

Theocratic authoritarian urbanism and performative right to the city: a case study of Tehran's City Theatre

Rana Dadpour

To cite this article: Rana Dadpour (2025) Theocratic authoritarian urbanism and performative right to the city: a case study of Tehran's City Theatre, *City*, 29:5-6, 1047-1066, DOI: [10.1080/13604813.2025.2541461](https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2025.2541461)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2025.2541461>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 18 Aug 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1528



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Theocratic authoritarian urbanism and performative right to the city: a case study of Tehran's City Theatre

Rana Dadpour 

The Cairns Institute, James Cook University, Townsville, Australia

Authoritarian regimes govern through space as well as law and ideology. This paper examines the enclosure of Tehran's City Theatre not merely as a preservation measure, but as a spatial intervention that reconfigures access, visibility, and memory in service of theocratic control. In Iran, where public space is tightly bound to moral doctrine and surveillance, urban planning becomes a tool of ideological discipline. Revisiting Henri Lefebvre's Right to the City, this study asks how this right is enacted when institutional participation is foreclosed and dissent is criminalized. Drawing on media archives, architectural histories, and digital traces, it interprets the fencing of the theatre as both material enclosure and symbolic erasure. I argue that under theocratic authoritarianism, the Right to the City is reconfigured—not extinguished—manifesting through gestures of refusal, mnemonic practices, and affective forms

*Email: rana.dadpour@jcu.edu.au

Keywords authoritarian urbanism, cultural heritage preservation, public space contestation, Tehran City Theatre, theocratic regime

URL <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2025.2541461>

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

of civic presence. Rather than being claimed through institutional channels, the Right to the City emerges through symbolic endurance and spatial storytelling. This reimagining extends Lefebvre's framework to ideological repressive regimes, where spatial justice unfolds not through participation, but through the performance of presence.

Introduction

Since 2023, Tehran's City Theatre—one of the most iconic cultural landmarks in Iran—has been the subject of an ongoing enclosure project. Officially presented as a safety measure, the plan to surround the theatre with permanent fencing has unfolded with little transparency, no apparent urgency, and no invitation for public input. The project does not follow the familiar logics of commercial redevelopment or aesthetic renovation. It presents a paradox: a cultural space built to host public life is now being physically walled off from the public.

In Authoritarian contexts the struggle over public space is inseparable from deeper histories of power, cultural regulation, and ideological consolidation. 'Perhaps, after all, Lefebvre was right [...] to insist that the revolution in our times has to be urban—or nothing.' David Harvey's (2016) words resonate in Tehran, where the battle for open civic participation and cultural expression is shaped by a theocratic state that has systematically restructured Iran's urban fabric since 1979 to reflect its religious-political vision (Alami Fariman and Hakiminejad 2024). Over four decades, this system has suppressed democratic reform, narrowed the spaces of public life especially for women, and subordinated cultural institutions to an authoritarian spatial order (Künkler 2013; True, Ahmadi, and Ross 2023). Within this context, the recent fencing project around Tehran's public City Theatre and public reactions demand close reading.

Henri Lefebvre's Right to the City offers a radical rethinking of urban citizenship and agency. Cities, in this framework, are *oeuvres*—spaces continuously shaped by their inhabitants. City dwellers are not merely users of space but its rightful producers, entitled to shape its meanings, rhythms, and futures (Lefebvre 1996; Purcell 2002; Purcell 2013). While this concept has inspired critiques of capitalist urbanism and calls for participatory governance (Harvey 2012), its deployment often presumes some degree of institutional permeability—public hearings, elections, legal protections—that are absent in authoritarian settings. Most literature on Lefebvre focuses on liberal or neoliberal democracies; far less is known about how the Right to the City is asserted when the political structure is closed and dissent is punished.

This paper advances a rethinking of the Right to the City under theocratic authoritarian regimes. While existing literature has examined insurgent urbanism, tactical encroachments, and everyday resistance (Bayat 2010; Canedo and Andrade 2024; Dadpour 2024), less attention has been paid to how spatial claims are made when public life is saturated with surveillance, ideological control, and punishment. Tehran, as I argue, is not a city of open protest or policy contestation, but one where citizens must navigate the city

through symbolic and indirect means. Exploring the recent fencing of Tehran's City Theatre as a spatial and political event, this paper investigates how urban rights are expressed not through institutional channels but through defiant gestures, acts of memory, and cultural refusal. These practices demand that we rethink what form the Right to the City takes when its legal and participatory foundations are absent.

To explore this reconfiguration, the paper examines the fencing of Tehran's City Theatre as a spatial intervention that operates not only as urban policy, but as a symbolic act of enclosure. Anchored in Henri Lefebvre's theory, it explores how citizens respond to this restriction through cultural and spatial practices that defy the state's control. Drawing on secondary sources—including media archives, academic literature, and social media discourse—the study traces how visibility, memory, and dissent are negotiated in and around the theatre site. Rather than assuming the disappearance of urban rights under authoritarian rule, the paper asks how such rights are differently articulated. It shows how urban agency persists under authoritarian spatial regimes—not through overt reclamation, but through symbolic endurance. It argues that under Iran's theocratic authoritarianism, the Right to the City is reconfigured as a symbolic and mnemonic struggle over space, memory, and civic presence—rather than a material demand for access or participation.

To develop this argument, the paper first revisits Lefebvre's concept of the Right to the City and outlines its limitations when applied to non-liberal, theocratic regimes. Then it situates Tehran within the broader context of authoritarian urbanism, highlighting how spatial control operates not through market logics alone, but through ideological purification and moral governance. Then it turns to the fencing of Tehran's City Theatre as a paradigmatic spatial intervention, interpreting it as both material enclosure and symbolic erasure. It examines how citizens respond to such spatial repression—not through institutional protest, but through symbolic, performative, and digital acts of resistance. Then it synthesizes these findings followed by a brief methodological note reflecting on the author's positionality.

Theoretical framework

Henri Lefebvre's formulation of the Right to the City was a revolutionary provocation—a call to reclaim urban life as a collectively authored project. For Lefebvre, the city is not a fixed built environment but an oeuvre—a living, rhythmic production of social space shaped through everyday practices, symbols, and affective ties (Lefebvre 1991; Lefebvre 1996). The right to the city, in this vision, is not merely a claim to inclusion; it is a demand to participate centrally in the ongoing production of urban meaning, infrastructure, and form (Harvey 2003, 2012; Purcell 2002).

This radical imaginary has deeply shaped critical urban theory, particularly in its confrontation with neoliberalism. Scholars have used Lefebvre to diagnose housing struggles, displacement of vulnerable populations, and erosion of democratic urban governance under conditions of capitalist urbanization (Huchzermeyer 2014; Marcuse 2009; Nogueira and Shin 2022; Turok and

Scheba 2018). The framework has animated social movements in Poland, South Africa, Turkey, Hong Kong and Latin America (Chan 2023; Hart 2008; Kuymulu 2013; Petropoulou 2014; Pluciński 2020), where the Right to the City has served as a rallying cry against privatization, elite capture, and technocratic rule. Across this literature, Lefebvre is consistently mobilized to critique the commodification of space and to defend alternative modes of spatial production grounded in use value, community, and participatory politics.

