

Original Research Article

Neighborhood Centers: Similar Appearance for Tourists, Diverse Characters in Citizens' Perception (Case Study: Vaqt-o-Sa'at Square in Yazd and Jolfa Square in Isfahan)*

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Abstract | The neighborhood is one of the smallest units of the urban system, and its pulsating heart is the “neighborhood center.” The neighborhood center constitutes the nucleus that generates the social, political, and economic life of the neighborhood, and as long as it remains Vibrant, the neighborhood will also endure. The existence of the neighborhood depends on its center, and the existence of the center, in turn, relies on the activity of the residents inhabiting it. When confronted with a phenomenon, first we perceive its existence as a unified reality in the form of a general impression, and only afterward proceed to comprehend its components. This holistic perception emerges from the elements and the interrelations among those elements that constitute the phenomenon. In the research journey titled “Ontology Reading of the Urban Landscape of Yazd”, through visiting several neighborhood centers in Yazd, the study pursued the overall impression derived from the experience of space, comparing four neighborhood centers with one another. In this comparison, the neighborhood centers were considered as unified wholes; therefore, the investigation was directed toward their constituent elements and the interrelations among them. The neighborhood center, in accordance with the domain of its intermediate space, its façades and immediate land uses, the adjacent land uses which, though not constituting its façades, nevertheless exert influence upon it, the streets that terminate in or branch out from it, and the events that unfold within it, possesses unique characters. These characters shape the personality and identity of the center, which, in essence, constitute its overall existential Ontology. The key finding of the research lay in apprehending these diverse characters of the neighborhood centers beneath their seemingly similar appearances. The method of data collection in this study was founded upon field observation and an ontological approach with a holistic perspective from the standpoint of the space-experiencer, complemented.

Keywords | *Neighborhood Center, Yazd, Vaqt-o-Sa'at Square of Yazd, Jolfa Square of Isfahan, Being, Ontology.*

Introduction and Problem Statement | The present study emerges from the research project “Ontological Reading of the Urban Landscape of Yazd”, conducted in 2024 at the Nazar Research Institute. Therefore, prior to discussing the research context (Yazd), it is necessary to clarify the subject of the study,

beginning with the research project's approach. Subsequently, after a thematic review (theoretical foundations), the study addresses the question: What elements sustain the vitality of neighborhood centers? Is it the design language, materials, and construction techniques, execution details, budget allocation, managerial determination, or similar measures that contribute to the flourishing or decline of neighborhood centers? By comparing two neighborhood centers in two different cities, these aspects are examined in detail. The present study, due to its nature, is based

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on lived experience, field observation, and the overall impression derived from it, approached from an ontological perspective. Accordingly, the text seeks to articulate the research hypothesis (i.e., the distinctiveness of the character of neighborhood centers despite their physical-spatial similarities) through the expression of this overall impression, rather than solely through logical, non-empirical, or literature-based argumentation. In terms of available resources, there is a limitation of scientifically grounded studies addressing the ontological effects of space, as opposed to theoretical or philosophical discussions; therefore, the research primarily relies on direct observations. Moreover, the defined objective of the research journey was to convey the overall impressions of observers regarding the ontological experience of the visited locations, presented in the form of findings within this article. Consequently, the study emphasizes field observations and the impressions and experiences derived from them.

The neighborhood constitutes a subsystem and a minor unit within the broader urban system. It is a semi-autonomous ontology that, while relatively self-sufficient in addressing the everyday needs of its inhabitants, remains dependent—at a larger scale—on other neighborhoods, urban domains, and ultimately on the city system as a whole. The spatial organization and components of neighborhoods (if not throughout Iran, at least within a single city) are often similar to one another. However, a closer investigation reveals that, despite these apparent similarities, neighborhoods respond differently to the ongoing life within them, shaped by diverse contextual factors. The neighborhood center, as the generative nucleus of the neighborhood, serves as a socio-economic hub and communal base. It has traditionally been the place where residents gather to receive the latest news, procure daily necessities (such as bread, groceries, fruits, and vegetables), bathe, perform religious rituals, and, in some cities—depending on climate and living conditions—accommodate additional functions (such as water cisterns, icehouses, and qanats), all strategically located within the neighborhood center. Therefore, neighborhood centers encompass multiple dimensions—economic, social, cultural, religious-ritual, political, and legal—through which the shared identity of the neighborhood residents acquires meaning in relation to the center. The multiplicity of value-generating layers within the neighborhood center causes the lives of residents to intertwine with the center and its components across various layers and in greater depth. On the other hand, the audience of the neighborhood center, due to the concentration of diverse functions, is broad, which further reinforces the universality and centrality of the neighborhood center.

