

Viewpoint\ Critical Review

## The Role of the Concept of “Place” in Rural Guide Plans (Case Study: Aboulvafa and Horin Khalifeh Villages)

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Received: 05/09/2024

Accepted: 14/10/2024

Available online: 21/11/2024

**Abstract** | The failure to realize spatial development programs for villages (Rural Guide Plans) in Iran is one of the significant challenges to the sustainable development of rural areas. These programs, designed and implemented to manage the spatial and functional development of villages, have not achieved the expected results despite efforts to improve and reform the functions of rural spaces. During visits to the villages in the central district of Kuhdasht County (Aboulvafa, Horin Khalifeh, Dam Sorkh, etc.), while confirming this premise, it appears that the failure to achieve development goals at the action stage is primarily due to the inability of planners to understand and identify the environmental characteristics and territorial values of the village during the program formulation stage. According to the definitions of place and landscape, planning based on the concept of place plays a crucial role in determining the identity and success of a space. Place is not equivalent to physical space; rather, the observer's perception of it contains various values and meanings. A comparative analysis of the Rural guide plans of the two villages of Aboulvafa and Horin Khalifeh in the central district of Kouhdasht also confirms that the way of approaching the concept of place significantly impacts the rural development process. It appears that the feasibility of rural development objectives (Rural Guide plans) requires a precise understanding of place and attention to landscape layers in the planning process. This necessitates a specific phase in the spatial planning service description titled “landscape reading,” in which the landscape specialist, in collaboration with the local community, uncovers the landscape layers, revealing territorial values. This process will lead to the preparation of a place-based (place-oriented) program that ensures sustainable rural development.

**Keywords** | Rural Guide Plan, Place, Spatial Planning, Place-Based Program.

**Introduction and Statement of the Problem** | What has been the reason for the failure to implement rural development programs, and what is its relationship to the program document? Rural Guide plans are the most significant upper-level spatial program for villages (within the framework of physical development) in Iran, aimed at managing the physical and functional development of villages and are approved and executed based on the regulations established in economic, social, and cultural development programs by the Housing Foundation of the Islamic Revolution (Housing Foundation of the Islamic Revolution, 1990, 32). More than four decades after the formulation and implementation of the first rural development plan from 1983 to the present, it can be observed that, despite systematizing the physical development of villages in an organized

and comprehensive manner (Mozaffar et al, 2008), the plans have achieved only 30% success in environmental and climatic criteria, 29% in physical criteria, and merely 28% in economic-social criteria (Alimardani, 1992). Despite numerous reforms made in the process of drafting the terms of reference for rural development plans<sup>1</sup>, the results of these programs at the action stage indicate conceptual, theoretical, and practical challenges in the rural spatial planning process (Rokneddin Eftekhari et al., 2018). This is because there exists a significant gap between the program's objectives and the actions taken. Based on visits conducted to some villages in the central district of Kuhdasht County (such as Abouloufa and Horin Khalifeh) in evaluating the extent of spatial program implementation, it appears that the answer to why rural Guide plans have not succeeded (prior to the action stage) should be sought in the planners' perspective on the concept of place in the process of drafting the document.

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## Structure of Criticism

According to the definition provided by the Foundation for the Islamic Revolution Housing, a rural Guide plan is a plan that, while organizing and reforming the existing structure, determines the extent and location of future expansion and the manner of land use for various functions such as residential, commercial, agricultural, facilities and equipment, and the public needs of rural areas, as appropriate, within the framework of the resolutions of spatial organization plans and rural settlement plans and comprehensive regional plans (Foundation for the Islamic Revolution Housing, 2023). Rural Guide plans were first introduced in 1983 as pilot plans and then, from 1988 to the present, have been implemented comprehensively as an overarching program (Ahmadi, 1995); these plans are prepared based on the model of comprehensive planning and are primarily based on the centrality of physical transformations, such that, following physical changes, other dimensions of the village, such as the economy and society, are also influenced, adopting an approach based on structuring physical transformations in rural development (Ebrahimi et al., 2014).

