

Alriwaq: The Power of Art in Creating Public Spaces

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Abstract

Bahrain like all Gulf Cooperation Council countries has transformed in a few decades from a traditional country to a modern one due to oil discovery. This modern life has created many problems within the city; the most obvious is the lack of public spaces. Modern buildings and roads replaced the courtyard, alleys and markets of the past, which were a place of social gatherings. With the latter in mind this paper would like to point out an art gallery in Adliya in Manama that has been able to recreate these experiences within Block 338. The gallery creates a few events around the block during the year which brings life to it. Adliya was not a dead space per se before these events however there were empty pockets with little or no human actives in the block. Those who visited Adliya would usually park their cars as close to the restaurant they are heading to. Al-Riwaq transformed underutilized outdoor and indoor spaces into public ones that encouraged social interactions. The event that will be analyzed within this paper is Alwan 338; this art event changed the characteristics of an abandoned building, a lifeless square and alleys to places full of people that brought life to them and added to the enthusiasm of the block. The goal of this paper is to investigate the effect of Al-Riwaq, specifically Alwan 338 in creating public spaces.

Keywords: *City, Manama, Public Space, Public Art, Urban Revitalisation*

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1. Introduction

Cities are growing and changing at a rapid rate in the age of technology and globalization. These changes have affected the spatial relations within a city and as a result the social relations of people using these spaces; Bahrain is not an exception to the effects of modernization. It is a country of around 800 kilometres square in size and with a population of 1,200,000 approximately. Bahrain lacks public spaces and this has been addressed by many urban critiques as well as the government itself. In 2012 the Bahraini Ministry of Culture had launched a competition to redesign Bab Market stating the following:

Almost a year prior to the competition, protests had taken place in Bahrain on a roundabout, perhaps a clear indicator of the lack of public spaces for people to gather in. These same protests had caused a divide in community and the production of two opposing public spaces; the roundabout where anti-government individuals would gather and the outdoor facilities of a mosque where the pro-government individuals would gather. However a public space should be flexible, neutral and allows for countless social interactions (Madanipour, 2003). These spaces were not neutral, flexible or open to any other social interaction that deviated from the political agenda they were created for. The use of such facilities as a place to gather is again a clear indicator of the lack of these spaces in Bahrain, an issue the Ministry of Culture was addressing through the competition.

Ali Madanipour explores the definitions of public space in his book *Public and Private spaces of the City* in different literatures. These various definitions can be summarised in the following: a public space is a non-private space where impersonal and personal interactions can take place and is constituted by three dimensions: a) access, b) agency and c) interest (Madanipour, 2003). Al-Riwaq – an art gallery in Bahrain – has engaged in the search and creation of public spaces that serve the community through its art exhibitions and more strongly through the art event Alwan 338. The following is a case study about an art event that has engaged the community and created public spaces that allowed for social interactions and that also addressed the issues of division in the Bahraini community.

2. Al-Riwaq: The Art Arcade

“Art is a powerful means of infecting those around us with ideas, feelings and moods.”

Baer in Madanipour, 2003: 128

Al-Riwaq - which means Arcade in Arabic - is an art space found in 1998 by Bayan al-Barak Kanoo which is situated in Block 338, Adliya which is in the capital of Bahrain, Manama. The founder Bayan Kanoo who was born in Iraq and moved to Bahrain in 1986 had played a big role in activating the art and culture scene in Bahrain. She is the director of Al-Riwaq and founder of Kanoo International Cultural Centre of the Arts. Furthermore she is active on both regional



Figure 1 Al-Riwaq Art Space, the exterior façade of the gallery. (Al-Riwaq, 2013)

and international levels as she is a board member of Al Mawrid Cultural Resources and a previous board member of the Arab Fund for Art and Culture (Mostafa, 2012). In 2006 Bayan converted Al-Riwaq to a non-profit art organisation and in November 2009 she had shifted the gallery to its current permanent location in Adliya. The current building consists of four floors that contain an exhibition area, a gift shop, administration offices, work studios and a cafe with an indoor and outdoor sitting area. The gallery provides exhibitions for those interested in art, residency and educational programs for artists, workshops that engage the public and a casual environment for those who simply want to hang out. Al-Riwaq nurture's local talents connecting them to international artists and institutions while collaborating with international artists from around the world and providing art exchange programs.

Al-Riwaq envisions that the role of art should transcend observed and admired art objects to ones that serve the community. It has created a platform that enables artists to freely express their thoughts on contemporary issues and engage the public in debates. Therefore it is no surprise that it was Al-Riwaq that had initiated Alwan 338; an art event that had an overlying theme of providing a public space that would act as an active agent in bringing the community together. The following is a more detailed account of how art was deployed to create spaces that engaged the public, encouraged interactions and addressed the issue of disintegration in the Bahraini community.

