

THE (ALMOST) ALL AMERICAN CITY

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THE CAPITAL OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN KNOWING THAT CAPITALS ALWAYS TAKE OVER THE REPRESENTATIVE FUNCTION FOR A COUNTRY, IT SEEMS REMARKABLE THAT IN THE CASE OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN AND ITS CAPITAL CITY TEHRAN, THE CAPITAL HAS SO MUCH MORE IN COMMON WITH ANY AMERICAN CITY THAN WITH ANY OTHER CITY OF THAT REGION. AND THAT, DESPITE THE FACT, THAT ITS GOVERNMENT IS TRYING SO HARD TO DEMONIZE EVERYTHING THAT COULD BE IDENTIFIED WITH THE USA – FROM ITS POLITICS AND SOCIAL ASPECTS TO ITS YOUTH CULTURE AND LIFESTYLE. ONE WILL FIND THE OBVIOUS REASONS FOR THAT, IN A MASTER PLAN FROM 1968, WHICH, COMMISSIONED FOR TEHRAN BY THE LAST SHAH, WAS AJAR TO AMERICAN CITY MODELS OF THE 60S AND 70S AND, PARTLY IMPLEMENTED, SHAPED MOST OF THE CITIES LAYOUT. AND STILL, IRONICALLY, REASONS CAN ALSO BE FOUND IN THE POLICY AND URBAN PLANNING APPROACH OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC TODAY.

THE CLASSIC

For nearly 25 years the world press is showing the same photo over and over, with only small variations. The photo shows a woman or a man, captured walking past a concrete wall with the US flag painted on it. The statue of liberty replaces the fifty white stars on the blue background, normally seen on the flag. But instead of her proud face we see a skull staring at us. If the photo shows a woman passing by the flag, she usually wears a chador or at least a scarf to cover her hair. If a man forms the foreground of the altered American flag, we usually see an Islamic cleric. The photograph was taken in front of the wall that surrounds the former US embassy in Teheran. It is reclaimed from the archives when the press tries to portray the awful relationship between the US and Iran. In the picture two cultures represented by the Statue of Liberty and the veiled woman, are facing each other. It is the symbol for the hatred between these two nations, which started with the attack on the US embassy in 1980.

This event, known as the “hostage crisis” was one of the key moments of the Islamic Revolution. In fact it was so significant that it decorated Iranian stamps for years, symbolizing the fall of the Shah and the end of American control exerted on Iran. [1] Later it led to the end of diplomatic relations between the two countries, a lasting embargo on Iran and a sheer endless amount of mutual hostilities and threats. Before the Islamic Revolution, both countries were economically and politically connected, set in a supposedly win-win situation, due to the Iranian oil reserves and America’s growing dependence on foreign oil. [2] It was the time of the Cold War when the US merged political and economical interests with actively spreading out American culture all over the developing world. [3] The Shah at that time wanted to westernize and modernize Iran and the US was more than happy to “help”. Thus the US was guaranteed Iranian oil and could prevent Iran from succumbing to Soviet influence. The Shah was grateful, knowing his throne was protected with such a powerful ally.

Since then, almost 30 years have passed and the wall around the former US embassy has turned into a billboard for anti-American propaganda. The omnipresent wall paintings have

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[a] White Revolution, H.I.M. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi



- [1] Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, “Starting a Revolution – The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, London, 2000, p. 229
- [2] Bahman Nirumand, “Persien, Modell eines Entwicklungslandes – Oder die Diktatur der freien Welt”, Hamburg 1967, p. 31
- [3] Michelle Provost, “New Towns an den Fronten des Kalten Krieges. Moderne Stadtplanung als Instrument im Kampf um die Dritte Welt”, in: archipius 183, Mai 2007, p. 63 - 67
- [4] Nasrin Alavi, “We are Iran – the persian blogs”, New York, 2005, p. 30
- [5] Over 600.000 Iranians live in Los Angeles. In the whole of the USA the number is about 2.000.000 people.
- [6] Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, “The White Revolution of Iran”, 1967, Teheran, p. 24
- [7] Deyan Sudic, “The Edifice Complex – How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World”, London, 2005, p. 148
- [8] ibd., p. 276
- [9] Ali Mandanipour, “Teheran - The Making of a Metropolis”, 1998, West Sussex, p. 20
- [10] Ali Mandanipour, “Teheran - The Making of a Metropolis”, 1998, West Sussex, p. 80
- [11] Line from the Iranian national anthem, “For Pahlavi dynasty improved Iran, A hundredfold from where it once used to stand”, 1933 - 1979, ironically called “Shah Hymn”

