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THE DRAMATURGICAL PATTERN OF PUBLIC SPACE
The Use Of ‘As If’ Space In Vali’Asr Mosque

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Keywords: City Theatre, Mosque Courtyard, Open-Air Theatre, Urban Transformations, Multivocality

ABSTRACT

The cylindrical modernist City Theatre and the public Park-e Daneshjü in Tehran were designed in the 1960s. Over the decades, this public place has encountered drastic urban transformations. In 2007, the municipality commissioned architect Reza Daneshmir to design the mosque behind the City Theatre to reintegrate the surrounding neighbourhood once again. Since, this mosque was expected to reintegrate religious and cultural activities simultaneously, the architect decided to design the mosque’s roof as an open-air theatre. The mosque thus holds the ‘as if’ space. Furthermore, by excluding the mosque from its internal courtyard, the architect transformed the multivocal surrounding public area into the mosque’s own courtyard. While in the past small vistas and the square occasionally opened up in front of important buildings, in Islamic cities this kind of large-scale urban area has rarely emerged. This transformation of a multivocal urban area into the mosque’s inner courtyard could be considered as an architectural antidote to urban fragmentation.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE CITY THEATRE

Some buildings and places continue to play a central role in the history of a city and its social life, even when the original circumstances have changed (Madanipour, 1993). One example in Tehran is of the capital's most important landmark, the City Theatre (1967–1972) (Figure 1), situated at the crossroads of Vali’Asr and Enqelab Avenue, which has remained important since the period of modernisation and the construction of the public space during the 1960s and 1970s. The cylindrical Modernist building and the public Park-e Daneshju (Student Public Park) were designed by the architect Ali Sardar Afkhami. Both are integrated fully into the urban social life, without recourse to the traditional turret and dome. There were attempts in the city in the late 1960s to derive contemporary designs from old cultural sources, and the City Theatre is an example of this. The round structure is of reinforced concrete instead of brick, but it is the surface which is important: it has completely tiled walls with geometric designs on a pale yellow background. The emphasis on surface and the use of tile are reminiscent of Seljuk architecture, as is the surrounding portico of raw, thin columns, of a proportion similar to those of Chehel Stoum in Isfahan. Ali Sardar Afkhami illustrated the combination of modern and traditional architectural approaches by using the ogive arches that surround the City Theatre building. These ogive arches illustrate the modern usage of a traditional structure. The thin columns, which are similar to the (modern) mushroom-shaped columns, recall a traditional Iranian structure. The area, however, underwent drastic urban transformation. A new matrix of space relations was imposed on the site: this resulted in a ‘fragmentation of spaces’ and destroyed the public space (Deutsche, 1992).

PROBLEMATIC ISSUES

The changes underlying this functional fragmentation and privatisation are multiple. The small Park-e Daneshju, located in front of the cylindrical building of the theatre, had been taken over by transgenders and had become a kind of private territory. In addition, in the 1980s, behind the theatre building, an outdoor congregational prayer place had been installed. Several years later, the area surrounding the City Theatre became taken up by a subway entrance, introducing a specific type of social relations and collective behaviour into the area (Avermaete, Havik, Teerds, and Woltjes, 2009). Finally, as the city suffered from traffic congestion, the whole area of the theatre and Park-e Daneshju was fenced off to force pedestrians to circulate instead of gathering there, and to use underground passages rather than crossing the street and getting in the way of traffic vehicles. The result was that no centre remained, and no visible public life, but instead a secluded space and a kind of ‘public sphere’ were created, that were just the sum total of many arenas of communication (Madanipour, 2003). The subdivision of the site into functional zones eroded the public space (Madanipour, 2003). The effect of all this was that the area also become overcrowded.

What makes such crowds difficult to bear is not just the number of people involved, but the fact that the built environment has lost its power to gather people or allow them to separate and/or relate to each other. The new public space created by the theatre was taken over by fast-moving cars and replaced a social experience with a new experience of speed and congestion (Madanipour, 2003). Individuals entering the public sphere no longer had in mind one clear pattern of action and expectation — that of the ‘public individual’. The public space fragmented into countless little spheres of individual ‘users’. The task for public designers in designing the modern city, however, is to create these intermediate places as neither fully public nor private, which reflects the complex urban tissue (Avermaete et al., 2009) and involves a diverse set of rules and conditions.

