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An Architecture of Uncertainty:
Narratives of the Built Environment Under Economic Sanctions in Tehran

By

Razieh Ghorbani Kharaji

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Architecture

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Andrew Shanken, Co-chair
Professor Nezar Alsayyad, Co-chair
Professor Stefania Pandolfo

Fall 2019

An Architecture of Uncertainty:
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By Razieh Ghorbani Kharaji

Abstract

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Professor Andrew Shanken, Co-chair

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This dissertation is shaped around the question of how under the politics and rhetoric of sanctions architecture acts as a cultural response and evinces different cultural reactions to the economic situation in Iran. Sanctions, while well understood in terms of politics and economics, have not been studied as part of everyday Iranian culture. And while they have been looked at as a temporary politico-economic force, their impact on physical space as a permanent social phenomenon has not been explored. Today, a vital part of what I call "the culture of sanctions" in Iran is experienced materially in architectural terms. I take interest in how the culture of sanctions has stimulated new forms of critiquing the built environment among different communities of practice.

Architecture is viewed in this project as a tapestry pf practices, which include construction, design, development, representation, even pedagogy, activism and speculation; these realms are explored in the chapters of this work among different professional groups, namely, builders, realtors, ordinary investors, architects and artists. The built environment in my research is studied along with the everyday political and religious rhetoric around sanctions. On the one hand, sanctions are viewed as an obstacle, and the cause of Iran's "global isolation." This has more than ever created a socio-psychological market for the cultivation of things that are "modern," "western," "global," and "foreign." On the other hand, sanctions are viewed as a rather positive force—an opportunity to build an Islamic economy independent of Western imperial influences. Such nationalistic reactions, which are tied to the spatial discourses of colonialism, globalization, and modernism, have also influenced architectural practices in terms of design, material culture, and financial calculations.

To build on this, I argue that sanctions have simultaneously worked as a closing and opening mechanism. In other words, they may have closed the borders to certain goods, capital and material flows, but they have also opened it to particular ideologies and cultural economies. This resembles the inherent polarities within the word "sanction" itself—a *contronym*, which means "permission," and "deterrent" at the same time. The invocation of sanctions as a contronym has a value as an

analytical framework because Iran has suffered from massive sanctions in the past few decades, but what this work has found is the process by which Iranian people and the Iranian state "sanction" themselves. Sanction here does not mean the deterrence that was imposed on them, but the permission Iranians have given themselves to respond to the ongoing political and economic instabilities through different cultural and economic strategies. My work documents the ways in which architecture is imagined and materialized in this political field of simultaneous depression and progression of ideas. To study the built environment in this manner is not to downplay the ruinous psychological and economic impacts of the imposed embargoes on society, but to view them as a form of "creative destruction."

To Zainab Leili
My little explorer

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Architecture and Sanctions—Two Interwoven Cultures

Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.[1]

When this project began in Tehran in the winter of 2017, the country seemed to be experiencing a phase of economic interlude, where inflation was brought down to less than ten percent at the cost of creating a prolonged recession in various economic sectors. A housing recession had been lingering for about three years, and it continued for another year until 2018 (Fig. 1.1). In a seemingly unruffled climate, the ongoing recession and the expected post-sanction outlook together framed the prospects of this dissertation. But as people were melancholically theorizing the causes of the recession no one would have had imagined that within less than a couple of months things would dramatically change. Ironically, in the midst of my ethnographic research, the re-imposition of sanctions in 2018 turned this work into a historical project.

Figure 1.1: Photograph capturing the silence of the construction market in Tehran. Source: courtesy of the photographer, Mohammad Amin Mohammadi, 2017

In a time when the state was capitalizing on the successes of its international nuclear negotiations, the threat of a new wave of sanctions being imposed on Iran by the United States began to create unprecedented turmoil in the country. The U.S. set the deadline of May 12th, 2018 for announcing its opinion on the so-called "Iran Nuclear Deal"—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as formally titled. That deal had been signed in 2015 and implemented in early 2016, where the US and other *P5+1 countries* had agreed to remove many of the sanctions imposed on Tehran in return for Iran scaling down its nuclear program.[2] But months before the May deadline, the Iranian currency and real estate markets began to fluctuate dramatically. Very quickly, whispers of international tensions along with internal economic mismanagements exposed such markets to uncontrollable inflation shocks.

In the early days of the spring of 2018, prices of apartments began to soar along with other commodities, and investors who had originally relied on high rates of interest on their bank deposits abruptly began to take interest in the real estate market. As money poured from banks into real estate, the housing recession that had started in 2013 soon turned into a temporary housing boom that saw prices escalated on a daily, even an hourly, basis. With the value of the dollar going up hourly and the embargoes enforced on certain products, construction imports became unusually scarce in the market as they were either unavailable or were hoarded by speculators. Realtors predicted that "this was only the beginning of a huge housing hysteria, before the new round of sanctions etched themselves on the body of new buildings."[3] During the recession years that followed the JCPOA negotiations, people looked for quality and livability in housing. Very soon the madness of the market convinced everyone that "buying any piece of property was better than seeing your money evaporate in your hands."[4]

As I write, things are rapidly changing. This work is thus an attempt at describing a window into the transient culture of architecture in Iran and exploring how architecture is attached to a condition of constant economic instability. The unfolding economic condition in 2018 introduced a new lens for this project—a lens which could afford a "before and after" perspective into how people invest in architecture as a means of exploring a potential future—a future which has been constantly changing because the imposition, the lifting, and the re-imposition of sanctions have given it different meanings. This work is thus not just about the relationship between sanctions and architecture, but more importantly about how the appearance and disappearance of sanctions provide a context for studying the production of the built environment under this condition of constant political and economic turmoil.

Architecture as a Cultural Metaphor

Iranians have had a shaky economic history since the Islamic revolution of 1979, experiencing numerous economic crises since the nuclear embargoes in the early 2000s. Along with the swings of the economy people have learned to make calculations and gamble on the future. Architecture is thus an important metaphor in the Iranian culture—a metaphor for describing how people create value in a particular moment of time, and how they imagine the future of their country. By focusing on quotidian and professional practices around the building of and investment in apartments, I aim to provide ethnographic narratives on the material, the representational, and the emotional landscape of economic and political crises in Iran.

This dissertation is therefore shaped around the question of how, under the politics and rhetoric of sanctions, architecture acts as a cultural response and evinces different cultural reactions to the political-economic situation in Iran. Sanctions, while well understood in terms of politics and economics, have not been studied as part of everyday Iranian culture. And while

they have been looked at as a temporary political-economic force, their impact on physical space as a permanent social phenomenon has not been explored. Today, a vital part of what I call "the culture of sanctions" in Iran is experienced materially in architectural terms. I take interest in how the culture of sanctions, in a complex relation with other economic, political, and cultural forces, has stimulated new imaginaries of urbanism and new forms of critiquing the built environment within various disciplines. Architecture is thus viewed in this project as a tapestry of different practices, which include construction, design, development, representation, even pedagogy, activism and speculation. These realms of practice are explored in the three main chapters of this work among different professional communities.

The built environment in my research is studied along with the everyday political and ethical rhetoric around sanctions. On the one hand, sanctions are viewed as an obstacle, and the cause of Iran's "global isolation." This has more than ever created a socio-psychological market for the cultivation of things that are "modern," "western," "global," and "foreign." For example, home furnishing imports—ranging from modern and classic tiles and floorings to kitchen cabinets and bathroom fittings—are flourishing as an attractive arena for investment, and new aesthetic sensibilities are more than ever connecting the Iranian market to the European luxury culture. Despite the existence of sanctions and recession, luxury developers are animating a new landscape of imports, which rely on huge sums of money expended towards "conspicuous building."[5]

On the other hand, sanctions are viewed as a rather positive force—an opportunity to build an Islamic economy independent of Western imperial influences. Those with this viewpoint also believe in *economic jihad*—an ideology encouraged by the Supreme Leader made on the principles of resisting sanctions and other forms of imperial hegemony.[6] Advocates of economic jihad have responded to the situation by consuming only domestic goods and sanctioning foreign products as a form of political-religious activism. Such nationalistic reactions, which are tied to the spatial discourses of colonialism, globalization, and modernism, have influenced architectural practices in terms of design, material culture, and financial calculations.

Taking all of these into account, I argue that sanctions have simultaneously worked as a closing and opening mechanism. In other words, they may have closed the borders to certain goods, capital and material flows, but they have also opened it to particular ideologies and cultural economies. This resembles the inherent polarities within the word "sanction" itself—a contronym, which means "permission," and "deterrent" at the same time. My work documents the ways in which architecture is imagined and materialized in this political field of simultaneous depression and progression of ideas. To study the built environment in this manner is not to downplay the ruinous psychological and economic impacts of the imposed embargoes on society, but to view them as a form of "creative destruction."

Architecture within a "Horizon of Expectation"

Within the complexities of the Iranian economy architecture has a temporality that goes beyond the logistics of building and construction—a temporality that relates buildings and people in a particular sense of timing about the political-economic situation around them. And this is not a situation that is particular to Iran. The culture of real estate investment is really a global phenomenon produced under conditions of economic uncertainty, and within this culture, architecture always has a temporality beyond the present. The case of Iran offers a particular

situation where this uncertainty is produced under the political and economic dynamics of sanctions—their imposition, their removal, and their re-imposition.

The temporality of architecture in Iran, to borrow from Reinhart Koselleck's work, creates different "horizons of expectation"—horizons which are radically malleable because of political and economic instability in Iran.[7] In Koselleck's description, expectation is "the future made present."[8] In order to examine this concept in the context of Iran, one would need to study how the future has so dramatically colonized the present through the regime of investment and speculation. In considering this problem of the conflation of time, Koselleck asks the historian to reclaim what he calls the "space of experience" in historiography—a space which embodies a "present past" (a past that "can be remembered")—and to revitalize the necessary gap between the horizon of expectation and the space of experience.[9] For him, this is the methodology through which the history of the present could be reclaimed. He thus wants the historian to narrate history in such a manner that both the past and the future are studied as part of the present experience. In a time where the future keeps invading the present, he looks to the space of experience in history to grasp time as a "concept"—as a notion that is malleable and has the life of its own in particular circumstances.[10]

The relevancy of all of this to the context of Iran is to acknowledge the temporality of architecture—which is usually seen as static or at least resistant to change—as elastic and connected to society's horizons of expectation in different political-economic moments. To explore the culture of architecture in Iran through this lens, this dissertation works through different spaces of experience as produced through pictures, words, dreams, nostalgia, dilemmas and calculations of various communities of practice. I study architecture as envisioned by various players and as represented through different media and cultural forms. I explore how buildings, especially apartments, are produced in a space of tension between multiple visions and practices and are experienced across a complicated landscape of real estate investment.

Over the years, apartments have increasingly become controversial objects within Iranian society. They are drawn, built, imagined, photographed, written about, painted and lived in across a contested political, economic and cultural landscape. Architects, realtors, developers, artists and ordinary investors battle over their meaning. Imagining the world with different scales of possibility, each of these subjects situates apartments within a different material and metaphorical economy and works hard to convince others that his/her definition of them is more valid than others. The city itself has thus become an important topic of critique through the language of apartment construction, gathering these various actors in a space of productive interaction with one another.

I have interviewed twenty architects, four economists, four city officials, twelve realtors, eight builders, four factory owners, seven artists, and twelve ordinary investors/homeowners. For someone with a quantitative eye, these numbers may appear random. But my intention was not to quantify the views of different players through a survey approach. My goal was to understand how these players interacted with each other and thus the interviews were organized based on tracing the dialogues and tensions between different individuals. I expanded my interview questions in the Fall of 2017 to inquire about specific economic episodes including the housing recession of the time and the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal in order to document how particular manifestations of sanctions have invoked different practices around the built environment.

Interviews took me to different sites within the city of Tehran. But the majority of the activities that I documented took place in northern Tehran, the part of the city that since the end of the Pahlavi era has served as the home of the elite and aspiring middle classes (Fig. 1.2). This

is a part of the city that has never been left alone by developers and investors, growing horizontally and vertically as far as city codes would bend (Fig. 1.3). Interviews also took me to the neighboring city of Isfahan, where a number of architects were exploring diverse possibilities for the profession under the pressures of the economy. The inner city of Tehran also introduced this research to a number of restoration projects (e.g. the Argo factory and the Minoo Street project), which allowed me to further investigate how architects were investing in new forms of criticizing the speculative life of the northern districts, and how at the same time they were themselves introducing speculative cartographies onto the old fabric of the central city.

Figure 1.2: a view from the hilltops of northern Tehran. Source: photo taken by author, 2017

Figure 1.3: A site of construction in a narrow alley in northern Tehran. Source: photo taken by author, 2018

This work is thus essentially about the culture of architecture as interwoven with the culture of sanctions—a set of intertwined practices, media, and discourses that have shaped the built environment in a particular economic-political episode. I focus my chapters on three main groups: first, small builders, realtors and ordinary investors—those who shape the majority of urban form with their investment in commercial construction; second, Architects, with a capital A, which are a rather small stream within the city but have the capacity to shape the discourse of architecture; and third, urban artists, who produce art specifically in conversation with and in critique of the urban trajectories of construction. The reason for focusing on these three groups is to map how various discourses are shaped around the built environment as one group critiques the other groups: Architects critique commercial builders, while artists critique both architects and commercial builders.

The Changing Politics of Sanctions and their Impact on the Built Environment

From 2006 onward Iranians have faced serious political and economic crises as a result of international embargoes imposed on the country's nuclear program. This fragmented episode, contoured by the ups and downs of different presidential politics, has been often narrated by people as the time of sanctions—a temporality rooted in the political memories of the past few decades and the uncertainties of the future. Many would talk about this crisis as one of many crises the country has witnessed since the Islamic revolution of 1979. But for many others the

crisis was distinct from the war and the reconstruction period. It was a crisis of living with uncertainty, which can be understood as a historiographical crisis—one which embodied all the nation's memories of its past forty years of uneasy engagement with the west. It was more than a simple economic, political or cultural crisis: this crisis was an overwhelming event that struck at deeply engrained feelings of Iranians towards their economy, their political infrastructure, and their socio-cultural being. It was also a crisis that deepened many Iranians' mistrusts in the U.S. as it showed how political deals and agreements can lose their meanings overnight.

Iranians have had a complex historical relationship with sanctions, and this relationship is interwoven with their identity as a nation. As the Iranian historian Ervand Abrahamian has put it, "Iranian identity has been forged not only by common history, common geography, common language, and common religion, but also by common experience in the recent past."[11] The built environment is an extension of this identity and offers a window into how Iranians imagine and deal with their history.

Iranians have experienced the embargoes of 1951, which targeted the nationalization of the Persian oil (a movement led by Mohammad Mosaddeq). They have also experienced the oil sanctions of the United States immediately following the events of the 1979 Revolution, and the hostage crisis of November 1980. From 1981 to 1988, during the eight years of war between Iran and Iraq, Iranians have seen the United States put their country's name on the list of nations who supported "terrorism."[12] From 1989 to 1992, during the presidential term of Hashemi Rafsanjani and in the years that followed the Iran-Iraq war, Iranians have witnessed the United States expanding the scope of its economic sanctions on their country claiming to be ambitious about creating "order" in the Middle East. During William Clinton's administration, Iranians have faced the "dual containment policy," which was made official as the continuation of Carter's hegemonic policies in the Middle East.[13] They have seen the passing of the D'Amato Act issued in 1996 during Clinton's term.[14]

With D'Amato, sanctions on Iran became more financial in character and more global in scale as the United States gathered a sanctioning community worldwide. The act was passed in a time when the realities of a multinational global economy situated countries in a web of more interwoven relations. As such, sanctioning a country influenced other countries who did business with it. This gave sanctions a new power for global hegemony over states, companies, even individuals. D'Amato threatened to punish companies and individuals that invested more than 20 million dollars in Iran.[15]

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, further sanctions were imposed on Iran, when in January 2002 George W. Bush titled Iran, Iraq and the North Korea as part of the "Axis of Evil." Following the events of 9/11, the United States invaded Afghanistan and later Iraq with the goal of erasing terrorism from the region. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and United States' unsuccessful plans for finding "weapons of mass destruction" in that country, Iran's nuclear program was spotlighted as the most important problem of the region. The US-Iran rivalry came to the foreground again. At this time, with Bush in power in the United States, the topic of sanctioning Iran's nuclear program became more explosive than ever. The U.S. accused Iran for being involved in making nuclear weapons. In June 2005, Bush issued Executive Order 13382, which allowed "the president to block the assets of proliferators of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their supporters."[16]

The new sanctions introduced a new era of crisis to Iran, this time gathering the international community and the United Nations against the country. In 2010, Iranian assets in the United States were blocked. According to a report by the Congressional Research Service,

"about $1.9 billion in blocked Iranian assets were bonds belonging to Iran's Central Bank."[17] In 2012, the EU imposed new oil embargoes on Iran and continued to freeze the assets of Iran's Central Bank. The United States put a ban on the purchase of oil and other petroleum products from Iran, and sanctioned transactions with the National Iranian Oil Company.[18] As a result of sanctions between 2012 and 2015, "Iran's economy shrank by 9 percent per year, crude oil exports fell from about 2.5 million barrels per day (mbd) to about 1.1 mbd, and Iran was unable to repatriate more than $120 billion in reserves held in banks abroad."[19]

These sanctions created economic instability and a general sense of distrust in the future of the economy. This sense of uncertainty gradually convinced the middle class to seek ways of solidifying their savings through ordinary investment strategies. In 2006 and 2012, for example, the imposition of banking and petroleum sanctions by the UN Security Council triggered waves of speculative investment in housing in many Iranian cities, especially in Tehran. In 2008, the New York Times wrote: "Prices for apartments are soaring into the stratosphere because, in part, of easy credit and demand outstripping supply. But this is not in New York or London. It is here, in the capital of the Islamic Republic of Iran."[20] The housing data by the Central Bank of Iran also indicates that by 2012, the number of new housing projects in the province of Tehran has increased by 198 percent since 2009 (Fig. 1.4).[21] The outcome of this increasing interest in real estate is "a Tehran full of empty apartments—and investors still looking to buy and build despite very little demand," the CNN wrote in 2014.[22]

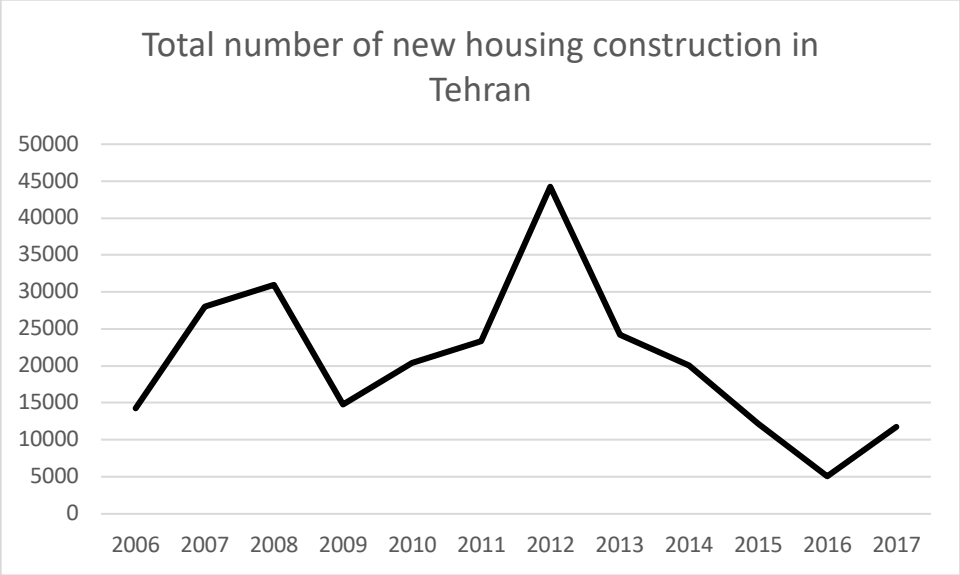

Figure 1.4: Total number of new housing construction in Tehran. Source: data from the Central Bank of Iran, accessed November, 2018

The national surveys indicate that there were one million and six hundred thousand empty apartments in Iran in 2010.[23] By 2016 this number doubled to two and a half million empty apartments within the entire country, 18.9 percent of which were located in the city of Tehran alone.[24] In 2017, the head of the ministry of infrastructure and urbanism announced that there were more than 500 thousand empty apartments in Tehran and thus more than 250 billion dollars of dormant capital unproductively locked behind their doors.[25] The majority of these new

empty properties were “luxury” apartments, however, made specifically for a market of investment by the upper middle class (Fig. 1.5).[26]

Figure 1.5: luxury apartments built in northern Tehran for investment. Source: Photo taken by author, 2017

With sanctions fully in action in late 2012, the housing market eventually began to lose its attractiveness. The rate of the American dollar vis-à-vis the Iranian rial tripled in a few weeks, and fears of economic downturn or a war outbreak shifted the focus of investment capital towards the currency market. Sanctions cut Iran’s oil income by half and imposed restrictions on banking transactions, making it difficult to use the country’s currency reserves abroad.[27] The simultaneous lowering of interest rates on local bank deposits also played a critical role in the currency crisis, encouraging people to take their money out of banks and invest in the dollar.[28] The data by the Central Bank of Iran also indicates a sharp decline in the total private investment in construction across the country from 2013 and 2014 onward (Fig. 1.6).[29]

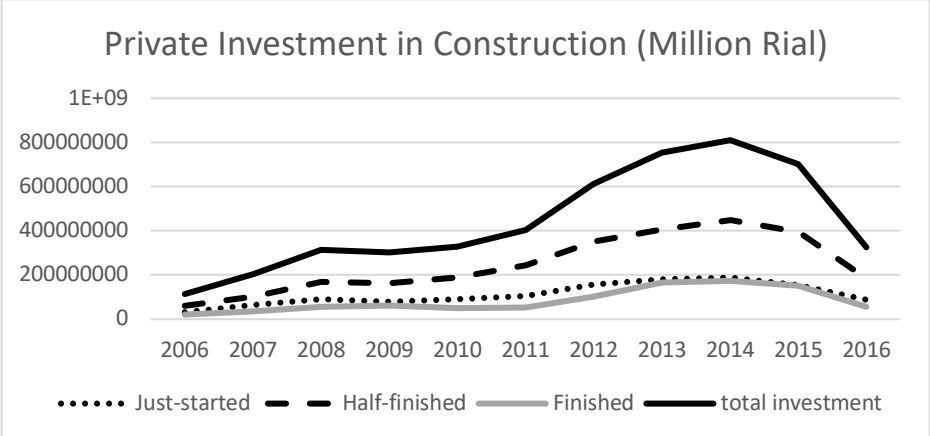

Figure 1.6: total amount of private investment in construction in Iran. Source: data from the Central Bank of Iran, accessed November 2018

In 2013 during the cabinet of Hassan Rouhani, the *Joint Plan of Action* (JCPOA) was signed as a provisional agreement between Iran and the P5+1 countries. Almost two years later, in July 2015, Rouhani and his cabinet were proud to announce that they had reached a final deal and had officially signed the JCPOA. Based on the deal, many of the sanctions were agreed to be removed by the United States and the other P5+1 countries in return for Iran to scale down its nuclear activities. The JCPOA sanctions relief enabled the country to increase its oil exports to almost pre-sanctions levels, gain access to foreign exchange reserve funds, and re-assimilate into the international financial arena.

The JCPOA, however, was not simply a diplomatic agreement between Iran and the P5+1 community; it was a political construct around which the state shaped the rhetoric of sanctions locally and preserved its votes among the middle classes. Economists have argued that "President Hassan Rouhani sold the nuclear deal to voters, who had elected him twice, as the only way he could improve their lives."[30] Against the anti-American spirit of the Revolution, through the JCPOA the state of Rouhani presented itself as a negotiator with the world.

The JCPOA was repeatedly advertised with narratives of hope and change. Rouhani's cabinet used it as a document with the power to cure the ills of previous administrations—a peaceful medicine that would end the pressure of sanctions and the hostilities of the United States towards Iran. The deal was advertised as a facilitator of "reconnection to the global economy."[31] In August 2015, Rouhani announced that with the establishment of the JCPOA and the removal of sanctions, "the country's [political and economic] atmosphere would change, while capital and technology would flow into the country."[32] In January 2016, he was also certain that "in the future, the United State would not be interested in re-imposing the sanctions."[33]

Despite the allure of JCPOA, economic grievances continued during the two terms of Rouhani, and the unrest happening in the smaller cities of Iran reveal that his promises about economic prosperity were far from realized. Inflation was forcefully reduced to a one-digit rate of 9 percent, yet at the cost of a prolonged episode of economic recession in various sectors including the housing market. Banks offered highly profitable interest rates (as high as 25 percent) on savings deposits, draining money from real estate and from the economy, storing it in astronomical bank accounts. Javad Salehi-Isfahani, an Iranian economist based in the United States, has called this the "Rouhani effect," a condition produced based on favoring businesses and the middle class who mainly lived in the capital.[34]

With the election of Donald Trump as the new president of the United States in 2016, the situation dramatically changed for Rouhani and his cabinet. On May 8th, 2018, before the mid-term elections in the U.S., Trump announced the removal of the United States from JCPOA, arguing that "we cannot prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb under the decaying and rotten structure of the current agreement."[35] He re-activated the sanctions on November 4th, 2018—a date charged with a history of hostilities between Iran and the United States.

In the first three months of 2018, the market value of the dollar rose about thirty percent. Inflation jumped from an annual rate of 18 percent in April 2018 to 34 percent in May, and by September, it reached the unprecedented rate of almost 78 percent.[36] Foreign goods and imports that relied on the dollar became more and more inaccessible, and while the state promised a 20 percent increase in government wages, prices of various goods at least increased by 50 percent.[37] Between 2017 and 2018, housing prices increased by more than one hundred percent (Fig. 1.7).[38]

And once again, in the midst of political uncertainty and economic turmoil, speculative architecture went on the rise.

Rouhani, who had invested his five years of presidency on building the JCPOA and its local rhetoric, accused the United States of committing "economic terrorism" for imposing sanctions on the people of Iran and disseminating a sense of mistrust in the economy.[39] In response to the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA, in May 2019, Rouhani's cabinet likewise announced that it will no longer fully comply with the signed agreement, developing a new step within the deal's framework of negotiations, and potentially a new episode within the complex history of the Middle East.[40]

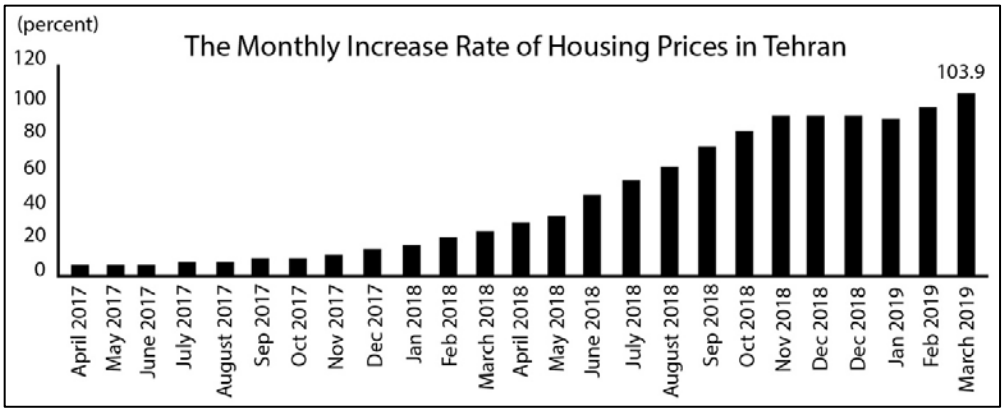

Figure 1.7: The monthly increase rate of housing prices in Tehran between April 2017 and March 2019. Source: eghtesadonline.com, accessed April 20, 2019

Domains of Ethnographic Inquiry on the Built Environment of Iran

Under conditions where sanctions are likely to become a modus operandi for U.S. imperial hegemony over the world, Iranians have come up with different strategies for maintaining their connection to the outside world. They have developed rather complex relationships with tropes such as globalization and modernity. Today these concepts have found diverse cultural and geopolitical definitions that demand to be studied among different communities of practice.

In exploring the cultural tropes of globalization and modernity under sanctions, I study how Iranians have not lived through the anti-global forces of sanctions passively. On the everyday level, they have managed to bypass sanctions through informal ways such as smuggling, or through inventing vernacular methods for replacing sanctioned products. Ordinary Iranians have also developed economic strategies to come to terms with conditions of uncertainty under sanctions through investment in different commodities.[41] On the professional level, they have come up with new transnational strategies to carve out a position within their desired global communities. And on an ideological level, they have invented politically conscious ways of everyday practice such as economic jihad to stand against western hegemony.[42]

By looking at a variety of cultural responses to sanctions, I challenge the generalizable definition of being global and being modern. In the midst of political-economic uncertainty in Iran, different players negotiate between different politics and different aesthetics of globalization to work on the city. In many cases, their transnational practices are leveraged for local professional power in a situation where access to the global space grants them domestic credibility. This credibility, as Iranian scholars have put it, is spent as a form of "transnational

capital."[43] For Iranian architects, for example, this transnational capital has become an important form of symbolic capital in the local market of professional exchange.[44]

The study of different realms of practice is important because the sanctions of the past decade have been different in character from previous episodes of sanctions on Iran. Previous sanctions targeted the state and specific economic affairs; these sanctions were imposed on individuals within various professions, situating them within a space of friction between nation-states. From 2006 onward, the new sanctions have been a totalizing event with various American and European companies getting involved in the act of sanctioning people's everyday practices of consumption.[45] In other words, the new sanctions have affected ordinary Iranians much more palpably. They have influenced the worldview and the practices of different professionals and thus their reactions towards the city. To get at this, ethnographic research is necessary. The ethnographic lens has allowed this dissertation to ask: what does it mean to be connected to the world for different communities of practice? It has allowed me to track the changes of the built environment as people make economic decisions with regards to their different horizons of expectations.

An ethnographic exploration of sanctions can contribute to the broader literature on sanctions by exploring new domains of professional and everyday life. The broader literature on sanctions has mainly developed in the arenas of public policy, political science, economics, and sociology. Sanctions have been studied through theoretical-philosophical frameworks.[46] They have been analyzed through ethical and moral perspectives.[47] And they have been examined through policy incentives and diplomacy measurements.[48] In the case of Iran, particular attention has been given to the role of sanctions in mediating U. S. and Iran relations, their impacts on Iran's economy, and their efficacy on the overall scheme of international politics.[49] Although the social impacts of sanctions have also been discussed along with their repercussions on the economy, a perspective that pays attention to the everyday experience of people is mainly missing in the literature. Recent journalistic publications have embraced this perspective via casual publications and documentaries, but a discussion of how sanctions are interpreted, grappled with, and reoriented by the target people is mainly left out of academic discourse.[50]

While the impact of economic crises, speculation, and inflation histories on the urban-architectural space has been studied through ethnographic inquiries, a particular focus on sanctions demands further attention from architecture and urban theory.[51] Sylvia Geehae Nam has for example, studied the speculative urbanism of Phnom Penh, looking at how a combination of events in the 1990s including the initiation of the United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia (UNTAC) and the establishment of a new constitution led to unprecedented influx of capital and a real estate boom.[52] Within a period of four years, property values and rents increased four to fivefold in anticipation of an economic growth that was expected to come about through the peace process.[53] By 1999, the speedy waves of speculative booms in the city had come under private ownership after a decade it was legally permitted. Nam argues that "central to this integration was the nature of conflict—the semblance of peace and political uncertainty two sides of the same coin—that made the risks and rewards associated with land transfers viable."[54] While Nam's study looks into how the speculative urbanism of Phnom Penh is financed by external forces, the case of Tehran's speculative urbanism offers a rather opposite scenario where the sanctioning of external resources has created waves of speculative booms in the city. What both cases share in common is how uncertainty about the political-economic situation can influence the urban built environment through investment capital and new professional visions.[55]

To understand the complex relationship between the urbanism of Tehran and Iran's economic and political situation, I look into how speculation and investment have become the most generative forces in the urban economic life of many Iranian cities, operating through a fragmented regime of construction fueled by the flexibility of the codes and regulations. In the city of Tehran, specifically, speculation has dominated the real estate landscape, shedding light on the presence of so much wealth that seeks solidification under economic crisis. Speculation has turned the city into an object always in the making, a construction site dismantled and assembled through the circulation of capital. To unpack the culture of speculation in Tehran, I build on Nam's work that frames speculation as part of the everyday production of space. Speculation, Nam argues within a different context, "is a platform in the production of space with property—its commodification and exchange—central to creating value. It is a form of governance structured as networks of relations." [56]

The speculative forces that shape the city of Tehran, and specifically its northern districts, are similar to Nam's context of analysis in Phnom Penh. Speculation in Tehran is a fragmented and everyday platform shaped by the investment capital of small savers and small builders. But unlike Phnom Penh, speculation is not urbanized through transnational linkages and the visions for a world city, but through strategies for overcoming the crisis of the economy and the uncertainties of the political future. It is in a sense, a regime for localizing wealth under the isolating forces of sanctions as it is operationalized through ordinary investors and ordinary professionals.

To get at a cultural exploration of speculation and sanctions, this work builds itself through the narratives and practices of different groups of professionals (i.e. builders, realtors, architects, investors, and artists). This is a view that has not been explored as much in the study of Iranian cities. Since 1979, Western scholarship on Iranian cities has been mainly focused around ideological narratives. State-centric analysis proliferate the work of many writers, while a more multidirectional perspective—one that also pays attention to the broader economic context and everyday activities of various building agents—is missing in the literature.[57] Kaveh Ehsani's "Survival Through Dispossession" is among a few cases, which looks into the construction activities of non-state agents in Iran.[58] The article discusses how certain neoliberal policies in Tehran's municipality have led to "the privatization of the urban skyline" by a speculative middle class, who has since dominated the Iranian residential construction industry.

Likewise, Pamela Karimi, an architectural historian critical of grand ideological perspectives, attends to the everyday experience of modernity, development and consumer culture among the Iranian middle class.[59] She looks into the changes of domestic space in relation to the ideological shifts of the Revolution, and the broader economic, bureaucratic, and cultural transformations of the society. As she observes, there have been in fact "few physical manifestations of a new ideological architecture in post-revolutionary Iran," apart from the architecture of certain tombs, shrines, mosques, and *mosallas* [Friday mosques].[60] Since the 1980s, with political and economic changes in the state system, most residential and commercial buildings have been financed and erected by the local private sector. This "semi-democratic" construction market, as Karimi puts it, has since operated beyond the Islamic "standards of the regime," drawing its references mainly from the Western cultures.[61]

Along similar lines, Cyrus Schayegh in an article on the governance of Iran during the First Pahlavi era, questions state-centric analysis about this period.[62] He suggests a Latourian approach to the study of both human and non-human actors that together shape the practice of governance during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi. He writes: "The image of a detached state is a

caricature of the complex practice of governing." Calling this a "methodological statism," Schayegh borrows from James Scott to argue that a top-down perspective "sees like a state," ignoring the intricacies of everyday life.[63] Methodological statism "turns the state and, more broadly, politics, into the ultimate reference point of studies," while ignoring various social, cultural and economic forces at play.[64] I propose that we adopt Schayegh's lens to explore how the flow of people, artifacts, words, advertisements, and ideas shape the urbanism of post-Revolution cities in Iran.

Schayegh's work could also be put in dialogue with more recent scholarship on the Global South, which has increasingly discussed the limitations of grand state-centric frameworks for tracking urban practices.[65] This scholarship looks at how government policies towards privatization and decentralization have fundamentally changed the practices of top-down urban planning in many cities of the world. This has brought many new players into the discourse of urbanism. Iranian cities are no exception to this scenario, where private market forces in combination with a diffuse array of smaller bureaucratic-institutional plans shape the urban space. Even though master plans are still in theory the overarching scheme of reference for many cities of the Global South, in reality, cities are formed at a much faster speed through disperse private market investments. In response to this, scholarship on the "citizenship of the rich" has tried to unpack how the empowerment of certain non-state actors (such as middle-class investors) in directing the urbanization of the city, results in more inequality.[66]

My work contributes to this literature on the Global South, by reflecting on how conditions of economic scarcity, such as sanctions and recession, invoke the movement of wealth and opulence among certain communities who have the power to shape both the city and the future of a nation. In examining the question of globalization within a postcolonial outlook, while the building activities of the state and the poor have been the focus of many scholarly works, the building activities of the rich and the middle-class have been mostly left out of urban theory.[67] In that regard, I use ethnographic interventions not just as methods but also as a politics of inquiring about the everyday activities of the rich, the flow of their money in shaping the built environment, their design incentives, and their calculations around the past, the present and the future.[68]

The Built Environment as Imagined in Art, Architecture and Construction

The body of this dissertation is formed around three main chapters in which the work of three main communities of practice are explored through different theoretical lenses on the urban built environment. Together the chapters intend to offer an anthropology of architecture and construction in Tehran under a specific economic situation.