become a prominent face of the city. And for people in both countries, as well as the rest of the world, the photograph of the woman in the veil and the skull Statue of Liberty has become an unofficial classic, representing the seemingly irreconcilable relation of these two cultures.

WE’RE THE KIDS OF AMERICA

But the west arrived in Iran long time ago. The ubiquitous US pop culture did not stop in front of Iranian living rooms. Despite all efforts of the government to avoid American influence, MTV and CNN are on television; Coca-Cola and Pepsi are cooled in the fridges and pop star posters hang from the interior walls of the average Persian household. [4] Phone calls from family members living in the West [5] and the Internet did the rest. However, this world has to stay home when one is goes out on the street and enters the public space of the Islamic Republic.

But despite all repressions on political opinion and life-style, living in Tehran today has much more in common with living in LA, than with the life in any other city in the Middle East. Thanks to the Shah, who, before taking 20 billion dollars of government money with him to exile in 1978, had commissioned a master plan for Tehran. A plan, being implemented, would transform Tehran into an American city, of his successors’ worst nightmares - with all its advantages and disadvantages.

THE POWER OF THE PLAN

At that time urban plans that endorse functional dissociation were promoted in the United States, but were also exported and build all over the world. Tehran, with the Shah as a promoter for modernity was no exception.

But the master plan for Tehran was just one part of a huge campaign to modernize the country.

In 1967 he wrote “The white Revolution of Iran”, a book, which summed up all his ideas, ideals and plans. Although it was probably meant as a powerful declaration of good intentions, it reads like election year propaganda. The book includes chapters on the improvement of the health-care system, the school system, the position of women and a comprehensive land reform. But in particular one message was strongly conveyed to the reader: Iran had to catch up with the leading nations of the world and play side by side with them. [6] The Shah believed Tehran, as the capital of this new Iran, should become the “Persepolis of the 20th Century”. In doing this, Tehran would create a link to the greatness and importance Persepolis had once inherited when it was the capital of the Persian Empire in 520 B.C.

Almost all totalitarian rulers have marked their sovereignty through urban planning and architecture. One associates Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein and Kim Il Sung not only with their political agenda but also with their urban plans and architectural influence. [7] They all have looked for the appropriate architectural means to express their supremacy. Hitler chose big axes and neoclassicism, Mussolini modernity in its most monumental form and Hussein combined modernity with kitsch in a very unique way. [8] Just like his predecessors Nasser al-Din Shah and Reza Shah, he dreamt of a Tehran similar to the important Western metropolises like Paris, London or New York. But in order to transform Tehran, a city that had in 1966 2.5 million inhabitants and was expected to have over 5 million inhabitants by 1976, into this new modern city with proper facilities for the inhabitants and importance for the world, he first needed a powerful plan. [9] More importantly, the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, not only had a vision, but also had enough oil money to make it happen. At a time where the cold war had just started and a central question for emerging countries in the new world order was whether to belong to the communist world or to the western world, it seemed logical for the Shah, who always feared the influence of communism, to choose the ideals of the modern US city as a model for the further development of Tehran and subsequently an American firm to develop the master plan for his capital. [10]

„For Pahlavi improved Iran“ [11] - to become American ...

Of all famous planners of that time, the Shah commissioned Victor Gruen to design his master plan for Tehran. Victor Gruen, who is know as the founder of the shopping mall, which is regarded as one of the main reasons for the decay of American city centres. From 1963 until 1967 he developed together with Iranian architect Abdol Aziz Farman-Farmaian the “Tehran comprehensive Plan”.

