patches of flowers and grasses, each of which slightly tilted in a way so that the whole ground plane was traced by folds of green, orange, purple and red (fig. 1).

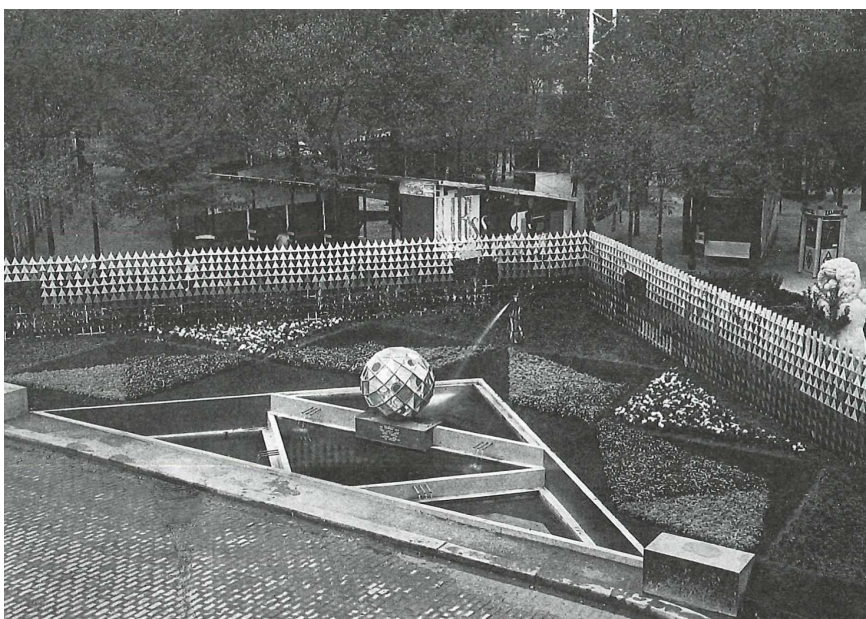


Fig. 1 Jardin d'Eau et de Lumière, by Gabriel Guevrekian 1925. (Excerpted from Michel Roux-Spitz, *Bâtiments et jardins. Exposition des Arts décoratifs. Paris 1925*, p. 74.)

Contrary to the common European traditions of garden design — French, English, Spanish and Italian styles — Guevrekian’s project put forward a new image of garden, formalized and manifested fully through architectural forms, elements and techniques. The garden installation stood against any imitation of nature, both in its form and concept; in a way, the project celebrated architecture as a contrast to nature rather than garden as imitation of nature.

Many art critics and scholars considered this project as one of the first attempts to apply modernist principles on landscape design, however according to the French landscape architect Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier, the co-curator of the exhibition, the garden was designed based on an idea taken from traditional Persian Gardens.

Persian Gardens

Iranian landscape gardens have not been limited to agricultural units or royal parks, but in fact, they have been the minimum structures to make any form of life and human settlement possible. In this way the Persian garden is a diagram of habitation. It is a response to the natural environment in which life constantly confronted with death and maintaining a life has been an exceptional deed. This peculiar form of built environment therefore creates a micro-cosmos within the extreme landscape; camps that protected life and let it flourish within the *tabula rasa*. Indeed, construction of these artifacts requires precise knowledge of topography, ground layers, and mechanics and hydraulics to trace life in a desert. In such a hostile condition any distinction between various forms of life ceases to exist and life becomes the ‘ideal life’ and garden becomes paradise (Khosravi 2014: 43).

Beyond its common exotic image associated with leisure or agriculture, the Persian garden has been an exceptional architecture. They are always behind walls; on the outside is the desert, representing desiccation and death, the harsh reality of life on the Iranian landscape. Within the walls are flowers, fruit, shade, water, and life. While the interior elements are real and tangible, the contrast with what is outside the wall is so striking as to make the interior a veritable paradise on earth (Hanaway 1976: 63). However, the form of these gardens has been intimately related to its *function*, as a mechanism that could make certain forms of life flourish within the hostile environment.

Precisely because of its literal abstraction — a livable space abstracted from a harsh landscape — the historically Persian garden has been bound to the concept of Paradise. In the western texts paradise appears in the Greek translation of the *Old Testament*, the Septuagint, in which for the first time

the idea of paradise coincided with the image of garden.¹ One of these images of paradise appears in the *Song of Solomon*, roughly contemporary with Xenophon, which describes a royal garden in fabulously sensual language and images. These descriptions not only depict the Judeo-Christian image of the celestial Garden but rather matches the actual spatial configuration of the Persian gardens to be found in the Iranian Plateau long before the advent of Islam. The etymology of the term can help revealing its manifold meaning. In Persian language, garden is *bagh*. The term is originally derived from the Indo-European root *bhag* that means ‘to share out,’ ‘to enjoy.’ It appears in the Old Persian and Avestan as *baga* which means ‘distributor of good fortune.’ In its Modern Persian usage, the term appears in two forms of *bagh* (short – a sound) as ‘God,’ and *bāgh* (long – a sound) as ‘Garden.’ Interestingly while these terms seem to connote two radically different meanings, they address the same concept, which is the act of ‘distribution’ and ‘allocation’ of life. That is precisely the reason for the dominance of the orthogonal grid in spatial organization of the Persian garden (fig. 2).

