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Transubstantiation of Economic Landscape in Contemporary Cities as a Consequence of Hyperrealities of Consumption Case Study: City of Gorga*

Mohammad Reza Frouzandeh**¹, Fatemeh Rajabi², Parisa Manoochehri³, Mehdi Hossein Zade⁴, Delaram Rajabpoor⁵, Mohammad Reza Sartipi Isfahani⁶, Saba Dobahri⁷

1. Ph.D. Candidate in Landscape Architecture, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran
2. Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran.
3. Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran.
4. Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran.
5. Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran.
6. Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran.
7. Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran.

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Abstract

What we refer to as the economic landscape of habitats, cities, and villages, is a product of human interaction with nature and the ways in which human societies use, trade, and distribute resources in historical context. Economic landscapes in cities sometimes emerge as urban organs like bazaars and at other times as economic activities and sub-activities. In the past, geopolitical factors and the resources available to a city would shape economic landscapes giving each city a distinguishing set of characteristics. Following the Industrial Revolution, the circulation of capital in cities ceased to be organic and based on essential mechanisms and evolved into monotonous global processes. Following the obsolescence of some professions, the emergence of Piercing Streets, and the asymmetric accumulation of capital historical texture of cities underwent a process of desertion one after another. As the political aspect of the economy became progressively more apparent in the context of cities and privilege-based governments emerged, construction projects around the historical texture of cities became more aggressive and common. Moreover, political economy in urban landscapes has always been affected by social factors so examining economic landscapes and the political economy of cities from a sociological viewpoint can help us gain new insights. The city of Gorgan, like many of other contemporary cities, has not been an exception to the aforementioned process. Affected by numerous social issues such as what Jean Baudrillard calls Hyperreality, the economic landscape of the city is undergoing the process of gradual destruction. Hyperreality, despite being primarily a social phenomenon, is one of the key factors in turning modern life into an aestheticized experience of spectacles. In the context of consumption and in combination with other factors, it leads to the deterioration of the economic landscape in cities such as Gorgan.

Keywords: *Economic, Landscape, Hyperreality, Consumption, Goregan, Politic economy.*

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** Corresponding Author: nozhan.frouzandeh@gmail.com
+989354071408.

Introduction

Economic mechanisms and relationships are one of the most fundamental and critical factors in the formation of modern metropolises and their historical predecessors. Naturally, as such relationships have undergone constant transformations throughout history, human habitats and urban organs have consequently been subject to transformations. The bazaar is considered as one of the most important urban organs and a manifestation of the economic relationships in a city. They are even referred to as the backbone of a city as neighborhoods form around them. Historical cities can be explored with regards to their economic function for their civilizations as being either a site for production, distribution, or consumption. Each city, as a consequence of its geopolitical status and access to resources, tends to be more active in one of these areas. That is why some cities assumed service-oriented roles to provide the needs of travelers while others excelled in production. Differences in the resources available to cities, the ways in which these resources were used, and the distinct needs of the population would lead to the formation of unique urban landscape. This distinct characterization of urban landscapes gradually declined with the advent of the steam engine and the Industrial Revolution as cities were pushed to industrial production era in the context of economic competition. Agricultural flourishing subsequently declined, and masses of farmers immigrated to cities causing unprecedentedly population density growth. All characteristic elements of urban landscapes were destroyed as a consequence of the fossil-fuel and machine-based modes of production increase. However, rather than the modes of production, the real reason behind the metamorphosis of urban landscapes was the prioritization of capital and capital circulation. The flow of capital was devouring the texture of these cities parallel to the modernity they were experiencing. The capital had to tear more and