Integral to the plan were all the elements of a “proper” American city in the 60’s: separation of functions, highways, suburbs, shopping centers and housing areas with different densities. [12] Taking into consideration that Tehran’s population would grow to 14.000.000 people in 1991, the plan intended a linear growth towards the west and the east of the city with highways connecting the ten new districts with the older parts. The plan also proposed different housing typologies, from small scale housing, to high-rise apartment blocks and large scale housing structures, to be used in the different density zones. In the north the density numbers were smaller mostly single family housing should be build, in the south were the density numbers were much higher, the plan foresaw large scale housing structures. [13] The middle part was reserved for the new gigantic city centre to be named, after the

ruling Shah “Shahestan Pahlavi”. It was here that office buildings and important cultural buildings such as the State Library would find their place. In the plan, a large park would connect the facilities with each other and provide public space for recreation, an idea borrowed from New York’s Central Park.

But the master plan did not reflect the socio-economic context of Tehran and its inhabitants. In fact, the situation in Tehran differed drastically from New York or any other city in the US or western countries. At that time, most of the population, especially in the south of the city, lived still in very poor housing conditions lacking sanitary components and often even running water.

Nevertheless, the Shah had the assets and the will to push the plan into action. And so the birth of a metropolis occurred that was similar to the American cities that Jane Jacobs had warned planners about years before, when she described the dangers of functional separation for the urban life. [14] The implementation of the plan by the local authorities started in 1970. And while the construction of the infrastructure systems and the realization of large-scale housing projects such as Ekbatan were in process, plans for distinguished buildings were still lacking. And the development of the new city center was behind schedule.

To face these challenges, in 1974 the second “International Congress of Architecture” was convened in Iran. The theme was “Architecture and Urban Planning in Industrializing Countries”, of which Iran at that time was the fastest growing country in Asia. The Shah invited the entire “Who’s Who” of the architectural and urban planning scene of that time and they all accepted his invitation. Oswald Mathias Ungers, Constantinos A. Doxiadis, Georges Candilis, Balkrishna V. Doshi, Moshe Safdi, Richard Buckminster Fuller, Kenzo Tange, Fumihiko Maki, I. M. Pei, James Stirling, Hans Hollein and many more appeared in the old capital Persepolis in order to show their conceptions of the new Tehran. [15] Most of the invitees left the conference with commissions for hotels, office blocks and posh condominiums. They were planning for a power hungry and megalomaniac Shah who believed in his vision of an American city in the desert and was willing to pay well for it. Thus, plans for skyscrapers in the desert, hotel facilities isolated from the context of guest’s needs and experimental housing estates in earthquake prone regions evolved.

It was a pathetic production, totally disconnected from the harsh reality of fast growing Teheran and its fundamental lack of adequate housing for the largest section of the population. Some eleven years after the Shah had announced the “White Revolution”, his megalomaniac plans found an abrupt end in the Islamic Revolution. Corruption, suppression of the opposition, delusions of grandeur and an alienation from the need of its citizens finally led to the collapse of the regime. Rioting mobs on the streets of Tehran forced the Shah into exile in 1979. Two weeks later, with

the Islamic Revolution already full in swing, Ayatollah Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini landed on the Airport in Tehran. And in between mass demonstrations, executions and plundering all on going projects of Western firms were stopped. Until then not much of the original plan had been realized.

FROM TOP-DOWN PLANNING TO SELL-OUT MARKETING

The change from monarchy to an Islamic republic brought major changes to the planning policies. The Shah had used all the Petrodollars from Oil to get the newest plans and planners from the West, to build new palaces, let himself crowns be customized- at a time where other monarchs are changing their crowns against business suits – and with all of that, followed a vision where concrete and structure facades as a sign of modernity should displace columns and winged lions that were known from other great building periods. He was one of the last monarchs of the 20th century eager to shape a city after his ideal, and whose big vision of a new Persepolis caught somewhere between desert housing estates, highways and the dreams of a glorious city.

