

## **Sovranità misurata: la scala come strategia politica dallo Shahestan Pahlavi alla Grande Mosalla di Teheran**

### **Keywords**

Scale, Space production, Political strategy, Urban modernity, Sovereignty

### **Abstract**

This article explores how two successive regimes in Iran, Pahlavi monarchy and Islamic Republic, employed scale as a political strategy in major urban projects on Tehran's Abbas Abad plateau: Shahestan (1970s), and the Grand Mosalla (1980s–present). Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theory, this study treats spatial magnitude not as a merely technical measure, but as a political instrument that links legal frameworks, design, and ideology to the material production of urban space. Attempting to secure their authority on Tehran's image and landscape, both regimes relied on a range of scalar strategies, from natural topography of the Abbas Abad hills to symbolically charged architectural forms. Together, these strategies turned the plateau into a compelling stage for expressing sovereignty, yet they also generated tensions whose sheer size produced delay, contestation, and enduring incompleteness. The unfulfilled royal vision of Shahestan was later reappropriated in the form of the Grand Mosalla of the Islamic Republic, aiming to concentrate the masses, where piety and politics converged through comparably monumental forms. Scale functioned as a double-edged tool that helped both regimes redefine spatial orders, while simultaneously exposing the limits of centralized power when confronted with historical contingency, political dissent, and the practical complexities of building at a metropolitan scale.

### **Biography**

Sina Zarei is an art and architectural historian, specializing in the political, cultural, and discursive production of meaning and space in modern Iran. His research examines textual and visual sources and archives, such as architectural publications, planning documents, exhibition materials, and digital collections, through which architectural, artistic, and spatial knowledge are constructed, circulated, and contested. He holds a PhD in architectural history from the Technical University of Munich and is currently a postdoctoral researcher at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich on art and digital platforms. His work bridges art and architectural history, media studies, and political theory, combining archival research with discourse analysis.

**Sina Zarei Hajibadi**

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

# Measured Sovereignty: Scale as a Political Strategy from Shahestan Pahlavi to the Great Mosalla of Tehran

## Introduction

Building on Henri Lefebvre's foundational argument that space itself is socially produced — a medium through which power, culture, and everyday life are organized — this article positions scale as one of the dimensions through which production of space unfolds, linking the technical with the political in the shaping of urban environments<sup>1</sup>. Although Henri Lefebvre never addressed scale directly, scholars such as Neil Brenner<sup>2</sup> and Erik Swyngedouw<sup>3</sup> have situated scale within Lefebvre's framework, redefining it as a relational and historically contingent process produced through struggles over power, territory, and governance. Some of the current literature examines scale primarily in relation to capitalist urbanization and globalization, tracing how economic processes and spatial restructuring interact across multiple levels. While this article draws on those theoretical insights, its aim is to understand how state power, ideological authority, and sovereignty in modern Iran were articulated through scalar strategies – inscribed in architecture, infrastructure, and even the spatial organization of the Abbas Abad landscape – as forms of political technology.

Situating the argument within Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad, this text understands scale as a cross-cutting dimension within the three moments of spatial production. For Lefebvre, spatial practice, or perceived space, refers to the material and sensory routines through which space is physically produced and reproduced; representations of space, or conceived space, denote the expert, conceptual space of planners, architects, and institutions, where plans, drawings, and programs intervene "by way of construction... by way of architecture"; and representational spaces, or lived space, encompass the directly experienced, symbolic, and affective dimensions through which space is inhabited and given meaning<sup>4</sup>. As Lefebvre notes, ideology only achieves consistency by intervening in space<sup>5</sup>, and the durable staging of authority often relies on monumental scale to project permanence and power<sup>6</sup>. While monumentality has received the most attention in both Lefebvre's theory and subsequent scholarship, this study argues that states mobilize multiple scalar strategies to impose order, structure visibility, and materialize ideological authority.

Recent scholarship has clarified how architecture and planning shaped political authority in modern Iran. Mina Marefat and Talinn Grigor trace how the built environment under the Pahlavi monarchy functioned as a medium of cultural self-fashioning and state legitimization<sup>7</sup>. Elmira Jafari shows how the 1968 Tehran Master Plan reveal how Cold War developmentalism and systems-based planning

<sup>1</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991), 26-27.

<sup>2</sup> Neil Brenner, *New State Spaces: Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood* (Oxford University Press, 2004); Neil Brenner, "The Limits to Scale? Methodological Reflections on Scalar Structuration", *Progress in Human Geography* 25, no. 4 (2001): 591-614.

<sup>3</sup> Erik Swyngedouw, "Neither Global nor Local: 'Glocalization' and the Politics of Scale", in *Spaces of Globalization: Reasserting the Power of the Local*, ed. Kevin R. Cox (Guilford Press, 1997), 137-66; Erik Swyngedouw, *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water: Flows of Power* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 38-39, 42.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 220-21.

<sup>7</sup> Mina Marefat, *The 1930s and the Shaping of Tehran: Modernization as a Political Project in Pahlavi Iran* (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1988); Talinn Grigor, *Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture, and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs* (Prestel, 2009).

## 10.1

Tehran. Map of the city after the removal of the walls and the beginning of its outward growth, 1948. Iran National Cartographic Centre. From Sepehr Zhand, "Political Reform and the Form of the City: Reading through the Adoption of Modern Planning in Tehran Using Space Syntax," in *Proceedings of the XXIX International Seminar on Urban Form*, 2023.



framed Tehran as a model of global urban modernity<sup>8</sup>. Complementing these planning-focused accounts, Sepehr Zhand examines Tehran's pre-revolution transformation through spatial-network analysis, demonstrating how political reform and modern planning reshaped the city's growth logic after the Second World War<sup>9</sup>. Extending beyond institutional and technical accounts, Farshid Emami and Shima Mohajeri interpret the Shahestan Pahlavi proposals as symbolic projections of elite ambition and ideological tension<sup>10</sup>, while following a relatively similar path, Ali Mozaffari and Nigel Westbrook highlight the continuity of spatial strategies across regime change, showing how both Shahestan and the Mosalla staged political unity through monumental form<sup>11</sup>.

Building on this trajectory, scale is treated not merely as a descriptor of size or ambition, but as a political technology: relational, multi-scalar, and historically contingent. A scalar reading is thus proposed to examine how architecture, planning, and ideology intersected in the production of modern Tehran. From this vantage point, the analysis turns to two key moments in the spatial production of political authority in Iran, when successive regimes sought to reorganize Tehran's urban order through large-scale interventions on the Abbas Abad plateau: Shahestan Pahlavi, an ambitious yet unrealized plan for a new administrative capital in the 1970s, and the Great Mosalla of Tehran, a vast religious and cultural complex initiated in the 1980s on the same site that was later reappropriated under the Islamic Republic. Despite the ideological differences, scale was mobilized by both regimes, primarily as an instrument to assert authority and inscribe symbolic power in Tehran. Read together, this can reveal how technical, spatial and experiential scale became the main medium through which sovereignty was envisioned, materialized and continually tested in Tehran's modern landscape.

Within the history of Tehran, three major episodes of urban intervention have shaped the city before the Second World War: the construction of defensive walls in the 16th century, the expansion of fortifications in the 19th century, and the infrastructural modernization under Reza Shah within the 1930s<sup>12</sup>, and beyond. Although each of these episodes changed Tehran's image in unprecedented ways, they mainly focused however, on securing, embellishing, or modernizing the pre-existing historical urban fabric—not to envision or impose a restructured metropolis at a fundamentally new scale.