In the few surviving texts on Persian gardens, the art and science of garden was always coupled with particular sciences. In one of these accounts, *Irshad al-Zara’ah*, Qasim ibn Yusef conducted a detailed study on the ways of managing the land and planting. Among the four treaties, two are on mathematics and geometry (multiplication and division with reference to circles and other geometric figures) in their very practical application for the circulation of grain and for construction of tents and pavilions; the third is concerned with the distribution of well waters, manipulation of topography and the economy of the city of Herat. The Chapter 8 of the *Irshad al-Zara’ah* specifically addresses “The layout of the four-partied Persian garden (*chaharbagh*) and its pavilion.” The garden is described as a rectangular walled platform, divided by paths or two waterways (a cross) into four symmetrical sections. It set on the ground, which rises to the north thus allowing for the water flow. Two streams, each a cubit in width are led round the garden; the first, three cubits from the wall, is separated from the second and inner stream by a path three cubits wide. The main canal flows down the center of the garden into a pool, which is some twenty cubits from the pavilion. Just inside the wall there are rows of shade-giving trees – pine trees or cypresses – which are restricted to the outer bank of the first stream. The fruit-bearing trees were planted on a grid-pattern within the four plots, divided by the two main water axes, where the flowers were planted in the same manner on the perimeter of the plots (Pinder-Wilson 1976: 80). In fact as Qasim ibn Yusef composed his treaties, the garden was part of the series of engineering for the management of the territory and founding of cities. Indeed Persian garden is a diagram of urban settlement through which the life is allocated (water supply), protected (wall), and managed (grid) on the land.

¹ James F. Driscoll in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, under the term „Terrestrial Paradise,” writes: „The association of the term [Paradise] with the abode of our first parents does not occur in the Old Testament Hebrew. It originated in the fact that the word *paradeisos* was adopted, though not exclusively, by the translators of the Septuagint to render the Hebrew [term] for the Garden of Eden described in the second chapter of Genesis. It is likewise used in diverse other passages of the Septuagint where the Hebrew generally has ‘garden,’ especially if the idea of wondrous beauty is to be conveyed” (Driscoll 1912: 519).



Fig. 2 Persian Garden in Fars-Iran. (Excerpted from Georg Gerster, *Paradise Lost: Persia from Above*, p. 91.)



Fig. 3 Shahzadeh (Shazdeh) Garden in Mahan-Iran. (Excerpted from Georg Gerster, *Paradise Lost: Persia from Above*, p. 57.)

The area inside the walls becomes inhabitable and forms the city; through its spatial configuration it bears the very meaning of separation and spatial order (fig. 3). The interior is managed, organized and ruled by the (divine) sovereign power, while the exterior is an unknown, unmanaged, and therefore uncivilized domain. The wall not only protects life and fosters it within the harsh landscape but even assumes symbolic dimensions when it goes to other cultures, religions and different geographical conditions; within the context of Christian symbolism, the wall signifies divine intervention, redemptive interruption of the natural order, “pointing up the power of Grace to undo the natural propensities of human will [and signifying] life-giving separation between nature and Grace” (Stewart 1966: 59). The walled garden represents no imitation of nature; it is in fact, anti-nature, an inherent concept, which was brought up to the contemporary architecture with the works of Gabriel Guevrekian.

Gabriel Guevrekian

Gabriel Guevrekian was born on November 21, 1900 in Constantinople (Istanbul). The increasing hostility of the Ottoman state towards the Armenians had forced his family (the parents, Simon and Mariame together with Gabriel and his two sisters and a younger brother) to migrate to Tehran. Upon their arrival, Simon was immediately offered a position in the Qajar court as the royal jewelry specialist for Mozaffar ad-Din Shah (Vitou 1987: 19). Having an Armenian origin and born in Turkey, Gabriel acquired Iranian nationality. He grew up in Tehran amongst the nobles and courtiers, and enjoyed the elitist cultural scenes and intellectual strata of the post-Constitutional Revolution in Iran. After having his primary education in Tehran, Gabriel – together with his older sister, Lyda – moved to Vienna where his uncle, Alex Galoustian, was a practicing architect. He first studied music in a private school, but, in 1915, after five years of music study, he started architectural training at the *School of Architecture at the Academy of Applied Arts*, where he enjoyed one of most flourished periods of the school under direction of prominent figures such as Josef Hoffmann and Oskar Strnad.

