

Viewpoint

Tehran: Confrontation with Aesthetics?

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Abstract

The importance of the “beautiful” goes even before the 5th century BC, when Plato suggests a difference between rational and logical facts, Noêta and the good, the sensitive, and the perceptible fact, Aisthêta. This phenomenon, which already existed among philosophers well before the appearance of its scientific definitions and of which societies had an intuitive perception, affected academic discourse through the course of the centuries and the experience of the various evolutions of societies: “the Science of the Sensitive”, definition proposed in the middle of the 17th century by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. The apprehension and understanding of the “beautiful”, therefore, began to evolve, and far from being limited to the discourse of art and concerning the subjective dimensions, this phenomenon reached an objective and pragmatic dimension. A concrete example of this mutation in urban literature would be the appearance of the expression “Urban Aesthetics”. Since the appearance of Roman cities and ancient Greece, societies have been familiar with aesthetically driven urban interventions or urban interventions with aesthetic aims. Measures such as the decoration of urban facades with a variety of patterns, the creation of framed visual perspectives, and the embellishment of urban public spaces with vegetation contribute to the aestheticization of cities. Urban management, using objective and sensitive tools on the one hand and relying on subjective and mental capacities on the other, seeks to achieve aesthetic goals in the urban context. However, what remains to be discussed is that in addressing this issue, urban management in Tehran has failed to recognize aesthetic capacities, potential, and needs. As a result, rather than being aligned with aesthetics, such methods seem to have confronted it.

Keywords: *Aesthetics, Urban Aesthetics, Aesthetic Intervention, Tehran, Urban Management.*

Introduction and Problem Statement

For urban management, urban aestheticization or intervention in an urban environment with a view to aestheticization is defined by various appearances and by mobilizing a variety of tools (Fig. 1) including the installation of works of art, the decoration of buildings, the creation of picturesque perspectives or even the use of greenery and vegetation. The recent years have seen a development in the objectives of aesthetics and beyond seeking only the pleasure and comfort of populations and their living environment, aesthetics must now intervene to improve the psychic conditions and mental health of societies and has thus advanced

towards ecological, environmental, psychological, and sociological discourses. Since then, the intervention within the city with an aesthetic objective consists in leading towards the qualitative improvement of the social life in the urban environment through the mobilization of tools, the support of the existing potentials, or the creation of new potentials (Fig. 2). These two examples perfectly describe the aesthetic vision in the creation of urban space and tell the reflection of societies at different times. But a focus on what we see in Tehran as aesthetics implies questionable results on understanding [mis-understanding? or un-understanding?!] of the nature of this phenomenon.

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Fig. 1. “The ideal city”, composition and creation by Francesco di Giorgio Martini, 1477. This is a view of an ideal city which is the culmination of objective elements of urban aesthetics: symmetry, remarkable architectural buildings, framing of the view and creation of depth of view on the square, decorative elements (statues, fountains, columns, capitals) and pavement with geometric patterns. It seems that the way of thinking at the time from which this illustration comes attributed the originality of the beautiful to the physical elements and was intended to demonstrate as many works of the artists and architects of the time as possible. Source: [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Cit_ideale_\(Urbino\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Cit_ideale_(Urbino))

