

Review Article

Analyzing the Relationship between Tourism and Social/Cultural Activities During the New Year Celebration (Nowruz)

(Case Study: Iran Mall Project, Tehran)

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Abstract | Nowadays, tourist and commercial centers are constantly expanding. These days, a grand project called “Iran Mall” has been constructed in District 22 of Tehran, which is a magnificent example of the capabilities of Iranian engineers using state-of-the-art technologies. It has managed to significantly change the appearance and structure of its surrounding area. One of the factors that has contributed to the recognition of this shopping center and attracting tourists is the organization of events and special occasions, which connects the tourism industry with the economy. This article examines the Nowruz event in Iran, its cultural and social activities, and its relevance to a commercial platform. The descriptive-analytical method, along with library studies and field visits through interviews, were used for this purpose, and the role of organizing such events in the formation of important tourist centers in Tehran was identified. Shopping centers have played a significant role in the development of social interactions and the improvement of urban life. Iran Mall, by utilizing large spaces, organizing multiple events, and providing diverse facilities, meets international standards. Even during the COVID-19 crisis, it played a crucial role in changing the use of spaces and solving societal problems. Overall, the completion and development of this cultural and commercial landmark, as an Iranian and Islamic symbol, has had a considerable impact on attracting tourists, despite some criticisms such as the lack of architectural coherence in the spaces.

Keywords | Nowruz, Tourism, Cultural, Commercial, Social.

Introduction | Nowruz, an ancient celebration in Iranian culture, is regarded as a symbol of renewal, season change, and spiritual and cultural flourishing, and is respected and honored. It has been recognized as an opportunity for the development of the tourism industry and cultural and social interactions in Iran Mall. In this event, not only are Iranian customs and traditions celebrated, but it also serves as a suitable platform for attracting tourists and economic development. Large chain stores and commercial-administrative-recreational complexes can be considered to be new architectural-urban spaces that have similarities with old markets. With the evolution of shopping

and consumption patterns, a new structure of commercial-recreational spaces called “mega malls” has emerged in the world, which are several times larger than ordinary shopping centers and includes retail spaces, hotels, restaurants, welfare facilities, and attractions such as amusement parks. Various studies have also shown that mega malls play a significant role in the retail and tourism industries (Dianati, 2019, 2). Iran Mall, located in District 22 of Tehran at the end of Shahid Khrrazi Street, covers an area of 1,669,504 square meters on four main floors: G0, G1, G2, & G3. The usage of this complex includes commercial, cultural, artistic, sports, tourism, residential, and recreational purposes. Iran Mall is one of the important commercial centers in the country,

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offering a variety of retail stores, welfare facilities, and recreational amenities. It is also one of the top five malls in the world and among the largest commercial, cultural, and social projects in Iran and the Middle East. The complex offers diverse facilities such as shopping centers, amusement parks, cinema complexes, sports facilities, and hotels, serving as both a shopping destination and a place for leisure and entertainment (Fig. 1). Architecture should aim to satisfy human beings, and the level of success of large commercial recreational spaces is proportionate to the quality of services they provide. Amid the daily chaos and busyness of modern cities, people are seeking spaces with unique identities where they can receive different services in addition to comfort and meeting their needs. By creating such service centers, the improvement of services for citizens and the tourism industry can be facilitated (Tabari & Esmaeili, 2016). Iran Mall has successfully met many of the citizens' needs in a short period and provided a suitable platform for various cultural and social events, including Nowruz. However, the high rents of this commercial center cannot be ignored. In the architecture of Iran Mall, an attempt has been made to incorporate modern and Iranian architectural characteristics to a significant extent, resulting in spatial diversity within the complex. The classical architecture in Jondi Shapour Library; the traditional bazaar in the style of ancient caravanserais, and the modern commercial spaces are examples of this spatial diversity. This diversity along with the attractiveness of the spaces, has led to a lack of coherence between the elements. Without any prior indication, the space suddenly changes from the viewer's perspective, and the juxtaposition of different styles creates visual inconsistency. This can be observed, for example, in Jondi Shapour Library, which is adjacent to a modern-style corridor of shoe and bag stores designed in a classical and Renaissance architectural style. Therefore, we encounter traditional elements and Iranian events in these spaces with contrasting and incongruous content and form. Although it may appear attractive and entertaining from the visitors' perspective, the main aim of this research is to investigate the social and cultural activities of Nowruz 1402 (2023) in Iran Mall. The focus is on Nowruz events, festivals, New Year's Eve celebrations, the arrangement of the Haft-Seen table, and the performance of music in this commercial complex.