The most important pillars of Planning rural guidance projects are based on three axes: studies of the area of influence, land use studies, and road network studies (Housing Foundation of the Islamic Revolution, Rural Development Deputy, 2004). The most crucial part of the process of understanding the location may be found in the phase of analyzing and inferring the current situation, prior to formulating the vision in the process of drafting the development plan. As previously mentioned, the primary focus of the planner in this phase is based on the physical structure and quantitative values (such as road area, type of land use, type of services, etc.). An evaluation of the experience of a purely physical approach to development indicates the failure of its programs to meet human and community satisfaction. Although these programs have succeeded in improving some objective indicators, they have not been particularly successful in ensuring the satisfaction of residents (Mansouri, 2023). According to statistics from the Rural Development Department, from 1989 to the end of 2018, more than 1,472 rural development plans have been drafted for Lorestan Province (Housing Foundation of the Islamic Revolution, Rural Development Deputy, 2004). With this logic, one would expect to witness maximum development of villages in social and economic fields; however, statistics and results measuring the level of social-economic development in the central part of Kuhdasht County prove otherwise.

Despite the development of rural Guide plans schemes and adherence to a common logic of spatial planning, the development of plain and Mountainous - Forest villages has a significantly different trajectory compared to mountainous-forest villages (Tavakoli et al., 2014). This premise suggests that the natural location of villages influences their level of development, allowing for an examination of the value of place and its role in the planning process. What is evident is the fundamental

difference in the approaches to rural planning both domestically and internationally. On a global scale, the feasibility of sustainable rural development from a physical perspective is intertwined with aspects such as land use, spatial design, housing, services, natural-cultural heritage, and settlement. However, a critical point in comparing international and domestic planning approaches is the reform of the purely physical planning process and the attention to contextual (place) values in the planning process.

International programs within the framework of spatial programs focus on organizing the dynamic structures of environmental, economic, social, and political aspects simultaneously and integratively, emphasizing the relationships and internal flows of settlements (Huggins, 2016, 1-3). Understanding and discovering these relationships may provide a gateway to changing the perspective from the physical to the contextual. Field observations and oral interviews from a collection of villages in the central district of Kuhdasht, such as Aboulvafa, Hoorin Khalifeh, and Sorkh Dam, indicate that a lack of attention to qualitative aspects in the planning process—such as neglecting the environmental characteristics of the village, failing to recognize the economic and livelihood dimensions of the villagers, emphasizing spatial uniformity without regard for notable natural diversities, and insufficient attention to meaningful components (preserving the symbolic values of the village, social vitality, sense of identity and belonging) and the participation and role of the people—constitute a reasoned conclusion regarding the lack of understanding of the context and place and its role in the planning process.

## Theoretical Foundations

### • Place

According to Schultz (1974), Place is defined as “the existence of spaces comes from Place, not from the space itself.” Therefore, the design of space is dependent on the understanding of Place and what is referred to as the sense of place; this sense is something beyond the physical and sensory characteristics, which is called the spirit of place. Thus, Place can be regarded as a space imbued with meaning. The reality of a Place is always open to embedding its own reality within a social process (Logan & Molotch, 1987, 47). Hence, Rapoport names Place as one of the four defining elements of space, which, in combination with the meaning of time and relationships, shapes the human environment. Lynch also defines the identity of a Place simply as its uniqueness from other Places, with his basis for this identification being the nature of being distinct (Lynch, 1993).

### • Place from the perspective of landscape

Based on the definition of landscape as a dynamic and relative phenomenon that is both objective and subjective, resulting from the interaction of humans with their environment and society throughout history (Mansouri, 2005), In fact, space transforms into place from the moment it becomes readable and interpretable, as it not only has an objective aspect but also

