اَلبانا

Collage by the author using a photograph of Ekbatan by Mahshad Jalalian (2017) and a protest image. The red circle completes the final Persian letter of Ekbatan, merging the neighborhood's name with its collective memory.

Ekbatan, a Place of Gathering:

Collective Spaces, Identity, and Resistance in Ekbatan, Tehran, 1966-2026

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Academic Year: 2025–2026

Master's Degree Programme in Architecture for Sustainability

Politecnico di Torino

Dedicated to the thousands of lives silenced
in the struggle for freedom in Iran

May there come a day when the fight for freedom and human dignity
no longer costs human lives.

Abstract

Tehran is a city shaped by contradiction, where political tensions, social transformations, and everyday life continuously redefine the relationship between people and the built environment. Within this complex landscape, Ekbatan, a large modern housing project in western Tehran, developed between 1966 and 1990, has emerged as more than a housing project, becoming one of Tehran's most distinctive places of collective life, shared memory, and social and political expression. Taking Ekbatan as its case study, the thesis explores how architecture contributes to the gradual formation of collective identity through the interaction of built form, collective spaces, and everyday life. Combining architectural analysis with urban and housing history, and residents' lived experiences, the research adopts an interdisciplinary approach to examine the relationship between space, society, and history. Rather than arguing that architecture determines social or political events, it suggests that architecture creates the spatial conditions through which trust, belonging, collective identity, and new meanings gradually emerge. Through the story of Ekbatan, the thesis ultimately offers a reading of contemporary Iran, tracing its transformation from the late 1960s to 2026 and showing how places continuously acquire new meanings through the lives, memories, and histories that unfold within them.

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of a question

Entrance to one of Ekbatan's residential blocks. The wall bears the inscription "Entrance No. 1."
Source: @EkbatanTwitter (2026); modified by the author.

As with any city, Tehran cannot be understood through its physical form alone. Behind its streets, buildings, and infrastructures lies another world, one continually produced through everyday life, lived experience, collective memory, and the countless ways its inhabitants negotiate, adapt to, and reshape their urban environment. Yet in Tehran, decades of political transformation, social change, and everyday practices have created an urban landscape in which different realities coexist: control and resistance, uncertainty and hope, fragmentation and solidarity. Rather than existing separately, these tensions are embedded within the ordinary spaces of the city, where architecture and everyday life continuously interact to produce new meanings. Understanding Tehran, therefore, requires looking beyond its material fabric to the dynamic relationship between space, society, and the people who continually reinterpret and redefine the city they inhabit.

Against this broader urban context, Ekbatan provides a unique lens through which these relationships can be understood. Located in western Tehran, it is far more than a residential neighbourhood. Since its construction, Ekbatan has evolved into one of the city's most distinctive social and cultural environments, recognised not only for its modernist architecture but also for the strong sense of community and everyday life that have developed within it. Over time, it has become associated with independent artistic practices, underground music, graffiti, parkour communities, informal cultural initiatives, and various forms of civic engagement. These qualities did not emerge suddenly during moments of political upheaval; rather, they were gradually cultivated through decades of shared routines, encounters, and everyday interactions. It was precisely this long-established social fabric that became particularly visible during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, in 2022, when Ekbatan emerged as one of Tehran's most recognisable spaces of collective action, sustaining a remarkable civic presence long after demonstrations had diminished elsewhere.

Yet what distinguishes Ekbatan is not any single historical event. Rather, it is the long process through which generations of residents transformed an architectural project into a living social environment, where everyday interactions gradually produced relationships of trust, belonging, shared memory, and collective identity. The events that brought national and international attention to Ekbatan did not create these qualities; they simply made them visible.

Research Motivation

It was precisely this distinctive dynamic that first drew my attention. This thesis did not begin with a hypothesis, but with a question. Watching the stories emerging from Ekbatan, I found myself becoming increasingly interested not only in the political events that unfolded there, but also in the conditions that had made those events possible. Why had this particular residential complex become associated with collective life, solidarity, and resistance? What was it about this place that allowed it to occupy such a distinctive position in the contemporary imagination of Tehran? Was this simply the consequence of political circumstances, or had the space itself quietly contributed to these processes over time?
As an architecture student , these questions became the starting point of my research. I wanted to understand whether architecture could contribute to the formation of collective life—not by determining political or social events, but by participating in the gradual production of the spatial conditions through which trust, belonging, and collective identities emerge. Following these questions gradually transformed the direction of the research. What initially appeared to be an architectural investigation evolved into an interdisciplinary journey that brought together urban history, housing studies, sociology, anthropology, phenomenology, oral narratives, collective memory, media studies, and, above all, the lived experiences of Ekbatan's residents.
This interdisciplinary path was never an objective in itself. Rather, it emerged naturally from the complexity of the questions being asked. Throughout the research, architecture remained the primary lens through which the study was conducted, while dialogue with other disciplines became essential for understanding the intricate relationship between space, society, and collective identity.

Existing studies have also approached Ekbatan from architectural, urban, and socio-political perspectives, each contributing to our understanding of the housing complex.In *Modern Middle-class Housing in Tehran: Reproduction of an Archetype*, architectural historian Rana Habibi (2021) situates Ekbatan within the history of modern housing and urbanisation in Iran.In *Inhabitable Voids*, architect Mohammad Sedighi (2020) examines its architectural and urban structure within the context of its development. Similarly, in *Ekbatan Township: The Contemporary Civility of Iranian Architecture*, architect Behrooz Marbaghi (2018) documents the project's architectural history and urban significance. Building on these studies, this thesis offer a broader reading of Ekbatan and its relationship with collective life and contemporary Iran.

Methodological Framework

This research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary, and case study approach centred on the Ekbatan Housing Complex. The methodological framework gradually developed through the research process itself rather than being defined from the outset. As the study evolved, it became clear that understanding Ekbatan required moving between different analytical approaches and disciplinary perspectives while maintaining architecture as the primary lens of inquiry.

The research combines spatial analysis to examine the architectural organisation and spatial qualities of Ekbatan; historical analysis to situate the project within the broader history of Tehran and the evolution of housing in Iran; phenomenological interpretation to explore lived experience and the meanings attached to place; semi-structured interviews and oral narratives to understand everyday practices, collective memory, and residents' experiences; and media and discourse analysis to investigate the contemporary representation of Ekbatan in both physical and digital public space. To address these questions, the research draws upon concepts and analytical tools developed in architectural history, urban studies, housing studies, sociology, anthropology, phenomenology, and memory studies.

Rather than functioning as independent methodologies, these approaches are brought together through a common research question: **How does architecture participate in the long-term production of the spatial conditions through which collective life and collective identity emerge?** Consequently, the interdisciplinary character of this research should not be understood as an objective in itself, but as the methodological consequence of a question whose complexity exceeded the boundaries of a single discipline.

The empirical material of the research combines architectural drawings, archival documents, historical sources, academic literature, field observations, and twenty semi-structured interviews conducted with current residents, former residents, and individuals closely connected to Ekbatan across different generations. Particular attention was given to younger participants and to individuals who experienced the Woman, Life, Freedom movement from within the neighbourhood. In addition, selected social media content and publicly available digital material were analysed as complementary sources for understanding the relationship between architecture, everyday life, and the public representation of Ekbatan

Thesis Structure

This thesis is organised into five chapters that gradually move from the broader historical and urban context towards the case of Ekbatan and, finally, to a broader reflection on the relationship between architecture, collective identity, and contemporary Iran.

Chapter One traces the historical development of Tehran, examining the political, social, and urban transformations that shaped the city and created the context in which projects such as Ekbatan could emerge.
Chapter Two focuses on the history of housing in Iran and explores how changing ideas of modernisation, architecture, and everyday life influenced the development of large-scale residential projects, with Ekbatan representing one of the most significant examples of this transformation.
Chapter Three introduces the Ekbatan Housing Complex as the central case study of the thesis. It examines its architectural design, spatial organisation, planning principles, and the qualities that have contributed to its distinctive social environment.
Rather than focusing on Ekbatan itself, Chapter Four broadens the perspective to contemporary Tehran and Iran. It explores the political, social, and cultural conditions that have shaped everyday urban life in recent years, providing the wider context within which the final discussion of Ekbatan is situated.
Finally, Chapter Five brings together the different strands of the research through the case of Ekbatan. Drawing on the historical background, architectural analysis, interviews, and theoretical discussions developed throughout the thesis, it offers a critical reflection on the relationship between architecture, collective identity, and collective action, and ultimately proposes an architectural reading of contemporary Iran, exploring how space, memory, and collective life have become intertwined through the case of Ekbatan.

Acknowledgements

This research has been one of the most meaningful journeys of my academic life, and it would not have been possible without the support, generosity, and encouragement of many people.

First and foremost, I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Sofia Nannini. This was my first research project, and I cannot imagine having gone through it with anyone else. Through her extraordinary knowledge, patience, and remarkable attention to detail, I learned how to conduct research while always having the freedom to follow my own questions and ideas. Looking back, I realize how deeply this experience has shaped the way I approach research today. Her unwavering support and the trust she placed in my ideas were a constant source of motivation and encouragement throughout this journey. I genuinely enjoyed every moment of this journey.

My special thanks go to all the residents of Ekbatan who shared their memories, experiences, and stories with me, even anonymously. Their voices remain an important part of this thesis. I am also grateful to everyone who, in different ways, helped me connect with the residents of Ekbatan and made these conversations possible. Among them, I would especially like to thank Amirhossein Hosseini and Shayan Mokhtarpour, former residents of Ekbatan, and Yasna Hosseini, whose close connection to the neighborhood brought valuable perspectives to this research. As fellow architecture students at Politecnico di Torino, they generously shared their ideas, experiences, and many valuable references, all of which played an important role in shaping this research.

At one point during this journey, I had the privilege of meeting Mariolina Affatato, architect, architectural researcher, and Ph.D. candidate at Politecnico di Torino. I am truly grateful for the time she dedicated to our conversations and for so generously sharing her knowledge with me. Her research on *Resistance Architecture,* together with her guidance and our conversations were a great source of inspiration throughout this journey .

I would also like to sincerely thank my dear friends,
Fahimeh Hajjiabadi and Maddalena Valentini, whose support extended far beyond friendship. Their insights into psychology, history and sociology, together with our many conversations, helped me see this research from different perspectives.

Alongside all of this, my deepest gratitude goes to my father, Siamak Zabihi, the first teacher of my life. Although his academic field is different from mine, he was always there to listen patiently to my questions and share his academic perspective. His suggestions helped me see many things more clearly, even if I sometimes forgot to follow his advice.
I am equally grateful to my mother, who taught me the value of staying true to the truth, a lesson that remained a source of inspiration throughout this journey, and to my brother, who always reminds me to keep believing.

Finally, I would like to thank my second family in Turin—all my dear friends—who spent countless hours listening to my questions, my ideas, and my endless thoughts about this research, always encouraging me to keep going.

01. From Walled City to Planned Metropolis:

The Political Production of Modern Tehran

A flock of sheep being driven through a Tehran street during Jim Van Orden's visit to the city in autumn 1978, reflecting the coexistence of rural traditions and rapid urban modernisation. Photograph by Jim Van Orden (1978).

Tehran, often referred to as the “City of Revolutions,” was orginally a small village situated just outside the ancient city of Ray[1] (Madanipour, 1998, pp.3-4).The earliest historical references to Tehran appear in medieval geographical accounts, which describe the settlement as consisting of multiple quarters and semi-subterranean dwellings, a feature often interpreted as a response to security concerns and climatic conditions.Its inhabitants were at times described as resistant to external authority—an early indication of a semi-autonomous local character (Madanipour, 1998, p.4).

By the fourteenth century, Tehran had grown into a relatively large but still unwalled town. Its favorable climate and proximity to Ray allowed it to benefit from regional trade and agricultural networks. A decisive transformation occurred during the Safavid period. In 1553, Shah Tahmasb I ordered the construction of a defensive wall around Tehran,as well as a bazar. This intervention formally established Tehran as a walled city and marked the beginning of its political and military significance.

Subsequent Safavid rulers added urban elements that reinforced this emerging status.The Arg[2](citadel) became the political core, while bazaars and public structures expanded around it. Shah Abbas I reportedly developed garden avenues such as the Charbagh and Chenarestan to the north of the settlement, integrating royal and landscaped spaces into the urban fabric. Over time, Tehran functioned intermittently as a Safavid garrison town and temporary court. Later additions to the fortified enclosure—including new gates and modifications under Afghan and Zand control—further strengthened its defensive character (Madanipour, 1998, p.28).

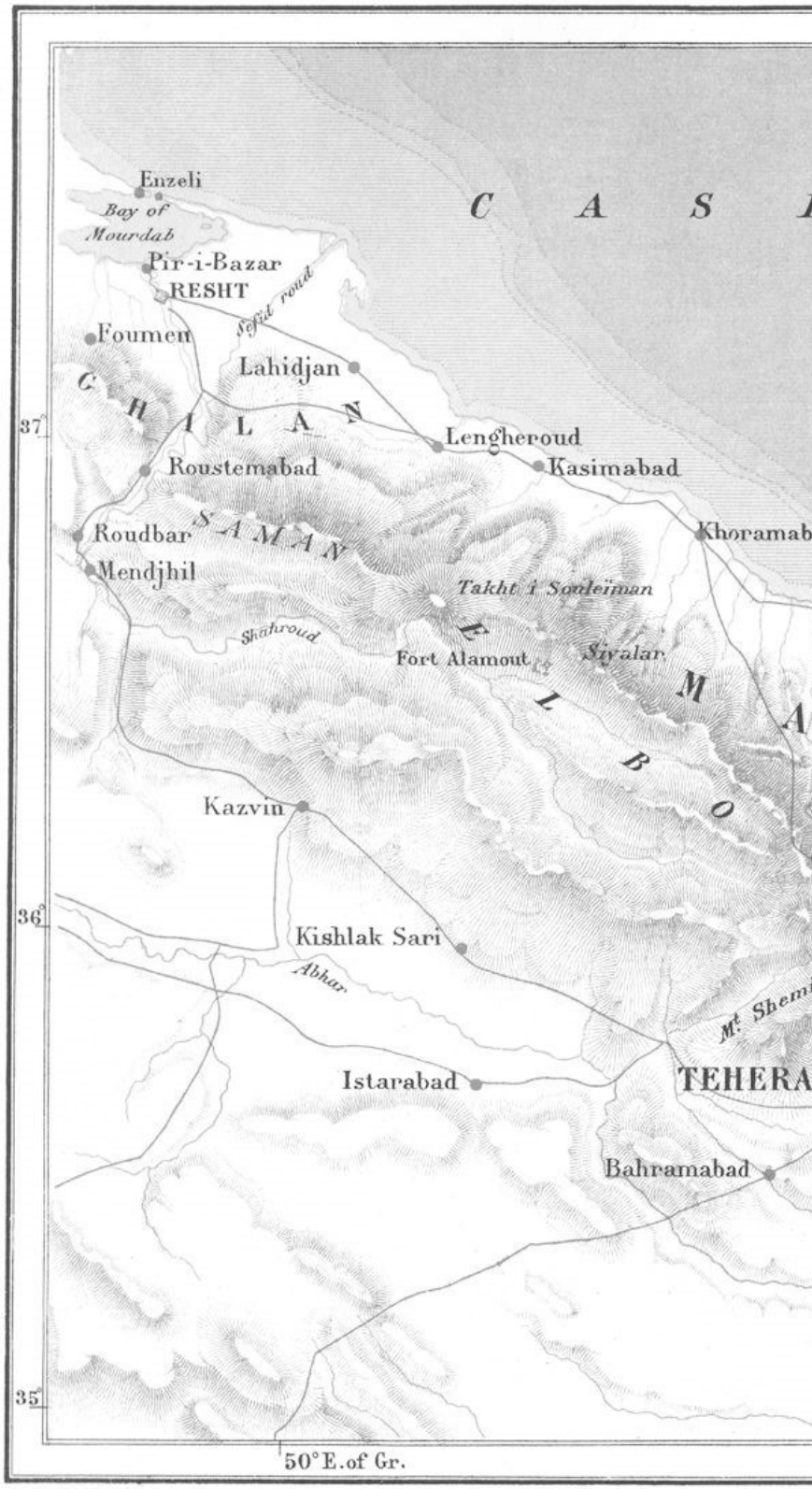
Following the decline of the Safavid Empire in the early eighteenth century, Iran entered a period of political fragmentation. Despite broader instability, Tehran continued to develop gradually, particularly as Ray had already diminished in demographic and administrative importance. By the late eighteenth century, the city’s strategic position and fortified structure made it an attractive candidate for dynastic consolidation.

1. *Ray (Raga)*was one of the oldest cities on the Iranian plateau, located south of present-day Tehran. Situated along major Silk Road trade networks, it functioned as an important political, military, and commercial center during the Parthian, Sasanian, and early Islamic periods. Following the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century, the city gradually declined, while nearby Tehran began to rise in prominence (Madanipour,1998, p.3)

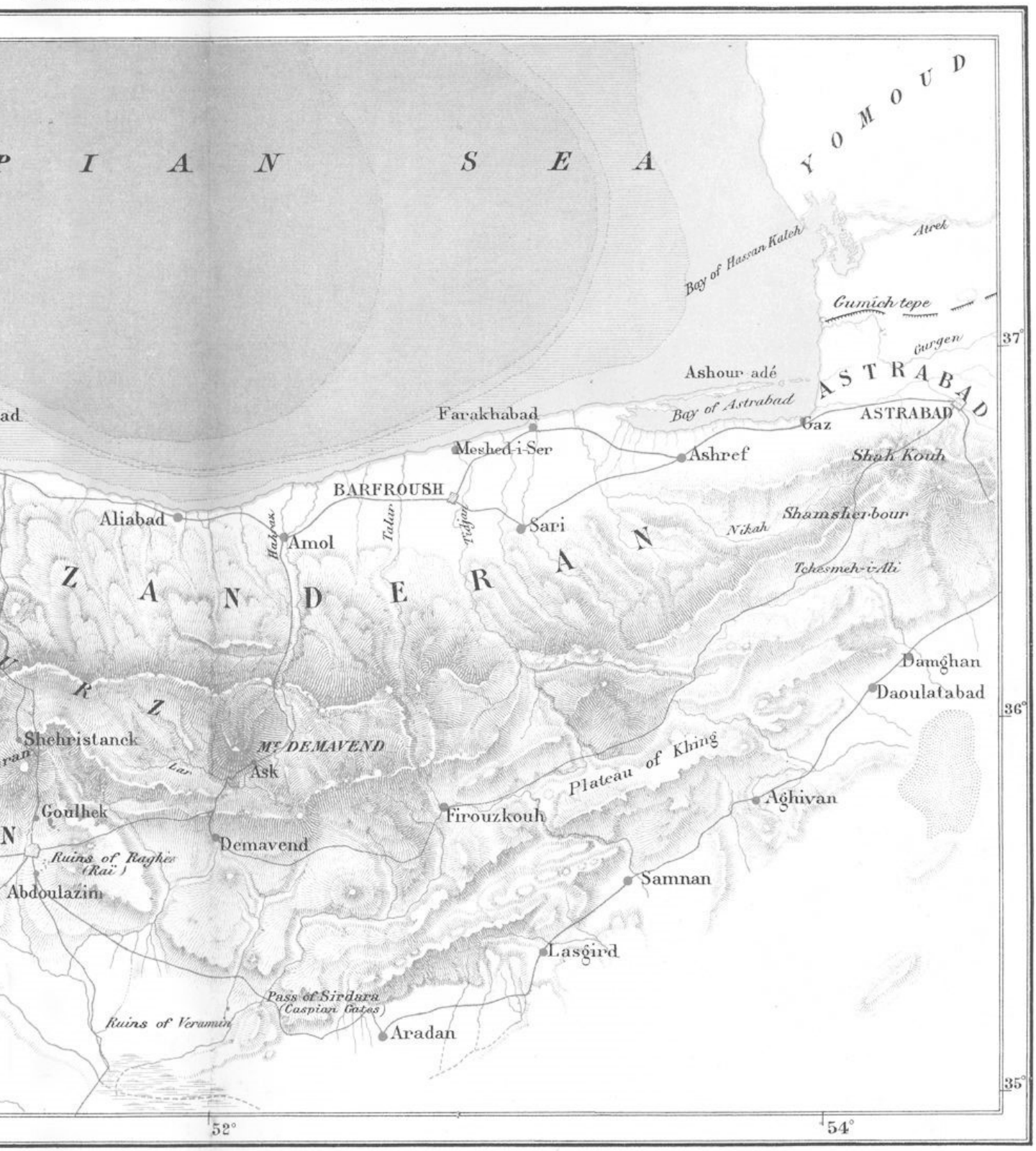
2. *Arg*,refers to a fortified citadel or royal governmental complex that traditionally functioned as the political and military center of many Iranian cities.

When Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar selected Tehran as the capital in 1785, the city's urban structure was still relatively compact. Early travelers such as Olivier estimated its population at approximately 15,000 inhabitants in the 1790s, including a substantial military presence. In the following decades, population growth accelerated as courtiers, soldiers, artisans, and merchants settled in the new capital. By the early nineteenth century, estimates suggest that the population fluctuated seasonally between 40,000 and 60,000 residents.
Under Fath-Ali Shah and his successors, palaces, mosques, and administrative buildings expanded within the existing walls. By the mid-nineteenth century, Tehran occupied roughly four square kilometers enclosed by Safavid-era fortifications. The city developed an axial organization connecting the Arg in the south to the central bazaar, aligning major religious and administrative structures along this spine.Two principal squares linked political authority and commercial life, connecting the citadel to the bazaar. The former retained a militarized character, while the latter operated as a more public marketplace.

Residential space was organized into four principal quarters, each containing houses, shops, baths, mosques and schools. Although these quarters were socially distinct, they were not physically segregated; circulation routes converged toward the bazaar, reinforcing its role as the economic and social heart of the city. Architecturally, Tehran remained modest in comparison to earlier imperial capitals such as Isfahan. Streets were narrow and largely unpaved, buildings were predominantly low-rise and inward-oriented, and urban grandeur was limited(Madanipour, 1998, pp.28-29).
Yet beneath this apparent modesty, a structural shift was underway. Tehran was no longer just a garden settlement or fortified town; it was becoming the administrative nucleus of a centralized monarchy. The consolidation of political authority within its walls, the expansion of courtly institutions, and the gradual demographic concentration laid the foundations for a new phase in which the city would be measured, mapped, and transformed through deliberate interventions that would define the later Qajar period and set the stage for modern urban planning in Iran.



Teheran and Demavend, published by J. S. Virtue & Co. in the late nineteenth century, depicts Tehran in relation to the Alborz Mountains and Mount Damavand, the highest mountain in Iran, emphasizing the geographical setting of the capital within northern Iran's broader landscape.



Depths

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1.1 Qajar Period (1785–1925): The Making of Tehran as Capital and the First Formation of the City's Spatial Logic

With the rise of the Qajar dynasty in the late eighteenth century, Iran entered a new phase of political centralization after a long period of post-Safavid instability marked by tribal rivalries, the short-lived Afsharid and Zand governments, and the weakening of central authority. After consolidating his military power, Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar selected Tehran as the capital in 1785-1786. This decision was not just a ransfer of the court to a small town; rather, it was part of a broader project to rebuild central authority in a fragmented country.

At the beginning, the Qajar state lacked a coherent administrative system and sufficient financial resources, and its control over the provinces remained limited. Nevertheless, the gradual concentration of bureaucracy, military forces, and commercial networks in Tehran rapidly increased the city's political importance and transformed it into the center of national decision-making.

Before this transformation, historical and geographical sources described Tehran not as a "great capital," but as a settlement organized around neighborhoods, closely connected to gardens, and adapted to its climate. Reference entries such as those in Encyclopaedia Iranica note the existence of a network of neighborhoods—sometimes described as twelve quarters—as well as underground or semi-underground houses (Encyclopaedia Iranica, 2026).

These accounts indicate that the *Mahalleh*[3] (neighborhood)was the basic unit of Tehran's socio-spatial organization. Therefore, every later wave of intervention either reorganized this unit, disrupted it, or reproduced it in a new form.

The importance of the city wall,Here, the map was not simply a representational tool but a document of power. By defining a new boundary, the state gained the ability to regulate taxation, exercise police control, and assign land value. From this moment onward, the boundary of the city was not only a physical wall but also a legal-cartographic line. This transformation turned the city into a manageable territory defined by official documentation.

After Tehran became the capital, its spatial structure gradually stabilized around three main poles: the royal citadel (*arg*), the central bazaar, and the surrounding neighborhoods. This arrangement may be described as a court–bazaar–neighborhood model. The *arg*

3. *Mahalleh*(neighborhood) refers to a socially and spatially cohesive urban unit in Iranian cities, characterized not only by geographic boundaries but also by shared social relations, collective memory, and a sense of local identity among residents.

concentrated political and military power; the bazaar functioned as the economic engine and as an intermediary between state and society; and the neighborhoods served as units of daily life and social solidarity.

During this period, the central government still lacked a modern bureaucracy, and urban administration operated through a network of intermediaries. Historian Ervand Abrahamian, whose work on the social and political structures of nineteenth-century Iran remains foundational, emphasizes the role of local actors in mediating between state authority and everyday urban life. In his analysis, *kadkhodas*[4] (neighborhood headmen) were usually chosen by local elders, yet they functioned within a complex interaction with state-appointed officials(Abrahamian,1982, pp.19-21). Applied to Qajar Tehran, this analysis suggests that urban governance was multilayered and heterogeneous. Consequently, any spatial intervention quickly became part of broader struggles over authority and resources.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Iran faced foreign pressures—especially from Russia and Britain—financial crises, and military defeats. Within this context, attempts at administrative and technical reform emerged, among which the establishment of Dar al-Funun[5] in 1851 was one of the most important. Architectural historian Zahra Atefmehr, argues that Dar al-Funun was not merely an educational institution; rather, it provided the infrastructure for producing a new technical language that treated the city as an object to be measured, mapped, and designed. Atefmehr shows that the translation and transmission of modern sciences in this institution helped create institutional capacity for technical interventions (Atefmehr, 2021, pp.81-85).

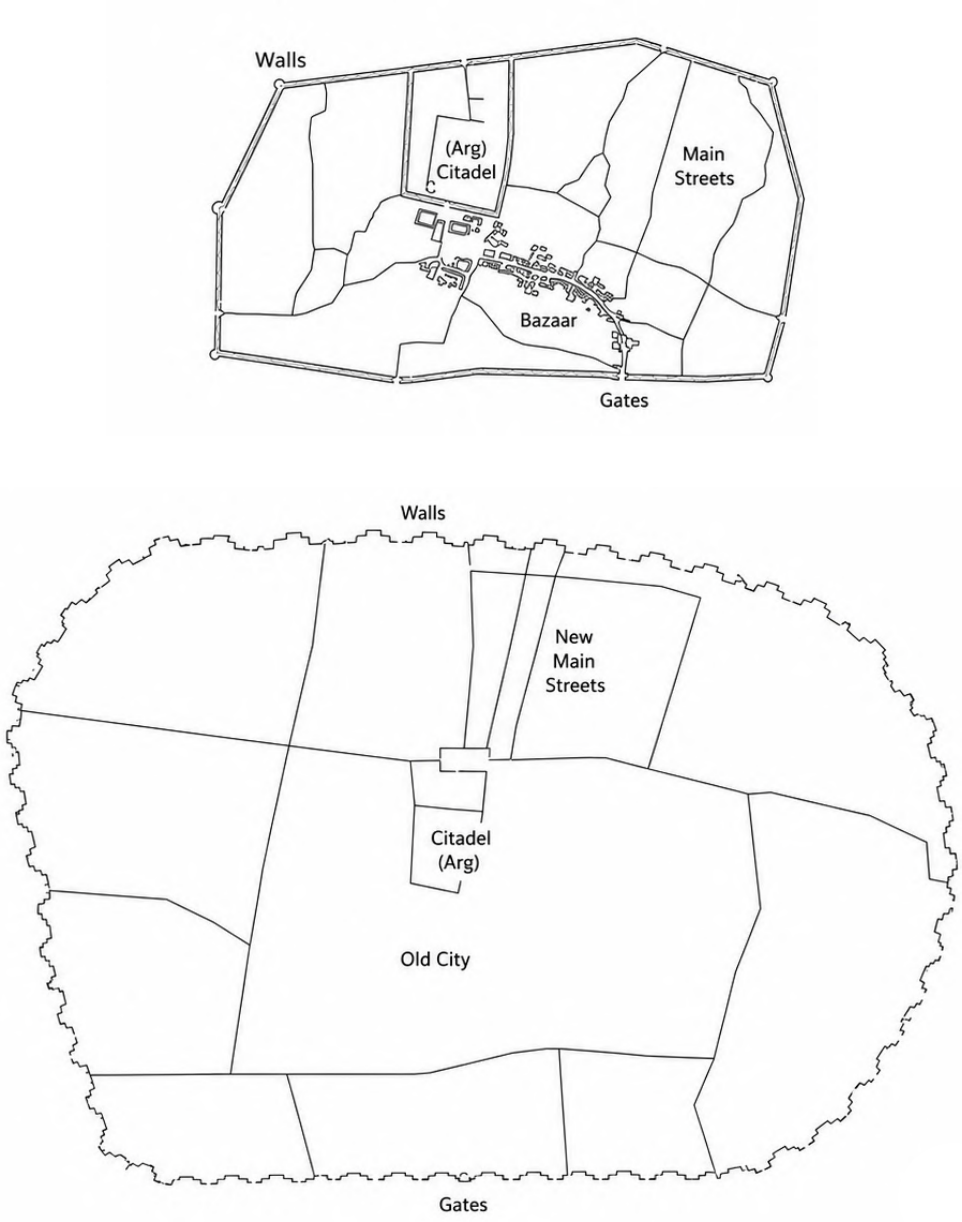
This capacity became materially visible in the Nasiri Map of the *Dar al-Khilafa*[6] in 1878. Urban historian Rana Habibi argues that the true emergence of modernization in Tehran's physical form began with the preparation of this map. Following this process, in 1891 the old fortifications were demolished and the city expanded in four directions; its area increased from approximately 3 to 19 square kilometers (Habibi, 2021, pp.21-24).

4. *Kadkhoda* was the traditional headman of an Iranian neighborhood or village, responsible for mediating between local residents and state authorities.
5. *Dar al-Funun*, founded in Tehran in 1851 under the initiative of Amir Kabir (1807–1852), the reformist prime minister of Naser al-Din Shah, was Iran's first modern educational institution and played a key role in introducing European sciences and technical knowledge.
6.The *Nasiri* Map of Tehran (1878), prepared by Abd al-Ghaffar Najm al-Molk, is one of the most important cartographic documents of nineteenth-century Iran. It was produced during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah (1848–1896), a period marked by significant urban growth and administrative modernization in Tehran, building on reforms first initiated by his influential prime minister, Amir Kabir (1807–1852).

Here, the map was not simply a representational tool but a document of power. By defining a new boundary, the state gained the ability to regulate taxation, exercise police control, and assign land value. From this moment onward, the boundary of the city was not only a physical wall but also a legal-cartographic line. This transformation turned the city into a manageable territory defined by official documentation.

Habibi points to another crucial issue: in the new expansion, gardens were incorporated within the new walls (Habibi, 2021, pp.25-27).This shift had long-term consequences. Bringing gardens into the official boundary meant transforming garden land into an urban development reserve—one that in later periods would become building land and an object of speculation. From this perspective, the roots of land commodification in Tehran can be traced back to this late Qajar expansion.

At the same time, the "technicalization" of the city did not eliminate conflict. For instance, the dispute over the Protestant cemetery in the same period, demonstrates how a spatial decision (the location of burial grounds) became a point of intersection between religious authority, political power, and foreign presence.This conflict was an example of how urban boundaries carried ideological and moral weight (*Hamshahri*, 2024; *Mo'asseseh Motale'at-e Tarikh-e Mo'aser-e Iran,* n.d.). Urban planning at this moment was therefore not only technical but deeply political and value-laden.

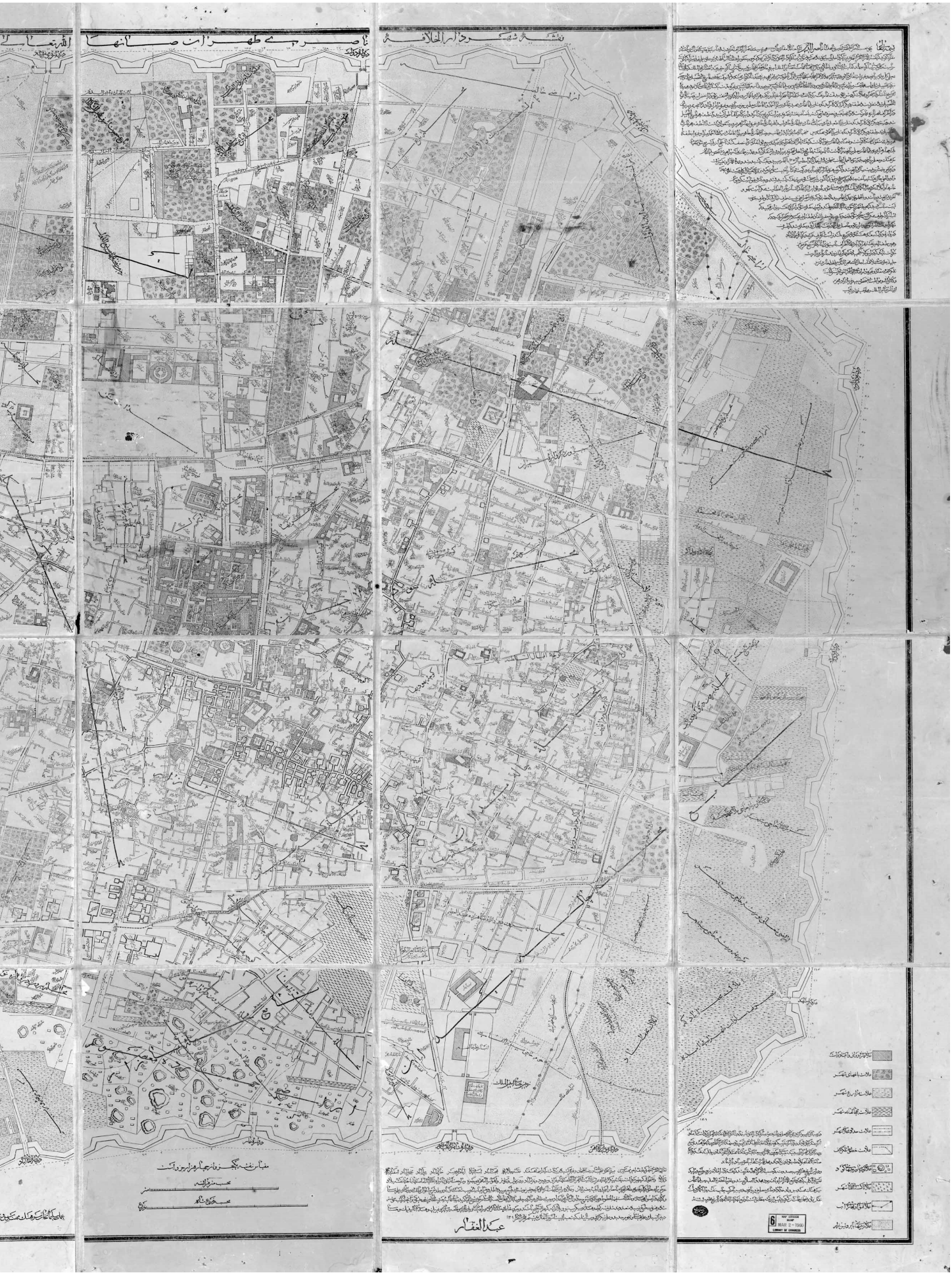


Morphological transformation of Tehran between the early and late Qajar periods. The upper diagram illustrates the spatial structure of Tehran around 1826, organized around the *Arg* (citadel), the bazaar, and the city walls. The lower diagram shows the expanded city after the Nasiri transformation of the late nineteenth century, highlighting the enlargement of the urban boundary and the emergence of new street networks. Redrawn by the author based on maps and diagrams published in Ali Madanipour's Tehran: The Making of a Metropolis (1998)

Map of Tehran in 1826, prepared by Russian military surveyors during the early Qajar period. The map depicts the compact walled capital organized around the Arg (citadel), the bazaar, and a limited urban fabric enclosed within the Safavid fortifications.
Source: Mohammad Mehryar et al., *Asnad-e Tasviri-ye Shahrha-ye Iran: Doreh-ye Qajar* (Tehran Shahid Beheshti university) (*Sazman-e Miras-e Farhangi-ye keshvar*, 1999), 147.

ДСКАГО СТОЛИЧНАГО ГОРОДА ТЕГЕРАНА
въ 1826мъ году
A.
B.

Nasiri Map of Tehran (*Dar al-Khilafe-ye Naseri*),1878, prepared under the supervision of Abd al-Ghaffar Najm al-Molk during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah. The map documents the spatial expansion of Tehran and the incorporation of surrounding gardens into the urban boundary during the late Qajar period. Source: National Library and Archives of Iran



Gardens as the index of the city. A village near Neyriz.Source: Khosravi, Hamed. “Geopolitics of tabula rasa: Persian garden and the idea of city.”
Source: Journal of Architecture and Urbanism 38, no. 1 (2014): 3–53. Photo by Georg Gerster, 1977.

1.2 Reza Shah (1925–1941): Centralized State-Building, Authoritarian Modernization, and the Reconfiguration of the State–City Relationship

The rise of Reza Shah must be understood within the context of the deep crisis of the late Qajar state: weak central authority, strong foreign influence, and administrative instability in the early twentieth century(Abrahamian, 1982, pp.111-136).The 1921 coup and Reza Shah's accession to the throne in 1925 marked a turning point in the history of modern state-building in Iran. He initiated a broad project aimed at centralizing power, creating a national army, weakening tribal and local structures, secularizing the legal system, and establishing an organized bureaucracy. For the first time since the Safavid period, political authority was exercised relatively effectively across the entire territory. In this framework, Tehran became not only the political capital but also the spatial laboratory of the centralized state. (Abrahamian, 1982, pp.111-145)

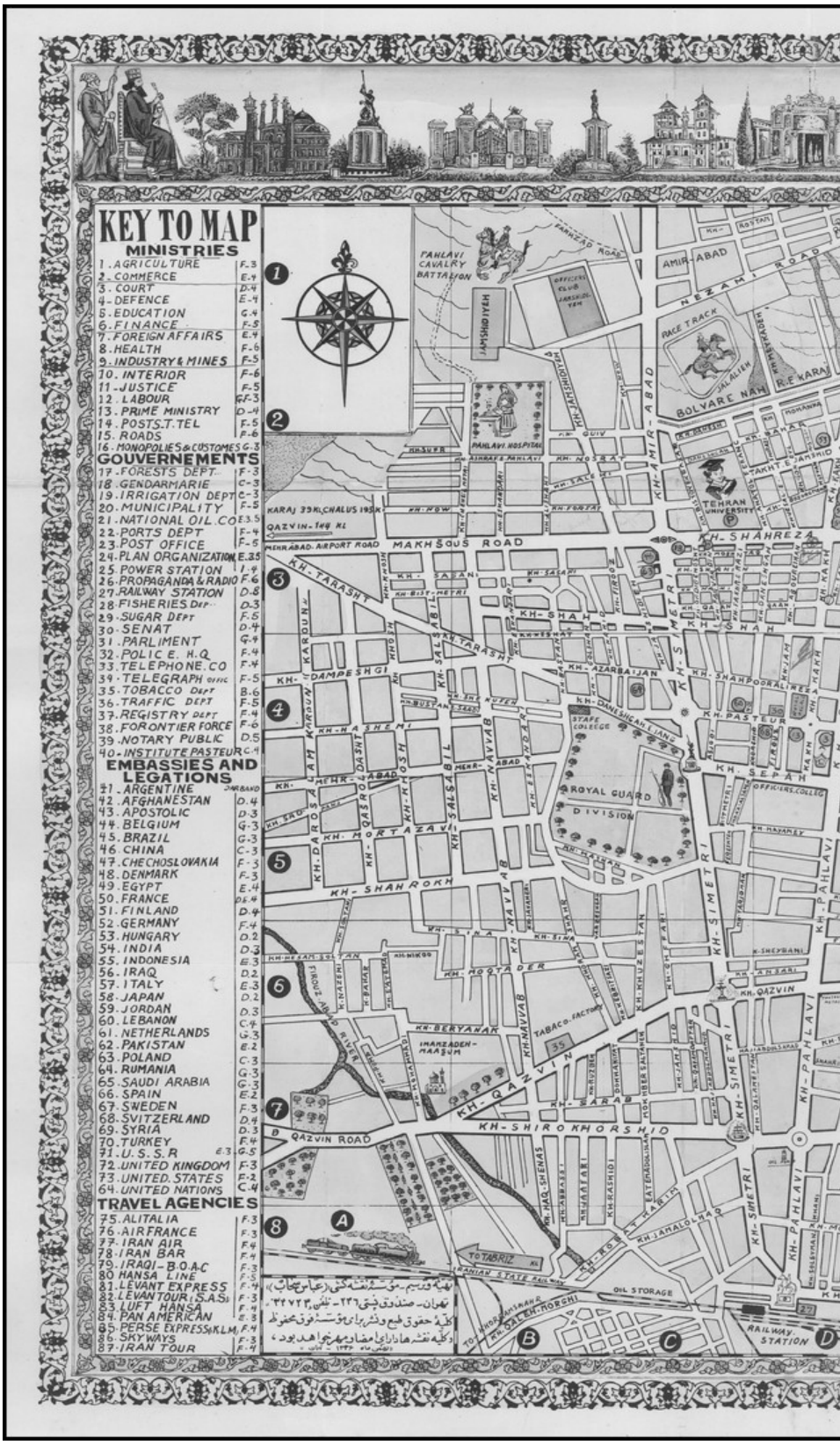
The transition from the Qajar period to the first Pahlavi era can be described as a shift from mediated network-based governance to state-centered and centralized governance. At the urban level, this shift resulted in direct state intervention in the physical structure of the city. If in the late Qajar period mapping and technical knowledge had enabled the measurement and expansion of official territory, under Reza Shah these capacities became executive tools for restructuring the urban fabric. Persian-language scholarship has emphasized that a defining feature of urbanism under Reza Shah was the state's direct intervention in transforming the city's physical structure and its connection to political centralization(Qadimi Qeydari and Mohammadi, 2020, pp.89-92).

In Tehran, this intervention took the form of extensive street construction, demolition of parts of the old urban fabric, and the creation of wide, straight avenues. These streets further than being infrastructural projects; were part of the logic of state-building. Straight networks allowed rapid military movement, police control, and the formal display of state power. In contrast to the previous neighborhood-based structure—organized around complex networks of kinship, bazaar, mosque, and local intermediaries—these new avenues created a kind of spatial cut. As Ervand Abrahamian shows, neighborhoods in Iranian cities functioned as relatively self-regulating social units, with intermediaries such as the kadkhodā playing key roles in conflict resolution and sometimes serving as sources of mobilization in critical moments.

The straight and legible streets of the Pahlavi period disrupted or reconfigured these organic networks and thereby weakened part of the social power embedded in neighborhoods.
This physical restructuring occurred alongside a broader social project. Reza Shah aimed to construct the “modern citizen.” Policies such as dress reform, the unveiling decree, the establishment of the University of Tehran, the creation of a secular educational system, the introduction of civil registration, and administrative modernization were all part of this effort.Rana Habibi argues that modernization between 1921 and 1941 was not only physical but also linked to the formation of ideas such as the middle class, urbanity, and the civilized citizen. From this perspective, the city became an instrument for reorganizing social order(Habibi,2021, pp.1-17).Population growth in Tehran during this period is also significant. According to Habibi, Tehran’s population increased from approximately 362,000 in 1921 to 1,205,000 in 1941 (Habibi, 2021, p.36).This rapid growth intensified pressure on infrastructure and urban services and allowed the state to justify large-scale interventions in the name of order and necessity. Street construction and central restructuring must therefore be analyzed at the intersection of demographic pressure and the political project of centralization. A legible and networked city became a tool for consolidating centralized state power.
At a structural level, the modernization of the first Pahlavi era had three major spatial consequences. First, administrative and military institutions were concentrated along major axes. Second, a new circulation network facilitated the movement of goods, capital, and forces. Third, the groundwork was laid for long-term spatial inequalities. Improved access along new axes and rising land values in surrounding areas accelerated the gradual relocation of more affluent groups to more desirable districts. The north–south divide of Tehran, although consolidated and deepened in later decades, began to take spatial form in this period. It should therefore not be attributed merely to natural or climatic factors, but understood as the outcome of the relationship between a centralized state and land, infrastructure, and spatial control.
The theoretical importance of this period lies in the fact that the city became an object of structural intervention. New streets and squares served a dual function: on the one hand, they were tools for control, parade, and the display of state authority; on the other hand, due to their legibility and capacity for gathering, they became potential sites of collective action. As urban scholar, Asma Mehan shows in her analysis of later Tehran, symbolic spaces constructed

to display state power—such as Shahyad Square in subsequent decades—could, in moments of political crisis, turn into spaces of protest (Mehan, 2023, pp.85-89). Although *Shahyad* Square belongs to the second Pahlavi period, the spatial logic that made it possible—the production of large, legible, and symbolic spaces—was rooted in the authoritarian restructuring of the first Pahlavi era.

