

The Wrapped City and the Wrapped Bodies

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FROM MOSQUES TO MURALS

I began contemplating the idea of writing this paper several years ago, as a freshman architecture student in Tehran while “walking in the city.” Hence, there is a personal dimension to my argument, in that it originates in my own understanding of the city as a woman and also covers my memories of the city from childhood and teenage years.

Although this paper presents a series of descriptions about the contemporary city of Tehran, the particular cultural and political framework within which this research is meaningful spans the period from the Islamic revolution of 1979 to the end of the war with Iraq in 1988. There are several good reasons why I have chosen this period. The overarching reason behind the structure of this paper is the strong ideological grip of Islamic fundamentalism on all aspects of political and cultural life throughout this period. In the aftermath of the Islamic revolution of Iran and during the years of war with Iraq, Tehran was under air attack and suffered from terrorist explosions. During the time, the dominant image of Tehran looked like a battlefield enclosed by tons of sandbags. At the same time exterior facades of buildings were covered with the brimming images of political propaganda and revolutionary slogans for almost a decade. Since the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war, the image of Tehran has been changing gradually. Nevertheless, because most of the materials – images, maps, etc. – that support the following arguments represent present-day Tehran, it is possible to maintain that the image of Tehran conveyed in this paper is still dominant in the city if not central.

Under the Shah and shortly before the Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979, the structure of the capital city of Tehran had come to reflect Western urban and architectural design as a result of the rapid modernization that took place during the fifty-four years of the reign of the Pahlavi regime.

After the revolution, ideological architects sought to bring a religious basis to the architectural ensemble of the city, in line with the return to Islamic fundamentalism. They envisioned the

construction of mosques and religious buildings in order to revive authentic Islamic architecture. This was particularly important because mosques in Iran were traditionally associated with a strong political flavor. An integral part of the Friday service in traditional Iranian mosques was the *khutbah* (speech). The *khutba* was one of several ways in which the close relationship between the Muslim ruler and the society was expressed. Historically, in times of civil strife or other kinds of political instability there was no quicker way than the *khutbah* of informing the populace as to who the true ruler and his accredited deputy might be. Therefore, the political dimension within which the mosque evolved and functioned was emphasized. It was particularly important for the *khatib* (speaker) to be clearly visible and audible.

Following this tradition, the erection of mosques for the purpose of reinforcing the position of a religious/political leader and of controlling and stabilizing society seemed to be a primary task of political reform and modification of urban life on the eve of the revolution. Nevertheless, what happened in fact was something very different. Because the war with Iraq had exhausted the state budget, the regime could not afford the erection of religious buildings. Thus, the Islamic revolutionaries and city planners resorted to changing the facades of already existing buildings by covering them with religious iconography, depicting the leaders of the fundamentalist movement such as Khomeini in larger-than-life guise.

The overwhelming effect of these larger-than-life images is effectively to cover most of the walls in the city, obliterating the original surfaces and turning the city into a big mosque. At the same time that the city of Tehran was being turned into a large mosque, the function of the original mosques *per se* was changing. In the past, mosques were the central sources of power of Muslim leaders; however, today, citizens rarely frequent the mosques, having being lured away by secular western thought. Illustrated walls that contain the gigantic figures of the fundamentalist Muslim leaders along with their wordy quotes are supposed to possess the “aura” of authentic

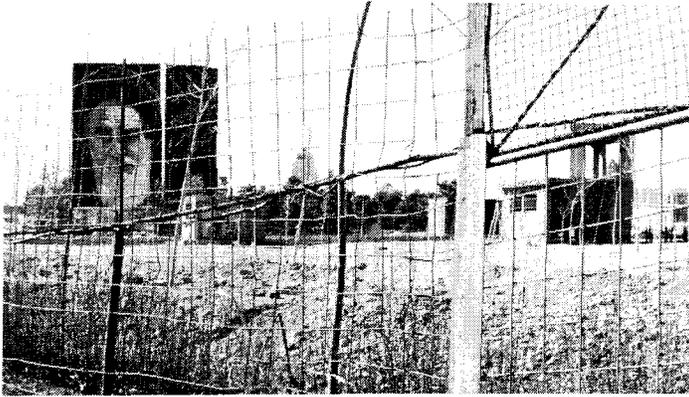


Fig. 1. A giant mural of Ayatollah Khamenei, Tehran, Motahhari Ave 2000, photo by the author.

