

STAGING THE TENT CITY

Persepolis, 1971, and the Afterlife of Temporary Architecture

Amir Abbas Mansoori Mehr

PERSEPOLI, ARCHITETTURA TEMPORANEA, CELEBRAZIONI DEL 2500° ANNIVERSARIO

Questo articolo analizza la “Città delle Tende” delle celebrazioni del 1971 a Persepoli, organizzate per commemorare il 2.500° anniversario della fondazione dell’Impero persiano, non semplicemente come alloggio per gli ospiti stranieri, né come cornice secondaria di un evento politico, ma come architettura scenografica temporanea. Situato in relazione studiata con le rovine achemenidi, il complesso ha creato un ambiente scenografico in cui ospitalità, esibizione politica e rappresentazione del patrimonio culturale erano strettamente intrecciate. L’articolo esamina come il campo funzionasse attraverso l’ordine spaziale e il controllo percettivo: la pianta a forma di stella, la coreografia del movimento e della visione, il rapporto tra spazi cerimoniali e domestici, e il ruolo di oggetti, arredi, luce e mezzi visivi nel plasmare un ambiente progettato sia per l’esperienza vissuta che per la telecamera. Da questa prospettiva, la Tent City non ha funzionato come uno sfondo neutro, ma come parte dell’apparato scenografico dell’evento. La sezione finale dell’articolo considera brevemente la sua vita successiva, mostrando come questo ambiente temporaneo sia persistito attraverso resti fisici, proposte di riutilizzo e mediazione archivistica. La Persepolis Tent City emerge così come un caso rivelatore di come l’architettura temporanea possa operare contemporaneamente come evento, immagine e costruzione scenografica in relazione diretta con un sito archeologico.

PERSEPOLIS, TEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE, 2,500th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS

This article reads the Tent City of the 1971 celebrations at Persepolis, held to mark the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire, not simply as accommodation for foreign guests, nor as a secondary setting for a political event, but as a temporary architecture of scenography. Set in deliberate relation to the Achaemenid ruins, the complex produced a staged environment in which hospitality, political display, and the representation of heritage were tightly interwoven. It examines how the camp worked through spatial order and perceptual control: the star-shaped plan, the choreography of movement and vision, the relation between ceremonial and domestic spaces, and the role of objects, furnishings, light, and visual media in shaping an environment designed both for lived experience and for the camera. From this perspective, the Tent City did not function as a neutral backdrop, but as part of the event’s scenographic apparatus. The final section of the article briefly considers its afterlife, showing how this temporary environment persisted through physical remains, reuse proposals, and archival mediation. The Persepolis Tent City thus emerges as a revealing case of how temporary architecture could operate at once as event, image, and scenographic construction in direct relation to an archaeological site.

Amir Abbas Mansoori Mehr

Politecnico di Torino, Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST)
amir.mansoori@polito.it

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Introduction

The principal programme of the celebrations in Fars took place from 12 to 15 October 1971 under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and officially commemorated the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great. Beginning with a ceremony at Cyrus's tomb at Pasargadae and continuing at Persepolis, it brought monarchs, heads of state, senior representatives, and their delegations to two Achaemenid sites in the province of Fars near Shiraz, in southern Iran. The programme combined diplomatic reception, ceremonial hospitality, a sound-and-light performance, banquets, and a historical parade, presenting ancient kingship and contemporary state representation within a continuous sequence of events (Grigor 2005, 22–27; Steele 2014, 43–47).

In the historiography of the 1971 celebrations, the Tent City at Persepolis has usually been treated either as temporary accommodation for foreign dignitaries or as a conspicuous expression of late Pahlavi state spectacle (Gusheh 2016; Grigor 2005; Steele 2021). Both readings capture part of the story, but neither explains the project's architectural significance. Built beside Persepolis, the camp was a temporary and carefully staged environment that organised hospitality, authority, and historical representation through siting, spatial order, movement, interior atmosphere, and visual mediation. Scenography is understood here not as decoration alone, but as the organisation of spatial orientation, attention, and atmosphere (Hann 2019).

