

Viewpoint

A Tourist Destination and Social Hangout or A Showcase of Power and Ideology?

An Evaluation of the Valiasr Square Reconstruction Project in Tehran

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Recived: 06/03/2023

Accepted: 09/04/2023

Available online: 21/04/2023

Abstract | Public spaces in cities have been conceived as leisure and tourism destinations due to their social and civic roles. Due to economic, political, and managerial factors, many of these spaces in Tehran have become passive and non-social in recent years. Although institutions such as the government and urban management argue that the objective of constructing spaces is to improve social life and tourism, in places such as Valiasr Square, the stagnation of social life is problematic. It seems that one-sided political tendencies toward space as a platform for the government to show its power position have frequently resulted in the elimination or diminution of the share and interest of groups of stakeholders in public space. Social inequality in space efficiency as a result of a biased approach calls into question the meaning of public space as a place belonging to the public. The reasons for the failure of government public spaces such as Valiasr Square can be the lack of full-fledged and inclusive processes to create a common place with an unexpected nature and accessibility to different groups of society. Therefore, social and tourism approaches to public spaces should not be atomistic and need to stay away from partiality. Space should be used as both an object and a tool to dominate and display power. Adopting a holistic approach to space as a common property of power institutions and members of the public and society can provide the possibility of forming citizenship and social life.

Keywords | Authority, Public space, Urban management, Urban plaza.

Introduction | Why do the spaces associated with governance not properly serve as public spaces and tourist destinations in the city?

Space is one of the most comprehensive concepts used for evaluating the environmental components of human life because it is a place within which we have been living and acting since the beginning of our existence. Space is a main structural medium and the site in which key transformations in the politics and economy of the 20th century are formed, representing the relationship between economic power and cultural representations (Zukin, 1993, 268). Public space is a type of urban space that is

accessible to all members of society or the public, and it is often managed by the government. It lends itself to cultural, political, and social expression. A place is public when it caters to the public as a whole and is shared by all members of a community while being controlled by government officials. In a deeper look, the public space is a socio-spatial structure with a diverse and multifaceted nature because it is formed under the influence of various social, economic, and political forces and comes into existence with the agency of city managers, citizens, and designers (Abarghouei Fard, Mansouri & Motalebi, 2023). This means that public spaces are influenced by the coercion and conflicts imposed on them by many institutions, including society and the government.

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Today, public spaces are critical points in cities that serve a significant role as tourist attractions in addition to their social and political functions. While the purpose of entities such as the government and urban management is to enrich social life and tourism in some cases, the stagnation of social life in the aforementioned public areas is questionable.

Structure of Criticism

Cities are proposed as a topology of multiple and intersecting institutions, forces, and flows whose combined force shapes the development of the city (Amin & Thrift, 2002; McFarlane, 2011; Faras, 2011). Based on this, each of the forces and factors affecting the public space uses the space as an accessible resource to achieve its various social, civil, leisure, and economic goals. Likewise, governments often use space to control societies and create their desired social order. "Spatial governance," as a subset of these strategies, is usually depicted as a recent technology of space governance in the city (Merry 2001, 17; Foucault, 2007, 108). Power can speak socially only if it steps through space. The social construction of space and place consists of multiple and ever-changing processes of placing oneself and others in the matrix of power relations, rather than the spatial fixation of identities formed exclusively based on dominance (Myers, 1996, 237). When the public space is viewed as a space of power and domination, significant institutions of contemporary society, particularly institutions of private property and the modern state, continue to violate all people's rights to access public space (Orum & Neal, 2009, 210). According to what has been discussed, the government's use of public spaces as a framework of authority and an element for establishing a desirable social order is common in many cities, including Tehran. The history of Valiasr Square demonstrates its function as a government-designated mobility artery (the old name of Valiahed Square). It also shows the absence of life and social interactions in the square's core space. The Valiasr Square reconstruction project was completed in the last months of 2015 and inaugurated in March with 7 floors and 45,000 square meters of usable space. The development plan of this square, under the title "Waiting Porch or Ivan-e-Entezar," including urban space, was planned and built by the municipality. This space, which was built underground of Valiasr Square, was an attempt to facilitate travel using the urban environment and subway lines. Under the titles "Tehran's First Plaza," "Social Hangout," and "Citizen's Stop," it was introduced to the citizen by the Tehran municipality. Contrary to the emphasis of some officials on the construction of the plaza to create a space

for leisure and tourism in inner-city trips, the daily use of this space by citizens has been limited to an underpass to reach the subway station. Overall, only in a few cases, with the organization of special collective programs by the city management and political institutions, do we see the gathering of a large population in this plaza. This is despite the fact that the mentioned events often have a political flavor and are open to only a limited group of the numerous and diverse society of Tehrani citizens (Fig. 1).

