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► **To cite this version:**

Bahar Majdzadeh. Mnemonic Cartography of Violence. *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Dramatica*, 2019, 64, pp.119 - 128. 10.24193/subbdrama.2019.2.06 . hal-03398974

HAL Id: hal-03398974

<https://hal.science/hal-03398974v1>

Submitted on 26 Oct 2021

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Mnemonic Cartography of Violence

BAHAR MAJDZADEH¹

Abstract: Important historical events such as revolutions sometimes lead to changes in the relationships that individuals have with places. The citadel of *Shahr-e No*, the largest brothel of Iran was burnt a little time after the end of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Streets and buildings are one of the most stable social frameworks, they are the one that lasted through wars, riots, and revolutions. They play a key role in the process of recollecting memories. A social group can leave its print in a place, as a place can leave its print on a social group. In the case of the citadel, everything that constituted the memory of the place and of the life that people lived there disappeared. I have done a *forensic cartography* in order to bring back the memory of this erased place. Indeed, in the absence of oral as well as visual testimony about the citadel, I resorted to the object, that is the map. My practical work in connection with my research work is based on maps dating from before and after the destruction of the citadel and they report on the violence of the erasure of a public space and of its memory. I try to restore a critical relationship between memory, time, place, and political violence.

Keywords: map, memory, erasure, space, political violence, Shahr-e No

The citadel of Shahr-e No (which means the new city), the largest brothel of Iran, was set on fire shortly before the end of the Iranian Revolution, on the 29th of January 1979. The fire of the citadel was followed a few months later by its total destruction. Ten years later in the summer of 1988, this destruction continued when the Islamic Republic erased definitely Jamshid neighborhood where the citadel was situated. This article is about an artwork that I made, using to the map of Tehran through the last 200 years.

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1. Shahr-e No (new city)

The place where the citadel of Shahr-e No was built, was until the middle of the 1920s, in the south-west of Tehran, just outside the city limits. With the extension of the city during Reza Shàh's reign (from 1925 to 1941) and the destruction of the city's gates, Jamshid area became a full neighborhood of Tehran. The regrouping of the prostitutes of Tehran in Shahr-e No begun at this time². In 1955, in order to ensure the safety of the prostitutes, a wall was constructed all around Shahr-e No. The size of Shahr-e No was a hundred and thirty-five thousand square meters, which is roughly equivalent to the size of two football fields. The exact number of the persons who lived and worked there is unknown but in the middle of the 1960s the number of the women was estimated at a thousand and five hundred at least³. The citadel had a specific gate entrance for men and had a clinic, a police station and two theaters.

It is somehow possible to say that these women were deprived of their full citizenship because of the ghettoization of their workplace. Shahr-e No was a defenseless city whose inhabitants were called «the inhabitants of the neighborhood of sorrow». They were poor, even broke, and were often suffering from sexually transmitted diseases. Whether they were children, elderly people, or even polish immigrants from the second world war, they belonged to the most underprivileged social classes of the people. Because it was an enclosed territory, the citadel had several particular characteristics; for example, its architectural look, the particular language used by its residents, the way they celebrated the national days, etc., and furthermore the fact that they didn't use their real names. They formed a distinct social group, or we might say, a small society, a small marginal city inside the big city.

The inhabitants of the citadel have several times been subject to a political exploitation before and even after the Revolution and have been involved in several political events at the time of the Shah. The most important one among

2. Several sources refer to this date as the year of the regrouping of the prostitutes in Shahr-e No, However some other sources refer to an earlier date, around 1908-1909, during the reign of Mohammad Ali Shàh (Shàh of Iran from 8.1.1907 until 16.7.1909)

3. See Mahmoud Zand Moqadam, *Shahr-e No* (Stockholm: Bokarhus, 2013).

them was the coup⁴ instigated by the US and the UK in 1953 against the Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq and against the nationalization movement of the oil industry in Iran.

