Introduction

Tehran is quite a young city. It is known to have been a small village with underground houses in the thirteenth century, and it was an unwalled town in the fifteenth century. The first major development that transformed this settlement into a typical Iranian city took place during the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736), when in 1553 the king Shah Tahmasb walled the city and built a bazaar, while in 1589 Shah Abbas I built a Chahārbāgh avenue and a Chinārstān (plane grove) in the northern part of the city (Zaka, 1970). In 1618, Della Valle, who visited Tehran, described it as a town with plane trees, only one-third of it being built-up area, while the rest was gardens (Bahrambeygui, 1977). The making of Tehran accelerated during the Qajar era (1785–1925), particularly during the Naserid era (1848–1896), a time during which confrontation with the modern world, in both its hard forms (e.g., war against Russia) and soft forms (e.g., travellers, students, missionaries, trade), was a significant part of the political setting.

In this chapter, we provide a brief overview of the making of Tehran from a small city into a megacity and make two key arguments. First, we argue that the making of Tehran has been, and still is, a predominantly modern project where the agents of the making, intentionally or unintentionally, have deployed the rhetoric or technology of modernisation. We focus on certain urban projects and city-making policies over time, which we call “moments of urban modernity”. These moments are historic turning points that mark large-scale urban transformations, with immense physical and social consequences and effects on the urban fabric. We maintain that these moments of urban modernity were either intended to be modern, in the sense that they were designed and programmed to modernise the city, or inevitably and eventually became modern, in the sense that they were planned to materialise through an anti-modern rhetoric and yet used highly modern and technocratic machinery and tools.

Second, we argue that the making of Tehran during the last two hundred years registered itself as a field for practising an incremental encroachment of modernity, which reflected the growing wish of both citizens and the city authorities for contemporisation. There was a constant oscillation between strong desires for progress and modernisation on the one hand and empathies for traditional values that also bore concerns about the loss of identity on the other. In reality, however, the society opted mainly for modernisation, to the extent that traditionalism became merely a romantic nostalgia or – depending on the historical period – an abortive
rhetoric advocated by officials, revolutionaries, or a group of intellectuals. As a result, and despite the strong deployment of anti-modern forces, the idea of being modern crept into the diverse tangible and intangible dimensions of urban life — what we call in this chapter an “incremental encroachment of modernity”.

The study offers a critical review of some grand moments of urban modernity in Tehran through a chronological study of the city’s urban development, mainly from the early nineteenth century to the present.

The making of Tehran in the Qajar period

There is no consensus among scholars on the exact point in the history that marks the beginning of the modern history of Iran. This chapter does not critically review different approaches to this question. It argues that the very selection of Tehran by Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar in 1786 and later developments in the capital are modern and progressive decisions made within a modern geopolitical situation — no matter whether we see the emergence of the Safavid Empire (1501–1722) and particularly King Shah Abbas I (ruled 1588–1629) (Amanat, 2017) or the time of King Fathali Shah (1772–1834) and Iran’s military conflict with Russia (Katouzian, 2009) as the beginning of the modern history of Iran. Tehran resided between the rising north — pro-Qajar — and the weakening south — pro-Safavid and pro-Zand (1751–1794) — in the late eighteenth century and the emergence of European powers in the north (Russia) and south (Britain) in the early nineteenth century. The upgrading of Tehran during the reign of King Fathali Shah was a project for demonstrating Qajar as a faithful Shiite dynasty. With the aim of revitalising the glorious Safavid times, Fathali Shah secured his legitimacy with the help of high clerics and upgraded Tehran’s urban landscape by constructing monumental religious and governmental buildings. This development was domestic in nature and character, using local thoughts and artisans for planning and implementation, but it took place within a sociopolitical context which carried the seeds that would shape a modern Iran. In fact, the recognition of restructurising was acknowledged by Abbas Mirza (1789–1833), the crown prince of Fathali Shah. He recognised the deficiency and inefficiency of the old system after losing two campaigns against Russian aggressions, in 1813 and 1825, and realised the urgency of an educational and administrative reforms, which he called the Naẓm-I Jadīd (New Order).