In conclusion, the first Pahlavi period represents a stage in which urban planning in Tehran moved from “expansion and mapping” to direct structural state intervention. The city not only grew in size but was fundamentally redefined in its spatial organization. This redefinition functioned both as an instrument for consolidating centralized authority and as a foundation for later developments—from the institutionalization of planning under Mohammad Reza Shah to the politics of the street in more recent periods.



Nasiri Map of Tehran (Dar al-Khilafe-ye Naseri), prepared under the supervision of Abd al-Ghaffar Najm al-Molk during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah in 1958. The map documents the spatial expansion of Tehran and the incorporation of surrounding gardens into the urban boundary during the late Qajar period.
Source: National Library and Archives of Iran.

TEHRAN
HOTELS
88. AMBASADOR E.2
89. APADANA G.2
90. ATLANTIC F.2
91. DARBANDE - DARBANDE
92 EVEREST F.3
93. FERDOWSI F.4
94. CARAVAN F.3
95. MAJESTIC F.2
96. MAYSEN F.3
97. CLARIDGE F.2
98. KIAN D.1
99. JAM D.2
100. GUILAN F.4
101. PARASTOO E.1
102. PLAZA E.1
103. PARK HOTEL E.4
104. PERSEPOLIC D.2
105. PACIFIC F.2
106. SEPID F.2
107. MUSEE E.5
108. NADERI E.4
109. RESIDENCE E.2
110. RITZ F.3
111. TOURIST D.2
MUSEUMS
A. ART MUSEUM G.4
B. COSTUMES " D.5
C. IRAN BASTAN " E.4
D. GOLESTAN PALACE F.5
POINTS OF INTEREST
1.- TEHRAN.
E. BAZAR F.6
F. GOLESTAN PALACE F.5
G. IMAMZADEH YAHIA G.6
H. IMAMZADEH ZEYD F.6
I. MAJLIS (PARLIMENT) G.4
J. SERAY.I.ATABAK F.6
K. SEPAHSALAR (MOSQUE) G.6
L. SHAH MOSQUE F.6
M. SEYD-ISMAIL G.6
N. SEYD NASREDIN E.6
O. SHAMSOLEMAREH F.5
P. TEHRAN UNIVERSITY C.3
Q. NATIONAL PARK E.5
2.-THE SUBURBS OF TEHRAN.
I. HAZRAT.E ABDOLAZIM - ARAMGAHE REZA SHAH KABIR (SHAHR.E REY) - BORJ.
II. E. TOGHROL. CHESMEH. ALI
VARAMIN, THE JOMEH MOSQUE - BORJ E 'ALA'E DIN
III. DARBAND - LASHGARAK - AB.E.ALI - DAMAVAND
ROUDEHEN. MOBARAK. ABAD
LAR. POLOUR.
BOOK SHOPS
R. ACADEMIA F.3
S. AMIRKABIR F.4
T. EQBAL G.4
V. EBNESINA F.4
W. FERANCEH F.4
U. MEL'S E.4
X. MEBSO E.4
Y. SACO E.5
Z. NASTARIN F.4
BANKS
I. AGRICULTURAL E.5
II. COMMERCIAL F.5
III. U.N. BANK G.3
IV. EXPORT & MINING F.4
V. EXPORTS PROMOTION F.4
VI. BANK MELLI IRAN F.4
VII. BANK MELLI IRAN (BAZAR) F.6
VIII. BANK SEPAH F.5
IIX. BANK PARS F.4
X. BANK TEHRAN F.4
XI. BANK BIMEH BAZARGANAN F.4
XII. BANK RAHNI F.4
XIII. BANK BARNAMEH F.4
SAHAB CARTOGRAPHICAL DRAFTING TEHRAN
FEBRUARY 1958
SCALE OF METRES
COPYRIGHT ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. A. SAHAB. CARTOGRAPHICAL DRAFTING TEHRAN. IRAN. P.O. BOX 236 - TEL: 32723

Top: Demolition of Tehran's city walls to facilitate the city's expansion and the construction of new state institutions, including the Ministry of Economic Affairs (visible in the photograph). Bottom: Shah-Reza (now Ferdowsi) Street, Tehran, in the 1950s, illustrating the emergence of new urban building typologies, including multi-story residential buildings, office buildings, and mixed-use shop-houses. Sources: Top: Photograph by Ali Khadem, 1937. Archive of the Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies.

Illustrated comparison of traditional and modern lifestyles published in the Iranian magazine Now, reflecting the cultural discourse of modernization and social transformation during the early Pahlavi period.
Source : illustrated spread, Tehran, c. 1940s–1950s. National Library and Archives of Iran.

1.3 Mohammad Reza Shah (1941–1979): Institutionalization of Planning, the Political Economy of Land, and the Production of Symbolic Spaces

The second Pahlavi period began in 1941 with the forced abdication of Reza Shah and the accession of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah during the Allied occupation of Iran.The first decade of this period was marked by the relative weakness of royal authority, political competition, the expansion of party activity, and the nationalization of the oil industry in 1951. Mohammad Mosaddegh, a leading nationalist statesman, leader of the National Front, and advocate of constitutional government, became the central figure of the oil nationalization movement. His government sought to reduce foreign influence over Iran's economy while strengthening parliamentary sovereignty and the authority of elected institutions. The 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh marked a turning point in the consolidation of royal power. From that moment onward, the Pahlavi state gradually evolved into an authoritarian developmental state supported by increasing oil revenues. The reforms known as the White Revolution in 1963—including land reform, the expansion of education, women's suffrage, and economic modernization programs—formed a state-led modernization agenda aimed at accelerating economic development, weakening traditional rural power structures, and integrating broader segments of society into the national development project. These reforms produced profound changes in Iran's social structure and led to large-scale rural-to-urban migration, particularly to Tehran.

Within this context, Tehran experienced unprecedented growth. Rising oil revenues in the 1960s and 1970s, the concentration of state investment in the capital, and the massive migration of labor turned Tehran into the primary administrative, economic, and cultural center of the country. Rapid urban expansion—often lacking institutional coordination and a guiding framework—revealed a crisis in urban governance Urban historian, Elmira Jafari shows that in the years following World War II, Tehran's growth proceeded in such an uncontrolled manner that urban management was unable to direct it; construction was fragmented and spatially incoherent, resulting in a city composed of unevenly connected parts(Jafari, 2022, pp.68-75). This situation transformed the need for planned intervention into both a political and administrative demand.

The establishment of the Ministry of Development and Housing in 1964 can be understood as an institutional response to this crisis. The ministry was tasked with organizing urban development and housing policies and creating coordination among different governmental bodies. Later, the approval of the Law for the Establishment of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran in 1973 provided a clear legal framework for the approval of master and detailed plans and for coordination among ministries. Urban planning in the second Pahlavi period thus moved beyond isolated projects toward an institutional system composed of a developmental state, the Planning Organization, specialized ministries, and a technocratic body(Jafari, 2022, pp.86-98).

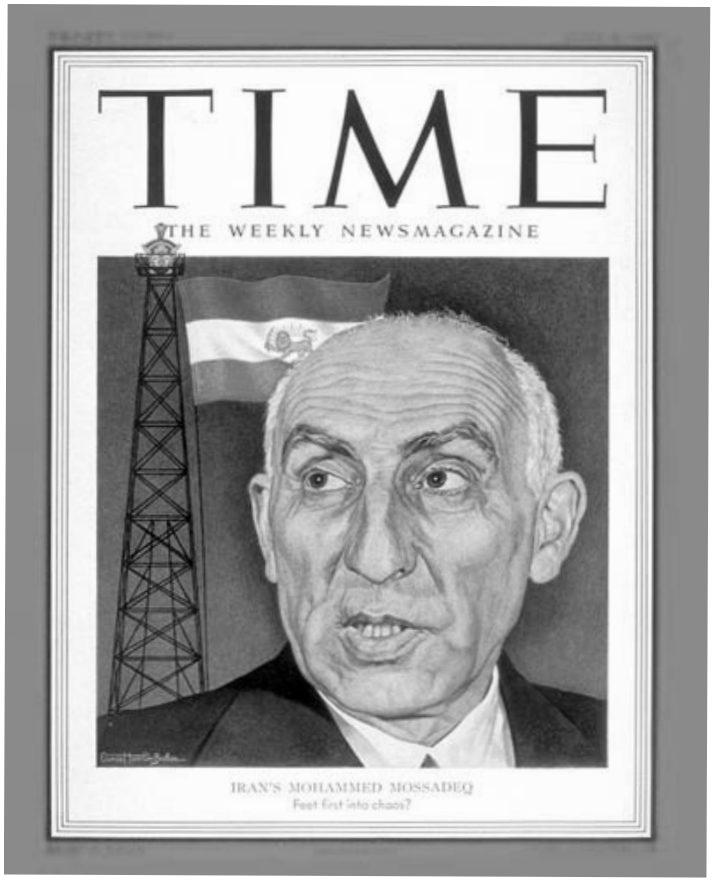
A central outcome of this emerging planning apparatus was the preparation of the Tehran Master Plan (TMP), developed between 1966 and 1969 by Abdolaziz Farmanfarmaian[7] in collaboration with Victor Gruen[8] . As Elmira Jafari argues, the TMP represented the first comprehensive attempt to manage Tehran's rapid expansion and redefine the capital's future growth through a coordinated planning framework. Rather than merely regulating physical development, the plan sought to reposition Tehran as a modern metropolitan center and proposed a polycentric urban structure supported by new transportation networks and regional centers (Jafari, 2022, pp. 97–101).
Jafari emphasizes that this plan should not be understood simply as a transfer of Western knowledge, but rather as a field of transnational exchange and a platform for consolidating the professional authority of Iranian planners. The presence of a foreign consultant had not only a technical function but also a symbolic and legitimizing one, while Iranian planners sought to define their own agenda for Tehran's future. The first master plan of Tehran was therefore not only a technical document to guide growth but also a site of contestation over the definition of the urban problem and the role of expertise within the state. (Jafari, 2022, pp.108-113)

7. Abdolaziz Farmanfarmaian (1920–2013) was one of Iran's most influential modernist architects. His works include the Azadi Sports Complex and the terminal buildings of Mehrabad International Airport, in addition to his contribution to Tehran's first comprehensive master plan.
8. Victor Gruen (1903–1980) was an Austrian-American architect and planner whose firm prepared Tehran's first comprehensive master plan in the 1960s. Beyond its technical proposals, the plan introduced new ideas of metropolitan governance, regional growth management, and large-scale urban planning, making Gruen an influential figure in the modernization of planning practice in Iran.

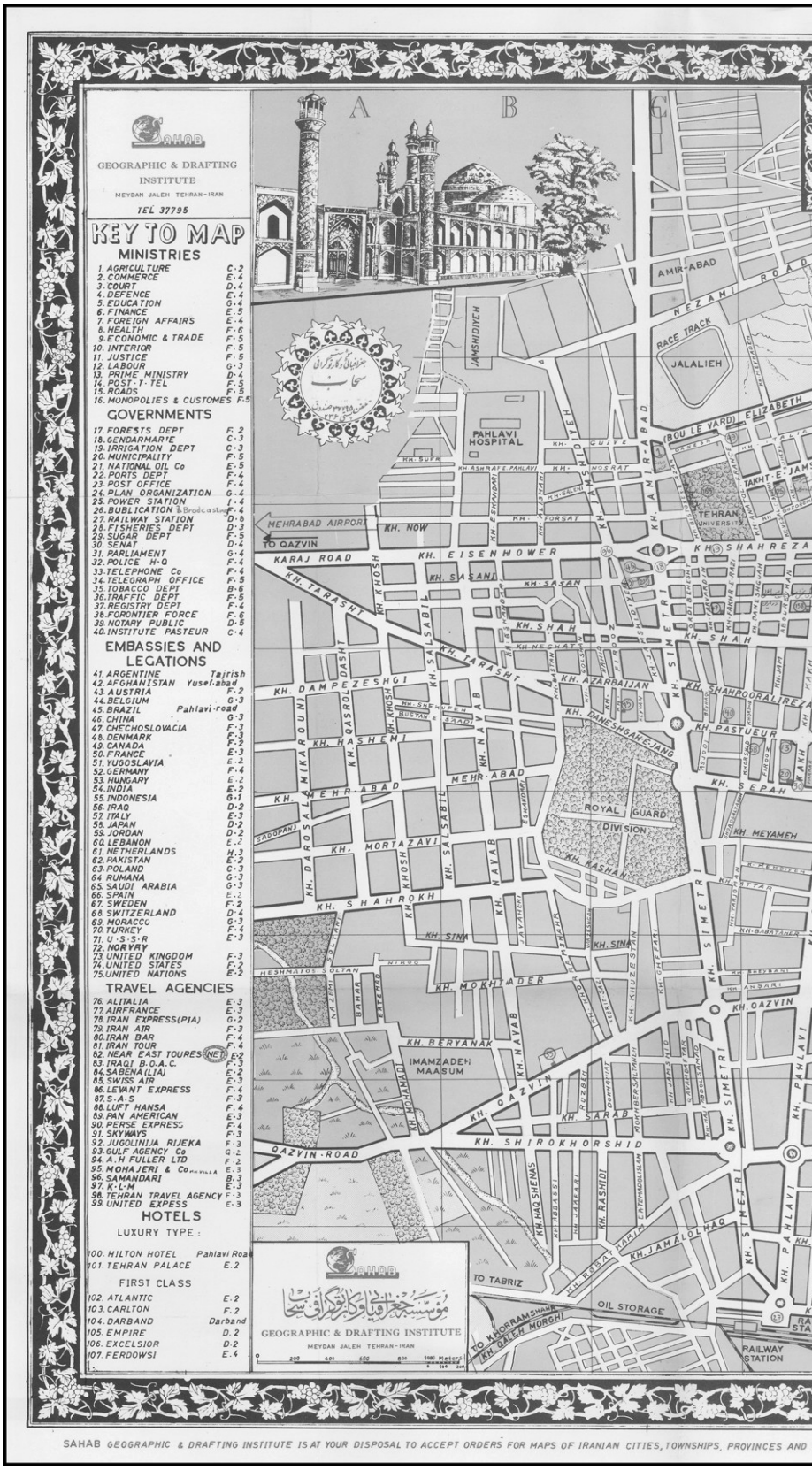
However, this development unfolded within an increasingly securitized political context after 1953. Abrahamian explains that with the establishment of *SAVAK*[9] in 1957, surveillance and repression mechanisms were significantly strengthened .While the city was becoming physically more modern, it also became a sensitive space in terms of political security(Abrahamian, 1982, pp.419-432). Universities, squares, and major urban axes functioned both as symbols of modernity and as potential sites of protest.This duality became symbolically visible in *Shahyad* Square (today *Azadi* Square). Built in 1971 to commemorate the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy, the square was intended to create a symbolic link between ancient Iran and Pahlavi modernity. Yet, as Asma Mehan shows, in December 1978 this monumental space became the site of mass demonstrations against the regime(Mehan, 2023, pp.85_89). Spaces designed to stabilize legitimacy turned, in moments of crisis, into arenas for redefining symbols and power. This transformation demonstrates that urban planning—even in its institutional and comprehensive form—always operates within the political field and cannot be separated from it.

Despite the economic growth and urban transformation of the 1960s and 1970s, the political system remained increasingly centralized and exclusionary. As Abrahamian argues, rapid modernization, expanding education, urbanization, and the growth of new social groups were not accompanied by corresponding channels for political participation. The concentration of power in the monarchy, the weakening of representative institutions, and the expansion of surveillance and repression generated growing dissatisfaction among diverse social groups, including students, intellectuals, professionals, workers, and sections of the clergy. By the late 1970s, these tensions converged in a broad opposition movement that challenged the legitimacy of the Pahlavi state and culminated in the Revolution of 1979(Abrahamian, 1982, pp.435-446).

9. *SAVAK* (*Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*) was the national intelligence and security organization of Iran under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Established in 1957, it was responsible for intelligence gathering, surveillance, and the suppression of political opposition. As a central instrument of state control, SAVAK played a significant role in monitoring social and political activities and extending the reach of the modernizing state into public and urban life until the 1979 Revolution.



Oil Nationalization, Political Mobilization, and the Urbanization of Politics in Tehran (1951).
Left: Mohammad Mosaddegh addressing supporters in Tehran during the oil nationalization movement, which challenged the dominance of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC)
Right: Mosaddegh on the cover of Time magazine (4 June 1951), reflecting the international significance of the nationalization crisis and Iran's growing prominence in Cold War geopolitics.
Sources: Bettmann Archive / Getty Images; Time Magazine Archive, "Iran's Mohammed Mossadegh," 4 June.



Central Map of Tehran,illustrating the rapid expansion of urban infrastructure, administrative institutions, and new transportation networks that reshaped the city into Iran's modern capital. published by the Sahab Geographic & Drafting Institute (1963). The map captures Tehran during the height of Pahlavi II modernization.

CENTRAL MAP OF
TEHRAN
SAHAB'S IRAN ATLAS
THE FIRST COMPLETE PUBLICATION THAT WILL ACQUAINT YOU WITH THE GEOGRAPHICAL, PHYSICAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, ZOOGEOGRAPHICAL, VEGETATION ETC. SITUATION OF IRAN.
108. JAM U-2
109. KIAN E-2
110. MAJESTIC F-2
111. NEW PLAZA E-2
112. PARK HOTEL E-4
113. RITZ F-3
114. SEMIRAMIS F-2
115 SINA E-2
116. VANAK HOTEL Vanak
NIGHT CLUBS:
117. COLBEH Darband
118. MIAMI Pahlavi Road
119. CASBAH
120. SHEKOUFE C-6
MUSEUMS
139. ART MUSEUM G-4
140. COSTUMES D-6
141. IRAN-BASTAN E-4
142. GOLESTAN PALACE F-5
POINTS OF INTEREST
143. BAZAR F-6
144. GOLESTAN PALACE 142(2)
145. IMAMZADEH YAHIA G-6
146. IMAMZADEH ZEYD F-6
147. MAJLES G-4
148. SERAY-E-ATABAK F-6
149. SEPAHSALAR MASQUE G-4
150. SHAH MASQUE F-6
151. SEYD ISMAIL G-7
152. SHAMSOL'EMAREH F-6
153. TEHRAN UNIVERSITY G-2-3
154. NATIONAL PARK E-5
BOOK SHOPS
155. AMIR KABIR F-4
156. AMERICAN EMBASSY F-2
157. I.A.D.A. Ltd E-4
158. INTERNATIONAL PRESS AGENCY OF IRAN D-3
160. FRANCEH F-4
161. MEBSO E-2
162. MEL'S E-4
163. NASTARIN E-4
164. LIB. Des Let. FRANCAISES E-3
165. PERSEPOLIS E-2
166. SACO E-3
167. PARS F-4
168. SOKHAN E-3
169. EBNESINA F-4
170. AVON 170(a), DANESH F-4
BANKS
171. EATEBARAT-E-Keshavarzi E-5
172. BAZARGANI IRAN F-5
173. U. N. BANK
174. INDUSTRIAL & MINES DEVELOP
175. EXPORTS PROMOTION F-4
176. BANK MELLI IRAN F-4
177. " " - BAZAR F-6
178. SEPAH F-5
179. PARS F-4
180. ASNAF F-4
181. TEHRAN F-4
182. KAR E-4
183. RAHNI F-4
184. EATBARAT-E-IRAN F-4
185. SAKHTEMANI F-2
186 SADERAT VA MAIDEN F-4
187 BIMEH BAZARGANAN F-4
188. IRANO BRITISH BANK F-4
189. EMRAN E-3
190. IRAN & THE MIDDEL EAST F-4
191. IRAN & HOLLAND F-3
192. IRANO GHARB F-4
193. INT IRAN & JAPAN F-4
194. IRANIAN BANK E-3 - F-4
195. IRANIAN FOREIGN F-4
196. KARGOSHAI F-4
197. BANKE MELLI Bra. Jaleh
198. CENTRAL BANK
COMMERCIAL COUNSELLORS
199. CHECHOSLOVAKIA E-2
200. FRANCE F-2
201. OTAGH-E-BAZARGANI E-4
202. POLISH C-5
203. SWEDEN F-4
204. U-S-S-R G-5
205. AUSTRIA F-5
LIBRARIES
206. MAJLIS G-4
207. MAJLIS SENA D-4
208. MALEK F-6
209. MELLI (NATIONAL) E-4
210. SEPAHSALAR G-4
211. AMERICAN D-2
212. GOLESTAN 142-F-5
213. IRAN-AMERICAN SOCIETY D-4
IMPORTANT TRADING HOUSES
214. CONSORTIUM VAHABZADEH F-3
215. AUTOKAVIAN Co F-3
216. POUST PASHM PANBEH Prod.Co (F-4)
HOUSING-AGENT
217. JOHN-SOLEYMANI F-3
COSMETICES & PATTERNS
218. AVON E-1, E-2
ABBAS-ABAD
VAHIDIYEH
KH. SHAHREZA
KH. MEHRAN
KH. FARANCEH
KH. SEPAH
KH. AMIR KABIR
KH. VARZESH
NATIONAL PARK - E-SHAHR
KH. BEHESHT
KH. BOUZARJOMEHR
KH. BOUALI
KH. MOWLAVI
KH. SHOOSH
KH. MOKHTARI
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KH. GUTEH
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KH. YAKHCHAL
KH. AHWNG
KH. GHYASI
KH. JAHAN-PANAH
KH. KHORASAN
KH. NAMEE-ABAD
KH. SHAHBAZ
KH. SIROOS
KH. PAMENAR
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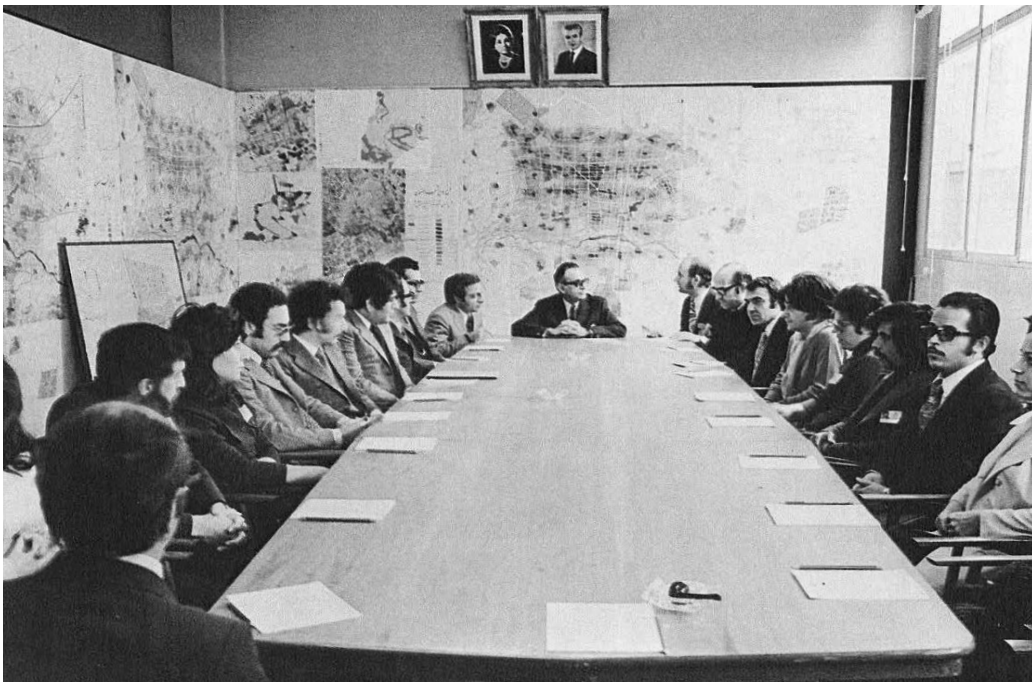
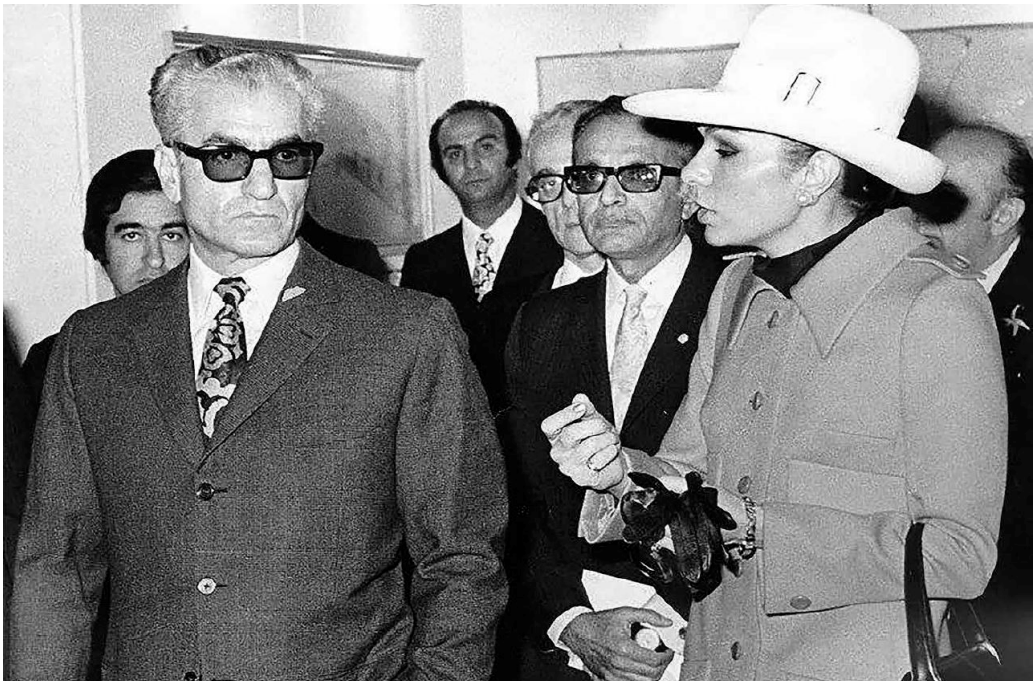
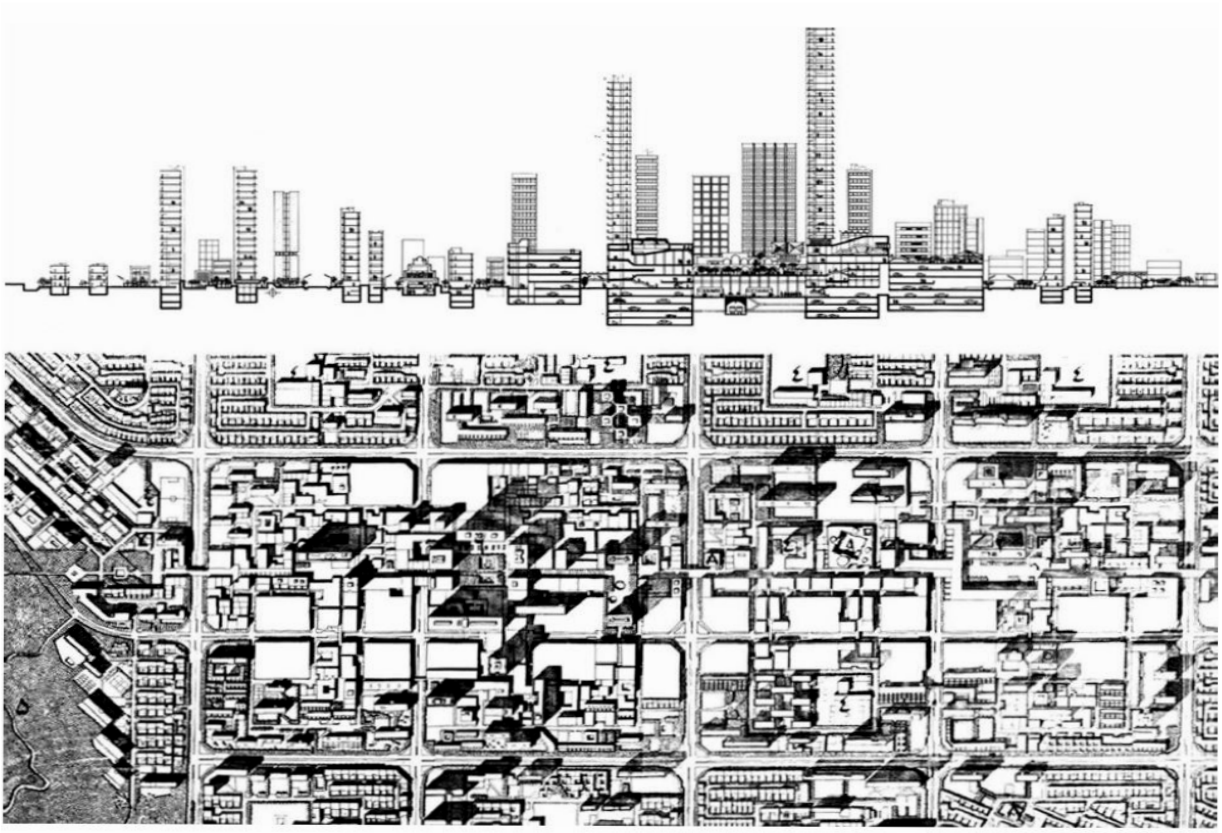
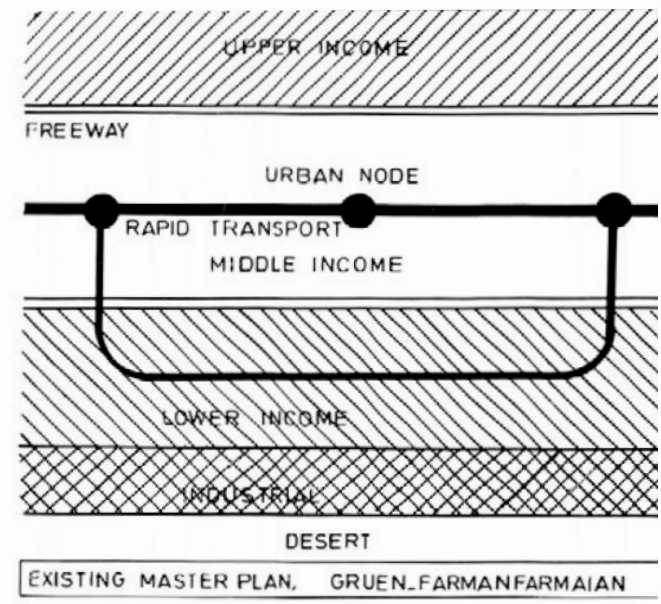


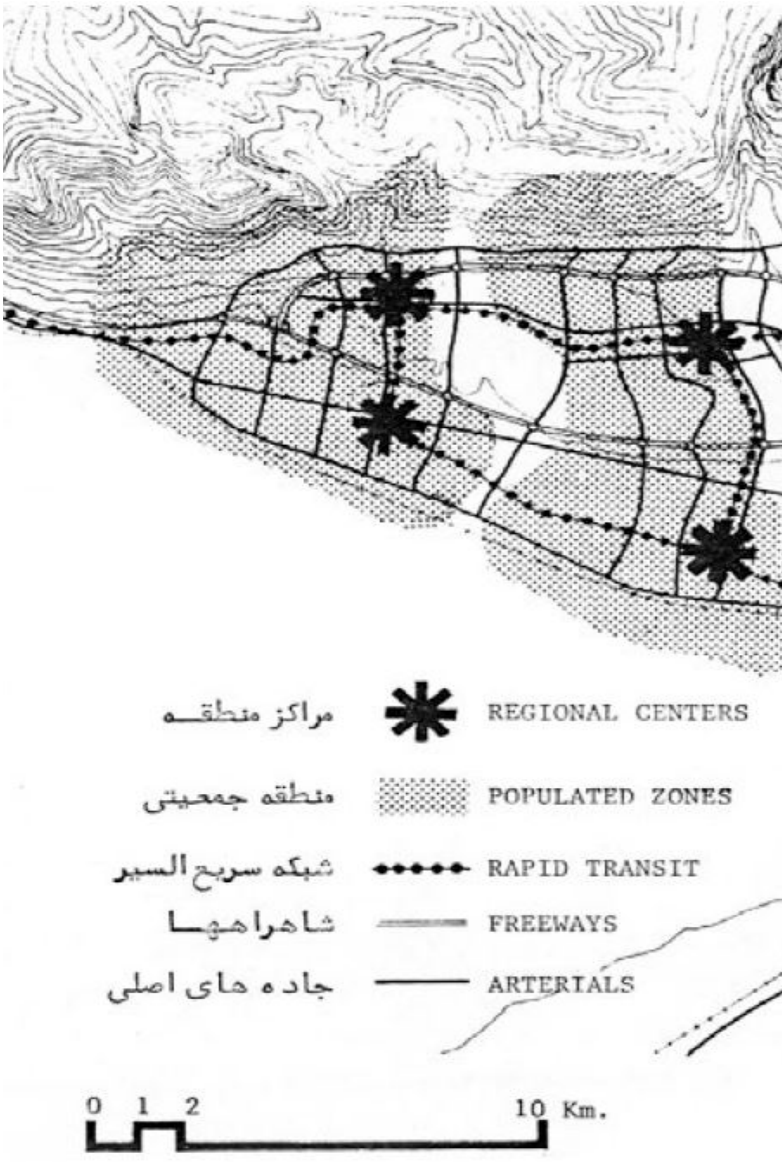


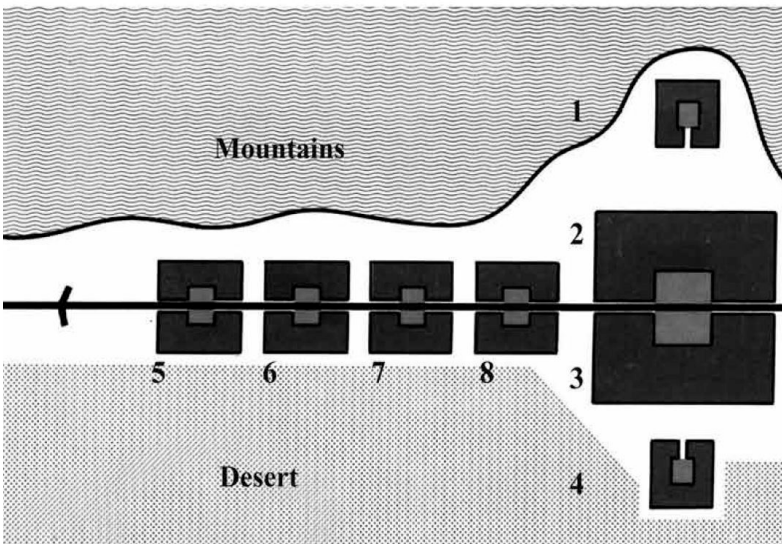
Urban planning and professional expertise during the second Pahlavi period.Left: The High Council of Urban Planning. / Source: Veroffentlichung des Büros Ihrer Hoheit (FarahPahlavi), 1352 (1975).Right: Mohammad Reza Shah and Farah visiting the High Council of Architecture and Urban Planning in 1966. AmirAbbas Hoveyda (Prime Minister), Naser Badi (Director of the Council), and Dariush Borbor (Urban Planning Consultant) are also present in the photo. / Source: Dariush Borbor



Examples of Gruen's visionary sketches (plans and sections) for the urban centres of Tehran.
Source: *Honar va Memari* 3, no. 5 (1970): 51, 67.

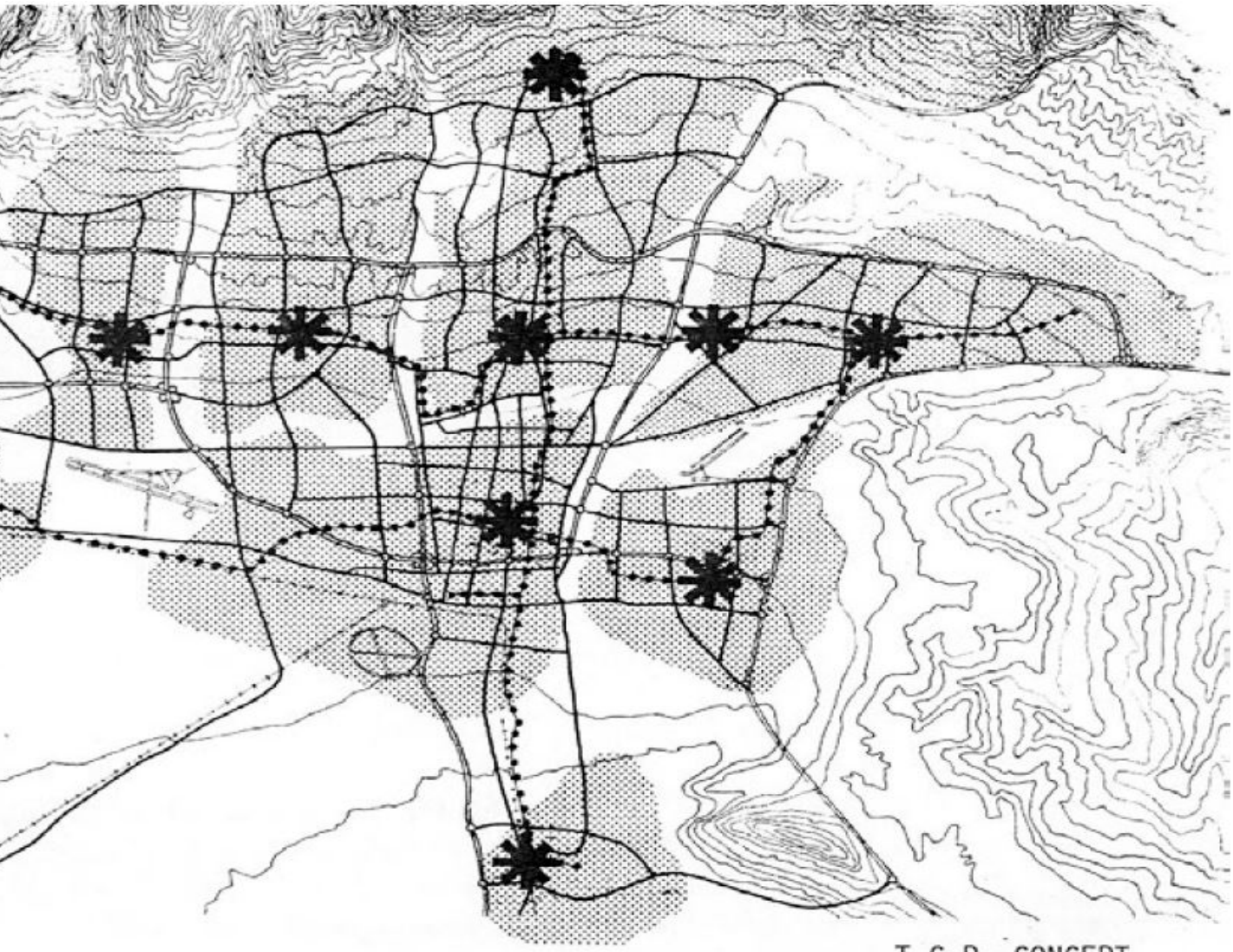






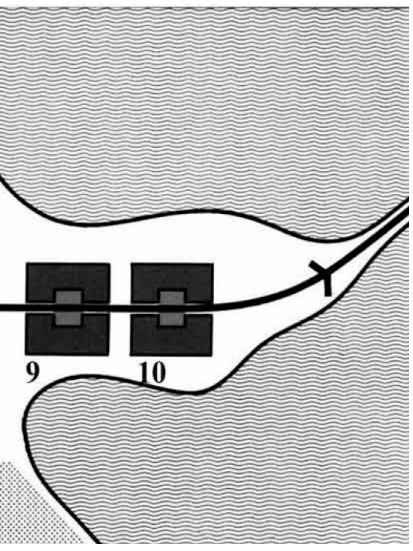
Conceptual diagrams of the Tehran Comprehensive Plan (TCP) prepared by Victor Gruen and Abdolaziz Farmanfarmaian . The figures illustrate the linear urban structure of Tehran, the organization of regional centers and rapid transit corridors, the cellular model of urban development, and the social-spatial distribution of different income groups within the metropolitan framework. Sources: Tehran Comprehensive Plan (1968); adapted from Moser-Khalili (1975) reproduced in Jafari (2022).

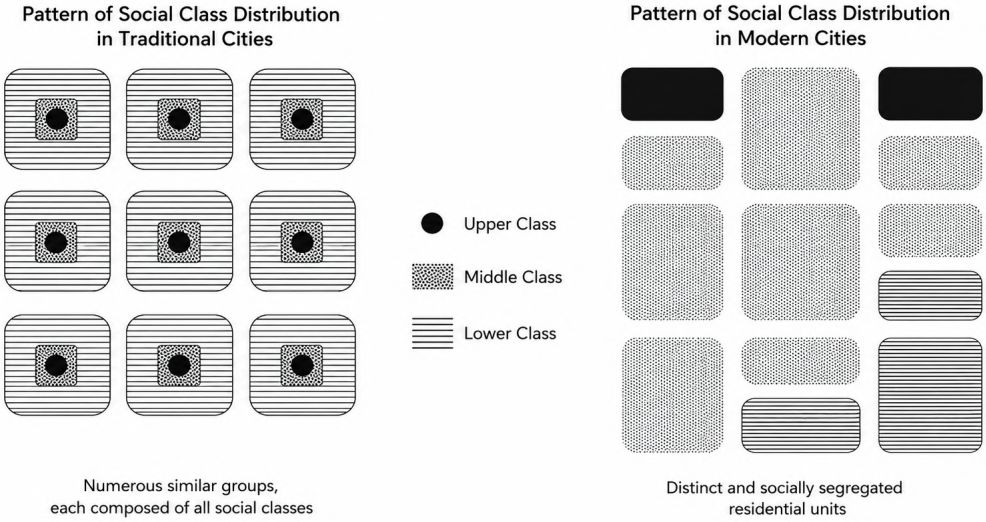
Note: While the Tehran Master Plan was only partially implemented and underwent multiple revisions due to rapid demographic and socio-economic change, it remained highly influential in shaping Tehran's urban growth. Many of its core planning principles continued to inform the city's spatial development, even as the actual expansion of Tehran diverged from the original vision of the plan.