more arteries for its inflating presence which left permanent marks of trauma on the historical textures of cities. Following this period and the unprecedented increase in production and the consequent saturation of the market, capitalist elements sought the solution for this saturation in “consumerism and consumption”. In the past, consumption used to be concerned with essential and basic needs of a population and was intertwined with social needs. Since the 1960s, however, consumption has been the main reason why human beings gather in urban spaces. Consequently, the primary factor in shaping the economic landscape of a modern city is consumption. Naturally, cities having urban identity of production, services, distribution, etc. are all affected by the various detrimental effects of consuming identical commodities. It is worth mentioning that the inhabitants of such cities also seek their identity in the consumer products. The city of Gorgan, the capital of the Golestan province, has not been an exception to this historical economic process affecting all contemporary cities. The historical texture of this city is counted among the most remarkable and valuable in the country. Thanks to the aforementioned historical process; however, this historical texture has become largely abandoned. Moreover, following the construction of piercing streets in the modernist period, commercial spaces founded on pure consumerism emerged. This led to decline of the traditional bazaars as well as the historical texture. Unregulated construction has altered the economic dynamics in the city to the point that adjacent rural areas have become urbanized. The municipal administration has not only performed poorly in stopping the deteriorative process affecting the economic landscape of the city, it has even assumed an active role in it. One instance of such collaborative participation would be the plan to turn of the oldest neighborhoods of the city into a food street and evicting its characteristic

street vendors. This paper aims to explain this global detrimental process of transforming urban economic landscapes through Jean Baudrillard's concept of "hyperreality" and "simulacra".

Methodology

This paper strived to explain the socio-economic issues in the city of Gorgan which were gathered through observation and field data through a unified approach. For this reason, «economic landscape» has been defined and discussed first. Furthermore, brief explanations and definitions concerning the concepts of «hyperreality», political economy, and the relationship between cities, economy, and capital have been provided. In the Discussion section, Baudrillard's hyperreality was thoroughly explained as to help shed light into the analysis of the social issues mentioned earlier.

Economic Landscape

The relative adjectives sometimes employed to discuss the meaning of "landscape" may prevent us from considering the integrated nature of this phenomenon; however, the essence of "science" in methodology requires us to re-examine the descriptive aspects of landscape analytically. This descriptive-analytical process helps us recognize the manifestations of worldviews and historical perspectives of civilizations in the context of natural and man-made environments with regards to the reciprocal effects of the human and the non-human and his perception of the material phenomena (Van den Brink, Bruns, Tobi, & Bell, 1996). There has been extensive research about the descriptive aspects of landscape; however, economic landscape has not been as thoroughly covered.

This work aims to study the different aspects of landscape (such as ritualistic landscape, economic landscape, heritage landscape, etc.) two levels:

1. at macro level when the extent and effect of the constituent elements of landscape (ceremonies,

rituals, economy, etc.) are in particular state in which they start creating landscapes with their own new terms and concepts. Concepts such as the neighborhood, city center, inner city, upscale and downscale areas, etc. belong to this category.

2. the minor level focuses on the descriptive aspects of a landscape have smaller yet vital functions of their own.

For instance, the pollution issue in the city of Tehran can be studied from an economic perspective. It is evident that incompetency at the administrative level is one of the key factors in the deterioration of the urban landscape; however, the issue is not merely stemming from urban management. The decision-makings of the municipal administration as a so-called business institution (such as selling urban density, or unjust traffic restrictions) and the lucrative activities of privileged parties (the automobile manufacturing cartel preventing the production of hybrid engines) are no small factors. Activities related to the circulation of capital can transform the landscapes and specifically cityscapes so drastically. studying the landscape in the light of economic relationships may help us understand this process better.

The above example is however, more relevant to financial interests rather than a broader and concept of economy. Economy is associated with relationships between production, distribution, consumption, and services. Modern metropolises are not exempt from this rule as the perspectives of both citizens and the institutions of power towards these economical relationships transform urban landscape. The historical evolution of cities reveals that factors such as security and economic necessities were the initial drive behind the formation of settlements. Yet, concepts such as security and economy have evolved into realities involving "subjective life" not merely physical perspective. For example, the bazaar as one of the main urban organs in historical cities plays a key

role in the subjective lives of citizens; gradually jobs and professions emerged guarantying sustainable logical life and shapes distinct urban landscapes. On a macro level, economic relationships change the trade value of property and concepts such as “upscale” or “downscale neighborhood” come into being. We seek to study not only the means of producing landscape according to economic relationships in the historical context, but also the “urban civilization perspective on economy”. Economic relationships are derived from the subjective life of citizens to the extent that it sometimes shapes a “popular landscape” and at other times in contemporary cities such as Tehran, founded on circulation of capital in the hands of a select few people, it turns into a ‘financial landscape’ instead of an economic one.

