

Original Research Article

An Investigation of the Concept of Alley Territory as a Cultural Element in Iranian Neighborhoods

Mohammad Mahdi Shabani ^{1*}, Seyed Amir Mansouri ²

1. Ph.D. Candidate in Architecture, Nazar Research Center, Tehran, Iran.
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, University of Teran, Iran.

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Abstract | A bilateral relationship between culture and space has been reflected by the architecture of different historical periods and across different geographies around the globe. As the current platform for life, a city is mainly influenced by the needs of its residents and cultural norms, in Iranian cities, neighborhoods are considered to be a common form of housing. In many studies, the close relationships between the neighborhood and Iranian culture and its adaptation to that culture have been explored. As a result, the structure of the traditional neighborhood has defined many tourist destinations in Iranian cities. To gain practical knowledge of the neighborhood, this study focuses on the concept of “alley” to see how it serves as a representative of the communication network in neighborhoods including streets, alleys, bazaars, etc. This study also attempts to examine and introduce this space as an architecture influenced by the culture and social needs of the time. To this end, this study scrutinizes the development and current events in the alley through the concept of territory. In this study, the concept of territory is used as a platform for communication and interactions occurring between individuals and communities. It is assumed that the spatial organization of the alley creates social communication and at the same time the desired privacy. It also responds to the cultural demands of residents through the objective and subjective concept of territory along with its functional nature occurs. This concept, aligned with the unplanned body of alleys, contributes to the possible spatial capacities for creating and expressing territorial and collective behaviors. It also transforms the general space of alleys into sub-spaces with specific uses and at the disposal of different groups.

Keyword | Alley, Iranian Neighborhood, Culture, Physical Territories, Territorial Behaviors.

Introduction | Public arenas have played a key role in the development and continuity of society throughout the history of civilization. The reason is that they can serve as a platform for social interactions in the city. The occurrence of current collective events

and social memories has always turned this area of cities into a destination where the common culture is being practiced. An urban street as a public arena can increase the spatial capacity of the city if it is active. The reason is that it contributes to the vivacity of urban and environmental vitality and also promotes interactions. In return, social interactions in the environment are also directly associated with the number of spatial and mental territories in that environment. This means that the concept of territory is important for the settlement of man and his coexistence with the society in the constructed space. Pastalan (1970)

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** Corresponding author: mmahdi.shabani@gmail.com, + 09126023962

refers to physical territories as a limited space used by individuals and groups as a specific area. He adds that territory is psychologically identified with space and turns into a symbol with a sense of belonging and physical composition.

Hence, to gain a proper reading of the alley as a cultural and tourism element, we need to examine the concept of territory in the alley. Analysis of the territory in the alley as one of the important elements shaping the neighborhood requires examination of human's reading, his relationships, and needs in the neighborhood. What is happening in the traditional Iranian neighborhood is different from a one-sided view of human material needs. The common culture in the traditional Iranian neighborhood, which is dominated by the Islamic view, considers a spectrum for life arguing that it can be led individually or through interactions with the community. Basically, according to the Iranian and Islamic culture, human beings have both individual and collective status. Principles such as respecting the rights of neighbors and interactions and agreement among residents are important, and any behavior that leads to residents' dissatisfaction in a neighborhood is disapproved.

It can be said that this general look forms the cultural foundation of traditional neighborhoods. As a result, the neighborhood is formed based on responding to housing, bio-social, and constructive human interaction needs, as well as finding a sense of privacy alone or within the family. What has been shared by traditional Iranian urban planning is the meaning of the public-private relationship in the city which implies a relationship between home and city. Neighborhood and neighborhood space gain their identities as a transition space connecting private spaces to public ones. Alley refers to space that accompanies a person from the time he is leaving home taking him from his private space, namely the home, to completely public space through the semi-private and the semi-public space. In a reverse process, it leads the person to his safe place which is home. This direct spatial interaction with the privacy and public spaces of the neighborhood forms a special role for this spatial element in the structure of the neighborhood. Also, due to the cultural presuppositions of continuous and deep neighborhood communication, the alley is not just a place for comings and goings but a place to stop and hold many collective events in the neighborhood.