It was only in the mid-20th century that planning in Tehran began to operate with metropolitan

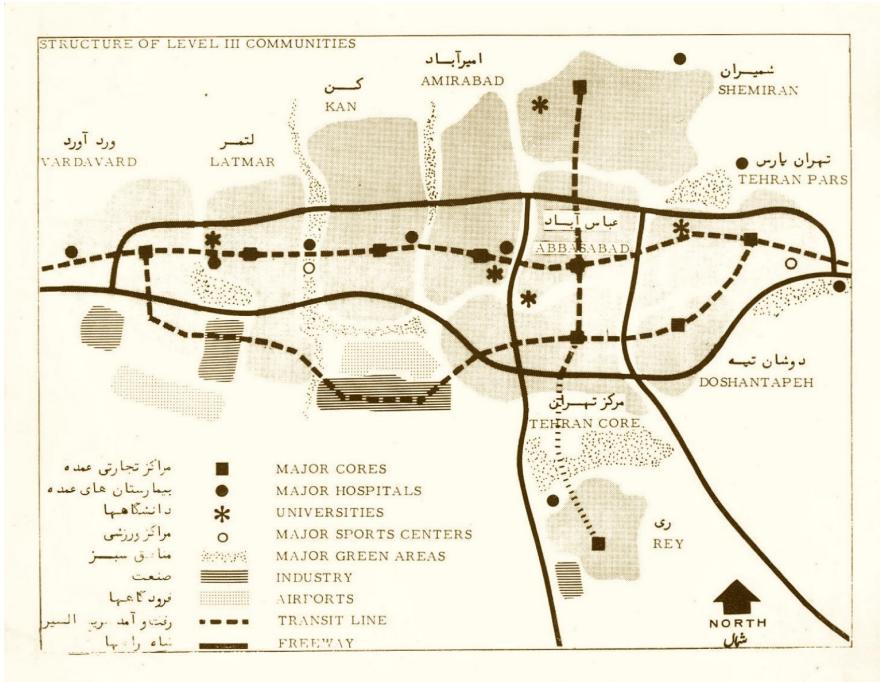
<sup>8</sup> Elmira Jafari, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Capital: On the Role of Iranian Planners in Tehran Master Planning at a Time of Urban Growth and Transnational Exchange (1930-2010)* (PhD diss., Delft University of Technology, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.7480/abe.2022.11.6574>; Azadeh Mashayekhi, "The 1968 Tehran Master Plan and the Politics of Planning Development in Iran (1945-1979)", *Planning Perspectives* 34, no. 6 (2019): 849-76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2018.1476892>.

<sup>9</sup> Sepehr Zhand, "Political Reform and the Form of the City: Reading through the Adoption of Modern Planning in Tehran Using Space Syntax," in *Proceedings of the XXIX International Seminar on Urban Form* (Łódź-Kraków, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Farshid Emami, *Civic Visions, National Politics, and International Designs: Three Proposals for a New Urban Center in Tehran (1966-1976)* (Master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011); Farshid Emami, "Urbanism of Grandiosity: Planning a New Urban Centre for Tehran (1973-76)", *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 3, no. 1 (2014): 75-96; Shima Mohajeri, "Transversal Modernity: Spatial Discourse in Architectural Paper Projects in Iran, 1960-1978", *The Architectural League of New York*, June 27, 2010, <https://archleague.org/article/transversal-modernity/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ali Mozaffari and Nigel Westbrook, *Development, Architecture, and the Formation of Heritage in Late 20th-Century Iran: A Vital Past* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Ali Madanipour, "Urban Planning and Development in Tehran", *Cities* 23, no. 6 (2006): 433.



## 10.2

Tehran. Abbas Abad plateau in the First Comprehensive Plan of Tehran (Gruen-Farmanfarmaian Plan), 1965. Identified as the only significant zone inside the city boundary overlooking the city centre and envisioned as a new administrative and cultural district to relieve the congested core and project political authority onto the modernizing metropolis. Tehran Municipality, *First Comprehensive Plan of Tehran*, 1965, sheet 9-4 (PDF in author's collection); adapted by the author.

ambition. Fueled by rural-to-urban migration, industrial expansion, and centralization of political power, Tehran's population grew dramatically from the early 1940s and 1966, reaching approximately three million<sup>13</sup>. The urban landscape of Tehran following this rapid expansion has been described as one of "under-regulated, private-sector-driven, speculative development, creating a disjointed urban form that challenged municipal governance"<sup>14</sup>. Diagnosed as one of the problematic cities suffering from "urban heart disease"<sup>15</sup>, the officials soon adopted an urgent tone in depicting the city's growth as chaotic and in need of centralized intervention.

By the late 1960s, the capital had outgrown the tools and jurisdictions of municipal governance, prompting a new era of planning designed not only to accommodate growth but to regulate and direct it. Between 1934 and 1976, Tehran's built-up area increased more than fivefold, while its population multiplied eightfold, reaching 4.5 million on the eve of the Revolution<sup>16</sup>. As the state grasped it, this new metropolitan magnitude demanded comprehensive plans, legal frameworks, and centralized institutions capable of reorganizing the city as a legible and governable whole. In this context, scale acquired a more complex meaning: it referred not only to the sheer physical size of Tehran's urbanization, but also to the state's ambition to master it through technocratic and centralized planning.

The 1968 Tehran Master Plan thus became the Pahlavi state's first comprehensive strategy to reorganize the capital as a metropolitan entity. Among its favored examples was the Abbas Abad plateau, envisioned as a new administrative and cultural district intended to relieve the congested urban core while projecting political authority onto a modernizing metropolis. Intended to materialize technocratic planning in monumental form, the project was ultimately interrupted by economic issues, corruption, and the Revolution. Observing the Islamic Republic's reactivation of the project through the Great Mosalla of Tehran from the 1980s onward shows how pre- and post-revolutionary projects on the same site reveal the role of scale as a medium through which political visions are transformed into spatial realities. Then, a central question arises: if – as Lefebvre argued – space is produced through the interplay of ideological conceptions and material practices, how did two ideologically opposed regimes draw on similar scalar strategies to materialize different spatial ideologies and rearticulate distinct images of sovereignty on the same terrain?

## 10.2

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*: 434; Zhand, "Political Reform": 6.

<sup>14</sup> Madanipour, "Urban Planning and Development": 434.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*: 435.

<sup>16</sup> Abbas Kariman, *Tarikh-e Tehran* [History of Tehran] (Bon-yad-e Farhang-e Iran, 1976); Vezarat-e Barnameh va Budjeh [Ministry of Planning and Budget], *Azarshahr-ha-ye Iran: Tehran* [Urban Statistics of Iran: Tehran] (Markaz-e Amar-e Iran, 1987).

### Abbas Abad: From Suburban Plateau to National-Scale Project

The Abbas Abad plateau rises over the urban horizon of modern Tehran. Set apart by its height, it first emerged in the Qajar era as an outlying elevation, gaining distinct symbolic weight as Tehran expanded around it. By the mid-20th century, the altitude, openness, and liminal position of Abbas Abad had turned it into a threshold zone in Tehran's topography: perched between the dense urban plain below and the open slopes leading toward the Alborz, neither fully inside the capital's fabric nor wholly beyond it. This combination of magnitude and elevation endowed Abbas Abad with what Mozaffari and Westbrook describe as a latent monumental charge: the sense that only projects of commensurate scale could fill its emptiness or match its commanding viewpoint<sup>17</sup>. While neighboring estates were gradually absorbed into Tehran's expanding fabric, Abbas Abad's size and topography resisted piecemeal urbanization, preserving a rare openness as an exceptional urban condition. This very openness also created a natural buffer between the plateau and the surrounding city, a unique spatial separation that would later be mobilized by both sovereign authorities through infrastructural corridors and planned landscapes, to secure and dramatize their claims to sovereign authority.

Yet distinctiveness alone did not guarantee any transformation. The historical shift for the hills occurred only in the early 20th century, when the whole city was reimagined as a governable, modernizing capital. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911 laid the groundwork for new forms of urban governance. The Ghanun-e Baladieh (The Municipality Act) of 1907 established Tehran's first elected municipal council (Anjoman-e Baladieh), formalizing municipal infrastructure<sup>18</sup>, in effect, and inaugurating new languages of urban management. However, by the 1910s, the optimism of the Constitutional Revolution — and with it the vision of a democratic, modern urbanism — had been replaced by a relative political instability, eroding the institutions that had briefly promised civic self-governance. Into this vacuum stepped Reza Khan, whose 1921 coup and 1925 coronation marked a decisive turn from participatory experiments toward what historians have described as modernization from above<sup>19</sup>.