In the early twentieth century, Vienna was the capital of culture and art. As part of the international *Arts and Crafts Movement*, the *Vienna Secession* (Wiener Secession) was formed in 1897. Rejecting the traditional historicism this group of artists and architects aimed for a fundamental reform in applied arts.² Based on the remarkable success of the *Vienna Secession*, Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser established a small enterprise, *Wiener Werkstätten*, in 1903. Their initial goal was to bring the new art movement into the everyday life of people, a motto that became popular only a few years later with the rise of the Modern Movement.

2 The *Vienna Secession* was established by a group of artists and architects who resigned from the *Association of Austrian Artist*. The founding members were Wilhelm Bernatzik, Adolf Böhm, Josef Engelhart, Alois Haenisch, Edmund Ritter von Hellmer, Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Hölzel, Eugen Jettel, Gustav Klimt, Friedrich König, Max Kurzweil, Julius Mayreder, Carl Moll, Koloman Moser, Alphonse Mucha, Felician Myrbach-Rheinfeld, Anton Nowak, Joseph Maria Olbrich, Rudolf Riiter van Ottenfeld, Kasimir Pochwalski, Alfred Roller, Hans Schwaiger, Ludwig Sigmundt, Ernst Stöhr, Arthur Strasser, Hans Tichy, and Otto Wagner.

The workshop started to design and produce a variety of objects ranging from jewelry to furniture design, and print and graphic arts. The *Wiener Werkstätten* promoted geometric designs, grid patterns and symmetry as a radical gesture against the common neo-classical style of the time.

For a young Guevrekian, it was a unique experience living and working at the heart of these movements. Thanks to the extended Jewish network of his uncle, Gabriel was put in contact with many avant-garde artists and architects, a group of trustees with whom Guevrekian's life was fundamentally changed. During his study at the Kunstgewerbeschule, Gabriel met Hans Adolf Vetter,³ whom soon became Gabriel's lifetime friend and colleague. They started working at Josef Hoffmann's office right after their graduation in 1920 during which they were mostly involved in designing residential projects.

In early 1921 Guevrekian, together with his sister Lyda and Hans Vetter, moved to Paris. After a short collaboration with Henri Sauvage, he joined Robert Mallet-Stevens' atelier in 1922, where he became the project leader (chef d'atelier), working on large residential projects and villas such as a house for the fashion designer Paul Poiret at Mézy-sur-Seine (1921–1923),⁴ a house for the couturier and collector, Jacques Doucet at Marly (1924) that was never realized,⁵ and five residences in the 'Rue Mallet-Stevens' (1925–1927). Next to those projects Guevrekian started getting small commissions for renovations of shops and studios. Although he was overshadowed by Mallet-Stevens' fame during those years, Guevrekian quickly managed to establish his name as an avant-garde architect. Being connected to the Parisian circle of artists, critics, and fashion designers, Guevrekian found his position at the heart of the modern movement. Since 1923 he exhibited his works in many venues in France and abroad, among which the *Salons d'Automne* of 1923 and 1924, and the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs* in 1925 were the most successful ones. His early works have been mostly read through the common Cubist formal language of the time, however, revisiting his life and works in a wider spectrum suggests a very strong influence deriving from his Eastern origin.

The 'Garden of Water and Light' at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, 1925

The Exhibition was planned in a large area at the center of Paris, including Pont Alexandre III, bridging over the Seine and connecting the Esplanade des Invalides to the Quai d'Orsay on the left bank of the Grand Palais, extending along the river. It went on for six months from April 28, 1925 until October. Compared to the previous exhibitions, this fair was extended in size and program; the steering committee divided the program into eleven

³ Hans Adolf Vetter (1897–1963) studied at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Vienna from 1913 to 1920, although this included a period of military service; he was taught by Josef Frank, Oskar Strnad, and Heinrich Tessenow. He then lived in Paris (1923–1926), where he worked in the ateliers of Robert Mallet-Stevens and Gabriel Guevrekian. In 1924 he married Guevrekian's older sister Lyda. Although their marriage did not last long, but Vetter remained Gabriel's close friend till the end of their lives. At the *Vienna Werkbund*, he designed and furnished house no. 48. In the following years, he acted as editor of the journal *profil* (1932–1936) and taught at the Kunstgewerbeschule (1934–1938). He then immigrated to England, before accepting a job offer at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pittsburgh, where he invited Guevrekian to teach during 1948–1949. Four years later he founded the Summer School of Architecture in Salzburg, where Guevrekian was a guest professor.

⁴ Large villa built in 1923 by architect Rob Mallet-Stevens for the couturier Paul Poiret. Situated on a hillside overlooking the Seine, it is conceived as a country house but also has a large patio for fashion shows. After the bankruptcy of the designer in 1924, the building, unfinished, remains abandoned for ten years before being bought by the Viscountess Elvira Foy (née Popescu), dramatic artist of Romanian origin. The architect shows the building to the new owner, in 1934 performing a series of amendments intended to strengthen the habitability of the villa, to the detriment of its ceremonial character.

