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the monument, its images and histories

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Architectural representations of national identities are often monumental buildings that similar to the national ideologies they support are essentially 'constructed from above'. These monuments are constructed by the states in order to represent the official understanding of nationalism to the public. In 1971 and on the occasion of the celebration of the 2500th Anniversary of Persian Empire, a memorial building –Shahyad e Aryamehr– was erected in Tehran. Yet, Shahayad with its specifically calculated design and most carefully selected visual references, hardly managed to represent the event or the idea of a glorious past for that matter. Far from the idea of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the king of Iran at the time, the monument constantly managed to represent the 'present' conditions of the country, and since its erection in Tehran, it has constantly been associated with a variety of often contradictory ideas: frustration vs. hope, freedom vs. constraint and revolution vs. stability. All these meaning has been associated with Shahyad in different episodes of modern history of Iran until today. This history could not have been narrated through Shahyad's architecture and the visual appearance of the building, but only through its photographs. As part of an ongoing research, this paper will focus on how the photographs taken from a monumental building can represent a far more sophisticated and detailed historical narrative than the architecture of the building itself. It will analyse the photographs of Shahyad, published in the leading press as the representative of the most critical episodes of modern history of Iran until today and unfolds how the meanings that Shahyad was associated to, has changed during the last 45 years. Focusing on its popular images in the social media it questions what people really see when the look at Shahyad.

national monuments and the construction of collective identities

National monuments, as one of the most influential forms of constructing a sense of collective memory and national identity, are often created in a top-down process. This process either injects a certain national value to a historic monument or demands the construction of a new one that represents such values. The latter often realizes through relating the present time to selected episodes of the past and construction of sense of historical continuity. In this process, architecture and its histories become useful means of both construction and communication of such policies.

As the political regimes change, often the centrality of the national monuments –either the historic edifices or the new buildings– changes accordingly. New governments tend to make their own mark in the urban context by constructing new monumental buildings[1]; or as a way of situating themselves within a certain historical narrative, they put the emphasis on different historic monuments. In fact, the specific selection of a historical episode as an instrument of legitimisation, is one of the distinctive aspects between the last three political regimes in Iran. The Pahlavi regime (1925-1979) distinguished itself from the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925) on the account of modernisation and formulation of a legitimising historical myth primarily based on the glorious history of pre-Islamic Iran. Such historical references were once again changed to the Islamic period for the Islamic Republic.

The establishment of the modern Iranian nation-state is marked with the establishment of Pahlavi monarchy in 1925. One of the priorities of the new regime was to reinforce the consolidation of a country, which was at the edge of separation. Therefore, construction of a historical narrative, which could be understood as a shared past between different ethnic groups was one of the main project of nation building. In this regard, architecture became one of the most useful media of transmission of national narratives, and the use of historical references in the design of the new buildings was a way to represent and highlight the glorious shared past. 'National Architecture' took shape with the use of visual references to Achaemenid (550-330 BCE) and Sassanian (224-651 CE) architecture[2] in the design of the new governmental buildings and gave a distinctive look to Tehran and other cities. While as an architectural trend it did not last for long, it influenced almost every future architectural representation of the official definitions of national identity.

What makes this process significant is not only the historical study of the attempt to inject certain ideologies to the public realm, but also the historical study of the public reading, interpretation, and engagement with such monuments. Such study could provide a different perspective to the relationship between the nation and the state, especially if we assume that the public interpretation of such monuments can change over time. In this regard, national monuments have played a significant role in introducing the appropriate historical myth to the society and as Pierre Nora mentions, they become the "sites of memory" where a multiplicity of cultural myths could be cultivated for different ideological or political purposes[3].

As part of an ongoing research, this paper will not claim to be able to provide a history of Iran through memory as Nora succeeded in Les Lieux de Mémoire. The aim here is to focus on one monument, and specifically its images as a way to understand the major transitions in collective memory that is embedded in the ways in which a national monument is read, not by architectural historians and critics, nor in coffee table books, but by someone possibly without any architectural knowledge; a journalist, or an ordinary citizen using their mobile phone camera. It seems to me that looking for a monument outside the architectural debates that surrounds it, and within other fields of knowledge is a way to examine the social impact of such buildings. such point of view helps to be able to examine the extent to which the public responses to a national monument correspond to the political values that the building was designed for.

Such examples are particularly significant, as we see every person, every viewer, and in this case every photographer –whether professional or amateur– as a holder of a memory, which is personal and collective at the same time. According to Maurice Halbswachs: "We can understand each memory as it occurs in individual thought only if we locate each within the thought of the corresponding group. We cannot properly understand their relative strength and the ways in which they combine within individual thought unless we connect the individual to the various groups of which he is simultaneously a member"[4]. Therefore, the meaning captured in the frame of each photograph could be seen not only as an expression of a personal point of view, but also as a representative view of a particular social stratum.

