

Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi  
Anne Huffschiid

## Uncertain Cities

### A Conversation about Public Space, Memory, and Urban Resistance

*In a globalized world in which urbanities are neoliberalized, public spaces and forms of resistances are evolving, changing, and interconnecting constantly. The urban scholars Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi (Tehran) and Anne Huffschiid (Berlin) discuss the hybridity of urban spaces and the (re)shaping of urban landscapes by space-producing agencies: these spaces face not only repression and control but also indifference, negation, and erasure. In their encounters in Tehran and Berlin the two scholars realized that even if their urban references and experiences are rather different (Tehran, Berlin, Mexico City), they share a strong interest in two concepts: the notion of urban memory and the idea of everyday practices or transgressions. The following is an edited version of a dialogue they presented before a public audience one warm April evening in Berlin in 2018.*

**ANNE:** To begin with, talking about public space is far from self-evident. I suppose we would agree on not subscribing to the classic Habermas notion of public space as a stable, rational, and reasonable public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*), a sort of free marketplace of public opinion, and instead share the idea of an unstable and uneven power play, be it in European or non-European urbanities. It is crucial here that the *public* character of a space is not just defined by physical or legal parameters but by accessibility and the uses to which it is put. And we certainly share the conviction that public space goes beyond physical, material space and includes immaterial arenas, such as cyberspace or imaginary spaces. We learn from Henri Lefebvre that urban space is not a given, pre-fixed setting or container but *produced* from all kinds of social practices.<sup>1</sup> Complementary to this, cultural historian Karl Schlögel argues that it is necessary to spatialize our understanding of history: historical events need to be seen as located and embodied.<sup>2</sup> So we might see space as a body of history, and that connects us to the notion of memory.

For instance, in my exploration of urban “memoryscapes” in Latin America I consider public urban space not just as a stage for memory performances and politics but as co-produced by these very practices, be it activist performance or official commemorations.<sup>3</sup> Urban memory is not just about collecting and displaying the remains of the past in order to create a linear narrative that can confer meaning but also, and most importantly, about creating a shared public space, where the intangibles of the past intersect with the flows of everyday life. Public memory spaces

cannot be anything other than conflictual; it is never everybody’s story told there but rather certain stories, in certain codes and languages. Public memory is not so much about remembrance versus forgetting but about competing memories, winners or losers, victims or perpetrators. For that, I find extremely useful the notion of the urban palimpsest, as proposed by Andreas Huyssen:<sup>4</sup> the overlapping of competing and overwritten layers, which may be highlighted or denied. These layers always leave some kind of trace of underlying “stories”, which might be reconstructed through a particular social chemistry.

When I first came to Mexico City, some decades ago, I was much attracted to what I – much later – would describe as an urban politics of palimpsest: a willingness to assume the underlying layers of history as constitutive of a shared and palimpsestic urban memory. They all seem to coexist openly, though not without conflict: traces of the Aztec or Mexica metropolis, the Spanish invasion, the destruction, re-signifying, and rebuilding of the city, the different modernities overwriting each other. In the Berlin urban landscape, especially in the eighties and early nineties, the overall presence of ruins and spatial voids could be read as traces of collapsed or aborted political architectures. Kenny Cupers and Markus Miessen have coined a term for these *wastelands* and leftovers that are disappearing under present-day urban development, calling them “spaces of uncertainty”: emerging public spaces, not defined yet, beyond representation, “interstitial places where public and private experiences overlap”.<sup>5</sup> So what about uncertainty in Tehran’s public space?

**MASSERAT:** These concepts of uncertain space or palimpsest can also be applied in the Iranian context, though in a slightly different understanding of the terms. Uncertainty, ambiguity, and impermanence are important characteristics of Iranian public spaces, in the sense that they can also change their nature and function for a short time based on the presence of unexpected actors. This has its roots in the contradiction between modernity and tradition, between “Republic” (based on elections and secular law) and “Islamic” (based on religious control and Sharia), especially since the beginning of the revolution and the implementation of Sharia laws after a relative period of modernism.