Following this introduction, chapter two focuses on the practices of ordinary builders, realtors, and middle-class investors. This chapter tries to go beyond the metanarratives of urbanization, modernization, and crisis in Tehran to explore how fragmented construction practices and everyday investment strategies shape the built environment of the city. Through what I call the landscape of investment apartments, I explore how a speculative culture of architecture is formed in the gap between the economies of the present and the future, a culture which is constantly challenged by groups like architects, neighborhood residents, environmental activists, and urban artists. I argue that from a collaboration of builders, realtors, investors, and city officials, apartments are operationalized as "forms-in-circulation," to borrow the term from Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, where the urban fabric is built through a specific temporal

and spatial logic of speculation.[69] I further argue that the reconfiguration of the urban built environment through apartments is further stimulated in the recent years by the "talk of sanctions" and the rhetoric of instability.

Chapter three looks into the activities of architects as another player within the context of Iran's construction market. The chapter explores how the contemporary culture of architecture in Iran is marked by a concern for being "modern"—a concern fueled by a desire to carve a position within the global community of architecture on the one hand, and within the local construction market on the other. Critical of the current marginality of architecture within the local construction market and the professional transnational arena, these architects have implemented different strategies and viewpoints to challenge the "sanctioned" status of architecture as a profession and a discipline. I document how architects talk about the unfolding economic condition—namely, the politics of sanctions and the economy of the recession—and how they invent new professional, disciplinary and pedagogical strategies to come to terms with it. By examining the words of these architects, I then discuss how recent ruminations on the dialectics of tradition and modernity have developed out of a close dialogue with specific social, economic, and political specificities of the context, pushing the debate beyond its traditional disciplinary and professional boundaries.

Chapter four is focused on artists as another group who has in recent years engaged with the speculative built environment of Iranian cities. This chapter explores how the overwhelming construction life of the city since the housing boom of the 2010 and 2011 has also found its way into the photographs, paintings, illustrations, and performances of a sizable group of artists in Tehran. These artists have invented different visual vocabularies to defamiliarize the everyday presence of apartments and construction sites within the city. The art described in this chapter reveals an emerging culture of environmentalism and activism that is formed in relation to the unfolding economic and political situation in Iran. It also reveals the development of new platforms and cultural tools for critiquing the built environment within a more global space of dialogue. This chapter experiments with a Koselleckian framework of history and historiography, by exploring the trajectories of urbanization in Tehran through the language of art. As the concluding chapter of the main body of this dissertation, it invokes a new approach to the study of architecture and urbanism as mediated by the "space of experience" in art.

Notes and References

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[3] My interview with "Saleem" took place in Tehran in November 2017.
[4] My interview with "Sohrab" took place in Tehran in January 2018.
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divorced from the banking system in Argentina to protect their money from devaluation. Calchons represented savings in the dollar cash and bricks came to represent savings in the concrete materiality of buildings. Both protected the savings of Argentines from inflationary forces. See Nicholas D'Avella, "From Banks to Bricks: Architecture, Investment, and Neighborhood Life in Buenos Aires, Argentina" (PhD dissertation, University of California, 2012), pp. 46 & 56-59.

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Chapter 2. The Landscape of Investment

Apartments in the World of Builders, Realtors, and Ordinary Investors

As the pending nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 committee was floating across national and international media in 2015, the noisy construction spectacle in Iranian cities spoke of the contradictory feelings of uncertainty and security. Nasim, a private contractor who worked on residential apartments in Tehran, recalled his hopefulness in the summer of 2015. Back then. he believed that his three five-story apartment complexes would be sold right away when the nuclear deal would be settled in a couple of months.[1] He said: "People were waiting for the deal. Iranian people cannot think of houses as disconnected to politics."[2] In 2015, he was in no rush to sell his properties, nor were people in any rush to buy; and despite that stagnated market, everywhere in the large cities of Iran apartments with travertine façades of various heights were going up with the hope of a *boom*: the fruit of a post-sanction economy—the time of economic flow. Mythologies of housing were thus widespread as the air of the deal generated dreams and dilemmas simultaneously.

When the deal— the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—was finally reached in July 2015, the hopes of many realtors, developers and investors for the activation of the market remained unanswered. A recession had started to spread across the housing market. Many realtors and investors explained it as an outcome of overinvestment in apartments during the heated years of the nuclear sanctions between 2006 and 2013.[3] Nasim like many other contractors and builders in Tehran had turned to construction as a second job to take the most advantage of the rush of investors to the real estate market. He built five-story apartments in northern Tehran, sold some of them and "slow-built" the rest to make them available to the market at higher prices in the future.[4]

In 2018, when the Trump administration announced the removal of the United States from the JCPOA, Nasim did not seem unhappy about the return of sanctions. For him the return of sanctions was a trigger for putting an end to five years of a stagnated housing market because he had seen the rush of investors to the real estate market after the imposition of sanctions in 2006 and 2012. Furthermore, the return of sanctions was the beginning of a new phase of building in which new higher prices were formed around the adjustments of the local currency to the new economic conditions. Within a year, housing prices increased by almost one hundred percent.[5] Nasim, like many other builders, spoke of apartments as "objects which could absorb the instabilities of the economy and the uncertainties of the political situation."[6] He viewed apartments not as spaces, but as capital that circulated among investors and builders.

Approaching the Landscape of Investment Apartments

Housing has always been an attractive investment arena in the oil-based economy of Iran especially since the end of the Iran-Iraq war. But sanctions and their ups and downs within the past decade have given this market a different economic and cultural dynamic. Thus, this is not just an economic question, but a cultural one. The study of the practices of apartment building and apartment investment among small developers and builders like Nasim, as well as realtors and investors in the capital city of Tehran, helps unpack aspects of this culture. While there are

different categories of builders who practice in the city (e.g. luxury builders, mass developers, architects, etc.), small developers and individual builders, in collaboration with small realtors all over the city, shape the majority of the housing footprint in the form of ordinary five to six-story apartments.

I argue that from a collaboration of builders, realtors, investors, and city officials, apartments are operationalized as "forms-in-circulation," a term Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe created to refer to capital as it circulates among ordinary people and transforms into commodities.[7] In the context of Iran, this circulation is facilitated by the involvement of ordinary people and nonexperts in practices of commercial construction, and in a situation where buildings are exchanged in a process detached from any banking institutions. The city is thus built rhetorically and materially through a specific temporal and spatial logic of investment and speculation in a condition where housing as investment has come to succeed over housing as residence as a social and cultural phenomenon.[8] I further look into how realtors and builders practice through the rhetoric of uncertainty around sanctions and around the economy in general to justify their speculative behavior.

This chapter thus explores the "landscape of investment apartments" to see how a speculative culture of architecture is formed in the gap between the economy of the present and anticipation of the future economy, a culture which is constantly challenged by groups like architects, neighborhood residents, environmental activists, and urban artists. While architects and artists, as it will be discussed in the next chapters, criticize the city's "speculative urbanism" as a form of destruction, realtors, builders and developers view speculation as a productive platform through which the city, and the economy in general, is put into motion.[9] For these groups, as Sylvia Nam has put it in a different context, speculation is not viewed as a reflection of greed and urban failure; it is rather viewed as an "enabling platform organizing space and the city."[10] Speculation for these people "is predicated on the inherent negotiability of the law. It is the *politics of anticipation* in which claims to the future must be taken in the present."[11]

To situate these practices of speculative building, a brief review of housing politics in Iran is necessary. Between 1979 and 1989, under the shadow of the Revolution, state policies were mainly designed to achieve social justice and equity. The 31st amendment of the Iranian Constitutional Law states that "appropriate housing based on need, is the right of every Iranian citizen and family. The state is responsible to provide this housing by prioritizing those in need, especially, the rural populations and the laborers."[12]

In the early years of the Revolution, the state became the main regulator of land policies, while reducing its role within the construction market. Prior to the Revolution, the state was in charge of about 13 percent of housing construction in Iran, while this number was reduced to 3 percent in 1984.[13] On the other hand, the role of the newly established *ta'avonihaye-maskan*—Housing Cooperative Associations—increased to 6 percent within the same year, indicating the gradually diminishing role of the state within this sector.[14] These coops were founded to increase the possibilities of home ownership for the lower middle classes, and were supported by the state through the provision of low interest loans, free land, and subsidized building materials.[15]

In the late 80s, as a result of neoliberal changes within Iran's economy, the state became an advocator of private development. The politics of neoliberalism were adopted along with an urge for development. The mentality of development prompted large infrastructural projects, while neoliberal reforms pushed for the independence of several state institutions such as the city municipalities. To generate revenue for the provision of city-wide infrastructure, the municipalities were not capable of taxing the entire city population at a time when most Iranians

were under economic pressure from the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Instead, they extracted taxes and charges from private builders at the time of issuing construction permits, or at the time of documenting a construction penalty.[16] Such orders eventually formed a speculative alliance between the city and the private construction sector.[17] Construction taxes were collected through bending the codes, selling density or charging for building penalties.[18] In this situation, the political incentives of city governments for building "visible" infrastructure, and the economic incentives of the private sector for maximizing profit through vertical building, mutually intersected with big sums of money circulating between the two and high-rises skyrocketing within the affluent districts of cities like Tehran.

Density was justified on the grounds that it would help the city generate its revenue for public infrastructure and that it would fulfill housing demands through vertical building.[19] 70 percent of the city's revenue came from the affluent districts in northern Tehran, where real estate was much more expensive and where speculative construction was in much more demand.[20] In the 1990s, this overwhelmed trade between the city and developers immediately turned into a construction boom that deeply benefited the elite and profoundly harmed others for good. As rents and property values skyrocketed in Tehran, many could no longer afford to live within the inner city and had to leave for the southern peripheries.[21]

In the third phase of housing policies, the state moved towards a complete privatization of the housing sector, freeing the land market and privatizing the credit system.[22] Such policies in the late 90s led to the increase of formal housing production within cities, but coupled with a fragile economy, they also led to a drastic increase in a speculative demand for real estate—a demand spurred by the highly variable rates of inflation and economic growth, and backboned by the speculative behavior of the wealthy middle classes.[23] The building industry in those years was expanded in a very sporadic fashion, dominated not by the state or giant corporations, but rather by small-scale firms and individual developers who took advantage of the very high rates of inflation, the increasing demand for housing investment, and the cheap labor coming from the neighboring countries.[24]

Very soon, the waves of apartment building, especially in northern Tehran where property prices were higher, surged through the city's neighborhoods and old gardens, reconfiguring the urban fabric through 60-over-40-percent infill typologies that were enforced by the law.[25] Apartments were everywhere erected on old properties in order to densify the footprint of housing and contract models like *moshrekat dar sakht*—collaborative building (i.e. between the owner and the builder)—further prompted these practices because the cash for erecting a new building now came from a contractor who would receive a share within the apartment complex as his salary. Along with these changes, nostalgia for the old green city became common, and people began to feel confused about the loss of green spaces and good atmospheres on the one hand and the urge for investment and economic calculations on the other.[26]

In the following section, ethnographic vignettes, which have been collected among twelve realtors, twelve ordinary investors/homeowners, and eight builders, are combined to offer a window into the very immediate history of a city in which houses are operationalized across a complex field of everyday economic calculations, political visions, and cultural desires. Political and economic analysis by the subjects are not analyzed as factual statements, but as a diverse range of interpretations around the economic and political condition. Today, the stories of people like Nasim could be incorporated into a "national genre of popular economic historiography," through which one can explore the ways through which ordinary individuals play into the cultural economy of sanctions and the reconfiguration of the urban form.[27]

The Talk of Sanctions and the Rhetoric of Circulation among Realtors in Tehran

In early 2017, realtors in Tehran spoke of a recession that had slowed down the booming housing market of Tehran for almost four years. Realtors theorized the recession as a condition of *tavaghof*—a condition of immovability or stagnation.[28] Nader, a realtor practicing in northern Tehran, described it as "the stagnation of capital, workers, smokes, cigarettes, noises, etc."[29] This stagnation, he believed, had become pervasive: "It overwhelmed the society and the city. My job depends on your job and when you lose yours, it's like I have lost mine too."[30] He said:

> Recession is a condition where we have supply but no demand. Sit in this office and no one comes in. Yesterday there was a young woman looking for a 50-square-meter apartment in Elahieh! I told her, there has never been any 50-square-meter apartments in Elahieh; builders never build anything smaller than 200 to 250-square-meter apartments in this area. This is the recession! When people seek impossible things. When the boundaries of the city are changed.[31]

Nader believed that people had money, but they were scared to invest it in apartments because they were unsure about how the political and economic situation would unfold in the so-called "post-sanction" days. The situation convinced Nader that recession was a cultural phenomenon more than an economic fact; it was constructed by people as they speculated on time and as they shared their experience of uncertainty with others around them. He said: "The most important factor in recession is culture. You are sitting in a party. Someone asks you if you have purchased an apartment. You say no because you have heard that prices will drop even more."[32] He then added that "this is recession. It travels from mouth to mouth. This is how it moves and becomes pervasive. Recession doesn't need any media other than word of mouth. It doesn't need to go through Telegram [a social media platform] to be public."[33]

In Nader's analysis, one could observe the work of the "talk of recession," which was followed then by the "talk of sanctions"—a rhetorical strategy through which the economic and political situation was narrated by means of economic precariousness and political instability. Teresa Caldeira in her book *City of Walls* explores the "talk of crime" in Sao Paulo to examine how everyday rhetorical narratives about crime and violence "feed a circle in which fear is both dealt with and reproduced, and violence is both counteracted and magnified."[34] She studies how the talk of crime reorganizes the city as people invent new strategies of protection and separation.

Caldeira's framework helps us understand how words are forms of action that have an impact on the world. The recession, as Nader described it, is reinforced via the talk of recession and so is the feeling of insecurity around sanctions as it will be discussed below. Nader and other interviewed realtors were themselves reproducing this talk through anecdotes and stories that underpinned the sense of investment in apartments, and as such they helped reorganize the city through more construction and more speculation. In other words, the talk of recession and sanctions was a mechanism for him and others, through which the temporality of architecture was challenged under the economic conditions of sanctions. It appeared that they connected the temporality of architecture to an uncertain "horizon of expectation," to use Reinhart Koselleck's phrase, by convincing people to interject themselves into the economy through building apartments.[35]

Nader further connected the swings of the housing market to the political situation in Iran; he argued that "Investors speculate based on the political situation. The ups and downs of

the housing market depend on when the dollar goes up or down, when the political situation on the other side changes, or when there are debates on national or foreign television about sanctions."[36] He recalled the "good days of 2011 and 2012," when his office was packed with people looking to buy apartments. He pointed to two important factors that boosted the housing market in those years: "first, the sanctions on Iran's oil and the Central Bank, and second, the high rate of inflation."[37] These two factors were directly related because with the imposition of sanctions on Iranian oil and the freezing of Iran's assets in International banks, state income, which is generated from petroleum sales, decreased considerably in the beginning of the year 2012. Following that, the state was no longer capable of putting a cap on the dollar, and consequently the foreign currency market faced a rather severe shock. With the rise of the value of the dollar, many Iranians rushed to take their savings out of banks and purchase dollars, euros, gold, cars, and most importantly, apartments, to protect their money from devaluation.

Nader recalled that in 2011 and 2012, "people bought just about anything."[38] He noted that buyers were not looking for quality so much as they cared about square meter maximization to exchange their savings into real estate. This attitude, Nader believed, encouraged builders to build more, and this, he argued was to the benefit of everyone, the people and the state equally:

> The end of the recession is frankly to the benefit of the state and the people because it creates jobs. People and the state should encourage builders to build more. If a location is good, why not give it a permit to build a 15-story tower? This is called job creation. Encourage them, give them grants! When this happens, everything starts to work: the elevators work, the trucks work, the cigarette sellers work, I work, and I buy drinks and cakes for my clients, so the confectionary works. This is when things are in motion. I have heard that there are 1960 jobs in housing. They all get activated again.[39]

Nader, unlike many people who thought that the biggest problem of Tehran was in fact over-investment in commercial construction, believed that the city would benefit from more construction. He viewed buildings as the center of a network of people and things that guaranteed the productivity of the city—its "motion" as he put it.[40] The productivity that Nader as a realtor was trying to put forward, was a combination of production and speculation, for a sector that as Henri Lefebvre has put it, "oscillates between a subordinate function as a booster, flywheel or back-up—in short as a regulator—and a leading role."[41] This productivity for the real estate sector is a means through which it prevents the falling rate of profit in construction.

Furthermore, Nader generalized the influence of sanctions as a positive influence on the productivity of the housing sector and thus simplified the experience of urban productivity in the condition of economic and political volatility as related to the amount of construction and the circulation of apartments. In his analysis, he produced a *before-and-afte*r narrative around the year 2012, the year in which the harshest sanctions were imposed on Iranian oil and banking institutions. This divide between the before and the after of sanctions, in the words of Teresa Caldeira (albeit in a different context), "reduces the world to an opposition of good and evil."[42] Caldeira notes, that "in making this reduction, people usually present simplistic accounts of experiences and tend to create caricatures. The before becomes too good; the after becomes too bad."[43] Similarly, Nader's narrative of the housing market reduced urban productivity to a simplistic experience of apartment building as connected to the politics of sanctions.

Mehrdad, a retired schoolteacher who had opened his real estate office in 2006, shared Nader's opinion.[44] In 2017, he also recalled the booming years of 2011 and 2012 as very productive years: "I sold crappy properties at unimaginable rates in 2012. Prices increased daily, even hourly in some months, and people were worried that if they don't exchange now, they

would never own an apartment. Many became homeowners in those years."[45] He continued: "But those days are gone now; buyers look for quality these days. They look for the most they could get with their money."[46]

For Mehrdad and Nader, the attentiveness of people to "quality" seemed like a negative factor in the business of exchanging apartments. As realtors, they viewed apartments as forms (rather than spaces) that needed to be in constant circulation to prevent an economic downturn. In analyzing the market, Mehrdad added:

> Now buyers have time to look among multiple options because things seem stable: sanctions are to be removed, inflation is down, and people are investing their money in high-interest savings account; but everything at the cost of a shut-down economy. The construction market is shut down; no one dares to begin a new project because the people of this country only buy apartments when there is instability. They buy apartments when everyone else buys apartments.[47]

In 2017, before the removal of the United States from the JCPOA and the return of sanctions, Mehrdad described the recession of the housing industry as connected to the seeming "stability" of the economy and the political situation. Like Nader, he also described it as a cultural situation where people behaved in a "crowd-like" manner upon their personal evaluations of the economic and political situation. He observed that the new administration of Hassan Rouhani had continued the process of lowering inflation by reducing money supply and allowing banks to offer interest rates way above the inflation rate. These policies, among many factors, and along with the constructed atmosphere of "hope" around nuclear negotiations, had encouraged many investors to deposit their savings in banks and "eat the interest," as people colloquially put it.

The graph below shows the continuous rise of saving deposits since the beginning of president Rouhani's term in 2013 (Fig. 2.1). It shows that between 2013 and 2018, deposits in savings accounts more than tripled. During these years, many builders, as my interviews also suggest, temporarily stepped out of the construction industry and invested their savings in banks, receiving astronomical interests as high as 25 percent. One builder argued that "at highest, I would get around 30 percent of return by building an apartment, and I would have to worry about selling it in this dark market. But I am putting my money in a bank now and am receiving 25 percent interest without any stress."[48] So even though the return of savings accounts was nominally lower than the return in building apartments, builders preferred not to take the risks of construction in the recession years.

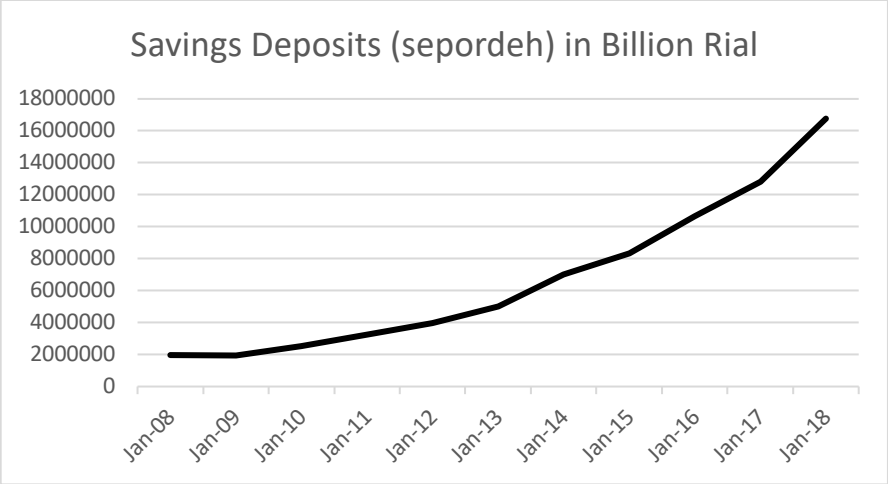

Figure 2.1: Saving deposits in billion rial since January 2008 across Iran. Source: data from the Central Bank of Iran, accessed April 2019

As realtors, both Nader and Mehrdad maneuvered between different investment strategies to extract the most profit out of their assets. During the recession, both had opened savings accounts in banks that offered an interest rate in excess of 20 percent. Before the recession, both of them invested in apartments as a complementary strategy in their everyday businesses. They bought apartments and "slept on them" (waited a period of time) until they could sell them at higher prices. Nader argued that without investing in real estate it was difficult to sustain his job. Mehrdad had also built a project in 2012, a five-story apartment in northern Tehran, right in the middle of the housing rush. He had sold three of the five units and was hopeful that the other two would also be sold after the recession at a higher price. He was worried though that his units would not be considered *nosaz* (new) in a couple of years and that they would lose their attractiveness in a market where newness and trendiness were very important factors. For him, and many others, newness was a stimulating factor in the circulation of apartments, because as it will be discussed later, investment apartments in Iran, in the majority of cases, very quickly looked out of shape because of their low building quality.

Amir, another realtor in northern Tehran, had a similar experience. He was also a builder himself and complained that the recession had damaged his business both as a realtor and as a builder.[49] Unlike Nader and Mehrdad, he believed that the recession was the result the former president's political and economic mismanagements. He said: "the money supply that Ahmadinejad injected into the market in the name of development was a disastrous money."[50] He argued that all of this money went into real estate and saturated this market to a degree that supply exceeded demand. In this situation, "money was no longer in circulation. People couldn't sell their properties to buy another one. Things stopped moving."[51] He said the market for luxury apartments was not experiencing a recession because those apartments had their special investors. But in the realm of ordinary buildings, investors tried to bargain a lot and pay as little as possible. They also sought quality and looked for special design features and materials in the options that were offered to them, and this itself slowed down the speed of transactions.

For all of these realtors, circulation of properties mattered the most because it guaranteed their business as middlemen. Quality was not something that Nader, Mehrdad and Amir cared so much about. They reduced buildings to commodities and categorized them based on their formal features such as material, size, and style. They operated through the talk of sanctions as a

mechanism to convince people that the uncertainty of the situation demanded quick investment strategies. These realtors were all unhappy that the search for quality in the past few years had slowed down the market, although some of them confessed that people's attention to quality had also created more competition among builders.[52]

The discussion of circulation in the analysis of these realtors was often linked to analysis of economic inflation. Inflation, in the word of these realtors, was viewed (directly or indirectly) as the source of circulation as it created a psychological sense of instability, thus encouraging people to find investment strategies that would prevent their savings from devaluation. Elias Canetti, in his book *Crowds and Power*, has written about the psychology of inflation and how it changes people's relationship with their belongings.[53] He argues that "inflation is a crowd phenomenon in the strictest and most concrete sense of the word," and compares its importance to wars and revolutions.[54] During an episode of inflation, Canetti posits, "the unit of money loses its identity," and values start to become mere names: "the millions one always wanted are suddenly there in one's hand, but they are no longer millions in fact, but only in name."[55] In this situation, people start to feel degraded because in Canetti's view, they have for too long identified themselves with their money: "Not only is everything visibly shaken during inflation, nothing remaining certain or unchanged even for an hour, but also each man, as a person, becomes less."[56] He calls inflation "a witches sabbath of devaluation where men and the units of their money have the strongest effects on each other."[57] The collective feeling of devaluation prompts collective effort for preventing the loss of money and the consequential humiliation. Savings evaporate before people's eyes unless they find a quick solution, "a flight," via clever or even irrational speculations.[58] The rush for purchasing apartments of any quality—even "crappy" ones—as Nader and Mehrdad commented earlier, is an example of Canetti's analysis. Sadly, realtors in Tehran spoke of this situation as a productive market—a *market in circulation*.

Other realtors brought up the topic of inflation in their analyses. Mehdi, another realtor in northern Tehran also commented that the source of the 2014-2017 recession was the low rate of inflation during Rouhani's administration.[59] He believed that "when there is no inflation, investors leave the market of housing and invest in other arenas."[60] He argued that "because of this, the market of renovation has developed as a strategy to prepare buildings for a time when prices would go up."[61] In this situation, he noted, many builders left the market: "Only the professionals have remained. And they have learned to slow-build because they want to finish their projects when prices would go up someday."[62] Unlike Amir, Mehdi believed that the current administration prompted the recession by forcefully keeping the money supply down. He called the situation "a fake recession, that would blow up soon with the trigger of an external force."[63] He then added that "we were doing better when *sanctions* were imposed on us," and continued:

> when sanctions were at play, people invested only in real estate or maybe in foreign currency. They never invested in banks, because inflation was so high that if you put your money in banks you basically lost it in less than a year. Sanctions worked to our advantage. Big money came into real estate… During the sanction years inflation was so high that money lost its value on a daily basis. People were fearful of losing their savings. They could not put it in production because raw material was sanctioned. They put it in real estate which was the safest business.[64]

Mehdi related sanctions to the rise of inflation. This relationship has been explored by economists. Ahmad Jafari Samimi and Sajad Jamshidbaygi have for instance shown that trade restrictions in the form of sanctions fuel inflation.[65] Moreover, Hamidreza Ghorbani-Dastgerdi et

al. have done a case study on Iran's sanctions and they argue that sanctions have a direct influence on the increase in inflation because of trade and foreign investment barriers on the one hand, and because of the creation of a "big gap between official and market exchange rates" of the currency, on the other hand.[66] These practices, as they argue, "decrease GDP and increase inflation as a situation of *stagflation*."[67] Abdol Rasoul Sadeghi and Komeil Tayebi have likewise shown that sanctions, by increasing the value of foreign currency and decreasing budget deficits in an oil-based economy like Iran's, increase inflation.[68] Because the rate of the dollar in Iran is often forcefully kept low by the Central Bank of Iran, during the time of sanctions when oil incomes are low, the state faces serious problems for maintaining the value of the dollar. As a result of this deficit, a speculative market emerges around foreign currency and demands increase in the market. Fluctuations in the currency market influence the prices of imported raw goods and thus the overall rate of inflation.[69]

In relation to this research, Parvaneh Aslani and Avideh Asadollahi have studied the relationship between economic sanctions and the housing market, explaining how this relationship is influenced by inflation, state oil incomes, and the exchange rates of foreign currency.[70] They argue that sanctions, by creating shocks within the currency market and state oil incomes, create business cycles in the price of housing in Iran, meaning that they create cyclical episodes of boom and recession. This means that sanctions do not have permanent influences on the market of housing but influence it through *temporary* shocks. In explaining the housing boom of 2012 to 2013, Aslani and Asadollahi posit that when sanctions began, demand for housing as a form of speculative investment increased and this resulted in the rise of housing prices. From 2014 onward, this demand for investment, however, was directed towards more cashable forms of investment such as gold and foreign currency, thus causing a recession within the housing market.[71]

Being cognizant of this relationship between sanctions, inflation, and housing prices, Mehdi believed that "those who work in real estate love sanctions," even though sanctions influence the import of materials.[72] But because ordinary construction projects (as compared to "luxury" projects) mostly use local products, their aesthetics and trends are not so much influenced by the boycotts. Mehdi recalled that between 2006 and 2008, and between 2011 and 2013, the real estate market experienced the highest rates of interest because of the rise of the value of the dollar and the increased inflation. He noted that "many people turned to commercial construction in those years and became builders overnight."[73] The flood of builders in the market of those years, Mehdi argued, substantially influenced the design and structural qualities of apartment-building, as many non-experts entered the market and built low-quality apartments for speculative purposes. Many realtors became builders and many builders became realtors and the two professional realms formally or informally helped to increase the socio-cultural influence of investment apartments within the city.

Mehdi's narrative thus seemed to be pointing to the creation of a landscape of investment apartments as a particular spatiality within the fabric of the city. The landscape of investment apartments is not a distinct place; it is interwoven within the fabric of the city and is embedded within the history of each property as a social and economic relation. This landscape is empowered by the ordinariness of construction and the ordinariness of exchanging properties, meaning that anyone who has a considerable amount of saving can be a part of this landscape; nonexperts can build within it, and properties can be bought and sold like ordinary products, detached from a mortgage system that would connect them to a banking institution. Within it, properties, especially apartments gain different meanings and different values as they are

exchanged based on different "politics of anticipation."[74] The landscape of investment apartments is thus a mundane and fragmented landscape, created here and there when there is opportunity for individuals to build an apartment or buy one, and make everyday investment decisions by making calculations around specific economic conditions and coming up with strategies to domesticate the uncertainties of the context.

Corruption Stories, Spatial Rhetoric, and Investment Imaginaries

Ramin and Shahram, two realtors in northern Tehran, were also actively involved in the construction industry.[75] They built residential apartments in Gheytariye and Farmaniye—two affluent neighborhoods in northern Tehran. Neither of them was a specialist in architecture or civil engineering. As Ramin, the older of the two brothers mentioned, they got interested in apartments because it was a profitable business in Iran. Their first experience in building had taken place back in the early 2000s, when they had demolished their father's property and built a five-story apartment. From selling those apartment units, Ramin and Shahram had earned a considerable amount of cash through which they had been able to buy another property and begin another project.

The two brothers opened their office officially in 2008. The office was a two-story apartment with one story dedicated to their real estate office and the other to their building company. Their practice flourished during the booming years of 2011 and 2012; even in 2013 and 2014 they were still doing very successfully. But when the recession became more widespread, they had to remodel their practice. They began to work through a different form of building contract, namely, collaborative construction. Between 2015 and 2017, they built three apartment complexes through collaborative construction. In this form of contract, they did not have to purchase a property to build an apartment. They collaborated with an owner who provided the property for construction and in the end, based on a particular formula (a formula specific to each property) they split the new apartment units among themselves. Through this model, Ramin and Shahram were able to sustain their practice in the recession years. The model had in a sense allowed them to downsize without losing much.[76]

In 2017, both Ramin and Shahram believed that the recession would end soon because the political-economic situation was becoming precarious. In early 2018, they were holding tight to their unsold properties waiting eagerly for the prices to go up after Donald Trump's announcement of the possible withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA. Shahram posited that "external political forces such as sanctions have a direct influence on the housing market. People are going to rush to apartments, but owners won't be easily letting go."[77] This was in a situation when the value of the dollar was going up daily before the beginning of the Iranian new year in March 2018, and investors were rushing to save their savings from another phase of economic shock. In mid-2018, Shahram and Ramin had sold their properties at a rate twice the amount they had proposed last year.

One of the apartments that Shahram and Ramin had sold in 2018, was located in a five-story building in the Gheytariye neighborhood. The building was clad in thin travertine stone, decorated as a somewhat modest Roman façade. The façade was already peeling off as one of the residents had detected. In a building less than two years of age, the stone cladding was falling off in the areas around the balconies where rainwater had been running down. The resident, Saman, described the building as a "besaz-befroushi building."[78] He also pointed to the small cracks on the interior walls and the stain of water on the ceiling of the parking floor: "these show you how

much care these builders put into building these apartments. What will remain of this besaz-befroushi building after ten or fifteen years?"[79]

The term *besaz-befroushi*—which translates to "built-to-be-sold"—generally refers to low-quality apartments built for the sake of investment. It is usually used as a pejorative adjective, as in a "besaz-befroushi building," referring to buildings that are not very firm in terms of structure and material. These buildings are usually decorated rather than designed and present themselves to the market through the maximization of square meterage on the one hand, and the maximization of superficial veneers on the other. The term also invokes a temporality for buildings, such that a besaz-befroushi building is usually considered a dilapidated structure after only 15 to 20 years and would be colloquially called a *kolangi* structure—a structure that needs to be taken down with a pickax (Fig. 2.2). In Tehran, via the temporal and the material logic of besaz-befroushi construction, the infrastructure of speculation operates through the arbitrage of apartments. This form of speculation, arguably, "multiplies sites for innovation" as it reproduces the "platforms from which to extract profit based on arbitrage."[80]

Figure 2.2: A building being demolished with a pickax in northern Tehran. Source: photo taken by author, 2018

The term besaz-befroushi began to be ubiquitously used in the 1990s when during the economic upheavals of those years, housing started to gain immense significance as an investment and the land market developed as the most dynamic sector of the urban economy. Inflationary pressures in the economy assured the continuous escalation of prices, and housing

proved to be not just an inflation-resistant form of investment, but also a highly profitable one. Within this situation, legal restrictions became difficult to maintain as developers and ordinary builders pushed for maximum speculative growth.[81] Among Iranians there are stories of how building besaz-befroushi apartments became a primary job, and many gained a fortune overnight when real estate prices started to redraw the map of the city.

When Saman used the term besaz-befroushi to describe the apartment, he was implicitly referring to this history of construction. He was the owner of the property on which Shahram and Ramin had built a five-story apartment via a collaborative-building contract. Saman was unhappy about the quality of the architecture and construction, stating that he would have had done a better job if he had himself built the building. He noted:

> I could build this project myself, but I did not have any *friends* in the municipality. These builders know the people in the municipality. They know how to get signatures and approvals. This building has broken the rules in many instances. The balcony has a transgression for instance. The front yard is half the size it should be. But builders solve these problems with money. They know who to approach to get the approvals.[82]

Saman was pointing to the negotiability of the law and the informal channels within the municipality. He was also observing that builders were no more expert at building than him; their only advantage was knowing how to manipulate the municipality and its rules. He believed that building an apartment was one thing, resolving it through the municipality was another. Saman brought up another example to reinforce his point. He had been notified by Ramin and Shahram about a 200 million toman penalty charge that needed to be paid to the municipality for the transgressions of the building, namely the balcony and the yard. Curious about the high amount of the penalty charge, Saman had himself approached the district municipality to ask about the details of the transgressions. The clerks had told him that there were no documented transgressions on the city files for his building, and the charge must have had been for other penalties that had not been documented yet. Saman believed that the charge was for the "invisible" penalties that the builders were trying to hide from him. He was certain that the builders had been negotiating with the clerks in charge of approving the building. His example pointed to the fact that although anyone could build an apartment in Tehran, only those who had a network of acquaintances in the city could bend the codes of building.

Hamed, another builder who practiced in northern Tehran, confirmed Saman's words.[83] He confessed that he could not build a project without "paying the middlemen."[84] These middlemen, he noted, were in every district of the municipality. Builders would pay them, and they would resolve their problems usually at rates lower than the actual penalties that have to be paid for certain transgressions. They essentially acted as brokers, who would be paid to get around the rules in a somewhat organized game of corruption. Hamed, for instance, had sold one his apartments to a municipality clerk at a lower rate and in return the clerk had resolved a legal problem he had with bringing electricity to one of his apartment complexes. Another builder, Reza, took pride in telling me about his "municipality stories."[85] He said he had paid the municipal architect in charge of inspecting his project a small gift to "un-see" his transgressions in the design of the façade.[86]

The above narratives show that everyday administrative and bureaucratic corruptions within the practices of building reinforce the culture of building low-quality besaz-befroushi apartments. Because of the elasticity of the codes, builders implement strategies to maximize profit through informal channels, and cut out what they think as the "unnecessary" qualities of

buildings, such as green spaces and common areas. This speculative behavior has resulted in the shrinkage of the so-called *mosha* spaces [common spaces] within buildings because they fall outside of the speculative calculations of developers and investors.[87] These spaces are also not really valued by the quantitative logic of the code itself and are implicitly considered as negotiable zones within buildings.[88]

Rahman, for example, as a builder who mostly practiced in the historic city of Isfahan, noted that the city required builders to dedicate at least twenty percent of green space to the front or backyards of apartment complexes.[89] But he viewed this rule as impossible because "more green space meant less parking space."[90] Rahman argued that "buyers do not usually care about the amount of green space in a property; what they care about is the number of parking spaces they get."[91] Rahman either paid the penalty for deleting this required portion of green space or negotiated with middlemen to resolve its omission at a lower cost.