This claim becomes clearer if Persepolis is read not only as an archaeological site, but as a historically legible landscape made available to view through decades of excavation, documentation, and conservation (Grigor 2005, 23–25; Gusheh 2016, 229). The ruins entered a larger arrangement in which guests, ceremonies, temporary structures, and media images acquired meaning in relation to one another. The Tent City should therefore be understood not as an isolated object, but as part of an event-based arrangement in which architecture operated through action, movement, and use (Tschumi 1996, 141, 254–55). This perspective also allows this study to move beyond sensational accounts centred on extravagance, luxury, and the trope of the “most expensive party in history.” Media attention concentrated above all on the banquet, ceremonial display, and spectacular surface of the event, pushing other dimensions to the margins (Steele 2014; Steele 2021).

Methodologically, the discussion combines close architectural reading of the camp's siting, plan, circulation, interiors, and surviving frames with the interpretation of published aerial and interior images and contemporary and later accounts. It treats these materials not as neutral records, but as evidence of how the event was spatially organised, visually mediated, and subsequently reframed (Grigor 2005; Gusheh 2016; Steele 2014; Taheri 2023).

This article reads the Tent City as a temporary architecture of scenography. The central hypothesis is that the camp's ephemerality was not merely a condition of limited duration, but the means through which an archaeological setting, diplomatic bodies, ceremonial movement, designed atmosphere, and media representation could be temporarily assembled into a single scenographic order. Through its relation to the Achaemenid ruins, the camp's spatial order, the choreography of movement and vision, and the role of objects, light, and media, it produced a coherent and stage-managed environment (Gusheh 2016, 230–31; Grigor 2005, 25–26; Hann 2019). Its subsequent material and archival lives demonstrate that the effects of such an environment need not end with its occupation. The case therefore extends scenography beyond the bounded duration of an event, showing how spatial order can continue to shape the perception and interpretation of a site through physical residue, images, and later acts of reuse (Taheri 2023, 562–64; Chattopadhyay 2022, 45).

Persepolis as Scene, the Tent City as Scenographic Insertion

Founded under Darius I around 518 BCE and expanded by his successors, Persepolis developed as a monumental royal complex of the Achaemenid Empire. Its elevated terrace, audience halls, processional stairways, and reliefs materialised an imperial order through architecture and ceremonial representation (Grigor 2005, 23–25; Gusheh 2016, 232).

To understand the Tent City, one must begin with Persepolis itself, not simply as an archaeological site, but as a place whose visual power, symbolic scale, and capacity for display had already been consolidated by 1971. Decades of excavation, documentation, and conservation had turned the terrace, stairways, halls, and reliefs into a legible and exhibitable ruin, allowing the site to function as both an object of preservation and a setting for the organisation of an event and the direction of attention (Grigor 2005, 23–25; Gusheh 2016, 229). Persepolis was therefore chosen not merely as a historical location, but as a scene whose ancient fabric already carried grandeur, continuity, and representational force.

Within late Pahlavi cultural politics, this legibility allowed the state to present contemporary Iran in direct relation to a selectively mobilised pre-Islamic imperial past. Persepolis offered historical authenticity, architectural monumentality, and an already prepared visual field through which the celebrations could connect ancient kingship with modernisation and international recognition. Its selection was therefore not incidental: the archaeological site supplied the event with a material claim to historical continuity while the event temporarily reorganised how the site was inhabited, viewed, and represented (Grigor 2005, 23, 26–27; Steele 2021).

The principal intervention of the celebrations took place not on the Achaemenid terrace itself, but at its controlled edge. The terrace remained the setting for the sound-and-light performance and historical parade, while the residential, diplomatic, banqueting, and service facilities were concentrated on adjacent ground. This separation preserved the visual dominance of the archaeological complex while providing a securable compound and the infrastructure required for the invited delegations (Grigor 2005, 25–26; Gusheh 2016, 230; Steele 2014, 43–47). The Tent City was erected in the southern sector of the site, where guests could inhabit the immediate vicinity of the ruins without the camp dissolving into the archaeological remains themselves (Grigor 2005, 25). The compound accommodated sixty-two heads of state or their representatives during the principal three-day programme at Persepolis, transforming the practical requirement of temporary lodging into an organised environment of diplomatic encounter and ceremonial display (Gusheh 2016, 228; Steele 2014, 43). The complex was neither so remote as to lose the symbolic charge of Persepolis nor so absorbed into the terrace as to forfeit its own spatial identity. It was a temporary insertion whose meaning depended on proximity to the ruins while also asserting an independent geometric and ceremonial order on the ground. Here architecture operated through its relation to site, movement, and staging (Tschumi 1996, 4–5).

