

Conclusion

Urban heritage assemblage in Iran: A sequence of ephemeral territorialization endeavours foiled by de-territorializing forces

The national picture

The trajectory of socio-material formations around conservation and urban heritage planning tracked by this book shows a recurring pattern. Figure 62 maps the interplay of agents that have played significant territorializing and/or de-territorializing roles in the urban heritage sites studied. The map illustrates how the work of territorializers has been twisted, diverted, and dispersed in the maelstrom of frequent political changes. More specifically, processes that attempted to territorialize conservation have been repeatedly pulled back towards de-territorialization by anti-conservation ideologies, purge processes, corrupt administrations, wars, and revolutions. In this context, the formal structures of conservation and heritage planning have not been able to channel the social and economic forces into sufficiently solid and durable structures that can accommodate their function. Indeed, the network of formal structures in Iran—laws, governmental organizations, and academic concepts—has not succeeded in constraining the informal behaviours of actors at the governmental, parastatal, and private levels.

Any form of long-term planning, including heritage planning,¹ is consistently disrupted and interrupted by a short-term society.² As seen in the various cases studied, despite legally binding, long-term policies, processes tended to be stopped or put on hold following political changes. Moreover, as many have noted when studying urban administration systems in Tehran, a society characterized by the concentration of power and resources in the hands of the few often experiences profound corruption in its public organizations.³ The cases discussed in this book show how public funds and urban spaces can be hijacked and diverted for the benefit of the elite.

The junior and senior public servants and private employees that I met during my field research were all well aware of the instability of the institutions they were working with. This awareness stymied their motivation to invest professionally and financially in long-term projects. In Tehran, for example, I witnessed a tendency towards short-term and small-scale projects. The popularity of short-term projects among experienced officials especially, often stemmed from a desire to claim credit for their accomplishments during their tenure, rather than allowing future political adversaries to benefit from their work. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that limited financial resources also contributed to their preference for these projects.

In order to understand the functioning of the urban heritage bureaucracy in Iran, it is crucial to recognize the volatile political and economic conditions directly influencing its human resources. Rampant corruption and nepotism based on gender and ideology across

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- 1 The term 'heritage planning' here is as used by Ashworth, see: Ashworth and Tunbridge, 'Old Cities, New Pasts: Heritage Planning in Selected Cities of Central Europe'.
 - 2 Katouzian, 'The Short-Term Society: A Study in the Problems of Long-Term Political and Economic Development in Iran'.
 - 3 Piran, *Az Shoma Harekat Az Khoda Barekat, Tose'e-Ye Mosharekat Mabna va Mosharekat Mehvar Dar Iran: Mored-e Tehran [God Helps Those Who Help Themselves: Participatory Local Development in Iran: The Case of Tehran]*; Abedi Jafari et al., *Sanjesh-e Fesad va Salamati Sazmani Shahrdari-e Tehran [Measuring Corruption and Organizational Health of the Municipality of Tehran]*.

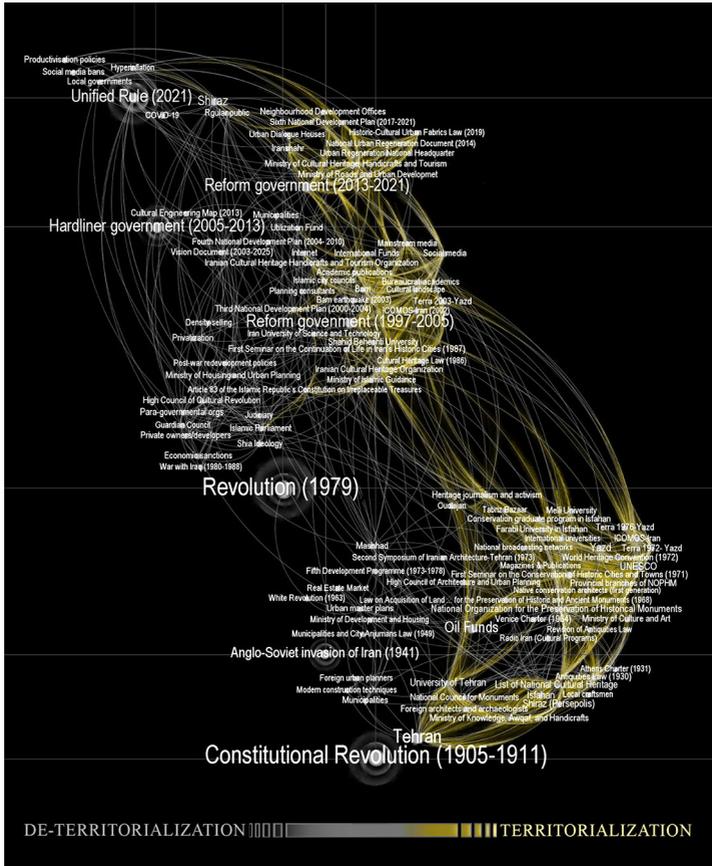
academic and professional realms have resulted in widespread scepticism among conservation architects considering pursuing careers in Iran. Exacerbating this context is the ongoing political and economic instability in the country. Out of the 29 young professionals I interviewed between 2021 and 2022, 18 had either already emigrated from Iran or were making arrangements to do so.

