

## Public Art: Place Making or Focus on Values (Case study: Vali-Asr Street, Tehran)

Narciss M Sohrabi\*

Defense Laboratory, University of Paris, Paris, France

\*Corresponding author: Sohrabi NM, Defense Laboratory, University of Paris, Paris, France, Tel: +33(0)673582286; E-mail: [Sohrabnarciss@gmail.com](mailto:Sohrabnarciss@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

Baharestan art festival, which was held in Vali-Asr Street in Tehran in March and April 2016 on the pretext of starting the Iranian New Year (Nowruz), has widely attracted the attention of artists and other people. This article attempts to examine the role of this urban art festival and similar festivals in placemaking and the improvement of the quality of urban spaces considering the potential and capabilities of these areas in the city. According to the prepared questionnaire, some questions were asked of respondents randomly selected from citizens with different demographic information about their comments on different aspects of the artworks presented in the festival. The results of statistical analysis of the questionnaire showed how this festival and similar events act as effective agents in development of placemaking and creation of common scenes using urban arts. Results revealed three key findings. First, the artworks of the festival were able to bring New Year's perceptions with Iranian value attributes to the respondents' minds. Second, the artworks were intended to make the public space lively. Third, this project had potential to act as a medium to spread positive messages among the citizens. According to the results, this festival and similar urban art projects can further be considered as a new form of Iranian contemporary public art.

**Keywords:** Baharestan art festival; Tehran; Vali-Asr street; Nowruz; Public art

### Introduction

As I remember, my visit to Tehran before the new year in 2016 (1395 Hijri) involved art city tours to the promenade of Vali-Asr Street. Walking along this street was always a pleasure while looking at artworks displayed at various amazing buildings from different parts of Iranian architecture history. All these invited me to walk and convinced me to have close observation while experiencing a place and ambience. This fantastic place was a part of Baharestan art festival which was held in Vali-Asr Street for 2 months (on March and April 2016) on the pretext of starting the Iranian New Year.

The aim of this festival for the Tehran municipality was the accompaniment of artists and citizens to greet the spring, creating the vitality and dynamism in the urban environment, and showing the process of artistic creations adapted to the urban environment.

In this event, for the first time, different types of art including urban, environmental, and modern arts have been emerged at the same time. This festival was held with the contribution of 481 artists in the fields of environmental graphics, murals, painting New Year's symbolic eggs, sculpture and environmental art along the Vali-Asr Street. Some of these artworks are illustrated in Figure 1.

The natural progression of interest in public art encouraged me to carry out this study to seek the opinions of citizens about this public art festival. Despite of existing data on what people actually think about Baharestan public art festival on the Vali-Asr street, I collected new information to answer my research questions about the importance of such public art events in Tehran.

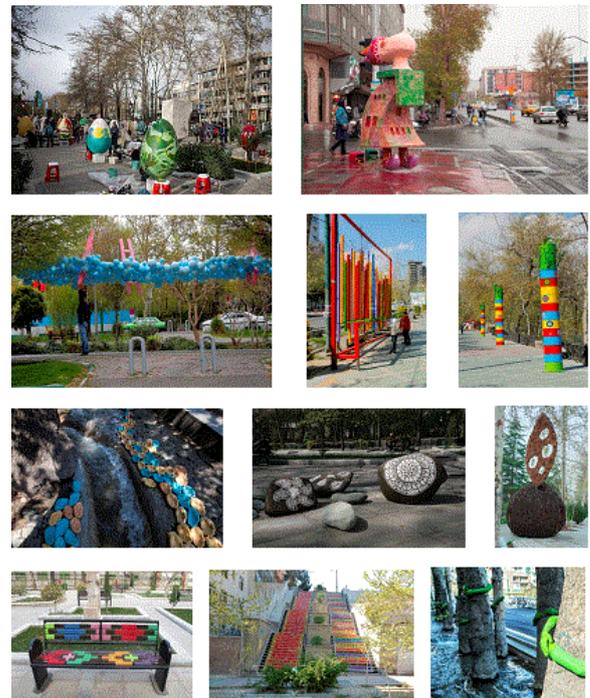


Figure 1: Some of artworks in Baharestan festival.

To date, there is no comprehensive study about the role of Baharestan urban art festival and similar festivals in placemaking and the improvement of the quality of urban spaces. The research reported here contributes to bridge this gap. In this research, investigating the

comments and opinions of artists and other people from different social classes about such events was attempted. To do this, a brief literature review is presented and then the concepts of placemaking are discussed. Afterwards, the geographical location of the Baharestan festival according to its potential and capabilities is brought. Then, the research questions and procedure of data analysis are brought. Afterwards, results of statistical analysis are presented and discussed.