Yet this scholarship is overwhelmingly focused on contexts where some degree of political contestation is still possible. Even in its most radical form, much of the literature implicitly assumes what might be called institutional permeability: the availability of protest space, public forums, civil society organizations, or legal recourse. These are the necessary conditions under which urban rights can be claimed, contested, and made legible. Whether in neoliberal democracies or post-socialist transitions, and even when the right is framed as insurgent or oppositional (Freitas 2019; Hou 2010), Lefebvre's framework is typically applied where the struggle over urban space presumes some access to visibility, recognition, or pluralism (Purcell 2022; Sechi and Golubchikov 2025).

But what happens when those minimal conditions are absent—when public architecture is saturated with ideological control, when space is not commodified but purified, and when visibility itself becomes a risk? In such settings, the Lefebvrian imaginary reaches its limit. This is particularly true in theocratic-authoritarian regimes like the Islamic Republic in Iran, where urban space is governed not through market logics alone, but through doctrinal enclosure, moral policing, and theological absolutism (Chehabi 2001; Ehsani 2014). Here, public space is not a terrain of neoliberal capture—it is a domain of ideological obedience. The urban is not privatized but sanctified. Under these conditions, the right to the city must be re-read not as a claim within a participatory system, but as a struggle to persist, to remain visible, and to remember collectively in the face of state-sanctioned erasure.

In such contexts, where theocratic authority fuses spatial governance with moral discipline, the foundational assumptions of the Right to the City become strained. Public visibility may no longer be an opportunity for claim-making but a trigger for disciplinary action. Participation is not denied through bureaucratic inertia but rendered conceptually impossible by a political theology that defines dissent as sacrilege. As Khatam (2023) notes, spatial order in Iran is not merely administrative—it is theological, moral, and affectively charged. Visibility becomes vulnerability; public presence becomes transgression.

As currently theorized, the concept often fails to reckon with the intensity and specificity of repression in such contexts. Interpretations that view urban agency as emergent through contestation or moral confrontation risk flattening political difference, importing assumptions about civic capacity and institutional responsiveness that do not hold. When dissent is met not with bureaucratic friction but with physical violence; when appearing in public without ideological conformity entails risk of arrest (Dadpour and Shewly 2025); when public architecture is not privatized but purified, how can urban rights be conceptualized?

Emerging scholarship has begun to reckon with this challenge. Jason Luger (2024), for example, explores how Lefebvre's notion of the oeuvre—the joyful co-creation of space—might operate even under affectively charged

authoritarianism, where spaces of repression can also produce moments of radical intimacy and community. Such readings unsettle the binary view of authoritarian space as simply bleak or closed, instead highlighting its contradictory textures. Similarly, other scholars and more recent third-wave Lefebvrian scholarship have called for a re-engagement with Lefebvre that attends to race, gender, and the phenomenology of spatial orders (Kinkaid 2020; Kipfer and Goonewardena 2013; Schmid 2024). These interventions begin to shift the field, but they remain exceptions.

This paper takes up and extends these critiques by offering a situated conceptual intervention. Iran, as a paradigmatic instance of theocratic-authoritarian urbanism, offers conceptual insights for rethinking of Lefebvre's vision. In Iran, public space is regulated not only by the state, but by a fusion of bureaucratic and theological power that dictates visibility, movement, and morality (Khatam 2023; Lak and Hakimian 2019). The enclosure of Tehran's City Theatre—as I will explain in the following sections—exemplifies this logic: not a neoliberal takeover for capital gain, but a purification project to enforce ideological clarity and suppress civic heterogeneity.

While much of the literature implicitly treats authoritarianism as an interruption to capitalist urbanization, recent scholarship challenges this notion. Rather than a pause or distortion, authoritarian spatial regimes increasingly operate as constitutive logics of global urban development. Concepts such as 'neoliberal authoritarian urbanism' (Can and Da Silva 2023) or 'authoritarian state capitalism' (Kinossian and Morgan 2022; Varró 2025) describe how coercive state power fuses with market-oriented governance to reshape cities through land appropriation, megaprojects, and infrastructural spectacle. In contexts like Istanbul, São Paulo, and Delhi, authoritarian governance intensifies accumulation by dispossession, blending populism, securitization, and market rationalities (Bathla 2025; Staletović 2022; Croese and Pitcher 2019). These dynamics are hybrid regimes that co-produce capitalist urbanization through illiberal techniques of control.

The Iranian case departs from these patterns in critical ways. While state control over urban form is equally intense, it is not primarily driven by accumulation, investment, or market logics. Instead, Iran's post-1979 urban order is shaped by a political theology of space—where spatial interventions seek not to attract capital, but to enforce moral order, suppress pluralism, and align the built environment with an ideological vision of society (Chehabi 2001; Khatam 2023; Lak and Hakimian 2019). Fencing a public theatre, in this case, is not a speculative act to increase land value—it is a purificatory act to delimit visibility, silence ambiguity, and eliminate civic co-presence. Thus, while authoritarianism and capitalism are deeply entwined in many urban regimes, theocratic-authoritarian urbanism introduces a qualitatively different spatial rationality: one grounded in moral governance, symbolic control, ideological enclosure, and the elimination of ambivalence from public life.

This paper does not ask whether Lefebvre's Right to the City applies to authoritarian contexts—it asks how it must be reimagined to account for spatial regimes grounded not in market exclusion, but in moral discipline. The case of Tehran's City Theatre provides a paradigmatic instance of how spatial control, memory, and dissent converge in settings where the very grammar of

urban rights must be rethought. Through this case, we glimpse a spatial politics where what is remembered, who is seen, and how space is made meaningful are themselves battlegrounds of authoritarian rule.

Theocratic authoritarian urbanism

The first half of the twentieth century saw a transformation of Tehran's public sphere, moving from communal identities grounded in religion and locality to a more secular urban culture (Rezvani Naraghi 2023). In the late Pahlavi era in Iran, modernist influences encouraged the creation of cultural venues that were fostering opportunities for artistic expression and social engagement (Farahbakhsh Daghigh and Mohammadi 2022; GrosPierre 2018). Designed by Ali Sardar Afkhami in the 1960s, Tehran's City Theatre (Teātr-e Šahr in Persian language) emerged from such architectural ethos that guided much of the city's cultural development prior to the Islamic Revolution (Naraghi 2023). Its distinctive circular design and tilework blended western modernism with Iranian aesthetics, reflecting a moment when public institutions benefited from broader—if still stratified—access and a relative openness to diverse artistic expressions (Figure 1).

This cultural pluralism and spatial openness would soon be overshadowed. The theocratic regime's authoritarian mindset rapidly consolidated control post-1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. The initial promise of broader participation evaporated as religious-ideological imperatives came to dominate every domain of public life. The legacy of the pre-revolution period—evident in cultural centres, universities, and urban planning—was methodically realigned to reflect the regime's interpretation of Islamic principles and social conformity. The state-sanctioned nationwide closure of universities in the aftermath of Islamic Revolution (1980–1983) and the systematic implementation of gender segregation in public domains including public transport, schools, and sports stadiums exemplified how public spaces were converted into instruments



of ideological control, where visibility, access, and movement were strictly regulated according to the regime's religious and gender norms (Boroumand and Boroumand 2000; Partow et al. 2024; True, Ahmadi, and Ross 2023).