The emergence of Iran's conservation bureaucracy in the early 1900s was the result of an intricate assemblage of the post-constitutional parliamentary administration, Western conservation doctrine, historic monuments, and official Iranian identity discourse. It involved collecting and distributing political and academic discourses, human resources, and funds, with Tehran playing a pivotal role in this process. The conservation workshops in Shiraz, Isfahan, and later Yazd played a significant material role as repositories of know-how for preserving stone and earthen architecture. Through generations, conservation architects learned the intricacies of working with local craftsmen and addressing the challenges posed by stone and mud brick structures in both archaeological and inhabited settings. Therefore, recognizing the material role within this discursive-material assemblage is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the field of conservation in Iran.

Despite the disruptive effects of World War II and the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran, which resulted in a slowdown and even a halt in conservation activities during the 1940s and 1950s, the policy and practice of the 1960s remained connected to the pre-war conservation assemblage. In other words, although these political events had a de-territorializing impact on the conservation assemblage, the pause was temporary.

To provide a clearer understanding of Figure 62, let's briefly follow the trajectories of the conservation and heritage planning assemblage in Iranian cities discussed in this book.

Figure 62: Disrupted efforts to territorialize urban heritage planning in Iran from the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 to the unified rule of conservative factions in August 2021



Author, 2023

In the broader historical context, conservation and urban heritage planning policy and practice in Iran have relied heavily on the institutional structures established during the 1960s and 1970s. These two decades witnessed an expansion and complexification in conservation and heritage planning assemblage across the country. During this period, the narrow scope of monument conservation gradually opened up into heritage planning, which included tourism economics and housing issues in cities.⁴ Supported by oil funds, a centralized bureaucratic and legal infrastructure emerged, extending links to various provincial branches of NOPHM, universities, national broadcasting networks, and public educational institutions. It was within this network that generations of conservation architects and academics, who played an instrumental role in shaping heritage journalism and activism in the 1970s and beyond, emerged.

However, in the tense and uncertain atmosphere of the late 1970s, urban heritage assemblage, which was still in its formative stages, experienced a state of suspense. Progress in conservation and heritage planning again slowed down and was at times halted altogether. In contrast to the temporary pause that conservation assemblage experienced after World War II and the political shifts that followed, the suspension during the Revolution in the late 1970s led to a break with the previously established infrastructure.

Despite the achievements and expansion of conservation and heritage planning assemblage during this period, the established networks failed to build effective discursive and material-economic connections with a significant portion of the Iranian population, who maintained a traditional lifestyle in socially and physically decaying historic cities. The aftermath of the Revolution in the late 1970s, as depicted in newspapers and magazines of that time, highlighted the challenges faced by the conservation assemblage in relation with this particular population.

4 See: Ashworth, 'Conservation as Preservation or as Heritage: Two Paradigms and Two Answers'; Ashworth and Tunbridge, 'Old Cities, New Pasts: Heritage Planning in Selected Cities of Central Europe'.

Ideology-driven acts of vandalism and the surge of private property owners seeking the delisting of historic buildings following the Revolution and during subsequent conservative governments demonstrated the alienation between conservation doctrine and the traditional Islamic approach towards the built environment. In fact, the disconnection was already present in the preceding secular state; however, it became more prominently manifested with the advent of the post-Revolutionary Islamized state.

Following the 1979 Revolution, legal instruments concerned with conservation experienced fluctuating levels of effectiveness due to alternating conservative and reform-oriented regimes. Specifically, during conservative administrations, there was a noticeable decrease in attention given to heritage laws, which can be attributed to both economic and ideological factors.

Ideologically, the ontological contradictions between conservation as a concept developed in Western cultures and Islamic traditions have also played a significant role in the cases examined in this book.⁵ An example of this is the prioritization of functional continuity over the authenticity of material and form in historic sites managed by Awqaf Organization and religious authorities. Another example is the prioritization of private property rights based on sharia law over modern heritage protection laws, leading to judicial approval to delist several historic buildings.

Given the transient nature of post-Revolutionary administrations, an independent and proactive academia and civil society could have ensured a certain degree of continuity. However, as reviewed throughout the previous chapters, both institutions across both of those sectors encountered systemic limitations. Even under the most favourable circumstances, in other words, during reformist governments, activism and academic engagement were only tolerated, and that was as long as they adhered to the discursive boundaries set by the reformist Islamic-Iranian identity narrative.

