Whose Space Is It?

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Designers and architects argue that interaction in public spaces is the product of relations between physical, cultural, social, and aesthetic components. As an art historian, my interest in and understanding of the production of public space is necessarily linked to its visual construction and to public art in particular. Urban planners have always included art in public spaces as a means of forming relationships between the people and the space. Governments have similarly understood the political significance of public space and its power to make meaning and have commissioned art accordingly. This essay reflects on the role of aesthetics and public art in the production and transformation of the modern public space in the Arab world by considering two examples from Cairo and Baghdad.

From an urban planning point of view, conventional public spaces are meant to be spaces of construction and representation where citizens are able to imagine and perform their identities in relation to each other and to the politics of the state. In the Arab world, however, public spaces are rarely sites of engagement but rather function as platforms of display.[1] The socialist urban design theory employed by many mid-20th-century revolutionary regimes, which sought to democratize public spaces beyond the social elite, ended up transforming them into controlled arenas for official state representations. Thus, while there is a Shuhada (Martyrdom) or a Tahrir (Liberation) Square in many Arab cities, they often do not reflect specific events leading to their naming but are a symbolic act by the new nationalist state and are typically spaces of cross-traffic roundabouts rather than of civic presence. How, then, did Cairo's Tahrir Square become the most engaged public space in the Arab world? Understanding the role of public space in facilitating revolt has become all the more imperative following the events of 2011. In the media, these spaces were imagined as spaces of action, rejuvenated and infused with new significance both locally and internationally. Their genealogy and transformation from mosque-dominated spaces to the imported space of the modern state and then to its nationalist and postcolonial alteration of meaning conveys the history of the modern Arab states' formation and evolution.[2]

Vishaan Chakrabarti argues that "Public spaces like Tompkins Square, Tiananmen Square and Tahrir Square have been stages for history because they provide the loci for urban gathering, particularly for a city's youth."[3] Yet in Arab cities, collective public presence and expression have been tightly limited and controlled, if not simply prohibited, by the security apparatus. These public spaces are commodified through government surveillance, while the state repeatedly exploits them to display its might on official occasions. Thus it is not surprising given the latest political unrest that Cairo's Midan al-Tahrir was dubbed the "geographic epicenter of the revolt" and celebrated as a place of change for the last two years.[4]

Most of the public spaces in the Arab world, though not only there, are utilized to display pedagogical public art that strictly follows the regime's ideology. Artists' agency is crippled, limiting critique and personal expression to the execution of the proposed program of the commission, which is usually to commemorate, celebrate, and beautify. While they are meant to aesthetically embellish the environment, public art is used in a general sense to define the state's political stance and as an object of intervention to construct and convey a specific identity for and to the citizens. There is no doubt that historically it is ideology rather than aesthetics that is the directive of most public art, and that is particularly true in the Arab world, where public art is always commissioned by the state.

In itself, Cairo's Midan al-Tahrir does not denote an important visual reference to "liberation" other than through the name given it by Jamal ʿAbd al-Nasir in 1952.[5] It was not initially designed as a central square; rather, according to Nasser Rabbat, it was a manifestation of an urban planning failure resulting in a series of leftover spaces that today form the midan.[6] Aside from the statue built in 2003 of Omar Makram (c.1750–1822)—a nationalist symbol of opposition against Napoleon's invasion—and the Omar Makram mosque built in 1948, there are no political references in Midan al-Tahrir. It is the center of the city (*wasaṭ al-balad*) and is surrounded by several Egyptian cultural icons, such as the Egyptian Museum. Ironically, it is also where the most bureaucratic representation of the Egyptian government, the Mogamma, is located. This, along with the size and centrality of the square, may be why it became the hub of the revolution. One would have expected the revolution to make use of the significance of Midan Nahdat Masr, which faces Cairo University and is where the iconic Nahdat Masr (Egyptian Awakening) sculpture by Mahmud Mukhtar (1891–1934) is located.[7]

In contrast to Cairo, Baghdad is a city outside the current discourse of "change from within" and Arab street power. Baghdad has endured several destructions and reconstructions over the course of its 20th-century conversion into a modern city, during which the past was always invented to suit the state. Nevertheless, Baghdad's Sahat al-Tahrir (Liberation Square), the home of the city's icon of resilience and endurance, *Nasb al-Hurriyya* (Monument of Freedom), 1959–62, did not acquire a reputation similar to that of its sister square in Cairo despite several demonstrations in 2011 that attempted to join the fervor of the other Arab revolts. *Nasb al-Hurriyya* is Iraq's first public art work by an Iraqi artist, commissioned by the city authority in Baghdad, Amanat al-ʿAsima, to celebrate the 1958 revolution and its charismatic leader ʿAbd al-Karim Qasim. It is also the only public monument that has remained standing without alterations through all subsequent Iraqi regimes.

