Houses without Content; Showcasing Housing Boom in Spain and Mehr Housing Plan in Iran after the year 2000

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ABSTRACT
Architectural speculation that occurred in Spain in early 2000s via numerous residential and touristic projects, and the one started in Iran in mid 2000s under the credit of gigantic governmental project to provide house for everybody in the country, are the studied in this text. The history of both share some common cause (excuse) and effects (aftermath). Like other types of large-scale speculations, they all grounded on political morbid relations and unbalanced economic status. Yet more than just being political, the reasoning also deals with some social pull forces, like ownership culture and tourism trend, that accelerate architectural speculation. The side-effects are also environmental and cultural. From one side architectural speculation entails excessive consumption of land, energy and resource, while on the other hand the vacant houses (the fruits), very eclectic in style and regardless of cultural motifs of the context lack a reasonable relation with urban cores.

INTRODUCTION
The story of recent speculation in Spain became a pretext for pondering on the mission of architecture, especially in respect to social housing. Not only speculation in Spain caught national and international press attention, but also informed the globe about a dangerous position that architecture obtained. Nevertheless it is needless to prove that this clearly happens all around the world, particularly in countries that do not have a liberal atmosphere and such news cannot be easily distributed there. However, as the speculation widens more, its aftermath leaks more into financial structure and the very nature of architectural vocation as well. Thus becomes evident in everyday life, which is by itself a danger signal. Not only in Spanish case but also in insemination of Mehr Housing Plan in Iran, the speculative construction are established based on a morbid relationship between builders and political powers, they also depict that never community –or in a general definition subject of the design- was under consideration, although they are built in the name of community. By over-budget construction and producing inaccessible houses, architecture negates its substantial affair which is building to live, and strolls in the realm of a financial practice that ends in anti-architecture.

By the aid of social activists and their illuminating/provocative actions, especially on internet, the repulsive story of Spanish speculation could eventually obtain international attentions. [1] According to the website [2] Citizen Coordinator in Defense of the Territory, for instance, never in the history of Europe had there been such a devastating use of territory. In respect to what is called a “wild speculation” by this reference, there are now three million empty houses. The message of this report is clear and disastrous; we are about to encounter effacing humanness from this preoccupied territory. After presidential election on 2013, political direction of Iranian government quite remarkably altered, particularly in domestic problems. This shift opened up a field to unravel malfunctions of the most beloved project in the time of Ahmadinejad’s presidential, Mehr Housing Plan. Nevertheless new government, from the beginning until present was the biggest criticizer of this project. On his last speech on this topic, president Rouhani declared that previous government had to print more than 16 billion USD just for Mehr Project, which eventually wrecked the financial structure of country with the inflation of 40%. [3] By great reflection of these situations in media, I think now the path to study cause and effects in both speculations is well paved and ready to open a window to international discourse. The premise of this text
is that the product of architectural speculation, like what Giorgio Agamben postulates for modern art products, is generally becoming independent form its content.

**Excuse:**

Architectural speculation, like any other types of speculation, entails a dubious political procedure that might refer to embezzlement, money laundering, implementation of mafias etc. Regardless of the level of its political engagement, the very reasons (perhaps better to say excuses) that trigger speculative actions are not necessarily manipulated. In other words, architectural speculation can be seen as a foxy-opportunistic deal or either a big mistake in property/construction management. Intentionally or unintentionally, at any rate, it is rooted back in some socio-financial sequences which embarks on over-budget construction and its various vigorous malfunctions.

Recession is a universal reason that can lead to emerge of inaccessible houses. Recent experiences show how recession occurs beyond the geographical borders, since over past thirty years both developing and advanced economies had fought with real estate bubbles. [4] Perhaps the major financial crises in developed countries were in Spain 1977, Norway 1987, Finland and Sweden 1991, and Japan 1992. [5] Recession can obviously cause increase of costs and prices and eventually substantial downturns in residential construction. A good example is evaluated by Gjerstad S., Smith V.L. (2014) in ten postwar U.S. recessions that –with the single exception of the 2011 recession– ended up with considerable decline in house makings. [6] However, on the other hand it can be potentially motivated by uncontrolled focus on residential construction on the scale of the whole country. Spain for instance, has experienced two influential construction streams in last forty years. The first boom in the early 1970s happened just before the 1977 recession and was linked to late industrial development and largely to a real housing need. And the second boom, in the early 2000s (just before financial crisis that started in 2008), in a context of a postindustrial economy, was characterized by an increase in housing construction as investment rather than for real use. [7]

![Figure 1](image_url)

**Fig. 1:** Distribution of major speculations in Spain; the interactive map provided by “elmundo.es” website with detailed regional information about each case.

