Cultural Strategy in Practice: A Case Study of Iranian Americans in Los Angeles

Hirbod Norouzianpour, David Weiss
Department of Communication and Journalism, College of Arts and Sciences,
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, USA

Abstract
We provide an analytic observation of Iranian-Americans in Los Angeles and their strategies to overcome "displacement" and "othering" challenges in a city they now call home. Our focus is on the Iranian community's efforts to manifest itself by investing in a specific manifestation of "cultural strategy" in the form of a permanent art installation—the Freedom Sculpture—and the underlying need for the community to make such an investment in the current political atmosphere. We conclude the article by considering the project's outcomes, including the impact on the greater Los Angeles community. This sculpture creates an opportunity for Iranian-Americans to publicly tell their stories and talk about who they are; it is a medium through which Iranian-Americans can start a dialogue with other citizens and thereby achieve greater integration. Accordingly, the role of the built environment in fortifying a sense of belonging is discussed, including ways that the environment can help new arrivals overcome certain aspects of an identity crisis.

Keywords: Displacement, Cultural strategy, Freedom Sculpture, Los Angles, Iranian-Americans

Importance of the issue

We live in a world in which people are constantly moving from one place to another and in which we regularly encounter in our daily lives new individuals, ideas, and cultures from around the globe. We are more globalized than ever and will only become increasingly so in the future (Friedman 2007)by Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum, on sale September 5th, 2011.A New Edition of the Phenomenal #1 Bestseller\"One mark of a great book is that it makes you see things in a new way, and Mr. Friedman certainly succeeds in that goal,\" the Nobel laureate Joseph E. Stiglitz wrote in The New York Times reviewing The World Is Flat in 2005. In this new edition, Thomas L. Friedman includes fresh stories and insights to help us understand the flattening of the world. Weaving new information into his overall thesis, and answering the questions he has been most frequently asked by parents across the country, this third edition also includes two new chapters--on how to be a political activist and social entrepreneur in a flat world; and on the more troubling question of how to manage our reputations and privacy in a world where we are all becoming publishers and public figures.The World Is Flat 3.0 is an essential update on globalization, its opportunities for individual empowerment, its achievements at lifting millions out of poverty, and its drawbacks--environmental, social, and political, powerfully illuminated by the Pulitzer Prize--winning author of The Lexus and the Olive Tree.","ISBN":"978-1-4299-2307-1","language":"en","note":"Google-Books-ID: oSsIfoDQHhgC","number-of-pages":"674","publisher":"Picador","source":"Google Books","title":"The World Is Flat 3.0: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century","title-short":"The World Is Flat 3.0","author":[{"family":"Friedman","given":"Thomas L."}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2007",7,24]]}}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} . The world is truly an international community, one whose citizens are closer to each other, more creative, richer, and more diverse. Art as a medium is a perfect lens through which to critically view these global phenomena. Public art, in particular, can be seen as a means of communication and dialogue.

Displacement, a defining reality of many people's lives, brings with it several challenges that transcend mere geographical disorientation (IFACCA 2019). Displacement forces an individual to revisit and redefine her own behavior and identity in order to cope with her new social environment (Milligan 2003). However, while displacement places great stress on virtually all individuals who experience it, there are great differences in how displaced people cope: Some might over-express their ethnic backgrounds and refuse to culturally adjust to their new environments; others adopt a completely opposite position, denying their backgrounds completely.

Identity is a galaxy of interconnected concepts that individuals use to define themselves and assess their position relative to other people., Among these concepts are the relationship of an individual to a place and the sense of belonging to a place (Norouzianpour et al. 2012). Moreover, identity is not singular, as an individual consists of different, interconnected, and intersectional identity markers, among which are national, ethnic, religious, and personal identity. For immigrants, the multifaceted nature of identity can be particularly challenging because they may need to (re)adjust or even jettison some long-held self-definitions, while at the same time holding onto others in order to maintain self-concept, which is the belief of an individual about herself (Rosling, Rönnlund, and Rosling 2018).

Attachment to place has an impact on identity. For that reason, immigrants, who by definition experience spatial discontinuity, do so because of their loss of a site of attachment (Milligan 2003). Displaced individuals often try to regain or maintain a sense of identity by recognition and redefinition of a shared past, which can lead to the emergence of nostalgia (Milligan 2003). Art, design, and architecture are contexts in which nostalgia can be represented visibly and physically, and can be especially valuable to members of displaced communities. Such shared nostalgic elements can be used as instruments to link people to a place and to others (Norouzianpour 2014) and to help displaced individuals establish new identity bonds based on their shared experiences of their now-lost built environment.

