

The Political Unconscious

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Reading Everyday Architecture in Post-revolutionary Iran

Abstract This essay reviews architectural trends in post-revolutionary Iran. The ideological turn of the revolution and its effect on architectural production, the genuine resistance and responses to this and everyday patterns of public architectural production are the subjects of investigation. The paper is an attempt to investigate the collective forces and meanings of an architecture living in revolution. The general hypothesis of the essay is that due to socio-cultural turn of the revolution different modes of historicism (peculiar modes of traditionalism) and culturalism appeared in architectural discourse which created different strategies and tactics in response. Even the public trends of everyday architecture is an unconscious response to that context. This paper, through three key spaces; ideological, intellectual and public, investigates the relationship of architecture and socio-political agendas in contemporary Iran.

Keywords Persian architecture, Public architecture, Ideology, Revolution

1. Introduction

Revolutions tear apart history into two separate worlds of post and pre. It is no exception for Iranian modern history, which is marked by the 1979 revolution. If fact, the ideological turn of the revolution has made not only two separate but opposite worlds. This opposition is evident in architectural policies and practices as well. In the pre-revolution period, a blind modernization – read it as an out of context application of an international architecture – were hegemonic, and counter and genuine efforts were trying to give it a local and cultural orientation. While post revolution, an ideological historicism was hegemonic resisted by either public trends or professional discourses for a more universal language of architecture. Reading these hegemonic patterns and forces of resistance could be a channel to reveal the hidden socio-political dimension of architecture. Architecture on the periphery, not as Avant-garde and design motivated architectural practices in the official discourses, tells a different story of architecture and therefore claims a different reading. This writing in itself is a question of how to read *other* architectures, or the silent majority of buildings.

Architecture in revolutionary Iran shows different conducting patterns. First is the state motivated discourses and constructions which sees architecture as an apparatus of authority and ideology. Here state policies range from instrumental use of architectures just as a mean to shape the public sphere, to conscious applications of ideologies into

architecture. In response, there are social forces which resist hegemonic patterns or consume them creatively in their own terms. One side of these resisting forces is public trends, which in their apparently de-political approach, consuming forces and publicness, soften the sharp edges of ideology or twists them to create tactical differences. Although these constructions are hardly regarded as architecture *per se*, they reflect the hidden socio-cultural potentials of architecture and reflects dimensions beyond the meaningless consumption of spaces and forms. The other side is elitist thoughts and designs fueled by academia and non-conformist social groups and demands. This group of architects and architectures has different patterns and motivation. The study of these three groups could be potentially a channel to investigate the subconscious of a society in search for architectural alternatives.

It should be mentioned that there is no sharp division inside and in between these groups and they are not consciously formed groups of thought. Yet these modes of categorization are inevitable for a better understanding of differences in architectural patterns. Persian architectural history, the will and forces of modernization, and political and ideological turns and twisting, has turned contemporary Iranian architectures into a battleground for different socio-political agendas. Reading into these movements is a way to bring architectural theory from the ivory-tower of academic discourses and place it upon its feet. The brief review in this paper shows that architecture in general and particularly outside the hub of *fine* architecture, in developing countries or the so-called global south, still fights through forces which in singularity of contemporary architectural designs finds no ground of discussion. To see this architecture only as developing, ignores the genuine problems which differentiate these worlds. It also questions

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different methods of reading architecture in different contexts. This paper, through a brief reading of architectural trends in post-revolutionary Iran under the groups of Ideological, Public and Intellectual, tries to set a ground for reading architecture on the periphery.¹

2. The Ideological Space

The Iranian revolution, as one of the last in 20th century movements, was a public revolt against the Shah's regime yet with different motivations.² The main drives of the unrest were a public anger against state cultural policies and class conflicts inside society. Nonetheless, different drives and subjects shaped the body of revolution.³ First and foremost were religious sects with strong popular support, who ultimately got the upper hand and shaped the upcoming state. Then there were true democratic and freedom demands, ranging from student movements to bureaucrats with national sentiments. Then there were 'religious intellectuals' who combined leftist tendencies with religious rhetoric who attracted public attention. And finally it was the Left with a strong intellectual background, which combined economic agendas with anti-bourgeoisie (western) sentiments. The Shah became the symbol of a hatred of the west as the source of all evils. Disappointment with the regime, romantic nationalism, religious demands with a strong Shi'ah color, intellectuals with leftist and popular sentiments, and leftist movements, were the sources of this revolution. Westernification (*Gharb-zadegi*), people (*mardom*), return to the self (*bazgasht be Khishtan*), and Freedom (*Azadi*), independency (*esteghalal*) and Islam were among main terms constructing the rhetoric of revolution. Khomeini became an incarnated soul for all these demands.