Although the anniversary celebrations had been conceived as early as 1959, their detailed preparation remained limited for much of the following decade. The Tent City and its supporting landscape ultimately took shape through an intensive two-year period of planning and realisation leading up to October 1971 (Gusheh 2016, 230). Its brief ceremonial occupation was therefore supported by a comparatively extended process of design, construction, planting, servicing, and logistical preparation.

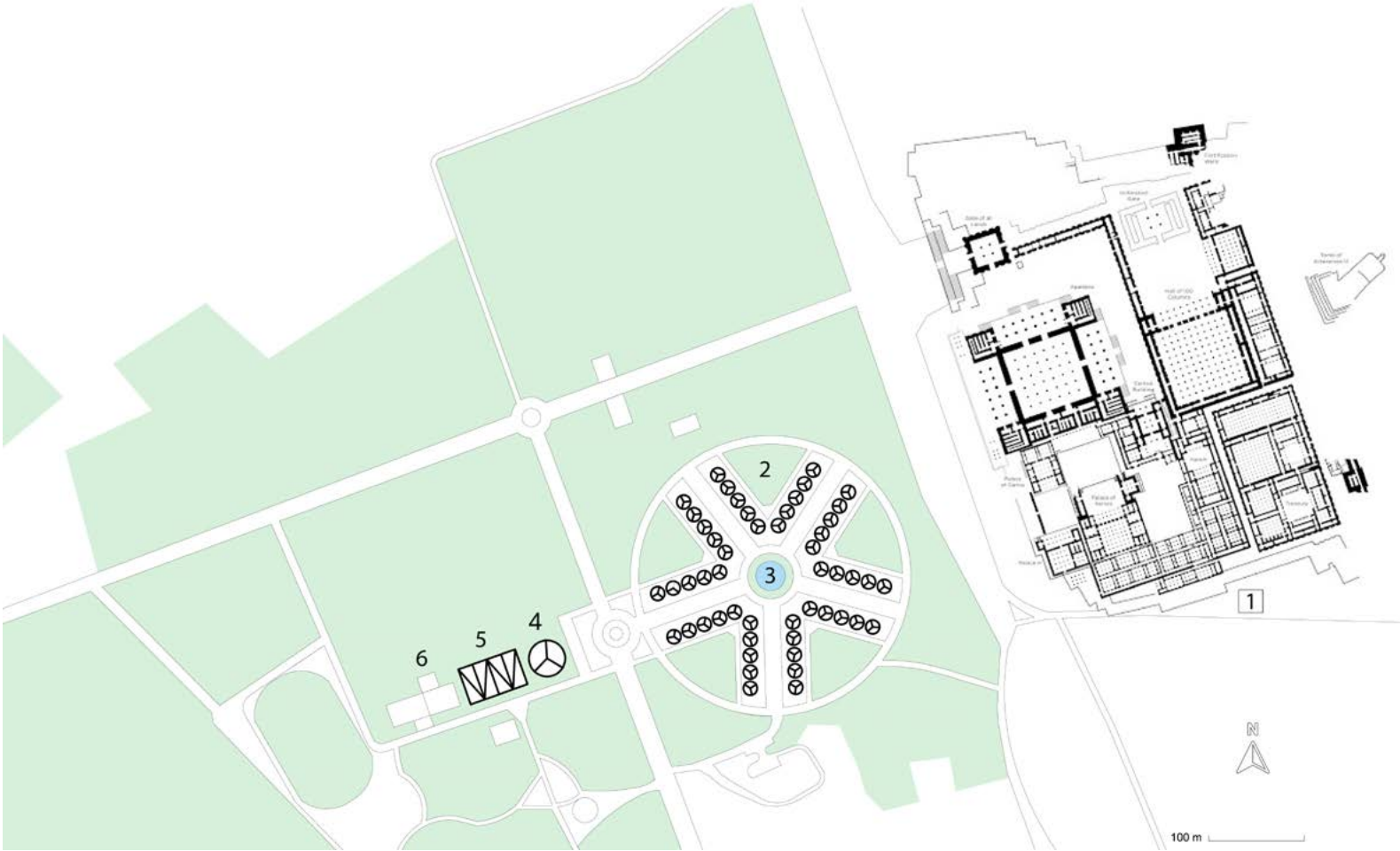
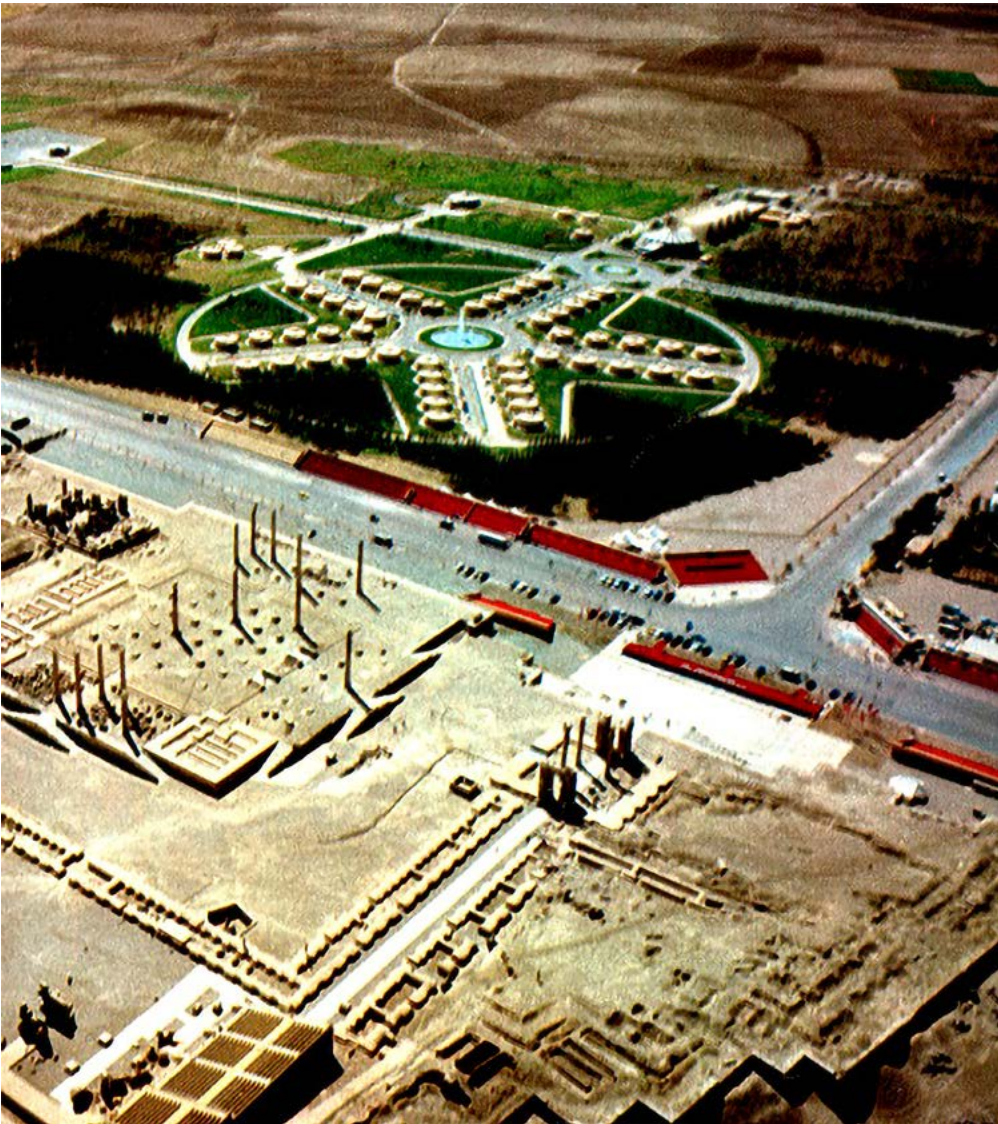
The final solution was a temporary garden camp set beside the barren ruins of Persepolis, practical in logistical terms yet highly effective for the organisation of the event. Its design was entrusted to Maison Jansen, making clear that this was not an improvised encampment, but an environment conceived from the outset as a designed whole (Gusheh 2016, 230–31). What emerged was an architectural form of diplomatic hospitality and state display.

