

Architecture, Matter and Mediation in the Middle East

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This article presents a series of case studies that capture aspects of how architecture may be informed and mediated by material things. Due to the historical burden of the architectural canon, material culture has not always merged easily into studies of Middle Eastern architecture. But instances are numerous in which buildings have been appraised vis-à-vis material culture. In this article, I foreground the place of material culture in the historiography of Iranian architecture, in particular. The range of objects that function as material mediators is vast, but I have limited the scope of my investigation in three ways. First, I look at objects that involve aesthetic design considerations, such as furnishings, decorative items, and applied imagery. Second, I look at three-dimensional objects whose functional capacity is more significant than their aesthetic value, such as wall claddings. Third, I look at materials that are conceived as immaterial due to their apparent indiscernibility in everyday life, such as pollution (caused by gasoline-burning engines) and dust (a pervasive reality in the desert). While materials like oil and dust might escape our attention, they play an important role in granting a unique identity to the built environment of the Middle East. Finally, I highlight the importance of technology and the emergence of immaterial, virtual pathways that mediate between people and their built environments.

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To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as the table is located between those who sit around it: the world like every in-between relates and separates men at the same time. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a

spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around the table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.¹

These are the words of Hannah Arendt from her book *The Human Condition*. Rather than arching over us, the material world hovers in the gaps that separate and contain us. Our relationship to space and its contents is one that beckons input, placing commoners in a position to disrupt the deeded structure. This dynamism among the people inhabiting a structure, the things that populate it, and the structure itself highlights the dynamic nature of the built environment, a condition that must be closely considered when examining architecture. Set in this context, architecture is not just a matter of architectonics.² In other words, the point of departure for this article is the social dimension of space, which has otherwise often been presented as static and imposed.

Since the publication of Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941) and Arnold Hauser's *Social History of Art* (1951), the scholarly melding of divergent foci into a single discourse implies, it would seem, an underlying indivisibility. Architectural historians have taken up diverse topics — from the complex interactions between designers and patrons to the objects of material culture that mediate between design and the consumer. And by doing so, the scope of their concern has gone beyond iconography, stylistic classification, and manifestations of the individual genius.

This changed attitude is particularly manifest in areas of the world where architecture has come about as the project of shifting social orders rather than design innovations — places where architecture is a byproduct of a gradual bottom-up development, rather than a top-down process decided by experts. The former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries have recently provided such an animated domain for the study of material culture and architecture. These regions created distinctive spaces fashioned from ideological templates, such as monumental parade grounds and Red Squares. However, rather than focusing on such edifices, many scholars, such as Svetlana Boym, David Crowley, and Susan E. Reid, have studied those things that mediated between the people and their state-designed architectural environments. The Soviet communal, according to Boym, was a site where occupants transformed their predetermined spatial parameters through singular, oddly original gestures. In particular, their desire to collect mass-produced, cheap consumer products, including rubber plants, presented a challenge and acted as a confrontation to socialist, utopian views. Boym thus depicted a space that was interrupted by this groundswell of collected, extraordinary, bizarre objects and furnishings, as well as by fields of ordinary experience. Following this logic, if we continue to associate these spaces with socialism — or any larger

socio-political agenda — we must take account of the shifting and multilayered interactions between things, people and architecture.³

Consequently, one might also consider the work of Oskar Hansen, the Polish architect and a member of Team 10, who as early as the 1950s, attempted to create potential opportunities for the “. . . user[s] to be able to change what [they have] been given, in line with the standards.”⁴ Beyond being of interest among humanitarian designers, the notion of the user's active involvement has been a topic of study for a variety of scholarly approaches to the built environment. These have ranged from Pierre Bourdieu's anthropological examination of the Kabyl House to Constantinos Doxiadis's consideration of people's ways of life and their impact on their built environments, rather than following the “universal” standards of Modern architecture.⁵

