

Framed, Therefore Real

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of the post-truth era, well-known definitions of urban activism have been calling for an update. Covering different territories and media, this essay aims at suggesting new ways of thinking about architecture and its digital representation as a medium for political engagement. It is my suggestion that, the information of space, or more precisely, architecture, can be deployed to reduce the ‘uncertainty’ of a message encountered online and can therefore be used for legitimization. Starting with Times Square in New York, the context of the research expands to Central Asia and investigates the relevant debates. It looks like, actors on the global political stage such as China, India, and Pakistan have been using the built environment of another global power, the USA, to validate their claims about each other. While employing well-known urban backgrounds for legitimizing political messages is far from new, campaigns using another country’s public places and monuments to gain repute at home might be a new territory for geopolitics.

This research unfolds the potential outcomes of this correspondence.

On New Year’s Eve 2018, online search engines recorded an unexpected surge for the word ‘Balochistan’ (Google Trends, n.d.). The spiking interest did not last long though, and a week later the graph was back to a plain. I was one of those who performed the search, but slightly later, in March of 2018. Before learning about Balochistan, I was watching the press conference Frances McDormand gave after she received her second Academy Award, this time for her role in the movie ‘Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri.’⁽¹⁾ She announced that the film had started an activist movement: social organizations were hiring trucks to protest in a similar manner. Thus, empowered by the trend, trios of red billboards –often mounted on trucks closely trailing one another– were being used to make public appeals to local authorities. Beginning with Justice4Grenfell in the UK, the billboards were photographed and shared online, carrying local political issues on to global social media platforms. According to McDormand: “that’s a kind of power an image can have, and that’s what we are making –we are making powerful images” (Timsit, 2018) (Figure 1).

Ever since the advent of cinema, film has been among the most influential media in the creation of memorable images and narrative. With recent developments in image-making and communication

technologies, images have transcended the constraints of physical space and time by being digitally shared; instantly moving across space and time. The intermingling of the actual and the virtual is non-negligible today, but it is rarely as visible as in this example. Billboards, at the intersection of architecture and screen, create a worm’s hole in the screen space of digital media; they transport the audience to an actual space on earth. Thus, the power of the images that McDormand references is enhanced by the movement of the image from the real world (i.e. placed on a billboard) to an online platform, framed by an actual urban background.

In the following paragraphs I will develop two interwoven topics and one argument: the first topic is the way in which urban screens in New York, and particularly in Times Square, are hired by international political groups to advertise local issues; the second will be the historical background of urban activism in New York and its conceptual relevance to the first topic. The argument is relatively simple: because architecture intrinsically requires material production, the certainty deposited in its material presence –or the information of space– in the context of the crisis of a post-truth era, acts as a tool for legitimizing a message.

THE BATTLE OF TIMES SQUARE

During New Year’s Eve 2018, twelve screens were hired in Times Square to broadcast the statement ‘Free Balochistan,’ which remained for roughly a week. Balochistan is a province of Pakistan in south-western Asia where five

(1) See Frances McDormand Explains Inclusion Rider at Oscars - Full Backstage Speech, 2018.

per cent of the country's population –36 million people– live. Their share of the GDP is lower than the national average (Economics and Extremism, 2010). As a reference, Pakistan's GDP per capita is \$1,482 US dollars (The World Bank, n.d.), hiring a screen in Times Square can cost anywhere between \$5,000 and \$25,000 USD daily (Inspira Outdoor, n.d.). The group which funded the screens in Times Square and in other platforms is the World Balochistan Organization (WBO), who describe themselves as “a non-violent and democratic international membership organization dedicated to defending the Baloch peoples’ political, social, and cultural rights, and self-determination” (World Baloch Organization, n.d.).