The plurality of motivations and demands, and the unexpected winning of the revolution postponed true understanding and collective application of these demands for years to come. Although clear political slogans were heard, nonetheless, the concrete results were vague and their materialization left for open discussion in the early years of revolution. For instance, the alleged 'cultural revolution' ended in the closing up of the universities in order to discuss and decide later on the cultural and educational policies of the revolution. However, unexpected upheavals and eight years of the Iran-Iraq war froze the social demands and made the religious and conservative sentiments gain the upper hand. It was in the so-called restoration (1989 – 1997) and reformation (1997 – 2005) years that undermined quests resurfaced into the public discourses.⁴ The Arts became the symptom and the symbolic battleground for the unsolved

socio-cultural conflicts which still went on in society.⁵ What is an Islamic cinema? What is the social role of the visual arts? Is sculpture pagan and which kind of music is culturally legitimate? Architecture had a contradictory position in here. On one hand, as the instrument of corrupted political power, it was hated the most. From palaces to towers as the symbol of inequality, to modern residential apartments as a manifesto of a western lifestyle, they were hated or left aside. On the other hand, architecture became the apparatus for the new state. This empties architecture from meaning in itself and turns it into an instrument. Then a new search for meaning appeared which ranged from the postmodern interpretation of history to a revival movement. 'Traditionalism' (*Sonnat-gerayi*) became the hub for this new tendency to search for meaning.⁶ And finally, architecture as apolitical, just as an everyday current of society, building in its purest sense, continued in the subconscious of society. Architecture, from an ideological apparatus to an everyday phenomenon, reflects the hidden conflicts of a society in revolution.

In the early years of the revolution, ministers left the offices of the old regime and palaces were chosen as the headquarters for public affairs. These were years with strong leftist tendencies. Here, before the war took the breath out of society and revolutionary spirit was high, new architecture for people, or a kind of Iranian housing was advertised and built.⁷ This architecture built by the revolution's housing foundation were purely functional buildings with a minimum of aesthetical or historical concern. Even in the mosques of this time, domes were absent and a simple gate with tilework over it or a small brick minaret marked this religious space. This architecture can be truly named as Iranian socialist architecture. Another similar wave of state supported constructions appeared during the Ahmadinejad presidency (2005 – 2013). Named as 'love' or 'affection' housing (*Maskan Mehr*) it was an Iranian model of soviet housing, building 4,400,000 cheap apartment blocks in more than 1100 cities.⁸ This reflects the enduring leftist tendencies of this revolution.

In parallel to this purely functional approach, the demands and search for meaning which appeared through reference to Persian architectural history created the theoretical discourses of architecture in the post-revolutionary years. Different phases and patterns shaped this historicism, from revival movements to the search for a contemporary translation of tradition. Historicism is the reflection of revolutions in search of stability and roots. First are revival

¹ Here periphery is employed as Wallerstein defined in his definition of world system.

² See (Algar, 2001)

³ This is in parallel to Laclau's idea of populism and how "the people" emerge as a collective actor.

⁴ Rafsanjani presidency is called reconstruction phase (1989 – 1997) and Khatami's is called reformation phase (1997-2005).

⁵ The recent conflicts over music concerts, which was the main factor in sacking the ministry of culture, is an example of these unsolved debates.

⁶ For a brief understanding of traditionalism doctrine in general and in art theory see: (Oldmeadow, 2011) and (Nasr, 1987).

⁷ Right after the revolution and with direct command of the Khomeini, Islamic revolution housing foundation is formed to build residences for poor and needed. These building were called Jihadi Houses which means those built by revolutionary department for construction.

⁸ For a review of this national scale housing project see: (Ministry of Roads and Urbanism, 1393 [2014])

movements, which mostly can be seen in religious buildings. These constructions resist a particular interpretation of the past and have a formal approach to history, comparable to the socialist classicism of the soviets.⁹ Domes and Iwan (Persian portal gates) were built with concrete and steel on a bigger scale and covered with tiles. The *Mosalla* or congregational prayer mosques of Tehran and Isfahan are good examples of these structures.