Over the ensuing decades, attempts at democratic reform in Iran were systematically and violently thwarted, and any suggestion of genuine citizen input in cultural policy or urban planning was largely co-opted or suppressed (Hunter 2014). Through this process, public space was not merely appropriated by the state but became an active site of political contestation and control (Alami Fariman and Hakiminejad 2024; Dadpour 2024; Dadpour and Shewly 2025; Low and Smith 2005). These transformations showcase the critical role that architectural and planning decisions play in reinforcing authoritarian control, a pattern observed across theocratic and authoritarian regimes (Bodenschatz 2015).

Case study: fencing Tehran's City Theatre

Situated at the heart of Tehran's cultural landscape, the City Theatre was once emblematic of the city's modernist aspirations—an institution embracing artistic innovation, international exchange, and relative cultural openness since its establishment in 1972 under the patronage of Shahbanu Farah Pahlavi. As Ghasemzadeh and Toofan (2014) note, the theatre played a vital role in enhancing citizens' quality of life, providing a space for leisure, cultural engagement, and social interaction. It was not merely a building, but a shared public good that belonged to all Tehranis, yet this trajectory was reversed under the Islamic Republic regime.

Once a hub for artistic experimentation and public cultural engagement, Tehran's City Theatre came under direct state control in 1980 when it was transferred to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. This administrative shift, following its removal from the jurisdiction of the National Iranian Radio and Television, marked the beginning of sustained governmental oversight over theatrical content, managerial appointments, and institutional direction. The theatre's integration into the post-revolutionary bureaucratic apparatus illustrates how cultural infrastructures were restructured to reflect the Islamic Republic's ideological imperatives (City Theater 2024).

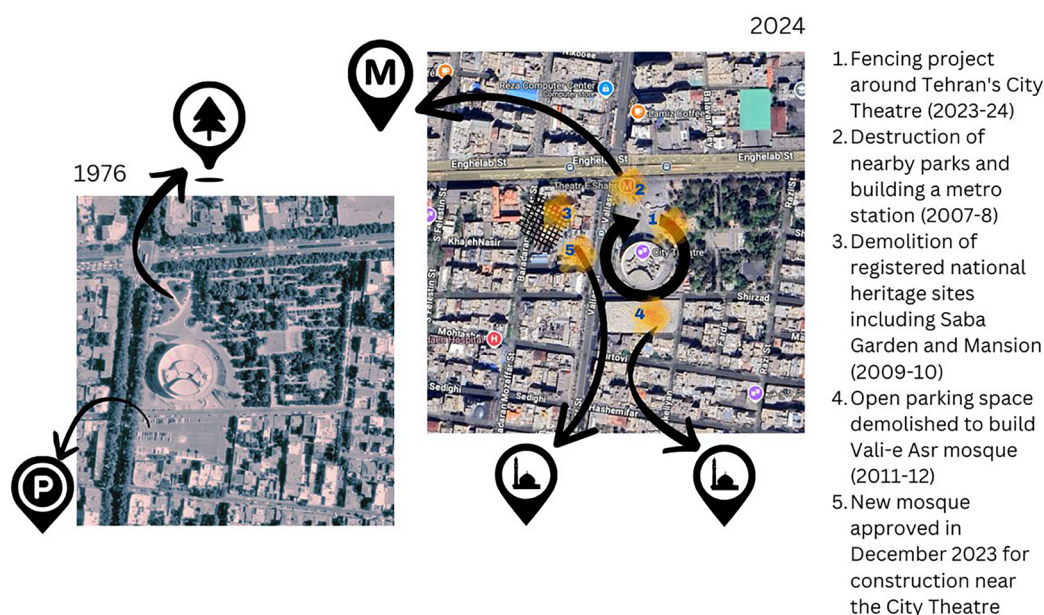
In tandem with this institutional transformation, physical modifications to the theatre's internal spaces further demonstrate how its cultural role was redefined. For instance, the upper floor of the theatre complex, originally designed as a café-restaurant to encourage informal artistic gatherings and dialogue, was repurposed into a library—an adaptation that reflects the regime's preference for more controlled, didactic, and disciplinarian uses of public space (Memarland 2022; DTO 2024). Such spatial reprogramming reflects a broader pattern of domestication, where open, plural cultural zones are reconfigured into morally sanctioned, state-aligned spaces.

These spatial interventions reflect a larger project of urban and cultural realignment. As the Islamic Republic sought to reconfigure Tehran's urban fabric in accordance with its religious and moral codes, sweeping changes in land use and public policy were enacted (Madanipour 2006). The City Theatre—comprising multiple halls such as Cheharsou, Qashqai, and Sayeh—emerged

as a prominent site in this reordering. Once regarded as a porous and plural space for civic participation, it has increasingly been subjected to material interventions that mirror cultural repression. In 2023, the Tehran Municipality announced plans to enclose the theatre complex with fencing under the pretext of preservation and security (Yalda 2023). This move restricts pedestrian circulation, curtails informal gatherings, and reduces public access—further reinforcing the theatre’s transformation from an open cultural forum into a monitored, exclusionary space. In this sense, the evolution of the City Theatre encapsulates the broader trajectory of Tehran’s public spaces: from arenas of civic possibility to sites of regulated visibility and ideological control.

The post-1979 transformations in the theatre’s surroundings underscore this logic. Rather than arbitrary development, the proliferation of religious buildings such as mosques and the destruction and alteration of secular heritage sites near the theatre during the last few decades reveal a systematic effort to reshape cultural spaces (see Figure 2). New religious buildings encroach upon historic parks and registered heritage sites, consolidating institutional presence in the urban fabric and signalling that spaces once devoted to diverse cultural narratives are now subject to new Islamic regulatory frameworks. The fencing of the City Theatre is thus not an isolated episode; it represents part of a broader process of reconfiguring Tehran’s urban environment to align with state-sanctioned spatial practices and worldview.

In this process, the state systematically restricts avenues for cultural plurality, thereby diminishing citizens’ capacity to claim ownership over urban spaces and participate as stakeholders in urban life. The transformation extends beyond the theatre’s physical space—by regulating access, attendance, and public gathering, it constrains the development of independent cultural spheres. As Yalda (2023)



reports, Tehranis view the fencing as a deliberate act of segregation and control, alienating the public from spaces meant for cultural expression, and limiting the emergence of cultural heterogeneity and spontaneous public engagement that characterized its earlier history.

The physical barriers around the theatre is not only limiting who can enter the building, but also who can lay claim to the cultural capital and collective memory it represents. Through alterations of physical characteristics and associated meanings, citizens' relationships to public spaces are transformed, potentially contributing to historical amnesia (Gehl and Gemzøe 2001; Lak and Hakimian 2019). Mazumdar's (2000) research demonstrates how such centralized urban planning decisions fundamentally alter how residents perceive and interact with their city, often leading to a diminished sense of connection among Tehranis' to their urban environment.

Ultimately, the fencing of the City Theatre undermines the democratic and inclusive principles that should guide the development of urban public spaces. The installation of physical barriers strategically limits not only access but also the visibility of often-marginalized social groups. As Sezer (2020) argues, control over visibility becomes a powerful tool for regulating participation in public life. In this context, the fencing can be understood as part of a broader strategy of spatial and moral 'purification,' through which the state seeks to align the visible fabric of the city with a singular ideological vision. The enclosure thus signifies more than mere physical restriction; it enacts a deeper reordering of urban space, determining who is permitted to appear, linger, and belong within Tehran's cultural sphere.