However, it was during the Naserid period (1848–1896) that the project of urban modernity gained momentum. The idea of modernity (tajaddud) was introduced to Iran through different sources and agents, but the intelligentsia had a great role in its expansion. However, not all the fractions of society had a similar understanding, and the idea of modernity was both negated and appreciated — or even celebrated. At the beginning, traditional institutions such as clerics and the monarchy either negated it or were sceptical. At the other extreme, some intellectuals advocated radical change, along with full imitation of the West as the birthplace of modernity, such as Mirza Malikom Khan (1833–1908), who believed that “The survival of Persia depends on the adaptation of Western civilization” (Adamiyat, 1970: 123). Some positioned themselves somewhere in between, trying to forge a Persianised or localised version of modernity.

At least in the material space of the society, we have enough evidence to claim that the project of modernity accelerated its incremental dominance by order of King Nasereddin Shah, who in 1868 instructed that a new plan was to be prepared for Tehran. This, we argue, was an unmistakeable moment of urban modernity in Iran. Iranian diplomats and politicians encouraged the king to accelerate the pace of modernisation and win the battle against the conservatives, and they even planned some visits to European countries (Çelik, 1992; Marashi, 2008). These visits took place in 1873, 1878, and 1889, after he had ordered the new plan for the city.
Thus, accounts claiming that the king ordered the development of Tehran based on certain European cities can be questioned here.

The plan (Figure 3.1A) demonstrates the various dimensions of a modern project in this context. First, it was designed to accommodate urban growth: while in 1853 there were 7,872

Figure 3.1  A: Map of Tehran, 1890; B: Plan of the New Avenues, 1937; C: Master Plan of Tehran, 1968; 1-D: Master Plan of Tehran, 2006.

Source: Tehran Municipality
Reza M. Shirazi and Somaiyeh Falahat

houses and 4,220 shops and businesses in Tehran, by 1867 the total population of 147,257 was residing in 9,581 houses.

Second, the head of the group commissioned for the preparation of the plan was General Buhler, a French teacher at Darulfunun, a polytechnic built by the reformist Prime Minister Amir Kabir in 1851. The octagonal city plan, enclosed by moats and walls with fifty-eight spearhead-shaped bastions and twelve gates, makes formal references to the old fortifications of Paris and other French cities. This implies a kind of co-production: advanced techniques of fortification design mixed with traditional architectural forms and motifs were materialised by local labour and technology.

Third, some of the new developments proposed were to accommodate modern institutions and a new spatial order. For example, the newly constructed Tūpkhānīh Square (Cannon Square) was the microcosm of the new order in different senses: (a) the name of the square (literally meaning the house of cannon) symbolised the new order of power, referring to the modern military; (b) modern institutions around the square, such as the Imperial Bank of Persia, embodied the city’s open-armed welcome to global progress; and (c) the gas lighting and the telegraph network presented the pleasures of modern living to the people. The newly established quarters for the homes of the wealthy Tehranis and the foreign embassies and houses for European residents all mark the consolidation of a new urban life which gradually extended northwards.

Fourth, this development planted the seeds of a bipolar urbanity that has left its mark on the future growth of the city up to the present time: a tension between old and new. This bipolarity was observed and reported on in the writings of various travellers, such as Curzon (1892), Williams (1906), and Bradley-Birt (1910) (cf. Shirazi, 2015).

Finally, the new development contained new geometries that were different from, if not in contrast to, the local spatial geometries. The gridiron order of the northern developments presented a different urban pattern from the organic geometry of the old city, and for the first time, green spaces were seen, with Western-style layouts referred to as “pārk” (park) which stood in contrast to the conventional geometry of a Persian garden. It is also worth noting that in terms of development order, the plan suggested a new expansion towards the unbuilt peripheries rather than a redevelopment or an upgrading of the old urban fabric. This order of development had been successfully implemented a hundred years earlier in Isfahan, where new developments took place in the southern lands of the old city (see Falahat and Shirazi, 2012; 2015).

The making of Tehran in the Pahlavi period

The next significant moment of urban modernity crystallised the urban transformations that resulted from the radical sociopolitical reforms of Reza Shah (1921–1941). After coming into power, Reza Shah initiated the intensive administrative, economic, social, and cultural reforms required to build a modern nation state. These reforms included the construction of a network of roads and the first railway, the establishment of a nationwide administrative bureaucracy, the introduction of a modern judicial system and a new system of secular education which replaced the old system governed by clerics, and the inauguration of the first university, to name but a few. In a nutshell, Abrahamian describes the core goals of Reza Shah’s modernisation project as

[the striving] for an Iran which, on the one hand, would be free of clerical influence, foreign intrigue, nomadic uprising, and ethnic differences; and, on the other hand, would contain European-style educational institutions, westernized women active
outside the home, and modern economic structures with state factories, communication networks, investment banks, and department stores.

