Lakes Drying, Tides Rising

Nazgol Ansarinia

> Perhaps more than any other element, water is a complete poetic reality. Water is the element of dreams, the element that in helping us dematerialise the objective world inspires us to dream.
>
> – Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*

The day I decided to contribute to this issue, the temperature was 41 degrees in Tehran and the electricity was cut off between three and six in the afternoon. I had no way of cooling myself and, in pure frustration, the only thing I could think of was to make a fan by pleating a piece of paper like we used to in school.

After an unusually long rainy spring we had one of the hottest Augusts I could remember. In fact Iran's annual average temperature has risen by two and half degrees over the past 30 years, one degree higher than the global average.[1] In the face of this palpable climate change, one feels somewhat helpless as an average citizen, dependent on the comforts of modern life. We no longer have the facilities or the knowledge that for thousands of years allowed Iranians not only to survive the overall hot and dry climate of their geography but to thrive by building sustainable habitats. Seeing the incredible gardens of pomegranates, grapes and dates cultivated in the middle of the Iranian plateau using *qanat* wells—the ingenious water transportation system—one truly understands the meaning of the Farsi word *abadi* (settlement), a composite of *ab* (water) and *ad* (place suffix).

In recent decades, however, the shortage of water has become visible through frequent dust storms, regional conflicts, and migrations due to dwindling access to water, and protests in various regions of south and central Iran. Apart from global climate change, experts argue that years of mismanagement have played a bigger role in this national crisis. According to environmental scientist, Kaveh Madani, 'Excessive manipulation of the natural environment for economic purposes has pushed Khuzestan's [one of Iran's southern regions] ecosystem to breaking point'...'[L]arge rivers have been blocked by gigantic dams to store water for agriculture, industrial, and domestic uses and hydroelectricity production', driving one region water-bankrupt to temporarily satisfy the needs of farmers, industries, and large cities in another region.[2] All of the above is the backdrop to contemporary everyday life in Iran and perhaps what brought my attention to water as a 'subject,' both on a personal level and for its place in the collective Iranian consciousness.

Nazgol Ansarinia, 2020, Connected pools, plaster, pigment, paint. Photo by Lorenzo Palmieri.

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Pools and Voids

I grew up in Tehran's first high-rise residential complex, which consisted of fourteen towers placed around an Olympic-sized swimming pool. This layout is perhaps one of the most exaggerated versions of traditional Iranian courthouse architecture where the rooms typically enclose a *hoze* or a shallow pool in the middle of the courtyard. In the mid-1980s, the complex's management allowed girls up to nine years old to use this swimming pool during the summers, and so I too jumped in and out of this pool between the ages of five and nine. But for me the sweeter experience of floating in water was at my grandparents' house in Mashhad, which had a swimming pool of moderate size on the south side of the two-story building. My grandparents' house was built a few years before the revolution of 1979. They included a pool perhaps because they had never lived in a house without a pool of water. When they married they lived in a traditional courthouse building with a *hoze* in the middle; gradually they moved to more modern houses, but every house they built integrated the element of water in its architectural form.

Their house, my childhood dream house, has been vacant for nearly fifteen years now, with its pool empty for even longer. As my grandparents grew old and the grandchildren were no longer children, the shortage of water also became apparent—it didn't make sense to fill the pool anymore. When they passed away, none of their descendants wanted to even talk about moving a single piece of their furniture, let alone selling the house. We thought that as long as we kept this house intact we could protect our memories.

We know that the moment we sell the house it will be demolished and replaced with a five-story building, its pool filled with rubble. The story of their house is an all too familiar one of the changing ways of life and the rapid development of large Iranian cities.

Private Waters

When viewing one of the modern middle-class neighbourhoods, like Jordan, from up high, the number of empty swimming pools is quite striking. According to municipality records, 1,100 shapes in this area of three square kilometres are labelled as 'private waters', representing swimming and decorative pools.