Moreover, Tehran's wider urban challenges have been exacerbated by decades of uncontrolled growth, inadequate infrastructure, and environmental degradation. As several studies have shown (Amirahmadi and Kiafar 1987; Arsanjani, Helbich, and Vaz 2013; Habib and Baghdadi 2012), Tehran grapples with a range of interconnected problems, from air pollution and green space deficits to socio-spatial disparities and vulnerability to natural disasters. In this context, the decision to prioritize the fortification and purification of cultural venues like the City Theatre over more pressing issues of urban liveability and sustainability raises serious questions about the authorities' priorities and their commitment to the well-being of citizens.

Community responses

The insights in this section are based on a qualitative analysis of Persian-language media and social media content related to the fencing of Tehran's City Theatre, primarily sourced from platforms such as Twitter (X) and Instagram between 2023 and 2025. These platforms are conceptualized as dynamic, affective publics (Papacharissi 2015), where users engage in ongoing negotiation of visibility, dissent, and urban memory. The comments analyzed include both vernacular expressions of nostalgia, anger, and loss, as well as normative justifications invoking morality, security, and spatial order. Drawing on digital ethnography (Postill and Pink 2012), this approach treats social media content not as a dataset for quantification, but as situated

cultural artefacts that reveal the affective registers and political imaginaries of everyday users. Rather than aiming for representativeness, the method foregrounds fragmentary, contingent, and emotionally charged utterances that offer insight into how urban space is experienced, contested, and mourned under authoritarian constraint (De Seta 2020).

Ethical considerations guided the use and interpretation of publicly accessible posts. No personally identifiable information is reproduced, and all quoted content has been anonymized and paraphrased to prevent traceability, in line with ethical protocols for researching vulnerable populations under regimes of surveillance (Markham 2012). Given the risks of state monitoring in Iran, particular care was taken to ensure that none of the content cited could be used to identify or harm individuals. The analysis thus adheres to a framework of ethnographic refusal (Simpson 2007) and situated ethics (Fine 1993), acknowledging the researcher's positionality and responsibility in navigating politically sensitive digital terrains.

Public responses to the fencing of Tehran's City Theatre reveal a deeply polarized civic discourse that goes far beyond aesthetic objections. Defenders of the project invoke narratives of moral degradation and urban decay, depicting the theatre's surroundings as occupied by 'thugs,' 'drug dealers,' and 'queers'—figures cast as threats to the 'cultural sanctity' of the space. In this view, the fence is framed as a necessary purification device, protecting not only the building but the cultural values it is said to represent. Such framing resonates with the regime's broader project of moral ordering in public space, where visibility and presence are governed according to ideological legibility. These justifications, often disseminated by those with minimal everyday engagement with the space, project external moral anxieties onto the urban poor, unhoused individuals, informal vendors, and queer communities—who are rendered both hypervisible and out-of-place. The narrative of 'urban contamination' thus becomes a tool for legitimating spatial exclusion and reinforcing hierarchies of belonging.

Opponents, by contrast, view the fencing as a manifestation of authoritarian spatial control—less about preservation and more about erasure. Social media commentary repeatedly points to the accumulative layering of barriers around the theatre since 2009: first one-way traffic restrictions, then underpasses, then fences encircling the square, and finally the enclosure of the theatre itself. These architectural interventions are read as a deliberate response to the area's political significance—as a historic site of protest, particularly during the 2009 Green Movement. Critics argue that the fencing is part of a broader strategy of 'enclosure governance,' designed to preemptively disable collective assembly and reduce democratic visibility. The result, as expressed by one user, is that 'nothing remains of City Theatre but walls and trash.' Others frame the fencing as not just spatial restriction but symbolic violence—a defilement of collective memory, a 'complete ugliness,' and a prelude to further militarization: surveillance posts, ticketing for entry, bag checks, enforcement of mandatory headscarves, and ideological filtering.

The fierce public backlash on Iranian social media against the fencing of Tehran's City Theatre reveals a collective refusal to accept the enclosure of urban meaning under the guise of preservation. Users sharply reject the

project not simply as an architectural failure, but as a symbolic assault on the civic and cultural function of public space. Tweets liken the fencing to prison walls and mock the regime's desire for control by comparing the site to a 'zoo' or 'Mr. Smith's farm,' underscoring the absurdity of the state's obsession with containment. Local urbanists argue that the theatre's modernist design was intended to foster openness and interaction—not isolation—making the fencing a betrayal of the very ethos of its creation. Moreover, multiple posts diagnose the regime's deeper fear: the unpredictability of public gatherings and the emancipatory potential of ungoverned space. As Tehranis argue the fear of public space drives these spatial interventions, transforming a cultural landmark into a censored site where presence is policed and spontaneity is foreclosed. This digital discourse frames the fencing not as an isolated incident, but as an architectural manifestation of the Islamic Republic's broader attempt to domesticate, depoliticize, and render impotent the spatial conditions of civic life.

The social media commentary also exposes a deeper regime tactic: the manipulation of visibility as a means of control. Under the Islamic Republic, visibility is not neutral—it is a governed condition, selectively granted or denied to reinforce ideological conformity. The posts suggest that the fencing is not simply about managing crowds or protecting heritage, but about disrupting the visibility of certain publics and practices that the regime deems threatening. This manipulation disproportionately targets marginalized groups—women, artists, queer community, informal workers, youth—whose presence in public space resists normative roles. One tweet cynically imagines the fence as a tool for attaching hijab-monitoring cameras, while others mock the enclosure as an animal pen, underscoring how state actors seek to domesticate and dehumanize the public. The presence of street vendors and pedestrian flows once blurred formal and informal, sanctioned and unsanctioned, yet the fencing renders these entanglements invisible or illegible. Thus, what is at stake is not just access to space, but the right to appear—to be socially and politically legible in an urban order that polices not only behaviour, but the very aesthetics of presence.

Invoking memories of the theatre as a vibrant civic and cultural landmark, citizens mobilized against its enclosure through mnemonic, symbolic and affective acts of resistance. An online petition was launched, garnering over 6,000 signatures from citizens who viewed the project as an unjust restriction of public space and a threat to the city's cultural vitality (Mortazavi 2024). Yet even among supporters, skepticism about the efficacy of such initiatives persists. As one architect shared on social media, 'While I remain deeply pessimistic about the success of this campaign, I still chose to participate to resist the symbolic and authoritarian shift toward "placelessness"—a shift that, if unopposed, could erode our shared sense of urban identity.' At the time of writing, the petition website is no longer accessible, reportedly taken down by state authorities.

A group of Iranian activists circulated the idea of forming a human chain around the complex—a symbolic act of solidarity that, while never realized, reflects the persistent desire for spatial resistance in an increasingly enclosed urban landscape. In Iran, such imagined or proposed performances of presence—ranging from silent gatherings to symbolic encirclements—function

as expressions of both defiance and care, aiming to reclaim public space from ideological and physical control (Dadpour 2024). These gestures do not operate within a liberal reformist paradigm; rather, they are peripheral, often fleeting, acts of civic memory work that confront a system structurally resistant to accountability or participatory transformation. As Carothers and Press (2020) argue, in authoritarian contexts, civic action rarely leads to linear liberalization. Instead, these proposed acts become part of a repertoire of dissident remembrance—public rehearsals of collective agency that challenge erasure, even if only momentarily.