Its spatial order was explicitly geometric and view-oriented. A principal east-west axis linked the entrance zone to the Tent of Honour and the Grand Banqueting Tent, while a

multi-tiered fountain served as the camp's central hinge. From this point, five radial paths extended outward, with residential units arranged along them and each avenue named after a continent (Gusheh 2016, 231; Steele 2021). The scheme was both practical and diagrammatic, legible from the ground and from above.

That legibility emerged from the relation between plan, landscape, and movement. The outer edge of the camp was marked by a circular access road and stabilised by dense pine planting, so that the ensemble appeared as a distinct cluster of pavilions and axes set against the weight and solidity of the ancient terrace (Gusheh 2016, 231). The project worked through juxtaposition: on one side, the hardness and age of the ruins; on the other, the lightness of temporary structures, gleaming surfaces, and geometric discipline. The Tent City did not seek to resemble Persepolis. It positioned itself beside it, drawing authority from the site while remaining perceptibly distinct.

Persepolis in 1971 was therefore not a passive backdrop, but a field for the organisation of vision, movement, and presence. The Tent City must first be read as a site-specific insertion that, through placement, distance, and spatial legibility, established the conditions of the scene itself (Figure 1) (Grigor 2005, 25–26; Gusheh 2016, 229–31).



2
Analytical site plan showing the relationship between the Tent City and Persepolis: (1) Persepolis; (2) Tent City residential zone; (3) central fountain; (4) Tent of Honour; (5) Grand Banqueting Tent; and (6) service buildings. Drawing by Nooshin Rezaei, 2026. Base imagery: Google Maps, accessed 2026

Spatial Order, Movement, and the Control of Vision

What distinguished the Tent City from a mere accommodation complex was not only its star-shaped layout or the quality of its decoration, but the way the scheme organised movement and perception in advance. The plan directed arrival, structured habitation, and produced a controlled sequence of visual encounters. The plan should therefore be read not merely as a functional arrangement, but as a spatial script through which orientation, distribution, and concentration of attention were organised (Gusheh 2016, 231; Grigor 2005, 25–26; Steele 2021). The analytical plan makes visible a relationship that the description of the camp's star-shaped geometry alone cannot fully explain. The radial compound and the predominantly orthogonal organisation of the Achaemenid terrace remained formally distinct, yet their proximity allowed them to be perceived as parts of the same event landscape. The Tent City was neither an extension nor an imitation of the archaeological complex. Its geometric autonomy enabled the temporary intervention to acquire a recognisable identity of its own, while its position beside the terrace allowed it to draw visual and symbolic authority from the ancient site. The scenographic effect therefore depended not on formal resemblance, but on the controlled adjacency of two contrasting spatial orders. This script was also hierarchical. The radial paths brought guests to their quarters, yet the overall organisation of the camp established a precise relation between residential and ceremonial domains. However comfortable the residential units may have been, they ultimately oriented their occupants toward the great ceremonial tents, where banquets, ritual, and display reached their point of concentration. Even the more private zones remained embedded within an order that guided the guest from lodging toward participation in the official scene. The architecture thus helped produce and organise the event rather than merely contain it (Gusheh 2016, 231; Steele 2021; Tschumi 1996, 141, 254–55).

The control of vision was equally important. The main axes and promenades made the composition legible at ground level, while the same geometry was immediately readable from above in aerial photographs and general views (Gusheh 2016, 231; Grigor 2005, 26). This dual legibility mattered because the Tent City was designed both for embodied experience and for the distant eye, whether in direct observation or mediated image. The marked perimeter, central fountain, and radiating avenues all contributed to an image that was instantly graspable and ceremonially ordered. Spatial readability therefore formed part of the apparatus of display itself. Movement through the camp was not simple circulation, but guided choreography. Entry



3
Banquet for foreign
representatives, Persepolis,
October 1971. Light, textiles,
table arrangement and protocol
formed part of the scenographic
apparatus. Unknown
photographer, Wikimedia
Commons, PD-Iran; digitally
enhanced

into the compound, passage to the centre, divergence toward the residential sectors, and return to the ceremonial tents all took place within an order that both simplified orientation and formalised experience. As a scenographic insertion beside Persepolis, the camp worked not only through placement on the site, but through the regulation of routes, thresholds, and focal points. The guest moved through an environment designed to guide bodies, gazes, and gatherings. The plan thus became an instrument for the management of experience (Gusheh 2016, 231; Grigor 2005, 25–26; Tschumi 1996, 121–23). The same logic extended to technology and media. Part of the scene's effectiveness lay in the fact that the technical systems necessary for its operation were kept out of sight. Sound and image equipment, loudspeakers, transmitters, projectors, television cameras, and other lighting and acoustic systems were placed so as to remain invisible to journalists and camera crews (Grigor 2005, 26). What the eye encountered was the scene itself, not the machinery that sustained it.