RESULTS

This paper enters and questions a particular interdisciplinary space — a discourse that combines ideas about art, architecture and
Figure 1. The City Theatre
urban design, on the one hand, with theories of the
city, social space and public space on the
other. This interdisciplinary field is called the
‘urban-aesthetic’ or ‘spatial-cultural’ discourse
(Deutsche, 2002). Thus the investigation
will focus on how public space, as a space
of cultural production, can be organised to
facilitate intermingling and minimise isolation
or segregation in the urban space, with
the aim of lending these public spaces the
ethical and aesthetic power that supports the
stability of society without destroying the
uniqueness of any single group. Instead of
relying on community, this paper will focus on
a network of relationships based on trust and
reciprocity between individuals. Then, instead
of concentrating on architecture as an object,
it will consider architecture as a dispositif. The
purpose is to show that architecture, viewed
as a dispositif and planned as such, can have an
effect on building trust-based relationships
between individuals and thus can stimulate the
appearance of social capital (Dascalu, 2013).

DISPOSITIF AND THE PRODUCTION OF
SUBJECTIVITY

The concept of le dispositif has a strong
philosophical history in the work of post-
structuralist philosophers such as Michel
Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Francois
Lyotard. For them, the effect produced by the
 dispositif on the social body is already
inscribed in words, images, bodies, thoughts
and affections. A dispositif thus appears
when the relation between heterogeneous
elements produces a subjectivating effect in
the social body, whether this is an effect of
normalisation or deviation, of territorialisation
or de-territorialisation or of appeasement
or intensification. This is how Foucault’s
dispositifs of power and knowledge, Deleuze’s
dispositif of the production of subjectivity and
Lyotard’s impelling dispositifs are addressed.
According to Foucault, a dispositif possesses
three different levels or layers. In the first,
the dispositif is merely a heterogeneous
set of discourses, architectonic forms,
propositions and strategies of knowledge and
power, subjective dispositions and cultural
inclinations. In the second, the nature of the
connection that brings these heterogeneous
elements together reveals itself. Finally, the
third layer contains the discursive formation
or ‘episteme’ resulting from the connections
between these elements (Parente and
Carvalho, 2008).

In the Islamic city, where the element of the
community can be applied simultaneously to
its religious, cultural and commercial public
spaces, by applying the term ‘Islamising’ as
the basic relationship of ‘cultural product’
(Kahera, 2007:384-385) and emphasising the
dispositif in architecture, the question
becomes: How can dispositif architecture
become a tool for creating the uniqueness of
different groups? (Dascalu, 2013).

DISPOSITIF: ARCHITECTURE’S TOOL FOR
BUILDING TRUST

Reza Daneshmir has written (n.d.):
We are living in a world of forces and waves,
the waves that are constantly radiated
and influence the environment while being
influenced. There is no fixed point in the
universe. As Heraclitus puts it, everything is
continually changing and moving in every
second. This movement and change is
perpetually in progress in all inner and outer
dimensions. To be sensitive to these waves
-- which are being radiated with their specific
wavelength and hence their specific effects
-- and to demonstrate them requires the
invention and utilisation of systems that are
capable of upholding them in flexible and
cohesive structures without loss of energy,
while redirecting them to form more effective
currents. Architecture has the potential to
detect, direct and record these waves within
a specific time-related process and yield
a space which articulates the association
between large-scale issues of urban space,
universe and history in a broader setting.
What position can an architect take regarding
a public sphere that is marked by this
continual change? (Avermaete et al., 2009).
In 2007, twenty-six years after the first
congregational prayer room was built behind
the site of the City Theatre, the municipality commissioned architects Reza Daneshmir and his wife Catherine Spiridonoff to design the Vālī‘Asr mosque to reintegrate the surrounding neighbourhood. The very traditional design, in accordance with stereotypical Islamic design and pattern, faced furious opposition from artists and intellectuals, mainly because of its height (Figure 2), which led to the decision to ask Daneshmir and Spiridonoff to redesign the mosque.

Recognising the rich history of Iranian architecture, Daneshmir was particularly interested in maintaining the traditional significance and poetry of a design’s geometry. He would not simply copy from the past, but rather would reinterpret traditional elements in order to create something new, that was both Iranian and modern. He was actively searching for new forms in which to house contemporary public life (Avermaete et al., 2009). ‘The previous design, compared with the City Theatre’s building, was extremely large,’ Daneshmir stated (n.d.). ‘It wasn’t an appropriate design. Then, the landscape design was offered, which works with the public park-e Daneshju.’

