Pathology of Environmental Graphics in Gorgan City, Iran: Areas for Improvement

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ABSTRACT

Background: As part of the urban society imagery, environmental graphics can play an effective role in how human interacts with his living space and meets his demands. This aspect of graphics with a broad range of symbolic pictorial elements aims to illustrate the concepts, information and functions of every location in most appropriate methods of expression in a dynamic manner. Based on an aesthetic perspective, the pictorial elements facilitate human perception of his environment to achieve his goals in minimum time with a common perception of signs, indications and visual structure of the images. Citizens’ browsing eyes always look for information that can lead them toward their goals in minimum time, which may bring them peace and comfort. Environmental graphics assigns three major responsibilities to the artists, as it is the most applicable subset of visual arts in the age of communication and urbanization, and as visual beauty of the city can only be guaranteed by rule-governed, discrete design. The assigned responsibilities are thus: 1) learning and application of the rules governing urban advertising, 2) drawing upon contemporary experiences to represent visual events so as to create visual interaction between the art work and audience, and 3) mobilization of creative imagination based on environmental characteristics and their organization at different levels [1]. Experts have divided graphic works into several categories based on the broad range of graphic activities, their goals and properties, their proliferation and regeneration capacities and their functions and applications: advertising graphics, media graphics, television graphics, political and cultural graphics and environmental graphics. Every aspect of graphics requires attention to and understanding social and urban needs. This requires further attention to people’s living environment and heeding their beliefs, culture, psychological characteristics and economy. Nowadays, graphics is considered as one of the main tools for advertising, information and distribution of people’s living environment and heeding their beliefs, culture, psychological characteristics and economy.

INTRODUCTION

As part of the urban society imagery with an information tendency, environmental graphics can play an effective role in how human interacts with his living space and meets his demands. This aspect of graphics with a broad range of symbolic pictorial elements aims to illustrate the concepts, information and functions of every location in most appropriate methods of expression in a dynamic manner. Based on an aesthetic perspective, the pictorial elements facilitate human perception of his environment to achieve his goals in minimum time with a common perception of signs, indications and visual structure of the images. Citizens’ browsing eyes always look for information that can lead them toward their goals in minimum time, which may bring them peace and comfort. Environmental graphics assigns three major responsibilities to the artists, as it is the most applicable subset of visual arts in the age of communication and urbanization, and as visual beauty of the city can only be guaranteed by rule-governed, discrete design. The assigned responsibilities are thus: 1) learning and application of the rules governing urban advertising, 2) drawing upon contemporary experiences to represent visual events so as to create visual interaction between the art work and audience, and 3) mobilization of creative imagination based on environmental characteristics and their organization at different levels [1]. Experts have divided graphic works into several categories based on the broad range of graphic activities, their goals and properties, their proliferation and regeneration capacities and their functions and applications: advertising graphics, media graphics, television graphics, political and cultural graphics and environmental graphics. Every aspect of graphics requires attention to and understanding social and urban needs. This requires further attention to people’s living environment and heeding their beliefs, culture, psychological characteristics and economy. Nowadays, graphics is considered as one of the main tools for advertising, information and distribution of people’s living environment and heeding their beliefs, culture, psychological characteristics and economy.
political, social and cultural knowledge. In developed societies, graphics is one of the main components of social life. Graphic design is considered as the major influential element in the environment in TV commercial advertising, movies, packaged goods, traffic signs and shop windows as well as street and public decorations such as hotels, airports and subways [9].

Nowadays, providing information in the medium of graphics is one of the hot social-scientific debates in the contemporary world, and it can make significant contributions to urban management and urban services productivity. Widespread information networks not only prevent unnecessary urban traffic but they can also establish mutual communication to provide citizens’ information needs and improve urbanization culture. Anxiety, disorders, restlessness and urban anomalies are studied by such disciplines as psychology, sociology, ethnography and urbanization. In the meantime, art plays an important role, as it is considered as a tool at the service of concepts and a narrative of human life and critique. The instrumental character of art has been converted into its interpretational identity that addresses social history and culture and displays the artists’ interpretation of existence beautifully [2]. Nowadays, our line of sight is different from the past, and buildings have limited our depth of view. The surrounding environment has changed both visually and aurally, and other visual elements and advertisements are added to buildings [10]. No doubt, unless these elements are logically organized, they will add to the adverse environmental effects. The above variations denote distancing the society from natural conditions and creating unnatural conditions such as stress, anxiety and apprehension in people. Visual organization is the main point in urban and graphic design. The urban view can be compared to a text that will remain beautiful with attractive words and phrases. Unless words are juxtaposed appropriately, the text will render chaotic and ugly. For example, medical signboards in the city have no standard height, appearance and color. This is a simple instance that shows a lack of consistency, visual organization and common color system in a specific profession. Another common error in the informing society is a lack of appropriate view and overlap of signboards as though the principles of positioning are totally neglected. One should not forget signboards where they are installed back to back around the corner. Visual identity refers to a set of visual works that are peculiar to a certain place. One may not find a visual identity in a city fraught with visual anomalies such as the juxtaposition of small, old buildings to new, high-rise buildings or brick-and-mortar, traditional buildings to high-rise glass buildings [3].