In the 1930s, the demolition of Tehran's old walls and gates — once symbols of dynastic order — materialized the political imperatives of the new state: openness, circulation, and centralized control<sup>20</sup>. Wide boulevards cut through the old quarters, ministries rose where gardens had once stood, and straight axes replaced winding alleys, embodying what James C. Scott would later call the high-modernist ambition to make the city legible and the state visible<sup>21</sup>.

At this historical moment, modernization ceased to be a negotiated, piecemeal process and became, as Ervand Abrahamian notes, a project of "authoritarian state-building" imposed from above<sup>22</sup>. Unprecedented authoritarian interventions set the stage for what can be labelled as a jump in scale — not only in what was built, but in how the state imagined and governed the city. Yet, as Mashayekhi notes, the first Pahlavi state began to command space but lacked institutions robust enough to plan at a full metropolitan scale<sup>23</sup>. That institutional capacity only emerged after the Second World War, when oil revenues, foreign expertise, and technocratic agencies such as the Plan Organization converged to centralize Tehran's planning apparatus<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Mozaffari and Westbrook, *Development, Architecture, and the Formation of Heritage*, 182-83, 213-14.

<sup>18</sup> "Baladiya [Municipality]," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, para. 2, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/baladiya-municipality-the-name-or-part-of-the-name-of-several-municipal-newspapers-and-journals-published-in-iran-and-afgh>.

<sup>19</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton University Press, 1982), 126-28.

<sup>20</sup> Xavier de Planhol, "Tehran i. Geography of Tehran", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, accessed September 20, 2025, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/tehran-i>; also see: Marefat, *The 1930s and the Shaping of Tehran*: 34-41.

<sup>21</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998), 58-60.

<sup>22</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 126-28.

<sup>23</sup> Mashayekhi, "The 1968 Tehran Master Plan": 850.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*: 856-60.

With Reza Shah's abdication under Allied pressure in 1940, the postwar years extended the earlier "jump in scale" in both Tehran's physical growth and the state's ambitions to govern it. However, this expansion soon revealed its own limits: the city's rapid transformation outpaced the institutional capacity developed in the 1940s and 1950s, exposing a growing imbalance between metropolitan magnitude and the mechanisms of centralized control. To address this gap, by the early 1960s the monarchy established a new planning apparatus. Key institutions — including the High Council of Architecture and Urban Planning (1966) and the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture (1973) — unified architecture, planning, and governance into a single technocratic machine.

At its center stood the Plan Organization, founded in 1948 but vastly expanded under the Shah's White Revolution into "a project that transformed Tehran into a national icon of modernization"<sup>25</sup>. Amid rapid urban growth and expanding technocratic control, Tehran's first metropolitan-scale Master Plan emerged in 1968. Designed by Victor Gruen Associates in collaboration with Abdol-Aziz Farmanfarmaian and Associates (AFFA), the plan reflected Gruen's diagnosis of the modern city as suffering from "urban heart disease," a condition he argued required drastic intervention rather than incremental repair<sup>26</sup>.

Interestingly, the master plan found one of its most ideal stages in Abbas Abad. As one of the few expansive, state-owned plateaus in Tehran, the site seemed to offer precisely the magnitude the Master Plan demanded: a place where the city's disorder could be confronted with monumental clarity, and where scale itself became the instrument of both diagnosis and cure. As a rare expanse of state-owned land, rising above Tehran's dense core, Abbas Abad invited planners to imagine the city at an entirely new scale. Its openness and elevation seemed to offer what the metropolis lacked: a site where ministries, museums, and boulevards could be assembled into a single, ordered frame. This emerging vision was reinforced by the new freeway system and landscape zones planned around the plateau, which further buffered Shahestan from Tehran and framed it as a distinct site of metropolitan authority. Here the physical magnitude of the plateau converged with the political ambition of the monarchy, turning Abbas Abad into the perfect canvas for projecting legibility, centralization, and monumental form onto a city otherwise marked by fragmentation and sprawl.

### Contested Visions, Unified by Scale: Two Plans for Abbas Abad (1968-1976)

10.3

Farshid Emami shows that the idea of transforming Abbas Abad into a new urban center predated the 1968 Tehran Master Plan<sup>27</sup>. Yet it was the Master Plan that introduced a new scale of intervention, dividing the plateau into three zones: the Abbas Abad district as one of ten metropolitan districts, the hills reserved for high-income housing, and the southern flatlands for the urban center<sup>28</sup>. These divisions produced early spatial distinctions across the plateau, as each zone mapped onto different parts of Abbas Abadi's terrain — its hills, slopes, and flatter southern lands — laying the groundwork for the differentiated landscape that later projects would amplify. Still, the 1968 plan remained within what Lefebvre called conceived space: the realm of maps and expert dia-

<sup>25</sup> Carola Hein and Mohammad Sedighi, "Iran's Global Petroleumscape: The Role of Oil in Shaping Khuzestan and Tehran", *Architectural Histories*, n. 1 (2016): 24, <https://doi.org/10.5334/ah.56>.

<sup>26</sup> Rosemary Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia: An Intellectual History of the New Town Movement* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 182-83; Victor Gruen and Abdol-Aziz Farmanfarmaian, *Tehran Master Plan: Final Report* (Plan Organization, 1968), 15-23.

<sup>27</sup> Emami, *Civic Visions*, 39-40.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

### 10.3

Tehran. Abbas Abad plateau in the 1968 Tehran Master Plan. Divided into three zones: the Abbas Abad district as one of ten metropolitan districts, the hills reserved for high-income housing, and the southern flatlands for the urban center. From Farshid Emami, *Civic Visions, National Politics, and International Designs: Three Proposals for a New Urban Center in Tehran (1966–1976)* (Master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011), 40; adapted by the author.



grams imposing technocratic order without yet carrying the means for material realization.

That shift came with the 1971 Law on the Implementation of the Abbas Abad Renewal Program<sup>29</sup>, which authorized wholesale land expropriation, bond-financed redevelopment, compulsory acquisition in cases of dispute, and the creation of a powerful development corporation with fiscal, planning, and administrative authority (Sherkat-e Sahami-ye Nosazi-ye Abbas Abad), consolidating the entire plateau under a single metropolitan vision<sup>30</sup>. In this moment, conceived space ceased to be merely conceptual, acquiring legal and institutional force, authorizing interventions whose legitimacy rested on their capacity to reorder the city as a single, centralized totality.

If the 1968 Master Plan and the 1971 law introduced a new systematic scale of intervention – legal, administrative, and territorial – then by the early 1970s Shah reintroduced a more explicitly political meaning of scale into the project. Dismissing what planners considered “appropriate” and “functional” as insufficient to embody royal modernity, the monarch, who in 1971 “had higher expectations” for the plateau, personally instructed the municipality to transform it into a national center of political and cultural life<sup>31</sup>. The imposed shift from low-rise proposals to demands for vertical dominance made clear that scale served both as an instrument of comprehensive urban management, and as a medium for displaying power and commanding visibility: an architectural language of sovereignty<sup>32</sup>.

Letters from 1972-1974 reveal how the ambition for Abbas Abad first expanded on paper, as ministries, budget offices, and municipal agencies issued decrees on expropriation, financing, and administrative control well before a single tower was designed<sup>33</sup>. One 1973 directive described the plateau as the site for a “national administrative and cultural center” under unified state authority<sup>34</sup>, thereby collapsing legal, fiscal, and architectural decisions into what Lefebvre would call

<sup>29</sup> Tehran, National Library and Archives of Iran (NLAI), Tehran Municipality, Letter to the Ministry of Finance Regarding Abbas Abad Land Consolidation, no. 8413, 12 Khordad 1352 [2 June 1973].

