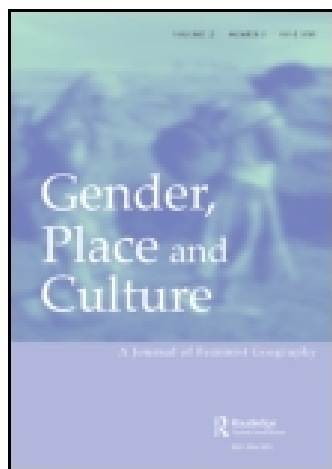


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Mapping women in Tehran's public spaces: a geo-visualization perspective

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Functioning public spaces, as 'public' political, social, and cultural arenas of citizen discourse, affect not only the citizen's quality of life, but are also indispensable infrastructure in democratic societies. This article offers a nuanced understanding of Iranian women's usage, feelings, and preferences in public spaces in present-day Tehran by not simply importing Western theories that sustain distinctions between traditional and modern women, but instead by hearing women's stories. This article raises concerns related to the gender identities, the politics of space, and design of these places. Meidan-e-Tajrish, Sabz-e-Meidan, and Marvi Meidancheh in Tehran accommodate an ethnographic visualization of gendering space. The process by which Iranian women attach symbolic meanings to those public spaces offers insight into the mutual construction of gender identities and space politics. The contrasting urban locations, different design styles, and distinct social activities provide an excellent comparison between the selected public spaces. Findings suggest caution in using gender as an essential category in feminist geography research to better represent the diversity of experiences in public spaces. Binary categorization of modern versus traditional, secular versus religious, public versus private, and male versus female in urban studies should be carefully validated as Iranian women's lived experiences challenge the homogenizing Western theories, particularly the predominant critics of modern public spaces in North America. The research process also highlights the benefits of geo-visualization in understanding the complex interaction between gender identities and the built environment.

Keywords: women; public spaces; Tehran; geo-visualization

Introduction

Since its inception, public space has been an object of architectural focus, a backdrop of political struggle, and an instrument in stabilizing the boundaries of gender. In Iranian cities, it has further become a mechanism for negotiating the religious significance of tradition and modernity. While gender identities and behaviors in public spaces play significant roles in understanding how public spaces work, such research themes are suppressed in Iran and there are only a few studies in which gender issues are a central focus (see Alizadeh 2007; Etemad, Khatam, and Yalda 2008; Jahanshahi 2008).

Najmabadi (2007, 109) has stressed the significance of ethnographic studies in the Middle East and its absence in Iranian studies as field research is usually not feasible in post-revolutionary Iran. Such difficulties in data accessibility in the Middle East, however, should not result in, at least not in academia, an unrealistic oppressive picture of women in Muslim countries. Of course, there are critical and feminist scholars such as Abu-Lughod

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(2000), who has bravely pushed the boundaries and offered a more nuanced approach in appreciating the complexity and diversity of women living in Muslim societies. Meanwhile it is important to remember that Muslim women's identities do vary in regards to their geographic locations, social and ethnic characteristics, educations and ages.

In this article, I investigate the usage, preferences, and feelings of Iranian women toward what are often called modern and traditional public spaces in present-day Tehran. More specifically, Meidan-e-Tajrish,¹ Sabz-e-Meidan, and Marvi Meidancheh were selected due to their contrasting urban locations, spatial settings, and design styles. I argue how Iranian women's experiences challenge the predominant critics of the modern public spaces in Western contexts. The selected public spaces accommodate an ethnographic visualization of the process in which space becomes, in Low's (1996) words, 'socially constructed and produced.' The main advantage of this research is that it is largely based on firsthand data gathered during the fall and winter of 2011 and the spring of 2012 in Tehran. Focusing on the relationship between women's experiences and the design and meaning of public spaces, I have chosen a mixed-methods approach including ethnography and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) visualization to explore women's usage and preferences.

Theoretical foundation

Although there has been a special interest in studying public spaces among urban planners, public space is also a common subject of investigation for many feminist geographers who study the relationship between gendered identities and constructed space (Fraser 1990, 57). Werlen (1992) suggests that studying space without considering the social agents and actions that shape and reshape it is indefensible. People, according to their race/ethnicity, gender, age, physical ability, religion, cultural background, and social class, define and attach their feelings and symbolic meanings to a space differently (Anthony 2001; Day 2011). Pakzad (2000, 35) believes what often makes a public space unsuccessful is that urban planners overlook the importance of those meanings.

Scholars (Fraser 1990; Habermas 1991; Low 1996) have identified public spaces as one of the most urgent issues of democratic societies. In this article, I focus on 'representational space' (Lefebvre 1991, 39) that users, in this case Iranian women, appropriate again and again. Representational space is the 'lived space' or 'space-in-use' and often contrasts the concept of 'representations of space' that is an ordered, controlled, planned space. As people use a space, the space is changed and can be appropriated according to users' needs (Mitchell 1995, 115). I aim to illustrate how space becomes 'the sphere of dynamic simultaneity . . . [and] is always being made and always therefore, in a sense, unfinished' (Massey 2005, 107). To do so, it is important to clarify the role gender identity plays in the social construction of public spaces.

Hanson (1992)² suggests that geographers who study the construction of cities and the creation of places need to recognize that space is 'socially produced' and, consequently, is gendered (Lefebvre 1991). Researchers from a wide range of disciplines have studied the differences between the ways men and women experience the city in regard to their diverse abilities, needs, and interests (see Monk and Hanson 1982; McDowell 1983, 1999; Ardener 1993; Massey 1994, 2005; Blunt and Rose 1995; Day 1999, 2011; Benhabib 1992; Moss and Falconer Al-Hindi 2007; Jarvis, Kantor, and Cloke 2009). Kwan (2002, 646) emphasizes that 'the material and discursive construction of gendered identities is crucial for understanding difference in the lived experiences of individuals.'