and genuine Islamic mosques and to bring it onto the streets where citizens now congregate. Unlike traditional Islamic mosques, which historically contributed to the enrichment of the Islamic city and to enlarging the opportunities for public interaction, these pictures consume space. They run from one wall to the next and turn the city into the sacred collective body of the Muslim leaders. In this sense, social interaction among citizens is replaced by one-sided communication between the revolutionary leaders and the public. Instead of contributing to the enrichment of the city and enlarging the opportunities for public enjoyment, these pictures merely consume space. They care little for architecture; they defile and obscure it.

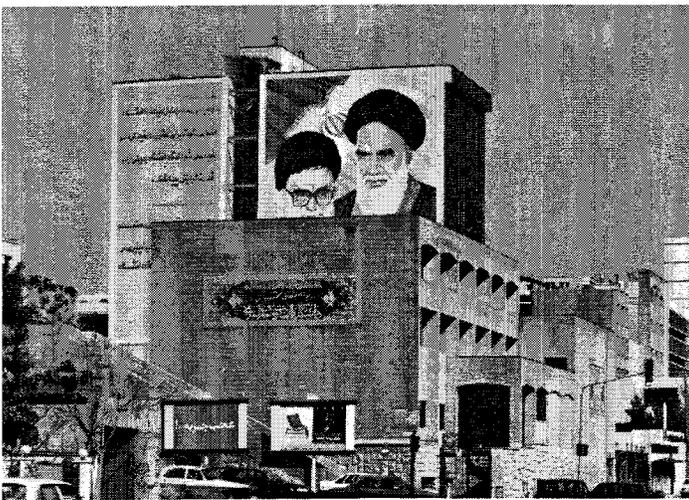


Fig. 2. A giant mural of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei aligned with their revolutionary quotes, Tehran, Motahhari Ave 2000, photo by the author.

In Tehran, streets and public spaces in general were used as stages for the display of all sorts of images that reinforced the ideals of revolutionary leaders. The type of propaganda that is displayed in Tehran is not particular to the Islamic regime of Iran. The evocation of space and the nature of political propaganda in the public spaces of post-revolutionary Tehran also share some features with phenomena in other countries in the Middle East. In the contemporary Middle East, monumental

representations of power become even more complicated in that they go beyond the simple aim of emphasizing a leader as a representative of modernization, national identity, and independence. Indeed texts and images also engage other factors central to mobilizing new Islamic identities, e.g. involving religion as a dominant factor and entrusting a leader with god-like status. For example, since the 1980's under the rule of Saddam Hussein the embellishment of Baghdad has become something of a national obsession. Public monuments in Baghdad mostly represent the figure of Saddam Hussein. These monumental urban objects either represent him in portraits and body images or depict monumental objects that indirectly signify his physical and emotional power. "In one of his 1979 speeches, Saddam Hussein claimed to be a 'descendent of Ali'" (Alkhalil, 1991:13). Moreover, life-story of Saddam Hussein in one of Baghdad's Museums is told by analogy with that of the Prophet. Such repeated and well-calculated strategies have worked to solidify a kind of power in Iraq that is akin to religion and to deliberate establishment of system of idolatry.



Fig. 3. A giant plywood billboard representing Saddam Hussein astride the ancient Babylonian gate of Ishtar (Alkhalil 1991, 53).

