

Viewpoint

Emogizing the City¹

A Critique on the Emergence of Unfamiliar Linguistic Signs in the Urban Landscape

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Abstract As a historical product of every cultural geography, language is an integral part of every landscape. Linguistic signs, one of the most important manifestations of the city landscape, help the audience easily communicate with the city by reading the concepts directly. Therefore, Persian-language signs are considered one of the identity elements of Iran's territorial landscape, and by reading them, people realize their place identity. However, in recent years, the contradictory position of city officials on the expansion of the Persian language has caused the urban landscape to be full of signs of foreign languages. Some of these urban signs, in the form of large-scale sculptures, have been placed in the most influential urban locations, such as city entrances, public spaces, and so on. These urban sculptures, which are generally placed to develop the tourist infrastructure, have been promoted by aesthetic interpretation of media from western cities than non-Persian-speaking tourists. In translating Persian guide signs, the focus has been on the imitation of the branding of European and American cities. Such imitation has been promoted by the media for decades, like linguistic signs, such as emojis, that have been promoted by social media. In other words, the previous centuries' tradition of architecture in Iran, which used to represent textual elements on the scale of the city and had often more complex linguistic content, gave way to frequent language expressions in the media but simpler content, such as smiley faces, red hearts, etc. Since these developments can affect the deepest collective memories of the citizens by being placed in the public space of the city, this article aims to deal with the roots of the formation and promotion of these signs with a critical and pathological approach.

Keywords | *Urban art, Urban branding, Language, Media, Signs.*

Introduction and Problem Statement | Are the non-Persian urban signs in the landscape of Iranian cities suitable or not? If you have experienced a road trip in recent years, it is very likely that, after passing through several cities, you have seen huge urban signs at the entrance of the cities that display the names of the cities in Latin script beside other signs like red hearts or yellow emojis². These urban sculptures, which are often placed in the most visited parts of the city, are generally made at the time of holidays to "beautify" the city and attract the attention of tourists to take memorable photos. For

example, Parviz Daghighleh, the head of Ahvaz district 5 municipality, has mentioned the installation of some of these statues: "On the occasion of the arrival of the new year, the streets and parks of the district are beautified by placing and installing the urban elements of the emoji statue... creative urban elements with visual effects attract passersby to photograph them. Every year, District 4 tries to create a different and unexpected atmosphere for happiness and make the most beautiful memories for citizens by installing new elements. ... these elements were located in the Maliat Square Park to create vitality, freshness, and attractiveness for the compatriots in the new year" (Ahvaz Municipality, n. d.) (Figs. 1&2).

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Fig. 1. Installation of emoji statues in Ahvaz, 2019. Source: <https://www.ahvaz.ir/news/ID/293311/>

Because these large-scale urban signs have altered the landscape of many modern Iranian cities, they will soon become a common image of the city for the audience. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate these elements and reveal their multiple aspects. This article seeks to discuss its different aspects by examining the issue and finally evaluating the presence of this category of urban signs.

Structure of Criticism

One of the most important achievements of the last century is the understanding of the city as a landscape. In the new understanding, the city, as a perceptual phenomenon³, is not what exists outside but what is formed in the minds of citizens through the perception of urban symbols (Keramati Niaragh, Hemmati, Forouzandeh, Mansouri & Rezaei, 2022, 401). If the urban landscape is interpreted as the citizens' perception of the city, which is obtained through its symbols (Mansouri, 2009, 32), then the "symbols" of the city become very important as components that are read by the audience and make meaning in their minds. The knowledge of the urban landscape should organize the city by establishing the citizens' understanding of these symbols. As a result, the city is meaningful as a "text" that carries concepts that are sent to the mind of the audience (Hemmati, 2021, 53–54; Hemmati, Mansouri & Barati, 2022, 69). Therefore, language signs, which are the historical product of how people communicate in geographical and cultural terms, are one of the most obvious symbols of the landscape of any land. In the sense that linguistic signs—both phonetic and written—are one of the most obvious indicators of the "location" of space through which we can understand where we are. Calligraphy or written signs, which are a visual reflection of the language's set of communication instructions, have such a pictorial capacity that they have been in Iranian cities for many centuries as decorations as well as a



