

Planning a Revolution

Labour Movements and Housing Projects in Tehran, 1943-1963

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PLANNING A REVOLUTION LABOUR MOVEMENTS AND HOUSING PROJECTS IN TEHRAN, 1943-1963

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When life itself becomes a political project, any distinction between space of action and dwelling ceases to exist. This differentiation indeed is tended to neutralise the life itself. The emergence of such forms of life has progressively eroded the strict division between public and private space, between the space of living and space of political action. The city becomes at the same time a continuous field of exteriorised publicity and a sequence of autonomous, privatised interiors. Tehran is a paradigmatic case of the latter phenomenon; the house is the place where all the economic, political, social, theological and class conflicts are deployed. In Tehran, parallel to the Post- World War II political movements (1943-63), the immediate need for massive reconstruction not only resulted in developing new construction techniques and planning regulations, but also paved the way for direct implementation of series of political projects. Those attempts are commonly seen as political projects to instrumentalise new technology and modernist architectural and planning principles in order to tame the socio-political tensions. However the paper tends to read the first post- WWII housing projects in Tehran as instruments of social and political mobilisation, through which the city's working class and middle-class re-established their social and spatial autonomy, through a dialectical process of action and resistance.

Keywords

Tehran, social movement, housing project, Post-WWII, Tudeh Party, Chaharsad Dastgah, Kuy-e Narmak, Kuy-e Nazi Abad

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INTRODUCTION

In the landscape of the Central Asia, or particularly, the larger Iranian Plateau, the original form of life is nomadism. The nomadic way of life is characterised by movement that is in vital balance with the ever-changing environment. This harmony can be achieved through the extensive control and management of the natural forces. To maintain their mobile way of life, nomads cannot only rely on the temporarily found resources of water, food and energy; they make use of environmental forces to produce necessary resources. Such performance requires a high level of changeability and resistance, which exists in contrast to the rigid and static boundaries. Indeed this interaction is not for an absolute dominance over the external forces, but rather is a dialectical relationship, which drives and supports the nomadic life. This form of life exists in a permanent state of conflict. For nomads the ideal form of living is only possible by having a communal life. Aristotle defines “communal life” as the response to the political nature of humans (as they desire to live together).¹ The political significance of communal life reveals itself when it is in antagonism with stabilising forces of state. Settlement of those nomadic lives, presupposes a land-appropriation, and a land-division that is determined by a broader stable order, applied by state. Historically this order was conducted through both spatial and juridical apparatuses: making frames that bounded life to a territory in order to regularise it. It has undergone many changes in its more than three thousand- year history, while in this transition, some of those tamed lives have tended to reclaim their original way of living even in the spatial configuration of the permanent living space.

A historic architectural model that successfully facilitated communal life is the *medina*.² Medina describes a habitat within a frame, a city that is structured and defined by edges. This frame performs three successive functions. Initially, it establishes a certain group of people by will power, then it excludes and therefore defines the group in opposition to the others, and ultimately by holding those lives, it establishes a relation between the people, the territory, and the (legislative) power. In this way medina not only accommodates the “community of faithful,” but by separating believers from non-believers it forms the political community. This model informs well-known typologies such as mosques, caravanserais, schools as well as traditional Iranian housing units, *serai*,³ that remains as a very dominant typology from the Bronze Age onwards. In its historical development as a dwelling space *serai* offers a delimited form whose walls are inhabitable; the chambers set in a rectangular shape around a void. This dwelling model became one of the most successful and easily achievable architectural means to celebrate the nomadic form of life; it mediates between open and closed, inside and outside, and more abstractly, between action and re-action, or forces and resistance.