While impermanence and uncertainty are general characteristics of modern societies, in the Iranian context they result from the permanent struggle between state and people. For instance, the sudden appearance



of “morality police” in the streets and on squares to control the Islamic appearance or behaviour of women and youth or the filtering of the Internet and social media accompanied by the extended use of VPN by the majority of Internet users are just two symptoms of this instability. In contrast to these controlled spaces, modern hybrid spaces such as new mega malls with their entertainment spaces or cultural centres seem to be safer and freer places for women and youth, because instead of the morality police, security guards or dedicated personnel monitor the un-Islamic appearance or behaviour of customers, without causing them major problems.

Before the revolution, during the Pahlavi period (1925–79), the status of public space was quite different. This period was characterized by a politics of modernization and the westernization of Iran. However, this rapid urban modernization did not include all social classes, cities, and rural areas. Tehran in this period was a city divided into two parts, where north and south were completely separate on the social, cultural, and economic levels, and public spaces were oriented around social class. In Tehran, almost all westernized urban spaces such as restaurants, cinemas, and theatres were situated in the northern, rich, and westernized part of the city, while South Tehran was basically a poor dormitory for the working class. With the revolution everything changed. The invisible wall between the south and north broke down and, for the first time, people could invade the streets. Massive numbers of demonstrators appropriated streets and squares, changing “public spaces” for a few months into “spaces for the public”.

However, after the revolution, with the implementation of Sharia law, public spaces very soon turned out to be spaces of exclusion and of the performance of the new authority based on religion and the revolutionary spirit. The first decade of the revolution and the eight years of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) are known as the most controlled and repressive period of public life and public space in Iran. The Islamic ethical control exercised by the morality police was complemented by political repression and affected the everyday lives of inhabitants. They would check all the streets, squares, and even cafés and restaurants for anything that looked un-Islamic in terms of appearance and behaviour or to identify political dissidents. Soon public spaces lost their function as a setting for leisure and cultural activities; these slipped silently into private spaces and went underground. Many people or artists organized their gatherings and cultural activities such as concerts, exhibitions, or theatre in secrecy and a state of fear, hosting them in their homes, behind drawn curtains. Meanwhile, public spaces became stages of official revolutionary and religious performances. With the end of the war, the 1990s marked the beginning of a new phase and gradually people returned to public spaces. The new controversial mayor of Tehran, G. H. Karbaschi, opened up and created new public spaces – by removing the fences of almost all the parks in Tehran, making them accessible at any time, and by constructing cultural centres in the south of the city, he tried to diminish the segregation between north and south. Bahman Cultural Centre was one of the first new hybrid spaces built on the site of the main slaughterhouse in the south of Tehran and became one of the capital’s most important cultural venues in the 1990s.

This cultural centre reminds me of the concept of the palimpsest, though the construction affected the sense of self-identification of the local residents: the older members of the community presented themselves as inhabitants of Koshtargah (the “slaughterhouse”), while the younger generation considered themselves to be kids of Farhangsara (the “cultural centre”).<sup>6</sup>

On the other side of the city, in the modern neighbourhoods of Tehran, during the same period, public spaces entered into a schizophrenic state. With the end of the war and the expansion of public spaces, people began to more overtly challenge traditional police control and created new situations that could transform the “permanent” nature of public spaces into temporary and *uncertain* ones. With the arrival of the morality police to control streets and squares, public spaces suddenly started changing from open, modern urban spaces into large enclosed areas, dominated by traditional rules and regulations typical of the enclosed Islamic spaces known as *andarouni*.<sup>7</sup> Such conflicting simultaneities in urban spaces made them more complex because the presence of the morality police, changed their function, making them insecure and restricted for youth and women, who were the main targets of the police. This permanent state of duality and confrontation between people and state over the public space for the last four decades has ultimately made spaces freer but at the same time even more uncertain, depending on the time and presence of different social actors. Since then, streets and other public spaces have become zones of contestation and everyday resistance, making them more provisional and ambiguous than ever.