(Abrahalian, 1982: 140)

Reza Shah also advocated a nationalism based on the pre-Islamic legacy to legitimise the Kingdom (Marashi, 2008), which was partly crystallised as formal reference to pre-Islamic architecture in the public buildings (Kiani, 2007).

The pace of modernisation of the material space during Reza Shah’s reign was higher than ever before, thereby turning it to a destructive agency that was abolishing the legacy of the immediate past to provide space for rapid construction. This destruction-construction dialectic was the urban agenda for about twenty years until World War II. The Municipality Law of 1930 regulated the street landscape (Habibi and Hourcade, 2005) and the Street Widening Act of 1933 imposed a network of streets on the urban fabric to facilitate motorised transportation (Ehlers and Floor, 1993). At the forefront of the destruction-construction apparatus was an army general, Karim Buzarjomehr, who orchestrated all the bureaucratic and technological power to fight the modernisation campaign. A set of guidelines (nizāmnāmi) prepared by the Tehran Municipality played a significant role in transforming the cityscape and the spatial configuration of urban components. With the aim of making different enterprises – such as cafés, coffeehouses, public baths, and traditional kitchens – into healthier and safer places, these guidelines prescribed identical spatial arrangements as a result of which traditional interior arrangements and social activities had to be radically transformed. For example, cafés and traditional coffeehouses (gahvihkānī) were introduced as identical; wall paintings and storytelling were no longer legitimate in coffeehouses, and sitting platforms had to be replaced by tables and chairs (Rezvani-Naraghi, 2018).

The destructive dimension of the redevelopment paradigm was to target anything reminiscent of the Qajar era, which symbolised the “old order of affairs”. This was also supported by a section of intellectuals and even art historians, such as Arthur Upham Pope, who in a speech in 1934 criticised the badness of Persian modern architecture. He accused the Qajars of copying bad Russian architecture, disregarding Persia’s magnificent wealth of great architecture, and knowing nothing about Persian art traditions (Pope, 1996).

Destruction was as massive as construction: all twelve gates and the wall were demolished and the moats were transformed to boulevards; minor references to the Qajars, such as tiles and writings, could be removed by police (Safamansh, 2009); the royal compound was fragmented to give space to modern governmental buildings such as the Ministries of Justice and of Finance (Madanipour, 1998); Tikyih Dulat, the royal theatre for religious ceremonies was torn down; and an entire neighbourhood (Sanglaj) was demolished and ultimately transformed to a public park. The destruction machinery operated so pervasively that it was described by the German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld as a “methodic destruction” (Grigor, 2015). However, construction was as ubiquitous as destruction, to the extent that the Tehran of 1941 bore no resemblance to the Tehran of 1921 (Banani, 1961).

This destruction-construction apparatus is also well-manifested in the so-called Naqshih-yi Khābānā-yi Jadīd (Plan of the New Avenues) in 1937 (Figure 3.1B). Overall, 9 percent of the entire city was devoted to thoroughfares and squares (Bahrambeigui, 1977). The regulation of cityscapes and streetscapes and the imposition of the new street networks took place with coercive power and, when needed, police brutality (Grigor, 2014). New streets connected the city to the northern villages, which exacerbated urban expansion towards the north and intensified the south-north division rooted in the Naserid developments. Overall, Tehran’s transformation
under Reza Shah was explicitly modern and was intended to serve as a showcase for the state’s modernisation project.

There is a significant difference in the Naserid and First Pahlavi urban development models if we analyse them from the point of view of destruction-construction dialectics: while the Naserid model was more about construction, the First Pahlavi model was the true practice of the destruction-construction dialectic, a simultaneous operation of destructive and constructive machineries. In the latter period, however, the construction machinery was relatively dominant; destruction was supposed to partly destroy the actual symbols of the old order or to provide space for the operation of the construction machinery.