carries interpretations that encompass the subjective aspect of the landscape. There are numerous indicators and factors for reading place in space; among the most important are being central, being scenic, being structural, having a historical-meaningful aspect, having a notable natural aspect, being subject to attention and consensus (crowdedness-emptiness), and having direction and hierarchy. In seeking to elucidate the above concepts and express the analytical relationship among the factors shaping place, four main factors can be identified in the success of place: imageability, accessibility and connectivity, usability, (PPS, 2001) (Fig. 1). Based on the provided definition, it seems that the fundamental problem in the process of planning rural guide plan projects can be traced back to a lack of proper understanding of the value of place, which itself stems from an inability to read and see correctly, and from not recognizing (the value and power of) place. The lack of oversight by the producers over the values of the Place is also reflected in the scope of services for the preparation of rural guide plans; based on the approved basic scope of services for the preparation of rural guide plans, it is divided into three main stages: 1- Basic studies and assessment of the current situation 2- Analysis and inference of the assessment of the current situation and formulation of visions 3- Determination and prioritization of proposed projects and presentation of the guide plan (Fig. 2). Considering the stages outlined in the three-phase process of developing rural guide plans, the primary criteria and indicators examined in the phase of exploratory studies, evaluation, and inference, and program determination predominantly emphasize the objective spatial aspects. In many cases, they neglect the characteristics and values of the Place and territorial context, such that they can be generalized to any village or area. For example, in the first stage, which focuses on baseline identification and analysis of the current situation, the assessments primarily remain at the level of political, geographical, demographic, and physical identification, without comprehensively studying the

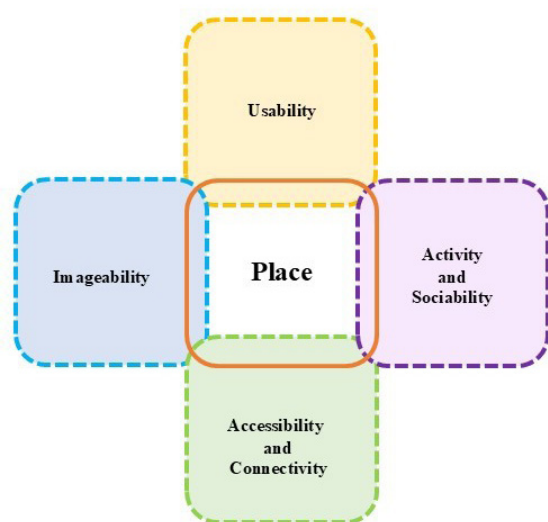


Fig. 1. Key Indicators of Place-Making.  
Source: Khorramrouei & Sadafi Kohnehshahri, 2024.

cultural, historical, and meaningful characteristics of the place. In the second stage, where analysis and inference from the conducted studies occur, the formulation of visions often relies on quantitative indicators and pre-determined standards, without adequately considering the local capacities and the social-cultural needs of the residents. This approach not only undermines the Place identity but also renders the proposed visions lacking the necessary flexibility to adapt to the specific characteristics of the area. In the third stage, the plans and regulations presented are often focused on the physical and service improvement of the village, while neglecting aspects such as natural, cultural, and social values that could transform the village context into a meaningful place. Subsequently, using the presented indicators, one can examine some of the rural guide plans in the Kuhdasht region and compare how targeted or random attention has impacted the planning process through to implementation.

### Examination and Explanation of Instances

#### • Aboulvafa Village

This village is located in the Gol-Gol district of the central part of Kuhdasht County, in Lorestan Province. According to the 2016 census, the population of this village has been reported as 382 individuals. The most significant asset of this village is the presence of the Imamzadeh Seyed Mohammad Aboloufa. Considering the evaluation criteria for locations and taking into account features such as historical and meaningful significance, public attention, being a core area, and being a focal point for development, it is undoubtedly the Imamzadeh Aboloufa that stands as the most important site in the village of Aboloufa. In the planning process, a correct interpretation of its landscape and capacities must be considered as a fundamental element in the spatial planning of the Haadi Plan. However, what has been outlined in the Haadi Plan is in contradiction with the realities of the location. In the proposed Rural Guide plan, the Imamzadeh and the surrounding pilgrimage complex are viewed not as the existential purpose of the village, but as an independent destination and a separate entity from the village. This distinction of the Imamzadeh from its context in the planning process suggests that the planner considers their mission to be the development of the Imamzadeh rather than the village; to the extent that the route leading to the Imamzadeh gains such importance that it disrupts the structure of the village neighborhoods and their connectivity in the design of the proposed road network with a forty-meter widening (Figs. 3 & 4), displaces the historical spring of the village for the purpose of developing the Imamzadeh, disregards the villagers’ potential benefit from the presence of pilgrims in the village, and an Imamzadeh that could have been a source of sustainable development for the village becomes separated from the village’s development axis due to the prioritization of the route leading to the Imamzadeh. Therefore, the definition of the definitive boundaries of a street in higher-level documents, without regard to the characteristics of the context, imposes irreparable effects