Although Balochistan is one of the most deprived regions in the territory, it possesses valuable underground resources such as natural gas, gold, and copper (Bhutta, 2011). Furthermore, its geopolitical significance creates conflicts of interest between the many actors involved in the development of the region: it is important to Pakistan, because it defines the country's connection with the sea; it is important to China, because of the ongoing infrastructure projects funded by the Belt and Road Initiative;⁽²⁾ and it is important to India because of the pipeline construction underway, which will bring natural gas from Iran.⁽³⁾ In addition to the Balochi people's, at least four nation's interests are entangled in the region's future. It is therefore not hard to imagine that an independent Balochistan could benefit more than one actor. Consequently, a billboard that is supposed to help bring

freedom to an oppressed people may or may not have a different agenda.⁽⁴⁾

On further research into news about Balochistan, one of the issues that stand out is the ongoing construction of the Deep-Sea Port in Gwadar,⁽⁵⁾ a city situated on the coast of the Arabian Sea across from Oman. The Port is one of the endpoints of the Belt and Road Initiative to connect Asia with Africa, more precisely with Kenya, via sea transportation. It is well known that Chinese companies have been building railways across Africa to access raw materials and other underground resources. So, to better understand India and China's involvement in the region, one should pay closer attention to the Belt and Road Initiative's investments and interests (Figure 3).

Starting with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China has been attempting to shut out its main economic competitor, India, on all fronts. Consequently, India would benefit from a slow-down – if not shut-down– of the aforementioned infrastructure projects; whereas China wants them completed as soon as possible. The first incident happened in the Himalayas; it took several years to connect Lhasa, in the autonomous region of Tibet, with mainland China (Marshall, 2016, p. 41) –the conflicts are still ongoing. Another front was a port project situated in Myanmar, which coincides with another minority's oppression: the Rohingyas. Although Times Square has not seen any billboards about them, the world heard about the situation via various news agencies.

Going back to the Balochistan billboards, another point worth mentioning is that almost no news agency from New York took notice of them, let alone covered the outdoor advertising campaign. Virtually all online newspapers and media platforms that reported on these billboards were based in India. Accordingly, it is difficult to write about them without drawing up theories on India's geopolitical involvement in the region (Bearak, 2016).

One of the reasons that might explain the choice of Times Square as the site of WBO's billboards is the First Amendment of the United States. According to freedom of speech laws, the owner of the screen decides what can appear in it, and if their decision annoys other people, that is unfortunate. WBO first went to London, where they hired the sides of the famous black cabs. However, according to journalist Caroline Mortimer's article in *The Independent*, following the pressures of Pakistani officials and partly because of the region's political ties following its colonial history, the ads were soon removed by order of the Transport for London (TfL) authorities (Mortimer, 2017). When this failed, they projected the phrase “Commonwealth must question Pakistan over enforced disappearances in Balochistan” on London's Marble Arch on July 1, 2019 (World Baloch Organization, 2019).

WBO kept being innovative in the ways they used the built environment for their cause. Following their New Year's Eve move, they hired a truck to drive around NYC during the UN climate change summit in September 2019 –much like the billboard-trucks Frances McDormand references– displaying messages like ‘Baloch Lives also matter,’ and ‘UN must help recover missing people in Balochistan’ (ANI, 2019). Furthermore, they not only took to the streets of NYC but also to its

(2) Series of mega infrastructure projects to connect Asia with Africa and Europe. See European Bank, n.d.

(3) Though, due to the US sanctions on Iran, the Pakistan section of the pipeline construction came to a halt, which makes India even more eager for an independent Balochistan (Woodward, 2009).

(4) See Ergin & Fatah gen. Schieck, 2018.

(5) Although a port already existed in the city, with CPEC involvement it will not only be developed further, but also will also host a special economic zone around it. See Walsh, 2013.

skies by hiring a plane to display phrases urging the UN to act in Balochistan. It was photographed and published with the Statue of Liberty as a backdrop.

Just like hiring trucks had a media-based reference, using the Statue of Liberty in the image had other ones too. To wit, in a 1987 rally to fight the AIDS pandemic in Washington DC, the New York based activist group ACT UP came up with a similar arrangement in their image.⁽⁶⁾ The Washington Monument appeared in the background, not only to corroborate the location of the protests, but to enforce their impact by including a strong icon next to the message. They also knew that it would be easier to stay in the spectators' mind when coupled with a strong image (Figure 4).

The Situationist International coined the term 'recuperation' as the process by which radical political ideas and images are stripped of their revolutionary content, absorbed, and commodified by bourgeois media culture (Plant, 1992). Although as employed by the Situationist International the term had a broader meaning, it is possible to see the WBO's move of creating (or appropriating) allegorical images as an example. There is a difference though: instead of using the local urban environment in their images, WBO employs another country's buildings and monuments to legitimize their cause in the eyes of the world. Obviously, this has something to do with the prominence of western symbolism in visual media, that started with Hollywood and carries on in today's

social media platforms. Although these platforms of new media are unbiased to user groups, the content creators of the very same platforms are mostly concentrated in the western world. Hence, images about western cities seem to have greater validity.