Every urban space accommodates various functions to meet the wide range of needs of its residents, reflecting the collective desires of the neighborhood's population. The weighting of different layers within neighborhood centers varies according to multiple factors, particularly the extent to which residents require diverse functions, so that some layers expand more than others and

occupy greater space. This factor, alongside other environmental influences, constitutes one of the main reasons for distinctions among neighborhood centers. Consequently, neighborhood centers with unique characteristics can be observed. In this article, these distinctions among neighborhood centers are examined, revealing that, from a holistic ontological perspective, the fundamental existence of a neighborhood center is the overall impression it forms in the mind of the observer, which serves as the basis for the perception and judgment of the center's quality. This overall impression, in essence, corresponds to the perception of the neighborhood's unique character. It is noteworthy that this study is grounded in the overall impressions of visitors, obtained through field observation.

Research Hypothesis

Neighborhood centers in the spatial organization of Iranian cities (particularly in similar climatic regions) exhibit a relatively uniform physical-spatial system, resulting in an overall similarity in their appearance, from form, structure, and materials to space and the arrangement of functions. However, in reality, each center possesses a distinct character (theme) that differentiates it from the others. This theme corresponds to the overall impression derived from the prevailing atmosphere, which emerges from the functions, physical fabric, and events of the neighborhood center and is perceived in the mind as an attribute of its Being.

Literature Review

In the literature review section, two categories of previous studies conducted by other researchers are addressed: the first category comprises studies focusing specifically on neighborhood centers, while the second includes studies that reference the case studies examined in the present research. Although some of the investigations concerning these case studies are discussed in detail within the main body of the research, particularly in the section on site-specific studies (analysis of case studies). In a study conducted by Zarabian and Monam (2008) entitled "Examining the Extent and Factors Influencing the Sense of Place," it was concluded that the sense of place results from an interaction between internal connections, mental perceptions, and environmental characteristics. Successful neighborhood centers are those that embody all three of these aspects simultaneously. For example, in addition to mental experiences and the preservation of memorable symbols, they must also possess a desirable landscape, sound, and even scent in order to be accepted by people as true neighborhood centers. Factors such as maintaining a connection with the past while addressing present-day requirements, fostering opportunities for social interaction, awareness of previous activities and the mental images recorded in collective memory, as well as the harmony of architecture and urban design, can all contribute to the continuity of these centers (ibid., 2008). According to Habib (2003), neighborhood centers as social focal points and the most public local arenas, serving

as spaces for interaction and gathering of co-residents. Similarly, Tavasoli (2003) describes neighborhood centers as gathering places that, in addition to accommodating diverse activities of various social groups, also serve as meeting places for the local elite (Tavasoli, 2003). The Toogh (or Togh) refers to the major Ashura mourning ritual, which was present in some neighborhoods and, by virtue of its presence, turned the corresponding location—the neighborhood center—into a gathering place (pātouq). In this way, the neighborhood center functioned as a “baashgah,” a meaningful place for being and communal presence in the collective consciousness of the residents. Pakzad (2007) argues that, among the two main components playing a central role in the neighborhood—namely, the physical boundary and social belonging—it is the neighborhood center that most strongly reinforces social belonging.

In the article “Differential Perception of Semantic and Visual Cues Affecting Environmental Identity” by Majdzadeh et al. (2023), focusing on the Fahadan neighborhood of Yazd, the authors examined visual factors influencing the sense of identity within the neighborhood and highlighted several relevant points. However, what has been overlooked is that prior studies have not addressed the experiences of visitors, as these visual features produce different impressions on observers from diverse cities and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the emphasis on visual elements diminishes the role of spatial sense and its influence on the perception of neighborhood centers.

In the study conducted by Naqsan-Mohammadi & Beyzaie (2024), the authors attempted to compare and examine successful patterns of desirable neighborhood centers in relation to the existing patterns in the neighborhood centers of Yazd. According to their findings, in many cases, these centers correspond closely and share numerous similarities. In this respect, the aforementioned study aligns most closely with the overarching concept of the present research. However, what distinguishes the current study is its findings and the extension of the comparative analysis beyond Yazd to another city with a similar climate. The research by Naqsan-Mohammadi et al., while addressing the characteristics of neighborhood centers, cites Soltanzadeh & Rohbakhshan (2006) in categorizing them into two types: one type resembling a courtyard-centered plan, and the other taking the form of a slightly wider street or passage than other alleys, accommodating commercial and social functions. It should be noted that although neighborhood centers host a variety of urban functions—such as baths, mosques (or other religious-ritual elements), water reservoirs, icehouses, small commercial shops, caravanserais, and so forth—as well as serving as focal points of neighborhood pathways connecting the center to other parts of the city (Naqsan-Mohammadi & Beyzaie, 2024), these attributes alone do not necessarily constitute a space as a true neighborhood center (Sartipi Isfahani, 2023).

Many scholars argue that, due to the richness of Yazd’s neighborhood centers and their preservation to the present

day, these centers are currently considered high-quality urban spaces (Naqsan-Mohammadi & Beyzaie, 2024; Tavasoli, 2003; Majdzadeh et al., 2023). However, what has been overlooked is that, although physical restoration and revitalization of the fabric through functional interventions is a positive measure, the true revival and vitality of the urban fabric require the social life of Yazd’s residents and citizens to be restored and maintained. It is not sufficient to rely solely on physical restoration and the conversion of spaces into accommodations, restaurants, cafés, or souvenir shops, thereby turning the fabric into a museum serving tourists; rather, a balance must be established between the life of residents and the presence of visitors within these spaces.

