Critical Reviews
No. 1
May-Jun 2025
14

Escalating Commercialization of Public Spaces in Tehran

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Abstract

Today, pseudo-public spaces have a special place in the landscape of cities as a result of the continuous transformation of the city, the setting of new rules for the management and use of space, and the complex and multidimensional process of the formation and development of public spaces. Limited users and the prominent role of the private sector in the management and maintenance of space are the most important features of pseudo-public spaces, such as shopping centers and entertainment complexes. The neutrality of the thinkers' critical assessment of the social function of pseudo-public spaces and the constructive effect of some of these spaces on the social life and urban landscape of Tehran, clarifies the necessity of discussing pseudo-public spaces. The pseudo-public spaces improve the social life of the citizens as a result of the interactivity of the environmental characteristics, such as the presence of attractive functions and the humanistic characteristics, such as the presence of a similar group of a public and special gathering of people in them, the appropriate planning of the private sector developers and the benefits of the financial capacities of the non-governmental sector. The constructive effect of pseudo-public spaces in the prosperity of the city's social life, along with their exclusive aspect resulting from the economic drivers of their formation, makes clear the necessity of moderation in the field of urban landscape management. Balancing the two approaches of creating attractive functions with economic benefits and not limiting the attractions of the urban landscape to the financial resources of the private sector leads to the manifestation of the city landscape as a common resource and asset. Strategies, such as validating the diversity of citizens within the framework of the definition of several publics, taking advantage of the economic component and spreading the facilities of the private sector in the public areas of the city, making part of the environmental and humanistic attractions of the public space independent from the financial resources of the private sector and bridging between government, private and non-profit sectors in the design and planning of public space will be effective in more appropriate management of the urban landscape.

Keywords: Public space; Pseudo-public space, Urban landscape.

DOI: 10.22034/JCR.1.1.4.1.1.30
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[DOI: DOI: 10.22034/JCR.1.1.4.1.1.30]

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What effect has the privatization and commercialization of space in the form of pseudo-public spaces had on the nature and social function of public spaces in Tehran? What strategies does the evaluation of the performance of pseudo-public spaces bring for better urban landscape management?

Extended Abstract

Public space has historically fulfilled essential social, political, cultural, and economic functions, yet in contemporary Tehran, its accessibility and character have been reshaped by privatization and commercialization. The emergence of pseudo-public spaces—such as shopping malls, residential complexes, leisure clubs, and food courts—reflects a shift toward privately managed environments catering primarily to specific social groups. While often popular, these spaces raise questions about inclusivity, democratic openness, and their contribution to the shared urban landscape. This study views pseudo-public spaces as products of global economic pressures, weaknesses in urban governance, and the prioritization of exchange value over use value in urban development. Publicness is treated as a relative quality, with ownership, access, and use often hybrid in nature. Two key factors shape the success and social role of these spaces: environmental capabilities, such as diverse and attractive functions that encourage extended occupancy but may impose financial barriers; and human capabilities, including user homogeneity, which fosters certain forms of interaction while limiting cultural and demographic diversity. Despite their exclusivity, pseudo-public spaces can sustain forms of social life through high spatial quality, targeted services, and private-sector efficiency. Academic perspectives diverge: some view these spaces as eroding the public sphere, while others see them as inevitable adaptations that need not diminish civic life. Rather than rejecting commercialization, this research examines how such spaces can inform broader urban design strategies. It argues for integrating their strengths to enhance inclusivity, positioning pseudo-public spaces as complementary elements within Tehran's complex public realm.

Pseudo-public spaces facilitate social life of the cities as a result of the juxtaposition of environmental and human capabilities, the appropriate planning of developers and the efficiency of the financial capacities of the non-governmental sector. Accrediting the diversity of citizens, spreading the facilities of the private sector in the public arena of the city, making part of the environmental and human capabilities of the space independent from the financial resources of the private sector and bridging between different stakeholders in the design and planning of the public space are the strategies obtained from examining the mechanism of pseudo-public spaces for more efficient management of the urban landscape.

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[DOI: DOI: 10.22034/JCR.1.1.4.1.1.30]

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