This form of spatial organisation, an inhabitable wall enclosing a void historically conceived as a ‘terrestrial paradise’.⁴ As analogon of the state, the enclosure is a micro-cosmos recapitulating the collective organisation of the political body. Thus, the Iranian house embodies many meanings: it is a theological entity outside history and the mythical foundation of the Islamic state; at the same time it is the engine of production and the theatre of everyday resistance.⁵ The socio-political significance of the Iranian house (*serai*) became evident in the 20th century when political projects explicitly targeted domestic spaces. These attempts abandoned the traditional housing archetype, established new housing models, and ultimately manipulated the interior space of the house to avoid political tension and stabilise the dwellers’ lives. And, with this, the house once again became the epicentre of social movements and the core of the resistance.



FIGURE 1 One of Tudeh Party's meetings in front of the Iranian Parliament (Baharestan Square) Tehran-Iran, 1951.



FIGURE 2 Chaharsad Dastgah housing project, Tehran-Iran. The photo shows the project in its just after its completion in 1946.

TEHRAN, POST WORLD WAR II

In Tehran, during the post-second world war period, the urgent need for massive reconstruction not only resulted in developing new construction techniques, but also paved the way for direct and fast implementation of both foreign and domestic political projects. Many of these attempted to instrumentalise modern technology and planning concepts on behalf of particular ideologies in order to control and to tame the socio-political tensions. This period could be characterised by state-initiated project of secularisation at large, at the center of which was the issue of domestic space and house. It operated not only through large scale planning apparatuses, but was initiated in the careful engineering of the form of living in domestic spaces. The intent was to administer and govern the Iranian society particularly in the large cities, like Tehran.

The Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran, which occurred in 25 August 1941, inaugurated an interregnum that lasted twelve years. Although the occupation ended in 1943 but effect of which remained effective in the political structure of Iran. It terminated Reza Shah's undisputed control of the army, bureaucracy, and court patronage and initiated a period in which the new monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah, maintained control of the armed forces, but lost control over the bureaucracy and the patronage system. This interregnum lasted until August 1953 when Mohammad Reza Shah, through a coup engineered by the Americans and the British, re-established royal authority, and, thereby, recreated his father's regime to act as an executive monarch for the next two decades. The ultimate manifestation of latter period was in 1963 when Mohammad Reza Shah announced his White Revolution programmes within which the Iranian society ought to be modernised and secularised.

In the first period, 1941-1953, power was not concentrated as before. On the contrary, it was hotly contested between the royal palace, the cabinet, the parliament, and most importantly the urban masses, organized first by a socialist movement and then by a nationalist one.⁶ The mass, which was mainly constituted of the urban middle-class and working class, formed a major threat to the Pahlavi dynasty.

The first real challenge to the notables came from the labour movements. Within a month of Reza Shah's abdication, a group of recent graduates from European universities and former political prisoners announced the formation of the Iran Communist Party on 29 September 1941. The party was called Tudeh, or the party of masses. By early 1945, the party had managed to create the first mass organisation in Iran's history. It became the party of the masses in more than name; in its first manifesto published on September 1944 in the Tudeh party's newspaper *Rahbar* (Leader), they claimed, "our primary aim is to mobilise the workers, peasants, progressive intellectuals, traders, and craftsmen of Iran."⁷ Besides their political activities in the form of demonstrations and gatherings,

they aimed to train and educate the public, specifically the working and middle-class. Henceforth the discourse of domesticity was at the center of their political thesis to activate urban society, and addressing women in particular as a forgotten half of the active political mass. Within a few years, the movement's organisation published various newspapers, pamphlets and books through which it not only attracted workers and peasants but also drew support from urban wage earners and the salaried middle class—especially the intelligentsia. Among the members were famous writers, artists, politicians, and architects. They were not only active members of the Tudeh party but also they increased by establishing unions, organising professional associations, and artists' groups in line with the party ideology. Among them was the 'Society of Iranian Architects', which remained vital to the Iranian architectural movements during the second half of the 20th century.⁸ Those architects and the political activists were the initiators and designers of many housing projects between 1948-1953. Those projects introduced new forms of domestic environments and were influential in perpetuating the social and political movements.