5 See: Yadollahi, 'Reflections on the Past and Future of Urban Conservation in Iran'.

Zooming in on Tehran

The examined cases in Tehran offer a close-up of the local socio-spatial assemblages in connection with the broader national heritage planning assemblage. When considered collectively, these cases illustrate the dynamics along the boundaries between the official realm of heritage planning and everyday urban life in a metropolis like Tehran. My ethnographic observations between 2019 to 2022 have allowed this study to further shift its focus to the micro-level of the informal socio-spatial dynamics of heritage planning in Iran's capital.

My fieldwork revealed that the reformist city administrations encountered a multifaceted political quandary when it came to heritage planning. The challenge was how to create a marketable concept of urban heritage, one that appealed to a wide range of social groups such as the middle class, women, and the educated. This intricate situation arose due to a distinctive political factor—unlike the conservative factions, the reformists had an interest in addressing the aspirations of these specific groups. The reformists encountered an immensely formidable task in attempting to appeal to Tehran's wider urban society, while simultaneously reconciling the presentation of an urban heritage that adhered to the official identity discourse and its associated economic-spatial structures.⁶

Drawing from my observations, particularly in Tehran, it becomes evident that heritage has functioned as a platform through which the general public expresses their political opinions, both through social media channels and at public gatherings. By closely examining the reformist city administration's strategy in Tehran, particularly their utilization of boundary objects to mitigate conflicts between official and non-official expressions of nostalgia, I have inferred that heritage

6 As defined, for example, in the Cultural Engineering Map, see: High Council of Cultural Revolution and Ahmadinejad, 'Mosavabe-Ye Naghshe-Ye Mohandesi-Ye Farhangi-Ye Keshvar [Decree on the Cultural Engineering Map of the Country]'.
<https://doi.org/10.14381/9783839471623-017> <https://www.hibris.com/de/egb> - Open Access - 

planners acknowledged the political strife and taboo nostalgic sentiments prevalent among the general public. These sentiments frequently intertwined with recollections of the economic prosperity and social freedoms witnessed in Tehran during the 1970s. In light of this, the planners attempted to incorporate the less uncomfortable aspects of these nostalgic elements into spatial projects, while aligning them with official identity discourses.⁷

My online and offline field observations suggest that the reform-oriented urban government was indeed in the process of capturing Tehran's urban heritage assemblage by acting along the boundaries of the official and informal social spheres. Such boundary action helped them to overlap formal and informal, as well as public and private spaces, funds, and discourses. The objective behind this strategy, as I argue, was to facilitate a closer alignment between Tehran's official heritage planning policies one side, and the private sector and the target groups within the city's heritage market on the other. Additionally, the deployment of boundary objects such as reconstructed public spaces, museum-houses, and NDOs played a unifying role, bringing together various motivations and actors. As evidenced by the cases studied in Tehran, it is not uncommon for individuals involved in multiple areas of heritage planning to possess diverse and overlapping motives, combining interests in tourism, academia, and activism.⁸

As expected in a short-term society, the bureaucratic and legal infrastructures that underpinned this strategy proved to be short-lived. Despite the transitory nature of post-Revolutionary administrations, it

7 Uncomfortable or difficult heritage as discussed by: William Logan and Keir Reeves, *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with Difficult Heritage* (Routledge, 2008); Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (Routledge, 2010); Pendlebury, Wang, and Law, 'Re-Using "Uncomfortable Heritage": The Case of the 1933 Building, Shanghai'.

8 In this study, the exploration of subjectivity, desire, and the multifaceted nature of individual motivations draws from the writings of French psychoanalyst and philosopher, Felix Guattari's works, including his collaborations with Gilles Deleuze such as "Anti-Oedipus" and "A Thousand Plateaus," provide insights into the complexities of human motives.

is beneficial to consider the policy fluctuations of subsequent administrations within the broader framework of the Iranian state. Also, sociologists have contended, the reformist and conservative administrations should be viewed as two sides of the same coin, illustrating how the Iranian state possesses the capability to alternately relax and tighten its ideological constraints as it sees fit.⁹ Or as noted by DeLanda, the collaboration between authoritarian states and the general public often exhibits an episodic nature.¹⁰ Within this political context, the reformist administration examined in the case of Tehran witnessed the ephemeral nature of cultural reconciliation and participatory programmes that have been implemented through the strategy of boundary action. Following the conclusion of the reformist city administration, various discursive, technological, and spatial assemblages that encompassed place-making and storytelling gradually dispersed. This occurred for instance, with the new city council's declaration in 2021 that promoted a devotional lifestyle over the city nightlife that had been favoured by the reformists.¹¹ The new mayor further asserted a vision of Tehran as an exemplary metropolis of the Islamic world.¹² Additionally, the Revolutionary parliament imposed new constraints on internet access and social media, thereby introducing further restrictions on the public sphere.