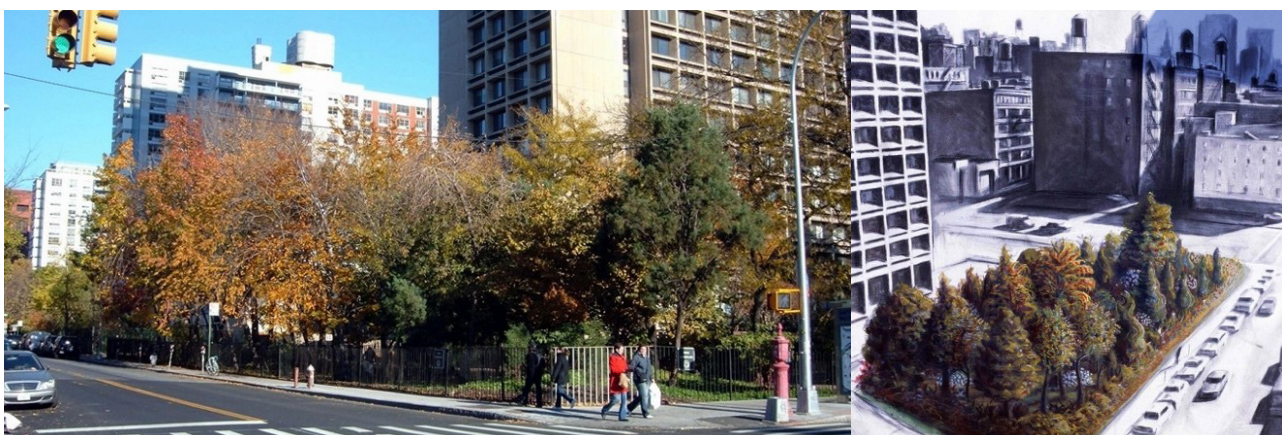


Fig. 2. The “Time Landscape” project, designed by Alan Sonfist, Manhattan, New York, USA, 1965. In Manhattan Island, on a rectangular piece of land, the artist specializing in Land-Art, Alan Sonfist, proposed to revive a collection (palette) of plants native to the region, which was then covered with forests during the era of the American Indians, but completely disappeared with the discovery of the continent by Europeans and the initiation and development of urbanization processes. This picturesque grove is the revival of the common memory of the natives, which, although none of them personally have the memory of the initial space, remains a symbol of common identity. The location of the project also follows the traces of history: close to where originally there was a swamp where the native Indians fished and hunted ducks and was considered a place of social life. In addition, the constant physical mutations of the project with the change of seasons and with the growth of plants have exposed and introduced a living and dynamic landscape, and in this sense, the project is considered an aesthetic intervention that combines identity, history, dimension social, environmental and tourism. Source: (Sketch) <https://fahrenheitmagazine.com/>; (photo) <https://www.hmdb.org/> The Historical Marker Database

Structure of Criticism

The first signs from travelogues and historical documents about Tehran emphasize the unique natural landscape of the city: the considerable slope between the heights of Shemiranat towards the plain of Ray; the numerous river valleys; the gardens and fields; and the nearby mountains. These elements are still distinguished today in the eyes of tourists and represent the natural character of the city. But

what is their position in the lives of city inhabitants? Those who claim to beautify the city, whether it be the Tehran Municipal Beautification Organization, whose title is related to its mission, or other organizations or councils, seek not only the interpretation of aesthetics in distant countries but are absolutely not asking the right question. It seems that their problem is centered on what should be done to make Tehran, the capital of Iran, look more “chic”

and “luxurious”! Large-scale construction projects (Fig. 3) imitating what happens in Chinese cities or the burial of river valleys under the pretext of building modern linear parks (Fig. 4) are examples of this deviant questioning. In Tehran and many other cities of the country, visions of the city so far removed from aesthetics, have caused the emergence of spaces and landscapes in conflict with human nature. The intervention in space without taking into consideration the aesthetic alphabet gradually leads to the emergence of a habitat that does not recognize the characteristics of its inhabitants, and thus, humans feel alien to it; concepts such as the feeling of belonging or the collective memory weaken, and populations end up inhabiting spaces that, according to Marc Augé, are non-places (Augé, 1992). The non-place that takes place in contrast to utopia is a space that exists physically, where people live and work, but where social life does not exist. The perception of beauty and aesthetic analysis require understanding the concept of the city and respecting the place of man. The city paves the ground for the fulfillment of the needs of the community, and the aesthetic point of view is the means of achieving this fulfillment. Aesthetics possesses the capacity to enhance the living spaces of communities by identifying, distinguishing, and prioritizing potentials, then setting them on a path of progress and continuous evolution. From the point of view of the aestheticization process (Mansouri, 2018), the achievement of each step is not only not an end, but it is a tool facilitating the advancement of the next step towards perfection (Fig. 5).