It is difficult to know what happened to these women and men after the Revolution, but what is clear is that this place remained until the summer of 1979 and was then destroyed by bulldozers. As for Jamshid Neighborhood as a whole, it remained until the summer of 1988. During a police operation, a thousand people were arrested at night, the neighbourhood was completely razed by bulldozers and this is how several streets and avenues were wiped off the map of Tehran. Part of the land of Jamshid neighborhood, in particular the part where the citadel was, was given to Farabi hospital and other parts were made into a nature reserve consisting of a large park (inaugurated in 1997) where no sign remained of the life that people had before in this place. Razi park, covering an area of 257 000 m² (two hundred and fifty-seven-thousand-meter square), had, among other things, a lake, a library, a craft market, two mosques, a football field, and other sports facilities.

Today, the only way to understand and learn more about the life in the citadel, (from which very few documents, images, and testimonies exist) is to refer to the few references found in the historical texts⁵, the few novels⁶, films⁷, and photos⁸ that survived the censorship of the Shah's regime and finally some archival materials. There was indeed a willingness of the previous regime to hide the social injustice and to show Iran as a modern country with a great history and an antique civilization and any image that could question this greatness was forbidden. Indeed, the monarchy's power had a complex relationship with this ghetto. On the one hand the State formally acknowledges

4. The Operation Ajax, known in Iran as the "Coup d'État of 28th Mordad", was led by the United Kingdom and the United States against the Prime Minister of Iran and his policy of nationalization of the oil industry. The aim of this coup was to keep a large share of the gas sales rights. Every year, the anniversary of the 19th of August 1953 coup was celebrated in the citadel.

5. Hakim Elahi and Ol-Allah Hedayat, *Ba Man Be Shahr-e No Biayid [Come with Me to Shahr-e No]* (Tehran: Sherkat-e Sahami-e cap, 1946).

6. Zakaria Hashemi, *Tuti [Parrot]* (Vienna: bongah-e matbuati-e hadaf, 1969).

7. Kamran Shirdel, *Qal'e [Women's Quarter]* (Iran: Ministry of Arts and Culture, 1966).

8. Such as the photo essays entitled "Prostitute" taken between 1975 and 1977 by Kaveh Golestan.

its existence, but on the other hand it didn't want it to be visible. This ambiguous relationship has continued in a different form, after the Revolution as a result of the religious restrictions imposed by the new Islamic regime against the prostitutes and its rhetoric of social justice. The Islamic Republic has always believed in the utopia of a Muslim nation, preserved from drugs, prostitution, and homosexuality, and the means it used for this purpose have always been eradication and confinement.

There seem to be no image of the arson of the citadel. There might be material traces of this event, but they could not, to this day, be found. The fire of the citadel has never been subject to a historical research, and according to my researches, there is no recorded testimony, either of the women and of the people who worked in the citadel, nor of the persons who set it on fire. Some photographers were there but they were prevented from taking pictures. This is why in this specific context; one can say that what we are talking about a missing picture. The awareness of a missing image such as the one of the fires of the citadel, encourages artists to initiate a process of reflection, inquiry, and analysis. This absence definitely had an effect on my artwork.

2. Space as the social framework of memory

When we walk in a city, and we go to the place of an event which we read about, or we face a building or a street that we saw in a film, a painting, a photo, or a novel, all the things we've learned re-emerge in our memory. Beyond the knowledge that we've acquired about the buildings, the neighborhoods, and the avenues of this city, these places, due to their architectural features, reveal a little bit of their history. Therefore, one may say there is a memory within and a memory through these social spaces. Space is a social framework of memory, it is a mean that allows us to organize, to fix, to lock, and to find memories. Maurice Halbwachs⁹ regarded streets and buildings as the most stable social formations as they survive through wars, riots, and revolutions. Yet, these events sometimes lead to changes in the relationships between the society and the places, of which meaning is likely to change during and after the major sociopolitical events. The traces that these events leave in the different

9. Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) French philosopher and sociologist. He died in Buchenwald concentration camp.

sites constitute the visual elements of the complex relationship that sometimes exists between the official history and the inhabitant's memory.