## Literature Review

Public art generally deals with concepts such as: urban identity politics and formation, class-caste representation of people, incorporation of heritage and culture presentation of self, territorial formation, site-specificity, semiotic, and so on. These basically affect the ways of connecting, to other people and situations that heighten the sense of belonging. This sense of belonging to a public space is further highlighted by elements that render positive aspects of habitation at public places and generate a set of concepts that methodologically orient and design activities towards place-person engagement, and further help in creating awareness of the spaces [1].

Apart from textual narratives, there are dialogues/discussions with policy makers, cultural practitioners and theoreticians based on their knowledge/experience and perceptions about art in public spaces and its engagement with people. There are numerous records of narratives, observations, theories and lived experiences of theoreticians and practitioners about people and their engagement with arts in public places.

The beneficial role of public art in the outdoor space has been recognized in recent studies as contributing the liveliness of public spaces and engaging people's sociability [2,3].

Art in public space often complements the aesthetic qualities of buildings and enhance the image of a place. Nimmo [4] asserted that the placement of artistic works in public space facilitates the involvement of young artists with the public and the integration of artwork with architectural and civic programs. Art in public spaces is a spatial and social phenomenon with the ability to produce intense emotions in audience as active receptors who constantly analyze the meaning of art thus contributing to the complete communication process of art creation. How people interact with, and experience their environment can be explored by studying public art [1].

Minty [5] acknowledged other roles of art in public space as a creative and indirect medium to engage the public with political and cultural dialogues. In recent years, artworks were found to focus more on critical social or environmental issues where art used to evoke or provoke certain thoughts or opinions [6]. As a form of creative expression the experience of users, but may also function as a landmark, to symbolize certain image of place, to represent an individual or collective representation of an idea, or simply as part of the beatification exercise of public space [7]. Numerous studies have been conducted on the various forms of public art in the Tehran [8], however, research on the placement of art in the outdoor spaces as public art is still in its infancy level.

## Placemaking and Creation of Common Sense Using Urban Art

Placemaking is a community approached planning and managing Public Space (PPS) [9,10]. All places cannot be designed like landmarks. However, placemaking focuses on creating spaces that

recognize landscapes as part of social constructions that promotes livability, health and wellbeing of the society. The state may control the physical context for activities within a certain time which permits certain public behavior and which is not [11].

According to the placemaking approach, based on extensive research and projects involvement, PPS finds that a successful place must have four key attributes; accessibility, people engaged in activities, be comfortable, and be a social place for people to interact [12]. These key attributes are intangible qualities required for a high-quality environment, based on their analysis of hundreds of public spaces around the world. PPS developed the place diagram which is used as measuring tools to evaluate the value and potentials of a place through its tangible and intangibles qualities. Almost all writers, researchers and urban planners present their literature dealing with desirable qualities of public space. Lynch [13] simplified five desirable qualities in public space such as control, fit, sense, vitality, and access.

## Geographical Location of Baharestan Festival

Vali-Asr Street is the tallest tree-lined street in Tehran with a length of approximately 17.5 km. The street is located from Railway Square in the south to the Tajrish Square in the north (Figure 2). It passes through four main city squares and covers four main urban crossroads of the city.

Many large shopping malls, public parks, cultural centers and national and international offices are located along this street. The street has been the place of many important cultural and historical events in Iran. Buildings with different styles from the Qajar era to modern times, some of which are in the national heritage list, are index points of this street. More than 8,000 sycamore trees can be seen along the street [14].

Research shows that historical Vali-Asr Street is a place full of memories in different living sequences of Tehran's citizens [15]. A diverse range of applications and dominant aspects of culture, education, tourism and leisure functions of the street next to its various cultural and shopping centers has turned the street to something more than just one street and somehow it has become a destination [16].

