Only concrete remains: material permanence and ambiguous experience of the Shahyad monument, Tehran

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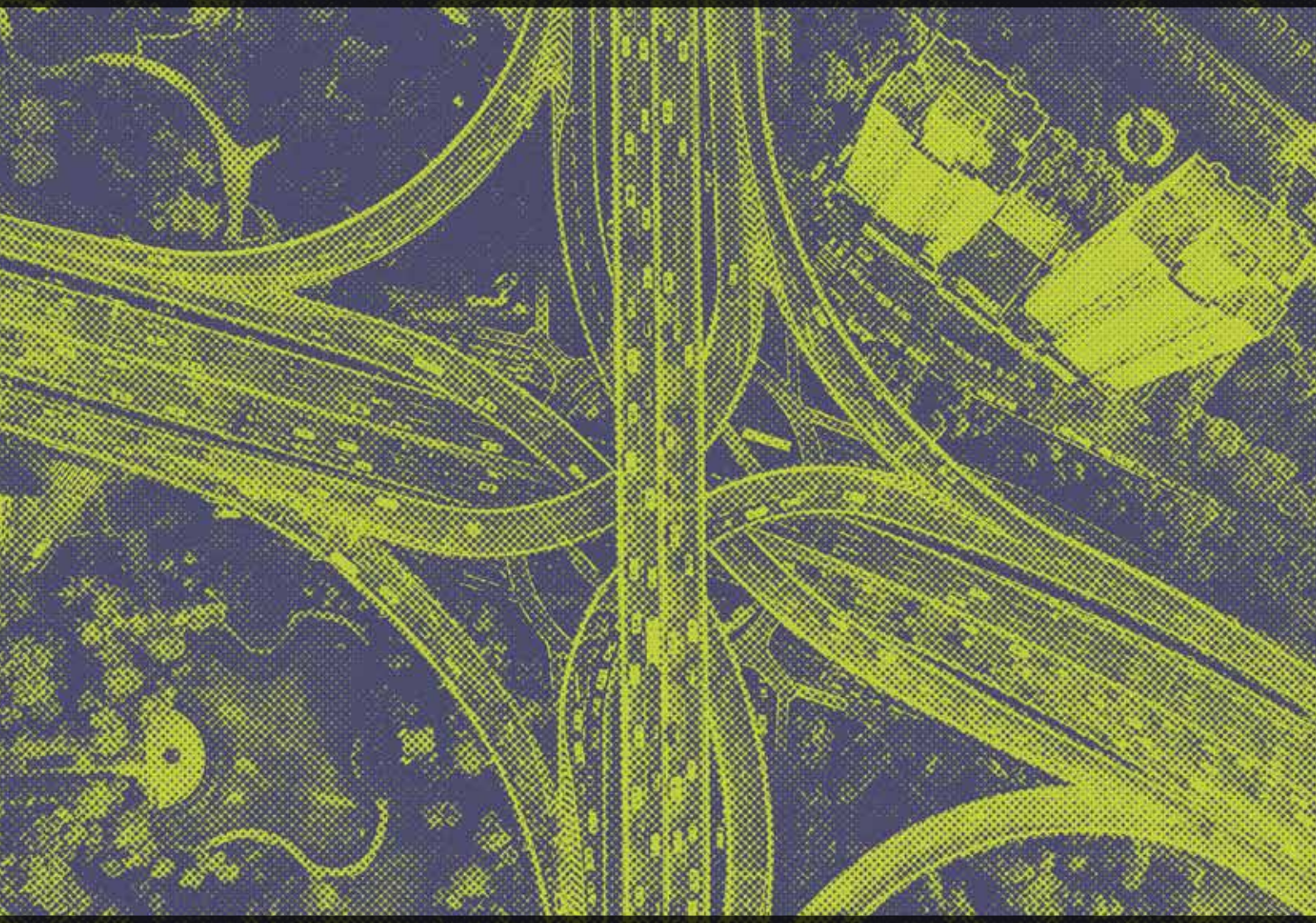

