No longer a prison

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This chapter discusses the political role of architectural work and design in transforming a prison into a museum and recreational centre. The text focuses on Qasr Prison, the first civil prison in Iran, designed by the Russian-Iranian architect Nikolai Markov in 1927 in Tehran. Built in 1790, the prison's site was originally a royal palace; it is from this that its name, Qasr – meaning palace – was taken. Later, in 1953, a new building was added out of necessity, due to the increasing number of political prisoners. It was only in 2003 that the prison was shut down. In 2008 a decision was made to transform it into a museum and a recreational centre, and it became Qasr Museum-Garden. The text expands the role of architecture beyond the design of the building and into designing carceral logistics as well as constructing performing grounds for state propaganda.
Figure 01. Qasr Prison in the 20th century, Qasr Museum-Garden. 2016. Source: Author

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The Cold Waters of Qasr Prison

To drink cold water (aab khonak khordn) is Persian slang for being imprisoned. The phrase originated from the location of Iran’s first modern prison, Qasr Prison, in the prosperous and verdurous outskirts of old Tehran, in the Khorram Abaad hills, rich with subterranean springs. From those springs flowed the cleanest and coolest water in Tehran, and thus the phrase to drink cold water entered the language as an ironic allegory for being imprisoned – the irony being the connection of a pure and refreshing element in the hot summers of Tehran and an intimidating and cruel institution that the poet Farokhi Yazdi (who was himself assassinated in that prison) called “the cold-hearted fortress of Qajar Palace” (Ebrahimzadeh, 2012). The site on which Qasr Prison was built had been a royal palace in the Qajar Dynasty, and the site has gone through various histories as power systems changed in different periods. Relating Qajar Palace to the prison points towards both the history of the site and serves as a metaphor for connecting palaces, as the loci of power, to tyranny and oppression. From palace to military camp to prison and finally to a museum garden. Qasr Prison and its history as an institution have not only played important roles in various historical moments, but also impacted culture and language, becoming interwoven with stories of the city and its inhabitants. In this chapter, I review the various phases of the site’s transformation, and the prison’s historical background and its deep entanglement with memories, language, literature and politics, whilst also discussing how the work of architecture has played a political role in this story. By focusing largely on the final episode of the story – that is, the opening up of the Qasr Prison and its transformation into the Qasr Museum-Garden – I expand the role of architecture in the logistics and politics of such a transformation and ask what it means politically to open up a prison in that specific socio-political context, and how architecture performs in this political project.

The Cold-Hearted Fortress of Qajar Palace
The story – or stories – of the site on which Qasr Museum-Garden, the former prison, is located goes back more than two hundred years. Layer by layer, these stories have been written on the site throughout its history; from the Qajar kings marching amongst the trees in the palace garden, to the soldiers gathering at annual ceremonies. From those imprisoned from various crimes and offenses writing on the walls of their cells to contemporary artists holding concerts and exhibitions there. Qajar Palace, a summer palace for the kings of Qajar Dynasty, was in fact the beginning of the story of Qasr Prison. In 1790, many years before the prison was built, Fath-Ali Shah, a king of the Qajar dynasty, ordered a royal palace to be built in the Khorram Abaad hills, which were beyond the gates of old Tehran at the time. The palace, then, was built on top of a hill and surrounded by a garden. Khorram Abaad – as is clear from its etymology: Khorram (خرم) means prosperous – was famed for its prosperity and greenery with rich subterranean water sources and pleasant weather; this made it a perfect summer destination for the king in the hot summers of Tehran. Fath-Ali Shah spent three months a year there and welcomed guests from Iran and abroad to this Qajar Palace, which quite resembled a fortress with a watchtower on each of its four corners. Perched on a slope, the palace overlooked a grand garden, with plenty of trees, streams and a central pergola. The popularity of the palace diminished significantly after Fath-Ali Shah. It was used sporadically for annual ceremonies during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah, but completely lost its initial function during the monarchy of Mozafar al-Din Shah, when its main building was allocated for military functions and the detention of war captives. Other surrounding buildings were disused and already on their way to becoming ruins.