⁵ In 1924, the couturier and collector Jacques Doucet commissioned Robert Mallet-Stevens to design a house at Marly that was never built. In this project Mallet-Stevens was positioning himself as heir to the Viennese Secession with his juxtaposition of volumes, vertical windows, ornate decoration, stained glass, wrought ironwork and antique statuary (all features of the Stoclet Palace, the mansion designed by Jules Hoffman for one of Mallet-Stevens' uncles). The project also shows the influence of De Stijl, the Dutch movement that prompted Mallet-Stevens towards asymmetry in his arrangement of volumes.

thematic sections: Architecture, Furniture, Decoration, Accessories, Textile and Paper Art, Publication, Music, Jewelry Design, Theatre, Photography and Cinema, Education, and Street Art and Garden (David 1925: 6).

The event is best known for the statement in ‘Art Deco,’ a term that was derived from the title “Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs” and soon was popularized, representing a style that combines arts and crafts with the industrial developments of post-World War I machinery. However, perhaps the highest achievement of the exhibition was to bring together many ground-breaking avant-garde projects by young architects and artists. The Soviet Union Pavilion, designed by Konstantin Melnikov, opened a new chapter in European architecture; it was composed of a rectangular glass box, cut diagonally by a staircase, opening the whole interior space of the pavilion up to the public ground. Such brutal composition was flagged by a space frame tower holding a large CCCP logo in red. “It was the most conspicuous structure at the Paris exhibition. It revealed to the West the existence of a new Russian architecture, which was further confirmed by the presentation elsewhere at the fair of over one hundred projects conceived in the USSR since 1920” (Cohen 2012: 166). Most critics found the project extremely striking; it was awarded the *Grand Prix of Architecture*.

Another remarkable project was Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret’s contribution, their Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau. It was a 1:1 prototype of the *Immeuble Villa* unit; a box composed of white standardized elements combining a modern habitation with an interior garden. This model ought to be infinitely reproduced stretching a domestic interior into an urban scheme. Although Le Corbusier’s *Immeuble Villa* was never realized, the unit made for the 1925 Paris decorative art exhibition was a provocative attempt to exhibit a house as a “*machine à habiter*.” Other projects such as Peter Behrens’s glasshouse or Mallet-Stevens’ Pavilion of Tourism were also among the well-noticed projects; together they marked the beginning of a new era in the history of architecture. Indeed soon after the opening the exhibition was received as a manifesto of the avant-garde architecture.

Despite the great success of the architecture sector in the 1925 *Arts Décoratifs* expo, the newly created garden and landscape section, organized by Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier, received unexpected attentions. The organizing committee decided to exhibit series of *Instant Gardens* throughout the exposition complex. These gardens were planned to be complementing the architecture of the pavilions and to create a cohesive, yet diverse, ensemble. Forestier invited artists and architects to design temporary gardens for the assigned plots throughout the exhibition site. One of the main challenges of the garden section was the timeline; having the exhibition between April and October meant that the gardens had to

remain pristine for six months. This problem triggered imagination and led to innovative solutions. In one of the most radical projects, Mallet-Stevens in collaboration with Jan and Joël Martel created a monumental garden with trees casted in reinforced concrete. Although the project was well received by the circle of avant-garde artists and architects it was criticized harshly in the public media (fig. 4).

Next to the French modernist takes on landscape design, Forestier's garden section also had traditional connotations; Arabic, Moorish, Spanish, Italian, and Japanese theme gardens were among the temporary installations exhibited during the fair. Beyond his official role as the curator of Paris Parks System, Forestier was a landscape theoretician too. In 1920 he published *Jardins: carnet de plans et de dessins* in which he described and illustrated structures and formal principles of various gardens of the world. There he dissected the influence of the Persian paradise garden into main streams: the Greco-Roman and the North African-Spanish, both of which he would employ in his designs (Forestier 1920: 51).

The Persian garden theme at the Paris Exhibition was assigned to Gabriel Guevrekian in one of the most oddly shaped plots of the exhibition site; located just in front of *Esplanade des Invalides*, adjacent to Tour de Bordeaux, Guevrekian's garden was a corner plot opening to the main exhibition path. The walking path and the garden were placed on a platform higher than the surrounding trees. Contrary to other garden installations, in the *Jardin d'Eau et de Lumière* the visitors were first detached from the space, then were put in a relation as if they were part of the setting. Although the visitors had to stand outside the garden, the forced one-point perspective of the installation engaged them immediately, collapsing vision and spatial experience within a self-referential aesthetic structure. Learning from Persian gardens, Guevrekian used abstraction not only for aesthetic reasons, but also as guiding principles through which the space is formed and organized. In this sense the garden was neither landscape nor architecture; it was a space taken out, whose remaining parts was an architectonic vestige.

In a review of the exhibition, Forestier praised Guevrekian's garden as the most curious installation of the exhibition. He wrote:

I really wanted to have a garden in the modern spirit with Persian decorative elements in the Exhibition. I would stress on the 'modern spirit' because today the imitation of Arabic gardens or Spanish courtyards has become too common, if not ubiquitous; they have no place in the exhibition. [In his project] Guevrekian has recalled his memories from Persia but has freely abandoned them. What he has shown acquired a great originality and ingenuity (Forestier 1925: 526).