Kalantari (2011) studied environmental graphics in Tehran, its cultural impacts and its importance in facilitating communication in urban communities[5]. He investigated visual anomalies and ugliness in Tehran in order to provide a sound understanding of beautification. His field studies revealed that inconsistent elements have rallied to make Tehran an intolerable city, which cannot answer the fast urban development[7]. These inconsistent elements were not informing enough at times or confused citizens so that they needed immediate correction. In a study on the role and importance of environmental graphics, Ghaffari Namin (2011) addressed the definition of environmental graphics and its essential impact on the city[4]. He asserted that visual arts are the key communication and education tools that are both informing and attractive in order to create the order necessary for understanding and acting the visible and invisible messages in the minds of the audience. Visual arts facilitate the understanding and practicing of social, cultural and native values in the audience. In his study of the effect of color and form in kindergarten environmental graphics, Kian Pak (2007) addressed the effects of environmental graphics in the kindergarten environment and environmental psychology[6]. As a field study, the research also examined psychological and unconscious effects of colors and spatial impacts of colors. He proposed visual solutions for color and form design in different locations as well as different functions of color and form in mental, physical and psychological development of children. Mir Mohgatadaie (2008) examined color and light in visual elements of the city. The research constituted library and field studies, which addressed how color and light were used in urban visual elements and advertising message[7]. The study also examined the factors contributing to visual literacy and the use of signboards in urban communities. The results showed that color should be selected in relation to form and function since color is a key factor in information and influence in urban design. Norouuni (2005) studied color and form in large urban graphics. She also examined form and color in cultural advertising portals in Tehran and compared the consistency of large urban advertisements such as billboards between Iran and developed countries[8]. The results demonstrated that Iran was facing more challenges in using environmental graphics comparing with developed countries. The reasons could be insufficient visual literacy, lack of graphic designers’ creativity and lack of attention to the emplacement of graphic works. In a study entitled the visual properties and concepts of environmental graphics with an emphasis on information, (Rashvan as cited in Pakbaz, 2006) investigated environmental graphics as a representation of social image[9]. The research was a library study that aimed to examine the uses of graphics in providing information through dynamic and expressive manners. The results revealed that, in addition to its informing properties, environmental graphics could create a beautiful, coherent imagery in urban spaces and improve public understanding and visual culture of the urban communities.

A glance at environmental advertisements in a city can reveal the levels of visual understanding and citizens’ culture. Thus, one may look at the environmental graphics of a city to recognize citizens’ taste, to see how they have pictured their historical and cultural identity in urban graphics and how they have thrived to
improve their national arts and prevent cultural decadence. Although environmental graphics is one of the key routes of communication between business owners and the general public, there seems to be serious problems in using environmental graphics in Gorgan city. Some of these problems include cultural, geographical, environmental and urban landscape issues as well as lack of designers’ expertise and knowledge about psychological and advertising aspects and urban management. Considering the above discussion and the importance of environmental graphics and pathology of urban textures, the present study aims to investigate the pathology of environmental graphics in the urban textures of Gorgan city, Iran.

**Methodology:**

The population of the study consisted of all graphic works in the urban textures of Gorgan city. The research sample was all works of environmental graphics created in Gorgan city. The samples were selected using simple random sampling. The data was collected through both library and field studies. The data was thus collected via questionnaires, photography, note taking, document scanning and the Internet. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data [6].

**Results:**

Gorgan is a historical tourisy city and one of the main cities in Iran. It requires cleaning, regulation and peace in all respects [1]. Currently, public organizations have installed signboards and signposts with different dimensions, colors and fonts throughout the city. The signboards of private places, hospitals and clinics have occupied large areas of sidewalks, which are used to introduce the businesses and work places. They have obscured a large number of signposts, however. Moreover, ample hurdles and elements beside the signboards on the sidewalks create a colorful swarm before the passengers’ eyes and obscure the more important signposts. Other key problems include inconsistent system of street and alley naming such as assigning multiple names to the same street or anonymity of others, name repetitions, inconsistencies in signposts depicting street names, inappropriate installation locations, a lack of signposts, disregard for landscapes and installing booths and trash bins.

