

Original Research Article

Reading a Neighborhood (Mahalleh) as a Landscape (A Case Study of Historical Neighborhoods of Semnan and Damghan)*

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Abstract A significant feature of the Iranian city in the Islamic period is the emergence of neighborhoods as subsystems and small groups. The neighborhood has made a great contribution to the conceptual development of civility and community, which are the fundamental components of the Iranian city. These small wholes are considered to be collective structures serving as hubs for social and public relations. Understanding such structures requires a holistic and inclusive view through which we can recognize and appreciate all their aspects. Semnan and Damghan, as two historical and ancient cities, like other historical cities in Iran, have unique textures and structures of neighborhoods. Examining and understanding the neighborhood landscapes of these two cities are of special importance because they can shed light on the mental and social structures of these cities. Despite this importance, this issue has not received much attention. This research aims to identify and develop a framework for reading the landscape of a neighborhood. By emphasizing the landscape of the two cities of Semnan and Damghan in particular, it seeks to answer this question: a) what framework can serve as a guideline to read the landscape of the neighborhood? For this purpose, this study employs a holistic view and detailed observations to recognize, investigate, and interpret the effective factors in reading the landscape of the neighborhood. The results showed that elements such as public spaces of neighborhoods, rituals and religious events, natural elements, streets, passages, uses, and activities, and finally, ethnic and guild-associated commonalities were influential in reading the neighborhoods of Semnan and Damghan.

Keywords Neighborhood landscape, Citizens' perceptions, Public spaces, Semnan, Damghan.

Introduction A city is not a collection of dispersed elements that are merely set next to one another. It is a "whole" in which there is cohesion among its elements. The more this unity and connectedness exist, the better the overall comprehension will be. "Neighborhoods" are one of

the most significant elements of Iranian city of the Islamic period. They play a significant role in the development of civility and community, and because of their totality and independence, they are referred to as "small wholes" in the literature on the spatial organization of cities. Based on social, cultural, and economic similarities, neighborhoods are like the cells of a living thing. They are a physical and social unit from which the entirety of existence is derived. Neighborhoods have played a significant role in the development of socio-spatial order in cities as well as the

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emergence of a particular type of small-scale monopoly (Abarghouei Fard & Mansouri, 2021). In fact, urban neighborhoods are regarded as the core of social ties and the skeleton of the urban system (Mousavi, 2012). The spatial organization of Iranian cities responded to the needs of their users through their neighborhoods and physical, functional, livelihood, identity, and semantic systems. However, nowadays, neighborhood centers have faded away both physically and conceptually in many Iranian cities (Hemmati et al., 2020), and the ignorance of the neighborhood as a vibrant and dynamic social unit has robbed people of their freedom of choice and made them passive participants in small gatherings (Barati, 2012). Thanks to their extensive historical backgrounds, Semnan and Damghan's ancient textures have unique contexts and neighborhood structures. As a result, it is particularly important to look into and appreciate these two cities' neighborhood landscapes to comprehend their social and mental structures. These two cities' textual arrangements are based on independent neighborhoods. In this regard, the goal of this research is to develop a framework for interpreting neighborhood landscapes in general. For this purpose, the neighborhood landscapes of Semnan and Damghan were examined to provide an answer to the following query:

- To read the landscape of a neighborhood in general and the landscape of the historical neighborhoods of Semnan and Damghan in particular, what criteria one should consider?

Research method

This study is a qualitative case study employing a holistic¹ view and in-depth observation to recognize, investigate, and interpret the effective factors contributing to reading the landscape of a neighborhood. This research examined the landscape of the two cities of Semnan and Damghan as a system that includes elements, characteristics, and specific cultural relations. An attempt has been made to understand the components and processes of this system. Part of the quantitative data for the research was gathered from the field and through observation in the historical context of the neighborhoods of these two cities; finally, the information obtained was verified and integrated with the library data, and the final results were presented.

The neighborhood landscape

"Neighborhood" can be considered the smallest civil unit after the family (Masoumiy, 2010). The scale and level of the neighborhood seem to be the oldest and most comprehensive types of division, ranging from the micro to the macro level, used for urban spaces around the world. This inclusion is not by chance and shows the significance and value of the neighborhood in human life (Barati, 2012). In the dictionary of Dehkhoda, Mahlah means "quarter, one

part of several parts of the city" (Dehkhoda, 1998). However, in western culture, this term is defined as "neighborhood unit," which does not seem to be accurate because the term "neighborhood unit" refers to a planned group, while the traditional neighborhood stands for a "social organization" (Pirbabaei & Sajadzadeh, 2011). The neighborhood was created after the appearance of Islam and the appearance of the concept of community and following the approach of Islam in giving authenticity to the society at the same time as individuality. According to the Islamic method, the structure of the city had semi-independent areas that had emerged due to ethnic or guild convergence. On the one hand, this kind of space division would place the citizens with the most points of commonality next to each other and increase the scope for participation in the community administration and the development of civility; on the other hand, it made the city out of its lumpy appearance and gave it a structured texture. Semi-independent areas called neighborhoods are known as small systems in the city that allow the survival of economic and social differences while balancing the environment (Mansouri, 2013). Such components have been shaped through communications with the physical, economic, social, and cultural aspects. Therefore, the neighborhood is a close physical unit serving as a place for social interaction. Based on criteria that can be defined from the social perspective, the neighborhood is a part of the spatial organization of the city where people's interactions occur face-to-face and can be conceptualized based on factors such as administrative communication and the definition of specific boundaries; livable environment; residents' social perceptions of the neighborhood environment; functional dimensions; and the provision of services needed by its residents (Barton, 2003, cited in Hosseini & Soltani, 2018). Therefore, it seems that one of the most important dimensions of a neighborhood is its social dimension and human connections, and neighborhoods are the places where social networks are formed, and such a structure is more than just a space, it is an "experience."