T.C.P. CONCEPT

ایده کلی طرح جامع تهران





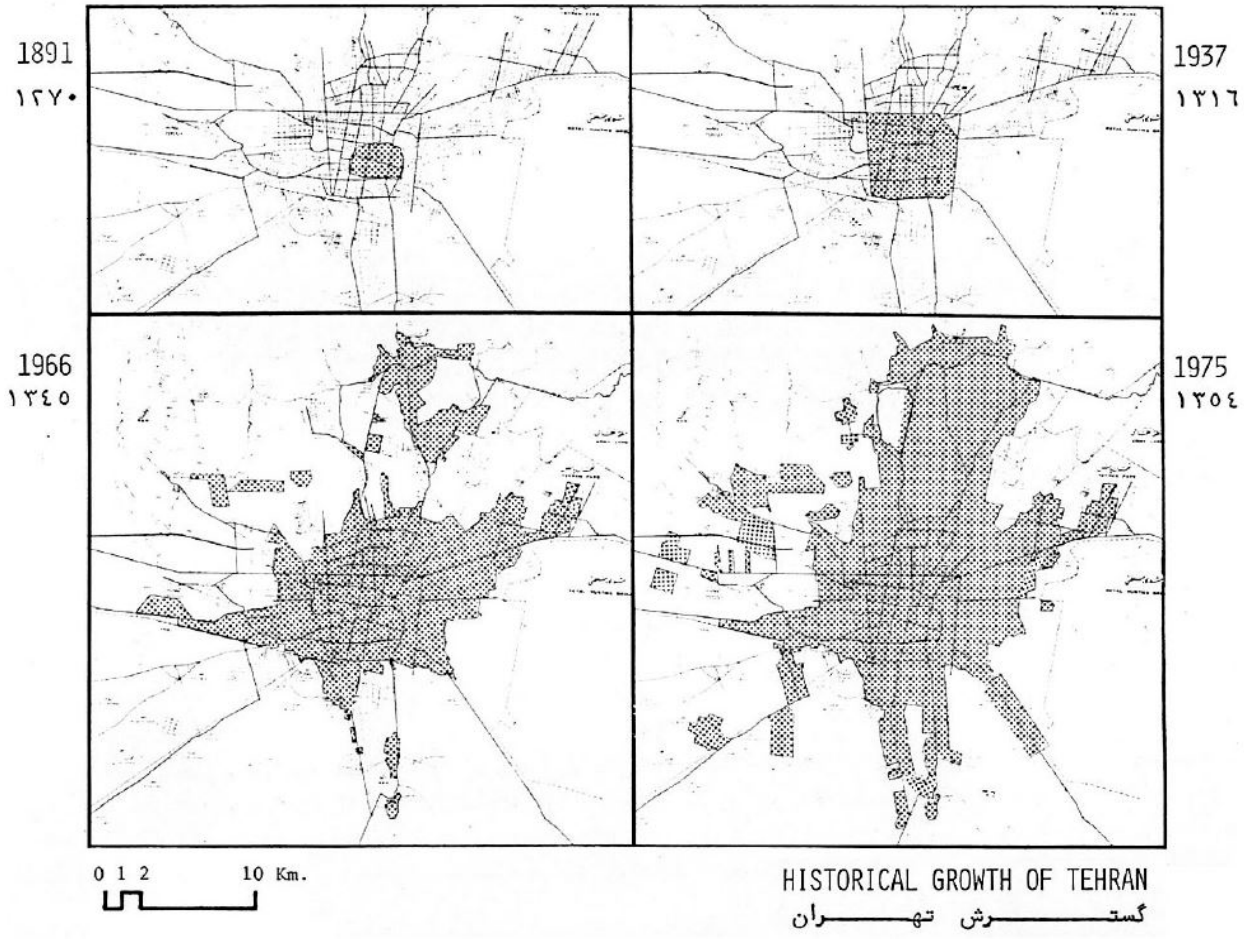
Left: Crowds gathered around Shahyad Square (today Azadi Square) during the final months of the Iranian Revolution in 1978–79. Originally inaugurated in 1971 to commemorate the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy, Shahyad Square became one of the principal sites of revolutionary demonstrations in Tehran.
Right: Demonstrators carrying portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini during the revolutionary movement, reflecting his growing symbolic presence in the public sphere and his role as the leading figure of the opposition to the Pahlavi regime.
Source: Historical photographs of the Iranian Revolution, 1978–1979.

What becomes clear in the historical review of the Qajar period and the first and second Pahlavi eras is that Tehran has never functioned as a neutral backdrop to political change. Space in this city has consistently operated as an active instrument in the production, stabilization, and restructuring of power. It has not only reflected political authority; it has helped constitute it.
During the Qajar period, Tehran shifted from a neighborhood-based settlement structured through intermediary networks into a measurable and legally bounded territory. The production of maps, the definition of official limits, and the incorporation of gardens into the city boundary transformed urban space into an object of calculation and governance. With the first Pahlavi period, this capacity for measurement became a capacity for intervention. Street cutting, axial planning, demolition of the walls, and the restructuring of circulation networks rendered the city more legible, more centralized, and more directly governable.
In the second Pahlavi period, this logic was institutionalized through comprehensive planning and technocratic state expansion. Urban growth was no longer limited to restructuring the historic core; it extended into planned districts, new infrastructures, and large-scale housing schemes. At the same time, the political economy of oil revenues and land development transformed urban territory into a key mechanism of capital accumulation and social reorganization. The city expanded not only spatially, but socially: new middle classes emerged, new forms of housing were introduced, and everyday life was increasingly shaped by planned residential environments.

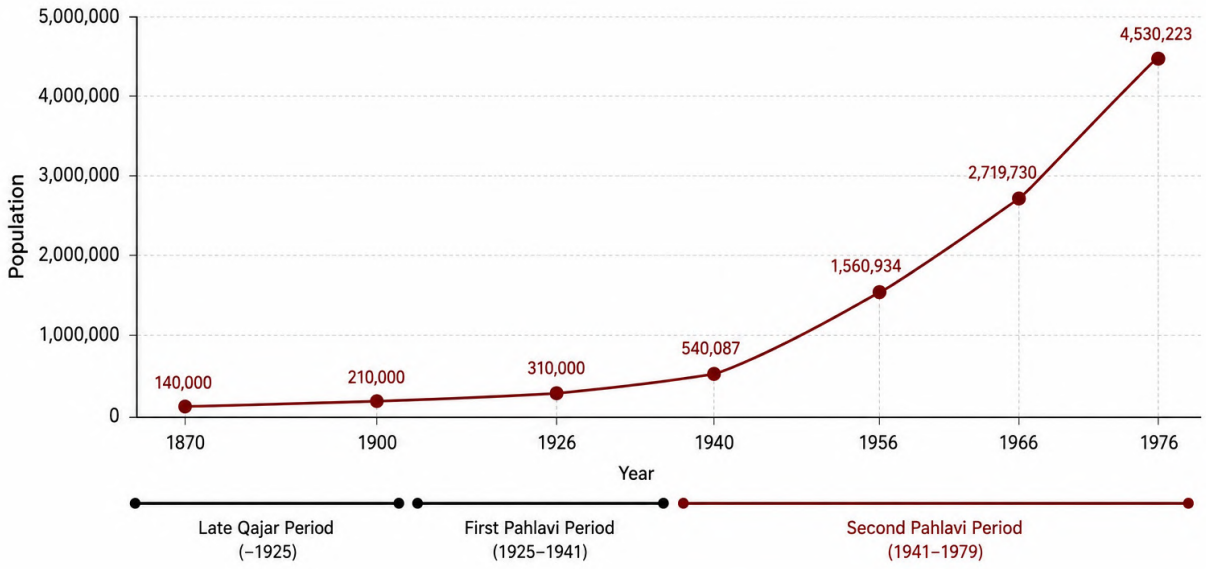
Across these three moments, space in Tehran performed three interrelated functions.First, it operated as an instrument for the concentration and stabilization of power. From the Safavid wall inherited by the Qajars, to the boulevards of Reza Shah, to the comprehensive plans of the 1960s and 1970s, urban space was repeatedly reorganized to enhance visibility, circulation, and administrative control.
Second, it functioned as a platform for economic accumulation. The incorporation of peripheral lands into the official city, the commodification of gardens, and the expansion of real estate markets during the second Pahlavi era transformed land into one of the central sources of value and influence in Tehran's political economy.
Third, it created new spatial conditions for social reconfiguration. While earlier neighborhood structures were gradually weakened, new forms of collective life emerged within modern residential

projects. Large-scale housing complexes, though conceived as technical solutions to housing shortages and instruments of modernization, simultaneously produced new patterns of proximity, shared infrastructure, and collective everyday experience.

It is within this historical trajectory that Ekbatan must be situated. Ekbatan did not emerge in a vacuum, nor was it simply an architectural experiment. It was the product of a specific historical convergence: comprehensive planning, oil-funded.Ekbatan was born at this moment: it was the product of comprehensive planning, oil-based technocracy, and the idea of modern housing. Yet its social life did not end at the moment of its production. After the revolution, this space entered a new field of contestation—one in which residential memory, shared lived experience, and the specific physical structure of the complex created distinctive possibilities for solidarity and action.



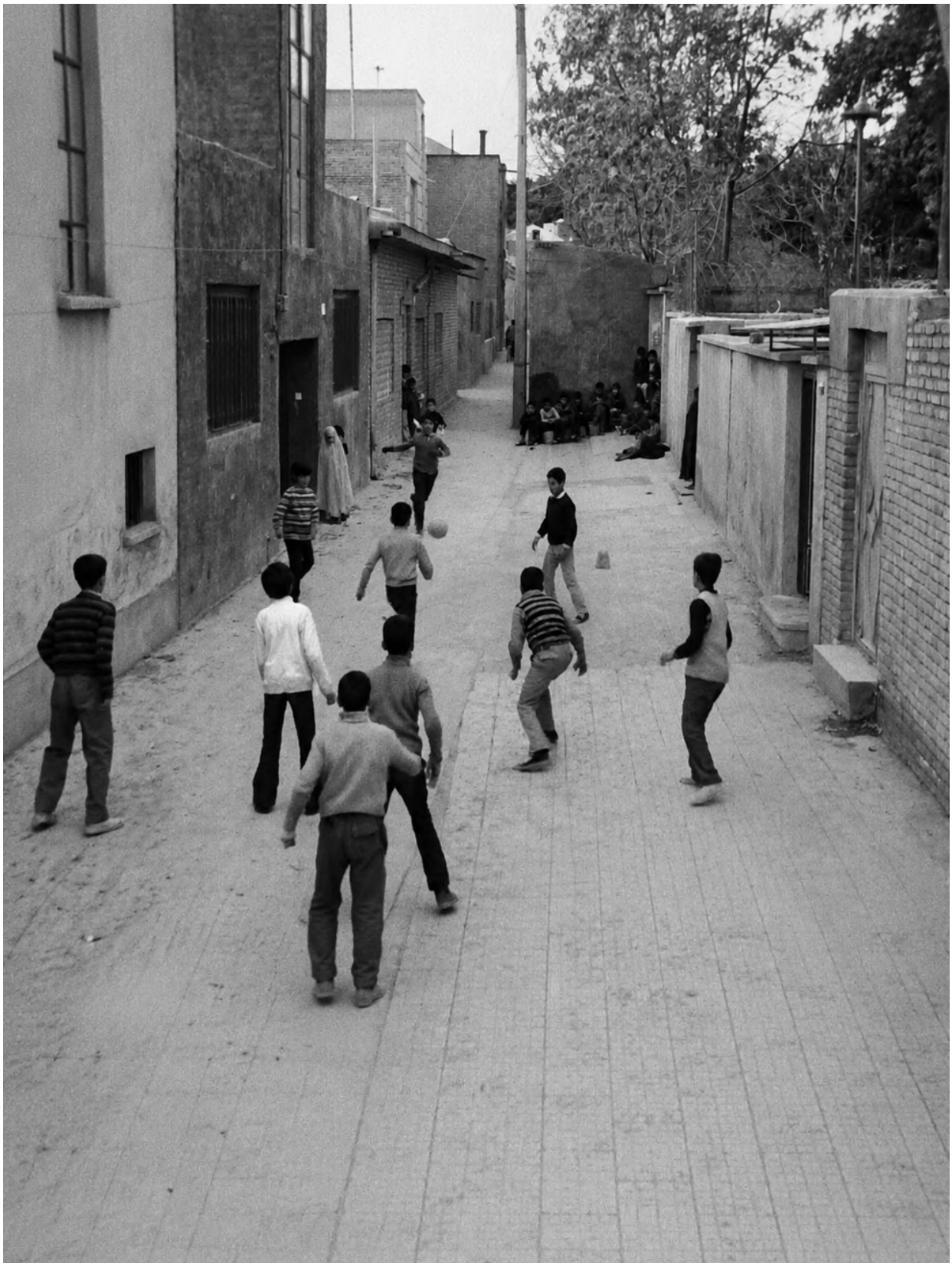
The diagram illustrates the spatial expansion of Tehran from the late Qajar period to the second Pahlavi era, highlighting the city's rapid growth during the 1960s and 1970s under state-led modernization and urban planning policies.
Source: Abdolaziz Farmanfarmaian and Associates, The New City of Kan; reproduced in Elmira Jafari, The Making of Tehran (2022)



Population growth of Tehran between 1870 and 1976, illustrating the gradual expansion of the city during the late Qajar and first Pahlavi periods and the dramatic demographic increase during the second Pahlavi era (1941–1979). The sharp rise after the 1950s reflects the combined effects of oil revenues, state-led modernization, industrialization, and large-scale rural-to-urban migration. Sources: Statistical Center of Iran, Population and Housing Censuses (1956, 1966, 1976); Jafari, Elmira. Planning Tehran: The Making of a Modern Metropolis (2022).

02. Beyond Shelter:

Housing Development in Tehran



A frame of the traditional Iranian neighbourhood and urban fabric, illustrating the alley as a shared everyday social space. Film still from Breaktime (*Zang-e Tafrih*), Abbas Kiarostami, (1972).

Housing in Tehran has never been only about providing shelter; it has always been a framework through which social life is organized and negotiated. From the inward-looking courtyard houses of earlier periods—where privacy, kinship, and neighborhood relations were carefully structured through spatial boundaries—the built environment played an active role in shaping everyday interactions and defining the relationship between the home and the city.

As modernization unfolded, these patterns began to shift. State interventions introduced new spatial orders, opening the city through streets, redefining property, and making urban life more visible and controlled. Housing became tied to broader political goals, transforming not only how people lived but also how they related to authority, public space, and one another.

Apartment complexes and large-scale developments introduced new ways of living together, where shared and semi-public spaces became essential in linking individuals to the community. These spaces made interaction, visibility, and collective life possible.

Later political and economic changes brought new tensions into housing. Efforts to provide large amounts of housing often focused more on quantity than quality, leading to uneven development, expansion toward the edges of the city, and weaker forms of belonging. In today's Tehran, housing is increasingly shaped by financial forces. High-rise buildings, luxury developments, and market-driven construction have reduced the strength of neighborhood life and social cohesion.

What remains constant, however, is the importance of the spaces beyond the dwelling unit itself. Courtyards, alleys, squares, shared gardens, lobbies, and circulation spaces continue to structure everyday urban life by mediating between private and collective existence. These are spaces of encounter, visibility, and social interaction through which forms of belonging and collective identity emerge. Yet visibility is not politically neutral. The same spatial conditions that enable social interaction and collective life may also shape relations of observation, regulation, and control, particularly within modern systems of governance. Understanding housing, therefore, requires looking not only at the dwelling unit itself, but at the spatial relationships that connect private life to broader social, political, and urban structures.

2.1 Domestic order, courtyard life, and the prehistory of modern housing

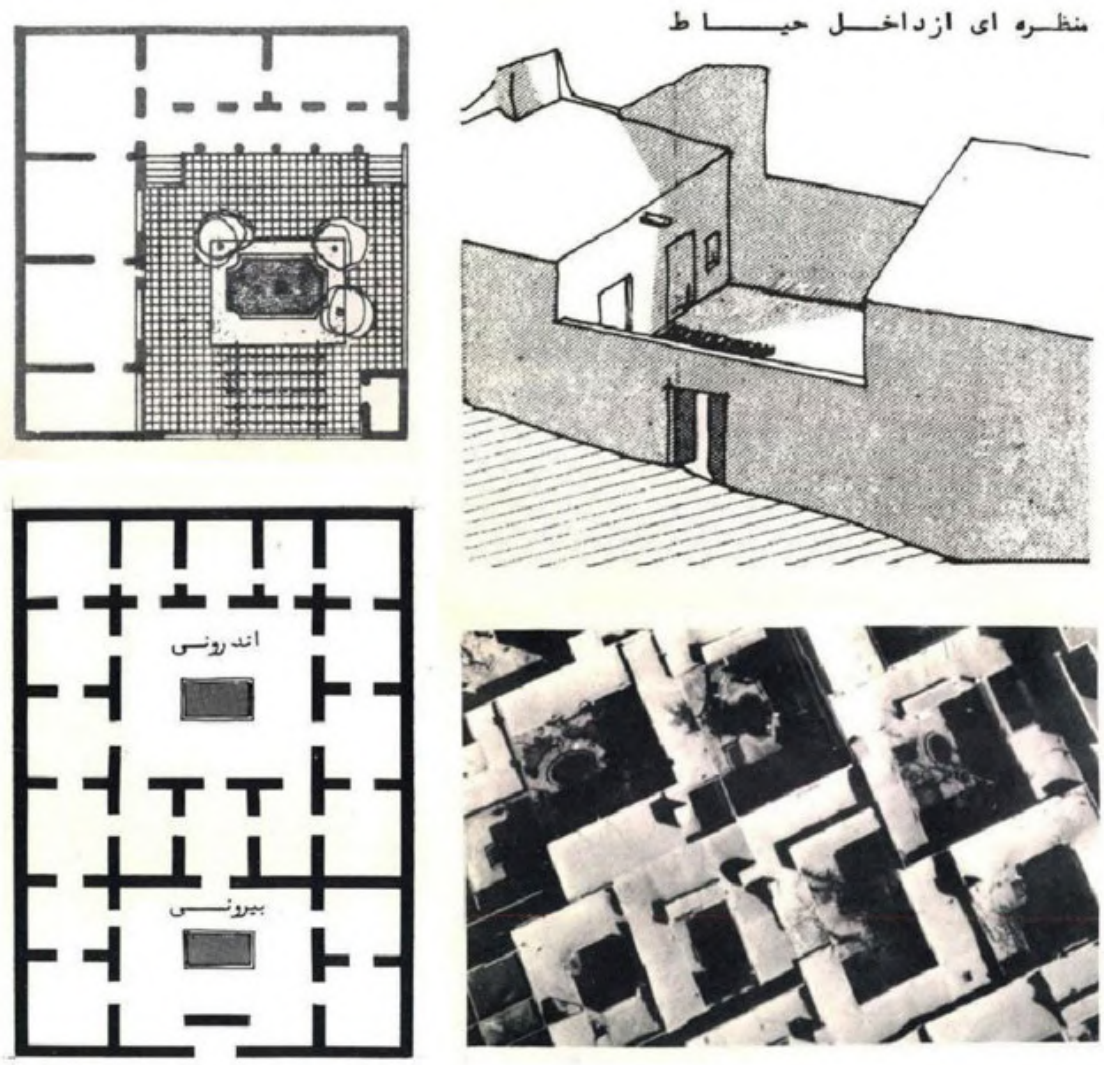
History of housing in Tehran can from a simple methodological point: the modern apartment, the planned neighborhood, and the housing estate did not arrive in an empty field. They entered a long-standing spatial culture in which dwelling was already a highly refined social technology. In the Iranian courtyard house, the house was not only a container for family life; it was a socio-spatial apparatus that held together privacy, hospitality, gendered codes of interaction, climatic adjustment, and the gradual transition between individual and collective life. The courtyard, in this sense, was not only an interior void. It was the central mediator through which domestic life received light, air, rhythm, and symbolic order. It enabled the coexistence of enclosure and openness, retreat and sociality, much as the *mahalleh* enabled the coexistence of neighborhood solidarity and urban belonging (Sedighi, 2020, pp. 44-58; Pirnia and Memarian, 2008; Memarian, 2011; Memarian and Brown, 2006). This matters because later housing in Tehran repeatedly returned to this older spatial grammar even while claiming to break from it. As Rana Habibi argues, central insight is that modern middle-class housing in Tehran did not simply copy imported modernism. Rather, it reproduced an archetype[1] in altered form; modern planning, even when institutionally new, frequently worked through the transformation of older Persian spatial conventions, above all the garden, the yard, and the relationship between built form and open space(Habibi, 2021, pp.29-32). This is why the history of housing in Tehran cannot be told as a clean shift from “traditional” to “modern.” The more accurate story is one of translation, displacement, and reassembly.

1. In Jungian theory, an archetype is a primordial image embedded in the collective unconscious and inherited from early human ancestors. In the Iranian context, the Persian garden can be understood as such an archetype: a deeply rooted spatial concept that shaped traditional landscape design and influenced the Iranian perception of space and dwelling.

In the Qajar period, domestic architecture remained tied to inward-looking houses, local construction systems, kin-based patterns of residence, and an urban structure in which everyday encounter happened through gradations of space: from room to courtyard, from courtyard to alley, from alley to neighborhood lane, and from there to mosque, bath, bazaar, or *meydan*[2] .Iranian neighborhood structure depended on a hierarchy of movement and visibility rather than on abstract street grids. Cul-de-sacs, semi-private passages, and local thresholds were not residual or underdeveloped urban forms. They were the spatial basis of a specific social order, one in which boundaries did not simply divide public from private but sequenced access and calibrated social exposure (Sedighi, 2020, pp.50-58).

This earlier domestic order also clarifies what modernization would later disrupt. When modern housing policy appeared in Tehran, it was not confronting only a shortage of units. It was confronting a robust pattern of dwelling that embedded moral codes and patterns of everyday life. For this reason, the political history of housing in Tehran is inseparable from the history of how governments, planners, reformers, and developers attempted to reorganize privacy, family life, neighborhood sociability, and the threshold between home and city.

2. *Meydan,* refers to a traditional public square or urban gathering space in Iranian cities, often serving social, commercial, and political functions.



Typical examples of traditional Iranian courtyard houses shown through plan, section, and aerial view. The images illustrate the courtyard as the primary organizing element of domestic space and the fundamental unit of the traditional urban fabric. Rather than opening directly to the street, rooms and circulation spaces were arranged around an internal open courtyard that provided light, ventilation, privacy, and environmental comfort. This inward-oriented spatial organization created a clear distinction between the domestic interior and the public realm while maintaining a strong sense of collective life within the household. At the urban scale, the repetition of courtyard houses produced a dense and compact fabric characterized by narrow alleys, interconnected neighborhoods, and limited visual exposure to the street. The courtyard house therefore functioned not only as a dwelling type but also as a spatial framework through which social relations, everyday activities, and patterns of urban life were organized in traditional Iranian cities.

Source:The Comprehensive Plan of Tehran: Review and Evaluation. Tehran: The Planning and Finance Organisation, 1970, 3.01-3.06.

Sectional diagram of the traditional Iranian courtyard house, reproduced from Rana Habibi, Modern Middle-Class Housing in Tehran(Leiden: Brill, 2021). Drawing on descriptions by Kamran Diba and Masoud Kheirabadi, the diagram illustrates the *biruni*[3] and *hayat*[4] as central spaces of domestic and collective life. The biruni, described as the largest and most public part of the house, functioned as a space for reception, entertaining, and hospitality, often containing the talar (reception hall), dalan (corridor), and iwan overlooking the courtyard. In contrast, the hayat operated as the spatial and symbolic heart of the dwelling — a courtyard, garden, and climatic device organized around a central water pool (howz). As a shared family space, the hayat hosted everyday activities such as gathering, eating, resting, and social interaction, while connecting rooms, inhabitants, and domestic functions. Through this relationship between the biruni and the hayat, the traditional Iranian house balanced introversion, collective life, hospitality, and environmental adaptation within a unified spatial system.

3. *Biruni*, The semi-public or outward-facing section of the house used for guests, hospitality, and formal social interaction. The biruni often contained reception halls such as the talar and represented the social and public identity of the house

4. *Hayat*, The central courtyard of the Iranian house, functioning as the spatial and social heart of domestic life. Beyond its climatic role, the hayat organized circulation, connected interior rooms, and created a shared collective space for gathering, leisure, and everyday activities. Often including water pools and gardens, it mediated between architecture, nature, and social life.

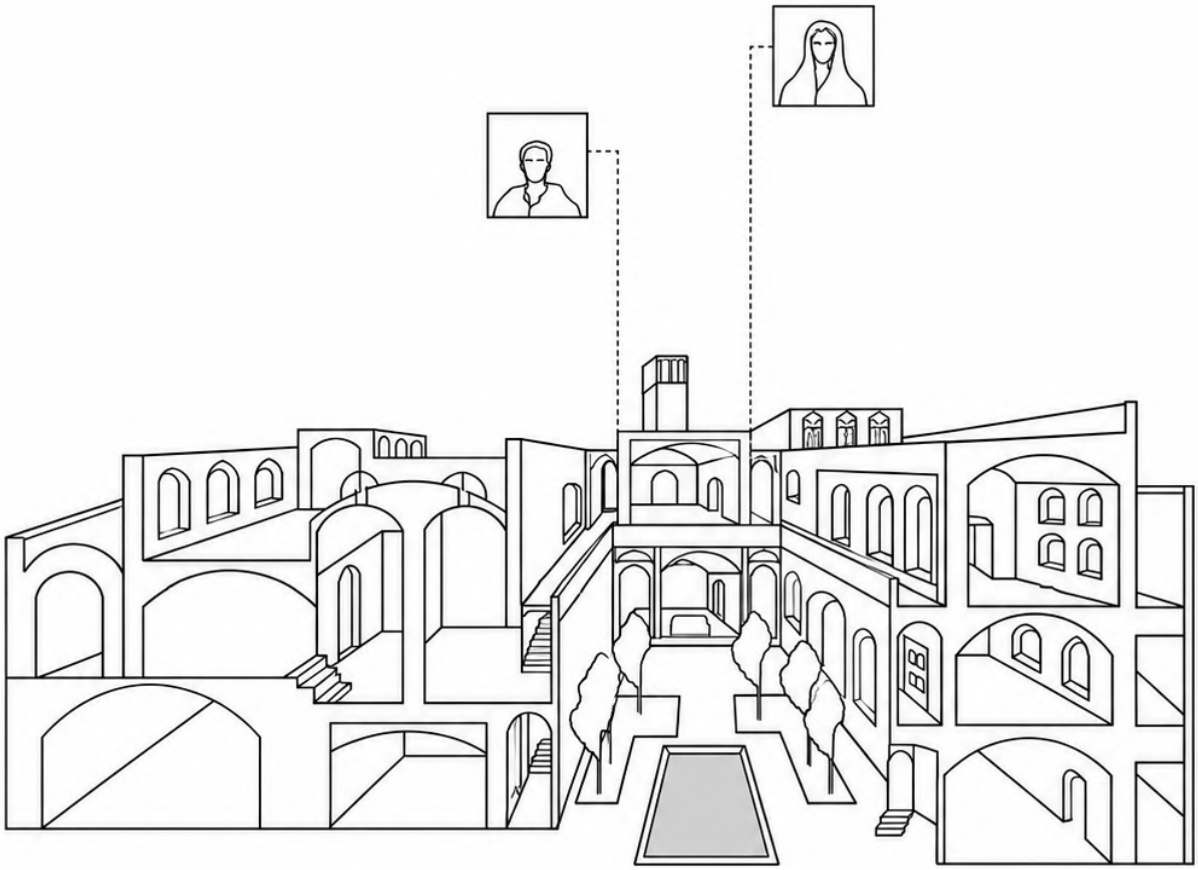
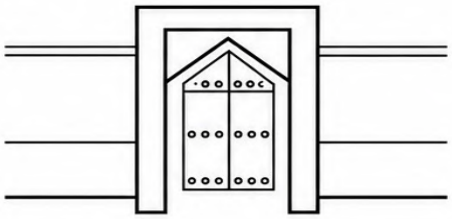


Diagram of the spatial hierarchy of the traditional Iranian courtyard house, reproduced from Rana Habibi, Modern Middle-Class Housing in Tehran (Leiden: Brill, 2021). Based on drawings by Kamran Diba and Masoud Kheirabadi, the diagram explains the organization of domestic space through a gradual transition from public to private realms. The exterior façade of the traditional house maintained a humble outlook toward the street, often without windows facing outward, while the entrance door acted as the only opening connecting the dwelling to the city. Immediately after the entrance, the *hashti*[5] functioned as a "division space," separating circulation toward the *andaruni*[6] and biruni while redirecting movement toward the hayat. The diagram identifies the andaruni as the private, interior, and hidden domain of the house, contrasted with the biruni as the public, exterior, and manifest realm. Together, these spatial divisions demonstrate how privacy, gender relations, and social hierarchy were embedded within the architectural structure of the traditional Iranian house.

5. *Hashti*, A transitional entrance space located immediately after the main doorway of the traditional Iranian house. The hashti functioned as a spatial filter between the public street and the private interior, controlling visibility, movement, and access.

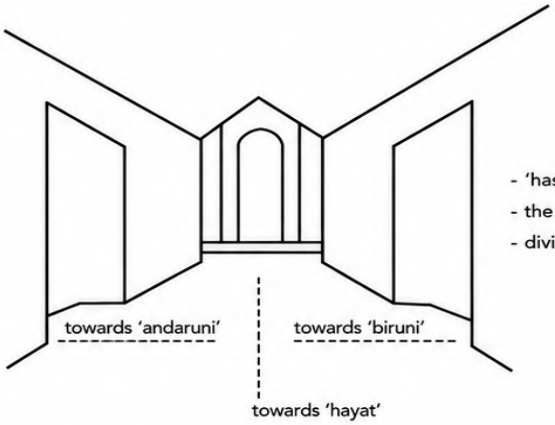
6. *Andaruni*, The private and inward-oriented section of the house, primarily associated with family life and everyday domestic activities. The andaruni accommodated spaces for sleeping, cooking, childcare, and intimate social relations, emphasizing privacy and protection from the public realm.

Outlook of Traditional House from Street



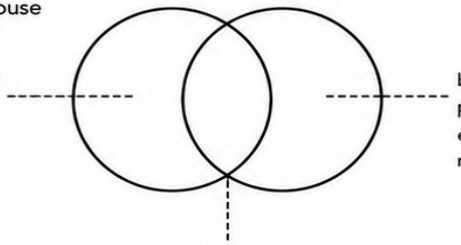
- the main and only entrance door
- humble outlook, no windows towards street
- outside as male domain

Hashti (Division Space)



- 'hashti' division space
- the next space after the main entrance
- divide 'andaruni' and 'biruni'

Three Main Spaces of the house



2.2 State Modernization and the Transformation of Dwelling

The first major break in the history of housing in Tehran came not through the construction of housing estates but through state-led urban transformation. As discussed in the previous chapter, the remaking of Tehran under Reza Shah advanced through the opening of wide streets, the demolition of walls and older urban fabric, the regulation of land ownership, and the growing authority of centralized planning. The making of the modern Iranian capital was inseparable from the emergence of a new planning regime in which the state sought to make the city more legible, governable, and comparable to contemporary European models of urban modernization (Jafari, 2022, pp.61-72). Although housing itself remained largely low-rise and courtyard-based, these transformations profoundly altered the legal, spatial, and social conditions of dwelling.

This transformation can be understood as housing reform by indirect means. As new boulevards cut through older districts and planning regulations standardized streets, plots, and building forms, domestic life was drawn into a new field of state intervention. The traditional sequence of nested spaces linking house, alley, neighborhood, and city did not disappear immediately, but it was increasingly disrupted by straight streets, new urban alignments, and greater public exposure. The house became less insulated by the social logic of the mahalleh and more directly connected to the expanding apparatus of the modern state.

Asma Mehan's work helps clarify the political dimension of this transformation. Her account of Tehran as a "city of modern reasons" shows that Reza Shah's urbanism was not only about infrastructure; it was also about public visibility, secular order, and the symbolic displacement of older politico-religious spatial hierarchies (Mehan, 2023, pp.26–49). In this respect, Tehran's transformation echoed broader projects of state-led urban modernization, most notably Haussmann's reconstruction of nineteenth-century Paris, where new streets and public spaces enhanced circulation, visibility, administrative control, and the symbolic authority of the modern state. Streets and squares became instruments of governance. Yet visibility was not politically neutral. The same spatial conditions that facilitated circulation and public life also enabled new forms of observation, regulation, and control. For housing, this meant that public space ceased to function merely as the external setting of domestic life and became part of a broader spatial framework through which citizens were seen, regulated, circulated, and socially produced.

At the level of everyday life, the relationship between private and public space was progressively reconfigured. The traditional courtyard house persisted, but its urban context changed dramatically. The city no longer relied on the gradual transitions that had historically connected inward domestic life to outward forms of collective existence. Instead, a sharper distinction emerged between the protected interior of the house and the increasingly exposed and regulated spaces of the modern city. This transformation established many of the spatial conditions that would shape later housing development in Tehran.

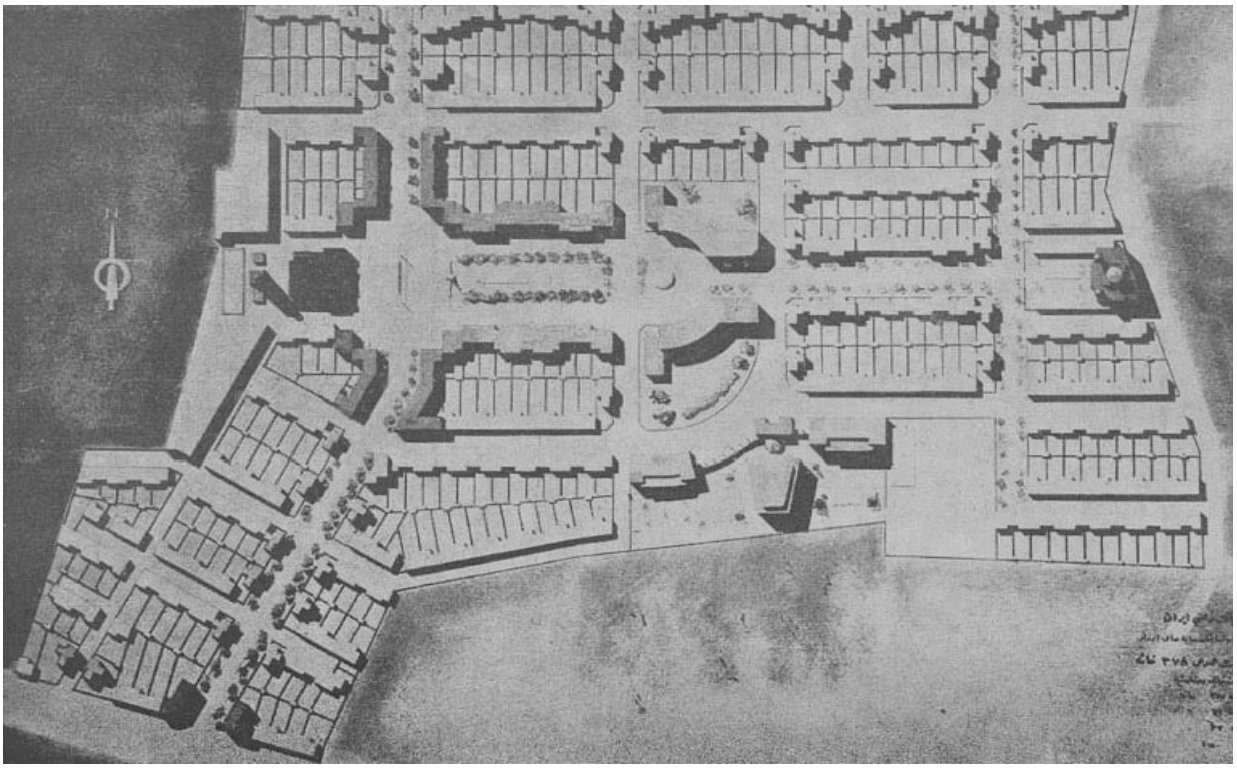
Following the Allied occupation of Iran in 1941 and particularly during the decades after the 1953 coup, these processes entered a new phase. Tehran experienced unprecedented demographic growth, fueled by rural-to-urban migration, administrative expansion, industrialization, and the emergence of new middle classes. The population of Tehran grew from approximately 1.5 million in 1956 to more than 4.5 million by 1976, making it one of the fastest-growing cities in the region. (Statistical Center of Iran, Census of Population and Housing, 1956, 1966, 1976) At the same time, the proportion of urban residents in Iran increased dramatically as migration intensified and economic opportunities became increasingly concentrated in major cities. Housing therefore emerged not only as a social necessity but also as a central field of architectural, urban, and political intervention (Abrahamian, 1982, pp.426-446). The challenge was no longer simply to modernize the city but to accommodate new forms of urban life. Housing became one of the principal mechanisms through which the state sought to organize social relations, manage urban growth, and provide material frameworks for a modernizing society. The postwar decades witnessed a gradual shift from the traditional house toward new models of collective urban living. Architects and planners experimented with different ways of mediating between private dwelling and collective life, attempting to reconcile modern planning principles with existing social and cultural practices. Rather than abandoning the spatial values of the traditional courtyard house altogether, many projects reinterpreted them through gardens, neighborhood squares, shared open spaces, and new forms of semi-public circulation. These intermediary spaces sought to maintain social interaction, visibility, and neighborhood life within increasingly modernized urban environments.

The housing projects that emerged during this period can therefore be understood as successive experiments in redefining the relationship between dwelling, community, and urban form. Each project proposed a different response to the tensions between privacy and collectivity, tradition and modernization, and individual dwelling and urban life. Together, they illustrate the gradual evolution of modern housing in Tehran and provide the immediate architectural and urban context from which later large-scale developments, including Ekbatan, would emerge.

Chaharsad Dastgah – Reinterpreting the Courtyard Model

Chaharsad Dastgah (the "400-unit project") was an early experiment in Tehran's housing expansion. Built in the early 1950s in southern Tehran, it consists of standardized single-story houses arranged in neat blocks, each with its own front and back garden. In plan, this preserves the essential idea of the courtyard house – every home has a private yard – but places them on a regular urban grid with paved streets and services. Habibi notes that this project marked the moment when the state first gave form to a new middle-class domesticity (Habibi 2021, 35–64). The project did not simply imitate the traditional courtyard house; instead it translated courtyard logic into a modern block form In effect, each row of homes retains a bit of semi-private space (the garden), yet these are connected by the public street network. The architecture thus weaves together privacy and collectivity: private yards open outward into a planned district, blending family life with the emerging public order.

Image sources: Ali Akbar Sadegh's Family Archive, Courtesy of Le Groupe d'Architectes de l'Ere de Revolution en Iran./ the urban layout of Kuy-e Chaharsad-Dastgah,Source: Arshitekt no4 (1946): Cover page.



Narmak – The Low-Rise Neighborhood System

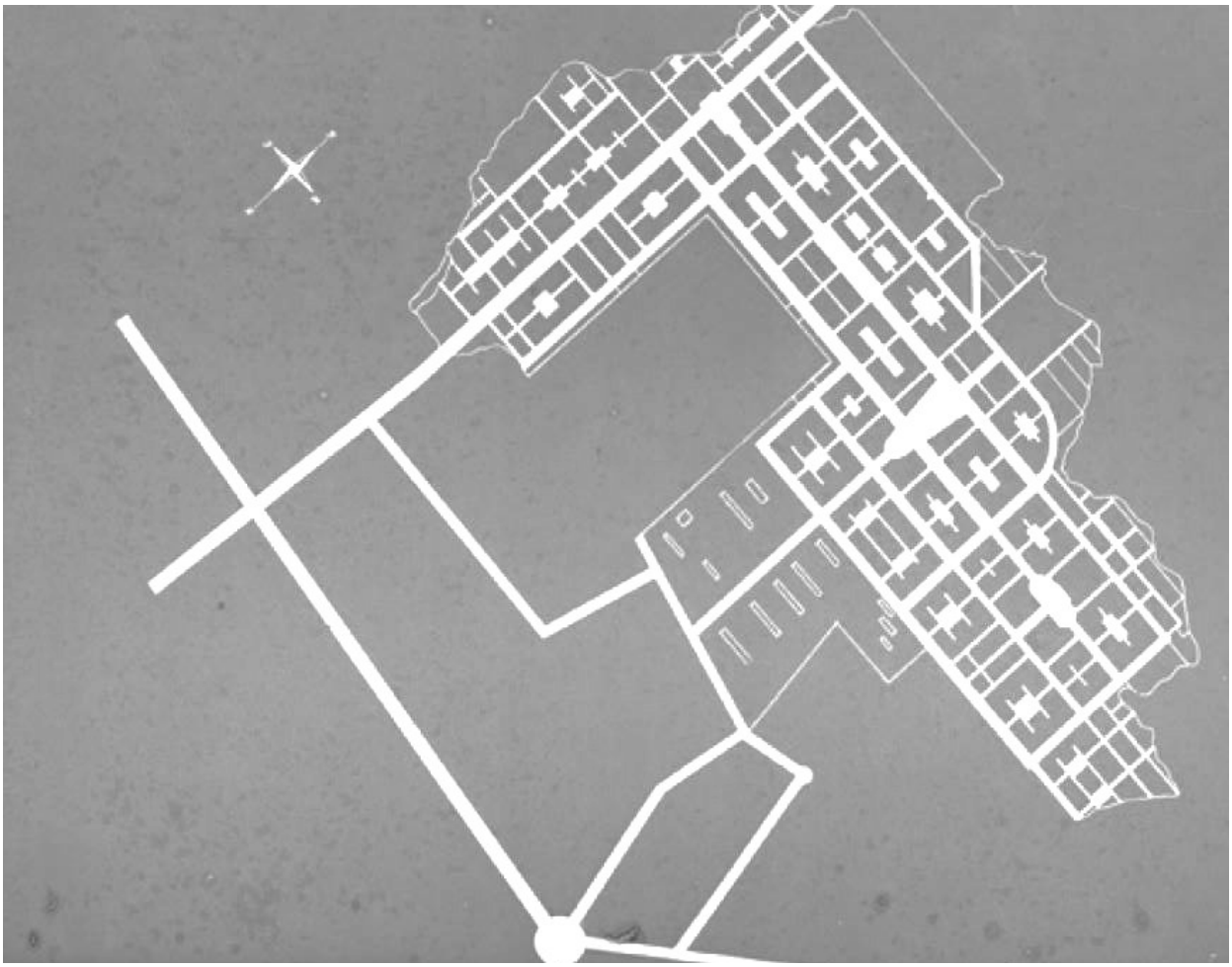
Narmak – Tehran's most ambitious postwar project – represents the mature phase of the low-rise neighborhood model. Planned from 1952 to 1966 in northeast Tehran, Narmak was designed as a largely self-sufficient district of houses for middle-class residents. Its layout is a grid of private plots, each with a house and garden, intersected by a network of straight streets and numerous neighborhood squares (meydan). The houses are modest – generally one- or two-storey units with simple roofs – but their arrangement is key: many are grouped around communal squares rather than isolated. The planners distributed these squares throughout the plan, ensuring that every household is near an open plaza or park. Schools, mosques, and small shops were placed at these nodes, integrating everyday public life into the neighborhood grid.
In Narmak, collective life is literally built into the plan. Sedighi calls it an "inclusive urban community" because the design encourages encounters beyond the home (Sedighi 2020, 145–158). For example, children naturally play in the local meydan, and neighbors meet at the small cafes or shops that face it. Women can walk freely through these shaded public areas between the houses. Mehan emphasizes that such everyday settings are crucial for visibility: public life doesn't only happen on grand boulevards; it emerges in smaller, repeated spaces where people's presence becomes a social habit and potentially political (Mehan 2023, 92–99). Narmak's architecture – with its myriad squares and connected gardens – effectively blends private plots into a broader communal fabric.

Image Sources: Journal of Bank-e Sakhtemani 1, no. 6 (1956): 57/ Journal of Bank-e Sakhtemani 1, no. 2 (1955): 30.

Nazi-Abad – A Denser Extension

Nazi-Abad extended the modern neighborhood logic into a denser, more modest fabric, geared toward working- and lower-middle-class residents. Built in the late 1950s and 1960s in southeast Tehran, it applies the block-and-yard concept on a larger scale of uniformity. The housing here consists of long rows of single-story houses packed along straight streets. Each home typically has a small front yard and a back garden, but the plots are narrower. Unlike Narmak, Nazi-Abad has far fewer formal squares or parks; its public space is limited to small cul-de-sacs and sporadic playgrounds. In spatial terms, Nazi-Abad emphasizes quantity: blocks of similar homes fill the grid tightly. This reflects its social aim: to house many people efficiently while still granting each household some private outdoor space. As Jafari notes, Nazi-Abad was one of the major postwar projects to manage rapid growth (Jafari 2022, 70–72). The architecture here reinforces social order through simplicity and repetition: neat rows facing the street, each behind a low wall.

Image Sources: National Archive of Iran, accessed April 2016 by Mohammad Sedighi/Nazi abad Urban structure ,Source: M. Maleki, "Nazi abad ,"Majalle-ye Bānk-e Sākhtemāni 2, no. 1(1955): 39–40



Kuy-e Kan – The Emergence of Collective Apartment Living

Kuy-e Kan marked a major shift in Tehran's postwar housing development, moving beyond the low-rise neighborhood model toward a new form of collective apartment living. Planned in the late 1950s on the western outskirts of Tehran, the project was conceived to accommodate working-class families and low-income civil servants through large-scale modern housing blocks. Unlike Nazi-Abad's tightly packed rows of individual houses, Kuy-e Kan introduced four-story walk-up apartment slabs arranged along wide boulevards and open communal grounds. Influenced by the principles of the Athens Charter and European postwar housing(Sedighi 2020,p 179) the project emphasized functional zoning, vehicular circulation, and standardized apartment units repeated across identical residential blocks. The architecture promoted a new social model in which everyday life unfolded not only inside private apartments but also within shared courtyards, staircases, green spaces, and collective outdoor areas. As Mohamad Sedighi explains, Kuy-e Kan became one of Iran's earliest experiments in promoting "collective living" as a modern lifestyle, inspired by Western housing models yet adapted to Iranian domestic culture and privacy norms.

Image Sources: National Archive of Iran,accessed April 2016 by Mohammad Sedighi/ Newspaper coverage of the Kan housing project published in Kayhan International (1 June 1964), including an urban-planning review by architect and planner Dariush Borbor. The article reflects contemporary debates surrounding postwar housing expansion and modern neighborhood planning in Tehran during the 1960s.