In the late 1960s, when Victor Gruen Associates worked on Tehran's master plan, they were influenced by their experience of planning for American cities.[3] The Iranian middle class also shared some aspirations with its American counterparts, some manifestations of which can be found in the architectural form of the city. In the 1950s, Los Angeles was a desert city with over a million private pools[4] and Tehran, with its long and hot summer days, also had the right climate for these features. For centuries, Iranians had built their houses and gardens around shallow pools that were both symbolic and functional. The *hoze* as a container of water is deemed sacred in Iranian culture; it acts as a mirror that reflects the sky above and symbolically connects the celestial and terrestrial worlds. Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar in their book *The Sense of Unity* describe the presence of the *hoze* as such: 'The dependent spaces within a courtyard focus on the central pools, whose full, brimming, emerald-green surfaces reflect the divine mercy.'[5] These shallow pools were not for bathing or swimming, and served as a reservoir for washing and cleansing as well as helping to cool and humidify the air. When the swimming pool was introduced as a feature of modern architecture to Iran, it was quickly adopted, as it was just a different version of a very old idea. With the growth of modern lifestyles in the 1960s and 1970s, the *hoze* became a swimming pool.

The post-1979 revolutionary culture, however, affected many aspects of life, including built space. The increasing significance of religious values over secular, and the traditional over the modern, shaped how swimming pools were perceived. These private waters became subject to voyeurism and their use was seen as a potential threat to new public morals. As the city grew in height, more and more one- or two-story buildings were replaced by five- or six-story structures, and the few remaining houses became surrounded by tall buildings. This new setting increased the possibility of being watched from the exponentially growing number of neighbouring windows. So if a pool was hidden from view, it had a better chance of containing water but if visible and exposed, it was likely to be empty.