Conclusion

The last word is that an aesthetic vision of the city of Tehran would seem to be something distinct from what is happening there today, the construction of highway bridges on several levels, the obligatory homogenization of facades while each bears its message and its memory, the exaggerated planting of lawn on the edge of urban highways requiring the expenditure of money and excessive watering to keep it green and not “ugly” or even the printing and the installation of a random selection of works by renowned Iranian and foreign artists on the sides of city streets under the guise of



Fig. 3. Sadr urban highway. The attempt of urban management to put forward an imposing and robust image of the capital by resorting to false aesthetic symbols such as superstructures. What emerges from the image, as was the case in the many debates and controversies surrounding the Sadr project between residents and stakeholders, is the imposition of a gap between the residential fabric and the degradation of its value. The Sadr project, which was designed with the aim of drawing a progressive, active, and powerful face for the capital and should have a positive effect on the aesthetic dimensions of the city, has turned into visual damage to the view towards the north of the city. Moreover, far from targeting the improvement of the quality of the social life of the inhabitants, it was an intrusion and harassment. Source: IRNA news agency.



Fig. 4. Nahjol-Balagheh Linear Park, 2015. The Farahzad river valley is designed as a linear park so that the user has almost no visual or tactile contact with the water which is its heart. Although at the time of choosing the location, the urban management seemed to have a good awareness of the natural landscape of the space as an aesthetic potential but, turns out during the design, to leave any aesthetic question to oblivion to replace it with an amalgam of decoration, excessive greenery, and insignificant monumentalism. The flowing water and the mountain landscape as aesthetic elements do not appear in any bridge in the design of the space. The principle of the design consists in distinguishing, with the help of pavement and painted concrete blocks, the cycle paths and the islets designed for picnics; then comes the non-local, chaotic, and insignificant planting plan. On the other hand, the fact that remains to be perceived is the desire of the user to practice nature. If aesthetics really seeks to improve the quality of life of human societies in space, this project seems to have ignored "man", "space" and "quality". Photo: Maryam Mansouri 2015.

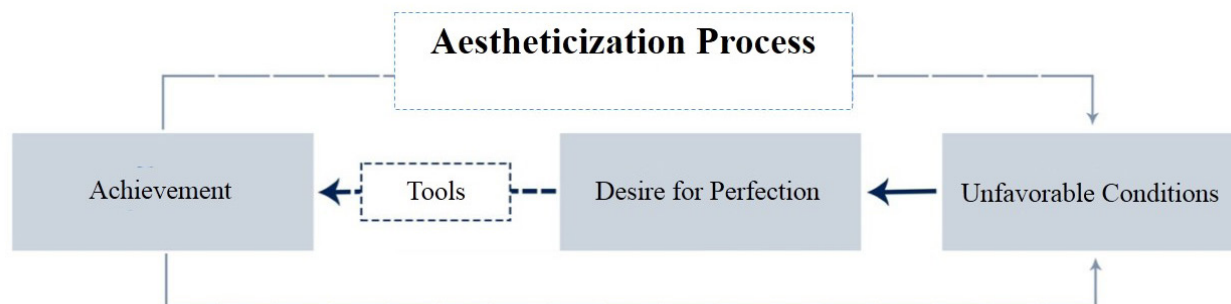


Fig. 5. Diagram of the aestheticization process based on John Dewey's Valuation Theory (Dewey, 1989). Source: Author.

holding a “city-wide gallery”. Perhaps an aesthetic view of Tehran is just an “appreciative look at nature,” involving it in spatial interventions and development plans. This outcome was written by Sohrab Sepehari in the poem “Be Bagh-e Hamsafaran” (To the Companion’s Garden) so eloquently that he thinks that the prosperity, maturity, and comfort of the human soul are only possible to reach by paying attention to the signs of nature and drowning in them. Taking advantage of aesthetic features ticks, he first draws frightening, invasive, imposing, and disturbing urban landscapes and then tries to get rid of them. In this way, he seeks the support of nature as an aesthetic tool. Finally, he considers awakening and blossoming to be identical to the “dawn” and the “blossoming” of flowers, which, although they are among the simplest and most mundane manifestations of nature, are seen as complex and rich portals to aesthetic understanding in the living environment of humans.

[...] Within the space of this silent age

Lonelier am I than the test of a song

Within the scope of the alley’s conception

[...] In these dark lanes

I fear the company of doubt and match

I fear this concrete-like century

Come, let us not fear towns whose dark soil

Is pasture to bulldozers?

Open me like a door to the falloff a simple pear in this age of steel’s birth

Lay me seep under a branch away this metal clattering night

When the miner of the dawn arrives

Call me and I will be awake,

At the blossoming of the jasmine

From behind your fingers.

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