Fig. 4 Garden with Concrete Trees by Mallet-Stevens and Martel Brothers 1925. (Excerpted from Michel Roux-Spitz: *Bâtiments et jardins. Exposition des Arts décoratifs. Paris 1925*, p. 76.)



Fig. 5 Jardin d'Eau et de Lumière. (Excerpted from Dorothee Imbert: *The Modernist Garden in France*, plate VI.)



Fig. 6 Jardin d'Eau et de Lumière (drawing), 1925. (Excerpted from Joseph Marrass: *1925 Jardins*.)

6 Since 1922 Guevrekian had worked closely with a group of young and avant-garde fashion designers in Paris, among them were Coco Chanel, Paul Poiret, Jacques Doucet, Jacques Heim and Sonia Delaunay who returned to Paris in 1922. Guevrekian designed a boutique for Sonia Delaunay's textile art at the Salon d'Automne of 1924. Also in the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs*, he designed another boutique for Jacques Heim and Delaunay's fashion products at the Pont Alexandre III.

7 The full list of artists includes Marcel Breuer, Louis Barillet, Sybold van Ravesteyn, Jean Prouvé, Mme. Klotz, René Prou, Raoul Dufy, Eileen Gray, Sonia Delaunay, Jean Perzel, Pierre Legrain, André et Paul Vera, Jan and Joël Martel, Constantin Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti, Henri Laurens, Jacques Lipchitz.

Although Guevrekian's contribution was not ready until mid-July it was precisely what Forestier wished for, a masterfully designed modern, yet Persian, garden. In fact it went beyond a mere employment of Persian decorative elements; following the concept of Persian garden, the garden of Water and Light was a space abstracted from the surroundings. It was an architectural statement within and against nature (fig. 5).

The Guevrekian's garden was a realization of a drawing that Guevrekian produced for the project earlier that year, an abstract illustration, composed of a flattened axonometric view of the garden, which appeared as provocative as the installation itself (fig. 6). Vivid shades of crimson, green, yellow, and cobalt blue were put together creating an abstract yet playful composition of triangles on a flat surface. While using Persian miniature perspectival composition, the painting in a way resembled the working style of cubist artists such as Robert and Sonia Delaunay. Despite Guevrekian's strong position in offering an innovative reading of architectural history, the influence of his artist friends on his works was inevitable.⁶ Particularly the juxtaposition of colors and forms in Guevrekian's painting comes very close to the technique and style that Robert Delaunay employed in his Window series or Circular Rhythms that appeared also at the bottom of tiered triangular fountains in the Garden of Water and Light. Beyond their mutual influences, what is shared in their works was a very peculiar approach towards form; the ways in which forms and colors merge and the perspective was manipulated. Delaunay's solid planes of colors are volumetric while Guevrekian's forms are flattened with colors. These formal principles have been employed in other garden projects by Guevrekian.

A Garden for Villa Noailles, 1926

One of the projects that Gabriel Guevrekian was involved in during his collaboration with Mallet-Stevens was a large residence for the young and wealthy descendants of Marquis de Sade's, Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles in Hyères. The couple was famous for their passion for modern art; they wanted a place to exhibit their collection while enjoying life in the Mediterranean coast. They asked Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Mallet-Stevens to present their ideas, among whom ultimately the proposal of Mallet-Stevens was selected, a project that was exhibited later that year at the 16th *Salon d'Automne*. The house became a work of art; the preliminary design was developed in collaboration of Mallet-Stevens with avant-garde artists and architects such as Georges Djo Bourgeois, Theo van Doesburg, Pierre Chareau, Francis Jourdain, and Guevrekian among others.⁷ Although Mallet-Stevens was the chief designer of the project, those artists were asked to design different spaces, decorations, or furniture; Bourgeois designed the dining room and also made furniture for the lib-

rary and the living room (1925), van Doesburg designed the ‘chambre des fleurs’ (1924-25), Chareau was tasked with designing the outdoor room, and the eastern triangular plot of the complex was given to Guevrekian to design a garden.

The 1925 Paris exhibition was still ongoing when Charles de Noailles asked Guevrekian to design the garden for the house, separate from his tasks at the Mallet-Stevens office. He visited Guevrekian’s *Jardin d’Eau et de Lumière* and wished to have a similar design for one of the gardens of the house.⁸ At the south eastern corner of the villa a 120 square meter triangular plot was still available to become one of the most famous modernist gardens. Guevrekian made a model and a drawing to express his initial ideas. The model, with its radical composition, became the emblematic image of Guevrekian’s garden manifesto.