The aftermath of World War II and the consequent political turbulences brought the modernisation project to a halt. Mohammad Reza Shah, the successor to Reza Shah, managed to stabilise his power after the 1953 coup and to pave the way towards his dream of creating a “Great Civilization”. The development project he advocated was massive and covered all the areas and geographies. One dimension of this development is crucial to our study: (sub)urbanisation. The destructive–constructive dialectic of development gained a new face: while the constructive dimension contemporised the material space of the city, it carried in itself a destructive potency that in the long term activated the growing social tensions underneath the changing social structure. The construction apparatus operated at extreme speed, thanks to the rising oil revenues. Urbanisation brought more advantages to the upper class and the growing middle class, at the same time as suburbanisation was limited to the growing informal settlements and slums which accommodated the urban poor who had immigrated from the Iran–wide rural areas. This urban–suburban division intensified inequality. The area of the city reached 180 square kilometres in the mid 1960s, while the population stood at around three million. Tehran was subject to multiple concentrations:

By the mid 1970s, Tehran – with less than 20 percent of the country’s population – had more than 68 percent of its civil servants; 82 percent of its registered companies; 50 percent of its manufacturing production; 66 percent of its university students; 50 percent of its doctors; 42 percent of its hospital beds; 72 percent of its printing presses; and 80 percent of its newspaper readers.

(Abrahamian, 2008: 142)

To manage this urban growth, preparation of the First Master Plan of Tehran was high on the agenda. The Master Plan of Tehran (approved in 1968) was a grand moment of urban modernity (Figure 3.1C) which aimed at using modern planning instruments to regulate existing and future urban space. Prepared by a consortium of the Aziz Farmanfarmaian Associates of Iran and Victor Gruen Associates of the United States under the direction of Fereydun Ghaffari, the plan proposed a linear city, oriented towards the west, consisting of ten urban zones, each with five hundred thousand residents and each provisioned with a clear hierarchy of urban services and facilities supported by a network of highways (Farmanfarmaian, 2006). The idea was to reorganise the southern parts of Tehran, transforming the Bazaar area to a touristic destination and deconcentrating the city structure. The Master Plan, which was predominantly a physical intervention and programming, largely ignored social realities on the ground and advocated a scientific, quantitative approach. Despite recommending an east-west orientation for growth, the north-south binary and division of wealth and urban quality continued to polarise the city. The Master Plan was supposed to function as a modern technology for growth management, a rational framework that would both ameliorate existing challenges and regulate the urban future.
Shahestan Pahlavi (Figure 3.2) was another grand project (inaugurated in 1975) which embodied governmental dreams of establishing a great progressive urbanity. With the aim of creating a high-quality, modern city centre which would symbolise Iran’s rapid progress towards becoming a leading industrial nation and world power (Robertson, 1978), Shahestan Pahlavi was located in the Abbas-Abād hills, an unbuilt terrain to the north of Tehran. It was planned to

![Shahestan Pahlavi Project, model.](image)

*Source: Robertson, 1978*
contain a complex of governmental and commercial offices, retail outlets, hotels, housing, and cultural and community facilities that would ultimately amount to 5.13 million square metres of floor space, fully served by local urban facilities and with the huge Shah and Nation Square. The project for Shahestan Pahlavi was designed by the British firm Llewelyn-Davies International, headed by American planner Jaquelin T. Robertson.

Similar to the Safavid and Naserid development patterns, this new city centre, instead of being imposed into the existing historic core of the city, was developed as a new urban space in an unbuilt area so that a completely modern complex would be constructed from scratch. The project was located towards the northern area of Tehran, where the upper-middle classes had resided and consolidated a new urban life. Before Robertson’s plan, two different proposals had been suggested by Louis Kahn and Kenzo Tange. Neither Kahn’s approach, which represented a contextualised modernism, nor Tange’s plan, which advocated a high-tech construction, could accommodate the ideal city centre envisaged by the Shah (Emami, 2014). Robertson’s plan was a modern but conservative proposal, imbued with postmodern references to the grand past history that partly offended the guidelines of the Master Plan – a kind of neoclassic style which could serve an urbanism of grandiosity. The project was admired by the jury as magnificent, but a member of the jury raised concerns about its economic and social appropriateness to the development of Iran: “The question is not whether it could be accomplished, but whether it should be, because of specific questions regarding the political and cultural context” (Llewelyn-Davies International, 1978: 98, original emphasis).

Ironically, while the project’s centre, called Shah and Nation Square, was planned to symbolise the unity of the Shah and the nation, the growing rift between the Shah and disfranchised majority culminated in the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and the project was never realised. The project, in fact, was trying to embody a glory and dignity which was rapidly withering away. The destructive dimension of the destruction-construction dialectic, which was aggravated by severe construction levels, put an end to twenty-five hundred years of monarchism.