In addition to displacement and all that it entails, many immigrants must also deal with the phenomenon of othering. Othering has been defined as "a set of processes, structures, and dynamics that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences, from race and ethnicity to religion, gender, or ability" (Powell and Menendian 2017). Othering, which can also encompass both discrimination and segregation, is an issue faced by many immigrants, and particularly Middle Easterners, after they relocate to the Global North and West.

However, belongingness and inclusion in one's new society can mitigate the deleterious effects of othering (Powell and Menendian 2017). Indeed, as social animals, all humans need to be accepted into groups and be actively involved with other members; otherwise, we cannot live healthy lives. Sadly, exclusion and segregation are the reality in the lives of immigrants, regardless of their places of origin. In order to respond to these challenges, immigrant communities' members may try actively to become accepted, try passively to protect themselves from being ignored, or a combination of the two. Among the active strategies that immigrants might choose in order to integrate into and assimilate with their new contexts, public art seems to be one of the most successful. The case of the Freedom Sculpture in Los Angeles serves as an instructive example.

Indeed, as Sen (2019) argues, oppressed communities, including immigrant communities, have a powerful tool at their disposal: *cultural strategy*. As defined by Sen, cultural strategy is a field of practice and learning which engages all aspects of cultural life and all avenues of social change-making to transform society for a just, viable, and liberatory future…It creates conditions for sustainable cultural change… For those communities most impacted by oppression, cultural strategy centers a politic of repair, redress, reclamation, healing, and building power. (2019, 2).

Moreover, and of direct relevance to the present project, cultural strategy is, or can be, a key component of the creative process; as Sen explains, "since the cultural strategy is inextricable from cultural work, artists, creatives, and cultural workers are

key agents and drivers of cultural strategy" (2019, 2). In a similar vein, Cavallini and his colleagues delineate the roles played by both "hard" and "soft" cultural assets in creating opportunities for members of otherwise oppressed communities. As they note, if it is common that hard cultural assets are publicly owned, it is also common that soft cultural assets are found within communities (e.g., artists and creative people), businesses (e.g., creative industry), and other stakeholders' groups. In this case, the task of the public administration is to valorize these assets and provide the assets' carriers with opportunities in this sense. (Cavallini et al. 2018, 3)

Thus, these cultural assets—and the "cultural image of a city or territory" to which the assets contribute—can not simply be seized by community members. Rather, their availability must first be "made visible by public authorities [via] initiatives [that] end up contributing to the development of the cultural strategy of concerned cities/territories" (Cavallini et al. 2018, 3).

Iranians in America

Iranian-Americans are a small community in comparison to other immigrant groups in the United States. It was estimated that in 2018 the Iranian-American community comprised between 500,000 and 1,000,000 individuals ("Resources on the Iranian-American Community | PAAIA" 2018). Like many other immigrant groups, Iranian-Americans are a heterogeneous community, diverse both ethnically and religiously. Iranian-Americans are also highly educated. According to a 2000 survey conducted by an Iranian Studies research group at MIT, 56.2% of Iranian Americans held Bachelor's Degrees or higher, placing them second-highest among the 67 ancestry groups considered on this measure. Further, among Iranian-Americans, 26.2% held Master's Degrees or higher, which placed them in the highest position among the 67 ancestry groups (Mostashari 2003). The United States Census Bureau's 2011 American Community Survey (ACS) corroborated the MIT group's 2000 findings. The Bureau estimated that Iranian-Americans age 25 and over received Bachelor's Degrees at a rate that was 28% greater than that of the same age group of Americans as a whole (Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans 2014). This same study also found that more than one-fourth of Iranian-Americans in the 25+ age group held a graduate degree or analogous post-B.A. professional degree, which put Iranian-Americans among the most educated of ethnic groups in the US.