Fig. 2. An installation in Toronto, Canada in October 2019 which has used giant emojis on a city scale. Source: blogto.com/arts/2019/10/toronto-giant-emoji/

communication element. With various writing methods in the graphic arts, such as brickwork and tilework, it is seen as one of the most obvious symbols of the territorial landscape of Iran. These works have reappeared in newer functions such as urban signs, commercial signs, etc., but the rampant spread of foreign language signs in recent decades has become a serious threat to the spatial identity of the contemporary Iranian urban landscape. Although the emergence of imported elements in the urban life of Iranians has a long history in both architecture and urban planning and cultural exchanges can be considered signs of the vitality and dynamism of other societies, what is worrying is the huge acceleration of importation in the last two centuries. Despite what was happening before and what was generally in harmony with the Iranian context, today's style can be entitled "postcard architecture"⁴. This form of landscaping does not establish even a minimal connection with its substrate. The new signs are the product of an infatuation with the symbols of the Western world more than facilitating communication for tourists, which has caused distant cities where there is no tourism infrastructure, especially international tourism, to take the lead in imitating western symbols. Although in the previous decades, informal parts of the urban landscape, such as shop signs, influenced by the emergence of western brands, showed serious tendencies toward Latin writings, the city government always attempted to protect the Persian language and Iranian urban landscape against them. Now, these signs are being produced on a city scale by the order of the city management and express the "contradictory position" of urban governance in the public spaces of the city as the most effective urban landscapes that have a serious effect on the memory of the audience (Abarghouei Fard, Mansouri, Motalebi, 2023). The concern is that even if store signs advertise their products using small words which seem to have little effect, such urban signs

directly target the audience's collective identity and have a double-negative effect. Another issue worth mentioning is the audience's reception! As mentioned, these urban elements are installed in the most influential public spaces of the city, which establish a direct and fast connection with the audience. A popular formula that seems to be inspired by previously used Latin urban signs—for urban branding—or derived from mass media visual signs such as emoji that attract audiences at little cost. However, it seems that what has caused the popularity and widespread growth of these signs is something other than their content value. Rather than having advanced linguistic meanings, these messages are elementary messages that, unlike the linguistic signs of the previous centuries, seek to provide simple, direct, and explicit content without delving into the concepts. For example, what remains from the architectural tradition of the previous centuries is the emergence of more complex language concepts such as poetic themes, mystical concepts, or sacred themes. Perhaps the most important feature of new signs can be considered to be tied to the concept of media. For example, large-scale writing has been installed on a hilltop in the city of Borujerd, which seems to be derived from the two signs "Hollywood sign"⁵ and "I love New York"⁶, which act as urban brands (Figs. 3-5). In another case, the emergence of social media signs such as hashtags, emoticons, and so on indicates the emergence of a new aesthetic to a mediatized language's grammar. It means that what is presented is not the conventional expressions of the English language but media language culture, such as emojis. Harvard describes the result of the mediatization process as creating a "cultural duality"⁷: "Mediatization of culture and society is a process by which culture and society become increasingly dependent on the media and their logic." "The characteristic of this process is the duality in which the media are integrated into the functions of cultural fields and other social institutions and at the same time, in turn, achieve the position of a social institution" (Hjarvard, 2019, 37).