The failure to pay attention to the influence of proper location on the construction of a successful public space can be seen in the investment in urban management at Valiasr Square, which serves as an urban area and traffic nexus. In Tehran's Valiasr Square Plaza, there are primary weaknesses such as the disappearance of the memorable square symbol and the replacement of an underground structure with limited visual access, and the lack of ease of physical access. Since it has been strictly planned based on detailed physical design and management, the chance of improving the social performance of the space is slight. This issue has been exacerbated by the lack of attention given to factors such as the availability of sufficient resting space, thermal comfort, and human size. In a more comprehensive view, the political approach to space has been problematic in the case of Valiasr Square and some other cases. In choosing such public spaces, the wishes and needs of the city and society in terms of leisure and tourism have been ignored, and those places have been used as a platform to display power and gain the government's credibility. This issue is not limited to metropolises such as Tehran because "control of the spatial organization and authority over its use is one of the main means of reproducing social power relations" (Harvey, 1991, 158). The use of space by power institutions in Tehran is of varying degrees. This issue is seen in the more hidden layers of the organization plan of Valiasr Square, where an ideological bias is imposed on the space by its specially selected name and by holding events planned by the government. The set of these issues has created public space by having free and universal access without civil restrictions for all classes. Despite the planned arrangements, however superficial and limited to the body of the environment, we witness the formation of social relations in the plaza space only at special times and under special conditions. The evaluation of examples such as Ivan-e-Entezar Plaza shows that metropolises like Tehran are something more than a fixed and programmable phenomenon with specific rules; they are places of contradictory cultural, aesthetic, political, and economic dialogues. This issue is much more prominent in the opposition

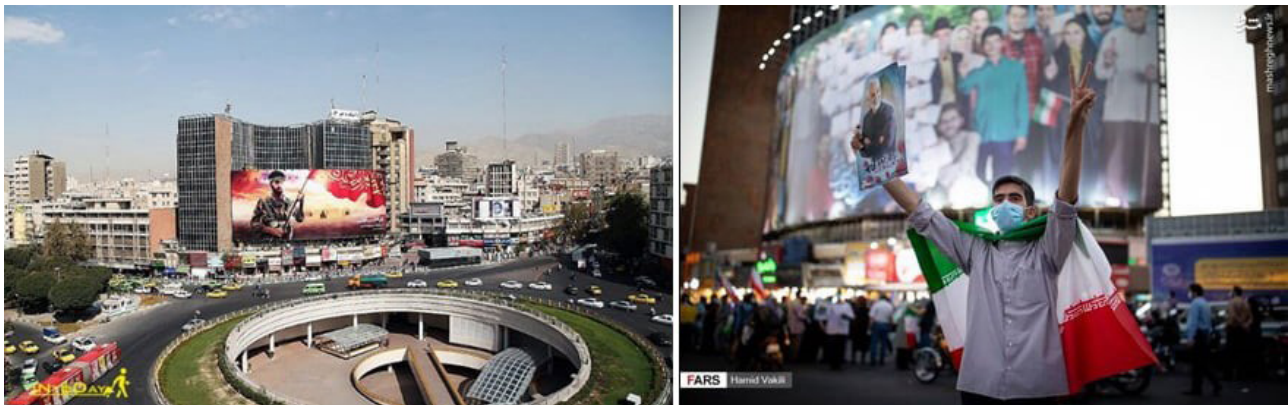


Fig. 1. The celebration held for the presidential candidate in the Plaza of Ivan-e- Entezar as a political event planned (the image on the right); Plaza on a normal day (the image on the left). Source: www.isna.ir.

to the social and tourism goals defined for public spaces and the distancing of the everyday reality of these spaces from the definition of public space as a platform for the formation and enhancement of social life. Because of the change in the nature of cities, urban communities, and political structures have evolved from places included in specific social traditions and routines to impersonal spaces produced by economic, political, and managerial considerations. The openness of the question of who can occupy the public space and present the meaning and image of the city has led to the formation of passive spaces that do not affect urban life. Instead of serving as public spaces, they are only used by specific people at certain times and in a planned manner, and hence they are a conduit for expressing and displaying ideological concepts. The axis of power institutions, the use of space as an object and a tool to dominate and display power, leads to the ideological use of space and the questioning of the meaning of public space as a platform for the formation of social and civic life in the city.

Conclusion

Establishing and developing a good public space requires the constructive contribution of residents. When dealing with the functional features required for the formation of a successful public space as an urban tourism destination, it is critical to pay close attention to its role and function for users. Moreover, it is important to fully

understand the audience's characteristics, demands, and needs. Although public spaces where social, cultural, and political narratives are presented and celebrated serve as a reminder of a group's power, the elimination or decrease of each beneficiary's contribution and interest makes a clear change in the functionality of public space. As a result, the creation of an efficient and significant public space at the city level requires It is necessary to distance oneself from one-sided political tendencies to use space as a platform for the manifestation of power. The social inequality in the efficiency of the space based on the fixed intellectual tendencies brings about spatial exclusivity and the questioning of the meaning of the public space as a space belonging to the public, and in the example of Ivan-e-Entezar Plaza, claims such as "social hangout" and "the first urban plaza in Tehran" are questioned. The reason is that the aforementioned public space is the only showcase of the government's power and ideology; the realization of the claims of the city management requires inclusive processes for creating a common place with an unexpected nature that is accessible to different members of society. However, social and tourism approaches to the social and civic life of the residents in the public area of the city demand sufficient attention to the physical-semantic nature and the social and dynamic essence of the city. Such approaches towards the public space as a means of citizenship and urban life should be far from an atomistic approach and one-sidedness.

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Abarghouei Fard, H. (2023). A Tourist Destination and Social Hangout or A Showcase of Power and Ideology? An Evaluation of the Valiasr Square Reconstruction Project in Tehran .*Tourism of Culture*, 4(12), 64-67.

DOI:10.22034/TOC.2023.394045.1117
URL: http://www.toc-sj.com/article_170346.html?lang=en