Geography is indebted to the recent feminist efforts in re-defining ‘space’ as a more dynamic entity. The construction of space influences and is influenced by the social organizations and processes in and surrounding it (Soja 2003; Harvey 2005). I agree with Durning and Wrigley (2000, 1) that ‘...architectural space is not the container of identities, but a constitutive element in them.’ Identities, including those of gender, are (re)defined in the space and therefore can change and be changed by social powers and processes occurring in the space (Longhurst 1995; Lips 2010).

It is important not to consider gender as a homogenous social group when one generalizes characteristics in social sciences. Although women and men experience the city in different ways, an individual’s age, education, race, social role, economic class and position in the hierarchy of power can play a significant role in her experiences throughout the city. The social construction of gender identity is largely derived from the patriarchal system of values defining gender roles and expectations that varies from one culture to another. ‘Each society,’ Lips (2010, 6) emphasizes, ‘makes up its own set of rules to define what it means to be a woman or a man, and people construct gender through their interactions by behaving in appropriate ways.’

Through the study of the lived experiences in which urban space is produced by gender relations and is reproduced in those everyday practices, I will explain that first, although women in Tehran have limited and controlled choices over their own spatial behaviors, they still play important roles in using and (re)appropriating public spaces. Second, women’s experiences, particularly in semi-private spaces such as shopping malls, challenge the homogenizing critics of modern public spaces in Western context. In other words, these urban places offer a ‘new sense of freedom’ to women in comparison to more traditional urban areas.

Methodology: the geo-ethnography of Meidan

Although feminist geographers have typically preferred qualitative methods such as ethnographies that capture ‘situated knowledge’ and account for ‘lived experience’ (Haraway 1988), GIS can open new avenues of knowledge to feminist geographers by aiding in the analysis of the spatial and social contexts of women’s lives. Mixed-method approaches, such as qualitative GIS (McLafferty 2002; Kwan 2002, 2008; Cope and Elwood 2009; Wilson 2009), grounded visualization (Knigge and Cope 2006), feminist visualization (Kwan 2002), and geo-ethnography (Matthews, Detwiler, and Burton 2005), have emerged and transformed the ‘inherent’ quantitative perspective on GIS as a research tool.

One major outcome of these approaches is promoting the ‘use [of] GIS in research that emerges from multiple or hybrid epistemologies, and theorizing previously unrecognized forms of social knowledge that may be present in GIS applications’ (Cope and Elwood 2009, 4). Finding patterns on maps can result in more questions that would not necessarily be answered without prolonged contacts with the groups studied. Such rich ethnographic data can then be mapped again and result in nuanced findings. Participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 83 female users of public spaces, and GIS visualization are my main data sources in this study.

I started with observing different public spaces in Tehran. After a week or so, I decided to choose Meidan-e-Tajrish, Sabz-e-Meidan, and Marvi Meidancheh as settings for understanding gender relations. First, they are vibrant centers of the city both on weekdays and weekends (Thursday and Friday in Iran) and take a special place in Tehranians’ nostalgic memories. Second, although they have different urban histories, both are integral social units. Compared to other Meidans I visited, Meidan-e-Tajrish and

Sabz-e-Meidanas as well as Marvi Meidancheh host the widest variety of activities. Finally, the contrasting design style and urban locations suggest useful comparisons. Tajrish square is located in Tehran's zone 1, the home of newer Saad-Abad Palace of the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–1979), while Sabz-e-Meidan and Marvi Meidancheh are located in Tehran's zone 12, part of Old Tehran's city boundaries, and home of the Qajar Dynasty's (1785–1925) Golestan Palace.

During the first phase of my observations, I recorded the activities, particularly by women, that occurred in each section of the public spaces on both weekdays and weekends throughout the day. I also sketched and photographed people and places to record what was happening in a certain space at a certain time. For different sections of each public space, I created behavioral maps representing the counts of people and activities by gender, age, and location. These preliminary GIS maps suggested some interesting spatial patterns and new questions, but did not offer any reasons or answers. So I went back to the Meidans and interviewed a variety of female users. Interview participants were randomly chosen in the public spaces representing diversity in age, occupation, hijab style, and home location. Except for nine women I approached, all the other 83 women openly shared their experiences. Through half-hour to hour-long interviews, I examined women's use, preferences, and feeling toward the selected public spaces. Women explained why they were there, how often they came and how long they stayed, and finally how they felt about the public spaces in question. The interviews were recorded, translated, transcribed, and content-analyzed³ (after Todd 2009).

It was through this feedback process, mapping, and going back to the Meidans that the interview questions derived from the field. GIS maps were accompanied by ethnographic patterns derived from interviews and participant observation to provide a graphic register of spatial meaning from the ground up. This methodology was very practical in overlapping a wide range of data that could be subsequently analyzed. I explored the broader question of how to visually represent the kinds of movement and patterns of agency that tend to remain invisible to non-local observers as well as local planners.

Setting: Tehran, between tradition and modernity

It is important to stress that with its unique historical, socio-political, and cultural geography, Iran 'relates just as much to its pre-Islamic past and its borrowings from the West as to Islam' (Adelkhah 2000, 178). Tehran, capital of Iran, is the home for more than 15 million people of diverse ethnicities and social classes. Known for its omnipresent tension between 'deep-seated tradition and wild modernity' (Bayat 2010, 99), Tehran offers a useful laboratory to study women's social behaviors in public spaces. Tehran is socio-spatially divided into Bala Shahr and Paeen Shahr (Figure 1). Bala Shahr (high city), located on the southern slopes of the Alborz Mountains and in the far north of the city, is the home of the most affluent neighborhoods (Bayat 2010, 105). Paeen Shahr (low city) neighborhoods are located south of Enghelab Street, consist of the lowest lands of the city, and are home to the poor, new rural migrants, and the lower strata of working people (Madanipour 1998, 103). Besides the physical and environmental advantages such as better air quality and visual dominance over Paeen Shahr, Bala Shahr has also been associated with sociocultural preferences. Paeen Shahr is associated with old school, ideologically traditional, religiously conservative, and a pre-modern and historical built environment. Unlike for southern Tehran, people have an image of Bala Shahr that associates it with higher classes, progressive, liberal ideology, religious openness, and Westernized modern architecture and public spaces.