Theoretical Foundations

• Ontology and the ontological approach

The question of Being has been one of humanity’s most fundamental philosophical inquiries since the beginning of thought. Consequently, a comprehensive discussion of it exceeds the scope of this article, and only a brief definition is provided. Being and existence refer to the fact that phenomena exist and to the “totality of all that exists” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Ontology is, in fact, defined as the philosophical study of the truth of “being,” “existence,” and “presence.” Branko Mitrovich argues that, in developing his conceptual framework, Plato laid the foundations for a new philosophical system, which we refer to as ontology (Mitrovic, 2020).

Ontology is the philosophical study of “being in general.” In Aristotle’s metaphysical thought, it was referred to as the “first philosophy.” However, the term ontology, derived from the Latin *ontologia*, meaning “the science of being,” was first introduced by the German philosopher Jakob Lorhard in 1606. Therefore, the inquiry into Being and its essence spans several thousand years, yet many aspects of it remain unknown to humanity (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

All phenomena that fall within human perception—whether they exist in the objective world outside the human mind (so-called “real” phenomena) or are constructs of the human mind that one contemplates (even if they have no external counterpart)—all belong to the domain of Being. Therefore, anything that humans can think about possesses Being. Any discussion of that which pertains to non-being or its essence inherently brings it into the realm of Being. Thus, everything we think about or speak of shares in “Being and existence.” A question that arises in this context is: within phenomena that share Being, what are the constituent elements, and what is the relationship among these elements? What is the relationship between the whole and its Being?

• Holistic and ontological perspective

One of humanity’s primary worldviews, from the earliest times to the present, is the holistic perspective on phenomena. This view, referred to as “holism,” was first formally articulated in its modern form by Christian Smuts in the early twentieth century (although

the perspective itself has deep roots in ancient thought). Holism posits that, although the phenomena of the world are composed of individual elements of Being, together and in relation to one another, they constitute a unified entity or identity, which is termed the “whole.” The perception of the whole emerges from the perception of its elements and the relationships among them. “The ‘atomistic’ [element-focused] approach prioritizes the knowledge of details, whereas the ‘systemic’ [holistic] approach considers understanding of each phenomenon contingent upon the perception of its entirety” (Mansouri et al., 2020). While elements possess properties independently, their synergy within a system with unified objectives generates new, unique characteristics. This phenomenon, described by Farshad (1983) as “emergence,” refers to the manifestation of new attributes in the whole that are not found in the individual components.

As previously mentioned, Ontology is singular and hierarchical. Although the holistic perspective acknowledges individual elements, it grants primacy to the whole that emerges from these elements and their interrelations. In this regard, both approaches aim to understand the whole of a phenomenon. Indeed, the foundation of systems thinking is based on synthesis and integration, with the initial step being the concept of “wholeness” (Mansouri et al., 2020).

Therefore, the systemic perspective on phenomena is closely aligned with the concepts of the whole and Ontology, and cannot be fully comprehended without them. Gestalt psychologists, as pioneers in this field, have played a significant role in analyzing this relationship. argues that although the structure of a place can be divided into smaller components for examination, the interpretation derived from such an analysis can never convey the meaning and significance as perceived by the residents of that place (Partovi 2010, as cited in Shafia, 2018). This raises the question: how does a human perceive the whole?

• Human perception of phenomena

When confronted with an unfamiliar environment, human beings instinctively strive to comprehend it. The accumulated knowledge of our ancestors—embedded within the collective unconscious (Jung, 2020)—aids us in reacting to unknown settings in ways that mitigate potential dangers. This cognitive process generally begins with experiential learning in relation to the environment. Yet what enables the mind to perform more effectively is the assimilation of new environmental data into the framework of prior experiences, thereby constructing a cognitive geometry that functions as the interpretive filter of the mind. This filter not only interprets and judges new inputs (adding layers of meaning to them) but is simultaneously reshaped by those inputs. The rational interpretation of a novel phenomenon requires both the accumulation of more data and deeper engagement with the phenomenon itself. However, before this analytical stage becomes active, and under the influence of the interpretive structure of knowledge, individuals first receive an overarching “general impression” of the phenomenon and instinctively assign

value, perceiving it as either good or bad. Accordingly, what is sought in this study is precisely this general impression that emerges through human encounter with place—specifically, the neighborhood center.

Now that it has been established that holistic perception leads to ontological understanding and directs the observer toward recognizing both the components and the relationships among them, it is worth noting that the perception of a neighborhood and its center—considered as manifestations of ontology within the urban fabric—enables the discernment of distinctions among the different strata of this ontology. Indeed, while neighborhood centers all belong to a shared ontology and may initially appear homogeneous, in reality each center possesses a unique character and theme. Accordingly, within the ontological strata of these urban spaces, differences emerge. Thus, if one focuses solely on the nature and essence of the elements that constitute neighborhood centers, one might find them identical, given that their components are largely similar. However, when the inquiry shifts toward the general impression—that is, what is often referred to as the *Genius Loci* or the *vibe* perceived from the environment—derived through an ontological approach, it becomes evident that the impressions elicited by each environment are profoundly distinct and unique.