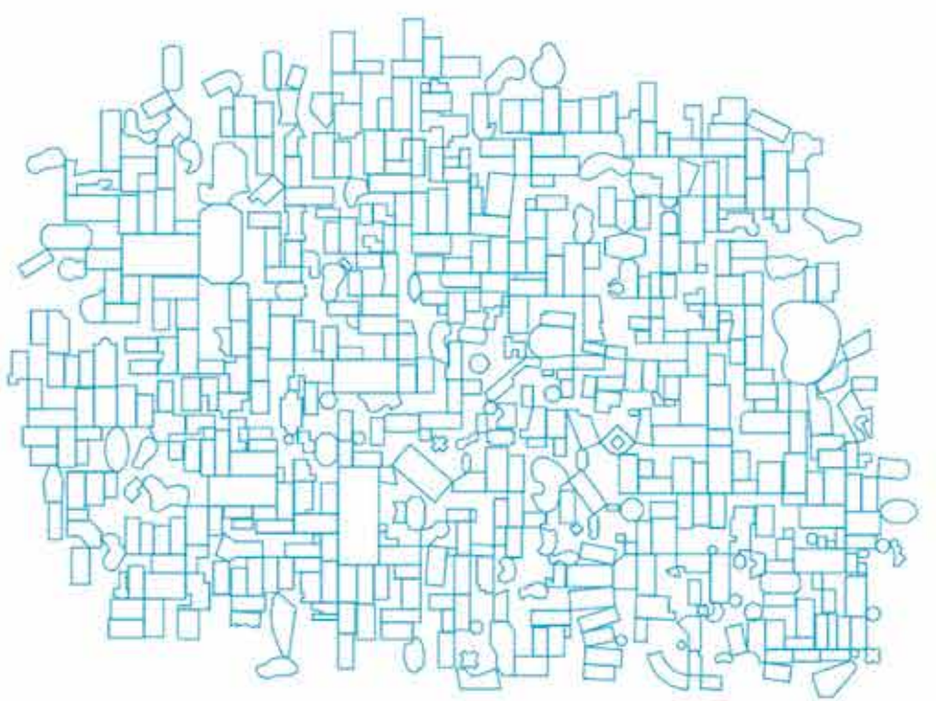
Connected pools

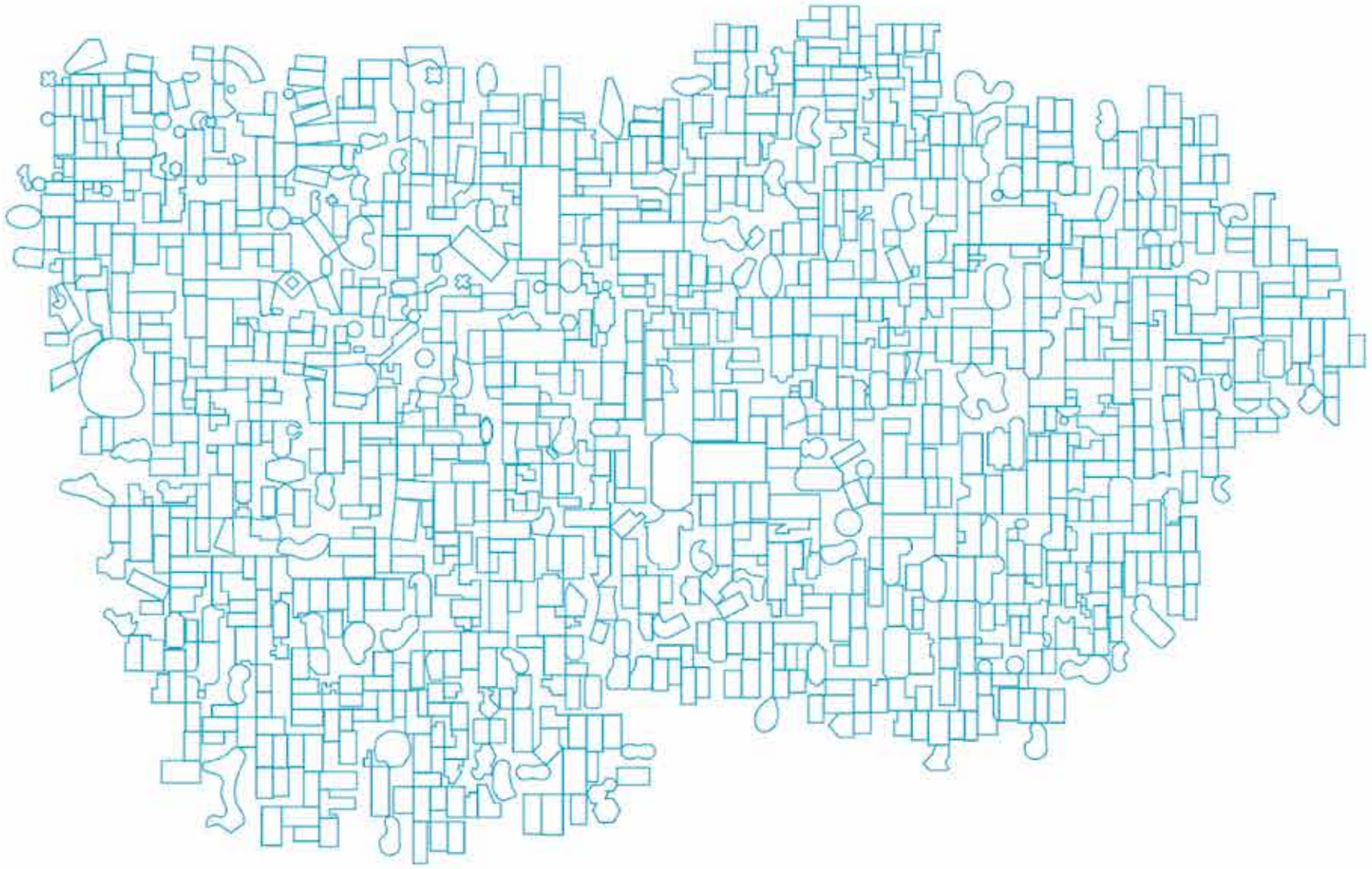
The reinforcement of moral codes combined with the gradual shortage of water has kept the pools empty and turned them into voids during the hot summers of Tehran. Yet it is fascinating that many of these voids continue to exist even after forty-five years. They have not been filled with earth and converted into parking or green spaces. In a city like Tehran where every inch is being built up, what does it mean to have these voids remain intact? Perhaps like any other object that one doesn't use but retains in the hope of using in the future, the maintenance of the empty swimming pools follows the same logic. Keeping these voids not only expresses a wish for them to contain water and be used again in an unforeseen future, but allows for holding on to the memory of them once full.

(Above) Nazgol Ansarinia, 2018, Untitled. Digital photograph.
(Left) Nazgol Ansarinia, 2021, Untitled. Digital photograph.

Nazgol Ansarinia, 2020, Untitled. Digital image.

