

What Hit the News-Stand?! Introduction to a Dialogue

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We may start by asking this: how does the unpredictability and inconsistency of the condition of the press in Iran hit the newspaper kiosk?

Or in other words, how do kiosk owners cope with this inconsistency and unpredictability?

As a display window from where news is distributed, the newspaper kiosk mirrors the disoriented, kaleidoscopic condition of the press (and of daily life, for that matter): affected by bans and releases, censorship and qualifications, rest and unrest, political division and hysteria. Often, the squeezed, claustrophobic space of the news-stand is not enough for the large number of publications. The displays frequently spill onto the sidewalks, making it hard for pedestrians to simply pass by. It is apparent that the spatial management of the kiosk is pursued through a continuous arrangement and rearrangement of its goods by the owners; what was displayed yesterday may have to be left out tomorrow^a

The lack of a consistent discourse (social or political) is compensated for by a continual recombination of shattered bits and pieces of signifying fragments: a kaleidoscopic attempt in continuously reconnecting the remaining pieces of coloured glass to shift in varieties of social and political configurations. These substitutive configurations, delusional as they may sometimes be, offer limitless ways of articulation, or in the case of the kiosk, of infinite spatial arrangements.

What are the parameters that define the structure of these configurations? Can these configurations help us in designing a kiosk, one that would reflect the condition of the press and at the same time offer a flexible space for infinite reconfigurations of the kiosk?

A gradually and continually altering architectural space, with elements that define different proportions of openness/enclosure, opacity/transparency, brightness/darkness, could be thought of in relation to the shifting patterns in the media. This can include the kiosks, over the years. The changing pattern of this space might be derived from a statistical diagram, which includes parameters associated with fluctuations in the number of publications, or other aspects in relation to time, which could then be interpreted in terms of architectural space and form.

Can formal oppositions such as openness/enclosure, opacity/transparency and brightness/darkness define the content of the model? These parameters are important as far as their factual nature can add relevancy and authenticity to the design. We need to maintain the idea of the kiosk as a location where actions take place.

The idea of proposing a new design for a news-stand in Tehran is a pretext for addressing the complex and layered socio-political and architectural condition surrounding the newsstands. However, we need not arrive at an actually functioning design. The aim is to design an 'object' that somehow suggests a news stand, a metonymic approach to the current condition.

Rather than coping with the problem of a changing configuration of materials, the newsstand owners have been trying to deal with more practical problems. The kiosks are too small to accommodate all the materials, and the owners are forced to lay their goods on the pavement around their stands. They usually lose a lot of their materials when it rains, and sometimes the papers are blown away by the wind.



Socio-economically, the kiosk owners are either poor, or come from the class with an average income. They have always been trying to increase their income by selling additional materials and goods such as cigarettes, candies, pills, and most recently, dial-up Internet subscription cards. They have now been banned from selling cigarettes, and this will cause their economic status to deteriorate considerably. Considering the fact that less than 20% of the news-stand's total income derives from newspapers and magazines, it is not clear how it would be possible for the owners to survive if they are not allowed to sell other goods too.

The public, kiosk owners, publishers, municipalities, designers and kiosk manufacturers all have their own viewpoints about this issue, but they do not exchange ideas with each other in order to reach an appropriate decision that can be applied to the design, manufacturing, location and function of news-stands. It is ironic that the news-stand, as one of the main portals of information and media in any society, should suffer due to this particular lack of communication.

From a wider perspective, the failure to establish comprehensive communication creates a political and social environment in which there is little tolerance for different or opposing ideas. Here lies one of the main roots of prejudice, which believes in a unilateral mode of cultural and political expression. The result: a closing of all alternative media and media forms to guarantee a homogeneous cultural environment.

Dialogue and communication are an integral part of any design process, especially in public spaces. The ideal architectonic structure for an individual is always an unbalanced and exaggerated one, which highlights and deals with a few characteristics or functions that look most important to a single party involved in the process of decision making about architecture. It is always essential to include different viewpoints about any architectural or urban project through comprehensive dialogues between different parties, so as to reach a balanced condition in the end. Communication and exchange of ideas are definitely a major part of an architectural design process that is supposed to respond to the requirements of the majority of people. This is also something that should be logically considered in the case of news-stands, in an urban context.