Such behaviors are encouraged by the municipality itself, for in many cases, it allows the transgression of a law to be reframed as a form of taxation. In other words, the municipality, as an institution independent from the state, allows itself to earn part of its income from selling illegalities—illegalities that could be resolved as "new legalities," as Sylvia Nam puts it in a different context.[92] But this is not happening in a state of lawlessness; in fact, one may argue that overregulation—in the form of issuing a multitude of codes, protocols, and decrees—is an investment mechanism for the municipality. Nam has examined how in Cambodia, for example, "the overregulation of the law has provided the means for great flexibility in appropriating and commodifying property, making it profitable."[93] She further argues that "overregulation has embedded speculation in the structure of the economy as well as in the structure of relations of space" by creating "a scaffold for residents, developers, speculators, and investors to negotiate legal rights."[94] A similar condition is observable in Iran, where overregulation has created a condition through which the municipality, the developers and the investors collaborate in Tehran's speculative urbanism. For example, through what has been titled the *Committee for Protocol 100,* which has the role of investigating building penalties at the time of construction, the municipality allows builders to transgress the law and then file their penalties as a form of exception. In other words, the municipality allows the act of transgression to take place before a request for transgression. As many interviewed builders suggested, the majority of Protocol 100 requests for transgression are resolved within the city through issuing a penalty charge.

But the state is also involved in this speculative urbanism. Construction regulations fall under the purview of several agencies which include the municipality, the City Council, the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development, the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad, the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, and the Natural Resources Organization. Agents from these institutions meet in the *Committee for Protocol 5*, and decide on the conditions of "exceptionality" from *Tarh-e-Tafzili* [the Comprehensive Plan] of Tehran.[95] According to Nima, a legal advisor in the municipality, the bigger space of corruption happens within the boundaries of Protocol 5 where builders can file for cases of "exception" from the Comprehensive Plan to build higher or bigger than what the law allows them to build: "this is where big sums of money are spent on bribing important officials," Nima argued.[96] Here, despite the independence of the municipality as a semi-private institution, the state enters the game of speculative urbanism through the votes of different governmental institutions. This is a case where "sovereignty is exercised through the power to decide the exception; a power that doesn't suspend the law but creates it anew."[97]

The municipality also has a role in prescribing certain spatial rhetoric in apartment building. The city requires each plot of land to be built in a 60-over-40 percent ratio, meaning that at least 40 percent of the property should be dedicated to open space and the remaining 60 percent to the built portion. Builders, in other words, almost always fill up the space allowed because if they were to build anything less, they would face substantial financial losses. Such codes therefore are often practiced to the detriment of patios, yards, and other semi-open or open common spaces as builders and investors try to take the most advantage of the 60 percent of built property. Apartments are thus usually built as full infills with flat plans, devoid of any exterior or interior common spaces that might reduce the calculatable square-meter measurements.

Yaser Mousapour, an Iranian architectural theorist, has for instance criticized this coded logic of construction in Tehran through what he has termed "the logic of painted boxes."[98] He argues that buildings as painted boxes speak to a culture of construction in which architectural production is inserted into a specific configuration of investment and city planning regimes in Iranian cities. In Tehran, buildings are defined by a package of codes and regulations as boxes rather than spaces and geometries: "the inside of the building is defined by engineering rules and bureaucratic necessities, and the outside is painted by a façade."[99] In this situation, Mousapour argues, "there is no place for the architect as a design professional; he or she steps into the project in its very last stages, just like how a painter would come at the very end of a project to just embellish the surfaces of the building."[100] This form of building, is aligned with the culture of speculation that has overwhelmed the city: "it is what investors seem to be satisfied with, as they seek to just protect the value of their savings through numbers and quantities."[101] The logic of painted boxes has deeply penetrated the spatial imaginaries of Iranians. As Mousapour puts it, "the box is not just a form but a culture that has become widespread in our society."[102]

Mina's story reveals aspect of Mousapour's observation on the culture of building in Tehran.[103] She was a resident of Tehran who owned an apartment in the Mahmoudiye neighborhood, one of the more affluent areas in northern Tehran (Fig. 2.3). The apartment complex in which she lived was three stories with two apartments on each level. 50 percent of the property was dedicated to the building and the remaining 50 percent was kept as a garden. "We kept the trees in memory of our father and our childhood days," she added.[104]

Mina and her siblings had inherited the property from their father and after he had passed away in the late 80s, they had decided to demolish the old villa in the property and build a family apartment in its place (Fig. 2.4). Mina called herself "an idealist," elaborating that at the time of building this apartment, she never made any calculations based on speculative thoughts.[105] She added:

> My family and I wanted to live together in a family apartment. We wanted to enjoy the garden and so we kept it as fifty percent of the complex. We also wanted to have more light in our apartment units, so we asked the architect to carve out open spaces from the east and the west side of the building.[106]

The apartment Mina and her family had built was an exception to the speculative mentality of builders in Tehran. It was not built as a full infill because the building was surrounded by open space which, after building, counted as common space. The front yard was also ten percent bigger than the minimum size recommended by the municipality's codes. And this again, reduced the so-called "salable" area of the apartment. In other words, in such an expensive neighborhood, where each square-meter of built-area was worth thousands of dollars, a bigger front yard meant less cash for each apartment at the time of selling. Because of this,

Mina and her family had eventually begun to regret their choices when facing the rising value of real estate in their neighborhood. Ali, Mina's brother in-law, argued:

> the open spaces that we preserved for our building do not count as measurable property because they are considered common space. I feel like we wasted this land by carving out so much open space around it. The garden is pleasant, and everyone falls in love with it. But honestly, for me, it is just a reflection of our ignorance in the late 80s. The price of land in this neighborhood is so high that builders count on every centimeter of it and look what we have done here.[107]

Figure 2.3: An old photo of Mina's family property before the demolition of their inherited villa, 1985. Source: courtesy of the interviewed family

Mina's older sister, Maryam, mentioned that there was not a single day in which she did not make calculations about their losses in this building.[108] She said: "the only way I can comfort myself about this situation is to remind myself that this building is a twenty-year-old building now and it will probably stay for at most ten more years. Then we can sell it as a *kolangi* all together."[109] She then added: "this building is too old anyways; it must be taken down soon. I don't think the structural system would function properly in a couple of years."[110]

Selling a building as a kolangi meant selling it for just the plot of land on which it laid. It basically meant selling a property by imagining that there was no building worthy of being kept on it. Despite the healthy condition of the building, Maryam and her family viewed it as old and crumbling and they made false assumptions about its structural stability. They believed that spending more money on a kolangi building was a waste of money because the price of land was so high in the neighborhood that they could just sell the property all together (as opposed to selling the individual apartment units) and each buy a new apartment in a better neighborhood or build a new bigger apartment over the existing property.

Figure 2.4: The new apartment complex built by Mina and her family in their inherited property in northern Tehran. Source: photo taken by author, 2017

Such stories show how the logic of real estate investment has become so deeply embedded in people's lives and how a set of economic realities have changed people's conceptions of the built environment. One can likewise observe how spatialized the culture of sanctions is in Iran, so much so that people's economic calculations overwhelm their love of beauty, nature, and family. Through the rhetoric of kolangi, Maryam and her family seemed to be engaging in a process of "creative destruction," forcing the building into the aesthetics of destructions.

But this rhetoric was not entirely theirs; they were influenced by the builders and realtors that visited them frequently to convince them to build or sell their property. Maryam noted that her family received phone advertisements about construction and collaborative construction contracts almost every week. A local builder, who had built an apartment next-door, had also approached them several times to convince them to demolish their low-rise apartment and build a high-rise in its place. The builder had assured them that he could buy density from the municipality to build higher. The family also received text messages every day from contractors who were interested in buying their property or making it brand new. Maryam noted that if it were not for one of her sisters who wanted to keep the house, they would have had signed a contract years ago.

In Maryam's comments one could observe how she imagined her property within the spatial and rhetorical dominance of the landscape of investment apartments. Here, the landscape of investment apartments could be explored through Abdoumaliq Simone's concept of "people as infrastructure," where the notion of infrastructure is extended to the practices of people in the city, to incorporate a "complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons and practices."[111] But while Simone's concept emphasizes economic collaboration among marginalized groups, the landscape of investment apartments points to economic collaboration among builders, investors,

and realtors, or more generally the majority who have the most impact on the reconfiguration of the urban built environment through their practices of mediating risk and negotiating opportunities for investment. To invoke the framework of people-as-infrastructure is to also pay attention to the ordinariness of the practices of building and selling apartments in Iranian cities, and to the power of the middle class in reconfiguring its role within the city to be a part of the network of speculation.

Maryam's comments about the building and the calculations she made around its future as an investment object suggested that her conceptions of the built environment had changed over the years. She was pushed by the flow of capital, people, ideas, words, text messages, and advertisement sheets that directly came to the front door of her apartment to convince her to sell her property or demolish it completely and rebuild. The front door thus became a conduit for the flow of all of these things—a conduit for pushing Maryam and her family to think of their homes as capital. As a result, Maryam was no longer nostalgic about the inherited property. Ali, her husband, noted later, that "the economy in this country has taught us not be nostalgic about anything, and just calculate."[112] He concluded: "next time, instead of wasting this expensive property, we will build it fully and then purchase a piece of villa in the peripheries of Tehran to compensate for the lack of green space around us."[113] Samin, Naser, and Mona, three other neighborhood residents in northern Tehran who were interviewed in 2017, were also of the same opinion that in contemporary Tehran, the culture of building and the economic logic of investment prevented them from dedicating a portion of their properties to green space.[114]

The mentality of Ali, Maryam, Mina and their siblings reflected the words of Hamid, a renowned builder in Tehran, who mostly built "luxury" apartments in Velenjak and Zafaraniye—two affluent neighborhoods in northern Tehran.[115] The building in which Hamid's house and office were located was nonetheless an old villa with a nice big garden in the front. Hamid noted that his office no longer could serve as an office building because of the escalating price of land in that neighborhood. He elaborated:

> This property is worth more than fifteen billion *toman* today, so it can no longer serve as an office building. This office can be easily relocated in a smaller apartment. When we bought this property, we bought it with an investment idea. We thought of it as a project for the future…Today this property is worth thirty million *toman* per square meter; when we bought it, it was worth less than twelve million *toman* per square meter. Today we can no longer afford to live here because it needs to be rebuilt.[116]

Hamid later noted that he had documented the garden of the house through films and photographs—representational forms that satisfied his sense of nostalgia about the garden. He was obviously very fond of the old villa and garden, but as a developer, he operated based on the quantitative logic of investment. When he said that they could no longer afford to stay in the villa, he did not mean that they could not afford the immediate costs, but that they could not afford to lose the unrealized gains that they could earn out of the property's "built" value.

Like the realtors who were discussed earlier, he also thought that building apartments made the city more productive. Hamid was especially interested in high-rises, arguing that "they were better suited for Tehran, a city which suffered from sporadic and fragmented building practices."[117] He believed that when people took their savings out of banks and invested in apartments, they helped to create a productive economy, while at the same time, benefiting personally from the profit they gained from exchanging properties. Through his analysis, Hamid thus drew a direct relationship between investment, speculation and production, desiring what

Lefebvre has called a "frenetic mobilization" of space where a vicious cycle is set up towards the production of space and the "self-destruction of spaces old and new."[118]

As a "luxury" builder, Hamid was also dealing with a specific group of clients, "for whom with or without the recession life went on."[119] These clients were mostly interested in big apartments built in postmodern classical styles. The so-called "Roman" buildings of Tehran were manifestations of this trend in building, which had become popular in the past decade or so (Fig. 2.5). Hamid viewed himself as one of the founders of neoclassical high-rises, arguing that he owed his reputation to his architectural knowledge of classical villas in the west.

Prior to coming to Iran, Hamid had practiced in the United States and had built more than sixty luxury family homes. When he came to Iran, he began his work with the construction of his family property in Zafaraniye—an affluent neighborhood in northern Tehran. He then continued his practice by focusing on 10 to 12-story luxury high-rises with relatively big apartment units (above 500-square meter). He argued that his specialty was in translating the typology of the western "luxury villa" into an apartment unit, and this was more than just designing a big apartment; "this was about knowing how to design for a luxury lifestyle."[120] As he noted:

> Most builders just magnify a 200 square meter apartment into a 1000 square meter apartment. But this is not how it works. When you get big, your appearance changes…and we know how to do this because we have built luxury villas in the United States.[121]

Figure 2.5: A Roman Façade in the Zafaraniye Neighborhood in Northern Tehran. Source: photo taken by author, 2018

Hamid believed that most of his clients looked for classical aesthetics because "within the formal attributes of classical architecture they could define their lifestyle."[122] But the sensibilities of pseudo-classical architecture had also disseminated in every neighborhood of Tehran, in districts very distant from Hamid's luxury apartments (Fig. 2.6). People admired the fancy look of the Roman façades on modest apartments. For luxury builders like Hamid, these were considered as superficial architectural efforts. But for a sizable population of neighborhood residents and small builders, as the ubiquity of the façades indicated, the Roman façade seemed to be a desirable aesthetic, speaking perhaps to deeper social, cultural and economic yearnings of

a society. The following section focuses on the Roman façade as an important aspect of the culture of speculative building in Tehran.

Figure 2.6: Roman façades in western Tehran. Source: photo taken by author, 2018

Strangers in Town: Roman Façades and the Aesthetic Economy of Speculation

> Look at this building. We have materialized your dream of an infinitely luxurious and unique house, that even imagination needs to develop a courage before it. Among the ostentatious towers of Tehran, no other building can compete with Mount Olympus in terms of scale and monumentality. The reaction of other buildings in front of it would only be one of homage…after so much excavation in architectural history, we have selected the best buildings of Gods and Kings, and we made them even more impeccable before assembling them into this building.[123]

These are the words of Fereshteh Asadzadeh and Eve Package, two architecture students who have chosen to represent the most extravagant imaginary apartment complex in northern Tehran: "a house which all of Tehran talks about."[124] By combining different layers of western historical architecture, Asadzadeh and Package offer a satirical commentary on the overwhelming spread of ostentatious neoclassical-looking buildings within the city and the cultural aspirations that support this growth (Fig. 2.7).

Figure 2.7: "The House Which All of Tehran Talks About," a representation by Fereshteh Asadzadeh and Eve Package, 2016. Source: Honar-e-Memari 43 (2016)

The Authors have named the building after the Greek mountain of Olympus, which according to Greek mythology is also the home of Dionysus (the god of festival and madness) and Apollo (the god of knowledge and prophecy). The building represents the struggles of the two gods in the lifestyle of a wealthy class in contemporary Tehran—a class which seems to be enjoying an "architecture of collages," made through fragments of western classical and neoclassical features.[125] The authors argue that "the house which all of Tehran talks about" is not about a homage to history, but a homage to speculation and investment.[126] Historic forms are not used in this building for their historic value, but for their cultural power in creating social distinction.[127]

The building is conspicuously sitting on no foundation. It appears to be sinking into the plains, decontextualized from an urban setting. The façade is crowned with the Cenotaph to Newton, a Revolutionary era project. One can also see something similar to Palazzo Della Ragione in Padua, a number of Renaissance buildings and even what seems to be like an English country house. The illustration is thus steeped in European classical architecture, pointing to how cultural capital is being represented as European. It speaks to the controversial culture of

commercial construction in Iran today—a culture produced by the anxieties, visions, calculations, and speculation of builders, developers, and ordinary investors around their relationship with the west.

The Roman façades (as they are commonly referred to), or similar eclectic forms, certainly have economic underpinnings within the real estate market in Iran. They are arguably part of a cultural trend toward "conspicuous consumption." On a grander scale, we could read these façades as a nostalgic wish for the flow of global capital and ideas that are no longer possible under the politics of sanctions. By turning to classism, even in this case the "kitschy" versions of it, admirers of Roman and European-looking façades may be in cultural dialogue with the West. These façades could be seen as part of the "talk of sanctions"—rhetorical practices that are taking place on the surface of buildings and have an impact on the culture of architecture. These façades could be seen as part of what Jyoti Hosagrahar calls the "landscape of surprises," in which the cultural turmoil of a rapidly globalizing world can be observed in the varieties of "uneven," "unexpected," and perhaps "kitsch" building forms that emerge throughout the city.[128]

The growing number of these façades is also indicative of the infirmity of the system of regulations and supervisions within the city. The city obviously suffers from the absence of a cohesive institutionalized body that could mediate between what people like, what architects and developers design and what is appropriate for the city. Despite the establishment of *comitehaye nama*—Façade Committees—in the past few years, the problem of façade design is still one of the most conflicting issues for developers, builders, architects and clients. "Cultural appropriateness" has been vaguely instructed by the city and lists of detailed instructions have been mandated by district municipalities for designing "good" façades. But as I argue, what is missing is a coding system that views architecture as one cohesive body, rather than compartmentalized properties like façade, plan, section, etc. The establishment of Façade Committees is in and of itself a reflection of how city officials themselves approach the problem of the city in a compartmentalized fashion.

Unpacked as a material and a rhetorical surface, the Roman façade can thus be understood as an indigenous product and a window into the larger politics of building in Iran where capital, corruption, and speculation intersect with questions of globalization, identity, and culture. The problem of Tehran as a city of Roman façades has invoked many concerns among city officials to a degree that even the Supreme Leader has criticized the city's appearance. In a meeting in December 2013 with Tehran's City Council, Ayatollah Khamenei argued that "the architecture and the façade of Tehran is indeed not an appropriate façade for an Islamic city. We must build the city in a way that it would accommodate an Islamic life style."[129] The irony, of course, is that Islam implanted itself and its architecture into the cultural and architectural traditions of Rome, but that is not what the Roman façade is referring to in Iran today.

Classicism in Iran, nonetheless, has a surprisingly deeper history. This trend began during the Qajar period (1785-1925), specifically, since the so-called Naseri period (1848) when the kings' love for European culture and aesthetics translated into new urban and architectural forms.[130] During this time, new "hybrid forms and meanings" entered Iranian society with neo-classical imitations being a big part of it.[131] Neo-classical motifs and orders began to manifest themselves mostly through palaces and governmental buildings in Tehran. An example of such buildings is the palatial complex of Arg, which included the palace of Shamsol-Emareh, a multi-story complex designed on the basis of both Islamic and European motifs (Fig. 2.8).[132] But the trend also gradually translated itself into urban planning strategies. These urban changes helped

the Qajar kings to build Tehran as their center of power and a new European-looking capital city. Eventually, through its architecture, the city became a symbol of connection to western powers, as well as being related to their technological progress and modernity.[133]

Figure 2.8: Shamsol Emarat, in Naser Khosro Street, Tehran (construction ended in 1905). Source: Amir Bani-Masoud*, The Contemporary Architecture of Iran* (Honar-e-Memari, 2009), p.91.

Following the more or less sporadic neoclassical tendencies of the Qajar period, the first official phase of this trend in Iran was formalized during Reza Shah's modernization project in the 1920 and 1930s. After the coup of 1921, Reza Shah carried out an enthusiastic project of urban and architectural transformation guided by the idea of creating a modern Iran.[134] The project sought to create a national glory—a revival of what was imagined as a glorious ancient Iran. For the king, and the Iranian secular elite who advised him in his project of nation-building, "Iran could and had to take its prominent place among fraternal nation-states precisely because it had done so 2500 years ago."[135] This period saw the development of many new civic projects that were carried out with a variety of styles and trends borrowed from the West. The intellectual elite extensively took interest in the urban histories of European cities to come up with ideas that could connect the glorious ancient past of Persia to the celebrated modern West.[136] Modernization and westernization were seen as one project, as "most members of the Iranian elite made no distinction between the West and Modernity."[137] Kamran Safamanesh, an Iranian architectural historian writes:

> The totality of what had taken place in Europe following the Renaissance in terms of the classical and neo-classical styles or the trends that came about in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, in the shape of early modern and modern movements, proved to be of real consequence in the domains of architecture and urban planning in Iran, and now came into view before the enthusiastic, and at times longing, eyes of the Iranian society [sic].[138]

Nineteenth-century Neoclassical European architecture as the consumable symbol of western progress was mixed with pre-Islamic Persian icons to build significant governmental buildings and create a sense of national identity. New modern institutes such as the municipality and the National Heritage Center were also established to govern these affairs. By investing in the dichotomy of pre-Islamic glories and Islamic backwardness, the state of Reza Shah invested in the duality of tradition and modernity to build its identity. Examples of such works were the new municipality building in the northern corner of Tupkhaneh square (1921) and the Alboraz high school (1924) (Fig. 2.9).[139] The desire to become modern, was thus cultivated as a desire to become *farangi*—European—and this tendency was expressed openly by the secular elite in public magazines and newspapers:

> Iran has to start afresh, and everything must become new. We want a new Iran, a new man; we want to make Iran like Europe…While preserving inherent Iranian moral values, we want to put into effect this great idea that Iran must become spiritually, physically, outwardly, and inwardly *farangi maab*—European mannered.[140]

Figure 2.9: The municipality of Tehran (1921). Source: Amir Bani-Masoud, The Contemporary Architecture of Iran (Honar-e-Memari, 2009), p. 102

The text resembles the modernist manifestoes of the same period (minus the part on moral values), which imagined something ahistorical—a stepping out of history; except here, Europe seems to have signified an escape from conventions, history and perhaps time itself. The naivete of it all is that everything new becomes old.[141]

Following this trend, certain intellectuals began to pursue purely European styles of architecture with no sign of influence from Persian precedents. The Pahlavi radio station (1926),

and the post and telegraph buildings located at the Tupkhaneh square (1928) were two examples of such works (Fig. 2.10).[142] But eventually, materiality and technique proved to be problematic in the context of Iran and around 1933 this phase of pure imitation was followed by another round of hybrid tendencies. The focus of this new period was mainly on creating glorious governmental buildings designed by renowned foreign architects.[143] Attention was paid to antiquarian elements from the Achaemenid and Sasanid periods, in combination with neoclassical orders. The National Museum of Iran (1933), the Darband police station (1933), and the Anushiravan Dadgar high school (1936) were among these projects (Fig. 2.11). Through these works the state cultivated an "Iran-time," to borrow the term from the Iranian historian Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi—a time which was constructed through a "schizochronic view of history."[144] The Iran-time reactivated the country's memories of its celebrated pre-Islamic past to dissociate Iran from its "backward" Islamic temporality and create an alternative national identity.[145]

Figure 2.10: The old Post and Telegraph Building in Toupkhaneh Square (1928). Source: Amir Bani-Masoud, *The Contemporary Architecture of Iran* (Honar-e-Memari, 2009), p. 100

In the post-Revolution times, except for a number of architects who took on the path of neoclassicism, postmodern trends were mainly used in a kind of bottom-up continuation of their Pahlavi history by developers and ordinary builders. As Shawhin Roudbari notes, "with the power to decide how façades should look, Tehran's developers had a strong hand in dictating taste—postmodern and neoclassical sold well" to a rising wealthy middle class who was increasingly seeking investment opportunities in the thriving real estate market of the post-war Iran.[146]

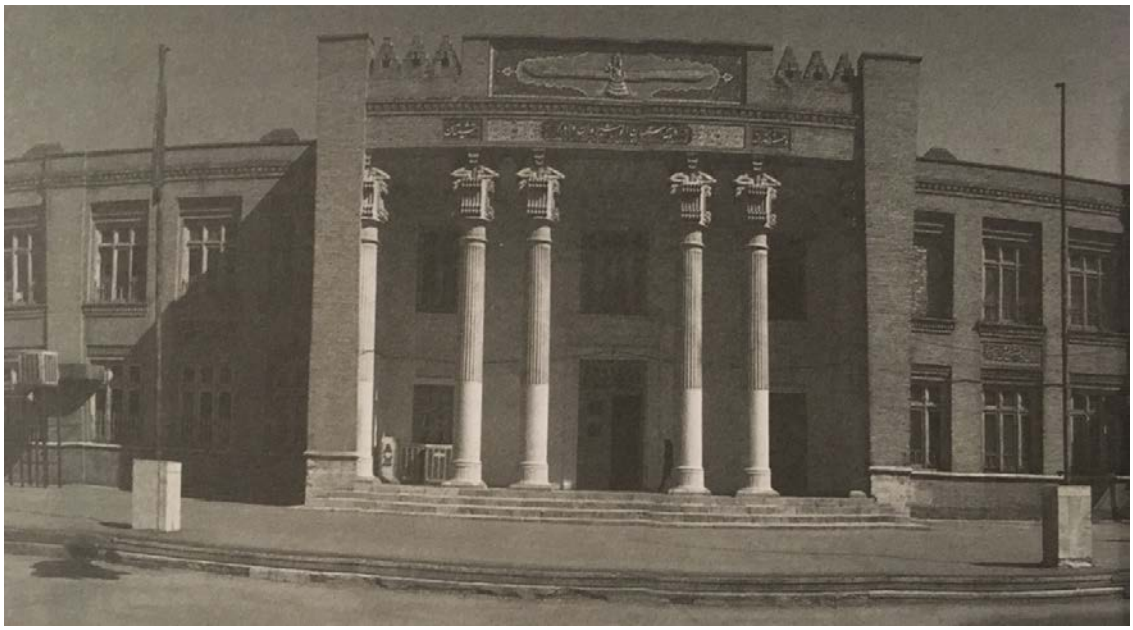

Figure 2.11: Anoushiravan Dadgar high school (1936). Source: Amir Bani-Masoud*, The Contemporary Architecture of Iran* (Honar-e-Memari, 2009*), p. 212*

With the dominance of developers in the real estate market of the 1990s, "architecture increasingly became a commodity exchanged in the currency of façades on mid-rise apartment buildings."[147] The spatial logic of the code, as well as the crude calculations of developers, encouraged buildings as infills with only one significant façade on the front side of the structure. Architecture as a volume designed in totality was eventually reserved for certain civic projects within the city, or for weekend villas on the suburbs. For developers who increasingly shaped the urban form through rapid apartment building, the façade became an important surface through which a building could distinguish itself from its surrounding. The logic of distinction thus overpowered the logic of harmony and modesty, which traditionally guided the design of houses in Iran.

The Roman façades of Tehran today are perhaps the boldest and the most extravagant versions of façadism in the past few decades. The distinguishing feature of these façades from earlier neoclassic façades is the homogenized use of travertine stone, the overwhelming application of statues, motifs, and decorative features, and most important of all, their application on high rises (Fig. 2.12). These façades became fashionable in 2008 and 2009, following the more modern-looking glass and composite façades of the early 2000s. Their ubiquity reflected the economic and political situation in Iran, speaking to the escalating rate of inflation during Ahmadinejad's second term, and the abundance of capital supply in the real estate market. In the inflated market of 2010 and 2011, where apartment building was the most profitable form of private industry, it made sense for developers and builders to use stone lavishly and to implement it in palatial forms as a competition strategy.

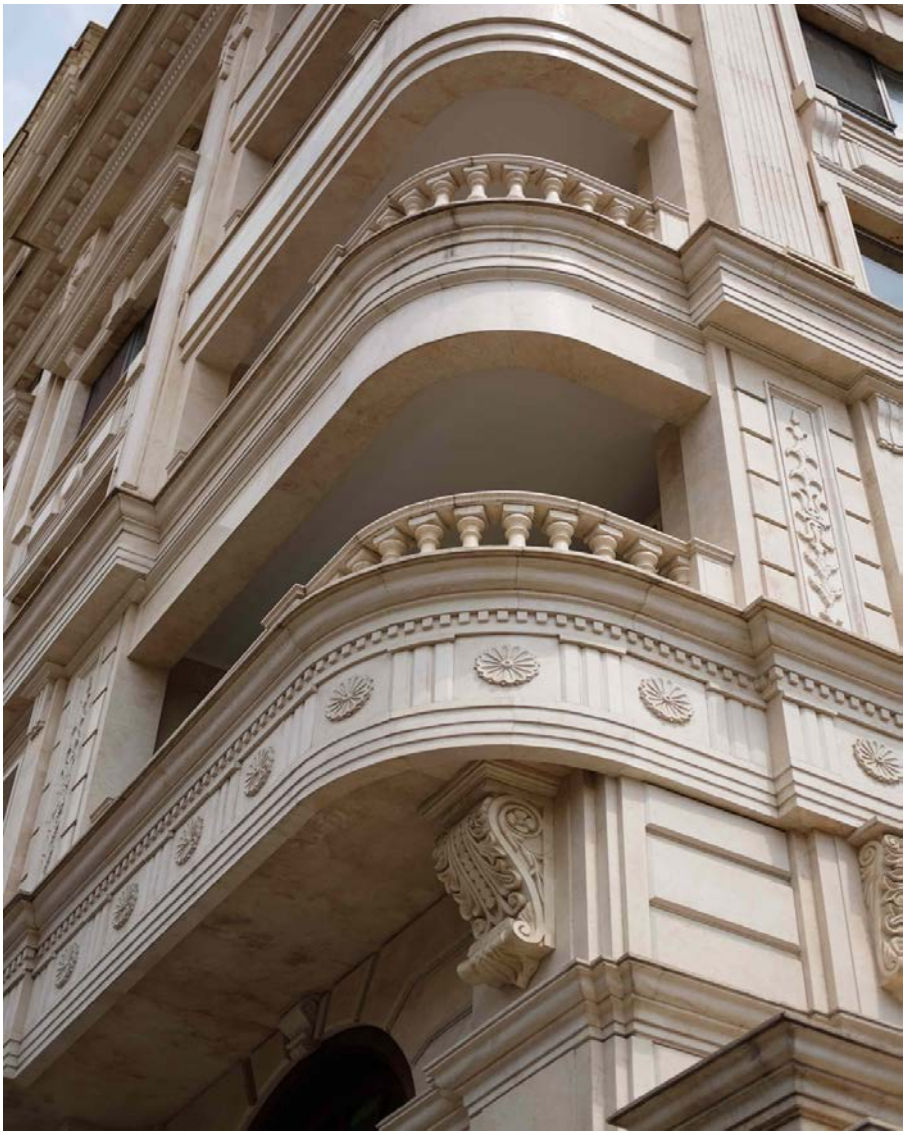

Figure 2.12: motifs and decorations on a stone Roman façade, Tehran. Source: photo taken by author, 2017

These neoclassical Roman façades were perhaps first introduced to the market through the work of the Iranian architect and developer Farzad Daliri. A graduate of Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran, Daliri is known to have branded and institutionalized the neoclassical and Greco-Roman stone façade through upscale high rises in upper class districts of Tehran (Fig. 2.13). In an interview with *Memar*, a local architectural magazine, he described himself as an architect who attended to the desires of his clients.[148] Building for mostly wealthy middle-aged clients, Daliri noted to *Memar* that he designed for a particular middle-aged lifestyle: "those who live in spaces surrounded by classical furniture and objects; those who favored classical sensibilities over modern aesthetics; those who even dressed in classical attire" (Fig. 2.14).[149]

Figure 2.13: A neoclassical façade: Bam-e-Alborz complex by Farzad Daliri, Tehran. Source: farzaddaliri.com, accessed May 10, 2018

Figure 2.14: Interior view of the Baroque-looking lobby area in Bam-e-Alborz complex. Designed by Farzad Daliri. Source: farzaddaliri.com, accessed May 10, 2018

Developers and ordinary builders who followed Daliri adopted his neoclassical façades for not just opulent high-rises, but also for ordinary residential buildings across the city. The Roman façade eventually became a symbol of wealth and affluence, and the term "luxury" became increasingly circulated when realtors and builders described these buildings.[150] The preference for Greco-Roman stone features eventually became widespread, and very soon everyone wanted to have a building adorned in a Roman façade and decorated with Roman goddesses.

Local ethnographic studies among designers and builders indicate that "a sizable percentage of buyers and clients of apartments favor classical façades," believing that "classical façades sell better in the market."[151] Even in the historic city of Isfahan, where the law forces buildings to cover at least fifty percent of the façade with brick, penalties are paid to build Roman stone façades (Fig. 2.15 & 2.16).[152] The popularity of these façades has also reached religious Iranian cities like Qom, creating concerns among city officials:

> The issue of façades is an important cultural issue that has been even noted by the Supreme Leader of Iran in his visit to Qom…Roman façades, which have become fashionable in the housing market [of Qom], are façades that belong to a particular period in Europe and have been advertised by a number of architects in Tehran. Today, even the religious city of Qom is grappling with their sprawling growth…. ordinary people are not specialists in questions of architecture and planning; they have an empty mind. Their mindset is formed by the trends of the market.[153]

Figure 2.15: An apartment complex with a Roman façade, Isfahan. Source: photo taken by author, 2018

Figure 2.16: A villa with a Roman façade, Isfahan. Source: photo taken by author, 2018

But for many residents, Roman sensibilities are not perceived as culturally irrelevant forms. A homeowner in northern Tehran believed that "these façades are not foreign to our culture. We have had similar façades in pre-Revolution times. So, they are part of our heritage. Besides, why can't Tehran look nice like Rome and Paris?"[154] Implied in her statement was a nostalgic desire for pre-revolution sensibilities, as well as a desire for being part of the network of European cities. For this particular interviewee, the Revolution divided the world both temporally and spatially, and the Roman façade was her way of healing this breach. Her version of heritage was situated within a much more recent past than that of Islamic or pre-Islamic times. It was situated with a vaguely distributed pre-Revolution history, while at the same time, being connected to the wider history of European classicism.

Naser, another interviewee argued that the Roman façade could be seen as "a continuation of our pre-Islamic Achaemenid architecture," supporting its aesthetic features via a nativist argument.[155] He continued that "our pre-Islamic architecture was built in stone and it did have classical features like columns and column capitals."[156] Commenting on the politics of stone in Iran he also lamented that "stone is an oppressed material in this country because the state favors brick as a symbol of Islamic architecture."[157] The binary between brick and stone, represented the binary of pre- and post-Islamic histories for this interviewee who was himself a manufacturer of Roman façades. He believed that stone was a much more durable material than brick and "if it wasn't for the ideological and political incentives of the state, it should have had been the main material for building façades."[158] Similar arguments were made by Hossein and Hadi, two other residents of buildings with Roman façades.[159] They also believed that Roman façades could be seen as part of our heritage. There were also comments that did not tackle ideological issues and were simply based on aesthetic judgments. Minoo, a housewife who lived

in northern Tehran, simply believed that the Roman façade was a more pleasing façade than what she called "ordinary brick façades;" she described these stone façades as "modern and chic."[160]

Contrary to the above-mentioned arguments, Ehsan and Marziye, a couple living in northern Tehran, believed that Roman façades were "a manifestation of *gharbzadegi*"—Occidentalism.[161] They saw them as a form of "self-colonization, and of seeing one's status as lower to that of the *other*."[162] The couple lived in a building with a Roman façade, but they disliked its sense of luxury and foreignness. Ehsan's father had bought the apartment for him as a wedding gift; he had selected this apartment mainly because of its good location and good floor plan, not being concerned so much about the look of the façade. But Ehsan and Marziye had ethical concerns about these façades. They were advocates of a resistant economy—an economy based on self-reliance and local values. In response to the imposed international sanctions on Iran, Ehsan and Marziye had mutually sanctioned foreign products and consumed only local goods, be they material or symbolic products.[163]

Ehsan and Marziye believed in alternative forms of social and global order. "Globalization today has been narrowly defined by the rules and orders of imperial hegemony," they believed.[164] For them, economic jihad, a concept coined by the Supreme Leader of Iran in 2014, was a form of resistance to this imperial hegemony. Ehsan and Marziye rejected the aesthetic symbols of this imperial hegemony and critiqued the Roman façade as an urban form that perpetuated a culture of "yearning for the West."[165] They also protested against the attitude of conspicuous consumption that was conveyed through these façades. Their behavior, to use Appadurai's words, showed that "various forms of abstinence can be equally *conspicuous* and socially consequential."[166] Ehsan argued that "the Roman façade is in contrast to our Islamic values of modesty and simplicity. These façades widen the gap between the rich and the poor through their palatial spirit."[167]

The couple was pointing to a clash in the missions of the Revolution—a clash between ideals and realities. In the gap between the Islamic visions of the Revolution, and the laws and regulations on paper, the Roman façade seemed to be occupying a safe zone among private builders. Based on the 25/9/87 *mosavabe shoraye-aliye shahrsazi va memari Iran*—as defined in the Comprehensive Plan of Tehran— a booklet of laws and regulations were collected in 2008 to enhance the urban appearance of Tehran. The decree encourages "purifying and enhancing façades and other building surfaces, enhancing pedestrian routes, and organizing the urban escape."[168] Both the Comprehensive Plan and the decree encourage "fundamentals of Islamic-Iranian architecture, with the use of appropriate materials, and the conformity to rules and regulations that prevent urban disorder."[169] But as a city official described in an interview, such decrees are not powerful enough on their own to "prevent the sprawl of an anti-cultural phenomenon like the Roman façade."[170]

The façade appears as a trivial component of the codes generated by the Comprehensive Plan of Tehran. It occupies a vague and passive position within the code and takes up literally two paragraphs within the entire document of the Comprehensive Plan.[171] In 2008, the city began to further enforce measures for regulating the formal attributes of the façades of under-construction buildings, and finally in 2011, the Façade Committees were established in the municipalities of each district to monitor and discipline ordinary urban façades. Being concerned with the haphazard look of the city, these committees were comprised of architects and planners responsible for monitoring the appearance of buildings as laid out in the *Guidelines for Design and Control of Urban Façades*—a document later gathered by *mo'avenat-e-shahrsazi va memari* in 2014.