To define the landscape of the neighborhood, it is better to consider the city first. The city is a landscape phenomenon flowing among the concepts and physical structures, the products of people's perceptions of their living environment. It is a context that has a visual form and a texture of visual signs that carry meaning. A landscape approach is a holistic approach in which the user's perception and mind play the main role, and objectivity and subjectivity are inseparable (Majidi, Mansouri, Sabernejad & Barati, 2019, 2021). Like the city, the urban landscape is also an objective-subjective process that results in the formation of a view of the city among people. The neighborhood landscape, a part of the urban landscape, includes natural and man-made components, and it is also affected by human components.

This means that, apart from physical characteristics, it is also affected by collective and individual events, memories, and human activities. Therefore, the neighborhood landscape is a category that exists in the present and the past, and it is a perception that is obtained through its symbols (which are part of the symbols of a larger whole, i.e., the city).

The historical neighborhoods of Semnan and Damghan

Semnan Province has eight cities, including Semnan (the capital of the province) and Damghan. Some information related to the number and names of the neighborhoods of these two cities has been mentioned in the travelogues. For example, Sani-Al-Dowleh, the author of “Matala al-Shams”, states that: “The city of Semnan has eleven neighborhoods: Nasar, Latibar, Esfanjan, Choobmasjed, Shahjoogh, Kodivar, Koshmoghan, Faradghan, Malhi, and Kodan Koh” (Sani-Al-Dowleh, 1976, 313). In his “Travelagoue of Estrabad, Mazandaran, and Gilan” in 1277 A.H., Ebrahim described Semnan as follows: “... the city of Semnan has 40 takaya (plural form of Tekiyeh²), 12 caravanserais, 41 baths... and five neighborhoods: Nasar, Latibar, Esfanjan, Choobmasjed, and Shahjoogh...” (Mirza Ibrahim, 1976). Regarding Semnan’s neighborhoods, Schindler stated that: “There are five neighborhoods in Semnan: Nasar, Esfanjan, Choobmasjed, Latibar, and Shahjoogh” (Schindler, 1977). He maintained that the rest of its neighborhoods were villages at that time, and that is why he did not consider them part of the neighborhood. Currently, the city of Semnan has seven historical neighborhoods: Nasar, Esfanjan, Latibar, Shahjoogh, Koshmoghan, Kodivar, and Zavaghan (Fig. 1). The first four neighborhoods were the main neighborhoods, and the rest were located almost outside the city limits in the past. In general, the division of neighborhoods in this city was based on the pools that were used for the division of water in the neighborhoods (Alian & Parsa, 2021). Therefore, water and water pools are of special importance in the system of creating the structure of neighborhoods in this city. Concerning the neighborhoods of Damghan, Mirza Ibrahim in 1276 A.H stated that there were five neighborhoods in Damghan city: Dabaghan, Shah, Khoriab, and Ghaleh (Mirza Ibrahim, 1976). In 1293 A.H., two neighborhoods were added to them. This number reached six. According to Schindler, the six neighborhoods were Dabaghan, Shah, Sarvali (Saravori), Choobmasjed, and Zarchoob inside the city, and the Ab neighborhood outside the city (Khosrobeigi & Ghanbari Melleh, 2013). In 1303, along with changes in the composition and names of some neighborhoods, another neighborhood was added to Damghan’s neighborhoods. Sani-Al-Dowleh (Etamad al-Saltaneh) mentioned six neighborhoods, including Dabaghan, Shah, Khoria, Ghaleh, Bala Mahalleh, and

Sadat Mahalleh in “Matla al-Shams” (1976, 267-271). In the book entitled “Buildings and the City of Damghan” (Eghbali, Jafarpour & Malekmohammadi, 1989), seven neighborhoods with the names of Dabaghan, Bala Mahalleh, Khoria, Imamzadeh, Shah Mahalleh, Bagh Shah, and No (Fig. 2).

Discussion: Criteria for reading the neighborhood landscape

Some criteria are required to know and comprehend the landscape of the neighborhood. Such criteria would help to have a more accurate interpretation of the landscape. Despite all the differences in the conceptualization of the term “neighborhood” by different experts, it seems that common elements exist in the definitions of the term. The most significant shared dimensions in the conceptualization of the neighborhood, for instance, emphasize the existence of the physical dimension and human dimension. The former creates the neighborhood’s physical framework (physical dimension), while the latter produces the neighborhood’s individual-social, cultural, and behavioral aspects (semantic dimension) (Hosseini & Soltani, 2018). Therefore, in examining the neighborhood landscape, some factors and elements play a more significant role and can serve as criteria for analyzing the case studies. This study examines and reads the landscape based on those criteria. But what is important is that in order to read the landscape of the neighborhood (as a whole) it is necessary to understand the components and then understand the relationship between these components. Therefore, in order to understand the whole, we will have to understand the parts. Therefore, in the following, some important components in the structure of the neighborhoods have been examined.