Most kiosk owners do not really care about the papers they sell, since the sale constitutes only a small fraction of their income. They do not have the real drive to think about possible solutions to present the maximum number of papers, and therefore many of them are never put on display. Apparently they are mostly concerned about the other goods they sell. In economic terms, their ideal kiosk in fact has little to do with the primary function that has been 'imposed' on it.

Actually, the ideal design is in some cases relevant to the illegitimacy or illegality of desired features. Some of these illegal acts or features in design are associated with real urban constraints that are devised to ensure social order or convenience. They are set as standards or regulations that are more or less similar in all urban

contexts throughout the world (urban traffic, compatibility of design with other urban amenities, safety, security, and so on). The features that characterise our approach in Kiosk # 947, as a project that is associated with Tehran, are the specific definitions of illegal acts that are somehow spectacular and unique in this particular context, as social tolerance and regulations or laws in Tehran differ from those in other contexts. Spatial boundaries for Tehran news-stands, irrationally fixed by the municipality and unable to adapt to the multiple functions of these spaces, are among these specific legal limitations.

There are some design features that are ideal for different parties and are not always legitimate or legal. For instance, considering the question of size and location of news-stands: the shopkeepers in the proximity of nearly all kiosks prefer the kiosks to be eliminated because of the damage the structures do to shops in terms of visual blockage or competition.

The kiosk owners themselves want to have the maximum possible space to accommodate all the different goods they sell. They would perhaps visualise the form of a big shop that allows them to benefit from the privileged location of a space accessible from four sides. They would also like this space to function as a residence or accommodation as well as a business. They would naturally dislike another similar kiosk in the vicinity of their own space within an effective range. On the other hand, pedestrians prefer to have kiosks in easily accessible locations, with ample space provided in which to search for their desired papers or other goods sold in a kiosk. They naturally may not care about or support the kiosks being located in areas allocated to vehicles. People in cars prefer the kiosks to be in an easily accessible location, where they can buy goods without getting out of their vehicles. Naturally, each driver would prefer this portal to be vertically positioned according to the height of his own seat in the vehicle. The drivers would not care to have the kiosk located on the sidewalk or in the middle of the street.

Certain spatial criteria can be recognised as favourable or undesirable according to the interests of different groups, while the government, which is supposed to consider the benefits and interests of the majority in a democratic order, determines the legitimacy of that feature.

An identical methodology is involved in the limits that are set for the media, including

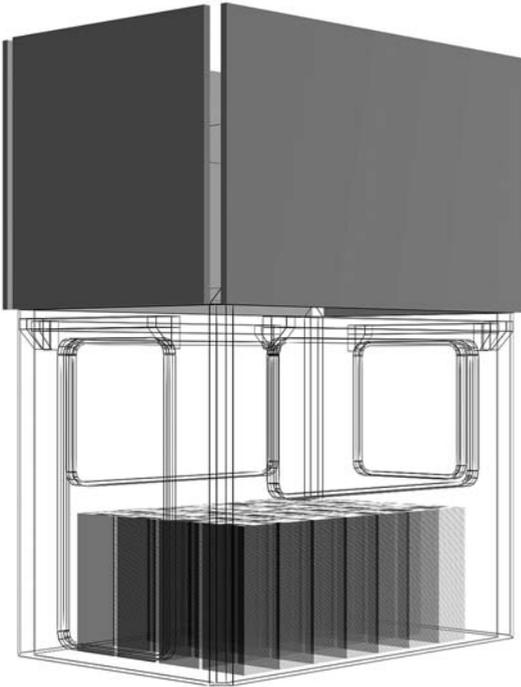


publications, in all countries. The defining factor in this regard is the power and force that each side can apply, through jurisdiction, civil procedures or other means. Subsequently, boundaries that are set for freedom of speech are neither absolute nor permanent in any case, and at any given time can only reflect a temporary balance of social forces and powers.

