

The Urban Book Series

Seyed Hossein Iradj Moeini  
Mehran Arefian  
Bahador Kashani  
Golnar Abbasi

# Urban Culture in Tehran

Urban Processes in Unofficial Cultural  
Spaces

 Springer

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Seyed Hossein Iradj Moeini  
Mehran Arefian · Bahador Kashani  
Golnar Abbasi

# Urban Culture in Tehran

Urban Processes in Unofficial Cultural Spaces

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# Preface

In the years 2013 and 2014, I ran a taught course in SBU Master's in Architecture programme on architectural criticism. The course works included a paper in which students parted with 'the analysis of great masterpieces' focusing instead on the exploration of ordinary spaces of everyday life. This coincided with my invitation to a criticism session in Berlage Institute/TU Delft on a project focused on designing everyday life spaces in Tehran. On both occasions, I came across like-minded students who shared my belief in the merits of focusing on the spaces of everyday life and how their formation and use are politically charged, as well as a passion about the uncanny, alternative face of Tehran. Furthermore, they all had first-hand experience of being in hotbeds of Tehran alternative cultural spaces. This was how the idea of the present book was born.

Like many other cities worldwide, the production of spaces for alternative modes of communication, socialisation and consumption is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon in Tehran. We chose to focus, however, on what we felt we are better positioned to investigate, namely, alternative cultural spaces mainly created and/or used by the middle-class urbanite: alternative cafés, bookselling practices and galleries all have elements of communication, socialisation and consumption about them, but at their core is a desire for a cultural scene and a mode of cultural exchange often ignored if not suppressed by the mainstream business and the establishment. It is this will to reclaim those missing territories that results in the unpredictable, transient and innovative modes of the production of space: the spatial idea-making of a nature 'great masterpieces of architecture' are probably unable to achieve.

Tehran, Iran  
November 2016

Seyed Hossein Iradj Moeini

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# Chapter 1

## Power and Resistance: Eternal Duality

**Abstract** This chapter reviews the historic inception and development of Tehran alternative culture, putting it in the context of theories of de Certeau, Fiske, Lefebvre and others. Making grounds for observations of the following chapters, it discusses how the everyday life and the consumption of space become battle-grounds for the alternative culture, and how culture related built environments of contemporary Tehran are shaped or reshaped in a rather bottom-up manner, in defiance to the officially recognised and promoted culture, to reclaim territories for the ignored and suppressed alternative subcultures without elevating their resistance to any form of head-on confrontation with the establishment.

A very common reaction by those who visit Tehran and other Iranian cities is one of surprise. They describe Tehran to others as ‘nothing like you think’. This is, of course, the case with many other cities throughout the world: many people similarly describe Mumbai, Paris, New York, Tokyo and Baku as nothing like the common perception of these cities. Cities and especially metropolises are complex mixtures of dense, interwoven connections worlds apart from what we see or hear in pictures, news and the media. It is just like photographing a densely populated pavement in Beijing or Johannesburg. At the first glance, all people look similar. A closer inspection, however, will reveal differences. Look more closely and you will find all kinds of personal stories behind. Images of cities take some patience to reveal differences between districts, streets and individuals. This is in part due to the fact that our perception of these cities is shaped first and foremost by power institutions: distorted images of what should be accepted as good or bad concealing many truths about the society on the way. Importantly, however, cities are not just shaped by their symbols, signs and important places: a city is also comprised of homes, streets, shops and other places forming an important part of the reality of cities. These are neglected by power institutions. Many urban commentators see the city as a grey mass of obedient people with little powers of resistance. People are deemed to have heroes to fight the power on their behalf leaving them to deal with their everyday affairs with minimal effects on power institutions, be it political, social or economic power. The everyday life of ordinary people is seen as receptive to policies