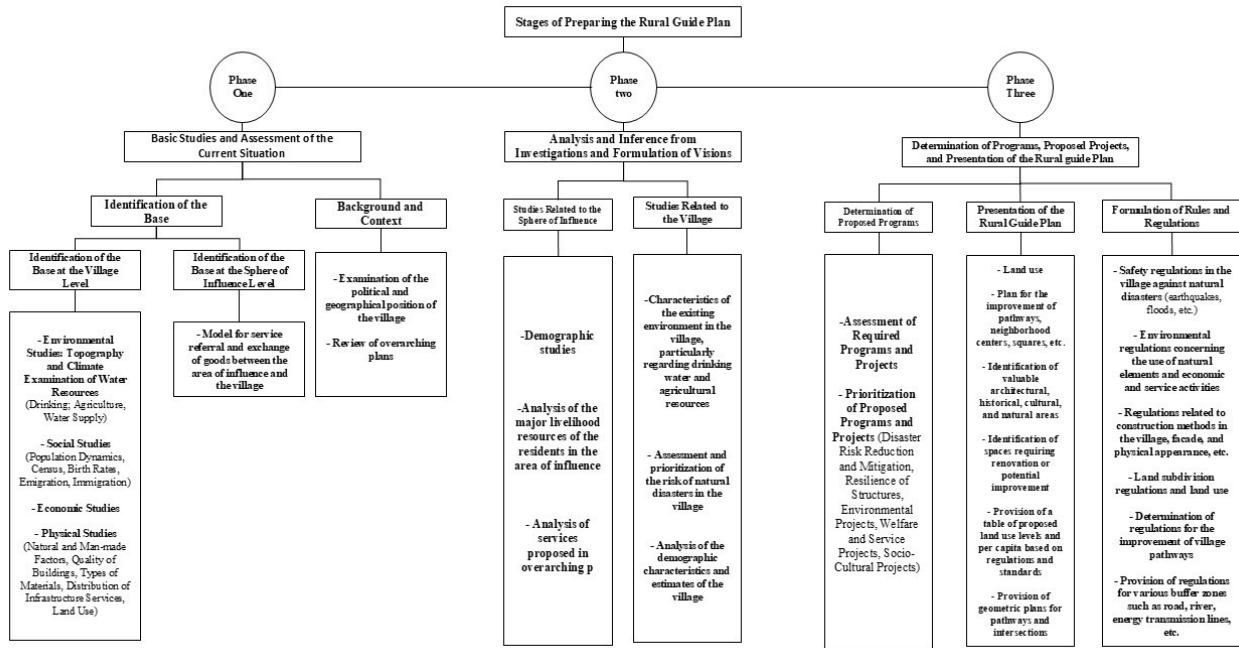


Fig 2. Stages of preparing the rural guide plan; Source: Author, derived from the Guide for Preparing Rural Comprehensive Plans, Rural Development Department of the Islamic Revolution Housing Foundation.

on the village; this is while one of the main policies of the spatial planning program of Kuhdasht County in the tourism sector has been stated as the empowerment of the local community through tourism development (Planning and Development Council of Lorestan Province, 2013). In contrast to this destructive trend, if the planner is familiar with landscape knowledge and the way to interpret the village landscape.

Following the discovery of the reasons for the establishment of the village (its emergence) at this location and in this manner, in this method, the planner initially considers the village as a whole that has formed within a natural context (the natural spring of the village in Abolvafa) and is the result of various activities of human groups, which is evident in the methods of resource utilization, ownership determinations, and the organization of groups (Raheb, 2007, 111). Subsequently, the landscape of the village is regarded as a unified entity and a conceptual integration of both objective and subjective aspects, which is itself influenced by the cultural and physical factors of the village. At this stage, with the understanding that each village has an environment and, in relation to the process of living, has developed its identity, this identity is manifested in its components; at this point, the presence of Imamzadeh Abolvafa at the center of the village fabric gains significance rather than being adjacent to it; as it serves as the center of the village by revealing the qualities present at the moment (the village spring, the sacred place), forming a focal point for the manifestation of human presence in nature to present a physical landscape (Hemmati, 2020), around which all economic, social, and cultural relations of the village are shaped.