Dealing with the content and the limits of legality or legitimacy in the media, necessarily leads to the question of political power. The process that determines the balanced condition between the interests of different parties, keeping the benefit of the majority in mind, is essentially a democratic one. But this is not the case in many countries, including Iran.

In relation to media content, there are some areas where the preferences of the ruled majority and the ruling minority overlap to some extent. For instance, the majority of Iranians do not like any magazine or newspaper displayed in newsstands to contain pornography, and if such a publication is displayed, the people themselves will act harshly against that. But many restrictions (either openly declared, or unspoken but applied) that are set for the media are virtually of little or no importance to the majority, as long as people have no civil means to express

their exact opinions, or prefer not to participate in any public dialogue that may challenge their stand in terms of religious or political beliefs.



The illegitimacy of outspoken desires becomes interesting in relation to the lack of communication; or the symptom of incomprehensive communication that the kiosk, as one of the main portals of information and media, suffers from. Manifestations of desire are always beyond language, and beyond any social order for that matter, and communication is definitely the last thing that these manifestations are about. If in a place like Iran there is little tolerance for difference or opposing ideas, and if everyone is pursuing his/her own interests, it is because the desires of the majority have undergone a long-term

suppression under a power that longs for a homogeneous cultural and political environment. Each small gap in the system is seen by people as an opportunity to express their individual presence, or as a mechanism to be utilised for individual advantage. Sometimes these efforts may be petty struggles, desperate strategies with little significance, merely giving the illusion of some kind of independence.

The illegitimacy of these strategies is interesting only as far as they offer new possibilities. What may help to develop this new design is to understand the way in which these 'gaps' are deployed in different ways. The temporary reinterpretation of these gaps into functional spaces may not result in long-lasting spatial infrastructures, but they are nevertheless some kind of concrete manifestation of desire. In the case of the kiosks in Tehran, these reinterpretations go only as far as a perennial rearrangement of disjointed spaces: a little more than one square metre on the sidewalk, sometimes a few metres away from the kiosk itself, for displaying additional newspapers; plastic sheets to function as some kind of shelter next to the kiosk on rainy days; a string of coloured light bulbs hanging outside to indicate a claim to expanded territory ^a

Identical strategies are used by the media, in particular by some newspapers, in reinterpreting the gaps or temporary openings in the system to reposition themselves. They are similarly often seen to be reconfiguring their position over and over, sometimes by reappearing under different names after being banned by the state. However, it is less interesting to focus on the ways that spatial boundaries and restrictions are set for both the kiosk and the media; a far more interesting approach, and one that can help to develop a design proposal, is to work out an understanding of the ways in which both entities redefine and expand their boundaries, or in some cases even reduce them.

In this respect the design proposal itself becomes political, taking the act of repositioning as a methodology for design, where design becomes the continuation of the political event, and is the evidence of a political disposition rather than the end of the event.

In other words, the project may start from a particular production of local discourse, but should evolve into a universal one: that of tackling issues concerning the condition of the press, news production, distribution and circulation, news ban and release, through addressing the architectonics of the news-stand. And this in turn proceeds through a design proposal for a new kiosk in Tehran.

This proposal carries with itself all the symptomatic significances and attributes of the news-stands in Tehran. In fact, the design proposal is a pretext to addressing these symptoms by way of excessively internalising them into the designing process. The act of designing is a mimesis of an actual design process, one of re-adopting the existing lacks in the condition of the kiosk, and the press, for that matter.

But at the same time, since it presents a symptomatic design for the kiosk (a proposal that may be unrealisable), it automatically becomes decentralised, referring beyond itself, to the actual problems of the kiosk/the press.

Translated into architectural form, the main response to all the problems caused by the banning and restricted release of newspapers would be 'flexibility', which can be seen in the

design of displays and stacking spaces. Needless to say, there are many other forces, requirements, functions and regulations involved in forming an actual or potential design for a kiosk, many of which are more related to economy and urban issues. For instance, the fact that many kiosk workers sleep in their kiosk and use it as an accommodation or residence is architecturally a significant issue. Another important point is the prevailing illegitimate use of kiosks to sell other goods, which is rooted in an economic condition.