CHAHARSAD DASTGAH (400-UNIT HOUSING), THE FIRST HOUSING PROJECT, 1944-46

One of the main issues of resistance was domestic life. In 1944, three members of the Society of Iranian Architects, Ali Sadegh, Manouchehr Khorsand, and Abbas Ajdari, designed the first large scale housing project in Tehran, known as *Chaharsad Dastgah* (400-Unit Housing).⁹ In contrast to the traditional Iranian courtyard house typology, they proposed a new dwelling type that allocated rooms to specific functions, such as bedroom, dining room, and living room. The proposal limited the traditional way of living in the house into specific uses. Instead, through its spatial configuration, it aimed at encouraging the inhabitant 'to go out of the house' and 'to occupy the city' for their socio-political activities. The feature that the architects incorporated in the proposal was a central open space intended to be the locus of public activities. Although the Chaharsad Dastgah seemingly followed the international post-war housing typologies, by placing it within the socio-political context of Iran, it aimed at domestic reform to generate mass mobilisation.

The project was designed based on three main housing typologies. The first was a single-story with three rooms: a bedroom, living room, and dining room), along with a kitchen, storage, and a courtyard. The second was a two-story made up of five rooms: two on the basement floor, which was one metre lower than ground level and therefore received light from the courtyard, and a first-floor level with two bedrooms, a kitchen, storage, and a courtyard. The third typology was designed in three variations for the one-, three- and five-room apartments that connected to the courtyard and contained a street-facing shop. Contrary to the traditional Iranian housing typology (courtyard house, or serai), the separation of functions and divided spaces of the new apartment plans imposed a new lifestyle. For example, kitchens remained separate from living rooms and often combined with storage spaces or bathrooms. In fact the Iranian woman's role as a housewife, which had been central to the spatial dynamism of a home, became marginalised in these new typologies. Previously, all rooms were multifunctional, and living spaces could easily be adapted for different activities of the household. The logic of the proposed apartments dictated not only very specific activities, but also a controlled family size and therefore a lifestyle. The city and houses, which since the mid-1940s had mushroomed in the urban periphery, had been depoliticised through rational planning. While the previous attempts at public housing had failed for either financial or political reasons. By the help of Qavam's government (1942-43 & 1946-47), who at the time had the support of Leftist groups (especially the Tudeh party), Chaharsad Dastgah was completed between 1944-46. It became a prototypical model in design, planning, and materialisation of future projects.



FIGURE 3 Plans of Three Housing Typologies in Chaharsad Dastgah.

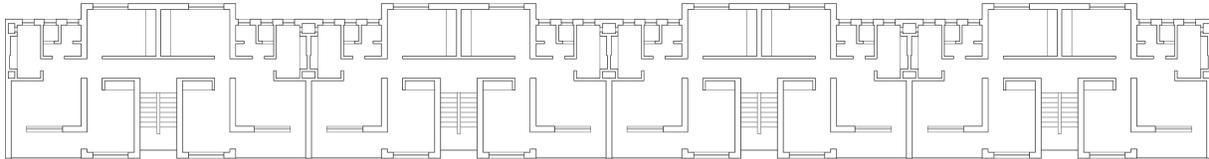


FIGURE 4 Typical Plan the Apartments Blocks, the Second Phase of Kuy-e Nazi Abad.