Nazgol Ansarinia, 2019, Untitled. Digital photograph.





(Above) Nazgol Ansarinia, 2020, Untitled. Digital image.
(Page 46-47) Nazgol Ansarinia, 2020, Untitled. Digital image.

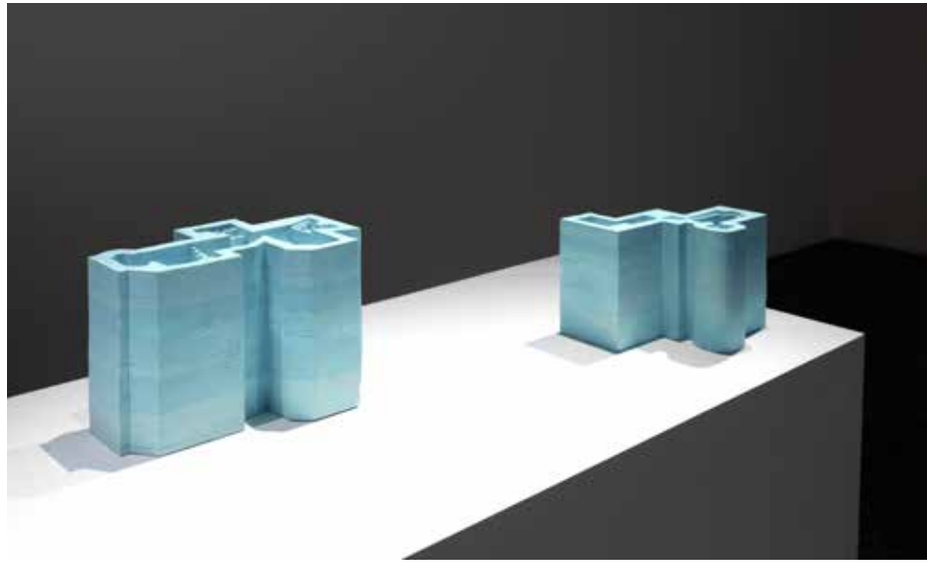
Longing for and dreaming of water in our dry lands is only natural. According to Gaston Bachelard, water is the element of dreams: 'By dissolving substances, water helps the imagination in its task of de-objectifying and assimilating.'[6] The connection between water and the flow of imagination also perhaps contributes to the continued existence of these empty containers.

Not so long ago water was such an essential and integrated part of Iranian architecture that no home could be imagined without it. This is perhaps the first time in the history of this region that houses are being built without pools of water. While its physical presence has disappeared from our modern life, allusions to it have not been totally abandoned. Its residue can still be found in the Iranian collective memory in the few remaining water-filled pools and in all the empty ones.

During the two years that I worked on the subject of the empty pools of Tehran, my personal investigation of these persistent voids pushed me more and more towards the latent collective longing underlying the individual appearance of each void and gave direction to my formal experimentation. Looking for new possibilities that the integration of these negative spaces could create, I took forms from the municipality records and gave them depth and dimension by combining them. When connected, their totality resembles that of a lake and once again allows for movement and flow. They create a possibility of streaming water, opposed to and resisting the image of the stagnant waters accumulated at the bottom of the empty pools of Tehran.

The forces draining our natural water sources in the name of development and progress, suppressing all manifestations of life, are driving our physical and social atmosphere towards aridness. The battle between wet and dry has been fought for centuries in this region; it is an actual struggle between life and death as well as a symbolic one. Water runs deep in the Iranian consciousness and depriving people of its material and imaginary possibilities will inevitably lead to rising tides.

'Water swells seeds and causes springs to gush forth.'[7]



Installation view at Green Art Gallery. Photo by Anna Shtraus.

Notes

1. Mahoozi, "Iran's Extreme Heatwave Underscores Urgent Need for Climate Action."
2. Madani, "Iran's Decision-makers must shoulder the Blame for its Water Crisis."
3. Jafari and Hein, "Revisiting the Transnational Building of a Modern Planning Regime in Iran," 461.
4. Van Leeuwen, *The Springboard in the Pond*, 165.
5. Ardalan and Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity*, 60.
6. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 12.
7. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 14.

Ardalan, Nader, and Laleh Bakhtiar. *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*. 2nd ed. University of Chicago Press, 2000.

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