**ANNE:** Public space, in all the urban contexts we are working in and referring to, is clearly related to conflict, which involves the attempt to control as well as practices of resisting. So is there a meaningful notion of *urban* resistance? In my research field, memory practices or markers related to violent pasts insist on the presence of the absent and therefore could be considered as a mode of resistance, defying everyday indifference. Because nowadays, in the Latin American megacities I am studying, it may be not so much about open repression and more about the “floating indifference” in the everyday urban public space, as Isaac Joseph puts it. This respectful disinterest in the affairs of the other, is the precondition for the sociability of coexisting strangers.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it tends to absorb any *interrupting* memory or resistance marker or practice.

So I would like to start with the notion of *spatial resistance*. In discourse studies, which is the field I come from originally, we tend to focus not only on what was said, in text format, but also on the unsaid, the non-text or silences as a powerful form of expression. Transferred into spatial terms, I propose reading the urban voids or other empty forms in urban space as *spatial silence*, an interference in established spatial or architectonic discourse, the emerging of silenced layers. For instance, the urban landscape of Berlin is nowadays recognized worldwide as having incorporated, and highlighted, the traces and markers of Nazi terror, relating to victims as well as to perpetrators. So Berlin is often considered a sort of role model for the public and self-reflexive commemoration of violent and shameful pasts, in contrast to the classic forms of heroic memorial culture. However, we should keep in mind that this coming to terms with the past in urban terms did not happen as a result of official willingness but was achieved under intense pressure from so-called civil society: firstly, the student movement in 1968, which questioned the “post-war reconcili-



ation” and “economic miracle” narratives, and later on, in the eighties, the citizens’ initiatives, like the one on the site of the former headquarters of the Gestapo, which pushed the government to convert the area into a memorial site, now known as the Topography of Terror.

But sometimes it is not even about resisting oblivion or maintaining coexistence but rather about the politics of erasure. One of the most prominent examples is the advanced construction of the Humboldt Forum, which is to be inaugurated in 2019, staging itself as a “global centre of world cultures” in the heart of a cosmopolitan city, though it is, quite literally, based on demolition. The Forum is a strange architectural hybrid, with three historical façades and one that is modernist. It refers to the memory of the former Prussian city palace, the *Stadtschloss*, which was located in the very same area: the building was severely damaged by World War II bombing and was then demolished by the GDR government in the 1950s. In the 1970s, on the same site, the GDR government erected the Palace of the Republic (*Palast der Republik*), the seat of the parliament, which also served as a popular venue for cultural events. From the 1990s on, after the reunification of the city, the majority of Berlin politicians, and also Western society, felt that this architectural remnant of GDR history was something to be eliminated from the New Berlin landscape. Instead, the Prussian palace would now serve as a memorial reference point even if it came, like the façade, as an architectural simulation. The Forum is thus overwriting, in spatial as well as in political terms, an undesired memory and is a perfect example of the selectiveness of all memory politics: there are urban memories that are worth conserving, reconstructing, and displaying, and others that are not.

In terms of social agencies, we are familiar with the classical mode of what we might call street politics, manifestations, and gatherings in streets and squares. I would like to bring up others forms of intervention in urban space. One might be called a discourse intervention. An example of this are the so-called postcolonial initiatives that promote the visibilization of a long-neglected layer of memory, the crucial role Berlin played in the colonial operations of the German Reich in the late nineteenth century. Besides guided city walks that draw attention to the entanglements of national and urban history with the colonial past, highlighting “colonial markers” in the urban fabric, these initiatives call for the rededication of streets named after key figures in German colonialism.

Another format is that of physical and *spatial intervention*, as the temporary occupation of public space; a famous example was an improvised but nevertheless long-term refugee camp in an inner-city neighbourhood in Berlin. This kind of occupation challenges the usual distinction between public life (the claims made by politicians) and the urban everyday (the publicly exposed privacy of the refugees’ “home”).