In theocratic authoritarian contexts where spatial control is exercised through both physical infrastructure and moral policing, such gestures are not instruments of policy change or territorial recovery. Rather, they are moments of rupture—symbolic interventions that unsettle the regime's claim to total visibility and order. These ephemeral performances do not dismantle fences or reverse enclosure, but they inscribe dissent into the social memory of the city. They make visible the desire for alternative urban futures and assert presence in spaces increasingly designed to erase it. In this way, their power lies not in restructuring space, but in reanimating it—through collective imagination, embodied defiance, and acts of public remembrance.

Others proposed reimagining the fencing of City Theatre through AI-generated ecological design—envisioning a living boundary of native plants and trees in place of metal barriers. This speculative intervention, while unlikely to be implemented under current political conditions, offers a symbolic counter-narrative to enclosure: one that foregrounds openness, ecological sensitivity, and communal care. As Javanmardi (2019) notes, such visionary proposals reflect a deeper tension in Tehran's urban politics, where civic creativity collides with authoritarian constraint. These acts do not restructure power, but they preserve democratic imaginaries as mnemonic futures through spatial storytelling and design. In this sense, AI-generated visions, like other forms of tactical resistance, function as repositories of collective memory and desire—refusing the normalization of control by projecting alternative futures that remain possible even if unrealized.

In the face of such spatial closures, acts of resistance often migrate to digital spaces. Here, platforms function as temporary counterpublics—what Lefebvre terms 'spaces of representation'—where citizens reassert their collective agency and articulate alternative visions of urban life (Lim 2014). Though unable to restore physical access, these digital forums foster continuity in civic discourse and symbolic belonging. Complementing this virtual resistance, transnational academic—activist collaborations—as Briggs (2008) argues—offer additional traction by documenting practices of spatial control and situating local struggles within broader theoretical and political frameworks. Together, these parallel strategies resist enclosure not by reclaiming space directly, but by sustaining dissent, memory, and imagination across scales.

The lack of transparency surrounding the fencing project only heightens public distrust, with unanswered questions about whether access will be subject to security checks (Akhbar Rooz 2023). Some mockingly suggest 'digging a moat around the theatre' to secure it even more, reflecting the absurdity of such exclusionary measures. The widespread backlash, marked by anger, frustration,

creativity and satire highlights the pervasive sense of disenfranchisement. For many ordinary citizens, the fencing project is a symbol of deepening social and political divisions within Iran. Despite the challenges, Iranian civil society mobilized to resist it and defend the public's right to access and enjoy the City Theatre.

As of March 2025, the highly controversial fencing project surrounding Tehran's City Theatre has been halted, following sustained public criticism from artists, architects, urbanists, and civil society actors. Despite the suspension of construction, the site remains visually and physically dominated by temporary white-and-blue barriers, which continue to obstruct pedestrian flow and symbolically sever the theatre from its urban context (Hosseini 2025). The initial justification for the project—preserving the cultural sanctity of the theatre—was always tenuous, and has now fully unravelled amid public skepticism, opaque planning processes, and budgetary dysfunction. A change in political leadership, including the replacement of officials within the Ministry of Culture, contributed to the pause, but the stalled state of the project has left the space in limbo.

Critics now view the lingering fences not as protective infrastructure but as enduring symbols of bureaucratic dysfunction, urban mismanagement, and the erosion of cultural stewardship. While municipal officials tout minor improvements at the Valiasr intersection, these claims ring hollow amid sustained neglect of the theatre's spatial and symbolic integrity. The enclosure, once framed as a preservation measure, has been widely discredited—not only by its aesthetic failure but by the dubious reoccupation of its surroundings by late-night street vendors operating with industrial-scale equipment, including refrigerators and floodlights. As noted by local commentators, such operations are unlikely to occur without some degree of coordination—or at least complicity—by municipal authorities. This raises critical questions not only about governance but also about selective visibility and the instrumentalization of public disorder to justify enclosure.

Veteran artists and cultural practitioners have condemned the situation as an intentional degradation of cultural space, arguing that the municipality—rather than protecting this nationally significant artistic site—has enabled its fragmentation. As some of these artists assert, the area has been rendered deliberately unsafe and unattractive by design, creating conditions that rationalize further restriction under the guise of moral or aesthetic necessity (Iranian Students' News Agency 2025). The fencing, therefore, is not a failure of preservation—it is a tactic of cultural displacement and symbolic erasure, reinforcing the broader pattern of ideological purification. What appears as dysfunction is, in fact, a spatial strategy: the abandonment and enclosure of a public good to facilitate its ideological domestication.

A performative right to the city

In Tehran, Henri Lefebvre's Right to the City must be reinterpreted not as a juridical claim or institutional demand, but as a symbolic and affective practice of urban agency under authoritarian constraint. While Lefebvre envisioned

the right as a collective struggle to reshape urban life through democratic participation and spatial appropriation (Lefebvre 1996), such pathways are foreclosed in Iran's theocratic system, where state power penetrates deeply into the everyday governance of space. In this context, the right does not emerge through legal reform or participatory planning but through situated acts of defiance—gestures that re-signifies space and contest state-imposed order. It shifts from spatial production through participation to spatial co-presence through affective refusal.

The fencing of Tehran's City Theatre encapsulates this tension. Officially justified as a preservation or security measure, the fence functions as a 'gray space'—a zone where state control and civic exclusion are simultaneously enforced and obscured (Yiftachel 2009). It is not merely a physical barrier, but a symbolic enclosure that severs the theatre from its history as a plural, participatory urban node. In seeking to de-politicize the space, the regime attempts to erase the layered memories and affective attachments that make space meaningful (Huysen 2003). Yet it is precisely through this attempted erasure that symbolic resistance intensifies.

Acts of refusal—lingering near the fence, recounting the theatre's past, circulating images of its enclosure—perform what Asef Bayat (2010) describes as 'quiet encroachment': non-institutional, everyday assertions of presence that challenge hegemonic spatial narratives. These acts do not reform institutions; they remap meanings. In this sense, the right to the city becomes an affective and mnemonic co-production of urban meaning, where defiance lies not in directly confronting the regime but in refusing its spatial silencing. The struggle is not only over access, but over memory, visibility, and presence.

Rather than channelling spatial resistance through formal democratic structures—which do not currently exist in meaningful form in Iran—the performative enactment of the right to the city sustains insurgent citizenship (Holston 2009). This citizenship is not recognized by the state but enacted in and through urban space, often against the law, and in tension with official narratives. In Tehran, symbolic acts of spatial reclamation become the primary means through which urban agency survives not as institutional reform, but as refusal to forget, to evacuate, or to yield.

Consequently, the Right to the City must be understood here as a struggle over meaning, not governance. It is animated by affective attachments to place and sustained by memory-work that resists spatial amnesia. While the enclosure around the City Theatre may appear permanent, its contested meaning remains alive through small-scale, improvised actions that subvert dominant spatial strategies. Such tactics preserve the theatre's pluralistic legacy and keep open the imaginative horizon of a more just and inclusive urban future.

In authoritarian contexts, then, the right to the city is not about reclaiming the city through formal participation, but about keeping urban possibility alive through symbolic, affective, and mnemonic resistance. This reframing does not dilute Lefebvre's vision—it radicalizes it by refusing to tether it to procedural democratic assumptions. As long as citizens remember, resist, and re-signify space, the city continues to be co-produced—even in the shadow of its enclosure.