A city planner reviews Tehran dormitory town

KAN

by Dariush Borbor

ONE of the biggest enemies of proper and sound planning is the age old parasite of speculation. Many of the so-called new towns built around Tehran in recent years, such as Narmak, Tehran-Pars and others have succumbed to this deadly disease.

Planning in general and city planning in particular is the outcome of logical, scientific, efficient enactment of certain principles in order to improve the standards and conditions of the masses.

The constant agglomeration of people into cities is a relatively new move in this country and the sooner the problem is tackled from the root the better. Otherwise it will lead to the extreme social and technical ills, from which many of the world's big cities are suffering.

The new dormitory town of Kan is a brave attempt to solve the existing housing problem for civil servants. Situated to the west of Tehran it is connected to the Mehrabad Crossing by an excellent dual carriageway. It consists of a number of five-storey blocks, housing a thousand three-roomed flats. Two hundred one-storey, three-room houses have also been provided. Schools, children's playground, and a supermarket are among the public utilities provided.

Siting

In a city such as Tehran, where large areas of undeveloped land still exist, it is a great mistake to take residential neighbourhoods outside the city boundaries.

It is true that the cost of land within the city boundaries is higher, but the lower cost of providing the services, such as water, electricity, connecting roads, telephones, buses, shops, recreation centres etc. easily compensates for the higher cost of land.

What is needed in Tehran is neighbourhood planning. This principle is necessary, in order to 'fill up' the city, thus cutting down the cost of providing all necessary basic services, and also the cost of upkeep. Dormitory towns are useful in areas where the city is fully developed and there is insufficient space left to cope with the housing demand.

Layout and landscaping

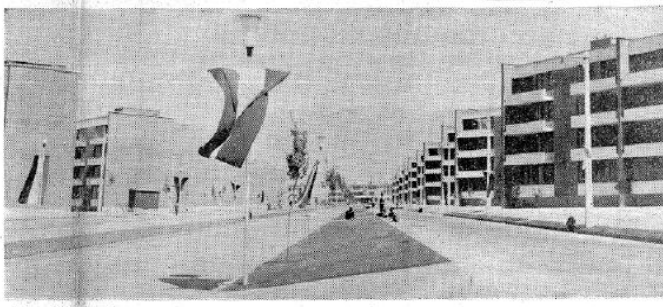
The buildings at Kan are placed to either side of a central boulevard which connects two ornamental squares. A ring road is provided to run round the site. A cul-de-sac connects each block of flats to one of the roads, and a certain amount of parking space has been provided on each of these roads. The layout of the buildings could have been made more interesting and brought closer together: the central boulevard rather tends to cut the community in two.

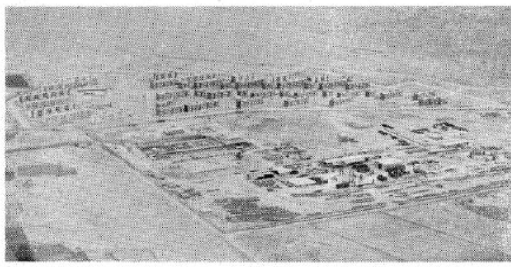
The buildings, which have been prefabricated, are painted in different colours, and some are faced with red bricks. It is surprising that no trees whatsoever have been planted despite the fact that building operations started some five years ago. This should be done as soon as possible.

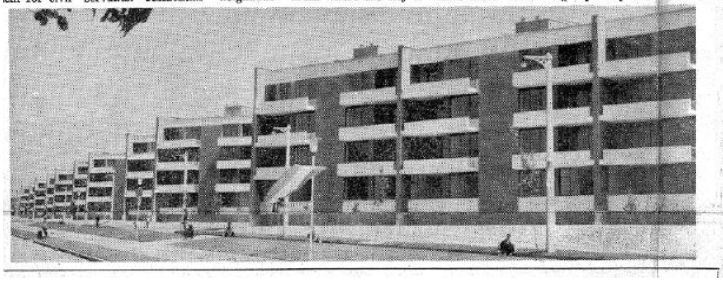
If the landscaping around the buildings had started concurrently with the building, the new town would now have had a much more livable appearance. Landscaping, specially in this country, should be given much more attention. In Switzerland for instance, three per cent of the total cost of any building must be spent on the landscaping of the surrounding areas. In some other European countries the percentage is even more.

Playgrounds

It is a great pity that the vehicular and pedestrian traffic has not been separated in any way. In fact the central boulevard may become a source of danger and discomfort to the inhabitants, as far as noise and other factors are concerned. The amount of playground space provided around the schools is







development is once and for all replaced by sound, well thought out, and up to date principles.

The idea of building high must be encouraged, and the idea of a 'Green Belt', a line beyond which the town cannot expand, must be strictly inforced. Even when building low, a sense of community must be sought.

Radio & T.V.

GERMAN RADIO

Near East programme of the German Broadcasting Service (Deutsche Welle) on wavelengths of 19.47 metres (15,405 kilocycles) and 25.51 metres (11,795 kilocycles).

MONDAY, June 1, 1964

1930 Nachrichten (News)
1940 Kommentar (Comment)
1945 Kummer mit Klavierstunden.-Probleme der privaten Musikpaedagogen.

On Tuesday, June 2,
AT 9:15 P.M.
Cinema Charlie
will present
The original English version of
COME FLY WITH ME
CINEMASCOPE AND COLOUR
starring:
DOLORES HART — KARL MALDI
PAMELA TIFFIN

CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS
1. Sac of coal
4. Flow back
7. Crustacean
11. Pit for roots: Maori
33. Nigerian negro
34. Singing voice
35. Default
38. Swab

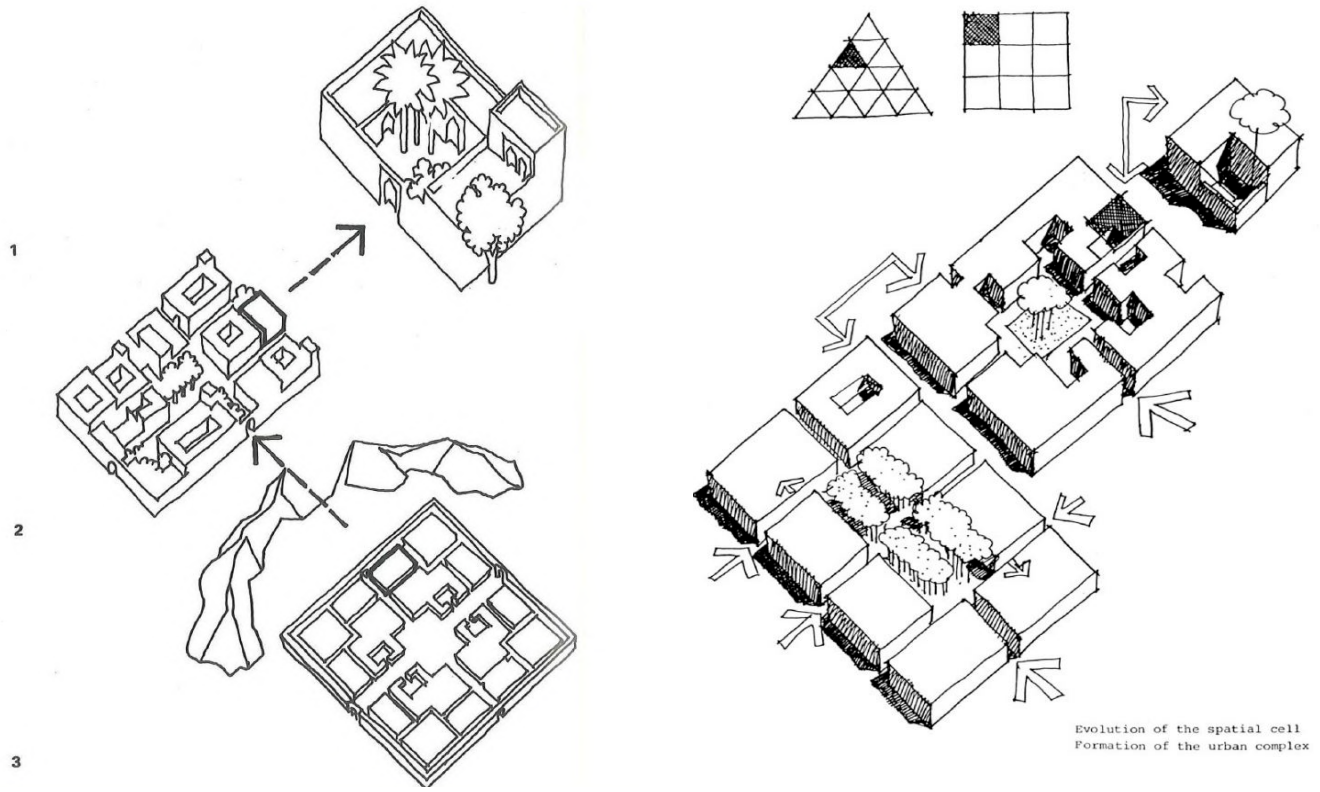
These early postwar housing projects, when viewed together, reveal a gradual transformation in the relationship between home, neighborhood, and collective life in Tehran. Although their architectural forms differed, Chaharsad Dastgah, Narmak, Nazi-Abad, and Kuy-e Kan all attempted to organize everyday life through new spatial frameworks. Housing was no longer understood simply as an isolated private dwelling or shelter; it became part of a broader project of organizing modern urban society. The transition from courtyard houses to planned neighborhoods and eventually to apartment blocks reflected a movement away from the inward-looking domestic model toward more collective forms of urban life.

What connected these projects was their attempt to mediate between private and public space. In Chaharsad Dastgah, the traditional courtyard survived but was inserted into a modern street grid. In Narmak, neighborhood squares and gardens extended domestic life into shared public space. Nazi-Abad intensified this logic through denser and more repetitive forms, while Kuy-e Kan introduced apartment-based collective living through staircases, corridors, and communal open areas. In all these examples, architecture became a tool for organizing visibility, movement, and everyday social interaction. The spaces between buildings — courtyards, pathways, squares, and semi-public thresholds — gradually shaped how residents encountered one another and formed neighborhood relations.

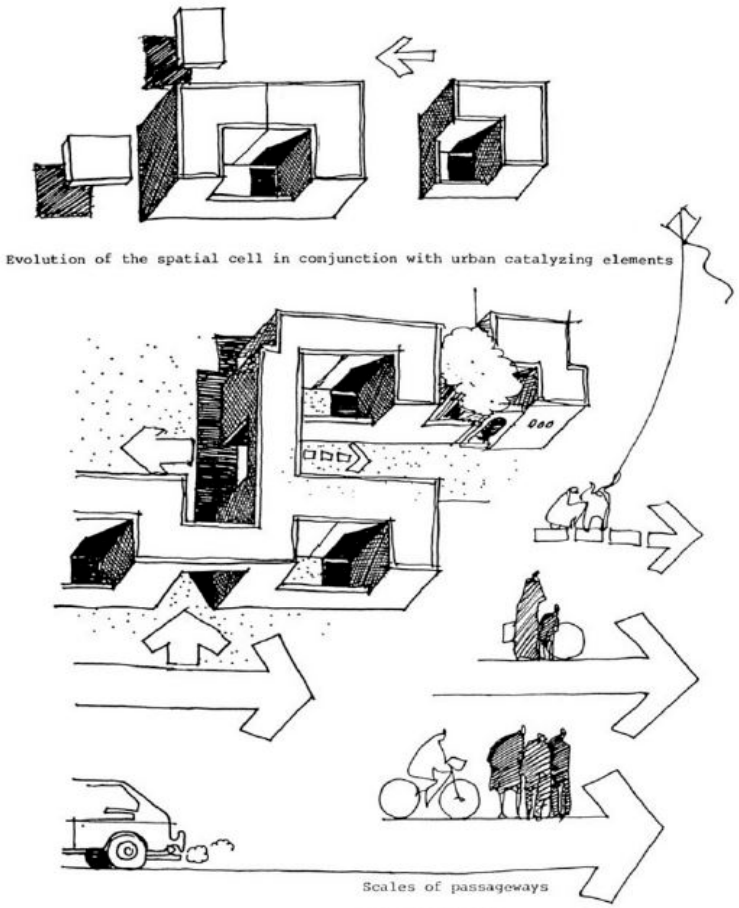
These projects were not produced through a single institutional model. Chaharsad Dastgah was largely developed through state-led housing initiatives, while projects such as Narmak were closely associated with the activities of the Building Bank (Bank-e Sakhtemani), which played a central role in financing and organizing postwar urban development. Other projects involved varying degrees of state support, municipal intervention, and public-sector planning. Despite these institutional differences, they shared a common objective: to respond to rapid urban growth and provide housing for emerging urban populations in Tehran.

At the same time, the original aim of many of these projects was not necessarily to transform lifestyles or consciously produce new forms of collective life. Their primary goal was to address the housing shortage, manage rapid urban growth, and accommodate emerging urban classes.

Yet these spatial interventions unintentionally reshaped everyday life. As homes became integrated into networks of shared spaces, patterns of neighborly interaction, childhood experience, family relations, and even the boundary between private and public life began to change. In this sense, these projects were not merely technical solutions to a housing crisis; they became the starting point for broader social and cultural transformations that would later be pursued more consciously in large-scale developments such as Ekbatan. None of these projects, however, fully resolved the tensions they attempted to address. Some remained overly dependent on repetitive state planning, while others struggled with high density, insufficient public infrastructure, or unstable relationships between privacy and collective life. Projects like Narmak succeeded in producing a strong sense of neighborhood identity, whereas denser developments such as Nazi-Abad often reduced collective life to minimal open spaces. Kuy-e Kan, despite introducing collective apartment living, lacked much of the spatial richness and flexibility found in older urban fabrics. These projects should therefore not be understood as complete solutions, but rather as evolving experiments through which architects and planners searched for new ways to reconcile modernization, social life, and urban form in Tehran.



Diagrams by Kamran DIba, illustratingthe gradual transition from the traditional Iranian courtyard house toward larger collective urban formations structured through hierarchies of privacy, shared courtyards, passageways, and neighborhood spaces. Developed for the Shushtar New Town project, they reflect an attempt to reinterpret Iranian spatial traditions within modern collective housing. The project was designed by Iranian architect and urban planner Kamran Diba, whose work focused on mediating between private domestic life and communal urban space through human-scale planning and semi-public thresholds.
Source: The Habitat Bill of Rights (Tehran: Hamdami Foundation, 1976), 156, and “Shushtar New Town On-Site Review Report,” 13.)



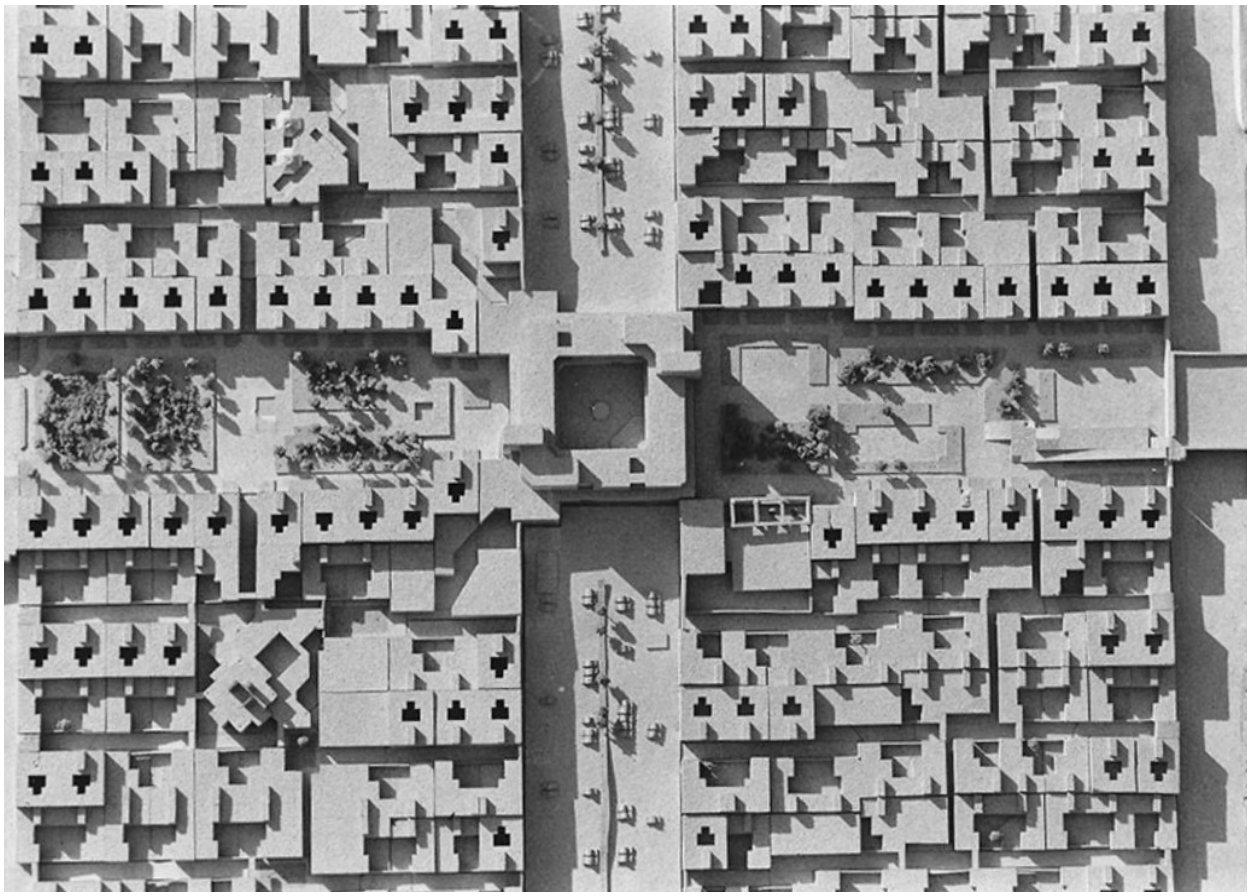
Evolution of the spatial cell in conjunction with urban catalyzing elements

Scales of passageways

main passageway
neighbourhood passageway
by-street

Pedestrian entrance and residential passage in Shushtar New Town, illustrating the project's use of gateways, semi-public thresholds, and human-scaled circulation spaces/Physical Model of the project.
Source: Kamran Diba archive

Note: Although located outside Tehran(Shushtar,Khuzestan,Iran), Kamran Diba's Shushtar New Town (1974–1980) offers an important reference point for understanding broader debates on housing and collective life in late Pahlavi Iran. Conceived as a new town for industrial workers, the project sought to reinterpret spatial principles associated with traditional Iranian settlements—including courtyards, narrow pedestrian routes, neighborhood centers, and graduated transitions between private and public space—within a modern planning framework. While Shushtar New did not directly influence the development of Tehran's housing projects discussed above, it reflects many of the same concerns that shaped architectural thinking during this period: how to accommodate urban growth without abandoning social cohesion, and how to create environments that support both privacy and collective life. For this reason, Diba's diagrams are included here not as a case study of Tehran, but as an illustration of contemporary architectural debates regarding housing, community, and urban form in Iran during the 1970s.



2.3 The Rise of Apartments

From the 1960s onward, apartment housing also became part of the mix. Low-rise condominium and walk-up buildings were promoted, particularly for lower-income groups. These blocks replaced the one-family model with stacked units sharing common corridors. Architecturally, they often included shared lobbies, stairwells, and roof terraces. Kitchens were opened onto living rooms to save space. Collective living was presented as modern and efficient: household chores such as laundry or heating were partly centralized. In this sense, the new apartment typology reshaped domestic space itself. Homes became more compact, and neighbors increasingly encountered one another in corridors, stairwells, and shared outdoor spaces. Apartment architecture thus introduced a different scale of collectivity into Tehran's housing.

During the 1970s, Tehran's housing entered a new phase. Habibi describes this decade as a turning point when oil revenues and global architectural trends transformed housing into a metropolitan-scale endeavor(Habibi, 2021, pp.136-146). The focus shifted from modest neighborhood developments toward large apartment estates, residential towers, and planned townships designed for different segments of the middle and upper classes.

Projects varied considerably in their approach to density, privacy, and collective life, ranging from isolated residential towers to more integrated neighborhood systems. Among these developments, Ekbatan emerged as one of the most ambitious attempts to combine high-density housing with extensive shared spaces and collective urban infrastructure. Its significance lies not only in its scale but also in its distinctive approach to mediating between private dwelling and community life. For this reason, Ekbatan serves as the central case study of this thesis and will be examined in detail in the following chapters.

Not every late-Pahlavi project followed the same spatial logic as Ekbatan. Several developments adopted markedly different approaches to housing, collectivity, and urban space.

بریده جریده

تهیه و تنظیم:حسن مجیدی

ساخت شهرک اکباتان آغاز شد

سنگ بنای شهرک اکباتان که قرار است در مدت دو سال، چهار هزار واحد مسکونی در آن ساخته شود، دیروز [سه‌شنبه ۱۹ فروردین ۱۳۵۴] در مراسمی که وزیر دربار، وزیر امور اقتصادی و دارایی، شهردار تهران و گروهی از مقامات مملکتی در آن شرکت داشتند، توسط اسدالله علم وزیر دربار کار گذاشته شد و به این ترتیب ساخت یکی از مدرن‌ترین شهرک‌های تهران آغاز شد.این شهرک که در حدود یک کیلومتری میدان شهیاد[آزادی] به سوی جاده کرج برپا می‌شود، ساخت چهار هزار واحد مسکونی را در برنامه دارد که هزار واحد آن تا پایان امسال و سه هزار واحد دیگر در سال دوم تحویل خریداران می‌شود.مدیر عامل شرکت سازنده این شهرک مهندس حسین گلزار است که باهمکاری یک شرکت فرانسوی و با هزینه چهارده میلیارد ریال ساخت این شهرک را به عهده گرفته است.

روزنامه آیندگان – چهارشنبه ۲۰ فروردین ۱۳۵۴

Newspaper report announcing the beginning of construction of Ekbatan New Town, published in Ayandegan newspaper on 20 Farvardin 1354 (April 9, 1975). The article presents Ekbatan as one of Tehran's largest and most modern housing developments, reporting the commencement of a project planned to provide approximately 4,000 residential units in its initial phases. Emphasizing state support, large-scale investment, and collaboration with foreign expertise, the report reflects contemporary narratives of modernization and urban expansion during the late Pahlavi period. Beyond documenting the physical construction of Ekbatan, the article illustrates how large housing developments were publicly promoted as symbols of progress, technological advancement, and the future growth of metropolitan Tehran.
Source: Ayandegan Newspaper, 20 Farvardin 1354 (April 9, 1975).

ASP Towers (Right) and Eskan Apartment(Left): These were high-rise cooperative and government housing projects, respectively. The ASP complex consisted of five eighteen-story towers grouped on a shared podium. Each tower had its own elevator and stair core, while most communal space was limited to a small plaza at the base of the towers. The Eskan blocks followed a similar model for state employees. In both cases, the architectural logic was one of vertical concentration: residents lived in tall towers with only limited shared ground space. Private apartments opened toward panoramic city views, while public interaction was largely confined to interior lobbies and enclosed gardens.

Image Source: Eskan Towers under construction, seen from the Gandi Street, November 1976. Source: Harvard University Library Archive./ASP tower's Image, Unkown photographer.

Apadana was one of the significant late-Pahlavi residential developments, built by the Franco-Iranian construction company SATEC in collaboration with state institutions and private investors. Located adjacent to Ekbatan in western Tehran, it formed part of the broader wave of modern urban expansion during the 1960s and 1970s. The project combined villas and low-rise apartment blocks organized around a central boulevard and interior gardens. Its spatial logic emphasized separation and enclosure: each home had its own yard, while communal facilities were placed within the development itself. Outside its boundaries, the neighborhood offered little communal space to the city. Public space existed, but primarily within the enclave, reinforcing the distinct social identity of its residents (Jafari 2022, pp. 107–109). Due to its proximity to Ekbatan, Apadana was often viewed alongside its larger neighbor as part of the transformation of western Tehran during the late Pahlavi period. While both developments sought to provide modern housing environments for the growing middle classes, Apadana adopted a lower-density and more inward-looking residential model, in contrast to the larger scale and more comprehensive urban vision of Ekbatan(Jafari, 2022, pp.107-109).
Image Sources:Unknown

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2.4 Post-1979 Changes and Mass Housing

The 1979 Revolution radically changed the rhetoric of housing, but not the fundamental challenges.Urban inequality was a backdrop to the revolution, and housing remained central to the crisis (Abrahamian,1982, pp.496-530). After 1979, no single new model dominated; multiple approaches were tried, including redistribution projects, war-related interruptions, informal settlements, cooperative ventures, and large state-built housing drives. As housing scholars Maryam Ghasemi and Nazife Özay argue, revolutionary promises of justice proved difficult to fulfill. Rapid urbanization and migration continued, placing increasing pressure on Tehran's housing. Even where new housing units were built, problems of location, infrastructure, and the lack of communal space often undermined their effectiveness(Ghasemi & Özay, 2018, pp.138-139). Increasing the number of homes did not solve the deeper issue: the alignment of housing with quality of life and equity.
Cooperative housing became a notable path. Organized groups – teachers, government workers, etc, formed cooperatives to acquire land and funding. This tied housing to social networks. In well-run cases, cooperatives built modest neighborhoods with local squares or shared courtyards. But often they delivered units without much extra space: the architecture might be a cluster of townhouses or apartments with only narrow pathways and no public open spaces. Thus, while cooperatives politicized housing by group identity, their spatial outcomes varied and rarely matched the integrated neighborhood ideals of earlier models.

The most ambitious later program was the Mehr housing plan of the 2000s. It was a massive social-housing drive with subsidized land, reduced fees, and state support. In practice, hundreds of thousands of units were built nationwide. Critics note that many Mehr estates have poor spatial quality (Shahraki et al,2020, pp.2-4; Ghasemi & Özay,2018, pp.137-145). The houses often line straight streets with little variation; communal courtyards or squares are rare. The design reduces open space to a few leftover patches, instead of weaving it into daily life.
For some critics, the spatial condition of many Mehr Housing projects recalls a dystopian vision of urban life: large concentrations of housing units with limited social infrastructure, weak public space, and few settings for collective encounter. In this sense, the shortcomings of Mehr were not merely architectural but social. The program demonstrated that housing cannot be reduced to the

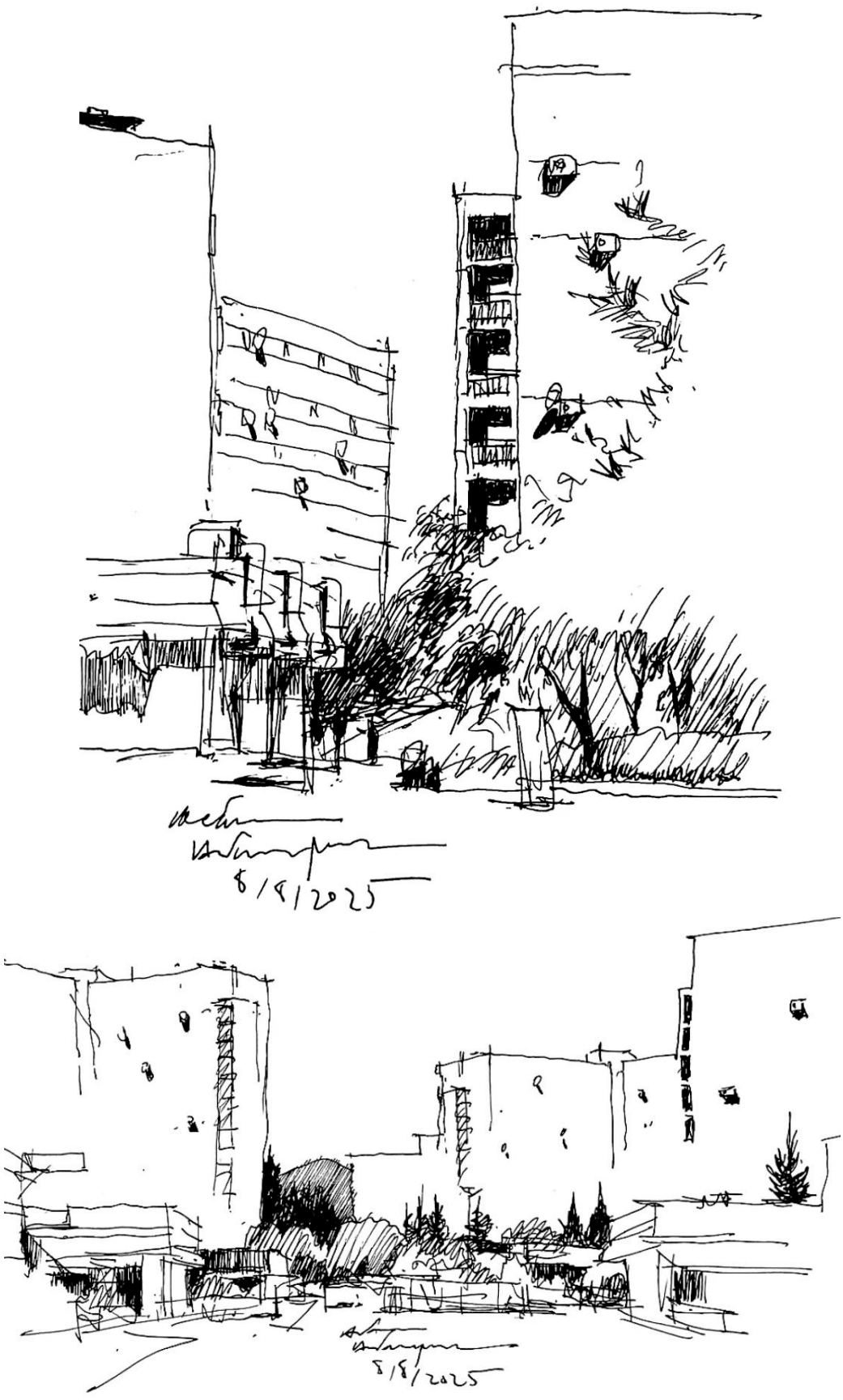
provision of shelter alone; without shared spaces, pedestrian
This reveals a pattern: when housing is treated as just a numbers game, the result is spatial mismatch. Units are delivered, but without the social infrastructure that makes a neighborhood livable. Courtyards, pedestrian links, shops, and playgrounds – these should be seen as part of housing, not add-ons. Projects like Mehr stand as counterpoints to Narmak or Ekbatan: they show what happens when communal space is sacrificed for rapid delivery.

Seen historically, Tehran's housing story is not just one of too many or too few units, but also is about how housing form creates or denies community. Housing has been used to modernize society, but also to control social relations: to integrate some groups and to isolate others. Above all, Tehran's history shows that the key struggle in housing is not just about the units themselves, but about the spaces between them. It is over those thresholds – the gardens, alleys, and open spaces where home meets city – that collective life is made or broken.
In the next chapter,The case study of Ekbatan will be examined in detail as a pivotal case: how its architecture and public spaces embodied a particular vision of collective urban life, and how those designs shaped the community that lived there.

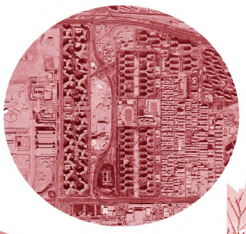
Examples of Mehr Housing project in Iran.
Source: https://blog.jeroenapers.nl/post/175230642575/maskan-mehr-project-dit-sociale-woningbouwproject.

03. Ekbatan:

Origins,Architecture, and spatial structure



Sketches from Ekbatan by Hesam Hasanpour (2022)



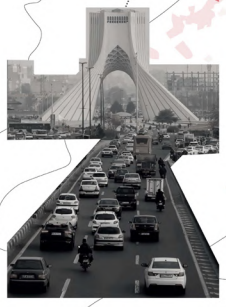
EKBATAN

Chitgar Lake

Major recreational and environmental landmark in western Tehran, developed as a leisure zone and urban climate moderator.

Mehrabad Airport

Former main international airport and a major transportation and military hub shaping western Tehran's urban



Azadi Square

Symbolic western gateway of Tehran, associated with national identity, mass gatherings, and large-scale urban infrastructure.

Tehran . 1981. 208,000 residents

Tehran. 1921. 362,00 residents

Tehran. 1941. 1,025,00 residents

Tehran. 1956. 1,600,000 residents

Tehran. 1966. 2,806,000 residents

Tehran. 1976. 4,827,000 residents

Tehran. 1986. 6,060,000 residents

Tehran. 1996. 6,960,000 residents

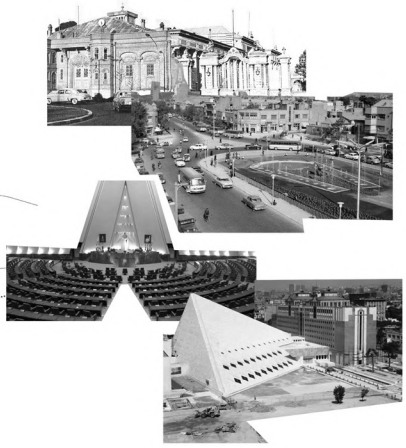
Tehran. 2011. 12,000,000 residents

Tajrish Square

Major commercial and leisure center in northern Tehran, connecting the city to the Alborz foothills and serving as a gateway to recreational areas.

Baharestan Square

Historic political center of Tehran, home to the Iranian Parliament and a key site of constitutional and state power



Tehran Grand Bazaar

Traditional commercial heart of the city, linking trade, religion, and politics within Tehran's historic core.

Enghelab Street

Main academic and cultural axis of Tehran, anchored by the University of Tehran and dense with bookstores, student life, and political discourse.

Tehran Development map, Drawn by the Author.

In the western part of Tehran, where the dense urban fabric of the city gradually begins to open up, Ekbatan emerges as one of the most recognizable landmarks of the contemporary metropolis. Its massive concrete blocks, geometric order, and expansive open spaces stand in sharp contrast to the fragmented and often chaotic urban landscape that characterizes much of Tehran. Located between the Tehran–Karaj Highway to the north and Lashkari Highway to the south, the complex lies in close proximity to some of the city's most important landmarks and infrastructures, including Azadi Square and Mehrabad Airport. This location places Ekbatan at a strategic point between the historic core of Tehran and the newer developments that have shaped the city's western expansion.

Today, Ekbatan is fully integrated into the metropolitan fabric of Tehran. Yet at the time of its construction, it stood on the western edge of the city, during a period when Tehran was expanding rapidly beyond its historical boundaries. The proximity to Azadi Square and Mehrabad Airport—two key elements in the urban landscape of western Tehran—positioned the area along one of the capital's most significant axes of development. Situated between the established city and emerging urban districts, Ekbatan occupied a location that would later contribute significantly to its role within Tehran's spatial structure. Viewed within the broader geography of Tehran, Ekbatan occupies an intermediate position between different urban worlds. To the east lie the city's historical, political, and commercial centers, while to the west newer residential districts and large-scale developments reflect Tehran's continuing growth and expansion. This location not only influenced the physical development of the complex but also placed it at the intersection of different phases of the city's transformation.

The significance of Ekbatan, however, extends beyond its geographical position within Tehran. It represents one of the most ambitious examples of modern housing in Iran, designed and constructed on an unprecedented scale as an attempt to integrate architecture, urban planning, and the infrastructures of everyday life within a single project. Its distinctive physical form, complex spatial organization, network of open spaces, and the relationships established between residential blocks distinguish it from many comparable developments. Understanding Ekbatan therefore requires an examination of its formation, design principles, and spatial characteristics—elements that contributed to the creation of one of the largest and most influential residential complexes in contemporary Iranian architecture and urbanism.

Ekbatan framed by Milad Tower and the Alborz Mountains. Milad Tower, one of Tehran's most prominent landmarks, rises in the city's western skyline.
Source: Ekbatan Online, 2022

3.1.The Birth of Ekbatan

Before examining the origins of Ekbatan, it is important to know that the history of the project is marked by a significant degree of ambiguity. Unlike many major architectural developments, Ekbatan does not possess a single, comprehensive archive that clearly documents its conception, design process, and construction history. Information concerning the project is often fragmented across interviews, personal recollections, scattered documents, newspaper reports, and a limited number of architectural studies. Questions regarding authorship, design responsibilities, and the roles of different architects and consultants remain subjects of debate, and in some cases different sources provide contradictory accounts (Marbaghi, 2018).
For this reason, the following narrative should not be understood as a definitive or complete history of Ekbatan. Rather, it is a reconstruction based on the available evidence, including interviews with architects and planners, published research, archival materials, and oral testimonies. By bringing these dispersed sources together, it becomes possible to trace the emergence of the project while acknowledging the uncertainties that continue to surround parts of its history.

The idea of building a large modern residential complex in western Tehran first took shape through Rahman Golzar Shabestari, an architect trained at the Faculty of Fine Arts and later known as the main initiator and developer of the project. After graduating, Golzar built a small apartment building for his own family on a 400-square-meter plot of land. The design of this building attracted the attention of one of Tehran's major landowners, who tried to convince him to sell it. In exchange, he offered Golzar not only twice the cost of construction, but also 100,000 square meters of land in western Tehran—land that would later become part of Ekbatan. This unexpected exchange became the first real step in the formation of the project .
At the beginning, however, Golzar controlled only this initial piece of land. The larger territory needed for the project still belonged to Nezam al-Saltaneh Mafi [1]and was acquired later after long negotiations. In this sense, Ekbatan did not begin as a fully formed master plan with institutional support, but as a project that gradually expanded through land acquisition, financial negotiation, and private initiative. This is important because it shows that the birth of Ekbatan was not simply the result of state planning; it also depended on personal networks, entrepreneurial risk, and the ability to mobilize trust .(Golzar Shabestari, quoted in Yale Architecture Podcast, 2024).

1. A member of the prominent Mafi family, an aristocratic landowning family with roots in the Qajar period, which owned extensive lands in and around Tehran

Golzar's relationship with Tehran's bazaar merchants[2] played a crucial role in this early phase. Because he had designed several mosques and schools free of charge, he had gained considerable respect among bazaaris. When the Ekbatan project began, he turned to this network for financial support. The merchants trusted him and invested around 30 million tomans, a very large amount at the time. Later, the same network became important in the pre-sale of the residential units. Around 2,000 units were offered for pre-sale, and buyers paid 25 percent of the price in advance. This brought another major sum into the project and helped transform Ekbatan from an ambitious idea into a financially viable development. To organize the remaining payments, the Ekbatan Savings Company was established under the supervision of Bank Melli Iran[3].

After land and financing had been secured, Golzar shared the project with Fereydoun Azari, an architect educated in Italy, France, and the United States. This marked the beginning of one of the most important collaborations in the history of Ekbatan. Azari became responsible for the architectural design of Phase 1, while Golzar remained the founder, client, and project director. Although Golzar did not directly design the buildings, his name appeared beside Azari's in official documents because of his central role in initiating and managing the project (Yale Architecture Podcast, 2024).The question of authorship in Ekbatan has remained complicated. In many public narratives, Kamran Diba is often associated with the project, while Azari's role—especially in the design of the residential blocks—has not always been clearly recognized. Behrouz Morbaghi argues that Ekbatan's architectural history has frequently been recorded incompletely and that the division of responsibilities among architects, consultants, engineers, and foreign collaborators remains partly ambiguous (Marbaghi , 2018). Understanding the birth of Ekbatan therefore also requires understanding it as a collective and layered process, shaped by multiple actors but strongly dependent on the early partnership between Golzar and Azari.

From the beginning, Azari approached the project not simply as a housing development but as a question of how a new way of life could be translated into architectural form. In his own reflections, he argued that architecture was not merely about creating forms; rather, if a new form was to emerge, it had to correspond to a new mode of living. His central concern was how Iranian architecture could be reinterpreted at the scale of the apartment building. Instead of reproducing traditional forms, he sought to reconstruct the underlying spatial logic of Iranian everyday life—alleys, courtyards, transitional spaces, and pedestrian passages—within the framework of modern collective housing (Marbaghi, 2018).

2.The Iranian bazaar historically functioned not only as a commercial institution but also as an important social, religious, and political network that played a significant role in financing educational, religious, and urban development projects.

3. Bank Melli Iran, founded in 1927, is the country's first and largest state-owned commercial bank.

This idea would become one of the defining characteristics of Ekbatan. The project was not conceived as a simple collection of residential blocks but as a comprehensive urban environment in which housing, public space, services, and everyday life could be integrated into a coherent spatial system. To realize a project of this scale, advanced construction technologies were required. The structural system depended on exposed concrete casting techniques that were not yet available in Iran. Consequently, Azari and Golzar traveled to several European countries, including France and Denmark, searching for a suitable construction partner. Eventually, they established contact with the American Starrett Housing Corporation[4] , a company experienced in large-scale housing production. A contract was signed in London, under which Starrett became responsible for the management and supervision of construction in Phase 1, while Azari retained responsibility for the architectural design (Yale Architecture Podcast, 2024; Marbaghi, 2018).

Starrett's participation introduced industrialized construction methods to the project, including repetitive structural grids, prefabricated elements, and large-scale concrete systems. These technologies connected Ekbatan to broader international developments in postwar mass housing. Yet the project was never conceived as a simple importation of foreign models. While its construction techniques were international, its spatial organization was adapted to Iranian climatic conditions, social practices, and urban traditions.

Golzar also sought to reduce dependence on imported materials. In line with broader industrialization policies of the period, local factories were established under foreign licenses to produce materials such as tiles, cement, and double-glazed windows. As a result, Ekbatan became not only a housing development but also a site of technological transfer, where Iranian engineers and workers gained experience with new construction methods and industrialized building systems (Yale Architecture Podcast, 2024).

The project was organized into three phases. Phase 1, designed by Azari, began in the southern section of the site due to its better access to central Tehran and the Tehran–Karaj Special Road. The first completed blocks were inaugurated in 1977 and their units were allocated primarily to government employees .

Phase 2 was later assigned to the Korean architect Kim Swoo Geun[5] and Space Group under Golzar's supervision. Compared to Phase 1, this phase adopted a different architectural approach, characterized by larger

4. Starrett Housing Corporation was a New York–based construction and development company led by Henry Benach during the 1970s. The company participated in several major housing and development projects in Tehran and played a key role in introducing industrialized construction technologies and project-management systems to the Ekbatan project.

5. Kim Swoo Geun (1931–1986) was one of South Korea's most influential modern architects and the founder of the architectural practice Space Group. Educated in Japan and active during South Korea's rapid modernization, he played a significant role in shaping contemporary Korean architecture through projects that combined international modernism with local cultural traditions.

green areas, separate commercial buildings, and duplex housing types. Phase 3, which was completed after the Iran–Iraq War, shared several architectural characteristics with Phase 1 while responding to the new political and economic conditions of post-revolutionary Iran.

The 1979 Revolution temporarily interrupted construction. Because Starrett was an American company, and because revolutionary discourse strongly emphasized independence from foreign influence, projects involving foreign firms were suspended. Ekbatan was among them. Nevertheless, the project was not abandoned. The Housing Foundation[6] established the Urban Development and Reconstruction Company, which continued construction according to the original plans and gradually completed the remaining blocks .
Completing the project was far from straightforward. Many materials used before the Revolution were no longer available, while the Iran–Iraq War[7] severely restricted access to foreign currency. Despite these difficulties, government authorities eventually authorized the import of essential materials required for completion. Following the end of the war, construction accelerated, and Phase 3 was officially completed in 1991 (Yale Architecture Podcast, 2024).

By that point, Ekbatan had evolved far beyond its original conception as a housing development. What began as an ambitious residential project had become a large urban entity whose scale, architectural coherence, and integrated organization distinguished it from most contemporary housing developments in Iran. More importantly, it embodied an architectural vision that sought to reconcile modern housing production with the social, spatial, and cultural dimensions of everyday life (Marbaghi, 2018).

6. The Housing Foundation of Islamic Revolution is a state institution established after the 1979 Revolution to address housing provision, reconstruction, and rural development.
7. The Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) was a prolonged military conflict between Iran and Iraq that began with Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980. Lasting eight years, the war had profound economic, political, and social consequences, significantly affecting construction, industrial production, and access to imported materials throughout Iran.