Research Questions

Considering the main objective of the research, the study aims to answer the following questions:

- Can Iran Mall effectively accommodate and represent the culture and traditions of Nowruz?
- What is the relationship between the anticipated events and the physical structure and architecture of the building?

Theoretical Framework of the Study

• History of Nowruz

In the world, there is no community, nation, tribe, or people



Fig. 1. North facade of Iran Mall. Source: www.toptourist.ir.

without a specific celebration or festival in their culture. The celebrations of each society can be divided into several categories: ancient and mythical celebrations, historical and national celebrations, religious and spiritual celebrations, seasonal and agricultural celebrations, political celebrations, and finally, private and family celebrations. Many of these celebrations cannot be held uniformly with the same rituals and traditions in all countries and societies, as they need to be adapted to the subject matter and region. However, the Nowruz celebration, originating primarily from Iran, has spread to many regions and cities around the world over centuries and millennia. It has endured and continues to be celebrated under the same name in a vast range of areas.

Nowruz, or the beginning of spring, occurs when the sun is at its zenith at the vernal equinox. It has found its way into the calendars of the Sogdians, Khwarazmians, Western Iranians, Armenians, all of Central Asia, the Near East, Greece, etc. It is still celebrated in various forms in significant parts of the world (Shabani, 2001, 3).

• Etymology of Nowruz

The word "Nowruz" is a compound of two parts that together mean "new day." It refers to the first day of the first month of the solar calendar when the sun reaches the Aries constellation. It is commonly used to refer to the Persian-Iranian New Year celebration, which is held on the first day of Farvardin month, corresponding to March 21st in the Gregorian calendar, marking the beginning of the spring season. The origin of this term in Middle Persian was "Nok Roc" or "Nogroz" (Azkaei, 1974, 1). In Arabic, Nowruz is mentioned in two forms: the commonly used Persian form "Nowruz" and the Arabicized form "Nayruz" (Shabani, 2001, 2). The term "Jashn" in Persian, which today means a general and national festive day, has its roots in the Avestan word "Yasn/Yasnah." In Pahlavi, it is "Yazshen," meaning praise and worship, as ancient Iranian festivals were primarily religious (Azkaei, 1974, 3).

• Commercial shopping Malls in the world and Iran

Commercial shopping malls are one of the most important commercial and tourist attractions in the world, including Iran. These malls have become destinations for shopping and entertainment by providing extensive and diverse spaces for shoppers. In Iran, "Pasazh" Persian: (پاساژ) is the first and most common term used for a shopping mall. The first Western-style shopping centers that started operating in Iran were inspired by shopping centers in France and were known as "Pasazh." Examples include Pasazh Naderi (established in 1947), Pasazh

Shirvani (established in 1951), and Pasazh Plasco (established in 1961). In France, during the 19th century, “passage” referred to covered passages constructed among other buildings. In Iran, although the early shopping centers constructed as Pasazhs were mostly independent structures, over time, many small local Pasazhs, similar to these covered passages between other buildings, were built (Kazemi & Mirebrahimi, 2021, 204).

• Mall, shopping center

The entry of the word “mall” into the urban culture literature of Iran is relatively recent and dates back to the 2000s. These types of commercial centers have a more modern architecture and structure compared to traditional shopping centers. In addition to restaurant and café spaces, they often include hypermarkets or supermarkets, as well as cultural spaces such as bookstores or art galleries. Many malls have well-known bookstore chains and cafes as part of their establishments. Malls have a broader scope than shopping centers and attract more customers from different parts of the city. Another characteristic of malls is that they often allocate large spaces to famous brands. However, this is not always the case, as some malls may not have prominent brands or the existing brands may not be well-known and large. The presence of brands itself attracts specific customers who may be less likely to visit regular shops. Most malls have one or two levels of public parking (ibid., 206). Modern and large malls have experienced significant growth in recent years and have become spaces for socializing and entertainment, especially for young people. In addition to the aforementioned spaces, multipurpose malls also feature food courts and leisure areas such as amusement parks, cinemas, exhibition halls, or concert venues. As a result, they attract diverse customers from the farthest corners of the city and sometimes even from outside the city. Many multipurpose malls house large branded stores. However, the presence of large foreign brands is not universal in this regard (e.g., Kourosh Mall). On the other hand, all multipurpose malls have parking facilities (ibid., 206-207). Moreover, today, the general public prefers multipurpose complexes where they can not only shop but also spend time on leisure activities and dining (Talebian, Atashi & Nabi Zadeh, 2010, 8).