The integration of modernist attitudes with the highest policymaking institutions during the Pahlavi period does not imply a unified voice and interpretation of modernity at these institutions, nor did it manage to dominate all social strata. Sections of society rallied under an anti-Western umbrella which had its roots in the moments of the shift towards establishing a modern governance which led to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911. Clerics survived with their traditional power and could leave limited influence on the material space of cities, such as through constructing religious buildings. Part of the intelligentsia advocated a revival of pure Islamic doctrines that was manifested in the works of Ali Shariati and Al-e Ahmad. However, even clerics and anti-Western intellectuals promoted a complex and contradictory pathway, which wanted to register itself as anti-Western but at the same time modern: criticising the West as a destructive, imperialist, colonising agency but benefiting from the achievements of modern urban life. This approach remained anti-Western but never lived anti-modern.

It is worth noting that some architects and urban planners managed to orchestrate a mediating voice which denied neither modernity nor tradition but which tried to unite them into new creations that could be called space-in-between (Shirazi, 2018). Architects such as Kaman Diba, Nader Ardalan, and Hossein Amanat designed several projects which introduced an alternative to the dominant urbanism discourse, though remaining marginalised. Ironically, this voice was present even in the court due to the efforts of Empress Farah Diba, so that in several cases the dominance of the modernist attitude was challenged at the highest level of governance. We know that Farah Diba struggled to put forward a joint design by Louis Kahn and Kenzo Tange for the Shahestan Pahlavi project (Emami, 2014), though the Shah’s taste for modernity ultimately prevailed.
The making of Tehran

Post-revolution Tehran

The Islamic Revolution advocated an anti-Western ideology and called for a revival of Pure Muhammadan Islam. The sociocultural discourse of the Revolutionary government was constructed on an antagonism towards anything western-like. All material manifestations of the Pahlavi era were considered illegitimate and satanic and thus should be abandoned and denied. This anti-Western attitude demonstrated itself as a call for Islamic urbanism: remaking urban space based on Islamic-Shiite doctrines and principles. We argue that, ironically, the call for Islamic urbanism was limited to the government’s official propaganda machinery; most of the bureaucratic apparatus, including the urban planning and city-making authorities – although mainly run by true believers in the doctrines of the Islamic Revolution – operated as modern technocrats who contributed, deliberately or unintentionally, to the project of modern Tehran, which had its roots in the Naserid era and even before. Overall, a mixed rhetoric marks post-revolutionary urban development, where the modernisation line is by far the most dominant and omnipresent.

The destruction-construction dialectic of development shifted from the early post-revolutionary call for destructing material manifestations of Pahlavi modernity or ignoring official urban policy documents such as Tehran’s Master Plan, towards the growing hegemony of a construction apparatus after the Iran-Iraq War era, the covert destructive consequences of which turned the city to a massive urbanscape that faced severe sociocultural and environmental problems. Right after the Revolution, the government facilitated land allocation and subsidised housing, leading to massive construction and suburbanisation. The city no longer wanted to be the scene of capitalism and the destructive technology of modernism, as the pre-Revolutionary intelligentsia had suggested, but rather at the forefront of the machineries of war to combat imperialism and its patrons. Clearly acting in nonconformity with the Master Plan vision, guidelines were ignored to fulfill revolutionary promises. This exacerbated suburbanisation and the expansion of informal settlements.

Tehran also suffered from the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), while the national budget had to be directed towards financing the war machine. The government launched various initiatives to control the urban growth of major cities, such as the construction of New Towns nationwide. In 1986 there were plans for twelve new towns to be constructed around the major cities of Iran, a number that increased to eighteen in 1991, and later more than twenty-eight (Ghamami, 2008). Far from achieving their goals, these towns suffered from critical problems such as under-population, lack of urban services, a low quality of life, and feelings of detachment, which effectively turned them into serving as dormitory towns without any vibrant urban life (Shirazi, 2013a; Ziari, 2009).

Three important urban development policies narrate three moments of urban modernity in the post-revolutionary era: urban regeneration, a plan for the Tehran Urban Region, and a new Master Plan of Tehran. After the Iran-Iraq War, alongside nationwide restoration programmes, the redevelopment of Tehran was on the agenda. The new Mayor of Tehran, Gholamhossein Karbaschia (in office from 1990 to 1998) was a reformist technocrat who changed the appearance of Tehran. He constructed several highways and bridges, enriched green spaces, built new cultural centres, launched several sociocultural programmes, and aimed at narrowing the north-south gap, though with limited success.