![Fig. 1: A view of Melli Bank and its periphery at the center of Gorgan city (Municipality Square).](image)

In the above location, different forms and sizes of the signboards and their emplacement have created many anomalies in urban space. Besides, the contents of banners and signboards are inconsistent, which disturbs the information flow to the audience. The banners and signboards are distanced inconsistently, which further creates anomalies in the location. Overall, the density of signboards and banners has seriously affected the outside of Melli Bank. No attention has been paid to the combination of signboards and banners and inconsistency between their contents and environment. Moreover, bad emplacement is another graphic flaw that has adversely affected the urban environment.
Two signboards of the same bank with a flag on the building roof have produced an unpleasant image in the urban space. The pedestrian bridge in front of the building has cluttered the urban environment.

As shown in Figure 3, the signboards around the shopping center are not in good size and dimensions. In fact, the signboards surrounding the shopping center’s signboard should come in smaller sizes. However, this proportion is not maintained in the signboard sizes so that they do not provide the audience with a good view and do not convey a good message. Disregard for the font and script are other important graphic flaws.

As shown in Figure 4, the signboards are emplaced in one direction in perfect chaos, and many of them overlap. In addition to spatial chaos, this can hardly convey a message to the audience. The signboards are highly congested. Besides, inappropriate signboard dimensions neither establish visual communication nor...
convey effective messages. Rather than being a guide to the audience, they create confusion in the urban environment.

**Fig. 5:** A sample advertising billboard in Setad Square, Gorgan.

As shown in the figure, the billboard dimensions are not appropriate, as it is too big. It has seriously affected the background space and has obscured the gateway to the Army barracks that is a historic mansion. It has also affected the spaces in the square across from it.

**Fig. 6:** A sample of several boxes emplaced on the sidewalk.

Figure 6 illustrates a sample of inappropriate emplacement, congestion and physical wear of the boxes as well as a lack of warning signs to inform the pedestrians. The stand on which the boxes are placed are of poor form and quality, which has made the urban environment disorderly.

**Fig. 7:** A view of a bench in Gorgan Park.
Although the bench is located in a recreational place, it is emplaced with its back to the recreational environment without any regards for the emplacement principles. No creativity is observable in the design of the bench. Furthermore, the bench is emplaced without heeding the center of attraction and activity. Public drinking fountains are part of the urban furniture that are set in different urban areas such as parks, shopping centers, playgrounds and other public areas. In emplacing and design of public drinking fountains, special attention should be paid to children and the disabled. The physical appearance of the fountains should match urban space and location, which would create a graphic space consistent with social needs.

![Fig. 8: A sample public drinking fountain in Nahar Khoran recreational area, Gorgan.](image)

The physical appearance and wear of this fountain is one of the main detrimental factors. The destruction of faucets, bad painting, bad appearance and sanitation and a trash bin next to the fountain are the main graphic harms in this setting.

![Fig. 9: A Red Crescent booth in Nahar Khoran recreational area, Gorgan.](image)

The booths are not distanced appropriately. There is no creativity in the design and appearance of the booths. Thus, they do not convey their intended message appropriately. Despite the environmental graphic rules for emplacing Red Crescent booths, there is no brook or stream running by the booths, which is forbidden in terms of emplacement principles.

![Fig. 10: Inappropriate graffiti.](image)

The wall for inscribing graffiti should be selected consistent with the natural light angle in order to prevent negative reflection of light on the wall. Besides, the type of color should be selected carefully since direct light affects colors quickly. Sometimes, the adjacent walls provide different levels that can help planning the
paintings or lines. In the graffiti illustrated in Figure 10, graphic principles are not observed. The wall is worn, and thus part of the message is wiped out. The angle of sunlight, unattractive color mix and inappropriate fonts have added to the graphic flaws in the setting.

Conclusion:

The first research hypothesis reads that environmental graphics in Gorgan city meets citizens’ needs. Art is a tool that assumes a more important role in improving living conditions that was thought in the past. In modern cities, the use of graphics is more important than its design. Whatever we build should aim to create better living conditions, stronger information systems and legal deterrent systems. Considering the increased population in Gorgan and as a touristic city, it needs to follow certain rules in graphic design in order to meet citizens’ needs and prevent anomalies. Environmental graphics should be used in Gorgan in a way to be more psychologically bearable to the citizens[4]. Gorgan citizens have a good understanding of environmental graphics; however, there are certain deficiencies in rule-governed application of environmental graphics. This creates problems in the application of graphic design in Gorgan. In most cases, rather than being informative, alarming, commercial or recreational, the signboards are emplaced in unsuitable locations and have inappropriate colors and fonts. Besides, unsuitable size and form of the signboards do not meet citizens’ needs and even create disorder and confusion in the urban environment. Thus, considering the above discussion and field studies, the first research hypothesis is rejected[2].