In his book *The Monument*, Samir Alkhalil Explains how “urban form [in Baghdad] has had to adapt itself around the larger of the new edifices . . . in fact Streets and squares are marked by the presence of such artifacts. . . .” (Alkhalil 1991, 19).

As in Baghdad, images of revolutionary leaders, particularly those of Ayatollah Khomeini, made evident their role as representatives of the holy Imams and Prophets. However, Tehran’s urban structure in the 1980s took shape in a different way. Streets in Tehran did not have to adapt to any large new edifice or symbolic monument. Streets and squares remained the same but they carried new meanings that were applied to them by imposing a new envelope – the two-dimensional murals that wrapped the walls around and all over the streets.

In contrast to Saddam Hussein, with his tendency toward the modernization of Baghdad in accordance with somewhat Western methods in city planning and architectural design, Ayatollah Khomeini wanted to revive tradition in various cultural spheres, including urban design, as guided by the doctrine of the rule of clergy and the use of religious laws.

HIS NAME, HIS BODY, HIS POWER

In contemporary Tehran, the central north-south axis linking the south to the most northern areas is where most of the formal and functional political propaganda and strategic targets are revealed. There is also a secondary east-west axis, which intersects at right angles with the central axis. The primary north-south axis can be identified with Vali Asr (meaning the resurrection), and the secondary cross-axis can be identified with *Enghelab* (meaning “revolution”).

Major squares that represent zones of political power in the city are located along the two main axes where the majority of protests, demonstrations, and annual religious rituals, such as Ta’ziye (1), take place. More importantly, most of the murals are located in line with these axes.

Before the Islamic revolution, the central vertical axis was in line with the newly built administrative institutions and ended at the palaces of the royal family in the north. Interestingly, this axis was named after the royal family (*Pahlavi*) and thus associated with monarchy. Today this axis is named after the future Imam of the Shiite — *Vali Asr*. The contemporary axis of *Vali Asr* is in line with the main administrative buildings as they were in the past and extends to the new palaces of the fundamentalist politicians of Iran. However, this axis ends at the huge monumental tomb of Khomeini in the south that symbolically represents the power of Khomeini’s cult. It is also aligned with the exact road that leads to the city of *Qom*, where the main radical religious schools in the country are located, and is in the same axis down to the south. The horizontal axis

in the pre-revolutionary era was named after Eisenhower and thus indicated a secular zone as opposed to the prior vertical zone, which was in line with the main mosque and thus designated a religious power. Today the street is called “Revolution,” which is lined up with the important protests zones such as Tehran University and the huge liberty square on the west. The new mosque of Khomeini, which is located somewhere around the intersection of the two main axes, denotes a new political zone that is at the same time associated with the worship of a “sacred religious leader.” (2) The major avenues and freeways in the north of Tehran have been named after famous Ayatollahs such as Beheshti, Motahhari, Modarres, Khomeini, and Nuri. The names of these Ayatollahs are also the ones most often used to name schools, hospitals, parks and stadiums (Chelkowsky and Dabashi 2001, 125).

In his evocative descriptions of spatial practices in “Walking in the City,” Michel de Certeau writes about the names of the streets to show their particular values in relation to the gaps of larger power structures in the city. De Certeau believed that the names of streets create new meanings for them. “[These names] detach themselves from the places they were supposed to define and serve as imaginary meaning points on itineraries which, as metaphors they determine for reasons that are foreign to their original value but may be recognized . . . by passers-by” (De Certeau 1999, 131). The names as De Certeau puts it make the city a “suspended symbolic order” (De Certeau 1999, 132). De Certeau’s notions may well have something to say about how the naming of spaces and streets function in present day Tehran.

Interestingly, there is some relationship between some streets that are named after particular revolutionary leaders and the body images on the facades of the buildings that face them. For example, at the beginning of Motahhari Avenue, a dominant image of Ayatollah Motahhari catches the eye as one enters the street. His body along with his name becomes important in reading the multi-dimensional ideological meanings that are applied to the street.

