

CHAPTER 13

Starting from the Mess: The “Environment-Worlds” of Architectural Research and Design

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Fig 13.1 Bells on top of the Abadan Technical Institute. (Source: Obodon.com)¹

Chimes are reverberating through the city. The thick smell of oil hangs in the hot, humid air, seeping forwards with every gentle breeze around the palm trees that line the pathway that leads to the Technical Institute of Abadan. The tap of black leather shoes ascending the steps at the building’s entryway rhyme with the chimes, enriching them with layers of curiosity, uncertainty, untold stories, and unseen dreams. The students rushing through the corridors bring in the lazy smell of oil. Sweaty bodies drift into the cooled-down classrooms; they are ready to learn all about oil, that black viscous substance that has brought the British Petroleum Company to this land.

The Technical Institute of Abadan was designed and built in 1939 by the British architect James Mollison Wilson – the architect of the British Petroleum Company – in Abadan in south-west Iran. On top of the building are three bells made by Gillett & Johnston Bell and Clock Manufacturing in Croydon, Surrey, in England. The bells used to be heard over the city of Abadan when they welcomed new students on the first day of every academic year. The bells continued to chime even after the nationalisation of oil and the dismissal of the British Petroleum Company in 1951, but they stopped after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. While students have continued to be educated at the institute, in the vicinity of these dormant bells, dictatorship, imposed wars, and external and internal colonisation have created what H el ene Frichot calls an “environment-world”² in which the architecture nearly disappears in a series of complex relations.

Abadan is the border city in the province of Khuzestan, and it is the home of the Middle East’s first oil refinery – one of the biggest in the world. Built and developed on oil economy after William D’Arcy’s team of engineers and geologists discovered oil in the outskirts of nearby town Masjed Soleyman in 1908, the city played an important role in British history in the Second World War, as well in Britain’s living standards from the 1920s to the 1940s, facilitating the move from coal to oil and paving the road for the arrival of modernity. Highlighting the role of Iranian oil in British history, Stephen Kinzer writes: “British cars, trucks and buses ran on cheap Iranian oil. Factories throughout Britain were fuelled by oil from Iran. The Royal Navy, which projected British power all over the world, powered its ships with Iranian oil.”³

The prominent role of Iranian oil in Britain is what made Winston Churchill call it “a prize from fairyland beyond our wildest dreams.” Churchill’s prize was a curse for the Iranians, however: it brought the country under the colonial rule of British Petroleum (or what was then called Anglo-Persian or Anglo-Iranian Oil Company) for more than forty years. As in every other colonial example, the colonisation didn’t stop at the exploitation of resources; a system of political manipulation was also needed to guarantee the monopoly over those resources. In his recent documentary *Coup 53*, Taghi Amirani shows how the colonisation of oil by Britain and its manipulation in the political system with the United States destabilised Iran forever. After the nationalisation of oil by Mohammed Mosaddegh in 1951 and the dismissal of British Petroleum soon after, MI6 and the CIA choreographed a coup d’ etat in 1953 to remove Mosaddegh from the political scene and to regain access to oil; the coup brought an end to the project of democracy in Iran and the Middle East and resulted in a tragedy and a mess that has been escalating since.⁴

This mess is where the Technical Institute of Abadan is situated. The building was created as an element in a larger constellation of built infrastructures to support forces of colonisation and exploitation of oil resources. Constructed at the intersection of social and political complexities in this context, it has not only lived and transformed along with political events, but has also actively

played a role in them. Besides being a historical building that has remained in operation on the site for nearly a century, it serves as evidence of how colonisation, through exploitation of natural resources, changes the course of history of a region and the life of its people forever. In this mess of colonisation, the exploitation of natural resources, various wars, dictatorship, ecological crisis, and social injustice, the institute, as a piece of colonial architecture, disappears and reappears in various instances. While the building inevitably carries its colonial legacy, its elements escape that legacy at critically political events, causing it to step back and fade into the background. In those moments of escape, the building becomes vulnerable, gives up its monumentality in service of a colonial period, and becomes an anti-monument to coloniality.