Research Methodology

In this study, the Nowruz 1402 (2023) event in Iran, along with its social and cultural activities within a commercial context, was examined using a descriptive and analytical research method. To answer the research questions, several field visits and interviews with Iran Mall officials were conducted during the Nowruz period. The data collection tools included photography, notes taken, existing documents, available studies, and the exclusive sources and archives available at the Iran Mall library. Additionally, by gathering real information, the extent of Iran Mall’s adherence to Nowruz culture, customs, and traditions was described. The present research is considered applied in terms of its objective and cross-sectional in terms of its time frame. Through the examination of

several case studies, the role of organizing such events in shaping important tourist centers in Tehran was recognized.

Case Study Sample

• Introduction to Iran Mall’s geographic location

Today, the advancement of cities and the emergence of new construction technologies, buildings, and modern structures have given cities a new face. Tehran is no exception to this rule. In the present era, a grand project called Iran Mall has been built in western Tehran, specifically in District 22. It serves as a magnificent example of the capabilities of Iranian engineers, incorporating state-of-the-art technologies and combining Iranian architectural treasures with modern construction techniques. Iran Mall captivates every visitor and has been able to significantly transform the appearance and character of its surrounding area, even being recognized as one of the main tourist attractions in western Tehran.

• Iran Mall’s location and accessibility for citizens

Iran Mall is located in District 22, western Tehran, away from excessive pollution in the city center. It enjoys excellent accessibility, being situated along major east-west and north-south highways. It is surrounded by three airports: Payam, Mehrabad, and Imam Khomeini. However, public transportation options for better access for tourists and citizens have not been adequately addressed.

• Cultural and social activities during Nowruz at Iran Mall

Every year, as the Nowruz holidays approach and the moments of the New Year’s transition draw near, various ceremonies and events take place in different parts of Iran. One of these spaces that effectively showcases the interaction between users and Nowruz is Iran Mall. This commercial, recreational, and cultural environment, with its diverse spaces and attractions, suitable accessibility, and desirable location in western Tehran, has managed to attract a large audience, especially after enduring the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the events that significantly contributed to this success is the ancient Nowruz celebration, which will be further examined within the commercial context.

• Nowruz shopping festival

According to Iranmall’s public relations department, on the first night of the festival, Tuesday, 15th of Esfand 1402 (March 6, 2023), all areas of Iranmall, including cultural, sports, recreational, and commercial sections, began their celebration and discount programs (The beginning of., 2023). In addition to cultural and sports sections, this festival, for the first time, covers all commercial and retail areas as well. Furthermore, all food and retail units have offered special discounts of up.

• New Year’s Eve celebration in 2023 or 1402 SH (Solar Hijri calendar)

According to the public relations of Iran Mall, on New Year’s Eve, Iran Mall will host a celebration and fireworks display in digital fountain Square with the presence of tens of thousands of people.

The “Manteq al-Tayr” performance, Haji Firuz characters, night tent shows, and giant puppets are part of these programs, and these groups will bring joy to their compatriots in the digital fountain, Mahan Garden, Didaar Garden, Traditional Market, and Sepid Food Court areas. (The beginning of ..., 2023), (Figs. 2 & 3).

• **Arrangement of the Haft Seen table**

In an interview with Ramin Samiee-Zadeh, the director of the exhibition center and the director of the Nowruz Festival in the spring of 1401 SH, which was published in the internal magazine of Iranmall called “Hojreh,” he provided the following explanation regarding the arrangement of the Haft Seen tables: In this festival, in addition to the Haft Seen tables arranged by Iranmall in various locations, efforts have been made to create unprecedented competition among our sales centers and business partners in Iranmall, so that we can witness the best arrangement of Haft Seen tables by shopping centers. It is evident that with this initiative, we contribute to the visual appeal of the Iranmall complex, as well as creating excitement, joy, and happiness among



Fig. 2. Performance of local music and dance. Source: Authors.