Due to its paradoxical relationship to the material world, the Middle East is an apt milieu for the study of matter and how it overlaps with architecture. Islam, the region's dominant religion, encourages the belief that human reproductions of the form of the deity — tangible renderings of the holy realm — reduce worship to mere idolatry.⁶ This belief, which engenders a radical immateriality, has at times been so strong that in the early caliphate the imprinting of Qur'anic inscriptions on coins was substituted for the imprint of the caliph's head, a practice carried over from Roman and Byzantine rule.⁷ According to the anthropologist Bill Maurer, this practice of replacing representational images with the sacred word on the most worldly of objects, golden coins, implied a dissociation from the object basis of the material world. Its goal was to convince believers that the coins themselves were actually “countenanced” by divine authority.⁸

This paradox from the early caliphate has lingered into our time, affecting how the material world is perceived and treated by contemporary groups in the region. Thus, in “War of Images, or the Bamyān Paradox,” the cultural critic Jean-Michel Frodon contended that the Taliban betrayed themselves, because in destroying the rock-cut Buddhas of Bamyān they too “did politics with images.”⁹ As Frodon suggested, progress toward immateriality actually implies prior engagement with the realm of matter, disclosing an inherent contradiction — the impossibility of transcendence without first engaging materiality. In Daniel Miller's words, “Just as there is no pre-objectified culture, there is no post-objectified transcendence.”¹⁰

The paradox of coinage is likewise applicable to other instances where the materiality of the built environment intertwines with things that, owing to their divine connotations, yield a kind of immaterial appeal. Consider, for instance, the epigraphy of the sacred words from the Qur'an that appear on the walls of thousands of mosques built throughout the history of Islam (FIG. 1).

FIGURE 1. A modern mosque and huseyniyah in Isfahan, Iran. The facade is mediated by Qur'anic texts that are inscribed in both traditional and modern ways. They appear on both ceramic tiles and murals painted on the brick walls. Photograph by author.



MATTER, MEDIATION AND ARCHITECTONICS

In scholarship on Islamic architecture the dominant methodological concerns of the field have often prevented material culture from emerging as an area of emphasis, although there are some buildings that have been appraised vis-à-vis material culture. Gulru Necipoğlu's study of paper scrolls and how their distribution influenced innovative architectural revetments at the time of the Timurids is a good example.¹¹ In *The Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture*, she explained how the process of transmitting architectural design became possible in the Islamic world between the tenth and sixteenth centuries via the agency of these large paper scrolls.

Another significant study in this vein is Sussan Babae's exploration of the material constituents of the Safavid feasting ceremonies and their impact on the shape of the palaces of seventeenth-century Isfahan. In *Isfahan and Its Palaces, Statecraft, Shi'ism and the Architecture of Conviviality in Early Modern Iran*, she showed how ceremonial preparations defined access and proximity to the king, and thereby established the physical contours of an institutionalized form of feasting that structured everything from the scheduled rhythm of eating, drinking and entertaining to the giving of food or wine by the king to a favorite subject.¹² Thus cultural practices ascended until they occupied the space traditionally occupied by the designer. Indeed, as a result of such habitual cultural practices, the *talar* palace, a new typology in Islamic design, emerged. In contrast to previous practice under a different set of customs, it substituted the agency of ritual for the freedom of the designer to determine how people would circulate spatially. Thus, design took on a rebel character when it revolved around matter.¹³

By the end of the nineteenth century, architecture again came to be mediated in Iran by paper items and kitchenware. However, this time the effect was literal, as exotic items — imported Turkish and Chinese earthenware and cheap European oleographic prints — came to animate the interior surfaces of upper-class homes. As their real use value faded, paper goods and kitchenware acquired exhibitionary value. As Karl Marx once noted, it is through such processes that a simple commodity, what may at first appear to be “a trivial thing,” may become “a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”¹⁴ In this case, simple imported goods were turned into validated signifiers of high culture and taste. They were also able to fill the vacuum left behind in the absence of tradition (FIGS. 2, 3).¹⁵

If exhibitionary value allowed bowls and oleographs to transform the late-nineteenth-century Iranian interior, in pursuit of international high-culture norms, the early-twentieth-century home became devoid of all decorative items. Simultaneously, however, demand for and appreciation of Persian carpets in Western (and, in particular, American) contexts provided the cultural imprimatur for carpets to continue to exist in wealthy Iranian homes rather than die out. Although walls were white and simple, and furnishings were predominantly imported, because of the pervasive presence of these carpets, an important tradition was safeguarded on the floors of these homes.¹⁶