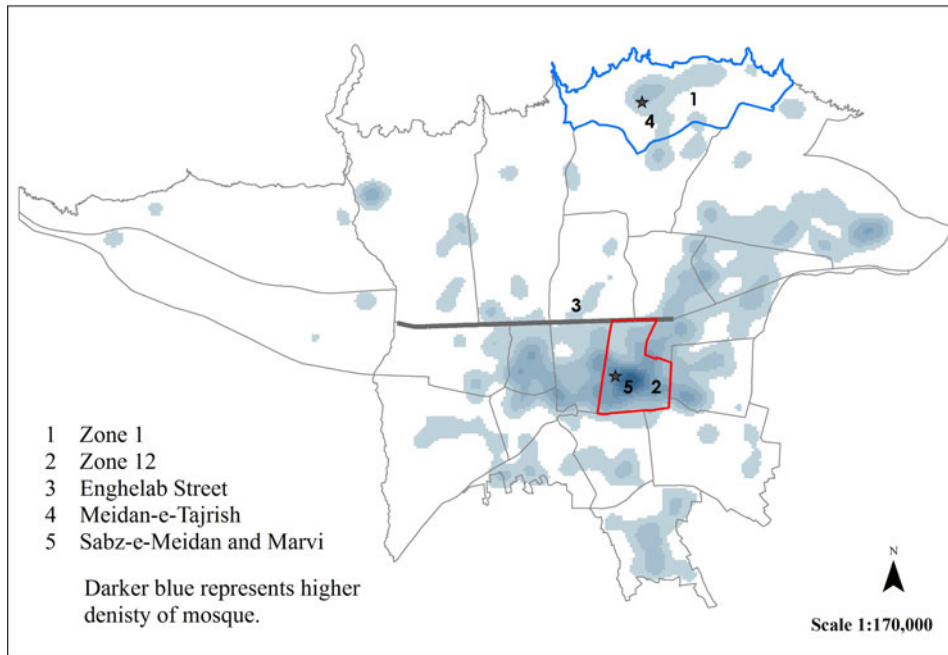


Figure 1. Geographical location of the study areas and the mosque density map, Tehran.

I have chosen two case studies in two of Tehran's zones (1 and 12) for their interesting social and spatial characteristics and dramatic changes over time. Zone 1 located in Bala Shahr and zone 12 located in Paen Shahr have both witnessed the largest and fastest change in their built environments and populations compared with other zones in Tehran (Fanni 2009). Figure 1 illustrates the geographical locations of zone 1 and zone 12 in relation to Enghelab Street. Using the Kernel Density Estimation tool⁴ in GIS, I also show in Figure 1 that most of the Tehran's mosques (religious and to some extent political presentations) are concentrated in the central and southern parts of the city.

Tajrish square, located in the north end and on the highest topography of the city, benefits from a beautiful view of the Alborz Mountains, clean air, and mild climate. Large old sycamore trees around the Darband river-hill that have added ecological value to the square are now endangered by uncontrolled high-rise developments. Being surrounded by important governmental, commercial, and religious establishments, including zone 1 municipality, Tajrish old bazaar, Emamzadeh Saleh (Shrine and Jaame Mosque), city-wide bus terminals, and Tandis and Ghaem shopping malls, makes Tajrish one of the busiest squares in Tehran. There are many stores in the two high-rise, modern shopping malls where young Iranians enjoy shopping for European and even American name brands. Modern coffee shops and restaurants make it possible for the opposite sexes to gather and chat for hours with less fear of police interruption.

Although its history goes back to the Qajar Dynasty, Tajrish square, today, exhibits a more modern Iranian culture and contemporary architecture. The only remnants of old Tajrish are the old Tajrish bazaar and few old houses behind the bazaar. Nevertheless, Tajrish square remains a major square in Tehran and creates a sense of place where Tehranians gather to enjoy the New Year celebration and many other national and religious holidays throughout the year.

The second case study consists of two related public spaces located in Tehran's zone 12 and within a 5–10 min walk from each other. Sabz-e-Meidan and the Marvi Meidancheh provide entrance spaces, respectfully, to Tehran's bazaar and Marvi Gozar, a relatively long narrow pedestrian street that has become the concentration of imported clothing, cosmetics, and health products from Turkey and neighboring Arab countries. Because of their unique urban locations in the heart of old Tehran; adjacency to major economic, religious, and governmental establishments; and easy access by the subway, they are excellent sites for the study of social behavior. In fact, rain or shine, these places were packed with people every time I visited. The activity level of the squares remained high until around 7 pm, when people started leaving for the evening.

Sabz-e-Meidan, the original Takhteh Pol, is one of the oldest squares in Tehran. Its long history goes back to the Safavid period (1502–1736) and spans the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties, as well as the Islamic Republic period (1979 to present). In the Qajar era, Sabz-e-Meidan connected Tehran's bazaar, Arg square, the main governmental square, and old Tehran neighborhoods. Besides its economic functions, this square served as public place for Teheranians to gather and perform religious practices during holy Islamic months. A place that used to be a city market for fresh produce, a few *Attaries* (herbal medicine stores), and spices, is now the financial heart of the capital where the price of gold and foreign exchange rates are set daily. Due to its historical value and present significance Tehran Municipality initiated restoration of the square in 2006 according to the architecture style of the Qajar and Safavid eras. Since then, the square has been upgraded with urban furniture, better lighting, and maintenance. Panzdah-e-Khordad Street, the street located north of the square, has also been pedestrianized and people can now commute, using decorated horse carriages, between the subway station and the square.