To examine the possibility of transforming a colonial piece of architecture into a decolonising infrastructure, I investigate how to expand those vulnerable moments during which the building becomes the antidote to its oppressive legacies and invites the multiplicities of narratives that are silenced or marginalised through colonisation processes. To do this, I apply two methods: watching the photograph, borrowed from Ariella Azoulay, and storytelling. The complex stories that buildings hold are not easily readable from looking at their photographs; one must delve deeper into the details that are inscribed in them over time. To be able to read those stories, we should start watching the photographs instead of looking at them, as Azoulay suggests, and expand the frame to the unframed and to what is not included in the photograph.⁵ While “watching” instead of looking at photographs animates a finished event and opens up a closed frame to new possibilities, storytelling changes the course of the colonising grand narratives and brings in other (hi)stories.

In the Disappearance of the Object

In her *Creative Ecologies: Theorizing the Practice of Architecture*, H el ene Frichot invites us to turn around an object-oriented and frontal approach to architecture that is carefully “framed and curated” and instead to allow “its facilitative background” to emerge and make architecture “near indistinguishable from these surroundings.” She writes: “This would be to allow the environment-worlds of architecture to be considered, as well as the minor characters who work away quietly at the periphery.”⁶ She describes the environment as what surrounds and supports all living things, where they do not passively exist but “reciprocally ‘environ[s]’ its local scenes through modes of action particular to its capacities.”⁷ She then expands these living things beyond living humans and non-human creatures to include “institutional arrangements and technological infrastructures.”⁸ These environments form the background when looking through the lens of architecture as object, where a contained and controlled environment is separated from its background. However, to challenge such a view and to

assist the “background” in taking over, one needs to contextualise the building in broader political and social relations of the site that have not only played roles in the creation of the building but have also had roles in how it has been transformed materially and institutionally. Through such a lens, one might wonder where the building starts and where it ends. This question renders a piece of architecture as more than a discrete object and expands it into a site, where the logistics of material movement, construction, labour, and the organisations involved in the creation of the building and its operation become part of architecture.

The methods through which we encounter, critically read, and inhabit architectural projects and sites play a significant role in making new trajectories and shifts in practices of architecture design and research. They also reveal what we mean by practice and what it can and cannot do in response to the social, political, and environmental crises. In her “Expanding Modes of Practice,” Bryony Roberts questions the “one-way street” architecture designers take “from idea to drawing to building” and dismantles this linearity by bringing in the “mess of labor, money, site conditions, trade collisions, political squabbling and occupancy,” asking: “What if that mess were the starting point?”⁹ To start from the mess, both in giving a critical reading of a piece of architecture and in designing one, is to embrace the complexity of the site and its environment-worlds and to interact with it. Staying with the mess throughout the process of design or critique would allow us to address the multiplicity of voices that construct the environment-worlds of architecture.

In reading an existing piece of architecture, storytelling is one way of staying with the complexity of the site that can make architecture as object fade in the cacophony of the mess that is integrated in its environment. Buildings carry evidence and are therefore storytelling creatures. Stories are inscribed in the building’s material and in its structure. Telling stories is to capture what is outside the perfect frame of architecture as an object and to pertain to the complexity of the context. Architecture has always been a powerful instrument in the discussion of colonisation, to represent the colonial power and to mark the land. To reverse the process, architecture and building could be an anchor for the story of decolonisation. To reconstruct the environment-world of a building for the project of decolonisation, we should make a choice about what stories we want to tell and which voices we want to be amplified and by means of what tools. In this text, the photograph is applied as the main material to reconstruct the story of Technical Institute of Abadan in order to tell decolonising stories.

In her *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Marguerite Yourcenar writes that “[t]o reconstruct is to collaborate with time gone by, penetrating or modifying its spirit, and carrying it toward a longer future.”¹⁰ There is a gap between the moment in which a photograph is taken and the time when one looks at it. “The photograph,” writes Ariella Azoulay, “exceeds any presumption of ownership or monopoly and any attempt at being exhaustive.”¹¹ There is more to read from a

photograph than how it is captioned. From a photograph, “some other event can be reconstructed,” “some other player’s presence can be discerned through it, constructing the social relations that allowed its production.”¹² Azoulay writes in *The Civil Contract of Photography*:

One needs to stop looking at the photograph and instead start watching it. The verb “to watch” is usually used for regarding phenomena or moving pictures. It entails dimensions of time and movement that need to be reinscribed in the interpretation of the still photographic image.¹³

Following Azoulay, the act of “watching” opens up an image to new meanings and (hi)stories to extract potentials and to reconstruct, not the event that the photograph bears, but the political ground that it suggests. In this text, the story of oil and colonisation is complicated by watching the two photographs of the institute: one as a monument of colonisation, claiming domination over the city via its form and elements, perfectly framed in a postcard, and the other a low-resolution picture of the semi-demolished building in the war that is stepping back from being a monument and representing a colonial knowledge institution; a building that emerged through colonisation suddenly becomes an open-ended story in the corridors of which the multiplicity of voices echoes.