The understanding of the notion of memory here is also influenced by Ann Rigney's approach in The Afterlives of Walter Scott: memory on the move[5], where by considering the influence of forgetting on the development of memory, she focuses on a more dynamic and fluid understanding of collective memory. This approach helps to explain the transitions of significance in such cases as the Shahyad monument.

shahyad/azadi monument

Because of its proximity to Mehrabad Airport, Shahyad is known as the monument that greets you on your arrival and escorts you on your departure. In terms of modern national monuments for the Pahlavi regime, Shahyad Aryamehr could be considered as the most significant example. Firstly, for the scale of the political project it was conceived for, and secondly, because of its architectural, aesthetical and technological aspects, which greatly distinguished it from other contemporaneous examples.

One of the most significant actions of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was to legitimize the authenticity of his monarchy, and to merge his ideology with that of his subjects and represent it through a world-class ceremony of the 2500th Anniversary of the Founding of the Persian Empire in 1971. Iran already enjoying one of its most financially powerful decades, hosted the greatest banquet of history. The three days of celebrations were exceptional in scale, spectacle and political significance as more than seventy of the highest ranking rulers of the world were invited and housed accordingly in an extraordinary tent city, adjacent to the historical site of Persepolis. Shahyad Aryamehr (the kingly memorial of the light of Aryans) was erected in Tehran as the memorial of this event, and the representative if Iran's transition towards modernisation.

Whether the ceremonies were successful in 'convergence of state, society, and historical memory'[6] or not, one thing is clearly evident; the main aim of the celebration was to picture Mohammad Reza Shah as the heir of Cyrus the great, the founder of Achaemenid Empire, which is known as the first Iranian state. The rest of the history of Iran was greatly marginalized in festivities; the official calendar changed to a new one, roughly estimated by the establishment of Achaemenid empire, and Shahnameh as the other significant part of the official national narrative, was marginalized from this narrative[7]. The same case happened to the public who were not playing a significant role in the celebrations except for witnessing the Shah's performance. It is precisely at this point that the distance between the official national narrative, which became excessively dependent on the Achaemenid heritage and the public interpretation of nationalism becomes evident. The following years and particularly the ways on which Shahyad as the monument of this event is seen the evidence of this claim.

The design is a product of a competition announced in 1970, and a developed version of a submission by a recently graduated architect from the University of Tehran, Hossein Amanat. In architectural terms, and as the only public monument of the event, Shahyad was not a mere reference to the Achamenid Empire, but as the architect himself

has mentioned the design does not follow a selective approach towards history. As explained by Amanat in an interview with BBC, it represents an inclusive approach towards the past, and showcases a variety of visual references to multiple periods of Iranian history[8]. In fact, it is very difficult to trance a purely Achaemenid reference amongst them.

The most explicit reference to the pre-Islamic history of Iran is its main parabolic arch as it is inspired by arches from the Sassanid era. Other significant pre-Islamic reference, which is used to shape the overall volume is the use of the form of a Chār-tāgh from the Sassanian era. In its purest form, Chār-tāgh (four-arched) consists of a dome structure which is placed on a square base and has arched openings on each side. The form was often used in religious buildings and palaces, therefore could be associated with the power of the Sasanians empire, as well as the genius of Iranian architects. While both of these references have been widely used during the Islamic period, the use of an axial water canal in the site could be understood as the only reference of the building to the Achaemenid architecture, similar example of which is discovered in Pasargadae[9]. The rest of its historical references, are to the Islamic era; its larger arch is a pointed arch, which was popularly used since the first Islamic century –late 7th Century. The design of the garden however, is inspired by the interior tilework patter of the dome of Shaikh Lutfollah mosque from Safavid period in Isfahan. Other historical reference of the monument include: the use of a pointed arch, above the main parabolic arch and on the other two sides of the monument; the top of the monument resamples the shape of wind catchers, which is an identifying feature of vernacular architecture in Iran.

The fabulous tilework in-between the two arches is a modern take on the traditional technique of Rasmi-sazi, which is another reference to the prime decorative works used in many public buildings since 1100 AD, and throughout the rest of the Islamic era. Rasmi-sazi is mostly used as internal cover of the dome ceiling in more modest public buildings, such as Hammam, Caravanserai, Ab-Anbar or a small-scale mosque, while for monumental buildings, such as palaces and the grand mosques the more sophisticated and extravagant technique of Muqarnas is employed. In the case of such monument as Shahyad, one would expect the reference to be a new take on the technique of Muqarnas, if it was merely to celebrate the grandiose of the occasion, or the monarchy[10].