These examples show that, far from being influenced by top-down processes based on decisions of the state or the intervention of elite and ambitious architects, architectural design may often be driven by concern over such common items as food, paper, carpets, and cheap imports. And this notion that design results from cultural preferences, rather than rational choices, is echoed in the context of many cul-



FIGURE 2. Interior view of the living room in Abrishami House, Rasht, Iran (circa 1910), with imported earthenware inserted into the masonry of the walls. Courtesy of Jassem Ghazbanpour.

tures throughout history. Thus, Giedion, in *Mechanization Takes Command*, described the world of material objects in the daily life of medieval Europe. Most domestic furniture at that time, he wrote, took its cue from monasteries; none of it was designed with attention to issues like “how the body might best relax in a chair.”¹⁷

Similar observations were made by Mary Helms in her now more-than-twenty-year-old book *Craft and the Kingly Ideal: Art, Trade, and Power*. Here, Helms explored the power ascribed to objects imported from faraway places, arguing that objects of long-distance trade become popular among elites not because of their use value but because they connoted honor and power. By making this suggestion, Helms provided a new model for understanding how criteria for preference concerning designed objects are based in culture. Her conclusion is enlightening when seen in the context of societies that have benefited from an abundance of resources for producing a particular item, such as a chair, and yet have still sought to acquire a type that they deemed unique, imported from a distant, exotic place.¹⁸ Like people, these objects have lives, whose meanings change in response to the different contexts within which they are found.¹⁹

It is also important to remember how ordinary things have played a central role in great works of philosophy, including Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, a book that discusses cooking pots, pitchforks and lampshades, allocating next to no discussion to higher culture.²⁰ This approach obliges me to enter into a dialog with other ostensibly distinctive Middle Eastern matters — namely, dust and petroleum. Below, I refer to these as “tacit matter,” things that are, in the words of Henri Lefebvre, at the same time “the most obvious and the best hidden.”²¹

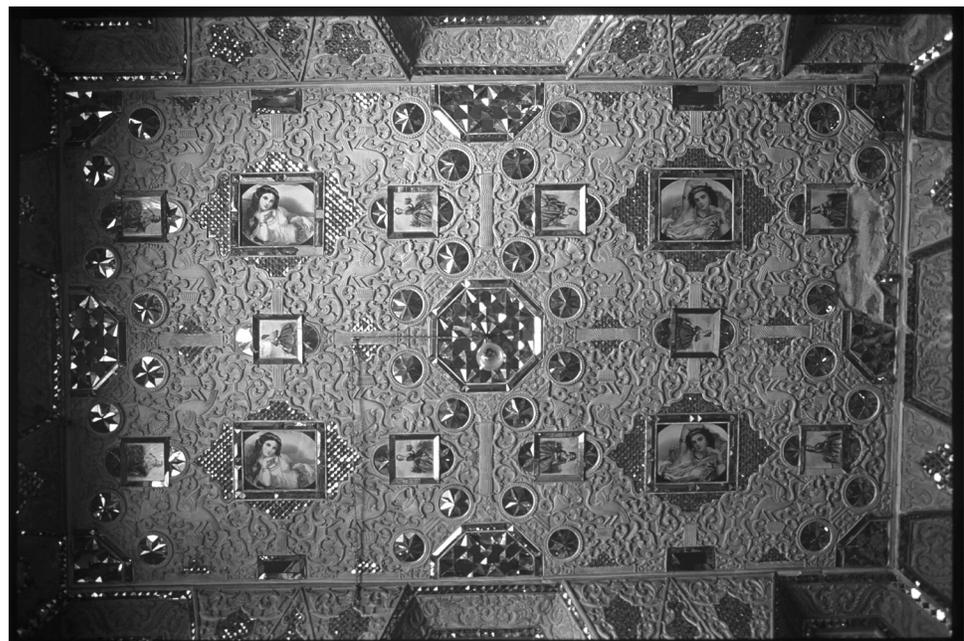


FIGURE 3. Details of a ceiling in Shahshahani House in Isfahan (circa the late nineteenth century), with framed oleographic prints or chromolithographs of European women. Courtesy of Jassem Ghazbanpour.