Figure 02: The map of Qajar Qasr on the current map of Tehran. Source: Najmi

The fortress-like architecture of the palace, with the defensive expression described in Farrokhi Yazdi’s poem, was already prepared to host an army and serve as a military camp. But with the occasional detention of war captives there during the reign of Mozafar al-Din Shah, the story of the site gradually began to deviate from leisure to discipline, from a summer palace to prison. In 1905, nature interrupted the gradual transformation. The palace sustained severe damage after a heavy flood and landslide; the palace was
almost destroyed, and the site was left in ruins. The only thing left were the remnants of a once-royal palace.

Figure 03, 04: Qajar Palace in Khorram Abaad Hills in 18th Century. Source: Najmi

When the Pahlavi Dynasty rose to power after Qajar, the project of modernization gained speed under the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi. Reza Shah adopted the western modern structures in Iran and founded institutions such as prisons, which had not existed in that form previously. While the initial idea of building a new civil prison goes back to the end of Qajar Dynasty, when the ministry of defence was run by Swedish counsellors, it was ultimately realised in the Pahlavi Dynasty and by Reza Shah (Manouchehrzadeh, 2020). He started the reform of prison systems and conducts of punishment in the early 1920s, after sending his representatives to New York and London to attend international conferences on the reform of prisons and punishment. The increase in the number of political dissidents accelerated the realisation of a modern prison and in 1927, Reza Shah ordered the construction of the first civil prison in Iran on the site of the few remains of the Qajar Palace. Reza Shah appointed the Russian-Iranian architect Nikolai Markov to design the prison, calling it Qasr Prison – or palace prison – after Qajar Palace (‘Iranian Political Prisoner Cells to Turn into a Museum’). Markov designed a complex brick building with long arms that met at octagonal joints and encompassed internal courtyards. The prison had four parts and consisted of 192 cells that could accommodate 800 inmates. Each part was designated for a different type of crime: Prison 01 was for ordinary prisoners. Prison 02 held political prisoners, and Prison 03 was for political leaders. The fourth prison, which was initially a clinic, eventually became a youth detention centre.

Figure 05: An octagonal space in Qasr Musuem-Garden, Markov’s Prison. 2016. Source: Author

The design of the octagonal joints as meeting places aimed to complicate the sequences of movements and logistics in the prison. Upon entering the octagonal halls, one faces eight exits; hence it was difficult for inmates to find their way. The design of the structure was intended to disorient the inmates and hinder any possible escape plan. These
octagonal spaces had various functions, including administrative functions, but they were mainly used for interrogation and torture. The function of this architectural element travelled beyond the building’s walls, entering the Persian language as the slang expression *going under octagon* (زیر هشت، *zire e hasht*), meaning to be tortured or interrogated. With time, the phrase was also used whenever prisoners were taken out of their cells for any administrative reasons; *going under octagon* generally indicated an encounter between the prisoners and the warders or prison officers. It is where the guards and prisoners meet and decisions are made, and it is ultimately a place of hope or despair, a turning point facing towards eight possible turns, or more.

Markov’s prison proved insufficient to hold the growing numbers of dissidents however, and in 1953 a new building was added for the increasing number of political prisoners (‘Political Prison’). This building, called Political Prison, is aesthetically different from the older brick buildings; it was constructed in concrete with a brutal form that corresponded materially to its function. It was located at a distance from the old prison on the north-east part of the site. Following the completion of the building, all of the political prisoners who had been exiled to different parts of the country were relocated to this prison. The building is still a reminder of the many big names – political activists and thinkers – who were imprisoned there until the 1979 Revolution. During the Revolution, Qasr Prison was liberated by the revolutionary forces, and ‘masses of people ran into Qasr, to welcome their imprisoned families and celebrate their freedom’ (Soltani, 2016, p 50).