Conclusion

In the end, it can be concluded that the wonderful popularity of these signs can be attributed to three factors: first, the effect of the media is to represent what happened in cyberspace and evoke it in the mind of the audience, and due to the internalization of this concept, even if it is elementary, the audience easily communicates with it (Hemmati, 2022, 136). Second, as mentioned, is the void of spatial identity in contemporary cities, which makes it difficult for the audience to distinguish them. Third, the public's interest in using foreign signs was

sparked by the current trend of Persian writing's aesthetic decline in comparison to its peers. However, it is evident that such action causes damage to the collective language and identity and, beyond that, distorts the urban landscape. According to the definition, environmental graphics depict and visualize various general concepts in the environment to quickly, clearly, and correctly convey these concepts to the audience (Iloukhani, 2015, 2). These Iranian emoji works are quick and clear in conveying meaning, but they do not establish a correct connection with the aesthetics of the context. Although in the process of "globalization," interaction and cultural exchange are natural, a low-quality, incomplete, and repetitive copy not only does not work in the direction of local identity but becomes its opposite. And it also distorts place by denigrating language, one of the main components of collective identity. Although according to Giddens, mediatization should be seen as an inevitable process of today, such as the process of globalization, considering the fundamental effects of media on the landscape, we can adjust and synchronize this accelerated movement to improve the urban landscape by carefully monitoring and evaluation.



Fig. 3. The biggest city sign in Borujerd on its most important urban complication named "Tepe Chogha", is a phrase with Latin letters: "I love Borujerd" with a red heart emoji. Photo: Alireza Soleimani, Rozbahani, 2019.



Fig. 4. The "I love New York" sign was designed by Milton Glaser in the 1980s with the aim of branding New York City. This sign was republished many times by visual media and became a source of inspiration for many artists. Source: <https://www.loc.gov/>



Fig. 5. The Hollywood sign was designed by Thomas Fisk Jaffe in the middle of the 20th century. This sign is located on top of the Hollywood hills and in the city street axis and stands out with its large scale. Source: Hotels, n.d.

Endnotes

1. To emoji is an infinitive that refers to replacing text with emoji (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). Emoji is a tool that has replaced language and facial expressions in offline and online writing (Nahid, 2022).
2. For example, if you travel in Khuzestan, you will come across the Latin signs of Andimeshk, Shoush, Abadan, and Dar Khovin at the entrances of the cities.
3. Although the definitions of the landscape provided by experts have many differences, it seems that most of them agree on the fact that landscape is the product of a perceptual process in the sense that there is a "perceptual device" or "perceiver" that forms a perceptual process with the "perceived" (Hemmati & Saboonchi, 2021, 16). For example, researchers such as Berque, Talento, and Angelstam have interpreted landscape as a perceptual relationship (Berque, 2017, 88; Talento, Amado, & Kullberg, 2019, 8; Angelstam, Munoz-Rojas, & Pinto-Correia, 2019).
4. Postcard architecture, which was used during the Qajar period, was a term related to the design of buildings based on postcards imported from Europe.
5. The Hollywood sign is a city emblem and cultural symbol of the United States of America in Los Angeles, California. This sign was designed in 1923 for a local real estate company called "Hollywood Land" and was supposed to be up for 18 months. Although the establishment of this sign was intended for a year and a half, it became an internationally recognized symbol and remained in place after the emergence of American cinema in Los Angeles during the Golden Age of Hollywood (Williams, n. d.).
6. "I love New York" is a city sign designed by Milton Glaser in the 1980s. This sentence is a slogan, a logo, or a song that has served as the foundation of a marketing campaign since 1977. This campaign was launched to promote tourism in New York State, which includes New York City. Its trademark is owned by the New York State Department of Economic Development (Swanda, 2018).
7. Aameli Rennani interprets this duality as "two-spatialization" and says: "The authority of culture will develop from "native sources" to "non-native sources" with the expansion of intercultural communication and the two-spatialization of the path of culture" (Aameli Rennani, 2011).
8. Giddens explains that mediatization should be seen as a process of modernization, parallel to globalization, urbanization, and individualization, through which, in similar ways, the media help to remove social relations from existing contexts and re-embed them in new social contexts (Giddens, 2000).

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