One of the major challenges large Iranian cities were facing was the problem of deteriorated areas (Bāft-i Farsūdih) – urban areas located mainly in the city centre or suburbs suffering from dilapidated urban infrastructure, physical degradation, unemployment, crime, traffic congestion and air pollution, etc., and vulnerable to natural disasters. An urban block is officially identified as
deteriorated when 50 percent of its buildings are not sufficiently secure structurally, the majority of its existing plots are less than 200 square metres in size, and half of the existing networks of streets are less than six metres wide (DIC, 2005). In Tehran, there are around 3,268 hectares of deteriorated areas, housing around 1.152 million people living in 261 thousand residential units. Such areas cover 5.3 percent of the entire city area, 16.5 percent of existing urban blocks, 17.6 percent of the residential areas, and 17.1 percent of the city’s population. About 96 percent of stressed fabric in Tehran is in the centre and south of the city.

Although urban regeneration was partly on the agenda from 1971, it was after the Iran-Iraq War that this issue was addressed as a critical urban problem, followed in 1994 by the re-activating of the Regeneration Organisation of Tehran (ROT) (Andalib, 2007). The first notable project was the Navāb Regeneration Project which targeted the construction of a highway to connect northern Tehran to the south, and in doing so passed through an old neighbourhood with high social cohesion and integrity. The plan proposed a 45-metre wide highway and a strip of around 27.5 metres in width on both sides that would be dedicated to new residential and commercial complexes which could provide financial sources for the implementation of the project. This top-down intervention endangered existing social ties and degraded place identity and security (Shokuei and Tabrizi, 2003; Bahrainy and Aminzadeh, 2007), and eventually led to a policy change towards more participatory and integrated programming. This was implemented in a couple of projects, such as the Khub-Bakht Neighbourhood in 2006, where a local office facilitated the implementation of the scheme and involved local residents. Although the implementation suffered from unequal benefits for residents, insufficient background studies, inadequate trust-building, and financial challenges, it did help the policymakers to take the next strategic step with the launching of the “facilitation offices” programme.

A facilitation office was a local bureau, established in a deteriorated area, consisting of a variety of experts to provide consultation services for neighbourhood inhabitants to renovate their premises and benefit from state incentives. This scheme advocated a participatory and community-based approach to urban regeneration, whereby local inhabitants could take the lead in renovating their houses sometimes through plot agglomeration. In 2014, around sixty-three offices were in operation; currently there are around 50, which are called “offices for renovation services”. This scheme has been also subject to criticism, being described as “physical determinism”, in the sense that only physical characteristics determine the deterioration of urban areas; “hegemony of technical rhetoric”, meaning that the success of offices are evaluated based on the quantity of activities and achievements (renovated plots), not long-term qualitative benefits to the community; and domination of the “financial ethos” that subordinates social benefits to financial benefits. A full paradigmatic shift from top down to participatory is hard to imagine, since facilitation offices are representing a rhetoric shift towards participation, rather than a radical policy shift (Shirazi and Falahat, 2017). The lack of constructive dialogue with international experiences, the “trial and error” nature of policymaking in the name of independence, and inward-looking development means misusing national resources for testing policies that have been challenged and/or have failed internationally.

Tehran’s urban growth cannot be understood without considering its regional growth. To slow down the pace of suburbanisation around Tehran, the 1968 Act prohibited the establishment of new industrial units within Tehran’s 120-kilometre peripheral zone. This led to the growth of satellite villages and towns and even large cities, such as Islamshahr. Post-revolutionary growth management accelerated Tehran’s suburbanisation process, since local authorities did not adequately control the expansion of informal settlements in which the urban poor found a modicum of shelter. In line with the growing scholarly and policy debates on polycentric urban regions, and taking into account the regional urban growth of Tehran and its network of
surrounding cities and settlements, preparing a comprehensive plan could be interpreted as a grand moment of urban modernity.