The 'power of architecture' was deployed in a different manner in a Washington Post ad paid by WBO. Although I cannot confirm they deliberately asked to be next to the image of the Washington monument in the printed newspaper, the result is difficult to deny. The power coming through architecture is so prominent that even the image of it does the job (Figure 5).

The 'battle of Times Square' did not end here. Shortly after the Balochistan billboard move, Pakistani officials hired screens blaming India for the invasion of Kashmir (Billboards in Times Square Highlight Kashmir Issue, 2019) (Figure 5). On the other hand, Xinhua, the news agency operated by Chinese government, hired the same screens to display the South China Sea conflict with the Philippines and to advertise their e-town in Beijing, among other things.

Still, these use of billboards begs a prior question, namely, why do political struggles, which have very little to do with the visitors or citizens of New York, deliberately take place in Times Square – supposedly the temple of advertisement and a place known for its commercial background? My hypothesis is that in a 'post-truth' era, big cities have gained a new role – they have become trustworthy narrators that are being used to validate the messages appearing in them (Ergin & Fatah gen. Schieck, 2018).

ARCHITECTURES OF TRUTH

Its neglection by architects notwithstanding, the power of an

architectural image encountered in a virtual platform is well-known to advertisers. ECP, the media company that designed the ads for 'Three Billboards,' also designed an advertising campaign which emphasized what seems evident: urban space has a 'real' tangible existence, as opposed to the virtual space of social media. Conflating 'real' material existence with truth, the ads emphasize the built environment as a background that would make messages more trustworthy (Figure 6).⁽⁷⁾ Furthermore, not all urban environments have equal value in this regard: famous cities have more advertisement power than unknown urban scenes, as they are more likely to be recognized. Times Square, being one of the most famous public spaces on the planet, begins to explain WBO's investment in a billboard there.

There are other reasons for Times Square's appeal. As I mentioned earlier, the history of 'billboard activism' in Times Square undoubtedly places WBO's political plea within a larger set of references and art history narratives. An ongoing exhibition at The City Museum of New York, for instance, demonstrates how extensive this history is.⁽⁸⁾ Among all the surveyed examples of Times Square as a site for political activism, 'Messages to the Public' deserves particular consideration. Running from 1982 to 1990, Public Art Fund commissioned one of the most longstanding projects on the Spectacolor billboard on The Times Building. In its 8-year time span, it brought together the most prominent artists of the 1980s and became 'the voice' of activists of the world.⁽⁹⁾ From Guerrilla Girls to

(6) The Second National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights took place in Washington on October 11, 1987, with the participation of tens of thousands of people, including prominent American politician Nancy Pelosi. ACT UP was there with their banners designed by another New York based activist group, Gran Fury. See Gran Fury, n.d.

(7) See Extra Credit Projects, n.d.

(8) About the exhibition, see Ellin, 2019. For the exhibition online gallery, see MCNY, n.d.

(9) <?> The exhibition was named by Jane Dickson, an electronic ad designer working for Spectacolor. Over eight years, more than ninety artist were commissioned by the Public Art Fund. See Public Art Fund, n.d.

ACT UP, or from Jenny Holzer to Alfredo Jaar, participants used their one month on the screen to urge the public to think about issues around consumerism, AIDS, inequality, racism, as well as sovereignty – in the USA and elsewhere.

The question of how Times Square gained this power is also related to its physical qualities. Since its conception, Times Square stands out for its extraordinary spatial arrangement and the technologies –or knowledge as Marx would put it– it showcases. In 1904, Long Acre was already the intersection of ten different subway routes (Figure 7). When The Times building –the eponym of the square– opened in that same year, it was the second tallest skyscraper on the planet. Shortly after, in 1907, when the ball dropping event began, it again showcased a new technology –this time, electricity. When zipper text began to ‘run’ in 1928, it replaced chalk and board as the method to inform the public on breaking news. And when the infamous Camel ad, designed by Douglas Leigh (the Don Draper of the time), appeared –with its unprecedented mechanism enabling real-time vapour production– Times Square was at its peak. So much so, that in April 1942, the US Government ordered Times Square’s lights-off to mark its entering to the Second War. And again, on August 14, 1945, thousands gathered to hear Japan’s surrender (Tell, 2007). Every action attracted the next one, and today their accumulation enables the events that triggered this paper.