Political economy and Urban Spaces

In a capitalist economy, the market is not the only factor affecting economic growth; socio-political forces outside the market are also of importance. To better understand these forces, a clear examination of the political economy of capitalism, circulation of capital, and the ideological structure of a government is necessary. In this light, the geography of countries, cities, and villages, as well as place and space are the by-products of Political economy. Accordingly, some geographers argue that the study of political economy should play a central role in geographical analyses. political economy deals with the geographical distribution of capital, profit, services, state and private sector shares in economic plans, and the unequal allocation of resources between cities and villages (Ahmadipour & Lashgari, 2012). political economy consists of the studies of social forces and the institutions through which certain groups of the dominant econo-political class manipulate the allocation of scarce resources for their own benefit.

The importance of political economy in a city

becomes twofold in the context of property. Harvey (1935), in his first work, highlighted the role of property in the economic development of the city in an analysis from a Marxist perspective. He believes that despite being a commodity like any other to the capitalist market, property is characterized by unique qualities not found in other commodities making it critical to urban economy. These qualities include: 1. Despite its capacity for being traded, it cannot be moved in space. 2. property is a necessary commodity as human beings need shelter. 3. Moreover, it relatively indestructible and everlasting as it can remain for a long time after construction. Nevertheless, Harvey considers a key role for property in the of political economy of cities (Ibid).

In his following works, Harvey (1935) considers three stages for political economy. The first consists of the industrial manufacturing of commodities leading to the growth of urbanization. Here, the profit of the capitalist lies in increasing the working hours of the labor force. This is while the production cycle will reach a point where there will remain no demand for the product and one of the following will take place: 1. Overproduction and the saturation of the market. 2. Reduction in profit. In the next stage, the second cycle of political economy begins, and this affects the city even more drastically. Capital is employed in the physical production process and is called man-made environment for manufacturing. This physical structure includes housing blocks, highways, streets, public maintenance facilities, and especially urban facilities that transform the body of a city. In transition from the first to the second stage, state-funding is a necessity and since the state needs to tax the capitalists, helps them to increase their profits. The emergence of Piercing Streets (Atashinbar, 2015) is an instance of this second stage manifested in urban space. Gradually, this stage will reach an end and the third cycle of capital circulation starts. In this stage, investments

in the fields of science and technology will become necessary to decrease expenses. Based on the global division of labor theory One of the policies employed at this stage is to move less lucrative manufacturing plants to other geographical locations where cheaper unregulated labor is available. Harvey's model of urban economics in capitalist economies, therefore, describes a city affected by short-term solutions to the crises essential to the nature of economies. In other words, Harvey believes that Marx had overlooked the importance of land ownership in urban economics while focusing on the issue of industrial manufacturing and the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

In Harvey's view, capitalism uses the context of a city to solve its crises and he argues that the emergence of Neo-Marxist political economy is explainable in this light. Accordingly, the capitalist modes of production lead to an inescapable asymmetric urban development. There will always be new opportunities to make more profit through the exploitation of new markets, labor forces, technologies, and commercial routes. This is the geographic aspect of capital accumulation that Harvey refers to as "spatial impasse" mainly takes place in cities. Moreover, this geographical aspect is vital to the further evolution of capitalist society as it helps adjust production, consumption, and trade accordingly. It goes without saying that the said adjustment takes place in an urban environment (Ahmadipour & Lashgari, 2012).