The concept of the alley, a subject of architecture and urban planning in the Iranian neighborhood, is not the only remnant of the masses built together rather, it is part of the masses which been formed in a cohesive

network through which both open and semi-open space complexes in the neighborhoods are usable for their residents. Alley as a collective living space is shaped based on the culture of social life common among Iranians. It is a concept that has had different geometric shapes over the years and in different geographies. In desert cities and central Iran, alleys were often level. They are surrounded by high walls and are narrow due to climatic conditions and the angle of the sun. In mild and mountainous areas, they are staircase-like and are different in level. In the central areas where is snowfall and risk of freezing, they are wider. This width makes them more exposed to the sun during the day. In the northern regions of Iran, the alleys can be identified with the walls of vegetation and their transparent appearance. Due to the climatic and cultural conditions in that region, they have a closer and more adjacent relationship with the houses, and in most cases, it is possible to see the houses from inside the alley.

However, the definition of an alley as a bio-space shaped by the culture of Iranian social life is relatively fixed. In this definition, climate, geography, and even cultural norms do affect its form though the effect is not enormous. Based on the definition proposed by Mansouri (2020) on the difference between a cultural element and a culture-making element, the form and morphology of the alley are not considered to be cultural elements. This study deals with the ontology of the alley emerging from Iranian Islamic bio-social culture.

Alley as a cultural element

According to Widlok (1997)'s studies, the socio-cultural influences of the environment play an important role in forming the orientation process and routing system. Familiarity with paths and streets is a way of relating identity to the environment. Von Miess argues access routes not only enable **people to move** but also serve as a factor reminding us of what has been seen and experienced (Von Meiss, 2007, 160). In Habibi's point of view, alleys and streets comprise the skeleton of a neighborhood, which includes all the normative and behavioral currents of the neighborhood, and organize not only its spatial organization but also infrastructural order (Habibi, 2002, 30).

Mansouri (2013, 59) considers the road as the most abundant urban space that has an important role in the meaning and function of the city. Through the lens of Islam, the city is like a context through which the society is formed and finds a different dignity and personality due to protective laws. In the evolutionary process, it has turned from the physical urban space into the public one with the possibility of public services

and finally has changed to the collective space creating social relations and collective identity for residents. Mansouri maintains that the alley in the Iranian Islamic city is the most important collective space that plays a key role in creating collective memory and realizing the neighborhood community. By looking at the organic forms of routes in historical contexts which is in contrast with the structure of streets in contemporary cities, one can understand how social interactions and the wishes of residents are shaped based on cultural and ritual patterns. The streets of public access routes among privately owned areas are examples of organic forms of the paths.

In his linguistic research on the road, Barati and Zarringalam (2013) have adopted a conceptual approach in the history of Iran and argued that the "road" is not only a route connecting two points but also paying to two different dimensions. These different aspects (which are more of a qualitative type) are evident in the different meanings and concepts of the words. In the definition of the term alley, he refers to the neighborhood and the small neighborhood, which is a sign of movement and pauses in this space at the same time. Using words such as dead-end road, Ashtikanan (reconciliation) alley, too narrow alley, and garden alley, he highlights the active and conceptual aspect of the spatial element of the alley in Iranian literature and culture. However, in new cities, the definitions of this space and different names are determined by the rules of urban traffic, and one-way, two-way alleys and streets supervise global urban contracts rather than being a semantic burden mixed with collective experiences and historical memory.

As a result, it can be said that the range of streets in the neighborhoods not only promotes movements but also serve as a place to stop, consequently, these spaces can form collective memories. In response, people need to belong to distinct space units. The distinction of each neighborhood and its public spaces are reflected in the definition of internal identity and its delimiting edges. When residents can attend the public space of neighborhoods with a sense of security and peace of mind both mentally and physically, they can think of it as their residential territory and part of their home. Many social activities are waiting for a safe space to take. In this case, any activity that is natural in the neighborhood at any given time can be freely formed and establish the social life of the residents.