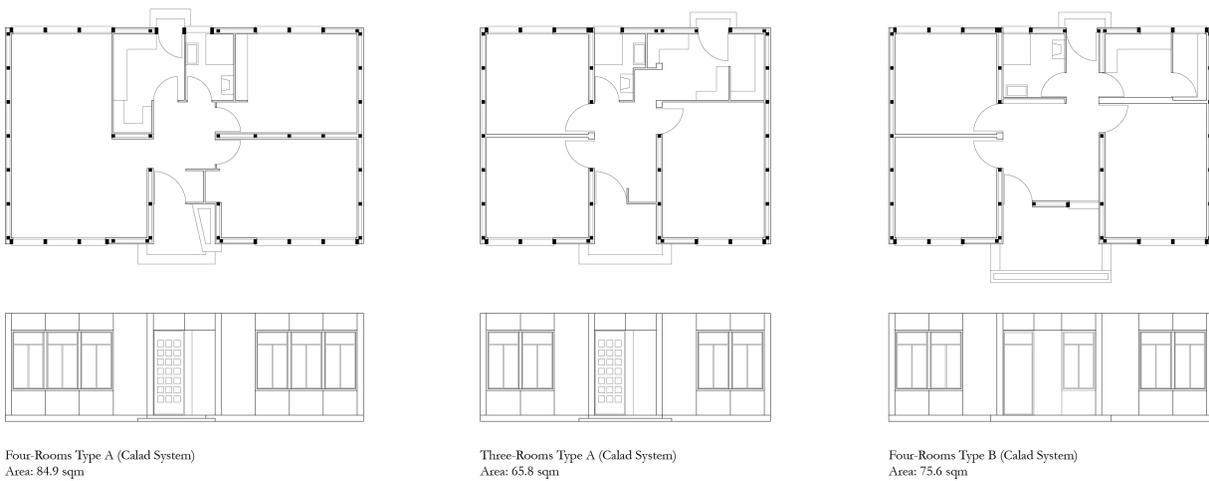


FIGURE 5 Plans of Three Housing Typologies in Kuy-e Calad.

Following on the experience of Chaharsad Dastgah project, the Mosaddegh government (1951-52), who at the time had full support of Nationalist, Leftist, and Islamist groups, launched the largest housing projects in the city. In 1951, the Law of Land Registration came into effect and large plots of land around Tehran became the possession of government as public property. At the same time, members of the Society of Iranian Architects with the support of the government founded the Construction Bank (*Bank-e-Sakhtemani*) that was responsible for providing affordable housing units and social housings. As a first step, the bank allocated 17,000 small plots of land for the purpose of accommodating middle-class and working class outside Tehran. Accordingly two of the largest housing projects of the city started in *Kuy-e Narmak* and *Kuy-e Nazi Abad*.¹⁰

KUY-E NAZI ABAD AND KUY-E NARMAK

The lands of *Kuy-e Nazi Abad* were bought by the Construction Bank in 1951. The project is situated in the southwest suburb of Tehran, between the railway station and the military Qalemorghi Airport and covers an area of nearly 300 hectares. In the first phase, 2,800 building plots of 200 to 600 square metres were allocated for building low-income housing. These plots, due to the financial situation of their owners, were later subdivided into much smaller plots of 80 square metres. As a result the housing units in this area are primarily two room flats including a small store together with limited services.¹¹ However, in the beginning, the government provided housing for the working class, who were concentrated around the railway station and factories in the south of the city. In the late 1960s, the second phase of the project started to accommodate the middle-class groups, mainly teachers and employees of the railway company. Eight apartment blocks, each containing between 24 or 32 dwelling units, were constructed. The plan of the units was strictly divided and minimised into the functional cells. A uniform 80 square meter layout was used for all the apartments: each unit had three 3 by 4.5 metre-rooms, which were two bedrooms and one living room with a balcony attached. The kitchen was an enclosed unit placed between the living room and the bathroom. Contrary to the traditional housing typologies, the *Nazi Abad* project applied a very rigid and rationalised framework for life, limiting the domestic space to the essential biological needs. By eliminating the courtyard, this project forced inhabitants to go out in the city in order to exercise communal life.

In 1951, parallel to the *Kuy-e Nazi Abad*, the Mosaddegh government bought a 600-hectare barren land outside the city. On this large site, 8,000 plots sized between 200 and 500 square metres each eventually supported one-story detached house with small gardens. This residential district has been divided into 100 sections, each with open spaces and equipped with power supply and well water. About a third of this area, or 200 hectares, has been allocated for administrative buildings, services, as well as roads connecting the area. After two years of plot divisions and land allocation the construction started in 1953. To accelerate the process of construction, the Construction Bank commissioned a French company to produce prefabricated concrete modules. Based on those standard concrete panels (1.10 m wide) various typologies were designed. Members of the Society of Iranian Architects, headed by Nasser Badie and Iraj Moshiri led the design and planning of the housing complex. Following the master plan and the allotment of the area, they provided initial designs of 3, 4 and 5-room typologies. The clients were free to choose between the given typologies or buy the plot and build their own house according to the construction schedule imposed by the bank. In the later they had to follow the general regulations provided by the planners. The bank constructed 400 apartments in the northern part of the area as model houses, which was named after the French company, *Kuy-e Calad*. In 1961, the population of this residential district was almost 70,000, while in 1966 it exceeded 90,000.¹²