TACIT MATTER

In the latter part of the nineteenth century England went through its industrial airborne pollution phase.²² Experts at the time strove to solve the problem by cleansing buildings of soot and dust.²³ Dust, in particular, came to be seen as a cumbersome residue that tainted everything. Already in 1851 the Crystal Palace boasted a structural feature whereby the wooden planks that constituted its floor were left slightly detached, allowing for a curious vacuum which assured the removal of dust.²⁴ Yet, prior to industrialization, the dust and rust of the old and dilapidated had been romanticized in Great Britain.

In *The Ethics of the Dust*, John Ruskin praised the architectural works of the medieval world. With their dusts (which were, in his view, miniature variants of stones), these old, decaying buildings were deemed authentic. And, according to the architectural historian Jorge Otelo Pailos, in matters concerning the conservation of old buildings, it was specifically important to preserve them in their authentic form.²⁵ This desire to preserve the past exactly as it is was persuasive among art audiences, and, as a mentality, it was clung to most passionately by admirers of the art and architecture of the Middle East, the cradle of civilization and the site of biblical tales. Here, artists and photographers often attempted to depict decaying buildings when there were no human subjects around. In this way, they hoped their images would present a sense of near timeless distance.

Noteworthy among those who traveled to the holy land was Francis Bedford, a British photographer who in 1862 accompanied the eldest son of Queen Victoria, the future King Edward. One of Bedford's most notable coups was permission to enter the "Noble Sanctuary," to photograph the Dome of the Rock at close quarters for the first time. By this time, the Dome's original gilt cupola had been stripped, yet its present bronze/aluminum cover was not in place; likewise, the Persian tiles that coated the building had fallen from its walls, exposing gaping plaster with nail holes.²⁶ Yet the shrine, beckoning to Bedford's lens, had a mellow and grounded beauty.²⁷ Dust and rust turned the sacred building inside out, accentuating the concrete aspect of its existence rather than its religious and political connotations.

If dust and rust were essential to the project of symbolically reconstructing the Middle Eastern past, petroleum has been important to envisioning its future. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, concessions for oil in the Middle East were held by foreign companies, which controlled the rate of extraction, ran the oil refineries, and supervised exports to the world market. For both the locals and the British and American companies that generated fortunes from these activities, the endeavor truly did represent the gift of Prometheus — for its first product was kerosene for illumination. This was, however, soon followed by gasoline for automotive propulsion, natural gas for cooking and heating, plastics for commercial products, and artificial fertilizers

and pharmaceuticals to feed and heal the world's growing population. However, like the later development of nuclear energy (another Promethean gift that promised unlimited energy and progress, yet also brought Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Chernobyl), petroleum turned out not to be a panacea. Rather, this gift has also brought sinister long-term consequences in the form of wars, social conflict, and environmental degradation.

Conflict first emerged in the oil cities of the Middle East in the form of social hierarchies, as neighborhoods segregated based on nationality, occupation and class. These divisions, set in place by the British, were initially deemed necessary because of the influx of a large number of rural migrants seeking work. But these problems lingered into later decades. When Michel Foucault visited the oil city of Abadan in Iran in 1978–79, he articulated the situation there in these terms:

[T]he misery starts around the factory with a sort of subtropical mining village, then very quickly one enters the slums where children swarm between truck chassis and heaps of scrap iron, and finally one arrives at the hovels of dried mud bathed in filth. There, crouching children neither cry nor move. Then everything disappears in the grove of palms that leads to the desert, which is the front and the rear of one of the most valuable properties in the world.²⁸

Later, oil poisoned the Middle Eastern cities' traffic-heavy roads, and wreaked terrible havoc on the delicate environmental balance of the region.