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ONLY CONCRETE REMAINS

MATERIAL PERMANENCE AND AMBIGUOUS EXPERIENCE OF THE SHAHYAD MONUMENT, TEHRAN

Imme Hannah van der Leij

ABSTRACT:
Concrete, inherent to modernist architecture, possesses agency. Its ambivalent properties have diverse material effects on the spectator. Drawing on Ingold's 'anthropology of materials', the framework of the social life of materials allows to interpret sociocultural implications of material manifestation. Within the underdeveloped domain of autocratic modernist architecture, this discussion of the case of the Shayad/ Azadi Tower in Tehran, Iran aims to illustrate how the material properties of concrete produce ambiguous experiences which are reflected in the design-strategies of the monument. The materiality of the Shahyad monument emits experiences of modernity and ancientness at the same time, which aligns with the design-strategy and ideology of the Pahlavi regime. Evoking imperial continuity, the Shah rooted his modern vision of Iran's future national identity in the permanence of Persian civilization. Yet, the highly malleable properties and agency of concrete have made the monument an active locus of power which continues to shape Iranian society after the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

KEYWORDS:
modernist architecture; autocratic regime; the social life of materials; agency; national identity

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Figure 1. Le Corbusier's buildings in Chandigarh, India. Photograph taken by Roberto Conte.

INTRODUCTION

Concrete is the material of the modern. 'Talking about concrete means talking about modernity' (Forty 2013, 14). It is *the* material which constitutes the origin and development of modern architecture. Now, concrete is accepted as the most widely used construction material worldwide (Meyer 2005, 1). Therefore, its presence and impact on public space is significant. Signalling modernity, concrete in architecture is used to separate the ancient from the modern (Wickstead and Barber 2015, 1). This gave rise to the ideological meaning of modernist architecture in the 20th century wherein concrete structures represent 'architectural utopias of social emancipation' (Minuchin 2013, 240). In contrast, besides aiming to elicit a sense of awe, concrete is also able to render an 'uncanny' feeling of 'not being at home' (Croft 2004, 8). Experience of estrangement through architecture is especially a modern - and thus a concrete - condition, according to Vidler (1992). Therefore, concrete modern architecture embodies this 'paradox of modernity' - seeking utopia vis-à-vis feeling estrangement - for concrete material possesses agency and has ambivalent properties which produce ambiguous experiences.

Drawing on the framework of the social life of materials, this study interprets sociocultural implications of moments when a substance manifests itself in a particular form (Drazin 2015, 13). The ideology of concrete modernist architecture as a utopian strategy for a progressive (democratic) society, based on its connotation of a free society and individuals, has been subject to extensive academic research (Levine 2018, 43; Mehan 2017a, 210). Le Corbusier's urban planning of modernist cities, in which concrete is applied for its emancipatory potential, can be viewed in this light (Figure 1) (Minuchin 2013, 239). In contrast to the role of modernist architecture in democratic societies, knowledge about its functioning in autocratic states is underdeveloped. Yet, this is perhaps even more relevant based on the idea that architectural forms can shape the political structure of a society (Mehan 2017a, 211). Hence, choice of material and the resulting structures matter considerably indeed. By focusing on the role of material properties, this essay discusses to what extent material experiences of concrete are significant when studying the design-strategies of autocratic modern architecture. Here, the Shayad/Azadi Tower in Tehran, Iran (hereafter: Shahyad monument) (Figure 2), a prime example of concrete modernist architecture in an autocratic context, will be used to illustrate how the concrete structure produces ambiguous experiences which are affected by concrete's material properties.

MATERIAL AGENCIES

Moving away from a semiotic approach of the object's 'symbolic meaning', Gell proposes that objects have an agency which mediates between art and social processes. His 'anthropology of art' studies social relationships caused by the agency of objects, which signals the move towards a 'material perspective' (Gell 1998, 6-7). As such, social 'agents' have the ability to initiate causal sequences of action and act on 'patients'. Many combinations of relationships between agents and patients are possible. Even so, Gell (1998, 39) ultimately argues that the agency of an object on a 'recipient' (spectator) is placed there by an 'artist' (maker). In the context of art and architecture especially, Gell (1998, 47) states that a patron executes his agency through the work of art he has caused to come into existence. Therefore, considering monumental architecture as the expression of power (Mehan 2016, 317), specific experiences of a structure could reflect or result from the intention of the patron. Gell (1998, 12, 18) however, remains somewhat descriptive of the various interactions that are possible between humans and 'things'. His theory could be used to analyse the relationships that are possible between artist's intentions, their creations, and their audience (Humphry 2005, 43). Nonetheless, Gell does advance understanding of *how* these interactions occur.