The gradual reduction of artificial restraints on the flows of capital and goods such as tariffs, trade control, or even the amount of time spent in the customs plays an equally important role in this process. The ever freer flow of capital pushes all governments to consider the quality of their commercial environment as a prerequisite for economic development. As the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank continually used neoliberalism as the measure for good commercial

environments, governments were further pressured to make more neoliberal reforms. This process has drastically affected the political economy of cities especially in developing countries refers to as 'the third world'. Simply put, since resources no longer belong to the taxpayer, the state is no longer required to answer for how they are spent. Consequently, the entire economic, social, and political system is dependent on how the state allocates its budget. This leads to a rapid expansion in the bureaucratic network of the state both with regards to revenues and number of employees. This will furthermore greatly affect the development of urban classes and subsequently urban economy. This is due to the fact that such distribution is ideally suited for an urban environment (Mirtorabi, 2008). This, in turn, will lead to such privilege-based governments becoming increasingly autonomous and independent. The state can then use these revenues to pursue goals which are not necessarily in the best interest of the public. Such governments are the complete opposites of what Luciani refers to as productive states whose main source of revenue is the taxes imposed on internal economic activities (Ahmadipour & Lashgari, 2012).

Simulation and Hyperreality

The concept of hyperreality was first introduced by the contemporary French thinker Jean Baudrillard. The importance of this concept in economic landscape is that it can help with the examination of unbalanced urban economic activities from a sociological perspective. A bulk of Baudrillard's work aims to form a theory of what has happened to the idea of reality. One might be tempted to regard reality as objective fact and take it for granted that it is not likely for other societies to find it different. Baudrillard; however, claims that phenomena and objects impossible to understand without reference to other phenomena and objects. In other words, any phenomena or objects can be understood in

a network or system of phenomena and objects different from them. The study of this phenomenon takes place in the field of semiotics.

In classic Saussurean semiotics, a sign has three aspects: the signifier, the signified, and the referent. The signifier is the word itself; the signified is a concept inferred from it, and the referent is what is outside the realm of thought and connects the signified and the signifier (Smith, 2010). According to this formation, there is a perpetual conflict: Is reality our representation of phenomena or is it an entity outside these signs? We know that with the development of science, many formerly assumed realities have undergone transformation or become invalidated. One of Baudrillard's main arguments is that in the second half of the twentieth century there was a return to a state in which reality challenged or ignored. This state of affairs; however, does not lead to the disappearance of the referent, but rather, to the emergence of an unreality or simulation of reality manufactured by mass media and the entertainment industry. Baudrillard believes that:

“In hyperreality, symbols of reality (signifiers), have overcome and replaced reality (the signified)” (Baudrillard, 2018). Baudrillard describes contemporary man's situation as one transitioning to a different realm; a realm which he describes as the realm of simulations and hyperrealities. Hyperreality describes the state in which reality is no longer tied to signs and can be controlled by the media and their representations and the media can subsequently transform it differently. In his *Pioneering of the Simulations*, he discusses the absolute hegemony of images and representations eclipsing reality in a world where referential truth no longer exists. In such a state of affairs, semiotics can be essential in understanding and explaining the process in which meaning is produced. Meaning is no longer a referential concept to be conveyed through the vessel of the signified; but rather, a concept that is produced and reproduced wholly in

a system of signs. Simulation is thus a sign without a referent that can never be replaced by reality and can only be replaced by itself (Tajik, 2008).

Baudrillard believes a sign to have four stages or states of being. In the first, a sign is a representation of reality. In the second, the basis of reality is manipulated by the sign (False Consciousness and Ideology in its Marxist sense). In the third, the absence of the initial reality is covered up. The fourth stage is a continuation of the third and Baudrillard argues that our contemporary world is in this stage; a world where a sign carries nothing of the original reality and has no connection to it whatsoever. A sign is not a pure simulation of itself and this marks the threshold of the world of hyperrealities (Lane, 2000). As a consequence of such states of affairs, social and political action declines. The contemporary human being is surrounded by consumerism and plentitude and the privileged are more concerned and in touch with objects rather than individuals; Objects that are given meaning and significance in a system of signs and through mass media. From this point on, daily interactions between individuals are no longer relevant:

“Their daily dealings are now not so much with their fellow men, but rather-- on a rising statistical curve -- with the reception and manipulation of goods and messages. This runs from the very complex organization of the household, with its dozens of technical slaves, to street furniture and the whole material machinery of communication; from professional activities to the permanent spectacle of the celebration of the object in advertising and the hundreds of daily messages from the mass media; from the minor proliferation of vaguely obsessional gadgetry to the symbolic psychodramas fueled by the nocturnal objects which come to haunt us even in our dreams” (Baudrillard, 2017).