Placing Tehran under the watchful eye of the depicted masculine leaders, these ideological wrappings have masculinized the city. The faces and bodies of the Ayatollahs define a particular identity for the architectural ensemble of the city and consequently influence the ways people understand their relationship to spatial settings in Tehran. A young citizen defines Tehran in these words: “It is worse after the revolution, as there are more restrictions on personal freedom and it is as if you are always being watched. You always have to have a good excuse for what you do.” (Madanipour 1998, 153)

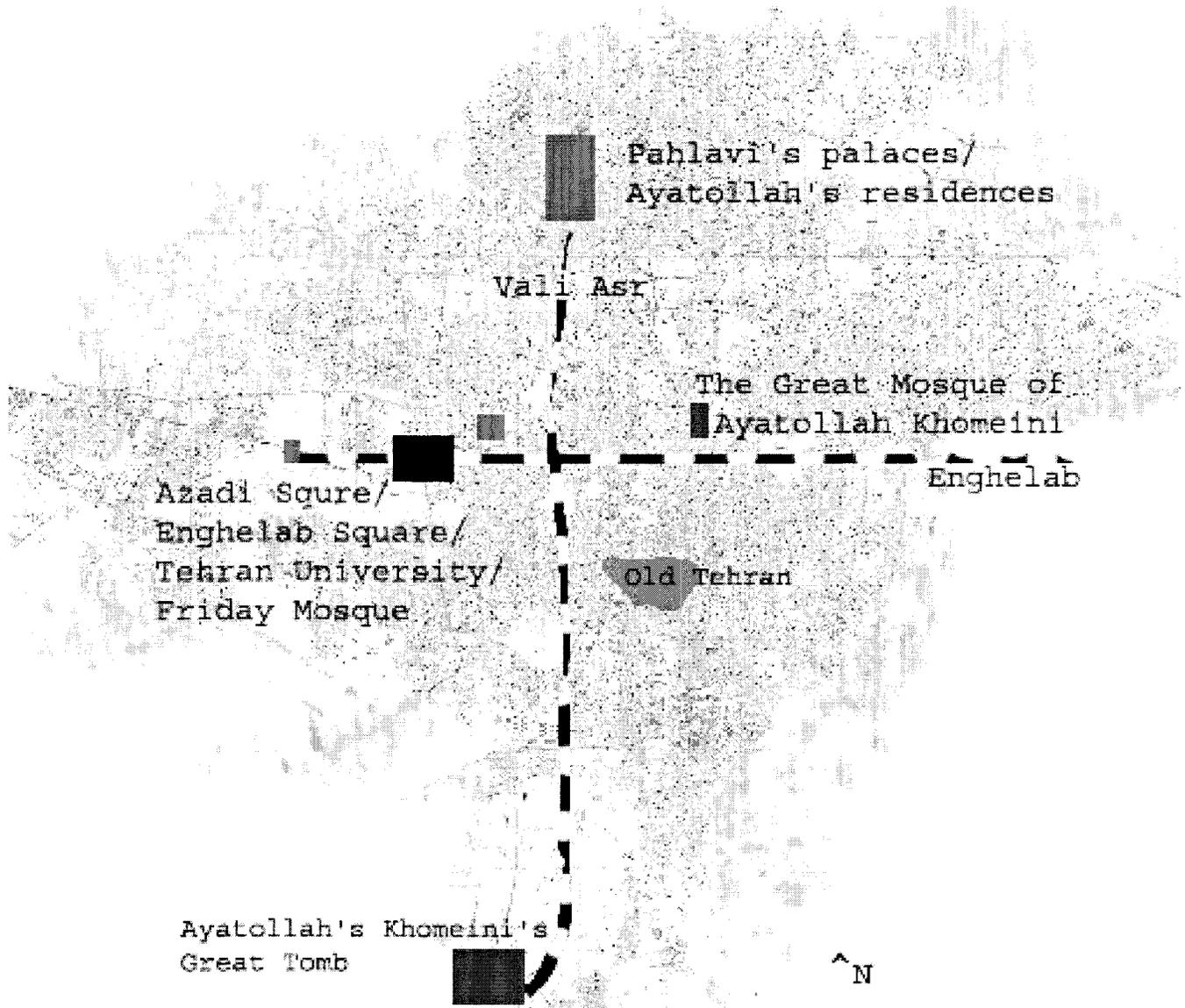


Fig. 4. Ideological urban structures in post-revolutionary Tehran, schematic drawing by the author.

Tehran is made and made over into the simulacrum of the "sacred" masculine bodies, and the real bodies (especially the female bodies) in their turn are transformed into something distinctively alien. Nevertheless, as Farzaneh Milani puts it, the socio-cultural implications of the veiled bodies of women in post-revolutionary Iran goes beyond its traditional significance (Milani 1992, 38). It attains a level of political and nationalistic