In *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*, a work of theoretical fiction about the Middle East, the philosopher Reza Negarestani reflected on the region's "tacit matters." Included among his concerns were the petroleum of its basins, the dust of its air, and the stain of its old built environment, as well as its rotting sun — all of which are, according to Negarestani, manifestations of "outside" forces. This so-called outside, characterized in Negarestani's text by sorcerous cults during the Persian and the Assyrian Empires, in modern times attracts fanatical jihadists and oil-thirsty capitalists toward each other in an unwinnable war, which is nonetheless capable of liberating the desert.²⁹ Indeed, the War on Terror has dragged the United States into a lopsided involvement with what Negarestani refers to as occultists, whose beliefs are ancient, incomprehensible, and oil-sullied. As Negarestani elaborates, "It is as if war itself is feeding upon the war machines, leveling cities into the desert, seducing the aggressors into the dark heart of oil."³⁰ Although a work of fiction, *Cyclonopedia* bears witness to how humans slough off and relegate practical and moral responsibilities, assigning them to objects that act on their behalf, leading to social networks composed of human and nonhuman matters like oil.³¹

To concur with Negarestani's ideas, one can see how oil and dust have gone from serving as a subject for romantics,

entrepreneurs and novelists to being a mere “fog” in contemporary oil-rich Middle Eastern countries. In Tehran, where new buildings turn black in the span of a few years, architecture is thus subordinated to petroleum. And the pressure to modernize, so prevalent in Iran’s oil-boom years of the 1970s, has brought nothing but a kind of forged comfort that feeds upon itself. Thus it was that the very air left many dead in Tehran in 2011 during the height of its pollution crisis.

Referring to the chaos of traffic in Tehran, the Turkish author and Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk, in an article in *The Guardian* titled “Road to Rebellion,” described the unpleasant consequences of the abundance of petroleum and automobiles and the craze of drivers:

When, after his brief attack of indecision in the outskirts of Tehran, my friend the driver took the short cut, went into the wrong lane, and made the turn without causing an accident . . . we both felt the rush that can only come from breaking a rule and felt so very clever that we could not help exchanging smiles. The sad thing was knowing that . . . the only time we could break the law in public was when we were behind the wheel of a car, and that the laws we broke governed traffic and nothing else.³²

ORDINARY MATTERS IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

In scholarly writings about the built environment of the modern Middle East, the works of sociologists and anthropologists are most helpful when it comes to recognizing the power of marginalized human agents and their use of commonplace mediators to generate shelter or transform architecture. Rather than exploring canonical sources in art and architectural libraries, the sociologist Asef Bayat emphasized the agency of the most ordinary of citizens, who use commonplace mediators to transform their built environments. In *Street Politics: The Poor People’s Movement*, Bayat detailed neighborhood communities constructed by the poor during and after the 1979 revolution in Iran.³³ These illegal settlements were constructed on unused urban lands and in the empty homes of wealthy families who had fled the country. Instead of being guided by what architecture *does*, Bayat focused on how ordinary people create and alter architecture.

Even when professional architects are involved, inhabitants have played a significant role in transforming design rather than adapting to it. Take, for example, *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo*, Farha Ghannam’s examination of Cairo’s architectural landscape from the perspective of its poor.³⁴ Through an ethnographic study of Al-Zawiya al-Hamra (a housing development built for a population relocated from Bulaq during the efforts by Anwar Sadat to redesign Cairo), Ghannam provided rich descriptions of how people altered the visible forms and uses of spaces allotted to them by the government.

She also showed how the poor appropriated the powerful forces that controlled their living environments. Ghannam’s study thus challenged the seeming intractable ideology of top-down architectural modernity, ordinarily construed according to Western standards, which non-Western cultures are expected to emulate.