Marvi Meidancheh is one block east and two blocks north of Sabz-e-Meidan. Marvi Alley is surrounded by historical sites such as Shams-o-Emareh (part of the Qajar's Golestan Royal Palace), Marvi school, and Hakim Abanbar (water reserve). The restoration project of Marvi Gozar was initiated by Tehran's Beautification Organization and Tehran municipality in 2004. The project consists of three main tasks of designing an entrance space on Naser Khosrow Street's end, restoring the old façade, adding a traditional bazaar roof over Marvi Gozar's central part, and creating a Meidan at the eastern end of the alley on Pamenar Street. One of the challenges has been bringing back the old sense of place to the alley where modern functions have partially replaced traditional ones. Nine out of ten women, with whom I talked in Marvi Meidancheh, had already been in Sabz-e-Meidan or were going there next. That is why I considered both public spaces for the second case study.

Located in two contrasting urban locations in Tehran, these public spaces are socially produced and maintained by the economic, cultural, political processes and are gendered through women's experience and social interaction. They not only exhibit differences in their physical production, but they also offer often contrasting symbolic meanings.

Moving beyond the boundaries in everyday life

Although boundaries are culturally defined, political powers influence them for their benefit and social control. The way we create boundaries largely impacts 'the production of social space and the politics of our everyday lives' (Low 2000, 155). But how do individuals experience and navigate those boundaries in their everyday lives? Is there a difference between the way professionals, such as architects, urban planners, and social

scientists, define and categorize boundaries and the way ordinary people perceive them and act accordingly?

I will explore in this section some of the ways women in Tehran move beyond the binary divisions of modern–traditional, conservative–liberal, form–meaning, and physical–metaphysical through their experiences in the selected public spaces. Their actions clearly reflect Lefebvre’s definition of space as ‘a whole’ in which ‘space is permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations but it also producing and produced by social relations’ (Lefebvre 1991, 286).

From my observation notes and interviews, I created and analyzed four types of data: (1) people counts that were translated to GIS maps (see Figures 2 and 3) showing population density and distribution by gender in each public space, (2) behavioral maps of activities by time and location, (3) photographs and architectural sketches representing the sense of place and illustrating with more visual details such as women’s style of hijab,⁵ and (4) women’s narratives describing their experiences and preferences in selected public spaces. In this study, the women’s narratives become particularly important as they enrich our understanding of Iranian women who do not have access to publicity and whose thoughts, emotions, and actions have been obscured by the dominant discourse around the seemingly inaccessible world of Muslim women. The overlay of such diverse data in the GIS interface (see Figures 2 and 3) provided a rich visualization that I analyzed for socio-spatial patterns that would better explain the ways in which women experience, prefer, and attach symbolic meanings to the public spaces.

I had an assistant who helped me in population counts during one weekday and one weekend for selected places in both zones 1 and 12. The results were transferred into GIS maps. These maps as well as my field notes show that the numbers of women and men using the selected public spaces are close. Depending on the time of a day, the numbers could diverge. Unlike Tajrish that showed a consistent equal distribution of men and women throughout the day, in Sabz-e-Meidan and Marvi Meidancheh, men outnumbered

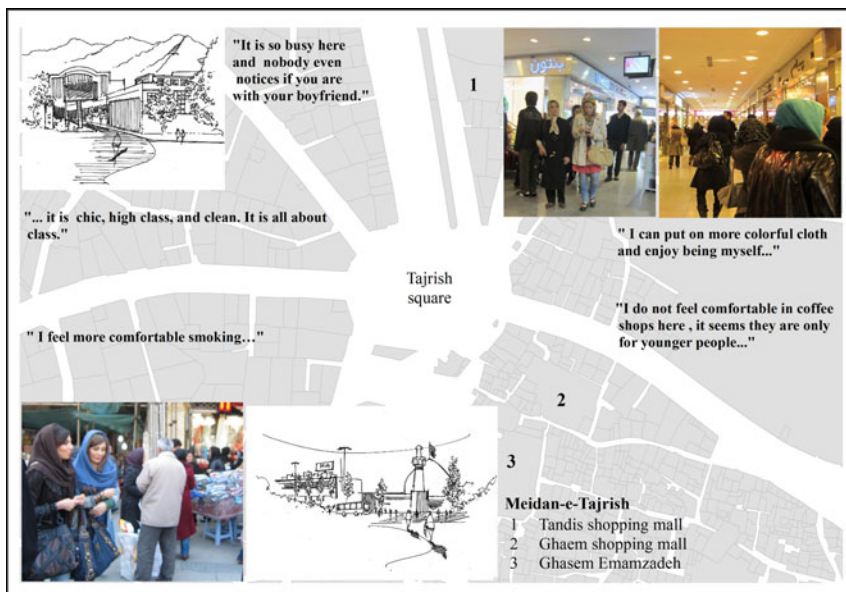


Figure 2. Geo-ethnography of Meidan-e-Tajrish.