Finally, there is what we might call, very generically, *body politics*, in the sense of disrupting (or “scratching”) public space by putting on bodily performance. One of the best-known examples in Latin America is the Mothers movement in Buenos Aires: the women exposed their own bodies, capturing public attention, as they marched around Plaza de Mayo one afternoon in 1977, insisting on visibilizing the void of absence left by their disappeared sons and daughter. They still continue this practice, more than forty years later, for half an hour every Thursday after-

noon. Their performance can be seen as a permanent disruption and has at the same time become completely naturalized, covered by the same magic cape of invisibility that hides most monuments in public space, as Robert Musil once stated, and accompanied by a clear process of emptification, with the protest having been converted into a tourist attraction.

Talking about bodies exposing themselves in public may connect us to body street politics in Tehran. Even if we are totally ignorant of Tehran street life, as I was before my first and only visit, we are probably aware, through media discourse and images, of the contestedness of female bodies in public space.

**MASSERAT:** This is correct, in fact, resistance is often entangled not only with urban spaces but also with the sociopolitical, historical, political system and specific social issues in a society. In Iran and in some other Middle Eastern countries the contradiction between the religion, Islamic precepts, and modernism, especially vis-à-vis women, creates new sources of antagonism and new kinds of resistance which may not exist or predominate in Western countries. This is why, since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, women have become the most important agencies of urban resistance. I would like to distinguish roughly four types of resistance entangled with the public space.

The first is the classical format of a political or social demonstration. The most important examples of this were the demonstrations that led up to the 1979 revolution. A month later, on 8 March 1979, a huge women’s demonstration against the compulsory hijab was a social form of this type of classical demonstration. These protests usually take place on central streets and squares, in front of industries, ministries, or parliament; most of them have been organized before and have visible leader figures.

A newer type of resistance is mostly leaderless and relies on social media. One example is the “One Million Signatures for the Reform of Discriminatory Laws against Women”, a feminist campaign which began in 2007 to organize ordinary women against patriarchal and misogynist laws. Recent demonstrations against the high living costs or water scarcity in different cities of Iran, and even the famous “Green Movement” contesting the presidential election of 2009, are further examples of these new leaderless and social media-dependent forms of resistance.

A third type of resistance, which is by far the most important in terms of size and social impact, is what the Iranian sociologist Asef Bayat called a “nonmovement” and defined as “the collective actions of noncollective actors”.<sup>9</sup> Their activities are not carried out as conscious political acts but as a necessary means to survive and to change their daily lives. This form of resistance became most important for women and youth in Iran: the massive admission of women to university, underground pop music, daily transgressions against the compulsory hijab, and imposed Islamic performances in public spaces. These non-organized resistances had a major impact on social change and on public life and public spaces.

The newest format of resistance is a protest known as the “Girls of Revolution Street”. This is an individual, impermanent, and short-term action which is very dependent on social media to spread and multiply it in different times and spaces, enabling it to have some effect on society.



Frers and Meier stress the importance of the duration of an event and also the time it takes for the last traces of an act of resistance to disappear: "The event as such is not so important, but it is the fidelity to the event that makes it an event in an emphatic sense."<sup>10</sup> It was precisely the repetition of the act and its recollection in different circumstances by different actors that converted the "Girls of Revolution Street" performance into a new format of protest. On 27 December 2017, Vida Movahed, a young woman, stood on a utility box in Enghelab Street, tied her hijab to a stick, and waved it to the crowd to protest against the compulsory hijab. A couple of hours later, her pictures and videos went viral and since then dozens of young women, as well as some young men, have mounted steps in different streets and squares and unveiled themselves or put a shawl on a stick to protest against the compulsory hijab. Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, a famous feminist activist, stated that "with the possibilities of social networking, the new generation of activists don't need to gather in any specific space, because they form their protests in social networking, with hashtags and tweeting storms."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the role of social media and virtual space must not be neglected as new spaces of contestation. Virtual space becomes an important component of urban resistance, strengthening actions of resistance in physical public space.