The quality of a space, and consequently the general impression derived from experiencing that space, is determined by its components and the relationships among them. Accordingly, the following analysis focuses on these elements, their interactions, and their influence. What has contributed to the vitality of neighborhood centers—design, function, allocated budget, modernity, or materials? After outlining some of the most significant factors affecting the sense of place in a neighborhood center, two case studies from neighborhoods in two different cities with similar climates and comparable urban systems are comparatively examined.

It should be noted that the term urban landscape refers to the perception of the city by its citizens (Mansouri, 2010, 32). Moreover, this research is based on field observations conducted during a research trip, which reflects a tourist-oriented perspective on the city. Therefore, it is important to highlight that the findings stem from this tourist gaze, initially observing neighborhood centers that are broadly similar to other centers in Iran’s hot and arid climates. Subsequently, through library research and examination of documents and reports, the current character of these centers throughout the year (as well as their character in historical periods) has been presented.

• Factors shaping the sense of place in neighborhood centers

Mansouri introduces the Center as the ontological nucleus and argues that, similar to nature, human-made artifacts—including cities and neighborhoods—require a generative and sustaining element, which is the neighborhood or city center as the ontology of the place. He asserts that “the perception of the uniqueness

and singularity of a neighborhood as a whole depends on the presence of certain features, the most important of which is the neighborhood center” (Mansouri, 2022, 3). According to him, the material and physical aspects of a neighborhood are dispersed and thus inherently lack unity. However, what allows unity to be inferred among the multiplicity of houses, streets, and dispersed services is a unity that exists not externally, but as a product of the observer’s perception and interpretation. The emergence of the neighborhood itself is contingent upon the observer perceiving this unity within the multiplicity of components. He considers the neighborhood center as the most significant factor contributing to the manifestation of the concept of the whole within the neighborhood. Accordingly, he maintains that a neighborhood rests on two pillars: the dispersed material components and the singular, perceived organization arising from the spatial arrangement and the interrelations of these components in the observer’s mind (*ibid.*, 3).

The neighborhood center, as an urban open space, generally possesses two categories of characteristics: those related to its physical form and those associated with the ongoing activities within it, which can be understood, respectively, as the “hardware” and “software” of the space. The combination of these characteristics, along with the elements and their interrelationships, shapes the sense of place for the perceiver. Physical factors include functions, accessibility, materials, façades, profile (the ratio of wall height to width), organization of components, and visible landmark elements, while the software factors encompass events generated through the surrounding uses of the neighborhood center or occurrences taking place within its open space. Moreover, macro-level factors at the neighborhood scale—such as lifestyle, dominant social class of residents, minorities, religion, nationality, and so forth—can influence the character (theme) of the neighborhood center. Therefore, these factors operate at both micro scales (the center of the neighborhood, its open space, and its built edges) and macro scales (the neighborhood), collectively shaping the identity of the neighborhood center. Subsequently, a comparison of three neighborhood centers in Yazd, followed by a comparative analysis of one of these centers with another center in a city with a similar climate and urban structure, highlights the distinctions in character and the quality of sense of place. Partovi (2010) argues that what gives a public space—such as a square or a neighborhood center—its essence is the overall atmosphere of the place (or, in the context of this study, the general impression derived from ontological perception), which cannot be captured through analytical decomposition into individual elements and components.

• Distinctiveness of neighborhood centers: a factor reinforcing the tourism foundation

Due to the shared climate prevailing across much of Iran—namely, the hot and arid climate, often referred to as Iran’s dominant climate (Motedayen & Motedayen, 2020)—the needs

of residents are largely similar. The abundant availability of local soil in these regions has made indigenous materials such as brick and mud plaster widely accessible. These materials, in turn, have led to a construction system—both in terms of building technology and execution, as well as spatial organization—that exhibits substantial similarities throughout this part of Iran. Consequently, the prevailing culture influences lifestyle, and by extension, architecture and urban planning, toward a maximal uniformity of spaces. Neighborhood centers in most neighborhoods of hot and arid climates, regardless of the city, are thus largely similar to one another. This homogeneity can create a sense of uniformity across the urban environment, potentially deterring tourism, as visiting one city and its traditional neighborhoods may appear equivalent to experiencing all cities within this climate zone. But why do neighborhood centers possess distinct characters? In fact, the dominant pattern governing neighborhood centers in similar climates is largely uniform; however, upon closer examination, the superficial details of these spaces—such as functions, façades, and decorative elements—exhibit notable differences. At deeper levels, neighborhood centers display such fundamental distinctions that only a few features may appear similar and categorizable. Each center thus possesses a unique character, much like human beings who, despite sharing relatively similar physical structures, fundamentally differ in personality. These differences allow each Iranian neighborhood center to offer something novel to its audience—in this context, tourists—thereby attracting them to the city. Such distinctive features should be leveraged to strengthen domestic and international tourism and to guide urban development aimed at identifying and reinforcing the city’s identity-forming elements. However, the distinctive urban landscape elements of each neighborhood center in different cities should not be overlooked. For example, in the neighborhood centers of Yazd, one can observe *āb anbār* (traditional water reservoirs) and the entrances to *qanat* access wells; in contemporary Qom, there are bases for the intelligent distribution of drinking water; and in Dezful, there are access points to underground water channels (*qamsh*). These elements contribute not only to the uniqueness of each neighborhood center but also to its attractiveness, thereby enhancing tourism in these cities (See Sartipi Isfahani, 2023).