• Neighborhood reading via public space

As discussed earlier, some researchers have placed special

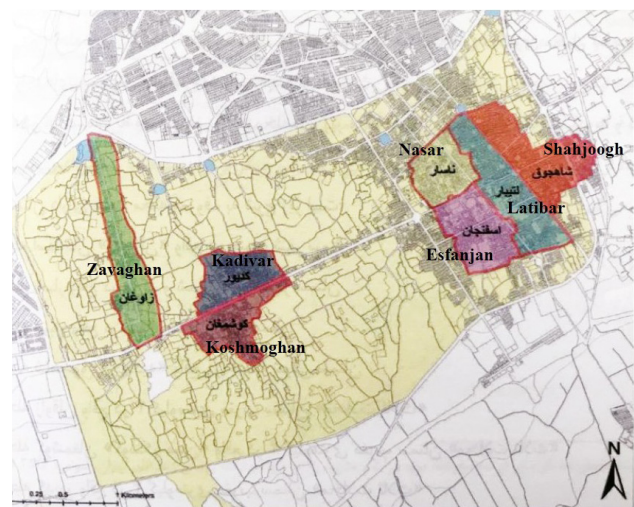


Fig. 1. The seven neighborhoods of Semnan city. Source: Alian & Parsa, 2021.

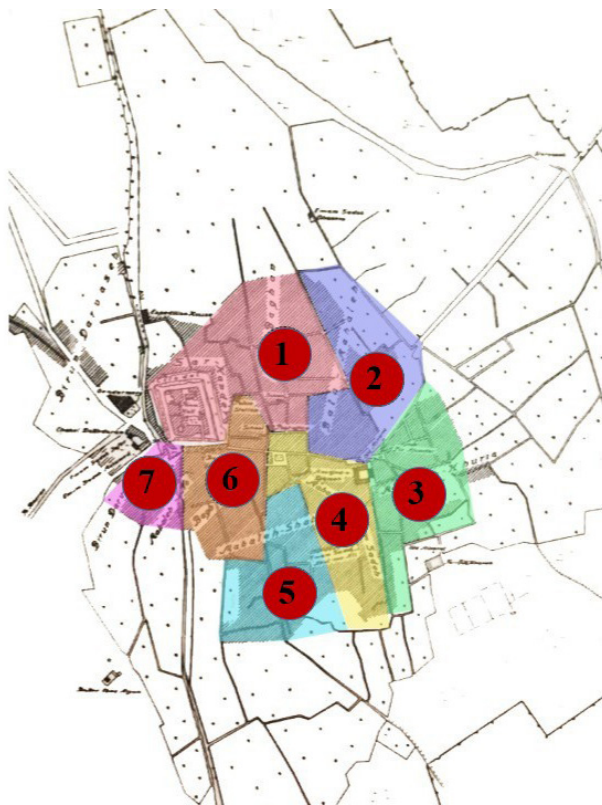


Fig. 2. The boundaries of the seven neighborhoods of Damghan: (1) Dabaghan, (2) Bala Mahalleh, (3) Khorla, (4) Imamzadeh, (5) Shah Mahalleh, (6) Bagh Shah, and (7) No. Source: Eghbali, Jafarpour & Malekmohammadi, 1989.

emphasis on the social dimension of the neighborhood and even considered the neighborhood as a social unit, in which case the neighborhood is defined as a set of social ties and interactions (Moztarzadeh & Hojati, 2013). The neighborhood as a public space paves the ground for people's participation in the issues of their society. In this way, it is used to establish social connections and broaden social observation. In such a setting, interactions increase, and the neighborhood turns into a place for social dialogues where cultural norms and behaviors manifest themselves. These spaces make neighborhoods evoke an associated event and a memory (Habibi, 2002). Some areas in neighborhoods have a greater impact on the social aspect than others. For example, the "neighborhood center" can be one of these areas. In all neighborhoods in Iranian cities, there was a social, functional, and meaningful centrality that provided services at the neighborhood level. These neighborhood centers played an important social role at the neighborhood level by being situated at the intersection of the main passages and having facilities and service spaces (Abarghouei Fard et al., 2020). Due to the type of access structure shapes, these centers fall into two types: small squares or Meidanche in Persian (often located at the intersection of several roads or next to the main road); and a small bazaar in Persian,

Bazarche or Khati (refers to a row of centers, i.e., centers that are formed along the passages and in the form of a bazaar) have been created and their main elements and spaces have been formed according to the social and economic status of the residents of the neighborhood (Hosseini & Soltani, 2018). Mansoori (2022, 3) argues that "the most important factor that contributes to the emergence of a whole from the multiple components of the neighborhood is the existence of the center." The neighborhood center is the common and interactive space of the neighborhood people, which is commonly perceived as the neighborhood. Therefore, the role of the neighborhood center should be more than a service center or distribution of access but as an entity. Among the neighborhood factors, the role of the center is more important than the others. Therefore, if the role of the neighborhood center gets weaker, the existence of the neighborhood and its unique perception among the residents will fade away. However, by strengthening the role of the center, the neighborhood will become stable and live." Among other public areas of neighborhoods that can serve as centers for social relations, we can mention Tekiyeh, bazaars, mosques, and passageways. Social presence in neighborhoods could be "temporal" and "spatial," which are related to each other. The "temporal" category refers to those events that depend on a certain time, such as different hours of the day and night, rituals or celebrations at a certain time, etc. "Spatial" social effects include those places that are the focus of collective memories and social activities, such as special and crowd-attracting spots in neighborhoods, and neighborhood centers: Takaya, Hosseiniyeha (plural form of Hosseiniyeh³), and Bazaars. These spaces, which are called public spaces in neighborhoods, serve as platforms for the formation of collective events. As mentioned earlier, in Semnan city, large pools of water play a special role in the structure of neighborhoods. Wherever there are pools, there are public spaces, and the neighborhood's people have a stronger presence there. For example, even in the early hours of the afternoon, despite the hot weather, the gathering and playing of children under the shade of the plane trees and in the pools and streams full of water in the center of the "Nasar" neighborhood of Semnan and next to the swimming pool area at Bagh-e Faiz, brings vitality and develops a stronger sense of neighborhood (Fig. 3). Although the presence of natural elements alone has been an important factor in attracting people from different classes and establishing social relations, today this area has not created a favorable environment due to inappropriate design.