Territory and alley: Mechanism of organizing human relations

According to what has been mentioned, when it comes

to the architecture of the Iranian neighborhood, the term alley refers to a conceptual element mixed with the community. In traditional Iranian culture, which is based on Islamic teachings, life falls on a spectrum ranging from individual to social, and from the human point of view. In other words, it has an individual and collective position. This general view forms the foundation of the cultural and social system of the Iranian neighborhood.

In contrast, in sociological and human-centered studies, the territory refers to a mechanism for organizing the relationship between one person and another and an individual with a group. It is a tool for going beyond a simple space that supports basic life needs such as identity, motivation, and security. Territory, as a basic need for all living things, makes it possible to organize the space around the individual or collective identity through continuous control over space, marking, and demarcation. It can be said that the territory is not necessarily spatial and physical, and it is important to understand it. Each individual and social group reacts and behaves based on their understanding of spatial territories.

Behavioral territorialism refers to a set of behaviors and perceptions that an individual or group expresses based on their sense of ownership of physical space. The sense of territorialism can be considered as a subset of the sense of belonging and familiarity with space, which creates a sense of distinction, privacy, and individual identity through levers imposed on space. In situations where territories do not exist or they do not function properly, there is a disorder in society. Behaviors resulting from a sense of territory can be distinguished and refined. Examples of behavioral expressions include ownership of space, participation, and responsibility in carrying out the territory-associated or collective affairs, monitoring the space, and defending the territory along with creating a sense of belonging and identity, and security. Each of these behaviors can be studied by researchers.

In a situation where, according to Lynch (1960), the city does not appear as a single entity, either good or bad, but is valued based on its perception of human beings, territory gives meaning to space. The tendency to be present in space increases with security, social control, and a sense of belonging. This continuity increases the dominance of individuals over society and the environment and creates security. As a result, under the concept of territory, space changes from abstract and meaningless form and turn into a meaningful notion. Lynch defines meaning as consistency, transparency, and legibility, which is the relationship between the body of the dwelling and the environment on the one

hand, and the concepts and values of non-space and perceptual aspects of life on the other. Achieving the expected mental space of territory and place based on its reality and existence is important because it leads to desirable patterns of behavior and social cohesion.

On a micro-scale, the neighborhood also has a significant influence on its area. This effect is reflected by a very high level of control and supervision seen compared to other areas, and it is considered a very influential area in any house. Porteous sees the house as the eternal symbol of the human self, which makes the most meaningful set resulting from the proximity of space, user, and time. As a result, the house can be considered the main and fundamental center of the territory (Porteous, 1976). The boundary of this level of territory sometimes appears with the placement of side streets, such as stairs that set a distinct threshold from the public street, but in many cases, this boundary is unclear to strangers. The neighborhood boundaries in such territories are so complex that they are not clear to others, yet there is security and social consensus. At such a level, territorial behaviors are both consensual and mutual, and the behaviors of the territory such as the right of an abyss, the right of a waterway, the right of roads, which are determined by agreement among residents, affect the shape of physical components. In practice, these behaviors determined the shape of the living space, and in particular the streets and alleys. According to Healey, the morphological issues of the city are related to social interactions and have an impact on the shape of the city (Healey, 1997, 23). Healey argues that if this aspect is ignored, there will be no basis for spatial planning and, consequently, permission to intervene in bio-complexes will not be issued (ibid.). According to what has been discussed, the territory can be considered as a simultaneous physical and behavioral concept on which the environment and man can affect. To further investigate the role of territory

in the evolution of the spatial-cultural element of the alley in two parts, we focus on physical territories and territorial behaviors (Fig. 1).

