

Original Research Article

Forgotten Modern Phenomenon of Landscape (Emphasis on Historical Landscapes of Semnan and Damghan Cities)*

Amin Mahan^{1*}, Zia Hoseinzadeh², Mohammad Shahab Lavasani³, Seyede Farzaneh Ehsani Oskuei⁴,
Shaghayegh Golshahi Porshokouh⁵, Reza Rohanian⁶, Kosar Gholami Ghadi⁷, Kimia Mansour Kiaei⁸,
Mohammad Rezaei⁹

1. Assistan Professor, Department of Architecture, Lahijan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Iran.

2. Ph.D Candidate in Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran.

3. M.A. Student in Landscape Architecture, Department of Architecture, South branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

4. M.A. Student in Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

5. M.A. Student in Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

6. M.A. Student in Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

7. M.A. Student in Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

8. M.A. Student in Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

9. M.A. Student in Landscape Architecture, School of Architecture and Environmental Design, Iran University of Science

& Technology, Tehran, Iran.

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Abstract | Landscape, an interdisciplinary field, not only takes into account the fabric and structure of the space in the space analysis but also seeks to understand the totality and spatial character, which have formed numerous interacting social, historical, identity, activity, and structural factors. Today, many urban spaces have lost their landscape qualities. Even historical cities, with an outstanding history of high-quality and meaningful spaces, have failed to demonstrate many of their spatial qualities and landscape characters. Some historical parts have no signs of life and are devoid of citizens and tourists. This research reviews library and historical sources and conducts field surveys of historical landscapes of two cities of Semnan and Damghan, which used to be successful in creating urban spaces. The study attempted to understand the causes of landscape failure by examining some spaces in these two cities as case studies. The study offers some guidelines for reviving and restoring these historical fabrics to encourage people and tourists to attend those spaces.

Keywords | *Landscape, Historical landscape, Modernism, Semnan, Damghan.*

Introduction | The landscape is a novel but complicated and multi-faceted concept in the Iranian and global community that involves diverse approaches (Alehashemi & Mansouri, 2018). Today, more comprehensive and accurate definitions have been provided about the landscape, characterized by cultural, historical, social, and aesthetical dimensions (Soltani, 2010). Cities reveal their residents' thinking, lifestyle, and cultural and historical developments. An urban landscape refers to the perception of the concept of a city for the residents who have lived there throughout

history and generated a semantic communication with the natural and artificial fabric of the environment, as it has greatly contributed to the continuation of their reasonable life there. The main theme of the urban landscape involves the correct interpretation and reproduction of qualities that link old and new values of the city together and help preserve a natural relationship between the human and urban environment, which provides for a livable space (Mansouri, 2010). Today, the identity of the urban landscape and the collected memories derived from all humans are facing a debatable challenge, with humans losing their relationships with

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** Corresponding author: mahan_landscape@yahoo.com,+989183156277

the place they were living in. This loss of identity towards places and their memorable characters in urban spaces have brought about some problems for the individual and collective identity and reduced the quality of these spaces. In the past, a landscape formed the main body of urban space qualities and served as the main agent of creating subjectivity for the citizens, which was also interrelated with the people. Today, however, Iranian cities, especially those with historical backgrounds, are experiencing a failing quality of landscape; therefore, this study aims to determine the causes of the failure in the landscape of Iranian cities.

Research background

In this connection, Hosseinzadeh et al. did a study on the landscape of Iranian cities, though they just paid attention to the values and role of the roofs in those cities (Hosseinzadeh, Skokouh & Mehrabani Golzar, 2021). Also, Mansouri and Abarghouei conducted a study to focus on the spatial organization of Iranian cities (Abarghouei Fard & Mansouri, 2021). In another article, Derakhsh and Basouli investigated Iranian cities and examined the role of piscina (Saghakhaneh) in the landscape of Iranian cities (Derakhsh & Basouli, 2021). In his article, Farzin investigated an Iranian city and focused on the role of pilgrimage sites (Farzin, 2010). In another research, Masoumy investigated the values of Iranian cities and emphasized the concept of neighborhoods (Masoumy, 2010). In this connection, no academic contribution is seen to have studied the role of historical landscapes and the causes of their failure; thus, the present study uses library and field sources to address it.

