Visual Essay
The Common Apartment
Golnar Abbasi

In Tehran, housing has been vital in forming a tamed post-1979-revolution nation, and expanding the middle class.[1] The *house* has for a long time been the locus of the Tehrani citizen's socio-political struggles. After the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), the Tehrani house gradually came to materialise more complex socio-political issues. It became a space and a structure that, on the one hand, embodied the state's subjugating agenda, the forces of the housing market, and the labour and material market, while on the other hand it exemplified and accommodated the people's desires, their political action, and architectural practitioners' attempts to prove their practices relevant to the market. This visual essay focuses on the form of housing that emerged after the privatisation of the Iranian housing market – starting in 1989, at the end of the Iran-Iraq war – which positioned the middle-class citizen as the main player of housing production, a state of affairs still current. This time period is characterised by the courses of action in housing in response to two forces: the country's post-war conditions, and global neoliberal economies.

The population of Tehran grew by 40 percent from 1976 to 1991, two million people over the course of fifteen years. This population increase was a result of three main factors: a baby boom promoted by the government to stabilise the power of the nation-state, large numbers of war migrants moving from the southern war-torn cities, and the increase of general post-war rural-urban migrations. The policies under-taken in the post-Khomeini period (from 1989 on) to solve the housing challenge were also a response to the global shift to neoliberal economies. The exhaustion of governmental funds (as well as human and natural resources) financing eight years of war, created a major budget deficit. In response to this crisis, the govern-ment of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani adopted policies that prioritised economic advancement.[2] He announced a list of twenty-three main challenges in the country, and argued that the way to deal with these diverse issues has to be primarily through economic frameworks.[3] In addition, he started publicly indicating that "making money is a 'good thing' which should be encouraged".[4] Through this list, he prepared the ground for his economically liberal policies, presenting privatisation as the main premise for the new financial plan.[5] This was widely propagandised as 'cooperation of the people and the government' in the post-war recon-struction effort. The government's announcement that it would outsource housing investment to the private sector, among other privatisation procedures signalled Iran's move to a to a neoliberal economy; one that for the most part celebrated 'people's participation'.

The start of Rafsanjani's liberalising plans, saw the construction of some large housing projects that played an important role in attempting to redefine the housing industry by increasing the square metre per capita from less than 70 in 1960s to around 150 in 1994 and creating speculation in the market.[6] However, they did not succeed in revitalising the industry in a substantial or durable manner. The government soon proposed more comprehensive policy plans to make it accessible for smaller private investors to engage in housing construction. The policy plans introduced a framework of housing production to be undertaken mainly by middle class citizens. And thus, a regime of housing was produced that would not only localise the middle-class citizens' practices of living, but also their economic conduct; a regime of control that worked by framing bodies as well as absorbing their capital. These regulatory frameworks are based on a neoliberal model in which the government acts as facilitator, leaving the production of housing almost completely to the private sector.

This visual essay shows how the sum of this objective liberalisation process – built upon distinct economic and political agendas – brings a multifaceted idea of the house, which in spatial terms comes to manifest as an architecture that is standardised, elemental and versatile. Concurrently, performances of domesticity, resistance, and production that have historically been intertwined within the locus of 'home', are practiced differently in these architectures in Tehran today. Further, we see how the constant (re)examination of basic principles of the house constitutes a new 'resident subject' whose agency is not limited to one of a mere dweller, but is rather that of an active agent in the constant (re)formulation of housing. In such manner, the generic frame of the house is constantly stripped bare by this new resident subject, conceptualised as a tabula rasa, and a frame of probabilities.

Re-regulating housing as a standard
Several scholars distinguish between two periods in post-revolutionary Iran, corresponding to two specific approaches to restoration of power structures through economic re-ordering.[7] During the first period, the decade after the revolution (1979–1989),[8] known as the time of 'revolutionary reconstruction', the provisional government of Iran appeared to commit to the popular revolutionary cause of subverting class divisions.[9] This involved measures such as land reform, the formulation of progressive labour laws, and the nation-alisation of foreign trade.[10] During the second phase, starting in 1989, the radical 'advancements' of the first phase were undone. It is a period of economic liberalisation, characterised by the suppression of the demands of the working class, peasants and ethnic minorities, and the empowerment of landowners and merchants.[11] Capitalist relations of production were revived. Procedures towards a standardised form of housing began with the second phase, as did an economic transformation towards neoliberal structures of governance. Re-regulating building practices on a more structural level was done through multiplying chan-nels of state intervention, and the establishment of administrative bodies.[12] Housing was a core to these re-regulations. The regulations firmly established a typical spatial configuration for housing, resulting in a homogeneous form of housing that arose all over Iran.