Despite the ever-growing housing needs of Tehran, housing projects seem to also carry a political agenda. They were designed to instigate the public to fulfil their political duties. The seeds of a revolution were planted in those domestic spaces. One of the main goals of these housing projects was to reform the traditional role of the housewife. By separating the functions and reducing the flexibility of the space, women were encouraged to go

outside the house and work alongside men. Paradoxically, this approach not only criticized the traditional role of Iranian women in Islamic society but also targeted the new Western role model, which was promoted by the state. The architecture of domestic space was not, in fact, the only instrument for this project; it was widely expressed through the leftist media.

In the October 1944 article “Home and Its Limits in the Modern Age,” published in *Bidari-e Ma* (*Our Awakening*)—the feminist bi-monthly publication of the Association of Women—contributor Farah Laqa Alavi emphasised that most of women’s traditional responsibilities should now be assumed by the society at large rather than confined to the home. In step with early Soviet ideology, the main concern of *Bidari-e Ma* was to get women out of the house.¹³ Ironically these publications also accused the Pahlavi regime for its Western Modernisation Project, which tried to free Iranian women from domestic traditions.¹⁴ In another article in *Rahbar* the writer claimed that the pro-Western political project of Reza Shah was to follow the German slogan of “kinder, küche, kirche, und kleid” (children, kitchen, church, and clothing),¹⁵ and put the Iranian women back in the role model of “good housewife.”¹⁶ As the movement got closer to the USSR, the promoted image of the woman increasingly resembled a Communist ideal. In an interview published in *Bidari-e Ma*, Said Nafisi, the Iranian Marxist writer, portrayed Soviet women as open-minded and active in the public sphere. The magazine also reported that despite their simple look and modest outfits, Soviet women possessed a unique beauty that surpassed women of other nations.¹⁷ These visible Marxist-leanings, within the context of the global Cold War, was an alarm for the Shah and his American allies, which consequently instigated an American project.¹⁸

HOUSING PROJECTS AS THE NEW EPICENTRES OF THE MOVEMENT

The same spatial devices of neutralization and control activated the political subjects (citizens) and triggered the counter-projects. Through these projects the concept of citizenship was reinforced and emerged to drive mass movements during the 1950s. For the first time in Iranian history people went out of their houses and mass street demonstrations eventually became a common form of protest. Those housing projects were indeed the hot spots in the later events. On November 3, 1951 the speaker of the royalist fraction of the parliament criticized Mosaddegh’s policies and described this new condition as:

“Statecraft has degenerated into street politics. It appears that this country has nothing better to do than hold street meetings. We now have meetings here, there, and everywhere – meetings for this, that, and every occasion; meetings for university students, high school students, seven-year-olds, and even six-year olds.

I am sick and tired of these street meetings . . . Is our prime minister a statesman or a mob leader? What type of prime minister says, “I will speak to the people” every time he is faced with a political problem? I always considered this man to be unsuitable for high office. But I never imagined, even in my worst nightmares, that an old man of seventy would turn into a rabble-rouser. A man who surrounds the *Majles* (parliament) with mobs is nothing less than a public menace.¹⁹

