Mural of the American flag on south side of Karim Khan Zand Boulevard, Tehran.

Tehran.

Mural of the Iran-Iraq War Veteran on Ferdowsi Avenue, Tehran.  

Propaganda murals and posters extolling the virtues of the Islamic Republic of Iran are familiar sights in the urban space of Tehran. While their bold messages refer to a repressive regime, they coexist with movements and ideologies of popular resistance and ultimately contribute to the complexity of Iran's contemporary socio-political development and environment. 

The Murals

The design of the murals falls into four thematic categories: 1) the continuity of the position and legitimacy of the Faghih or the jurisprudent; 2) the concept and reality of the Iranian-Shi'a-Republican meta-narrative; 3) the visual aesthetic quality consistent throughout in the examples seen in Tehran; 4) the continuity of the position and legitimacy of the Faghih or the jurisprudent.

The (Re)Claiming

The most striking quality of these murals consists of their site and scale. They are painted on the sides of private and public tall buildings and are visible from the main avenues. The well-designed, well-planned, and well-placed representations are intended to be seen from far and by many, where the Iranian-Shi'a-Islamic Republic meta-narrative is made. Tehran’s urban planning incorporates the place and motif of these murals as integral to its master map. The proportions, the colours, the figures and their formal relations to each other within the frame are meticulously calculated and assembled. These signs and their meanings are intentional. Nevertheless, the presence of these murals is also very practical. After the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, great effort and money was spent to turn Tehran into a more agreeable urban place. When President Rafsanjani launched his reform program in 1989, he appointed Ahmadinejad as the innovative mayor of Tehran. After a decade of war and revolution, Tehran had 10 million inhabitants who were suffocating in a city designed for 5 million people. Karbaschi managed to bring many positive changes to the urban complex; the murals and posters extolling the virtues of the Islamic Republic are also manifestations of visions, veterans are rewarded and glorified, often at the expense of the dead. In the narrative of martyrdom on these murals, the male soldier – always white and often young – is the sole protagonist of that war. He is brave but modest, religious but proactive, and distinctively non-Western looking. He is often juxtaposed with a religious figure that guides him on the path to God. The third group of images comes directly out of the iconography of the 1979 revolution. The image represents the American flag with skeleton-heads and falling-bombs replacing the stars and the stripes. In Latin lettering, the writing reads, ‘Down with the USA’; the typology of these murals conveys the topic of the ‘Great Satan’ which involves the United States and Israel. The images are always abstracted and reduced to familiar icons such as the American flag, revolutionary slogans such as ‘Death to America’. The social unity of the revolution is recalled and maintained by the narrative of these paintings that evokes the perpetual dehumanization of the revolutionary ‘other’. This ‘other’ has become a sign that is vital to post-revolutionary Iranian identity precisely because the history depicted in this image is missing; the image fails to tell the story of Mohammad-Reza Shah who took his cues from the CIA, hence the American flag. Tehran is rich in these and other images that portray the Islamic Republic of Iran as a great power, a perfect example of the unity of the revolution is recalled and maintained by the narrative of these paintings that evokes the perpetual dehumanization of the revolutionary ‘other’. This ‘other’ has become a sign that is vital to post-revolutionary Iranian identity precisely because the history depicted in this image is missing; the image fails to tell the story of Mohammad-Reza Shah who took his cues from the CIA, hence the American flag. Tehran is rich in these and other images that portray the Islamic Republic of Iran as a great power, a perfect example of美丽, honesty, courage, devotion, etc. At times, the messages on these public signs are literally clear; the black ink on the white background declines ethics as universally self-evident. The bold and simple aesthetics of the murals reinforce their equally simplistic and absolute morality.

The References

- Talin Grigir, MA is a PhD candidate in the History of Architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, focusing on nineteenth-century Iranian public monuments. She received her S.MArchS from MIT and her BArch from USC. E-mail: talin@MIT.EDU

International Art & Cultures Newsletter | #82 - August 2003