The garden demonstrated a symmetrical triangle framed by two crisp walls, the third side of which was left partly open in order to connect the Lower Salon. The ground plane had a checkerboard pattern of tulips and glossy mosaics; the squares were slightly tilted creating a pixelated topography. Along the two side walls the ground was orderly mounded into sloping triangles; on the ground they were covered with smooth layers of grass while next to the lower salon, the triangles were stacked up reaching to half of the height of the wall. Flowers were planted in the stepping platforms. All these geometrical patterns were outlined with white cement frames, as if the garden was carefully traced with lines. Just in front of the entrance, on the western wall, two rectangular platforms were raised; Guevrekian originally planned four orange trees to be planted there, but during the construction the platforms were reduced to squares and only two trees were placed. A sunken pool of water marked the central axis, along which, at the vertex of the triangle, was placed *La joie de vivre* — a bronze sculpture by Jacques Lipchitz. It was a dancing figure with a large guitar and a motor rotating the sculpture every four minutes (Imbert 1993: 135). The statue was not part of the Guevrekian’s original design, however, perhaps by Mallet-Stevens’ suggestions it was included in the setting after which, during the construction, the walls were lowered down in order to make the statue — and the garden — more visible (fig. 7).

Similar to the *Jardin d’Eau et de Lumière* the Noailles garden was designed to be seen from outside; although Guevrekian provides entrances to the garden, his landscape composition was staged to be viewed from the Lawn Terrace, on the roof of the Lower Salon (fig. 8). This was the point where in 1928 Man Ray photographed the garden, and those photos, together with the ones taken by Thérèse Bonney, soon replaced the garden itself. Guevrekian’s original setting did not last for long: only a few years

8 “Je viendrai probablement à ce moment là causer avec M. Guévrekian à qui je voudrais demander quelques idées pour le jardin, si il désire toujours collaborer un peu a notre maison comme il l’avait dit. J’ai beaucoup aimé ce jardin des Arts décoratifs et lui demanderais volontiers un dessin du jardin pour ici si vous avez l’impression que ce genre de chose l’amuserait à faire.” Letter of Charels de Noailles to Robert Mallet-Stevens, dated, 5 November 1923 (Briolle 1990: 62).

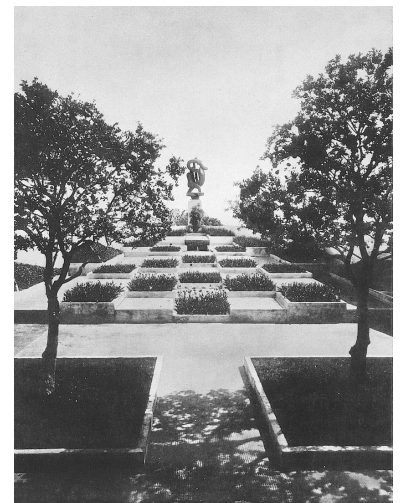


Fig. 7 Guevrekian’s Triangular Garden at the Villa Noailles. (Excerpted from *Innendekoration* August 1929.)

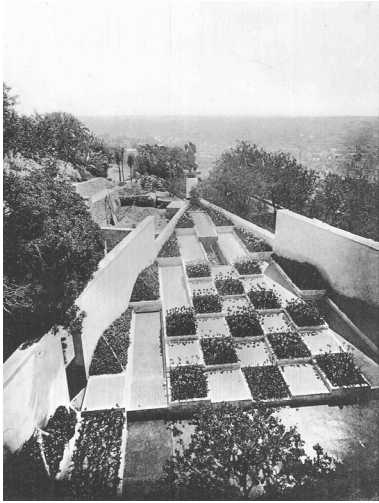


Fig. 8 Guevrekian's Triangular Garden at the Villa Noailles, 1928. Photo by Man Ray (Excerpted from André Lurçat: *Terrasses et Jardins*.)

after its completion, the Vicomte de Noailles proudly issued a postcard of his makeover design for the garden (Imbert 1997: 172).

A spectacular emptiness within the densely planted landscape of the surroundings, Guevrekian's garden was a space cut out of nature. In both triangular gardens, the architect demonstrated in-depth understanding of Persian garden formal principles. Not only that, Guevrekian used the conceptual aspects of the Persian garden and rearticulated them as a critique to the common imitation or representation of nature in the European landscape designs of the time.⁹ The Persian garden is anti-nature, as were Guevrekian's gardens; it is a traced ground with manipulated topography, mechanized with all the hydraulic facilities preserved for life and habitation, though not yet inhabited. Even if there is form of habitation, it will be placed around it, outside the walls of the garden. It is precisely for this peculiar characteristic that the triangular gardens had to be experienced from outside.

⁹ Following the ideological turns that occurred during the Enlightenment, the concept of transcendental paradise garden was replaced by the idea of arcadia or a romantic image of landscape where humankind is in harmony with nature as the source of life. This idea later was well articulated in the philosophies of Jean-Jacque Rousseau and Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century. What Rousseau promoted was landscape garden where natural compositions were restored and a perfected nature was proclaimed. As a result of this ideological shift next to the influences of the Chinese traditional gardens brought by travellers books and missioners, a peculiar idea of landscape was developed and specific garden styles were practiced and promoted: English garden, French *jardin paysager* and *jardin pittoresque*. In these European gardens the imitation of nature stood opposed to the theological idea of paradise garden; a heavenly realm guarded by walls outside of which was the unknown territory of evil forces and expellees.