1. Photo: Abbas Vahedi, 2017.

Regulatory frameworks

A crucial regulatory shift in making the production of housing accessible to private parties was made when the municipality set up a system of 'density sale' in 1992. The density zoning system included in the Comprehensive Plan of Tehran (1992) prescribes a certain density rate to each area of the city for future development.[13] The density sale system is a form of privatisation that outsources the execution of the Comprehensive Plan of Tehran to the private sector and citizens in a monetary fashion. The monetisation of these permits transforms the administrative process into a commercialised, and hence, flexible one. Allowing private owners to buy permits for their land created a crucial shift in the project of housing by proliferation of housing construction on small privately-owned pieces of land, in the place of grand housing projects on large pieces of state-provided land on the periphery of the city, as had formerly been the case. The result was a prolific amount of private housing construction, turning it into one of the dominant industries in the country. Hence, a booming housing market was formed through the circulation of wealth among smaller (but abundant) private investors. The re-regulation of housing based on citizen's private funds facilitated a lucrative real-estate market whose main players were the middle-class citizens, and increased the speed and scale of housing construction (to an exaggerated level), to the detriment of architectural thought in the process. Initially, investors minimised the role of the architect simply to reduce costs by avoiding architectural design fees and other allocated expenses. Thus, a system in which every square metre of housing space equalled so much profit, instantly caused the limitations imposed by regulations to be the only determining factor in the spatial layout of the houses. In 1989 the first brief set of regulations was published, fundamentally establishing a language, a series of components, and a toolbox, which Tehran would later use to exponentially expand its territory. It addressed issues such as construction permits, density limits, spatial protocols for backyards and balconies, and defined the parties involved in construction (e.g. supervisors, municipalities).

2. Generic plans showing internal spatial arrangements of apartments (top left and middle) and reproduction of regulation drawing that shows massing as well as balcony measurements on a plot of land (top right). Drawings: author. Photo: Ramtin Taherian, 2014.
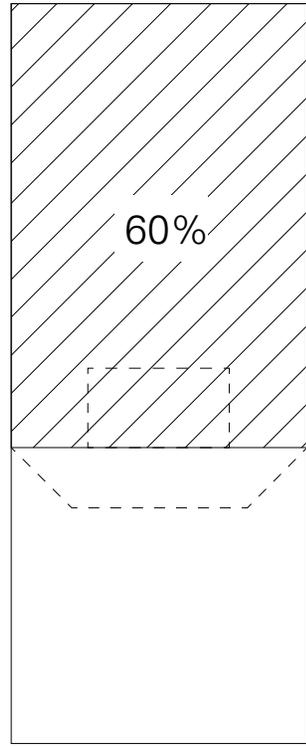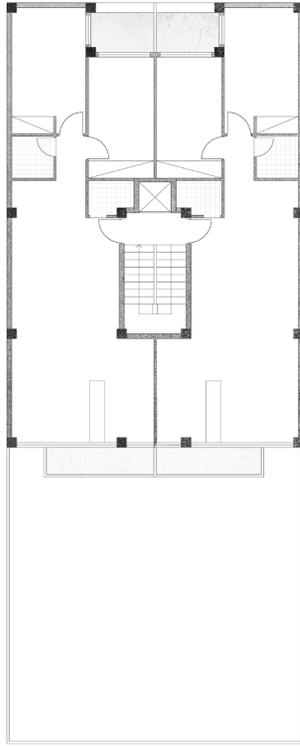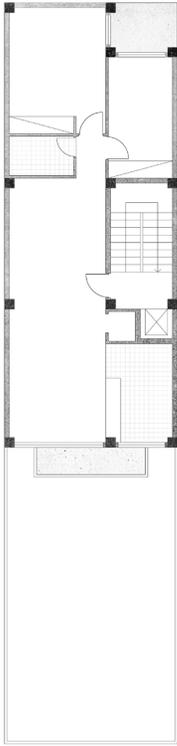
An analogous frame: the Common Apartment