Sacred places can take many forms, and are not necessarily limited to their traditional typology (Britton, 2010). The Vālī‘Asr mosque is remarkable because of the architects’ reinterpretation of traditional forms in a contemporary setting (Figure 3), thereby illustrating the possibility of a convergence of viewpoints. First of all there is the fascinating interior, with its innovative interpretation of the traditional shamsheh (Figure 4), the ornamentation of the dome in Iranian architecture. Equally important is the fact that the mosque is much more than just a religious building; it also is designed as a public building in the city. The project is all about the roof.

The main danger of trust-building through architectural practices is provided by its potential success, which can lead to the privatisation of space. In such situations, the individuals tend to look first and foremost to the interior while isolating themselves from the exterior. At a territorial level, this can lead to spatial and social segregation. Isolation, eliminating the exterior, appears, amongst other reasons, because of routinisation and familiarisation with a certain space, use or process. At this point, appropriation becomes the exclusion of the unknown, of what is different from the usual. Therefore, all trust-building strategies must find a way of breaking the routine, of introducing disequilibrium, which reshuffles the established structure so that contact with the outside and accessibility can be assured (Dascalu, 2013).

In this regard, the social and religious function of the Vālī‘Asr mosque is not expressed by a monumental traditional form that dominates its environment, but by a monumental roof surface as a way of breaking a routine that functions as an open city square and open-air theatre. The building, therefore, is directed inwards and simultaneously creates a space for social activities on the outside. It combines and integrates religious and cultural functions. The roof is designed as an open-air theatre, connected to the City Theatre, where ceremonies and spectacles can be performed, but it works first as an urban plaza, as an antidote to the specialisation and functionalisation the area had undergone previously, transforming the pedestrians into urban actors and ‘public men and women’, who meet and are together without necessarily belonging together. It is, indeed, the essence of public life, and a critical ingredient of any successful public-space design, that the role of actor and spectator are interchangeable, that there is free access and also that no one is forced to participate and be exposed (Singerman, 2009:307).

In the other words, architecture built to serve ritual, as sacred architecture nearly always is, needs those individuals and communal rituals to complete them -- they depend on humans to animate their spaces and articulate their meaning. The meaning of the architecture is deepened and broadened through ritual, and the architecture becomes the setting of ritual performance and the re-enactment of
Figure 2. Traditional Mosque which was designed behind the City Theatre had faced furious opposition
mythic themes and stories. Through ritual each participant becomes part of the myth (Barrie, 2010).

If social life is understood and lived as appearing on public and semi-public stages, what can we learn about the architecture of social life from theatre design?

According to Christopher Alexander, "[W]hen you build a thing, you cannot merely build that thing in isolation, but must also repair the world around it, and within it, so that the larger world at that one place becomes more coherent, and more whole, and the thing which you make takes its place in the web of nature, as you make it" (cited in Barrie, 2010:50).

ARCHITECTURE AS AN ANALYTICAL LENS

The concept of dramaturgy relates ideas to structure, and action to architectonics. This section will focus on the conceptualisation and production of space in the ‘theatre event’. Architecture is often considered as though we can separate the meaning of buildings from their habitation. This is despite the work of many in the field, often indebted to Lefebvre himself, who have drawn attention to the ‘event-space’ of architecture and the way that space is produced socially, with buildings merely one component of that production (Turner, 2015).

However, the design of buildings for the performing arts focuses on the relationship between the auditorium and the platform or the stage. In its classical setting, the stage is conceived as a neutral and empty container, open to one side. Modern theatres try to be as flexible as possible to accommodate a variety of relations between actors and the public. The stage becomes a neutral container that can be adapted to a wide variety of performances. This is also what the mosque’s rooftop urban plaza tries to achieve, and the way it relates to the surrounding area: a neutral and flexible setting that allows for a multiplicity of social encounters. The undulating roof plaza emerges from the ground next to the City Theatre without blocking the view of the theatre, and it turns into a dome at the top (Hensel & Gharieghi, 2012). The roof opening allows for natural light penetration into the mosque. Despite their formal differences, the quality of the interior lighting and indirect organisation of the entrance resemble that of the Sheikh Lotf-ol Allah Mosque in the Imam square in Isfahan, dating from the Safavid period (1501–1736). The walk towards the mosque is organised by the narrative of light, in which the light is not considered as the visual ambience but as a substance in itself. The divine is evoked primarily by revealing and experiencing the ineffability of nature and not by conventional symbolism. By cutting out the mosque’s roof, the light has been separated from sight and creates a sacred space. In this way, via the subtle approach of architectural design and construction, inspired by European examples rather than re-using conventional Islamic design patterns, the Vall’Asr mosque succeeds in responding to changing social needs as well as to rooted cultural traditions (Singerman, 2009).