Study Samples

Urban spaces, based on their components and the relationships among them, as well as the events that occur within them, possess diverse characters (themes). For instance, one neighborhood center may have a religious-ritual theme, serving as a venue for religious events; another may carry a heavier commercial load, taking on a market-like character and hosting specific trades; yet another neighborhood center, at a more localized scale, may serve primarily as the site for the neighborhood’s main elements and thus have a local character.

Accordingly, in the initial phase, three neighborhood centers in

Yazd—the Vaqt o Sa'at Square, the area surrounding the Shrine of the Twelve Imams and Eskandar Prison, and the Fahadan neighborhood center—were examined and presented in terms of their thematic character. These centers were selected based on field visits conducted during the research trip and the authors' ontological experience of the sites. Each of these three neighborhood centers possesses a unique character. Although at first glance all neighborhood centers within the traditional urban system of Iran appear similar, alongside the common features that characterize them, each center exhibits its own distinct character and theme. This distinctiveness arises from the uses along the edges of the center, the placement of the neighborhood center within the overall neighborhood system, the residents themselves (in terms of ethnicity, religion, trade, and socio-economic class), and the types of events that take place within the center.

In the second phase, one of the aforementioned neighborhood centers (Vaqt o Sa'at Square in Yazd) was selected and expanded for comparison with a neighborhood center in the city of Isfahan. These two centers (Vaqt o Sa'at in Yazd and Jolfa Square in Isfahan) are similar in terms of their physical form, particularly in what is initially perceived. Both are neighborhood-scale centers, featuring façades closely resembling traditional Iranian communal spaces, situated within the shared hot and arid climate, employing similar architecture and materials, hosting a variety of functions along their edges, and incorporating nearby religious structures visible from within the center (the Seyyed Rokneddin Shrine in Yazd and the Church of Bethlehem in Isfahan), along with other characteristics that make the two centers appear alike at first glance. These similarities were the reason for selecting these two centers for comparison.

Accordingly, in the first phase, three case study samples were compared to demonstrate that, within a single city with identical environmental features, three distinct characters emerge. In the second phase, the comparison involves two neighborhood centers with a shared character (religious-ritual) located in two different cities.

It is also worth noting that cities are constantly changing. Although we examine the historical background of these centers, what has been perceived through fieldwork and serves as the basis for our general impression as observers of the space reflects their current state. Therefore, the sense of place described here pertains to neighborhood centers as they exist today, which may differ significantly from their condition during the traditional period. For instance, Vaqt o Sa'at Square currently experiences its highest footfall during religious ceremonies, while the contribution of surrounding edge uses to attracting visitors is minimal. Historically, however, it served as a center for fulfilling the daily needs of neighborhood residents and was continuously used by the local population. This dynamic differs from the present situation; if one were to evaluate the urban space based on the vibrancy and density of visitor presence, Vaqt o Sa'at Square might appear less significant today, whereas in the past it was

highly central. Similarly, Jolfa Square in Isfahan has now evolved into an urban space at the city scale, attracting visitors from across the city, whereas historically it functioned as the center of the Jolfa neighborhood. Thus, the assessment of the general impression of the space is primarily oriented toward the contemporary experience of these centers and the character perceived in the present.

Against this backdrop, the research hypothesis was examined, and for better illustration, the neighborhood centers were analyzed and compared at two levels: first, three neighborhood centers within Yazd were compared, and second, the comparisons of two neighborhood centers across two different cities were made.

• The unique theme (character) of each neighborhood center

during the research field trip, three urban spaces were visited—Vaqt-o-Sa'at Square, the Fahadan neighborhood center, and the urban space adjacent to the Mausoleum of the Twelve Imams. Urban spaces, in accordance with the land uses of the façade defining their central space, their internal components and elements, the events that occur within them, as well as their adjacent streets and surrounding land uses, acquire a unique theme. This character is either intentionally conceived from the inception of the space or gradually assumed over time. With regard to this, the Fahadan neighborhood center, due to land uses such as a children's playground, the vacant space adjacent to the center, and the degree of greenery, currently displays a family-oriented and child-friendly character. Conversely, in another case, the presence of the Mausoleum of the Twelve Imams, Alexander's Prison, and other historic sites surrounding the central urban space of this ensemble has transformed it into an urban space with a historic-heritage theme, attracting tourists as its audience. Finally, there is Vaqt-o-Sa'at Square, which, with its historical-ritual background, assumes a religious-ritual character. Among the three examples mentioned, this square is further examined in the following discussion. Subsequently, a comparison is drawn between two neighborhood centers in Yazd and Isfahan. (The Mausoleum of the Twelve Imams and comparing them with Yazd's Vaqt-o-Sa'at Square was merely to provide examples illustrating the diversity of character in urban spaces; however, the primary comparison of the article is based on the juxtaposition of Yazd's Vaqt-o-Sa'at Square and Jolfa Square in Isfahan, which is elaborated in Section B of the case study analysis.) (Figs. 1 & 2).