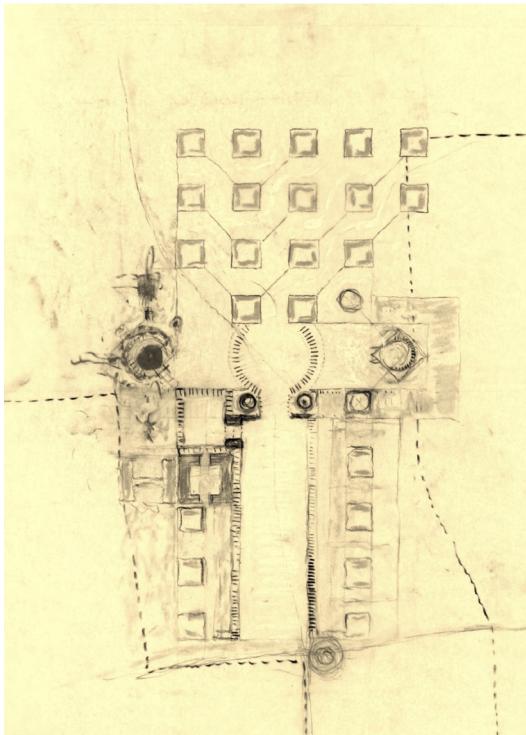
<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Emami, “Urbanism of Grandiosity”: 75.

<sup>32</sup> NLAI, Tehran Municipality, Letter to the Ministry of Finance Regarding Abbas Abad Land Consolidation, no. 8413, 12 Khordad 1352 [2 June 1973].

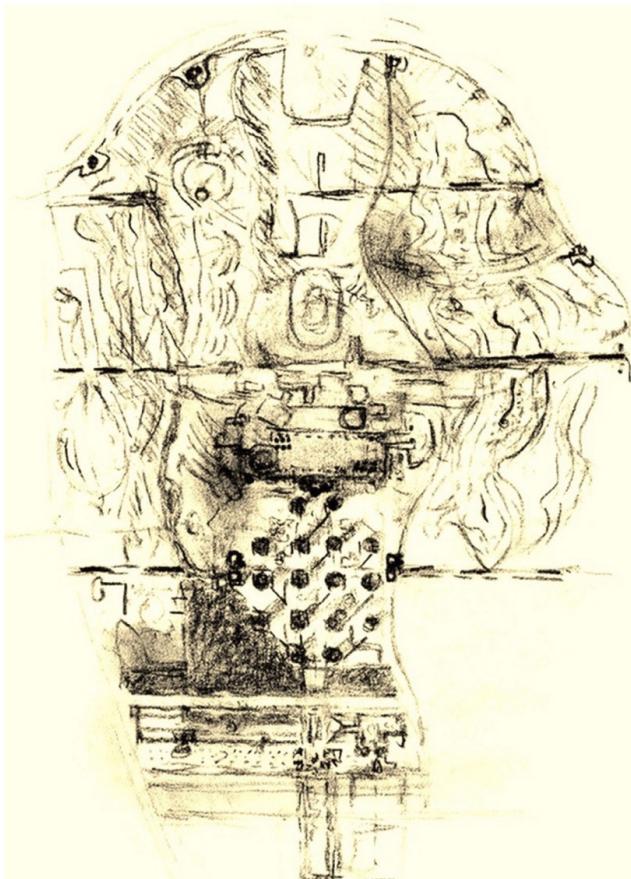
<sup>33</sup> Brita Snellman (1901-1978) was the first architect and Greta Woxén (1902-1990) was the first civil engineer to graduate from KTH.

<sup>34</sup> Tehran, National Library and Archives of Iran (NLAI), Tehran Municipality, Letter to the Prime Minister's Office Regarding Abbas Abad Administrative Center, no. 15247, 17 Shahrivar 1352 [8 September 1973].



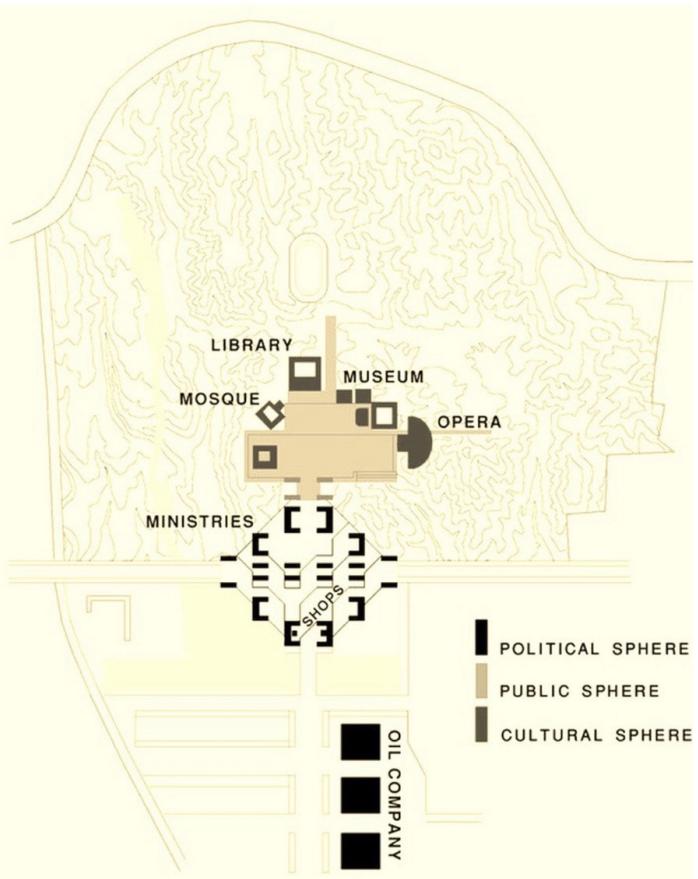
#### 10.4

Tehran. Louis I. Kahn, early sketch for Shahestan Pahlavi cultural-administrative complex on the Abbas Abad plateau, 1974. From Shima Mohajeri, "Transversal Modernity: Spatial Discourse in Architectural Paper Projects in Iran, 1960–1978," *The Architectural League of New York*, June 27, 2010, <https://archleague.org/article/transversal-modernity/>.



#### 10.5

Tehran. Louis I. Kahn, final plan sketch for Shahestan Pahlavi cultural-administrative complex on the Abbas Abad plateau, 1974. Depicting Kahn's proposal for a monumental civic plaza framed by museums, libraries, theaters, and a relocated city hall. From Shima Mohajeri, "Louis Kahn's Silent Space of Critique in Tehran, 1973–74," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 74, no. 4 (2015): 485–504.



abstract space: a space where law, finance, and design converge to make monumental ambition technically and politically possible<sup>35</sup>.

While the scale of the project — in legal, territorial, and now even physical terms — expanded in the early 1970s, the project was rebranded as Shahestan Pahlavi, or the Land of the King Pahlavi. Ironically, at this stage, not all the plans aligned with the Shah's vision. In 1973, for example, Queen Farah and her cultural circle commissioned Louis Kahn and Kenzo Tange to design a vast cultural-administrative complex for the plateau<sup>36</sup>. At the February 1974 presentation in Tehran, Kahn proposed a monumental civic plaza framed by museums, libraries, theaters, and a relocated city hall: a composition that fused the geometries of Persian gardens and caravanserais with the promise of a modern order.

10.4, 10.5

Mohajeri interprets Kahn's proposal as resisting both the Shah's technocratic modernism and the nostalgic traditionalism of its critics, envisioning a democratic public space beyond state authority. Such readings, however, risk detaching the design from the conditions that made it possible<sup>37</sup>. By the early 1970s, the Abbas Abad plateau had already been consolidated under unprecedented legal, territorial, and institutional powers: the 1971 Renewal Law enabled wholesale expropriation, municipal decrees centralized planning authority, and the Shah himself demanded vertical monumentality to embody royal modernity. Within this apparatus, scale operated not only as a matter of size but as a political technology linking law, finance, planning, and architecture into what Lefebvre called abstract space: a space where the state renders urban life measurable, governable, and symbolically unified<sup>38</sup>.

Seen in this light, Kahn's monumental plazas, axial boulevards, and cultural complexes — however inspired by Persian gardens or caravanserais — could not escape the spatial regime that enabled them. The very scale that promised openness and collective visibility also transformed architectural form into an instrument of centralized authority. Far from guaranteeing democracy, Kahn's design risked reproducing the very logic of power it sought to resist, with its cultural archetypes ultimately subsumed within the metropolitan gigantism of Pahlavi modernity.