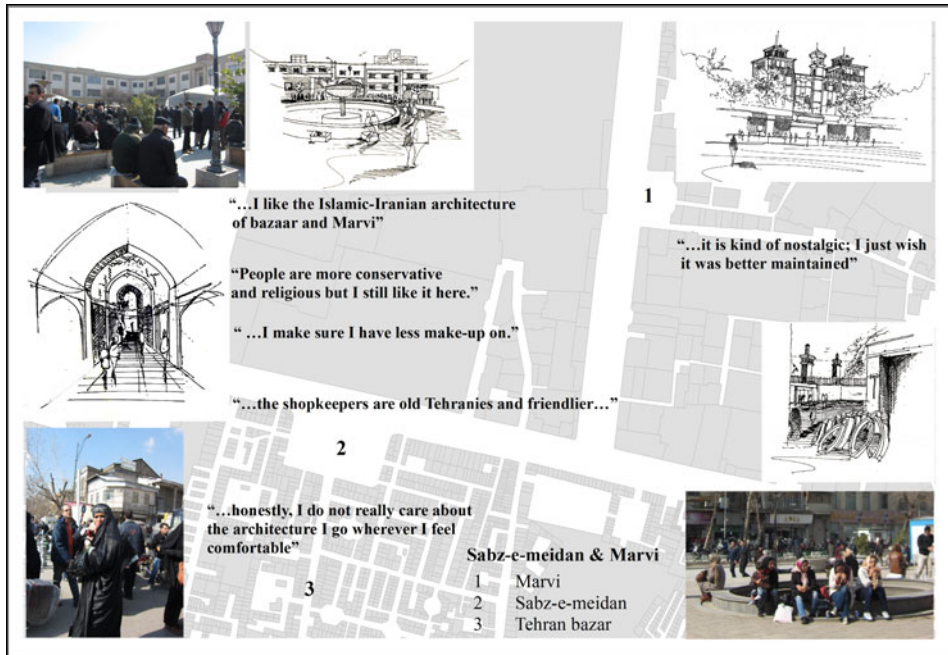


Figure 3. Geo-ethnography of Sabz-e-Meidan and Marvi Meidancheh.

women during early morning hours of 7:00–8:00 am and late evening hours of 8:00–10:00 pm. That can be explained as Tajrish square is surrounded by many more residential neighborhoods while both Sabz-e-Meidan and Marvi Meidancheh are located in Tehran's Central Business District. Also, Tehran bazaar that attracts the majority of women to Sabz-e-Meidan and its surrounding public spaces closes at 5:00 pm.

As a female Iranian, I had all the benefits of what Adler and Adler (1987) called a 'complete membership,' including knowing the cast of characters or at least part of the cast. Although my goal was to talk with women and ask about their experiences in public spaces, men who accompanied women or men who were very interested in what I was doing also started to talk with me.

The population patterns observed in Sabz-e-Meidan and Marvi Meidancheh are not unlike those of Tajrish square except that there are many more families and women in groups on Thursday evenings and Fridays. Whereas many young, single female college students in the Tajrish area were passing through, window-shopping or just having a good time alone, women in Sabz-e-Meidan and Marvi Meidancheh tended to be in groups or with male partners. Based on the spatial distribution of men and women in Figures 2 and 3, one may conclude that women are more segregated in Sabz-e-Meidan and Marvi Meidancheh than in Tajrish. In Sabz-e-Meidan women walk close to stores and occupy the marginal space of the median. Men, on the other hand, are in the center trading and talking about gold prices and the stock market. The maps also suggest some places that women are not welcome, such as the central parts of Sabz-e-Meidan, secondary alleys and the dead-ends of Marvi that are occupied by workmen.

Although the selected public spaces are different in their history, design, and meaning, the activities happening in them were relatively similar. But again, the people who carry out those activities were different; at least in their appearance and representation. Although most

women who go to Sabz-e-Meidan and Marvi want to shop and find cheaper products, there are some who come to enjoy the bazaar's sense of place and to commemorate 'good old days' by walking around traditional architecture and urban places where shopkeepers are often either the original owner or the son of the original owner. On the other hand, in Tajrish, the majority of shops offer European-brand clothing and home goods and shopkeepers consist of young men who know more about modern economic practices and rarely enjoy bargaining with customers. Tajrish represents a more modern place for young women to hang out, show off, or present themselves in hopes of finding a boyfriend.

My boyfriend and I often come here [Tajrish square] because it is chic, high class, and clean. It is all about class. What do you think if I tell you I bought my shoes from Tajrish or from Marvi? Even if I bought my shoes from Marvi or the bazaar, I tell my friends I shop in Tajrish shopping malls... this is how my friends judge me. (Woman, aged 18–25)

My friends and I come here [Sabz-e-Meidan] as we are art students, but, honestly, I think we do not take care of our historical architecture. I know they started a project to restore the Sabz-e-Meidan but it is just decorating it, putting trash baskets everywhere, or even adding horse carriages. Young people only care about class and fashion. I just know the way people think about what these places are and should be like has to change too. (Woman, aged 26–35)

Unlike in Sabz-e-Meidan and Marvi, there are some modern-design coffee shops in Tajrish where women spend their leisure time and can temporarily escape from some societal norms with activities such as smoking. Young men and women, who carefully styled their hair and wore brand-name clothing, were found exclusively in Tajrish. On the other hand, in Sabz-e-Meidan and Marvi people just *looked* more conservative in appearance and behavior. Gökariksel's (2012) work on veiling fashions in a somewhat similar context (Turkey) became helpful in understanding women's diverse hijab styles in Tehran's public spaces. Gökariksel (2012, 2) highlights that binary categorization of women to 'Islamist' or 'secularist,' or good hijab and bad hijab, merely based on their appearance, result in an informal 'spatial politics' that largely affect women's everyday experiences in public spaces. Such spatial politics can make women feel 'in or out of place.' Many women expressed their concerns about their social representation of self in public spaces. I should highlight that women often referred to functional and physical characteristics of spaces while explaining what an appropriate behavior or hijab style is in each place. The following statements are illustrative:

When I come to Sabz-e-meidan and even Marvi to shop, I always make sure I have on less make-up. There are many workmen here that I do not want to hear say 'wow! Babe' while looking at me. (Woman, aged 26–35)

every time I want to come here [Sabz-e-Meidan], my mother makes sure I do not have my tight dress and red lipstick on. She thinks we should respect the traditional and religious atmosphere here, but I like to be myself anywhere I go... (Woman, aged 18–25)

I come here [Marvi] because I live really close. But, I honestly would rather go to Bala Shahr's shopping centers and new malls. There, I do not need to constantly think who is watching me or which neighbor would catch me with my boyfriend. Look around! So many mosques! People are just noisier here [Laughing]... I want to go out and be free, where nobody knows nor cares who I am. (Woman, aged 18–25)