1940s–1950s | Structural Preconditions

- Rapid population growth in Tehran begins after World War II

- Early industrialization and state centralization increase rural–urban migration

- Traditional housing models start to fail under demographic pressure
Shahyad Monument project begins (1969)

Late 1950s–1960s | Western Expansion of Tehran

Actors

- State planners
- Infrastructure authorities

Events

- Construction of Mehrabad Airport (1938, but impact intensifies later)
- Development of western Tehran
-Tehran–Karaj Freeway (1966)

Early 1970s | Financial & Institutional Structuring

Actors

- Golzar Shabestari
- Bazaar investors
- Bank Melli Iran
- Ekbatan Savings Company

Events

- Pre-sale of approximately 2,000 units
- Creation of Ekbatan Savings Company to manage payments
- Shahyad Monument project begins (1969)

Early–Mid 1970s |

Actors

- Fereydoun Azari (ar
- Starrett Housing C
- Iranian engineers (

Events

- Azari designs Phas
- Introduction of pref
- Construction factor licenses

1963 | White Revolution and Urban Transformation

Actors

- Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi
- State planning institutions

Events

Ratification of the Six Principles of the White Revolution
Accelerated migration from villages to cities, especially Tehran

Late 1960s | Conception of Ekbatan

Actors

- Rahman Golzar Shabestari (architect, developer, initiator)

Events

- Golzar acquires initial land (~100,000 m²)
- Negotiations to acquire remaining land from Nezam al-Saltaneh Mafi
- Financial backing secured through bazaar merchants

Early–Mid 1970s (Pre-1979)

Actors

- Kim Swoo Geun
- Space Group (South Korea)
- Rahman Golzar Shabestari (o

Events

- Architectural design of Phase
- Introduction of:
- Central green park
- Three detached commercial b
- Duplex residential units

Phase 1 Design and Construction

rchitect)
orporation (USA) (construction system)
Parviz Mirzakhani, Davood Shahin)

e 1
fabricated concrete systems
ries established locally under European

1980–1988 | War and Interrupted Construction

Actors

- Post-revolutionary state
- Mir-Hossein Mousavi (Prime Minister)

Events

- Severe material shortages
- Limited foreign currency access
- State authorizes imports to finish Phase 1

Early 1990s | Completion of Phase 3

Actors

Iranian construction authorities

Events

Phase 3 completed and inaugurated (1991)

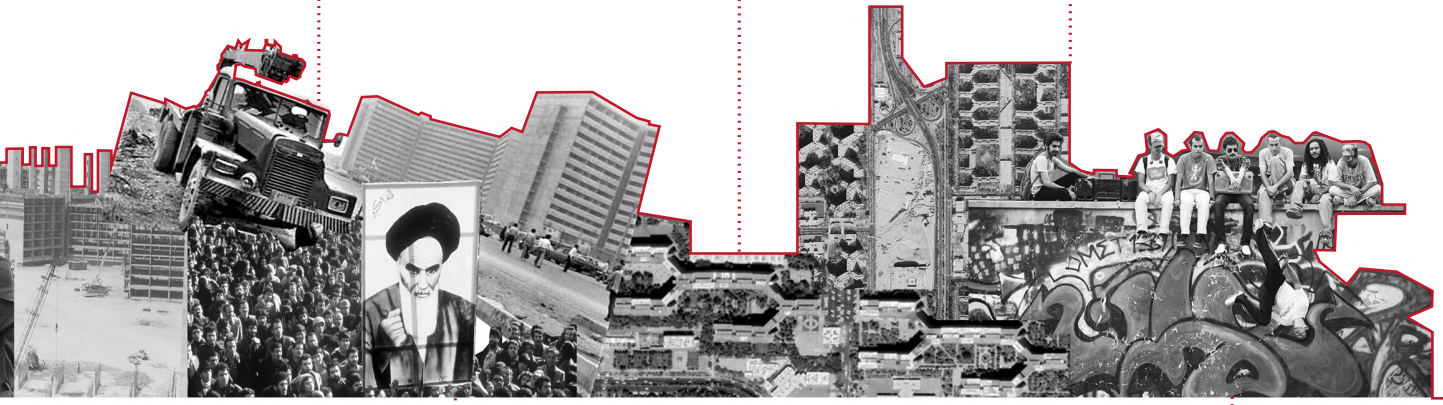
2002 | Shahid Sattari Highway

Actors

- Tehran Municipality

Events

- Construction of Sattari Highway
- Physical separation of Phase 2 from Phases 1 and 3



) | Phase 2 Design (Korean Involvement)

versight)

2 completed before the Revolution

uildings

1979 | Islamic Revolution

Actors

- Revolutionary government
- Housing Foundation of the Islamic Revolution

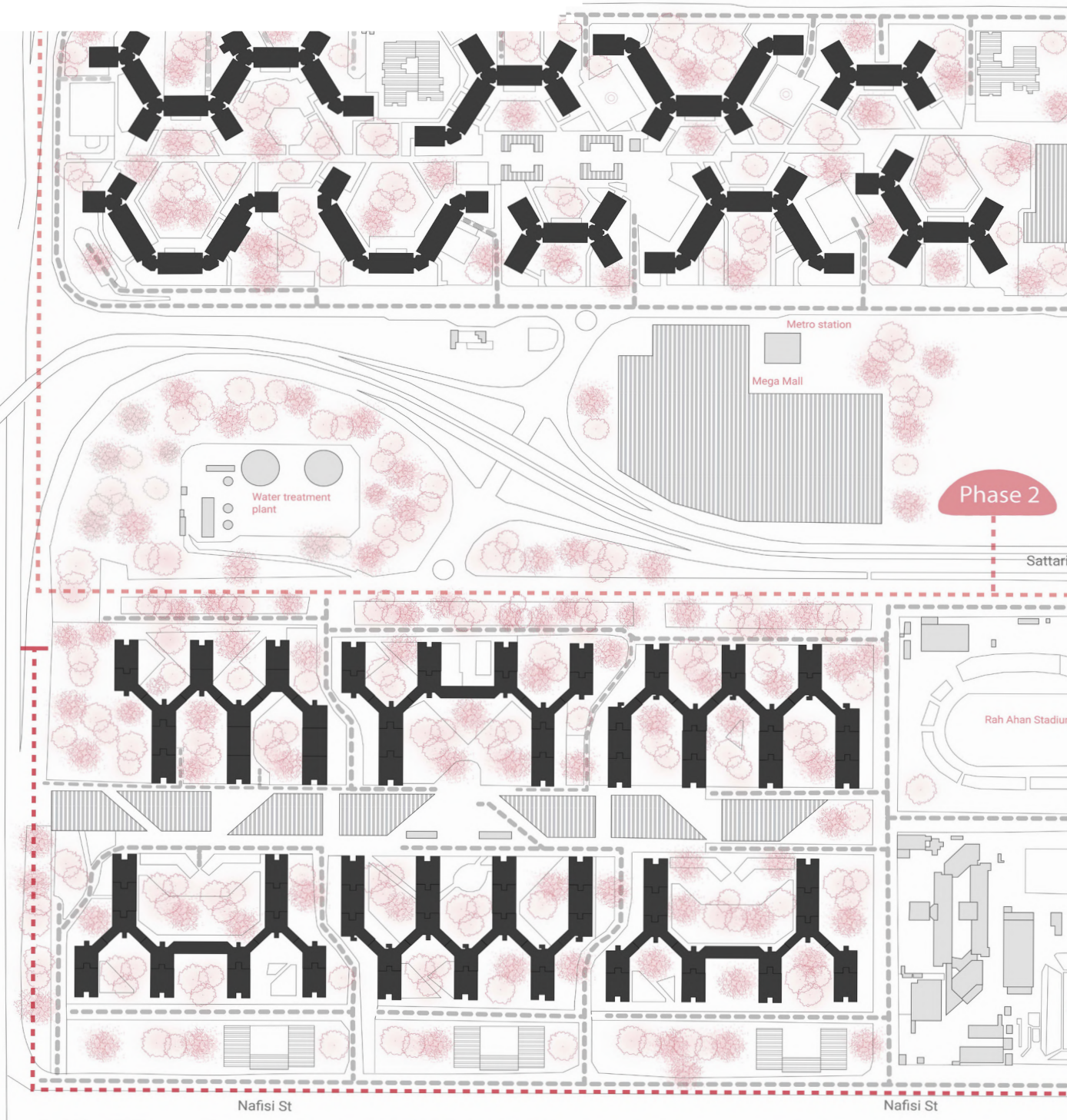
Events

- Suspension of foreign company involvement
- Starrett exits the project

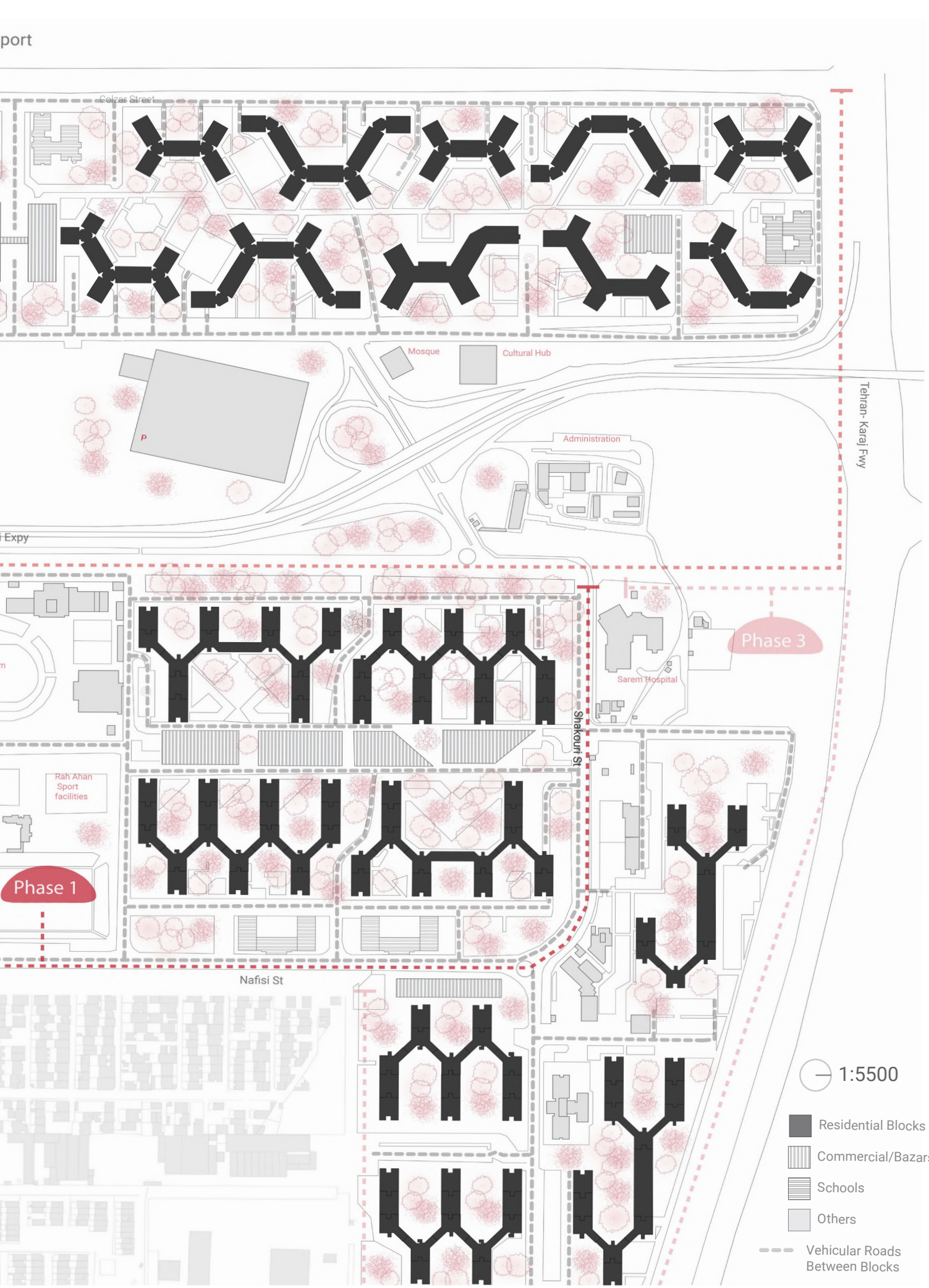
EKBATAN TODAY ...

Timeline of Ekbatan Development and key actor, Collage by the author.

3.2 Spatial Structure and Architectural Organizatio



Masterplan of Ekbatan showing all three phases and facilities in teh site, Drawn by the Author


port
Colzar Street
Mosque
Cultural Hub
P
Administration
Tehran- Karaj Fwy
Expy
Phase 3
Sarem Hospital
Shakouri St
Rah Ahan Sport facilities
Phase 1
Nafisi St
1:5500
Residential Blocks
Commercial/Bazars
Schools
Others
Vehicular Roads Between Blocks

Phase I. Reinterpreting Iranian Spatial Traditions

Phase I is the earliest and most architecturally coherent section of the Ekbatan complex. Designed by Fereydoun Azari, it consists of ten residential blocks organized into two principal types—A and B. Together, these blocks accommodate a wide range of apartment configurations, from studio units to large three-bedroom apartments, all arranged as single-level dwellings. This phase represents Azari's attempt to develop a new model of collective urban living rooted in both modern planning principles and the spatial traditions of Iranian cities.

The most distinctive feature of Phase I is the form of its residential blocks. Constructed as stepped U-shaped reinforced concrete structures of five, nine, and twelve stories, the buildings are elevated on pilotis, creating an extensive network of covered pedestrian spaces (piloties)beneath them. For Azari, these walkways functioned as a contemporary reinterpretation of the traditional Iranian *koocheh*. Rather than serving solely as circulation routes, they were conceived as transitional spaces that connected residential entrances, courtyards, commercial areas, and public facilities.

In this sense, movement through the complex was designed not merely as a functional necessity but as an opportunity for everyday social interaction.

The arrangement of buildings and open spaces was equally important to the overall design concept. Instead of isolated towers surrounded by undefined residual land, the residential blocks were positioned to create a sequence of interconnected courtyards, pathways, and communal areas. This spatial organization reflected once more Azari's effort to translate the social logic of traditional Iranian urban environments into the context of modern apartment housing. As he later explained, the objective was not to reproduce historical architectural forms but to recreate the patterns of everyday life, encounter, and community that those forms had historically supported (Morbaghi, 2018).

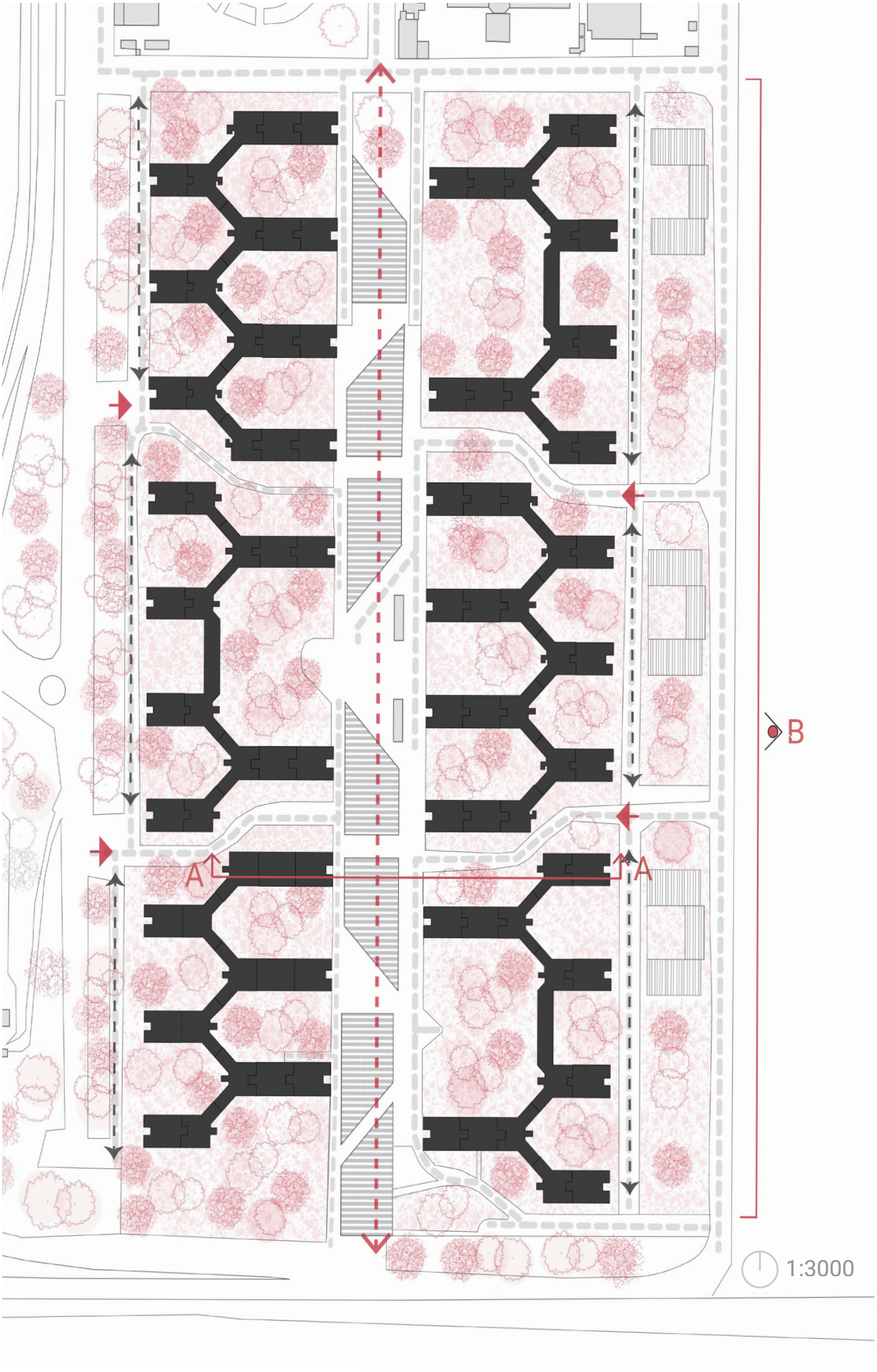
Commercial space played a central role within this vision. Although small retail units were initially planned along the pedestrian walkways, the design was later revised to concentrate commercial activities within a single linear bazaar extending through the center of the phase. Stretching for nearly one kilometer, this commercial spine became the principal social and economic axis of Phase I. Through its sequence of enclosed passages, open courtyards, and interconnected circulation routes, the bazaar consciously echoed

the spatial logic of the traditional Iranian marketplace while adapting it to the scale and requirements of a modern residential development. Beyond its economic function, it provided a central gathering space that reinforced daily interaction among residents.

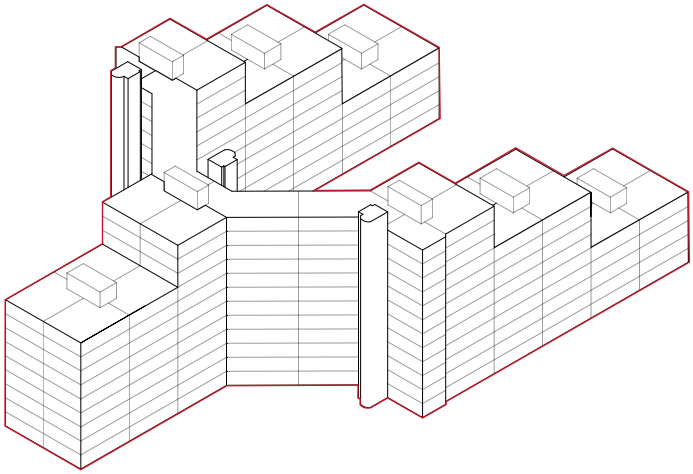
Economic and technical considerations also influenced the final architectural form of the buildings. The required residential density necessitated structures of up to twelve and thirteen stories, yet Azari sought to avoid the monotony commonly associated with large-scale housing projects. To address this challenge, he adopted a stepped building profile that created terraces at regular intervals and visually fragmented the overall mass of the structures. This strategy improved daylight access, natural ventilation, and visual diversity while mitigating the repetitive character often associated with high-density residential developments.

The proximity of the site to major highways further shaped the architectural design. Conventional balconies were omitted because of concerns related to noise, pollution, and construction costs. In their place, continuous horizontal windows were installed across the width of the apartments. According to Azari, this solution maintained a visual relationship between interior and exterior spaces while responding pragmatically to environmental and economic constraints.

Phase I also incorporated a broad range of urban services and facilities, including schools, sports complexes, commercial spaces, parking structures, storage areas, and technical infrastructure. The integration of these functions within a single spatial framework reflected the broader ambition of the project: to create a self-sufficient urban district capable of supporting everyday life within its own boundaries.


A
A
B
1:3000

Axonometric View of a Typical Phase 1 Residential Block



Open spaces between the blocks

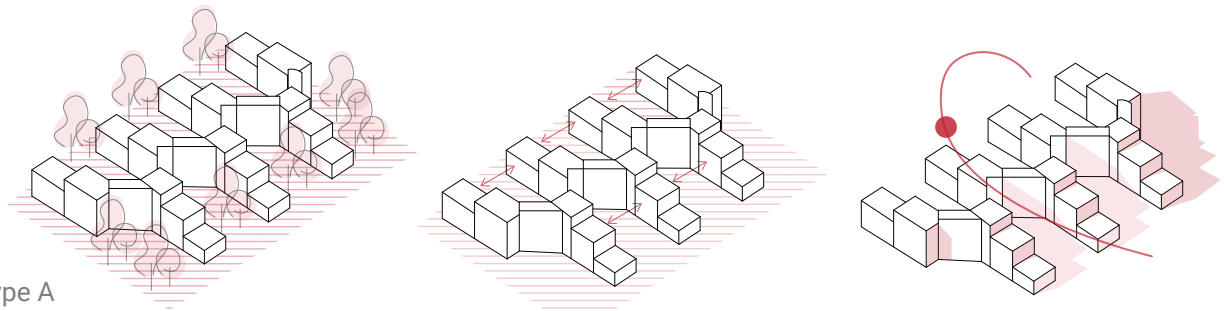
Open spaces between the blocks form the primary setting for collective everyday life.

Privacy Through Spatial Distance

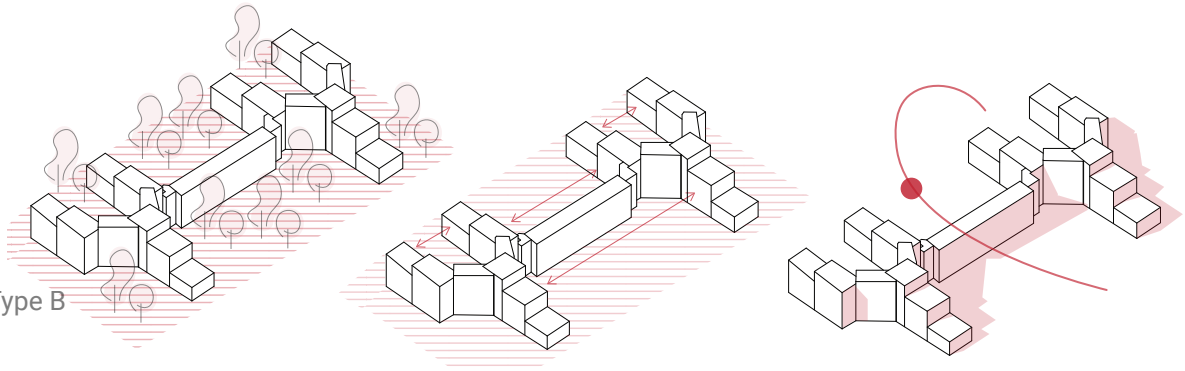
Generous distances between facing façades preserve visual privacy while maintaining openness across the neighbourhood.

Sunlight and shadow

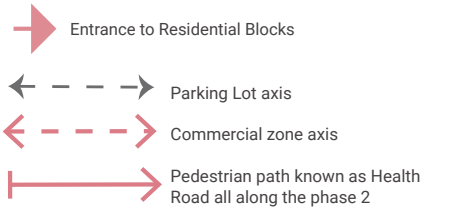
North–south building orientation maximises eastern and western daylight while providing effective mutual shading.



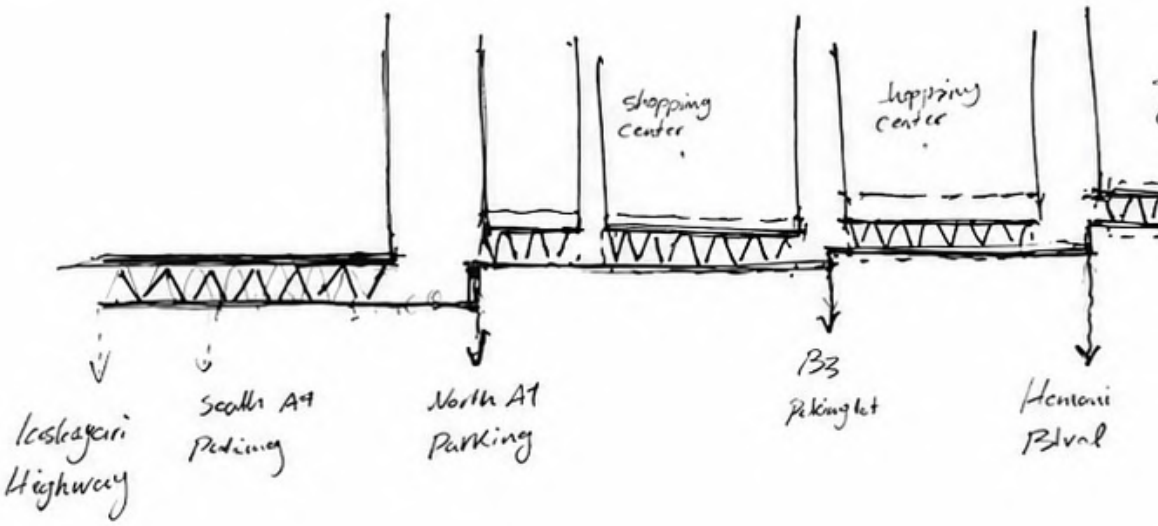
Type A



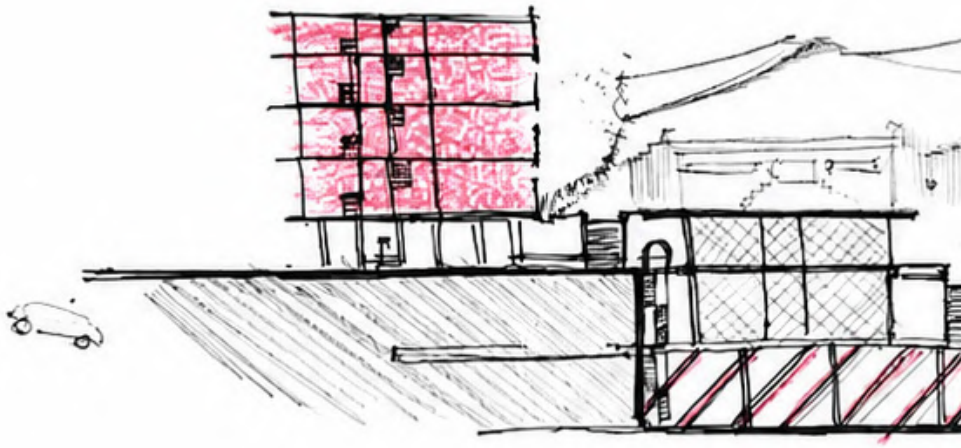
Type B



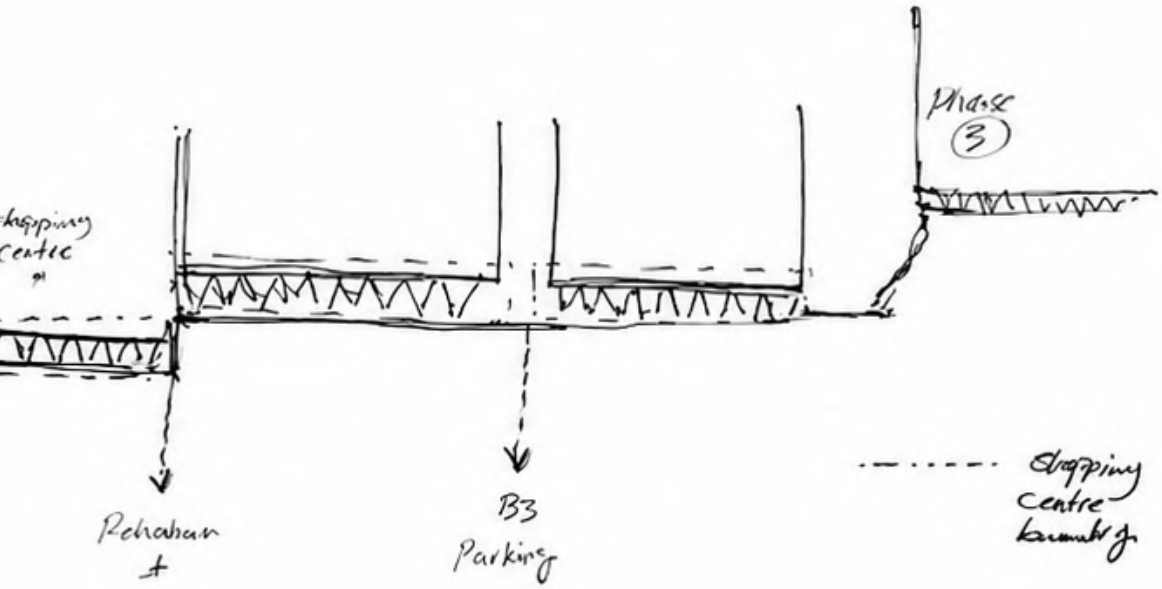
Plans and diagrams by the author.
Axonometric drawing redrawn from Sedighi (2019)

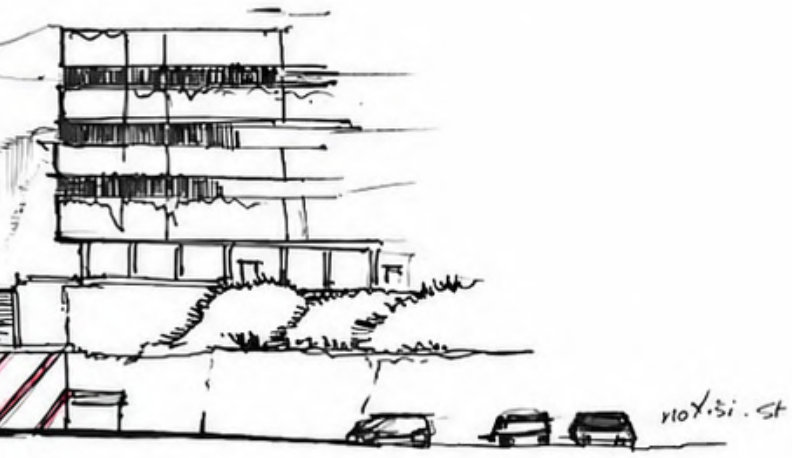


View B



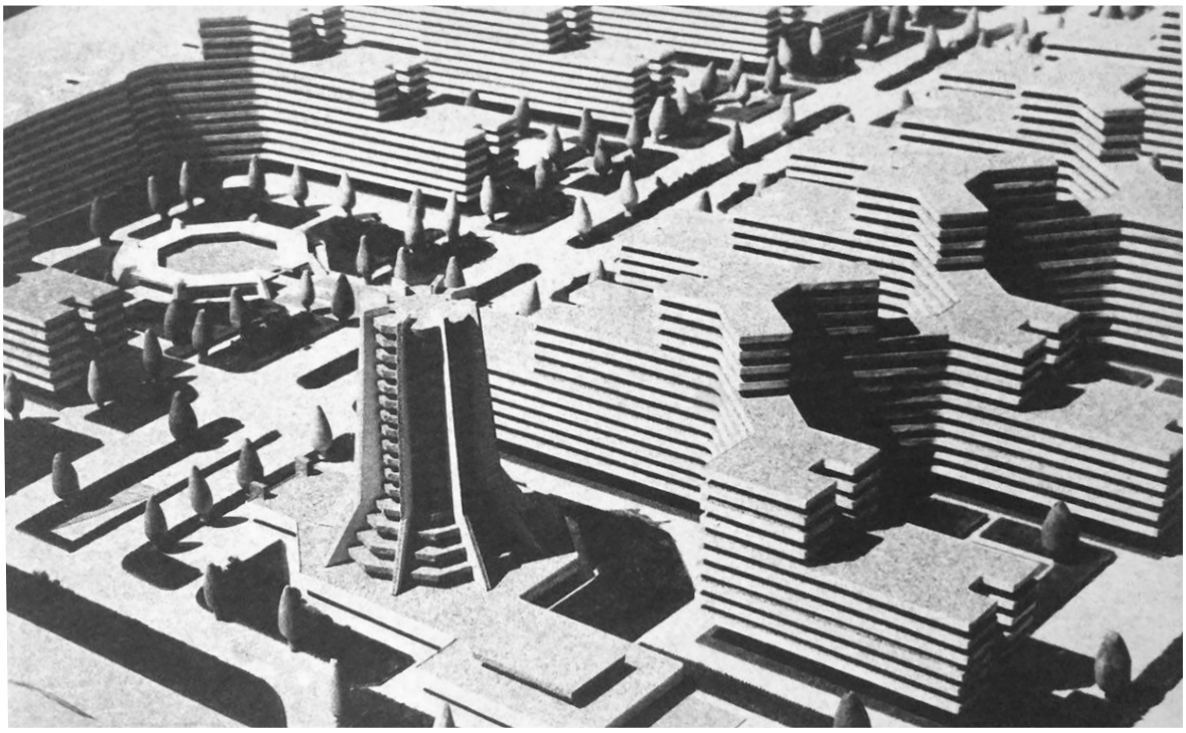
Section A-A

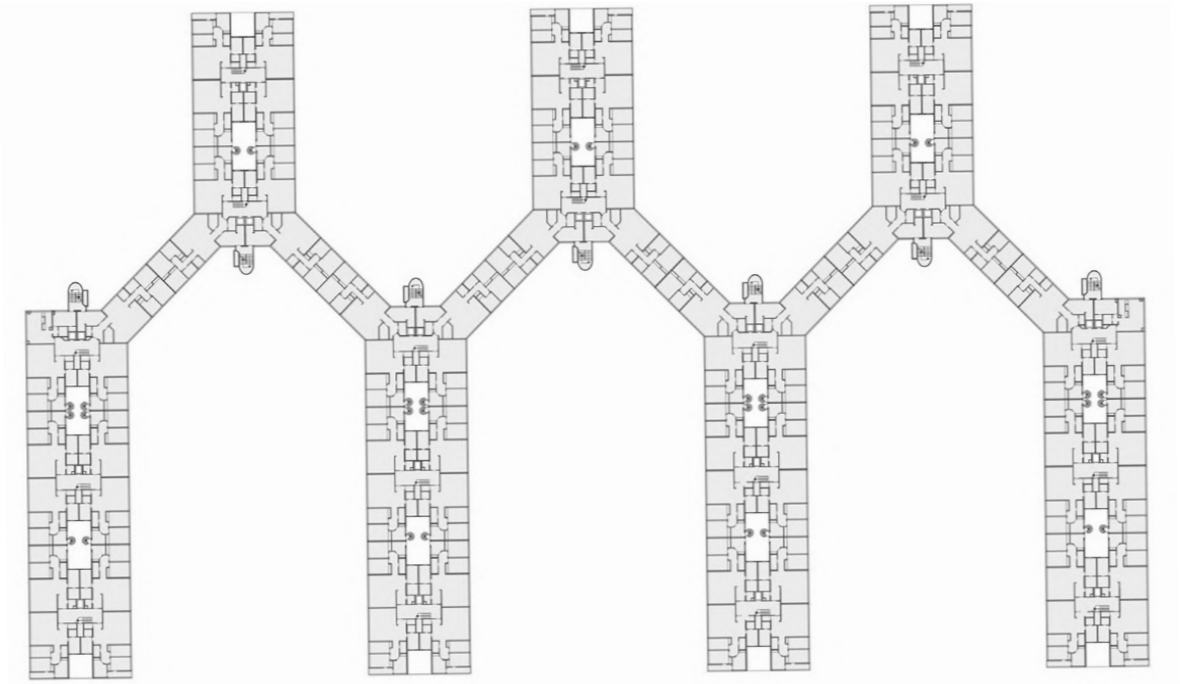




Schematic Sections and Elevations of phase 1, produced through the valuable collaboration of Amirhossein Hosseini, a former resident of Ekbatan and an Architecture student at Politecnico di Torino. In the absence of detailed technical documentation, they were reconstructed based on his recollection and lived experience of the space.

Surviving documents and representations. Compared to Phase II, very few original drawings, plans, and archival documents from the design and construction of Phase I remain accessible today. As Behrouz Morbaghi notes, despite extensive efforts and interviews with architects and individuals involved in the project, a significant portion of the original documentation could not be located, highlighting the absence of a systematic archive for one of the most important housing projects in modern Iran (Morbaghi 2024). This situation stands in sharp contrast to Phase II, whose architectural archive was preserved by the office of the Korean architect Kim Swoo Geun and later made available to Morbaghi and published in 2017. The images presented here therefore represent some of the limited visual material currently available for Phase I, including a physical model of the initial proposal for East Ekbatan—featuring residential slabs and a mixed-use tower containing a shopping center, hotel, and luxury apartments—and a typical housing plan and contemporary view of the built complex.
Sources: Sedighi (2019); The Former Archive of Ekbatan Redevelopment Company.





Phase II. Landscape, Openness, and Modular Urbanism

While Phase I was organized around a dense network of pedestrian routes, courtyards, and a continuous commercial spine, Phase II introduced a markedly different spatial logic. Designed by the Korean architect Kim Swoo Geun and the architectural firm Space Group, this phase reflects a greater emphasis on landscape, openness, and the relationship between buildings and green space. Although it remained committed to the broader objectives of Ekbatan—providing high-density housing integrated with services and public amenities—it pursued these goals through a distinct architectural and urban strategy.

Phase II consists of nineteen residential blocks arranged primarily along a north–south axis,organized into two principal types—A and B. Unlike the more enclosed and interconnected structure of Phase I, the buildings are positioned around a large central green area that functions as the principal organizing element of the neighborhood. Rather than defining space through a sequence of courtyards, passageways, and enclosed communal areas, the architecture frames an expansive landscape that remains visually accessible from multiple directions. Open space is therefore not residual land between buildings but the central element around which the entire phase is organized.

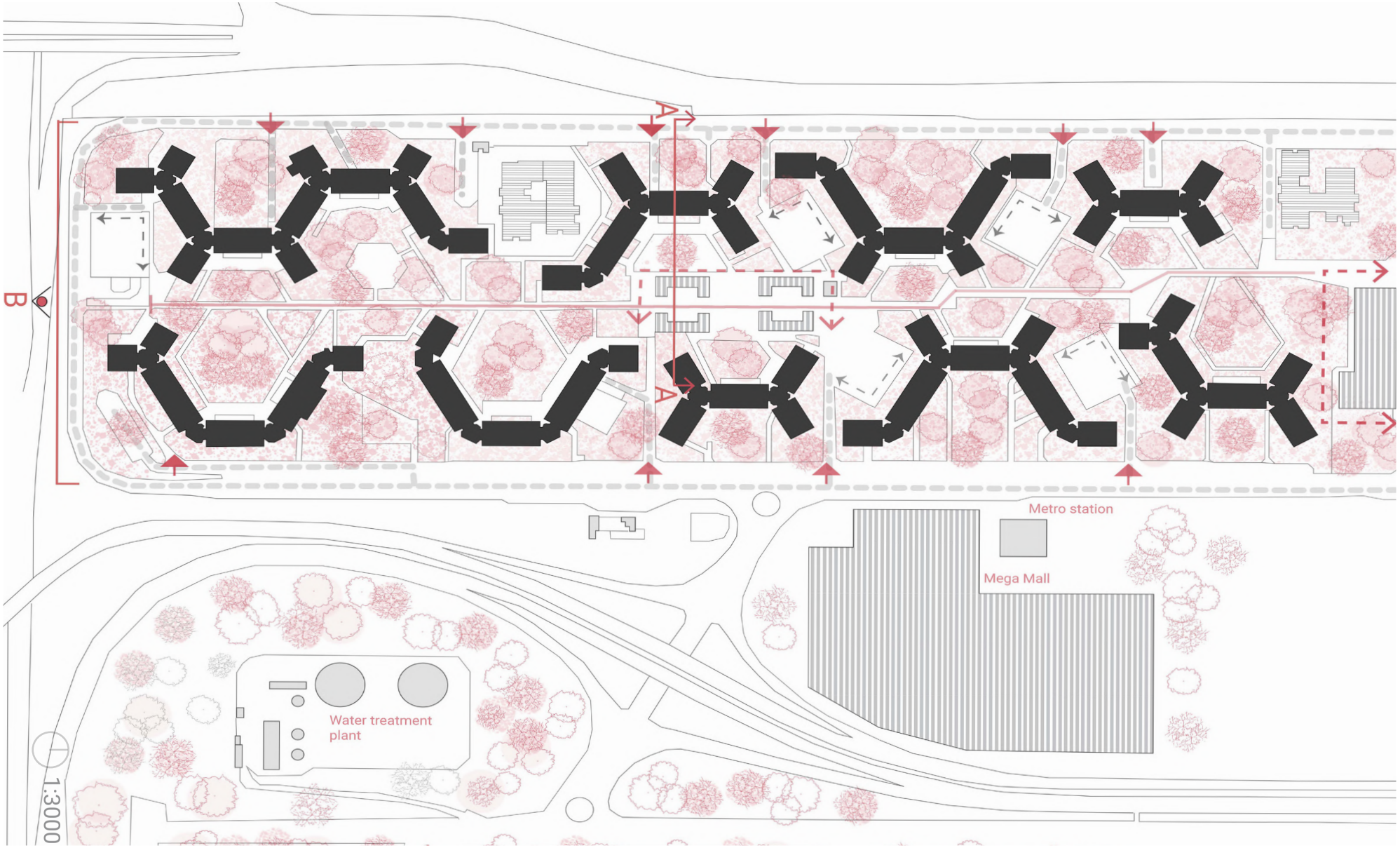
This emphasis on openness constitutes one of the defining characteristics of the project. The residential blocks form permeable edges around shared green areas, creating long visual corridors and maximizing daylight penetration throughout the site. The resulting environment encourages visual connectivity across the neighborhood while reducing the sense of enclosure present in Phase I. In contrast to Azari's reinterpretation of traditional Iranian urban spaces, which relied on the intimacy of pedestrian networks and transitional spaces, Phase II establishes collective life through a shared landscape that is continuously visible and accessible to residents. Landscape thus becomes the primary medium through which buildings, public space, and everyday activities are linked together.

The residential units further reflect this shift in design philosophy. Whereas the apartments of Phase I were predominantly organized as single-level dwellings, Phase II introduced duplex typologies. Two-, three-, and four-bedroom units were distributed across two floors, creating a clearer distinction between public and private domestic functions. Living and reception areas could be separated

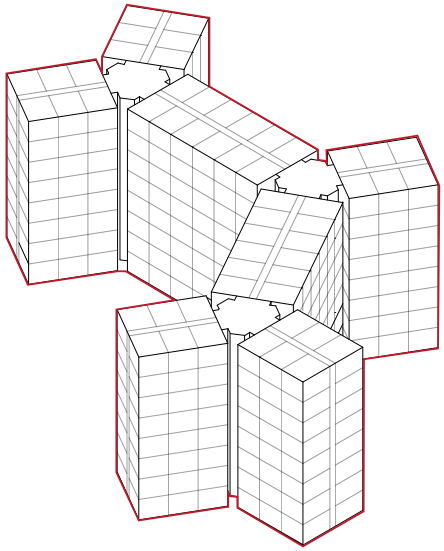
complex internal spatial hierarchy and responding to changing expectations regarding privacy and family life within modern apartment housing .

Commercial facilities were also reconfigured. Rather than concentrating commercial activities within a single linear bazaar, the designers distributed them among three independent commercial buildings located within the landscape. These structures function as local centers serving different sectors of the phase while preserving the openness of the central green space. The result is a decentralized commercial system that contrasts sharply with the highly concentrated social and commercial axis established in Phase I. This approach reflects a broader shift from a corridor-based urban structure toward a dispersed network of activity nodes embedded within the landscape.

Educational, recreational, and public facilities were similarly integrated throughout the phase. Schools, sports facilities, playgrounds, and community spaces were distributed across the neighborhood to ensure accessibility from different residential clusters. In later decades, the construction of Mega Mall adjacent to Phase II further reinforced the area's role as one of the principal commercial and service centers of the wider Ekbatan complex, adding a new layer of urban activity beyond the original masterplan.

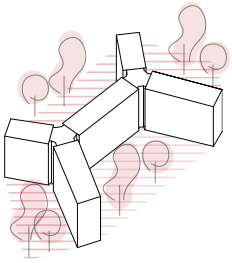

A
A
B
Metro station
Mega Mall
Water treatment
plant
1:3000

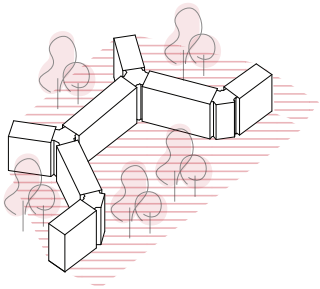
Axonometric View of a Typical Phase 2 Residential Block



Open spaces between the blocks

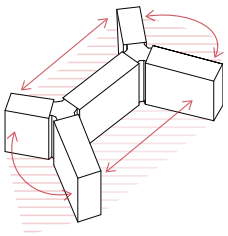
Open spaces between the blocks form the primary setting for collective everyday life.