The second research hypothesis reads that current environmental graphics in Gorgan city cannot relate to citizens appropriately and meet their needs. Environmental graphic design has assumed the informative role in urban areas based on the principles of visual arts in order to coordinate aesthetic and utility aspects simultaneously. There are elements to convey messages and concepts primarily addressed in painting and sculpture. Nowadays, we use the same artistic rules, colors and composition along with aesthetic elements to establish communication in the society. Thus, we encounter graphic representations in cities that are designed for both aesthetic and communicative, educational, controlling, traffic and organizing purposes. Appropriate use of environmental graphics for communication purposes gives cities a good appearance and establishes effective communication with audience. Unsuitable use of environmental graphics in Gorgan has failed to establish good communication with citizens. For example, bad emplacement of signboards, billboards and stands as well as graffiti and Macro TV, that are established to convey effective messages to the audience, have failed to meet citizens’ needs due to lack of expertise in environmental graphics and monopoly of some advertising companies such as Naghshineh Gorgan Company. Thus, the second research hypothesis is supported[8].

The third research hypothesis assumes that environmental graphics in Gorgan city compares with that in other Iranian cities. Attempts have been made to present graphics to the citizens in Gorgan; however, the mode of presentation is poor in that it has failed to observe the rules governing environmental graphics. Gorgan has tried to keep up with other cities in the north of Iran such as Sari, Babol, Rasht and Amol in using signboards, stands and billboards[10]. Of course, the vastity of the city and streets can also affect these services. For example, great attention has been paid to the application of environmental graphics in signboards, stands and billboards as well as light, color and graffiti. However, the old texture of the city has resulted in a kind of disorder. Thus, the urban texture should be heeded in providing environmental graphic services. Environmental graphics in Gorgan is superior to that in Tehran. In terms of advertising, Tehran is a disorganized city and one of the ugliest cities in the world for environmental advertising. Unfortunately, though large Iranian cities are the hubs of political, social and cultural affairs, they lack the most basic advertising tools. Nevertheless, environmental graphics in historic cities of Iran such as Shiraz and Isfahan are superior to that in Gorgan. A reason is the arrival of foreign tourists which has resulted in specialized environmental graphic design in these cities. Besides, the historic texture of these cities contributes to the environmental graphics, as they have been the capital cities in different historical epochs while Gorgan has recently been selected as a provincial capital. Considering the above discussion, the third research hypothesis is supported[6].

Urban furniture design has long been practiced in western countries and many sources have been published on the introduction of urban furniture. In Iran, the design and production of urban furniture started before the Islamic revolution. For example, benches, water fountains, trash bins and bus stops were designed and installed though they had poor quality. After the Islamic revolution, urban furniture came into vogue due to competitions among smaller and larger cities and municipality activities. Attempts were then made to provide good samples of environmental design. Nevertheless, the examples that were not efficient enough were imitated. In the cities where urbanization, architecture and urban furniture were managed appropriately, these elements produced a consistent and beautiful set and trimmed the urban appearance. However, when cities like Gorgan were developing, many different public or private organizations were involved so that they developed each of these elements in different ways, which brought about inconsistency and chaos in the urban appearance. The problems in urban furniture can be attributed to management and planning problems, technical issues and cultural and social factors. In most of the productions, there is a lack of attention to aesthetic and workmanship aspects, and they often have instable forms. The productions are usually defective copies of foreign products, and social
needs are neglected. Human factors and safety issues are absent in the productions. Moreover, required predictions are not made during design and production stages; thus, the installation and emplacement processes cause problems. Finally, some materials used in urban furniture are not recyclable, which result in environmental contamination[3].

Gorgan is en route of Mashhad city where people go on pilgrimage. Thus, it receives many travelers in a year. It needs to have resorts for the travelers – the resorts that are both beautiful and prevent traffic. It is recommended that recreational resorts be built at the city entrance and exit that include restaurants, public restrooms, prayer house, playground, places for pitching tents, parking lots and telephone booths that meet citizens’ needs. It is recommended that maps be placed at the city entrance and exit containing the name of the streets, places for pilgrimage and sightseeing, hotels and restaurants. Like other cities, Gorgan has many newsstands; however, they are old and worn out in appearance. This has given a bad appearance to the city. It is recommended that these stands be built with the shape of different fruits, as the city is located in the north of Iran that is home to many indigenous fruits. This can help observe graphic rules and maintain attractions in the city. Appropriate flooring of sidewalks and streets, their evenness, the material and arrangement of floors and smooth asphalt are other important issues that can beautify the appearance of Gorgan.

REFERENCES