Theoretical foundations

• Landscape

City is not just translated into the fabric; rather, despite structural measures within the city, it has a spirit that is simultaneously a result of social interactions and civil life in the urban's fabric. Meanwhile, landscape architecture offers a new perspective on the human-environment relationship that interprets the space and regards the place as a single entity whose internal and external parts cannot be separated. Thus, an in-depth perception of landscape architecture greatly contributes to the continuation of modern urban life. The environment and nature also add to the content and concept of the landscape, which helps people comprehend it. For this, a landscape is a subjective-objective phenomenon utilized by humans due to their attention to the environment, aiming to make the external spaces of the environment desirable (Saharkhiz & Zandieh, 2018). The modern "time-place" approach is a new system that offers a new meaning to the landscape and is used for analyzing environmental issues. This approach suggests that the landscape is not a geographical and structural phenomenon to interpret

morphological characteristics. Modern definitions of landscape warrant a revision of popular viewpoints in this regard (Soltani, 2010). The landscape is a dynamic phenomenon that is, on the one hand, affected by the human and the way he communicates with the environment, and, on the other hand, evokes memories that have arisen, over time, in the environment and have affected the human and landscape, consequently changing the human's cultures and civilizations. Landscape cannot, on the one hand, be translated into fabric because it also entails both quality and meaning; on the other hand, it cannot be regarded as an abstract concept because the structures and senses perceive it. In sum, a landscape refers to the phenomenon that is simultaneously achieved from our perception of the environment and the interpretation of the mind; in fact, the landscape is a subjective-objective phenomenon (Mahan & Mansouri, 2017).

• Historical landscape

The city is a product of human sedentism and the evolution of the basic concepts of his mind (Mansouri, 2010) and refers to the reciprocal relationship between man and the environment throughout history. The city is also regarded as an achievement of human civilization and the human mind, a product of collective life and the development of humans' collective spirit in the context of nature's system over time. In this connection, nature as a setting that embraces man and his life attains meaning via integration into human history and order. Thus, it is tied to the human presence and place of living. A city's landscape helps read various subjective and objective layers of the environment and interpret layers forming it to control and manage urban human living space in a natural order. As a result, a city's landscape is created from the interaction of the urban ecology (nature) with its history and the citizens' perception of it, thus ensuring the meaning of the environment and place sustainability. In other words, a city's landscape interprets the intersection of history and nature. The intersecting points of history and nature involve various subjective and objective layers, including the prior presence of nature as an underlying context, followed by the human and his processes, including "history of residence," "social events," and "human memories" to create a meaningful place in the city (Rafat, 2013). A city is a product of a society where man lives, as the diversity of city landscapes in the history of the geography of the world is a product of the different civil thinking of societies. Thus, a city's landscape can serve as a measure to investigate the transformation of the society and to perceive its civil thinking across history. Geographical and historical context greatly contributes to the creation of the user's mind. "Landscape is created of the intersection of history and geography." Place is not a physical affair and cannot be conceived to be the same as a place or a geographical point.