In contrast to Kahn's attempt to redirect the project toward a cultural and democratic end, Tange's proposal embraced the logic of monumental state power from the outset<sup>39</sup>. Tange envisioned Abbas Abad as a vast metropolitan megastructure: a continuous north-south axis lined with ministries and cultural institutions, cylindrical towers punctuating the skyline, and bridge-type residential blocks spanning the plateau in sweeping gestures of infrastructural modernity<sup>40</sup>. His plan violated Tehran's 1969 Comprehensive Plan—which had limited the civic center to the southern section of the site—by imposing instead a totalizing spatial order across the entire expanse of the Abbas Abad hills<sup>41</sup>. Drawing on the Japanese Metabolists, Tange deployed modular super-blocks and axial hierarchies to promise both geometric coherence and unlimited expansion, synthesizing infrastructural rationality with the Shah's penchant for monumental verticality<sup>42</sup>.

10.6

Despite the differences between Kahn's design and Shah's vision, and between Kahn's and Tange's approaches, ultimately it was scale—the sheer magnitude of land clearance, infrastructural massing, and architectural centralization—that could unify all of the proposed elements into a single spatial

<sup>35</sup> Tehran, National Library and Archives of Iran (NLAI), Tehran Municipality, Budget Office Directive on Abbas Abad Financing, no. 19453, 2 Aban 1353 [24 October 1974].

<sup>36</sup> Shima Mohajeri, "Transversal Modernity: Spatial Discourse in Architectural Paper Projects in Iran, 1960–1978", *The Architectural League of New York*, June 27, 2010, <https://archleague.org/article/transversal-modernity/>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

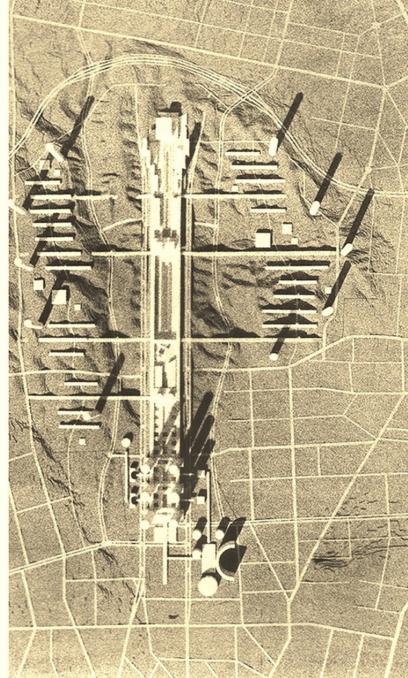
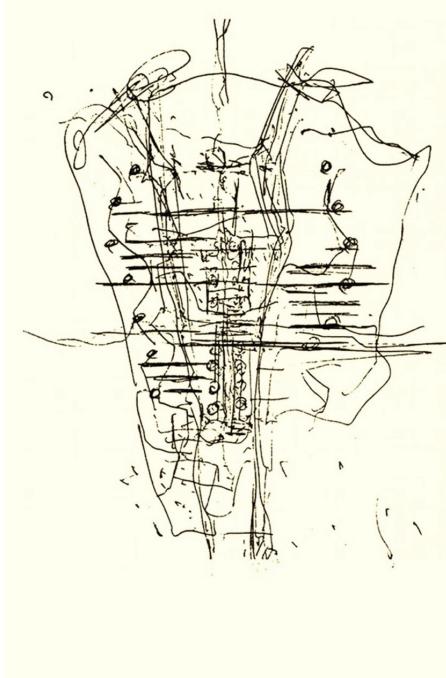
<sup>38</sup> Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 120.

<sup>39</sup> Emami, "Urbanism of Grandiosity": 74.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*: 75.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*: 76.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*: 77-88.



10.6

Tehran. Kenzo Tange, schematic design collage for the Abbas Abad New City Center, 1974. Depicting a north-south axis with modular blocks and elevated platforms, evoking a megastuctural logic of flows and administrative order. From Shima Mohajeri, "Transversal Modernity: Spatial Discourse in Architectural Paper Projects in Iran, 1960–1978," *The Architectural League of New York*, June 27, 2010, <https://archleague.org/article/transversal-modernity/>.

regime. Kahn sought cultural depth through archetypal forms. Tange pursued administrative control through infrastructural rationalism. Yet both visions relied on vast plazas, axial boulevards, and continuous platforms whose enormity presupposed the centralized power of the Pahlavi state. As Lefebvre reminds us, abstract space emerges when political authority translates itself into calculable, reproducible, and enforceable spatial forms<sup>43</sup>. In Abbas Abad, kilometer-long boulevards, modular blocks, and elevated promenades turned urban life into something measurable, governable, and symbolically unified. Scale was never neutral, especially in this context. Even as it suggested civic openness, cultural identity, and metropolitan order, its forms consistently revealed the authority that had imposed them.

This convergence became unmistakable after Kahn's sudden death in March 1974, which marked a decisive turning point for the project. By late 1974, the commission shifted to Llewelyn-Davies International (LDI), whose preliminary concept for the entire 554-hectare site soon gained the Shah's support<sup>44</sup>. Under the direction of lead planner Jaquelin T. Robertson, nearly fifty American and British architects, engineers, and landscape designers collaborated on a comprehensive plan allocating over five million m<sup>2</sup> for ministries, cultural institutions, embassies, commercial districts, and 12,000-14,000 housing units for ministry staff<sup>45</sup>.

On August 19, 1975, before LDI had even finalized its master plan, the Shah and Queen staged a ceremonial inauguration of the Abbas Abad project. A commemorative gold plaque was laid, the first foundation stone set, and hundreds of white doves released into the sky, an event theatrically paired with the opening of the Shahanshahi Expressway<sup>46</sup>. The final version of the plan appeared in 1976 in two illustrated volumes – nearly 270 pages, 1,000 copies – circulated internationally through *Architectural Record* and other outlets, presenting "Shahestan Pahlavi" as a 1,400-acre new town with a projected working population of 200,000 and nearly a third of its land reserved for green space. Conceived by LDI, the design combined modernist urbanism with monumental representation: a continuous ceremonial spine, modular Abbasid super-blocks, radial expressways, and residential towers collectively organized the plateau into a legible urban totality<sup>47</sup>. The plan's images – whether bird's-eye perspectives, colored land-use diagrams, or panoramic renderings – depicted

10.7, 10.8 Shahestan not merely as a functional district but as the sovereign stage of a modern empire<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 85-86, 222-23.

<sup>44</sup> Emami, "Urbanism of Grandiosity": 82.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*: 82-83.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*: 84.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*: 84-85.