I like it here [Tandis mall], first because it is cleaner and fancier. The architecture looks modern and different. I just feel more comfortable here. Or maybe because I do not feel that all traditional and religious norms are practiced or even important here. I can be myself instead of 'being a good girl' defined by other people. (Woman, aged 26–35)

The notion of 'becoming a stranger' in public spaces is not new for women. Wilson (1992) discusses how anonymity in public spaces of the city can provide a sense of freedom, rather than fear, to a single woman using public spaces. Her works suggest a complex relationship

between gender and public, regulated by class, ethnicity, sexuality, and family status. These women's experiences also show how modernity competes while co-existing with Islamic Sharia (written laws such as the compulsory hijab in public) and societal *urf* (unwritten but often strictly practiced norms for women in public such as condemning smoking or laughing loudly) in Muslim societies (Amir-Ebrahimi 2006). Much writing on women and public spaces investigates the role social scrutiny plays in women's feelings of safety and comfort. Gendered social norms not only affect women's presence in public spaces but also their self-representation and behavior (Gardner 1994). Women often do not have the same right to observe and socialize with strangers in public spaces (Day 2011). Women are also more observed and approached by strangers than men in public spaces (Henley 1977). In Tehran, how women dress and behave not only depends on whether they are in public or private space but also it depends on where and which neighborhoods in the city they are present. Women's narratives confirm that the geographical location of a public space impacts their sense of freedom in self-presentation. The built environment's design and the symbolic meanings attached to them further shape the women's experiences in Tehran's public spaces. In more traditional public spaces located in Paean Shahr, such as Sabz-e-Meidan, the societal norms are more enforced and practiced by the locals:

I can dress more modern and in fashion here [in Tandis Shopping mall in Tajrish], I would not imagine I would feel comfortable going to Paean Shahr like this! (Woman, aged 18–25)

If I [a modern dressed woman with distinguished make-up] go to Paean Shahr like I look now, I would be starred at and possibly reminded by local men that we still live in an Islamic country. I feel safe in the malls. (Woman, aged 26–35)

According to the State's law, women have to cover their hair and body in public; but that did not stop women of innovatively creating new ways to represent themselves and show their beauty. The fashion police are mostly located in the main squares in Tehran (and other larger cities) and oversee women's hijab observance and the relationship between opposite sexes. Although malls have their own security guards, the presence of fashion police is much less tangible in the malls. In fact, as the malls are semi-public spaces, it is not that easy for fashion police to get in. Women have often become objects of observation (Day 2011), in the Iranian case, by two groups: first male users of public spaces who would watch women as sexual objects and second the police fashions and the locals to remind them of Sharia and societal norms. Women are often advised to follow the traditionally defined and socially accepted self-presentations of femininity and in this case, 'be a good Muslim woman' as defined by men. The gendered social norms influence women's usage, self-representation, and identity production in Tehran:

I think I can be two persons, here in Bala Shar, I am more me and in Paean Shahr, I have to become what others, or a religious society, expects me to be, the so-called good woman! (Woman, aged 26–35)

It is easy to adjust myself, my scarf and make-up, according to the neighborhood I am in . . . I just feel in Paean Shahr, a traditional and religious me is much more accepted. (Woman, age 26–35)

Figures 2 and 3 show women's narratives gathered during interviews with spatial data on men and women as well as photographs and sketches illustrating the character of the case studies. The spatial visualization and ethnographic work show that women in Tehran make up a considerable number of public space users. Although since the revolution Iranian women have experienced much more governmental control of their appearance (e.g., the compulsory hijab) and behavior in public, they have been actively participating in public spaces by reappropriating the existing places. This refers to the concept of the

unfinished and ever-changing characteristic of public spaces and their symbolic meanings. Meanwhile, the number of traditional women using public spaces has dramatically increased after the revolution. Young Iranian women have specifically made use of enclosed, privatized spaces (such as shopping malls, coffee shops, and super bookstores) that are mostly modern in their design and the activities offered.

In Tajrish, a young woman in her late twenties, who was heading to a coffee shop with her male partner, mentioned that

We often come to here to go to coffee shops and to hang out in shopping malls. None of us live close but we prefer to take a bus or taxi to come here. It is so busy here and nobody even notices if you are with your boyfriend.

Another woman in her mid-thirties sitting with three other women around a table in coffee shop expressed that 'I like it here because I can smoke... You know in some neighborhoods in Tehran societal norms are strictly practiced. I need to be really careful about my surroundings.' I asked her for an example and she answered 'we like to go to old historical places but forget about having fun there ...'. She was interrupted by her friend who happened to be a sociology student. She offered a contradictory perspective:

I do not agree that we are more ourselves here in Tajrish or in more modern places. I feel I need to look fashionable enough to even come to this shopping mall. Look around, all these teenagers spend hours matching the color of their shoes with their make-up. Is that being yourself?

In addition, middle-aged women expressed that they do not feel welcome in coffee shops:

I do not feel comfortable or even welcome in the new shopping malls or coffee shops. They are packed with young people. I think they want to fight against tradition and religion; they just want to show they are different from us, their mothers. I personally prefer to spend my time in places I grew up. I enjoy walking in Marvi alley as I remember every Norouz [Persian New Year], my mother and I would come here to shop. (Woman, aged 46–55)

My girlfriends and I gather at least once a month to catch up with each other. We usually go to the places we used to go when we were younger but recently we come to the more modern areas [describing a coffee shop located in a big modern bookstore that recently opened in Tajrish]. Unlike other coffee shops, I like it here because it feels more inviting to our age group and also we can sit down and have a tea together. Plus it is clean and you do not see any workmen hanging out in them! (Woman, aged 46–55)

I like our own old fashion tea-houses that are actually disappearing. I make an hour trip by the subway to go down to the neighborhood where I was born [Monirieh, close to Sabz-e-Meidan]. I walk around with my children and revisit my memories with them. It is sad that they do not maintain these places better, but we still go there. The coffee shops around our current house [Elahieh near to Tajrish] are anything but genuine. They are not real modern designs or ideas! It feels that the owner just copied a Starbucks store he visited in his trip to Dubai! (Woman, aged 46–55)

These women's experiences confirm that gender boundaries never fully translate into lived experience. Gender, like culture, is itself an abstraction – it is the map, not the thing it represents. Agency plays an important role in the social production of space. Interviewees, according to age, social status, economic class, home neighborhood, and individual life experiences express themselves and their preferences differently.