¹⁰ *Villa Heim* in Neuilly (1927), *Villa Nubar Pasha*, in Saint-Cloud (1932), *Villa Fuchs*, in Budapest (1933), *Villa Malek-Aslani* (1933), *Villa Panahy* (1934), *Villa Siassy* (1935), *Villa Khosrovany* (1936), *Villa Taleghani* (1936), *Villa Nezam-Mafi* (1937), and *Villa Firouze* (1937) all in Tehran.

A House for Jacques Heim (1927 – 1928)

Between 1927–1937 Gabriel Guevrekian drafted other garden projects, most of which were built as part of his urban villas.¹⁰ The bold formal characteristic of the two triangular landscape installations was softened in Guevrekian's rectangular courtyard and terrace gardens. Jacques Heim, the famous fashion designer, whose pavilion at the 1925 *Decorative Arts* fair was designed by Guevrekian, approached the architect again in 1927 in order to make a plan for an urban villa (*hôtel particulier*), *Villa Heim*. Guevrekian designed and supervised every single detail of the project, from the building to its interior decoration and furniture as well as the garden.

The villa was built in an exclusive private neighborhood at Neuilly-sur-Seine; an austere cubic volume stood between Rue de Madrid, to its north, and looked towards the park to the south. Marcel Zahar, the French art critic compared the brutal form of the villa to a safe with a blank façade and cheerful interior (Zahar 1931: 48). The street façade was almost flat, only accentuated with an orthogonal bow window stretched vertically, three floors high; upon reaching the first floor, it became a narrow terrace in front of the *Chambre de Monsieur*. The southern façade however, was layered in terraces overlooking the park. On the first floor, adjacent to the *Chambre de Madame*, a large terrace cascaded down to the courtyard, extending the typical ground-floor courtyard garden to the upper levels. The plan was strictly modulated; the interior spaces, structure, openings, and paving all followed the same grid. The garden too was compartmentalized just like the rigid plan of the apartment.

Guevrekian put no trees in his garden; the space was flanked only by geometrically formed bushes. The prevailing visual symmetry of the previous gardens was dismantled here in favor of different functions and spaces adjoining the courtyard. The plane was divided into six platforms; each was paved with a different brick pattern. A concrete staircase descended from the first floor and became the entrance to the garden. In the initial plan, Guevrekian designed the staircase with a 90-degree turn, in order to stop on the central axis of the garden, however during the construction the stairs were shortened, consequently there was a disorientation in the way one enters the space. Just after the stairs, on the main axis, there was a bare platform; it was bracketed with lines of flowers planted in white concrete boxes. The platform was an architectural statement, set against the richly planted landscape of the park. In fact, Guevrekian's paved garden was put in a dialectical relation with the surrounding landscape ensemble (fig. 9).

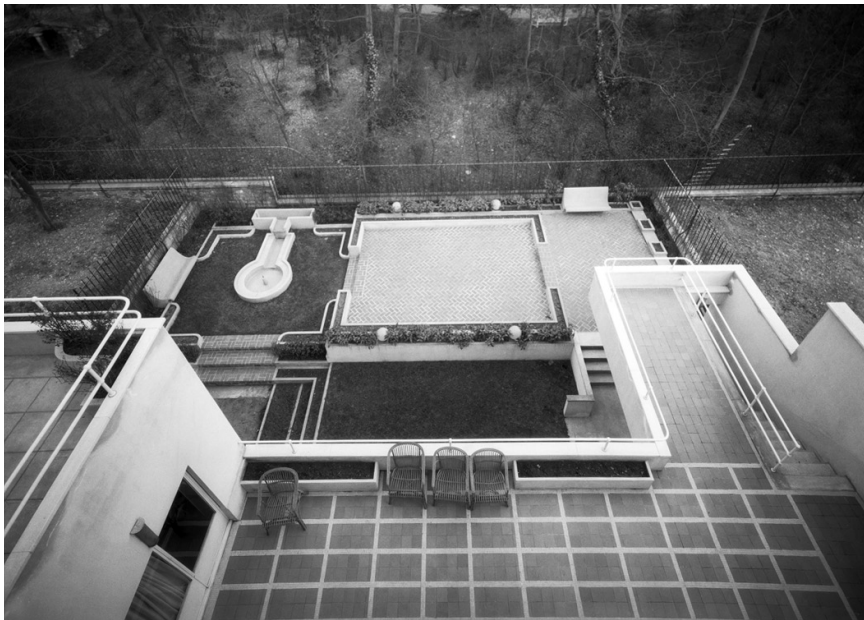


Fig. 9 The Garden of the *Villa Heim*, 1929. Photo by Thérèse Bonney (Ministère de la Culture, France, Médiathèque de l'architecture et du patrimoine, diffusion RMN.)