Each point over the intersection of these two axes indicates an event at a place that leads to the emergence of a concept and common experiences of people and helps to create the identity of people in that place. The intersection of geography and history leads to the development of a concept humans call *landscape*. A landscape is where an event or event has happened. The Theory of Landscape is a framework that considers two fundamental features of meaning and urban fabric. Consistent with this theory, a reciprocal relationship between the human and the environment is discussed, the result of which is the meaning of the environment as a result of interacting geography and history. Also, the theoretical basics of “landscape” suggest that the experience of human activities in the fabric of the environment creates a meaning that results from the interaction between humans and the environment (history and geography). Hence, these activities evoke memories in the mind that may be individual and collective (Nagarestan, Teimouri & Atashinbar, 2010). Thus, an “urban landscape” reality is not just reduced to the fabric, proportions, and morphological dimensions. Residents’ sense of attachment to a place is created and strengthened due to the lapse of history and experience, for the fabric can only have a beautiful form without experiencing history (Atashinbar, 2010). To sum up, as clarified by the definitions and explanations by scholars of this domain, the constituting elements of the historical landscape are defined based on the intersection and interaction of two elements of geography and human over time (history) (Fig. 1).

• Landscape and modernism

Since the Renaissance, and following the formation of the absolute subject of modernism and the emergence of the bipolarity of subject and object, the landscape was born as an aesthetic and individualistic perception and representation of part of the land and nature, serving as an expression of the “large division” by the classic and modern intellect between human and the world, object and subject, and nature and the environment (Alehashemi & Mansouri, 2018). In modern times, the complexity of subjective and objective features of the landscape have caused the scientific disciplines, developed from Descartes’s bipolar world, to reduce it [landscape] into a single-dimensional concept, thus laying the ground to search it abstractly within subjective

or objective features (Mahan & Mansouri, 2017). Partial and modernist thinking of the past decades has caused cities to reduce their cheerfulness and vitality as a dynamic phenomenon. A structural and bipolar approach causes a lack of sense of attachment, followed by a lack of formation of lively and dynamic collective spaces. Unfortunately, modern urban development does not focus on the category of place, or if it is focused, it will be viewed just as a mere object, an object against not a subject (Mortaz Mehrbani, Mansouri & Javadi, 2018). Historical cities were generally products of collaboration between the public and the governments. In the historical ages, due to the conformity of the worldview of the public and the upper class of the society, there was no considerable difference between their approach and tastes; as a consequence, decisions and measures by these two groups for the city could lead to some sustainable coordination. However, with the rise of modernism in Iranian society since the Qajar era, some rift caused between the ruling system and the public sector led to the formation of unilateralist approaches concerning urban development policies. In the Qajar era, these policies were mainly confined to government spaces; however, from the Pahlavi era, these policies changed urban residential fabrics without considering the role of people in this process (Maghsoudi, 2019).

Discussion

As stated earlier, the landscape was formed in the context of time and geography and in humans’ continuous interaction with the natural and artificial elements of their cities, which helped create historical landscapes over time. The continuity and coherence of how humans approach the environment form the public’s subjective context, and organize the fabric structure, thereby continuing the landscape across history and revealing a sustainable landscape. This sustainability was seen in the public’s minds and the space fabric (objectivity) as continuing subjectivism and objectivism can, over time, create archetypes and traditional customs that embrace people’s lives.

Another side of the issue is the process of forgetting landscape, which appeared following the 19th century worldwide due to modernism and the downgrading of history. This subject was meant to become modern but became a barrier to



Fig. 1. Main constitution elements of a historical landscape. Source: Authors.

continuity and repetition. Thus, new forms were followed, and new patterns were established in the human mind. This phenomenon diminished the role of past patterns, reducing their relationship with history to spiritless fabrics and show museums. Landscape, fully dependent on the human mind and the environment's fabric, began to change in this process and had its old patterns forgotten. In Iran, too, with the rise of modernist thinking, especially since the Qajar era, the landscape which was formed of the integration of historical, human (subjective), and geographical layers, and served as a subjective and objective phenomenon, was gradually replaced by meaningless fabrics which were dissimilar of the social spirit and mind. Thus, in a reciprocal relationship, the pervasiveness of modernist thinking, especially in the minds of the officials, caused the living urban fabrics to be subjected to destruction and fragmentation, which, in turn, caused those fabrics to be forgotten and, the landscape values to be lost (Fig. 2). These developments included the lessening role of water scaredness and loss of the close relationship between water and its touching in urban spaces, loss of the role of dervish convents that served as centers of the congregation of people and social ties, loss of spatial totality and coherence of original Iranian spaces, etc.

