Unfolding Azadi Tower: Reading Persian Folds through Deleuze

Published by

Léopold Lambert.
The Funambulist Papers, Volume 1.

➤ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76454
Sometimes the veins in marble are the pleats of matter that surround living beings held in the mass, such that the marble tile resembles a rippling lake that teems with fish. Sometimes the veins are innate ideas in the soul, like twisted figures or powerful statues caught in the block of marble. Matter is marbled, of two different styles.¹

The Azadi Tower (Freedom Tower) is the gateway to Tehran. This 50-m tall tower is located in the heart of the 15,000-sqm Azadi Square (Freedom Square) and has been the center of many cultural and political revolutions since its completion in 1971. The architecture of the tower is influenced by both pre-Islamic Persian architecture of materiality and Islamic architecture of geometry. The significance of the Azadi tower is not only in its sociopolitical presence, but also in the fact that it is one of the world’s first structures that incorporated computation in the design, analysis, and materialization processes. From 1966-1971 the monument was constructed with 25,000 unique white marble pieces. The customized geometry of each marble unit was computed using a structural analysis program and carved using a combination of manual and automated techniques.

Gilles Deleuze in The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque, acknowledges other kinds of folds from the East, Greek, Roman, to Classical folds; however, Deleuze believes only the Baroque trait “twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other… oscillating between the pleats of matter and the folds in the soul.”² However, the Azadi Tower complex is an anomaly to Deleuze’s argument in a sense that it embodies the notion of an infinite vector of movement inspired by Islamic architecture (folds in the soul), but

---

also reintroduces traditional Persian ideas of materiality in the construction of this monument (folds in matter). Therefore, if the Deleuzian world is interpreted as a body of infinite folds and surfaces that twist and weave through compressed time and space, the Azadi monument is composed of the same underlying behaviors.

Every culture and religion has its own particular understanding of the relationship between the divine and the world. This implies a certain manner of unfolding, which informs theology, art and architecture. The term fold in ancient Persian culture and language is often synonymous with the definition of edges of a polygon. For instance, an octagon shape is referred to as an eight-folded geometry and the interior of the polygon is called the body of the geometry. Thus, the notion of folds in Persian architecture emphasizes the significance of space dividing edges of the tessellated geometry. The main trait of traditional Persian architecture is based on creating an earthly paradise through a series of subdivided gardens, water canals, and indoor and outdoor rooms. Thus, the geometric folds become the defining boundaries for enfolding material differentiations. This garden design philosophy called Chahar Bagh (four gardens) has influenced the designs of gardens from Taj-Mahal to Alhambra and beyond. However, with the introduction of Islamic culture in the 8th century, the notion of material articulation in Persian architecture was overwritten with the use of more complex geometric tiling compositions of quasicrystalline patterns. A quasicrystal formation is based on the arrangement of a set of polygons (often five- to twelve-sided) to create complex tiling patterns. This application of pattern intensity is rooted in the Islamic belief of transfiguration and transformation as an essential part of material life. The application of quasicrystal patterns, whether as an architectural style, textile design or calligraphy, becomes a way of representing the world around as less substantial and articulated. Thus, the pattern becomes a tool for de-materialization of architecture. The scale differentiation of monocentric quasicrystal patterns, either as two-dimensional tiling units or three-dimensional muqarnas, introduces a forced perceptual trajectory for the visitors. The focal point of pattern deformation creates a sensation of lightness in the ceiling of the space and creates the idea of arriving from geometric multiplicity to formal unity to reinforce the notion of infinity in the space.

A Deleuzian might object that Islamic influenced art and architecture cannot be a playing field for real creativity, because its purpose is to direct the worshipper toward God. However, one can argue that Deleuze’s notion of the folds in the soul, inspired by Gottfried Leibniz’s theories of Monads as centers of force, are based on the idea that a fold is always influenced by a force and is constantly imposing force onto its neighboring folds. Deleuze claims that, “the world must be placed in the subject in order that the subject can be for the world.
This is the torsion that constitutes the fold of the world and of the soul.\textsuperscript{3} Therefore, one can argue that the same described force interplay between any subject and its immediate world, also applies to the relationship between an elaborate quasicrystalline muqarna and an observer. This force interchange allows subjective interpretation, encourages endless curiosity, and creates a perceptual and contemplative venture into the infinite for the person experiencing the space.

The inspiration for the Azadi Tower complex were the stalactite-shaped muqarnas of the 17th-century Sheikh Lotf Allah Mosque in Isfahan region of Iran. The architect of the complex, Hossein Amanat, was a 24-year-old graduate of Tehran University when he won the competition for designing a monumental tower complex in commemoration of the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire.\textsuperscript{4} Like many architects in the 1960s, Amanat was interested in the structural performance of geometric modules. He combined the organizational logic of monocentric Islamic patterns with the long-forgotten traditional Persian architecture of substantial mass and articulated landscaping divisions. Thus, the architecture of Azadi tower complex was as much about its heritage as it was about its fabrication techniques and the future vision of the city.

The fold in matter, Deleuze states that “A body has a degree of hardness as well as a degree of fluidity, or that it is essentially elastic, the


\textsuperscript{4} See BBC Interview with Hossein Amanat: \textit{The man behind Tehran’s Freedom Monument}. July 8, 2009.
The design of the macro landscape pattern of the Azadi complex was influenced by the surrounding circulation arteries of the existing urban context. These circulation trajectories, much like a ripple effect, continued towards the center of the complex to become the micro scale differentiation and articulation of the marble blocks on the body of the tower. Although, over 8,000 blocks of 6 cubic meter marbles were utilized in the fabrication process, the continuity achieved by careful computation of each marble block, has given the tower the nickname of ‘the tower of draped silk’ among civilians. The Azadi tower complex, Tehran’s main landmark, houses a national heritage museum, multiple galleries, libraries and shops that are nested in multiple levels throughout the tower. However, all main entrances are recessed underground, to enhance the monumentality of the tower. The articulation of exterior customized marble units translates to fluid concrete forms that create the interior shell of the tower. The transition of the Azadi tower’s exterior folds to the interior folds is much like Deleuze’s description of a Baroque costume: “fold in matter is broad, in distending waves, billowing and flaring, surrounding the body with its independent folds, ever-multiplying, never betraying those of the body beneath.”

Now, over four decades from the completion of the Azadi complex, an architecture that was once designed with the most utopian vision of enfolding a nation’s cultures, politics, and architectural styles into one architectural body has witnessed many gruesome revolutions and manifestations, ironically with regards to its name. Deleuze argues that folding is, after all, political, in the sense that theories of curvature, movement, and point of view cannot be localized. Perhaps, like the continuous folds of its geometric body, it is in the constant process of becoming and revolution of its hosting ground that the Azadi tower, now more than ever, embodies unity and continuity with its nation.

/// Published on August 9th 2011