After the Revolution, the prison briefly became a location of the Revolutionary Tribunal, but soon, with the stabilisation of the new regime, the two buildings of Qasr Prison continued to exist only for ordinary prisoners – mainly because, as Zohreh Soltani writes: ‘the prison became an important symbol of the socio-political struggles of Iranian society under the rule of the Pahlavis’ (p 48), and the new regime wanted to make a historical break from that period. In 2003, the prison ceased to function as a prison and was shut down. The plan to transform it into a museum and a recreational centre for the public was approved in 2008 (Laylin, 2013). Following the approval of the plan, the Tehran-based architectural office Experimental Branch of Architecture was commissioned to transform and renovate the complex. The doors of the former prison finally opened to the public in
2013; it had been dressed up with clean architectural details and hosted recreational activities to lighten the dark and heavy history of the prison. In this way, Qasr Prison left the network of the juridical system and continued its life as a new institution.

**Prisoners on the Move: Carceral Logistics and Preparing the Ground as Work of Architecture**

One important aspect in the architecture of prisons is the design and control of the sequences of movements and various daily routines within the prison walls, whilst also reducing the chances for escape or leakage of sensitive information. Every single prison is an isolated space, contained and disconnected from the rest of the everyday life spaces, but at once also part of a larger network of a carceral and juridical system. Prisons are considered spaces of containment, restricted movements and stillness, and looking at them through the lens of logistics and movement brings another dimension to the understanding of these spaces and the infrastructures thereof. Carceral logistics put the focus on movement and mobility, which is usually invisible in such spaces. As Iolanthe Brooks and Asha Best write in their ‘Prison Fixes and Flows: Carceral Mobilities and Their Critical Logistics’, ‘examining the carceral state through movement shifts our perspective from the warehousing of people to the prison’s necessary mobilities’ and shows how prisons are ‘fundamentally networked’ (Brooks & Best, 2021, 3-4). In this network, bodies and things move in between prisons, courts, detention centres, police stations, hospitals, and other institutions. Things and supplies enter and exit the prisons as material support for prison life.

Figure 06. The main prison door, Qasr Museum-Garden. 2016. Source: Author

While such logistics sustain the life of prisons, they also create openings and weak points for leaks and escape. The need for such connections make it impossible to render prisons perfectly impermeable. ‘Doors, windows or any opening that debilitates the perfection of the containment beckons’ the prisoner to the world outside (Karami, 2016). When the walls of the prison are cut, the institution is interrupted and the power is questioned and challenged. When the prison as an institution of control and discipline is cut open, either through a single escape, or a collective one during a revolution or a war, the stability of
power and the efficiency of control are questioned. Yet, when a prison is opened up by
the controlling power itself, for reasons of renovation or transformation of its function,
other dimensions are involved. Although escape and transfer are completely different
within the carceral system and space, they both work through the design of logistics, and
when realised, represent absence in one place and presence elsewhere. They both create
voids in the network of juridical system, and the process of creation of such voids is
interesting to investigate from the point of view of logistics as well as spatial
performativity. In either case, what creates that void and how it will be filled or dealt with is
a political question.

Qasr Prison experienced several such episodes of void, of which the most significant were:
a collective escape of ten political activists in 1950 (Majidi 2020); the liberation of the
prison by revolutionaries during 1979 Revolution; and the closure of the prison in 2003.
From the point of view of spatial performativity, each of these can be described as a
playwright, with detailed design of characters, scenography and logistics. The stories of
escape and breaking a prison open are interesting and significant in the story of Qasr
Prison. In this text however, I focus particularly on the controlled opening of the prison in
2003 and describe it in relation to the work of architecture and the political role it plays.

In the video From Qajar Palace to Qasr Museum Garden (2015), the story of Qasr Prison,
from its first origins as a palace to its inauguration as a museum, is depicted by animated
archive material such as drawings, photos and films, as well as the renovation process and
its inauguration ceremonies. While various historical moments are shown throughout the
film, there is no mention of the logistics or transfer of the prisoners and the institution
itself to another location, when the prison closed down in 2003 and remained closed until
2008. Obviously, this phase is not depicted for security reasons; nevertheless, it is an
interesting phase of the story that can be imagined as one phase of the architectural work
of transforming a prison into a museum.