The elaborate structural instructions for housing production published in the regulation briefs, modulate all the main steps in the construction procedure, while also fundamentally shaping the spatial layout of apartments. The regulations set a limit of 60 percent for built area on a plot of land, and also prescribed its positioning on that land, establishing a relationship between the building and its front/backyard. The regulations also control visibility in openings, windows, and terraces, based on the Islamic doctrine of the nuclear family's privacy from the gaze of strangers, reinforcing a binary relation between the domestic life within and the street.[14] Additionally, regulations organise the rather wide variety of commonly-owned spaces around apartments (e.g. patios, rooftops, yards, staircases). Today, the whole of these shared spaces takes up at least 12 percent of the built area of a plot,[15] and due to the similar proportions and orientation of plots, these commonly-owned spaces are distributed in ways that eventually homogenise the spatial layout of houses.[16] Thus, these seemingly inconsequential spaces turn into one of the critical structuring elements of apartment buildings. A crucial consequence of regulating housing based on such standards is that the construction of housing is broken down into dual steps: the structuring frame (rigidly defining the spatial layout), and the interior components (walls, joinery, etc). The generic frame, consisting of columns and slabs, becomes the main structure of housing, while every other architectural element seems supplementary. This establishes a distinctly simple system of construction detaching the frame from anything inside, allowing investors of different financial statuses to contribute to the market.[17] The cost of constructing the frame is proportionately similar in all areas, while the significant difference lies in the interior components and finishing: windows, floorings, joinery. The procedure is divided into two distinct steps[18] for housing construction to remain relatively simple and pragmatic; and thus, for its production to continue without interruptions.[19] The result is an urban landscape based on an architectural form chiefly defined by building regulations. Houses became standardised, homogeneous, uncomplicated in construction, and accessible to a major portion of the population. As a result of a housing market in which the apartment buildings were commodities, in order to liquidate the house at a decent price, its design and execution process became highly risk-averse and conforming. Hence, the city of Tehran gradually transformed into a field of urbanisation whose main component was this standardised building: the *Common Apartment*.

3. Steps of the construction of the Common Apartment. Drawing: author.
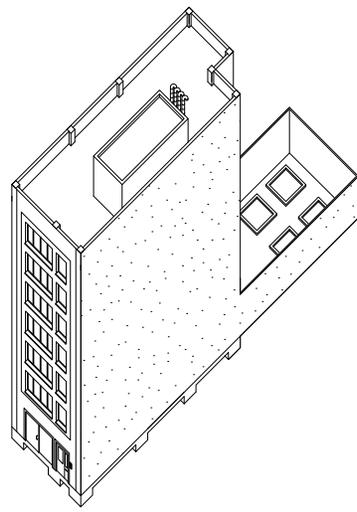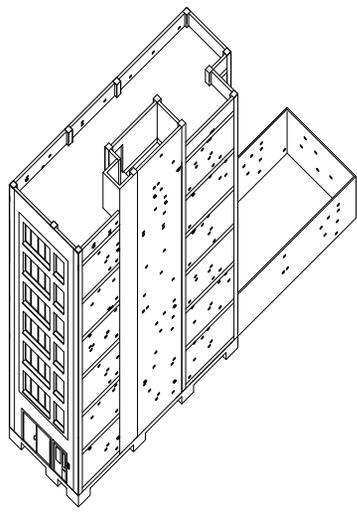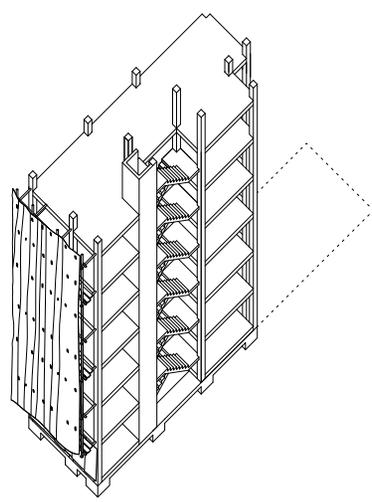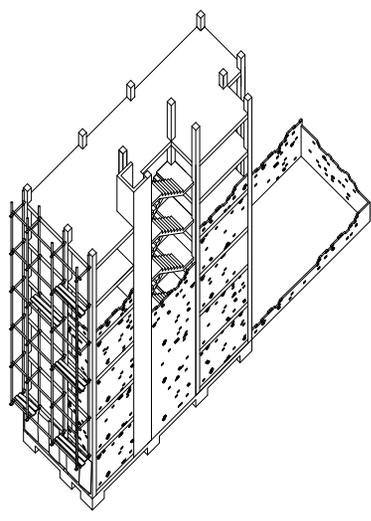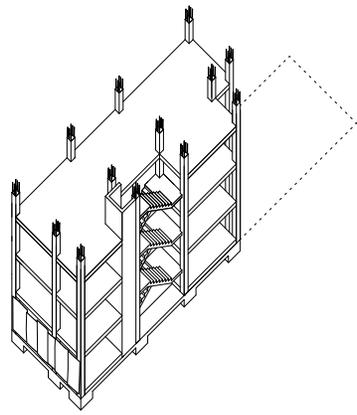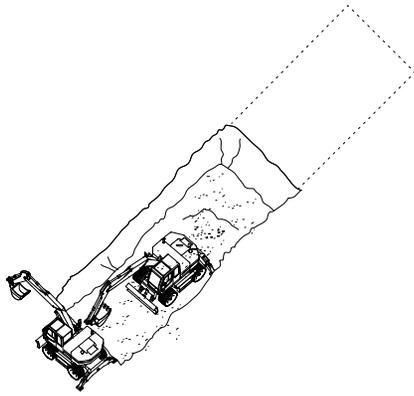
The interior: a space of subversion