This could be the result of Gell's focus on *things* as his loci of agency, rather than the material. As Ingold (2013, 7) critiques, the study of material culture has mostly focused on finished objects and their role in the life histories of those who use them. Ingold (2013, 7, 12) argues the role of sensory awareness in processes of making and knowledge *through* materials is lost. In order to study the role of agency in shaping design-processes and material experience, the concept of material properties is chosen. This is defined as 'the ascription of the quality of having material effects' by the material substance of which a thing comprises (Drazin 2015a, xxvi). Consequently, the focus of this essay moves away from analysing specific moments of interaction between objects and individuals (Gell) towards an 'anthropology of materials', which interprets sociocultural implications at moments when a material substance takes on a specific form (Drazin 2015b, 13). In the case of the Shahyad monument, this moment of material manifestation takes place when concrete becomes architecture. The study of social relations in the vicinity of architecture from the material perspective of concrete, as an 'anthropology of materials', is a valuable contribution of this essay (Ingold 2013, 10).

MATERIAL MANIFESTATION AND EXPERIENCE

So, what happens at moments of material manifestation? Drazin (2015b, 23) argues that these manifestations constitute the exercise of authority and mobilization of

Figure 2. Frontal view of the Shayad monument in Tehran, Iran. Photo courtesy from Wikipedia.org

those actors who view themselves as being in control. Tompson (2004, 295) adds that those in control have the power to ensure their objects are durable, whereas those of others are transient. Hence, materials underlie, enable, and naturalize established hierarchies and social orders (Drazin 2015b, 27). Consequently, this conceptual avenue allows for the combination of material, social and political perspectives.

Material manifestations impact public space. Findley (2005, i-xi) clarifies those processes and material qualities in public space are a locus and indicator of power relationships. Architecture is integral to reasserting cultural and political agency and is used as a spatial strategy by those in power to control and manipulate the physical world. Moving beyond the role of the architect as an agent in architectural creation, Findley (2005, xii) asserts that the political, economic, and socio-cultural power structures inherently connected to architecture result from its dependency of patronage. Therefore, approaching monumental architecture as a locus of power integrates Gell's notion of patronage with Ingold's view on material properties and effects.

As concrete constitutes the most widely used construction material worldwide, the application of concrete in architecture is also versatile. By altering its constituent parts, its material properties and affordances change (Croft 2004, 8). This results in different architectural forms, due to which the look, feel and experience of concrete is diverse. Design-strategies of the architect and the patron could integrate this phenomenon, when aiming to exert a certain agency through the application of the material. Choosing the material concrete shapes the design-process. In what way ambiguous experiences of concrete's material properties in modernist architecture are present in the design strategies of an autocratic client, will thus be discussed hereafter.

AUTOCRATIC MODERNISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

The creation of monumental architecture involves the material, the architect, and the patron. Here, Iranian Shahyad monument serves as an example to investigate the material experiences of concrete modernist architecture. The monument was built by architect Hossein Amanat and inaugurated in 1971 for the celebration of the 2500-year anniversary of the Persian Empire. Grigor clarifies (2003, 215) that Shahyad was a material manifestation of the political ideology of Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi (reign 1941-1979) to create a modern Iran as a continuum of the *Great Civilization* of the Sassanian past into a bright future of the nation-state. Hence, Shahyad reflects the autocratic tendency to crystallize identity through the

fixation of memories in objects and institutions (Grigor 2003, 209). The monument, however, was appropriated by other socio-political meanings when it was claimed as the ultimate symbol of the Islamic Revolution in 1978-79 by the Islamic clergy, after which an Islamic Republic was established (Grigor 2003, 207). From this moment onwards, the original name Shahyad Aryamehr (denoting the Shah's name), was changed to Azadi Tower (Freedom Tower). Accordingly, Grigor (2003, 224) argues that a monument's social and cultural meaning depend on those in power, as those generate the culture of signage of society at that specific time. Thus, monuments are constantly appropriating new cultural memory, due to which the human-centred understanding of a monument is constantly evolving.