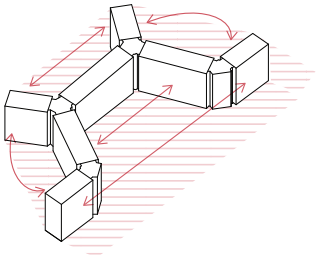




Privacy Through Spatial Distance

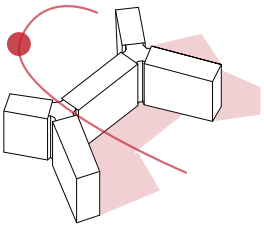
Generous distances between facing façades preserve visual privacy while maintaining openness across the neighbourhood.

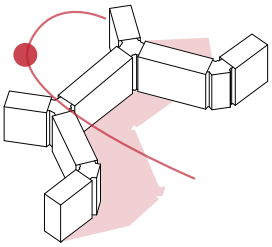


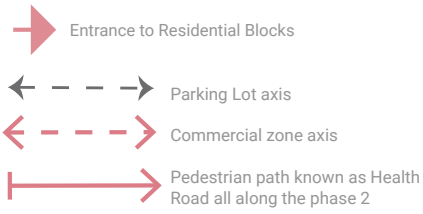


Sunlight and shadow

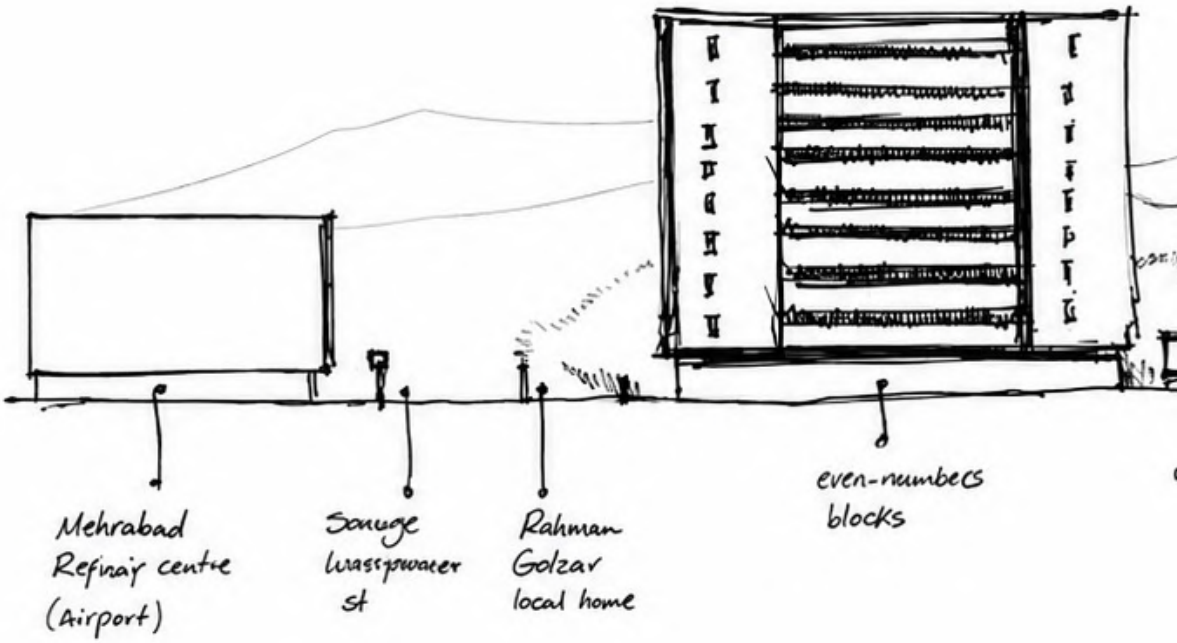
North–south building orientation maximises eastern and western daylight while providing effective mutual shading.



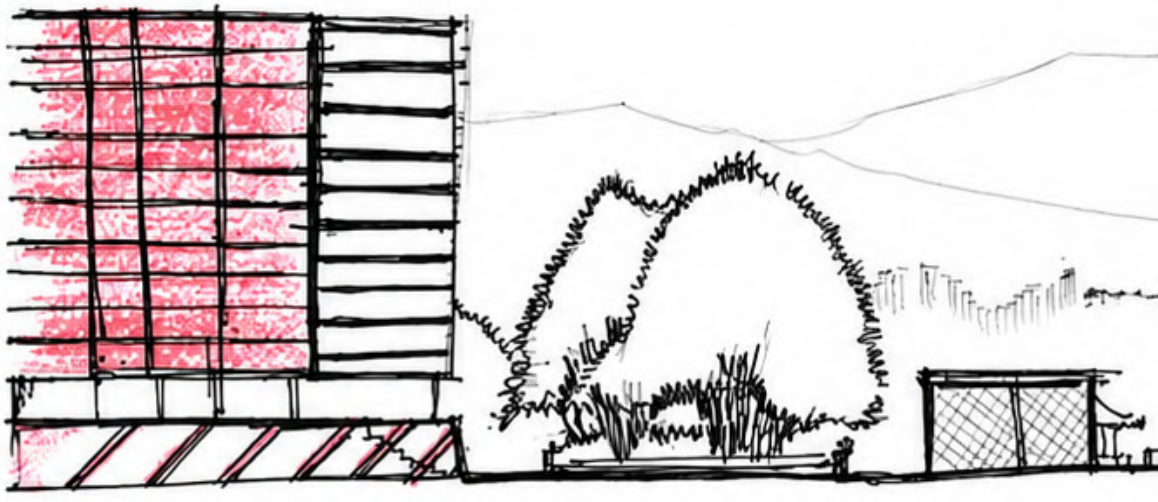




Plans and diagrams by the author.
Axonometric drawing redrawn from Sedighi (2019)

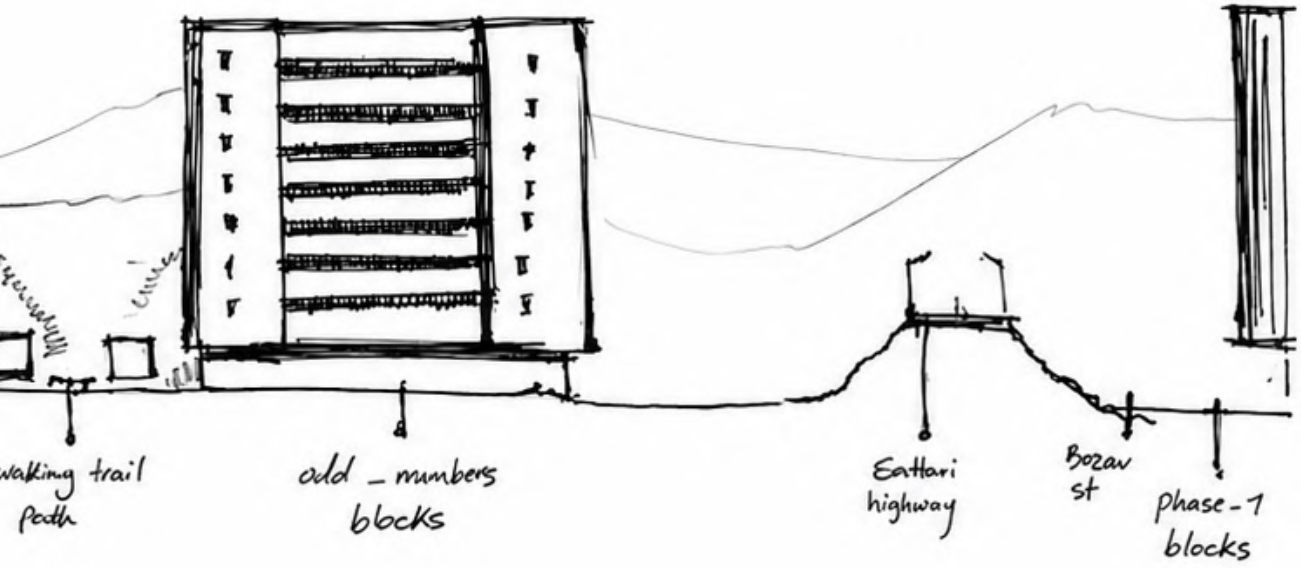


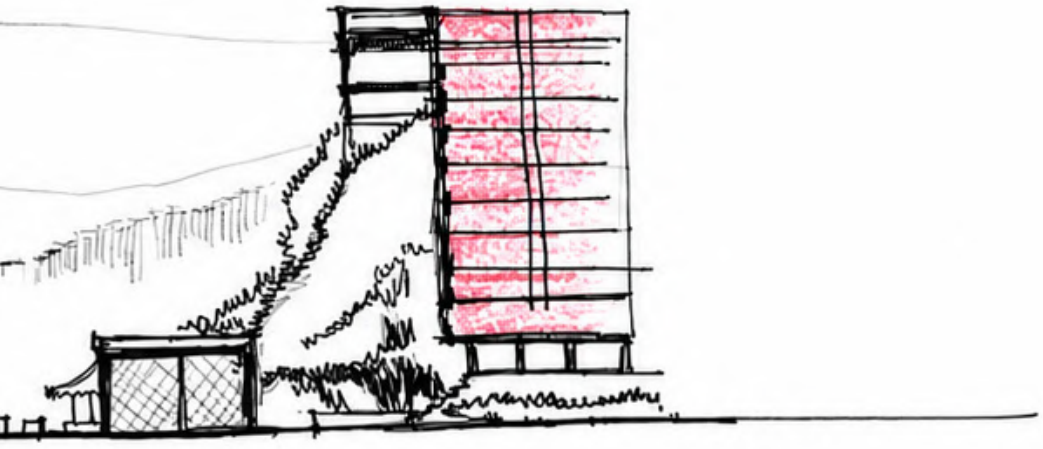
View B



Section A-A

Schematic Sections and Elevations of phase 2, produced through the valuable collaboration of Amirhossein Hosseini, a former resident of Ekbatan and an Architecture student at Politecnico di Torino. In the absence of detailed technical documentation, they were reconstructed based on his recollection and lived experience of the space.

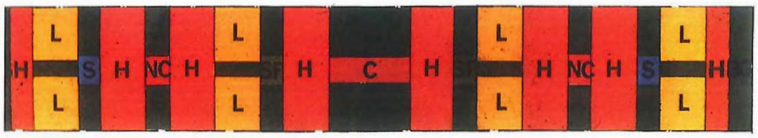

walking trail
Path
odd _ numbers
blocks
Eattari
highway
Bozav
st
phase-1
blocks



Design development and spatial organization of Ekbatan Phase II. The figure combines conceptual diagrams, urban design studies, a physical model, archival housing plans, and a contemporary aerial view of the project. Together, these documents illustrate the evolution of the design from early planning proposals to the realized built form, highlighting the central role of landscape, open space, and modular residential organization in the spatial structure of Phase II.
Sources: Dense Modernities: Kim Swoo Geun—Korea's Architect for the Twentieth Century (Berlin: Aedes, 2011), 44–45; Archive of Kim Swoo Geun, Iran's Centre of Contemporary Architecture, Tehran; Sedighi (2019).

GREEN SYSTEM

SERVING AREA

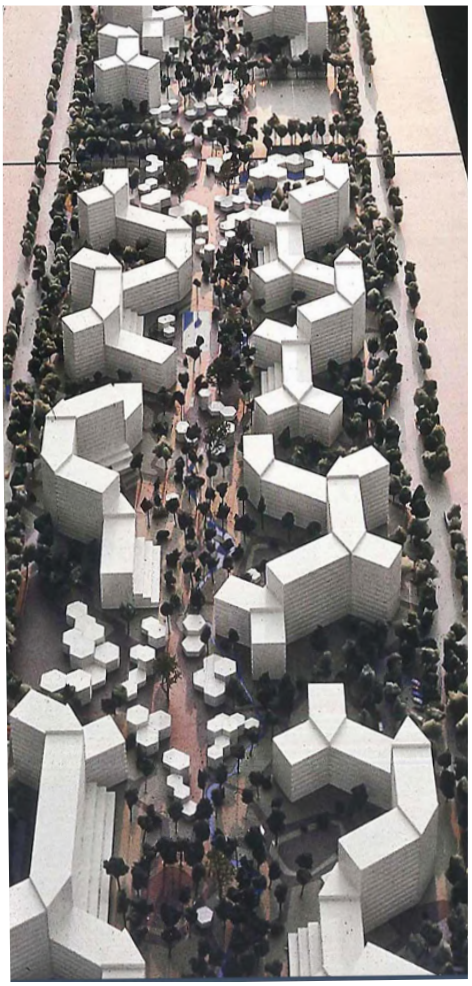


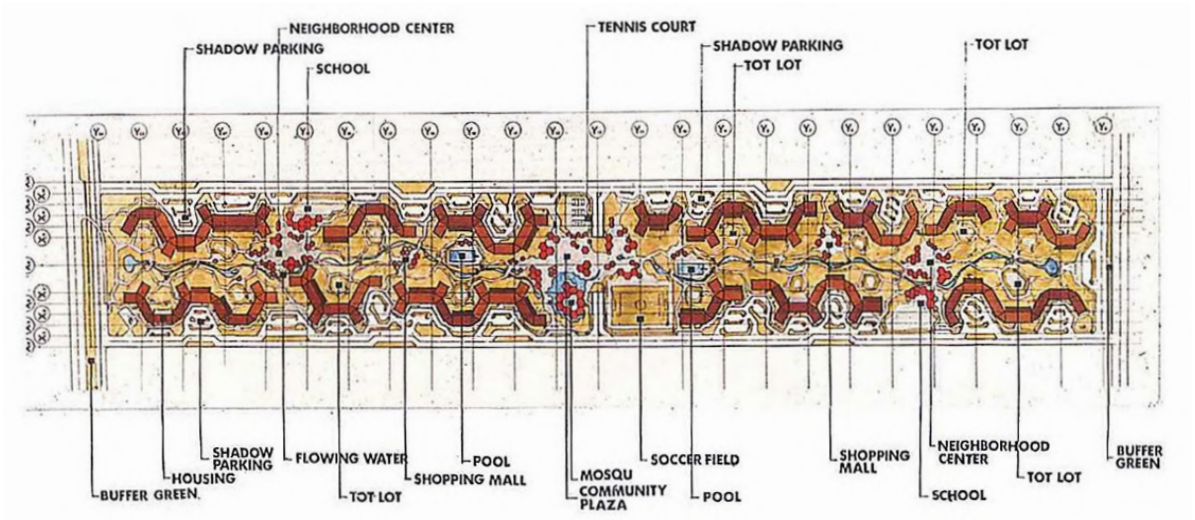
H - HIGH DENSITY
L - LOW DENSITY
C - DISTRICT CENTER
NC - NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTER
S - SCHOOL
SF - SPORTS FACILITY
G - GREEN
BG - BUFFER GREEN

ALT. 3

ALT. 4

LAND USE ALTERNATIVE

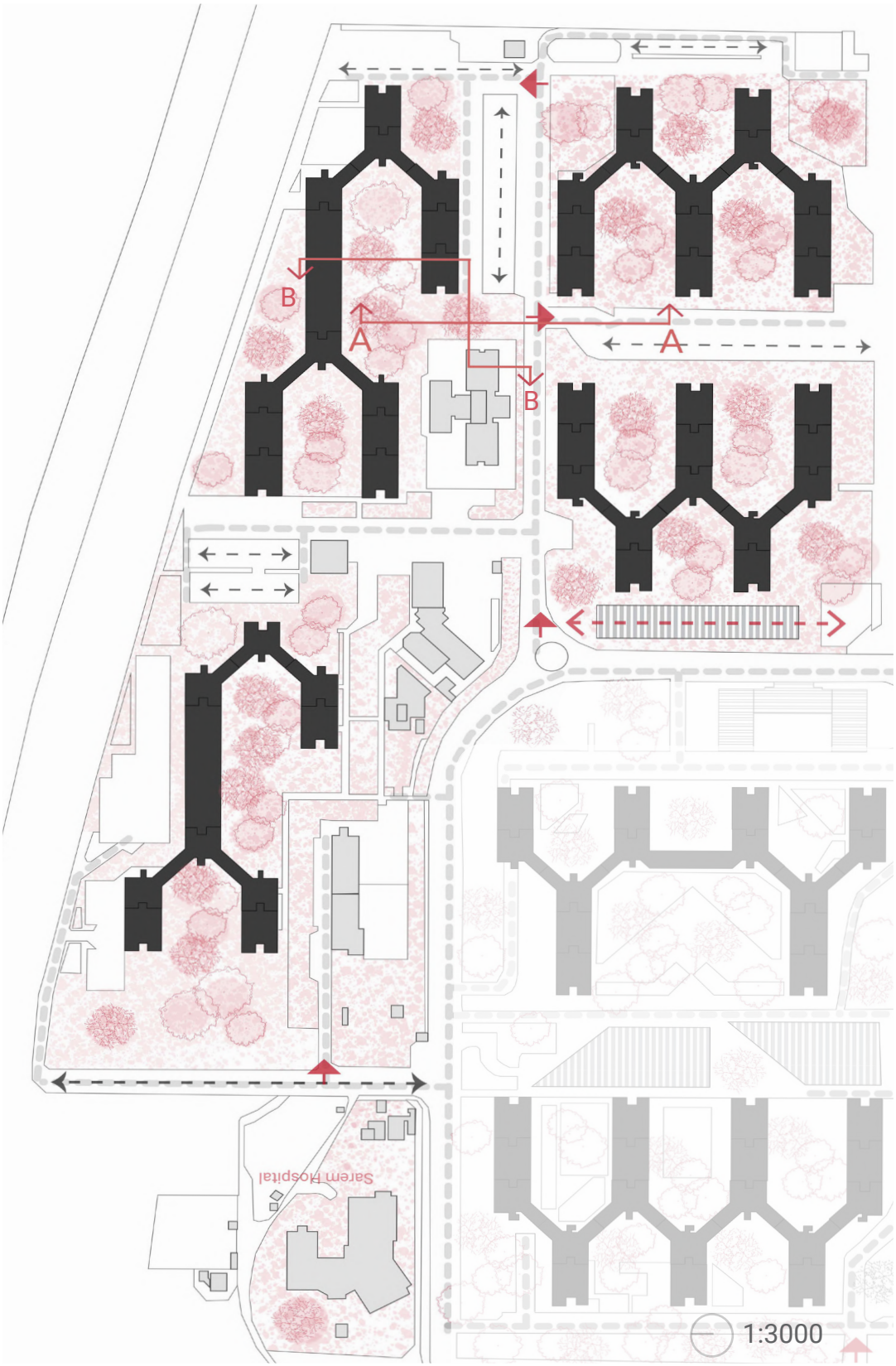




Phase III. A More Compact Residential Structure

Phase III is the smallest section of the Ekbatan, Completed after the Iran–Iraq War, this phase was developed under different economic and political conditions from the earlier phases. Although smaller in scale, it follows many of the same principles that shaped the overall design of Ekbatan.
In terms of housing typology, Phase III is closer to Phase I than to Phase II. Most residential units are organized as single-level apartments and include a range of dwelling types, from smaller units to larger family apartments. However, the overall spatial organization is more compact and straightforward. Distances between buildings are shorter, circulation routes are simpler, and the relationship between residential blocks and communal facilities is easier to understand.
The four blocks are arranged around semi-enclosed courtyards that provide shared outdoor spaces for residents. These courtyards create a gradual transition between private residential areas and public space while also offering opportunities for everyday social interaction. Compared to the large open landscape of Phase II or the extensive pedestrian network of Phase I, the spatial structure of Phase III is more modest in scale but remains centered on collective outdoor space.
Parking and service facilities are integrated directly into the layout of the phase. Shared parking areas are located between the buildings, while additional parking is provided beneath or alongside the residential blocks. This arrangement contributes to the compact character of the neighborhood and allows daily activities to take place within relatively short walking distances.

Although Phase III does not introduce a fundamentally new architectural language, it demonstrates how the design principles of Ekbatan were adapted to different conditions over time. Its smaller scale, simpler organization, and compact spatial structure distinguish it from the earlier phases while maintaining continuity with the overall vision of the project.



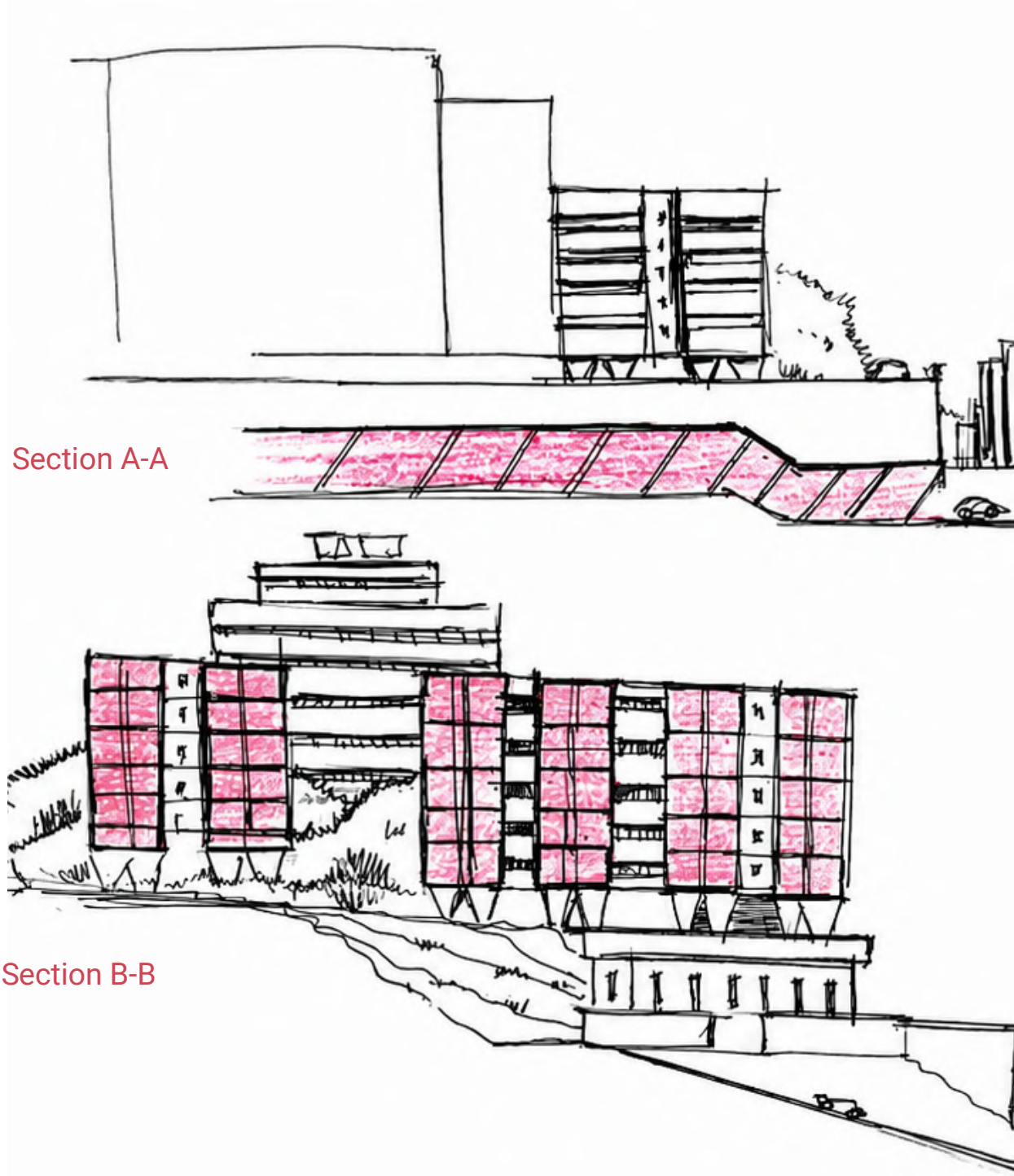
Entrance to Residential Blocks

Parking Lot axis

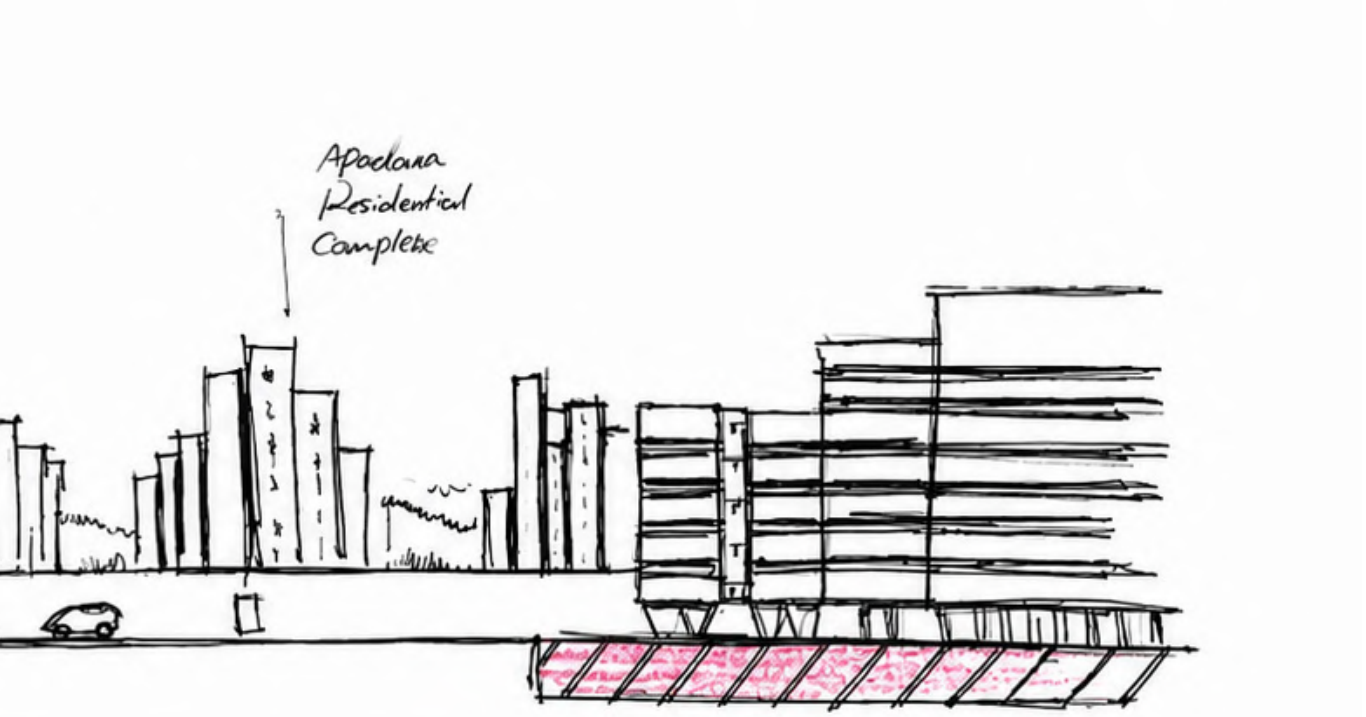
Commercial zone axis

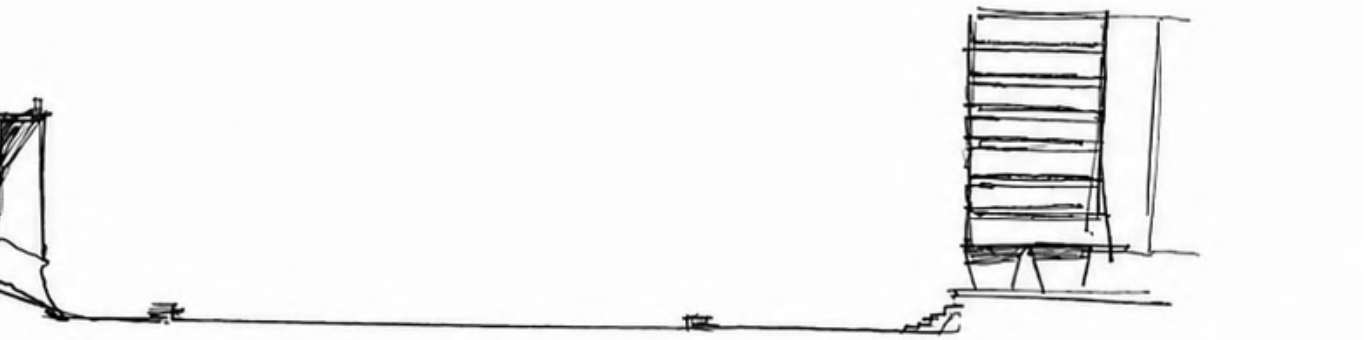
Pedestrian path known as Health Road all along the phase 2

Plans and diagrams by the author.
Note: The volumetric analysis of Phase 3 is identical to that of Phase 1.



Schematic Sections and Elevations of phase 3, produced through the valuable collaboration of Amirhossein Hosseini, a former resident of Ekbatan and an Architecture student at Politecnico di Torino. In the absence of detailed technical documentation, they were reconstructed based on his recollection and lived experience of the space.


Apadana
Residential
Complex



3.3 Construction Technologies and Infrastructure

The scale of the Ekbatan project required construction methods that were uncommon in Iran at the time. Building thousands of residential units within a limited period demanded a level of technical organization and construction efficiency that conventional building methods could not easily provide. For this reason, the project relied on a series of industrialized construction techniques and infrastructural systems that distinguished it from most contemporary housing developments in Iran. According to Fereydoun Azari, the structural system was based primarily on reinforced concrete construction using reusable metal wall molds and flying forms for floor and ceiling casting. These technologies enabled the repetitive production of residential units while maintaining structural consistency across the project. At the time, such systems were largely unavailable in Iran and had to be introduced through international collaboration and technical expertise (Yale Architecture Podcast, 2024).

A central role in this process was played by the American Starrett Housing Corporation. After Rahman Golzar and Fereydoun Azari traveled through several European countries in search of a suitable construction partner, Starrett agreed to participate in the project and became responsible for supervising and managing the construction of Phase I, while Azari remained responsible for the architectural design .Through this collaboration, new construction technologies, management practices, and industrialized building methods were introduced into the project. However, the significance of this partnership extended beyond the construction of Ekbatan itself. The project gradually became a testing ground for new building technologies and industrialized construction systems in Iran. Many Iranian engineers, technicians, and construction workers encountered large-scale concrete casting, reusable metal formwork, prefabricated components, and heavy construction equipment for the first time through their involvement in the project. In this sense, Ekbatan functioned not only as a housing development but also as a site of technical learning, experimentation, and knowledge transfer, where imported technologies were adapted to local conditions and integrated into Iranian construction practices (Yale Architecture Podcast 2024; Morbaghi, 2018).

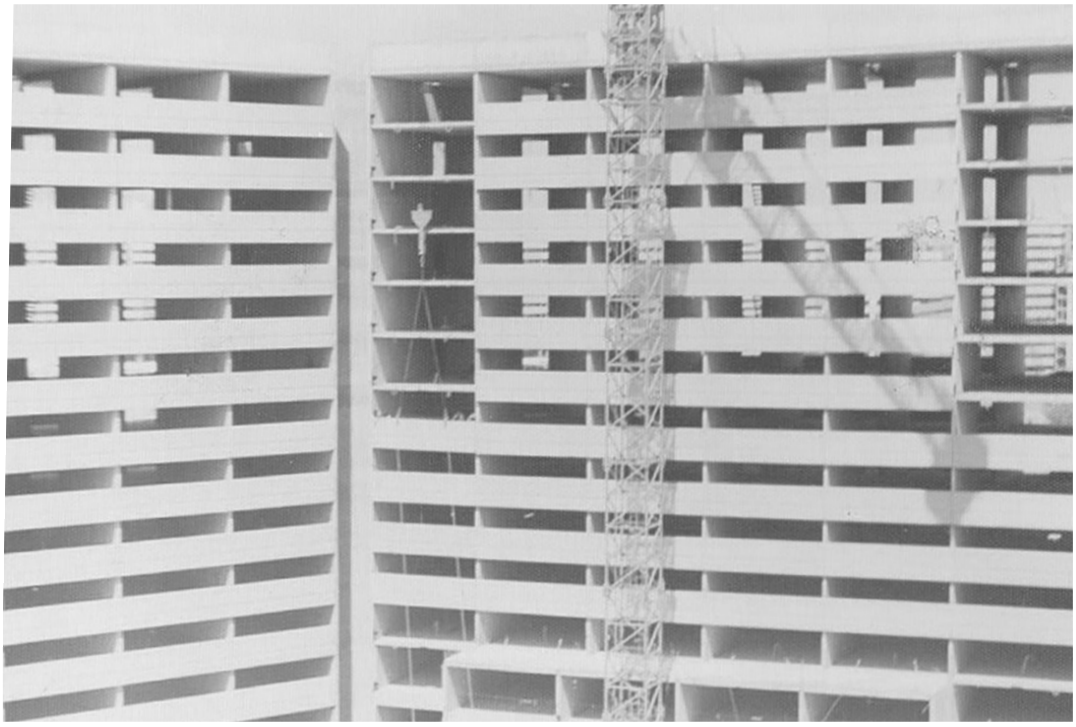
The industrial character of the project was also visible in the production of building components and the organization of construction itself. Several façade elements were assembled on site, while standardized structural components helped accelerate construction and improve

efficiency. Mechanical, electrical, and architectural works were coordinated simultaneously rather than being carried out as separate stages. Each residential block was equipped with its own central boiler room and cooling tower, supplying heating and cooling through multiple fan-coil units distributed throughout the apartments. In addition, elevators, emergency power systems, fire detection and fire-fighting systems, utility networks, storage areas, and both covered and open parking facilities were incorporated into the project from the outset. These systems were not treated as secondary additions but formed part of the original design strategy, reflecting an understanding of housing as a complete urban environment rather than a collection of residential buildings.

The industrial dimension of Ekbatan extended beyond the construction site itself. In order to reduce dependence on imported materials, factories producing tiles, cement products, aluminum components, and double-glazed windows were established or expanded under foreign licenses. These facilities supplied materials required for the project while simultaneously contributing to the development of local construction industries (Yale Architecture Podcast, 2024; Morbaghi, 2018). One of the most visible symbols of this technological transformation was the use of American tower cranes. According to Azari, Ekbatan was the first project in Iran to employ such equipment on this scale, significantly increasing the speed and efficiency of construction operations (Yale Architecture Podcast, 2024).

Taken together, these technologies, infrastructural systems, and industrialized construction methods played a crucial role in the realization of Ekbatan. More importantly, they transformed the project into a point of encounter between international expertise and local knowledge. Through the collaboration of foreign companies, Iranian engineers, architects, and construction workers, Ekbatan became one of the earliest large-scale experiments in industrialized housing production in Iran and an important example of technological adaptation within the country's building industry.(Morbaghi, 2018).

Ekbatan during construction.
Source :former archive of Ekbatan Redevelopment Company
as reproduced in Sedighi (2019).



3.4 Ekbatan Between International Modernism and Local Reinterpretation

The development of Ekbatan coincided with a period in which large-scale housing projects had become one of the main tools through which architects, planners, and governments responded to rapid urban growth and the increasing demand for middle-class housing. In Tehran, this process was closely connected to the internationalization of the city during the oil-boom years. Rana Habibi describes the 1970s as a moment in which international companies, architectural models, and construction technologies entered Iran more visibly, making Ekbatan part of a broader transnational architectural culture rather than an isolated local project (Habibi, 2021, pp.6–7, p.140)

Architecturally, Ekbatan can be read in relation to late modernist housing and postwar megastructural thinking. Its large residential slabs, modular organization, exposed concrete construction, and integration of housing with collective facilities connect it to a broader international search for new forms of urban living. Sedighi explicitly frames Ekbatan within the discourse of "Megastructure Reloaded," arguing that it shared architectural characteristics with well-known megastructural projects (Sedighi, 2019, pp.261-274). such as Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam, Le Vele di Scampia in Naples, Robin Hood Gardens in London and, the Million Programme housing developments in Sweden,while still developing a distinct urban character in Tehran.

This megastructural logic is visible in the way Ekbatan combined housing, infrastructure, movement, public services, and open space within a single urban framework. Rather than treating residential blocks as isolated objects, the project organized them as parts of a larger system of neighborhoods, communal facilities, schools, commercial centers, and green spaces. Habibi similarly notes that Ekbatan aimed to function as an independent spatial unit capable of providing for residents' everyday needs through the integration of shopping centers, schools, a hospital, a post office, swimming pools, and sports centers into the plan (Habibi, 2021, p.151).

Beyond its scale and technical systems, Ekbatan also reflected architectural principles that had circulated widely through modernist planning since the mid-twentieth century. The use of pilotis, the separation of pedestrian and vehicular circulation, the presence of large open green spaces, and the integration of housing with collective facilities all connect the project to international modernist

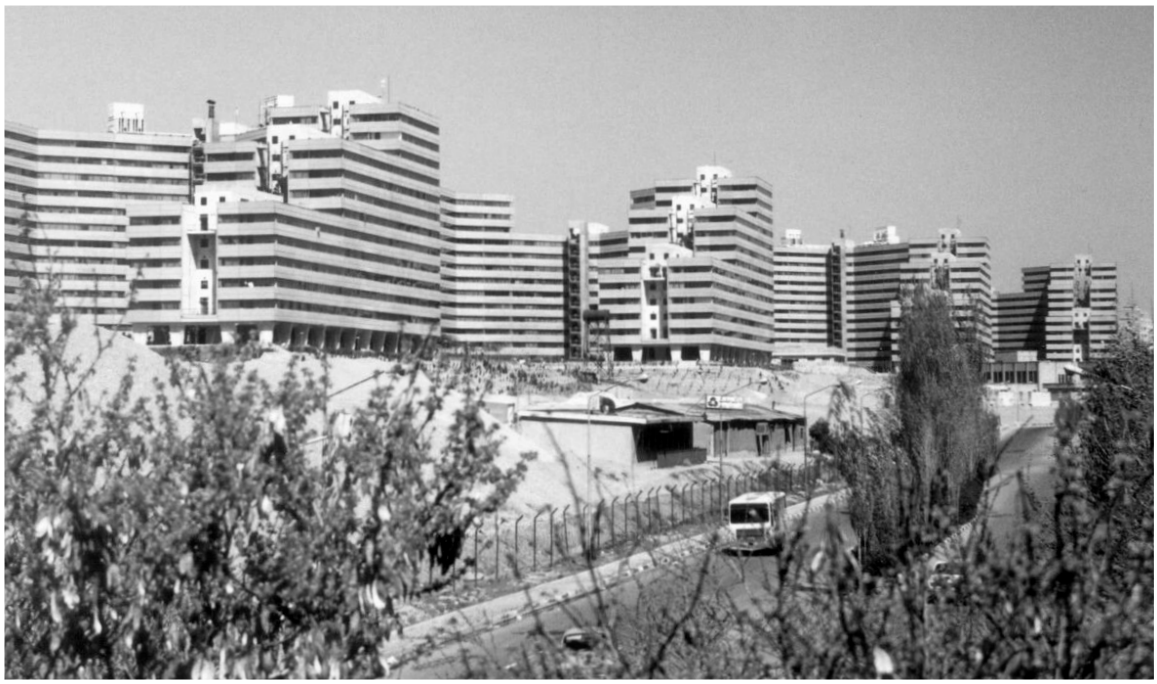
debates on collective living. However, Ekbatan should not be understood as a direct copy of a specific foreign model. Its importance lies instead in the way these circulating ideas were reworked within the social, climatic, and urban conditions of Tehran.

This local reinterpretation is especially visible in the organization of public and semi-public spaces. Habibi argues that, despite its international references, Ekbatan adapted its building typologies and neighborhood structure in relation to the local context. She also identifies two different design approaches within the complex: Phase I, with its linear bazaar, and Phase II, with its modern shopping malls and different treatment of green space (Habibi, 2021, p.151). In this sense, Ekbatan combined international models of large-scale housing with spatial elements that recalled familiar Iranian urban patterns, particularly the relationship between housing, gardens, commercial space, and everyday collective life.
For this reason, Ekbatan occupies a distinctive position in the architectural history of twentieth-century Iran. It was simultaneously a product of international modernism, a large-scale experiment in megastructural urbanism, and a local reinterpretation of collective housing. Its significance lies not only in its size or construction technology, but in the way it translated global architectural and technical ideas into a spatial form that responded to Tehran's specific urban reality. In this sense, Ekbatan was not merely influenced by international architectural developments; it actively transformed them within a local context.

Visual affinities between Ekbatan and Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation, Marseille. Although there is no evidence that Ekbatan was directly modeled on Le Corbusier's projects, several architectural characteristics—including pilotis, exposed concrete surfaces, horizontal façade articulation, and the expression of structural form—place the project within a broader architectural culture shaped by postwar modernism and Brutalist architecture. The images highlight these formal similarities through a comparison of Ekbatan's residential blocks and pilotis spaces with corresponding elements of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation (1947–1952).
Photographs by Catrina Beevor(Unité d'Habitation),Ali Fathi(Ekbatan)

Viewed alongside projects such as Robin Hood Gardens, Bijlmermeer, and Le Vele, Ekbatan initially appears to embody many of the anxieties associated with large-scale modernist housing. As architecture researcher Brian Ackley argues, its monumental concrete slabs, repetitive façades, and immense scale evoke the image of a dystopian urban landscape rather than an ideal place to live. Public perceptions of the complex have often reinforced this image, portraying Ekbatan as an anonymous concrete environment associated with social isolation, delinquency, and urban alienation (Ackley, 2010).Yet, the everyday reality of the township presents a striking contradiction. Rather than becoming a failed housing estate, Ekbatan evolved into a functioning community whose residents developed a strong attachment to place and a distinct collective identity. Positioned between the symbolic geographies of north and south Tehran and inhabited by people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, the complex gradually became a shared point of identification that often transcended existing social divisions (Ackley, 2010). Its relative self-sufficiency, extensive public facilities, and dense social networks further reinforced this sense of belonging.

The case of Ekbatan therefore suggests that the social life of a place cannot be reduced to its architectural appearance. If its physical form recalls some of the most controversial experiments of postwar modernism, its subsequent history demonstrates how residents can appropriate, reinterpret, and transform planned environments in ways that exceed the intentions of their designers. In doing so, the very architectural and spatial framework that might otherwise be understood as a symbol of modernism's failures becomes a condition of possibility for new forms of social life. Rather than determining collective practices, the spaces of Ekbatan provided a setting within which residents could generate their own meanings, attachments, and modes of belonging.Understanding this process requires moving beyond the architectural object itself and considering the wider urban, political, and social contexts within which Ekbatan emerged and evolved.



Comparative views of Ekbatan, Robin Hood Gardens, Bijlmermeer, and Le Vele di Scampia
Despite their different geographical and political contexts, these projects share a common architectural language characterized by large residential slabs, extensive open landscapes, separated circulation systems, and an ambition to create self-contained urban environments. The comparison situates Ekbatan within a wider international history of postwar housing megaprojects and highlights both its architectural affinities and its distinct social legacy.Source: The Former Archive of Ekbatan Redevelopment Company ,Censimento delle Architetture Italiane dal 1945 ad Oggi, Ministero della Cultura, Italy, “Le Vele di Scampia,
Sandra Lousada, 1972 © The Smithson Family Collection, Architectural Review, “Bijlmermeer Estate by NL Architects with XVW Architectuur.”

04. Contemporary Tehran:
Everyday Life, Control, and Resistance

My City Tehran (2026) by Iranian artist Hanieh Ghashghaei. To the artist, Tehran is understood not only as a physical city, but as an emotional condition shaped by memory, fear, and resistance.

But Tehran stands

-A Frame of Contemporary Tehran, a note by Fahimeh Hajiabadi (April 2026).

Perhaps at first glance, writing about a city like Tehran may seem difficult; for this city is constantly a city of contradictions and struggles; yet not like any bustling city that never ceases to move, but rather like a living body that observes and breathes every sequence and act of the city's daily drama from through every single frame of its houses' windows.