In the network of the juridical system, a prison turning into a museum suddenly leaves the
system and creates a void in that network. This departure is not completed overnight; it
requires a long process of planning and moving. The transformation of the prison from a
closed and controlled space into a public space requires detailed preparations and
decision-making for relocation, transportation, and evacuation, or more generally, the
design of the logistics, its infrastructures and sequences of movements. Following the
relocation of the prisoners, the clearing of the prison spaces should also be undertaken for
security reasons to purge the space of any evidence of an ongoing system of punishment,
particularly when the prison is transformed under the same juridical system. In the
moment of evacuation, the architecture of a prison becomes a stage that gradually arrives
at a moment of silence. The prison becomes a point of departure. Doors open – not to
freedom, but to another prison. After the dislocation, what is left is an empty container
that has lost the bodies upon which control and confinement were once imposed. At this
moment, architecture is suddenly unburdened from its controlling and disciplining
mechanism. It becomes a container that could host any other activity. It manifests a
chasm. This chasm lasted five years in Qasr Prison.

The call for an architectural proposal for the evacuated Qasr Prison immediately summons
to mind an image of an in-between phase – an empty prison with unlocked doors, empty
cells, no prisoners, no warders – and points towards the previously hidden process of
preparing the site to host a new function; the phase when the architect is still absent and
the architectural design in its disciplinary connotation has not yet begun. Yet, this
preparation phase could be also understood as a work of architecture, although not
undertaken by architects. This phase could be read as preparing the ground for
architecture work, and thereby – in this very project – the construction of a political
performing ground.

Similar to architecture that designs sequences of movements and pauses in space, this
dislocation could also be understood as an architecture that forces, controls, captivates
and moves people and things in different sequences. The story itself, the moving of the
disciplined bodies from one prison to another, could be an act of architecture through
*evacuation*. If architecture creates sequences of movements in space and creates
connections or disconnections between humans and nonhuman things, then the act of
evacuation could be read as an architectural act that transforms a space of control into an
empty space or a moment of total silence. This silence could be filled with various voices,
sounds, or noises, or it can be kept intact. Each architectural decision in this context directs the project toward a different political statement that tells us what it could mean when a prison is no longer a prison.

Figure 07. Qasr Museum-Garden, prison courtyard. 2016. Source: Author

A Visit to the Prison: The Politics of Opening up a Prison

I walk into Café Markov. A piano is playing amidst cheers; one drowns out the other. The espresso machine hisses. Within a few seconds Adele’s voice prevails, filling the space: ‘I let it fall, my heart, And as it fell you rose to claim it, It was dark and I…’

The lyrics fade into the clink of spoons stirring in teacups, voices chatting, footsteps, chairs being pushed and pulled, strangers, familiar faces, sounds, gazes, smells, noises, words; then memories emerge: the echoing roar of metal doors, voices dropping in the middle of a cabin visit, fingers completing the last utterances on the glass. A history appears in its pieces: This used to be a prison.

The café is only one small part of the huge complex of Qasr Museum-Garden in Tehran. The Café Markov – also known as Café Architect – is named after the architect of the original prison Nikolai Markov. Qasr Prison has a significant place in the history of political fights against totalitarian regimes and continuous struggle for democracy in Iran, as it held many political prisoners and thinkers from almost all political parties and under various political systems over eight decades. As many of the former prisoners say, it was one of the rare places where thinkers with opposing political positions and diverging opinions cohabited and could continue political debates and discussion among themselves (Manouchehrzadeh 2020). Their presence in one space and under the same condition also brought their families closer together outside the prison. This condition ended with the 1979 Iranian Revolution and soon after the stabilisation of the new regime, the prison held only ordinary inmates; after the revolution, political prisoners were kept in other prisons. This was already a discontinuity in the history of Qasr Prison and its place in the
collective memory of the people in regard to the history of political struggles and the story of political prisoners.