The Guideline defines the façade as "the exterior surface of the building, which is visible from the outside, and has a volume and a form, and is comprised of details like open and closed surfaces, as well as horizontal and vertical dividers."[172] The Guideline further insists that the "façade be indicative of the function of the building."[173] The main features of the façade are listed as "materiality, entrance, openings, roof, and skyline," and the Guideline lists a series of mandatory and suggestive criteria in relation to them. Under the topic of *"*necessities" the Guideline asks builders to avoid "uncommon and exotic forms such as a ship, a figure, fruits, etc.," as well as "signs and symbols that perpetuate anti-religious and anti-cultural beliefs."[174] Along similar lines, under the topic of *"*suggestions" the Guideline asks builders to "use indigenous and vernacular materials," and "take advantage of Islamic-Iranian values in designing façades."[175]

But despite the rigorous work of these committees across the city, the existence of informal negotiation routes, as well as loopholes such as Article-100 of the Municipality's Law, can allow builders to bypass the advice of the Façade Committees and build their desired façades as a form of exception. In the absence of an organized system of property taxation in Iran, the municipality collects these penalties as a form of taxation or as hidden bribery. Signatures are exchanged through bribes without the involvement of any protocols or any committees. For ordinary citizens, the only window into these corruptions is the visible illegalities that have colonized the city over the years.

Tehran is thus visibly a manifestation of an elastic code—a city built through unjust monetary negotiations. In many instances, one witnesses two adjacent apartments, where one has obeyed the rules and one has transgressed them (Fig.2.17). Such adjacencies invoke many questions about the power of the law and its effectiveness in society. They also invoke many questions about social inequality and power. Through the elasticity of the code, the city is consumed as a permissible space, where wealthy developers and builders dominate the city and its imagery. In their speculative practices, they also regulate the market taste through varying trends. The Roman façade, which is in a sense a revival of pre-Revolution neoclassical tendencies, is one manifestation of these temporary trends that have emerged in a timely fashion under the politics of sanctions.

Figure 2.17: A comparative illustration in the District one's guideline for designing façades; the illustration compares a good and a bad façade, showing how the building façade in the bottom image has a transgression in its skyline. Source: "The Handbook of Regulations for the Management of Urban Façades in District 1, Tehran," Tehran Municipality and the Department of Urban Planning in District 1 (March 2012)

Conclusion

"Tehran, with these Roman façades, has become a stone quarry. District One in Tehran has turned into a vertical excavation; now what does *Hegmataneh* [a historic city in Iran] have to offer to an architectural student?" cries Lia, the protagonist in Reza Amirkhani's most recent novel, *Rahesh*.[176] She is a non-practicing architect who is critical of the pervasiveness of commercial construction in Tehran, and is married to a practicing architect who works for the

municipality. Lia's husband is an advocate of development and modernization. He is proud of the number of cranes that are assembled in Tehran and evaluates the city based on the number of construction sites.[177]

The novel narrates the couple's constant debates over the city and depicts the struggles of two opposing viewpoints on what the city should be about. The protagonist's life is interwoven with the city; her feelings reflect the post-Revolution urban trajectories of Tehran. She reads the city, talks to the city, and at moments, becomes one with the city:

> and what have they done for me? After thirty years of living together, no one even celebrated me with a monument. Am I a woman? They only built for me an incomplete *mossala* [a Friday mosque] and that was it—something that was meant to be my source of connection but failed.[178]

The protagonist morns the erasure of old gardens and big orchards. She is nostalgic about *kolangi* structures and hates the growth of apartments: apartments "whose balconies (common spaces) have shrunk and whose lobby rooms have expanded day by day;" apartments "whose façades have become prettier and whose structures have become weaker day by day."[179] Lia likens the landscape of apartments to "boxes of tissue paper" that are precariously assembled on top of one another and are adorned with thin layers of "postmodern" decorations.[180] In an encounter with one of these postmodern apartment, the protagonists posits: "I look at the top of the fountain; there is a statue of a fat lady who does not look like Anahita [a Persian Goddess]. The fat lady has a closed fist around her breasts, pushing water out of them."[181] The female figure is a common Renaissance motif, used all the way up through the French Revolution. It is an allegory of nurturing in the western culture. The figure, out of its context, makes Lia laugh as she feels sorry for how the city and its architecture are influenced by the aesthetic trends of developers and their superficial borrowings from a different culture.

The protagonist is also cognizant of the politics of the state in shaping the city. She reads into the city-wide infrastructure of highways and connects them to the practices of builders to explain how Tehran is shaped through a vicious cycle of development. Driving in her car in an incomplete highway, Lia explains to her four-year-old son that "to build the second story of the highway we need to make money. We should get the money from those who want to build big apartments. When we build new big apartments, the owners buy more cars, and when there are more cars, we need to build more highways, ..." and the cycle goes on.[182]

The simple cycle, which Lia paints for her son, points to a complex field of political and economic relations that guide the speculative urbanism of a city like Tehran in a condition where neoliberal changes are coupled with developmentalist politics, and space is produced as investment under the global forces of sanctions and the local responses of the society. The cycle alludes to a form of governance that operates based on networks of relations between state officials, city managers, realtors, builders and ordinary investors—a network which is also reinforced by corruption and corruption stories.

In weaving corruption stories into the narrative of the chapter, I was interested in offering a window into the ways through which builders and investors turned the question of architecture and urban planning into a political question about the state.[183] Further research is thus required to examine how these rhetorical practices, namely corruption stories and gossip about the bureaucratic structure of the city give builders and developers more power over the production of space.

Builders and realtors also invoked sanctions as another mechanism to enter the realm of the state. I looked into how sanctions as an external force were domesticated by the real estate community as a form of uncertainty about the future, and how this uncertainty served as a pretext for speculation and the rhetoric of productivity. "The talk of sanctions" functioned as a mechanism for many realtors and builders to evaluate the real estate market and its productivity within the city based on a specific before-and-after narrative. I looked at how speculation and investment were seen by these groups as forms of production, and how apartments where enacted as "forms-in-circulation"—as objects that needed to be constantly animated across a landscape of investment. Interviewed subjects thus viewed apartments and the city as a constantly gentrifying form, where practices of demolition and rebuilding assured the economic survival of the residents and workers.

Ethnographic stories showed that the speculative logic of building and the economy of investment have influenced how people imagine their homes and how they make decisions for future accommodations. In a city where buildings are viewed as "kolangi" and "dilapidated" at the age of twenty, and in a condition where speculation along with the power of the codes push for maximum profit, buildings are operationalized as circulating capital, with spatial qualities pushed to the very bottom of the list of building attributes, and formal qualities (such as façades) elevated to the top. The analysis on Roman façades emphasized this aspect of the landscape of investment.

The next chapter is a continuation of this chapter looking into the position which architects take towards the practices of builders, realtors, and investors. I look into the critique of speculative building and the emergence of alternative architectural practices in reaction to the expanding landscape of investment.

Notes and References

[1] My Interview with "Nasim" took place in Tehran on May 23, 2017.
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[8] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (BlackwellPublishing, 1991 [1974]), p. 222.
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[11] Ibid., 20.
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[15] Ibid., 123.
[16] Kaveh Ehsani, "Survival Through Dispossession," *Middle East Report*, The Islamic Revolution at 30, no. 250 (2009): 26–33.
[17] Ibid., 29.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ehsani, "Municipal Matters: The Urbanization of Consciousness and Political Change in Tehran," p. 24.
[21] Ehsani, "Survival Through Dispossession," p. 29.
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[24] Ibid., 127-129.
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[26] This argument is based on interviews with ten homeowners in Northern Tehran in November 2017.
[27] I am using Nicholas D'Avella's provocation in Nicholas D'Avella, "From Banks to Bricks: Architecture, Investment, and Neighborhood Life in Buenos Aires, Argentina" (PhD dissertation, University of California, 2012), p. 42.
[28] My interviews with "Nader," "Mehrdad," and "Amir" took place in Tehran in November and October 2017.
[29] My interview with "Nader" took place in Tehran in October 2017.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Teresa Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Univ of California Press, 2000), p. 19.
[35] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 255-275.
[36] My interview with "Nader" took place in Tehran in October 2017.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Blackwell Publishing, 1991), p. 336.
[42] Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo, p. 28*.
[43] Ibid.
[44] My interview with "Mehrdad" took place in Tehran in November 2017.
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[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] My interview with "Farhad" took place in Tehran in November 2017.
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[52] My interview with "Mani" took place in Tehran in December 2017.
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[55] Ibid., 186.
[56] Ibid.
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[71] Ibid., 127-128. Note that the same situation happened in 2018 and 2019, when the re-imposition of sanctions created a temporary boom within the housing market. The above-mentioned studies have been done prior to the impositions of these sanctions.
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[73] Ibid.
[74] Nam, "Speculative Urbanism: The Remaking of Phnom Penh," p. 20.
[75] My interview with "Ramin" and "Shahram" took place in Tehran in November 2017 and January 2018.
[76] My interview with "Ramin" and "Shahram" took place in Tehran in November 2017.
[77] My interview with "Ramin" and "Shahram" took place in Tehran in January 2018.
[78] My interview with "Saman" took place in Tehran in January 2018.
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[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] My interview with "Mina" took place in Tehran in March 2017.
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[105] Ibid.
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[114] My interviews with "Samin," "Naser," and "Mona" took place in May 2017.
[115] My interview with "Hamid" took place in Tehran in January 2018.
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[118] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 336.
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[159] My interviews with "Hossein" and "Hadi" took place in Tehran in November 2017.
[160] My interview with "Minoo" took place in Tehran in September 2017.
[161] My interviews with "Ehsan" and "Marziye" took place in Tehran in February 2017.
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[169] Ibid.
[170] My interview with "Saeed" took place in Tehran in January 2018.
[171] See "The Codes and Regulations of the New Comprehensive Plan of Tehran" (Tehran Municipality and the Department of Architecture and Urban Development, 2012), pp. 49 & 51. The first paragraph, which is located on page 49 of the booklet of the code basically refers the readers to a booklet on façade regulations as organized by the Committee in Charge of Iran's Architecture and Urbanism. The paragraph briefly notes that façade design should be based on the fundamentals of "Iranian-Islamic Architecture." The second paragraph in the booklet is located on page 51 and it asks Tehran's main municipality to publish a collection of regulations and instructions on façade design for the consumption of builders. The paragraph also puts the municipality in charge of regulating and monitoring the overall appearance of the city.
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[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid., 5-6.
[176] Reza Amirkhani, *Rahesh* (Nashr-e-Ofogh, 2017), p. 10. Note that the title of the book, *Rahesh*, is the backward writing of the word *Shahr*, which in Persian means city. The title implies that the city of Tehran is going backwards rather than forward.
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[178] Ibid., 79.
[179] Ibid., 23.
[180] Ibid., 41, 73.
[181] Ibid., 37.
[182] Ibid., 61.
[183] See also: D'avella, "From Banks to Bricks: Architecture, Investment, and Neighborhood Life in Buenos Aires, Argentina," p. 117.

Chapter 3. The Economy of Architectural Imagination

Sanctions, Modernity, and the Search for Alternative Practices Among Iranian Architects

Introduction

In continuation of chapter 3, where the practices of ordinary builders, realtors, and investors were explored, this chapter looks into the activities of architects as another player within the context of Iran's construction market. Working among a group of Iranian architects, I explore how the contemporary culture of architecture in Iran is marked by a concern for being "modern"—a concern fueled by a desire to carve a position within the global community of architecture on the one hand, and within the local construction market on the other. Critical of the current marginality of architecture as a local and transnational profession, these architects implemented different strategies to challenge the contemporary status of architecture. I document how architects narrated the unfolding economic condition—namely, the politics of sanctions and the economy of recession—and how they invented alternative professional, disciplinary and pedagogical strategies to come to terms with it. I then discuss how recent ruminations on the dialectics of tradition and modernity have developed out of a close dialogue with these specific economic and political conditions, pushing the debate on modernity beyond its traditional disciplinary and professional boundaries.

As a manifestation of the economic crisis in the past decade, the recession often found its way into the analysis of the interviewed architects. It was discussed as an outcome of sanctions, or as an outcome of their partial removal during the first term of President Rouhani. Having more direct impact on the construction market, the recession was more tangibly felt among practicing architects than sanctions themselves, and thus more vividly present in their everyday calculations and conversations. Unlike sanctions, which for the interviewed architects represented an economic and political condition of scarcity and deprivation, the recession allowed them to better compete in the housing market and come up with new strategies to reinvent the boundaries of their profession. Iranian architects engaged with the recession as a productive platform for competition and experimentation. They enacted the recession as an opportunity for reworking the local-global dynamics of "Iranian identity," and described it as a space of recovery from "threatening" forces, be they market-driven construction, incomplete modernization, global isolation, and sanctions.

Although for some of these architects the recession had provided an opportunity to experiment with new projects and new theoretical ruminations on the concepts of tradition and modernity, the space in which the larger discourse of tradition and modernity was evolving was contoured through a much more complex interplay of various psychological, technological, political and economic forces that the country was grappling with. The recession was just a small temporary manifestation of certain economic and political dynamics that unfolded within the larger space of sanctions. Yet as a tangible point of reference, it allowed for more direct analysis within a particular window of observation among several architectural offices.

The focus of this observation was on offices that could be characterized by their "architectural activism"—*talash-gari memaraneh*—as one local architect termed it in Farsi.[1] Often small-scale practices, but renowned in their professional community, these firms were actively concerned with the relationship between the discipline and the profession of

architecture. Accordingly, they could afford the opportunity to experiment with new ideas and methods. To use Magali Sarfatti Larson's term, these were the "professional elite," who also had the opportunity to write about and represent the discourse through architectural magazines, websites, installations, exhibitions, symposiums, and other professional media.[2] In 2017 and 2018, what seemed to be really shaking the profession from within was the ambitious implementation of a multiplicity of media by these figures to animate and broadcast new ways of taking the profession forward.

I narrate this chapter as multiple "scenes" as if in a cinematic representation, to emphasize the scattered yet related debates on contemporary architecture in Iran. This is to show that these debates are currently formed as glimpses within the discipline rather than a wholistic discourse. The glimpses are very cinematic in the way they animate architecture through different media and different representations.

Scene One: The White Boxes of Architecture

On the second-largest plot in the Venice Art Biennale of 2015, the national exhibition of Iran hosted an architectural section designed and narrated by the prominent architect Nashid Nabian. Concerning the installation, titled *The Little Game of Architecture*, Nabian offered the following terse commentary on what could be interpreted as the isolated situation of "real architecture" in Iran:

> Hundreds of thousands of square meters are built in Iran each year. A very small fraction of this massive construction can be called *real architecture*! Little Game, is an individual performance, collaboratively performed by the audience, to experience the *awkward* role that architecture plays in the mainstream construction industry (my emphasis added).[3]

According to the exhibition's director, 64 projects were selected from a pool of projects built in Iran, and each project was allowed to represent itself through an "artistic" image and a caption that offered "a glimpse into the contemporary architecture of Iran."[4] The installation was then assembled in the form of sixteen floating white cubes, elevated one and a half meters above the ground (Fig. 3.1). According to Nabian, each cube housed photographs of "four celebrated architecture pieces, which [were to] be experienced in an immersive fashion" (Fig. 3.2).[5]

As Nabian further elaborated in her description of the cubes in the exhibition booklet:

> A limiting set of dimensions allows for a different corporeal understanding of these pieces. This involves certain visual intimacy with the fourfold. Trapped within the box, celebrate them as isolated text, independent of the context of their conception [sic].[6]

Figure 3.1: The Little Game of Architecture: Iran's installation at the Venice Biennale of 2015, by architect Nashid Nabian. Source: Courtesy of Mehrdad Zavareh Mohammadi, 2018

Standing within the boundaries of the cubes, viewers were thus urged to understand Iranian "architecture" as occurring in a state of being "trapped within the box."[7] The box functioned as a visual device, operating simultaneously on multiple levels and laminating different imaginations into one panoramic organization. It cleaved the viewer from the larger exhibit, and at the same time, separated architecture from the world, making it an autonomous object and thus part of a rarefied field of practice. The box also functioned as a political device; it separated Iran from the rest of the world.

On first glance, one might conclude that context did not seem to matter to Nabian, and its absence as part of the very form of the installation spoke to a widespread "Pevsnerian" dichotomy between architecture and mere building.[8] Urban background had simply been erased from the scene of the installation. Perhaps, ordinary buildings and ordinary people were too chaotic and disorderly to be displayed here, and they had been Orientalize for the sake of global and disciplinary consumption. But on second glance, one could read the installation as a satirical commentary on the situation of Iranian architects. Nabian noted in an interview, that "the white cubes represent the isolated colonies of architects in Iran—their bounded frames detached from the wider context of commercial construction."[9] Viewed in this fashion, in the limited dimension of the box, there seems to be a double action, even a paradox, that pointed out Architects' limited power within the society, while also preserving it as a special autonomous field that could correct the life outside of the box.

Here, the white surface of the box perhaps also alludes to Iranian architects' love for modernist aesthetics. It also seems to subvert the "black box"—a metaphor that Reyner Banham, among others, used to refer to the elitism of the profession and the "academic snobbery" that defines what can be categorized as "architecture."[10] The white box here is not so different from the black box, and perhaps Nabian is commenting on being trapped within professional structures not of her making.

Figure 3.2: Looking through the white boxes of Nashid Nabian's installation at the Venice Biennale of 2015. Source: Courtesy of Mehrdad Zavareh Mohammadi, 2018

In 2018, Nabian further argued that "Iran has not been registered as a significant spot within the global landscape of architecture, even though architects are building a lot in Iran."[11] she added: "we are building a lot compared to architects in Europe and North America, but isn't it strange that we don't have a place within the local context of construction?"[12] She believed that group exhibitions such as these biennales could allow architects to represent their works collectively, and this collectivity, could precisely become the key for architecture to acquire a position both within the local construction market of Iran and among the global community.[13] More importantly, the collective representation of a culture of architecture was a good "discourse-making" practice, as it allowed for a critical engagement with a body of works that were usually not put into conversation with each other.[14]

The projects displayed within the boxes were selected based on their ability to create a "dialogue between tradition and modernity."[15] One of the architects who was in charge of organizing the event believed that "only those projects that looked to the local were able to go global. In other words, those that created a conversation between the past and the present, were able to access the world of architecture."[16] Ironically, such a view was being presented at an exhibition whose grand theme was *All the World's Futures*. Under the politics of globalization, and the forces that contoured the recent history of Iran, the past, present and future seemed to have collapsed into one another for these architects, and so had tradition and modernity.

In 2015, when the installation was being designed, these temporalities had further coincided with the economic and political realities of international sanctions against the Iranian government and the ongoing construction recession that was more than ever making architects conscious of their professional position locally and globally. If architects' isolated colonies from the construction market had become the main narrative for introducing Iran's contemporary architecture in a global gathering on "All the World's Futures," then something was indeed

spilling out from the white boxes of Nabian—something that responded to the very specific economic and political situation in Iran.

Interestingly, Nabian's installation did not end in Venice. It was restaged three more times in Yerevan, Armenia, and in Tehran and Isfahan in Iran. Mehrdad Zavareh Mohammadi, the exhibition director, hosted the events in Tehran and Yerevan in October 2015 and September 2016 respectively, as a way to present the accomplishments of contemporary Iranian architects (Fig. 3.3). And Ehsan Hosseini, an architect practicing in Isfahan, who had also been involved in the Venice installation, re-presented it in Isfahan in November 2015, advertising it as the "Iranian Pavilion in the Venice Biennale of 2015" (Fig. 3.4).

With the re-exhibition of the installation inside the country, the represented image of Iranian architecture was consumed locally as evidence of international acclaim. Indeed, in consuming what Shawhin Roudbari has called a "spectacle of transnationalism," the exhibition of Iranian architecture for the *other* became more important than the work itself.[17] Thus "transnational credibility" became a new resource to promote local architectural authority.[18] For Dana, a local architect who participated in one of these exhibitions, the "consumption of the spectacle of transnationalism" did not seem so hurtful to the profession in a context where architecture as a discipline suffered from a lack of collective production.[19] These efforts, she argued, "could benefit the profession if they stimulated further discursive conversations around theoretical topics such as tradition and modernity as a collective effort".[20]

The installation, as performed inside and outside of its original context, thus offered a glimpse into how the local and global, as well as the modern and the traditional merged into one another in contemporary Iranian architecture. The poster designed by Ehsan Hosseini's firm could be read as a reflection of these thoughts. For an astute viewer, there is an immediate reference to Kaaba (although this may not have been on the architect's mind) with the black box turned white, Mecca transformed to Venice, and the solidity of tradition hollowed out in order to create a technique of observation from the inside rather than the circuits of pilgrimage around the Kaaba, whose inside is to remain mysterious. The heaviness of tradition is remade as light, so light in fact that it can be suspended. But it still trails tendrils of black calligraphy, thus connecting it back to tradition. [21]

Figure 3.3: the poster for re-staging the Little Game of Architecture in Yerevan, 2016. Source: Courtesy of Mehrdad Zavareh Mohammadi

Figure 3.4: the poster announcing the re-exhibition of the Little Game in Isfahan. Source: Courtesy of Mehrdad Zavareh Mohammadi, 2018

Scene Two: "Have We Become Modern in Iran?"

"Have we become modern in Iran?" asks Yaser Mousapour, in a talk on *Contemporariness* in Tarbiat Moadarres University in April 2018.[22] His question echoes Bruno Latour's provocation "we have never been modern," but he takes his answer to a different direction. He continues:

> No, we haven't. We have only *published* our works in western media. We will become modern only if we are able to create something that would expand the universal stream of knowledge—when we are able to cast something of our own towards that intellectual direction.[23]

Mousapour is perhaps one of the most active intellectuals among the architectural community in Iran, considering the number of lectures and seminars that he has performed in the past few years. He is among a young generation of leading architects and theorists in Iran who are engaged in a project of establishing an intellectual tradition for Iranian architecture and redefining its disciplinary borders. This chapter opens by his words because his polemics set up the ground for the arguments that unfold later. His name is repeatedly brought up in this chapter because his voice is also conspicuously present in contemporary architectural circles in Iran. A brief summary of his analysis here unpacks some of the key questions and concerns that are posed to the discipline today.

Inspired by the work of the contemporary Iranian philosopher and cultural theorist, Dariush Shayegan, Mousapour argues that "Iranians have spent the past couple of centuries in a historical holiday."[24] This means that that they have not participated in the "universal" process of knowledge production in the watershed moments of the history of architecture: "We haven't offered new thoughts for augmenting the universal knowledge of architecture. We have only produced *projects* without contributing to the discourse of architectural history."[25] Following Morad Farhadpour in *The Melancholic Mind*, Mousapour believes that "there has been no tradition of thinking in Iran about architecture, at least since the Mongol conquest of Khawrezmia in the 13th century."[26] He agrees with Farhadpour's philosophy that the only method for producing knowledge in this situation is through the work of translation:

> Translation here becomes a form of thinking about both the west and the east. Alberti returned to Vitruvius and translated him to produce new knowledge. But no matter how far back we go, Iranians don't have a Vitruvius to translate. We would need to translate from the traditions of others.[27]

Mousapour believes that we could not talk about our modernity if we do not reconnect to a "universal" tradition of knowledge production through the work of translation. Through translation, he argues, we would then be able to "graft," as in planting, "into the thick trunk of historical experience."[28] There is thus something utopian to translation for Mousapour. Through translation, he is interested in a "horizon of expectation," joined to a past that is western.

But his rhetoric could be viewed as controversial on some grounds. In asking for translation, he has this idea that translation is a rational one-to-one experience. Besides that, his fertile metaphor seems hauntingly reminiscent of Bannister Fletcher's "Tree of Architecture," which is a diagram of western superiority and a manifestation of Orientalism (Fig. 3.5).[29] Mousapour's metaphor assumes, in a troubling way, that there is such a thing as a "universal" tree, grown and located within a western tradition of knowledge production. The concept of universality comes out of the Enlightenment. To call something universal is to talk about

something that rises above all differences and this is a concept rooted in a western tradition, and as part of modernism, it is about being ahistorical. Furthermore, grafting itself is also a precarious act as it means that one needs to be cut from its context and then added to something else in order to grow. This too could be viewed as an Orientalizing metaphor.

But aside from these objections, the word universal seems to be performing a certain kind of temporal and geographical work for Mousapour. For him, universality de-historicizes architecture in Iran; it connects architecture to a tradition that pretends not to be a tradition. It also performs a geographical function for him. Universality is about being ageographical in the sense that one can be Iranian and also be part of the world. Mousapour insists that this form of connection is different from being a mere "consumer" of a knowledge: "I am not talking about how we should make that knowledge ours or how we should localize it; I am talking about a much bigger project of creating something *of ours* and contributing it to the universal direction of knowledge production."[30] Of course the problem with this is that he seems to think that the only way to measure an Iranian contribution is if it became part of western learning.

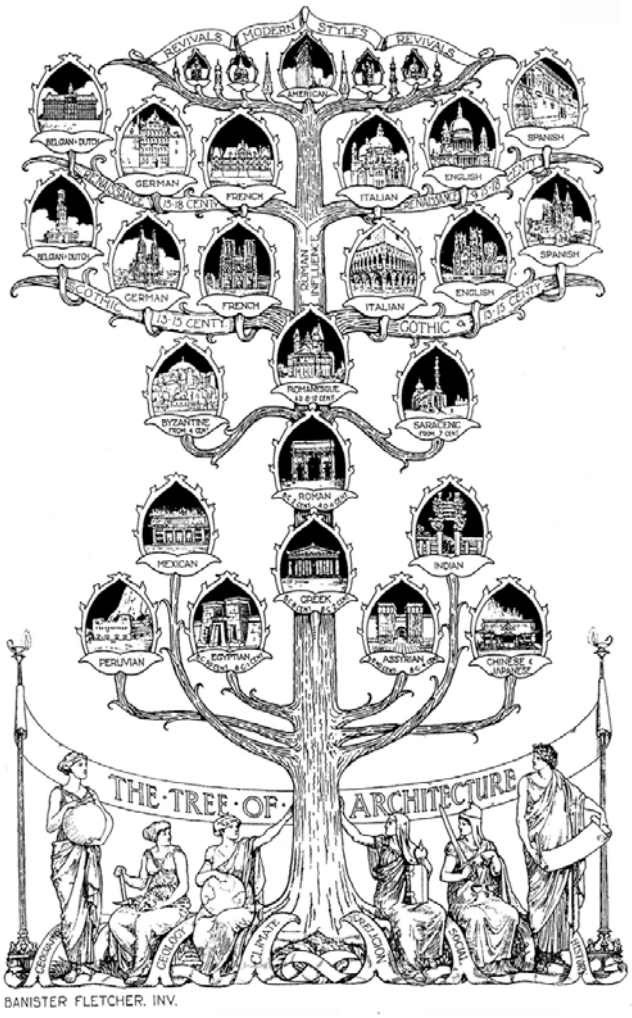

Figure 3.5: "The Tree of Architecture," from the 1956 edition of Banister Fletcher's A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method. Source: The Genealogical World of Phylogenetic Networks (blog), http://phylonetworks.blogspot.com/2015/07/the-tree-of-architecture.html, accessed July 5, 2019

For a non-consumerist engagement with universal knowledge, Mousapour offers two examples. He believes that in these two important historical moments, the west accepted the participation of eastern knowledge in the path of modernity: "the Japanese Metabolism movement and the Russian Constructivism."[31] In both cases, the movements were born out of "a direct conversation with the very specific local conditions of their societies, and both participated in the expansion of the universal history of architecture."[32] Mousapour believes that "Iranian architects have not come close to this form of discursive imagining of architectural production."[33] In his rhetoric, he views the west as the superior entity who is in charge of "hosting" or "accepting" eastern participation.

In an interview, he mentioned only one instance, the "infill" theory by the Iranian architect Nashid Nabian, which possessed the capacity to turn into a bigger architectural movement (Fig. 3.6).[34] The infill speaks to the very concrete physical and bureaucratic limitations in which architects have to design apartments in the urban setting of Tehran, and it tries to create a new dynamic relationship between open and closed spaces by challenging the conventional hard borders between the two.[35] As an architectural "type," Nabian's infill stands against the culture of building by square-meters calculations, and it tries to invoke new spatial possibilities within the building codes of the city.[36]

Figure 3.6: Illustration by Nashid Nabian's office on the concept of the infill. Source: http://www.tuic.ir/en/project/infill-3-0-an-extreme-future-for-the-urban-context-of-tehran, accessed March 10, 2019

"EIlkhaneh," an apartment project designed by Nabian and his partner Rambod EIlkhani, is a fine example of Nabian's "infill" theory (Fig. 3.7). The house seeks to revitalize "the intrinsic complexities of interior spaces that were the product of well-crafted sectional and planar connections [sic]" in traditional Iranian domestic spaces.[37] EIlkhane, which means a "tribe house," looks into "the possibility of designing for real homes within the framework of erecting an infill apartment."[38] Unlike the typical flats built every day by developers in Tehran, EIlkhneh tries to invent a new complex spatial relationship between the plan and section. For example, the floors of apartment units in several instances are broken into different levels, where small rooms are carved out for different functions within a single space (Fig. 3.8). A small play zone is

designed in a declivity in the living room, and a kitchen is formed as a hole in the ground. In creating such moments, the house does not shy away from creating unconventional arrangements and daring juxtapositions to challenge the norms of design and construction.

Figure 3.7: Eilkhaneh residence by architects Nashid Nabian and Rambod Eilkhani, 2014. Source: https://www.shiftprocesspractice.ir/projects/eilkhaneh/, accessed June 12, 2018

Figure 3.8: Interior caption within the Eilkhaneh by Nashid Nabian and Rambod Eilkhani, 2014. Source: shiftprocesspractice.ir, accessed June 12, 2018

Particular moments stand out in the building, like the cooking oven tucked into the staircase of the first-floor living room, or the staircase itself, which is cut in half, one part sitting on the ground and one part floating from the ceiling to create a shelf space in the middle (Fig. 3.9). Another instance of critique involves the kitchen counter, designed to be at the same level as the floor of the living room (Fig. 3.10). Such details can be seen as reflecting "defamiliarization," to use James Holston's term for the practice in modern architecture of making space strange through transformations that challenge expectations.[39] The cooking oven, the floating staircase and the kitchen counter are all very modern gestures aimed at reinventing new spatial relationships within a building by upsetting the norms and the habits of everyday life, challenging unquestioned values, and reinventing traditional spatial qualities. By making the oven, the sink, and the staircase appear as strange objects, Nabian renews the users' perceptions of them in an exercise to invoke an attitude of critical evaluation of architecture.

Figure 3 9: the oven located near the living room on the first floor of Eilkhaneh, 2014. Source: shiftprocesspractice.ir, accessed June 12, 2018

Figure 3.10: the kitchen counter on the first-floor apartment in Eilkhaneh, 2014. Source: shiftprocesspractice.ir, accessed June 12, 2018

Such gestures resemble the kinds of juxtapositions evident in landmarks of modern architecture. Among these one might point to the entrance to Le Corbusier's Villa Savoy, where the choreography of an out-of-place sink, a column, a lamp and a staircase together form an unfamiliar spatial assemblage (Fig. 3.11). This space, as Michael Hays has put it, "is the most modern space" in this iconic structure, created through the collaboration of the column and the lamp in highlighting the location of the sink.[40] The sink also provides a stunning contrast for Le Corbusier, since it makes the house appear much more current. It dates the house as contemporary. Here, Le Corbusier has in a sense monumentalized the sink and the act of washing hands, thus giving form to a whole new conscious experience of everyday life with issues like sanitation being a big part of it. Perhaps, Nabian's strange oven in the staircase of the living room is likewise a monument to modernity's attitude of critique towards the social and cultural norms that govern the practices of everyday life, as well as the conventions of design and construction in Iran today.

Figure 3.11: the entrance to Le Corbusier's villa Savoy (1928-1931). Source: archdaily.com, accessed April 10, 2019

For a critique like Mousapour, Eilkhaneh is a manifestation of a new culture of practice against the conventional ways of building apartments in Tehran, or what was mentioned earlier as the "logic of painted boxes."[41] Through the example of the infill and the provocation of painted boxes, Mousapour draws attention to an urgent need for a collective discursive power through which Iranian architects could change their relationship with the established norms and

codes of the built environment, and this power would only be accomplished if they paid close attention to the social, economic, and political specificities of Iranian cities.[42] His arguments and examples echo Nasrine Seraji's statement, that in Iran, "perhaps because architecture is primarily associated with the act of construction, it is neither intellectual nor discursive."[43] Later in an interview, Seraji, a prominent Iranian architect practicing abroad, elaborated that "our architecture could only become powerful intellectually if we begin to problematize the context rather than ignore it."[44] These architects were thus trying to reactivate the very context from which architects usually separated themselves from—the context which also laid outside of the white boxes of Nabian in the Venice Biennale exhibition.

Drawing from my ethnographic observations among twenty practicing architects in Iran, however, I show that there are indeed emerging spatial narratives that are being shaped in relation to the very specific political-economic condition in Iran in the past few decades. These pathways offer new intellectual platforms for the topic of tradition and modernity and new possibilities for discursive and theoretical ventures, without being self-conscious of accepted norms and canons of knowledge such as "universality."

On the Discourse of Tradition and Modernity

The topic of tradition and modernity has been somewhat exhausted in Iranian architectural circles. Interviews suggest that traditional ways of approaching the topic do not serve the contemporary intellectual needs of the younger generation of architect scholars. Indeed, the relationship between tradition and modernity in Iran's contemporary architecture is no longer that of an either/or relationship. Iranian architects, especially in the past few decades, have been widely experimenting with this dialectical relationship through actual built projects. Yet, what is still missing is a discursive platform through which the spectrum of meanings for both tradition and modernity could be explored in relation to the global discourse on modernity and tradition on the one hand, and in relation to the very geopolitical specificities of Iran on the other hand. As Parsa Khalili has argued, "instead of asking the old question of 'is this modern?' we should now be asking 'how is this modern?" and this question should be understood among a combination of relations and events that together form the contemporary history of Iran.[45]

One problem is that architectural writings on the topic of tradition and modernity in Iran are mostly circumscribed within a narrow understanding of the two terms. Most histories of architecture and urbanism in Iran define modernity as an unquestionably western phenomenon and most of them continue to equate the notion of "tradition" with *gozashte*—the past.[46] At the same time, the majority of accounts on architecture and modernity have a canonical narrative on modernism focusing on certain architectural canons such as state projects in the early 20th century.[47] These texts pay less attention to the experience of modernity in small, everyday architectural interventions. The same canonical lens also dominates histories of "traditional" buildings—as seen, for example, in the writings of Mohammad Pirniya in the1980s and 1990s, which continue to serve as major textbooks in Iranian architecture schools.[48]

In recent years, influenced by Marshall Berman's conception of modernity, accounts of architecture and modernity have been more or less focused on narratives of destruction and reconstruction, curtailing the modernity of Iran to a Faustian experience of development and modernization.[49] Berman's renowned book, *All that is Solid Melts into the Air*, is more and more celebrated among Iranian architects.[50] The book is considered a key document in the circles of Iranian architects who are interested in writing critically on the modernity of the city. Mohsen

Habibi's *Intellectual Trends in the Contemporary Iranian Architecture and Urbanism*, for instance, references the first chapter of the book in this manner:

> Modernity, in the past century, despite being pronounced differently here, has proven to be fundamentally similar to its western definitions. Accordingly, endless destruction and reconstruction have prevented us from collecting our local experiences. Today, we have been standing on our century-long reconstructions like Goethe's Faust, and happy with what we have done, we are looking forward to erasing the last remnants of life and tradition.[51]

Here, like in most Iranian architectural writings, modernity is understood as a purely western phenomenon, disengaged from the broad tapestry of postcolonial debates on alternative modernities.[52] The use of words like "incomplete modernity" or "copycat modernity" are frequently used among architects in Iran, and these terms are usually theorized as an experience of "modernity without going through complete modernization," an argument similar to that of Marshal Berman in describing the "modernity of underdevelopment" in St. Petersburg.[53] In describing Tehran's modernity, Hani Abtahi, for example, writes: "Tehran has always looked to the West from the time that it wanted to become like the Paris of Haussmann…Even efforts for the Islamisization of the city could not prevent the city's construction frenzy and a desire for an imported modernity."[54] Such interpretations are important because they "cast the question of being modern in the universalist idiom of Western reforms," as Ananya Roy puts it in a different context.[55] They inevitably dictate a high and low relationship between the west and the east.