Fig. 3. Environmental puppet show. Source: Authors.



Fig. 4. (a): Arrangement of the Haft Sin table in Haj Ali Akbar Bazaar. Source: Authors, (b): Environmental performance of Haji Firouz in the commercial corridors. Source: Authors, (c): Traditional Iranian music performance in the Mahan Garden. Source: Authors.

customers. Moreover, the result of this work will lead to the maximum attraction of tourists and customers. In this way, the objectives of organizing this festival are also achieved (Khashaei, 2022, 19), (Fig. 4a).

• **Environmental performances**

“Bahr-e-Taweel” is an artistic performance featuring a series of choreographed movements with music and the presence of mechanical puppets designed, written, and directed by Hamidreza Ardalan. The story is told in a specific carnivalesque manner with the presence of these puppets and body costumes created using electronic and digital techniques (Carnaval-e “Bahr...”, 2023). The performance took place in the commercial corridors and surrounding area of the digital fountain called “Ab Nava”. Another environmental performance was the puppet show of Haji Firouz in the corridors of Iran Mall, which invited visitors to watch, adding a more New Year’s atmosphere to this shopping complex (Fig. 4b).

• **Musical performances**

Another part of the Nowruz celebrations at Iran Mall was the Festival of Music of Iranian Tribes and Traditional Ceremonies which took place alongside pop and international music during the festival period at Iran Mall (Khashaei, 2022, 20). Other indoor environmental performances included traditional Iranian music and singing performances in the Mahan Garden, which introduced visitors to local music and songs during Nowruz at Iran Mall. Ambient musical performances, featuring musicians moving through the shopping areas, were also part of the Nowruz programming at the mall, inviting visitors to listen to live music (Fig. 4c).

The Interactions of People and Citizens with the Operations of Iran Mall

Attractive and modern shopping malls have become one of the newest additions to urban spaces, shaping the commercial landscape of cities and fostering economic vitality. They serve as hubs for retail activity, providing essential services and amenities to city dwellers. The construction of a shopping mall like Iran Mall in a metropolis like Tehran is not only necessary but also has the potential to significantly impact the lives of citizens by fulfilling their needs and enhancing their well-being. Undoubtedly, such a complex can serve as a popular destination for both domestic

tourists from across the country and international leisure travelers, contributing to the nation's economic growth (Madanipoor, 2017) (Fig.5a).

• Social interactions

This complex is designed for visiting, recreation, sightseeing, and leisure activities for various social groups and facilitates the formation of individual and group relationships among them. Such complexes create opportunities for economic development, and employment, as well as social interaction, communication, and the intermingling of different cultures in society. Iran Mall is not just a shopping center; it is a multipurpose center that appeals to all ages and provides the necessary facilities. In addition to providing playgrounds and entertainment services for children and adolescents, it also offers the necessary facilities and conditions for the leisure of the elderly.

• Space adaptation

Among the space adaptations and facilities provided for the elderly and disabled, the entire complex is equipped with wheelchair ramps and elevators on all floors, as well as special restrooms. The movie theaters, mosque, and other parts of the complex have also been adapted for accessibility. Additionally, an emergency medical center is available to ensure the well-being of the elderly and disabled.

• Change of use during the coronavirus pandemic

In the short few years since its opening, Iran Mall Exhibition Center has not only hosted numerous exhibitions but has also served as the largest isolation ward for COVID-19 patients with a capacity of 3,000 hospital beds and the site of the country's largest vaccination center. This has been made possible thanks to the exhibition center's extensive spaces, diverse access options, and state-of-the-art facility features (Moarefi-ye bazar..., n.d.) (Fig. 5b).

• Emphasis on Iranian traditional architecture in Iran Mall

This building, in addition to being built in a modern way with the latest available facilities and new technologies, has not been indifferent to the past architecture and has not cut off its connection. Prioritizing comfort and modernity has not been a reason for not paying attention to tradition and old buildings. You can easily see the most beautiful traditional architectural art in it. In different parts, it has been devoted to ancient beliefs and memories, preserving them and challenging people to create memories (Figs. 5c).