expression not previously achieved or even envisioned in Iran (Milani 1992, 154). In fact, in Tehran, women's wrapped bodies have been abused in order to create a new image in the public environments of the city. These wrapped bodies Islamicize the city along with the walls that are wrapped in and bounded by the body images of the Ayatollahs.

THE WRAPPED BODY: AN INTERVENING IMAGE WOMEN'S VEILED BODIES AND URBAN SPACE IN TEHRAN

Women's bodies have always been central in Iranian political discourse in the construction of public space. Soon after Reza Shah came to power in the beginning of the 20th century, he embarked on his quest to give a modernized image to Iranian cities, ordering that the streets be rid of the most conspicuous sign of backwardness—the veil. In 1933 women were again obligatory re-veiled and this signaled the creation of a strong Islamic image for post-revolutionary Iranian cities.

Unlike other Islamic countries, in Iran, the composition of the veil since the Islamic Revolution has not been the bearer of its

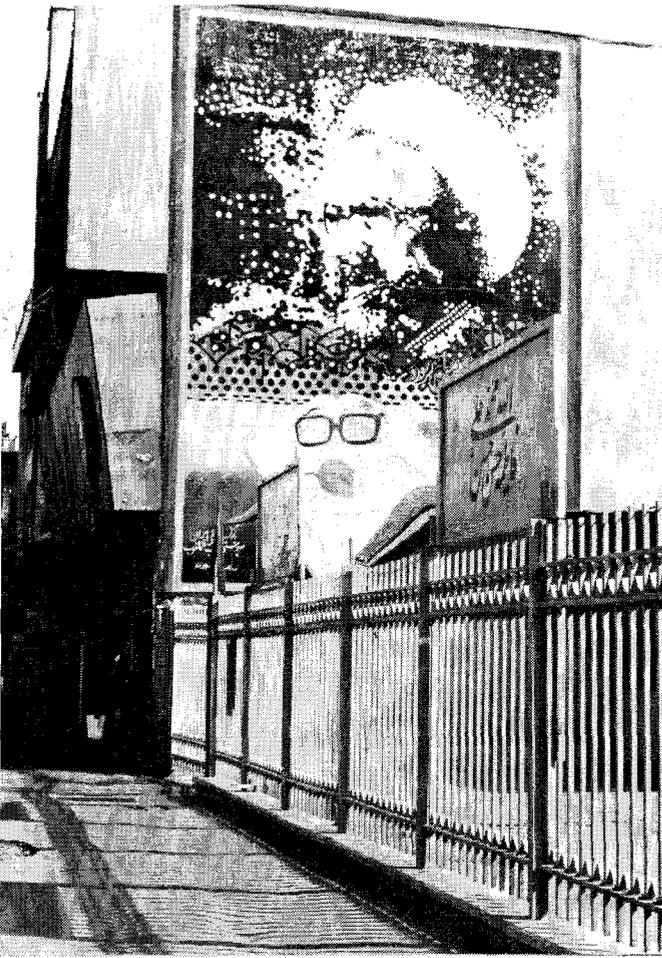


Fig. 5. A mural of Ayatollah Moteahhari, Tehran, Moteahhari Ave. 2000. photo by the author.