To understand the overall feeling and emotion that the city of Tehran imparts to an individual, one does not need to walk it from north to south and pause at every dead end. Perhaps it is only necessary to wander within its central regions[1]. From Daneshgah Street and Enghelab Square to Keshavarz Boulevard and Valiasr Street. These very places are enough to show that despite how much people are still entangled in their everyday and minimal existence, sometimes the uncanny and the exception emerge and alter the usual rhythm. In Freud's definition, the "uncanny" is not something completely unknown or alien; rather, it is something that was once deeply familiar and part of ourselves, but because it has now reappeared, it evokes a feeling of strangeness, fear, or surprise in us.
Finding this uncanny element is not difficult at all; sometimes it manifest itself in the unique and non-Islamic customary clothing of someone standing in front of the Teatr-e Shahr[2], or it may reveal itself in the spread of a street vendor at Enghelab Square who, alongside the world's current bestselling motivational books, sells an uncensored copy of Sadegh Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*[3]. Sometimes a conversation between two people in Daneshjoo Park might bring the uncanny to our ears, and sometimes we simply hear it from a vendor on the Karaj/Tehran metro. For me, this is exactly the difference between Tehran and all the cities in the world; it always rebels and, mediated by the uncanny, flaunts its manifestations of resistance and defiance to the world.

1. Tehran has historically been shaped by a socio-spatial divide between its wealthy northern districts and poorer southern neighborhoods. Between these two poles, the central areas of the city have traditionally housed much of the middle class and functioned as one of Tehran's main social, economic, and emotional cores."
2. *Teatr-e Shahr* is one of Tehran's most significant cultural and social landmarks, located in the central areas of the city. Beyond its role as a theatre complex, it has long functioned as a public gathering place and informal meeting point for students, artists, intellectuals, and young people
3. Sadegh Hedayat was one of the most influential figures of modern Persian literature, best known for *The Blind Owl* (1937), a novel centered on alienation, death, and psychological fragmentation that has been censored and banned in Iran during different decades.

Speaking of this city without considering its political and social currents is impossible. It is exactly like getting into a *Taxi Tehran*[4] and, instead of listening to the passengers' discussions, turning the music volume all the way up, or simply not knowing Persian at all. Because the language itself has become intertwined and unified with all the recent events and major currents. Even if we stuff cotton in our ears, it is impossible for our eyes not to fall upon the billboards and other political symbols. Now, no matter which alley or side street we turn into or whatever highway traffic we hit, ultimately Nasrin Sotoudeh[5] gets into the taxi with her magnificent tone and speaks of attending to and caring for political prisoners. That red rose left behind by her on the taxi's dashboard is the most beautiful manifestation of that very uncanny.If the uncanny gets lost in the deafening honks of motorcyclists in Palestine Square, or stalls in a medical prescription exchanged in Nasser Khosrow[6] , it will eventually manifest itself elsewhere and in other forms. It multiplies in the very fabric of those slow footsteps in Keshavarz Boulevard, in taking refuge in the dark mezzanines of Vesal Street cafes, and in the cigarette smoke sent up into the city's smoggy sky with a bitter laugh. The youth of this city have chosen the street not as a passageway, but as a stage to reclaim their confiscated lives.

With all the contradictions and the transition from tradition to modernity that Tehran and Iran have undergone throughout all these years, Tehran has always stood and watched; how bombs destroy houses, how the police and the morality patrol fall upon the people, and how the economy, with the radiation of the day's first sunlight, cracks like a fragile and unattainable plant.
But Tehran stands; for Tehran is the heart of rebellion and the symbol of the rebellious human. Despite the heaviest police presence and the strictest surveillances, this city always takes the first step of uprising. By materializing and creating forbidden and uncanny elements that the state would forever keep in the Garden of the Hesperides: from the CDs of uncensored movies from past decades to the most fundamental human rights. The city has always taken back its freedom piece by piece over the decades, and will continue to do so. Whether in the stature of its bloody uprisings and the tears of its mothers, or through the everyday micro-defiances of its women.

4. *Taxi Tehran*, a film by Jafar Panahi set almost entirely inside a taxi driving through Tehran.The film portrays everyday urban life, social tensions, censorship, and the perspectives of ordinary citizens in contemporary Iran.
5. Nasrin Sotoudeh, a prominent human rights lawyer and activist, is among the figures whose name has become closely associated with resistance and persistent advocacy in contemporary Iranian history.
6. Naser Khosrow Street is one of Tehran's oldest streets, widely known for its informal and semi-legal markets where almost anything can be found—from rare or unprescribed medications to imported goods difficult to obtain elsewhere.

Enghelab Street is one of Tehran's most important intellectual and cultural corridors, long associated with universities, bookstores, publishing houses, and student life. Alongside its formal bookshops, the street is also known for its sidewalk vendors and second-hand booksellers, who sell everything from academic texts and banned literature to photocopied translations and rare publications, making the street a central space of literary exchange and everyday public culture in Tehran.Photograph by Alex Shams (2021).(top)

The coexistence of dense traffic, public transportation, historic plane trees, and everyday urban movement within one of the city's central social corridors in the city center of Tehran. Photograph by Kamyar Adl (2012).(bottom)

The women-only carriage referenced here is part of the Tehran Metro system. Sadeghiyeh Station, located in western Tehran, functions as one of the main connection points between Tehran and Karaj through Line 5 of the Tehran Metro network.Unknown photographer (2017). (Top)

In contemporary Tehran, cafes are among the few accessible spaces for leisure, socializing, and everyday interaction, especially for young people. Within a city shaped by political and social restrictions, they often function as informal refuges for conversation, self-expression, and temporary escape from the pressures of daily life. Even these spaces, however, remain heavily monitored and restricted; in recent years, hundreds of cafés have faced warnings, temporary closures, or shutdowns over issues related to mixed gatherings, dress codes, music, or violations of Islamic regulations.Unknown photographer(2019).(bottom)

A familiar and repetitive urban scene inside Tehran's shared taxis: fragmented conversations, passing strangers, traffic, and fleeting moments of proximity between people who may never meet again, yet still share brief moments of empathy, conversation, and collective experience during the course of the journey. Photograph by Christina Kalampoki(2018-2019).(top)

Nasrin Sotoudeh appears in *Taxi Tehran(2015)* movie as herself rather than a fictional character, further blurring the boundary between cinema and lived reality. In one scene, she carries red roses intended for the families of political prisoners, transforming the flower into a quiet symbol of solidarity, dignity, and peaceful resistance within the film's portrayal of everyday life in Tehran.(bottom)

4.1 Everyday Life under Ideological Rule

Tehran's everyday life has been shaped by the Islamic Republic's attempt to regulate public behavior, gender norms, dress, speech, media, and political expression, while residents have continually adapted, negotiated, evaded, and resisted those pressures. Ethnographic work on Tehran has emphasized precisely this daily struggle over self-expression, especially among the postrevolutionary generations (Khosravi, 2008; Bayat, 2010).

Asma Mehan, in her recent work, treats Tehran not as a neutral backdrop to politics but as a city whose built environment has been repeatedly shaped by struggles over power, memory, and public visibility. In her account, Tehran is a historically layered urban setting in which political change leaves marks not only on institutions but also on streets, monuments, gathering sites, and the everyday experience of moving through the city. Consequently, streets, campuses, metro stations, cafés, and major urban sites such as Azadi Square and Enqelab Street are not politically neutral settings but spaces shaped by the overlap of state control, collective memory, and recurring forms of dissent (Mehan,2023, pp.86-88, 108-109).

This is why a discussion of neighborhoods such as Ekbatan requires a broader account of post-1979 Tehran first. Over the last four decades, the city has become a place where ordinary actions—walking in the street, gathering in a university courtyard, driving without a headscarf, posting on social media, sitting in a café, joining a memorial, or even remaining silent in public—can acquire political meaning. under such conditions, every small act of disobedience becomes an act of resistance .Tehran's collective life has developed under the combined pressure of ideological rule, economic instability, repeated protest cycles, and recurring state violence.

The result is a city marked by contradiction. Tehran is highly urban, educated, digitally connected, and socially complex, yet it is governed through institutions that continue to monitor morality, censor communication, and punish dissent. That contradiction is central to the emotional atmosphere of the city today. It helps explain why fear, exhaustion, irony, caution, solidarity, and sudden collective eruption can coexist so strongly in contemporary Tehran.

For many residents, living in Tehran has meant living with a constant awareness of visible and invisible limits. The state has never controlled every part of daily life, but it has worked hard to shape the rules of public appearance and public speech. Over time, this has produced a practical urban habit of caution: what can be said in a taxi, what can be worn on the street, what can be posted online, what music can be played in public, who can gather where, and how quickly an ordinary social event can become politically risky.Islamic Republic has repeatedly blurred the line between social control and political control. What may appear from outside as a matter of “culture” or “morality” is often also a matter of surveillance and intimidation. Of course, these conditions are not unique to Tehran and can be found across Iran. However, as the country’s political, economic, and cultural center, Tehran provides a particularly visible and concentrated expression of the broader forces that shape everyday life in the Islamic Republic.

Over time, these mechanisms of control have expanded beyond physical public space. As communication, social interaction, and political expression increasingly moved online, digital platforms became another important arena through which the state sought to regulate visibility, monitor behavior, and shape public discourse. Iran’s internet environment has become increasingly restricted through censorship, surveillance, content filtering, and repeated efforts to steer users toward a more controlled domestic internet (Freedom House, 2024). Following major protest movements, the state has repeatedly intensified digital control through platform filtering, restrictions on circumvention tools, and greater centralization of internet governance (Tightening the Net, 2024). By 2026, internet access had become more restricted, expensive, and vulnerable to repeated disruptions and shutdowns. As Freedom House argues, such measures are not merely technical restrictions but part of a broader strategy to control communication, information, and public narratives during moments of political tension (Freedom House, 2026).

In Tehran, where social life is heavily mediated through smartphones, messaging applications, and social media platforms, control over digital space has become inseparable from the governance of urban life itself. As a result, online spaces have increasingly become sites of both state control and social resistance.

Mehan's discussion of protest media adds an important dimension to this argument. She suggests that during moments of unrest, digital visibility itself becomes part of urban struggle, as people film, repost, and witness events in ways that extend the contested public sphere beyond the street. In this sense, the smartphone screen functions not as an escape from public space but as one of its contested extensions (Mehan, 2023, p.100).

Yet even under conditions of intense control, urban life in Tehran continues through adaptation, improvisation, and everyday negotiation. Residents constantly test the limits of visibility, create temporary spaces of autonomy, and find room for friendship, leisure, self-expression, and dissent. These practices often depend on careful calculation and selective visibility, reflecting the unstable boundary between what is tolerated and what is punished. As a result, contemporary Tehran often feels tense even when it appears outwardly ordinary.

4.2 Women, Compulsory Hijab, and Gendered Control

No aspect of everyday life in Tehran more clearly reveals the political nature of public space than the regulation of women's bodies. Compulsory hijab is not merely a dress code but one of the central mechanisms through which the state asserts authority in everyday urban life. Women's appearance in streets, cars, universities, offices, airports, and shopping centers has long been subject to monitoring, correction, and punishment.
The protests known as the "Girls of Enghelab Street" are particularly significant because they demonstrate how the regulation of women's bodies is inseparable from the politics of urban visibility. The movement began in December 2017 when Vida Movahed stood on a utility box on Enghelab Street in Tehran and silently waved her white headscarf on a stick. Her action quickly inspired similar acts by other women across the country and became one of the most recognizable symbols of resistance to compulsory hijab. By transforming an ordinary element of the street into a platform of dissent, the protest revealed how the control of clothing could become part of a broader struggle over visibility, citizenship, and the right to appear politically in public space.

By the early 2020s, women in Iran could face harassment, arrest, fines, and imprisonment for violating compulsory dress regulations, while surveillance technologies were increasingly used to identify and punish unveiled women (Reuters, 2023). Human rights organizations have repeatedly described these policies as systematic violations of women's rights (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Amnesty International, 2024).
The death of Mahsa Jina Amini in morality police custody in Tehran in September 2022 exposed this system to the world in a particularly stark way. Reuters, the United Nations, and numerous human rights organizations identified her death as the immediate trigger for the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising (Reuters, 2023; United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on Iran, 2024). The movement rapidly expanded beyond opposition to compulsory hijab. Under the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom," protesters articulated broader demands concerning bodily autonomy, civil liberties, political accountability, and social justice, making it one of the most significant challenges to the Islamic Republic in decades.

For many women in Tehran, however, Amini's death was not an isolated shock. Rather, it condensed a much longer history of humiliation, arbitrary interference, and bodily discipline in public space. This helps explain why the protests resonated so widely: they were not only a response to state violence, but also to the accumulated burden of everyday gendered control.

The practical forms of this control are often deeply invasive. Reports from 2024 documented that tens of thousands of women had their cars confiscated for alleged violations of veiling regulations and that enforcement relied on a combination of surveillance cameras, text-message warnings, police stops, citizen reporting, and arbitrary vehicle impoundment (Amnesty International, 2024). Women reported being chased on roads, stranded after car seizures, forced into "morality" classes, insulted, threatened with imprisonment or flogging, and denied access to transportation and services unless they complied. Amnesty International described this system as a campaign of constant surveillance and policing that caused severe psychological distress and disrupted everyday life.International investigators further warned in March 2025 that the government had intensified the policing and criminal prosecution of women defying compulsory hijab and was increasingly relying on technology, surveillance systems, and what it described as state-sponsored vigilantism (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025).

This is one reason public space in Tehran remains profoundly unequal. Men and women may share the same city, but they do not move through it under the same conditions. For many women, going out in Tehran has meant not only dealing with traffic, pollution, work, study, and the ordinary pressures of urban life, but also navigating the possibility of official or unofficial discipline. This is not simply a private inconvenience. It reshapes how one inhabits the city, how one travels, how long one lingers in public places, what risks one is willing to take, and how one relates to strangers and institutions. In this sense, the regulation of women's bodies is not only a question of dress or morality; it is also a question of power, visibility, and the unequal experience of urban space.

Women protesting compulsory hijab regulations in Tehran shortly after the 1979 Revolution. The demonstrations marked one of the earliest collective public confrontations between women protesters and the emerging Islamic Republic over gender, visibility, and the control of public space.
Source: Hengameh Golestan, Witness 1979, Tehran,(March 1979).

Members of the morality police (Gasht-e Ershad) escorting women into a police van in Tehran. Taken decades later, the photograph illustrates the continued enforcement of compulsory hijab regulations and the enduring role of public space as a site of negotiation and contestation over women's visibility.
Source: Entekhab News, "Return of the Morality Police to the Streets," (2024).

Vida Movahed standing on a utility box on Enghelab Street, Tehran, in December 2017, holding her white headscarf aloft in protest against compulsory hijab. Her action became one of the defining images of the "Girls of Enghelab Street" movement and transformed an ordinary element of the urban streetscape into a platform of political dissent. In subsequent years, supporters have continued to leave flowers at the site to commemorate the protest and its enduring significance in struggles over women's rights, visibility, and public space in Iran. Source:Soran Manssounia (2026).

Childhood photograph of Mahsa Jina Amini.During the protests, the Kurdish phrase “Jina giyan, nawî te dibe hêma” (“Dear Jina, you will not die; your name will become a symbol”) became one of the movement’s most widely repeated slogans.
Source: Amini’s family(2022)

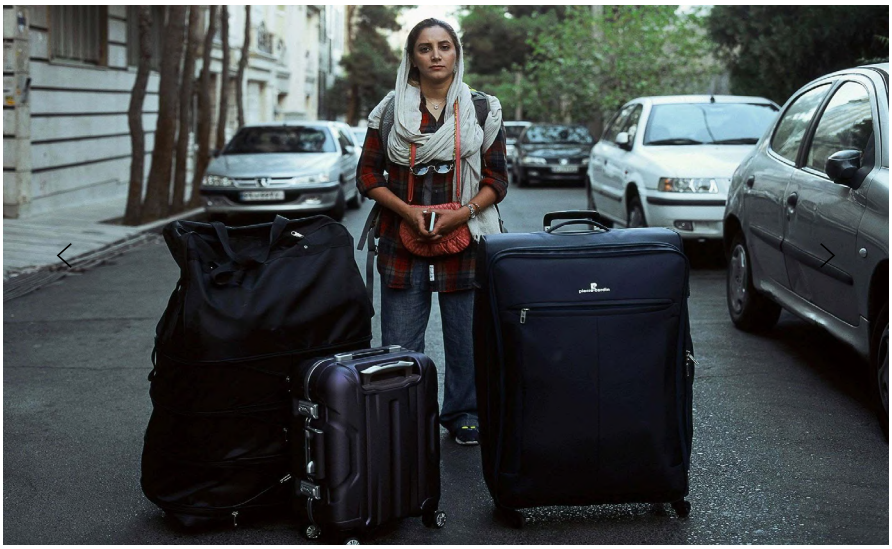
Photograph from the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests in Tehran following the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in 2022
Source:Unknown

4.3 Economic Pressure, Youth Frustration, and the Question of a Future

Alongside ideological restriction, economic pressure has been one of the most important forces shaping everyday life in Tehran. Economic reports have described the period between 2011 and 2020 as a lost decade of growth, marked by declining per-capita GDP, rising poverty, and inflation that significantly eroded purchasing power (World Bank 2023). For many Tehran residents, these pressures appear not as abstract economic indicators but as stalled life plans: unstable employment, delayed independence, difficulties accessing housing, and deep uncertainty about the future. Although Iran experienced periods of renewed growth in the early 2020s, driven largely by the oil sector, the broader outlook remained constrained by sanctions, geopolitical uncertainty, energy shortages, weak investment, and persistently high inflation (World Bank 2025). As a result, improvements in macroeconomic indicators have not resolved the everyday experience of insecurity, rising costs, and uncertainty that continues to shape urban life in Tehran.

Tehran offers education, social networks, exposure, and aspiration, but frequently without a believable path toward a stable and secure adulthood for its young generation. This makes a sense of a blocked future that has also made migration increasingly central to the social imagination of educated Tehranis.The Migration Policy Institute notes that large numbers of well-educated Iranians have left the country since 1979, driven by political restrictions, limited professional opportunities, economic difficulties, sanctions, and the desire for greater personal freedom (Migration Policy Institute, 2023; Stanford Iran 2040 Project, 2020).

In Tehran, these pressures translate into a familiar social experience: the sense that departure has become one of the few remaining strategies for preserving a future. Language classes, visa examinations, foreign university applications, and conversations about leaving have become part of everyday middle-class life. Even for those who remain, migration continues to shape everyday feeling. Friends leave, siblings move abroad, professional networks disperse, and imagined futures are often located elsewhere. The city remains socially dense, but it is also marked by absence, anticipation, and the persistent possibility of departure.



Shahrzad, 2018, to Italy, from The Last Day series, 2018.

Omid, 2021, to Germany, from The Last Day

Negin, 2021, to Germany, from The Last Day series, 2021

Paniz, 2022, to Armenia, from The Last Day

Behnam Sadighi's ongoing series The Last Day looks at the immigration of Iranian youths to distant countries, aspiring to find a better situation and lead a successful life. They leave their own country, not to experience new things, but as a form of evacuation, like those who are flood-stricken and forced to seek refuge in a foreign land. This is a daily experience, visiting young students who are desperately trying to leave their country; some wishing to pursue their educational goals and others seeking permanent residency abroad. This project presents their last portraits, taken before they leave their motherland, as a memory for them to hold of a land that they may never see again.
Source: Mohit Art Archive, Accessed June 2026

Paniz, 2022, to Armenia, from The Last Day

y series, 2021

Shilan, Farbod, 2016, to Denmark, from The Last Day series, 2016

series, 2022

Soheil, 2021, to Germany, from The Last Day series, 2021

series, 2022

Paniz, 2022, to Armenia, from The Last Day series, 2022

4.4 Cycles of Protest, Memory, and Urban Space

The political atmosphere of contemporary Tehran cannot be understood without reference to the repeated cycles of protest and repression that have shaped the city over the past three decades. These were not isolated events that appeared and disappeared. Each wave of protest altered how people understood the street, the university, the home, and the boundaries of public expression. At the same time, each crackdown left behind memories that continued to shape collective life long after the protests themselves had ended.

One of the earliest moments in this cycle emerged during the 1999 student protests, triggered by the closure of the reformist newspaper *Salam*. The violent attack on student dormitories at Tehran University demonstrated that universities were not simply educational institutions but politically charged urban spaces. For many young Tehranis, the events of 1999 became a lasting reminder that even peaceful criticism could be met with state violence (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

A decade later, the 2009 Green Movement expanded this experience dramatically. Following the disputed presidential election, hundreds of thousands of people filled the streets of Tehran in the largest demonstrations since the 1979 Revolution (Reuters 2009). Beyond its political demands, the movement transformed the city itself. Streets, squares, and even residential rooftops became sites of collective expression. As Mehan notes, the widely circulated images of rooftop protests blurred the boundary between private and public space, extending the geography of dissent beyond the street and into everyday urban life (Mehan, 2023,P.101).

The protests of 2017–2018 and the nationwide uprising of November 2019 reflected a different form of discontent, driven increasingly by economic hardship, political frustration, and declining trust in state institutions. These protests demonstrated that dissatisfaction was no longer expressed primarily through reformist politics but through broader social and economic grievances. They were also met with severe repression, mass arrests, and, in the case of 2019, a near-total internet shutdown that highlighted the growing importance of digital control in the management of dissent (Amnesty International, 2019; Tightening the Net, 2024).

The 2022 “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement marked another turning point. As mentioned before, sparked by the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in Tehran following her arrest by the morality police, the protests quickly evolved into the broadest challenge to the Islamic Republic in recent years. More importantly, they transformed the symbolic meaning of urban space. Metro stations, university entrances, schools, shopping districts, and neighborhood streets became sites where ordinary visibility could suddenly become collective action. The movement demonstrated how deeply questions of gender, bodily autonomy, public space, and political authority had become intertwined in contemporary Tehran.

These cycles of protest were also marked by significant loss of life, mass arrests, executions, and restrictions on communication. Precise figures remain contested, partly because independent reporting has often been restricted and because state authorities have not consistently released comprehensive data. Nevertheless, human rights organizations and international observers agree that each major wave of unrest was accompanied by substantial repression[8] . More broadly, recent reports point to a dramatic rise in the use of the death penalty in Iran. The United Nations documented at least 901 executions in 2024, while later assessments by Iran Human Rights and ECPM recorded 975 executions in 2024 and at least 1,639 executions in 2025, the highest figure reported since 1989 (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025; Iran Human Rights and ECPM, 2026). Although not all of these executions were directly related to political protest, they point to the wider punitive environment in which political and social life now unfolds.

8. The 1999 student protests resulted in deaths, injuries, and the detention of more than a thousand people (Human Rights Watch,1999). The 2009 Green Movement was followed by mass arrests, extrajudicial killings, and reports of torture (Human Rights Watch, 2009). During the November 2019 protests, estimates of the death toll ranged from at least 323 people documented by Amnesty International to approximately 1,500 reported by Reuters, while nearly 7,000 people were believed to have been arrested (Amnesty International 2019; Reuters, 2019). The same protests were accompanied by a near-total nationwide internet shutdown, which rights groups later described as a critical tool of repression and information control (Amnesty International 2019; Tightening the Net, 2024). Following the 2022 “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising, hundreds of protesters were reported killed, tens of thousands faced judicial proceedings, and a number of executions linked to the protests were carried out after widely criticized trials (Reuters 2023; United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on Iran, 2024). Amnesty International later reported that the number of protest-related executions continued to rise through 2024, often following grossly unfair trials and torture-tainted confessions (Amnesty International, 2024)

From top to bottom: The July 1999 student protests following the attack on Tehran University dormitories; mass demonstrations at Azadi Square during the June 2009 Green Movement after the disputed presidential election; and the November 2019 protests in Enghelab Square- following the government's fuel-price increase.

Source (from top to bottom): Unknown, Unknown, Atta Kenare

Examples of contemporary protest art addressing the death penalty in Iran. The upper image, created by Roshi Rouzbehani, depicts the intertwining of execution, state violence, and national symbolism through the juxtaposition of gallows, waves, and Tehran's Azadi Tower. The lower image, published through the Iran Free Art platform, calls attention to executions in Iran through a visual language of silence, censorship, and collective witnessing.(2022; 2026)

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Taken together, the overlapping political pressures, economic crises, social struggles, and cycles of protest discussed throughout this chapter help explain what it has meant to live in Tehran in recent decades. The city is not only dense, polluted, expensive, and rapidly changing; it is also deeply politicized. Rules concerning dress, speech, social interaction, and online behavior do not remain in the background of everyday life. They shape how people move through the city, gather with others, communicate, and present themselves in public. The memory of past protests, crackdowns, arrests, executions, and disappearances remains embedded within the everyday experience of urban life.

At the same time, Tehran cannot be understood solely through the lens of repression. The city's collective life is also produced through friendship, neighborhood ties, humor, fashion, coded forms of defiance, mourning rituals, small acts of care, and the persistence of social gathering even under conditions of pressure and uncertainty. Streets matter because they can become routes of protest. Universities matter because they repeatedly bring together the young and the politically restless. Media and social media matter because they extend the city's public sphere beyond physical space, document events that might otherwise remain invisible, and connect local experiences to wider national and transnational audiences. In contemporary Tehran, media have become a central arena through which visibility, memory, and collective action are produced and contested.

What emerges from this discussion is that collective life in Tehran has not developed within a politically neutral urban environment. Rather, it has evolved under a system that has long sought to regulate bodies, beliefs, images, gatherings, and information, while simultaneously failing to provide many residents—particularly younger generations—with economic security or a convincing sense of the future. Fear, resistance, exhaustion, anger, and solidarity therefore carry particular weight in contemporary Tehran. These are not exceptional emotions that emerge only during moments of crisis; they form part of the ordinary social reality within which everyday urban life unfolds.

It is within this broader atmosphere that the political and social significance of Ekbatan can be more fully understood. As the previous chapter demonstrated, Ekbatan was originally conceived as a large modernist housing project shaped by particular ideas about urban life, collective infrastructure, and middle-class modernity. Yet the contemporary meaning of the neighborhood cannot be separated from the wider political, social, economic, and cultural forces that have transformed Tehran over recent decades.

The recurring cycles of protest, repression, surveillance, internet shutdowns, executions, and collective mourning examined in this chapter have profoundly altered how urban space is experienced across the city, including within Ekbatan itself. During recent protest movements, the neighborhood repeatedly emerged as one of Tehran's most visible spaces of collective expression. Rooftops, courtyards, shared spaces between residential blocks, pedestrian routes, and digital media networks became intertwined with protest, memory, and public visibility. Ekbatan became visible not only through events taking place within it, but also through the circulation of images, videos, testimonies, and narratives across social media platforms. As a result, the neighborhood emerged as both a physical and a mediated space of collective expression, extending far beyond its original architectural intentions.

In this sense, Ekbatan became more than a housing complex. It emerged as a space through which broader questions of collective identity, memory, visibility, media representation, and resistance in contemporary Tehran could be expressed, negotiated, and reimagined. Understanding how this transformation occurred requires a closer examination of the neighborhood's social life, collective practices, and evolving place within the urban landscape of Tehran.

05. Ekbatan as a Lived Space:
Collective Identity, Spatial Practices and Collective Action

Rainbow over Ekbatan, Tehran, on the first day of Nowruz 2026. Shared widely across social media during a period of political and social uncertainty, the image became associated with themes of hope, endurance, and renewal. Photographer: unknown.

The “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement transformed Ekbatan into one of the most visible neighbourhoods in contemporary Iran. Images of collective gatherings, nightly chants, protest graffiti, illuminated windows, and everyday acts of solidarity circulated widely across social media platforms, extending the neighbourhood far beyond its physical boundaries. Through this process, Ekbatan gradually became more than a residential complex. It entered the realm of public imagination and emerged as a powerful symbol associated with collective presence, resistance, and community life. Yet the visibility that Ekbatan acquired during and after the protests cannot be understood solely through media representations or political events. To understand why this particular neighbourhood became so prominent, it is necessary to look beyond the images and examine the social and spatial conditions that existed long before 2022.

The previous chapters examined Ekbatan through its historical development, architectural design, and urban structure. They traced its emergence within the broader context of Tehran’s modernisation and analysed the spatial principles that shaped its physical form. This chapter shifts the focus from architecture as a designed object to architecture as a lived environment. Rather than concentrating on the intentions of planners and architects, it explores how Ekbatan has been experienced, interpreted, appropriated, and transformed by its residents over time.

The analysis presented in this chapter draws primarily on semi-structured interviews conducted with current and former residents of Ekbatan from different generations, complemented by ethnographic studies and secondary sources. Through these narratives, the chapter examines how residents understand their neighbourhood, how collective identities are formed, and how everyday experiences contribute to the production of social meaning and attachment to place.

The central argument of this chapter is that the significance of Ekbatan cannot be explained solely through either architecture or politics. The neighbourhood’s distinctive character emerged through the interaction of spatial organisation, everyday life, collective memory, and social relationships accumulated over several decades. In this process, architecture did not determine social or political outcomes. Rather, it functioned as an enabling condition that facilitated encounters, visibility, familiarity, and forms of collective presence through which social relations could develop and endure over time.

5.1 Ekbatan as a Neighbourhood: Spatial Organisation and Community Life

With approximately 15,500 residential units designed for around 70,000 inhabitants, Ekbatan remains one of the largest planned residential developments in the Middle East (Sedighi, 2020). Whether Ekbatan can be understood as a neighbourhood has been a recurring question among both researchers and residents. In a roundtable discussion published by Behrouz Morbaghi, a group of architects, planners, and researchers reflected on Ekbatan's architectural and urban legacy from different professional perspectives. (Morbaghi, 2018) .Among them, Hamideh Amakchi, an architect and urban researcher affiliated with the Center for Architecture and Urban Studies of Iran, argues that neighbourhoods are not fixed entities; rather, their boundaries and meanings evolve alongside the growth and transformation of the city. From this perspective, Ekbatan has developed far beyond the scale of a conventional housing project and today functions as a self-contained urban environment that, in many respects, resembles a small city within Tehran. This perception emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews. Residents frequently described Ekbatan not simply as a residential complex but as a complete urban environment capable of accommodating most aspects of everyday life within its own boundaries. Commercial facilities, schools, healthcare services, public transportation, recreational spaces, and social amenities are all located within walking distance. For many residents, this degree of self-sufficiency distinguishes Ekbatan from other neighbourhoods in Tehran and contributes to a strong sense of local attachment. In one of the field interviews conducted in June 2025, a participant described Ekbatan's self-sufficiency in the following terms:

> One of the main differences, I think, is this: Ekbatan truly deserves to be called a *shahrak*[1]—a small city. If we take the word literally, then Ekbatan fully embodies that meaning. It's the kind of place that, if there were an apocalypse like in those zombie movies and people built walls around the city, Ekbatan could function completely on its own. It has hospitals, shopping centres, public spaces, transportation, and everything necessary for everyday life. In many parts of Tehran, you constantly need to leave your neighbourhood to get things done, but in Ekbatan that rarely happens.

What is striking in this account is not simply the availability of services but the way residents imagine and experience the neighbourhood.

1.*Shahrak* is a Persian term meaning "small city" or "township," commonly used for large planned residential communities with integrated services and infrastructure

Although Ekbatan is formally divided into three phases, residents rarely describe these phases as separate neighbourhoods. Instead, they tend to view the complex as a single social entity despite its internal differences. This perception is particularly significant given the physical separation introduced by Sattari Highway, which divides Phase Two from Phases One and Three. In the same round-table discussion, As Negar Jokar, an urban designer and researcher notes, however, the distinction between the phases predates the construction of the highway itself. Differences in planning strategies, building forms, and spatial organisation had already produced distinct characteristics within each phase. Yet these differences have not undermined the broader sense of belonging associated with Ekbatan as a whole. (Morbaghi, 2018) This relationship between unity and difference appeared clearly in the interviews. One participant described the three phases through a familial metaphor:

> Overall, Ekbatan has its own peculiar variation—these three phases are like three siblings, with one that doesn't quite resemble the others. It's like when people ask, 'Who do you take after?' Phase Two feels like that odd child, the unlike one. Its architecture, atmosphere, residents, and even its businesses set it apart. But it is still part of the same family.

Rather than presenting the phases as fragmented territories, the interviewee imagines them as members of a single family. Difference exists, but it does not undermine the sense of belonging to a larger whole. The metaphor suggests that diversity within the complex is accommodated within a shared social identity rather than experienced as division.

Neighbourhood identity in Ekbatan is reinforced not only through shared facilities and services but also through the everyday practices that structure life within the complex. According to Negar Jokar, one of Ekbatan's defining characteristics is its pedestrian-oriented circulation system. Unlike many contemporary residential developments in Tehran, where movement is largely mediated through automobiles, parking garages, and elevators, everyday mobility in Ekbatan requires passing through courtyards, pathways, pilotis, and other shared spaces before reaching the private realm of the apartment.

Daily movement through shared spaces creates repeated opportunities for encounter, recognition, and interaction. As residents move through courtyards, pathways, and pilotis, they regularly encounter neighbours, children, gardeners, shopkeepers, and other familiar figures. Although these interactions may appear ordinary, their repetition gradually produces familiarity, trust, and mutual awareness. Rather than functioning simply as circulation routes, these shared spaces become part of the social infrastructure of everyday life.
Several interviewees connected these everyday encounters to a distinct sense of identity associated with living in Ekbatan. For them, being “Ekbatani” was not simply a matter of residence but a particular way of experiencing urban life. In many respects, this identity also emerges from Ekbatan’s pedestrian-oriented circulation system, which continually brings residents into contact with one another before they reach the privacy of their homes. Although the monumental scale of the complex may initially appear anonymous or impersonal to outsiders, residents consistently described a strong sense of belonging produced through everyday interaction, shared routines, and long-term familiarity with both people and place. The identity of being Ekbatani therefore emerges not only from the physical environment itself but also from the social relationships and spatial practices that unfold within it over time.

This interpretation is reinforced by recent ethnographic research on Ekbatan’s public spaces. Drawing on interviews and field observations conducted in Phase One, Abedini, Ayvazian, and Diba argue that residents actively construct systems of meaning through their everyday experience of space. Their findings suggest that public spaces function not merely as physical settings but as environments where collective meanings are continuously produced through memory, social interaction, narratives, symbols, and everyday practices. Among the principal themes identified in their research are a strong spatial identity distinct from the rest of Tehran, the role of lived experience in strengthening place attachment, the relationship between urban civility and social participation, and the lasting influence of Ekbatan’s architectural and historical characteristics on residents’ everyday lives (Abedini, Ayvazian, and Diba 2025).

Pedestrian pathways and the prominent role of green spaces in Ekbatan.
Source: Ekbatan Magazine (2022, 2023, 2024).

Pedestrian pathways and the prominent role of green spaces in Ekbatan.
Source: Ekbatan Magazine (2022, 2023, 2024).

5.2.Ekbatan as a Place of Gathering

Even the name Ekbatan carries associations with gathering and collective life. Derived from *Hegmataneh (Ecbatana)*, the ancient capital of the Median Empire, the name is often interpreted as “a place of assembly” or a gathering place. (Schmitt,1998; UNESCO, 2024).While the contemporary township of Ekbatan bears little physical resemblance to its ancient namesake, the idea of gathering remains remarkably relevant to the lived experience of the neighbourhood. Throughout the interviews, residents repeatedly described courtyards, pedestrian pathways, green corridors, playgrounds, cafés, and public spaces as places where everyday social life unfolds.
In one of the field interviews conducted in June 2025, a participant described the significance of these public spaces:

> What really gives Ekbatan its identity are its residents and its public spaces. My feeling toward its public spaces is very warm. I love them—they have history, tall old trees, and plenty of open spaces for teenagers to gather and strengthen social ties. Even if someone had relatives living in Ekbatan, their kids loved visiting because they could play freely in the public areas. Parents easily allowed their children to visit their friends’ homes—there was a strong sense of trust. Collective activities have taken other forms too—like live music performances at sunset, where people would gather and sing together. Even the cats of Ekbatan are famous. Residents care for them, organize groups to feed them, and even neuter them to protect them. Pets in general bring people closer together. Even though keeping dogs is technically banned, in the evenings the area is full of people walking their dogs, socializing, and chatting together.

This account highlights the extent to which public space in Ekbatan operates as a form of social infrastructure. The importance of these spaces lies not only in their physical characteristics but also in their capacity to facilitate encounters between residents. Activities as diverse as children’s play, pet care, informal conversations, and collective cultural events create opportunities for interaction and contribute to the formation of social ties. Rather than being confined to private domestic spaces, many aspects of everyday life unfold within the shared environment of the neighbourhood.

The role of public space becomes particularly visible in residents’ memories of childhood. Several interviewees associated the open spaces of Ekbatan with experiences of play, friendship, and freedom. One participant described these memories through a series of sensory impressions:

For me, the name ‘Ekbatan’ smells like summer—playing with other kids in the green spaces between the blocks, the smell of homemade chips sold in the local stores back then. When I was a child, the public spaces of Ekbatan were full of kids my age. Everything we needed for play and recreation was available. Ekbatan meets all the basic needs of its residents. It’s very green and offers a strong sense of security.

These recollections reveal how public space functions not merely as a recreational setting but as a framework for socialization. Childhood experiences are remembered through specific places, routes, and shared environments. The courtyards and green spaces become settings where friendships are formed, independence is negotiated, and a sense of belonging gradually develops. Such memories demonstrate how collective spaces contribute to the social life of the neighbourhood across generations.
Beyond childhood, these spaces continue to play an important role in everyday social interaction. Several participants emphasized that the courtyards and public areas of Ekbatan remain active throughout the day and night, creating opportunities for spontaneous encounters and informal gatherings. As one resident explained:

When I hear the name ‘Ekbatan,’ I think of its friendly and unique atmosphere. The courtyards give you a feeling that you can go there and sit at any time of day or night. There’s always a sense of life flowing through those spaces. Ekbatan is a place that everyone in Tehran knows, and it feels like it gives you a separate identity of your own.

The recurring image of “life flowing” through the courtyards reflects the social vitality that residents associate with these spaces. Unlike many urban environments where public space is used primarily as a route of circulation, the open spaces of Ekbatan function as destinations in themselves. People gather, linger, observe, converse, and participate in the social life of the neighbourhood.
Public sociability is further reinforced through a variety of shared activities and gathering places. Interviewees frequently referred to cafés, pedestrian walkways, cultural venues, and neighbourhood landmarks as important sites of encounter. These spaces facilitate interaction between different generations and social groups while contributing to a broader sense of community. One participant described this atmosphere as follows:

The first thing that comes to my mind when I hear ‘Ekbatan’ is its green environment and its beautiful cats, but in reality, there are many more things that represent Ekbatan for me: its diverse communities of both the elderly and the young, its crowded night cafés, the sound of music and people’s unity, and Mr. Akbari’s Book City, which for years has been like a second home for cats and teenagers.

This account illustrates that gathering in Ekbatan is not limited to formally organized events. It emerges through everyday practices, shared routines, and informal uses of public space. Whether through evening walks, conversations in cafés, encounters in courtyards, or collective care for animals, residents continually reproduce social relationships through their presence in the neighbourhood.

The significance of these spaces therefore lies not only in their physical design but in the social practices they support. Through everyday encounters, informal gatherings, cultural activities, and shared routines, the open spaces of Ekbatan create opportunities for interaction and collective life. In this sense, they function as more than recreational or circulatory environments; they operate as places of gathering where social relationships are formed, maintained, and renewed over time. It is through these everyday practices of encounter and coexistence that the open spaces of Ekbatan have become central to the neighbourhood’s social life and collective identity.

5.3 Everyday Life, Rhythms and the Lived Experience of Space in Ekbatan

Residents often describe Ekbatan through routines, familiar routes, repeated movements, and everyday practices that gradually become embedded in daily life. In this sense, space is not only a physical setting but something that acquires meaning through continuous use and lived experience.This perspective resonates with the work of David Seamon, an environmental phenomenologist whose research focuses on the relationship between place, routine, and everyday experience. Seamon argues that places become meaningful through habitual practices and repeated engagement rather than through their physical characteristics alone. From this perspective, place is experienced through everyday activities, bodily routines, and long-term familiarity with particular environments (Seamon, 2000, pp.15-18).

The narratives of Ekbatan's residents strongly reflect this experiential dimension of place. When interviewees speak about the neighbourhood, they rarely focus exclusively on architectural form or design. Instead, they describe familiar routes, recurring encounters, daily movements, and places that have gradually become woven into the fabric of ordinary life. Spaces that were once designed elements become part of residents' lived worlds through repeated use and long-term presence.In this sense, home in Ekbatan often extends beyond the apartment unit itself. It encompasses a wider network of familiar environments that structure everyday experience and everyday routines. As Seamon suggests, experiences of home emerge through an ongoing relationship between people and their environments rather than through a fixed physical dwelling alone (Seamon, 2000, pp.24-27).This understanding emerged clearly throughout the interviews. Several participants described a lasting attachment to Ekbatan even after moving away from the neighbourhood. What remained significant was not simply the residential unit but the network of places and routines that once organised everyday life. One participant reflected:

> If I talk about two years ago, home would mean Phase 1, where I lived. If it's a bit earlier, then it's Phase 2, because that's where my friends were. And if I go back about five years, then home becomes my friend's café in Phase 3—during the COVID period, that café was home. Or maybe, to be more precise, I should say it was a refuge—a shelter from stress and the chaos of daily life.

Rather than defining home as a fixed domestic space, this account reveals how attachment develops through repeated presence and everyday experience. Home emerges through familiarity, routine, and emotional investment in particular places. The neighbourhood becomes meaningful not because it is inhabited once, but because it is inhabited continuously.
The idea of staying also occupies an important place in residents' narratives. Several interviewees described the difficulty of leaving Ekbatan even when personal or economic circumstances required relocation. This attachment should not be understood simply as a preference for a particular residential area. Rather, it reflects the gradual formation of a relationship between body and place. Through repeated presence, residents become accustomed to particular routes, sounds, atmospheres, and patterns of everyday life. Over time, these experiences become integrated into personal memory and identity.

The temporal dimension of these experiences becomes particularly important when considered through Henri Lefebvre's concept of rhythm. A French philosopher and urban theorist, Lefebvre argues that everyday life is structured through recurring rhythms that connect time and space (Lefebvre 2004, 8–17). From this perspective, Ekbatan can be understood not simply as a collection of buildings but as a lived environment animated by recurring patterns of movement, encounter, and use.
Daily activities such as walking, sitting, meeting others, or following familiar routes create rhythms that gradually coordinate the presence of different bodies within space. These rhythms are not imposed through formal planning but emerge through repeated practices. Over time, residents learn when particular spaces become active, how everyday life unfolds throughout the neighbourhood, and what forms of presence become expected in different places and at different times. This knowledge is rarely explicit; rather, it exists as a shared and embodied understanding of place.

At this stage, these practices are not necessarily political. What emerges first is a form of everyday presence: bodies repeatedly occupying space, following familiar rhythms, and developing long-term attachments to place. Through repetition, ordinary activities become embedded within the neighbourhood's social life and contribute to a shared understanding of space.

Sources:
Hasti Mardaniazar (2025)
Ekbatan Magazine (2024).

Everyday rhythms of life in Ekbatan's shared spaces, illustrating how different generations inhabit them throughout the day. and Everyday rhythms of life in Ekbatan's shared spaces, illustrating how different generations inhabit them throughout the day. Source: Amirhossein Hosseini (2022), @Ekbatan Online and @Ekbatan Magazine (2021–2026).

5.4 The Threshold Between Being Seen and Unseen

Visibility occupies a distinctive place in residents' accounts of Ekbatan. Beyond questions of architecture, neighbourhood life, or everyday routines, many interviewees described a particular relationship between seeing and being seen that shapes the experience of living in the complex. This condition is closely connected to Ekbatan's spatial organisation, especially its courtyards, the distances between residential blocks, and the extensive use of strip windows that overlook shared spaces.Rather than creating a strict separation between private and public life, Ekbatan establishes a gradual threshold between interior and exterior space. Residents remain visually connected to the life of the neighbourhood while maintaining a degree of privacy within their homes. Visibility therefore functions not as surveillance, but as a form of awareness and connection that links individual dwellings to the collective life unfolding outside.
This relationship is emphasised by Negar Jokar , describing the window as an important interface between residents and their surrounding environment. In her discussion of Ekbatan, she argues that windows are not merely technical elements designed to provide light and ventilation. They also create opportunities for communication, expression, and everyday interaction. Through simple practices such as displaying plants, arranging objects on window sills, or maintaining a visual connection with outdoor space, residents personalise the boundary between private and public life. In this sense, the window becomes a medium through which people establish a visible presence within the neighbourhood (Morbaghi 2018).Jokar further suggests that Ekbatan's spatial configuration achieves a careful balance between visibility and privacy. The distances between facing buildings allow residents to keep their windows open and maintain visual contact with the surrounding environment without feeling excessively exposed. This balance creates a sense of openness while preserving individual autonomy, encouraging residents to remain connected to collective life rather than retreating entirely into private interiors.