In the interior of Common Apartments, materialities became the main or even only area to be designed or modified. This unfolded not only in the form of material trends in the market, but also in it becoming the only space where design duties can be handed over to architects. They would make new arrangements for the same trendy materials, deliver new 'styles', or design only facades. This extremely standardised way of house production carried out by the middle class, based almost solely on regulations, removes the knowledge of spatial design and material construction from the province of any particular profession, and posits it instead as a common knowledge mastered by all; construction procedures, penalties, material choices, and even design, became the subject of everyday conversations. Ultimately, the knowledge and practice of the architect are not only marginalised, but the values and aims of the housing project render them essentially trivial; a paradigm shift that minimises (professional) discourse and maximises production. Hence, here, the agency of citizens in housing production is not limited to their practices of domesticity as mere 'dwellers', but is expanded in the ways that housing is financed, drafted, and produced. The subjects' knowledge and practice in the production of housing carries liberating possibilities. While the house reinforces a (normalised) regime of privacy and its underlying habits, it should be noted that these very codifications are used as elements in a toolbox for the subject to resist that system of norms. In Tehran, since the 1979 revolution, not only did life turn increasingly inwards (and away from the street), but also many non-domestic activities found their place of operation at home. The public space of the post-revolution Iran is characterised by explicit systems of control.[20] As part of the post-revolutionary discourse on the Islamisation of living practices, the government stressed the binary pair of public and private to define what can be performed visibly.[21] As a result, a number of activities that were banned or restricted in public found refuge in the private domain or were refined in accordance to this withdrawal process. In this context, practices of disobedience have become greatly nuanced and widespread, and must be understood as alternatives to the state's order of norms – forms of praxis that continuously re-codify both practices and spaces of living beyond the conventional notions of domesticity and home.[22] The house becomes an enabling ground for resistance. It can be read as what Bernard Cache calls a 'frame'[23]: a structure with the agency of framing the becomings of the subjects it houses.

4. Photo: Abbas Vahedi, 2017.

Framing of frames

In Iran, people have come to perceive the house as a frame that allows them to constantly undermine normalised standards. Hence, emancipatory practices of resistance shall not *only* be traced in particular moments of political rupture (such as the Green Movement in 2007) but also in everyday practices. While the public sphere increasingly embodies the control of the state, the private sphere is reformulated to house a spectrum of activities wider than what is usually considered domestic. It plays the role of an enabling structure. The state's compartmentalising and disciplinary processes do not succeed in subjugating life in its entirety, but rather people's conduct subvert those procedures, and everyday rituals of living embody resistant ambitions. It is in this context that the idea of form-of-life[24] becomes an important deliberation to this thesis; as a life whose constitutive parts cannot be separated from each other – a life that cannot be separated from its form.[25]