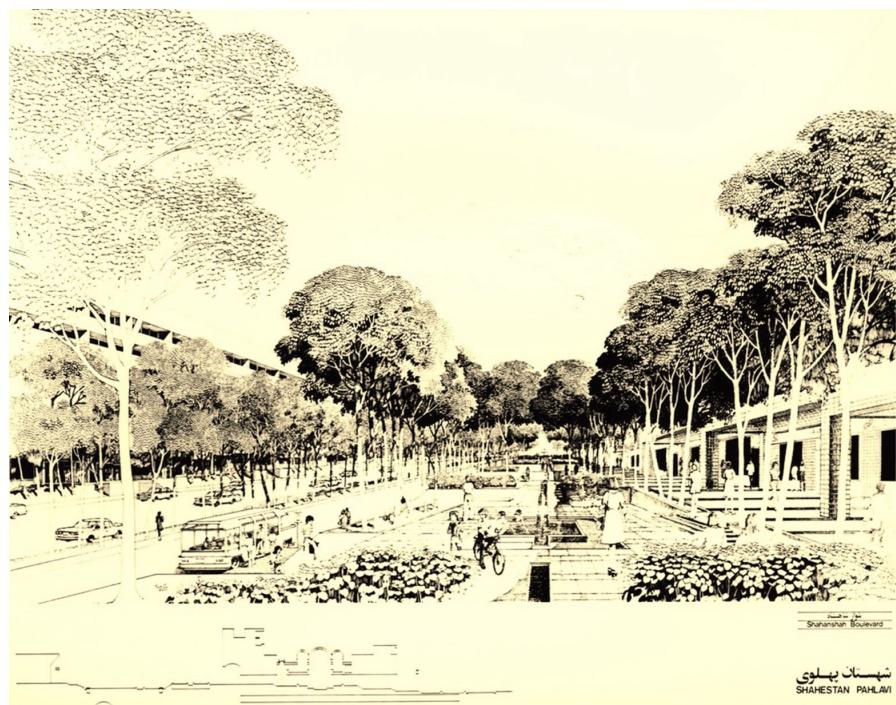
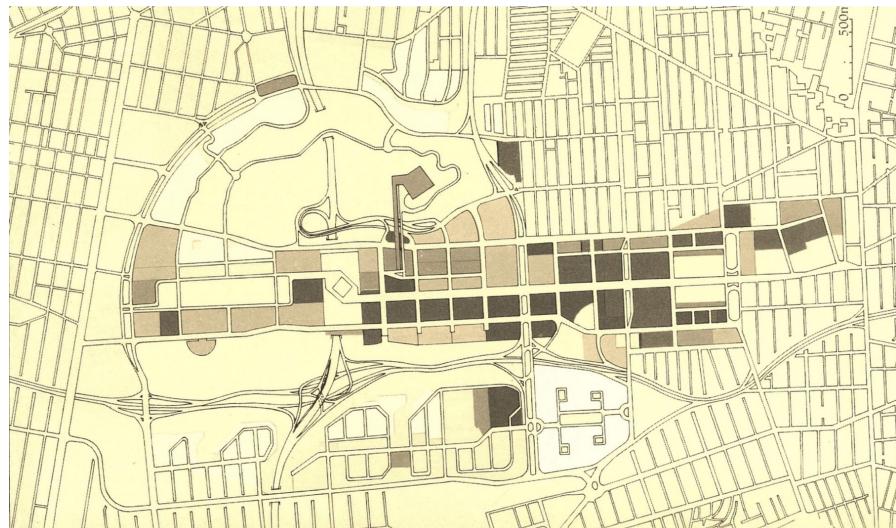
<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*: 85; Mohajeri, "Transversal Modernity".

### 10.7

Tehran. Llewelyn-Davies International (LDI), final master plan for Shahestan Pahlavi, 1976. Colored land-use diagram showing the 1,400-acre new town with its ceremonial spine, modular "Abbasid" super-blocks, expressways, and green spaces, conceived to house a projected working population of 200,000. From LDI, *Shahestan Pahlavi Master Plan*, 1976; adapted by the author.

### 10.8

Tehran. Llewelyn-Davies International (LDI), perspective view of Shahanshahi Boulevard in Shahestan Pahlavi, 1976. Depicting the monumental axis with its linear public spaces, residential towers, and ceremonial water features framing the envisioned urban center. From LDI, *Shahestan Pahlavi Master Plan*, 1976; adapted by the author.



The plan was premised on reinforced concrete, steel, and glass, supplemented by brick and reinforced blockwork<sup>49</sup>, even envisaging a special Abbasid block as a standardized unit for large-scale building<sup>50</sup>. These industrial systems were combined with arcades, courtyards, domes and vaults, recessed openings and coloured tile "headdresses" marking important roofs and parapets<sup>51</sup>, producing a recognizably Iranian monumental image from a thoroughly modern technical palette. The result was a "hybrid of New York formalism and Iranian contextualism"<sup>52</sup>, in which a mega-structural, technocratic core was deliberately clothed in quasi-traditional forms. A photograph from the presentation of the new design captures this moment vividly: Queen Farah stands before a large model of Abbas Abad while Mayor Gholamreza Nikpay, pointer in hand, bends and stretches to trace the plan across maps too large for a single frame. His bodily contor-

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*: 85; Mohajeri, "Transversal Modernity".

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*: 50.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*: 51.

<sup>52</sup> Muriel Emanuel, *Contemporary Architects* (Springer, 2016), 677, quoted in Jafari, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Capital*, 164.



10.9

Tehran. Queen Farah and Mayor Gholamreza Nikpay at Abbas Abad, ca. 1970s. Nikpay points across oversized maps to explain the Abbas Abad plan as Queen Farah observes, their bodily gestures dramatizing the problem of scale itself. National Library and Archives of Iran (NLAI), Document No. 1254-55, Tehran.

tion dramatizes the problem of scale itself: a project so vast it resists comprehension, demanding physical extension simply to be apprehended. In contrast, the Queen's stillness embodies sovereign vision, calmly receiving what technical expertise must labor to display. Here, scale was not merely geometric but performative, linking Lefebvre's notion of abstract space—the production of spatial order through plans, images, and authority—to the visual and bodily staging of modern power.

10.9

Following the visual staging of the project, the attention turns to its design logic. Borrowing the concept of overdetermination from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, scale in Shahestan cannot be reduced to a single logic of size, function, or symbolism. In their analysis, *overdetermination* describes how political, economic, ideological, and aesthetic discourses intersect, so that no single one can fully account for a phenomenon: meaning arises only through their convergence rather than from any ultimate foundation<sup>53</sup>.

In this sense, the overdetermination of scale is evident in LDI's 1976 plan, nowhere more visibly than in the Shah and Nation Square. Conceived to surpass Moscow's Red Square while recalling the arcaded form of Isfahan's Safavid Meydan, the square concentrated Tehran's most prestigious institutions — the Pahlavi Library, City Hall, museums, the Theatre Centre, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs — around a single ceremonial core<sup>54</sup>.

10.10

Apparently, at its center, a 30-meter-high Pahlavi Monument was also proposed as a platform for parades and royal ceremonies, visually linking Iran's imperial past to its modernizing present, although it is not visible in the surviving images of the design. In its overdetermined ambition, Shah and Nation Square exemplified, in Fredric Jameson's terms the postmodern sublime: a spatial totality, whose magnitude exceeded individual perception, while nevertheless promising an image of a unified order.

LDI's designers famously described their ambition as creating an "immediate sense of urban maturity"<sup>55</sup>. Unlike ordinary cities, which acquire depth through centuries of layering, Shahestan was to appear fully formed at its inauguration, with monumental boulevards, a vast ceremonial plaza, and Abbasid super-blocks projecting the gravitas of a historic capital. Scale was the crucial instrument here: 554 hectares of elevated land were mobilized to transform emptiness into the image of permanence. The square's immensity was legible primarily from the air or the royal balcony rather than through everyday use, turning civic space into dynastic spectacle and national display.

<sup>53</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Social-ist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso, 1985), 97-100.

<sup>54</sup> Emami, "Urbanism of Grandiosity": 83-84.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*: 86.

### 10.10

Tehran. Llewelyn-Davies International (LDI), model view of Shah and Nation Square in the Shahestan Pahlavi Master Plan, 1976. Designed to surpass Moscow's Red Square while recalling the arcaded form of Isfahan's Safavid *maydan*, the square was planned to house Tehran's most prestigious institutions around a single ceremonial core, with a proposed 30-meter-high Pahlavi Monument at its center. From *Shahestan Pahlavi: The New Capital Center for Tehran*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Llewelyn-Davies International, 1976).



The plan thus deployed scale on multiple levels — physical, functional, symbolic, and historical — but always through overdetermination. Shah and Nation Square fused Islamic heritage, communist ceremony, global modernism, and royal ambition into one monumental frame. Even the residential towers lining Shahanshah Boulevard extended this logic, reinforcing the plateau's vertical dominance and ensuring its visibility across Tehran's skyline. Yet the very scale whose ambition made sense amid the oil-fueled optimism of the 1970s, also carried the seeds of Shahestan's sudden death. As Mashayekhi shows, Tehran's planners had already overreached institutional capacity in the 1968 Master Plan, relying on foreign expertise and centralized control that became liabilities once economic pressures mounted and political stability faltered<sup>56</sup>. By the late 1970s, spiraling construction costs, inflation, and the regime's growing crisis of legitimacy left monumental projects vulnerable to paralysis. The late Pahlavi era pushed urban planning to unprecedented scales, but these ambitions peaked just before the Revolution.