Although women were aware of the built environment and architecture and even briefly mentioned the modern design or cleanness of places in their responses, they seemed to care more about the structure of social relations and norms in each place. For them, the distinction between modern and traditional designs was not as important as architects and planners think or like it to be. Generally, women do not prefer one public space over the

other; they enjoy having the options to move from one to the other. Grosz (2001, 48) emphasizes that the concept of modern, new, and futurity influence the ways people experience and understand their place in cities. In what urban planners called modern spaces, women feel a greater sense of self, more freedom, and a sense of equality with men. Traditional spaces are male dominated but those places help them relate to their cultural identity, evoking a feeling of nostalgia. These places connect women to their past, just as modern spaces connect them to their future. This moving back and forth along with the social construction of public spaces that occur in between highlight the two-sided relationship between structures and agencies in social processes and the process by which each society creates its own space (Lefebvre 1991).

The spatial representation of women's presence and preferences confirms that built environment interpretations not only are tied to social and economic institutional forces, but they also are influenced by symbolic meanings derived from local culture and history (Low 1996, 2000). More importantly, these women's experiences shed light on the unrealistic categorization of binary divisions of public–private, modern–tradition, and form–meaning. In fact, they do not exist in tidy distinctions in our everyday lives.

of course, our historical architecture or whatever you want to call it our cultural heritage is important to me, but I need a break from it. I like having the choices. Depending on the mood I am in and what I need, I go to different places in Tehran and I think I enjoy them all. (Woman, aged 18–25)

I encountered and talked with an architecture student who had a very different perspective about Tehran's public spaces:

It does not matter if you are talking about Tajrish, Vanak, Sabz-e-Meidan, or Azadi square, there is no original tradition or modern style anymore in Tehran. The character, if any, is a mixture of everything a little bit Islamic, a little bit Iranian, and a little bit copying Modern architecture. People use these spaces because they simply have to. (Woman, aged 26–35)

As Day (1999) suggests, the actual women's experience in and perceptions of privatized and modern public spaces are way more diverse than those that were considered in compelling critiques of privatized public spaces in North America. Many (Sorkin 1992; Crawford 1992; Soja 2003; Zukin 2003) have warned us of the loss of authentic *public* spaces and the danger of overtly controlled designs and behaviors in privatized public places such as shopping malls. These critics emphasize the lack of sense of place based on boring designs of malls, the potential of segregation through target audiences and controlled behavior, the systematically designed notion of consumption and leisure, and finally depoliticizing the space through confining the user's democratic rights. Although there have been a few efforts (Day 1999; Salcedo 2003) to include more diverse experiences into these criticisms, the literature still lacks the inclusion of examples from non-Western contexts where the malls, like other modernity's features and forces, are developed, perceived, and used in significantly different ways. It appears that Iranian women are experiencing a sense of self-representation and freedom in these modern places because of less social scrutiny by fashion police and strangers. Of course, in the case of Tehran, women are in a 'passing through stage' and still dealing with the existing tensions between modernity and tradition; but such variation among women's experiences remains valid.

The interviews show mixed feelings about Tajrish square located in Bala Shahr representing high city, a modern, newer, and somewhat less religious place in which women enjoyed a sense of freedom and equality, and Sabz-e-Meidan and Marvi, located in Paen Shahr representing a traditional, more religious, and an older neighborhood where women appreciated their unique sense of place. The symbolic meanings, ubiquitous in women's

social behavior and preferences, become as significant as their geographic locations and architectural design. I agree with Doan (2010, 648) that ‘gender matters, but due to its discursive complexity, how gender is performed matters even more.’ Other demographics and socio-cultural characteristics influenced women’s answers in expressing their experiences of the selected public spaces. I contend that although feminist geographers have bravely questioned our presumptions about space, geography’s most basic concept, and have successfully changed the classical dualism (such as public/private, modern/traditional, and mind/body), gender as a relatively widely used social construct still requires a more detailed reconsideration. Considering the controversy over trans-gendered and -sexual subjectivity particularly in non-Western contexts, the complex and ever-changing process in which ‘gendered’ identity is constructed, deconstructed, and re-constructed, remains open to inquiry.

Conclusions

In these examples of what are called modern and traditional Meidans in Tehran, I have shown how geo-ethnographic research methods can be employed in feminist geography research to study women’s experiences. Focusing on the women’s experience and use of public spaces in Tehran through participant observation and interviewees as well as spatial visualization, I have painted a picture of the complicated relationship between the architecture styles, the gendering of spatial boundaries, and the contingent nature of public spaces that goes beyond the simple dichotomy of female–male, private–public, and modern–traditional. Drawing upon Werlen’s (1992, 100–139) notion that space is one of the many forces that constitute, constrain, and mediate social action, I emphasized that the selected public spaces become meaningful only in the context of subjective human actions, including those of female users.