• A comparison of neighborhood centers (analysis of the primary case studies)

- vaqt-o-sa'at square of yazd

This square, named after the astronomical installations and observatory established by Sayyed Rokn al-Din Muhammad Qā ī in the 8th century AH (no trace of which remains), is surrounded by monuments dating from the Ilkhanid, Timurid, Safavid, Qajar, and Pahlavi periods. Since then, no additional structures have been appended. Although the present structure of the square emerged during the Safavid era and persisted until the



Fig. 1. Neighborhood center with a local-family theme. Fahadan neighborhood center, Yazd. Source: Authors.

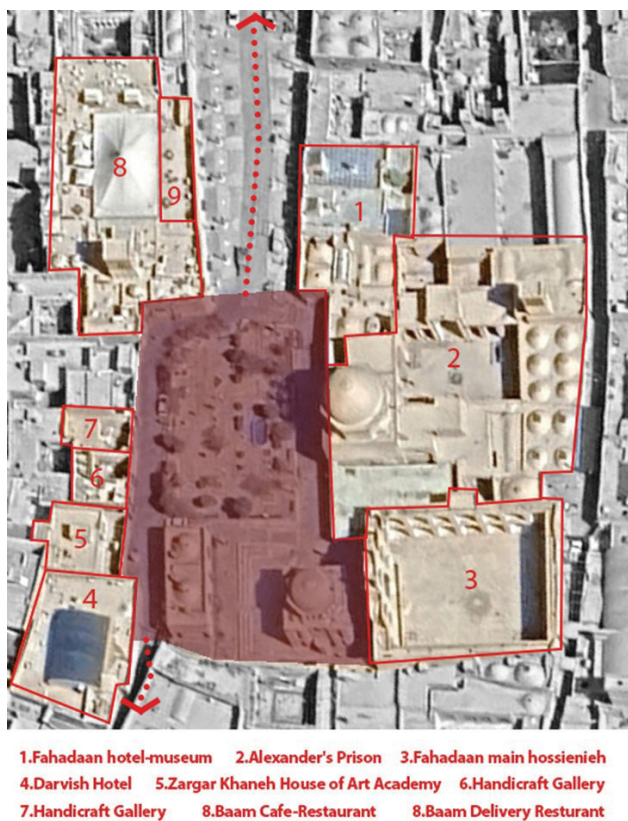


Fig. 2 . Urban space with a historic-touristic theme. Vicinity of the Mausoleum of the Twelve Imams and Alexander's Prison. Source: Authors.

late Pahlavi period, the precedence and sequence of construction of its façade buildings (both pre- and post-Safavid) have resulted in organically evolved and incremental façades, in contrast to its nearly regular plan. The oldest surviving monument within the square is the central square water reservoir, dating to the reign of Shah Sultan Husayn Safavid (Shahabinejad, 2022a; 2022b).

One of the significant features of the square is the diversity of land uses around the square (both immediate façades and peripheral zones): residential, urban utilities such as the central square water reservoir and stairwell, brocade weaving workshops (Sha-ar Bafi Workshops), the square's Hosseinieh and the Mausoleum of Sayyed Rokn al-Din from the Safavid and Qajar periods, office and administrative functions such as a law office (Khordmand House), medical practice, pharmacy and clinic, and the Afshar Islamic School from the Pahlavi period (Shahabi-Nejad, 2022b) (In the 1340s SH (1961-1971 AD), under the initiative of Master Pirnia and with the efforts of residents, the dome of Sayyed Rokn al-Din's mausoleum was restored and reinforced. In the 1350s SH (1971-1981 AD), scaffolding was installed on the Hosseinieh façade of the square (Hosseinieh Vaqt-o-Sa'at), and the open ground of the square was asphalted (Shahabinejad, 2022a; 2022b). Archaeological excavations in 2006, directed by Ebrahim Kazem-Nezhad, revealed Ilkhanid, Muzaffarid, and Timurid tiles from the square's floor, attesting to its antiquity, alongside multiple human remains, indicating its probable function as a cemetery, probably pre-Islamic, before the Qajar period (Shahabinejad, 2022b). The social fabric surrounding the square in the past consisted of residents from distinguished and long-established Yazdi families, many of whom gradually migrated either to other parts of Yazd or to other cities (Shahabinejad, 2022a). This social capital contributed to the square's persistence, as initiatives such as restoration and structural reinforcement were undertaken by its local inhabitants. On the other hand, this outward migration and the subsequent museification of the urban fabric (discussed in more detail later) suggest that the square has lost its former vibrancy as an active social hub, now reaching its peak activity only during religious ceremonies.