Figure 1. Mosalla of Isfahan

Revolutions dream the future but live in the past. In parallel to this peculiar revivalism, a symbolic approach to Persian architecture emerged in academia. It is interesting that nationalist romantic movements in pre-revolutionary Iran supported by the queen's cultural office were transformed with minimum changes into revolutionary and conservative discourses of revolution. The symbol of this transformation is the turning of the memorial tower for the Shah into the tower of freedom after the revolution. The little conflicts in between these two opposite modes of historicism show how a historically oriented manifesto can be contextually interpreted differently. The sole negation which brought these differences under one umbrella was opposition against the international and history-less (rootless) trends in architecture. The so-called traditionalist movement became popular in academic discourse; in fact most genuine art theories were motivated by this school of thought. This trend could be called a religious leftism, which tried to define a universal tradition against the hegemony of the materialistic and blasphemous modern west. Tradition has a symbolic, ethical and popular agenda. In fact, this is not a revival of a golden age in history, it is building an essence of tradition into contemporary architecture. The true hermeneutics of the past, vague and as Derrida says always postponed, become a yardstick for true tradition *per se*. Nonetheless, idealistic in nature, it is detached from the realistic demands of society. Different modes of hermeneutics exist in this context, from hardcore conservatism to moderate reformism. This de-historicized tradition is interpreted differently: a culture, a

symbolic reading of the past, spatial and behavioral patterns, primordial forms and finally ethical interpretation of Persian architecture.¹⁰

Architecture has always been the apparatus of power and ideology. However, history, for inventing another future and building the symbolic foundation for it, is the only reference for ideologies.¹¹ To introduce a value reference – in that sense true hermeneutics becomes the channel of control – and also to keep the sense of home and root, searching an untimely tradition becomes the goal of identity discourses. Traditionalism turns into a pattern of thought for search the truth about history, always there, close but postponed. There is no homogeneity here. From total revivalism to shallow postmodernism, from propaganda to genuine identity requests, shapes and turns this into history. Therefore, the judgement of this historicism should also be hybrid and contextually oriented.

3. The Intellectual Space

Ideological hegemony either creates tactical consumption or strategical resistance. The intellectual space of architectural design after revolution also is divided between two main groups. Those who buy or follow the discourse of tradition, and on the other hand, those who directly or discretely reject it in favor of a more universal and international discourse. Yet, in both groups, the confined space of ideology was resisted for a more universal space. The aim is to empty architecture of historical connotations and search for a contemporary spirit. Here there are struggles over what makes contemporariness. Does 'contemporary' have a contextual definition? How?

The question of modernity has not left the public mind of Iranians since the constitutional revolution (1905-1911). In architecture, from the sixties, after a period of rapid modernization the question of a modern yet regional identity surfaced in architectural discourses. A de-historicized understanding of Persian architecture and an untimely local spirit in different names were searched for as a response to internationalism. What dimension of Persian architecture is the product of time and historical, and what is untimely and could live in a contemporary context? These were all motivated by a belief that this architecture has a particular poetics. Metaphoric or abstracted use of historical forms enabled architects to employ them in different contexts. The spatial and behavioral patterns seek for cultural and social sustainability in consuming architecture. Talks on Persian aesthetics tried to reinterpret the genuine poetics of this architecture. And finally different semantic approaches tried to understand the philosophy of this architecture. These resulted in genuine efforts in the search for a regional modernism and understanding of history beyond limited

⁹ Numerous comparison between revolutionary Iran and Soviet society is mainly by the belief that revolutions, especially those with left and republic tendencies share structural similarities. In addition, the leftist tendencies and cultural policies in both societies ends up in similar material culture.

¹⁰ As a popular book on this subject see: (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 1979).

¹¹ See the second chapter on Ideology and architecture in the book: (Jameson, 1988).

historicism.