Before going further, the media-hype image of Times Square coming from its history and the effect it creates deserves further discussion. After the Covid breakout, Times Square became a media ‘trend’: a place known for its crowds suddenly became deserted, as several articles, photographs, and videos

illustrated. Furthermore, Times Square screens broadcasted Covid solidarity messages, albeit at a time when no one was supposed to be there to see them. Yet, (you have guessed it) those screens were never purely for the people who visit the square, but for the people who will see the photos and videos shared by those who visited the square. All the unintentional appearances are factored into the calculation of the price of renting these screens.⁽¹⁰⁾ While I have never been in Times Square on New Year’s Eve, the photos from that day are easily accessible today. So, when you hire a screen in Times Square, you are not only buying the actual screen-time in a particular spot and date; you are obtaining the future of that screen in the virtual realm, which will live on basically forever.

CONCLUSION

Internet activist Eli Pariser coined the term ‘filter bubbles’ (2011) to highlight the increasing use of proprietary algorithms by social media platforms and search engines, which –based on user data and striving for frictionless user experience– isolate internet users from information that disagrees with their viewpoints. Working against these bubbles, different viewpoints (or even opposite ones) of a concept can coexist on the same urban space and utilize the information of space in their narrative. In other words, urban space and architecture become the common ground of different ‘truths.’ Thus, the reason for choosing Times Square back then, is the same reason

for choosing it today. The difference is one of technology: In the 1980s LED billboards represented the ‘new media’, whereas today their legacy lives in digital photos of their 4K descendants uploaded onto online platforms. The various examples discussed in this essay point towards the same conclusion: the information of space, or more precisely, architecture, can be deployed to reduce the ‘uncertainty’ of a message and can therefore be used for legitimization.

The ethical debate on the use of mass media for ‘better causes’ was famously brought to the public’s attention following Benetton’s AIDS awareness campaigns in the early 1990s. With audience numbers in the millions, the ads did contribute to raise awareness of AIDS and related diseases on the planet, while commercially benefiting the company (Wolf, 2016). It caused heated disagreements back then, and to some extent the debate today is the same, save for a more broader consensus over the statement that “if you could use propaganda for war, you could certainly use it for peace” (Edward Bernay, as cited in Curtis, 2002). So, what WBO has been doing might be seen as using people’s real suffering for political leverage, in a win-win situation: if WBO achieves their aim of a ‘Free Balochistan,’ they will have power to negotiate in the upcoming infrastructure projects (i.e. Belt and Road). If they fail, they will be remembered as the group who actively fought for a people’s suppressed right. Regardless of the potential ulterior motives or aims, WBO have caused some people on the other side of the world to talk about Balochistan, and I believe that as long as the receivers of their messages are aware of the possible biases, them doing what they have is better than silence.

While the term ‘post-truth’ was coined only recently, the idea it represents is ancient:

(10) Times Square is the one of the most expensive public spaces on the planet for advertisement, along with Piccadilly Circus. Especially at New Year’s Eve, with up to one billion viewers, it sits in a unique place. Yet they both are dwarfed by the Super Bowl, but neither Super Bowl, nor Piccadilly, see similar political messages, which again reveals something.

everyone curates their own truth through the data that is available to them. The ideologies behind techniques or technology may or may not be produced by those who develop and implement them, or in turn by their immediate users, but they still do facilitate all forms of communication. What makes data available is technology – whether it is chalk and a board or a 5G internet connection. What is different today is the increasing amount of available data; though, as we now know, availability does not guarantee accessibility. To sum up, the issues around the trustworthiness of digital media, and the role of the built environment as an informer of the public have created a new area to battle over: cities and outdoor advertisement. Due to closer monitoring of the content on billboards in the city, as opposed to digital platforms, the authority cemented upon the built environment has acquired a new dimension, and it looks like the digital world is not free from its influence. **m**

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