• Quality of space and citizen presence

The success of this project has a two-way relationship with the level of use and presence of citizens in it, and they affect each other. If a space is designed with quality, the presence of people there is noticeable, so citizens have a good feeling about this complex so that they can have comfort and recreation, in addition to meeting their daily needs, away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

• Functions of Iran Mall

This building has addressed commercial needs by providing a suitable platform for social and recreational activities. Attention has been paid to achieving new patterns of social and cultural space for visitors and their social relationships. In addition to meeting the needs of citizens, it impresses audiences in the lobbies with modern interior designs, attractive decorations, and furniture tailored to each space. This complex offers various recreational welfare facilities such as an amusement park, cinema complex, sports complex, and hotel. Among the notable sections of Iran Mall are the Grand Mosque, Mahan Garden, Encounter Garden, Traditional Tea House, Library, Hall of Mirrors, Eshragh Pavilion, Sharbatkhaneh (Traditional beverage house), and International Restaurant Garden.

Landscape, Architecture, and Their Interplay

Humans have long held a deep-seated belief in nature's profound and calming influence on their well-being, a connection rooted in their inherent biological and psychological makeup (Andrew & T, 2015). This innate affinity has driven a persistent pursuit of experiences in natural outdoor environments, a yearning that has only intensified with the rise of urbanization.

• The relationship between landscape and Iran Mall

In line with the global trend of transforming large shopping malls from purely commercial spaces into commercial and recreational hubs, incorporating leisure and entertainment areas, the creators of this complex have effectively employed spatial landscapes by simulating environments reminiscent of single-purpose parks and Persian gardens to enhance visitor acceptance.

• Soft symbols and signs in the environment

One of the captivating features of Iran Mall is its stunning musical fountain, situated in the southern section of the complex, accessible from the G0 level. This meticulously designed digital fountain serves as a harmonious blend of soft and hard elements



Fig. 5.(a): Citizen's presence in the Iran Mall's Encounter Garden (Bagh-e- Didar). Source: Authors, (b): Vaccination at Iran Mall Source: www.farsnews.ir, (c): Haj Ali Akbar Timcheh. Source: Authors.

within indoor and outdoor spaces. The presence of restaurants and cafés alongside the fountain invites visitors to linger for hours, immersing themselves in tranquility while fostering a deeper connection between humanity and nature.

• Fountain and night illumination

The beauty of this fountain reaches its peak at night, and a well-designed lighting system has been designed for it. With the most advanced lighting and water dance, it creates a work of art that delights tourists. This space is also known as “Abnama”(digital fountain), due to the language of rhythm and movement, music, light, and sound that are intertwined (Abnava, n.d.). The designers of this complex have paid due attention to meeting human needs for nature and establishing a balance between them. Aware of the climate of Tehran, they have tried to create the best concept of sustainability and place (Fig. 6).

Conclusion

An analysis of the Nowruz celebrations in 2023 at Iran Mall reveals a clear and positive correlation between tourism and social and cultural activities during this festive period. By leveraging its expansive spaces, the mall successfully hosted the traditional and ancient Nowruz festivities within a commercial setting. During Nowruz, tourist attractions such as Nowruz shopping, traditional ceremonies, and the Haft Sin table, along with exhibitions and local arts activities, draw a substantial number of domestic and international tourists. Traditional ceremonies, performances of local theater and music, and Nowruz festivals

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Fig. 6. Iran Mall Fountain. Source: Authors.

are among the activities that attract visitors. Therefore, it can be concluded that during Nowruz, tourism, and social and cultural activities are closely intertwined, simultaneously creating a vibrant and energetic atmosphere that contributes to cultural development and exchange. The expansion of cities has made it increasingly difficult for citizens to access traditional markets for their shopping needs, necessitating the utilization of regional shopping malls. Field studies and examinations surrounding this large multi-purpose mall indicate that this commercial center, by considering the diverse needs of its users, has the capability to cater to the demands of every age group and social stratum. Moreover, due to its existing capabilities, it can play a significant role in preserving culture and hosting Nowruz events. Therefore, by attracting individuals from various segments of society, it can organize diverse events within a commercial environment, providing tourists with a recreational and interactive space alongside shopping and economic activities.

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