The spatial components of the apartment building are utilised by the citizens according to their spatial possibilities. A crucial instance is that of autonomous and underground cultural and artistic activities, that in the restrained artistic landscape of the post-revolution Iranian government, have to consistently navigate through landscapes of censorship and control. After a twenty-year interruption in any public artistic practice (due to the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War), they re-emerged during Ayatollah Khatami's reformist government (1997).[26] Here artistic practices proliferated, finding shelter in the Common Apartments; not only due to the abundance of these spaces but also their safety as formulated within the private/public dichotomy. The endangered and vulnerable practices of critical artistic production that could not exist freely, found refuge behind the face of housing – a safe space of domesticity. Spaces such as exhibition venues, artists' residencies, studios, and collective platforms often inhabit the privately-owned architecture of the house, where they do not simply survive, but even thrive. These resistant practices perform spatial and organisational strategies that re-codifying houses as (temporary) spaces of counter-action. Appropriating and reterritorialising the spaces of Common Apartments, made possible by their elemental and simple spatial frame, here epitomises the house as a space of possibility. The internal relations of the space are re-arranged and reassembled through the demolition and the construction of new walls, thresholds, and boundaries. The shell of a living unit after its walls have been cleared, or re-compartmentalised through the construction of new partitions, operates as an underground platform.

5. The living room of a Common Apartment unit (top) becoming appropriated as an unofficial space of collective cultural production (bottom). The image represents a series of spatial tactics used in the formation of several such spaces in Tehran, namely Sazmanab in Sadeghieh (2008). Drawings: author.
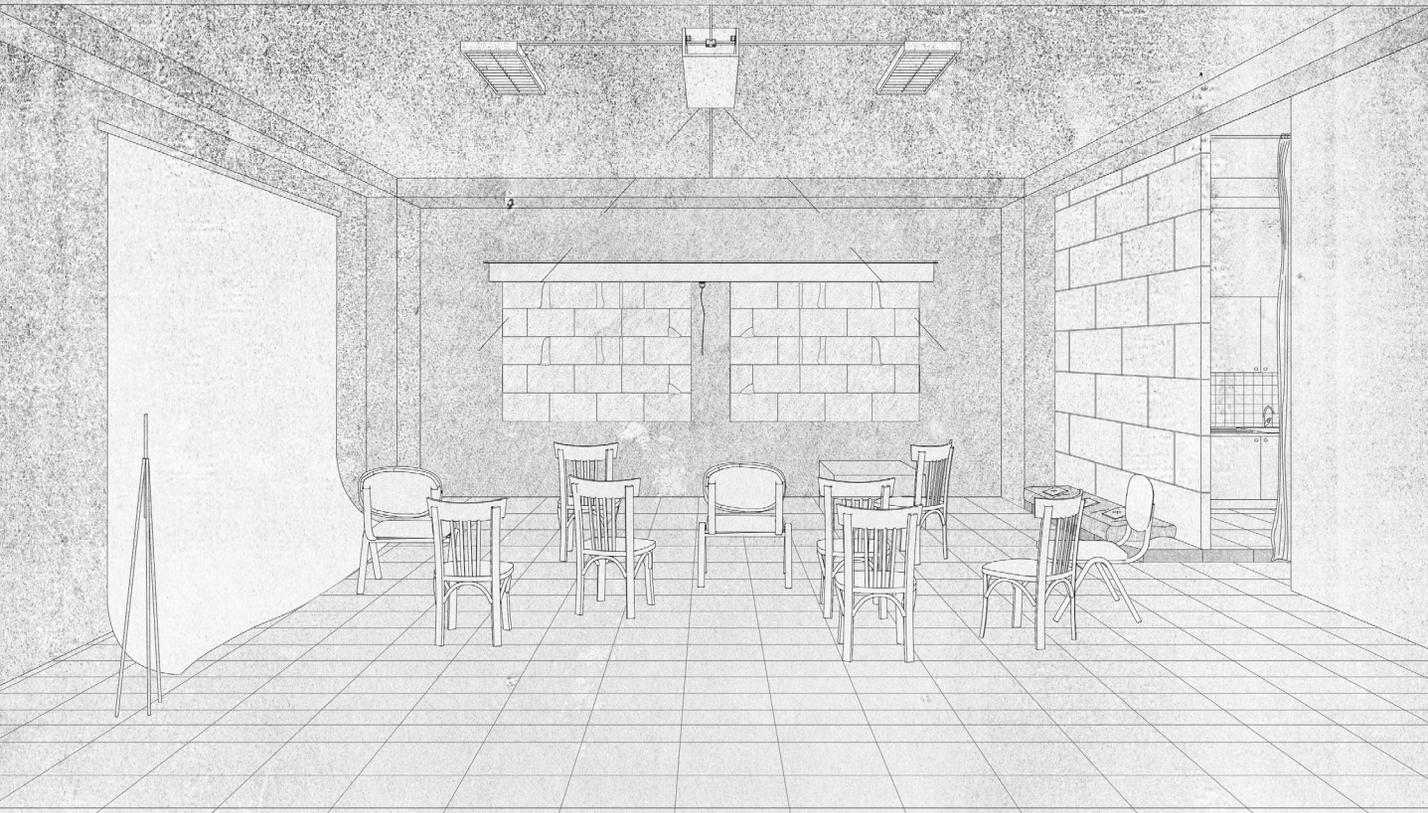
An apparatus of control – an instrument of resistance