Like the recent Spanish case, the governmental construction boom in Iran, under the title of Mehr Housing Plan, took place in contemporaneity of an unbalanced economic situation. Commenced in mid 2000s, government budget spent for provision of adequate housing for all citizens, especially low-income ones, with a strong emphasis (by all means). [8] It was about this time that international sanctions against Iranian government started to rising up, and the economic pressure gradually led to evacuation of all the national treasuries. One important difference between Iranian and Spanish cases of architectural speculation is that Mehr Housing Plan was by and large very much governmental. The government in this sense was very proud to apply the idea of industrial techniques of construction, which are due to advertisements fast and cheap. A historic example of such boom of residential construction, careless about style but affordable and easily buildable instead, was prefab movement of Japanese postwar construction, which is mainly known as “system built house”. [9] To convey the size of this project, it is worthy to know that, by excluding 8 metropolitan areas of the
country, national government aspired to implant these little towns adjacent to all cities over the whole country. The decision was as big as reconstructing the country after war. 

The postwar effects on construction fashion are universally very significant. Lack of housing in Spain in this respect from the early postwar period had deeply entrenched the residential culture as it promoted ownership as a model of investment. [10] Although construction movement in Iran after war against Iraq does not effectively influence on Mehr Housing Plan, but the ownership culture in Iranian instance is important to be considered as it is in Spanish case. Generally speaking, building as a property is known as the safest investment, especially for ordinary people. A big amount of money is spent on construction in both countries, which needs to be reconsidered from the point that it naturally entails huge energy and material consumption and leaves severe impacts on social aspects of life posthumously. The construction budget in Iran fluctuates every year, due to the political context, nevertheless the fact that residential buildings in Iran do not last for a long time, has been consistent for decades. Even though the number of architects and architecture students are increasing, the construction regulations are being regularly revised, and transnational professional practices are happening more and more, the beneficial age of houses in Iran are almost one third of international standards, between 20 and 30 years in average. [11] This, more than any statics, shows how waste of money in this so-called investment is extensive. It is similarly happening in Spain, where the construction budget is taking 11 percent of GDP, which in comparison to EU norm (5.8 percent) is almost double. [12] The result in both instances is uncountable vacant houses.

In Spain a big excuse for emergence of such phenomenal speculation is the trend in tourism. Plenty of touristic towns, in various sizes, have been built in this context to equip the beach tourism interest as much as possible. However they have gone a bit far. What has been built in terms of dwellings for foreigners and tourists, exceeded the real need for that and its legitimate territory, since the coastline lands were soon occupied and the construction wave went inevitably further to the area of influence of 15-20km. [13] Like any other financial project that overrates housing construction, various touristic structures will leave so many vacant living areas. The tourism trend also does alter the focus from fulfilling real requirements to following the brand in design. The corresponding phenomenon in Iran is not directly affecting Mehr Housing Plan, but its evolution and fruits afterward is worthy of study. Due to impediments in Islamic regulation, there actually do not exist beach tourism, as it is known in international vocabulary. Hence, the Islamic government does not willingly finance on big housing projects in coastline. However, especially in coastline of Caspian Sea, there is an aged villa-construction boom that depicts an influential tendency among people from other cities to taste the beach fashion as long as Islamic/governmental regulations allow them to do so. In the result of this housing boom so many vacant villas - which characterized by chaotic design manners - leave in different parts of urban fabric. Also this construction trend is a verdict for Iranian culture of ownership, since most of the middle and upper class populace of big cities invest on villa construction for their vacations or they just construct to sell it because most of the time – due to inflation and other market factors - the price of a new house has considerably increased, compare to the time that one starts to build it up.