Figure 08. Café Markov, Qasr Museum Garden. 2016. Source: Author
Figure 09. Qasr Museum-Garden. 2016. Source: Author
Figure 10. Qasr Museum-Garden, glass corridors added to the old prison. 2016. Source: Author

Nowadays, the central watchtower and the original main door of the prison – which almost every Tehraner or former visitor to the prison remembers – are still standing, and the prison yard has been opened to the city, becoming an extension of it and acting as a lung for the densely built surrounding neighbourhood. Today, the building hosts various cultural activities, concerts, exhibitions, seminars and discussions in its various galleries, library, conference halls and cafés. It has successfully attracted a broad public since its inauguration. While this complex is doubtlessly an asset to a highly populated and densely built city like Tehran, which suffers from a lack of open public spaces, one cannot forget the history of fear and imprisonment attached to it, even in its new function.

The carefully renovated Qasr Prison with its old ochre brick walls and pointed arch windows that have been retrofitted with glass walls in dark brown coated metal frames and thin bracings, surrounded by a garden of sycamore and cypress trees, has become a hub for artists and thinkers and a city park and museum for a larger public to stroll around. The corridors have become calm and relaxing spaces amidst columns of light and shadow. It is still silent, and the footsteps on the brick floor echo through space. The architecture office Experimental Branch of Architecture, which carried out the design and renovation of Qasr Museum-Garden, worked mainly with the older parts of the prison – namely the brick buildings also known as Markov Prison – and the garden. An effort has been made to play with the materials and aesthetics to produce a liberating space borne out of a state proposal and a building that was originally built to confine. The application of layers of light and transparent walls, light bracings, light hanging stairs, and open spaces offers a contrast to the massive walls of the former prison, which was a solid and closed architectural structure. It is a humble approach to the revival of the materials and
spaces of a historical building with its brick walls, arches and wooden doors, one that tries to make the horrifying space of the prison look habitable. The renovation has effectively lightened this heavy building, burdened as it was with a hefty history of fear and imprisonment, by means of delicate architectural design and renovation. But what does bringing light into the space of a prison with architectural means enable? Does this aesthetic play cover something more important to question in the political body of the state?

Figure 11. A corridor ending at an octagonal space in Markov’s Prison. 2016. Source: Author

Opening up a former prison and transforming it into a museum and a cultural and recreational centre is a widespread practice across the world. As one form of ‘dark tourism’ that, in Peter E. Tarlow’s words, is identified as ‘visitations to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives’, prison tourism remains a political project of representing punishment and control in the past (2005). At the same time, such museums not only represent a juridical system and its spaces in the past, but they also reconstruct the people’s imaginations of the contemporary prisons (Welch & Macuare 2011: xx). Like other museums that are concerned with the ‘conservation and display of architecture and artefacts of historical, social and/or cultural importance or interest’ (Barton & Brown, 2015: 238), prison museums also transform the spaces of suffering and often their objects of discipline and torture into ‘artefacts’ to display. Alana Barton and Alyson Brown write that the intention to preserve such structures and display their objects ranges from ‘purposes of aesthetics, education and conservation to entertainment and commercial profit’ (2015: 238). But beyond the commercialisation of a history of suffering and horror, such museum projects raise more questions about what political statements they wish to make with such transformations.

Figure 13: Farrokhi Yazdi, the poet, in his cell in Qasr Prison. Markov Prison. 2016. Source: Author
Prison architecture as a modern institution is to move “beyond constructing the image of power to becoming an active power in itself”, in Keller Easterling’s words (2014, 40). An architectural commission that opens up a prison to a public cannot be detached from that very active power. The modern prison is a place in which modern techniques of control are revealed in their unbridled operation. The architecture of prisons is the most exemplary form of an architecture that maximizes control and normalizes human behaviour. It is ‘an organizer of human behavior’ and ‘an active power in itself” instead of representing that power (Paez 2014, 44). Based on the modern concept of prison, the state organizes human behaviour not by punishment, but by instruction (Carbonell 2024, 46). This instructing is done by institutions that are organized around ‘the idea of discipline as a structuring force for morality’ (46). Following such an argument, spatial instruments of modern institutions are powerful tools assisting the instruction for morality and reform. As Roger Paez writes in *Critical Prison Design*, such instruction, or such a correcting mechanism, became a new role for modern architecture that started with the prison project and continued to hospitals, housing, factories and public space (2014, 44). The instruction towards normalization and reform effectuated through architecture reveals the role of architecture in the reinforcement of a political agenda within a context by way of design.