Watching the photographs of the Technical Institute of Abadan in these two situations animates the building’s many stories and situates it in a complex historical, political, and social context. It connects these two photos to many others, documented or undocumented, taken or never taken. By watching a photograph, one creates a storyboard, many frames of which are missing from the colonial narratives and the grand narratives of the state. Those undocumented, vanished, or silenced frames become glitches in the animated story of one photograph; they can be found, exposed, or imagined and reconstructed by the act of watching. This is to assist the building’s “background” in taking over the building as an object, in making the framed pictures of the building and its architect disappear, and then reappear differently.

The language that I use to describe the building of the institute during the colonial period is deliberately different from the language in the story of the building during the war. In the former, the absence of a specific character allows us to look at it from a distance and thereby map the building in a broader context. In the latter, the introduction of a character, a soldier, brings us as close to the building as possible. The choice of a semi-demolished, abandoned, and empty building allows the soldier – who can also be imagined as a former student of the Technical Institute – to daydream while wandering through the building and extract the many stories that are buried within its walls.

The Postcard: From Retaining Knowledge to Appropriation through Material Intervention

When British Petroleum formed a contract with Iran and founded the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1909, most of the workers were either from other colonies, such as India, or were British technical staff. Iranians were not even considered a local workforce, since they were mostly employed as servants. The staffing strategy was obviously a way to secure the monopoly of the oil industry in British hands. Over the years, however, there was increasing pressure on the company to employ local workers as well as to create chances for Iranians to gain technical skills. The Abadan Technical Institute was an initial response to give Iranian apprentices basic technical skills. But, as Katayoun Shafiee writes in her book *Machineries of Oil: An Infrastructural History of BP in Iran*, seven years after the establishment of the institute, in 1945, only 1,700 Iranians had received training. As a strategy, the company “sought to minimize the number of Iranians sent for university training and maximize the number sent for trade training” in the United Kingdom, as it would block the threat of returning Iranians with superior skills stirring up trouble among the workers.¹⁵



Fig 13.2 A postcard depicting the Technical Institute of Abadan (Source: mizenaft.com)¹⁴

The Technical Institute thus becomes an interesting case as an institution in the context of colonisation, as it played a role in who could have access to knowledge and to what extent. While knowledge ownership was used to retain control over natural resources and the benefits thereof by enforcing dependency on a foreign source, the architecture also supported such dependency through material intervention and manipulation, to enroot colonial power. Such dependency was visible in general in Wilson's work – not only in terms of architectural style and models of urban planning and design but also in the building process and building material. For example, in Wilson's other work, Taj Cinema, also in Abadan, the London red brick that was used in construction of the building was imported from England to Abadan as ballast.¹⁶ Injecting foreign material in a place is a symbolic way of appropriation. In his *Appropriation Through Pollution*, Michelle Serres writes about how polluting and leaving traces in a place enforces appropriation. The examples to support his argument vary from a wedding ring, marking ownership over the other's body, to how animals territorialise by urinating and leaving odour.¹⁷ Similarly, as one of the most powerful material practices, architecture also assists colonisation and the appropriation process.

The dependency on a foreign source and symbolic appropriation by means of material intervention is also present in the Technical Institute of Abadan. Besides the bricks and the Indian teak wood flooring, the two more animate elements in the building – the clock and the three bells made by Gillett & Johnston Bell and Clock Manufacturing in Croydon and imported to Abadan from England – take the material manipulation to a different level. Bells and clocks are both living elements that manipulate time and the rhythm of not only the building but also the town. At present, while the bells are dormant, the clock is still working and visible as a colonial monument in Abadan. But perhaps the dormant bells are an anticolonial gesture, a silenced sound of colonisation over the town.