Physical territories in the alley

The main streets used to be the main link between the neighborhoods and their centers and played an important role in determining the territory of the neighborhoods. Local centers used to often form at the intersection of the main crossings, and most religious, educational, and service places were built in their vicinity. The main streets provided communication between neighborhood centers and important urban centers and played a major role in city life and communication. The linear bazaars of the neighborhoods were created along such streets. There was often a symbolic element such as a sabbatical, or a covered and elevated space at the intersection of the main and secondary passages whose purpose was to show the street. Saqakhans were symbolic elements that were built along the main streets and often at their intersections. However, although the alleys were less common than the main streets, they created a set of very important territory units within them. In fact, the organic texture of neighborhoods, the boundaries of land ownership and tolls, used to create curving streets that eliminate uniformity, attract passers-by and encourage them to explore spaces, and define more limited public territories. The width of alleys in some places provides a space for children to play and have a friendly conversation with neighbors. The height of the bodies depends on the height of the floors and the space adjacent to the building and the degree of privacy and security that the owner of the adjacent space wanted. The narrow width and high walls around, in addition to responding to climatic conditions and creating a more pleasant environment in the warm seasons, create an enclosed space that encouraged passers-by. In the following, with a closer look at the physical solutions of the territory used in the alley, we try to express the adaptation of the concept of the territory to the residential needs of the residents of the alley.

1. The organic texture of Iranian neighborhoods resulted in the natural and even unplanned formation of alleys. Houses located in cold cities or on steep slopes next to each other turned the alleys of the neighborhoods into a network of sloping roads. The use of stairs along the alley was a common idea to allow comings and goings. This idea at the same time helped to create a lot of territories. The doorsteps in front of one or more houses provided a semi-private space. In

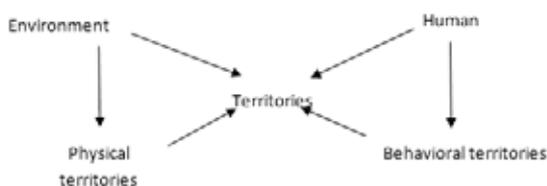


Fig. 1. Human communication in the environment falls under the concepts of physical and behavioral territories. Source: Authors.

addition, along the alley, you could find steps or stairs for sitting and gathering together, which were not necessarily adjacent to special houses and allowed alley residents to use the alley as a group for multi-purposes.

2. In the desert and relatively flat cities, this organic and unplanned texture contributes to forming alleys with many turns and different widths. Sometimes the narrow width of the street, successive turns, and the long length of the alley used to limit its use and give it a semi-general state. In addition, due to the geometric and organic shape of the alleys, depressions or openings could be found in many places that allow a group of people to use this space and stop there for a while. These spaces were hidden like a shelter in the turns of the alley.

3. The simultaneous formation of houses and alleys as well as the requirements of alleys have resulted in many covered spaces in the streets. Some of these semi-public streets have been generally dead-ends, but in long-roofed alleys, parts of the streets have often had no roofs for lighting and ventilation, and at intervals, wider spaces have been considered as dividing spaces. The presence of Saabats¹, despite their structural function, has helped to separate the territory in an alley by changing its height while covering it. These spaces also provided a place for residents to take refuge from rain or sun. Such spaces in the alleys are considered to be a more private territory due to their physical shapes and the supervision imposed on them.

4. Private streets, which were sometimes covered and were considered to be the entrances of houses, emphasizing the security and privacy of the house and had a special gate and entrance open or closed to the occupants of the house, and this provided different degrees of supervision leading to the porch or private corridor of the house, porches seen in different shapes. The degree to which the doors were open or closed attracted or repelled passersby psychologically.

5. The openings in the alleys were designed and installed with special planning. Due to the shape and pattern of the houses, the interior and habitable spaces in the houses usually used openings adjacent to the courtyards for the lighting purpose and having a suitable view. However, the use of openings at heights above the observer's eye but in limited numbers was common to monitor the space inside the alley. In the case of entrance doors, creating a difference in height between the yard and the alley, as well as opening the entrance doors to the inner porch or twisty corridor leading to the yard made it impossible to see inside the house from the alley while the alley could be seen by residents.