This social mobilisation that started in the early 1950s went beyond the political agenda of the Left and attracted large number of people of any ideology. In one of the largest demonstrations, on July 21, 1952 in support of Mosaddegh’s anti-Shah sentiment, thousands of people promptly poured into the streets, and after three days of general strikes and bloodshed, forced the Shah to back down. The crisis became known as *Si-e Tir* (July 21). In memory of those days Mosaddegh named *Kuy-e Narmak* as *Kuy-e Si-e Tir*. These riots and demonstrations became widespread movements throughout the country during the 1960s and 70s while the Islamists had the leading role in those years. It ultimately resulted in the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79. Although there is no immediate and direct effect of the spatial configuration on social behaviour, but specific spatial condition of those architectural projects helped the middle-class and working-class reclaim their social and political autonomy. In fact there seems to be a link between the form of life in domestic spaces and the political engagement of those people in the city.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the historical forms of ruling states in Iran as theological powers, since the mid-nineteenth-century, the state has tended toward secularization in order to tame the socio-political tensions. Carl Schmitt exemplifies this difference between the two forms of power as the one of statesman and shepherd. He writes, in the nomadic society “the shepherd (nomeus) was the typical symbol of rule,” which stands opposite to the statesman;²⁰ He rules over the flock with the nourishment by which he regulates their lives. While the statesman does not stand as far above the people he governs; “he only tends to, provides for, looks after, takes care of.”²¹ In this way the shepherd mirrors the image of God and the divine Rule.²² While shepherd performs through the mechanism of command and obedience, the statesman rules in a dialectical manner. This clash of forces, however, has not always been destructive; in particular periods, the conflicts have enabled and activated life in evolutionary processes. The nomadic way of life has been overcome by instrumentalisation of the idea of the house as legal and spatial framework through which the state manages and controls lives of the subjects. The conflict between the stabilising forces of the state and the form of life that escapes it is held within a four wall of the domestic space. While these walls establish an elementary distinction between inside and outside, between house and the city, and between rules, rituals and orders, the nomadic way of life maintains its dialectical opposition to static forces. It is characterised by constant movement and change, and is unfettered by systems of spatio-temporal organisation. Through the spaces of the house living becomes an act and tends to exceed the boundary of the house and overcome the city.

The ever-present possibility of conflict becomes the permanent state in which the life was held. In this way, the architecture of domesticity holds life within a dialectical conflict, and deliberately gives rise to confrontation and struggle. This spatial configuration retains the possibility for the form-of-life to emerge within this dialectical process. Once this architecture, as a frame, houses the subjects, it holds conflict; a moment in which action and reaction, movement and resistance emerges. It is precisely through this relationship that the idea of citizenship is conveyed. The house becomes a frame casting the life in an on-going process of resistance.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Hamed Khosravi is an architect, writer and educator. He is an associate lecturer at the school of architecture, Oxford Brookes University and a guest lecturer at the faculty of architecture TU Delft. In 2013 he co-founded Behemoth press, a Rotterdam-based architectural think-tank, with whom he co-curated architectural expositions and events including 'Architecture of Fulfilment' at the 2014 Venice Biennale, and 'Cerberus, The Three-Headed Monster' at the 2016 Venice Biennale. His recent articles include 'Camp of Faith' (2013), 'Geopolitics of Tabula Rasa' (2014), 'Discreet Austerity' (2015) and 'The Multiple Lives of Gabriel Guevrekian' (2015).