traditional meanings. As Milani puts it, the *socio-cultural* implications of the veil in post-revolutionary Iran went beyond its traditional significance (Milani 1992, 38). With its strong symbolic connotations, the veil became, among other things, a revolutionary emblem. It attained a level of political and nationalistic expression not previously achieved or even envisioned in Iran (Milani 1992, 154). Covered bodies of women came into play as ideological symbols to support the goals of the revolution.

The image of veiled women protesting in mass demonstrations is one example among many that reinforces how images of the wrapped bodies of women are mobilized in order to create a new identity for the city. Luce Irigaray's notion toward women's body may well have something to say about how women's wrapped bodies function in present day Tehran: "as commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value." (Luce Irigaray 1985, 175)

The image of veil did not only remain limited to the actual wrapped bodies of women. The words *hijab* or *mohajjabbe* (veiled woman), and the images of faceless veiled bodies of



Fig. 6. "The Wrapped Body" photo by the author & M. Gonzales.

women are often used in the slogans plastered all over the white washed walls of the houses, office buildings, institutional centers, and factories in Iran. Women who do not appreciate the veil are subject to ideological criticism. Val Moghaddam writes that, "On the walls of Tehran and other major cities, always covered with inscriptions of one type or another, the following admonition can be seen: 'Do the women who oppose *hijab* not feel ashamed before the corpse of the martyrs'" (Moghaddam 1988, 225)

BEHIND THE WRAPS

Being wrapped by an artificial skin (veil), women in Tehran literally do not relate to the outside, because, as Beatriz Colomina states, "To be outside is to be in the image, to be seen, whether in the press photograph, a magazine, a movie, on television, or at your window" (Colomina 1994,7).

Since the development of new institutions beginning in the late Enlightenment, the private/public spatial dichotomy in the West has broken down and as a result public and private spaces in western and westernized cities alike have acquired similar spatial characteristics and have even become enmeshed into one. In some contemporary Islamic cities the division of public/private space, however, is still perhaps one of the most important features of spatiality. Interestingly, the divisions



Fig. 7. "Women's bodies as socio-political artifacts" Tehran Enghelab Ave 2000, photo by the author.

between public and private spaces have often centered on the female body.

In general, gendered space and the creation of male and female zones are perhaps among the most important features of public and private spaces in Islamic cities. However, as Janet Abu-Lughod points out, it is important to bear in mind that the rules governing gendered spaces not only established physically distinctive regions; more importantly, they established visually distinctive or insulated regions. The object was not only to prevent physical contact but to protect privacy visually as well. Line-of-sight distance, rather than physical distance, was the object of urban design. Thus, Islamic law regulated the placement of windows, the heights of adjacent buildings and the mutual responsibilities of neighbors toward one another so as to guard visual privacy. According to Abu-Lughod, visual features of spatial settings in Islamic architecture thus are as important as the functional aspects of space (Abu-Lughod 1987, 167). Post-revolutionary Tehran with its emphasis on the creation of new visual spaces bears a strong similarity to Abu-Lughod's theories about the visual features of an Islamic city or what she calls: "mechanism of visual control."

Interestingly, there are some connections between conceptions of spatiality and the veil in Iranian cultural contexts. The term *chador* in Persian means tent and indeed the veil, functions as a portable habitat, reduced in size to the bulk of a woman's body.