Shahyad was not a simple sculptural monument in Tehran; it was a complete cultural complex, comprising a library and galleries in the basement and small gallery in the upper part, which after the ceremonies were open to public. Indeed, it was the only remains of the celebrations that Iranians were invited to visit. Therefore, it had the potential to be easily despised or loved by the public. Yet as much as the event was increasingly criticized, especially during the revolts of the last years towards the revolution, Shahyad became more popular. Considered separate from the memory of the events that it was designed for, many riots took place near Shahyad and by the collapse of Pahlavi monarchy, it was named Azadi Tower –the tower of freedom. Today, it is the icon of Tehran, while from the marvelous tented city, which was constructed near Persepolis nothing is left but the ruins.

the monument in photographs

One of the first collection of the photographs from Shahyad are captured during the festivities of 1971. The glowing white Joshaghan stones that cover the structure of Shahyad against the dark back ground on the left, and an eye level view point give the monument, as well as the sparkle of fireworks on the right side of the frame represents the celebration and the grandiose of the monument. This photograph celebrates the festivities as much as it celebrates the monument **(f2)**. In the other photographs in the series Shahyad is seen in the background. In one frame Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi is leading his guests from the monument, and in the other Shah's Arab guests are standing in the foreground, posing for a photograph with the monument.

f2_Eftetah-e bana-e yadboud-e Shahyad-e Aryamehr
Tehran, 1971, Islamic Revolution Document Centre: Tehran

Although Shahyad is the only urban monument of the event, loaded with great deal of anticipation as the 'Gate towards the Great Civilisation'[11], there is no clear trace of the public in the remaining official photographs of the festivities. In following eight years however, as the gap between the nation and the state widened, Shahyad become the locus of public gatherings. Michel Lipchitz's photograph of the rites on 10th December 1978 is perhaps one of the most iconic photographs of this sort. Looking to the camera, a young man in the foreground is holding a large picture of Ayatollah Khomeini. In the background, thousands of protesters fill the distance between him and Shahyad monument. The caption of the photograph at AP Images reads:

"Demonstrators hold up a poster of exiled Muslim leader Ayatollah Khomeini during an anti-shah demonstration in Tehran at the [Shahyad] monument which was built to commemorate the monarch's rule and symbol of his power. The popular revolt against the shah raised alarm bells in the West, which saw the shah as a trusted ally and counterweight to hard-line Arab regimes and Palestinian radicals. The face of the revolution was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose demeanor, vehemently anti-American rhetoric and stern interpretation of Islam challenged not only Western interests but also Western values"[12].

For the Western Eye, Shahyad which until this moment was the representative of an ally, and perhaps the extraordinary event of the 1971, is now the monument of dramatic

changes that looks at the emergence of a deep gap between Iran and West. For the Iranian revolutionaries on the other hand, it became the locus of people's power and the sparkle of an uprising.

The Shah leaves Iran on January 6th 1979, and Ayatollah Khomeini return to the country on February 1st. On February 6th Shahyad hosts another demonstration, this time in the support of the new temporary government and eventually on February 11th, Iranian government changes to the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this process the memory of Shahyad changes from a memorial monument that looks towards a brighter future, to the memory of violent months of fight for a different interpretation of future and freedom. The Revolution affects every aspect of Iranian life, and Shahyad is not an exception. The name which resembled the Shah, changed to Azadi (freedom).

Despite being and integral part of the Iranian recent past, it seemed challenging for the new regime to inherit the icon of its capital from the last sovereign regime. The idea of constructing a 435-meter-long telecommunication tower, seemed the only competing option for Azadi of 45 meters. After eleven year of construction, Milad tower was opened on October 7th 2008. Throughout this period, it has been anticipated that Milad would become the main icon of Tehran and of course the representation of the modern and Islamic Iran, while Shahyad –or Azadi– would be a distant memory[13]. On the contrary, just one year after the opening of Milad, the large scale rites of June 2008 was once again held around the Azadi monument.

Once again photographs of the monument embracing the crowd became central to the events and this time, took over the internet. Javad Moghimi's photograph of the demonstration for the Guardian became viral over a few days[14]. Here, the fierce female protester is raising her hands, showing the sign of victory, while Azadi tower stands tall as in all other photos in the background; as if the monument is the also a supporter.

Over the last decade, the almost ignored monument of Tehran finds new management under Tehran municipality's supervision. In one way, Milad and Azadi are now both accepted as the icons of the city, perhaps with a degree of difference and surely associated with different memories. As the social media expands constantly over the last decade, the endless number of photographs of both monuments are in reach to satisfy the curious eye. If one questions the degree to which each of the two is more significant, perhaps the random and authorless photographs of Milad taken from the smallest arches of Azadi would give the answer. To a great extent however, I do not believe that this represents a simplistic comparison or competition between the last two political regimes in Iran, but to a great extent is influenced by the longevity of Shahyad/Azadi, and its enduring existence and versatility in collective memories. As an architectural product, Azadi has the physical and visual potential adhere to multiple narratives.