Compared to these efforts for a culturally oriented modernism by a different interpretation of history, there are other groups who seek a universal architectural language. The difference between contemporary and tradition, between universal and regional, and between change and stability were among the subjects through which they tried to justify their approach. Partially these oppositions were a defense against the controlling ideology and the semi-closed space of culture after revolution. Occasionally they just gave a pseudo-cultural flavor to an architecture which in appearance could not be read as regional easily. Talking about the meaning of light in Persian architecture, spatial hierarchy, and the symbolic-esoteric meanings of color, forms and spaces were only charities given to the ideology to open the space for their freedom of design. For others, it was a real effort to search for a universal language of contemporary architecture through an alternative reading of Persian architecture. In addition to those in whom a trace of culturalism exists in their theory and practices, there are new groups who see architectural design as a professional, singular yet universal without an obliged collective culturalism. However, in the semi-closed cultural space of the country and negation of conservative approaches of the state, they occasionally fell into an image-based avant-gardism or performative contemporariness in which the question of context and culture is absent. It is interesting that part of the state supported this avant-garde architecture as a banner of success and futurism to balance their ideological conservatism.



Figure 2. What is contemporary for global south?

Part of the discourse on the true architecture of the time was the debate on the difference between *right* and creative architecture. In the lack of proper technology ravaged by ideological jargon, to be claimless but right, turned technique and proper design into politics. This could be read as a sort of rationalism which appears in different phases of architectural history. The hesitation to enter normative talks on form, style and identity, and doing architecture in the purest sense was a conscious silence. It searched for the true approach which is absent or lost in the shouts of ideologies or manifestos.

This elitist architectural discourse ranged from genuine searches for an alternative architecture to reactions either to the closed ideological space or an image of the outside, from

a contemporary interpretation of Persian architecture to shallow talks of regionalism or blind reproduction of what is regarded as avant-garde. This reproduction of a perception of contemporariness resurfaces in the question of socio-cultural context into architectural context. Should this architecture be only ethnic to be contextual? Is an empty image-oriented universalism true contemporariness and if not, what is or should be the nature of this third space? How can global-south or so-called progressing nations, like Iran with a rich architectural heritage be contemporary without falling into these two traps? Is this a question to be left to individual creativity or do categorical and cultural responses exist? These are unsolved questions which still occupy the mind of contemporary Iranian architecture.

4. The Popular Space

The popular architecture, or what is commonly differentiated from architecture in its true sense, is almost absent from Iranian academic discourses. If there are different architecture classes and styles, these everyday constructions are regarded as class-less, without certain qualities to enter the fine domain of architecture. Yet, if in artistic discourses the category of “fine art” through the context of production and aestheticization is comparatively defined, this line in architecture is more blurred. Various socio-cultural background of production is decisive in what is regarded as architecture *per se*. Yet, the turn from art history to visual studies in the artistic domain could and must find a parallel story in architecture as well.¹² This is the case where these constructions constitute more than 90 percent of our built environment. But how to read this architecture, and how to interpret the difference and changes inside patterns of public architecture?

Classification of popular architecture in post-revolutionary Iran cannot be exclusively time-based and chronological. Patterns exist which appear repeatedly in different times and contexts. Architectural *habitus*, to use Bourdieu’s terms, in the sense of unconscious continuation of custom is a proper definition for this architecture. *Habitus* here does not mean absence of change and creativity. Change is the unbroken current inside what is regarded as the same. An Architecture, which according to its resources reacts to different socio-political and cultural pulses, is the best definition for this architecture. Like many other aspects of life in post-revolutionary Iran, for instance fashion and music, popular trends and desires neither were recognized by the ideology, as blasphemous western trends and corrupted desires, nor by the intellectual discourses, as mundane and worthless. They built their architectural patterns through an unofficial market in a peculiar relation to the outside trends.

One of these patterns, more in use in the years of revolution and during the war in the absence of grounds for true design, was a functionally oriented architecture based on

¹² See for instance: (Elkins, 1999).

popular habits of consuming space, with simplistic perception of aesthetics as beautification. Ornaments, the popularity of different materials like brick, stone and aluminum tiles later on, the reappearance of certain classical elements of Persian architecture like arcs or windows, were the characteristics of this architecture. When the luxury of choice in styles and architectural fashions appeared in the post-war period, this mode of constructing found class based connotations, which continued in periphery and lower strata of society. This architecture has its own stylistic trends or “modes” as it is used in Persian terms. It is worth mentioning that most of the architectural construction in this domain is residential and to some extent commercial. A kitsch layer of different material and styles eclectically covers the surface of more stable functional architecture.