Zahra Ahmadi considers this square a coherent and unified entity, perceiving it as a human-centered square and introducing integrated perception as the basis for walkability and, consequently, human-orientedness. The measures she enumerates in support of walkability and human-centeredness include covered pedestrian pathways (sabat) for climatic comfort, the accessible placement of land uses around the square near residents' homes or workplaces in the neighborhood, the mixture of land uses (which attracts individuals of all ages, genders, needs, and preferences), and a connected network of pedestrian pathways—a characteristic of traditional cities due to their pedestrian-oriented lifestyle and the limited presence of automobiles in everyday life (Ahmadi, 2021). She further states: "This historic square served as a gathering place for the neighborhood's public spaces and exemplified the successful

integration of multiple functions within a single space, allowing individuals to choose among several activities within the same environment” (ibid.). Having now been briefly acquainted with Vaqt-o-Sa’at Square in Yazd as the primary case study, we proceed to introduce another example and, finally, to present a general discussion on the factors contributing to the success or failure of these urban centers. (See Shahabinejad, 2022a; 2022b) (Fig. 3).

- Jolfa square of isfahan

What brought this square into focus in this research as a case study is the “religious and national minority” characteristic of this neighborhood in the city of Isfahan. The Jolfa neighborhood dates back to the migration of the Armenian population during the Safavid era to the capital of Iran in Isfahan. The center of this neighborhood is a geometric square surrounded by various functions. The connecting routes to the neighborhood center, the diversity of land uses, the proximity of the square (the center of the Jolfa neighborhood) to Christian religious buildings, and, on the other hand, the economic and political prosperity of this neighborhood (especially at the time of its formation) are among the factors of vitality of this neighborhood.

Unlike most traditional neighborhoods in Iranian cities, this neighborhood still thrives. Although the extent and type of its prosperity differ from the past, it has been able to adapt well to the needs of contemporary life. Due to the connections of its resident Christian merchants with Christian Europe and also the support of the then government, Jolfa had become one of the centers of “firsts in Isfahan,” and this trend continues to this day (although much more limited than before).

Jolfa Square, as a neighborhood center, has been the venue for the social, religious, and economic activities and events of the minority residents of this neighborhood. These events continue with the support and follow-up of its Christian residents, and both its physical form and land uses, as well as its events, have turned the Jolfa neighborhood into a tourist destination. On the other hand, the placement of commercial-economic land uses in this neighborhood, which are of relatively high quality, has been a factor in renewing this vitality and has turned Jolfa into a social hub for other non-Christian residents of the city as well. In general, the factors of prosperity of the Jolfa neighborhood, and consequently its most important daily gathering center, i.e., Jolfa Square, from past to present, can be referred to as the internal solidarity of Armenian Christians to preserve their neighborhood, the support of the Safavid government for the merchants of this neighborhood in economic terms, freedom of action in religious affairs as well as trade, and the non-mixing of the Christian population with the city residents at first (the Jolfa neighborhood was established south of the Zayandeh Rud, in a place that was not part of the city), the wealth of the neighborhood’s residents in the present time, and the collective will of the citizens of Isfahan (Sartipi Isfahani & Saqafian, 2021).

Therefore, the theme and character of Jolfa Square is also a combination of religion, economy, and life (although this

neighborhood, like many other neighborhoods, has lost its real residents and its Christian population has migrated out of the fabric, still a particular way of life with the presence of a few special population centers such as churches, old Christian houses, Christian shops, and spaces of the same kind has kept the neighborhood’s character distinct) (ibid., 2021) (Fig. 4).

Summary of Findings

In this study, based on field visits from the research trip and subsequent library research, and grounded in the experience of space and direct encounter with it, various themes can be identified in neighborhood centers at present. Although these centers had other characters in the past and have since undergone significant changes, what is observed today is as follows: the Fahadan neighborhood center carries a local theme, suitable for families, children, and teenagers. This neighborhood center

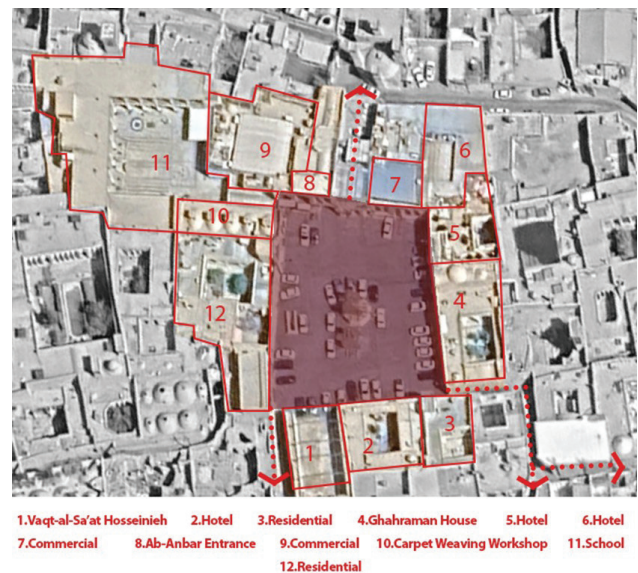


Fig. 3. Neighborhood center with a ritual-historical theme: Vaqt-o-Sa’at Square, Yazd. Source: Authors.