In the eyes of the new Islamic government, modernity was linked to the culture of the western countries and thus became perceived to be imperialistic and godless. Nevertheless Khomeini kept the pragmatic aspects of the Shah’s master plan, such as densities and infrastructures, only throwing out everything that was too obviously associated with the Shah’s Western vision. Of course, nobody wanted a centre named after the Shah Reza Pahlavi. From the Shah’s master plan only the infrastructures and the big housing projects were implemented. Housing was needed desperately, no matter what the political situation was. Nothing of architectural importance that would depict the new regime was added to the city. Only later would a very kitsch tomb for the Ayatollah appear in the south.

And then, the new government needed money, not to generate alternative urban plans, but to finance the war against Iraq, that started in 1980. To raise revenue, the government of Tehran sold parcels of land according to the density numbers from the old plan. People began to build private houses and private investors developed large housing estates, which were disconnected from the original layout of the master plan. Together with new highways, empty lots and large holes in the middle of the city the now deformed plan revealed that the vision of an glorious Americanized Persepolis was finally lost.

„I CAN’T LIVE – IF LIVING IS WITHOUT YOU“ [16]

But besides their complete lack of interest in architecture and planning, the mullahs brought one big invention to Tehran: the Iranian version of the billboard. Although it may not have been meant to shape the city, these images did have a lasting effect. In many of them, the American flag was the core element for distinctiveness. The antagonism towards the US became major criteria for the self-definition of the new Iranian state. That was not only clearly expressed in Khomeini’s orations, but was present in all possible media. Posters, banners, graffiti’s, poems, tapes, songs and murals all began to transmit one message: next to Israel, the number one enemy of Iran is the United States of America. Thus, the “Star Spangled Banner” that once only flew for state-visits was suddenly seen everywhere. Stamps, postcards and even chewing gum wrappers were decorated with caricatures of the flag. Burned, crossed out and altered, countless versions of the US flag appeared in the city. [17] And while the burning flags and banners were only temporary but reoccurring signs, the murals on the walls became permanent elements of everyday life.

These pictures were nothing more than huge advertisements for the new official opinion. The use of propaganda murals is best known from communist states. Here they provide a relatively cheap and effective way to reach out to a lot of people. They tell the great story of communism, with all

- [12] Ali Mandanipour, “Tehran - The Making of a Metropolis”, 1998, West Sussex, p. 210
- [13] Hind International Brief - U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Urban Development in Iran, Washington, 1971, p. 16
- [14] Jane Jacobs, “The Death and Life of Great American Cities”, New York, 1961
- [15] “The Iran International Congress of Architecture”, article in “Art & Architecture No. 36”, Teheran, 1974
- [16] Song by Mariah Carey from the album MusicBox, original lyrics by Tom Evans and Pete Ham
- [17] Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, “Starting a Revolution – The Art of persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, London, 2000, p. 6



[b]



[a]

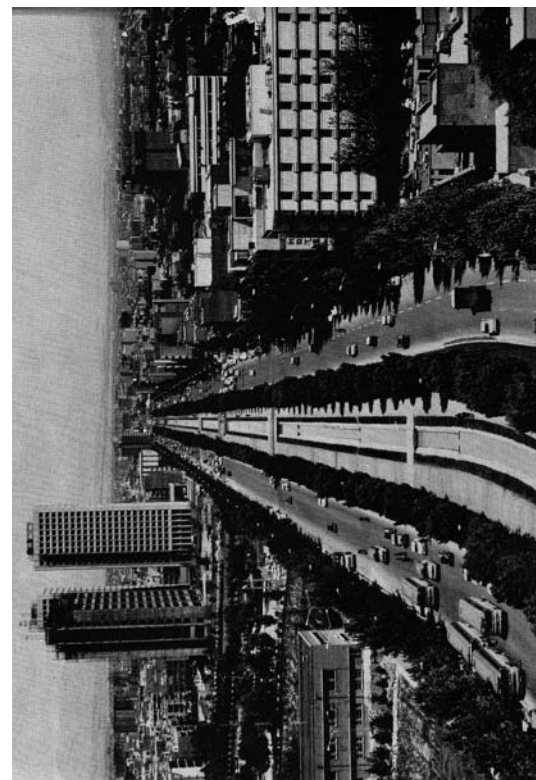
- [a] Tehran, 1965
- [b] Beheshti (Abbas Abad)
- [c] US Embassy
- [d] Tehran today
- [e] US Embassy
- [f] US Embassy
- [g] Boulevard Elisabeth, 1978
- [h] US Embassy