Despite Iranian-Americans' contributions to society, their image is often overshadowed by political hostility, particularly in the mainstream media, where they are represented as enemies, spies, terrorists, and generally evil people. As Mobasher showed, "American mainstream media had a central role in the construction of new ethnic identities among Iranians in exile and causes cultural trauma" (Mobasher 2006, 100)this article examines the impact of the Iranian Revolution and the ensuing hostage crisis in 1979 on the formation of ethnic identity among Iranian immigrants in the United States. These events resulted in the loss of cultural and ethnic pride, the rise of anti-Islamic religious sentiments, and the concealment of religious, national, and ethnic identity among Iranian immigrants in America. The article argues that the continuation of negative images of Iran and the equation of Islam with fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism by American mainstream media had a central role in the construction of new ethnic identities among Iranians in exile."","container-title":"American Behavioral Scientist","DOI":"10.1177/0002764206289656","ISSN":"0002-7642","issue":"1","journalAbbreviation":"American Behavioral Scientist","page":"100-117","title":"Cultural Trauma and Ethnic Identity Formation Among Iranian Immigrants in the United States","volume":"50","author":[{"family":"Mobasher","given":"Mohsen"}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2006",9,1]]}},"locator":"100"}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} . This hostility toward Iranians and Iranian-Americans dates to the hostage crisis following Iran's 1979 revolution and has recently been exacerbated by new legislation such as the "Muslim ban," which has compounded various existing forms of discrimination that Iranian-Americans have long suffered.

Iranian-Americans, like many other groups, have a constructed dual identity, a duality that contemporary scholars, beginning with Crenshaw (1989), refer to as intersectionality. Iranian-Americans have been particularly successful in

preserving their Iranian identity within their households and private domains while at the same time publicly embracing American culture (Mostofi 2003). Iranians are not unaccustomed to coping with this dualism, since, historically, they have always had to deal with contradictory identities and cultures, such as Islamic culture versus Persian culture, or Shiism versus mainstream Sunni Islam. Consequently, Iranian immigrants to the U.S. have purposely maintained identity elements such as language, tradition, and belief systems even while living in a new environment. As members of a non-homogeneous community that has experienced massive cultural, religious, and other paradigm shifts, Iranians have orchestrated their multi-layered identities and have emerged with a shared communal identity. Having come to the Global West as a diasporic people, Iranians have faced particular challenges while constructing the social identity that is crucial to leading a healthy life in a new environment. To do so, Iranians have had to "absorb, reject, and assimilate specific elements from both Iranian and American cultures into their identity" (Mostofi 2003, 682).

The Freedom Sculpture

In recent decades, Iranian-Americans have increasingly used art, culture, and design as means to both change their negative image and disconnect themselves from ongoing political controversies. It is considered common sense among Iranians that being personally successful is necessary but not sufficient in order to be fully accepted and assimilated into U.S. society. In the many major cities in which they live, Iranian-Americans organize a variety of festivals, events, and exhibitions to raise awareness about themselves as a community as well as about Iran. The annual Farhang Film Festival based in Los Angeles, the FOCUS IRAN: Contemporary Photography and Video event (also in Los Angeles,) the Nowruz Festival in Seattle, and the Persian Parade in New York City are just a few examples of the large and impactful Iranian events that annually take place outside of Iran.

In Los Angeles, home to the largest Iranian community outside of Iran, such awareness-raising recently reached another level. Iranian-Americans decided to donate a permanent art project to their city in order to open a dialogue with their fellow citizens and raise awareness on a previously unreached scale about the positive aspects of Iranian society, culture, and history. This project was initiated in 2014, when the Farhang Foundation, an apolitical, secular, not-for-profit Iranian-American cultural organization, commissioned the design and construction of an urban sculptural monument to honor Cyrus the Great (Jadalizadeh 2017). Cyrus, a Persian Achaemenid king, was the founding father of the State of Iran as well as the biblical figure credited with freeing the Jews who had been displaced and enslaved by the Babylonian Empire in the 6th century BCE (Silverman and Waerzeggers 2015). An important figure in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Cyrus is acknowledged in the Old Testament as being recognized by God and as the issuer of the decree to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (Frye and Zand 2014). The principles of Cyrus, as published in the *Cyropaedia*, a book written around 370 BCE by Xenophon, a student of Socrates, also served as an inspiration to the American Founding Fathers during their writing of the U.S. Constitution (Jadalizadeh 2017).[1] "As Xenophon describes in the *Cyropaedia*, the qualities of leadership Cyrus exercised were such that they transcended nationalism, sectarianism, and partisanship" (Frye and Zand 2014, 13).