The mosque reactivates a sense of public space in the area, introduced there first by the theatre, which is well described by Hannah Arendt: ‘The public realm, as the common realm, gathers us together and yet prevents us from falling over each other, so to speak’ (cited in Madanipour, 2003:168-170). The new mosque is more than just a well-designed and innovative architectural project. Its importance also lies in how it exemplifies one of Putnam’s basic assumptions, namely that religious networks play a major role in developing a country’s civil society (Pickel and Sammet, 2012) In addition, in Islamic territories, religious institutions such as the mosque can play a vital role economically, socially and culturally in the improvement and optimisation of urban development in a neighbourhood. They can help identify problems and needs, maintain identity, take care of old buildings and historical spaces, etc. In general, they can help organise the urban space and create a good balance between the old and new urban body (Garsivaz-Gazi, 2012). Throughout the history of the development of Islamic cities,
mosques have functioned as one of the most important public spaces. Because of the lack of public spaces, such as agoras, forums, theatres, stadiums and halls of justice, in an Islamic city, the social role of the mosque is important. This also has had an effect on its architectural morphology.

THE MOSQUE COURTYARD

In Iran, mosque architecture seems to have become standardised some time during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, to incorporate an open courtyard, a large bulbous dome over the prayer chamber and occasionally a minaret or two. Traditionally, an internal courtyard provided an open, breathing space within the mosque. Despite its introverted and closed character, this courtyard also functioned as a centre, a kind of public space where major and minor passages terminate. It became a kind of local city plaza, linked to other public functions in the city, part of an integrated network of public spaces (Makani, 2015). As Rumi, the great classical Persian poet, wrote in the third century, the mosque was built to promote social integration and solidarity: ‘[T]hat is the secret of why mosques were erected, so that the inhabitants of the parish might gather and greater mercy and profit ensue. Houses are separate for the purpose of dispersion and the concealment of private relations; that is their use. Cathedral mosques were erected so that the whole city might be assembled there.’ The public realm that is thus created finds a strong religious and social purpose with the intention of bringing people together. An aspect of the Middle Eastern city that has been criticised is the lack of public urban squares like those of the medieval European cities. However, there is some opposition. For instance, the major Meydan-e-Imam public square in Isfahan should be considered a courtyard of the Sheikh Lutfi Allah mosque. It is a large open space surrounded by arcades, which, however, give the public space a specific religious rather than secular character. In fact, three mosques in the history of Iran are an exception to the rule. First, there is the Sheikh Lutfi Allah mosque, from the Safavid era, situated in Maydan-e-Imam near the Masjid-e-Imam and Ali Qapu, which avoids grandstanding by omitting the minaret and inner courtyard. Second is the Al Javad mosque (Figure 5) in Tehran, from the Pahlavi period, which is integrated with a large-scale public space on the outside around the monuments. The Al’ Javad mosque does not have a dome, minaret, inner courtyard or a surrounding portico. Also, no typical Islamic ornamentation can be found on its exterior. This monumental mosque has a prismatic shape, with twelve faces. It was designed to be independent of the surrounding urban context. Its vertical windows are similar to the Gothic cathedral, indicating it was influenced by the St. Sarkis Cathedral (Figure 6), which is located in the same neighbourhood and was built in 1970, one year before the Al’ Javad mosque was constructed (Ghobadian, 2013).

Finally, there is the Vali’Asr mosque. Not only do these three mosques avoid following the traditional typology, they are also integrated with their urban surroundings as extrovert public places.

The Vali’Asr mosque is remarkable since it has no traditional courtyard and has been integrated fully with the City Theatre and its surroundings so that the public Park-e-Daneshjoo becomes its courtyard. The extrovert courtyard of this introvert mosque is the entry to the mosque, but also to the City Theatre building, the subway entrance and the public park; in other words, the city’s daily life. This city-scaled courtyard is the architectural solution to giving public space back to the city.

According to Kaesten Harries, myths and architecture share the role of representing the world so that ‘it no longer seems indifferent to our needs, arbitrary and contingent, but is experienced as a place we can call home’ (Barrie, 2010:61). One could expand this definition to include all the arts. Architecture may be the principal means by which humans articulate places in the world, but its ‘existentially mediating task’ (Barrie, 2010:61)
could logically be applied to two- and three-dimensional art, literature and other expressive and narrative forms. In this manner, we can deepen our discussion of architecture as a communicative medium. Then, turning to the Vall’Aṣr Mosque, the symbolic and communicative capacity of architecture and its roles emerge as a medium of transformation (Barrie, 2010).