Through the application of GIS, ‘the spatiality of social processes’ (Pavlovskaya 2006), in this case the mutual construction of gendered identities and public spaces, was illustrated. I incorporated a geographical concept of space into the interdisciplinary studies of social and gender relations. An alternative application of GIS, as an interview’s guideline and a tool to represent the spatiality of changing gendered identities, illustrated how GIS practices can be adopted to fuller understand ‘people’s lived experiences in an interpretive manner rather than for conducting spatial analysis that relies largely on quantitative geographical information’ (Kwan and Knigge 2006). Applying a mixed-methods approach contributed to broader questions of how to represent visually the kinds of movement and patterns of agency that tend to remain invisible to Western observers as well as local planners. By finding spatial patterns on GIS maps, I was able to modify my interview questions and ask new questions. The results showed that there is a sense of enhanced mobility for the women that we would not necessarily see either with solely GIS data or with solely ethnographic data. On the other hand, it should be stressed that spatial patterns on GIS maps were just the beginning and not what have often been considered as the solution. Maps can reduce social processes to spatial patterns and treat human activities as a function of space. Maps, however, leave out the people’s stories who socially construct public spaces through their actions and constantly (re)define boundaries in such places.

The findings also suggest that gender boundaries never fully translate into lived experience. Gender, by itself, does not offer an essential category or an independent social construct and it may be studied in regards to culture, class, race, and sexuality. I agree with McDowell (1999, 23) that ‘what it means to be a woman or a man is, therefore, contextually

dependent, relational and variable.’ This study was an attempt to enrich the Western theories on women and public spaces by including diverse experiences of non-Western women, and more particularly, to challenge the predominant critics of modern public spaces in North America. I argued that women in Tehran use modern and often privatized public spaces such as shopping malls in unexpected ways to enjoy a sense of freedom that is not usually available in traditional urban locations. Women, in Iran, attach meaning in unpredictable ways to public spaces, in part, because they remain uniquely invisible to those who are tasked with designing the public space. Being invisible to planners allows women to maneuver and manipulate boundaries to fit constantly changing needs, but renders and keeps them politically marginal. While going unseen also translates into going unheard in Western models of citizenship and by Western observers, the important role women play in (re)defining ‘public space’ in non-Western contexts remains rather unexplored. In this regard, this article is among the preliminary works in a larger effort to map out future theoretical directions.

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Notes

1. Meidan is a Farsi translation of square. Meidancheh is a smaller Meidan.
2. In the 1992 presidential address to the Association of American Geographers [also cited in Staeheli and Martin (2000)].
3. A post-structural approach to discourse analysis was used to analyze women’s narratives.
4. Kernel density estimation calculates a magnitude per unit area from point features using a kernel function to fit a smoothly tapered surface to each point.
5. While hijab is mandatory in Iran (since 1979), Iranian women largely vary in their hijab styles. Some show hair and put on make-up while others are more conservatively covered.

Notes on contributor

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS

El mapeo de los espacios públicos de las mujeres en Teherán: una perspectiva de geovisualización

Los espacios públicos en funcionamiento, como esferas políticas, sociales y culturales "públicas" de discurso ciudadano, afectan no solamente a la calidad de vida del ciudadano, sino también son infraestructura indispensable en las sociedades democráticas. Este artículo ofrece una comprensión matizada del uso, sentimientos, y preferencias de las

mujeres iraníes en los espacios públicos en la Teherán actual, no simplemente importando teorías occidentales que sostienen distinciones entre mujeres tradicionales y modernas, sino escuchando las historias de las mujeres. Este artículo muestra plantea inquietudes en relación con las identidades de género, la política del espacio y el diseño de estos espacios. Meidan-e-Tajrish, Sabz-e-Meidan y Marvi Meidancheh en Teherán permiten una visualización etnográfica del espacio generizador. El proceso por el cual las mujeres iraníes ponen significados simbólicos a estos espacios públicos ofrece una mirada de la construcción mutua de las identidades de género y la política del espacio. Las contrastantes ubicaciones urbanas, los distintos estilos de diseño, y las diferentes actividades sociales brindan una comparación excelente entre los espacios públicos seleccionados. Los resultados sugieren precaución al utilizar al género como una categoría esencial en la investigación geográfica feminista para representar mejor la diversidad de las experiencias en los espacios públicos. La categorización binaria de moderno vs. tradicional, secular vs. religioso, público vs. privado y varón vs. mujer en los estudios urbanos debe ser cuidadosamente validada, ya que las experiencias vividas de las mujeres iraníes desafían las teorías homogeneizantes occidentales, particularmente las críticas predominantes de los espacios públicos modernos en América del Norte. El proceso de investigación también resalta los beneficios de la geovisualización para comprender la compleja interacción entre las identidades de género y el entorno construido.

Palabras claves: mujeres; espacios públicos; Teherán; geovisualización

繪製德黑蘭公共空間中的女性：地理可视化的观点

使用中的公共空间，做为公民论述中“公共的”政治、社会与文化场域，不仅影响了公民的生活品质，更是民主社会中不可或缺的基础建设。本文不仅只是引进维持传统与现代女性区别的西方理论，而是透过倾听女性的故事，对伊朗女性对德黑兰当前的公共空间使用、感觉与偏好提供细致的理解。本文提出有关性别认同、空间政治，以及场所设计的考量。位在德黑兰的公共空间Meidan-e-Tajrish、Sabz-e-Meidan与 Marvi Meidancheh 提供了性别化空间的民族志可视化。伊朗女性依附于上述公共空间象征意义的过程，提供了理解性别认同与空间政治相互建构的洞见。截然不同的城市地点、相异的设计风格，以及特殊的社会活动，提供了所选择的公共空间之间的绝佳比较。研究发现对使用性别做为女性主义地理学研究中的本质化范畴提出警告，以更佳地呈现公共空间经验的多样性。城市研究中的现代—传统、世俗—宗教、公共—私人，以及男性—女性的二元范畴，应该被谨慎地验证，因伊朗女性的生活经验挑战了均质化的西方理论，特别是在北美对于现代公共空间的主流批判。本研究过程同时凸显了地理可视化之于理解性别认同与建成环境之间复杂互动的优异之处。

关键词：女性；公共空间；德黑兰；地理可视化