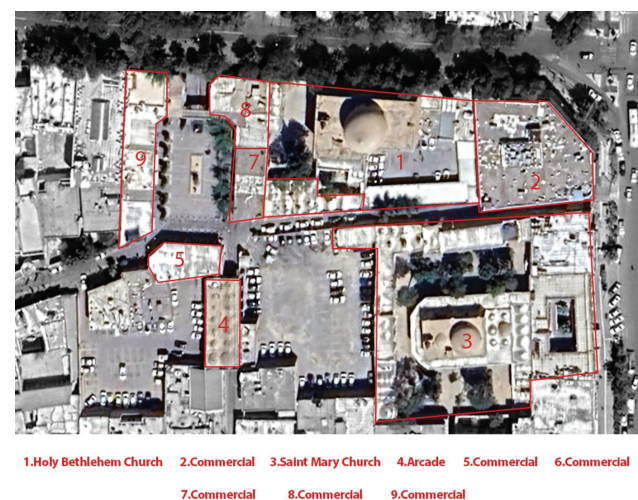


Fig. 4. A neighborhood center with a ritual-historical theme. Jolfa Square of Isfahan. Source: Authors.

includes shaded green spaces and play areas. The next case is the urban space adjacent to Alexander's Prison and the Mausoleum of the Twelve Imams, which, due to the surrounding historical and heritage sites, has acquired a historical and touristic theme, with correspondingly different users. Finally, Vaqt-o-Sa'at Square, because of the Hosseiniyeh (on the edge of the square) and the Mausoleum of Seyed Rokn al-Din beside it, has taken on a religious-ritual atmosphere and hosts many events and observers during religious ceremonies. Among the three aforementioned cases, Vaqt-o-Sa'at Square of Yazd, with its religious-ritual theme, was compared with another neighborhood center in another city (Isfahan), which also has a religious-ritual theme. The result of this comparison revealed that numerous physical and non-physical factors can cause a neighborhood center (and any other urban space), regardless of place and climate, to adapt to its cultural, geographical, and social context, and not only maintain its vitality since its origin but also continue to evolve and align with contemporary life—whether in its original form and uses, or in a modernized way suited to current needs. Ultimately, it is noteworthy that among the four neighborhood centers studied, the two that have preserved social vitality and local life and remain vibrant (the Fahadan neighborhood center in Yazd and Jolfa Square in Isfahan), contrast with those that have largely turned into museums serving tourists, losing much of their resident population and everyday life, and therefore lack significant vitality (the urban space adjacent to the Mausoleum of the Twelve Imams in Yazd and Vaqt-o-Sa'at Square in Yazd). Accordingly, neighborhood centers, depending on various physical and mental factors, acquire different characters, which in turn determine their modes of use and their users.

Conclusion

In encountering the phenomena around them, humans strive to understand them. This understanding occurs in two steps: first, as a general sense that takes shape in the mind as a unified whole and brings forth the perception of the being of that phenomenon; and second, as cognition that is achieved after examining the components and results in the perception of its whatness. The first perception is holistic and beyond the details, while it is precisely those components and the relationships among them that constitute the foundation of that general perception,

although at that stage, the mind does not consciously pay direct attention to them. The second perception, however, is based on the precise recognition of the components. What constitutes the world is, in a way, the components and the relationships among them (the whole), which ultimately shape a unified entity called "being." Our overall sense and perception as observers and users of space arise from our connection to the being and existence of that phenomenon (or space). The higher the quality of the components and their interrelations, the stronger and more desirable the resulting overall sense will be, and on the level of being, it will hold a higher degree of perfection.

Neighborhood centers, as one of the most fundamental elements of Iranian urbanism, serve as the social, economic, political, and cultural base of the neighborhood and its beating heart. The concept of neighborhood and neighborhood identity emerges in the interactions of individuals in this place and contributes to its vitality. Therefore, considering the features of neighborhood centers, each neighborhood and its center possess a unique character and identity that shapes the theme of that part of the city. Thus, depending on the character of the neighborhood centers, each center shapes a specific role and rank in the perceptual ontology of the audience's experience of space. Although in terms of outward appearance, materiality, and especially form, the level of similarity among them is considerable, "what is perceived through the experience of them by the observer (the perceived) is different." Hence, there is something within them that differs and is not contained in the material. What constitutes the difference in the midst of similarity among neighborhood centers is their being. Being that is the product of the components, the relations among them, the observer's perception of these, and so forth. Here, being is not equal to the observer's understanding of the phenomenon, but rather a capacity that is grasped through the experience of space as an integrated, unified, and holistic perception. Being is the subject of holistic perception, which here results in the overall sense of difference within similarity and the construction of a unique identity for each neighborhood center in people's minds.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in the execution of this research.

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