Examination of Historical Landscape of Semnan and Damghan

As stated in the previous section, historical Iranian cities were formed via an emphasis on the people's subjective interpretations of the city. The passage of time and continuity of the patterns contributed to a sustainably historical landscape that passed from one generation to another, with each generation adding something new to it. However, this trend declined in the Qajar era, and following the rise of

modernism, it is now totally lost. In this section, the authors seek to investigate objective and subjective components of the landscape within the framework of environmental and structural elements of Semnan and Damghan as case studies. In the environmental elements section, the role of water in the historical landscape of the city of Semnan and the also the role of plants in the historical landscape of Cheshmeh Ali in the city of Damghan are investigated. In contrast, in the section on the structural element, developments of convents and mosques in the urban landscape of Semnan and Damghn are examined.

• Environmental elements

- An embodiment of water in the historical landscape of Semnan City

The water needed for the city of Semnan is supplied from a permanent river that originates from the mountain ranges of Sangsar and Shahmirza, which have formed the urban landscape and structure of Semnan's neighborhoods. The neighborhoods take the names of Latibar and Shahjouy, with the urban landscape affected by the movement of the streams in the alleys (Fig. 3). On the other hand, the water streaming down the gutters is collected downstream in large ponds, which serve as a suitable resource for irrigating the downstream farmlands. These spaces also played recreational, climatic, and landscape roles in the city. For this, the historical landscape of the city of Semnan as a Charbagh formed an initial structure that integrated water, plant, and grain architecture, functioning in the form of a sustainable system. Thus, people had their minds interwoven with water, and considered it vital, as the fabric and the objectivity of the space were affected and formed by water. That said, modern urban development affected how people approached water, as modernism removed urban water management

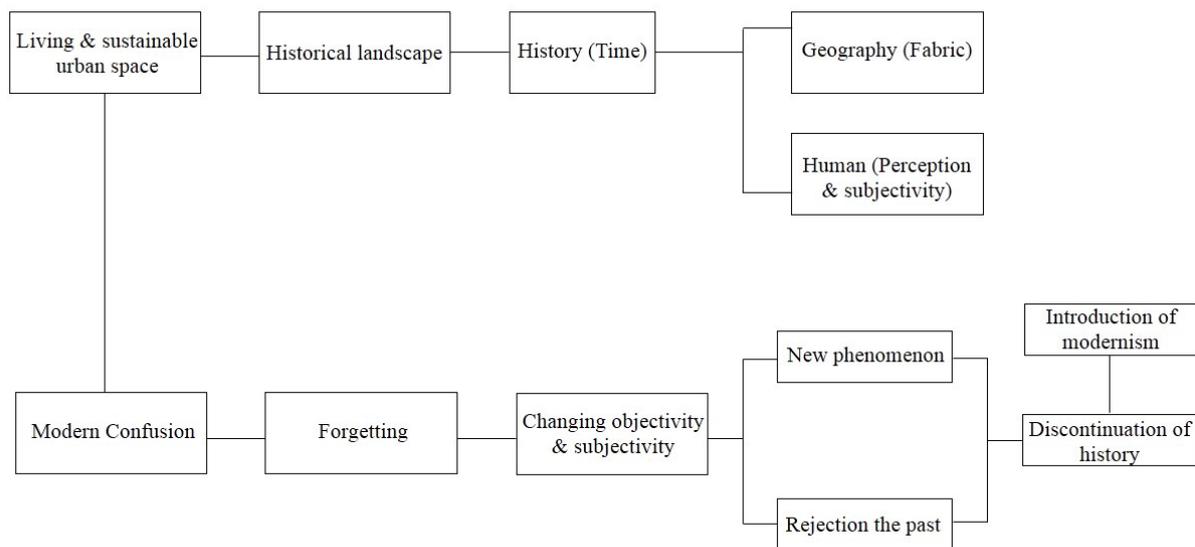


Fig. 2. Constituting elements of a living and sustainable urban landscape and effects of modernism on it. Source: Authors.