Positionality and reflections

From my vantage point, examining the fencing of Tehran's City Theatre through a transnational lens is fraught with epistemic, ethical, and methodological tensions. This struggle is not purely logistical; it is deeply political. The Iranian state's pervasive scrutiny and history of harsh reprisals discourage direct fieldwork and personal interviews, making them ethically fraught endeavours (Rivetti and Saeidi 2018). While I may want to speak with cultural producers, urban activists, or local residents, I must weigh the risk of placing them in jeopardy. In a landscape where dissent is punished and information is fiercely controlled, I must embrace alternative strategies. Digital ethnographies, careful triangulation of diverse sources, and cross-verifications become my essential tools (Makaremi 2025). Like Lefebvre's vision of the city as a shared enterprise, my scholarship must be co-produced through delicate, indirect collaborations with distant commentators and careful interpretation of fragmentary clues.

My diasporic position provides me with certain analytical advantages. I share linguistic and cultural fluencies that enable me to read between the lines, to perceive the historical and social layers embedded in Tehran's urban environment. Yet this remove also constrains my insight. I cannot fully grasp the current daily rhythms, embodied negotiations, and the granular strategies of resistance that occur within the city itself. The nuanced local knowledge—the subtle shifts in tone, the everyday acts of subversion—remain partially elusive. But as Tehran's citizens are denied their right to co-create the city, doesn't it mean, I am, in a parallel sense, denied the immediacy that would allow me to fully comprehend these struggles?

Much like Lefebvre's call for participatory urban governance collides with Iran's theocratic apparatus, my pursuit of understanding is constrained by a system that withholds data and represses critical engagement. State censorship and the systematic curtailment of civic input obstruct my access to primary sources, compelling me to rely on other accounts—independent media clinging to narrow margins of freedom, cautious scholarly critiques, digital (counter-) archives and the reflections of diaspora communities like my own. Inevitably, the frameworks I construct are shaped by these mediated narratives, and I remain acutely aware that my understanding, much like Tehran's fenced urban spaces, is subject to surveillance, silence, and strategic omission.

Faced with these conditions, I embrace a reflexive, dialogical stance in my research. I do not seek a singular truth about the fencing project, nor do I attempt to present a definitive narrative. Instead, I foreground the polyphony of voices—Tehranis who strive to reclaim their city, cultural practitioners who find new ways to assert their presence, and activists who resist despite enormous risks. Rather than offering a neat conclusion, I position my analysis within the broader global discourse on spatial justice and seek not just to document but also to interrogate the forces that fence off cultural spaces, silence critical voices, and reduce the vibrant complexity of urban life to a tightly regulated script. As feminist scholar-activists have argued, producing knowledge within and about authoritarian contexts is not simply a methodological challenge but a political act of resistance that bridges theory and lived struggle (Philipson Garcia et al.

2025). The symbolic defiance explored and demonstrated in this study resonates with this scholar-activist praxis, extending it into the domain of urban justice under repressive rule.

Implications and conclusion

The fencing of Tehran's City Theatre is a stark manifestation of authoritarian urbanism under a theocratic regime—an act that spatially embodies the suppression of civic participation, cultural plurality, and public memory. This paper has shown that such enclosures are not merely infrastructural projects but ideological instruments that recast visibility, access, and meaning in service of moral governance. By tracing symbolic acts of resistance in response to this spatial repression, the paper contributes to critical urban theory by extending the conceptual reach of Lefebvre's *Right to the City* beyond liberal-democratic infrastructures. It challenges the assumption that urban agency must be institutionally mediated, and instead shows how spatial rights persist through symbolic defiance, mnemonic struggle, and affective presence.

In doing so, the paper radicalizes the *Right to the City* by detaching it from formal participatory systems and rethinking it as a performative, embodied, and affective co-presence under authoritarian constraint. Rather than assuming the death of urban citizenship in repressive contexts, it reframes citizenship as enacted through refusal, memory, and the creative remaking of public meaning—even when physical access is denied. This reworking not only addresses a blind spot in much Lefebvrian scholarship, which presumes a baseline of institutional permeability, but also opens new theoretical pathways for understanding spatial justice under ideological absolutism.

The fencing of the City Theatre in Tehran reflects a global trend of contested urban development. Cities worldwide face the challenge of balancing heritage preservation, urban revitalization, and security concerns (Gomaa 2023). Yet, as Ghertner (2014) warns, these projects often exacerbate existing inequalities, leading to gentrification and the displacement of marginalized communities, especially in developing countries.

In the context of theocratic authoritarian regimes like Iran, however, the struggle for the *Right to the City* takes on heightened urgency as it involves challenging ideological, legal and political structures that exclude and silence marginalized voices (Mitchell 2003). By viewing Tehranis' forms of resistance as affirmative rather than reactive, the study highlights how citizens' desires for open, free and participatory public spaces are not solely oppositional but inherently creative. The fencing of the City Theatre, therefore, becomes a catalyst for the continuous production of differential space through symbolic defiance and collective (re/counter-) imagination (Lefebvre 1991; Purcell 2022). Tehran's struggle reflects how, across divergent regimes, citizens continue to imagine, contest, and re-signify the meaning of public space even in its absence. The City Theatre, though enclosed for now, remains a contested node of civic memory—a space still co-produced, not through bricks or policy, but through the enduring insistence to be seen, remembered, and felt.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics statement

This research draws exclusively on publicly available sources. Given the sensitivities surrounding dissent and public critique in Iran, particular care has been taken to avoid referencing or exposing individuals in ways that could risk their safety. All critical voices cited are drawn from materials already in the public domain. The analysis maintains strict anonymity and does not involve human participants, ensuring compliance with ethical standards appropriate for research in politically repressive contexts.