#### Defrosted and Rescaled: Shahestan and Abbas Abad after the 1979 Revolution

The main body of existing scholarship treats the 1979 Revolution as the ultimate breakpoint that halted the ambitious path of modernization pursued by the Pahlavi state, including the mega-project of Shahestan. In this simplified narrative, the Revolution is often described as the definitive break in Tehran's urban history; while Shahestan Pahlavi is observed as suddenly frozen in place after several street protests, and its half-finished structures left as ruins of royal modernity.

<sup>56</sup> Mashayekhi, "The 1968 Tehran Master Plan": 43-44.

Yet this story oversimplifies what was a far more entangled process. By the mid-1970s, scale was already in a contradictory condition, one that both enabled and destabilized the project. Economic uncertainty, increasing political unrest, and scandals surrounding land speculation had begun to unsettle the Shah's showcase of modernization.

In March 1976, *The New York Times* reported the arrest of senior officials, including retired General Mahmoud Naimei-rad, on charges of bribery and embezzlement linked to Abbas Abad expropriations, with over three million dollars allegedly diverted through inflated compensation claims and speculative land deals<sup>57</sup>. The same article estimated the project's cost at three billion dollars, noting how its sheer magnitude had transformed it into what critics described as a "hub of corruption"<sup>58</sup>. Seen from this perspective, the Revolution did not simply interrupt the straight path of a well-planned project; rather, it exposed and amplified tensions already internal to Abbas Abad's hypertrophic ambitions. The plateau's transformation after 1979 — from royal megaproject to revolutionary monumentality — unfolded through this longer arc of crisis, rescaling, and ideological rearticulation.

After the Revolution, the large-scale aim for Abbas Abad did not vanish. It merely paused, awaiting its eventual reappropriation. The Iran-Iraq War redirected funds toward military and infrastructural priorities, leaving the plateau an empty expanse of expropriated land, a physical void marking the suspension rather than the erasure of royal ambitions. Yet this silence proved temporary. By the early 1980s, the Islamic Republic began reinterpreting Abbas Abad's monumental logic in new ideological terms.

While the project as a whole remained in deep hibernation for over a decade, a part of it — on a smaller but symbolically charged scale — was defrosted as a new center for gathering the masses and the state. Partly mirroring the monarchy's "Shah and Nation Square," yet reshaped within a Shi'a revolutionary idiom, the regime announced plans for the Grand Mosalla of Tehran as the nation's central stage for Friday prayer. The vastness of Abbas Abad, once reserved for modernist megaprojects, now offered an irresistible platform for revolutionary monumentality. Over the following decades, the Mosalla became increasingly framed by adjacent cultural and even recreational institutions, including the National Library (Ketabkhane-ye Melli), the Book Garden (Bagh-e Kebab), and the Sacred Defense Museum (Muze-ye Defa-e Moqaddas). This placement, within newly landscaped zones and infrastructural corridors, further buffered the complex from its urban surroundings<sup>59</sup>.

In his memoirs, then-Speaker of Parliament Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani recalled sending a message to Ayatollah Khomeini in June 24, 1983, requesting funds for the construction of the Grand Mosalla of Tehran on the site of the "former Abbas Abad army base"<sup>60</sup>. Two weeks later, Eid prayers were held on the site, inaugurating both the location and a nationwide fundraising campaign. "The plan", Rafsanjani noted, "was for this Mosalla to be built with the lawful contributions of the people. Bank accounts were opened across the country so that everyone could donate, whether one toman or ten"<sup>61</sup>. This call performed what Lefebvre might call a scalar inversion: a monumental center for the entire nation would rise, at least symbolically, from countless small, dispersed,

<sup>57</sup> Eric Pace, "Corruption Cases Spreading in Iran", *New York Times*, March 7, 1976: 8.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Ahmadreza Hakiminejad, "'Errors of Scale': The Story of Tehran's Abbas Abad Lands", *KONESH*, March 11, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Aramesh va Chalesh: Karmameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1362* [Calm and Challenge: Performance Report and Memoirs of the Year 1983] (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Ma'aref-e Engelab, 2001), 151.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

### 10.11

Tehran. Parviz Moayyed-Ahd, model of the winning proposal for the Tehran Mosalla complex. Envisioned as a monumental religious and cultural center on the Abbas Abad hills, the design integrated mosques, plazas, and ceremonial spaces into a single urban composition. From *Moussalla Cultural Complex, Tehran*, <https://www.tehran-mosalla.com>.



voluntary acts. The space of revolutionary piety thus merged political authority with the everyday spatial practices of donation, prayer, and participation.

The ambition soon expanded. In January 1985, *Kayhan* announced an international design competition, inviting “all designers, architects, consulting engineers, professors, artists, and capable specialists to participate in a great competition for this grand and historic structure”<sup>62</sup>. As the newspaper emphasized, the Mosalla was to be nothing less than “a monumental project for the Islamic Republic”, one that would symbolize both revolutionary faith and architectural excellence<sup>63</sup>. The call set a clear timeline: “Preliminary designs must be submitted by the end of Mordad [August], and the results will be announced in Mehr [September/October]”<sup>64</sup>.

Thirty-six proposals arrived from Iran and abroad—including Japan, Syria, Pakistan, and the Netherlands—and a jury combining revolutionary legitimacy with architectural expertise was formed: Mohammad Karim Purnia, the eminent historian of Iranian architecture; Mehdi Chamran, head of the Faculty of Fine Arts after the Cultural Revolution; Bagher Ayatollahzadeh Shirazi, deputy head of the Cultural Heritage Organization; Ali Ghaffari, professor and editor; and Mehdi Hojjat, head of the Cultural Heritage Organization and Supreme Council member. However, as the jury approved none of the submissions, a second round was announced in 1987, this time inviting academic architects. Only two proposals were submitted, one by Latif Abolghasemi and the other by Parviz Moayyed-Ahd. The latter’s design, blending traditional motifs with modern scale, was eventually accepted and confirmed by the Supreme Leader in 1991<sup>65</sup>.

In Moayyed-Ahd’s proposal, the iwans and vaulted halls rested on a steel structural system, producing a silhouette legible within Iran’s architectural canon while relying on contemporary construction techniques. As Mozaffari and Westbrook note, the repeated pointed arches recalled those of the Shahyad monument<sup>66</sup>, marking a continuity in monumental vocabulary across regimes despite ideological rupture. The vast central courtyard and axial promenades were calibrated for mass assembly, framing worshippers and political crowds as visible embodiments of collective unity. In this sense, the Mosalla pursued a scalar strategy parallel to Shahestan’s, mobilizing modern construction and recognizable forms to project an enlarged, unified social body onto the urban landscape.

The choice of Abbas Abad revealed the continuity beneath the rupture of 1979. The same vast plateau, once envisioned for the Shah’s modernist ambitions, now became the Islamic Republic’s largest religious hub. Here again, scale served as the medium of transformation: where Shahestan had projected royal modernity, the Grand Mosalla staged religious authority and revolutionary

<sup>62</sup> *Kayhan*, “Tehrīk-e jāmī-e bāna-ye Mosalla-ye Bozorg-e Tehrān be mosābeqeh gozashteh shod” [The Comprehensive Plan for the Grand Mosalla of Tehran Put to Competition], January 19, 1985, 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Mozaffari and Westbrook, *Development, Architecture, and the Formation of Heritage*, 209–10.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.



#### 10.12

Tehran. Construction of the Tehran Mosalla complex, ca. 2017. Showing the vast steel-and-concrete iwan described as the largest of its kind in the world. From *Moussalla Cultural Complex, Tehran*, "Gozāresh-e tasviri az sâkhte ivâن-e bozorg-e Mosalla," July 19, 2017, <https://www.tehranmosalla.com>.

unity. Both regimes relied on the same spatial logic: the plateau's exceptional magnitude demanded architectural grandeur. Yet, in a telling irony, the Islamic Republic too struggled to advance the project. Through the 1990s and early 2000s, construction proceeded so slowly that it often seemed the complex might never be completed.