Bazaars seem to have played the same function. They are main roads and passages that are roofed due to their importance in the urban context. Many major social, economic, political, religious, and cultural events in Iranian



Fig. 3. Children's water play under the shade of plane trees in the hot sunny hours in the center of Nasar neighborhood in Semnan shows the collective life of the neighborhood. Photo: Maryam Majidi, 2022.

cities took place in these areas, which served as the backbone of the Iranian city and the cornerstone of its socio-economic growth. The diverse functions of bazaars produced an integrated functional structure in Iranian cities that met a substantial portion of the city's different social and economic demands (Abarghouei Fard et al., 2020). Bazaars are another kind of social spaces. Damghan was built at the intersection of the city's principal axes, which were combined with the bazaar. Bazaars were usually the main passage in cities and formed the backbone of the city, and neighborhoods were usually created after them. In the book "Buildings and Damghan City" (Eghbali, Jafarpour & Malekmohammadi, 1989), the authors believe that there was a market in the central part of Damghan city, and residential neighborhoods were gradually built on both sides, and the market and neighborhoods were connected to each other by passage.

Mosques were the main public spaces of neighborhoods in the past. They have preserved their function to some extent. Such a function is not as strong as before. As the main social institution, mosques have been an integral part of the social life of Islamic cities. In this regard, we can mention the presence of people in the center of the neighborhood and the entrance of Soltani Mosque in Semnan, a social landscape of the neighborhood, for Friday prayers or congregational prayers, which can be seen at different hours of the day. Religion and rituals are influential elements in creating and shaping neighborhoods and in the perception of the neighborhood by the user. Religion and rituals affect the shape and structure of the neighborhood through the creation of spaces and uses and through the occasions and events that cause people to attend the neighborhood. Thus, they increase the communication and interactions in the neighborhood and affect its solidarity.

Finally, it seems that public spaces, as the spaces where the most communication and collective actions take place, play

the greatest role in creating collective memories, and this makes the audience reach a collective understanding of the neighborhood space and better understand the landscape of the neighborhood.

• The role of rituals in reading the neighborhood landscape

Cultural values have found their way into the neighborhood over time. They have emerged as continuous qualities from the historical course of the work. This value is identified by identity value, collective memories, and historical memory (a kind of mental commonality in connection with the past). This factor itself creates a sense of belonging to the neighborhood. Over time, it creates bonds between community members, fosters social cohesion, and strengthens the collective spirit and participation (Poursarrajian, 2015). The ritual-Islamic landscapes in Iranian cities are related to neighborhoods and, with a similar and repetitive pattern, the landscapes create the city and form a network of semantic elements and physical and social milestones. These ritual landscapes affect the entire city and facilitate the possibility of a unified perception of the city and its spatial organization through a network of milestones. These landscapes include shrines and small-scale ritual elements such as Takaya, Hosseiniyeha, and Sagha-Khaneh⁴.

As a complementary element, micro-scale ritual elements form the indicative and symbolic points of a neighborhood and strengthen the experience of the spiritual sense and social identity of the residents of the neighborhood (Abarghouei Fard, Saboonchi & Farzin, 2018). One of the important features of neighborhoods in Semnan is the division of neighborhoods into smaller units and sub-neighborhoods. What makes the structure of these sub-neighborhoods different from other cities is related to the presence of "Takaya" in the center of each, which act as central squares (neighborhood centers) in these neighborhoods (Fig. 4). According to what is mentioned in the travelogues, the city of Semnan had 40 Takaya. Therefore, in the historical context of this city, Takaya have had a special role. The coherent network of neighborhoods in the historical context of Semnan has provided a special social system, and the centers of neighborhoods have been places for gatherings, holding collective events, rituals, religious ceremonies, etc. For example, in the neighborhood of Esfanjan, which is one of the main neighborhoods of Semnan city, there is a tekiyeh called "Tekieh-y-Bozorg-e-Pahneh", which has a special centrality and position, and in the past and even today, especially during the days of mourning in the month of Muharram, it has played a prominent role and served as a gathering place. It has been a gathering place for residents and a platform for the formation of social events and relationships. "Tekiye-y-

Bozorg-e-Nasr", located in the neighborhood of Nasar, is also one of the main and important Takiye of this city. In the book "Customs of the People of Semnan" (Panahi Semnani, 1995, 278), it is stated that on the 6th, 7th, and 10th days of Muharram, they used to make Togh⁵ in the main neighborhoods. It is documented that people's desire to watch them caused a lot of excitement. The most important ceremony was performed in Nasar Tekiyeh, which was related to the 10th day of Muharram. In general, Takaya are the social spaces of the city, the gathering centers of the residents of the neighborhood. They are focal points for promoting the local identity. They play an important role in improving the social life of the neighborhoods. Due to their intersectional and division roles, they are not only important from the physical point of view but also the functional point of view. It even seems that their roles as Takaya have been

secondary compared to their intersectional roles. It means that, at first, they used to be a part of the public space of the city, but later they were roofed. In the city of Damghan, Hosseiniyeha are the most important gathering place for the people of Damghan, especially during mourning days. Hosseiniyeha are also often located at the intersection of roads and passages, and one of the most important of them is Dabaghan Hosseiniyeh, which is located in the neighborhood of Damghan.