ORCID

Rana Dadpour  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6674-5695>

References

- Akhbar Rooz. 2023, December 26. کارزار برای توقف طرح حصارکشی محوطه تئاتر شهر تهران به کجا خواهد کشید؟ [Campaign to Stop the Fencing Plan of Tehran City Theatre: Where Will It Lead?]. <https://www.akhbar-rooz.com/228225/1402/10/04/>
- Alami Fariman, M., and A. Hakiminejad. 2024. "Woman, Life, Freedom: Revolting Space Invaders in Iran." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 0 (0): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494241268101>.
- Amirahmadi, H., and A. A. Kiafar. 1987. "Tehran: Growth and Contradictions." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 6 (3): 167–177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X8700600305>
- Arsanjani, J. J., M. Helbich, and E. Vaz. 2013. "Spatiotemporal Simulation of Urban Growth Patterns Using Agent-Based Modeling: The Case of Tehran." *Cities* 32:33–42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2013.01.005>
- Barazandeh, H. 2022, June 7. Teatr-e Shahr, Amiralı Sardar Afkhami, Leila Far. [Photographs]. <https://isoarch.ir/تئاتر شهر-امیر علی-سردار-افخمی-،-لیلا-فر>
- Bathla, N. 2025. "Authoritarian Urbanism beyond the City: Infrastructure-led Extended Urbanisation and India's More-Than-Neoliberal Configurations." *Urban Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980241309737>.
- Bayat, A. 2010. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Redwood: Stanford University Press.
- Bodenschatz, H. 2015. "Urbanism and Dictatorship: Expanding Spaces for Thought!" In *Urbanism and Dictatorship: A European Challenge*, edited by H. Bodenschatz, P. Sassi, and M. Welch Guerra, 15–26. Berlin: Birkhäuser. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783038215134-002>.
- Boroumand, L., and R. Boroumand. 2000. "Illusion and Reality of Civil Society in Iran: An Ideological Debate." *Social Research* 67 (2): 303–344. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971475>.
- Briggs, L. 2008. "Activisms and Epistemologies: Problems for Transnationalisms." *Social Text* 26 (4): 79–95. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2008-012>.
- Can, A., and H. Da Silva. 2023. "Neo-liberal Authoritarian Urbanism: The Dominant Contemporary Patterns of Urban Spatial Production in Istanbul and São Paulo." *Globalizations* 21 (6): 1108–1124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.2156237>.
- Canedo, J., and L. da S. Andrade. 2024. "Towards an Insurgent Urbanism: Collaborative Counter-hegemonic Practices of Inhabiting and Transforming the Cities." *City* 28 (1-2): 121–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2024.2325755>.
- Carothers, T., and B. Press. 2020. "Understanding Protests in Authoritarian States." *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 40 (2): 15–24. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/understanding-protests-authoritarian-states/docview/2518752947/se-2>.
- Chan, E. 2023. "Take Back Our City: Reclaiming Shopping Malls in Hong Kong." *City* 27 (5-6): 778–794. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2023.2256527>.
- Chehabi, H. E. 2001. "The Political Regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Comparative Perspective." *Government and Opposition* 36 (1): 48–70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1477-7053.00053>.
- City Theater. 2024. تار یخچه تئاتر شهر. <https://city.theater.ir/fa/95115>
- Croese, S., and M. Pitcher. 2019. "Ordering Power? The Politics of State-led Housing Delivery under Authoritarianism—the Case of Luanda, Angola." *Urban Studies* 56 (2): 401–418. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017732522>.
- Dadpour, R. 2024. "Echoes of Dissent: The Transformative Power of Sound in Iran's Urban Nightscapes." *Philosophy of the City Journal* 2 (2024): 45–59. <https://doi.org/10.21827/potcj.2.4>.
- Dadpour, R., and H. J. Shewly. 2025. "Dancing In-between: Interstitial Feminist Defiance in Iran's Public and Digital Spaces." *Third World Quarterly*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2541809>.

- De Setta, G. 2020. "Three Lies of Digital Ethnography." *Journal of Digital Social Research* 2 (1): 77–97. <https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v2i1.24>.
- DTO—Deputy for Technical Affairs, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. 2024. پروژ ههای فرهنگی—تئاتر شهر. <https://dto.farhang.gov.ir/fa/porozzeh3/teatrshahr>.
- Ehsani, K. 2014. "The Production and Politics of Public Space Radical Democratic Politics and Public Space." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (1): 159–162. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743813001335>.
- Farahbakhsh Daghigh, R., and M. Mohammadi. 2022. "Investigating the Impact of Public art on Everyday Life and Creative Consumption Action of Space: Case Study: City Theater Space in Tehran." *Armanshahr Architecture & Urban Development Journal* 15 (39): 97–111. <https://doi.org/10.22034/AAUD.2022.235850.2234>.
- Fine, G. A. 1993. "Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22 (3): 267–294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124193022003001>
- Freitas, C. F. S. 2019. "Insurgent Planning? Insights from two Decades of the Right to the City in Fortaleza, Brazil." *City* 23 (3): 285–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2019.1648030>.
- Gehl, J., and L. Gemzøe. 2001. *New City Spaces*. 2 rev. ed. Copenhagen: The Danish Architectural Press.
- Ghasemzadeh, B., and S. Toofan. 2014. "The Role of Cultural Gathering Spaces in the Promotion of Citizen Quality of Life Case Study." *Tehran City Theater*. 18:18–25. <https://doi.org/10.5937/GeoPan1401018G>.
- Ghertner, D. 2014. "India's Urban Revolution: Geographies of Displacement beyond Gentrification." *Environment and Planning A Economy and Space* 46 (7): 1554–1571. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a46288>.
- Gomaa, M. 2023. "Beyond Culture and Civilization: Community-Based Approaches to Strengthening Architecture and Urban Heritage Conservation in Southern Egypt." *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Architecture and Cultural Heritage* 6 (1): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.21608/ijmsac.2023.284385>.
- Groszpiere, N. 2018. *Modern Forms: A Subjective Atlas of Twentieth-Century Architecture*. Munich: Prestel.
- Habib, F., and A. Baghdadi. 2012. "Unsustainability of Urban Community, an Analysis to Urban Heterogeneous Area in Urban Fabric (Case Study: North Parts of Tehran)." *International Journal of Architecture and Urban Development* 1:47–54.
- Hart, G. 2008. "The Provocations of Neoliberalism: Contesting the Nation and Liberation after Apartheid." *Antipode* 40 (4): 678–705. <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1467-8330.2008.00629.X>.
- Harvey, D. 2003. "The Right to the City." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27 (4): 939–941. <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.0309-1317.2003.00492.X>.
- Harvey, D. 2012. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. London: Verso.
- Harvey, D. 2016. "The Right to the City." In *The City between Freedom and Security: Contested Public Spaces in the 21st Century*, edited by D. Simpson, V. Jensen, and A. Rubing, 156–171. Berlin, Boston: Birkhäuser. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783035607611-014>.
- Holston, J. 2009. "Insurgent Citizenship in an era of Global Urban Peripheries." *City & Society* 21 (2): 245–267. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-744X.2009.01024.x>.
- Hosseini, N. 2025, March 28. "Endless Walling: Tehran City Theater in the Grip of Dysfunction." *Shargh Daily*. <https://www.sharghdaily.com/-220/988770-بخش-جامعه-220/988770-دیوارکشی-بی-پایان-تئاتر-شهر-در-حصار-ناکارآمدی>
- Hou, J. 2010. *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203093009>.
- Huchzermeyer, M. 2014. "Invoking Lefebvre's 'Right to the City' in South Africa Today: A Response to Walsh." *City* 18 (1): 41–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2014.868166>.
- Hunter, S. T. 2014. "Can Hassan Rouhani Succeed Where Muhammad Khatami Failed? Internal and International Politics of Reform in Iran." *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 1 (3): 253–268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798914542325>.
- Huyssen, A. 2003. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory (Cultural Memory in the Present)*. Germany: Stanford University Press.
- Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA). 2025, February 9. "Who let the zombies into City Theater?" <https://www.isna.ir/news/1403112115549/چه-کسی-پای-ز-امبی-هار-ایبه-تئاتر-شهر-باز-کرد>
- Javanmardi, L. 2019. "Urbanism under Dictatorship." *Archnet-IJAR: International Journal of Architectural Research* 13 (3): 498–516. <https://doi.org/10.1108/arch-05-2019-0128>.
- Khatam, A. 2023. "Mahsa Amini's Killing, State Violence, and Moral Policing in Iran." *Human Geography* 16 (3): 299–306. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19427786231159357>.
- Kinkaid, E. 2020. "Re-encountering Lefebvre: Toward a Critical Phenomenology of Social

