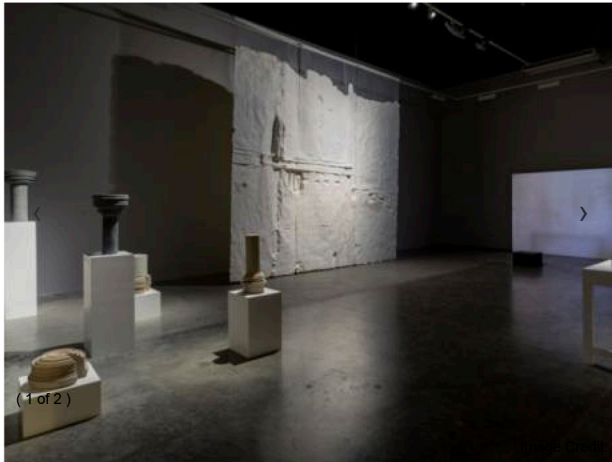


## Changing cityscapes of Iran

An artist takes a quirky look at the consequences of rapid urban development – the widening gap between the rich and poor and damage to the environment



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By Jyoti Kalsi, Special to Weekend Review ([/writers/jyoti-kalsi](http://writers/jyoti-kalsi))

The post-revolution economic recovery in Iran has led to a flurry of new construction in Tehran, with older buildings being demolished and replaced by larger, more ostentatious structures across the city. At the same time, as the city becomes dense, there is a growing nostalgia for rural life and traditional Persian architecture, which is reflected in quirky ways in the urban landscape.

Since returning to Tehran a decade ago, after doing her graduation in the UK and obtaining a Masters degree in the US, Nazgol Ansarinia has observed with keen interest the rapid changes happening in her city. In her first solo exhibition in Dubai, "Surfaces and Solids", the Abraaj Art Prize winner explores the changing economic and social fabric of the city through a variety of innovative artworks.

In a work titled "Membranes" she has recreated an entire wall of a demolished two-storey building in an attempt to preserve traces of the past. "The face of my city is changing rapidly. But when a building is demolished, the side that is attached to the neighbouring wall remains; thus the private spaces of what used to be homes become exposed to the public. You can see what kind of tiles people had in their bathrooms, what colour their bedrooms were, or what posters they put up on the walls. These traces of people's lives are part of the collective memory of the city's residents, which gets lost along with the buildings. So I wanted to preserve them in the form of a skin that has been pulled off the building," the artist says.

The process of making this life-size work was complex. She first did a 3D scan of the wall, and then used complex software to create a model from the pattern of several million dots on the scan. She then created a mould made up of 30 pieces connected together, which was cast in paper and glue and suspended from a sheet of delicate fabric to recreate the wall, complete with impressions of staircases, sockets, ledges, pillars and other structural elements.

Ansarinia's project "Pillars" comments on a new hybrid style of architecture that is popular in Tehran. Unlike traditional homes with high walls and enclosed gardens, the ostentatious new buildings in Tehran, designed to flaunt money and status, are a curious mix of classical Roman and Persian architecture.

They symbolise the erosion of traditional values of simplicity, humility and modesty. Inspired by the pillars in these buildings, the artist has created her own pillars cast in resin. The cross-sections of these pillars reveal texts of economic articles from the Iranian constitution inside them.

"The most distinct element of this new architecture is the exaggerated use of pillars, which are dramatically lit up by night and play a symbolic role beyond the functional aspect of load bearing. I see the strange hybrid pillars as expressions of wealth and power and a reflection of the country's economy and social structures. The shapes of my pillars are generated by rotating the written text through 360°, as an allegorical reference to the fact that the current economy is shaped and supported by the constitution, which was written in the past," the artist says.

Her "Fabrications" series is inspired by another recent architectural trend in Tehran. As the city becomes crowded with modern buildings, the municipality tries to mask the lack of open spaces and greenery by painting murals of pastoral scenes and traditional rural architecture on the walls of modern buildings. The mural artists often blend architectural features of the buildings on which they are painting into their flat renderings to create the illusion of a three-dimensional perspective.

"It is quite strange to be driving through Tehran and seeing rural landscapes or Kashan- and Yazd-style houses on the buildings. These paintings of blue skies and traditional rural homes and gardens represent an escape from the pollution and the lack of greenery in the city. I wanted to take the idea of these virtual spaces a step further by using 3D printing to convert these two-dimensional murals into three-dimensional models," she says.

The beautiful way in which balconies, shop fronts and doorways of one home merge with the domes and wind towers of another in her models highlights the nostalgia and the irony of the constant replacement of old with new, while also capturing an ephemeral moment in the history of a rapidly changing city.

Adding a personal note to the show is a video titled "Living Room". "Soon after I returned to Tehran in 2005, my parents moved from the apartment I had grown up in. As I helped them pack, I noticed the traces left behind on the walls by our furniture and paintings. My video begins with a blank white wall on which barely visible marks gradually appear as traces of the time we spent in that home. The work is about the passage of time, the traces we leave behind, and also about the dust and pollution in Tehran," Ansarinia says.

"Viewers in Dubai may not be familiar with the context of these works. But I hope they will relate to the global issues I have addressed, such as rapid urban development, social and economic change, widening of the gap between the rich and poor, and damage to the environment," she adds.

*Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.*

*"Surfaces and Solids" will run at Green Art Gallery, Al Quoz, until January 9, 2016.*