The engagement of Iranian architects with particular economic and political conditions in the past few years, nonetheless, has invoked new modes of operation and new intellectual pathways within the profession and the discipline. Not surprisingly, as it has been experienced in other contexts around the world, Iranian architects are investing in new strategies to sustain and rework their practice through the sanctions and the recession, and some of these nascent efforts are intriguing new disciplinary dialogues. Interviewed architects spoke of local and transnational pathways that allowed them to overcome these economic conditions of scarcity and invent new opportunities out of them.

American architectural historians have already discussed similar experiences in the context of the Great Depression in the United States. Among many themes, this body of work has examined how architects reinvented the boundaries of their profession during difficult times by assuming new visionary roles and invoking utopian discourses.[56] Scholars have explored how architects shifted the focus of their design to new urban-architectural practices.[57] They have also studied how architects produced new stylistic trends and aesthetic sensibilities and how they re-invested in tropes such as heritage and tradition as a way of bypassing the crisis of the present.[58] Interestingly, the consumption of tradition and modernity has been a recurring theme in this scholarship. Case studies show how narratives of nostalgia became a tool to imagine alternative temporalities by either looking backward or looking forward. The Iranian example contributes to this literature by offering an ethnographic study of tradition and modernity, in a time where the confluence of recession and sanctions has animated a space for alternative architecture and transnational practices.

On the Path of an Alternative Iranian Architecture

In response to the unfolding political-economic transformations in the past decade, and the inability of official academic institutions to incorporate these changes into their programs, a young generation of architects has been searching for "alternatives" in defining the disciplinary

and the professional status of architecture in Iran. And these efforts, I argue, are themselves moving towards the formation of a discourse on alternative architecture in Iran, as created through intellectual debates and built projects at the same time.

Several architects have invoked the topic of alternative architecture and architectural activism by drawing attention to the interconnectedness of professional, disciplinary and pedagogical arenas.[59] Nashid Nabian and Shirin Barol have for instance, looked into the evolution of alternative pedagogical practices in Iran from the early 2000s onward, arguing that "pedagogy as a constant moderator of discourse, research, and practice, needs to be analyzed in a state of multiplicity and thus not just limited to what constitutes the frameworks of official academic institutions [sic]."[60] Mousapour has elaborated on the importance of multiple viewpoints in the creation of what could be called alternative practice, defining the word alternative as "the points of views which are on the periphery of the dominant ideological viewpoint."[61] Mousapour has criticized the "ideological" logic of education among official Iranian academic institutions—"a logic that shuts down on other points of views and blocks the possibility of critical thinking."[62] Elaborating on the importance of critical thinking, Mousapour notes:

> To invoke critical thinking, we do not need a Heidegger or a Derrida in our educational system. We just need one person: Socrates. Socrates is a person who would go around the Greek agora and ask people if for example they knew what justice meant. He would then take that person through a journey of questions that by the end of that journey the person would hit himself on the head and ask: what is justice? I don't know what justice is! This is how one should learn critical thinking: to learn about thinking.[63]

Mousapour goes to the roots of western thought to articulate his model and invoke the Greco-Persian connection in ancient times. For him, to think like Socrates is to be able to think critically; he adds that "the key for the creation of critical thinking and alternative practice in Iranian architecture is discourse."[64] Using the Persian word, *gofteman*, as a translation for discourse, Mousapour argues that "discursive production uncovers, rather than hides, the multiplicity of points of views and the friction between them as a dynamic intellectual platform for critical thinking."[65] For architects such as him, who engage both in practice and teaching, the relationship between professional practice and discursive production is an interwoven relationship in critical thinking, specially within the political-economic situation in contemporary Iran.

Along similar lines, Ali Kermanian has proposed the framework of *talashgari-e-memari*—architectural activism—for Iranian architects to form alternative practices in reaction to the shortcomings of architecture as a discipline and a profession.[66] An "activist," Kermanian argues, "is a modern person who reacts to the status quo, and tries to change it for the better. Activism in every field is a method for upgrading, improving and revitalizing that field."[67] The Tehran Institute was established in 2013 by Kermanian as an alternative private institution that sought to gather a community of architects in meetings focused on the notion of architectural critique.[68]

In parallel, new private institutions such as the Contemporary Architects Association (ARCHCA), the Center for Contemporary Architects of Iran (CCAI), and the Tehran Urban Innovative Center (TUIC) have been established in recent years by a number of architectural practitioners who have been discontented with the status of architecture within the construction market, as well as the degrading status of architectural education in public institutions. Such

institutions are born in a blurred boundary between individual actions and organizational settings. As Roudabari has observed in his ethnography among Iranian architectural institutions, "what is unique about the intersection of individual and institutional practices speaks to the ability of individual actors to exert agency at an institutional level."[69] This has important implications for institutional practice in the case of Iran:

> where the state casts a watchful eye on the activities of organizations, it is less stringent with the movements of individuals…Through the rather thick individual-institutional boundary that weak bureaucratic regulation in developing countries sometimes provide, individuals mobilize a good deal of institutional power.[70]

These emerging institutions operate through a wide network of formal and informal practices that are carried out by prominent voices in the community of architecture. Some like TUIC, have been more concerned with the relationship between research and design, trying to expand the scope of spatial practices in relation to the transforming urbanism of Iranian cities. TUIC is built on the premise that a new trajectory for Iranian architecture requires the establishment of alternative institutions that are capable of offering new spatial narratives in the social, political, and economic context of Iranian urbanism.[71] Others like ARCHA (established in 2014) and CCAI (established in 2016) have been more focused on offering design, theory, and technical courses that are not covered by academia. Through workshops, seminars, symposiums, and a myriad of lectures, these institutions have been working with university students and graduates as the audience for whom a new culture of architecture could be constructed through investment in new business models for architecture on the one hand, and new theoretical explorations in design disciplines on the other.

But in parallel to these pedagogical initiatives, these emerging institutions (namely ARCHCA and CCAI) have also become the "de facto model to internationalize the design discipline in Iran," to use Nabian and Barol's words.[72] Arranged around a short visit or a Skype-meeting of an architect from abroad, some of the courses offered by these institutions are viewed as a vehicle to connect architectural education in Iran to international schools of architecture. As Nabian and Barol have put forward however, this agenda to internationalize Iranian architecture schools has not always considered the contextual relevance of the imported knowledge.[73] Some of the techno-scientific courses offered by CCAI and ARCHCA for instance, are simply a product of fascination with specific design programs in Europe and the United States, lacking the sort of socio-cultural and political attentiveness that architects such as Nabian and Mousapour have been trying to invoke through the debates on alternative architecture.

The path of alternative architecture has been also explored by architects interested in defining new design territories for architectural practice. For example, a new attention to restoration practice and installation architecture is emerging among young architects in Iran. Interestingly, installation and critical preservation are currently in vogue among young intellectually oriented architects in the west as well. In Tehran, these approaches are directly animated in response to the speculative culture of the northern districts of the city and have formed around the question of "what could be done with decaying structures of the city besides demolition and reconstruction?"[74]

These projects—mostly in the form of cafés, restaurants, galleries, houses, and temporary exhibitions—have been loosely categorized as the projects of "return," which, as Leila Khodabakhsh and Benousheh Farhat conceptualize, are the product of two major tendencies in

the urbanism of Tehran.[75] First, the tendencies of a specific middle class who seeks new housing and recreational options in protest to the over-developed northern territories of the city; and second, the tendencies of a more specific group of people who seek to revitalize the center of the city through the spirit of "inhabiting the city" against the culture of speculation.[76] This second tendency has a somewhat Lefebvrian flavor to it, implying the language of the "right to the city," and the "urban revolution." For Henri Lefebvre, the right to the city is not the right to housing or to infrastructure; it is the right to the "oeuvre"—to the possibility of enjoying the city, or what he calls "habiting" the city, in a condition where the city has become a pure commodity or an exchange value.[77] The right to the city, Lefebvre puts it directly, is "the right not to be excluded from centrality and its movement," where the possibility of "dwelling poetically" defeats the commodification of space.[78]

Ali Shakeri is among the leading figures in returning to the central city of Tehran and revitalizing its old fabric through restoration strategies. Shakeri's work is best describable through his Argo-Factory Gallery, located in the Ferdowsi street in one of the old districts of central Tehran. In 2016, the project was commissioned by the Pejman Foundation (established in 2015), a private organization focused on the contemporary life of art in Iran. Pejman is now known as one of the most prominent organizations in building a transnational space of dialogue between Iranian artists and practitioners from abroad. The Foundation is interested in the revitalization of decaying structures that do not normally fall within the category of historic buildings in Iran. The Argo Factory, the building of a 90-year-old beer factory, is one of those buildings which had remained vacant for almost 40 years (Fig. 3.12).[79]

Figure 3.12: The courtyard of the Argo factory as renovated by architect Ali Shakeri, 2017. Source: Memari va Farhang 55 (Spring 2018)

Scene Three: Creative Restoration

In January 2017, Ali Shakeri began his restoration project on the Argo Factory, implementing limited changes to the body of the building. New elements were added to the building to fortify

its structure and prevent further damages, but the distinction between the old and the new has been meticulously kept apparent such that "the footprint of time is remained on the body."[80]

In the restoration of the Argo Factory, Shakeri addresses the damaged parts through the recycling of existing materials on the site. Old bricks and metal bars are reassembled by the architect to maintain the "incomplete" aura of the building. As Elnaz Nasehi and Golnoush Razazi put it in an article: "the building is a narrator of the many years where buildings have been forced to change their face—of the years that the city has transformed from a space of inhabitation to a space of speculation."[81]

In a different project, Shakeri practices his restorative ideas through a more temporary exhibition project in the central city of Tehran. The project is titled the *Minoo Alley*, located in a three-tory house in the Neauphle-le-Château street in central Tehran. Shakeri's studio was commissioned by a private client in 2017 to renovate this house, which had stayed vacant for more than four decades. But before taking any preservationist acts, with the permission of the client, Shakeri decides to "re-narrate" the house as an artistic exhibition to enact its past life.[82] The house is then turned into a temporary exhibition in the Winter of 2018, visited mostly by architecture students in Tehran in the form of group tours organized through Shakeri's studio. In a student tour in the house in January 2018, Shakeri states:

> Conventionally, conservation is only defined as a project of re-use, and houses like this are only restored as a physical body. We do not often think about non-physical narrations, i.e. the life experiences of the residents, as a valuable aspect of the house. We won't have the opportunity to perceive the spirit of the house, and the house won't have the opportunity to narrate itself.[83]

In this project, which is a theatrical performance on the history of the house, Shakeri re-stages the remnant objects and artifacts of the house in various settings to tell stories of different spaces. He invests in a project of "deep exploration in the building, through *in-between-art-and-architecture* assemblages of everyday objects and architectural artifacts."[84] This is a space, which according to Shakeri, is produced "on the edge of poetics," and we can consider it a "museum of family and urban memories."[85] This museum describes the city from within its ordinary houses, and tries to "make us feel better by hearing the voice of vacant houses that seem to have no place within the speculative urbanism of Tehran today."[86]

The house originally belonged to an Armenian family who migrated from Tabriz to Tehran in the 1930s. Shakeri was commissioned to do the restoration project in August 2017, but when he visited the house to begin the project, he found a pile of documents about the house and its previous residents in the basement. He archived all the pieces and began to think of them as agents in narrating the history of the house and its socio-economic situation within its particular urban setting.[87]

Through different theatrical settings, Shakeri tries to invoke different stories about the house and the city. In the ground floor, a party setting is imagined in the living room: "a get-together for the remaining plaster and cement bags in the house" (Fig. 3.13).[88] The bags are seated on the chairs and sofas, occupying the empty, yet heavy place of the previous residents. The setting is titled "the goodbye party of the cements." In the courtyard's washroom, a fancy lamp is hung on top of an Iranian squatting toilet as a sign of respect and a gesture of defamiliarization. The installation is called "Mr. Irani," perhaps to draw attention to the decontextualized place of this facility in the life of its Armenian residents (Fig. 3.14). The framing of the squatting toilet also recalls Le Corbusier doing something effectively similar with

the sink at the Villa Savoy, which is also about recontextualizing a fixture in a contemporary domestic setting. The light above the fixture creates a contemporary space in a traditional setting; it reactivates the toilet as a present space within the house. In a different setting, bathroom and toilet fixtures found in the basement are re-staged as if floating in space; the installation resembles an archeological dig within the house (Fig. 3.15). The documents of the previous residents are also put on display to offer a glimpse into the logistics of their everyday life (Fig. 3.16).

Figure 3.13: "The goodbye party of the cements," an installation by Ali Shakeri. 2018. Source: photo taken by author, 2018

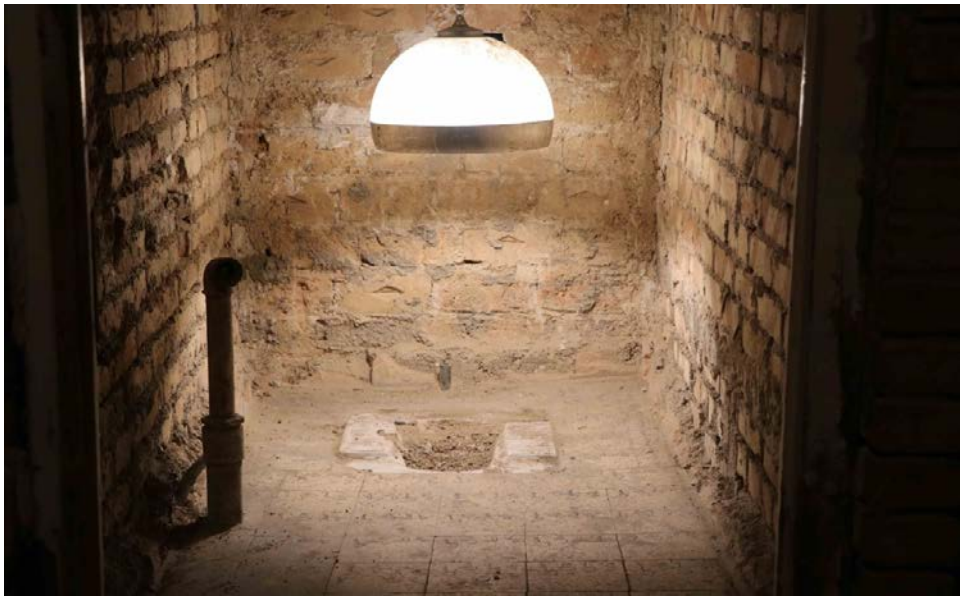

Figure 3.14:" Mr. Irani," an installation by Ali Shakeri, 2018. Source: photo taken by author, 2018

Figure 3.15: an installation by Ali Shakeri in the Minoo Alley house. Source: photo taken by author, 2018

Through such installations, the restoration of the house is intentionally delayed, and the process is prolonged by redefining the project of architecture. This project, and similar efforts (e.g. the Final Encore exhibition which will be discussed in the next chapter), invest in new cultural vocabularies against the culture of construction in Tehran. In other words, they invoke a creative restoration against the logic of creative destruction and its unnaturally short horizon of expectation. Perhaps, against the extreme mobility of capitalist modernity, they reanimate the slow endurance of tradition as a way of redefining the temporality of architecture.

Figure 3.16: an installation by Ali Shakeri documenting the previous lives of the owners of the building under restoration. Source: photo taken by Amirali Tusi by author's request, 2018

Where these projects speak to alternative pathways in the discipline and practice of architecture, interviews with a range of architects reveal how the culture of searching for alternatives has taken a number of unexpected forms. The ethnographic observations below, volunteer four critical narratives on alternative architecture and the unfolding dialectic of tradition and modernity. The interviews were conducted between February 2017 to January 2018 in a condition were the housing recession had become the most tangible manifestation of the politics of sanctions among professionals.

Within the economy of the recession, small activist architects seemed to have become important actors in shaping the urban built environment. Their size and their independence from state money allowed them the freedom to imagine unconventional pathways of practice. At the same time, the heat of the local and global politics of sanctions since 2012 convinced many of them to think beyond the national borders either as a symbolic gesture or as a practical move.

Four Scenes on Tradition, Modernity, and an Alternative Architecture

Scene One: The Recession as a Platform for Rethinking Architecture

Ali pinned a small picture on the mounted map of the globe; He said: "this is the network of our global partners. They once worked in this office, but each has ended up somewhere on this map" (Fig. 3.17).[89] The map presented an image of a diaspora and visualized a kind of imaginary taking shape around the local/global dynamics of a profession in a particular economic-political situation.

Ali had experienced serious economic problems in 2012 and 2013. When sanctions were imposed on Iranian oil, construction prices skyrocketed. In 2013, the dollar jumped from roughly IR10000 to IR30000. As Ali recalled, prices of construction materials increased hourly: "we bought flooring material for 40 dollar per meter, but the next day it was 60. We lost over 70 thousand dollars then. The sanctions cut us in half."[90]

Figure 3.17: Ali's global map of partners, 2016. Source: photo taken by author with the permission of the architect, 2017

It took Ali a while to recover from that loss. But after that shock, he realized that to survive Iran's instable economy he needed to fuel his firm with foreign income and transnational work. He started to familiarize himself with globalization theories and transnational cultures and invested in learning their aesthetics and vocabularies. The global network map of his friends was also produced around the same time when Ali sensed that he could use the influence of his old employees around the world to expand the audience of his office: "I started to think about tourism and came up with the idea of creating professional architectural tours for foreign tourists. I called it *Iran Architours* and began to advertise it through my people on the map."[91]

Ali recounted the political and economic events that enriched the potential of Architours. "BARJAM"—the local acronym used to reference *The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA)—"reestablished a sense of trust in Iran," Ali believed.[92] As he said, "the deal started to stimulate a dialogue with the world."[93] One result was that tourists were returning to Iran, he argued; and they seemed to be especially interested in the vernacular and indigenous landscapes of the country. According to Ali's analysis, the recession in housing also pushed many developers to withdraw from shaky real estate investments, and many of them turned to tourism as an alternative. All of this, in his view, made Architours a culturally relevant project for the time—a project also "capable of redrawing the established conventions of architectural practice."[94]

Although Architours was the product of an economic urgency, it eventually came to embody Ali's dreams about architecture as a profession. He said:

> The recession in the housing market and the lack of money for public projects, have made us architects think about the top of our *Maslow Pyramid.* Some people migrate to the West. Some turn to luxury building for the elite. Those in the middle, like us, use the luxury of

> recession to invest in their beliefs. When the bottom of the pyramid doesn't work, you start thinking creatively about the top: things you never had the time to work on. We start connecting to the rest of the world to make our dreams.[95]

For Ali, "the rest of the world" clearly meant both the world outside of the national borders and the world outside of the conventional field of architectural practice. And through the tours, Ali was able to reconnect to a third outside world—the vernacular context, the pastoral setting: "an entire field inaccessible to the everyday life of a conventional design firm in Iran."[96] Such fields, usually ignored by the locals, were nonetheless revitalized through foreigners.

For Ali, the *baft*—the vernacular context—was the reason he became an architect to begin with. But before the recession, the everyday work of his office occupied him with only urban projects for wealthy clients. Yet at the time of my interview with him in 2017, he was already working in three historic villages in Isfahan to map historic sites suitable for traditional hotels. He was also planning new cultural activities within those villages, such as establishing a summer nature school for kids. Ali had also purchased 50 percent of an online travel agency, which sold tours, hotels, and airline tickets, as a way to tie his activities together. With a wide vision of the potential expansion of Architours, he had also contacted several American hotel owners, inviting them to invest in his projects. "The sanctions in a way, put us in closer contact with the world," laughed Ali.[97]

Hamed, a young architect working in Tehran, had also sensed similar dilemmas. His office had not been able to sustain itself through design work in the early years of the recession. But Hamed saw the downturn as a form of blessing, which provided him the opportunity to finally focus on what he had always cared for: "people's architecture"—architecture concerned with social problems and spatial justice.[98] For years, his studio in Tehran had worked on reinventing vernacular ideas through experimental architectural projects. But these were marginal interventions compared to his design work. The recession gave Hamed the courage to close his studio in Tehran and start a new humanitarian architectural practice. This also allowed him to connect with humanitarian organizations around the world and globalize the scope of his charitable visions.[99]

From the perspective of these architects, the recession appeared as a productive disruption in the life of architecture in Iran. Lamenting the rapid urbanization of cities, Ali and other architects worked towards a return to the city as a site that now demanded a different body of architectural interventions. Several other architects also referred in interviews to the dualities of rural and urban, tradition and modernity, as a fruitful lens through which they could contemplate the current state of architecture and urbanism in Iran. Ali even returned to the rural setting as a way of reconstructing urban conditions. His favorite project, as he stated, was a family villa, built on his father's horse farm in the peripheries of Isfahan (Fig. 3.18).

Built on the arid outskirts of Isfahan in 2014, the project allowed Ali's firm to combine "a modern design with a traditional construction system to create a sustainable structure."[100] The traditional system allowed for the "passive functioning" of the villa, using masonry walls, a pair of wind catchers, and a thick thermal mass of soil on the northern edge of the building to facilitate a natural adjustment of temperature and humidity. As he emphasized, the villa was also built by local workers using only local materials. In plan, it consisted of a minimal array of rooms arranged side by side in a narrow rectangle (Fig. 3.19). But in section, its logic of organization went beyond modernist aesthetics, functioning like a traditional cooling system: "a truly sustainable architecture, that combined modernity with tradition," Ali liked to note (Fig. 3.20).[101]

Interestingly, in photographing the villa, the horse is a significant part of the image. Juxtaposed against so many modernist buildings that were photographed with cars as emblems of modernity, the horse here could be read perhaps as an emblem of a dialogue between tradition and modernity (Fig. 3.21).

Figure 3.18: Ali's villa on the horse farm, 2014. Source: architect's public website.

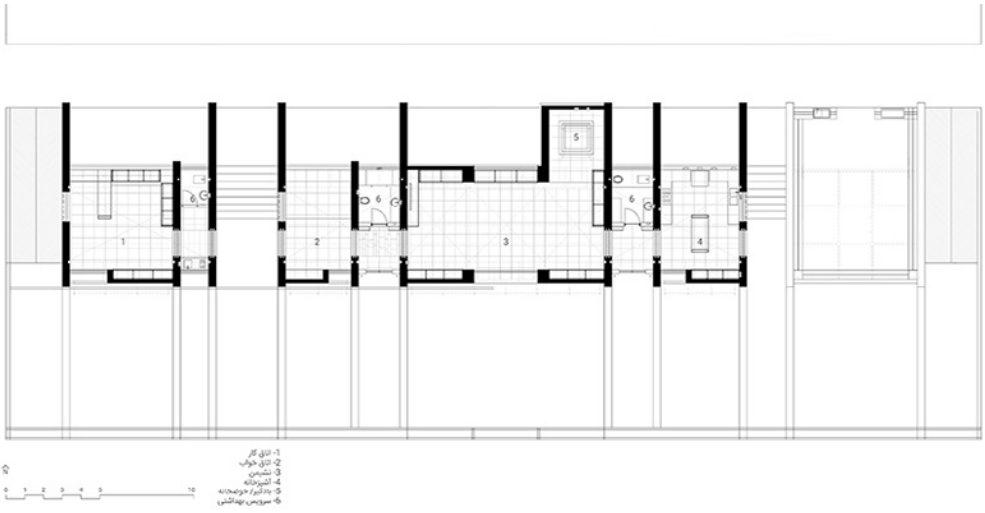

Figure 3.19: the floor plan of Ali's villa on the horse farm, 2014. Source: architect's public website

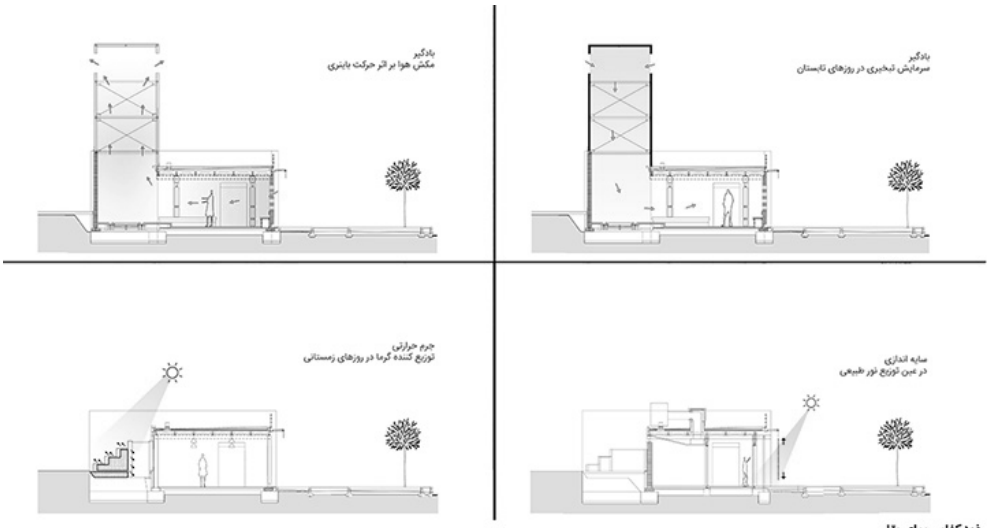

Figure 3.20: sectional view from Ali's villa in the horse farm - source: from the architect's public website.

Figure 3.21: Le Corbusier's Villa Stein (1926-1928), photographed with a car in the foreground. Source: https://colinbisset.com/2014/04/29/the-umbrella-of-history/, accessed October 10, 2019

Scene Two: "Re-Finding," "Re-Cycling," and "Re-Turning" Architecture

The nostalgic yearning for the past, which was nonetheless accompanied by a hope for both the resurrection and reinvention of tradition, was echoed likewise in Amin's words.[102] An acclaimed young architect, Amin won the prestigious Memar Award for one of his residential projects. He had opened his architecture office in 2013, right in the middle of the recession. He was nevertheless very happy that his practice was born during the recession as opposed to during the boom. He noted that the recession allowed him to talk to clients about "things like space, and spatial qualities."[103]

Amin believed that the previous boom damaged not just the Iranian cities, but also the Iranian culture and humanity. "Everyone saw the boom, everyone was unhappy about it, but everyone participated in it because it was profitable. The boom changed us as humans."[104] As he explained:

> I often contemplate on *Safavid* ruins. There was a spatial quality to architecture in those eras that allowed it to work as a living space. Architecture was entangled with the everyday life of the people. But in the 1930s, the project of modernity in Iran turned architecture into a commodity. We began to see everything within the constructed duality of the modern and traditional: a system of valuation that only operated through demolition and reconstruction. Our architecture has been emptied of quality; it has become surface, calculated by developers' speculative formulas. In the past few years, fortunately, the construction recession has cut down on the speculative behavior and we can now reevaluate architecture through the lens of everyday life. This very small office was a practice of "re-finding" those lost qualities for me.[105]

Amin was particularly upset by the use of the term *kolangi* [something that deserved to be demolished with a pickax]. In Iran, *Kolangi* is commonly used to refer to houses that are more than 20 years old, implying a sense of forced ruination despite the fact that many of these houses can be easily renovated and reused. By engaging with both historic and contemporary ruins within the city, Amin was trying to reinvent a more "humanistic" relationship with the past, one that jettisoned the constructed duality of tradition and modernity.[106]

Amin also refused to use the word *sonnat* [handed down from the past] as a translation for "tradition," or *bed'at* [invention] as a translation for "modernity."[107] He believed that these words were overused in Iran and had lost their anthropological and theoretical importance. Instead, he used the prefix of "re" to make new terms like "re-finding, re-cycling, and re-turning," to emphasize present action toward the past. "Such words engage with the duality of the modern and traditional in a more operative way," he argued: "they are verbs, rather than nouns; they put the emphasis on the creative process, rather than on things. They make you ask: redefining what? Recycling what? Returning to where?"[108]

Amin's words echoed the arguments of scholars like Ramin Jahanbeglu, Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, and Hamid Dabashi on the relationship between the modern and the traditional. Jahanbeglu, for example, has theorized the tension between tradition and modernity as a productive factor in the political and cultural development of the Iranian society.[109] This tension, nonetheless, is not viewed as a clash, but as "a series of ontological and anthropological encounters between the two."[110] He argues that our "semi-colonized" modernity, rooted deeply within our heritage, can only be juxtaposed with tradition through a "deeply ambiguous" attitude.[111] The state of ambiguity, for Jahanbeglu, allows for the formation of a questioning mind, and an attitude of uncertainty about both historic and contemporary *truth*.[112]

Building on this, Tavakoli-Traghi has theorized the tension between tradition and modernity in Iran as a "heterotopic experience"—a historical imagination formed on the basis of the "us versus them" power relations. Intellectual debates on Iranian modernity, as Tavakoli-Targhi has criticized, have always been written in relation to the European history, without acknowledging an autonomous Iranian experience of modernity.[113] Elaborating on this postcolonial lens, Dabashi has gone a step further to offer an alternative framework for giving agency to a specifically Iranian modernity. For Dabashi, "anticolonial modernity," which has developed from the humanist ethos of the Persian culture, and from two decades of encounter with colonialism, has allowed Iranians to imagine themselves as contemporary beings with the power to critique and resist colonialism and western imperialism.[114]

Amin's words echoed these sentiments. Through his three verbs he tried to reimagine the relationship between tradition and modernity as a dialectical relationship rather than a clashing one. Specially, the emphasis on the act of asking questions showed an attitude of ambiguity—something that as I will present later, was also discussed in conversation with other architects.

The building in which Amin had located his office embodied just such dialectical relationship (Fig. 3.22). He called its design a project of "re-finding living space, within a modern infrastructural cut."[115] His concept of living space reflected Lefebvre's space of habitation—a space that sought to revitalize use value.[116] Such space does not establish itself through the logic of exchange value and commodification. It is rather created in protest to the capitalist politics of modernization—in protest to the clash of tradition and modernity.

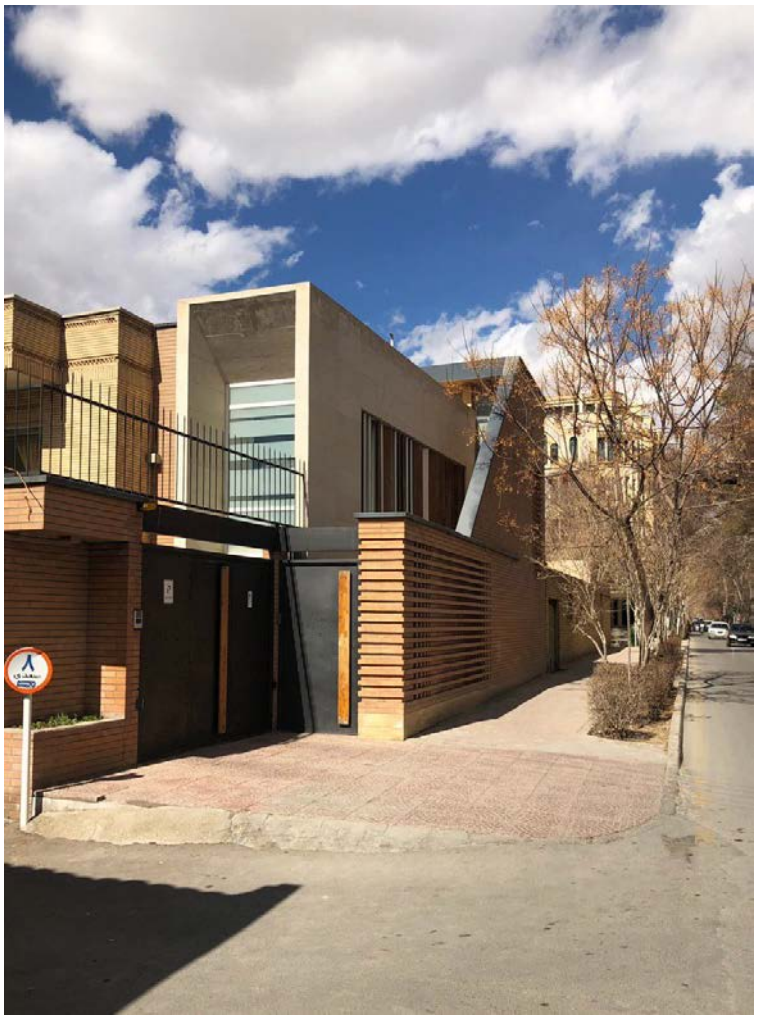

Figure 3.22: Amin's office in Isfahan (completed in 2011). Source: photo taken by author with the permission of the architect. 2017

The most important feature in Amin's office was its "unfamiliarly tiny size within an ordinary housing block."[117] In fact, it represented an anomaly within the master plan of the city, built on a 40-square meter property that was a remnant of a bigger property cut through by a modern road extension.[118] According to Amin:

> other people would have not built anything in this cut of land. Iranians do not even consider this land a property—they call it a leftover. To make it worthy of building, they would wait until they can profitably attach it to the adjacent property.[119]

Amin's impetus to "re-cycle" this leftover land was, however, shaped as a response to the city's current urban planning mentality. He thus mentioned that "the most recent master plan of Isfahan stated that any residential unit built under 60 square meters lacked proper living qualities."[120] And he recalled that when he was in the process of building this tiny office, his friends and the employees of the municipality ridiculed him for his irrational decision:

> I told them then that I can sell this office any time I desire; I can sell it better than a piece designed for investment. Just last year, someone offered me a blank check for this office. He said he loved the building so much he wanted to gift it to his son who lived abroad.[121]

By diverging from a conventional investment logic, Amin succeeded in creating a space whose value could be measured in architectural terms rather than square meters. In plan and section, it offered surprising shifts from *Neufert* standards by offering unconventionally narrow small spaces (Fig. 3.23).[122] On paper, evaluated by the rulers and calculators of city professionals, it did not make much sense as an office building. Yet, an old neighbor had mentioned to Amin that "strangers ask us about the architect of the building." And for Amin, this was a form of re-finding quality and space within the mentality of modernity in Iran's housing industry.[123] Although aspects of the building's form referenced traditional building techniques and materials, the real resurrection of tradition for him was about the resurrection of new economies of envisioning architecture. The recession allowed Amin not just to build this office, but also to create a discourse that was specific to the concrete realities that surrounded his practice at a particular moment in time.

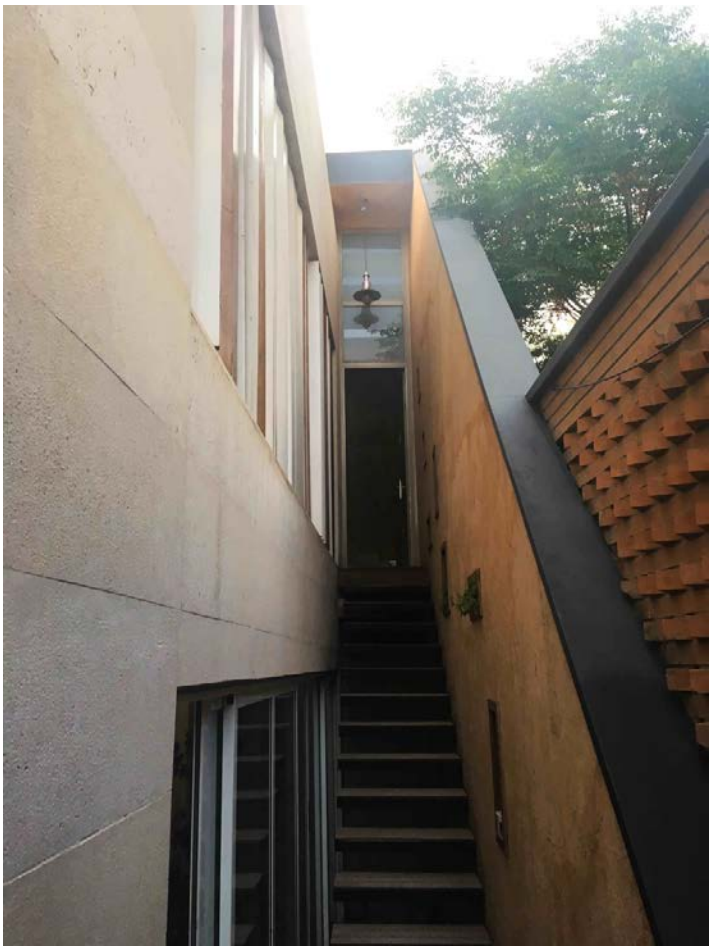

Figure 3.23: the narrow entrance hallway in Amin's office (2011). Source: photo taken by author with the permission of the architect, 2017

Scene Three: "A Theory for Entering the Past"

Reza and Banoo, two young architects practicing in Tehran, were excited to show me the magazine which had published their award-winning villa project.[124] The villa was among their first design projects in 2013, after they had transformed their architectural practice from serving large construction firms to designing for small private clients. As a result of the previous construction boom, Reza and Banoo had lost a great deal of money. Big developers had offered their office relatively sizable construction projects, but when the market had gone down in 2013, the same developers had refused to pay them. By contrast, the modest villa, which had brought them national and international fame, had provided an opportunity to re-characterize their practice as "slow-walkers."[125] By eliminating the real estate market as a factor in their practice, the recession had thus allowed them to spend more time on fundamental questions of architecture.