3. Alwan 338: The Colors of Block 338

Alwan 338 is an event that took place between March 15 and April 22 of 2012, during which period Adliya became the destination of art lovers, youth and families. The name of Alwan 338 is derived from "Alwan" the Arabic word for colour and 338 the number of the block it took place in. The event is an art intervention which included workshops aimed to transform a block which is associated with fine dining into one that offers a public space that engages the community. Alwan 338 was part of the Spring of Culture 2012 festival which is a series of events carried out by the Ministry of Culture in Bahrain. It is worth mentioning that during the same festival the Ministry of Culture was addressing the lack for public spaces in Bahrain and had launched a competition to convert Bab Al Bahrain - a square in Manama currently used as a parking lot - into a public square.

This art intervention came at a time of political unrest that followed the 2011 protests which had caused a sectarian and political divide amongst people in Bahrain. Therefore the theme for this art event addressed these issues boldly and its success could be attributed to the fact that the art on display resonated with many people from all classes, religions and ethnicities in the society who found their own thoughts, fears and emotions in different art pieces. In addition to the displayed art there was a public square that people gathered in, and the alleys around the block had art works which could only be uncovered by walking around the block. Additionally a substantial number of restaurants around the block allowed art to be displayed inside them while also agreeing to be sponsors of the event.

The public were provided by a map designed by the artists of Alwan 338 to inform them of the location of displays and activities around the block. The design of the map was similar to the ones used for London Undergrounds. The map was marked with stations around Block 338; the three main stations were Almahata, Bohemia and The Park. In between were the smaller stations that are the restaurants and the street art installations.



Figure 2 Alwan 338, the icon of the art event was created 3d model made out of paint buckets and mounted on the road leading to Al Riwaq. (Personal photograph taken by the author)

3.1. Almahata - The station

“You are suddenly transported into another world – to a vibrant subculture that infiltrates and eradicates monotint of everyday life.” (Seno, 2010: 10)

The journey through Alwan starts at the building of Al-Riwaq which was transformed into a busy pseudo-train station and re-named AlMahata which is station in Arabic. The two young artists Mohamed Sharkawy and Waheeda Malullah set art installations in it that conceptualised the idea that our lives are nothing but a journey through multiple stations. The space served as one of the main station people stopped at, where they would take a tour to view the work, get their maps and event brochure. The design of Al-Riwaq (AKA Almahta) allows for free circulation between the spaces which are visually connected to one another. The facade of the building is made of glass and allows any passer-by to view the activity going on inside. The first floor is partially overlooking the ground floor which creates a vertical visual connection. The walls are coloured in white whilst the floor is grey providing a good background to display the art installations. Opposite the cafe counter is a wall that has been drawn on with a black pen by various artists and people who go to Al-Riwaq. This interesting wall is a means of communication between those who share that space at different times.

3.2. Bohemia

“Mass-mediated, declaratory, crowded, and in your face, the city may be the best place to keep the kinds of secrets that need to be shared.”
Seno, 2010: 85

Bohemia was an exhibition located in a building that is scheduled to be demolished within a 5 minutes walking distance from Al-Riwaq gallery and located next to a posh restaurant. The exhibition that was held there had an independent theme than Almahata and it was “I am the other” which was described as following:

“Where does the self end and the other begin? How can we exclude the other, when we ourselves are ‘the other’ to those around us? Visiting Artist at Al-Riwaq Art Space Mo Reda collaborates with artists from Bahrain to present an evoking exhibition that takes place in an abandoned restaurant in the heart of Adliya.”

Al-Riwaq, 2013

The theme clearly invokes emotions and memories close to the Bahraini society that has been divided due to the unrest resulting in a new loudly hostile language in Bahrain. This language is based on creating enemies out of others who are different religiously, politically or ethnically. Bohemia was simply posing questions that many in the community were searching for answers to and that touched them on a personal level and played on the collective memory of the community. The artists themselves were from different backgrounds and all of them had experienced the feeling of being an “other” to someone.

Perhaps due to the sensitive topic the exhibition was touching upon a different approach was needed to design the space. That is clear from the building facade that had bicycles mounted on it. The odd choice of the artist to use life-sized bicycles as a wall treatment aroused the curiosity of anyone who passed by making them want to investigate the inside of the building. Inside the four stories of the old building including its rooftop the public found themselves in an



Figure 3 Almahata, the exhibition that was held at Al-Riwaq art gallery by the artists Mohamed Sharkawy (above) and Waheed Malullah (below) who tried to express that life is nothing but a journey. (Personal photograph taken by Rasha Yousif)



Figure 4 Bohemia Façade, the bikes mounted on the façade of an abandoned building. (Personal photograph taken by Rasha Yousif)

intense artistic, political, social and intellectual debate. In each corner an artist had put their signature and interpretation of the gallery's theme. The result was a mosaic of drawings, photographs, words, video and sound installations, live art performances and other settings. Walking through the building people were surprised at every corner with something new and unexpected. "The Other" exhibition clearly wanted to address the disintegration in the society, however that would not be possible had the display been static. Therefore through the building the public find themselves every once in a while face to face with an artist who is performing live.