Endnotes

- 1 See Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 11.
- 2 Etymologically, the term "medina" derives from the Akkadian root *dinu* (or *denu*), which stands for "law," "right," and "judgment" and appears as *din* in Aramaic. In its exclusive occurrence, *din* is politically loaded and borrowed primarily in Hebrew and Arabic as the root of two fundamental words: *din* as "judgment" or "law," and *medina* as "city." There is, however, another translation of *din*, which provides further meaning: in Persian, *din* means "religion." These three readings – legal, political and religious – construct the deep meaning of "medina," a term which affirms the formation of a city or a settlement defined and controlled by theological power through construction of limits and borders.
- 3 *Serai* stands for spatial configuration of living space. Etymologically the word is from the Indo-European root *tra* as boundary or limit, which appears in Avestan as *thraya* (to protect), and Persian *serai* as a bounded space or a house. In its historical development *serai* offers an architectural layout; a delimited space by inhabitable chambers. It becomes suffix in shaping words like *caravanserai*, which eventually addresses a temporary communal housing.
- 4 Terrestrial Paradise here refers to the common concept of an earthly garden. This idea is shared in most of the religions and has been historically an instrumental spatial model for cities, and building typologies. See Khosravi, *The City as Paradise*, 270-285.
- 5 See Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*.
- 6 Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 99-100.
- 7 Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 108.
- 8 The Society of Iranian Architects was also a politically active organisation that along with the leftist movement during 1940s and 50s. It had a central role in mobilising the intelligentsia.. Among the early members of the Society of Iranian Architects were Nouredin Kia-Nouri, which at the time was the active member of the central committee of the Tudeh Party and later became the secretary general of the party, Mohammad Mosaddegh who was the leader of the National Front of Iran and later became the Prime Minister, Fereydoun Keshavarz, active member of the Tudeh Party fraction in the Parliament and later became the Minister of Culture, other who at the time were either members of the communist party or sympathizers. See the full list of members in *Architec* 1, 39.
- 9 The head architect of the project was Ali Sadegh, who studied first at the Ghent University and then at the *Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts* (1932-36) in Brussels. There he was influenced by the modern movement and particularly the discourse of minimum housing unit (*Existenzminimum*). Later after returning to Iran in 1937, he incorporated those experiences, i.e. the protocol of CIAM 1929 in his practice of architecture. While Sadegh's architectural style was, perhaps, less distinctive than some of his contemporaries, he made significant contributions to the architectural environment of his time; perhaps his most influential contribution was the promotion of mass housing projects in Tehran as vice-president of the board of Mortgage Bank. Together with Iraj Moshiri, Naser Badie, and others, he established the Society of Iranian Architects in the mid-1940s, where he served as vice-president and then president.
- 10 These housing projects were named after the neighbourhoods in which they are located.
- 11 Bahrambeygui, *Tehran: An Urban Analysis*, 120.
- 12 Bahrambeygui, *Tehran: An Urban Analysis*, 119.
- 13 Karimi, *Dwelling, Dispute, and the Space of Modern Iran*, 121.
- 14 For example between 1936-41 Reza Shah ran a movement called *Women Awakening*. This movement sought the elimination of the Islamic veil from Iranian working society. Supporters held that the veil impeded physical exercise and the ability of women to enter society and contribute to the progress of the nation. This move met opposition from the religious establishment.
- 15 The phrase originally appeared in writings in the early 1890's when Wilhelm II denoted the role of women: 'Let women devote themselves to the three K's, *die Küche, die Kirche, die Kinder*' (kitchen, church, and children). The phrase then was used multiple times throughout the 1890's in liberal writing and speeches. In August 1899 the influential British liberal, *Westminster Gazette* elaborated on the story, mentioning, as well, the 4th 'K' as *Kleid* (clothing). This slogan later repeated by Hitler with less emphasis on *Kirche*.
- 16 Firouz, *Rahbar*, 8.
- 17 Karimi, *ibid*, 123.
- 18 Truman's Point IV programme.
- 19 Emami, *Parliamentary Debates*.
- 20 Here Schmitt refers to the Plato's Statesman 'In Statesman, Plato distinguishes the shepherd from the statesman: the *nemein* of the shepherd is concerned with the nourishment (*trophe*) of his flock, and the shepherd is a kind of god in relation to the animals he herds. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 340.
- 21 Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 340.
- 22 "The true shepherd could only be a divine shepherd." Castoriadis, *On Plato's Statesman*, 101.

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Image sources

- Figure 1: LIFE Magazine Archive.
- Figure 2: Ali Sadegh's Family Archive, Courtesy of Le Groupe d'Architectes de l'Ere de Evolution en Iran.
- Figure 3: Redrawn by the Author.
- Figure 4: Redrawn by the Author.
- Figure 5: Redrawn by the Author.