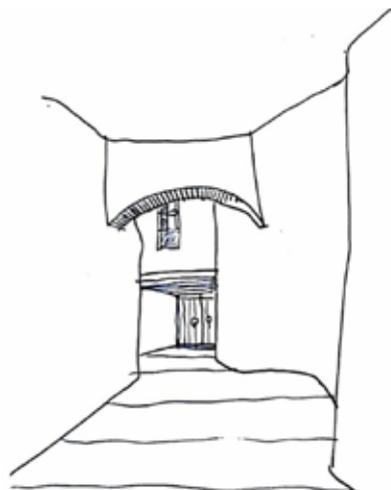
Based on the discussion presented, it can be inferred that the organic texture of the old neighborhoods indicates a precise and orderly hierarchy in the road network, which connects the most private streets to the most public ones in a special elegant way and defines the thresholds carefully. Such a hierarchy can be presented as follows: private streets, semi-private streets, semi-public streets, secondary public streets, and main public streets, or in other words, main streets. In addition, using the strategies outlined, sub-territories or intermediate spaces have emerged at the same time that does not necessarily follow public to private order and formed a broader of territories sequences in different alleys. The simple and genuine space, the unpretentious and dusty view of the alley, and the light shadows caused by the walls and Saabats, and the narrowness, width, and sharp turns, all make it possible to visually and psychologically identify more sub-territories in the public space (Fig. 2).

Territorial behaviors in an "alley"

Territorial behaviors in the "alley" can fall on a range of behaviors associated with an individual or group and public, each of which changes and occurs according to the location and position of the territory. Territorial behaviors are demonstrated under the influence of competence in a place, neighborhood activities, as well as traditional and religious rituals, are being held in the alley.

For the historical inhabitants of a place, who consider themselves the people of that place or domicile, the term place refers to a single whole and an integrated territory where any social and physical changes are important. This is manifested in various ways through which the territorial monitoring of natural and abnormal changes in all areas associated with the place occur. Ralph considers identity as an essential feature of the experience of place (Ralph, 2010, 61). The identity causes the sense of belonging, attachment, unity, sacrifice, and identification with the continuity of historical presence and sincere interactions with the place (Falihat, 2006). As a result, people who associate themselves with their places or neighborhood because of their historical background or other background are well aware of their influential role in shaping their "institutional place" compared to other places; that is why most of the time, the location and relocation of areas required the participation of locals.

In this section, examples of territorial behaviors that have been formed in the alleys of traditional Iranian neighborhoods under the influence of the above-mentioned factors, are expressed. Many of these



A



B

Fig. 2. A: Perspectives on the organic texture of an alley in an Iranian neighborhood, combining different physical capacities to create sub-territories, or private territories among public territories, Source: Author B: A schematic plan of a network of alleys with the capacity to create public, semi-public, and semi-private territories in the Iranian neighborhood, leading to residential spaces. Source: Authors.

behaviors are based on prolonged residence in a place that contributes to full or partial knowledge of the neighbors and a sense of ownership and belonging to the place. These behaviors can be examined as either individual or public behaviors.

1. The ritual of welcome and farewell are among the rituals that can be evaluated in the form of territorial group behaviors. Being added to the semi-public territory of the house, the alley as a permeable space, especially adjacent to the entrances and porches provides the ground for the territorial behaviors such as “watering and sweeping the alley when guests arrive” lighting up the alley” or “burning wild rue known as Expand in Persian” “. As a result, the scope of ownership and influence from inside the house was extended to the alley space based on an unwritten and collective agreement and parts of the alley public space became a semi-public or semi-private space.

2. Behaviors arising from a sense of ownership and

responsibility in the alleys have many manifestations, including the monitoring parts of the alley by residents who are adjacent to a house. In some cases, these behaviors in the past resulted in a state of surveillance, in the defense of the territory. Throwing water from the roof or through the window to disperse a group, mostly children, and reducing noise “can be among these behaviors. The possibility of sitting on the stair in front of the house also allowed the homeowner to monitor the alley more and at the same time help pedestrians tired of walking. The responsibility and concern about the alley lighting at night and the sensitivity to the comings and goings of strangers in the alley are also in this range of behavior.