The Tent City was thus a setting in which plan, circulation, and visibility worked together. The star-shaped scheme was not merely a formal gesture, but a device for producing order, directing movement, and generating a coherent image of the celebrations (Gusheh 2016, 231; Steele 2021). Its significance lay in the way it brought habitation, orientation, concentration, and display into a single structure. In this respect, spatial control was not an incidental consequence of temporary accommodation; it was the architectural mechanism through which diplomatic hospitality was transformed into representational performance.

Objects, Textiles, Light, and the Camera: Completing the Atmosphere of the Scene

Spatial choreography acquired its full scenographic force through the construction of atmosphere. This was not a secondary decorative effect, but part of the project's logic. Guests encountered not only routes and spatial order, but surfaces, objects, textures, light, and the tactile and visual qualities of space. The environment worked through material and perceptual cues that structured orientation, attention, and presence (Hann 2019; Gusheh 2016, 228, 231). This quality began in the residential units. The fifty residential units were prefabricated multi-part pavilions containing a sitting room, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a service space (Steele 2014; Taheri 2023, 563–64). The interiors varied from unit to unit, so residence became more than temporary lodging. Iranian carpets, French toiletries, luxurious sheets and towels, and even a personalised portrait of each guest woven against a Persepolis background suggest that the point was not comfort alone, but personalisation within the scene (Gusheh 2016, 231; Steele 2014; Steele 2021). In the ceremonial spaces, this logic intensified. The Tent of Honour,

with its silk damask walls, gilded borders, chandeliers, and luminous surfaces, acquired something close to a jewel-like interior. The Grand Banqueting Tent extended this richness on a larger scale: draped silk walls, a pleated ceiling, a long ceremonial table, historicising furniture, and luxurious tableware and crystal turned the space into an environment that had to work both for bodily presence and for immediate visual legibility in images (Figure 3) (Gusheh 2016, 231; Grigor 2005, 25–26; Steele 2014). Decoration directed the gaze, while hospitality itself formed part of the apparatus of the scene (Steele 2021).

Light also played a structural role. It activated fabrics, reflective surfaces, crystal, and furniture, preparing them for both eye and camera. Controlled lighting turned temporary enclosures into theatrical interiors, creating not only splendour but also depth, reflection, and visual legibility (Gusheh 2016, 231). Just as the overall scheme of the camp was legible from above, its richly dressed interiors worked in photographs and media representations as effectively as they did in lived experience. The Tent City was therefore not simply the site of an event, but an image-producing environment (Gusheh 2016, 231; Grigor 2005, 26; Hann 2019). The surviving photographic record cannot by itself demonstrate that every spatial and material decision was made specifically for the camera. It does, however, show how readily the environment's axial order, reflective surfaces, controlled lighting, and ceremonial arrangements could be translated into reproducible images. The camera should therefore be understood not as the sole cause of the design, but as one of the principal conditions through which its scenographic effects acquired a wider and more durable public life (Grigor 2005, 26; Gusheh 2016, 231). The two principal evenings were the Royal Banquet on 14 October 1971 and the more informal "Persian Evening" on 15 October, following the historical parade at Persepolis. The second event was offered to a more restricted group of special guests (Steele 2014, 43–46). Even the shift in aesthetic register between the two principal evenings confirms this logic. If the more formal banquet relied on overtly Western codes of interior, protocol, and dining, the "Persian Evening" moved toward a different register, shaped by Iranian music, dance, food, and a more deliberately reconfigured form of hospitality (Grigor 2005, 25–26; Steele 2014). This change did not signal instability, but the scene's capacity to modulate its own codes. Objects, textiles, light, and media should therefore not be treated as secondary details. They transformed spatial organisation into experience and made the Tent City legible from within as a scenographic architecture. Atmosphere operated here as a representational technology, translating political and diplomatic claims into sensory experience and photographically reproducible form.

After the Event: Remains, Reuse, and the Afterlife of a Temporary Scene

If, in 1971, the Tent City operated as an environment for accommodation, ceremony, and display, it did not simply vanish once the celebrations were over. Its afterlife was another phase of the same project: no longer in textiles, light, and hospitality, but in steel frames, concrete traces, and repeated acts of reinterpretation (Gusheh 2016, 228, 232–33).