[c]



[e]



[g]



[d]



[f]



[h]

the big heads, which invented it and the workers fulfilling it. In Tehran the “enemies” gained most of the attention, not the regime itself. The book “Learning from Las Vegas” [18] suggests that a good sign in front of the building is actually more important than the building itself. A bland building can hide behind neon and glimmer.

This theory proved to be very true in Tehran. Before the revolution the US embassy was so unspectacular and unrecognized in the city that people were calling it “Henderson High”. The name was Henderson because that was the name of the US ambassador at that time, and high because it looked just like an ordinary High school in the US. There was nothing spectacular about it, no fancy décor, no huge columns or stairs. It was just a simple administration building from the early 50’s. [19] After the revolution it became the “decorated shack,” of Tehran [20] recognized from afar. The wall of the embassy became one of the most well known billboards in Iran. However these advertisements were not promoting entertainment or consumption but were projecting the fiercely dogmatic views of an Islamic state.

KEEPING IT PRIVATE: A HOUSE AND A CAR Just the political message on the wall is unable to produce a real perception of the inner state of a country. When people are not allowed to express their opinion in public space; they withdraw from public life and start to express themselves in the private sphere. In this way, the police of the Islamic Republic had long ago started to produce multiple realities in Tehran. Besides that one official that smiles down from all the walls there could be 14.000.000 others.

When self-expression is limited to private spaces, the amount of privacy one has on the outside becomes extremely valuable. In the streets of Tehran a car provides privacy and a house provides it for one’s life. Although Iranian and American people may disagree on a lot of things only few would contest the idea that owning a house and a car is a good thing. Dreaming of it does neither stop at the borders of Iran, nor at the shores of the US. The same holds for the car. Not only have cars become the status symbols of the 20th century for wealth and prestige, they have also begun to define one’s mobility and position in the city. Not only is the car the most important means of transportation, it has become in both cities part of the cities culture. The TV series “Pimp My Ride,” [21] is shot in Los Angeles. In Tehran the youth practice “car flirting”. [22] In both cities one can find an obsession with cars and driving among the people. But for people in Tehran it really means freedom, as the car allows them to bring a little bit of privacy out on to the streets.

Individual mobility may be the thing that Tehran and Los Angeles have most in common. Despite both cities’ endless oceans of houses, empty centers, invisible public space, highways that define the city layout, indoor shopping paradises and huge sprawls growing more and more into the mountains, it is the car dependant infrastructure today that makes them most similar.

The reasons for that, are to be found as well back in the 60s, tracing the Shahs visions for Tehran, which changed mostly the structural development of the city, as in today’s policy of the Islamic Republic, that, by pushing a free mar-

ket orientated development of the city, plastering the walls with advertisements and murals, banning private life to the inside and thus provoking an atmosphere which makes you almost feel like being out in the streets of Los Angeles. Almost, because some things will always remind you, that you are walking through the capital of the Islamic Republic. Instead of Jim Morrison’s face looking melancholy down from the painted walls, like in Venice Beach, in Tehran you will only find the melancholy eyes of the martyrs looking down on you from the murals. And in Tehran, for at least some more years, you will also miss the picture of a woman, walking through the streets, wearing an “I love Tehran” t-shirt.