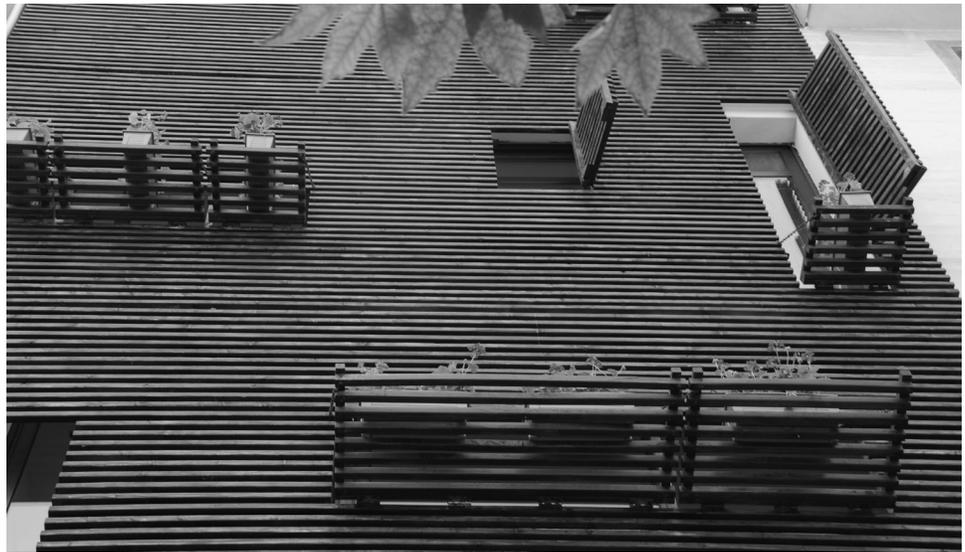
However, even when the role of ordinary people as active agents is brought to the fore, there is still too little emphasis on the importance of three-dimensional material objects. In fact, outside of formal economics, the implications bound up with the production and consumption of daily-life goods has been conspicuously absent in the study of the modern Middle East. Much has been written about how revolutionary regime change can reframe the meaning of a monument (think of Tehran’s Azādi/Freedom, formerly known as Shahyād/the Shah’s Memorial). But little attention has been paid to how readily available objects of daily life, such as air conditioners or chairs, may likewise be readapted and reframed. They may lose their original meaning and gain new ones as soon as they are brought into a house. These objects help create new ways of being modern, assist in promoting new senses of nationalism, and facilitate a novel appropriation of gender roles. This is not to mention their influence on any spatial organization that they enter.

The potential act of agency can even be performed by architectural elements themselves, as described by the anthropologist Setrag Manoukian. He has suggested that free-standing ancient-looking columns play a part in defining and defending particular collective identities within the city of Shiraz in Iran’s southern province of Fars.

The skilits and soutuns [skeletons and columns] are at once material and conceptual signposts that direct attention towards the spatio-temporal configuration of contemporary Shiraz. Their ubiquitous presence and the degree of investment they attract make them into crucial matters of concern in the city. The result of financial, architectural and political networks, iskilits and sutuns are themselves webs of relations that delineate a territory. [They] . . . orient and delimit the city, changing the multiplicity of forces that invests them. . . . Rising higher above the average vertical cityscape, skilits point towards visions of modernist utopias. . . . Sutuns are often decorative surplus on private and public buildings, statements of affluence and nationalism that overflow current boundaries of money and nation.³⁵

By this account, simple objects, including parts of architecture, are active agents that inform collective identity through their performative, emotive and expressive capacities. Not only do they allow for shared identities, but they also create a *lieu de memoire*, sustaining the will for the past’s remembrance. According to the historian Andrew Jones, collective remembrance is an “interplay between people and things.” As he elaborated:

FIGURE 4. *The Dowlat II Residential Complex by Alireza Shirafati of Arsh Design Studio, 2007. View of the facade with opened wooden lattice screens. Photograph by Arsh Design Studio, courtesy of Aga Khan Trust for Culture, Geneva.*



Although the material world provides a framework for remembrance, it is the social practices in which artifacts are engaged which determines how remembrance is socially experienced and mapped out. In this sense we can consider the material world as a kind of “distributed mind,” not only spatially distributed, but also temporally distributed.³⁶