In contrast, from a material point of view, Grigor (2003, 223-224) states that Shahyad endured the shifts of power in Iran and became a central locus in the popular uprising, precisely because of the formal and architectural qualities of the monument. Shahyad's only pre-Revolutionary meaning that remains is its *disciplinary memory* of inherent architectural qualities, such as its monumental size and shape, its modernity, and its material presence. Disciplinary memory is defined as the process of architectural design and the practice of the architectural profession, which is therefore based on cognition and experience (Grigor 2003, 208). This alludes to Ingold's (2013, 7) notion of knowledge *through* materials. As such, knowledge of materials through experience is vital in the process of architectural design and the disciplinary memory of a building results from its material physicality. In other words, Grigor (2003, 207) asserts the physical persistence and durability of monuments is indicative of their disciplinary memory. In terms of disciplinary memory, Shahyad is constructed of reinforced, poured-in-place concrete, in order to address the challenging shape and the seismically active location. After this, the structure was clad in white marble, of which every stone cladding is unique due to the complexity of the Tower's structure with arches and curves (www.archdaily.com) (Figure 3). Even though the skin of the monument is not made of concrete, the shape of the cladding was dictated by concrete material. Material can also be understood as a structural form. The structure's shape gives direct

Figure 3. Inferior view of the Shayad monument in Tehran, Iran.

meaning to the material of which it is constructed, according to Poerschke (2013, 151). The constructive essence of concrete is strength and malleability, which enables Shahyad's dynamic shape to be 'stable on the ground and bursting into the sky' (Grigor 2003, 214). Thus, the material properties give physical presence to the ideology of the Pahlavi regime: the nation's movement towards the future. The material experience of concrete's properties culminates with the design-strategies and the meaning the autocratic patron intended for the monument. Grigor (2003, 214) states that 'the sudden halt of that dynamic movement upward was designed to imply achievements still necessary to reaching that future.' Therefore, the shape shows that the nation is heading towards a new modern destiny, under leadership of the Shah. In material terms, the concrete creates a solid base, which enables the building to present a powerful, simple, and centralized experience (Figure 2; 4). The concrete allows for the creation of pure and bold lines, revolving around a monarch who would lead the nation to a modern and bright future (Figure 2; 3). This sense of centrality, directionality and power of the Pahlavi government is what was sought to be represented in the monument.

In addition, Shahyad's modernism, colour and concrete material implies a sense of openness and honesty (Grigor 2003, 215-216). These utopian modernist experiences of concrete are thus present in the design-strategies and objectives of the monument's architecture. Significantly, the Shahyad square and monument as its focal point constituted the centre of Tehran's urban renewal during the Pahlavi regime. Grigor (2003, 97-98) used the term 'Tabula Rasa' to describe the dominant strategy of political and social modernization, comparable to the Haussmannisation of Paris, which created a '*utopian blank slate upon which a new Iran could be conceived "over again"*' (Mehan 2017a, 215). The central positioning of the monument in a modernized Tehran and the structure's composition revolving around a central point strengthen each other. This could mark the glory of absolute power, according to Mehan (2016, 317). Taken together, the materiality of Shahyad marks a new urban identity (Mehan 2017a, 218). In the formation of this new (urban) national identity, modern concrete materiality is central.

Shahyad's modernist style is nonetheless also influenced by the shapes and structures of Antiquity it derived its inspiration from. Grigor (2003, 212) describes the monument as a modernist abstraction of ancient Persian architecture, such as the renowned *iwan* of the Sassanian palace of Ctesiphon (Figure 5) which inspired the central arch of Shahyad. The monolithic and solid design of Shahyad is a reference to the monumental sizes of ancient Persian architecture. Thus, the material physicality not only allows for experiences of modernity but is also reminiscent of ancient Persian structures. As a result, the strong and monumental shape of the concrete inspires ancientness and timelessness, according to Grigor (2003, 216).