Social events leave their mark on places. Social groups can also leave their marks on places and vice versa. As Halbwachs writes: "place and group have each received the imprint of the other"¹⁰. He continues by saying "The group not only transforms the space into which it has been inserted, but also yields and adapts to its physical surroundings"¹¹. The place is the home of the collective memory, or in other words, the group's memory. Halbwachs highlights the relationship that the group and the collective practices have with the place. He considers that "every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework"¹². There are several spacial frameworks and a multiplicity of space representations in each city, because each group cuts up space in its own way, Halbwachs says "there are as many ways of representing space as there are groups"¹³. Therefore, one can distinguish different spaces into one city.

The determination of social frameworks in a city allows us to comprehend the groups that live or lived there, thanks to the marks they left in the space. Those are sometimes very visible and can take very various forms, depending on the neighborhood and the streets. In the case of the citadel and Jamshid neighborhood as a whole, everything has totally disappeared, it means everything that represented the memory of this place and the life that people led. The destruction of the citadel meant the disappearance of the collective memory of this group. Their collective memory no longer exists because their group has disappeared and this memory now belongs to History.

Shahr-e No was not the symbol of the monarchy as the I.R.I pretended. It was in reality, the symbol of the discriminations existing within the Shah's political regime. The freedom won during the revolution paved the way for the fire of Shahr-e No by the muslim revolutionaries (and not to all the revolutionaries), those who from that time had already plans to build a new Islamic state. This arson of the citadel that is the most extreme form of the destruction of a group and its place didn't constitute a revolutionary violence

10. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. JR. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 130.

11. Halbwachs, 130.

12. Halbwachs, 139.

13. Halbwachs, 156.

that targeted the State power (the divine violence as Benjamin defined it¹⁴), it was more exactly a lawmaking violence. The erasure and the total destruction of Jamshid neighborhood in 1988 demonstrated a political willingness which goal was to control the urban space and the social life. The destruction of this neighborhood must be considered as the manifestation of a continuous domination and should not be understood as part of a simple urban planning policy.

The use of violence during the destruction of Jamshid neighborhood was a strategy to control the urban landscape of Tehran and the memory of its past. It was part of a homogenization policy of the city. This place has been the place of the State's political violence. It was an erasure by an authoritarian power of the memory of a social space and everything that was associated with it. The Islamic Republic attempted to reshape the memory of Tehran and to manipulate the memory of its inhabitants with a willingness to rewrite the history of the city. The citadel was a neighborhood that had elements of the life from before, that the new regime had to erase, as it was doing everything it could to get rid of the reminders of the past.

3. A forensic mapping

In the case of Jamshid neighborhood that was wiped of the map and within which the citadel was, the inhabitants were scattered in different places, were forgotten, and the atmosphere of the place completely changed. In the absence of direct testimonies of former residents and given the impossibility of saving their traces, I resorted in my artistic project to an object, that is the map.

I put together a series of maps of Tehran on which I revealed the episodes of violence which marks were erased from the urban landscape. Thus, in my work, it is the map itself that represents the trace. Indeed, the map is a recording system of the trace that is outside the memory of the social group and outside written history. Its structure allows to retrace something that cannot, in the case that I'm studying, be found otherwise. Indeed, given the lack of image, the absence of witness and the few archival materials, I started my work with the things I could access.

14. See Walter Benjamin, *Critique de La Violence et Autres Essais*, trans. Nicole Casanova (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2012).

What I actually did is something I call (forensic) mapping. My work is based on the maps, before and after the destruction of the citadel. When they are put together, these maps create a form of continuity and relation that allows to see the trace. My work was inspired by the *forensic architects*, brought together by Eyal Weizman, an Israeli architect, within the *Forensic Architecture* agency. As Weizman says, its task is to : “study the forms of destruction and, rather than viewing them as an illustration of the atrocities committed, considering them as epistemological resources”¹⁵. In the concept of forensic architecture, the pictures of a place, taken before and after a conflict, are from an architectural point of view, considered as analysis tools of violent acts. As Weizman said, there is, in this type of work, a switch from the testimony to the object. He recalls that the 20th century, which was “the era of the testimony” has little by little given rise to a “legal culture focused on the object”. That culture led us to what he calls “the era of the object”. For him, the object can facilitate the testimonies, especially those from people who went through traumatic experiences that affect their stories¹⁶.