Therefore, rituals seem to have influential elements both in creating and shaping localities and in the perception of the audience from the perspective of localities. Because they influence the shape and structure of the neighborhoods through the creation of spaces and uses, and through the occasions and events that cause the presence of people in the neighborhoods and in this way they increase the communication, interactions and solidarity of the people of the neighborhood, which themselves cause Collective memories emerge and create a colorful image of the neighborhood in the minds of its residents.

• Natural elements and infrastructures and their role in reading the neighborhood landscape

Natural elements are among the factors that play a special role in both the structural and physical formation of neighborhoods, and they give identity and meaning to the landscapes of neighborhoods. The natural elements in the two cities of Semnan and Damghan are water, wind, and, to some extent, plants. For example, in the city of Semnan and the Latibar neighborhood, there is a mulberry tree, the remains of which can be seen in the main passage and next to the river, and it is considered an element of identity in that neighborhood. In another neighborhood, there is an old cypress tree similar to a mulberry, which plays the same role. This element can be seen in Damghan neighborhoods only in the form of streams of water in the neighborhood. Despite the lack of water in Semnan province, some pools still exist, and water can still be considered a symbol of life in these areas. But going through the old textures of Damghan city, the presence of water is only limited to small water streams. It may seem that the city of Semnan was formed where there were either water pools or water in this area, but the two cities of Semnan and Damghan have almost similar conditions in terms of geographical locations. Both of them lead to the southern slope of the Alborz mountain range in the north and the desert in the south. Both have rivers, and the main occupation of the people of both regions used to be farming in the past. In the city of Semnan, watercourses are known as the main element of the city, while in Damghan there are no pools and only small streams of water can be seen. Therefore, the reason for the formation of the city of Semnan might not have been water. If the neighborhood structure is examined with a component-oriented approach,

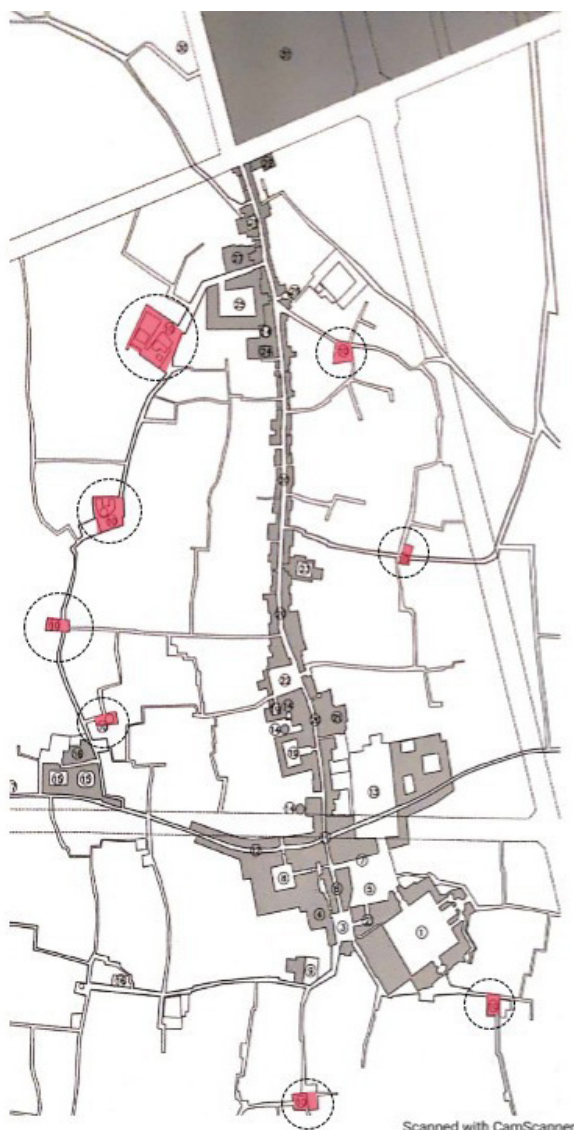


Fig. 4. Takaya (red spots), an important element in the urban structure and collective life of Semnan, is located at the intersection of passages. Source: Acecr Tehran University Art center, 2009.

both have organic texture and non-linear order. The result is that the type of division and formation of neighborhoods was based on water and wind. Due to the organic form, water has been derived from the earth, and non-linear alleys reduce the effects of strong winds on the area. The turning point of the city is the bazaar is stretched in the west-east direction where there are no water pools. Up the north, watercourses but down the south, the desert limits the expansion of the settlements. Semnan city has three neighborhoods in the western part and two in the eastern part, and its main neighborhood is located in the central part. The formation of neighborhoods next to each other is more elongated and north-south, and the five main neighborhoods of the city were irrigated in the past through six well-organized pools. In the holistic view of the landscape, it is not possible to examine human interaction with the environment without a historical view of society. The reason is that the landscape is an objective-subjective phenomenon and a result of human interaction with the environment and society with history. The history of these two cities shows that their locations on the Silk Road, Shahi Road, and Khorasan Road were associated with their commercial purposes. Water was not the main element, otherwise, the city of Damghan should have followed the same form. In addition, the two cities of Semnan and Damghan are located on the paths of important roads such as the Silk Road, Shahi Road, and Khorasan Highway. Naturally, the almost similar climatic conditions and similar uses have similar effects on the formation of the neighborhood structure, but the formation process of Damghan neighborhoods has been different. Unlike Semnan, there are no water pools or water distribution. This indicates that a variety of factors such as history, climate, and currents of modernity affect people's understanding of the environment and the course of thought. The changes in the identity of the neighborhoods depend on the strength of the intellectual foundation. They will sometimes only leave a trace of themselves on the existing identity. In fact, in the city of Semnan, as soon as the settlement formed, water appeared. Despite the climatic changes and water scarcity, the water pools are still standing and can only be a sign of the special importance of water for the people of Semnan. The investigation into the history of Damghan shows that this city also had a past similar to Semnan city. However, the main purpose behind forming the city was not water. External factors and changes in people's intellectual foundations throughout history have changed the structure of the city. Therefore, it can be said that natural elements and infrastructures as a part of the whole neighborhoods play an important role in shaping the structure of the neighborhoods and after the formation, they are effective in the functions and activities of the neighborhood and consequently in structuring the identity of the neighborhoods.