However, even amid delays, state-supported newspapers began dramatizing the Mosalla's growing dimensions. Official reports, ministerial speeches, and media coverage transformed square meters and structural heights into symbols of ideological permanence, revolutionary modernity, and sovereign centrality. In Lefebvre's terms, this moment revealed how scale cuts across spatial registers: from representations of space—the technical abstractions of planners and officials—to representational spaces, where architecture staged the collective body of the nation as both spectacle and lived experience.

Early reports described the future Mosalla as a space for "hundreds of thousands" of worshippers, hosting not only Eid prayers but also revolutionary gatherings, cultural festivals, and national ceremonies. In 2003, for instance, *Fars News* reported that the "Third Exhibition of the General Inspection Organization" filled the site's "vast courtyards" with forty pavilions under the slogan "Questioning is the People's Right; Accountability is Our Duty": a striking attempt to cast the unfinished complex as already monumental through its temporary uses<sup>67</sup>. That same year, the "National Festival of Resistance and Victory" brought thousands for concerts, speeches, and revolutionary pageantry, again justifying the project's dimensions through the scale of its audiences<sup>68</sup>.

Later reports lingered more directly over structural statistics — the height of the main dome, the span of the colossal iwan — insisting that only Iranian engineers, led by the Revolutionary Guards' Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, had dared to attempt such feats after foreign firms had declined the challenge<sup>69</sup>. One article even celebrated the planned iwan as "the largest column-free structure in the Islamic world", transforming engineering data into the language of political and religious grandeur<sup>70</sup>. In some cases, even the delays became part of the spectacle. Journalists highlighted the thousands of workers on site, the hundreds of billions of tomans allocated, and the repeated promises of imminent completion; each deadline receding almost as soon as it was announced<sup>71</sup>.

10.12

When Eid-e Fetr prayers were relocated back to Tehran University in 2009 for safety reasons, reports stressed that the Mosalla normally hosted "one and a half to two million worshippers", as though sheer capacity could outweigh the embarrassment of incompleteness<sup>72</sup>. Political rallies likewise seized upon the site's monumental stage. During the 2009 presidential campaign,

<sup>67</sup> *Fars News*, "Third Exhibition of the General Inspection Organization," June 23, 2003.

<sup>68</sup> *Fars News*, "National Festival of Resistance and Victory," July 18 2003.

<sup>69</sup> *Mosalla News*, "Iranian Engineers Build the Largest Iwan," 2013, A.

<sup>70</sup> *Mosalla News*, "The Largest Column-Free Iwan in the World," 2013, B.

<sup>71</sup> IRNA, "Eid-e Fetr Prayers Relocated to Tehran University," September 6, 2009.

<sup>72</sup> *Kayhan*, "Crowd Rally for Ahmadinejad," June 9, 2009.

*Kayhan* described a “tsunami of unprecedented crowds” filling the Mosalla to support President Ahmadinejad’s re-election, claiming the assembly was so vast that “the president himself could not reach the podium”<sup>73</sup>. Here the unfinished structure magnified the mass, while the mass retroactively justified the structure’s vastness: architecture and assembly fused into a single spectacle of revolutionary legitimacy.

By the early 2010s, state coverage pushed the scale narrative even further. In 2010, *Iran* reported that “3,700 billion rials” had been allocated for national construction projects, with the Mosalla alone employing “1,400 workers and specialists” on its “325,000 square meters of central structures”<sup>74</sup>. Officials promised that the main dome — “one of the largest in the world, with a diameter of 54 meters and a height of 63 meters” — would soon crown the complex, its dimensions repeated across articles as proof of both architectural ambition and revolutionary will<sup>75</sup>. Yet frustration persisted. In 2011, the Mosalla’s CEO admitted that fewer than 60 percent of the project had been completed, blaming funding shortages while promising that exhibitions and prayers would continue to fill the unfinished site<sup>76</sup>. By 2013, Tehran’s governor complained that “if we had four complete Mosallas, it would be better than one left unfinished for decades”, even as a national design competition invited architects to propose plans for its remaining sections, an attempt to recast delay as an opportunity<sup>77</sup>.

In 2017, after three decades of construction, *Financial Tribune* reduced the entire saga to a single equation: thirty-five trillion rials already spent, another eighty-five trillion still required, and no completion in sight<sup>78</sup>. What had begun as the Islamic Republic’s architectural epic now risked becoming its perpetual cliffhanger. The Grand Mosalla, conceived as the stage for national unity and revolutionary grandeur, appeared increasingly destined to remain unfinished: a monument not to transcendence alone, but to the politics of delay itself, where every promise of completion only rehearsed the next deferral.

This prolonged incompleteness shifts the meaning of the project itself. What was once envisioned as the architectural embodiment of revolutionary permanence increasingly functioned as a stage for anticipation, a vast structure whose significance lay as much in its promise as in its physical form. The Grand Mosalla thus joined Abbas Abad’s longer history of monumental ambition, in which scale did not simply project power but exposed its limits, turning unfinished grandeur into the most enduring spectacle of all. Abbas Abad’s fate — first as Shahestan, then as Mosalla — shows that magnitude can gather a nation without ever coming to rest. The same plateau that promised legible order became a machine for producing suspense: budgets announced, models unveiled, domes imminent, continuously impending without ever materializing. In Lefebvre’s terms, abstract calculations kept fabricating a future that lived as spectacle long before it existed as stone. What remains, then, is a paradox: a sovereignty that insists on being seen at metropolitan scale, and a city that answers with delay, diversion, and unfinished edges. Abbas Abad endures not as a completed monument but as a recurring scene, where rulers measure themselves in hectares and horizons, and Tehran replies by turning scale itself into an interval, a held breath, a grandeur perpetually deferred.

<sup>73</sup> *Iran*, “Funding for National Construction Projects,” October 6, 2010.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Mosalla CEO, *Mehr News*, February 2011.

<sup>76</sup> *Iran*, “Governor’s Remarks on Mosalla,” October 9, 2013; *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, “National Design Competition for Mosalla,” December 5, 2013.

<sup>77</sup> *Iran*, “Funding for National Construction Projects,” October 6, 2010.

<sup>78</sup> *Financial Tribune*, “After Three Decades... 35 trillion Spent, 85 trillion More Needed,” August 25, 2017.November 1950.

## Conclusion

Relying on the sheer size and the unique height of the Abbas Abad hills, both regimes initially distanced their major urban project from the everyday city, framing them on their own terms. The plateau provides each regime with space – literally and metaphorically – to stage a theatrical setting in which its authority could be displayed. Despite this common ground, each regime further pushed scale in its own ideological directions, producing different spatial orders.

For the Pahlavis, scale reinforced the image of a modern, centralized, and forward-looking monarchy. After 1979, the Islamic Republic turned those same spatial possibilities toward a very different purpose, using large, open areas to gather the faithful and present a collective, revolutionary public.

But beneath these differences lies a deeper continuity. Over roughly five decades, Abbas Abad has been shaped by the same basic tools: plans, regulations, design competitions, technical drawings, and a centralized control of land, which survived despite the political break of 1979. Both regimes worked with the same spatial logic: an elevated plateau, buffered from the city, imagined as a blank canvas where authority could be laid out at a scale unavailable elsewhere. What changed was the ideology projected onto the site, not the spatial apparatus itself.

Seen in this light, Abbas Abad clarifies the question raised at the beginning. If space takes shape through the interaction of ideas and material practices, the site shows how two ideologically opposed regimes could rely on similar scalar strategies, while pursuing different visions of power. At the same time, the history of the plateau also reveals the limits of those ambitions. The very size that made the projects compelling also made them hard to realize. Shahestan collapsed before it could be built; the Mosalla has stretched across decades with no clear endpoint. In both cases, scale was meant to secure authority, but it ended up revealing its fragility as well. After nearly sixty years of plans and revisions, Abbas Abad remains marked by this tension: grand designs that promise a coherent order, and the uneven realities that keep pulling them back.