The main concept in the new design is to propose a longitudinally expandable and latitudinally scalable structure, which shows some sort of intermediary condition that is formed as the result of a continual challenge, and can still be reconfigured according to upcoming changes.

As the unsettled condition of the printed media continues to fluctuate, with the number of newspapers and magazines frequently changing, the kiosk can be altered to adapt to the current condition. It can be expanded to have more displays for newspapers in provided stands and spaces, or to retract these and transform into a snack bar, or even a temporary residence in extreme conditions.

It also has to accommodate the permanent challenge between kiosk owners who usually try to expand their territory, and municipality operatives who try to control this desire for territorial expansion.

The condition of kiosks has some interesting analogies with the nomadic lifestyle followed by many Iranians throughout their history. This lifestyle was intrinsically flexible, habituated to continual shifts and changes in the surrounding environment; it responded to these changes with lightweight or ephemeral methods. Nomads lived in temporary structures such as tents, and carried minimal personal goods. Similarly, kiosk owners adapt to the daily pressures faced by their business, such as rain and wind, lack of display space, or the need to convert the kiosk into a residence at night. Kiosks can also be thought of as portable structures that are amenable to relocation, according to the preferences of kiosk owners and a minimal set of rules set by the government to regulate and manage this relocation, taking into account urban conditions and limitations.

Maybe we have to address each architectural element of the kiosk (interior, windows, display shelves, sidewalk displays, roof, air conditioning; and the kiosks' spatial expansions, lack of formal consistency, capacity to block off traffic, etc.) separately and individually, outside any urban location. This would automatically prevent the design from becoming an object suggesting a kind of wholeness integrated into a specific site.

To develop a reflective model (design proposal) for each of the elements without considering or placing them within the totality of the kiosk would help us to address the various attributions (architectural, social and political) that they each have; attributions that also in reality may not be compatible to one another.

In reflecting on each detail, it is important to consider its relation to the condition of the press, and try to re-attribute these details from an extremity that is both affects and is affected by these conditions. An example would be the re-attribution ; designing ; of the space of the sidewalks used for displaying the variety of publications for sale: internalising in the design the problems around distribution and the banning and release of papers by considering different spatial levels of display, adjustable to the changing political and economic climates.

One proposal was to analyse the ideal or desired features (either legitimate or illegitimate) visualised by different people associated with the news-stands, and reproduce these features as an architectural and social phenomenon. This strategy would help to present multifaceted images of different issues related to kiosks. Methods of presentation (the ways in which newspapers and magazines are put on display), and the news-stand design might be completely different when they are created according to the viewpoints of publishers and kiosk owners. The expectations, as well as the functional and formal requirements, of the design object are formed by different cultural and socio-economic attitudes.

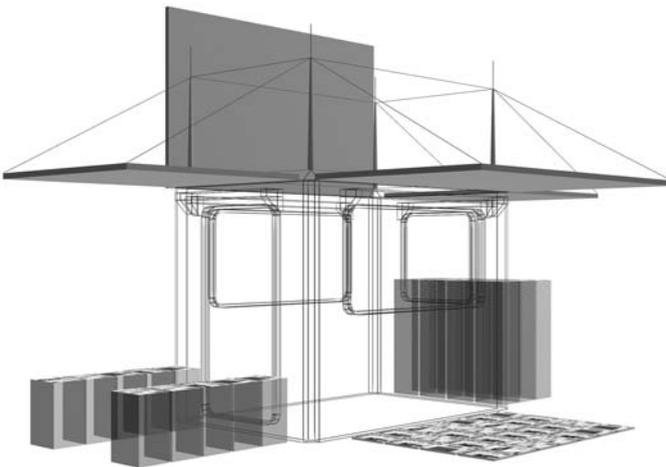
For instance, it is an established fact that Iran has been dominated by verbal culture for centuries. In general, many cultural productions have never been documented or saved. In addition, many written materials have been processed back and mass-produced in verbal form.