• **Horin Khalifeh Village**

This village is located in the northern Kuhdasht district and is part of the central Kuhdasht section. According to the 2011 census, it



Fig. 3. Entrance Boulevard of Abolvafa village. Photo: Author archive.

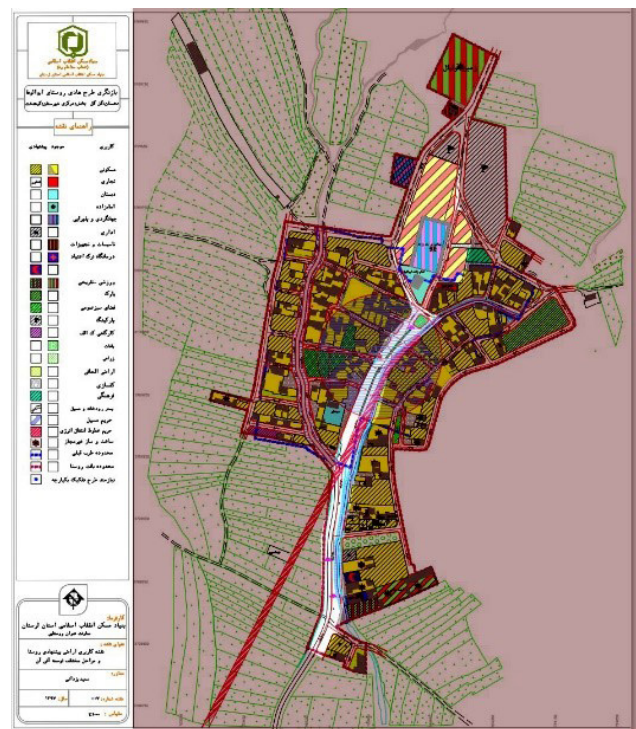


Fig. 4. The Imamzadeh area in the detailed plan of Abolvafa village. Source: Village Council of Abolvafa.

comprised 107 households and is situated at the foothills of the Changeri Mountain. Considering the village's location, perhaps the most significant spatial feature of this village is its positioning at the foothills of Changeri Mountain (settlement), the dominant view over the lower plain, development along the river path, the stream, and its proximity to the oak forests of the mountains, with its initial core forming along the mountain stream, although the existing river has become seasonal due to water scarcity and drought in recent years.

By evaluating the Plqce indicators, the village river, with its characteristics such as being a structural element, having a scenic aspect, and its prominent natural features, is indeed one of the significant locations of the village. The development of the village along the eastern-western axis (from upside to doznside) has occurred in alignment with this waterway, where the most important service centers of the village, such as the school and the village house, are situated alongside this waterway. However, structural interventions with a completely objective approach or with the aim of modernization and contemporization have led to a lack of taste and neglect of the indigenous nature. The restriction and walling off of the stream channels (Figs. 5 & 6) based on the assumption that it would make the village streets more similar to urban fabric, have undermined the natural and indigenous identity of the village instead of enhancing place-based qualities. Such approaches require reconsideration and attention to unique Place characteristics to maintain the sustainability and authenticity of the village. Similar actions in the planning and implementation process, albeit minimal, demonstrate how strengthening place-based values can pave the way for sustainable development.