• Streets and passages and their contribution to the perception of the neighborhood landscape

The main roads and passages are important elements that compose the skeleton of the neighborhood, and the main street in the neighborhood is the backbone of this skeleton. Other elements and factors are established around this axis, and the main street plays a key role in creating an interactive link among them (Habibi, 2002). Streets have a special role in establishing social interactions and the prosperity of social life in neighborhoods. Part of the passage can turn into a gathering for social relations after a small greeting. These social spaces of the neighborhoods create spatial links through the city's texture and contribute to the spatial coherence of the city. Creating unique differences and various qualities in a place or giving it a distinct identity has been the main goal of spaces. Because of their various roles in the neighborhood, passages serve as a bridge between humans, perceptions, and feelings concerning space (Pouyan, Ghanbaran, & Hoseinzadeh, 2020). Passages have spaces along their length, which are generally located at the intersection of several roads or are forecourts for religious elements such as mosques, schools, or Sagha Khaneh. Most of the passages have a view of the entrance or the minaret and dome of religious elements as if an individual is supposed to always remind himself of the presence of a superior force. The presence of such views, in addition to inducing the meaning of the texture, strengthens the sense of orientation and its readability (Sholeh & Yousefi Mashhor, 2019). These signs and symbols, especially by being placed at the intersection of passages, help to strengthen the sense of direction and increase the readability of the texture. The unifying factor in this method is the outcome of forces from the symbols, not their volumetric shape (Habibi, 2002).

One of the important and influential elements in the view of neighborhoods is the visual corridors of their passages. Visual corridors generally include different axes that are placed in the proper orientation to urban signs and create a valuable view of a strong visual element. In the visual corridors, there are focal points and strategic signs that represent the identity of the city. Understanding place-based identity, which has mental effects on the city's identity, is one of the issues of vision corridors (Vahdat & Rezaei Rad, 2017). Visual corridors in the passages of neighborhoods are elements contributing to a better understanding of the neighborhood landscape. It is because if the landscape of the neighborhood is the citizens' perception of the neighborhood based on symbols, the visual corridors, a factor that provides these symbols to the user, contribute to the identity of the neighborhood and play an influential role in the memories of the citizens about neighborhoods.

Visual corridors in the passages of the historical neighborhoods of Semnan city contain various elements,

each of which can shed light on the identity of that neighborhood. For example, in the Nasar neighborhood of Semnan, the strong presence of water and trees as natural elements in the neighborhood can be observed. This triggers schemata of its landscape in the user's mind. The existence of these natural elements and follow-on social life are important factors in the perception of this neighborhood. This perception is different from other neighborhoods that branch off from the bazaar. An example of this is a neighborhood located in front of the congregational mosque (Fig. 5). As can be seen after a narrow and covered alley with a limited view axis, suddenly there is an open space. This brings the user into a new space at once. This results in a spatial contrast through which narrow spaces end up in spaces and spatial openings. The view of the entrances of spaces such as the bazaar of the city is also among the elements that are perceived in these corridors. This makes the user enter a space. The differences in terms of the characteristics of the passages, such as width length, height, elements, and enclosing components of these passages are also among the elements that are perceived in the corridors of vision.

However, in the passages of the historical context of Damghan, the visual corridors are slightly different. In the historical neighborhoods of this city, what attracts the most attention to the corridors is the presence of symbolic elements such as towers and minarets. Over time, these elements have been drawn upon to identify these neighborhoods. In other words, the neighborhoods are evoked by those symbols in minds (Fig. 6). In terms of natural elements, trees are usually used in the courtyards of houses in these neighborhoods, and what is visible to the user is a part of them protruding from the walls of the houses. Therefore, it seems that the view in the passages of Damghan's historical neighborhoods is not only a representation of the neighborhood landscape but also an expression of the city's landscape. Finally, it seems that the visual corridors in the neighborhoods provide citizens with multiple elements, each of which leads to a different perception of the neighborhood. From the thatched houses on the road, trees and water streams, and the bazaar to the guideposts, each of which creates a distinct perception of the neighborhood for the user. As a result, the presence of these elements in the visual corridors plays a significant role in understanding the landscape of the neighborhood, and any change in them will lead to a change in the perception of the neighborhood landscape.