- Space." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38 (1): 167–186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775819854765>.
- Kinossian, N., and K. Morgan. 2022. "Authoritarian State Capitalism: Spatial Planning and the Megaproject in Russia." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 55:655–672. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X221104824>.
- Kipfer, S., and K. Goonewardena. 2013. "Urban Marxism and the Post-colonial Question: Henri Lefebvre and 'Colonisation.'" *Historical Materialism* 21 (2): 76–116. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-12341297>.
- Künkler, M. 2013. "Electoral Victory, Political Defeat: A Failed Democratic Transition in Iran." In *Actors, Institutions and Regime Resiliency: New Challenges to Democracy from old Sources*, edited by S. Mainwaring and D. Chalmers, 166–201. Indiana: Notre Dame University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2228401>.
- Kuymulu, M. B. 2013. "Reclaiming the Right to the City: Reflections on the Urban Uprisings in Turkey." *City* 17 (3): 274–278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2013.815450>.
- Lak, A., and P. Hakimian. 2019. "Collective Memory and Urban Regeneration in Urban Spaces: Reproducing Memories in Baharestan Square, City of Tehran, Iran." *City, Culture and Society* 18:100290. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2019.100290>.
- Lefebvre, H. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Nicholson-Smith D. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Lefebvre, H. 1996. *The Right to the City*. Writings on Cities. Trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Lim, Merlyna. 2014. "Seeing Spatially: People, Networks and Movements in Digital and Urban Spaces." *International Development Planning Review* 36 (1): 51–72. <https://doi.org/10.3828/idpr.2014.4>.
- Low, S., and N. Smith, eds. 2005. *The Politics of Public Space*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203390306>.
- Luger, J. 2024. "Affective Authoritarianism as Joyful 'Oeuvre?' Godly Subjects and Suburban Gladiators." *Cultural Geographies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740241274339>.
- Madanipour, A. 2006. "Urban Planning and Development in Tehran." *Cities* 23 (6): 433–438. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2006.08.002>.
- Makaremi, C. 2025. "Insurrections in Iran: An off-site ethnography." *Geographica Helvetica* 80 (1): 9–17. <https://doi.org/10.5194/gh-80-9-2025>.
- Marcuse, P. 2009. "From Critical Urban Theory to the Right to the City." *City* 13 (2–3): 185–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604810902982177>.
- Markham, A. 2012. "Fabrication as Ethical Practice: Qualitative Inquiry in Ambiguous Internet Contexts." *Information, Communication & Society* 15 (3): 334–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.641993>.
- Mazumdar, S. 2000. "Autocratic Control and Urban Design: The Case of Tehran, Iran." *Journal of Urban Design* 5 (3): 317–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713683966>.
- Memarland. 2022. بررسی معماری و تاریخچه تئاتر شهر تهران معماری و تاریخچه تئاتر-شهر-تهران. <https://memarland.com/file-بررسی-تئاتر-شهر-تهران>.
- Mitchell, D. 2003. *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. New York: Guilford.
- Mortazavi, M. 2024. "Request to Stop the Fencing of Tehran's City Theatre Area [Online petition]." Karzar. Accessed November 29, 2024. <https://www.karzar.net/98250>.
- Naraghi, A. R. 2023. *A Social History of Modern Tehran: Space, Power, and the City*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009188906>.
- Nogueira, M., and H. B. Shin. 2022. "The 'Right to the City Centre': Political Struggles of Street Vendors in Belo Horizonte, Brazil." *City* 26 (5–6): 1012–1028. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2022.2126208>.
- Papacharissi, Z. 2015. *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Partow, N., M. Moridnejad, E. Irannezhad, M. Parizadeh, and R. Dadpour. 2024. "Systematic Oppression of Tertiary Education in Iran under the Islamic Republic." *Higher Education Policy* 37 (4): 655–669. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-023-00321-4>.
- Petropoulou, C. 2014. "Crisis, Right to the City Movements and the Question of Spontaneity: Athens and Mexico City." *City* 18 (4–5): 563–572. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2014.939478>.
- Philipson Garcia, D., J. True, A. Abbashar, F. Akbari, P. Asadi, I. Aung, R. Dadpour, et al. 2025. "Is Scholar-Activism an Oxymoron? Reflecting on the Challenges and Opportunities for Scholarly Activism or Activist Scholarship in the Politics and Gender Field." *Politics & Gender*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X25000194>.
- Pluciński, P. 2020. "Henri Lefebvre's Second Life. The Real Utopia of the Right to the City in Contemporary Poland." *History of European Ideas* 46 (8): 1107–1121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2020.1761649>.
- Postill, J., and S. Pink. 2012. "Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a

- Messy Web." *Media International Australia* 145 (1): 123–134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X1214500114>.
- Purcell, M. 2002. "Excavating Lefebvre: The Right to the City and Its Urban Politics of the Inhabitant." *GeoJournal* 58 (2/3): 99–108. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:GEJO.0000010829.62237.8f>.
- Purcell, M. 2013. "The Right to the City: The Struggle for Democracy in the Urban Public Realm." *Policy and Politics* 41 (3): 311–327. <https://doi.org/10.1332/030557312X655639>.
- Purcell, M. 2022. "Theorising Democratic Space with and beyond Henri Lefebvre." *Urban Studies* 59 (15): 3041–3059. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980211067915>.
- Rezvani Naraghi, A. 2023. *A Social History of Modern Tehran: Space, Power, and the City*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009188906>.
- Rivetti, P., and S. Saeidi. 2018. "What Is So Special about Field Research in Iran? Doing Fieldwork in Religiously Charged Authoritarian Settings." In *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges*, edited by J. A. Clark and F. Cavatorta, 35–45. Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190882969.003.0003>.
- Schmid, C. 2024. "Keeping Our Thinking in Motion: Response to the Lefebvre Symposium." *Raumforschung und Raumordnung | Spatial Research and Planning* 82 (5): 450–453. <https://doi.org/10.14512/rur.2968>.
- Sechi, G., and O. Golubchikov. 2025. "Neoliberalism as Space Fragmentation: A Lefebvrian Gaze at Post-socialist Urban Transitions." *Urban Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980251322410>.
- Sezer, C. 2020. "Visibility, Democratic Public Space and Socially Inclusive Cities." *Architecture and the Built Environment* 10 (04): 1–202. <https://doi.org/10.7480/ABE.2020.16.4604>.
- Simpson, A. 2007. "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship." *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* 9: 67–80. <https://www.junctures.org/index.php/junctures/article/view/66/60>.
- Staletović, B. 2022. "Captured City: Authoritarianism, Urban Space and Project Skopje 2014." *Nationalities Papers* 52:360–379. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2022.98>.
- True, J., A. Ahmadi, and A. Ross. 2023. *Gender Apartheid in Iran: Foreign Policy Responses*. Melbourne: Monash University. https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/AFFPC-Issues-paper-13_Gender-Apartheid-in-iran-and-FFP.pdf.
- Turok, I., and A. Scheba. 2018. "'Right to the City' and the New Urban Agenda: Learning from the Right to Housing." *Territory, Politics, Governance* 7 (4): 494–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2018.1499549>.
- Varró, K. 2025. "Provincialising Smart Urbanism Further, from the Global East: Articulating the Smart City in the Context of Hungary's Authoritarian State Capitalism." *Urban Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980251315946>.
- Yalda, T. 2023, December 28. حصارکشی نادرست اطراف تئاتر شهر تهران [Improper Fencing Around Tehran City Theatre]. Shargh. <https://www.sharghdaily.com/-بخش-یادداشت-65/911822-نادرست-اطراف-تئاتر-شهر-تهران>
- Yiftachel, O. 2009. "Theoretical Notes On 'Gray Cities': The Coming of Urban Apartheid?." *Planning Theory* 8 (1): 88–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095208099300>.