The formal and informal connections between organizational, spatial, and social elements shaping the reform-oriented urban heritage assemblage gradually loosened by the end of the reformists' term and towards the beginning of the conservative government and city council

9 For instance see: Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, 'The Conservative Consolidation in Iran', *Survival* 47, no. 2 (2005): 175–90.

10 DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*.

11 The topic was also widely discussed in the conservative newspapers. See for instance: 'Montakhab-e Doeh-Ye Sheshom-e Shora-Ye Shahr Dar Bareh-Ye Zist-e Shabaneh Che Goft? [What Did the Elected Member of the Sixth Tehran City Council Said about Tehran's "Nightlife" Plan?]', *Tasnim News Agency*, 13 July 2021, <https://tn.ai/2537595>.

12 Alireza Zakani, 'Tehran Ra Kalanshahr-e Olgu-Ye Jahan-e Eslam Midanim [We Regard Tehran as a Role Model Metropolis of the Islamic World]', *Mehr News Agency*, 13 May 2022, mehrnews.com/xXG3n.

in 2021. It would be inaccurate to suggest that all the connections and friendships that were made, the spatial and infrastructural structures that were built, and the legal and administrative bases that were established to create the aforementioned assemblage have vanished. But it is fair to say that the change in political power has had a significantly detrimental effect on project-funding priorities and, more importantly, on-line and offline public life as an essential part of Tehran's urban heritage assemblage.

It is essential to exercise caution when dealing with heritage discourses that are rooted in nationalism, essentialism, ideology, or racism, as these discourses can have profound implications for heritage policy and practice.¹³ However, after closely examining the evolution of urban heritage assemblages in Iranian cities, I have come to the conclusion that the most significant challenge facing urban heritage planning in Iran lies not in excessively rigid structures influenced by what Laura-jane Smith calls 'Authorized Heritage Discourse' (AHD),¹⁴ but rather in the absence of stable structures altogether. Smith's work is a comprehensive exploration of the ways in which heritage can be framed and controlled by institutions, experts, and dominant groups in society. However, I argue that in the context of ever-changing urban heritage policy-making in Iran, AHD has faced challenges in rooting itself in a stable and enduring discursive, spatial, and bureaucratic-legal framework.

In this context, the notion of sufficiently durable and solid structures refers to the establishment of robust scientific, professional, administrative, civil society, and legal frameworks that serve as binding points of reference for the various competing discursive-spatial forces

13 Grigor, 'Recultivating "Good Taste": The Early Pahlavi Modernists and Their Society for National Heritage'; Talinn Grigor, *Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture, and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs* (Periscope Publishing, distributed by Prestel, 2009); Gustav Wollentz et al., 'Toxic Heritage: Uncertain and Unsafe', *Heritage Futures. Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices*, 2020, 294–312; Johanna M Blokker, 'Heritage and the "Heartland": Architectural and Urban Heritage in the Discourse and Practice of the Populist Far Right', *Journal of European Studies* 52, no. 3–4 (2022): 219–37.

14 Smith 2006

at play within cities. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that the lack of durable structures in heritage planning in Iran is symptomatic of the proliferation of rigid ideological and political systems, along with their associated economic-spatial structures. In other words, the history of state-organized conservation in Iran consists of recurrent, short-lived episodes in which attempts at territorialization have been thwarted by de-territorializing forces.

Manuel DeLanda's concept of the 'knob' could provide a framework to understand the push-and-pull dynamics between actors engaged in territorializing and de-territorializing an assemblage.¹⁵ In this book, I have borrowed the concept to explain the varying degrees of territorialization and de-territorialization witnessed within the investigated urban heritage assemblage (see Figure 62). To survive, each assemblage has to undergo experimentation to determine the optimal position of the knob, striking a balance to avoid the pitfalls of becoming excessively rigid at one extreme or descending into chaos at the other.

With that said, it is essential to underscore that this book does not propose practical suggestions. Nonetheless, it does provide a map of recurring patterns in Iran's urban heritage planning assemblage, offering glimpses into its potential future tendencies. Within the prevailing political and ideological landscape of Iran and the Middle East, the prospect of maintaining a stable legal, administrative, academic, and spatial backbone for urban heritage planning appears to be waning, and this poignant realization stands as a pivotal outcome of this research. Yet, through fostering connections that extend beyond our conventional boundaries, while bearing in mind the historical tendencies of the assemblage, academics and professionals have the potential to initiate a gradual transformation, bringing the assemblage closer to a state of equilibrium —balanced between chaos and rigidity. Persisting with this struggle and embracing the value of the human resources and the existing academic, spatial, and bureaucratic infrastructure (even if rooted in a troubled past) could inform our actions should we find ourselves in other instants of participating in a Body Without Organs.

15 DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*.