In this way, a transformed prison can be a very strong ground for that power to perform such instruction on one hand and stage its propaganda on the other hand, and reinforce it by means of architecture. In the project of Qasr Prison, turning the older prison corridors into galleries and exhibition spaces mixed with various cultural and recreational activities while some of the cells of well-known political figures have been kept intact detaches the prison from its contemporary context and represents it as historical heritage. Looking at prisons as modern institutions that are oriented toward reform rather than punishment (Carbonell 2024, p 46) also suggests that the transformation of Qasr Prison into a museum and recreational centre could be read through the concept of reform. Soltani writes: ‘Once the prison is turned into a museum, it is circumscribed with a well-defined identity, meaning, and target’ (2016, p 52). This reform happens through a selective narrative of the history and limiting the visitor with one dominant and master narrative.
A selective narrative approach of this kind is even more present in the renovation of the other building, the concrete building on the site that was added much later and housed only political prisoners. The building is located far from the main entrance and is somehow separate from the rest of the complex and its ongoing cultural activities. In contrast to the rest of the complex, this prison building has been left nearly intact. The cells, the torture rooms, the yard, and the visiting spaces are open to the public, and some selected former prisoners work as prison tour guides, narrating their own stories. Sound installations, historical documentation of the prisoners and the dark and empty cells with doors left ajar create the illusion that it is still a prison. Walking in the space is frightening; it feels like the building’s function as a prison has just been temporarily interrupted; there is a sense that the space could resume serving as a prison at any moment. Despite the older brick prison that tries to represent itself as a historical building and strongly assert what it is not, i.e., it is no longer a prison, this building stands there, creating a moment of pause, a silence that triggers uncertainty about whether it is still a prison, as if its function were on hold. Rather than accentuating its change of use, it is exposed in this moment of emptiness, as though the prisoners have only just left and as if it can continue to be a prison. At the same time, it gives some gestures of the current codes that can work as a tool to discipline society by invoking fear and intimidation.

What is present in both approaches to the renovation of the two buildings is the representation of the political statement by the state in terms of mechanism of control and discipline, and codes of justice, by drawing a line between the past and present, and taking distance from the past by rendering the current system as a more fair and just system. As Soltani writes: ‘In Qasr, the direct influence of politics on the transformation of the space has left almost no space for the interpretive action on the side of the observer’ (2016, p 52). Through a selective narrative and well-defined identity, the prison
transformed into a museum has put an end to the history of Qasr Prison and created a discontinuity, specifically in the history of political struggles and the lives of political prisoners until the present moment.

Figure 17. Prison corridors and cells, Political Prison, Qasr Museum-Garden, 2016. Source: Author.

Afterword
Opening up a prison that was originally designed to confine, hide, control and punish is a complicated task for architecture. When the prison stops serving its initial function and is planned to become a representation of its own story, exhibiting its own history as a museum, architecture becomes an effective tool to realize a political agenda. Symbolically, the transformed prison could stand for a reformed society by the state, where the need for a prison has become something that existed in the past, as a discontinued history. Such a project simply says: There is no prisoner. The opened-up prison becomes a stage upon which the absence of prisoners could be a symbolic performance of a politically open society. As in many other similar projects, in the transformation of the Qasr Prison into a museum, architecture is complicit with the dominant power to reinforce such a political statement. But does the story of architecture stop here? Could architecture do more than aestheticizing the material in a former prison and instead present possibilities for bringing liberating potential into a very closed space and its relations? Could the project of transforming the prison into a museum construct an open ground for the multiplicity of narratives in the history of political struggles, not as a finished story, but an ongoing one?
References:


