A City-wide Art Gallery

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Abstract

In Tehran, the capital of Iran, billboards bear two parallel responsibilities with, of course, different directions. Some of them have commercial functions, while others transmit moral messages and religious and political slogans. In the spring of 2015, billboards in Tehran suddenly transmitted a new message. A new urban project, called "A City-wide Art Gallery", converted Tehran into a gallery using billboards. For many people, this was "a city-wide coincidence". This was the first time that the municipality of Tehran allocated billboards to a topic that followed neither a commercial nor an ideological purpose. The change that the project brought about in the city's landscape has sparked debates among citizens and experts. The present study investigates the relationship of citizens with the images displayed in this project and compares this urban-scaled movement to people's reference to art galleries and museums. Data for this study are collected using questionnaires and interviews. According to the results, the respondents were generally satisfied with the selection of artworks and their layouts. However, the size of the artworks and the size of the subtitle letters of the images were criticized. Data analysis also shows that this program has been able to partially create a discursive space among citizens and encourage people to visit museums and art galleries.

Keywords: Billboards, Tehran, Gallery

1. Introduction

The functionality of image in conceptualizing urban space can be analyzed from the point of view of its external efficiency in design disciplines (Soderstrom, 2000). Mitchell believes that "visual culture is not limited to the study of images or media, but extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing, especially those that we take to be immediate or unmediated" (Mitchell, 2005). Images can express controversial meanings and power relations by contributing to shape a specific vision of the world. Visual materials displayed on city walls are cultural products containing commercial advertisement or political propaganda and reflecting the dominant context in the urban space.

"A City-wide Art Gallery" was a two-week long urban project run by the Beautification department of the municipality of Tehran in April 2015 and 2016. During these two weeks, the

billboards of the city that normally hold advertisements as well as religious and social awareness mottos were transformed to host images of artworks. About 1600 artworks including paintings, handicrafts, calligraphy pieces, and sculptures by domestic and international artists have been represented in the project. From its incepetion, the project has received a vast feedback by social media inside and abroad. However, the performance of this project as an extensive urban art activity has not been yet investigated.

This study therefore aims to investigate "A City-wide Art Gallery" as a project that through its duration has been controversial, in order to offer a critique of the projects strengths and weaknesses. To do this, data has been collected through questionnaires, printed documents, and conversations with the respective authorities.

2. The challenge of using the image in Tehran

In Iran, from the viewpoint of ownership, the city walls are considered «public property» (Mirshahi,2003). The simplest idea of this interpretation is that anyone can stick adverts or posters to the walls (Rahbarnia,2006). In the years before the Islamic Revolution, the use of images in Tehran was commercial. Paintings on the walls at large scale, usually in busy places, was seen in every corner of the city. For example, we can point out wall paintings and billboards to advertise goods like Pepsi or large neon boards on the roof of the shops or at the marginal areas of main squares of the city (Figure 1a). During the years after the Islamic Revolution (1978-1979) and the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the city's images included slogans related to revolution, sacred defense, martyrdom, and Islamic messages (Figure 1b). There were no billboards for commercial uses around the city in these years (Rahbarnia, 2006).

The gradual trend of commercial advertisings began in 1989, largely due to the "necessity for the reconstruction of the country". Therefore, the intermediary sector began introducing commodities. Reference to official news and events published by the country's newspapers is indicative of events that are directly related to commercial advertising. After the Iran-Iraq war, the government omitted grants to the municipality and finding revenue sources became critical for municipality of Tehran (Kamran, 2006). The municipality of Tehran prepared some programs such as land sale and land use change to provide financial requirements for city management. In the beginning, a small part of the municipality's revenue came from urban advertising. In the same period, the beautician organization of the municipality of Tehran was formed in 1991 (Asadollahi, 2010). As the first advertising experience, the organization started installing cement stations in different shapes around the city. These stations were places to attach free ads to preserve the walls and buildings from adhesives and paints. Wall boards, cement and metal stations, 8, 15, 48 and 72-meter length billboards, digital boards and video walls were among the methods that gradually began to be used since 1990s in Tehran. In this period, about 250 boards were installed at crossings, intersections and sidewalks in urban areas of the city (Mirshahi, 2002).

3. A new plan for presenting the image in the city

At the beginning of a new plan, 48 and 72-meter length billboards were installed along the highways, which were visible from the distance by car passengers. This way, the owners of the goods and capital, would take advantage of the visual space of the city for a certain period of time to advertise their products graphically by paying money. Advertisements for products like salt crackers, South Korean television sets, or bank and insurance services occupied most of the city's advertising space. The billboards which were installed on the city walls since the fall of 1990, were a new move. On many billboards, small and large banners and posters were glued together, so that underneath any poster or advertisement, a corner of the previous poster or advertisement was visible. However, the city walls were never empty of advertising (Soghrati, 2016), and in the early 2000's, the use of billboards began as a government podium. These billboards have ever since changed in different periods and occasions, due to the political situations (Nejadsalari, 2016).

4. Placing billboards

According to the municipality of Tehran, there are about 20,000 square meters of billboards in Tehran, with 5,000 square meters for cultural advertising and 15,000 square meters for commercial advertising. Most of the urban advertising billboards are installed in the highways of Tehran and its suburbs. Tehran's highway network, apart from the central part, is scattered across the city, and as Figure 2 shows, the highest density of highways is in the northern regions of Tehran. Meanwhile, the width of the highways in the northern and western parts of Tehran is greater and, on the other hand, the owners of the companies tend to advertise their products in the northern regions of the city. The dispersion of these billboards is higher in the city's main and secondary streets (Nejadsalari, 2016). Cultural billboards are intended to convey cultural-social messages or, according to national, cultural or religious events, such as Nowruz and the beginning of the academic year to communicate messages relevant to these events.

Figure 1 - Left image a billboard for advertising Pepsi before the Islamic Revolution,
right image a billboard with anti-western concepts after the Islamic Revolution
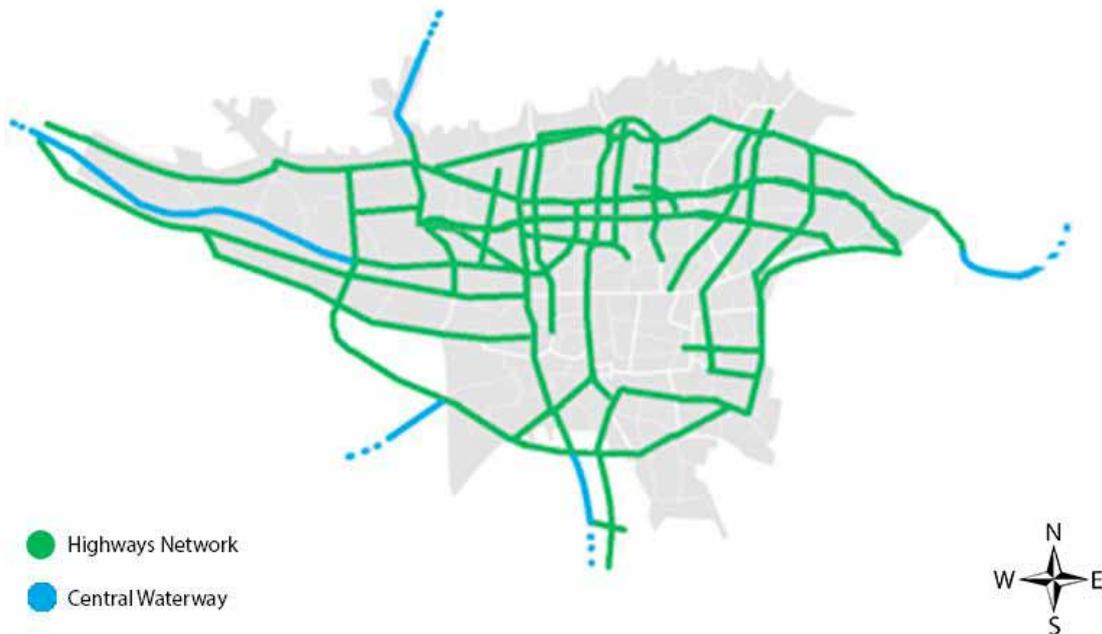

Figure 2 - A schematic map of the highways of Tehran (source: http://sdi.tehran.ir/)

5. Cultural action of "A City-wide Art Gallery"

In April 2015, for the first time, billboards in Tehran became an art gallery. These advertising mediums in the city all began showcasing artworks. This project is considered to be the most important cultural project in Iran after the Islamic Revolution. In this project, 1800 billboards were dedicated to visual arts. Although billboards of Tehran were usually kept for propaganda, religious quotations or anti-American slogans, the project turned the city into a great gallery using these billboards. Paintings by Pablo Picasso, René Magritte, Faramarz Pilaram, John Sargent, Jazeh Tabatabai, Reza Mafi, Sohrab Sepehri and many other national and international painters were printed on billboards in Tehran. (Vakilemelat, 2017) The gallery kept running for 2 weeks and was titled as "A City-wide Art Gallery". During this time, all commercial advertisements, ethical advices and political slogans were cleared from the city to make way for the project.

The purpose of this project was to promote cultural level and to encourage various social classes to visit museums. According to interviews with the executive section of the project, it was found that the majority of these images were gathered from the treasures of the museums, such as Malek Museum, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, the Carpet Museum and a number of collectors and visual books. The intention of Tehran municipality was to provide citizens with incentives to value visual arts. The project was implemented in two stages. The first step was the fast formation of a policy council and selection of artworks. One element of the Council's decision-making included efforts to introduce the rich artworks of Iran and the world, using the artworks established in the history of Iranian art and the world, allocating 70% of the contribution to the works of Iranian artists and 30% to foreign artists, and to bear the trusteeship by mentioning the location of the original works (Jamal Kamyab, pers. Comm., 2017). Collecting appropriate images of selected Iranian and world artworks was the most important executive action in the second phase, and this was carried out through consultation with museums and cultural centers. For this reason, consulting with museums such as the Malek Museum, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, the Carpet Museum, the Niavaran Cultural Center, Tandis and Herfe Honarmand professional art journals, Nazar Publication, and some professional photographers holding an archive was done in the second phase. These

centers and individuals worked collaboratively in the interest of the project and in order to achieve the overall approval of the plan (Seyed Mojtaba Moosavi, Pers. Comm., 2017).

6. Socio-geographic conditions of Tehran: the distribution factor of the project artworks

The geographical separation of social classes in Tehran is based on the social gap between the north and the south of Tehran. The three waves of immigration to Tehran were eastward, westward and to the marginal east-west areas. As shown in Figure 4, Tehran is divided into twenty-two urban areas with areas 1 to 3 being the northernmost parts of Tehran located in the hillside of Alborz mountains. According to the distribution map of artworks in the city, there was no balance in distributing artworks across the city. Due to the extensive economic activity in the northern parts of the city, most billboards are installed on highways in the northern regions of Tehran. Hence, in northern Tehran, higher volume of artwork was seen, and since advertising billboards in the southern and southeast parts of the city are limited, most of these works were installed on pedestrian bridges and, consequently, the amount of installed works was less. In the northern part of the city, due to the natural beauty of the scenery, there was a better opportunity to see these works. According to the organizers, the program has been trying to provide the opportunity to watch these artworks by car passengers at speeds up to 50 km/h.

Figure 3 - Some of highway billboards expressing artworks in the "A City-wide Art Gallery"

7. The questionnaire and procedure of data analysis

The main research hypothesis of this study is twofold:
Hypothesis 1 (H01): the performance of the municipality in organizing "A City-wide Art Gallery" was acceptable;
Hypothesis 2 (H02): the citizens were interested in "A City-wide Art Gallery" held by Tehran municipality.
Demographic variables such as age, gender, education level, job, monthly income, and daily presence in public spaces are important in explaining variation in attention to the project in general. These variables have been considered as independent variables in this study. The dependent variables are based on the satisfaction level of the citizens on the project as an urban art project. In this study, a survey method was developed to evaluate the research hypothesis. Multiple regression analysis was used to analyze the raw data. The survey was undertaken after in June 2016.

Dependent questions consist of several sections as follows: (1) the respondents' level of attraction to the artworks, (2) the effects of artworks on promoting the cultural level of citizens; (3) the effects of artworks on encouraging citizens to visit art galleries.
For the ordinal variables, 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the intensity of respondents' opinions on a variety of indicator statements. Statements were selected as neutrally as possible.
Table 1 shows the independent and dependent variables of the questionnaire. A number of 150 respondents were randomly selected from citizens with different demographic information. Respondents filled in the questionnaire, guided by the interviewer. Among the gathered questionnaires, 22 copies of questionnaire were not completely filled by the respondents and were removed from the gathered data.
Multivariate regression analysis is performed to analyze the

Variable No.	Description	Variable levels
V1	Age	young to old
V2	Gender	female and male
V3	education level	very low to very high
V4	relationship between the job and art	very low to very high
V5	monthly income	very low to very high
V6	daily presence in public places	very low to very high
V7	number of observed artworks	very low to very high
V8	level of satisfaction on the selection of artworks	very low to very high
V9	level of satisfaction on the layout of artworks	very low to very high
V10	level of satisfaction on the size of artworks	very low to very high
V11	level of satisfaction on the annotation of artworks	very low to very high
V12	level of artworks becoming the subject of talking	very low to very high
V13	level of artworks becoming a way to get familiar with other artworks	very low to very high
V14	level of artworks becoming a way to encourage visiting art galleries	very low to very high
V15	level of satisfaction on the duration of the project	very low to very high
V16	level of agreement with organizing similar events	very low to very high

Table 1 - The independent and dependent variables of the questionnaire

raw data of the gathered questionnaires. Table 2 shows the results of linear regression analysis for collinearity diagnostics between variables. Multi-collinearity occurs when two or more of the independent variables are highly correlated and the effect of some variables might be underestimated. The collinearity diagnostics function in SPSS was used, giving two values, tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF). Tolerance indicates how much of each independent variable that is not explained by the other independent variables in the model. All the independent variables included in the analyses scored higher than the threshold 0.2 on the diagnostic measure of tolerance. VIF is an index measuring how much the variance of a coefficient is increased because of collinearity. Typically, a VIF value greater than 10 is of concern which all of our explanatory factors had lower VIF values.

8. Results and Discussion

This study is based on analysis of the impact of a large cultural event on the cultural sustainable development of the city by using interviews and distributing questionnaires to gather statistical data.

9. Results of interview analysis

The important starting point in developing a concept for any public art project is to identify the talents and assets within the community. In any community, there are people who can provide historical perspective, valuable insights into how urban art functions, and an understanding of the critical issues and what is meaningful to people.

According to the interviews with the researchers in the field of image, the artworks of the project had been installed on urban highways, in which the speed of car passengers is high. In the design of the billboards, which includes artwork and its related descriptions, the scale proportions should be maintained. Furthermore, text descriptions and annotations of the artworks should be written in such a way that they can be seen and understood by the drivers so that they would not face problems driving on the highways. Many of the artworks lacked enough light, especially at night, so nothing was seen at night except for a vague image. According to the experts, placement of some of the works was not suitable. For example, on the body of several pedestrian bridges, at least three artworks were installed which were not visible by drivers due to their small size.

If there was the possibility of replacing images on certain paths during the two weeks of presenting the artworks, citizens who routinely traveled everyday could see more works. Color quality and clarity of some artworks were not desirable. In addition, organizers of this project had been less mindful of the pedestrians. In fact, this project is not intended for pedestrians, and due to the high speed of motorways on highways, these works could certainly not be seen in detail by drivers. The artworks installed on pedestrian bridges, two works were usually displayed side by side, which were completely different in terms of style. The shape of these billboards has diminished the size of the works displayed, and it was not easy to see the details in the works. However, the white background for all the works has contributed to the

Independent Variable	Tolerance	VIF
V1	0.664	1.506
V2	0.920	1.088
V3	0.901	1.110
V4	0.872	1.147
V5	0.704	1.421
V6	0.848	1.179

Table 2 - Linear regression analysis for collinearity diagnostics

unity of their presentation. But in some boards, the volume of this white background was so large that the painting was almost lost, and in some works, because of the size of the billboards, this background was so small that the drawing was merged into the texture of the urban space and it was not readily visible.

10. Results of statistical analysis

Demographic analysis of respondents indicated that 41% of them were under 30 years old whilst 44% of them were between 31 and 45 years old. The remaining 15% were older than 46. Furthermore, 49% of respondents were women and the remaining were men. In terms of education, more than 44% of respondents had a bachelor›s degree who have the highest frequency and then, 26% had a master's degree. In terms of employment, the job of 13% and 52% of respondents had high and low relationships with art, respectively. In addition, 40% of respondents had an income less than 300 USD, 5% more than 2000 USD, and the remaining had incomes between 300 to 2000 USD.

In terms of daily presence in public places, 42% of respondents spent lower than 2 hours in public places every day whilst 45% of them spent between 2 and 4 hours in public space. 13% of the respondents spent more than 4 hours in public space every day.

Table 3 shows the comments of the respondents about different aspects of "A City-wide Art Gallery" project. According to the table, although the respondents were generally satisfied with the choice of artwork and their layouts, the size of the artworks and the size of the subtitle letters of the images were the ones that were criticized. Due to the location of the artworks (streets, highways, and pedestrian bridges), the size of the letters used for the subtitles of the images was not large enough and the audience needed to be precise and focused to read them.

"A City-wide Art Gallery" project was highly accessible due to the fact that it was implemented across the city. Data analysis shows that this program has been able to partially create a discursive space among citizens. According to the results, more than 50% of the respondents have discussed the project with others. Many people saw this project as a step towards getting acquainted with the rich artistic works of Iran and the world, which can determine the importance of the project for people from moderate and lower social classes. Table 4 also shows that the project has encouraged people to visit museums and art galleries.

The respondents were not satisfied with the duration of the project, which indicates that the project could last for more than 2 weeks. If the organizers periodically replaced the boards installed in the project, the visitor's consent would certainly increase. Finally, a large number of respondents advocated the idea of re-implementing this project and similar events.

Table 4 shows the results of logistic regression analyses of the feedback of respondents about the project. As shown in

Variable	Percentage %				
	very low	low	moderate	high	very high
V8	8	4	28	56	4
V9	17	8	27	48	0
V10	21	50	24	5	0
V11	5	61	23	10	1
V12	7	23	19	48	3
V13	4	14	24	49	9
V14	3	9	26	51	11
V15	32	30	23	15	0
V16	0	35	23	42	0

Table 3 - Comments of the respondents about different aspects of "A City-wide Art Gallery"

this table, there was no significant differences among people with different demographic parameters in the number of observed artworks. The age of respondents had a negative, significant effect on artworks becoming the subject of talking. This means that younger respondents have converted the project to a subject of talking more than older respondents. Men were more often in agreement on the selection of artworks by the organizers and the size of their annotation more in comparison to women who preferred the size of the artworks more than men. Furthermore, the project has encouraged men more than women to visit the museums and art galleries.

There was a positive, significant relationship between the education level of respondents and level of satisfaction on the layout of artworks in general. However, people with lower education levels talked about the project with other citizens more than respondents with higher education levels. Furthermore, respondents with lower education level wanted to increase the duration of the project.

Respondents who had art-related jobs commented on the appropriate selection and annotation of the artworks more than people with jobs not relating to art. Finally, respondents who spent time in the public spaces were encouraged to visit museums and art galleries more than respondents who spent lower time.

Dependent	Constant	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
V7	2.704 (0.364)^a	-0.062 (0.066)	-0.131 (0.089)	0.006 (0.047)	0.056 (0.041)	-0.016 (0.046)	-0.038 (0.053)
V8	2.220 (0.594)^a	-0.088 (0.107)	0.350 (0.115)^b	0.041 (0.077)	0.191 (0.072)^b	0.072 (0.075)	0.078 (0.087)
V9	1.151 (0.778)	-0.109 (0.140)	-0.006 (0.190)	0.297 (0.100)^b	0.046 (0.088)	0.100 (0.098)	-0.091 (0.114)
V10	1.872 (0.769)	0.031 (0.139)	-0.405 (0.128)^a	-0.120 (0.049)^a	0.058 (0.087)	0.087 (0.096)	0.025 (0.112)
V11	2.660 (0.774)^a	0.148 (0.140)	0.231 (0.119)^b	-0.143 (0.100)	0.141 (0.067)^c	0.036 (0.097)	0.002 (0.113)
V12	4.801 (0.870)^a	-0.311 (0.107)^a	-0.132 (0.213)	-0.323 (0.112)^b	0.089 (0.098)	0.174 (0.109)	-0.023 (0.127)
V13	3.052 (0.948)^a	-0.169 (0.171)	-0.295 (0.232)	0.071 (0.122)	-0.003 (0.107)	-0.023 (0.119)	-0.038 (0.139)
V14	2.133 (0.846)^b	-0.063 (0.153)	0.645 (0.207)^a	-0.030 (0.109)	0.058 (0.095)	0.074 (0.106)	0.184 (0.064)^c
V15	3.240 (1.051)^a	-0.082 (0.189)	0.318 (0.257)	-0.250 (0.106)^b	0.054 (0.118)	0.007 (0.132)	-0.069 (0.154)
V16	2.402 (0.801)^a	-0.121 (0.144)	0.073 (0.196)	-0.107 (0.103)	-0.006 (0.090)	0.075 (0.100)	-0.071 (0.117)

Table 4 - The logistic regression analyses of questionnaire raw data

Conclusion

According to the results of interviews with art experts and statistical analysis of questionnaires filled by citizens, to evaluate "A City-wide Art Gallery" project, we should not forget the courage to implement such a plan in this volume of 1,600 environmental structures.

In addition to its availability, visiting the artworks presented in "A City-wide Art Gallery" did not impose any costs to the citizens, on the contrary, the project facilitated art experiences for those who could not afford visiting the artworks in galleries and museums. In fact, in this project, art was not only accessible to a particular economic class, but to all others, meaning that individuals with unequal economic conditions were equally capable of enjoying this project.

Although the acceleration in the implementation of the idea has led the organizers to implement the project only in environmental advertising boards to achieve the goal of familiarizing and reconciling people with artworks, this urban art project with its strengths and weaknesses was a privileged experience in the cultural activities of the municipality of Tehran. Furthermore, this project gained the admiration of many experts and the media both inside and outside the country followed by requests from the Beautification organization to repeat the project annually, although the organization announced not planning for any repetitions after the second year of the project was run. The project has left the lasting effect of more public appreciation for art in Tehran's urban space. Nevertheless, considering Tehran as the capital city to which other cities look up to as a pattern of development, the repetition of the project could have paved the way towards developing similar cultural urban activities, thereby potentially spreading the art appreciation effect in other parts of the country. Further benefits of such project are stylizing city space, the improvement of the city's quality, the familiarity of the community with the artistic treasures of Iran and the world, encouraging people to visit museums and galleries and other cultural achievements. Finally, two further benefits can be mentioned for such projects: to create a sense of peace and sympathy among Iran's citizens who had seen the rich art of Iran and the world in front of their eyes in their boring and repetitive days. The second is the creation of an exciting reason for people in taxis or on buses, as a sum of different classes, to talk about art and culture.

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