CONCLUSION
“MULTIVOCALITY AND MULTILOCALITY”

Diverse urban audiences have accepted conflict and bitterness as a part of the story necessary to understand their communities. For the artist or designer seeking a broader audience in the urban landscape than a single patron or a gallery or museum can provide, it means being willing to engage with historical material. The kind of public art that truly contributes to a sense of place needs to start with a new kind of relationship to the people whose history is being represented. In fact, it is about giving respect to members of a community, listening to them and talking to them as equals, and earning their trust (Hayden, 1995).

Yet how can we construct our voices so that they can represent the diversity of voices we hear in the field? The problem of voice (speaking for and speaking to) intersects with the problem of place (speaking from and speaking of). It becomes difficult to say who really speaks for whom. The problem of voice is thus a problem of multiplicity as well as a problem of representation (Appadurai, 1988).

How do we deal with the problem of multivocality and with the differential power relations implicit in such cultural constructions of place? We can only understand the world from within our culture by joining multivocality to multilocality.

Multilocality in this sense, then, means looking at places from the viewpoint of others while recognising that there really are no ‘others’ in a world in which everyone can potentially suffer from one agent’s action. A single physical landscape can be multilocual in the sense that it shapes and expresses polysemic meanings of place for different users. This is more accurately a multivocal dimension of place, but multilocality conveys the idea that a single place may be experienced quite differently. As Fabian argues, ‘making the other present rather than making representation [is] predicated on the other’s absence’ (Rodman, 1992:647).

For the Vall’Aṣr Mosque, the production of space is integral to the articulation of religious and cultural identity, but the space created in this process remains multivocal and contested, drawing together different groups of people, each of which expresses its own historical interpretation.

As mentioned above, more recent anthropological studies have introduced the concepts of the multivocality and multilocality of space. Space as a social product, then, must reflect the multiple meanings emanating from within a society. Places, as Rodman explains, are politicised, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions. Naturally, these multiple constructions of space will not always coexist in harmony. Spaces are often contested: ‘geographic location where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion and/or resistance engage actors whose social positions are defined by differential control of resources and access to power’ (Vovina, 2006: 256). In fact, where the space for action is usurped -- where action, in the strict sense, is no longer possible -- resistance becomes the primary vehicle of spontaneity and agonistic subjectivity (Villa, 1992). What cities most need today is to protect their public space. But where is it to be found? Not every public space determines the future of urban life. Those of its forms are regarded as most desirable which promote ‘both modern ambitions to eradicate differences and postmodern strivings to emphasise such differences by distinguishing and isolating them. This applies to public space which appreciates the creative and life-giving value
of diversity and acknowledges the need for an active dialogue between differences’ (Dymnicka, 2009:62). All these theoretical concepts are important for this investigation of the Valî’Asr Mosque, whose cultural and religious revival hinges on its ability to create sacred space infused with its own vision of traditionalism and modernity, on the one hand, and Tehran’s recent postmodern public space on the other.

Merely imitating the formal characteristics of successful public spaces, in this case, can be seen as looking for the solution in the wrong place. The relationship between form and meaning is soon watered down by the huge increase in the mobile consumption of places, varied according to lifestyle, which has fundamentally altered the meaning and nature of the public space (Hajer and Reijndorp, 2001). The process of meaning-making of socio-cultural interaction has here converted the mosque’s roof and its introverted traditional courtyard into event-spaces, which is the effective answer to the epoch of simultaneous juxtaposition: in other words, the epoch of the multivocality of the postmodern public place. Further research could be done in this field of study.

Muslim communities are fundamentally multivocal, and hold diverse views. In fact, one of the important properties of ritual symbols is their polysemy and multivocality (Turner, 1969). The relationship between a culture and the formal character of architecture is not easy to formulate. Globalisation has made issues of identity and representation in dwelling and settlement very cumbersome. It has challenged the very possibility that a physical form can represent the identity of a people, a nation or a culture. But forms can never be more than the reflection of a transitional stage in the life of a society (Nezar, 1995). However, they are meaningful. In the case of the Valî’Asr mosque, we observe its transformation from a traditional inner courtyard to an open public square: the architects’ attention, which traditionally was paid to the inner open space of the mosque courtyard, has now been diverted to the embellishment of an extrovert and multivocal public space (Gurallar, 2009). In this specific cultural context, this is a significant change.


Kahera, A. I., 2007. Two Muslim Communities: Two Disparate Ways of Islamizing Public Spaces. Space and Culture, 10 (4), 384-396.