Aftermath:

The fruits of architectural speculation, the phenomenon we are now facing in Spain and Iran are of course financial troubles that occur in construction market and may attack other financial fields of society. But moreover, these aftereffects have cultural features that can plausibly infect on divergent ranges, easily conceal and last longer. If such qualitative factors gain attention in academic and professional level, they will supposedly imply treatment and solution, but if the focus remains on quantitative data of financial aftermath, the house again becomes degraded as a commodity to buy and sell. Hence, the aim of this article from now on is to highlight some aftermath of architectural speculation which entails a sort of cultural characteristic; they all in all indicate that house does lose its content as a living place in speculative procedure.

Before entirely leaving financial effects behind, it is worthy to bear in mind that architectural speculation in any rate is entangled with excessive consumption of land, recourse and energy. Just taking energy factor and reviewing national reports of energy consumption in different sectors depicts the crucially importance of rethinking residential construction. In Iran, with obtaining 40% at the end of year 2006 (a year before the Mehr Housing kickoff) and 37% in 2011 [14] (the year the malfunctions of the project become rather obvious for everybody), residential and commercial usage has been the main consumer sector. The figures of the year 2006 shows that, with 7.2% increase, the residential and commercial usage experienced the fastest growth in energy consumption among other sectors. [15] This is a long way through scientific analysis of energy and resource consumption, but also from this general statics crops up annually, one can estimate the extent of expenditure. The excessive consumption in figures may also refer the change in handling patterns of buildings and the need for more equipment and appliances to support the activities by contain, which seems to occur more drastically in Spain rather than Iran. Between 1990 and 2004 energy use in Spanish buildings increased by 56% per capita (with only a 12% increase in Europe over the same period) and a 38% increase in energy use per household. [16] The other reason in both countries is housing boom that happened literally without a real call for it. When,
for whatever reason, the construction is taking place, natural sources and materials are inevitably eaten up. So the solution is stopping unnecessary constructions and also improving efficiency in buildings. This is the path that Spain should get inured to, because due to new standard in Europe all new public buildings have to be nearly zero-energy buildings by the end of 2018, a standard that will equally apply to all new private sector buildings after 2020. [17]

The other aspects of architectural speculation that deals with environmental relations of building to its context are what I all-inclusively call trivialization of landscape. What large-scale speculation projects unmask over urban fabric is basically a mass of vacant dwelling structures. These physical structures do not distinctly belong to anybody; there is no real user and the government or the builder company owns its credit rather than its actual space. So the practice of space is pretty ramshackle and vulnerable. Bubble houses are ghosts of living space, they are houses without content. Since mostly such projects are conducted in mega structure formats, they required an afield land to be grounded in, and accordingly they stuck to suburban area. The outcome in most cases lacks reasonable correspondence to an urban core.

Fig. 2: Mehr Complex in southern part of Rasht, north of Iran. The pictures show the difference in spatial organization of city from 2005 to 2014.

Fig. 3: Mehr Complex in eastern part of Marvdasht, south of Iran. The pictures show the difference in spatial organization of city from 2003 to 2014.

When urban context loses its significance in design process, style does not matter so much. Therefore a kind of eclecticism occurs. In cases triggered firmly by touristic trends, the design style is inclined to brands. When construction for the people with low-income is the case, the design remains in basics. Money is the most pivotal factor among others. House as a livable place, neighborhood as asylum for community, and construction as a real craft are not considered at all in these projects.

All practice of architecture like instances discussed above are samples of destruction through construction. although in this process a physical structure in the form of a house is being built, but since it lacks essentially presence of something that accredits its use as dwelling, it cannot really obtain the value of house. this the result of a great perversion in the craft of architecture, when the sociopolitical excuses make pure commodities out of cultural and natural benefits of house. the perversion in this respect reveals a type of architecture that is instrumentalized by political purposes, and “inaccessible housing” accordingly addresses to a new connotation of taste in modern art productions. the perverted taste results in a hollowed body of art production, independent of its required content. agmaben had already described this general annihilation very structurally in his the man without content with exemplifying many different artistic works. He argues “good tastes does not simply have a tendency to pervert itself into its opposite; it is, in some way, the very principle of any perversion, and its appearance in consciousness seems to coincide with the beginning of a process of reversal of all values and all contents” [18]. Similarly the housing boom happened recently in Spain and Iran, with the result of uncountable inaccessible houses and financial side-effects did actually abolish all the livability contents from houses.
REFERENCES

[1] Some websites that provide beneficial analytic data from all over the Spain are mentioned below:
[8] www.nosevende.org
[16] Concheiro, Isabel, 2.
[20] Ibid. p. 3