[18] book by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steve Izenour, “Learning from Las Vegas”, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1972

[19] Jane C. Loeffler, “The Architecture of Diplomacy”, New York, 1998, p. 89

[20] Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steve Izenour, “Learning from Las Vegas, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1972, p. 60

[21] “Pimp My Ride”, Reality Show, created by Bruce Beresford-Redman and Rick Hurvitz, broadcasted ON MTV, 2004 – 2007

[22] Pedram Sadough, “Wo jugendliche im Iran flirten”, article in “Kulturaustausch IV”, Stuttgart, 2007

[16] Song by Mariah Carey from the album MusicBox, original lyrics by Tom Evans and Pete Ham

[17] Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, “Starting a Revolution – The Art of persuasion in the Islamic-Republic of Iran”, London, 2000, p. 6

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[22] Pedram Sadough, “Wo jugendliche im Iran flirten”, article in “Kulturaustausch IV”, Stuttgart, 2007

[i] White Revolution Book

[k] Tehran, Strassennamen

[m] Tehran, 1969

[n] Skyscraper desert housing



[k]

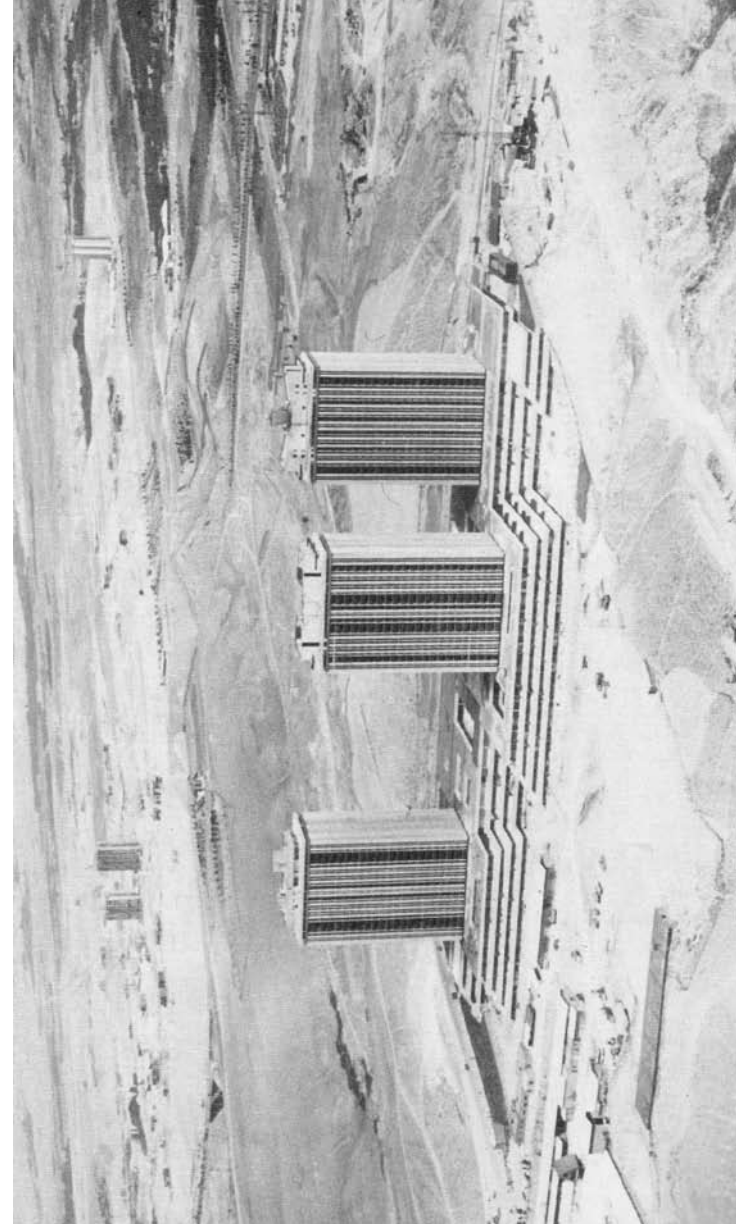


[k]



The White Revolution of Iran

by
His Imperial Majesty
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Shahanshah of Iran



[n]