Today Azadi plays a successful role both in the governmental and the public eye. The 34th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was celebrated at Azadi square. The supporting public gathered once again around the monument, holding once again banners that has the image of Ayatollah Khomeini and reads, "We will stand until the end" **(f3)**. Hossein Zohrevand's collection of "memorial photographs" shows people standing in front of Azadi while showing their support for the government.

The theme of freedom (Azadi in Persian) is addressed in various ways in photographs of the monument shared on social media. For example, it is represented in a unique wedding photograph by Sean Alami. Here, the bride and the groom are walking pass Azadi, while the bride is wearing a white gown and no sign of Islamic coverings. The photograph which is shared on social media in a light sepia hue, represents a degree of fantasy and dream-like environment. This theme is also addressed in multiple photographs looking at the monument through a cage.

f3_Hossein Zohrevand, Memorial Photograph
Tehran, 2013, Farhang News

With a different approach, Fazel Khakbaz photograph of a girl and the monument poses multiple questions. The girl is seated on a section of the decorative water canals of the site and looks at the monument. The photograph, which represents stillness is filled with anticipation and perhaps hope. The question here is which monument the girl is looking at? It is the monument of a historical and futuristic greatness? A revolution? Or freedom? Is she hopeful or disappointed? The photograph challenges all possibilities.

It could be argued that Shayad in one way is the true representation of a collectivity. This is evident in the visual reference of the form, and in its architectural programme as not simply a monument, but a public space; a garden, a library and a museum. In one way, this is reflected in the pictorial representation of the monument too. It has both served and formed a multiplicity of ideologies as they come and go during its life.

Whether is it the wise choice of references by the architect that has spoken to different social strata, or simply because of the historical events that took place at the location of the monument, Shahyad –perhaps more rightfully called, Azadi– has become a "site of memory". Yet, this could hardly be understood, or proven simply by looking at it from the architectural point of view. The endless description of every detail of the building, drawings and architectural photographs can only help the curious eye to hypothesize and question the mysterious popularity and enduring significance of the monument.

The monument however, shines much more gloriously outside the architectural discipline, in the memory of every visitor. It takes multiple meanings only through the preceding socio-political assumptions of the viewer, which is reflected in the captured frame. The multiple readings of freedom, hope, contradiction, pride and objection are crystalized in the physicality of the monument, and its histories. However, it is only evident in a collection of its images, much better than the monument itself.

endnotes

1. For further information, look at: Vale, Lawrence J. *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008).

2. It is important to note that Islamic visual references were also used even in the early decades of the development of National Architecture, but the main emphasis in the formation of the historical narrative as well as its architecture was primarily on the pre-Islamic heritage. Of course without looking at the details of its development, this approach could be seen rather powerful until the revolution of 1979 and the abolition of Pahlavi monarchy.

3. Nora, Pierre, *Realms of Memory: rethinking the French past*, vol.1, Translated and Edited by L.D. Kritzman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-98).

4. Halbwachs, Maurice, *On Collective Memory*, edited and translated by Coser, Lewis A.

 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 53.

5. Rigney, Anne, *Afterlives of Walter Scott: memory on the move*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

6. Marashi, Afshin, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, power, and the state, 1870-1940*, (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2008), 5.

7. Ansari, Ali, *Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 176.

8. Amanat, H. (2007) '-'. "Interview with Hossein Amanat", BBC, accessed May 4. 2014, http://www.amanatarchitect.com/shahyad/index.php.

9. For more information, look at: Herzfeld, Ernst, *Archaeological History of Iran*, (London: Oxford University Press,1935), p. 27.

10. Kakhi, Niloofar, "the Architecture of Celebration: From Memorizing a Sovereign to Revolution". In *Art History Studies: Art & Society*, edited by Gungor, Ayse, 211-217. (Istanbul: DAKAM Publishing, 2014).

11. Grigor, "Of Metamorphosis: Meaning on Iranian Terms", *Third Text*, 17, 3 (2003): 213-214.

12. "Mideast two revolutions", AP Images, Accessed August 21, 2016, http://www.apimages.com/metadata/Index/Mideast-Two-Revolutions/afe66d16541046699984885a1c99de94/48/0.

13. Grigor, "Of Metamorphosis: Meaning on Iranian Terms", 223-224

14. "Javad Moghimi's story reveals the peril of being a journalist in Iran", The Guardian, Accessed August, 21, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/jul/05/javad-moghimi-iran-journalists-jailed.

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CV

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