Reza and Banoo also believed that the recession was an outcome of the state's politics of global isolation: "of being sanctioned and sanctioning itself from the world."[126] Reza criticized the previous national administration for overinvesting the country's oil money in massive local projects. "We have so many foreign investment opportunities like the market of Afghanistan and Iraq; but we have made ourselves isolated and disconnected from even the regional world outside," Reza stated.[127] He argued that the oil money has been used on grand infrastructural

projects locally to portray the state as a powerful agent of modernization and development. And he criticized this effort as an attempt to manipulate public opinion. “Big projects represent a big state,” he claimed.[128]

Reza instead believed that the time of development and modernization has passed, and that the country should now invest in spatial qualities and small architectural interventions. Reza’s voice immediately transformed as he began to discuss Rouhani’s administration. He said:

> This may be the time of housing recession, yet it is the time of economic prosperity. The oil money does not reach the real estate market because the state no longer wants to be the sole carrier of civic projects at grand scales. The new state wants the private market to be the activator of qualitative architecture. Among these private actors, are a generation of young architects who are not interested in grand manipulative projects but in small urban-architectural interventions. The market is also following these architects. They search us through magazines, websites, and competitions.[129]

The acclaimed villa designed by Reza and Banoo was an example of such small interventions. They described their villa through a narrative mainly focused on the relationship between the modern and the traditional. Reza mentioned that at the time they were designing the project, they tried to approach the foreign typology of the villa through the spatial language of the traditional *kooshk*—a palatial Persian architectural type. “This was a theoretical challenge for us: of creating a dialogue with an architectural tradition,” Reza said.[130] And when I asked why this dialogue was important, he responded:

> our culture is a culture clogged in between modernity and tradition. A society with no history does not have this dilemma. Modernity is a European event, which has never grown from inside of us. In the realm of architecture, likewise, European architects decided for us.[131]

For Reza and Banoo, this history of modernity in Iran was connected to the very experience of “being Iranian” today. “Who is the contemporary Iranian? A contemporary Iranian is someone who is standing in the breach between modernity and tradition. Having this dilemma and having the concern to talk about this is a contemporary thing,” Reza explained.[132] By defining modernity as a western experience, Reza characterized the contemporary Iranian identity as “caught in the friction between here and there.”[133] For him, the architect possessed the power to come to terms with this distance and invent new experience out of it. He operationalized this gap in a sense; he neither rejected it, nor took it for granted. He intentionally politicized it as a cultural-historical friction, charged with various political events like the 1979 Islamic revolution. This friction allowed him to criticize the present through the language of tradition.

Reza’s words echoed Jahanbeglu’s argument on the ontological productivity of the tension between tradition and modernity.[134] Reza and Banoo animated this tension architecturally. And the ambiguity that Jahanbeglu proposed as the right attitude to enact this tension, was also present in their rhetoric. They were not nostalgically copying the past, but were “entering it with a theory”:

> What matters though, is how you approach the past. With what theory you enter a conversation with history? With which part of it do you engage? Via Ardalan and Nasr’s theory of unity? Or with other theories? We are all experiencing this breach now and are practicing ways of engaging with it. We are experimenting. [135]

Approaching tradition through theory allowed Reza to turn the project of the past into an ambiguous realm of interpretation.[136] Theory thus enabled the architect to enter the past through a critical lens. It allowed the architect to distinguish between what Ananya Roy has categorized as dwelling versus the performance of tradition.[137] Reza had not heard of Roy, but he distinguished his use of tradition, from state practices of consuming selective traditions. He mentioned that "having a theory to approach tradition is different from the ideological practices of nation building."[138]

To approach tradition through theory allowed tradition to be a performative space—a personal realm invented by the architect's modern lens. Interestingly, Reza, and many others, believed that the modern could not be made without the work of the traditional. Thus, when I asked Reza and Banoo if they were comfortable with the binary of traditional and modern, they said, "there is no binary for us. It's all part of a continuous history."[139]

The breach, which Reza and Banoo's architecture struggled to resolve as a continuous history, was repeatedly mentioned to me by other architects. In another interview, Farbod, a practicing architect in Tehran, discussed the breach as "a sudden escape in history."[140] He argued that "we were modernized overnight, but we didn't know where to go with it. No, let's put it this way: we were modernized without becoming modern."[141]

The rupture discussed by these architects may also be theorized as a space of cultural confusion—an unresolved historical interruption having to do with how Iranians could have proceeded from their past to their present. Within the rhetoric of rupture, there was thus as embedded sense of nostalgia about what Iranians have been and what Iranians could have been. These is also an assumption that modernity is a western experience by nature. For these architects, only architecture can make sense of the contemporary anxiety over this breach. Only architecture can be "original." Isn't this precisely an Iranian experience of modernity? An experienced so entangled with the culture of sanctions?

Scene Four: Personalized Modernity and the Importance of Architectural Collectivity

Dana, a prominent architect working in Tehran, also spoke of a discrepancy between modernization and modernity in Iran. When I interviewed her in October 2018 about the condition of modernity in Iranian architecture, she laughed and cried that "we haven't become modern, we have just become modernized."[142] She referenced the traditional Iranian film, *Gheysar*, to elaborate on her point:

> In *Gheysar*, we witness the clash between tradition and modernity in a society which has become fully modernized. The film portrays the city as a context which has gone through all the visual checkmarks of modernization: the roads, the train, and the new governing institutions like the police. But the spirit of modernity is absent from the city. People still grapple with old traditions and they cannot resolve a case of murder because of corruption. The film moves between the context of the city and the context of a public bath to show the back and forth relationship between a traditional setting and a modernized environment. We are still dealing with this dichotomy I believe.[143]

Dana believed that Iranians have not yet acquired the logic of modernity, and by that she meant "the logic of restructuring the political order and being critical of the status quo."[144] For her, the project of modernity was a very political project that had to be experienced in a collective manner. Architecture as a discipline of spatial practice possessed a powerful role for her in shaping the experience of modernity, but it was only capable of taking action through discourse: "we don't need more *rhetoric* around modernity, we need to create *discourse*," she argued. This

argument sounded odd, because discourse is always rhetorical, and rhetoric is always discursive. But Dana clarified that for her rhetoric meant mere words, while discourse was collective and polemical.

She continued: "It is time that we acknowledge that writing about architecture is as important as building physical projects."[145] She believed that the production of discourse was about the production of an architectural collectivity that would expand the scale of each project by guiding it within an intellectual current. During economic recession, this is indeed a fallback position for architects who are deprived of building. The unbuilt becomes powerful, important, and an avenue for exploration, invention, and political engagement. Dana's valuation of discourse as being important as building seems to have come out of this particular economic situation.

Interestingly, Dana believed that one of the platforms for harvesting this collectivity was the international arena.[146] She believed that the political restrictions of the state on independent architectural institutions has prevented architects from investing in group projects and collective efforts locally. She mentioned the Venice Biennale and the World Architecture Festival (WAF) as so-far the potential institutions through which Iranian architects have been able to form a collective image, and this collective image, she believed was a step into the creation of "personalized modernity."[147]

Both Dana and Yaser Mousapour (as discussed earlier) spoke of the need for global connectivity as a pathway towards modernity. If translation was Mousapour's method of theoretical connectivity, for Dana who was a more hands-on practicing architect, collective participation in international architectural forums was a mechanism for creating a dialogue with a universal intellectual tradition. Following Mousapour on the dialectics of tradition and modernity, she continued:

> We can create a contemporary understanding of the world which is informed by our very own historicity and a deep knowledge of our hyper localized specificity. We can then upgrade or update our tradition or our regional philosophies to make a personalized modernity. And this means applying the logic of modernity, which to a great extent is about critical thinking, to our own architecture.[148]

To elaborate on her point architecturally, she pointed to the example of the "shopping mall" as an architectural type that resonated in two radically different ways in two different cultures. Quoting Yaser Mousapour, Dana mentioned that "the mall as an architectural type is the result of a culture of consumerism in the west. But in Iran, the mall, as an architectural type, has developed as a result of a culture of resistance to the grand religious orders that govern public spaces in Iran."[149] She elaborated that "the mall is a very specific context produced in reaction to the social, political, and economic condition in Iran—a private institution, which has emerged in the past decade to compensate for the lack of proper public space in the city."[150] As a private space, the mall forbids the kinds of policing that regulate people's manners in other types of more traditional public spaces such as the old bazaar or the shopping passages of the 80s and 90s. Dana believed that this was a form of critical gesture towards the norms, and thus a potential manifestation of an "Iranian modernity."[151] Given its historical specificity, and its context-based formation, the mall possessed the capacity to enable a discourse around the dynamics of public and private space in Iran, and this gave it the power to be more than a simple construction project.

On the other hand, one could think of a more everyday reading of this, namely that "modernity is as modernity does."[152] The mall, as a local architectural manifestation is modern in so many ways, not because it self-consciously works out a position vis-à-vis modernity and tradition, but because it is built for everyday uses of modern people. In this reading ordinary people are also part of the professional process of discourse making.

The example of the mall in Dana's analysis invoked a new perspective towards architectural discourse in Iran—one that allowed for the politics of everyday life to be seen and evaluated along with the professional dynamics of architecture. Dana described the process of "mallification" as a socio-cultural reaction towards the status quo—a process of re-inventing the norms of public space in Iran. She defined an experience of modernity which was embedded in a sort of architectural narrative that brought about the ordinary people, the architects and the developers under the same umbrella of interest. Although Dana was less cognizant of the role of developers in shaping the culture of mallification, she was nonetheless trying to give form to an architectural modernity that was not meaningful without digging deep into the realm of everyday life.

Conclusion

Through open-ended interviews with Ali, Amin, Reza, Banoo, Dana, and others, this chapter has explored emerging signs of showing care towards the economic and political specificities of the context, as unfolded within the space of sanctions and the economy of the recession. Ruminations on the topic of tradition and modernity were thus more directly engaged with specific conditions and responded to particular disciplinary concerns. Critical of the current marginality of architecture within the local construction market and the professional transnational arena, interviewed architects implemented different strategies and viewpoints to challenge the dominant culture of building as well as the ideological authority of academia in training architects.

Ali for instance, redefined the scope and the nature of his practice in reaction to the ups and downs of the market to introduce new cultural projects for his firm. Amin offered a much more nuanced and much wider definition of tradition by attending to the limitations of the code and the master plan of the city. Reza and Banoo invoked tradition as a theoretical realm open to personal interpretation to expand the scope of their design interventions. And last but not least, Dana saw within the collectivity of group architectural projects an opportunity for discursive production around the topic of modernity, and this, she argued, allowed architecture to establish a position for itself both within the local market and within the transnational arena. She also proposed new architectural types as a way towards the creation of an Iranian modernity.

The juxtaposition of different viewpoints on the topic of Iranian architectural modernity in this chapter animates the sort of collectivity that architects like Mousapour and Nabian were looking to establish. Each of the architects offered a singular experience, but what may have seemed like a kaleidoscopic view of the culture of architecture in Iran, in fact, is a narrative of an emerging collective effort for investing in alternative disciplinary, pedagogic, and professional pathways in response to the existing political, economic, and social conditions. This investment on alternatives is fueled by a collective effort to infuse architectural practice with an attitude of critical thinking. Yasin, another interviewed architect, believed that currently, Iranian architects are deprived of this attitude of critical thinking because of "their fascination with the west on the one hand, and their immersion in the rhetoric of tradition on the other hand."[153] He argued that

"tradition is only one aspect of our geographic condition; we have been blind to our specific political and economic context because the topic of tradition has exhausted our understanding of history and geography."[154] And this shortcoming, I argue, is specifically a result of understanding modernity as a western phenomenon and understanding tradition as a purely local trope. In this regard, the emerging architectural discourse on tradition and modernity could glean various lessons from the broader postcolonial debate on tradition and modernity, with specific attention to the Iranian scholars discussed in this chapter. Historians like Dabashi, Tavakoli Targhi and Jahanbeglu have tried to give form to an Iranian experience of modernity by theorizing the relationship between tradition and modernity within the "semi-colonial" history of Iran. These scholars have not ignored the footprint of the west but have drawn attention to the "us versus them" power relations that have marked the historical imaginary of modernity in Iran.

In the end, while this chapter has explored emerging architectural narratives and practices under economic sanctions and recession, it does not mean to imply that these architectural practices are, in and of themselves, projects that improve people's lives and urban qualities. As it has been shown in other contexts around the world, architectural interventions have in many cases leaned towards the concerns and questions of the discipline and profession, rather than the actual needs of the people in a social-economic situation.[155] For example, what may seem like an activist movement in the project of return, as elaborated by Leila Khodabakhsh, can in fact cultivate the ground for gentrification, hence the flow of speculative construction in the central city. Such projects essentially serve the cultural needs of a more cosmopolitan population of the Iranian middle class by eventually removing the urban poor from their informal residences in the central city.

Postscript - The Final Scene: On the Edge of Architecture

Ghazal, an architect photographer, conducted an Instagram page which invited images from abandoned houses around the country (Fig. 3.24). In December 2017, she was still in the process of collecting these images, uncertain about what she would do with them in the future. Her intention was to first draw people's attention to these sites of ordinary ruins, and then send a collective invitation for intervention.[156] She argued:

> Iranians have not developed the habit of paying attention to ordinary ruins around them; and I am not talking about historic ruins; I am talking about everyday ruins of contemporary houses. I think the recession has changed the economy of our aesthetic sensibilities. Because we are no longer forced to think in terms of investment formula to value a property, we have been able to appreciate *space*.[157]

Figure 3.24: "iranabandoned:" the public Instagram page by "Ghazal." Source: Instagram, accessed April 20, 2019

Ghazal was interested in the idea of revitalizing the city's core as a way of revitalizing lost ambitions of architectural practices. Ruins represented space for her in the sense that one had to see them through a sense of imagination. Ruins did not allow for economic calculations, except for the hidden real estate property on which they laid—so they lie in Lefebvre's domain that resists capitalism. The economy of ruins worked through a different logic than that of apartments, and attention to their spatial, material, and aesthetic qualities allowed for an activation of architecture and space as use value, rather than as exchange value.

Ghazal's cultural investment in ruins was not just an aesthetic response to urban conditions, but to the very economy of architectural imagination. She envisioned a grand restoration project that worked through silent grassroots interventions that benefited the lower classes. She seemed to be hoping for an "urban revolution" in the Lefebvrian sense of the term, where the poetics of space would defeat the commodification of space. Perhaps, within the aesthetics of ruins, she saw the possibilities of reclaiming the *oeuvre* [work of art] or the art of inhabiting the city.[158] She believed that these vacant properties could serve as platforms for social change "if one was capable of imagining them outside of the top-down logic of gentrification and outside the gentrifying tendencies of architecture."[159] Through its experimental attitude, this project seemed to be eventually setting the context for a more everyday and non-canonical landscape of theorizing tradition and modernity.

Ghazal's project was, nonetheless, still on the edge of the practice and unsure about its future position within the discipline of architecture. It occupied a position somewhat in-between art and architecture. By exploring the lens of artists towards the construction life of the city, the

next chapter digs deeper into other disciplinary strategies and representational practices that have tried to resurrect the sensibility of ruins in the urban built environment and offer new optical methods for the critique of Tehran's speculative urbanism during economic hardship.

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[3] Nashid Nabian, *A Little Game Called Architecture*, exhibition booklet, 2015.
[4] Mehrdad Zavareh Mohammadi, interviewed by Razieh Ghorbani, Tehran, Dec 20th, 2018. The content of the interview was publicly lectured by the interviewee in previous events.
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[111] Ibid.
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[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
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[123] Ibid.
[124] My interviews with "Reza" and "Banoo" took place in Tehran in November 2017. Their work is not illustrated in this paper to protect their anonymity as they requested.
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[126] Ibid.
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Chapter 4. Painting Through Concrete Columns and Iron Scaffolds

Iranian Artists and the Experience of Urbanization in Tehran

Introduction

Holding two skinned chickens in her hands, walking on a newly paved road that is outlined by an unfinished curbing, moving against a densely growing horizon of residential apartments, this melancholic girl in Newsha Tavakolian's staged photograph offers a snapshot of Tehran's urbanism—an urbanism that grapples with political, economic, and cultural difficulties (Fig. 4.1). The photograph is part of a larger collection titled "Listen." The protagonist in the image is a singer—an agent for communicating the silence of female soloists in Iran under the restrictions of Islamic law, while at the same time, situating this silence within the louder urban trajectories of the city.[1] In a solo performance, the protagonist *sings* the city with a closed mouth, turning it into a silent poem about political and economic conditions in Iran.

The numerous apartments in the background are incomplete, rendered as non-static objects in-the-making. Perhaps the only sound that can be heard from the image, is the noise of construction. The girl is not standing in the image; she is an animated subject, walking on an empty road, and thus bringing time into the frame of the photograph. This is a city built as a moving horizon yet possessing an overwhelming concrete reality over the past, the present, and the future of its people. It is almost as if the girl is a refugee taking an empty road out of the city. She is leaving the city in the garb of mourning. But what would she be mourning if not the death of a certain urban experience?

Figure 4.1: "Listen," a staged photograph by Newsha Tavakollian, 2011. Source: newshatavakolian.com, accessed March 10, 2016

The scene also highlights chickens and apartments, artifacts that have special quotidian meanings for Iranians as they track the value of their savings through them. The skinned chickens may also reference a tradition of western still life, in which dead animals often mean something like *tempus fugit* or *memento mori*—images of time's passage or mortality. They represent a city that is built and lived through the logic of investment in politics and economics—a city perhaps muted of the sounds of experience and imagination.

By situating the female figure within the frame of this urban scenery, Tavakolian seems to be animating a Koselleckian "space of experience."[2] The presence of the singer in the image makes us conscious about the difference between music and noise. This is also related to the difference between inhabiting the city as an oeuvre (work of art) or treating it as an object for investment—the kind of Lefebvrean opposition that was also enacted by architects discussed in the previous chapter. Tavakolian's photograph is thus a suitable point of entry into this chapter, which aims to engage in a similar task: of approaching the urban trajectories of Tehran through the language of art. This sort of engagement with art is also a methodological experiment for creating a new framework of writing a contemporary history of Iranian architecture and urbanism, a framework enacted by the experience of mourning the city.

Re-Writing a History of Tehran's Urbanization Through Artistic Expressions

As the previous chapters laid out, investment in housing has played a big role in shaping Tehran's urban built environment. From the reconstruction period of the 1990s to the high-inflation episodes of the first decade of the 2000s, the city's urban form has been rapidly shaped by practices of speculative apartment building. Caught in between the mathematical logic of investment, and the emotional nostalgias of the "good old green Tehran," the city is often talked about as a disturbed landscape of housing construction. Within the narrow alleys of different neighborhoods in Tehran, where the Comprehensive Plan of the city forbids high-rise building, an ordinary walker is frequently faced with scenes of massive construction sites overlooking the low-rise fabric of the old city (Fig. 4.2). An Iranian journalist, for example, nostalgically described these scenes as such:

> Our Tehran has caught a *housing syndrome*: an incurable disease that spreads its body like a beast across the land and finds its way in every corner. The syndrome like an earthquake destroys everything: gardens, ponds, alleys, neighborhoods, shadows, corners, birds, water, and silence. Houses, houses, houses! this mold-like growth of houses! Nothing can stop them from spreading—neither the letters of the city council, nor the ancient trees, or the narrow alleys, or the historical topography.[3]

Figure 4.2: a high-rise being built in a narrow alley in Zafaraniye neighborhood. Source: photo taken by author, 2018

Representations of this "housing syndrome" have also become plentiful in art. The overwhelming construction activity of the city since the housing booms of 2006 to 2012 has eventually found its way into the photographs, paintings, illustrations, and performances of a sizable group of artists in Tehran. Even though the interviewed artists did not explicitly talk about the politics of sanctions and the economy of the ongoing recession, their works have produced a visual narrative around a particular historical moment in Iran where construction in the form of apartments has become the dominant mechanism through which people make sense of the present and gamble on the possibilities of the future.

The majority of these artistic works have been formed during the housing recession of 2012-2018, when the economic downturn allowed a space of contemplation on the city and a temporary pause within its process of rapid vertical growth. The artists have portrayed a city that disseminates a sense of crisis, alienation, and constant change. They have argued through different visual narratives that the city has become a ruinous landscape of building—a dystopia of architecture.

This chapter explores these artistic productions as a form of discourse on architecture and urbanism. It studies how the wider culture surrounding the economic sanctions has stimulated construction and in turn an artistic response across media in which architecture has become a social figure and a form of cultural critique. In the introductory chapter of this dissertation, I argued that architecture in Iran has a temporality that creates different "horizons of expectation"

because of economic instability.[4] This means that the future is a very present concept in the everyday life of people—so present that it flattens experience or the sense of *presentness*. Koselleck asks the historian to revitalize this "space of experience" precisely through the sort of media that enact experience, memory, imagination, and emotion. Koselleck himself does this through explorations of temporality in historical paintings, in ordinary people's dreams of traumatic experience, and in urban monuments among other media. Following Koselleck, I use artwork in this chapter as a way of enacting a space of experience around Tehran's architecture and urbanism in a condition where the culture of speculation has arguably flattened the experience of living in the present.

For the artists discussed in this chapter, Tehran's urbanization has become both a subject of critique and a resource for artistic opportunity. I look into how one's understanding of the city changes as the city moves through these different media and visual narratives, and how artists employ different visual tools and technologies to enact the city as an object of activism. Analysis of these works shed light on the deep engagement of artists with the practices of visuality and their fundamental role in creating urban experience and cultural production. This includes how artists defamiliarize the ordinary landscape of construction by turning it into a condition of cultural and environmental crisis. Along this way, I explore how artists create implicit and hidden juxtapositions with western traditions of art, architecture, and urbanism as a way of creating disciplinary and cultural dialogue.

The art works discussed here mainly fall within the category of exhibition art, speaking to a particular form of urbanism, to a particular audience and happening within a particular cultural infrastructure. They speak to the struggles of the middle class in Tehran, and its anxieties around the housing industry, the environment, and the aesthetics of the city. Questions of class and subjectivity are thus embedded within the production of these artistic interventions and their way of approaching the city. Representations of the city are arguably representations of a social, cultural, and economic identity.

Artistic Responses to Urbanization in Other Contexts

Scholars have studied the relationship between art, urbanization, and political-economic conditions, looking specifically at how art becomes an expression of the uncertainty of modern life as caused by urbanization. Perhaps the most seminal work on this topic is T.J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life*. Clark studies impressionist paintings in Paris to argue that "the form of the new art is inseparable from its content"—that the paintings beyond being representations of space, give form to the modernity of the city.[5] The modern, in Clark's description, is not the new spectacle constructed by Haussmann, however; it is "the marginal; it is ambiguity, it is mixture of classes and classification, it is anomie and improvisation, it is the reign of generalized illusion."[6] By situating the new art in the social, economic and political context of Paris, Clark tries to "unlearn our present ease with Impressionism" and invoke it as the art of giving form to this modern experience of ambiguity.[7] He shows how the uncertainties of modern life became an aesthetic for the new art through cloudy brush strokes and how "doubts about vision became doubts about almost everything involved in the act of painting."[8] Impressionism was thus born out of this space of uncertainty, while at the same time, producing a new lens for experiencing modernity. Following Clark, this chapter thus examines how art can give form to new politics of encountering and framing the trajectories of the built environment, and how it can become a lens through which larger political, economic and social questions could be examined.[9]

More recent studies on the relationship between art and urbanization have also offered interesting venues for this chapter. In her book *The Art World City*, Joanna Grabski studies how the city of Dakar in the West African nation of Senegal became a thriving art metropolis where artists helped build a creative global economy and a creative urban built environment through different artistic platforms.[10] The book is based on research conducted in Dakar between 1998 and 2015, "a period of unprecedented urbanization and art world globalization."[11] In a condition where a construction boom and a widespread infrastructural project were transforming the city, the author studies works of art that were formed in direct response to the urbanization and globalization of the city.[12] She looks at how artists were increasingly becoming interested in the city's visual and spatial registers; but "not only did the city become a resource for artistic production, it also became more integrally part of the city's exhibition culture."[13] These artistic projects, Grabski argues, "portray[ed] Dakar as an urban locality while mediating symbolic imaginings and Dakar as a city and an art world city."[14] Through these representations, she explores how art and urbanization became two interwoven realms in Dakar as they "scaffold[ed] opportunities for mobility from one city to other cities."[15] As one of her interviewees put forward, urban canvases were like "passports" helping artists travel to other cities and other art world platforms.[16]

The theme of construction is significantly present in the work of Cheikh Ndiaye, an artist whose work is studied by Grabski. In a painting titled *Hann Bel-Air*, the artist portrays a pile of building materials sitting next to a container in a neighborhood of the same name in Dakar (Fig. 4.3). The painting is based on a photograph the artist took in the neighborhood, rendering the peculiar nature of the assemblage of recognizable elements of construction. Grabski reads Ndiaye's painting as a reference to how Dakar's construction boom was mainly financed by the Senegalese Diaspora who sent money home to invest in residential building for their family in the country.[17] But in addition to financing building activities back home, the Senegalese living abroad were also important players in connecting the market of commercial goods in Europe and North America to Africa. They sent these goods in shipping containers to Dakar and helped build a cityscape marked by a somewhat haphazard choice of foreign materials. The arrangement of these goods, as Grabski notes, "convey[ed] the artists impressions of the city while alluding to the broader dynamics of urbanization and globalization, the alternative economies of used items from the Global North, and the ongoing state of construction that reorder[ed] Dakar's spatial layout."[18] My work resonates with Grabski's research in terms of animating representations of construction as a way of getting into deeper cultural questions about urbanization and globalization in Tehran under specific political and economic questions.

Figure 4.3: "Hann Bel-Air," 2009. Acrylic paint on canvas, by Cheikh Ndiaye. Source: Joanna Grabski, The Art Worl City (Indiana University Press, 2017), p. 193

Santiago Zabala, a philosopher of art, has also studied the relationship between art, urban life, and economic conditions. In his book *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, Zabala views art as the only possible mechanism, which can make the silenced crises of our time visible.[19] In a chapter titled "Emergency through art," Zabala studies a number of artworks produced with a sense of emergency towards particular contemporary economic events or crises. Among these works, he writes on an installation titled "Mortgage" by the Peruvian artist Jota Castro, a work produced to comment on the break-down of mortgage-backed loans in the United States in 2008 (Fig. 4.4). The word mortgage in old French translates to dead pledge, "meaning that the pledge ends (dies) when the obligation is fulfilled, or the property is taken through foreclosure."[20] The installation is thus a conceptual translation of this death pledge, comprised of several hangman nooses made of the American dollar bills. In describing the artwork Zabala writes:

> Other elements in the work are almost invisible: the ceiling, the house and the homeowners. We can assume these suicide ropes are attached to the ceilings of the houses whose owners could not pay their loans because of the irresponsible behavior of government regulators. Home and owner have been replaced by those same dollar bills with which the house was both purchased and lost.[21]

Zabala reads the installation as a commentary on "the capitalist imperatives of competition, profit maximization, and accumulation, where Being is ignored in favor of liberal individualism."[22] He looks into how the artwork captures a bigger picture, that is, the politics of big American banks as well as the war zones created by the United States in the early years of the 2000s.[23] Zabala investigates how these conditions imposed huge risks on loan borrowers, and how Castro's conceptual installation is in fact a lived reality for many homeowners. In

unpacking this artwork and other projects, Zabala shows how art, instead of revealing "objective truth," can become a medium "to alter the historical frames that [have] concealed essential emergencies."[24]

Figure 4.4: "Mortgage," an installation by Jota Castro, 2009. Source: http://www.jotacastro.eu/selected-works/mortgage/, accessed April 14, 2019

Following Zabala, Grabski, Clark and others, this chapter examines how the speculative urbanism in Tehran is narrated through emerging artistic media and how these media can help us rewrite an urban-architectural history of the present. I look into how artists make the ordinary landscape of construction unfamiliar by turning it into an event or a form of crisis in everyday life, and how through this process of alteration, they situate the viewers into particular frames of economic and social experience. As Grabski has observed in her ethnography in Dakar, while these construction and urban-referential images depict the city as their subject of analysis and produce experience for their viewers, they also denote artists' identity as urbanites and situate them within a network of urban affiliations.[25] This urban affiliation, which in the case of Iranian artists is signified through references to global—or more particularly, western—practices of construction and image making, connects these artists to a broader network of urban-architectural imaginaries. For example, in many of the studied works, artists formed their visual representations *as if* in dialogue with a western tradition of thinking. I view these dialogues as strategies for the critique of local conditions and for becoming part of a global platform of art.

The works of art discussed here are selected from various disciplines within the visual arts—from painting, photography, and children illustration, to sculpture and performance—to discuss the complex life of construction as it is "enacted" in a variety of mediated formats.[26] A close attention is paid to aesthetic techniques and material technologies to explore how the city is pictured as a diversity of spatio-temporal experiences. Meanwhile, by juxtaposing these visual features against the stories told by the artists themselves, artworks are unpacked as methodological frameworks for describing the city through the lens of a particular community of practice.

Art and the Life of Construction in Tehran

In between the apartments and the construction sites of the city of Tehran, Mohsen Shahmardi, a photographer, has situated his camera to capture what he has termed *The Contemporary Landscapes of Tehran* (Fig. 4.5). Here the concept of landscape is somewhat melancholically invoked to comment on the rapid urbanization of the city. Shahmardi writes: "to experience the landscapes of my city, I looked for vacant parcels of land with vast and open views but could only find a few examples in small sizes and in the form of public places [sic]."[27] Shahmardi offers a view of the city that captures buildings and landscapes in juxtaposition to one another to draw attention to the somewhat corrupted nature of these remaining natural parcels. In his photographs, buildings are observed from a distance—a distance that allows them to be seen within an urban context. The urban is thus re-staged through its pastoral remnants, the leftover spaces that have not been built over yet and offer narrow lenses into the larger landscape of construction. Far from being considered as romantic spaces, these so-called landscapes of Tehran reveal how the city's environment is transforming through everyday practices of apartment building.

Figure 4.5: "The Contemporary Landscapes of Tehran,"2014-2015; by Mohsen Shahmardi. Source: Mohasen.Gallery, accessed January 10, 2018

Tehran as a city of construction is also portrayed in Sasan Abri's photographic collages. In a collection titled *Exposed*, Abri tries to stimulate the encounter of the eyes and the city's space of construction (Fig. 4.6). He writes: "The eyes are first to be 'exposed' to the city. They roll up and down its shell, and sometimes, they stare at it: it is as if they are suspended from the façades and the skyline, in an indefinite space [sic]."[28] In Abri's photo collages, Tehran is a city in grayish clouds: "not quite gray, not quite colored."[29] It is a city whose weather conditions are defined by its construction life, whose sky is fractured by suspended tower cranes. His camera is always located in a high-rise; that is where the experience of the city could best be captured. The same objects that are Abri's subject of critique, are thus his camera stands. It is from the top of a

high-rise that Abri could "expose" the city. Abri notes that "the viewpoint of the camera is somewhere between the ground and the sky, suspended and unreliable."[30] This viewpoint reflects the realities of Tehran itself—a city suspended in time, "heading for an uncertain vague future."[31]

Figure 4.6: "Exposed," a photo exhibition by Sasan Abri, 2018. Source: photo taken by author with the permission of the artist, 2018.

Abri has followed the construction life of the city since 2011 when the boom was sweeping the city with apartments in every corner. He describes the boom as a "thunderstorm: a disaster that had no order and no direction but invaded in every possible way."[32] He has titled his collection "Exposed" to invoke a sense of anxiety and insecurity about the future. Tehran is a city which according to Abri has a master plan and a long list of building codes, but in reality, it does not seem to operate through any organized system of regulations. The buildings in his images, he notes, "are confused about their location within the master plan."[33]

Technique is not separate from the content of Abri's work. In other words, technique is the intellectual work itself. In the collection, he has implemented polaroid photography but has reinvented its methods and procedures to create something new. For the artist the notion of interfering in the common process of making and presenting artwork about urban landscapes is critical, for he does not simply want to depict the city but produce it as a new experience. He has tried to create unexpected and uncontrollable photographic outcomes, something that also reflects the trajectory of Tehran as a city of uncontrollable and unplanned growth.[34]

Abri's images are made through a very specific printing and stamping procedure. About fifty to sixty percent of the ink on photos are transferred to the canvas by rubbing the polaroid on paper and stamping the ink through pen strokes (Fig. 4.7). The technique tries to construct Tehran as a city of ambiguity and incompleteness—"a city both good and bad, both colorful and gray," a city uncertain about its own future, a city half printed, and half remained to

interpretation on the photo paper.[35] The technique gives a sense of oldness to the images, situating the city in an uncertain temporality. The artist notes that "it is as if the future of the city is already its past."[36]

Figure 4.7: A view of Tehran by Sasan Abri, 2018. Part of the "Exposed" collection. Source: photo taken by author with the permission of the artist, 2018.

As the photograph below indicates, time is an important concept in Abri's work (Fig. 4.8). The photographic collage shows an incomplete building with a naked structure and cranes overshadowing it. It depicts Tehran as a city always in the making and always filled with "an enormous volume of iron and concrete."[37] The put-together pieces of the building try to convey that it would never be possible to capture a finished image of Tehran; that it would never be possible to capture the city as a present condition. For Abri, the city is presentable only in a complex relationship between the future, the past, and the present. The cranes imply an act of production, which is to be carried out through time (over the present and the future), and yet the fragmented pieces of polaroid photography situate the city in the past through the aesthetics of decay.

The image is very Koselleckian in this sense as it animates the city across the "space of experience" (the past made present) and the "horizon of expectation" (the future made present).[38] The old and the new are constantly in the making and the hints of color amidst Abri's grayish photographs play into this game of temporality: that "you can never tell if it is the new or the old that is decaying."[39]

Figure 4.8: A collage by Sasan Abri. Part of the "Exposed" collection, 2018. Source: Photo taken by the author with the permission of the artist

Abri has had a long-lasting interest in the city. *Exposed* is his third urban collection. His first collection, *Conjunctivitis*, was produced in 2012. The term "conjunctivitis" is a medical term for the red eye syndrome. In describing the series, Abri defines the malady as such: "Conjunctivitis, red-eye, is a malady that irritates the soft tissue of the inner lids and the ball of the eye disturbing clear vision. It is contagious. Here it has infected the paper I print on [sic]."[40] Again, in this collection, Abri explores the architecture of the city through a specific interaction between photography, the city, and his eyes (Fig. 4.9). Technique is a mechanism to reinvent the city as it is experienced through the eyes of the photographer and reproduced through an appropriation of polaroid photography. In describing this interaction, Abri writes:

> The chemical and physical disturbances on the surface of the polaroid creep into my eyes, and to my mind, melding me to the vague and suspended surfaces that hold me, mesmerized. This is no simple chemical reaction; it's fear's insidious effect. A fear born from the constant view of distant states extended so very near. So distant that they are invisible, indecipherable, yet so close, that their shapes create fear. The malady continues, sometimes merely an internal thought, sometimes they spill on paper like this, but never an escape from the disturbed vision that cannot help but see [sic].[41]

Figure 4.9: The Milad Tower in Tehran in the "Conjunctivitis" series by Sasan Abri, 2012. Polaroid photography. Source: Sasanabri.com, accessed November 20, 2018

Through appropriated polaroid photos, Abri looks through the city as if in a condition of conjunctivitis. Technique merges with his body in encountering the city, constructing the feeling of fear and disturbance.[42] In a photograph of the Milad Tower in Tehran, the city appears as both a very distant cloud, and a very near form presenting itself through the familiar shape of the tower. This encounter with the city is fearsome, Abri believes, for it is an encounter situated in a hazy space of unpredictability where distant objects appear too close and too invading.[43] We could read the photograph as a commentary on architecture too. In this caption, form represents architecture; it is the only thing that is comprehensible in the cloud of the city. This photograph is accompanied by captions of infrastructural elements within the city such as an electricity tower situated next to a construction crane (Fig. 4.10). Abri thrusts us into a city which has been reduced to architecture and infrastructure: to elements and signs rather than spaces. In the obscurity of the space of the city, these giant masses invade the unprotected eye.