War-Torn Institute: Mess in the Death of Democracy

The photograph depicts the war-torn Technical Institute of Abadan, vulnerable and about to vanish from the frame. Smog obscures the view over the Arvand Rud river. The sun is blurring in its own heat, painting the slightly bowed palm trees orange. Palm trees, beheaded, half burned, cast their shadows over the building and the site. The orange shade stretches itself over the bricks and the dusted and broken windows. The arches and brickwork, once designed and drawn by the architect of the British Empire and British Petroleum Company James Morrison Wilson, are partially destroyed in the photographs; the walls have been hollowed and destroyed by the rockets and bombs. Wilson's commitment to symmetry¹⁸ is overthrown by the asymmetrical mechanism of war.



Fig. 13.3 The Abadan Technical Institute at the time of war between Iran and Iraq.
Source: neconews.com.

The lower windows are cushioned by sandbags piled on top of wooden planks, each supported by two empty oil barrels; the structure is supposed to protect the fragile building material against the blast waves. The breakage in the upper windows, with dark irregular shapes, reveals the emptiness of an interior, an interior itself left in a mess upon evacuation at the onset of war in 1980 and later covered with the dust of frequent blasts that found their way in by smashing the windows. The photo partially frames the war-torn institute, which is just one of the many buildings demolished in south-west Iran during the war between Iran and Iraq, which started just after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and lasted for eight years. This war-stricken building in the photograph, however, points to longer and much more complex histories and stories.

Weary soldiers could have passed by this building. Perhaps they leaned against its walls, lit cigarettes while playing with pebbles on the ground with the tip of their boots. They exhaled the smoke into the air and watched it disperse against the sunset. Perhaps they remembered the chime of the bells when the Technical Institute was still in operation. They might have imitated the bells chime in their heads and rhymed it with the punch of bombs and the barrages. Weary soldiers might have lifted the sling of their rifles off their shoulders and have felt momentary relief from the weight of war.

One weary soldier might have stepped into the building on a quieter day of war to escape the burning heat of the southern sun. His steps might have echoed in the empty corridors, punctuated with pieces of glasses, stones, smashed bricks, pens, pencils, debris. The weary soldier might have opened the door to that famous, small lecture hall, called the Churchill Room by the petroleum students. Perhaps he blew the dust off the desk in front of him and looked through the obscured view of the lecture hall, recalling the photos of Churchill's war rooms in London. The weary soldier might have looked around at the mess and murmured: "This is the English job." Perhaps he laughed out loud at his own thought.

The weary soldier, like most other Iranians and those familiar with the history of the political relationship between Iran and Britain, knows the phrase: "This is the English job." It has turned into an ironic phrase that suggests that, behind every unexplained malfunction or sabotage, there is probably an Englishman. The saying has even become the title of a book by Jack Straw that explains why Iran distrusts Britain. Such a conspiracy theory has moved beyond the political realm into the realm of everyday life: a pipe breaks in your bathroom, and you could think "this is the English job." The phrase is from one of the most popular Iranian TV series of the '70s, called *My Uncle Napoleon*, based on an eponymous graphic novel by Iraj Pezeshkzaad. The story takes place in a garden in Tehran around which different families live. The community is dominated by the protagonist Uncle Napoleon, a paranoid patriarch who believes that foreign countries – specifically Britain – are responsible for any unfortunate events that happen in Iran. Such social satire is not mere paranoia, however, and the weary soldier knows that it is rooted in a long history of colonisation and manipulation of politics in Iran by Britain.¹⁹

The story is long, and the weary soldier remembers the opening line of a bedtime story that his father used to tell him: on the dawn of Tuesday, 26 May 1908, the dormant ghosts of oil were awakened by William D'Arcy's team of engineers and geologists.²⁰ They had come from an island far, far away called England, and they found the oil in Masjid Souleyman near Abadan. From that day forwards, the curse of oil has never left us.

The weary soldier still remembers the smell of oil on his father's big rough hands. And a blast wave wakes him up from daydreaming in the corridors of the Technical Institute of Abadan.

Notes

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3. Stephen Kinzer, "BP and Iran: The Forgotten History," CBS News, 2010, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bp-and-iran-the-forgotten-history/>.
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7. Frichot, *Creative Ecologies: Theorizing the Practice of Architecture*, 19.
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