The modern house is a spatial arrangement that classifies and segregates, while also connecting citizens. The house is a political form. Its architecture frames and solidifies the idea of citizenship through private or collective ownership. It is an apparatus with a strategic function: to advance the state's plans. It is the state's most fundamental biopolitical project. In the four decades of neoliberal housing policies in Iran, there is a shift in both the project of housing itself, and in how it constitutes the constant transformations of the city of Tehran. Where previously large housing projects served as the precursor to the outwards expansion of the city, now the mass proliferation of single apartment buildings is the constitutive architectural element of the city. This overview also shows that strategies adopted to cope with the socio-political conditions of Tehran use housing and domesticity as their main instrument. The generic frame of the Common Apartment should be read not as an isolated architectural entity but a (bio-)political form and the meeting place of supply and demand. While the dominant paradigms consider the binary pair of producers (e.g. construction firms) and consumers (citizens), in the case of Tehran these categories are overturned. Housing here turns into an entity that embodies the economic stability and 'development' of the nation-state at large, as a bureaucratic system, and a market. It is itself a commodity. It embodies the formation of the middle class not only by housing their (domestic) lives, but also by investing their savings in this market. By promoting the notion of 'responsible' citizen who subscribes to a (moral) value system, the state propagandises the neoliberal privatisation of housing as cooperation of the government and the people. The Common Apartment plays a complex role: it is an apparatus embodying market forces and the regimes of privacy they put forward, as well as the subversive practices of the people. It can be understood as an assemblage of architectural form, the political forces conditioning it, and the practices of the people that constitute its constant (re)formation. It is a form that not only accommodates the domestic practices of the nuclear family, but embodies forms of familial and non-familial kinship. It can be read through its potential for not only framing everyday practices such as of caring for the body, procreation, or maintaining the institution of the family; but rather to frame and support ones that that define a human life as processes of living that are above all, *possibilities*.[27]

6. Photos: Monireh Askari, 2015 (top), Farhad Yassavoli, 2013 (bottom).

Notes

1. The microcosm of the home as the site of the socio-political struggles of the Tehrani citizen is an extensive discussion addressed in the work of many authors. Arguments in architectural discourse of biopolitical resistance is put forward in the work of Hamed Khosravi. See Hamed Khosravi, Amir Djalali, and Francesco Marullo, *Tehran – Life Within Walls: A City, Its Territory, and Forms of Dwelling* (Berlin. Hatje Cantz, 2017).

2. Immediately after Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, the role of the presidency gained more authority. Hashemi Rafsanjani was Iran's infamous post-war president for two terms.

3. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Ettelaat* newspaper. Tehran, 1989. More details on this source are not currently available, as the archive is not accessible due to political restrictions.

4. Ibid.

5. Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921: The Pahlavis and After.* (London: Pearson Education, 2003), 244. Two items on the list explicitly mark the start of the liberalisation: the discontinuation of subsidies that people and government agencies relied upon, and urging the revival of municipalities out of war-time bankruptcy.

6. In the introduction of the seminar report for *Policies of Housing Development in Iran* (1994) this growth is explained by the injection of oil revenues into housing projects, and the further breaking down of extended families into nuclear families.