The next platform was built in a square shape; having a reversed pattern it was covered with grass, at the center of which was placed a circular fountain tiled in pink. It was put in a slightly lower level than a rectangular basin from which the water overflowed to the fountain. Three steps down, the next stage was set; the third platform had a paved landing that was bordered by a U-shaped bed of grass. All lined with white concrete; bushy shrubs and flowers surrounded this lowest platform. To its west, it was connected to the last step; a pool of grass stretched along the south façade of the building. This ground plane of the courtyard was folded up to the traces and ultimately became a roof garden.

Similar to the garden of *Villa Heim*, Guevrekian designed seven villas in Tehran. Although the architect claimed that in the Tehran projects his design was adapted to the climatic conditions and technological constraints

(Guevrekian 1938: 78), the formal principles of the gardens remained the same; flattened and paved gardens, animated with mechanized water circulation and glazed by use of colored tiles, a setting which was fundamentally Persian, but reformulated in modern formal language.

The Garden as a Statement

In *Jardin d'Eau et de Lumière* (1925) and two following garden projects — for *Villa Noailles* (1926), and *Villa Heim* (1927–1928) — Guevrekian proposed designs that manifested no conventional garden but a spatial autonomy through architectural elements (fig.10). In all of the projects the gardens were excluded from the ‘reality’ by crisp walls; they were set against the nature. They were bare interiors: while in the two triangular gardens the position of the observer was fixed outside, in *Villa Heim* the observer was placed inside. The topography was always manipulated and engineered; the ground was molded and platforms were raised. Underneath, the hydraulic system and electrical equipment distributed the water together setting up an animated scene before the eyes of the observers. Guevrekian’s gardens were all about organization, distribution, and composition; these concepts, aesthetic principles, and formal expressions are derived from Modernist architectural precedents as much as they are found in the idea of the Persian garden.

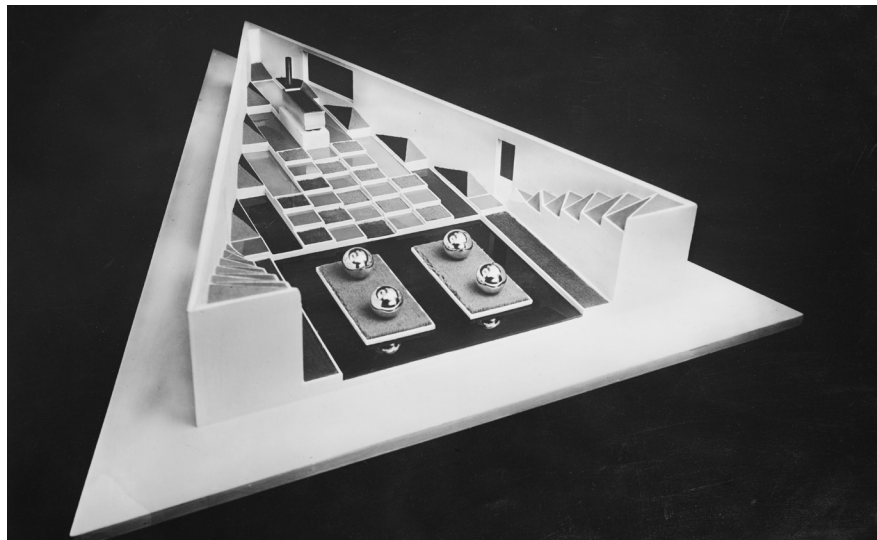


Fig. 10 Triangular Garden of the Villa Noailles (model), 1927. Photo by Thérèse Bonney (*Ministère de la Culture, France, Médiathèque de l'architecture et du patrimoine, diffusion RMN.*)

Indeed the original concept of the (Persian) garden has no emphasis on vegetation, plantings or greenery; it is simply a wall that encloses a piece of land. In the arid Iranian landscape the walled land is an *exception*, a city within a desert, a life within death. In fact, to *garden* a land is to make it protected and livable; an operation through which any difference between architecture and garden ceases to exist. Architecture stands in a sharp contrast with the (harsh) nature; it is reduced to the most austere form in or-

der to make a distinction between what is outside and what is kept inside. Through his garden projects, Guevrekian declared an architectural manifesto; just like in Persian gardens, Guevrekian's architecture was to reject all common presumptions and to start from scratch in order to re-create *life*. The idea of garden as an imitation of nature was challenged by those projects; celebrating a discreet austerity through which architecture is put in dialogue with nature.

Author

Hamed Khosravi is an architect, writer and educator. He studied architecture at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tehran and received his Ph.D. in *The City as a Project* program at the Delft University of Technology and Berlage Institute. His research focuses on architectural 'form,' 'materialization,' and 'representation' in relation to political ideologies. Hamed Khosravi has been teaching Design studios as well as History and Theory courses in various schools of architecture.

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