### Evaluation

Considering the mentioned instances, it can be said that the process of planning and developing rural Guide plans becomes distorted when the proposed plans are not place-based and the perceptual values of the space (historical, meaningful, identity-related, natural, etc.) are overlooked. Since the planner's perspective on the place is objective and merely physical (which is predictable based on the approach of rural guide plans grounded in physical planning), short-term objectives are prioritized in the planning process, resulting in the definition of land uses, delineation of property boundaries, and allocation of uses to the lands. The intensity of focus on the physical aspect and the application of personal preferences becomes such a priority for the planner that, in some of the villages visited during field studies, the recognition aspect—which is a prerequisite for identifying the place and contextual values in the document preparation process—is ignored, and only the preparation of the final map is considered sufficient, while the natural characteristics of the context, heritage capacities, etc., are recognized as limiting elements in the planning process. This type of perspective on Place is, in fact, based on the matter of reality and not on people's perception of that reality. Consequently, the position

and role of various natural and artificial elements in the village are compromised during planning, and their spatial values are overlooked. In this approach, the primary goal of the village program remains limited to defining boundaries, whereas in the correct process of village planning, the social territory forms a material-spiritual whole and recognizes a boundary that holds no meaning for non-residents beyond it (Mansouri, 2023). Planners should adopt a landscape approach and regard the landscape as a matter of reality, seeking to interpret the layers of the village landscape and discover the interpretive aspect of space from the people's perspective. This means paying attention to how the people read and record that place, using that as the basis for drafting the planning document. Thus, it seems that examining the four cognitive components of emergence, establishment, function, and perception of residents (Hemmati, 2023) provides a model that leads to reading the landscape in the stage of understanding prior to the preparation of the planning document. Ultimately, what is reproduced as a program in this process will be based on the same rural landscape.

### Conclusion

By examining the higher-level programs and aligning them with the conducted specific evaluations and through field visits to the target villages, it appears that the most important and fundamental factor in the failure to realize rural guide plans from the program level to the action stage must be sought in the process of formulating these plans. Here, a lack of accurate understanding of the Place and territorial capacities leads to the development of programs that do not closely align with environmental realities; the term “understanding the Place” as the primary context and background for planning refers to an interpretation of the village based on the reasons and conditions of its emergence and development, derived from a precise review of its historical and geographical background and the understanding of the village in the minds of its inhabitants. This concept provides a comprehensive and unified meaning of the village, which the researcher identifies separately in each village. In the absence of this approach, and by merely recording the physical characteristics of the village, the program's objectives remain unfulfilled, and the development process halts. The solutions to escape this deadlock involve reforming the approach to the process of formulating the rural development plan. This requires a staged phase called “reading the rural landscape,” so that while paying attention to the Place indicators, with the assistance of a landscape specialist and the participation of the local community, the layers of the landscape are uncovered and the territorial values are revealed. This process will lead to the preparation of a place-based program that guarantees the sustainable development of the village.

### Endnotes

1. From the beginning of the First Development Plan until Spring 1395.



Fig. 5. Attention to the village's waterways as a development axis for the village structure. Photo: Author archive.

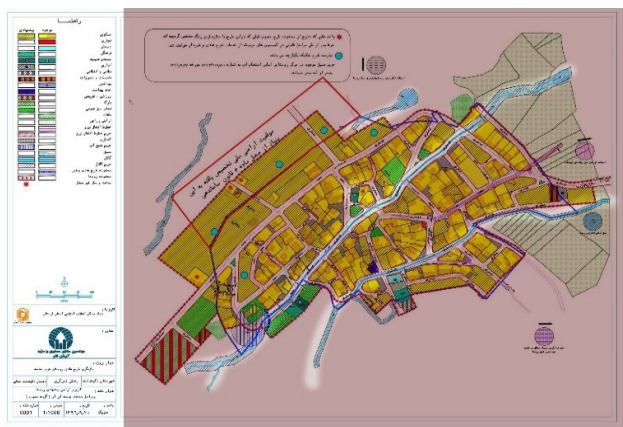


Fig. 6. Attention to the seasonal river as a development structure for the village in the approved detailed plan, 2018. Source: Village Council of Harin Khalifeh

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**HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE**

Sadafi Kohnehshahri, P. (2024). The Role of the Concept of “Place” in Rural Guide Plans (Case Study: Aboulvafa and Horin Khalifeh Villages). *Tourism of Culture*, 5(18), 48-53.

DOI: 10.22034/TOC.2024.492973.1174

URL: [https://www.toc-sj.com/article\\_211095.html?lang=en](https://www.toc-sj.com/article_211095.html?lang=en)

