

The Bridge

Hassan Radoine

Within the space of a few short years Tabiat Bridge has become one of the landmarks of Tehran. Set in the Abbasabad Hills, the 270-m-long pedestrian bridge spans over a valley to connect two public parks on either side of Modarres Avenue, one of the city's major highways. The location provides respite from the nightmare of traffic-jam Tehran, with views of the whole city and the spectacular backdrop of the Alborz Mountains. Designed as a place 'to stay' rather than simply 'to pass',¹ the bridge generates different experiences for its users day and night, in accordance with the principle (a revolutionary one, for Iran) that the pedestrian should have priority over the car.

It is striking to note that the bridge is located in the very same area of north Tehran that Mohammad Reza Shah earmarked for his new ceremonial urban centre – a large plaza and two boulevards lined with government and commercial buildings, master-planned by Llewelyn Davies International. Construction of the complex began in 1975, but was abruptly halted by the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy in 1979. An earlier proposal for the site, solicited from Louis Kahn and Kenzo Tange, was left unfinished when Kahn died in March 1974, while the master plan for Tehran (1966–70), prepared jointly by Victor Gruen and Farmanfarmaian Associates, also came to naught. All three proposals were responses to demands for the rapid modernisation of Tehran – demands that would lead the city into a 'tragedy of development'.²

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the country began to rebuild after the Islamic Revolution and the eight-year Iran–Iraq war, proposals by local firms paved the way for a final master plan, which was drawn up by Naqsh-e-Jahan Pars, the practice directed by Seyed Hadi Mirmiran. With its hilly topography making it naturally resistant to the march of high-rise residential development, the area was now designated a green zone with low-rise public spaces. Later, in 2008, the municipality of Tehran launched an invited competition to design the bridge, teaming up with young designers. The winning scheme goes beyond the bounds of a simple engineering structure to embrace the human dimension of design. The originality of Tabiat Bridge consists in its integration of architecture, structure, landscape and urban design. And this integration extends to its social dimension, as a space that invites all cultural and ethnic communities to use it, without restrictions.

Resting on two tree-shaped supports, the bridge's curved truss branches into multiple decks, offering a variety of places to walk, to gather, to sit, to share cultural activities. One type of bench is used throughout: made of

the same material as the paving, these seats seem to rise up directly from the deck, double-curved, wide at one end and narrow at the other, inviting use in many different ways. Likewise, the walking routes wind their way in a non-linear manner, encouraging human encounters and evoking, in a sense, the kind of experience one might traditionally have had walking through a medina. There is an evocation, too, of the tradition of building community and ceremonial bridges in Iran, the prime example of which is Khaju Bridge in Isfahan, constructed under the Safavid dynasty in 1650. A pioneering bridge for its time, it regulated the flow of the river as well as separating carts and horses from pedestrian ways.

Thus, the tradition of pedestrian bridges in Iran is not new, but here this art achieves a new dimension, fully integrating engineering and architecture. All the spaces of Tabiat Bridge are defined by its visible structural elements – its steel trusses. The complexity of the overall structure is underpinned by a rigorous geometry, revealed only when its different layers are seen in elevation and in plan. In this way, the design of the bridge explores an intricate geometry that insinuates a sense of order to generate a place of gathering within an environmentally and ecologically strategic location in Tehran.

¹ Interview with Leila Araghian, key architect-designer of Tabiat Bridge, Tehran, 26 April 2016.

² Farshid Emami, *Civic Visions, National Politics, and International Designs: Three Proposals for a New Urban Center in Tehran (1966–1976)*, MSc Thesis in Architecture Studies, MIT, 2011, 13.