In Damghan, the passages were oriented to the first axis formed in this city, the line that connected the eastern and western gates, and due to the proximity to the Silk Road and Khorasan Road, there was a lot of traffic and social interactions that took place their daily. Over time, it



Fig. 5. Passage branched off from the bazaar to connect it to the congregational mosque, Semnan. Photo: Paniz Soleimani Salar, 2022.

housed the city market and became the main backbone of the city. On the other hand, due to people's desire to be close to this main artery to spend their lives, residential neighborhoods emerged around it, and side passages from one side to the main road and from the other side to the important and busy centers of each neighborhood, such as mosques, takaya, bathrooms, etc., were connected to help people carry out their daily activities and form social interactions. Passages are not of the same width throughout the route (Fig. 7) and in parts of neighborhoods such as neighborhood centers, entrances to holy places, and services where the role of social interactions is more pronounced due to the presence of more people, they increase to create an open space to fulfill the social needs of the people, such as organizing the Muharram mourning ceremony, this change in the width of the passages causes a change in the perception of the neighborhood. They interact with the user across the corridors; in parts where the passages are wide, people are allowed to stop, talk with acquaintances, and have social interactions. However, in parts where the passages are narrow, people are only allowed to pass through, and the dead ends of each neighborhood are reserved for its residents, with no way for strangers to access them. The pattern of passages in the historical neighborhoods of Damghan shows their landscape language. These patterns have been formed experimentally and gradually based on



Fig. 6. Left: A view of the minaret of the historical mosque at the end of the southern passage of Pir Alamdar, Damghan, Right: A view of the minaret of the congregational mosque at the end of the western passage of Pir Alamdar, Damghan. Photo: Paniz Soleimani Salar, 2022.



Fig. 7. In the passages of neighborhoods in Damghan, the width of the alley is not the same and changes according to usage. Photo: Zahra Tahmasbi, 2022.

people's behavior and the need for social interactions in different parts of the neighborhoods and show the effect of people's social solidarity on the formation of roads, which by responding to people's social needs has also increased the spatial quality of neighborhoods.

Finally, the network of passageways and passages are considered as one of the elements of the landscape of the neighborhoods, which both cause communication between the elements and parts of the neighborhoods and can act as arenas that create an understanding of the neighborhood as a whole for the observer.

• **The contribution of placement of activities and uses to the reading of the neighborhood landscape**

The neighborhoods of Iranian cities are considered to be small landscape wholes and spatial-social urban divisions that place human beings with their fellows and, to the extent of their perceptive ability, create social relationships with others. From McKenzie's point of view, the neighborhood is a concept reflecting "a close physical unit and a place of social communication" (Mousavi, 2012, 71). The skeleton of the neighborhood gathers a set of various uses and shapes the economic, social, and cultural life of the neighborhood. This sometimes goes to the extent of neighborhood self-reliance. The existence of these activities in the vicinity of the main access points of the neighborhood increases social activities at the neighborhood level and brings patronage to

the public space, increasing social interaction and creating a street full of activity, population, and memories (Habibi, 2002). The proximity of service centers to urban spaces on a neighborhood scale will create spaces that, in addition to increasing social exchanges, acquaintances, and social surveillance, will also guarantee security and, in other words, will create living urban spaces.

After the old bazaar, which served as the city of Semnan's primary covered structure and passage going through its historical texture, along its linear path, there is a static and spacious area that invites people to stop. This is typically a meeting place for various urban and public uses. It is a point where many routes come together. These areas serve as the neighborhood's community hub and central spot for gatherings. In one of these local social nodes, which is discussed as an example in this paper, several uses, including the mosque in Semnan, Soltani Mosque- Madrasa, Pehneh Takiye, Imamzadeh Yahya, and Pehneh, are situated in one of these local social nodes (Fig. 8).

Since the act of bathing is an action with a prior intention, if the bath were located somewhere far from the centralized center, people would travel a long distance. Access to water could have been a reason for the selection of the location. In desert cities like Semnan, where the issue of water is closely related to the lives of the residents, the need to place buildings that need water (bathrooms, water storage, etc.) together is of particular importance. Compared to the same centralized organization in a city like Gorgan, where the issue of hot and dry climate does not dominate, the public buildings are concentrated almost in the center, intersecting with the bazaar. Therefore, it can be concluded that although access to water is very important in the establishment of buildings next to each other, it is probably the main reason for the placement and establishment of public buildings in the central area and intersecting with the market is something else. Some consider the reason for this issue to

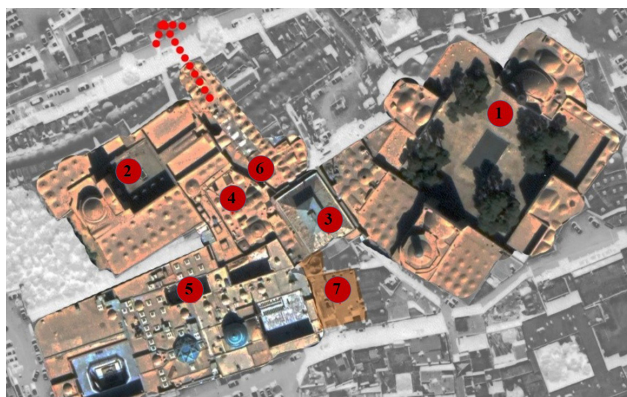


Fig. 8. A collection of public buildings in the center of the neighborhood, (1) Soltani Mosque- Madrasa, (2) Congressional Mosque in Semnan, (3) Pahneh Takiye (4) Pahneh Bath (5) Imamzadeh Yahya, (6) Bazaar of Semnan and (7) Hosseiniyeh, Esfanjan neighborhood, Semnan. Source: Authors.

be ease of access. In traditional cities, where the extent of urban development is less than now, the access of houses away from the center is limited to the center itself and the main uses of the neighborhood. With the concentration of spaces at one point, although it is possible to access most of the uses at the same time, therefore, the ease of access was also better provided by the distribution of users at the neighborhood level. But it is worth noting that, according to the usual mode of transportation at that time (pedestrian), the center was created and grew with multiple uses available to everyone until it exceeded the limits of one neighborhood, and this caused the creation of the next neighborhood.