Forty (2013, 10) argues this results from concrete's ability to blur categorical distinctions such as modern/ancient, as well as liquid/solid, smooth/rough, natural/artificial and base/spirit. Similarly, the cladding of the monument is engraved marble (Figure 6). When a spectator

approaches the structure, the experience of a monolithic concrete building is replaced with the experience of 'vernacular' engraving, creating a more 'tangible' experience.

Figure 4. Aerial view of Azadi Square.

Figure 5. The ruins of Taq Kasra (Madain, Iraq). Photo courtesy from Wikipedia.org

In short, the monument allows for experiences of modernity and ancientness at the same time, due to which Shahyad embodies the uncommon representation of both the modern-and the un-modern in concrete (Forty 2013, 34). Unifying the past and the present, the monolithic Shahyad monument represents the locus of the creation of Iran's national 'identity'. Its architecture embodies language of form, shape, colour and concrete materiality which enables ambiguous experiences. All this serves to remember, narrate, glorify and legitimize the nation state. Hence, the initial purpose of the monument was to freeze the Shah himself in time and space, as an 'architectural manifesto of Shah's monarchy, his vision, ideology and ultimate aim' (Grigor 2003, 216). The Shah aimed to ascribe political status to the Shahyad monument through association with historical memory and collective imagination of the Sassanid Empire's glorious past. Mehan (2017a, 319) cites that once this memory fades, the monument may be appropriated by new meanings and new ideological imperatives. As such, only Shahyad's physical concrete presence has endured (Grigor 2003, 216).

CONCRETE FUTURES

In this article, I have argued that Shahyad presents ambiguous experiences, due to its various material properties. Significantly, instead of contrasting these different experiences of the concrete monument, the modern and the ancient align in the design-strategy and ideology of the Pahlavi regime. The Shah legitimized his rule through referencing historic precedents in his architecture in order to evoke notions of continuity. The Shahyad monument served as a spatial-temporal threshold between the glorified Persian empire and the Pahlavi capital (Grigor 2003, 215). Through this concrete monument, the vision of Iran's national future was aligned with the permanence of Persian civilization.

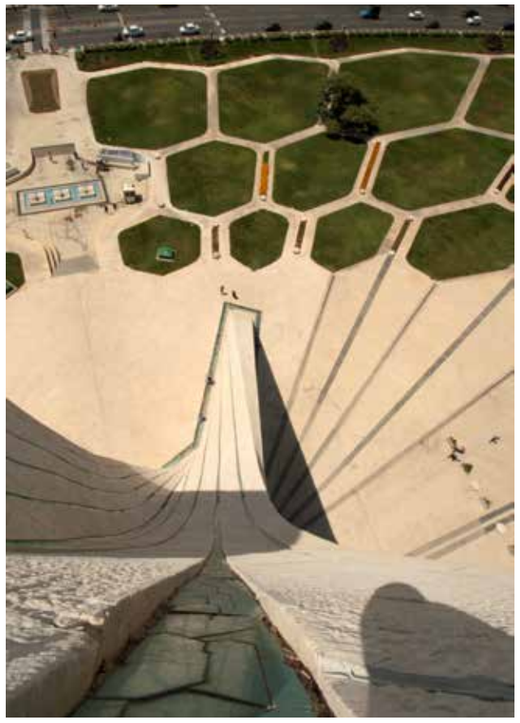

Figure 6. View of Shayad monument from the Azadi Tower.

Ultimately, the highly malleable properties and agency of concrete allow the architect of autocratic modernist architecture to engineer its plasticity in order to articulate a form of material politics. The impact on human experience of the monument itself and the variable image it represents, bringing together the ancient and the modern, is part of the monument's design strategy (Minuchin 2013, 241). Therefore, the ability of concrete to elicit many different experiences affects the strategies and outcomes of autocratic modernist architectural projects. Yet, despite the changing sociocultural context surrounding the material presence of Shahydad, its endurance has not been influenced. Significantly, the monument itself, through its concrete permanence, has become a locus of meaning-making which continues to shape the development of Iranian society. In essence, all fades but concrete remains.

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