In fact, the emergence of urban regions was a known urban phenomenon. In 1961, Gøttmann argued that the urban agglomeration of the north-eastern seaboard of the United States was a new phenomenon that needed a new terminology: “megapololis”. Named and described differently, such as “polynucleated metropolitan regions” (Dieleman and Faludi, 1998), “polycentric urban regions” (Kloosterman and Musterd, 2001), “global city regions” (Scott, 2002), and “mega-city regions” (Hall and Pain, 2006), this phenomenon indicates the move from monocentric to polycentric spatial arrangements, which include the decentralisation of economic activities, increased mobility, complex cross-commuting, and a fragmented spatial distribution of activities (Davoudi, 2003), and it characterises the dynamic nature of twenty-first-century cities.

In Europe, the idea of a polycentric urban region has been incorporated into planning policy objectives (Faludi et al., 2002) and is included in the spatial policies of the European Union. Leading European examples of this kind are the Randstad in the Netherlands, the Flemish Diamond in Belgium, and the Ruhrgebiet in Germany.

By the end of the 1990s, the Research Centre for Iranian Architecture and Urbanism was being commissioned to prepare the Plan for Tehran Urban Region. This plan, which was finally approved by the government in 2002, considered the region as a “polycentric complex” in which, through the implementation of a “decentralized concentration” policy, its urban zones had to play a vital role in providing sufficient urban facilities and a high quality of life for their inhabitants. The plan embraced the Tehran and Alburz provinces and consisted of seventeen counties (Shahrestan), with a combined population of around ten million in 1996. This plan contained recommendations for regional growth, traffic systems, green spaces, and so on and suggested the establishment of a management institution of the Tehran urban region that would be responsible for providing the regional plan, collaborating with top-level management institutions and the local administrations, and monitoring the plan’s implementation.

Unfortunately, this ambitious plan was never properly implemented by local and governmental bodies. The lack of efficient service coverage and a regionally adaptive level of management in the existing governance system, the ambiguity of the service area and the multiplicity of responsible administrative units, the lack of a mediatory level of governance between the national level and the provincial level, and the political conflicts and short-term policymaking are only some of the obstacles in the way of implementation. Nor did the plan benefit from the ongoing debates on sustainability and sustainable development; insufficient dialogue was established with the sustainability discourse, such that a constructive dialogue with the leading international thinking and practice in this area was missing. Providing a comprehensive and sustainable plan for the Tehran-Karaj urban region which would address it as an interwoven urban complex, administered through a unified management unit that oversaw and monitored its implementation, remained a forgotten requirement (Shirazi, 2013b; 2014).

As the plan for the Tehran urban region remained unimplemented, provision of a new Master Plan for Tehran to deal with urban challenges and draw a clear urban vision became important. As noted, post-revolutionary Tehran was developing based on early ignorance of the 1968 Master Plan or later minor amendments made to it. The new Master Plan, we argue, shows another moment of urban modernity where the rhetoric of Islamic urbanism is significantly absent. How the provision of the plan was administered is indicative of a city authority that intended to show itself as being progressive and avant-garde. A central administration unit was established to monitor the process. The new Master Plan (Figure 3.1D) predicted a population of 8.7 million for 2026 and proposed a polycentric pattern reminiscent of ongoing international recognition of polycentric urban development. While one of the seven ideas envisaged in the plan says that
the goal is to give Tehran an “Iranian-Islamic” identity and authenticity, what governs the plan is technocratic rhetoric and technical and scientific language that looks for rational justification and achievable improvements – a classic way of engineering of the city towards a modern and progressive future, which puts the long-standing official and state-supported struggle for achieving Islamic urbanism in the background. This plan scarcely provides any space for manoeuvring around a utopian Tehran, as depicted in the official dream of Omm-ol-Goray-e Jahane Islam (Mother-Town of the Islamic World) (Figure 3.3).

We would like to close our review with a comparison between two iconic large projects: Milad Tower and the Grand Musalla. Milad Tower, a 435-metre-high telecommunication tower, the sixth highest in the world, was completed in 2007. Occupying a site of 12,000 square metres, it embraces a complex of facilities, including cultural and commercial, but with fewer telecommunications services than it was planned for. Through minor references to Islamic-Iranian motifs, the city tries to market it as a showcase for a modern Iran. Tehran’s Grand Musalla (place of Friday praying) is a huge edifice consisting of a series of religious and cultural buildings with domes, minarets, porticos, portals, and so on (Figure 3.4). With formal references to Islamic architecture, Musalla was planned to serve as an icon for Shiite Islamic Iran. Supported by the government, in line with official wishes advocating principles of Islamic architecture, and commissioned to revolutionary bodies and institutions, this project is still under construction and has been since 1988, a total failure of performance. These two examples show how in many cases, despite the official wishes of the government and its financial supports, projects which crystallise the modernist taste of the society perform at a higher efficiency, even when policymakers and authorities share the same rhetoric and language.