and replaced it with water pipes. Urban plans directed the urban development in downstream lands and converted the farmlands into urban textures and water did not have a role in shaping the new landscape. Therefore, the prior urban pattern was forgotten. Water ponds gradually lost their roles and were thus converted into decorative elements in the city. On the other hand, the subjective relationship between residents and water transformed, and the role of water started diminishing. Water, being forgotten by the people, was on the brink of losing its role and significance; water was now taking on a functional role. The drinking water supply could meet the residents' needs at this time. On the other hand, water not only had a specific function in history but also created people's subjective patterns and formed their customs. Thus, this element, which once met the functional needs of the citizens and also enlivened the city and had a high stature among people lost its subjective and meaningful place and life-giving value in the city's landscape.

- Diminishing place of water and plane trees in Cheshmeh Ali

Cheshmeh Ali is located in the northernmost valley of the Damghan mountain ranges, dating back to the pre-Islam era. It is a collection that has had a religious and functional status for the people and the government and received attention in various historical eras, especially for the Safavid and Qajar kings. Like other Iranian places, Cheshmeh Ali followed the Iranian triad pattern, historically forming in the proximity of a spring, plane trees, and a Chahartaghi¹. Two old plane trees lie north of the spring and just at its confluence with the Aab hill-mountain. The site is considered holy for the people who used to tie a faith ribbon to the plane trees and ask God to answer their prayers. The important point is where the faith ribbons are tied, as if the Iranian man considers water and plants to be the origin of life and has his knots untied at the confluence of these two elements, being the origin of life. However, Cheshmeh Ali, like other Iranian spaces, was affected by modernism and saw large-scale objective and subjective interventions. Most of the artificial changes in the collection, like the geometry of the pond, the pavilion inside, the Fathali Shah's mansion, and the Gharavelkhaneh building date back to the Qajar era. These changes were made regardless of the identity of the landscape and the history of the place by merely focusing on a functional-structural approach. The organic structure of Cheshmeh Ali demonstrates continuity and coherence of the landscape elements of water, tree, and mountain, thus providing the possibility of human's continuous interaction with them, though a geometric structure has replaced this structure. The natural bed of the spring was fenced, and contact with water was lost, as short-lived Tabrizi plants replaced plane trees and were planted in a geometric order; the mountain bed was changed into a seating where mansions were built for the



Fig. 3. One of the few surviving effects of the role of water in Semnan's alleys. Photo: Zia Hoseinzadeh, 2022.

pleasure of the kings (Fig. 4). Thus, the mind of an Iranian person is lost in a duality of tradition and modernism. On the one hand, water is still the origin of life and symbolizes purity, and the tree is valuable and symbolizes firmness and life; for this, this place is sacred for people who tie faith ribbons on those trees; on the other hand, they forget about the place and respect of a place and consider it as a park or recreation center where every activity is permissible. In sum, the historical landscape of Cheshmeh Ali and defined patterns in the Iranian landscape changed with the advent of modernism.

• Structural elements

- Semnan Tekiye

Convents serve as spiritual and traditional places and are viewed as inseparable elements of the physical fabric of most cities and villages in Iran (Mahmoudabadi & Bakhtiari, 2010). Convents refer to public places which, as the center of the neighborhood, functioned not only as religious sites but also as places for making a stay, rest, purchasing from the surrounding commercial offices, places of gathering the people, and formation of irrigation councils for allocating the water ratios in the neighborhoods, etc. (Alehashemi, 2020). Traditionally, the convents in the city of Semnan had numerous religious and social roles, which usually constituted the center of the neighborhoods and critical areas in the marketplace, thereby playing a major role in the landscape of the city. However, convents as the main core and center of the neighborhoods of Semnan have seen their roles diminishing, as their religious functions have just been confined to some days of the year. For instance, the Nasar convent of Semnan is almost situated in the middle of the main marketplace. In the central part of the convent lies a historical cistern related to religious and commercial functions. Location at the intersection of such functions in the neighborhood has given such attributes as the possibility of presence and sociability to this space because the people of the city and residents of the neighborhood had to pass through those neighborhoods to do their daily affairs. The