A similar observation appears in the reflections of Behrouz Sarabandi, architect and managing director of Tarh va Tahkim-e-Bana Consulting Engineers, In the roundtable discussion published by Behrouz Morbaghi . Sarabandi emphasises that Ekbatan's strip windows contribute not only to daylight and environmental quality but also to a broader sense of openness. By strengthening the relation-

ship between interior and exterior space, the windows encourage an outward-looking orientation that remains one of the defining characteristics of the complex (Morbaghi 2018).
The significance of these windows emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews. One long-term resident described them as one of the most recognisable features of Ekbatan:

> When people talk about Ekbatan, the first image that comes to mind—even for someone who has only seen a single photograph—is that of the concrete buildings with their long, continuous bands of windows stretched across the façade. These windows, with their particular design and reflective surface, almost seem to protect the interior environment, creating a kind of visual shield. For outsiders, they might appear defensive, but for residents, they carry a deeper meaning—something far beyond mere separation. They have played an important social role.

The same participant went on to describe how windows functioned as a form of social infrastructure before the emergence of digital communication:

> Back in the 1990s, before social media existed, these windows served a purpose very similar to what online networks do today. We used to recognise our neighbours through these windows. We would say, 'Those four windows on the eighth floor belong to so-and-so,' or 'Those two windows on the second floor are our friends' home.' That's how we knew one another. Even though the arrangement of windows did not always guarantee complete privacy, people respected each other's boundaries.

What is particularly striking in this account is the way visibility becomes intertwined with recognition and memory. The windows do not simply provide outward views; they enable residents to locate themselves within a wider social landscape. Through everyday acts of observation, neighbours become familiar presences and buildings acquire meanings that extend beyond their physical form. Visibility here does not produce anonymity. Instead, it contributes to a shared awareness of people, places, and everyday life within the neighbourhood.
The relationship between visibility and collective life became esevident once more ,during the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant recalled the evening gatherings that took place across the neighbourhood:

The 9 PM gatherings during the pandemic, with music and residents standing at their windows, were a unique social experience. Each night, it moved me emotionally and showed me how much humans crave social life and flee from loneliness.

In this moment, the windows became points of connection between physically separated households. Residents remained inside their homes, yet continued to participate in a shared social experience. The event revealed how architectural elements originally intended for light, ventilation, and visual connection could also support forms of collective presence during periods of isolation. Visibility in Ekbatan therefore operates through a delicate balance. Residents are neither fully exposed nor completely hidden. Through windows, courtyards, and carefully calibrated distances, the architecture creates a condition in which people remain aware of one another while preserving personal privacy. This threshold between being seen and unseen forms an important part of everyday life in the complex and contributes to the distinctive social character of Ekbatan.

Ekbatan Windows. Source: Fereshteh Eslahi (2024).

5.5 Reappropriating Space: Graffiti, Parkour and Alternative Spatial Practices

Beyond everyday routines and patterns of visibility, Ekbatan has also been shaped by practices through which residents actively reinterpret and appropriate space. Rather than using the built environment solely according to its intended functions, different groups of residents have continuously transformed architectural space into a medium for expression, creativity, and experimentation. Among the most visible examples of this process are graffiti and parkour, both of which reveal how space can be reimagined through alternative forms of engagement.

One of Ekbatan's most distinctive cultural characteristics is its graffiti scene. Emerging gradually through the activities of young residents and street artists, graffiti transformed the modernist concrete surfaces of the complex into a new visual landscape. As Mahsa Sharifi argues in her study of graffiti in Ekbatan, street art often functions as a form of expression for groups that lack access to formal channels of representation. Rather than operating merely as decoration, graffiti becomes a visual language through which alternative voices enter urban space (Sharifi, 2019, p.45).
Ekbatan's architectural form has played an important role in facilitating this process. The repetitive rhythm of the residential blocks, the extensive concrete surfaces, and the continuity of shared public spaces create an environment particularly suited to large-scale street art. According to Sharifi, the spatial coherence and physical characteristics of the complex provide favourable conditions for the development of graffiti culture and contribute to its visibility within Tehran's urban landscape (Sharifi, 2019, pp.47-48).
The content of these works varies considerably. Some murals are artistic and experimental, while others address social and political themes. Rather than presenting direct narratives, many works rely on ambiguity, symbolism, and visual provocation. As Sharifi observes, contemporary Iranian graffiti often seeks to raise questions rather than provide answers, encouraging interpretation and reflection among passers-by (Sharifi, 2019, pp.50-52). Over time, locations such as *Jaddeh-ye Salamati* and the informal open-air gallery known as *Happy Walls* in Phase Three have become recognised sites of artistic production and visual expression.

Yet graffiti represents only one form of spatial appropriation. A different but equally significant relationship with the built environment can be observed through the practice of parkour. While commonly understood as an urban sport, parkour has increasingly been interpreted by scholars as an alternative way of reading and inhabiting urban space. Rather than accepting architecture according to its intended functions, practitioners reinterpret walls, stairs, railings, platforms, and level changes as opportunities for movement, creativity, and exploration.

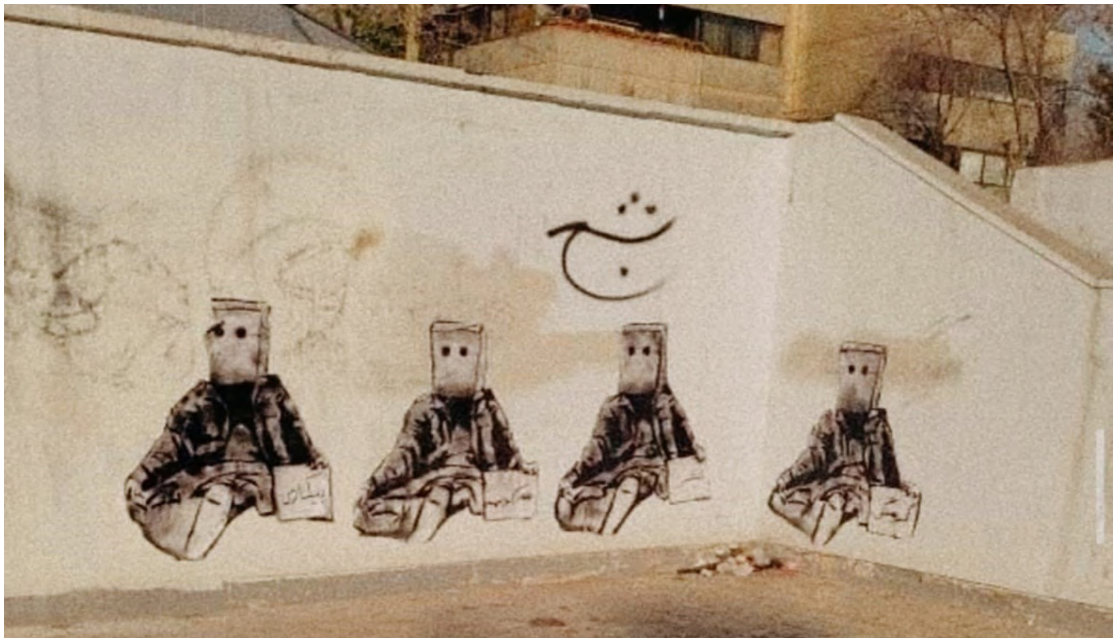
Jeffrey Kidder, a sociologist whose work focuses on urban subcultures and spatial practices, argues that parkour involves what he calls an "affective appropriation of space," through which practitioners transform ordinary urban structures into opportunities for movement and experimentation. In this process, architectural elements that might appear insignificant to ordinary users acquire new meanings through bodily engagement and practice (Kidder, 2012, pp.230-231; 236-237).

Viewed from this perspective, Ekbatan offers particularly favourable conditions for such practices. Its interconnected pedestrian networks, changes in level, pilotis, platforms, retaining walls, and extensive concrete surfaces create an environment that invites alternative forms of movement and engagement. Parkour practitioners interact with the architecture not as passive users but as active participants in the production of space. Through repeated bodily engagement, the built environment becomes something to be explored, tested, and reinterpreted.

This process of reinterpretation extends beyond visual and bodily practices. Several interviewees also highlighted the role of music in Ekbatan's cultural life. According to participants, the thick concrete walls and relative acoustic insulation of many apartments made the complex particularly suitable for informal music production and home studios. A number of rock and rap musicians who later became active within Tehran's alternative music scene reportedly began their activities in Ekbatan. While less visible than graffiti or parkour, these practices similarly reveal how residents adapted and redefined architectural space according to their own creative needs.

Taken together, graffiti, parkour, and informal cultural production demonstrate that Ekbatan has never been merely a residential environment. Its spaces have been continuously reinterpreted through everyday acts of expression, movement, and creativity. Residents have not simply inhabited architecture; they have actively participated in producing meanings that extend beyond the intentions of planners and designers. In this sense, Ekbatan is not only a designed space but also a lived and continually reappropriated one. These practices did not yet constitute collective political action. However, they reveal a long-standing capacity for spatial appropriation through which residents learned to reinterpret, occupy, and assign new meanings to the spaces around them. Long before moments of collective mobilisation emerged, Ekbatan had already become a setting in which architecture was not merely inhabited but continuously negotiated, transformed, and made part of everyday cultural life.

Parkour in Ekbatan. Source: Amir jalili (2021).



Graffiti in Ekbatan (top)Source: Fereshteh Eslahi (2024)
Political graffiti in Ekbatan(botton) reading “Hunger, Repression, Nothing but Unemployment.” The work was created by the graffiti artist *Shabah*, who has been under surveillance and prosecution for several years because of his politically charged murals, despite their repeated removal by security forces.Source:@EkbatanTwitter[2] (2024).

2. EkbatanTwitter is an independent socio-political social media platform on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), whose administrators identify themselves as a group of freedom-seeking residents and supporters of Ekbatan. Over the years, the platform has documented political, social, and everyday events in the neighbourhood, creating a valuable visual archive of Ekbatan’s recent history.

Graffities associated with the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in Ekbatan.
Source: @EkbatanTwitter.

5.6 The Emergence of Collective Presence and Collective Action

The prominence of Ekbatan during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement did not emerge suddenly in 2022. What became visible during those months was not the spontaneous appearance of a collective actor, but the activation of social relations, shared memories, and spatial practices that had been developing within the neighbourhood for decades. The movement revealed capacities that had long existed within the social and spatial life of the complex. In this sense, the protests did not create collective presence in Ekbatan; they exposed and intensified it.

Unlike many large-scale housing developments in Tehran that gradually became dormitory neighbourhoods, Ekbatan evolved as a place where everyday life extended beyond the apartment unit. Generations grew up within the same courtyards, pathways, pilotis, sports fields, and communal spaces. Daily encounters accumulated into friendships, memories, and shared experiences. Over time, these repeated interactions produced a strong sense of belonging and familiarity that distinguished Ekbatan from many other urban environments.

This continuity became particularly visible during moments of political tension. Residents frequently referred to the Green Movement of 2009, as well as the protests of 2018 and 2019, as important moments within the collective memory of the neighbourhood. These events did not create a permanent movement, but they reinforced a shared understanding that Ekbatan was a place where people responded to public events rather than remaining indifferent to them. By the time the Woman, Life, Freedom movement emerged in 2022, the neighbourhood already possessed a history of collective awareness and public responsiveness.

At the same time, this readiness was reproduced through practices that were not necessarily political. *Chaharshanbe Suri*[3] celebrations, football gatherings, neighbourhood festivities, and countless informal encounters familiarised residents with forms of collective presence. Gathering together was not an exceptional occurrence but an ordinary dimension of everyday life. Through repetition, residents became accustomed to occupying shared space, acting in relation to one another, and experiencing themselves as part of a larger collective.

3. *Chaharshanbe Suri* is a traditional Iranian pre-Nowruz festival marked by collective gatherings in public spaces, bonfires, music, and shared celebrations. As one of the most popular public rituals in Iran, it plays an important role in producing temporary forms of collective presence and social interaction.

This process can be understood through Seyyed Mohammad Beheshti's distinction in Marbaghi's discussion, between a "population" and a "society." According to Beheshti, a society emerges not simply through physical proximity but through temporal continuity, shared memories, and accumulated lived experience. Unlike many districts of Tehran characterised by constant mobility and urban transience, Ekbatan has maintained a significant degree of generational continuity. Families have remained in the neighbourhood for decades, memories have accumulated across generations, and social relationships have persisted over time. This continuity provided the conditions through which collective identity could emerge and through which coordinated forms of action later became possible (Morbaghi, 2018).

The Woman, Life, Freedom movement revealed the extent to which these long-standing social relations could be activated. Several interviewees described the protests not through abstract political concepts but through vivid spatial memories. Their recollections repeatedly returned to images of movement, solidarity, refuge, and mutual support. One participant described the images of protest graffiti beneath the residential blocks as among their strongest memories of that period. They recalled people running towards entrance lobbies while residents opened building doors to shelter young protesters escaping security forces. They also remembered residents accompanying gatherings from behind their windows and emphasised the visible presence of both teenagers and elderly residents throughout the protests:

> The images of protest graffiti beneath the blocks will always stay with me. I remember people running towards the entrance lobbies and residents opening doors for the young protesters. I remember residents accompanying the crowds from behind their windows. The presence of teenagers was especially striking, but so was the presence of older residents. There are many memories from those days that will one day have to be told in a safe environment.

This recollection reveals an important dimension of collective action in Ekbatan. The neighbourhood was not simply a site of protest; it functioned simultaneously as a space of protection and care. Residents did not merely participate in demonstrations. They also provided shelter, guidance, information, and support to one another. Acts of solidarity unfolded through ordinary architectural elements: entrance lobbies, staircases, pilotis, corridors, and semi-public spaces became temporary infrastructures of refuge.

These architectural features did not produce resistance in themselves, but they enabled forms of collective presence and collective action that might have been more difficult to sustain elsewhere. In this sense, architecture functioned not as a determining force but as an enabling condition—one that expanded the possibilities through which solidarity, care, and political expression could emerge

The role of windows acquired a similarly important significance. As discussed in the previous section, Ekbatan's strip windows have long mediated the relationship between private and public life. During the protests, however, these windows became channels of collective expression. Night after night, chants echoed across the neighbourhood as residents participated from within their homes. Those gathered in courtyards and open spaces below were accompanied by voices emerging from hundreds of apartments above. Individual dwellings became connected through sound, transforming the entire complex into a collective acoustic landscape. People could participate while remaining physically protected. In this sense, collective presence was produced not only through bodily gathering but also through the circulation of voices across space.

The physical structure of Ekbatan also played a crucial role in shaping these experiences. A number of interviewees noted that people from neighbouring districts—including Apadana, Bimeh, and other surrounding areas—frequently came to Ekbatan during the protests. Part of this attraction was symbolic. By that point, Ekbatan had already developed a reputation as an active and politically aware neighbourhood. Yet interviewees repeatedly stressed that spatial characteristics were equally important. The interconnected pedestrian routes, pilotis, courtyards, staircases, level changes, and multiple access points created a complex urban environment that was difficult to control and easy to navigate.

Residents often described the neighbourhood as possessing a maze-like quality. Unlike urban environments organised around a limited number of streets and exits, Ekbatan offered multiple routes of movement and escape. It was possible to move between blocks, pass through semi-public spaces, disappear beneath pilotis, and re-emerge elsewhere within the complex. During moments of confrontation, these characteristics provided opportunities for dispersal, regrouping, and temporary refuge. While such features were never designed with political mobilisation in mind, they acquired new

meanings during the protests. The same architectural qualities that facilitated everyday movement became resources for collective action.Yet the memories that residents retain from this period often focus not only on confrontation but also on care. One interviewee recalled a particularly vivid scene from the morning after a night of clashes:

> One vivid memory I have is from the morning after a night of protests, when residents collectively helped clean and remove the shattered glass that had been broken by security forces the night before.

What makes this memory significant is precisely its ordinariness. Residents were not gathering to protest at that moment. They were gathering to repair. Rather than focusing on slogans or confrontation, this recollection highlights a form of collective responsibility towards shared space. The courtyards and common areas of Ekbatan were not experienced as anonymous urban territory but as environments that residents collectively cared for and maintained. Such acts reveal that solidarity during the movement was expressed not only through resistance but also through care, repair, and responsibility.

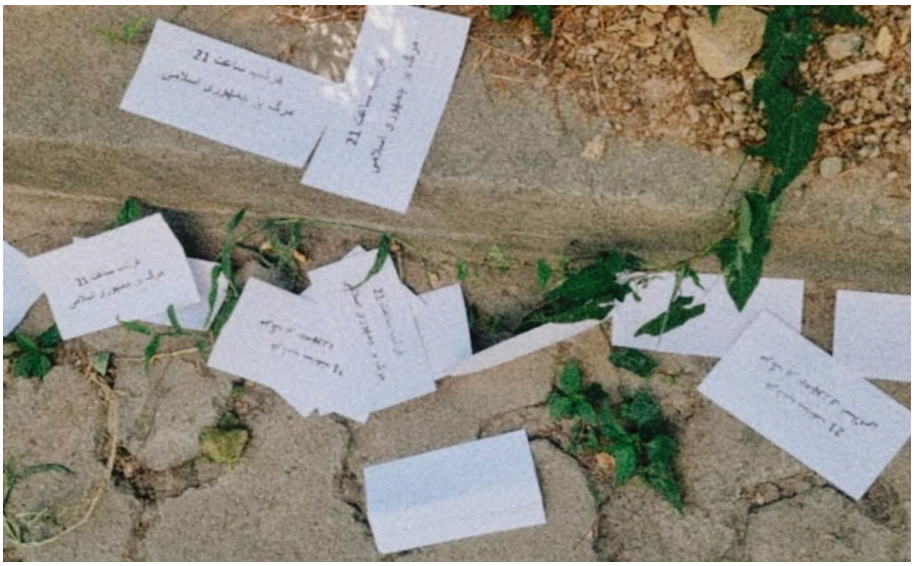
A major turning point occurred on 28 November 2022, when Arman Alivardi, a member of the *Basij*[4] , was killed during clashes in Ekbatan. The incident became a decisive moment in the relationship between the neighbourhood and the state and was subsequently used to justify an extensive security crackdown on the area. In the weeks that followed, security forces conducted a series of raids across the complex, arresting dozens of residents, many of them during night-time operations in their homes.
According to reports, more than fifty residents were detained, while fourteen individuals were formally prosecuted. Six young men—Milad Armoon, Alireza Kafaei, Amir-Mohammad Khosh-Eghbal, Navid Najaran, Hossein Nemati, and Alireza Barmarz-Pournak—were later sentenced to death. The case quickly attracted national and international attention and became one of the most widely discussed legal cases associated with the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. Public reactions intensified on social media platforms, particularly on Twitter/X, where hashtags such as #EkbatanBoys circulated widely. Many users, activists, and human rights organisations criticised the broadcast of alleged forced confessions on state television and raised concerns regarding due process and fair trial standards.

4. The *Basij* is a state-affiliated paramilitary organization in Iran, operating under the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and is widely known for its role in suppressing protests and enforcing state control.

widely. Many users, activists, and human rights organisations criticised the broadcast of alleged forced confessions on state television and raised concerns regarding due process and fair trial standards.Although several of the death sentences were later overturned and returned to the Supreme Court for further review, the prolonged judicial uncertainty surrounding the defendants became part of Ekbatan's collective memory. Over time, the "Ekbatan Boys" case came to represent more than a criminal prosecution. For many residents and observers, it became a symbol of the broader consequences of participation in the Woman, Life, Freedom movement and further transformed Ekbatan from a residential neighbourhood into a nationally recognised site of memory, resistance, and political significance.

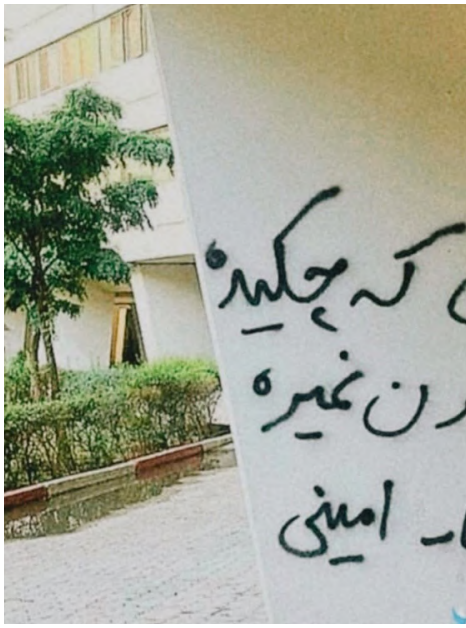
What emerged in Ekbatan during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement was therefore more than a site of protest. The neighbourhood functioned simultaneously as a place of gathering, refuge, visibility, mobility, care, memory, and resistance. Its significance lay not only in the political events that occurred there but in the long social and spatial history that made those events possible. The movement did not create collective presence in Ekbatan; rather, it revealed a collective presence that had been forming for decades. What became visible in 2022 was the culmination of a much longer process through which residents had learned to live together, remember together, occupy space together, protect one another, and, when necessary, act together.

"For generation Z, the rebel generation"
Photograph taken in 2023 by Hashem Shakeri in Ekbatan.



Flyers distributed in Ekbatan in 2023, calling on residents to chant from their windows at 9 p.m.
Source: @EkbatanOnline (2023).

The dollar has reached 50,000 tomans. Still silent?(Left)
The revolution will not be silenced. (Right)



We will not forget the blood that was shed.

The Flight of Freedom.

"Women, Life, Freedom"

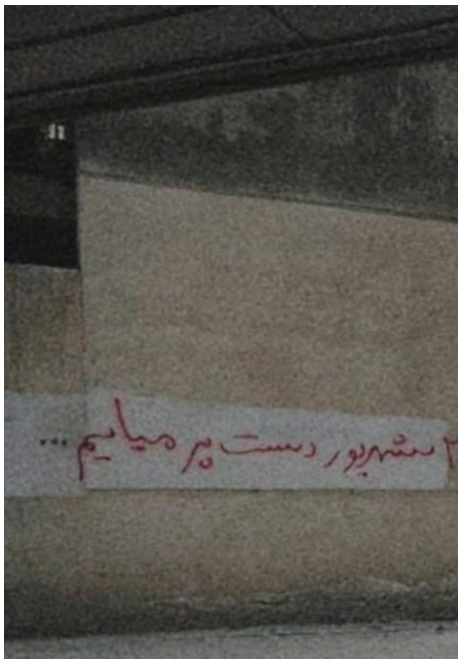
Graffiti and wall writings on the columns of Ekbatan over the past five years(2021_2026). In several cases, despite being repeatedly covered by security forces, new writings reappeared on the same surfaces. Source: @EkbatanTwitter.

Life. Homeland.

All covered with paint.

No to exectuation.

"Women, Life, Freedom"



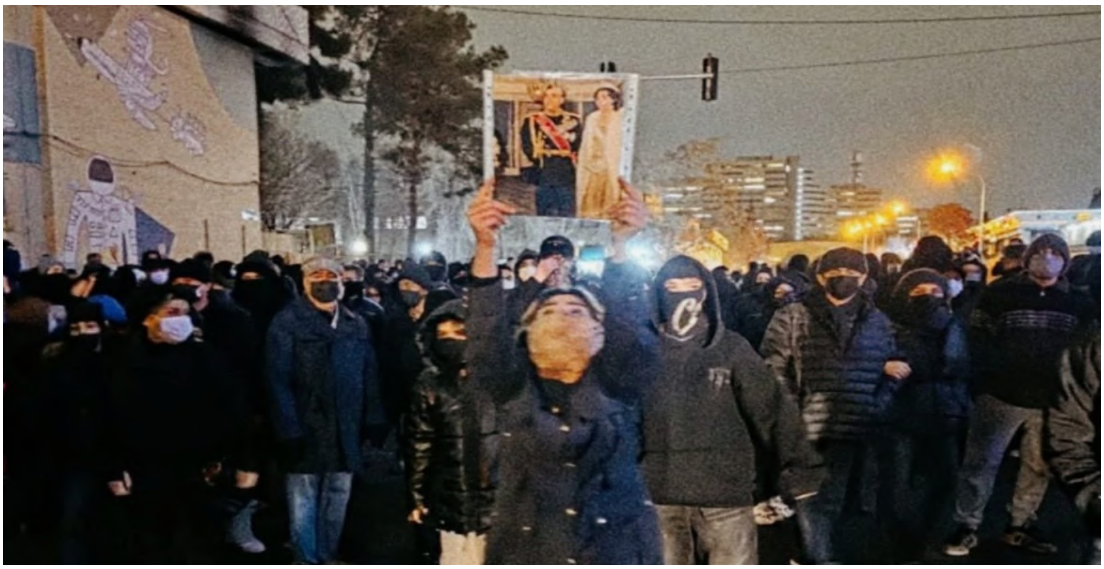
We will return stronger, With our hands full.

Graffiti and wall writings on the columns of Ekbatan over the past five years(2021_2026). In several cases, despite being repeatedly covered by security forces, new writings reappeared on the same surfaces. Source: @EkbatanTwitter.

Signature of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

Come to the streets.

Frames documenting the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests in Ekbatan during September 2022 and Bloody January protest in 2026. Photographers unknown.
Images published by @EkbatanTwitter.



Remembering "Ekbatan Boys" through graffiti and posters in Ekbatan.
Source: @EkbatanOnline(2023).

Flyer distributed in Ekbatan during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, bearing the inscription: *The echo of a Kurdish girl's voice will bring to light the injustice they sought to conceal*.
Source:@EkbatanTwitter(2022-2023)

Snowman holding a sign reading "Freedom."
Source: EkbatanTwitter (2023)

Some other Forms of Civic Action in Ekbatan
Source:@EkbatanTwitter(2022-2023)

5.7 From Neighbourhood to Symbol: Media and the Production of Ekbatan

What happened in Ekbatan during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement did not remain confined to physical space and direct action. A moment arrived when practices that had previously unfolded in courtyards, windows, corridors, pilotis, and semi-public spaces entered the realm of media and began to circulate far beyond the neighbourhood itself. This transition marked an important turning point in the social life of Ekbatan. The significance of this moment did not lie in the emergence of a new form of action, but in the visibility of existing actions on an unprecedented scale.
At this stage, media did not function as something external to space, but as an extension of it. Mobile phones, social media platforms, and digital networks created what could be understood as a second spatial layer through which everyday experiences moved beyond the physical boundaries of the neighbourhood and entered wider circuits of visibility. Ekbatan, which had already been lived, practiced, and collectively experienced, now entered the field of representation. Media scholars José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, whose work examines the social and political consequences of platform societies, argue that contemporary public life increasingly unfolds through digital infrastructures whose mechanisms of visibility, circulation, and attention shape how events are perceived, remembered, and transformed into public narratives (van Dijck and Poell, 2015). Within this logic, what matters is no longer only what happens, but also how it is seen, shared, and repeated.

During the autumn of 2022, Ekbatan became one of the most visible examples of this process. Videos of nightly chants, mobile-phone lights, gatherings in courtyards, and collective acts of solidarity circulated rapidly across social media. These recordings were often shaky, technically imperfect, and produced without professional equipment. Yet precisely because of these qualities they appeared authentic. Unlike official media narratives, they emerged from within lived experience. The camera was not positioned outside the event as a detached observer; it was carried by bodies already participating in the space being recorded.
Importantly, media did not simply document events after they occurred. Recording, sharing, reposting, and watching became part of the event itself. In many cases, filming functioned as an act of participation. To record was to bear witness; to share was to contribute to collective visibility. Ekbatan was therefore not only a place

where collective action occurred, but also a place where images were continuously produced.

The relationship between architecture and media has been explored extensively by architectural historian and theorist Beatriz Colomina, whose work demonstrates that architecture is never experienced solely through inhabitation but also through images, publications, and forms of representation (Colomina, 1994). In Ekbatan, this relationship became visible in an unexpected way. The neighbourhood was not designed as a media object, yet during the protests it entered a condition of intensified visibility. Windows became frames, courtyards became stages, and sounds became narratives. The spatial arrangement of Ekbatan—its inward-facing windows, interconnected courtyards, pilotis, multiple levels, and strong visual and acoustic connections between buildings—made collective actions highly visible and highly recordable. Space itself helped produce images.

One of the most significant media images associated with Ekbatan during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement was the widely circulated video of young women dancing in one of the neighbourhood's shared spaces. The importance of this video did not lie solely in the act of dancing itself, but in the way architecture, gender, bodily presence, and media visibility converged within a single image. The scene required little explanation. Within the context of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, the image carried an immediately recognisable political meaning. Women were moving freely within a shared residential environment, performing an act that directly challenged dominant social and political norms. Dance here was not simply entertainment; it functioned as a bodily and gendered form of political expression closely aligned with the core demands of the movement.
Architecture played a decisive role in shaping both the image and its impact. Ekbatan's spatial structure—open courtyards, visible windows, large scale, and semi-public character—created a setting that was neither fully private nor fully public. This in-between condition is crucial. The dance did not take place inside the privacy of the home, but neither did it occur in a formal public square. Instead, it happened in a space that was simultaneously everyday and collective. Architecture framed the bodies in a way that made the image feel intimate yet public, ordinary yet disobedient. As a result, the action appeared lived and spontaneous rather than staged or performative.

From a media perspective, the video stood out because of its sharp contrast with dominant images of Iran. For international audiences, the combination of Ekbatan's modern architecture and the contemporary movements of the dancers produced an unexpected image. It resembled forms of urban life familiar to many global audiences while sharply diverging from stereotypical representations of Iran centred on repression, victimhood, or violence. This contrast increased the video's appeal and made it highly shareable. Without the need for subtitles or extensive explanation, the image communicated meaning clearly, aligning perfectly with the logic of social media platforms and their preference for short, emotional, and visually legible content

The circulation of the video further demonstrates how local actions can acquire meanings far beyond their original context. What began as a short recording in one of Ekbatan's shared spaces quickly became part of the global visual archive of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. The women featured in the video became widely known as the "Ekbatan Girls," and the image generated numerous responses, reinterpretations, and acts of solidarity across digital platforms. The transnational significance of the video was later reflected in international discussions, exhibitions, and academic analyses dedicated to the visual culture of the movement. Through this process, the image ceased to belong exclusively to Ekbatan and became part of a broader narrative of resistance, gendered agency, and collective visibility. The transnational significance of the video can also be understood within a broader international cultural context. By 2025, themes closely associated with youth agency, collective resistance, and new forms of political expression had entered major cultural platforms such as Fotografia Europea 2025 in Reggio Emilia, whose theme "Being Twenty" focused on Generation Z, youth activism, and the search for more just futures. Although the Ekbatan video emerged from a local residential setting, its visual language resonated strongly with these broader international conversations.

For international audiences, the combination of contemporary urban architecture and female bodily freedom produced an image that differed sharply from dominant representations of Iran centred on repression, violence, or victimhood. Without requiring subtitles or extensive contextual explanation, the image communicated meaning instantly. Its visual clarity aligned perfectly with the logic of contemporary social media platforms, which privilege short, emotionally resonant, and easily shareable content.

Through such images, Ekbatan gradually moved beyond its physical boundaries and entered the realm of collective imagination. Over time, the neighbourhood ceased to function merely as a place and became a symbol. Certain images reappeared repeatedly: chants emerging from windows, phone lights illuminating balconies, gatherings in courtyards, protest graffiti beneath residential blocks, and collective voices filling the night. Although rooted in specific events, these images gradually detached from their original contexts and acquired symbolic meanings. For many people who had never visited Ekbatan, the neighbourhood became synonymous with solidarity, resistance, and collective presence.

This process of symbolisation had important consequences. On the one hand, media visibility amplified the significance of Ekbatan and allowed local experiences to resonate far beyond the neighbourhood. On the other hand, visibility also simplified complexity. Social media platforms favour short, emotionally charged, and easily recognisable content (van Dijck and Poell 2015). Consequently, a complex lived environment was increasingly reduced to a limited set of circulating images. What travelled across networks was not the full reality of everyday life but particular moments that could be easily recognised, shared, and remembered.
The symbolic figure of the “Ekbatan Boys” demonstrates this process clearly. Through social media circulation, journalistic reporting, and activist campaigns, the legal case surrounding a number of young residents became associated with the neighbourhood itself. The name “Ekbatan” increasingly functioned as a symbolic sign rather than merely a geographical location. For many audiences, the neighbourhood became inseparable from narratives of resistance, repression, solidarity, and political struggle.

Yet Ekbatan’s relationship with media did not begin in 2022. Long before the protests, the neighbourhood had already occupied a distinctive place within different forms of representation. In fictional works, documentaries, podcasts, and journalistic accounts, Ekbatan repeatedly appeared as a site through which broader social questions could be explored.
A notable example is *The Frog (Ghoorbaghe)*, a television series directed by Iranian filmmaker Houman Seyyedi. In the series, Ekbatan appears as a setting associated with tension, uncertainty, and social crisis. Its concrete surfaces, monumental scale, and semi-dark spaces are mobilised to produce a particular atmosphere. In this representation, Ekbatan becomes a metaphor for marginality,

instability, and survival. Interviews with residents, however, reveal a significant gap between this image and everyday lived experience. Many participants described such portrayals as exaggerated and one-dimensional, arguing that they reduce the neighbourhood to a narrative of violence while neglecting other dimensions of collective life such as solidarity, care, culture, and belonging.

A different representation emerges in analytical projects such as the Yaleh Architecture Podcast, an independent Persian-language platform dedicated to discussions of architecture, urbanism, and society. Rather than treating Ekbatan as a dramatic setting, the podcast approaches it as an urban and social phenomenon. Discussions focus on the history of Tehran's urban development, collective forms of living, class transformation, and the relationship between architecture and society. In this narrative, Ekbatan appears not as a symbol of crisis but as a complex urban experiment whose significance lies precisely in the interaction between spatial design and everyday social life.

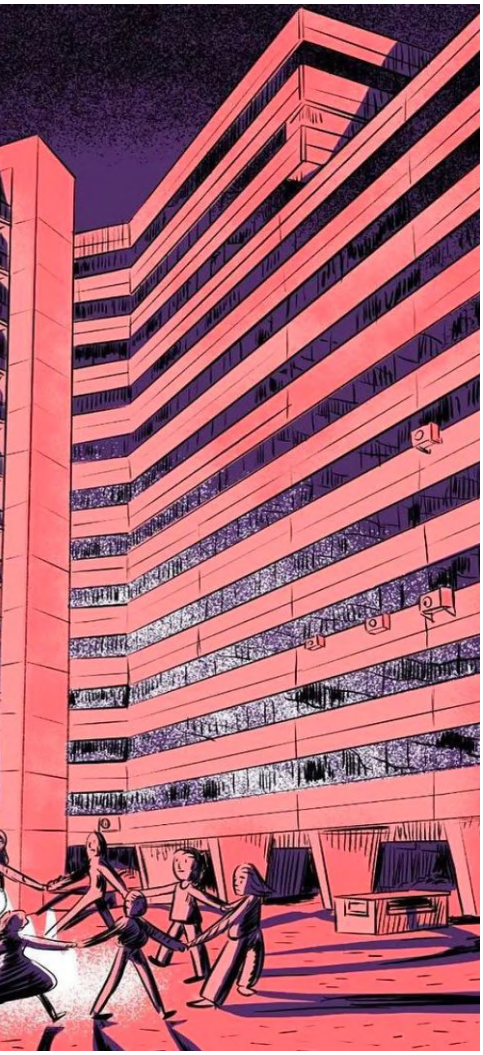
The emergence of social media after 2022 introduced a third form of representation. Unlike fictional narratives or expert analysis, these images were produced from within the neighbourhood itself. Mobile-phone videos, personal recordings, and residents' own documentation created a form of representation in which the observer and participant were often the same person. This produced what might be described as a representation from within. The result was a shared visual archive through which Ekbatan entered the collective memory of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement.
In conclusion, Ekbatan's media presence can be understood on three levels: first, Ekbatan as a fictional location, often used for dark and crisis-oriented narratives; second, Ekbatan as a subject of analysis in documentaries and podcasts that highlight its social and spatial complexity; and third, Ekbatan as an image produced from within on social media, turning it into a symbol of everyday resistance.This plurality of representations shows that Ekbatan is not a single image, but a field of narrative struggle. Understanding this field is crucial for grasping the relationship between architecture, media, and politics in contemporary Iranian cities.

The coexistence of these different representations reveals that Ekbatan is not a single image but a field of narrative contestation. Fictional narratives, academic interpretations, journalistic accounts, activist documentation, and residents' own experiences all produce different versions of the neighbourhood. Interviews clearly demonstrate that residents themselves experience this tension. Some express pride in the visibility that Ekbatan gained during and after the protests. Others feel frustrated that the complexity of everyday life has been reduced to a limited set of political images. These contrasting reactions highlight the double nature of media visibility. To be seen can be empowering, but it can also involve simplification and loss of complexity.

Therefore, Ekbatan should not be understood merely as a media case. Rather, it represents a space in which lived experience, architecture, politics, and representation continuously interact. Through social media, documentary narratives, fictional representations, and residents' own recordings, Ekbatan gradually moved beyond its physical boundaries and entered the realm of collective imagination. Yet the visibility that transformed the neighbourhood into a symbol also reduced part of its complexity. What remained after the images circulated was not the full richness of everyday life, but a powerful symbol onto which different actors projected different meanings. Understanding Ekbatan therefore requires moving constantly between lived experience and representation, between space and image, and between the neighbourhood itself and the stories told about it.
In this sense, the trajectory of Ekbatan—from everyday lifeworld to collective action and finally to media symbol—reveals the complex relationship between architecture, society, and media in contemporary urban life.

The widely shared dance performance of the Ekbatan Girls .
Source: @EkbatanOnline (2022).

Digital artworks inspired by Ekbatan and its stories, shared across social media.
From Left to Right: Ekbatan Girls, *Charshanbe Souri* in EKbatan,Ekbatan Boys.
Sources:Aslan Aghababaei (2022), Milad Musav (2023), Unknown Artist(2026).



CONCLUSION

Ekbatan is still being written...

Windows taped against blast waves in Ekbatan during the 2026 war. An ordinary architectural element became a material expression of uncertainty, vulnerability, and everyday resilience.
Source:Maandani(2026).

If this thesis began with a question rather than a hypothesis, it concludes with the recognition that Ekbatan never simply answered that question—it continually generated new ones. The more I tried to understand it as an architectural project, the more it revealed itself as a place where architecture could never be separated from the lives, memories, emotions, and histories unfolding within it. What initially appeared to be a study of buildings gradually became a study of people, and in trying to understand those people, I found myself returning once again to architecture—not as an isolated object, but as one participant within a much broader process through which space, society, culture, and history continuously shape one another.

What this research ultimately revealed was not simply the story of a housing complex. Rather, it revealed how places gradually acquire meaning—not only through design, but through the lives that unfold within them, the memories they accumulate, and the ways successive generations continuously reinterpret them. Perhaps this is the most enduring lesson that Ekbatan offers: architecture is never complete when construction ends. Its deepest meanings continue to be produced, negotiated, challenged, and transformed through the people who inhabit it.

Seen in this way, Ekbatan is significant not because it offers a universal model of collective life, nor because it can explain every social or political event associated with it. Its significance lies precisely in its specificity. It demonstrates how a particular architectural environment, shaped over decades by everyday life and collective memory, can gradually become a place whose meaning extends far beyond its physical boundaries. In that sense, Ekbatan became more than the subject of this thesis; it became the lens through which broader questions about architecture, collective life, and contemporary Iran could be explored.

Yet this story did not end with the completion of this research. While this thesis was being written, contemporary Iran continued to change, and Ekbatan continued to produce new stories. Rather than closing the questions that initiated this research, these unfolding events opened new ones, reminding us that places are never fixed. Like the people who inhabit them, they continue to evolve, accumulate new meanings, and become part of histories that remain unfinished.

The Story Continued

Yet the story did not end with the completion of this research. If anything, the process of writing this thesis made it increasingly clear that Ekbatan could never be understood as belonging to a single historical moment. While these chapters were being completed, contemporary Iran continued to change, and with it, new stories continued to emerge from Ekbatan. Rather than closing the questions that initiated this research, these events repeatedly returned me to them. They suggested that the relationship between architecture, everyday life, collective memory, and collective experience explored throughout this thesis was not confined to a single protest movement or historical episode, but continued to reveal itself under new and often unexpected circumstances.

When this research began, the Woman, Life, Freedom movement represented the most immediate context through which Ekbatan's contemporary significance could be understood. Yet the years that followed brought another nationwide uprising, the violent crackdown of late 2025 and January 2026, mass arrests, executions, prolonged internet shutdowns, and eventually war. The true scale of the January crackdown may never be fully known. While official figures remained substantially lower, independent investigations, eyewitness testimonies, and human rights organisations suggested that the number of those killed may have reached the tens of thousands. The extensive internet shutdowns, restrictions on journalists, and the systematic control of information made independent verification extraordinarily difficult (HRANA, 2026; Reuters, 2026; Amnesty International, 2026; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2026). In this sense, uncertainty itself became part of everyday urban life.

As Aryan et al. (2026) observe, internet shutdowns were not merely mechanisms of censorship; they fundamentally transformed the lived experience of the city. People were no longer disconnected only from the outside world—they became increasingly disconnected from one another. Families struggled to reach relatives, neighbours often did not know what was happening only a few streets away, and rumours travelled faster than verified information. The city gradually became defined not only by what could be seen, but also by everything that could no longer be known. Under these conditions, the control of digital space became inseparable from the experience of urban space itself.

Against this changing landscape, Ekbatan repeatedly returned to public attention. During the protests of 2025–2026, it once again became one of Tehran's most visible spaces of collective presence and resistance. Only months later, during the war that reached Tehran, the neighbourhood again found itself at the centre of another historical moment. Because of its proximity to Mehrabad Airport, residents witnessed bombardments directly from their homes. Images of the red sky above the airport, videos recorded from balconies and living-room windows, photographs documenting explosions, and scenes of everyday life under bombardment circulated across social media whenever communication briefly became possible. Residents taped their windows against blast waves, watched the changing skyline from their apartments, and documented the unfolding war from the same domestic spaces that had previously become associated with neighbourhood life and collective protest.

Perhaps what struck me most was not simply the recurrence of violence, but the recurrence of space. Throughout this thesis, I argued that Ekbatan's semi-private spaces—its balconies, windows, shared circulation spaces, and courtyards—mediate the relationship between domestic life and collective experience. During the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, these spaces became platforms of visibility, solidarity, and collective expression. During the protests of 2025–2026, they once again became spaces through which fear, resistance, mourning, and everyday life were negotiated under conditions of repression and digital isolation. During the war, they assumed yet another role.

Once again, the windows of Ekbatan became a form of media.

They no longer simply connected the private interior to the outside world. They framed the red sky above Mehrabad, recorded explosions, documented ordinary life under extraordinary circumstances, and carried these images far beyond the neighbourhood itself. Across each of these historical moments, the architectural threshold between inside and outside repeatedly became a threshold between private experience and public history. The same windows that had once carried voices, songs, and acts of solidarity now bore witness to war. Architecture did not determine these events, but it profoundly shaped how they were experienced, documented, communicated, and ultimately remembered.

Reading recent architectural reflections after completing this thesis,In *Il Giornale dell'Architettura*, Iranian architecture students described contemporary Iranian cities as places experiencing a condition of semiotic ruin, where homes, rooftops, streets, universities, and everyday rituals no longer retained fixed meanings but were continuously redefined by violence, surveillance, fear, resistance, disappearance, and loss (Anonymous, 2026). The experiences unfolding in Ekbatan seemed to embody precisely this transformation. The architecture itself had not changed, yet its meanings continued to evolve alongside history.

Rather than challenging the conclusions of this research, these events reinforced many of the arguments developed throughout it. More importantly, they reminded me that places never cease to produce new meanings. Ekbatan matters not because it belongs to one extraordinary historical moment, but because successive generations continue to return to it under profoundly different circumstances, each leaving another layer of memory upon the place.
Even as these final pages were being written, new death sentences were once again issued for several young people from Ekbatan, while their legal cases remained unresolved. (HRANA 2026)
It became impossible to write about Ekbatan as something belonging only to the past, because history itself refused to stand still. New events continued to unfold even as this thesis was reaching its conclusion.

Ultimately, this research became an attempt to tell a story about contemporary Iran through the discipline I know—architecture. Ekbatan was never simply the destination of this research. It became the lens through which questions of space, collective life, memory, and contemporary Iran could be explored. By the time this thesis reached its conclusion, it had become clear that the story itself was still unfolding.

Ekbatan is still being written.

View from Ekbatan towards Mehrabad Airport during the 2026 war. Recorded from residents' apartments, images such as this circulated widely on social media, turning the windows of Ekbatan into frames through which war was witnessed, documented, and shared. Source:Instagram page of "Ekbatan Twitter"

Recent graffiti on one of Ekbatan's structural pilotis reading "*In tāze avvaleshe*" :
(This is only the beginning)
photographed following the latest wave of protests January 2026
Source:Instagram page of "Ekbatan Twitter"

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