Back to the destruction-construction dialectic, we argue that the post-revolutionary era is similar in its development strategy to the second Pahlavi era. Construction, particularly after the Iran-Iraq War, has been the dominant aspect of the development apparatus, while in parallel a destructive machinery gradually dilapidates urban life and exacerbates inequality, unemployment, unfair destruction of resources, social stigmatisation, and so on. Neglect of the sociopolitical and
The making of Tehran

spatial consequences of the destructive dimensions of construction, imbued with ideological dogmas which blind the authorities to reality and imprison them in an imaginary fragile bubble, represents the present Tehran.

Concluding remarks

Exploring a number of urban turning points over time, what we called moments of urban modernity, from the selection of Tehran as the capital up to the present, we argued that the making of Tehran was a predominantly modern project, orchestrated by an “incremental encroachment of modernity”. Rather than observing the urban transformation of Tehran as the manifest triumph of Westernisation, imperialism, capitalism, neo-liberalism, and globalisation, the incremental encroachment of modernity brought to the foreground a gradual invasion of contempoparisation in diverse material and immaterial aspects of urban life. The chapter argues that within this incremental encroachment lay an unseen inclination towards rootedness and respect for the domestic culture, so that from the early nineteenth century, one might observe a tendency to produce localised versions of a universal modernity. The result was the creation of a dialogical space-in-between where culture and being modern negotiated a situated modernity that accommodated the spirit of the rooted culture as well. This situated modernity was constructed by the process of encroachment: a gradual but an ambitious move towards contemporisation – in other words, being contemporary and addressing its implications.

The chapter explored the making of Tehran by discussing some of the grand moments of urban modernity, which were mainly produced in a top-down way reflecting the desire of the elite for being modern. However, this is not the entire history. To capture the big picture, we also need to pay sufficient attention to those moments of urban modernity that are constructed,
lived, and inhabited in everyday life. This part of the project of modernity is absent here and needs a separate interrogation. However, some hints at its nature would be informative.

A significant dimension of urban modernity in Tehran was shaped, and is being shaped, by the practices of everyday life. This builds up a matrix of dispersed moments of urban modernity, a network of interconnected moments of resistance, creativity, and action inhabited in everyday urban life. It is not a single moment but multiple moments of struggle and resistance taking place in public spaces and more apparently on the street. These dispersed moments of urban modernity are constructed of diverse moments of resistance, where overt and covert implications of the state are peacefully challenged by ordinary people. They encroach on hinterlands of power and turn those hinterlands into the arenas of alternative demonstrations. A recent book successfully discusses how ordinary people in Tehran use innovative and creative methods to produce an alternative discourse to that of the upper classes and how they cultivate a culture of urban resistance which, supported by cyberspace, is reflected in many aspects of everyday life (Iraj Moeini et al., 2018). Using public spaces such as cafés and booksellers, young people demonstrate a semiological resistance.

We argue that this ongoing, omnipresent, incremental encroachment of modernity, orchestrated by the ordinary people of the growing middle class, and actively led by women, is turning the public realm and the urban streets into the scene of an Iranianised or “domesticized” urban modernity that will mature into a new urban discourse with progressive multimodal rhetoric imbued with the universal values of liberty and equity. This urban struggle construes dispersed moments of urban modernity, where modernity is not necessarily in absolute correspondence with the classic project of modernity as associated with Europe and the West but is instead a situated modernity constantly (re)produced on the wishes of contemporisation. The urban future of Tehran, material as well as non-material, rests on the dynamics of this urban struggle for contemporisation.

Bibliography

Amanat, A. (2017), Iran, a Modern History (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
Bradley-Birt, F. B. (1910), Through Persia, From the Gulf to the Caspian (Boston: J. B. Millet Co.).
The making of Tehran


Gottmann, J. (1961), Megalopolis, the Urbanized Northwestern Seaboard of the United States (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund).


Madani, A. (1998), Tehran, the Making of a Metropolis (Chichester: Wiley and Sons).


———. (2018), Contemporary Architecture and Urbanism in Iran; Tradition, Modernity, and the Production of ‘Space-In-Between’ (Cham: Springer).


