

# An Island Within an Island

## The Establishment of the Oil Company in the 'Desert Island of Abadan (1910-1935)

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Proceedings of the Society of Architectural  
Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ)  
Volume 40

Confence hosted by the University of Queensland  
and the Queensland University of Technology,  
Brisbane 2-4 December 2024

Edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz

Published in Brisbane by SAHANZ, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-7638772-0-7

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DOI: 10.55939/a5404pvrxc

Citation:

Hanif, Ehssan. "An Island within an Island: The Establishment of the Oil Company Town in the 'Desert' Island of Abadan (1910–1935)." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 40, Islands*, edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 29-30. Brisbane, Australia: SAHANZ, 2025.

Accepted for publication on 9<sup>th</sup> June, 2024



**SAHANZ** Society of Architectural  
Historians Australia  
& New Zealand



December 2-4 2024

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The Establishment of the Oil Company Town in the 'Desert' Island of Abadan (1910–1935)

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William Darcy's drilling machinery reached the Iranian subsoil oil reservoirs, sufficient for industrial-scale extraction, in 1908.<sup>1</sup> Following this "discovery" in southwest Iran, identifying a location for refining and exporting oil appeared as the oil company's first primary task. Responding to Darcy's company request, Andrew Campbell, administrative manager of the Burmah Oil Company, and R. R. Davidson, an engineer endorsed by the G. J. Weir pumping company, journeyed to Iran in January 1909 to survey the region's geography for establishing a pipeline, refinery and accompanying company town.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, the island of Abadan, situated approximately 200 kilometres southwest of the extraction site, was chosen as the ideal location for the refinery.

could reshape the land according to its needs. This perception of the island as an "empty desert" facilitated unrestricted developments, regardless of the socio-environment context of Abadan. As architectural historian Samia Henni has noted, perceiving the desert as an empty space would pave the way for occupation, exploitation, toxification, and destruction, accompanying the act of extraction.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Abadan, these developments resulted in a company town encompassing not just a refinery but also essential amenities such as hospitals, clubs, cinemas, and residential neighbourhoods primarily tailored to accommodate the British expatriate employees of the company, employing the ethos of the "garden city" paradigm.

However, the island already housed Indigenous inhabitants residing in the old town of Abadan or small villages dispersed along the banks of the Shat Al-Arab (later called Arvandrood in Iran) and Bahmanshir rivers encircling the island. The company's decision to house British expatriates within the precincts of a secure "garden city" enclave was based on the colonial ethos of racially segregating colonisers and the colonised.<sup>4</sup> In this way the company town was working as

1.

Leonardo Davoudi, *Persian Petroleum: Oil, Empire and Revolution in Late Qajar Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2020), 95.

2.

R. W Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 135-146.

3.

Samia Henni, ed., *Deserts Are Not Empty* (Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2022), 11.

4.

Mark Crinson, "Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company," *Planning Perspectives* 12, no. 3 (January 1997): 342, <https://doi.org/10.1080/026654397364681>.

an island within the island of Abadan, an oasis within the perceived “desert.”

Simultaneously, aiming to provide “comfortable” accommodations for the British expatriates, the company introduced new facilities like air conditioners alongside “modern” spaces into the island, thereby catalysing the process of modernisation in the whole region. Therefore, examining the history of this company town reveals not just the persistent colonialism on the island of Abadan, but also the intricate relationship between coloniality and modernity interwoven with issues like environment, race, and gender. This paper, focusing on the constructions of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later known as Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and subsequently as British Petroleum Company) in Abadan, explores how the discovery of oil resources in the Middle East accelerated the process of colonisation alongside modernisation in the region.

Drawing on archival materials from the British Petroleum Archive, Iranian National Petroleum Museum, and British Admiralty records, I argue that the British oil company identified Abadan’s distinctive geographical features as a

strategic asset to its colonialist dominion in a more fundamental manner, not only in the region but also globally. In this context, the fluidity of oil, which forms an extensive global network, and the island’s enclosed geography, as two sides of the same coin, served the imperial ambitions of the colonisers. Employing an architectural lens on this history, my narrative commences with the initial phase of construction in Abadan in 1910, culminating in the construction of the Bawardeh Neighbourhood in 1935, a seminal project emblematic of a relative shift in the administrative mindset of the company.<sup>5</sup>

5.

One of the drafts of this paragraph was developed using ChatGPT. The AI-generated content was reviewed and revised to ensure academic rigor and adherence to the research objectives.