Two categories of buildings appeared in the post-war period with two opposite directions. By the growing of the universities, architectural design found its way from a narrow layer of society into the public. This is parallel to the growth of middle class urban settlers who were looking for a different life style. Free plans with modern looking compositions on facades changed the appearance and patterns of architecture in Iranian cities. The rise in land expenses ended in highrise constructions which opened the space for the public appearance of a different architecture. Yet, these new modes were more a cover for the façade of the buildings, rather than conscious or deep stylistic changes and spatial patterns showed more stability and cultural continuity. Modern composition of new materials made a kitsch modern appearance for these buildings. In commercial buildings, curtain glass walls and aluminum built a modern image with a postmodern flavor.



Figure 3. A kitsch Perception of Modern with Postmodern Flavor.

A completely different story, if not opposite, was going on in two different phases of construction in the post-war period. One was the so-called Roman façade (or cement-cutting) which used pediments, Corinthian columns and other classical elements as facades of residential buildings in the 90s, and a so-called classic architecture, and still popular, which builds a local interpretation of neo-Palladian or Parisian neoclassicism. These two phases of building pseudo-classical architecture are important. First they are accompanied with two economic turns, one in so-called

reconstruction phase after Rafsanjani’s presidency, which opened the economic space of the country. The other was during Ahmadinejad’s with rises in oil prices and imports changing the modes of consumption in society. The appearance of new wealthy sects in society was almost accompanied the appearance of these neoclassic styles of architecture. The question is why classism? Does classic architecture hold certain meanings regarding power and social status? What are the connotations for Iranian society? Is there any relationship with between the use of this neo-classic architecture with ideological propaganda of the state and social reactions to it? It is interesting that the state in recent years tried to limit building of these western looking buildings with certain laws.¹³ The masonry based construction and the ability of different local stone industries to take part in building this architecture should not be forgotten as an element in their popularity.



Figure 4. Pseudo-Classical Architecture

Different subjects must be taken into consideration in reading this architecture. As it is called in Persian, the reproachful attribution of *Besaz-befroosh* (builder-seller) to those who build these buildings, connoting a dealer who reduces architecture into a market issue¹⁴, blocks true understanding of popular trends of this architecture. A similar approach in “everyday life” studies is needed to bring this architecture into academic discourses.¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that in both phases of classical architecture popularity, the plan or true space design were according to Iranian tastes.¹⁶ In brief, this architecture shares particular aspects. First the trends are more on the façades and the architecture in itself shows a different tempo of changes and

¹³ For instance, a new law forces the uses of bricks in façade and forbids glass curtain walls.

¹⁴ In a state running economy which almost eighty percent of value production is in the hand of the State, construction industry is the only private sect which public are both the producer and the consumer. The absence of other channels for economic activities makes exchange value of building more important than the use value.

¹⁵ See: (de Certeau, 1988)

¹⁶ For instance, one of the well-known architects of these style of buildings uses the patterns of Iranian architecture like entrance space, division of guest and private space, and other spatial orders, as the plan for this classic looking architecture.

patterns. The duality of modern oriented and conservative classism is a pendulum permanently swinging in this architecture. And finally, masonry based modes of construction and local industries are formative in the modes and trends. This architecture, to some extent apolitical, and in some mundane, reflects some unconscious political and cultural patterns of society. It might hold some answers to the question of where lies the true politics of architecture in a peripheral culture.

5. Conclusions

The architecture of Iran in the post-revolutionary years consists of a body with two heads. The body is a popular architecture with its peculiar modes and tempos of change with a loose connection to what happens at the top. This constructs the everyday body of architecture. There are twin heads on the top of this body dreaming separately. One is the ideological capital, which tries to implement the ideas and ideologies of the revolution in the architectural domain. It also sees architecture as an apparatus of authority, which values trends pragmatically only according to public reception and the show of power. Re-reading history under the request of roots, tradition and negation of westernification were the main conceptual frameworks of this ideology. The other capital is the intellectual one, which more than historical sentiments, thinks of time and a universal spirit of architecture. While they are separated parties, there are edges that these heads and body confront in dialogue. These are the front line and hard talk of architecture. This conflict and the patterns inside reflect the political unconscious of an architecture in a society in revolution. Dualities of functionalism and symbolism, rationality and ideology, internationalism or historicism are among conflicted sides which architecture after revolution swings in between. Here architecture is still a political subject and seeks collective answers.

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