Central to its goal of honoring Cyrus, the Farhang Foundation chose as its inspiration for the design of their new Sculpture the Cyrus Cylinder (Figure 1), a historical artifact dating to 539 BCE commissioned by Cyrus to serve as the world's first visual symbol of the declaration of human rights and religious tolerance.[2] The Foundation described its 21st-century project as the creation of a Statue of Liberty for the West Coast as it was inspired by Cyrus's humanitarian concepts of freedom, cultural diversity, citizen advocacy, and inclusiveness, concepts that were ultimately enshrined by the framers of the US Constitution (Frye and Zand 2014). This new Freedom Sculpture, then, was intended to serve as a reminder of the universally shared values that continue to shape our democracy today.

1 - Frye and Zand (2014) stated that the founding fathers, particularly Jefferson, were looking for a model that validated their ideas by virtue of its success in the past; they found a model much like their own in ancient Persia.

2 - Not surprisingly, the Cylinder has inspired the creation of a replica at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

Figure 1: Cyrus Cylinder. (Source: Hudson 2014)

Cecil Balmond's proposal for the Freedom Sculpture was selected from more than 300 designs submitted by artists from around the world. When naming Balmond's design the winner, the Farhang Foundation cited the tremendous success of the exhibition of the original Cyrus Cylinder (on loan from the British Museum) which had taken place at the Los Angeles Getty Center in 2013, an event that attracted a record-breaking number of visitors to the Getty (Jadalizadeh 2017). (Balmond, an internationally renowned artist, architect, and engineer, is also an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for Services to Architecture (awarded 2015) and the 2016 winner of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation Media in Architecture.) Taking the Cyrus Cylinder as the inspiration for his own proposal, Balmond structured the Los Angeles Freedom Sculpture as two concentric cylinders featuring a symbolic mathematical component: an original heartbeat-shaped script, designed by Balmont himself, based on the Fibonacci sequence, and intended to represent the universal and timeless humanitarian values of Cyrus the Great (Farhang Foundation n.d.). (See Figure 2).

The Freedom Sculpture was officially given by Iranian Americans to the City of Los Angeles on July 4, 2017, as a symbol of peace and coexistence. Located at the busy intersection of Santa Monica Boulevard and Century Park East, at the gateway to Beverly Hills, the Sculpture enjoys a high degree of visibility and prestige. It manifests Iranian-Americans' collective effort to actively engage with their host society and to be seen in the way they believe they deserve. Southern Californian Iranians, concentrated primarily in

Figure 2: The Freedom Sculpture, a gift to the city of Los Angeles. Source: (Farhang Foundation n.d.)

Los Angeles, are the largest community of Iranians outside of Iran; further, they represent the "middle- to upper-middle-class professionals who aspired to become more Westernized in Iran (Mostofi 2003)". Fittingly, they have played a significant role in shaping modern Iranian culture and art since the Islamic revolution, due to their number and their access to the financial resources necessary for undertakings such as those exemplified by the design, construction, and bequest of the Freedom Sculpture. Indeed, the Freedom Sculpture, supported by more than $2.2 million of contributions by Iranian-Americans (Chiland 2017), has been described as "the most widely crowd-supported public monument ever gifted in U.S. History, with 10 times more supporters than the Statue of Liberty" (Farhang Foundation n.d.).

Similar approaches

The International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies, based in Australia, recently published an extensive report on public art as a way of integrating immigrant communities into the larger culture (IFACCA 2019). As the IFACCA report shows, governments and non-governmental organizations typically invest in public cultural projects such as museums, religious sites, and monuments to foster bonds between minority groups (typically defined by ethnicity or religious affiliation) and their cities, encourage their assimilation, and/or help them to overcome identity challenges. Historically, architecture and art have contributed significantly to creating a sense of belonging among minority group members, at least at those times when the majority would allow it.