Fig. 4. Design of new plantation applied to the Cheshmeh Ali linearly and regularly, unlike the irregular old plantation design. Photo: Zia Hoseinzadeh, 2022.

Pahneh convent is also situated in the endmost part of the marketplace and has myriad functions; this convent, like the Nasar convent, enjoyed the said qualities. However, convents are nowadays not playing the previous role in the historical landscape of the cities and neighborhoods, and this is noticeable in the historical landscape of Semnan City. Modern changes made to the Iranian cities with organic fabric and extension of street lines caused the cutting-off of the organic passageway of the neighborhoods and the unwanted separation of the urban fabric from each other. The passageways, once a place for the passage of the pedestrians and connection of the neighborhoods, the convents, and the marketplace, were now separated by street lining, making the commuting to the convents and the marketplace cut off (Fig. 5).

With the changing direction of the pedestrians and focus of movement on main streets, the peoples' mental structure gradually embraced the developments, which caused the valuing of the urban spaces in the public's mind to change. This led the convents to lose their previous centrality. Meanwhile, mental developments were strengthened by authorities' spread and adoption of architecture to restore and reconstruct old fabric and abandon historical areas. In this connection, the historical fabric was demolished on the pretext of being old and decrepit, thus becoming ruins under the current conditions of Semnan city. In this state, the marketplace, once a beating heart and the main core of the city that connected neighborhoods, was now losing its role and becoming a separate singled-out element, thus failing in the wake of newly-made commercial sites and shopping malls. Hence, today Semnan's historical landscape does not have its old vitality and liveliness, as it has become a view of several spiritless and separated historical sites (Fig. 6).

- Damghan's Tarikhaneh mosque

Mosques are one of the pivotal elements of Islamic cities, which have served as public spaces with different social, economic, political, and structural functions across cities

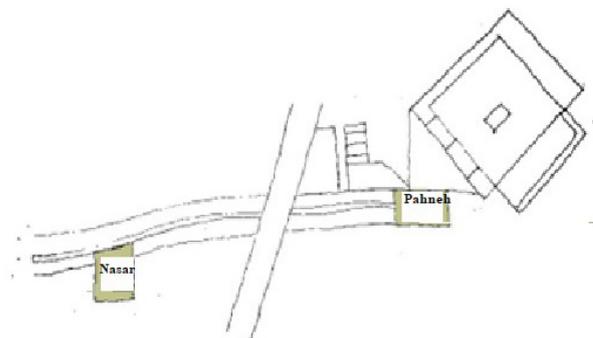


Fig. 5. Situation of the two Convents of Nasar and Pahneh relative to the main marketplace and new street lining. Source: Authors.

(Taghvaei & Maroufi, 2010). The Tarikhaneh mosque is one of the oldest buildings of Damghan, located in the southeast of the city (Azad, 2013). Thus, as stated, mosques function as centers of social interaction for residents in Iranian cities; in other words, they have embraced urban life. Although mosques still play a major role in many affairs and are more or less as prosperous as before, there are many cases in which historical mosques are becoming urban museums than centers of prayers for residents. This suggests a drawback of the revivalism perspective that is debated in the field of repair and maintenance, as mosques are becoming a focal point of directors of cultural heritage. Mosques that were once homes to religious ceremonies and involved public participation are now closed to people and have become a fabric void of space spirit. This issue also comes from the objective and structural view of the authorities of the city and their neglect of the urban historical landscape as a subjective-objective phenomenon, thereby stripping the city from its social and semantic features. Hence, the residents' subjective structure gradually accepts the objective and structural features of mosques, decentralizing mosques and converting them into spiritless spaces. This is more evident in the Tarikhaneh mosque in Damghan, which is the main historical mosque of the city, as the mosque has preserved its structural features while it remains a space without the spirit (Fig. 7).