Different buildings have their specific users. By putting them together, one can use each other's capacity to attract contacts with different characteristics (age, gender, interest, etc.) and take a step towards strengthening social solidarity. This relationship is bilateral, and the research on whether first solidarity has caused establishment or establishment helped to strengthen solidarity needs more research. But functional diversity is the factor in stabilizing the social role of people in their region and place of residence (Abarghouei Fard et al., 2020, 26). However, social solidarity, which can be one of the most important factors contributing to the placement of public buildings next to each other in the structure of neighborhoods, attract specific users of each function together, increase the probability of social encounters between people and strengthen solidarity and subsequently the sense of the neighborhood.

• Ethnic, commercial, and religious commonality factors in reading the neighborhood landscape

The initial formation of the neighborhood was based on racial, ethnic, religious, or kinship divisions. In many cases, the divisions were used to name the neighborhood. The neighborhoods were sometimes named after famous people living in them. The structures of the neighborhoods were also affected by climatic, economic, political, and social factors. They were formed based on the gathering and continuity of the community living in those areas. Strong neighborhood relations with Iranian-Islamic and indigenous identity in traditional neighborhoods have led to the manifestation of common patterns of life, deep local dependence, and respect for sanctuaries in the past (Pirbabaei & Sajadzadeh, 2011).

Traditional neighborhoods developed naturally as a result of the natural selection of their inhabitants and households. In many large cities across the world, the selection of neighborhoods has been closely tied to both social and economic uses. Divisions in various regions of the city may occasionally have been based on various religious, racial, sectarian, or economic issues (Masoumiy, 2010). Solidarity and unity among the residents of the neighborhood (even informal), which used to play a significant role in

supporting fellow neighbors and strengthening cooperation and participation between them, were factors that contributed to the formation, consistency, and unity of the neighborhood (Mousavi, 2012). A certain stratum of society, who had a specific profession, lived in each of Damghan's neighborhoods.

For instance, farmers, ranchers, and agricultural workers lived in the southern, southeastern, and eastern neighborhoods of Damghan. This is because farms and gardens were located in those parts of the city. This shows that Damghan's neighborhoods were based on social solidarity among a certain stratum. Another example is the neighborhood of Imamzadeh Ali, where dervishes lived, and today every family in this neighborhood belongs to one of these two dervishes. In the city of Semnan, many neighborhoods and alleys had the name of a special trade or profession. For example, Ghalgaran Alley, where the artisans who were engaged in coppersmithing and silversmithing lived, or Doregard ha Alley (Vendors), Ghizat (Judges) Alley, Kuzegaran (Potters), Naal bandan (Shoemakers) Alley, Motreb (Singers) Alley, and the like.

Conclusion

A neighborhood is a phenomenon that is perceived as an integrated physical-social entity. This perception arises both from the neighborhood's objective features (such as physical structure, history, events, etc.) and from the interpretation of the user. The user views the neighborhood as the land of their own, on which they depend, and views it as a dependent property at their disposal. One indication of this sense of belonging is a person's sense of obligation to their neighborhood and the people who live there, as well as their sense of control over it. The reasons for discovering this sensation of mutual connection are disclosed through an in-depth investigation. Because of this reciprocal link, the individual

views the neighborhood as a whole, even though it is made up of an unlimited number of parts. He understands how those parts are related to one another. The neighborhood is conceptualized through interactions. These links are strengthened and that "whole" is created by the functions, services, and other factors. In actuality, the neighborhood landscape is a whole, consisting of several elements. Understanding the whole depends on the appreciation of the interactions among its elements. What gives us a sense of the neighborhood is the cohesiveness of its elements. As a result, the first stage requires the creation of a whole, and in the second stage, the produced whole needs to be perceived and experienced. What the user perceives from the neighborhood as a "whole" is the integrity and unity of the parts perceived through an observer's reading. If the observer can create unity among the elements of the neighborhood, its schema can be created in his mind. It is worth mentioning that the relationships among the elements of the neighborhood are also of special importance. If these elements and components have a strong presence in each neighborhood, the landscape of that neighborhood will be perceived as better. Partial studies and partial readings of a neighborhood can contribute to understanding the relationship among the multiple components of the neighborhood and help people create a connection between them in their minds. The relationships form a single entity from multiple components, which is perceived as a neighborhood. Reading the landscape of a neighborhood offers the possibility of understanding this general concept. Whenever the user can understand this overall integrated concept of the neighborhood, they have succeeded in reading its landscape or reading the neighborhood as a landscape. If there is a problem in any of the components of this whole, the whole will be transformed and the view of the neighborhood will be faded.

Endnote

1. Holistic: Being holistic is to consider the whole as a more complex (or additional) entity from the parts of an entity. In fact, being holistic is different from totality. Totality refers to the sum of different dimensions that have their own independent characteristics that are only placed together, while the different components of a whole are theoretically separable but actually inextricable in the holistic view. Therefore, the holistic view does not adhere to the sum of the dimensions, but it takes into account the unity of dimensions; meaning that the product of a holistic view has an independent entity. In this regard, the landscape is a holistic phenomenon in which the two objective

and subjective dimensions are unified and an independent being called landscape is created; a being which is no longer objective, nor subjective.

2. Tekiyeh: It is a place in which the Shiites gather to mourn Imam Hossein's death in the month of Muharram.

3. Hosseiniyeh: It is a place used by the Shiites for the commemoration of Imam Hossein in the month of Muharram.

4. Sagha-Khaneh: A drinking fountain.

5. Togh: It is a flag-like object with a special shape and image that the Shiites of some regions of Iran set up during Muharram days of mourning and carry with them in the neighborhoods.

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