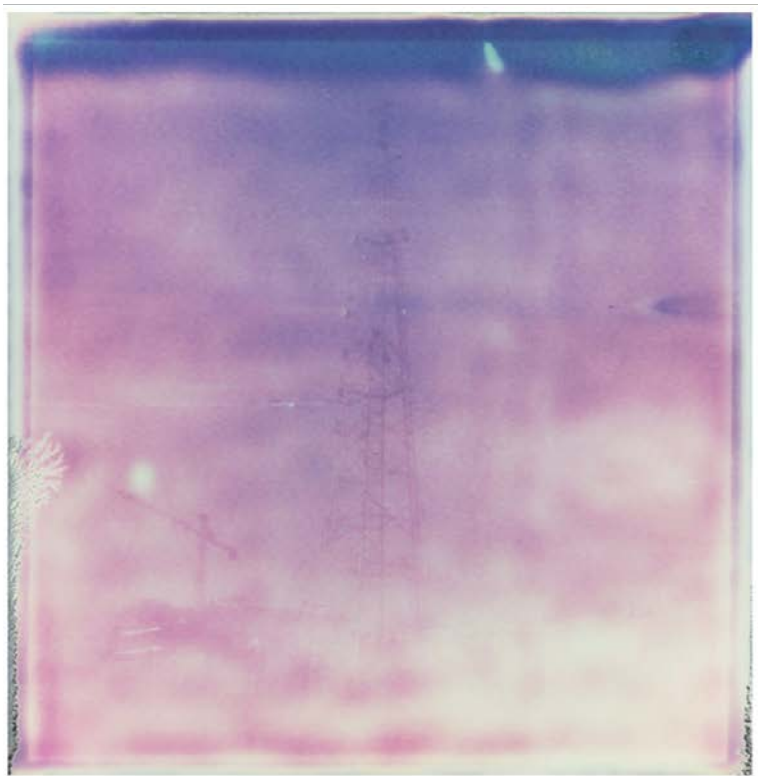

Figure 4.10: "Conjunctivitis," by Sasan Abri, 2012. Polaroid photography, Source: Sasanabri.com, accessed November 20, 2018

Abri's second collection on urban landscapes is *The Dormant Yellow*, created in 2013. In this collection he focuses on old vacant houses in Tehran (Fig. 4.11). He photographs all of these houses with a special polaroid camera set on the ground level of the courtyards. What he aims to produce in The Dormant Yellow is a sense of "imaginary space," perhaps located outside of our present world.[44] In describing the collection, the artist writes:

> In the hidden corners of this turbulent and ever-changing city that claws and tears its own historic flesh asunder to devour it in the name of progress, leaving nothing but a monstrous creature, a few trees still stand tall. Trees, often pines, that hide something in their shadows as if to protect it. They are guardians of the past; guardians of spaces in the territory of a lost time when there was still art in laying brick upon another brick. Yellow bricks dormant in silent uninhabited walls. The pines are the main emblem of these houses. They herald from afar that they are surrounding and watching over a building that has long gone to sleep. Barely breathing, yet still beautiful, with a living identity. You can still hear their sound, the sound of pale yellow. The sound of crows and sparrows, the sound of lightening [sic], and relentless rain, the sound of the incessant honking of generations of cars and bulldozers and the battle cry of electrical saws and the thunder of iron and concrete that draws ever closer [sic].[45]

In this nostalgic eulogy to the vacant houses of the city, Abri captures another aspect of the city: spaces lost in time. This collection, which came before the *Exposed* series, documents the city on the ground level, under the shadow of trees, beneath the ruins of dormant yellow bricks. It tries to contemplate on the relationship between the house, the sky, and the trees, giving homage to the low-rise fabric of the city, its materiality and its lost spatiality. These spaces, Abri

argues, belong to a different temporality; they no longer exist in the city.[46] This is what the technique also tries to produce: a *heterotopia* perhaps, unfolded within the space of Abri's polaroid photographs. The viewer would be at pain to read these spaces. They are suggested by the drabness of the colors. It is as if the houses in this collection are produced by fluids rather than solid materials, and this slipperiness helps to situate them outside of the present time. At the same time, the houses are reconstructed through individual pieces of photographs, like the fragments of memory put together to build an image. Each fragment has a specific tone and resolution which helps to create a fractured experience of the house. In these photographs, Abri seems to be recreating a "space of experience," again in the Koselleckian sense of the term—a space which tries to revitalize the past as a present incident.

Figure 4.11: "Dormant Yellow," by Sasan Abri, 2013. Source: sasanabri.com, accessed November 20, 2018

In all three of Abri's collections the polaroid is used as the overarching method of representation, yet different spaces are constructed through different implementations of the technique. Nostalgic sensibilities are present in the three collections, but nostalgia performs a different task in each of them. While in the Exposed series the nostalgic aesthetics try to disturb the relationship between the future and the past, in Conjunctivitis, they become an inherent experience of the body, and in the Dormant Yellow, they reconstruct a fantasy space—a pleasant dream perhaps. In all three collections, Abri's photography points to the co-constitution of the relations between art, body, and the built environment: that artistic production, bodily experience, and the built environment constitute one another, and that the relationship is beyond a simple depiction of reality.

The entangled relation between art, body, and the construction site is also present in Davood Gholami's artwork, yet with a completely different approach. Gholami's statues portray human bodies, specifically female bodies, as imprisoned in the rebar that comes out of the concrete columns in Tehran's typical construction sites (Fig. 4.12). The statues, built in various sizes, portray human figures as the extension of concrete columns. The columns are not just any columns, but the specific 40-by-40-centimeter concrete columns built as part of the load-bearing skeleton in the majority of residential construction sites in Iran. Conventionally, these columns

are built through pouring concrete into vertical casts and reinforced by an armature that supports them vertically and horizontally.

Figure 4.12: Statue built by Davood Gholami, 2017-2018. Source: courtesy of the artist, 2018.

The statues, Gholami nostalgically argues "are representations of us—the citizens of the city surrounded by and immersed in the concrete materiality of buildings. They are a manifestation of our century's problems."[47] He sees the ubiquity of construction as a translation of a famous poetry verse written by the Iranian modernist poet Sohrab Sepehri who described the modern city as "the sprouting of cement, Iron and stone."[48]

In the image below, Gholami has photo-montaged the statues as part of the column plan of a half-finished building (Fig. 4.13). The image puts the human body in a tight relationship with the structure of the building. One could read the image as an ironic intervention on the caryatids in the famous Porch of the Maidens in the Greek temple of Erechtheion (Fig. 4.14). But here, Gholami's crippling figures are built of concrete; they are poured, rather than carved and seem to be prisoned by the structure rather than taking pride in bearing its load.

The human body and the column have been in dialogue traditionally.[49] Gholami has turned all that dialogue in classism into a corrupted form here to make a satirical commentary on the culture of architecture in Iran and its trajectory as entangled with the construction industry. His implicit reference to a western icon of architecture is perhaps a strategy to invoke a global

evaluation on art and architecture in Iran as put in conversation with a western tradition of building.[50]

Figure 4.13: A photographic collage by Davood Gholami, 2018. Source: courtesy of the artist, 2018.

Figure 4.14: The Porch of the Maidens, Erechteion (421 – 406 BC), Greece. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erechtheion#/media/File:Athènes_Acropole_Caryatides.JPG, accessed June 4, 2019

Gholami has enacted this dialogue through other forms of artistic intervention. In a performance staged on a construction site, the artist and his cohort occupy the 40-by-40-centimeter space within the so-called "waiting" armatures of the concrete columns under construction (Fig. 4.15). The waiting rebar metaphorically stands for future construction perhaps as the artist captures a building in its state of incompleteness. Within the bounded space in between the rebar, the bodies of the participants make a commentary on the relationship between construction and human life. The bodies act as if they are part of the materiality of the concrete column, unwillingly participating in the structural system of a building, and forced to contribute as load-bearing elements.

By putting his body into the structure of a building, Gholami thus invests in a kind of rhetoric of out-of-placeness that invites the public to re-see ordinary building practices and their artifacts as harmful to the environment of the city. His performance is both situated within and constructed of the site of construction and tries to re-introduce a site that is so familiar yet so marginalized in our everyday political imaginary about the built environment.

Figure 4.15: An urban performance by Davood Gholami, 2018. Source: courtesy of the artist, 2018

The construction sites of Tehran have also found their way into the canvases of painters and have been put in dialogue with western traditions of architecture via other interventions. Tania Pakzad, an Iranian painter practicing in Tehran, has invented an interesting aesthetic response for representing Tehran's construction life. In a collection titled, *My City the City of Our Loneliness* (2015), Pakzad describes Tehran as such:

> For me, Tehran – where I was born and grew up – is a city in which people's presence can be seen along with nonstop construction and organizations with all their signs and symbols shown on yellow and gray boxes on the sidewalks, or on the lampposts supplying electricity to our houses. My Tehran today, seems to have nothing other than construction to present [sic].[51]

Abstraction as a mode of representation is significant in Pakzad's paintings, conveying how the built environment of Tehran is produced as a series of flat infill apartments. "Abstraction," describes Carl Schorske, "liberate[s] the emotions from concrete external reality into a self-devised realm of form, a heuristically posited ideal environment."[52] In Pakzad's abstract paintings everyday artifacts and structures are reduced to signs and colors. Red, gray, yellow, orange and black disseminate a machine-like aesthetic of space. The presence of numbers in most of the artist's paintings perhaps reflects a sort of coded existence—an existence emptied of human emotions and fueled by a quantitative system of regulation or a calculative behavior of investment.

In a painting that portrays a yellow crane raised above a number of towers, Pakzad signifies each structure with a number and reduces buildings to the aesthetics of a bar diagram (Fig. 4.16). Numbers could be seen as signifiers of wealth and capital, the speculative tropes that control and shape our cities today. They render buildings as quantities rather than qualities. These signs and symbols however, Pakzad notes, present themselves "like a swelling on the bodies of construction projects," exposing the monetary logic that is hidden behind each structure.[53]

Figure 4.16: "My City the City of Our Loneliness," by Tania Pakzad, 2015. Source: Mohsen.Gallery, accessed January 10, 2018

The painting also subverts a western tradition of high-rises image-making—a class of illustrations that go back to 19th century images of the tallest buildings of the world (Fig. 4.17). But where form plays a major role in making each building significant in those types of images, Pakzad seems to be making a commentary on how in Iran "form equals finance" by abstracting buildings into flat bars, dwarfed in fact by the crane, and lined up like suspects in a police lineup. Unlike the illustrations of the tallest buildings of the world, where height is used symbolically to

emphasize the memorability of each building, Pakzad's illustration is not about memorability or a game of global competition (Fig. 4.18). Her painting is about how pure commerce governs space in Iran. Where numbers specify actual heights in the illustrations of the tallest buildings of the world, for Pakzad, numbers lose their meaning just as forms lose their significance.

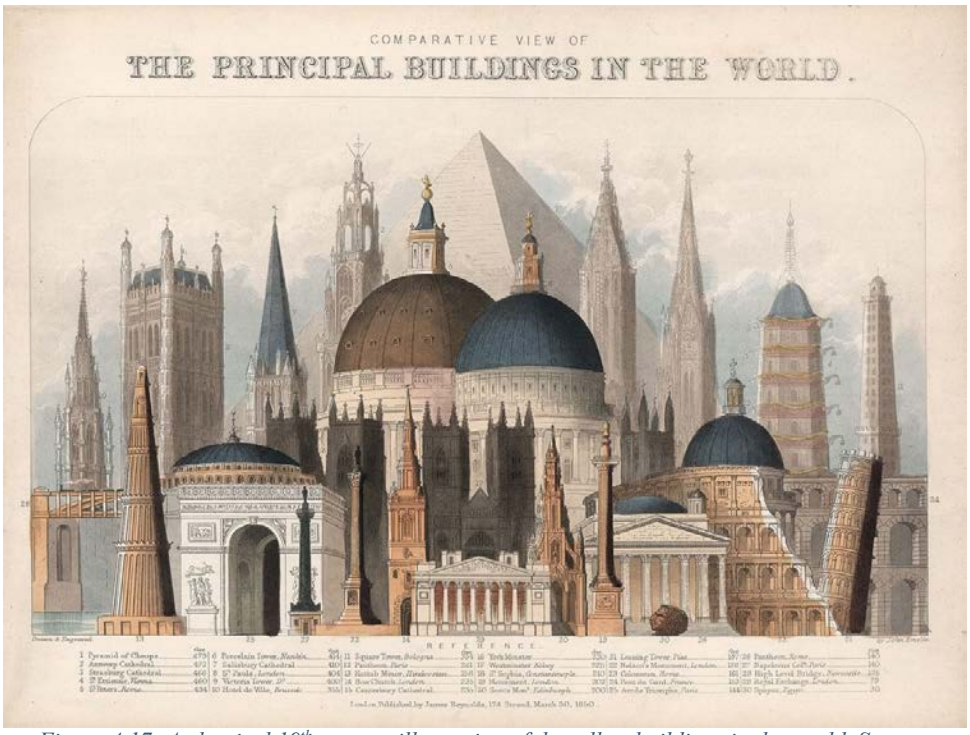

Figure 4.17: A classical 19th century illustration of the tallest buildings in the world. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_world%27s_tallest_buildings, accessed July 8, 2019

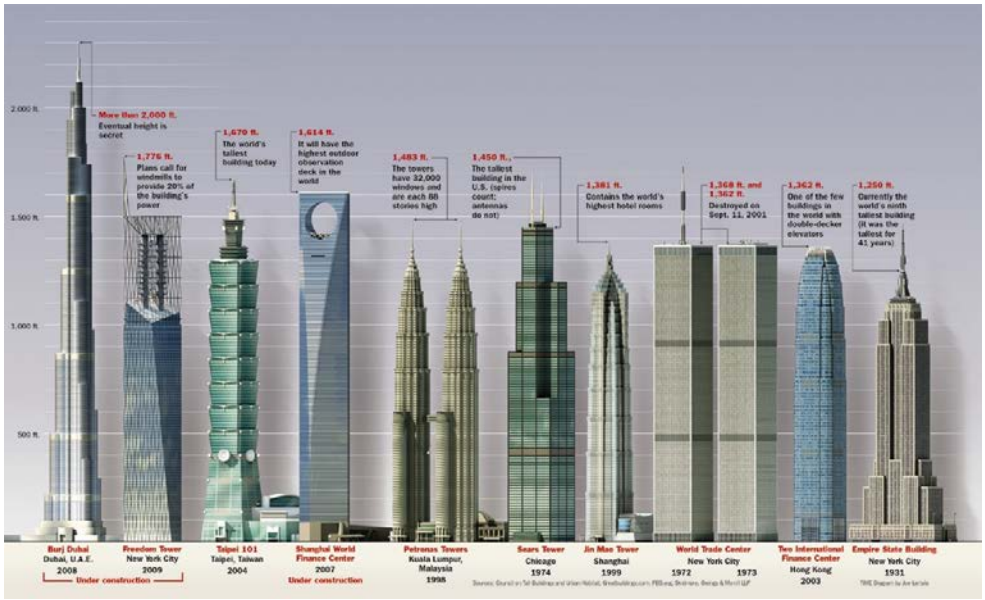

Figure 4.18: An illustration of a global competition of high-rises. Source: https://weburbanist.com, accessed July 8, 2019

A yellow crane overshadows the high-rises in Pakzad's painting, because the painting is not about individual buildings but about the chain, the process of production, and the construction artifacts that eventually disappear from the site. The city in this image is reduced to the overwhelming task of construction as it is carried out repetitively by the enormous yellow crane. In the flatness of Pakzad's painting, the crane is the only element that is drawn as a three-dimensional form. By giving volume to the form of the crane, the painting perhaps highlights the strong and animated presence of the apparatus of construction and its dominance over the built environment.

In another painting, Pakzad offers an interesting shift in scale by illustrating an elevational view of an *alamak*—a gas meter usually installed on the exterior walls of buildings in Iran (Fig. 4.19). The painting resembles the work of abstract expressionist painters such as Richard Diebenkorn's in treating paint on the canvas and simplifying the use of color in creating flat shapes (Fig. 4.20). The colors in Pakzad painting are also almost of the same color palette as one of Diebenkorn's master pieces referenced below. It almost seems that Pakzad is referencing Diebenkorn's painting in the left corner of her illustration, perhaps bringing a tradition of painting and representation into the frame of her image. Pakzad never talks about Diebenkorn in her collection, but one could argue that her implicit reference is a way of giving agency to art as a global media for narrating space.

Pakzad's little snapshot is a window into the fragility of the infrastructure of the entire building system in Tehran—an infrastructure so essential to the life of buildings, yet so vulnerable in its design. It almost feels as if the pipe and the meter are improvised and installed on the building as a temporary apparatus, falling outside of the logic of investment that governs other aspects of construction.

The pipe here is a "swelling" on the body of the building—a hint about the unimportance of the mechanical system in the commodification of buildings. Handwritten notes on the pipe and the wall reinforce a sense of informality about the numerical and the coded life of buildings. These notes, like the numbers on the edge of the canvas, or the small text next to the red pipe, which says "the Country's Ministry of Gas," situate the pipe within a larger political and bureaucratic space that is supposed to govern buildings in the city today.

Figure 4.19: "My City the City of Our Loneliness," by Tania Pakzad, 2015. Source: Mohsen.Gallery, accessed January 10, 2018

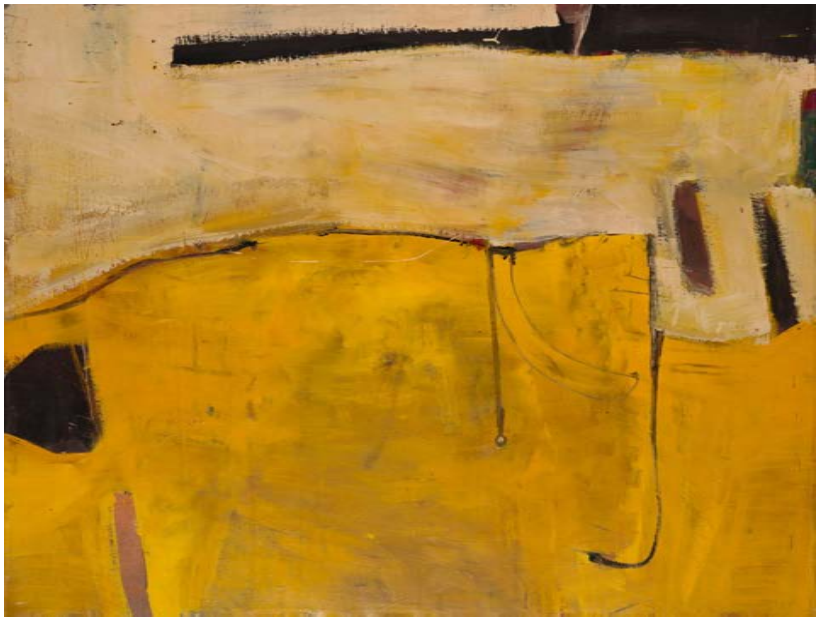

Figure 4.20: An abstract painting by Richard Diebenkorn, 1952 (rotated by the author). Source: https://portlandartmuseum.org/exhibitions/richard-diebenkorn/, accessed July 8, 2019

Painting as a medium of representation has also been used by other Iranian artists to animate the experience of construction in Tehran. Milad Mahmoudi's paintings in a collection titled *Incompleteness*, depict an abandoned city overwhelmed by half-finished buildings and construction sites. He portrays real places in Tehran, which have been nonetheless "altered ontologically," to use Zabala's term in a different context, where the scenery of construction is

turned into a narrative of destruction. The sort of loneliness that was present in Pakzad's paintings is also present here yet through different aesthetic choices. Unlike Pakzad who painted in an abstract style, Mahmoudi produces the city's experience through expressionism, because the paintings are really born out of his own everyday encounters as an urban dweller with apartments and construction sites (Fig. 4.21).

Figure 4. 21: "Incompleteness," painting by Milad Mahmoudi, 2013. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2018

For Mahmoudi, high-rises resemble isolation despite the fact that they gather hundreds of people within a single building.[54] He believes that the concept of neighborhood is absent in these buildings and people spend the majority of their life in a state of loneliness. The absence of human figures in his paintings is also an intentional gesture to emphasize the absence of city life in the urbanism of Tehran. This state of incompleteness produces a dystopian feeling in his paintings, rendering the city as a space long abandoned by its residents.[55]

Mahmoudi captures all of his buildings in an unfinished state. His paintings date back to 2013 and 2014 when the recession had forced many developers and builders to leave their projects unfinished. The paintings are originated in real photographs, but they are not painted directly from them. Rather, they are produced in a space "in-between the real world and the world of the canvas."[56] To add to the dystopian sense of the images, Mahmoudi implements a set of aesthetic techniques that reinforce the ruinous qualities of his selected sites. He shows that these buildings are already in a state of destruction even though they are not completed yet. The artist tries to convey the message that the future of the city is a ruinous future if builders continue to build like this. He exaggerates the forms, the depths, the curves and the perspectives to give form to a condition of crisis around very ordinary practices of construction (Fig. 4.22).[57]

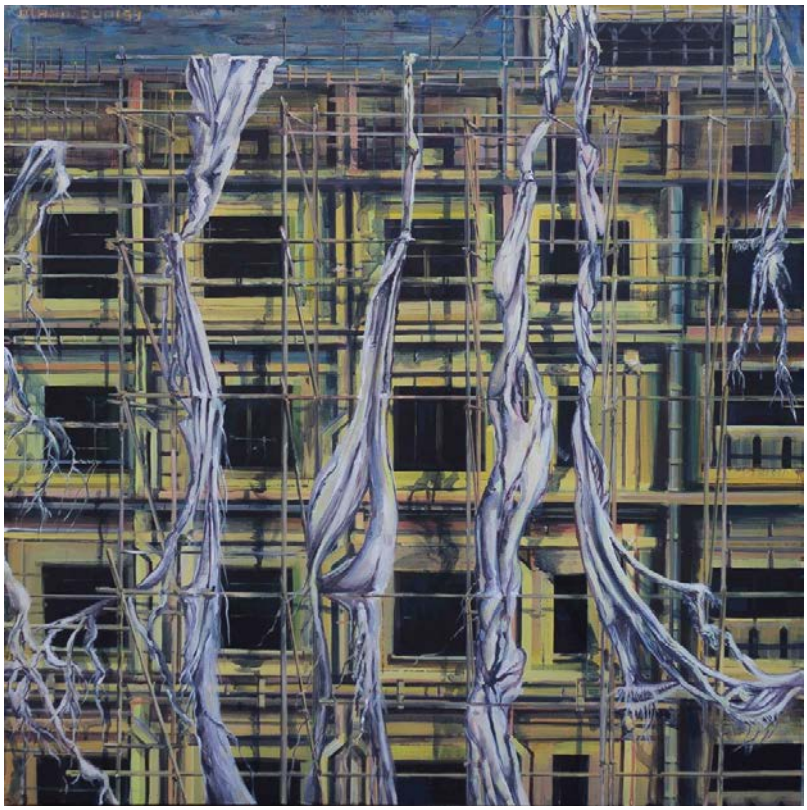

Figure 4.22: "Incompleteness," painting by Milad Mahmoudi, 2013. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2018

Mahmoudi's paintings seem to be in conversation with a tradition of apocalyptic and dystopian visualizations produced in the west. For example, the below painting could be juxtaposed against a painting done by Michael Kerbow, an American artist who is interested in depicting the future aftermath of our contemporary actions towards cities (Fig. 4.23 & 4.24). Kerbow's painting is titled "A New Religion," communicating the overwhelming presence of the fossil fuel industry in the modern society. The influence of fossil fuel industry and its architecture is compared to the influence of a major religion, and these industrial facilities are thus for Kerbow comparable to the monumental cathedrals of our age.[58] The same monumental treatment of construction sites could be read in Mahmoudi's work. The image below could be interpreted as the new Friday mosque of Tehran, with its dark hypostyle hall in the bottom, and the multiple minarets on the roof rising into the sky. But unlike Kerbow who does not depict real scenes of construction, Mahmoudi engages with actual projects of construction all over the city, which give him the visual rhetoric to develop them as degraded environments.

The perspectives that Mahmoudi works with are different from the perspectives of the photographs he takes of real buildings. He works with crossing lines in the horizontal plane and with relatively parallel lines in the Z axis. He paints his buildings as if he is a "four-meter-long creature, hugging the building on the ground and looking towards the top, while forcing the lines in the Z axis to cross each other with a delay."[59] To start a painting, he would put the canvas in his studio and set the vantage points at least five meters away from the edges of the canvas. He would then set the horizontal vantage points along with the bottom edge to set the horizon as low as possible.[60] In doing so, Mahmoudi obliterates the ground and the sky—the usual things that orient us, ground us, and connect us with nature.

Figure 4.23: "Incompleteness," by Milad Mahmoudi, 2013. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2018

Figure 4.24: "A New Religion," by Michael Kerbow, 2015. Source: http://michaelkerbow.com, accessed August 1, 2019

In one of his paintings Mahmoudi depicts a shopping mall in northern Tehran in the upper-class neighborhood of Farmaniye (Fig. 4.25). The painting mediates between the act of construction and the sense of destruction, especially when juxtaposed against the original inspirational photograph taken by the artist in 2014 when the building was still under

construction (Fig. 4.26). The painting offers a different take on the concept of the shopping mall—a view different from those discussed by some of the architects in the previous chapter. For him, the shopping mall is an emblem of capitalism and speculative urbanism—a dystopian phenomenon imposed on the city through the act of construction. While for the architects in the previous chapter, the mall was a space of permissiveness and safety, for Mahmoudi the grotesque exterior of the mall implies a sense of fear and anxiety.

The construction scaffolds and the curtains are exaggerated in Mahmoudi's painting of the mall. Fabric curtains, which are normally installed on the sites of construction to prevent the fall of debris on pedestrians, play a big role in producing a sense of anxiety and vacancy in the painting. The curtains in the painting are much more animated than the ones in the photograph. Their curves and twists are overplayed to produce more motion and more insecurity. The edges of the building are painted with shaky strokes of the brush, as opposed to sharp straight lines, and extra shadows are reproduced unrealistically to intensify the feeling of decay and horror.[61] Because of this, the photograph of the building under construction is much more at peace than the painting. It appears as if the building is already decaying as it is being constructed, and the red and black sky in the background contributes to this feeling. Furthermore, in Mahmoudi's painting the building seems to be moving out of the canvas like a crumbling creature. The perspectival play with the x, y, and z axes in the painting have made the building appear much wider than the building in the photograph. It is as if the building in the painting is "swelling out of the canvas in all three directions."[62]

Figure 4.25: The painting of a shopping mall in Tehran by Milad Mahmoudi, part of the collection of "Incompleteness," 2013. Source: Courtesy of the artist

Figure 4.26: Photograph of the painted shopping mall under construction, Tehran, 2013. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2018

The exaggeration of the perspective is much more evident in another painting, which offers a tunnel view of a building through a dense structure of scaffolds and curtains (Fig. 4.27). The perspectival intervention here creates a vertiginous and transient encounter between the viewer and the building, forcing the viewer "to seek a space beyond the edges of the canvas," or beyond the reality of the building.[63] It also destabilizes the position of the viewer on the ground, making her over-conscious about the verticality that surrounds her in the city. Likewise, the scaffolds perform several optical tasks for the painter. They amplify the sense of incompleteness, while at the same time giving depth to the space of construction. But most importantly, they work as perspectival devices to create an uneasy encounter with the building: "they help to situate the vantage point outside of the canvas."[64] Mahmoudi unsettles the viewers, "making them feel that they are being pulled up and thrown to the top."[65] The scaffolds show the viewer that he or she is only viewing a small fracture of reality: "the deeper layers of reality are beyond the space of the canvas."[66]

Figure 4.27: "Incompleteness," by Milad Mahmoudi, 2013. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2018

Another painting that stands out in Mahmoudi's collection is an illustration of two high-rises facing each other with a very narrow distance between their windows, and a crane occupying that distance (Fig. 4.28). For Mahmoudi, buildings like these reveal the corruptions of the municipalities, speaking to the construction permits that should have not been issued in such situations. The concept of incompleteness within this particular painting is narrated around the incompleteness of urban life scenarios: "the incompleteness of the sort of interior spaces that apartments like these would offer their residents by not allowing them to have open curtains towards an enjoyable view."[67] But another form of incompleteness is also evident in the painting: the huge walls facing the viewer are sheer—windowless by city regulations, in preparation for other high-rises to be built exactly next to them. These windowless walls are indications of more construction to come, an indication of more high-rises in the neighborhood, hence more incompleteness to arrive.

Figure 4.28: "Incompleteness," painting by Milad Mahmoudi, 2013. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2018

Figure 4.29: photograph of two facing buildings under construction in Tehran, 2013. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2018

When this painting is juxtaposed against the photograph of the real situation, one can observe the strange adjacency of the two buildings in real life (Fig. 4.29). For this particular painting, Mahmoudi did not even need to exaggerate the small gap between the two buildings to make his point. The solid walls, however, are painted in gray with heavy brush strokes that add to the brutality of the concrete and the implicit incompleteness of this side of the building. The painting is organized as a symmetrical view, capturing the scene in a closed frame that has been somewhat mandated by the shape of the crane. These spaces, Mahmoudi likes to note, "are not designed for living; they are made through the flexibilities of the codes for pure investment."[68]

Fatemeh Tahami, an illustrator of children's book, has also tried to capture this dichotomy between living and investment in Tehran's urbanism. The artist has illustrated this sense of dichotomy in a painting called *The Mass Building Project*, referencing practices of massive apartment building in the east and west of Tehran (Fig. 4.30). The illustration narrates the life of a miserable man, who has returned home after a busy day of work. The complex in which his apartment is located appears as a giant mass of objects: walls, windows, doors and furniture. The artist notes that "instead of feeling relieved, the man feels more exhausted when he encounters his apartment. Is this the definition of a home, he asks?"[69] Tahami sees this work as a commentary on the meaning of home and home ownership in Iran. She urges the viewers to ask: "at what cost should we become homeowners? At the cost of losing the city to giant masses of construction which hardly satisfy the standards of a living space?"[70]

Figure 4.30: "Mass building," by Fatemeh Tahami, 2010. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2017

The illustration tries to show the feeling of insecurity about living in such apartments, and it does this through a sharp form, a dark background, and an ambiguous gray mass, on which one has to really zoom to find the soft details of everyday life. With a close look at the painting, a viewer can detect little ordinary things that are indicative of life in these buildings: domestic appliances, clothing racks, closets, etc. These artifacts, as opposed to architecture, build the space of this giant apartment complex: "like *besaz-befroushi* apartments where you only have a compiled mass of things and no secure design, no secure architecture," the artist notes.[71]

The giant mass of construction in this work troubles the eye. It is as if this mass of artifacts is constantly moving within itself, "like a worm in pain," Tahami likes to put it.[72] The pain in the building is the result of the haphazard and chaotic methods of creating space. Such spaces, built by careless builders and developers, "do not offer a sense of tranquility and settlement. They are not formed as houses, but as an amalgam of fixtures and materials put together in the most efficient way."[73] For the artist, the only peaceful way for approaching such spaces in painting is through sarcasm. She argues that "only through satire, one could make an effective commentary on the state of the city and only through satire one could enact laments for the loss of the city to the overwhelming practices of construction."[74]

Tahami has environmentalist concerns about the city. Like Gholami and Mahmoudi, she is interested in drawing attention to the sprawling of construction activities across the city. This is most evident in her paintings titled *Tehran*, which was originally created for an international children illustration competition in Paris in 2010 (Fig. 4.31). The painting embodies years of Tahami's encounter with Tehran: "a city one hates and loves at the same time."[75] The international competition encouraged Tahami to draw a bird's eye view of the city in the most detailed way the artist had experienced the urban fabric. Because of sanctions, Tahami could not go to Paris to receive her award for the competition, but her painting did go on her behalf and allowed both her and the city of Tehran to participate in a global art platform on urban life.

The drawing shows the overpopulated life of the city, pointing to its many environmental problems such as pollution, overbuilding, and traffic. The artist has drawn the city from the north to the south and from the east to the west, paying attention to the little details of interwoven neighborhoods and confused streets. Tehran is drawn in a miniature style in black ink. The sky is textured with tiny black dots, representing pollution articles that saturate the air of the city. The sun is turned black from observing this polluted air. In the corner of the piece a little boy is flying in a balloon, spray-painting the sky with blue paint. Tahami thinks of him as "a little agent who feels responsible for the city and is trying to resurrect the blue sky through painting."[76] This is in a sense what Tahami herself has been trying to do for the city: "to revitalize it through painting."[77]

Figure 4.31: "Tehran," by Fatemeh Tahami, 2010. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2017

Tehran, as illustrated by Tahami, must be seen from up close. It is almost as if there is no other way for her and for Mahmoudi to capture the city. Through this painting, Tahami encourages outsiders (like the competition committee in France) to experience the city in an immersed fashion. From distance, the city appears only as an ambiguous gray cloud, but when one enters it with a detecting eye, one finds it familiar: "You begin to find the streets you know, and you feel closer to the city. This is when your nostalgia for the city is awakened and you no longer see it as an incomprehensible cloud of buildings."[78] For Tahami, the city could only be mapped through this attitude of paying attention to details.[79]

Her illustration is small in size, occupying only a 30-by-30-centimeter frame; but within this small surface area she has managed to use an aesthetic mechanism that gives form to two different modes of experiencing the city: a bird's eye view and a situated experience. Tahami's vocabularies resemble the language of the situationists, even though she has not read about them. She has created a connection between walking in the city and painting the city and has borrowed from a tradition of Persian miniature painting in Iran to enact this interplay between a wholistic and a detailed perspective in experiencing the city.

The theme of environmentalism and the concerns for the rapid urbanization of the city are also present in another collection of paintings by Tahami. In a series of illustrations worked for a children's book, Tahami renders the sad life of Tehran's development through the story of a girl who finds a red rose in a city of towers, which has been emptied of all plants and flowers because of construction and pollution (Fig. 4.32).

Figure 4.32: A scene from the story of a girl with a red rose, by Fatemeh Tahami, 2015. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2018

In the story, a little girl finds a red rose near a factory site (Fig. 4.33). The rose is ill from all the noise and the pollution in the city. The little girl takes the rose to her house but fails to offer it a home in which the flower could recover from sickness. She finally decides to climb the construction debris near the factory and take the rose to the moon. Once she reaches the moon, she plants the rose there, so the entire moon would be covered with red roses.

But this is not the real story as the rest of the book reveals. The story of a girl climbing up the moon and planting a flower there is too good to be true: "too imaginative for our cotemporary mindset."[80] The real story is one in which the girl gets stuck under the debris of the factory and passes away while holding the rose. The moon becomes red in mourning her tragic death (Fig. 4.34). Tahami believes that this city could be any of the large cities in the Asian continent: "this could be Tehran, Tokyo, Shanghai, or any other crowded and polluted city in the world. Through death I am invoking the sad destiny of these cities."[81]

Figure 4.33: A scene from the story of a girl with a red rose, by Fatemeh Tahami, 2015. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2018t

Figure 4.34: A scene from the story of a girl with a red rose, by Fatemeh Tahami, 2015. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2018

Almost all of Tahami's illustrations deal with an urban narrative; she is specifically interested in painting apartments and making stories around their social life in Tehran. This interest, she explains, is rooted in her memories of her childhood house. She grew up in a big traditional courtyard-house with pine trees and a big water pond. When Tahami was fifteen, her father passed away and her family was relocated to a small apartment in the east of Tehran. The artist's world suddenly vanished with the disappearance of the house. But the urban became a new visual resource for her artistic production.

In Tahami's illustrations, her education from Tehran University as a graphic designer intersects with her lived experience in a small apartment within the city. She turns to painting and drawing as a new way of inhabiting the city. As someone who is raised in the city, she situates her identity within the urban setting of Tehran, arguing that her subjectivity and imagination are formed by its urban space.

In one of the artist's earliest illustrations, titled *Lost*, Tahami captures her entangled psychological relationship with the city and the concept of the house (Fig. 4.35). The painting is an illustration of a child whose face is a patchwork, a quilt of different identities. She is lost among rows of housing and feels confused about her spatial and temporal belonging. "She is lost in both time and space," the artist notes, and this confusion is highlighted through the different colors of the sky in the background.[82]

The child is Tahami herself, but she is also a metaphor for the city of Tehran: "a confused patchwork of many buildings and many temporalities, a city abandoned by caring souls, and left on its own to grow in a state of schizophrenia."[83] The reason for this sense of confusion, the artist notes, is because the child (or the city) has been abandoned in infancy: "the city feels that she is not loved by anyone from the early days of her life."[84] The illustration positions the child in a way that parallels Tavakolian's woman walking with dead chickens. The senses of disorientation and out-of-placeness resonate. In both of these works, the protagonists have lost hope in the city; they are confused about the quick temporality of its architecture and urbanism.