This abstraction and alienation among individuals one of the reasons behind the increased attention

given to the concepts of space and environment. In other words, as the distance between human beings grows, space and objects assume the haunting role of phantoms calling for more distance and virtualization (Frouzandeh, 2018).

Baudrillard believes that hyperreality seeks to completely erase the object and this has led to the progressive abstraction of the contemporary post-modern world. Hyperreality is a fruit of the third stage of representation where the absence of reality is covered up where the simulated becomes “real” as truth itself.

Consumption, Hyperreality, and Theatricalizing Urban Life

The initial understanding of “consumption” was that it is an activity to respond to actual economic needs. Twentieth-century thinkers; however, explored its cultural significance and deemed cultural consumption one of the most important characteristics of modern society. Cultural Consumption is a social activity and daily act shaping our lifestyle, organizing our needs and desires, and provides the material for our dreams and imaginations. Furthermore, it helps clarify social differences and also manifests itself as the byproducts of the manners in which we employ available tools (Kazemi, 2013). The essence of Baudrillard’s theories in the field of consumption and political economy in an urban context is that the signifiers of economic value (monetary units) have completely dissociated from necessity and practical values of the signified. Consequently, an aestheticized phantom of reality emerges where consumption is a means for dream-like representations. Baudrillard emphasizes the key role of mass media and communication in these representations as the apparent aspect of the ongoing illusion. He describes this situation as nothing but a pallet of signs to interpret and a passing mirage. For him, the post-modern world is essentially a

copy with a nonexistent original. In such a world, “simulations can often be experienced as more real than the real—even better than the real thing” (Jayne, 2018).

Theoreticians pointing out a shift from modernity toward postmodernity believe that a certain distancing from mass consumerism is taking place. This demonstrates that aestheticizing daily life has brought forth a new type of tribalism. Individuals may gain membership in these new tribes through commodities such as clothes, taste, music, fashion, etc. Moreover, a spontaneous structuralist is emerging in local communities which could lead to the rebirth of urban life. The urban life referred to here is one characterized by modern forms of collectivism and community as opposed to the competitive individualism of the consumerist market. As a result, the consumption spaces of both urban pedestrian passages and shopping centers outside the city are somewhat transformed. The said transformation has changed these spaces into grounds for collective activities where individuals can emphasize their identity through consumption. This supposedly creates a sense of collective belonging not rooted in heredity but rather consumption. The detrimental effect of this process is the exclusion of groups possessing no cultural and economic capital. Bauman (1925-2017) who has extensively examined this issue, distinguishes between the seduced and the suppressed in cultural consumption. He believes that a new idea of the concept of freedom is forming and the consumer experiences it in a distorted manner. This is due to the fact that the consumer has access to multiple choices of commodities for purchase while those dispossessed of capital do not. In other words, consumer society protects those in possession of resources (Ibid, 110).

Discussion

As pointed out earlier, according to David Harvey

and many others, changes related to political economy have transformed urban spaces. The city of Gorgan, like many other historical cities, has undergone this process and has suffered its detrimental effects. Before examining the urban space of Gorgan through the aforementioned theoretical concepts, it is necessary to point out some instances of the adverse effects the processes had on the city and its adjacent villages. The following are the result of field observation around Gorgan and nearby villages:

1. In addition to the characteristics found in other historical textures, the spatial organization of the described texture in Gorgan includes gathering places consisting of a ritualistic (Tekyehs and Hosseiniehs) element and commercial and residential functions. The examination of these gathering places reveals that they would act as inter-textual public spaces in the past. The large number of such spaces reflects the role they played in the social life of the citizens. Consequently, most of these gathering places have become abandoned.
2. Shopping centers and megamalls economically and architecturally inconsistent with the texture are becoming progressively more commonplace. Moreover, the commodities sold feel grotesquely out of place in the context of the texture.
3. The portions of the historical texture maintained and restored by the national heritage organization now serve a purely aesthetic function with no practical purpose.
4. The municipal administration seeks to ‘clear out’ the street vendors of Pasarv neighborhoods in order to construct a food street.