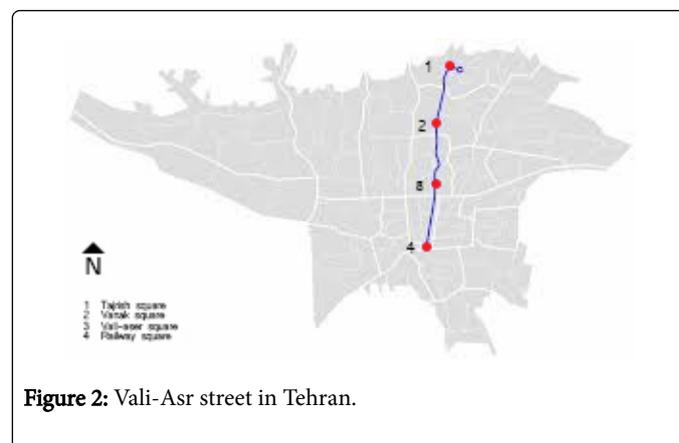


Figure 2: Vali-Asr street in Tehran.

## The Questionnaire and Procedure of Data Analysis

The main research hypothesis of this study is threefold: the artworks of the Baharestan festival were able to bring New Year's perceptions with Iranian value attributes to the respondents' minds; the artworks

were regarded to make the public space lively; the festival had potentials to act as a medium to spread positive messages among the citizens.

Before creating the questionnaire, it was necessary to identify the types of the artworks presented in the Baharestan festival. Therefore, I made several visits to the artworks along the Vali-Asr Street and Baharestan project and identified various types of artwork in public spaces, such as sculptures, mural paintings, graffiti, and reliefs on the building facades. Furthermore, some of the artists whose works were presented in this project were interviewed. Then, the questionnaire was designed covering independent and dependent variables<sup>1</sup>.

Demographic variables such as age, gender, education level, job, and income are important in explaining variation in attention to the Baharestan festival in general. These variables have been considered as independent variables in this study. The dependent variables are different aspects of the role of the Baharestan festival as an urban art in placemaking and the level of attraction of the citizens' attention to this event. In this study, a survey method was developed to evaluate the research hypothesis. Multiple regression analysis was used to analyze the raw data. The survey was undertaken after the Baharestan festival in 2016<sup>2</sup>.

Questions consist of several sections as follows: (1) respondents' profile and demographic information; (2) their level of attention to the artworks, and (3) their opinions about the harmony of the artworks with urban elements.

For the ordinal variables, 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the intensity of respondents' opinions on a variety of indicator statements. Statements were selected as neutrally as possible. Concepts used in the statements were developed based on theories found in review literature.

Understanding the level of harmony of the artworks with the urban elements including: street, waterways along the street, walls and stairs in the street border, and natural and unnatural potentials of the street was important. Therefore, several questions were considered to investigate these harmonies.

Some questions investigated the level of the artworks being interesting in general, artworks made with recycled materials, unnatural elements in the artworks, artworks placed at the crossroads, parks, entrance of alleys, and entrance of subway and bus stations. One of the important questions investigates the level of bringing Nowruz (New Year) in respondents' minds by the artworks.

Table 1 shows the independent and dependent variables of the questionnaire. Multivariate regression analysis is performed to analyze the raw data of the filled questionnaires. Table 2 shows the results of linear regression analysis for collinearity diagnostics between variables. Multi-collinearity occurs when two or more of the independent variables are highly correlated and the effect of some variables might be underestimated. The collinearity diagnostics function in SPSS was used, giving two values, tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF).

Variable No.	Description	Variable levels
V1	Age	Young to old
V2	Gender	Female and male
V3	Education level	Low to high
V4	Job	In the field of art to unemployed
V5	Monthly income	Low to high
V6	Living city	Tehran and other cities
V7	Distance from living place to the street	Very low to very high
V8	Distance from working place to the street	Very low to very high
V9	Level of being interesting of the artworks in general	Very low to very high
V10	Level of being interesting of the artworks made with recycled materials	Very low to very high
V11	Level of harmony of the artworks with nature	Very low to very high
V12	Level of harmony of the artworks with waterways along the street	Very low to very high
V13	Level of being interesting of unnatural elements in the artworks	Very low to very high
V14	Level of harmony of the artworks with the street	Very low to very high
V15	level of harmony of the artworks on the walls in the street border	Very low to very high
V16	Level of harmony of the artworks on the stairs in the street border	Very low to very high
V17	Level of being interesting of the artworks placed at the crossroads	very low to very high

<sup>1</sup> <http://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/130091>(viewed: 10/18/2016)

<sup>2</sup> <http://hamshahrionline.ir/details/163208>(viewed: 10/15/2016)