Its disappearance was gradual rather than immediate. After the celebrations, the fabric enclosures, bright surfaces, and interior fittings were progressively stripped away, yet the structural skeleton remained. The camp was not cleanly dismantled, but slowly reduced through looting, weathering, and deterioration until what remained was a set of bare metal frames (Gusheh 2016, 228, 232). A structure built for a short-lived event persisted as residual architecture, still bearing its spatial trace. Those remains, particularly in their later condition within the Bagh-e Pardis area, were not merely mute ruins. Once the coverings and interiors had gone, the surviving frames still preserved the geometric order of the original scheme. Concrete footprints and steel structures continued to register the star-shaped layout of the camp, so that what endured was not simply a scatter of fragments, but a material diagram of the initial plan (Gusheh 2016, 229, 232). The afterlife of the Tent City was inscribed in the ground as well as in memory and photography. Their significance was not only formal. Proposals to convert the complex into a luxury hotel had circulated during the 1970s, including a scheme involving operation by Club Méditerranée, but remained unrealised amid



4
Remains of the Persepolis Tent City, 2017. The surviving steel frame registers the afterlife of the temporary scene as architectural residue. Photo: Rup, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0, cropped

institutional disagreements and the political instability that culminated in the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (Gusheh 2016, 232; Taheri 2023, 564–68). Following the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy in February 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic later that year, the future of the camp became entangled in a broader reassessment of royal symbols and the pre-revolutionary built environment. The former pavilions came to stand, for some, as signs of late Pahlavi excess. Yet they also escaped total destruction, in part because they were used as a military training ground during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) (Gusheh 2016, 232). The site became not only an object of ideological judgement, but also one of practical reuse.

A further shift took place in the early 2000s, when the remains entered a new heritage and planning framework. A 2003 architectural report described the garden as a space with varied spatial and environmental potential and proposed it as a multi-use facility. Rather than reconstructing the 1971 setting, the proposal translated the surviving ceremonial and residential fabric into a cultural, educational, research, and visitor-oriented complex (Gusheh 2016, 233). A 2005 newsletter proposed a more limited intervention: a single tent on the former site, not to reconstruct the camp as such, but to introduce visitors to Persepolis and help prevent further damage (Gusheh 2016, 233; Taheri 2023, 568–69).

The afterlife of the Tent City cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between survival and disappearance. Since 1971, the project has been reframed several times: first as an environment of diplomatic spectacle, then as the residue of excess, later as a usable structure, and finally as an issue within heritage management and landscape archaeology. Its fabric changed, but its legibility endured. The steel frames, footprints, and star-shaped order kept the camp available for new interpretations over time (Figure 4) (Gusheh 2016, 229, 232–33). The archival fate of the project must therefore be sought not only in photographs, files, and reports, but also in the site itself. For this reason, the Tent City offers a strong case for thinking about temporary architecture in the long term. What is designed as ephemeral does not

necessarily disappear with the event. Once its scenic layers fall away, it may persist in another form, entering the landscape as residue and later becoming the object of conservation, reuse, political judgement, or tourist curiosity (Gusheh 2016, 228–29, 232–33; Chattopadhyay 2022, 45). At Persepolis, the scene of 1971 did not simply end. Its layers changed from diplomatic stage to quiet remains and, later, to heritage interpretation. The case therefore shifts attention from duration alone to the institutional and interpretive processes that continually redefine what a temporary architecture becomes after its initial use.

Conclusion

The case of the Tent City demonstrates that ephemerality is not the opposite of endurance. Its temporary fabric enabled a concentrated arrangement of archaeological site, diplomatic hospitality, ceremonial action, designed atmosphere, and media representation, while its later remains and reframings extended the event's material and interpretive effects in altered forms. Scenography, in this sense, describes not only the spatial and perceptual organisation of an event, but also the continuing production of meaning across occupation, representation, decay, and reuse.

The surviving steel frames, concrete footprints, and reuse proposals show that this environment long outlasted the event for which it was designed (Gusheh 2016, 228–29, 232–33). At Persepolis, temporary architecture persisted in another form within the landscape, archival records, and later heritage discourse, showing how it can retain material and interpretive life after its primary function has ended (Chattopadhyay 2022, 45).

Reading the Tent City through scenography also releases it from two persistent reductions: to accommodation and to sensational political narrative (Steele 2014; Steele 2021). What makes this case important for architectural history is the dense relation it reveals between site, event, image, and residue. At Persepolis, temporary architecture operated at once as hospitality infrastructure, instrument of display, and object of later reinterpretation. In this sense, the Tent City shows that temporary architecture can survive not only as material residue, but as a scenographic logic through which a site continues to be seen, judged, and reinterpreted.

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