Ferdowsi's Shah-Nameh, one of the most important works of Persian literature, has been recited (with many compromises in accuracy) in public spaces such as teahouses, perhaps for centuries. Many people used to know the Shah-Nameh through these recitals alone, without ever reading the book itself.

Nowadays the news is also commonly received through the act of listening to

different people who quote it from different unidentified sources.

This dominance of verbal culture is characterised by inaccuracy, inconsistency and unreliability in many aspects of life. This can also be traced in cultural productions, including the media in general and specifically the



printed news. However, with the growing number of educated people and the changing patterns of social life, this condition seems to be now shifting. The demand for publications, and specifically for newspapers and magazines, is expanding, but the 'verbal culture symptom' is still strongly present both in the printed materials and in the way they are read and analysed.

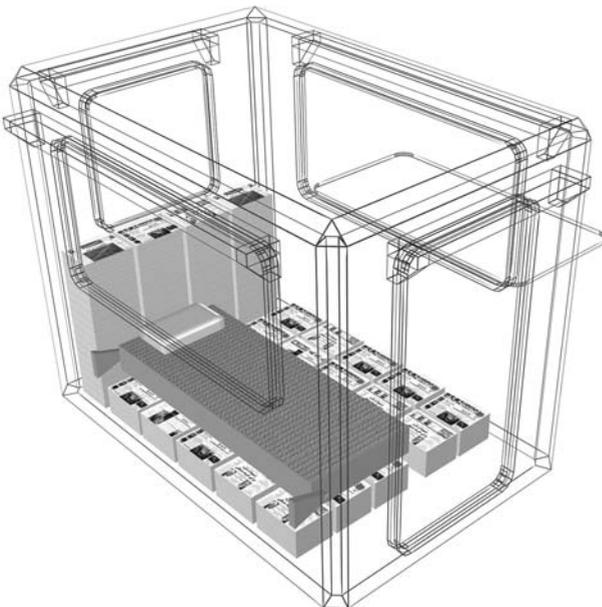
On the other hand, due to vigorous controls and restrictions that have been imposed on the media, people tend to consider the news as unreliable and fake in many cases. People's attitude towards the media, newspapers, and consequently to the news-stands could possibly be analysed from this perspective. As there are 'red lines' that vaguely define the limits within which the media are supposed to convey information, there are also specific boundaries that define the whole content of the media.

These boundaries are set by both the Iranian political system and Iranian cultural sensitivities. It becomes unlawful to write about certain issues, sometimes: for instance, in recent years discussions about potential diplomatic relations with the US have been officially banned in the media, through a direct order by the country's leadership.

To search for the cause of this symptom of distrustfulness is less interesting than the ways and forms in which this symptom manifests itself. For instance, it is interesting that instead of a single truth about an event, there are a variety of contradictory stories and narratives about that event. Different newspapers and magazines each fabricate their own report; books are written about the event, and finally, truth is displaced by the overwhelming amount of information.

This urge to fabricate stories is perhaps related to the cultural practice of/reliance on verbal culture. We could say the news-stand is a place from where stories and narratives are distributed and stimulated.

Is it then culturally significant that these stories of 'truth' are inaccurate, inconsistent and unreliable? They are reliable as far as they tell a story, which for its part stimulates another story, which stimulates another, and so on. This motor is kept running by the unreliability and the inconsistencies of the versions. Everyone wants to participate in completing the puzzle to arrive at



a unified picture, but the more pieces are added, the more gaps are introduced that need to be filled with new stories.

This dialogue was excerpted from extensive e-mail correspondence between the authors. A version of the text has appeared in a supplementary publication in relation to *Kiosk #947*, a project initiated by Pages (Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi) and developed in collaboration with Kianoosh Vahabi. The work was exhibited at the Collective Creativity Exhibition, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, May 1 - July 17, 2006. www.pagesmagazine.net (Farsi/English).