V18	Level of being interesting of the artworks placed in the parks	very low to very high
V19	Level of being interesting of the artworks placed in the entrance of alleys	very low to very high
V20	Level of being interesting of the artworks placed in the entrance of subway and bus stations	Very low to very high
V21	Level of bringing Nowruz (new year) in minds by the artworks	Very low to very high
V22	Amount of taking selfies with the artworks	Very low to very high
V23	Amount of tendency to touch the artworks	Very low to very high
V24	Level of being interesting of lighting effects of the artworks in night	Very low to very high
V25	Level of tendency to walk along the street for looking at the artworks	Very low to very high
V26	Level of harmony of the artworks with natural and unnatural potentials of the street	Very low to very high
V27	Possibility of seeing similar urban art projects in Tehran in the past	Yes and no
V28	level of recommendation of similar but permanent urban art projects	Very low to very high

**Table 1:** The independent and dependent variables of the questionnaire.

Independent variable	Collinearity statistics	
	Tolerance	VIF
V1	0.764	1.31
V2	0.782	1.28
V3	0.735	1.36
V4	0.86	1.163
V5	0.721	1.387
V6	0.831	1.203
V7	0.944	1.059
V8	0.735	1.36

**Table 2:** Linear regression analysis for collinearity diagnostics.

Tolerance indicates how much of each independent variable that is not explained by the other independent variables in the model. All the independent variables included in the analyses scored higher than the threshold 0.2 on the diagnostic measure of tolerance. VIF is an index measuring how much the variance of a coefficient is increased because of collinearity. Typically, a VIF value greater than 10 is of concern which all of our explanatory factors had lower VIF values [17]<sup>3</sup>.

A number of 250 respondents were randomly selected from citizens with different demographic information. Some of the questionnaires were distributed among the citizens randomly in different parts of Vali-Asr Street and remained questionnaires were distributed among the people who had published images about the Baharestan festival on Instagram. Respondents filled in the questionnaire, guided by interviewer.

## Results and Discussion

Demographic analysis of respondents indicated that 42% of them were women and the remain were men. In terms of education, more than 49% of respondents had a master's degree who have the highest frequency and then, 39% had a bachelor's degree. In terms of employment, 42% of respondents were employed in non-artistic fields, 20% in the field of art, 13% art students, 21% non-artistic students, and 4% were unemployed. In terms of monthly income, 39% of respondents had an income less than 300 USD, 4% more than 2500 USD, and the remain had incomes between 300 to 2500 USD.

In terms of living city, 79% of respondents lived in Tehran and the remain were living in other cities in Iran. 85% of respondents were living in neighborhoods more than 500 meters away from Vali-Asr Street and the remain were living in the neighborhoods with a maximum distance of five minutes' walk from Vali-Asr Street. The workplace of 76% of respondents had a distance higher than 500 meters to the Street and the remain were working in the closer neighborhoods.

Table 3 shows the comments of the respondents about different aspects of Baharestan Festival. Level of being interesting of each aspect, from 'very low' to 'very high' is shown in this table in percent. As can be seen, the majority of the respondents stated that different aspects of artworks presented in Baharestan Festival was interesting in total. The attractiveness of the festival was 'high' or 'very high' for 64% of respondents, 29% had no specific comment, and it was 'low' for 7%.

Given that some artists used recycled materials such as plastic bottles in their artworks, the respondents' attention to the use of these materials was investigated as a question and the results showed that these artworks were attractive for the respondents.

<sup>3</sup> [http://fararu.com/fa/news/209627/\(viewed:10/8/2016\)](http://fararu.com/fa/news/209627/(viewed:10/8/2016)).

Variable	Percentage (%)				
	Very low	Low	Moderate	High	Very high
V9	4	3	29	30	34
V10	1	6	18	41	34
V11	0	11	21	39	29
V12	8	11	28	31	22
V13	7	18	21	31	23
V14	7	15	21	37	20
V15	7	15	25	35	18
V16	4	14	28	34	20
V17	4	17	23	35	21
V18	4	20	30	25	21
V19	7	15	46	22	10
V20	7	21	37	17	18
V21	8	14	37	28	13
V22	22	11	30	23	14
V23	20	10	27	28	15
V24	13	17	35	20	15
V25	10	6	30	28	26
V26	4	14	37	37	8
V28	8	8	11	21	52

**Table 3:** Comments of the respondents about different aspects of Baharestan festival.

The interaction of the festival with environment and, in particular, sycamore trees in the street was acceptable due to the respondents' comments. The relationship of festival works with waterways along the street, which is a part of the identity of the street, was also remarkable. The interaction of artworks with unnatural elements, such as flooring, street furniture, etc. was appropriate, according to the responders<sup>4</sup>.