3. Collective use of the alley by its residents is one of the most obvious types of territorial behaviors used to be practiced in traditional neighborhoods. It is clear that during the day and in a different season, there was a change in the composition of groups of men and women their ages. For example, most days, children and adolescents’ play spaces were determined in the association with housewives. These social gatherings, along with the usual conversations, used to take place at the same time as doing chores around the house, such as preparing food and monitoring children’s play. The collective use in the evenings and early hours of the night was related to socialization and chat with young men and women (Fig. 3).

4. The economic behaviors of the residents of the houses in the alleys and the neighboring houses are another territorial behavior. The sale of food products such as pickles or sweets or practical handicrafts made by the residents of the house, especially women, was very evident and applicable. This possibility or sense of ownership of the semi-public territory of the alley allowed even children to sell products such as snacks or children’s handicrafts.

5. The collective activities of the inhabitants are one of the most obvious behaviors of the visible territory in an “alley”. These activities, which are based on religious or ancient occasions, are always voluntary and unplanned and make it possible to use a large part of the alley as a space called *husseiniyah*². In some neighborhoods, although the focus is on mosques and *husseiniyahs*, alleys still play a role in hosting these gatherings. In ancient celebrations such as Soori Wednesday, collective behaviors in the streets are evident and can be evaluated (Fig. 4).

Conclusion

By examining the territory and the events and spatial organization of the alley in Iranian neighborhoods and



A



B

Fig.3. Exclusive use of different groups from public space in the alley.

source A: www.didaniha.com

Source B: www.sokhannews.ir

its direct connection with the common Iranian culture (at the time of the prevalence of residential in the traditional neighborhood form), it can be concluded that the territory in the alley, as expressed in the theoretical section is both physical and behavioral concept that covers both objective and subjective dimensions. The alley is a demarcated and marked space aligned based on individual or collective ownership and is also responsible for establishing social relations between residents. This space is regularly monitored by individuals, the presence of strangers is noticeable, and the immediate invasion of family privacy is considered, in fact, a space that can be monitored and defended for the security of the individual or collective territories. They reflect collective features and with their limited width, they serve as a connector between the alleys with lower degrees to the main streets and provide connections within the neighborhood. They also provide safe thresholds that allow the transition from a noisy public space to a private home while creating a safe space for children to play and gather with neighbors. All of this has been in full connection with existing cultural norms. Paying attention to the principle

of privacy and attention to family privacy along with the importance of the rights of neighbors is one of the most important of these principles.

Examples of behaviors are monitoring the comings and goings of people up and down the streets and controlling and managing them, territorial behaviors such as collective use of public space by local children playing in the streets while women gathering in the doorway spaces and the presence of the elderly on the built-in stairs at the entrance of the houses.

Participatory behaviors in public spaces resulting from the opening in the organic form of alleys or open space resulting from the intersection of several alleys, such as holding rituals and ancient ceremonies can also be considered in this area. Examples such as spatial demarcation, the hierarchy of accesses, the possibility of multi-purpose use of space, and also the exclusive use of spaces such as openings, slopes of roads, and stairs, which in the legal divisions belong to urban and public spaces but because of their physical potential, they can be considered temporarily in the private territory.

With this in mind, it seems that although from a physical perspective an alley is a street creating a space for traffic and access, culture, its formation has been simultaneously affected by its individual and social needs. In many cases, the influences have been on the sequence and variety of current events in this space. As a fluid space, the alley creates access between the private spaces of the house and the public spaces of the city, but it is also a place to take a break. It also serves as a destination and platform through which many collective memories of the Iranian neighborhood are shaped.



Fig. 4. Cooking votive food in the alley, collective activity of residents.
Source: www.dana.ir

Endnotes

1. A structural element used in alleys that not only provides height

reduction but also serves as a shed in the alley.

2. People- made space for holding Islamic rituals.

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