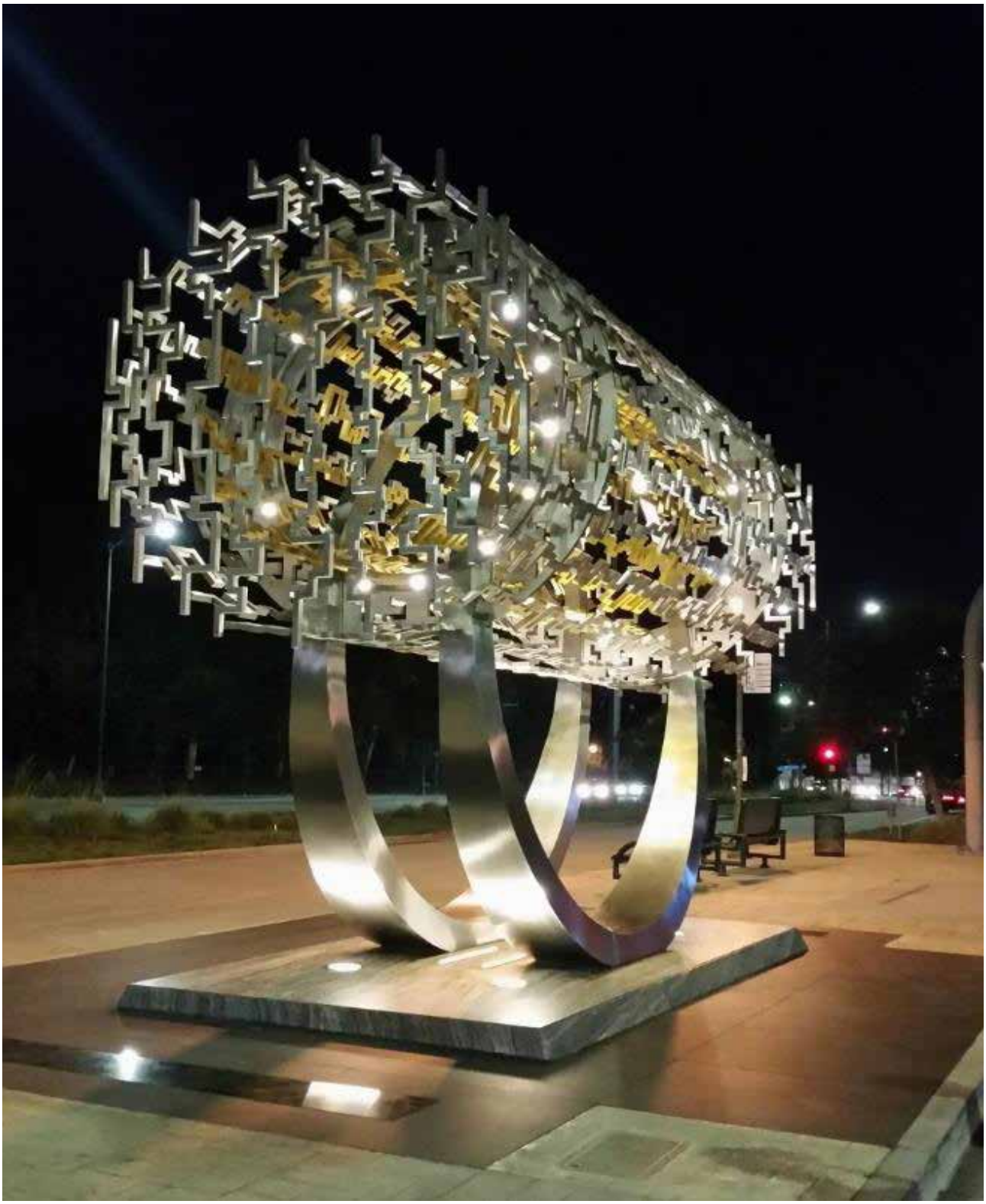

Figure 3: Freedom Sculpture (night view). (Source: Farhang Foundation, n.d.)

Figure 5: The Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, designed by Charles Moore. (Source: Brake 2015)

On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Italian-Americans' desire to publicly celebrate their origins and identity has led to the construction of a wide variety of monuments and memorials that reflect their rich cultural background in the US cities that they have chosen as their new homes. One such monument is the Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, designed by Charles Moore (Figure 5) and completed in 1978. While Louisiana has one of the highest per-capita Italian-American populations in the US, Italians living in that state often feel overshadowed by the other ethnic communities there, especially those of French-, Spanish-, African-, and Native Americans (Brake 2015).

The Piazza d'Italia was envisioned as a monument celebrating the Italian community of New Orleans, one that would serve as both a memorial and a public space (Betsky 2017), allowing the community's members to maintain their connections to their origins and celebrate who they are as a community. At the same time, the Piazza serves the greater New Orleans community and as "a manifestation of Moore's ideas of an 'inclusive' architecture, which can speak to and be enjoyed by anyone" (Brake 2015).