According to the height difference of Vali-Asr Street with the surrounding streets, there are some local accesses available by stairs. The artworks implemented on the stairs were also attractive by visitors. Some artworks were installed at the margins of Mellat and Laleh Parks, which are located in Vali-Asr Street. The general attention to these works was not considerable.

Along with Vali-Asr Street, four subway stations and several bus stations are located. Since the subway entrances are considered as gateways to the underground and bus stops are waiting places of passengers, some of the artworks were placed in these stations. Aspects which the respondents paid less attention to were the artworks placed in the entrance of alleys and the ones placed in the entrance of subway and bus stations.

Furthermore, the festival was held on the occasion of Nowruz which has its own customs, including family gathering together, visiting, or use of components such as the Haft Sin colored eggs and Easter grass.

The use of these elements in the artworks was appropriate due to the respondents' comments. Placemaking with volumetric artworks can be studied by factors such as zest for taking selfie-pictures, a tendency to touch the artworks, and the attractiveness of lighting effects.

Furthermore, the time spent being in a space not as a passing space, but as a destination has been investigated and the results showed that this kind of placemaking is done at the festival.

Table 4 shows the results of logistic regression analyses of the feedback of respondents about Baharestan Project.

There was a positive, significant relationship between the education level of respondents and level of being interesting of the artworks in general. The age of respondents had a negative, significant effect on paying attention to the artworks made with recycled materials. Respondents who had a job related to art commented on harmony of the artworks with nature and paying attention to unnatural elements in the artworks more than those who had a non-related job.

<sup>4</sup> <http://zibasazi.ir/fa/urban-arts/> (viewed:14/08 /2016).

Dependent	Constant	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8
V9	2.661 (1.075)b	-0.188 (0.150)	0.175 (0.287)	0.221 (0.091)b	-0.073 (0.119)	0.035 (0.146)	-0.066 (0.151)	0.305 (0.211)	0.200 (0.175)
V10	2.995 (0.948)b	-0.207 (0.132)c	0.270 (0.253)	0.185 (0.168)	0.042 (0.105)	-0.104 (0.129)	0.067 (0.133)	0.098 (0.081)	0.078 (0.088)
V11	4.185 (1.002)a	-0.084 (0.140)	-0.336 (0.267)	-0.101 (0.178)	-0.446 (0.111)a	0.192 (0.136)	-0.095 (0.140)	-0.001 (0.085)	0.054 (0.093)
V12	2.359 (1.192)	0.153 (0.166)	-0.409 (0.318)	0.117 (0.212)	0.121 (0.132)	0.258 (0.162)	0.103 (0.167)	0.152 (0.101)	0.104 (0.111)
V13	2.663 (1.119)b	-0.138 (0.156)	-0.353 (0.299)	-0.079 (0.199)	-0.374 (0.024)a	0.195 (0.152)	0.506 (0.107)a	0.083 (0.095)	0.108 (0.104)
V14	1.664 (1.160)	-0.157 (0.162)	-0.219 (0.309)	0.252 (0.206)	0.043 (0.129)	0.362 (0.357)	0.176 (0.163)	0.120 (0.099)	0.096 (0.108)
V15	3.531 (1.168)b	-0.037 (0.163)	-0.630 (0.212)b	0.147 (0.208)	-0.005 (0.130)	0.013 (0.158)	0.173 (0.164)	0.003 (0.099)	0.066 (0.108)
V16	3.801 (1.065)a	-0.103 (0.149)	-0.544 (0.184)b	-0.048 (0.189)	0.201 (0.118)	0.151 (0.144)	-0.121 (0.149)	-0.075 (0.090)	0.212 (0.099)
V17	4.723 (1.119)a	-0.023 (0.156)	-0.877 (0.198)a	-0.159 (0.199)	0.144 (0.124)	0.069 (0.152)	-0.087 (0.157)	0.069 (0.095)	0.054 (0.104)
V18	2.889 (1.168)	-0.225 (0.163)c	-0.210 (0.312)	0.315 (0.208)	0.161 (0.130)	0.012 (0.158)	-0.145 (0.164)	0.049 (0.099)	0.005 (0.108)
V19	2.019 (1.014)	-0.126 (0.141)	0.057 (0.270)	0.177 (0.180)	0.108 (0.113)	0.076 (0.137)	-0.203 (0.142)	0.276 (0.086)c	0.007 (0.094)
V20	2.888 (1.085)	-0.166 (0.151)	-0.227 (0.289)	-0.098 (0.193)	0.156 (0.121)	0.117 (0.147)	0.048 (0.152)	0.390 (0.092)c	-0.185 (0.101)
V21	3.486 (1.127)b	-0.284 (0.157)c	-0.054 (0.301)	-0.015 (0.200)	0.083 (0.125)	0.003 (0.153)	0.403 (0.158)b	0.034 (0.096)	0.036 (0.105)
V22	3.450 (1.382)b	-0.428 (0.093)b	-0.573 (0.169)a	0.046 (0.246)	0.183 (0.153)	-0.128 (0.187)	0.261 (0.194)	0.127 (0.117)	-0.140 (0.128)
V23	2.952 (1.374)	-0.370 (0.102)b	0.011 (0.366)	0.121 (0.244)	0.117 (0.153)	0.003 (0.186)	0.101 (0.193)	0.027 (0.117)	0.095 (0.128)
V24	2.634 (1.224)	-0.293 (0.131)c	-0.243 (0.326)	0.102 (0.218)	0.190 (0.136)	0.025 (0.166)	0.043 (0.172)	-0.177 (0.104)	0.120 (0.114)
V25	4.035 (1.186)a	-0.570 (0.065)a	0.042 (0.316)	0.180 (0.211)	0.056 (0.132)	0.078 (0.161)	-0.107 (0.166)	0.066 (0.101)	0.066 (0.110)
V26	2.355 (0.967)a	-0.127 (0.135)	0.135 (0.258)	-0.018 (0.172)	-0.203 (0.007)a	0.066 (0.131)	0.166 (0.136)	0.098 (0.082)	-0.017 (0.090)
V27	0.699 (0.515)	-0.013 (0.072)	-0.153 (0.137)	0.002 (0.091)	0.020 (0.057)	-0.015 (0.070)	0.330 (0.172)	-0.005 (0.044)	-0.008 (0.048)
V28	4.323 (1.276)a	-0.375 (0.118)b	-0.379 (0.340)	0.356 (0.127)c	0.178 (0.142)	0.027 (0.173)	-0.347 (0.179)b	-0.157 (0.108)	0.171 (0.118)
a: 1% significance level									
b: 5% significance level									
c: 10% significance level									