There are also instances when commonplace mediators allow for subtle political negotiations. A case in point is the Dowlat II Residential Complex, completed in 2007 by the Tehran-based firm Arsh Design Studio, a multilevel residential complex of only 535 square meters that was nominated for the 2010 Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Its main facade is covered by a cladding system that allows inhabitants to change its configuration. While carefully separated from the public, the private life of the inhabitants can be made visible to passersby if the wooden lattice screen, which cloaks the building like a veil, is altered. One may posit that the architect, while not wishing to change or disrupt the sanctioned way of life, aimed nonetheless to suggest an alternative lifestyle using the system’s own dictates. By concealing and revealing their interiors from and to the outsider’s gaze, the inhabitants may take control of their private lives. At the same time, residents may make a public pronouncement of their variance from a seemingly imposed design. To borrow from the cultural theorist Michel de Certeau, the designers as well as those who occupy this building inhabit the “text” like a “rented apartment.” They build on the existing sanctioned status quo and create new meanings in response to it, making it their own.³⁷ Thus, Iranian designers and architects in Iran have asserted agency in changing their own lives as well as those of others, but this “agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (FIG. 4).³⁸

With the Middle East going through a series of revolutions, occupy movements, and civil wars, it is worth addressing the importance of mediators and material things and the ways they complement what Asef Bayat has called the “spatiality of discontent,” or spaces that foster revolutionary acts.³⁹ As images of the pepper-spraying of Istanbul Technical University professor Ceyda Sungur spread over the Internet during the recent Occupy Gezi Movement, so did the public’s criticism of the use of pepper spray and tear gas by the police there.⁴⁰ Many of the materials used by citizens to communicate their thoughts about Sungur’s message to preserve Istanbul’s green spaces — as well as their criticism of the use of tear gas and pepper spray — were cheap and unimportant (paint and stencil used for graffiti, for example) (FIG. 5). Yet these politicized matters continued to engage passersby after the event in what the Situationists in the 1960s referred to as “detourment,” culture jamming, or the rerouting of messages to create new meanings.⁴¹ But, more often than not, these political messages are now delivered in immaterial ways, as indicated below.

TOWARD IMMATERIALITY

The 2009 Green Revolution in Iran allowed for peculiar expressive forms. One might think, in particular, of the dark and blurry images of YouTube videos, which were frequently captured and posted under harsh circumstances (when the revolutionary guard was present, for example), and were combined with an array of sounds and words.⁴² Yet, despite its poor quality and shoddy appearance, according to the musicologist Michel Chion, this type of audio-vision is capable of creating powerful effects, sensations and meanings.⁴³

This audio-vision (i.e., hearing first and then seeing), which produces a delay in “getting” the image, thus becomes



FIGURE 5. The text adjacent to the image of the tear-gassed urban planning professor Ceyda Sungur reads: “The more you press, the bigger it gets.” Stencil on the ground in Gezi Park, June 4, 2013. Photograph by Christiane Gruber.

an important site of encounter between human beings and processes of subject formation.⁴⁴ As immateriality thus becomes increasingly relevant, it seems as if all that was solid

has indeed melted into air. And this even transcends the two-dimensional images that Guy Debord articulated as such in *The Society of Spectacle*:

When the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior. The spectacle as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized meditations . . . naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs.⁴⁵

Current cutting-edge thinking in science suggests that the fundamental nature of the spatial three dimensions of the universe may in fact be nothing more than the projection of a deeper, more fundamental two-dimensional surface.⁴⁶ We may therefore construct our entire reality at every second via projections of this “holographic universe,” just as we may now interpret the world mediated through digital data conveyed to us from all points on the globe, in real time.⁴⁷ Thus it is apt to conclude by saying that in this era of dematerialization, it is worth contemplating the role of the virtual pathways that have already begun to mediate between us and architecture.

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17. S. Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp.268–304.
18. For more, see M.W. Helms, *Craft and the Kingly Ideal: Art, Trade, and Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), particularly, “Naturally Endowed Goods and Skillfully Crafted Goods,” pp.146–59. By contrast, it is important to be attentive to the views of the historian Jared Diamond as expressed in his landmark *Guns, Germs and Steel*. Historically speaking, some

- past societies simply lacked access to those natural resources essential for the production of such gadgets as wheels. Indeed, access to carbon reserves would have made revolutionary changes in a place like Papua New Guinea, whose population relied mainly on human strength, rather than mechanical tools, for agriculture and other day-to-day chores. See J. Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).
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