#### Notes

- 1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).
- 2 Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit: Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2009).
- 3 See the following works by Anne Hufschmid: *Risse im Raum: Erinnerung, Gewalt und städtisches Leben in Lateinamerika* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2015); and "Scratching Space: Memoryscapes, Violence and Everyday Life in Mexico City and Buenos Aires," in *Urban Latin America: Images, Words, Flows and the Built Environment*, ed. Bianca Freire-Medeiros and Julia O'Donnell (New York: Routledge, 2018), 231–51.
- 4 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: University Press, 2003).
- 5 Kenny Cupers and Markus Miessen. *Spaces of Uncertainty* (Wuppertal: Müller und Busmann, 2002), 49.
- 6 Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, "Influence of Bahman Cultural Center in the Social and Cultural Life of Women and Youth of Tehran," *Goftogu* 9 (1995): 13–23.
- 7 Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, "Conquering Enclosed Public Spaces". *Cities: The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning* 23, no. 6 (December 2006): 455–61.
- 8 Isaac Joseph, *El transuente y el espacio urbano* (Barcelona: gedisa editorial, 2002), 29.
- 9 Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, ISIM Series on Contemporary Muslim Societies (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 14.
- 10 Lars Frers and Lars Meier, "Resistance in Public Spaces: Questions of Distinction, Duration, and Expansion," *Space and Culture* 20 (May 2017): 1–14.
- 11 Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, "Girls of Enghelab Street and the Emergence of a New Generation of Social Actors," 6 March 2018, <https://noushinahmadi.wordpress.com/2018/03/06/ن-ک-دی-دج-لسن-رود-ظ-وب-ال-قن-ان-اب-ای-خ-ن-ارت-خ-د/>.

# Colophon

## Staging a Change

November 25 – 26, 2017, Tehran

Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA)

with: Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, Nazgol Ansarinia, Farhad Fozouni, Anne Huffschmid, Sohrab Mahdavi, Kaveh Rashidzadeh, Homayoun Sirizi, Jörg Stollmann, Florian Wüst

November 24, 2017

City Tour

Artist presentations in BonGah, Neda Zarei, Anita Esfandiary, Tehran Carnival

November 27, 2018

City Walk with Taraneh Yalda

## Shifting Panoramas

April 19 – 20, 2018, Berlin

Deutsches Architektur Zentrum (DAZ)

with: Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, Arash Hanaei, Anna Heilgemeir, Anne Huffschmid, Azam Khatam, Hamed Khosravi, Niloufar Tajeri, Homayoun Sirizi, Tirdad Zolghadr

April 20, 2018

City Walk with Erik Göngrich

April 21, 2018

City Walk with Anna Heilgemeir

April 21, 2018

"New Municipalism"

Homayoun Sirizi in conversation with Niloufar Tajeri Tehran/Berlin  
As part of REALTY, KW Institute for Contemporary Art

### Initiator

Elke aus dem Moore

### Concept/Curators

Solmaz Shahbazi, Azar Mahmoudian

### Realization and organization

Henrike Hoffmann, Alexandra Joshi, Claudia Nejati

Special Thanks to Roozbeh Tazhibi, BonGah and Studio Tehran

## Booklet

### Published by

ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen), Stuttgart, Ronald Grätz  
www.ifa.de

### Concept

Solmaz Shahbazi

### Publishing managers

Alexandra Joshi, Henrike Hoffmann

### Design

Ronald Kolb, Alexander Schmidt, Biotop 3000, Stuttgart, Berlin  
Golnar Katrahmani, Studio Katrahmani, Berlin

### Printing

Druckhaus Köthen

### Copy-editing

Simon Cowper, Zoë Harris, Zahra Rashid

### Translation

Samaneh Maddah, Roozbeh Tazhibi, Mahan Moalemi, Simon Cowper

Posters, p. 50-51: Farhad Fozouni, Studio Tehran, 2017/2018

Pictures, p. 47-48, 53-54: Victoria Tomaschko, Somayeh Jafari,  
Henrike Hoffmann

© Authors, photographers, Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen e.V. (ifa),  
Stuttgart, Germany  
All rights reserved.  
Printed in Germany

The ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) is sponsored by the German  
Foreign Office, the State of Baden-Württemberg, and its state capital  
Stuttgart.

## Organized by

**ifa** Institut für  
Auslandsbeziehungen

## Funded by



Federal Foreign Office