**Table 4:** The logistic regression analyses of the feedback of respondents about Baharestan Project.

Furthermore, respondents who lived in other cities were interested to unnatural elements in the artworks more than Tehran citizens. Women reported the harmony of the artworks on the walls and stairs in the street border and artworks at the crossroads more than men.

Younger respondents enjoyed the artworks placed in the parks more than older ones. Respondents who lived in neighborhoods far away from Vali-Asr Street were more interested in the artworks placed in the entrance of alleys, and subway and bus stations. Younger people and those who lived in other cities stated that the artworks brought Nowruz in their minds [18-23]<sup>5</sup>.

Youths and women tended to take selfie-pictures more than men and older people. Furthermore, youths tended to touch the artworks, enjoyed the artificial lighting of the artworks, and walk along the street for looking at the artworks more than older people. The respondents who had art-related jobs stated the harmony of the artworks with natural and unnatural potentials of the street. Younger respondents, more educated people, and who lived in Tehran recommended similar but permanent urban art projects in the city<sup>6,7,8</sup>.

## Conclusion

Public art is artistic set of actions for the open spaces and available to the public. Hubbard [24-30] as an advocate of public art, emphasizes that the constant formation of public art introduces it as a means to humanize the built environment and adding concept to abstract landscapes and converts the space into the place. Baharestan Festival which was held in Vali-Asr Street in Tehran for Nowruz is a good sample of placemaking in a 17.5 kilometers long street in the heart of Tehran.

Results of this study showed that the artworks of the festival were able to bring New Year's perceptions with Iranian values attributes to the respondents' minds. Furthermore, the artworks were regarded to make the public space lively. This project had potential to act as a medium to spread positive messages among the citizens. This festival and similar urban art projects can further be considered as a new form of Iranian contemporary placemaking method.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.fardanews.com/fa/news504745/> (viewed: 14/08/2016).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.iscanews.ir/news/619727/> (viewed:10/8/2016).

<sup>7</sup> "Why Public Art is Important", [dirt.asla.org/2012/10/15/why-public-art-is-important/](http://dirt.asla.org/2012/10/15/why-public-art-is-important/)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.tavoosonline.com/Articles/ArticleDetailEn.aspx?src=211&Page=1> (viewed:18 /8/2016).