As stated before, and according to Table 1, the historical landscapes of Semnan and Damghan cities seem to have been affected and damaged by the structural interventions caused by modernism and the diminishing role of old and decrepit sites, as revealed by the people and the officials. Although objectively speaking, the building's fabric seems to have been preserved and repaired, most of such buildings have become spiritless structures that have lost their identity. The historical landscapes of the cities of Semnan and Damghan, which were once believed to establish a subjective bond with the users, are now becoming spiritless and singled-out buildings, as noted from the Piralamdar Shrine and Pachenar Castle.



Fig. 6. Abandonment of the Nasar convent in the Semnan marketplace; loss of its social role and activities. Photo: Zia Hoseinzadeh, 2022.



Fig. 7. The Tarikhaneh mosque, which shows no sign of social life due to the structural grain view of the urban landscape. Photo: Zia Hoseinzadeh, 2022.

Table 1. A synopsis of case studies. Source: Authors.

Case study	Damages
Water landscape in Semnan	The diminishing role of water sacredness and the relationship between citizens and water due to the mere focus on urban structural issues and forgetting of the subjective feature of the presence of water in the urban landscape
Convents of Semnan	Loss of social roles and neighborhood centrality due to the failure to perceive landscape as a whole; destruction of the fabric and the life, and preservation of grain architecture
Cheshmeh Ali of Damghan	Disruption of order and triad system of the Iranian landscape due to forgetting of the subjective feature of the sacredness of water and trees for Iranians
Tarikhaneh mosque of Damghan	Loss of social life in the mosque and preservation of its shell and fabric due to structural perspectives and removal of the subjective feature of the landscape

Conclusion

Iranian cities have demonstrated a sustainable landscape in terms of semantic, subjective, and structural features due to the conformity of geographical (structural) and human (subjective) layers throughout history. This continuing landscape remained stable until the rise of the Qajar era and modernism in the country, with urban spaces mirroring public beliefs, norms, and holy values. With the rise of modernism and changing view of space from a subjective-objective perspective to a mere fabric and structure, semantic features of the natural elements of the urban space were lost and forgotten, destroying valuable urban fabrics and introducing inconsiderate measures which caused landscape values of urban spaces to be lost. Thus, the historical fabrics and structures of different cities were destroyed daily, resulting in the diminishing role of landscapes such as water, springs, old trees, Charataghi, convents, and many other identity-giving elements which were historically sacred for people. Some of the changes made to the historical sites and their landscapes were inevitable and were required of modern

urban life, like implementing a water piping system, construction of industrial centers on the outskirts of the cities, and transfer of labor and production centers to the surroundings of cities. However, as stated before, space and landscape elements in the historical fabrics had not only functional roles but also played social, cultural, religious, mythical, and identity roles specifically in the events and memories of the people, as they had a long presence in the geographical context of the cities. As initial changes were made to the structure and function of these spaces by the then officials, people also forgot about those roles due to changing cultural and subjective features caused by modernism, thus failing to preserve them. In sum, it should be admitted that some of the functional roles of the spaces and urban elements in the old textures cannot survive in modern life; thus, measures to revive and strengthen their roles and convert the historical fabric of the cities into cultural, social and tourism sites can provide a new opportunity for the ever-increasing presence of people and tourists, thus adding to the life and vitality of these sites.

Endnote

1. literally meaning “having four arches”, is an architectural unit consisting of four barrel vaults and a dome

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