These instances of anomalies can be studied through Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality. As pointed out before, the hegemony of signs, images, and simulations in the contemporary world effaces objective reality and there exists no referential truth or objective causes. The simulation is thus a sign with no referent which can never be replaced

by reality but rather by itself. Simulation is then the methodological aspect of simulacra or a non-referential representation with no referent.

In accordance with Baudrillard and Bauman’s ideas, instances 1 and 2 are covertly bolstering one another. In other words, by “aestheticizing” daily life perpetuated by the hegemony of capital and mass media, a new “tribalism” is brought forth. In this new form of tribalism, individuals seek to find their identity in new commodities as a seductive new reality replacing real referents and signifiers. It is evident that the strategic value of the historical texture tempts capitalist entities are to commodity them in new packages to further seduce consumers. This process leads to the abandonment of historical textures in two ways. Firstly, the new shopping centers will dominate the public space and turning them into consumption spaces. Secondly, as Bauman’s work suggests, the economically under-privileged residents of these textures will be suppressed as they cannot participate in this illusory circulation of capital.

Hyperreality in instances 3 and 4 leads to the metamorphoses of municipal administration. The national heritage organization aestheticizes daily life by seeking to restore the historical texture picturesquely. In the fourth case, the municipal administration seeks to destroy the current character of the Pasarv neighborhood and its street vendors and replace it with an imported metropolitan element: the food street. This conversion will furthermore lead to the exclusion of lower-income consumers decreasing the variety of class, functions, and popular landscapes in the city. However, it is worth mentioning

that this is not the first time that an approach has led to such inadvertent detrimental consequences. Constructing food streets in cities such as Gorgan is just a copy of other disastrous projects such as “Tir 30th” and “Shahrivar 17th” in Tehran. The pedestrian passage of “Tir 30th”, regardless

of its functional problems on both planning and executional levels, has marginalized people (Kheyroddin, Haghbayan & Shokouhi Bidhendi, 2020).

The key point is that all the points mentioned will never be visually reflected in mass media. The only thing reflected is a mass of picturesque images. These images, as Baudrillard points out, will first erase any trace of all the problems related to these signs, and then replace itself instead “reality”.

Conclusion

The relationship between a city and hyperreality can be studied from two perspectives. First, we know that media acts construct our understanding and perception of time and space. Reality from this viewpoint is not the product of our exposure to objective reality (in this case, of urban space); but rather, the consumption of commodities presented to us on advertisements and display windows. Media is no longer a means to convey messages but the message itself. The content of the message loses its importance against methods of presentation and advertisement too. The second perspective can be regarded consequentially to the first. Following the transformation of human life discussed earlier, social and political phenomena can hardly be considered unaffected by the artificial simulation. Urban public spaces will consequently be stripped of their functions. Streets and other such public spaces will cease to be vessels of spatial praxes and social activism and turn into sites for the shiny display windows of shops presenting amassed commodities.

This reciprocal influence has created an environment where social activism has become obsolete and political activism has ended. does not seek her/his own world in the space he/she inhabits, but instead in an unreal world perpetuated by media. Under such circumstances, attention to life experience becomes vital in constructing

urban spaces. Street and urban spaces have the potential to become referents of objective reality through the direct interactions between actors in. As pointed out before, pathological investigations in the economic landscape cannot be considered mere examinations of the different ways in which capital circulates and accumulates; these processes can sometimes manifest as social issues altering the urban landscapes. The study of this particular case confirms this. As shown, The four issues of Gorgan landscape and the way of dealing with them were not merely derived from capital. They are moreover the product of a social issue and the transubstantiation of society’s view towards the economy. In order to find a solution then, it is necessary to remedy this social issue. It seems that the only course of action for accomplishing this is to come up with new creative strategies to gather citizens in urban spaces. This will also help decrease the distance between society and reality. Public spaces emancipate society from the hegemony of signs perpetuated by mass media. Moreover, the cognitive collision between individuals will help create a common meaning of these processes and objective reality can provide the basis for this phenomena.

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