A bas-relief mural in bronze (50 × 8 m), *Nasb al-Hurriyya* is a masterpiece by the painter and sculptor Jewad Selim (1921–61) and an undisputed Baghdadi landmark. Consisting of twenty-five connected figures, divided into ten units, it visually constructs the revolution and its consequences. Refusing to include an image of Prime Minister Qasim, Selim succeeded in negotiating various styles, including the linear quality of Arabic characters and the stylized forms of the Sumerians and Babylonians. The narrative is organized in several interconnected groups of figures, expressing injustice, resistance, solidarity, hope, and ambition, and portrayed in a style of abstract symbolic realism. A humanistic composition juxtaposing eternal calamity, motherhood, and fertility, it is timeless and universal in its iconography.

In contrast stands a public work by another of Iraq's pioneer artists, Faʾiq Hassan, a mural in Sahat al-Tayaran (Aviation Square) that was also commissioned in the early

1960s by Amanat al-ʿAsima. While Selim's abstract iconic sculpture is revered by Iraqis as quintessentially Iraqi, Hassan's social realist rendering of postrevolutionary Iraqi society's cultural diversity, which includes a collection of poems by Iraqi poet Saʿdi Yusuf at its base, is neglected.[8] Since 2003, the de-Baʿthification policy has confirmed the meaning of public space in Baghdad as a place of representing the state. Many of the city's old monuments have since been dismantled. Baghdad's declaration by the Arab League under the UNESCO Cultural Capitals Program as the Arab Capital of Culture 2013 has forced a renewed state interest in the city and its public spaces, giving the government an official excuse to refashion the city into a new image.[9]

There is no denying that the performativity of the Egyptian revolution is what brought Midan al-Tahrir into the light. Egyptian protesters were aware of being broadcasted around the world and very much incorporated this visibility into their actions. It was specifically through performance that the Egyptians reclaimed their public space. From the beginning, their political expression included street performances, exhibitions, comedy, and graffiti. Nevertheless, the Midan was imbued with significance not through its aesthetic/historical/iconographical mobilization but through the mobilization of the media. Baghdad's Sahat al-Tahrir was not afforded the same opportunity and for various ideological reasons had no international media coverage for what could have become its revolution in 2011. Given the ironclad rule of the current government, the iconography (history) of the square was critical to the mobilization of Iraqis, yet that significance remained local in the absence of world media and Baghdad's Liberation Square lost its chance to be reclaimed by the people.

NOTES

[1] An interesting and unique example of artists utilizing public space for resistance is the 1969 open-air exhibition at Jemaa el-Fna Square in Marrakech organized by the artists Farid Belkahia and Mohamed Melehi and their colleagues.

[2] See Nasser Rabbat, "The Arab Revolution Takes Back the Public Space," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (2012), http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/online_features/.

[3] Vishaan Chakrabarti, "Writing the City, Liberation Squares," 16 February 2011, http://urbanomnibus.net/2011/02/liberation-squares/.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Commissioned in the 19th century by the Khedive Ismaʿil, the square was known as Midan al-Ismaʿiliyya until the 1919 revolution, when it became unofficially known as Midan al-Tahrir.

[6] Nasser Rabbat, "Circling the Square: Nasser Rabbat on Architecture and Revolution in Cairo," *Artforum International* 49, no. 8 (2012): 182–91.

[7] It is also interesting that Midan Nahdat Masr was the site of the forty-day sit-in in by the Muslim Brotherhood.

[8] Thus soon after the 2003 invasion, *Nasb al-Hurriyya* underwent a restoration operation, while Hassan's mural has been ignored despite threats to its condition and there have been rumors about its removal.

[9] See Nada Shabout, "A Makeover: Baghdad, the 2013 Arab Capital of Culture," *Middle East Report* 266 (2013): 26–33.