Figure 5 The People Want, an art piece by Tamadher Al-Fahal that was created as a live performance. Written on the wall was the phrase "The people want" which Tamadher stroked out and wrote "I want" as the public watched and interacted. The performance was an expression that people are tired of political and religious leaders who assume they represent people and speak in their name. (Personal photograph taken by Rasha Yousif)



Figure 6 Ministry of Truth, an art installation by Tala Bashmi. The artist was referring to how the media has become an unquestionable source of information. (Personal photograph taken by Rasha Yousif)



Figure 7 The Yellow Book, an art installation by Ferar Sroor. The map represented a planet that he ruled and where people followed the laws of his yellow book. (Personal photograph taken by Rasha Yousif)

3.3 The Park: Reused Materials

“...a process that converts intuition into reality, by selecting an “accident” and understanding it’s potential aesthetic significance and power. Chance and randomness are constants of creativity.”

Gasparina, 2009: 43

The third major station in Alwan 338 was “The Park” which was a pop-up-up park set in an empty, hidden and mostly unused square. Most of the materials used in The Park were reused; from the curtain of plastic bottles with flowers inside them that define the borders of the park to the colourful cushions set into car tires made into stools. At one side was a large screen set on wooden crates that displayed movies. At the other side was a traditional tea corner, where you can help yourself to Karak (tea with milk) and Nikhi (Falafel). At one corner a bookshelf was set with a wide variety of books donated from people who responded to Al-Riwaq’s call for books. The reuse of everyday materials for the design created a relaxed atmosphere for the public where they could hang out with family, friends or alone. The wooden library held book readings for kids and next to it was a corner where art workshops for kids were held. It is worth revealing that the children activities were held by volunteers; the author of this paper has participated in doing a book reading for kids. The unused space was converted into a lively square where people came from all over the island to watch movies sitting on the cushioned tires or to hang out with friends or even get to know other people who shared their passion for art.



Figure 8 Reuse of Empty Bottles, the use of plastic bottles as pots for plants and as a design element



Figure 9 The Traditional Café, it was set in one corner of the park and people could order traditional Bahraini food from it. (Alwan 338,



Figure 10 The Outdoor Cinema, some of the park visitors sitting on the stools made out of Car tires watching a movie at the park on movie night. At the left corner is the bookcase. (Alwan 338, 2012)

3.4. Alleys: The Spaces in Between

“...the space they occupy and the space they leave unoccupied complement each other as the positive and the negative.”

Lefebvre, 1991: 301

The alleys that are between the three main stations previously mentioned also had art installations in them. Following the paths indicated on the map you will discover art installations on the walls of the houses and restaurants in block 338. It is worth mentioning here that both residents and restaurant owners had agreed to cooperate with Al-Riwaq and allowed them to use their facades for Alwan 338. On some evenings a live band played in one of the alleys for anyone who wanted to sit down and enjoy the performance or for people passing by. An aimless walk around Block 338 would allow people to discover intriguing art installations that would make them stop, reflect, laugh sometimes and even provoke onlookers to discuss the installations with one another.



Figure 11 Music and Prayer, this installation was found in one of the alleys leading from Al-Riwaq to the Park. (Personal photograph by the author)



Figure 12 LOL, Sorry about your wall, this building had walls mounted on its wall, a graffiti to the side. The camel was part of another project called the Caravan which aimed to gather money to fight against sickle cell anaemia and was initiated by Wihda Wahda to unite Bahrainis. (Personal photograph by the author)

3.5. Social Media Networks: The Online Public Square

The effect of Alwan 338 extended beyond its physical settings into social media networks especially Twitter and Instagram. Hashtags such as #Alwan338 #Alriwaq #Block338 and #Bahrain became an online public space where Alwan 338 visitors would share their experience with one another and provoking their followers to visit the physical setting. Some people who knew one another online only would actually meet for the first time at Al-Riwaq during one of the workshops that were taking place or at the park. The online sphere brought the experience close to many people before they visited Block 338 and engaged them. The sharing of photos on Instagram, which was getting popular in 2012, helped attract the public to the space. Photos of the facade with bicycles and a park made of what was usually considered trash aroused the curiosity of many people. The design of the space was different than what people in Bahrain were accustomed to seeing and the photos on social media intrigued people to visit the place at least once.

4. Conclusion

Public spaces are created for the possibility of interaction between members of the community; whether it is physical verbal or even a visual interaction. However a public space cannot be a tabula rasa, it has to invoke emotions which stem from our memories. A public space has to play on collective memory of a community and public art is able to do so. One cannot deny the notion of groups assigning meaning to a space as a result of their collective memories. This idea has been studied by Anne Buttimer however it is yet to be accepted in conventional practice (Hubbard & Kitchen, 2010). Public art plays on our memory and on us using a referencing system to dissect the art we are viewing. Art is used to make what is ugly and abandoned beautiful and useful, it also creates a parallel reality; a reality we are trying to reach.

This research could be carried out further in the future to study a few themes that have been mention in this paper:

- 1) A more in-depth analysis of the effect of social media in creating public spaces and finding exact statistics to document the social reach online and translate it to the social reach of the cyber sphere
- 2) A more in-depth analysis of each of the art work in Bohemia and a discourse analysis on the written concept of each piece
- 3) The occupation of public spaces politically by specific groups in the society who prohibit the access of the other

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