Figure 4.35: "Lost," by Fatemeh Tahami, 2011. Source: Courtesy of the artist, 2017

The square format of the illustration could be a suggestion of the courtyard in which Tahami spent her childhood days. It could also be a reference to a courtyard of the mind that does not exist in reality, with the little patch of grass and starry interior. The apartments in this image surround this courtyard; it is as if two spatial imaginaries are laminated onto one another with different temporalities—one belonging to the past and one to the present. The simultaneity of day and night could likewise evince the simultaneity of the past and present. One could read this as a psychoanalytical treatment of time and space as theorized by Michel de Certeau and Sigmund Freud. De Certeau, in his book *Heterologies*, describes the difference between

psychoanalysis and historiography as a difference in the "ways of distributing *the space of memory*."[85] He writes, "they [psychoanalysis and historiography] conceive of the relation between the past and present differently. Psychoanalysis recognizes the past *in* the present; historiography places them one *beside* the other."[86] In other words, if historiography "postulates a continuity (a genealogy)" based on a system of narration that creates a "clean break between the past and the present," psychoanalysis operates based on a process in which the present is organized through the "traces" of past events—a Freudian return of the repressed past in the present.[87]

Tahami seems to put forward that the new urban trajectories of Tehran cannot be represented without the spatio-temporal framework of the courtyard as traces of urban memory "returning" to the present city. She almost makes a claim that to live in this psychoanalytical environment transforms us, fractures us like a quilt of patchwork, making us the same as the confused urbanism around us.

This psychoanalytical representation of the city is also evident in an installation project by a group of Iranian artists in Tehran, where a vacant house is turned into an exhibition of its past life (Fig. 4.36). The event of the exhibition was held in 2012, in the midst of the construction frenzy that was hitting most of the neighborhoods of Tehran. The Facebook page of the event posted an invitation on September 25th, 2012, with the following note:

> Every day, in every avenue and every street of our city they dismantle a house—a house which has been designed through the fundamentals of architecture and built based on our needs. We do not know now, whether we do not have needs anymore? Or we do not want? Or we do not know?[88]

Figure 4.36: the invitation poster for the "Final Encore" exhibition in Tehran, 2012. Source: Courtesy of Namdar Shirazian, 2017

The curators titled the event *Vapasin Ejra*—translated to English as *The Final Encore,* "a ceremony for an old house, which is awaiting its demolition."[89] The word *encore* means "a repeated or additional performance of an item at the end of a concert, as called for by an audience."[90] As the title implies, the event accommodated a series of artistic interventions on the body of a house which was already sold to a developer to be built into an apartment. The event in a sense, was the final opportunity for the house to present itself and narrate a story about its past—a final encore on the trajectory of low-rise building and its traditions and environments in northern Tehran.

To reconstruct the memories of the house, old images of the construction process were found and restaged to resurrect the traditions of workmanship that gave birth to houses like this in northern Tehran (Fig. 4.37). The old photographs also referenced the low-rise landscape of housing in the *Shemiranat* district, portraying the small clusters of houses against the natural scenery of the *Alborz* mountains.

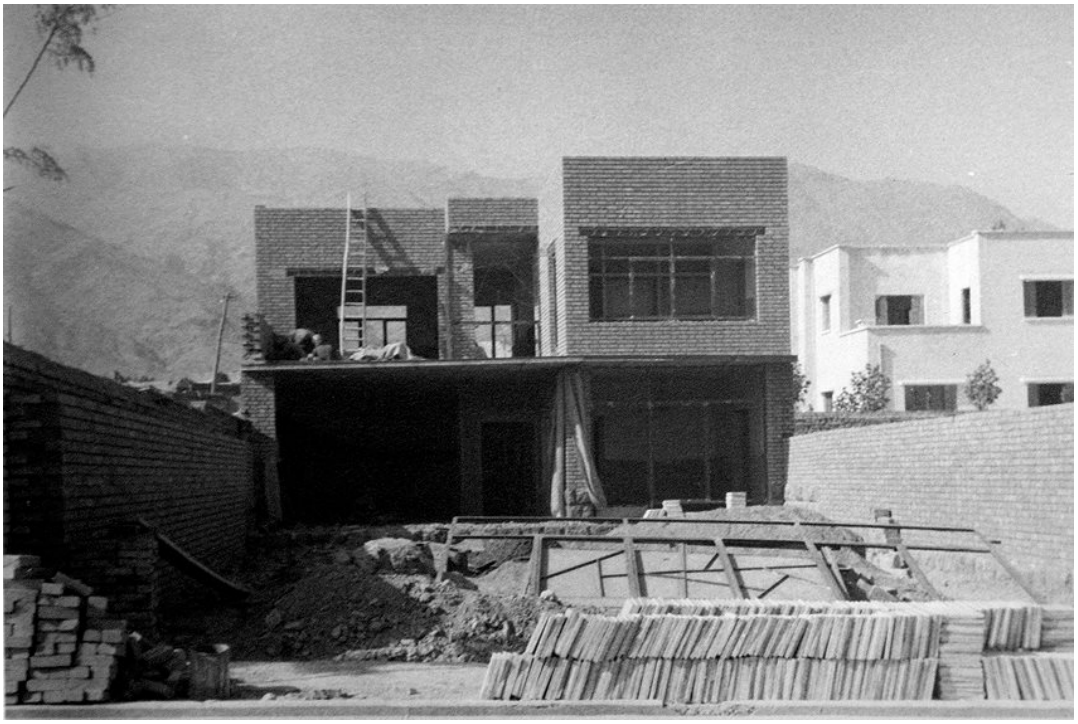

Figure 4.37: an old photograph showing the house in Mahmoudiye in the state of construction. Source: Courtesy of Namdar Shirazian, 2017

The documentation of the event shows that the installations in the house were numerous and varied. But the general attitude that seems to have unified them all, is a gesture of re-appropriation and defamiliarization of artifacts, fixtures, and spaces of everyday life. In one of the corners of the house, where the main interior staircase is located, the rails of the stairs are suspended from the ceiling, like a majestic or heavenly structure cut from the body of the house (Fig. 4.38). The act of dismantling the rails is theatrically displayed and monumentalized through a geometrically patterned web of robes that hold the structure from the ceiling. What is interesting about this gesture in relation to the future of the house is that the rails perhaps in protest to the demolition of the house, are going up as opposed to going down.

Figure 4.38: an installation in the "Final Encore" exhibition, 2012. Source: Courtesy of Namdar Shirazian, 2017

In another corner, a number of old appliances are assembled into an installation, with a note stating that "the residents have long left their house, leaving their stuff behind. The appliances no longer remember their utility because they have been unused for such a long time" (Fig. 4.39).[91] In a different corner, a bathroom space is turned into a sailing scene, with the bathtub transformed into a boat and the space of the room filled with pretend water made out of toilet paper (Fig. 4.40). The bathroom here is turned into a fantasy space, where each object has forgotten its usual function. Water once played a major role in the utility of the bathroom, and now it performs a new task in shaping a dreamy space and coordinating it with other remaining ordinary artifacts. The final encore of the bathroom scene is perhaps the reimagination of the bathroom space.

Figure 4.39: an installation in the "Final Encore" exhibition posted on Facebook, 2012. Source: Courtesy of Namdar Shirazian, 2017

Figure 4.40: a bathroom installation in the "Final Encore" exhibition, 2012. Source: Courtesy of Namdar Shirazian, 2017

The house is thus given one last chance to speak out through the work of art. With these installations, architectural and art discourses intersect; artists and architects begin to gesture to one another, and they do so, first, as a form of talk about sanctions, and second, in a temporal alley between expectation and experience. The expectation of demolition is turned into a social and political event and is prolonged as an experience though both architectural and artistic interventions.

But here, one can also view the whole project as an act of violation before violation. If the event has been organized as a critique of the speculative practices of demolition, these artistic interventions that work through acts of scrapping, dismantling, breaking, spraying, and wrapping inevitably legitimize the house as an object not worthy of being kept. Two images from the house show dismantled doors as they are restaged in the yard, and an artist wrapping a tree with a saran wrap (Fig. 4.41 & 4.42). A critical viewer might argue that the house is turned into a playground for art, more than being a site for a particular rhetoric of activism. In conveying a message of crisis about the pervasiveness of apartment building in Tehran, the house itself is consumed rather than produced by art, almost like an Orientalized object. Is the Final Encore, the final voice of the house or that of the artist? Through what nostalgias is the house being performed?

Figure 4.41: An artist wrapping a tree as an installation in the "Final Encore" exhibition, 2012. Source: Courtesy of Namdar Shirazian, 2017

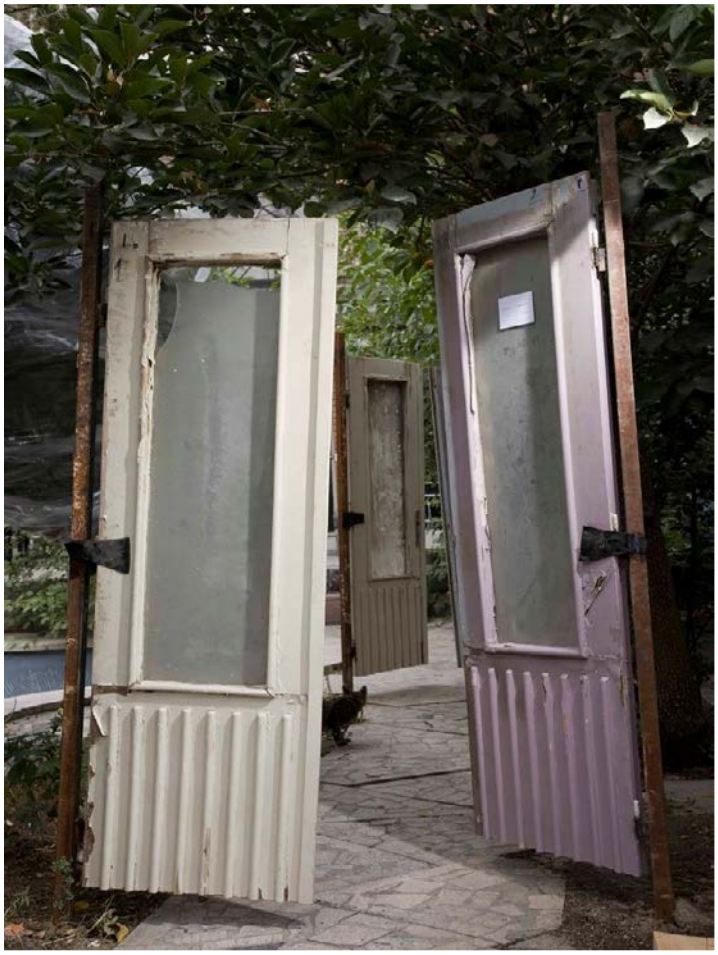

Figure 4.42: an installation of dismantled doors in the "Final Encore" exhibition, 2012. Source: Courtesy of Namdar Shirazian, 2017

But one could also argue that while the house was demolished as planned, it nonetheless continued to live on forever in a series of photographs and installations produced by the artists. One is here reminded of the work of Gordon Matta Clark, especially the *Splitting* project in Englewood, New Jersey, where the artist literally split a house in half with a one-inch-wide cut right down the middle (Fig. 4.43). To create an ever-widening split, one half of the house was then leaned back at five degrees. As Mark Wigley writes, with this intervention, "a simple house, a house whose simplicity acts as our culture's very image of simplicity, had been transformed into an image of dense internal complexity."[92] He continues:

> Despite the polemical physicality of the surgical operation, the work of splitting is not in the object itself but in the wide array of forensic documentation. After all, the goal of an autopsy is never the body on the table, but the explanations extracted from it. In this case, images of the dissected house were exhibited alongside the extracted corners, books of drawings, cut drawings, and collages. Even the act of cutting was documented in photographs and films. Each and every aspect of the surgery was itself cut into.[93]

Figure 4.43: "Splitting" by Gordon Matta Clark, 1974. Source: https://smarthistory.org/gordon-matta-clark-splitting/, accessed September 7, 2019

The artists who worked on the *Final Encore* in Tehran did likewise try to reconstruct the house through conceptual interventions and re-documentations of the house. Each work acted as an archival project, which captured a particular aspect of the house through the language of art. By removing parts of the building, or displacing certain objects and artifacts, these artists tried to project the state and the feeling of abandonment and demolition that was already a part this building. Here the site of the project, i.e. the house, not only accommodated artistic activity but became the artwork itself. To use Robert Smithson's words in a different context, in this project "one does not impose, but rather expose the site."[94]

Perhaps one could have a deeper reading of this process of exposure, given that even in Matta Clark's project of Splitting, the real violation is a violation on the symbolism of the house as a space of familial wholeness. In other words, "to cut the house is to violate not just the family, but it's social foundations—in fact, the very premise of modern, western society."[95] The *Final Encore* could also be scrutinized along similar lines, even though the artists in charge of the project liked to give it a more nostalgic rhetoric. The act of violation could be interpreted as an act of defamiliarization—an Iranian experience of modernity so entangled with the details of architecture, as discussed in the previous chapter too.

Such projects could also provide a challenge to the assumptions of architecture and construction about site and building. They should be considered beyond works of conceptual art and taken into consideration as alternative ways of approaching the built environment in ways that challenge the dominant regime of demolition and reconstruction in Iranian cities.

Conclusion

The *Blue Monday*, a rock song from the 1980s by the English band New Order, is playing in the background of the video. The artist shows me the video clip made for the *Tehran I Love You*

exhibition, an event organized in 2013 by a group of photographers who were all interested in the urban life of the city. The music, the artist notes, "captures the love-and-hate relationship with the city, just like how we approached it via our photographs."[96] He continues:

> Tehran is like rock music; it has the same materiality. It is overwhelmingly noisy but at the same time, it is doing its work every day. Those who have lived in Tehran cannot live anywhere else. I lived in London for a couple of years and the most important thing that occupied my mind was Tehran. I saw everything within the context of Tehran. That is why I returned; I realized that I couldn't work on the city remotely; I had to be within it.[97]

The artist's thoughts about the city are also influenced by Benjamin's *Arcade Project*. He calls himself a "flaneur," because of spending most of his time walking aimlessly within the streets of Tehran: "the city is a thick texture; it allows you to think about nothing. You can lend yourself to the city to take you wherever it wants to go," he elaborates.[98] He takes his camera with him everywhere and spends more than fifteen hours a day in his car. He basically lives in his car as a way of living in the city. With his camera and his car, he follows the city and documents it at every second. "With my camera, I become a more structured person; with the camera I transform from a flaneur to an investigator of the city," he notes.[99]

The artist is a well-known photographer who is interested in urban characters, be they people, buildings, or streets and alleys. He believes that the density of things and characters is so high in Tehran that there is almost no space in the middle to pause. The artist's photographs are particularly about ephemeral urban moments: "small everyday events that happen in a second and are either already done or in the middle of happening."[100] He is interested in the "transient characteristic of modernity."[101] He recalls a time when he walked in the *Vali-Asr* street in Tehran for twenty consecutive days and continuously took photos. He was certain at that time that within five years from then the ordinary photos that he took would gain a different meaning, and this was precisely because of the rapidly changing character of the city.

Tehran, for the artist, is only describable through the ephemeral character of modernity and photography is his mechanism through which this modernity could be documented. The artist believes that "Tehran could never be represented directly; one has to approach the city indirectly, from a mixture of media and from different angles."[102] He further notes that he was able to re-see Tehran's urbanism after he lived in London for a couple of years. The distance allowed him to reevaluate his lens towards the city.

The artists sentiments about the city imply a global imaginary about Tehran. The reference to the rock music, to the literature on western modernity, and to the geopolitical distance that a trip had granted him, all position his work within a global network of practice. Furthermore, he locates his identity as an urbanite who focuses his work on the city, arguing that his artistic work has been shaped by the trajectories of urban life. He tries to elaborate on this feeling by making connections to fragments of western tradition.

Several artists who were interviewed in this chapter conveyed similar sentiments. References to western traditions of art were not always direct in the discussed works, but implicit comparisons were indicative of a powerful imaginary about Tehran's place in an ever-globalizing art and architecture world. Specifically, two of the artists noted that the visualization of Tehran's frantic urbanization was a media through which they could communicate with urbanites in other metropolises, because cities were growing at a rapid pace in many countries around the world.[103] Visualizations of the city represented the city as a subject of critique while marking artists' identities as urban dwellers. This urban affiliation perhaps allowed them to

connect to broader urban networks, permitting their work to eventually participate in the global discourses of art, architecture and urbanism.

By looking at a variety of artworks, this chapter tried to offer a narrative of the city that is built through different media and different representations of construction. These artistic narratives underpinned shared experiences of the city—experiences so entangled with the urbanization of Tehran under conditions of economic instability. While sanctions were not directly discussed by these artists as a political situation, their footprint was evident in the ways through which artworks captured the culture of architecture under a specific economic situation. These artworks not only tried to critique the city, they also became a cultural mechanism through which a city under sanctions could be experienced and talked about within a global context.

Notes and References

[1] Newsha Tavakolian, "Listen," Newshatavakolian, 2011, https://www.newshatavakolian.com/listen.
[2] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Columbia University Press, 2004).
[3] Reyhaneh Behboodi, "Shahr-i-Ma Sandrom-i Khaneh Gerefte Ast," Tabnak News, 2014, http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/398603/نگاه-شما-شهر-ما-سندرم-خانه-گرفته-است.
[4] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, p. 255-275.
[5] T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Art: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton University Press, 1984).
[6] Ibid., 49.
[7] Ibid., 17.
[8] Ibid., 13.
[9] I have been also inspired by the work of historians and anthropologists who have used art as a medium for capturing the experience of space within a particular temporality. See for instance: Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner (Stanford University Press, 2002); Carle Schorske, *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (Vintage Books Edition, 1980); Stefania Pandolfo, *Impasse of the Angels: Scenes from a Moroccan Space of Memory* (University of Chicago Press, 1997); Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (Forthcoming Books, 2009).
[10] Joanna Grabski, *Art World City: The Creative Economy of Artists and Urban Life in Dakar* (Indiana University Press, 2017).
[11] Ibid., 6.
[12] Ibid., 7.
[13] Ibid., 8.
[14] Ibid., 177.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 206.
[17] Ibid., 193.
[18] Ibid., 194.
[19] Santiago Zabala, "Emergency Through Art," in *Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency* (Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 25–110.
[20] Jota Castro, "mortgage," *Jotacastro* (website), 2009, http://www.jotacastro.eu/selected-works/mortgage/
[21] Santiago Zabala, "Emergency Through Art," in *Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency*, p. 38.
[22] Ibid., 41.
[23] Ibid., 39.
[24] Ibid., 110.
[25] Grabski, *Art World City: The Creative Economy of Artists and Urban Life in Dakar, p. 206*.

[26] I am borrowing the term "enactment" from the work of anthropologist Annemarie Mol to argue that the use of different media in art is not just about the use of different methods of visualization but about different modes of thinking and operation. Please see: Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Duke University Press, 2002), p. vii. For a great usage of this concept in an architectural study please see: Nicholas D'Avella, "From Banks to Bricks: Architecture, Investment, and Neighborhood Life in Buenos Aires, Argentina" (PhD dissertation, University of California, 2012), p. 30.
[27] Mohsen Shahmardi, "The Contemporary Landscapes of Tehran," *mohsenshahmardi* (website), 2015, http://www.mohsenshahmardi.com/mohsen-shahmardi/works/contemporary-landscapes-of-tehran/.
[28] Sasan Abri, "Exposed," *Sasanabri* (website), 2018, http://www.sasanabri.com/works/exposed.
[29] Sasan Abri, "Exposed Solo Exhibition," Exhibition opening at Mohsen Gallery, February 9th, 2018.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time, p. 259*.
[39] Abri, *"*Exposed Solo Exhibition.*"*
[40] Sasan Abri, "Conjunctivitis," *Sasanabri* (website), 2012, http://www.sasanabri.com/works/conjunctivitis.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Sasan Abri, "The Dormant Yellow," *Sasanabri* (website), 2013, http://www.sasanabri.com/works/the-dormant-yellow.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Davood Gholami, interviewed by Razieh Ghorbani, Tehran, January 2018.
[48] Sohrab Sepehri, *The Eight Books* (Entesharat-e-Tahouri, 2001 [1977]).
[49] Joseph Rykwert, *The Dancing Column: On Order in Architecture* (The MIT Press, 1996); John Onians, *Bearers of Meaning: The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance* (Princeton University Press, 1988).
[50] The juxtaposition of Gholami's artwork with the Greek temple of Erechtheion is done by the author as part of the analytical work on the pieces. This comparison was not invoked by the artist himself.
[51] Tania Pakzad, "My City the City of Our Loneliness," *Mohsen Gallery* (website), 2011, http://mohsen.gallery/series/my-city-the-city-of-our-lonliness/.
[52] Schorske, *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture, p. 271*.
[53] Pakzad, *"*My City the City of Our Loneliness.*"*
[54] Milad Mahmoudi, interviewed by Razieh Ghorbani, Tehran, December 2017.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Michael Kerbow, *"*A New Religion,*"* Michael Kerbow, 2015, http://michaelkerbow.com.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Fatemeh Tahami, interviewed by Razieh Ghorbani, Tehran, March 2017.
[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Michelle De Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] "The Final Encore," *Facebook*, September 25, 2012.
[89] "The Final Encore," *Facebook*, October 1, 2012.
[90] "Encore," in *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2016.
[91] "The Final Encore," *Facebook*, September 24, 2012.
[92] Mark Wigley, "Anarchitectures: The Forensics of Explanation," *Log* 15 (Winter 2009), p. 125.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Robert Smithson, "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site," *Artforum* 6/10 (1967), Cited in Martin Hogue, "The Site as Project: Lessons from Land Art and Conceptual Art," *Journal of Architectural Education* 57, no. 3, p. 54.
[95] Andrew Shanken, personal communication, September 27, 2019.
[96] My interview with "Mani" took place in Tehran in November 2017; please note that this artist requested for anonymity and that is why he is not referenced by his real name here.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Davood Gholami, interviewed by Razieh Ghorbani, Tehran, January 2018; and Fatemeh Tahami, interviewed by Razieh Ghorbani, Tehran, March 2017.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

A "Sanctioning" Architecture

From the hotel room in the city of Karabla in Iraq, the voices of two architects and several workers could be heard as they communicate with each other about a concrete structure. They all appear to be from Iran and speak in Persian. The immense construction site in which they are working is part of the project for the expansion of the shrines of Imam Hossein and Abalfazl—two of the most important pilgrimage sites in Shia Islam (Fig. 5.1). Advertisements in the Iranian national television that invite artists, craftsmen, architects, and engineers to Iraq indicate that a whole infrastructure of religious tourism is being built in Karbala with Iranian and Iraqi capital and expertise.

Figure 5.1: The expansion of Imam Hossein Shrine, Karbala, Iraq. Source: http://imamhussain.org/english/inpictures/26248, accessed July 20, 2019

The presence of Iranians in these cities reveals that while sanctions have smothered Iran out of a global network of relations, they have opened up new regional connections via new areas of economic activity and political cooperation. Iranian capital is now flowing into the neighboring country of Iraq helping reconstruct the Shia cities of Najaf and Karbala like the religious cities of Qom and Mashahd in Iran. Aesthetic features of ordinary Iranian architecture such as neoclassical facades, have also become common in Iraq. These elements along with other Iranian artifacts, goods, and advertisements that circulate in the city, speak of a strong cultural and economic presence of Iran in this area (Fig. 5.2 & 5.3). Even a railway is being constructed by the Iranian government to link the city of Shalamcheh in southern Iran to the Iraqi city of Basra. The railway is designed to eventually reach Lattakia in northwestern Syria, to accelerate economic exchange between the three countries.[1]

Figure 5.2: A neoclassical façade in Karbala, Iraq. Source: photo taken by author, 2019

Figure 5.3: Advertisements of "Kaleh" an Iranian dairy brand near Karbala. Source: photo taken by author, 2019

Besides the Iranian government, Iranian citizens have also approached neighboring countries such as Turkey, Georgia and the United Arab Emirates for investment opportunities. The Iranian upper- and middle-class investors have participated in the real estate market of these countries at a time when sanctions denied them further global access. For example, when in 2015 the JCPOA created a short pause in the imposition of sanctions, political and economic uncertainty encouraged a stream of investors to buy dollars and convert them into real estate

properties in these countries. A study by Iran's Parliamentary Research Center in May 2018 estimates thirteen billion dollars of capital outflow in the years of 2017 and 2018.[2] This capital outflow has been mainly caused by the fear of new sanctions and mobilized by speculators seeking opportunities beyond the national borders.[3]

By looking at these regional engagements, as well as the local narratives that were discussed in the chapters of this dissertation, can we now talk about a "sanctioning" architecture in Iran? In the introduction I looked at sanctions as a *contronym*—a word which contains two opposite meanings. Sanction means restriction and prohibition, but it also means authorization and permission. The invocation of sanctions as a contronym has a value as an analytical framework because Iran has suffered from massive sanctions in the past few decades, but what this work has found is the process by which Iranian people and the Iranian state "sanction" themselves. Sanction here does not mean the deterrence that was imposed on them, but the permission Iranians have given themselves to respond to the ongoing political and economic instabilities through different cultural and economic strategies.

In this dissertation I looked at cultural territories that were opened up and closed by sanctions inside Iran. Art, architecture and construction offered venues to explore how sanctions stopped or created a flow of ideas, goods, and capital within the built environment. To unpack this space of simultaneous deterrence and permission within Iran, in the first chapter I looked into the narratives and the activities of a number of builders, realtors and ordinary investors to examine how they worked with speculation as a productive platform for shaping the city under the force of sanctions, and how they navigated their practice between the simultaneous excess and scarcity of foreign goods and aesthetics. In the second chapter, I approached a group of practicing architects and studied their experiments on the themes of tradition and modernity. These architects invoked a dynamic relationship between tradition and modernity as a way of responding to the speculative practices of developers, and as a strategy to reconnect to the global community of architecture. They were interested in inventing a "modern" Iranian architecture—an architecture conscious of and attentive to the very particular economic and political situation in Iran and more importantly, capable of being part of the global discourse on architecture. And lastly, in the third chapter, I looked at the work of a group of Iranian artists who focused on the theme of urban construction to criticize the trajectory of the city as overwhelmed by investment apartments. These artists criticized the city as their subject, but they also used the city as a platform for dialogue with other communities of practice in Iran, as well as the larger global community of art.

Ethnographic methods allowed me to dig deep into the relationship between different professionals to explore how they formed their rhetoric and practices in a kind of uncomfortable dialogue with each other, and how these dialogues stimulated new forms of art and architecture in the city, and potentially, beyond the city. Understanding the built environment in Iran today means understanding the dialogues and frictions between these different communities of practice who are all in one way or the other active agents in shaping the urban built environment and its discourses. It means, to use Ulf Hannerz's words, understanding their "creative confrontation"—of how "the coming together of distinct flows of meaning result in a generative cultural process."[4]

Traditionally each of these communities practiced in a somewhat state of isolation from one another. But during fieldwork I realized that new cultural platforms were emerging among them specifically in the larger cities of Tehran and Isfahan. Collaborative exhibitions, symposiums and workshops seemed to be giving artists, architects and commercial builders a

new space to share their viewpoints, critique each other's works, and invent new strategies to communicate and collaborate with each other.

Aspects of this space of dialogue was evident in an international exhibition on stone manufacturing in Tehran in July 2018, where artists, architects, builders, and stone manufacturers had created a space in which different communities of practice could interact with each other through lectures, workshops, competitions, and art galleries (Fig. 5.4 & 5.5). The encounter was awkward and at points uncomfortable as observed ethnographically.[5] But it was nonetheless fruitful as a space of knowledge production—knowledge formed specifically in a condition of strained unconventional encounters, where ideas, stories, and physical objects were exchanged among different experts with different world views about the city.

Figure 5.4: Architects holding presentation sessions at the 2018 International Stone Exhibition in Tehran. Source: photo by author, 2018

Figure 5.5: Artists holding exhibitions on stone art in the 2018 International Stone Exhibition in Tehran. Source: photo taken by author, 2018

The *Memar*, one of the prominent architectural magazines in Iran, also tried to give shape to such spaces of encounter by giving voice to other communities of practice in its architectural journal. In its 84th issue in the spring of 2014, Hossein Hejrat provocatively juxtaposed architectural writings with images borrowed from artists who had worked on the theme of urban construction in Tehran, using the rhetoric of art to create a visual conversation between architects, builders and artists in describing the contemporary housing market of Tehran. In the same issue, Memar's editors approached a group of commercial builders to create a dialogue between two somewhat divided realms of commercial construction and architectural design.[6]

All of these cultural platforms—workshops, exhibitions, and magazines—worked on the city as their subject of analysis and yet were themselves a direct outcome of the city's urbanization and globalization under certain economic conditions. Iranian cities under sanctions and other economic circumstances faced rapid urbanization as stimulated by private investment in residential construction, and ironically, under the isolating forces of sanctions, they were moving towards rapid globalization by trying to be more than ever connected to international sources of material and culture on the built environment. The sense of global isolation arguably created a psychological urge for being connected to the world and this was translated into different practices, images, and narratives.

The cases in the chapters suggest that different communities of practice often engaged in what could be called a rhetoric of comparison, in the way they situated their work within a global or western tradition of practice. Local and global interplay was visible in their work and their rhetoric. Artists often made implicit juxtapositions to western projects and tried to elicit arguments about the city's urbanization through the strategy of invoking comparisons against other urban settings and urban representations. Similarly, architects tried to be in conversation with a western project of modernity not just in producing space but also in an effort to give a theoretical form to an Iranian experience of modernity. Builders and developers likewise tried to convey a sense of connectedness to a global or western tradition of building by relying heavily on the conspicuous consumption of "foreign" materials, goods, and aesthetics as a form of symbolic capital for competition.

I view these practices as everyday attempts for globalization under the force of current economic conditions such as sanctions, although some of them are distinctly localizing or regionalizing practices. Even economic jihad, which is generally understood as an anti-global religious ideology, could be seen as a form of globalization under sanctions in the sense that it tries to place more agency on regional connectivity and give the concept of "global" a new political scale. As Michael Herzfeld reminds us, "understanding globalization means understanding its agents, some of whom are paradoxically engaged in what appear to be radically localizing activities, while others may pay court to more regional concerns of various kinds."[7] Sanctions may have created restrictions on the entry of capital, goods, and materials, but they have also led to the creation of small networks of global and regional connectivity among different professional circles, and among different countries as discussed earlier. The city, and particularly its urbanization process, has been a mediating ground for different professional communities to re-imagine their relationship both internally and externally.

In the end, it should be noted that the lessons learned from the case of Iran extend beyond Iranian borders. Sanctions are not particular to Iran. They are really a global phenomenon. Sanctions, as Richard Nephew, an American politician, has stated, "have become a favorite instrument of U.S. foreign policy and have the potential of becoming a favorite of other major global powers."[8] They have different forms based on the nature of different countries and

different embargoes. Iraq, Cuba, Russia, and Venezuela are the targets of sanctions among other countries, and a comparative study in the future would indeed introduce this dissertation to new questions and concerns about the different configurations of the built environment in this global era.

Future Venues for Exploring the Culture of Sanctions

This study will be expanded in the future to explore how the culture of sanctions creates and is created through other art forms. The film industry, for example, is a big thriving industry in Iran and contemporary Iranian directors have been very attentive to the realities of everyday life under existing economic and political conditions. My interest in the culture of sanctions could be traced not just through particular films and cinematic productions, but also through an historiography of Iranian cinema and its cultural dynamics towards globalization.

In addition to the film industry, literature and poetry are two other realms through which the culture of sanctions and its influence on the built environment could be explored. Reza Amirkhani and Fariba Vafi, among many others, have written novels on the urbanism and architecture of Tehran as situated within the context of everyday life and its economic ups and downs.[9] These authors have specifically looked at the new social life of apartments in Tehran and how their proliferation as commodities has transformed people's lifestyles and urban imaginaries.

In addition to looking at other forms of cultural productions under sanctions, this work would also like to invest in deeper research on how sanctions, as imposed by the United States and the international community, were designed in the first place to produce different outcomes for the built environment. Richard Nephew in his book *The Art of Sanctions,* touches on the same topic. He reviews the experience of the United States in sanctioning Iraq and Iran. His analysis reveals the mindset of American politicians on sanctions towards Iran—of how sanctions are viewed as an "art" of imposing pain, in the sense that they require more than just mathematical analysis; they require creative thinking and flexible imagination in putting the desired pressure and pain on the targeted country.[10] One of the most provocative examples he offers to put forward his polemic is about how American sanctions at times operated via NOT imposing embargoes on certain products. By allowing luxury goods such as expensive cars to enter Iran, sanctions triggered hard currency to stream out of the country, while luxuries flooded in, and "stories began to emerge from Iran of intensified income inequality and inflation."[11]

Nephew's narrative thus reveals how sanctions, as designed by the American government, have unequal effects on the lives of different walks of people in Iran. The work leads us to think about the psychological effect of sanctions on people as they observe and interact with objects, artifacts, even spaces that have been able to bypass the fence of the embargoes. While this work has mainly focused on the cultural manifestations of sanctions within a number of professional communities whose work related to the built environment and specifically the construction industry, further research is required to explore the culture of sanctions within the context of ordinary life.

Lastly, as mentioned earlier in this conclusion, a global-regional lens would also shed light on the path of this research—a lens which would situate Iran within a broader regional community and would widen the scope of analyses on the built environment through a comparative study. Via this perspective the transnational activities of the Iranian middle class and the regional engagements of the Iranian state during sanctions could be explored in more detail.

An Ethnography of the Future?

I have suggested some future directions for my dissertation, but in reality, the most important future pathway for this research is the future of sanctions. I remember that while working on this manuscript in 2015, sanctions were suddenly lifted, and some people challenged the value of a work on the impact of sanctions on the built environment. But sanctions came back, and in the midst of an ethnographic and historical study of architecture, the future became the most prevailing topic of conversation.

This dissertation is thus essentially about an ethnography of the future—about an ephemeral horizon produced via the constant ebbs and flows of the social, political, and economic conditions in Iran—a fleeting concept that can never be grasped in a particular moment of time and yet its footprints can be mapped within the built environment at certain moments. The ethnographic work in this research is thus always incomplete by nature—always situated within a "horizon of expectation" that constantly permeates the present through new possibilities for the city as it interacts with the world

As a researcher I had to work under this fleeting horizon of the future. I have traced its presence in the dystopian representations of the artists, in the speculative narratives of developers and investors, and in the alternative routes through which architects redefined their profession and discipline. But as the future changes, the spatial narratives on the city change as well. It is my hope that someday I will write about this future—a future that hopefully in which there will be more peace among nations.

Notes and References

[1] John Catherine, "Iran to Build Railway through Iraq, Connecting to Syrian Port: Official," *kurdistan24*, November 2018, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/af69da03-8c84-4947-b250-fafe4a9d1f44.

[2] Mehdi Bani Taba and Mehdi Hossieni Dolatabadi, "An Analysis on the Condition of the Currency Market" (Iran's Parliamentary Research Center, 2018).

[3] Javad Salehi Esfahani, "Tyranny of Numbers: Poverty and Living Standards in Iran After the Nuclear Deal," *Djavadsalehi* (blog), January 3, 2018, https://djavadsalehi.com/2018/01/03/poverty-and-living-standards-of-iranians-since-the-nuclear-deal/#more-4152. Of course, the movement of money out of banks and into apartments, currency and gold points to the asymmetrical power relations that divide ordinary Iranians from wealthy Iranians whose money could more easily cross the borders and settle around the world. It also speaks to the state's propensity for favoring the interest of the more privileged groups over the dire needs of the lower classes. While inside the country, housing was suffering from a prolonged phase of recession and many were losing their jobs as a result, the state's efforts for keeping the value of the dollar down was fueling the engines of construction on the Mediterranean costs.

[4] Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (Taylor & Francis US, 1996), p. 61.

[5] This reflection is based on one day of participant observation within the different sections of the exhibition, as well as interviews with different practitioners. My interviews with "Mahsa," "Majid," "Sara," and "Moeen" took place in Tehran in July 2018. The content of the interviews was public as the subjects had talked about them earlier in a lecture and a workshop.

[6] See for instance: "A Dialogue with Farzad Daliri," *Memar* 84 (Spring 2014), p. 74.

[7] Michael Herzfeld, *The Body Impolitic: Artisans and Artifice in the Global Hierarchy of Value* (The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 210.

[8] Richard Nephew, *The Art of Sanctions: A View from the Field* (Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 2.

[9] Reza Amirkhani, *Rahesh* (Nashre Ofogh, 2017); Fariba Vali, *My Bird* (Nashre Markaz, 2002).

[10] Richard Nephew, *The Art of Sanctions: A View from the Field, p. ix.*

[11] Ibid., p. 111.

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