The Forensic architecture is a new discipline that is based on the evidential value of architecture. Architecture can be a way of seeing, a point of view on images and it allows to confirm things that used to be denied. Forensic architecture enters into the very reserved domain of the forensic expertise to make it a political tool for citizens. It is an archaeology of image, images of violent acts of the past or captured by citizens in real time, at the very moment when violence occurs. These images are put in relation with texts, testimonies, and other kind of proofs of a particular type like for example the visible marks on the soil of the desert or the analysis of the waves motion. The forensic architects search and collect evidence, then they make them public. They make three-dimensional objects, maps, images, etc. Forensic architecture suggests new readings of pictures in a time of the « image complex » (in reference to the thousand pictures in the social networks), analyses them, links them with each other, and put them back into space and time. They extend the realm of the image and of its very definition. In the investigations conducted by this agency, the State is most often the criminal,

15. Eyal Weizman, “L’archéologie Des Pixels,” in *Le BAL. Que Peut Une Image*, ed. Dork Zabunyan (Paris: Centre National des Arts Plastiques, 2014), 160.

16. Weizman, 162.

and in fact the citizens are the ones who reverse things. The official forensic practices are the police practices of a State in order to govern and monitor its citizens and have always created counter practices. Weizman writes:

Forensic, as the rhetorical “art of the forum” refers to the mobilization of aesthetic practices to make them investigation tools able to reverse the forensic look, no longer from the State towards the citizen but from the citizen towards the State.¹⁷

The use of this technique in my work is for me a way to question and challenge the spatial and memorial representations by the political authority. My cartography is called “the book of the erasure of the citadel”. For an artist who works on the issue of memory and its preservation, the book is the preferred medium. Lack is the starting point of this book which content can evolve according to political developments and to the possible historical discoveries. It is indeed an open project, which means that the possible developments on the ground can have an impact on the map and be included, gradually, in this book.

I found maps, recent or on the contrary very old, in different books and archives dating from the middle of the 19th century, when Shahr-e No didn't exist yet. I did an archaeological work through the maps in order to show the traces of this erased place. The reading of these maps, when crossed with texts, allows to understand how this place changed, from the time it appeared and expanded, until it disappeared.

Weizman turns to *forensic* practice in order to get a proof, and I use this practice to find the trace. The 1980s maps of Tehran, where I found this trace, are so eloquent that one can say they “talk”, so to speak, about the erasure. Shahr-e No appears on the 1981 map of Tehran while in reality it had already disappeared at that time. On the map of 1984 an empty rectangle can be seen in place of the citadel. From that year and until 1988, in place of the rectangle, “park under construction” is written. In 1988, the year of the construction of Jamshid neighborhood, the word “DESTROYED” was written on the whole Jamshid neighborhood and Kàj park took the place of Shahr-e No. From 1988, and until 1997 (year of inauguration of Ràzi Park) these writings were

17. Eyval Weizman, “Note Sur Les Pratiques Forensiques,” in *Images à Charge, La Construction de La Preuve Par l'image*, ed. Diane Duffour (Paris: LE BAL & Éditions Xavier Barral, 2015).

replaced with the following information: “park under construction”. While all the streets of this area have disappeared, there is only one very small trace left of the two main avenues of the citadel and only one of them, of which a small, 80 meters long, section remained, kept its name; Abdolmahmud.



Figure 1. Excerpt from a 1980s map of Tehran

The lack of images, as I mentioned before, is somehow part of the history of the citadel. This deficiency says much more about the citadel than any other thing and even more about the relation that the city of Tehran and the successive governments had with this marginal space and its inhabitants. The missing image of the citadel tells us things about Tehran’s history and about the memory of this city. The recognition of this deficit that affects me explains, in the absence of witness and documents, the feeling of having only a very limited knowledge of this place. This feeling can lead the artist to adopt a new form of practice because the missing image, as such, cannot be recreated nor even replaced. The feeling of lack creates a void that should lead to a work of critical imagination. It is the role of the artist to try to imagine different ways to show the lack, with the making of an original mechanism, as I have tried to do: the creation of a cartography in the form of a book, with texts. This work of critical imagination with and from the map can draw awareness to the issue of lack and trace.



Figure 2. “Le livre de l’effacement de la citadelle”, the author’s project.

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