7. Several scholars make a somewhat similar distinction; the argument put forward here is based on: Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad, 'The Rise and Fall of Iranian Classes in the Post-Revolutionary Decades', *Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 3 (2008): 377-396; and Mansoor Moaddel, 'Class Struggle in Post-Revolutionary Iran', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, no. 3 (1991): 317-343.

8. The decade after the 1979 revolution is specifically significant featuring the Iran-Iraq war, ending with the death of Ayatollah Khomeini.

9. Nomani and Behdad, 'Rise and Fall', 377–96.

10. Called the 'social revolutionary phase' in Moaddel, 'Class Struggle', 319–20, and the 'structural involution' phase in Nomani and Behdad, 'Rise and Fall', 377.

11. Named the 'reversal' phase in Moaddel, 'Class Struggle', 319; and the 'de-involutionary process' in Nomani and Behdad, 'Rise and Fall', 377.

12. Neoliberalising procedures, often referred to as "deregulation" in favour of flexibility and less restrictions, are indeed ones in favour of capitalist control on fundamental levels; minimising supervision as such, while reinforcing control in the level of planning. Perhaps in this case they are better called re-regulations.

13. The term 'density' is also known as floor area ratio or plot ratio.

14. The terraces have an extensive set of regulations regarding placement, size, and openings. For instance the minimum width allowed is so narrow (eighty centimetres on the street side) that Common Apartments often feature very cramped terraces.

15. National Building Regulations, (Tehran: Ministry of Roads and Urban Development Deputy for Housing and Construction, 2013).

16. In order to place the living room and kitchen on the sunlit south side, bedrooms are placed in the north, somewhat determining the place of staircase and elevator as well.

17. This construction model has created an occupational phenomenon called Besaz-befrooshi, someone who mediates the multiple fronts of housing production (investor, builder, administration) for profit; Nomani and Behdad call them 'small real-estate entrepreneurs'; 'Rise and Fall', 390.

18. The different phases of construction are adapted to budgets: costly processes like the digging of deep foundations could be, and facade construction could be postponed, even until moving in.

19. In his essay, Mehdi Taleb, advisor to the minister of Housing and Urban Development, discusses the pros and cons of the proposed mechanism, and explicitly mentions the advantages of a gradual building of houses that facilitates construction for people from different financial classes. Mehdi Taleb, 'Housing Cooperatives Facing Change and Transformation' in

the seminar report *Policies of Housing Development in Iran* (Tehran: 1994), 238.

20. This is based on the Islamic doctrine of modesty in society. The impact on public life of the Islamisation discourse in post-revolutionary Iran, regarding both gender segregation and private life, is discussed in Z. Pamela Karimi, 'Transitions in Domestic Architecture and Home Culture in Twentieth Century Iran' (PhD dissertation, MIT, 2009), 266.

21. Karimi, 'Transitions in Domestic Architecture', 271.

22. Here too, a certain regime of privacy is enforced in the private sphere of the home, to align the domestic lives of the nation with the doctrine of modesty of Islam. Home life was part of the discourse on re-organising society in the Islamic Republic of Iran, part of which is a refusal of 'Western' ways of life. See Karimi, 'Transitions in Domestic Architecture', 282.

23. The notion of the frame is elaborated in Bernard Cache, *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories*. (Cambridge, MA:MIT Press), 1995.

24. Ideas about form-of-life are elaborated by Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3.

25. Ibid.

26. Mohammad Ali Khatami's government adopted culturally liberal policies while the rise of oil prices and privatisation rejuvenated the economy.

27. Agamben, *Means Without End*, 3

Biography

Golnar Abbasi is an architect and artist based in Rotterdam. She holds a Master's degree from the Berlage Centre (Delft) and a bachelor's from the University of Tehran. She has recently been an artist in residence at the Jan van Eyck Academie (Maastricht), and is currently a PhD candidate at Faculty of Architecture and Urban Environment in TU Delft, chair of Methods and Analysis. She is a founder and editor at *Sarmad Platform and Magazine*, has been co-editor of *Two Times One* and is currently organising the project 'Un-making Image', researching the relations between image and power. She is a co-founder of the art and architecture collective WORKNOT!. Her work has been shown at the Venice Biennale of Architecture (2016), the Tehran Biennale of Architecture (2016), and Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art (2018), among others.