Chador (veil) is perhaps one of the most symbolically significant structures of a complex cultural heritage that

expresses, among other things, Iran's prevailing attitude toward the self and the other. It indicates ways in which people relate to or interact with each other and, ultimately, with themselves. It is a ritualistic expression of culturally defined boundaries. Like walls that enclose houses and separate inner and outer space, the veil makes a clear statement about the disjunction between the private and the public. (Milani 1992, 23)

In her movie, *The Apple*, Samira Makhmalbaf illustrates the problematics of the urban space on the part of two young girls in many ways. In one scene a social worker says "The problem is that they are girls. If they were boys they could have played outside. They could even climb people's walls . . ." (Dabashi 2001, 271). *The Apple* turns the real life-story of the protective incarceration of two young sisters by their father. It can, however, be understood as a story of social repression of women's desire to be on the outside in Iran.

Women in Iran are isolated from the public space of the city. The walls that surround them are many—the walls of their homes, the walls of masculine political propaganda, and the walls of their veil.

BEYOND THE WRAPS

Besides not being rooted in traditional Islamic visual culture, which initially prohibited any correspondence between real objects and represented ones, ideological iconography in Tehran is for the most part a Western construct. In other words, the Western phenomenon of media has been used in Tehran at large while being covered by the gloss of religion.

Jean Baudrillard, the French cultural critic, regards Los Angeles as the world center of the inauthentic and weightless. He also maintains that, "the whole world is implicated in this uprootedness; however, there is only one exception: Islam . . . and perhaps that is why the West is so weak and vulnerable in the face of the certitudes of radical Islam" (Baudrillard 1989, 53). In contrast to Baudrillard's argument, and based on the ideological wrapping of Tehran, one might argue that the contemporary Islamic city of Tehran has been modernized through the same Western techniques that have shaped the inauthentic nature of some American cities. Los Angeles with its mix of Hollywood and Disney counts as a site of "anywhere." Considering this, one might argue that there is not much difference in the inauthentic wrapping of the radical Islamic city of Tehran and the forged Hollywood media hype on the façades of buildings in Los Angeles.

Unlike American patterns, murals in Tehran are not used in space for commercial persuasion; however, they are used for political influence. As a result, the approach to developing pure



Fig. 8. A giant mural of Marilyn Monroe, Hollywood, photo by the author.

Islamic patterns is first and foremost absent within the ideological discourses of urban design under the control of the revolutionary leaders of Iran who speak of the return of religion and the awakening of Islam. The Islamic city promised by the Muslim leaders of Iran has been transformed into anti-Islamic city of weightlessness, and inauthenticity. Tehran subordinates what remains of Islamic traditions, traditional forms, and popular ways of life and transforms them into something new.

In his book *Hybrid Urbanism*, Nezar Alsayyad opens up an important genre in contemporary urbanism that emerges from multi-identical features. He sees globalization as an important factor in the production of a local culture and believes that hybridity is equated with globalization (Alsayyad 2001, 16). He further explains that globalization has made it difficult to use urban form to understand the special manifestation of human behavior (Alsayyad, 2001, 13). It casts doubt on the utility of urbanism as an analytical category that may represent the cultures of people and places (Alsayyad 2001, 13). Tehran might best fit into the global/hybrid model that Alsayyad illustrates while seen from the outside. Nevertheless, it is always a patriarchal site; a site of one and not the "other", when seen from the inside – from behind the veil, from behind the dark shelter of a repressed female citizen.

1. After the revolution, the function of these traditional rituals and processions was transformed into an ideological shape to support the aims of the Islamic regime.

2. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic, not only were all the names associated with the Pahlavi rule changed; even those names which could be associated with a monarchical system in general were changed. In order to bring in a new Islamic world-view, themes from Islamic history, as well as individuals and heroes from the Islamic revolution and the war against Iraq, lent their names to Iranian streets and public buildings. In Tehran alone, between the years 1979 and 1987, 302 avenues, forty-one squares, thirteen freeways, and seventeen parks had their names changed. (Chalkawski and Dabashi, 2001: 120)

NOTES

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