

Foreword

Gems on the Silk Roads

The story of this book is somehow unusual. It started in London in 2010, when Farnaz Arefian, an Iranian Architect and urban designer, at that time a doctoral researcher at the Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU), proposed to organise a small academic seminar around urban transformations in Iran. A few from us at the DPU got enthusiastic, as no recent international events or research programmes had discussed how Iranian cities expand, what key challenges they face, and how people and institutions are addressing them, in a country with close to 80 million inhabitants and that is renowned for its age-old multilayered urban cultures. As the preparation phase went on, we decided that the seminar should not only give an account of the transformations themselves, but examine critically these urban transformations in Iranian cities of all kind and size, and understand the rationale and underpinning logics explaining current situations, good or bad. To a large extent, this book brings new answers to these questions.

Soon after the conventional call for abstracts was launched, we realised that what was designed as a small high-profile international event was expanding swiftly, much beyond any original plans. Over 600 abstracts were received, way beyond the 40–50 expected. The scientific committee that gathered eminent specialists accepted generously to review ten times more proposals than originally planned, as their curiosity and interest were growing. The results were surprising: at least 150 abstracts deserved to be selected! A second observation from an academic point of view was that over 90 Iranian cities, of all sizes, and covering the whole Iranian territory were referenced, analysed, and in various cases critically examined. Two-thirds of the abstracts were coming from master's and doctoral students, essentially from Iranian universities, not only from Teheran but also from much smaller, less prestigious ones than those from the capital. To our opinion, this interest mirrors a fantastic desire to express and exchange ideas in an international scene, beyond the difficulties of writing in English. The seminar gave voice to a whole generation of young researchers, many of whom writing for the first time for

an international academic event. In addition to this massive afflux from Iran, Iranian and non-Iranian scholars living outside Iran, sent quite a large number of fascinating proposals. They covered long civilisation and political periods, and not only those that followed the toppling of the Shah in 1979.

Unfortunately, the few papers selected here do not fully reflect the wealth of ideas, the bubbling of diverse opinions that were read. However, the book remains an excellent appetiser of different tastes and colours on the layering of different urban transformations that took place and that are taking place in the country.

As a way to 'face the flood,' give due visibility to a high number of promising papers, and stimulate the creativity of their authors, 150 of them were invited to deliver an exhibition panel that could be in Persian and English and that would conceptually and visually give an account of a longer paper. Again, this excellent complement that was exhibited during the London conference on November 8–9, 2012, is not included in the book, but deserves attention on the abstract proceeding of the conference, available at <http://www.silkcities.org/data-bank>.

The one strength that delineates the limits of the book comes from Iranian urban transformations seen through a kaleidoscopic view of Tehran, primarily of its spatial and social transformations and its waves of expansion. From chapter to chapter, the reader explores different realities that altogether sketch a unique view of the capital, as the laboratory of urban transformation in Iran. First, Tehran Bazaar is interpreted as a 'non-place,' following Marc Augé's anthropologic theories. Then, three iconic modern urbanism neighbourhoods are revisited and they allow understanding the metamorphosis of traditional Tehran into a modern metropolis, and at the same time, opening new paths of urbanisation in other urban centres. Detailed and refined analysis takes place at a much smaller scale, down to housing level, and explores the relationship between housing typology and urban morphology in order to understand the various transitions from courtyard houses to narrow row houses and to row apartments.

A review of urban images of Tehran through Iranian post-revolution movies enriches the vision and finds spaces through a perceptive question: How are urban spaces portrayed in movies and documentaries films staged and how do they link or not to other spaces in the city? This is an interesting question in relation to the fragmented growth of most metropolises that could find their unity only through representation and art, as a mean to reveal the city. Tehran is explored in another chapter as the scene of modernity that contributes to a long history of urban transformation of the capital.

Tehran 'call for spatial justice,' or the losing of natural resources and of agricultural land because of current models of urbanisation, or the illustration of old and new emerging spatial inequalities pattern, raises critical issues on the way the urban transformation has been taking place since the 1979 revolution. Such chapters bring unique points of view on urban Iran today and give to this book a unique position too. These critical visions are well complemented by an instigating Quranic reading of changes in today Islamic Iranian cities. Based on the philosophical pillars of Islam and its value systems, the work opposes the concept of modesty, reflected in traditional Islamic values and urban patterns, to the degree of immodesty of urban

forms of the contemporary Islamic city, which de facto contradicts the philosophic pillars they are built upon.

These are only a few of the multiple visions of Tehran offered by the book. One should add the critical visit to Tehran satellite towns such as Hashtgerd New Town or some of the major regeneration projects. However, one of the interests of this collection lays on its capacity to drive the reader toward much less known and documented Iranian realities such as the Central Plateau's arid small cities such as Sabzevar or to Bam severely affected by the 2003 earthquake and to new towns, such as Shustar-e-No, one of many that would deserve a much greater critical review, for the challenges they raise and the serious problems that some of them are facing and that most probably will grow as time goes by.

One way to keep open the communication channels open beyond the international seminar was to carefully select a limited sample of papers. This book is a first account. A second mean was to launch a platform that would maintain and foster a dialogue on urban matters for the academic community within Iran, and just as importantly between Iran and its neighboring countries, and with far away scholars. The Silk Cities initiative, still modest, was an answer. Its name reminds a time when ancient Silk Road caravans were peacefully crossing Iranian ports and cities on their way from Istanbul to China. They brought wealth and new ideas, and were an engine for sharing knowledge. This book is in essence is a collection of gems found in some of the cities of the future silk roads of the twenty-first centuries, where knowledge on urban transformation will be one of the wealth to be shared and exchanged.

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