However, the Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans was not the first such public gift by an Italian immigrant community. A half-century earlier, in 1911, the Italian community in Argentina gifted a lighthouse to the city of Rome. Installed on Rome's Janiculum Hill as a "tangible sign of affection for their fatherland" (Madden 1972), the Janiculum Lighthouse (Figure 6) was designed by architect Manfredo Manfredi to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Italian nation-state ("Lighthouse on the Janiculum, Rome" n.d.). As was the case for the Freedom Sculpture in Los Angeles, Italian immigrants in Argentina designed, funded, and donated this marble monument (Madden 1972). This shows how cultural material can be used as an answer to diasporic identity challenges via commemoration of immigrants' cultural and political landscape.

Figure 6: Janiculum Lighthouse or Roman Lighthouse, Rome, Italy. Source: (Ermengem n.d.)

Conclusion:

Art in its various forms can be a means of social transformation as well as a response to displacement and other issues related to global immigration. Consequently, government agencies and non-governmental organizations responsible for arts and culture need to recognize their ability to foster inquisitiveness, creativity, and care among the citizens whose lives are touched by them. In our increasingly globalized world, immigration and displacement have become topics of concern for governments around the globe; fortunately, many such governments properly see art and culture as important responses to these related concerns. For example, since the beginning of the current refugee crisis, the European Union's cultural division has published several reports on the importance of art and cultural representation of newcomers as part of the process of overcoming their displacement challenges (European Union 2015; Kendrick 2017).

Art and architecture are central components of cultural strategy, creating welcome spaces for those who might be considered "others." The interactions and mutual understandings that art and architecture can engender between diverse people can lead to the discovery of new solutions to the shared problems that both majority and minority group members are facing in their society. Also, architecture and art can contribute significantly to creating a sense of belonging among minority group members. A project such as the Freedom Sculpture may seem to be merely a sentimental gesture that consumed a great deal of time, effort, energy, and money. However, by looking deeper, one can see that it addresses some of the discussed struggles that displaced persons face in new contexts such as othering, spatial discontinuity, segregation, and absence of a sense of belonging.

Art and culture are powerful mediums for fostering a "welcome space – both physical and ideological" for people who might be considered "others," doing so by providing a context for "interaction, engagement, dialogue, negotiation, and exchange of values, knowledge, and experience which can lead to mutual understanding among communities" (IFACCA 2019, 2). Cultural strategies can change the atmosphere in communities, facilitate interaction and dialogue between diverse individuals, and help to foster mutual understanding and openness to discovering new solutions to shared problems. Art and architecture can provide a framework that can help to build a community's social capital, establish trust, and develop collaborative resources by celebrating cultures of belonging and inclusiveness (IFACCA 2019). Physical objects that mark migration often become elements of discussions around transnationalism, diaspora, globalism, identity, and integration. These objects also can provide a window onto the social politics of the people who identify themselves with those monuments or markers.

While the Iranian-American community is relatively small, its members are highly successful, contributing significantly to American society. However, since the first waves of immigration in the wake of the 1979 revolution, their lives have been overshadowed by ongoing hostility between the Iranian and American governments, as well as misrepresentation in the US media and popular culture. The Freedom Sculpture project was the cumulative effort of a displaced group of people, who chose to create this strong marker as one way to help themselves in their quest to be represented positively in an often hostile environment. They chose Los Angeles, one of the most important cities in the US and, arguably, in the world in which to make a bold statement, in the hope that it could positively affect all Iranians in the diaspora.

The immediate outcome of this investment for and by Iranian-Americans was that, for at least a short period, they had an opportunity to be represented in a positive light in the US media. But in the long run, the Sculpture and what it represents as a visible manifestation of Iranian American cultural strategy will help Iranian-Americans, particularly those of the younger generations, to find peace with their dual identity and fully embrace who they are. The Sculpture creates an opportunity for Iranian-Americans to publicly tell their stories and talk about who they are; it is a medium through which Iranian-Americans can start a dialogue with other American citizens and thereby achieve greater integration into their new society. Having a sense of belonging to the environment is an important factor in humans' quality of life. By contributing to LA's built environment and making their own marks, Iranian-Americans can now feel a stronger sense of belonging to the city that they call home.

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