

Original Research Article

## A Comprehensive Graphic Branding Design in Alborz Province

### (Creating a Sustainable Cultural and Aesthetic Urban Landscape to Improve the City Image and Strengthen Tourism Appeal)

Mastoureh Sarhadi\*

Department of Arts, Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Technical and Vocational University (TVU), Tehran, Iran

Received: 07/12/2025

Accepted: 03/04/2026

Available online: 21/04/2026

**Abstract** | One of the fundamental challenges of contemporary cities, particularly in Iran, is the absence of a coherent visual identity in urban spaces. This issue not only affects the quality of urban life experience but also creates an obstacle to attracting tourists and improving the mental image of cities. In this regard, Alborz Province, despite its diverse cultural, historical, and natural capacities, has so far lacked an integrated graphic branding system compatible with its local characteristics. This study aims to examine the possibility of designing a comprehensive graphic branding system for Alborz Province in order to create visual coherence in urban spaces and provide the basis for strengthening cultural identity, urban aesthetics, and tourism appeal. The present study is qualitative and analytical in nature. Data were collected through the study of theoretical sources, review of case studies, and analysis of visual elements. Then, using a comparative approach, the components of visual identity, including the logo, color palette, typography, and graphic symbols, were analyzed in relation to the cultural and functional indicators of the province. The findings show that designing a coherent and locally oriented visual identity system can reduce graphic fragmentation, improve the urban image, and strengthen the cultural identity of Alborz. Within this framework, specific implementation guidelines and criteria are proposed that can be applied not only in Alborz Province, but also as a model for other provinces of the country.

**Keywords** | *Urban Graphic Branding, Visual Identity, Visual Pollution, Urban Tourism, Alborz Province, Graphic Design.*

**Introduction** | The city is not merely a setting for human social life; rather, it is a living and dynamic structure composed of signs, colors, and forms that interact with one another to create a semantic and cultural system. This semiotic system reflects the history, identity, and collective mentality of its inhabitants, and through it, the city becomes an entity with a distinct “visual personality.” In this context, urban graphic branding, as a strategic tool, plays a fundamental role in recreating this personality and organizing the visual perception of urban spaces. This approach can create a balance between the functional and aesthetic dimensions of the city and, by giving meaning to visual elements, provide the conditions

for improving the aesthetic experience and tourism appeal.

Karaj, as the capital of Alborz Province, is a city in transition and possesses broad capacities in cultural, natural, and economic fields. Nevertheless, its urban image reveals weakness in visual coherence and coordination. This gap in the semiotic system of the urban environment has prevented the visual identity of Karaj from being properly established in the minds of citizens and tourists. Therefore, the development of a graphic identity system capable of reflecting the local culture, climatic characteristics, and social values of the city appears to be an undeniable necessity.

In contemporary literature, particularly in the fields

\*Corresponding Author: msarhadi@tvu.ac.ir, 0989386868636

of design and urban management, the process of branding is considered a multidimensional approach. This process goes beyond superficial beautification and addresses the deeper representation of meaning and the cultural narrative of the city. In this process, urban graphics function as a visual language: a language that depicts a coherent identity of the city through the combination of visual elements such as the logo, color palette, typography, and symbols. Comprehensive graphic branding not only organizes the city's image but also establishes an emotional and meaningful relationship between the city and its audiences, including citizens, tourists, and investors. Accordingly, the present study has been conducted with the aim of designing and formulating a comprehensive graphic branding system for Alborz Province. Drawing on the foundations of urban visual identity, the analysis of cultural-place components, and the review of successful global examples, this system seeks to create a model for visual coherence and the enhancement of urban spaces. The research method is qualitative with an analytical-participatory approach, and its process includes the collection of field data, analysis of cultural-environmental contexts, and the design of graphic prototypes compatible with the urban fabric of Alborz.

It is expected that the results of this study will provide an implementable framework for managing and organizing the city's visual signs and, through this, reduce graphic disorder while improving visual perception and the aesthetic experience of public spaces. In other words, graphic branding in this study is considered not merely a tool for beautification, but a cultural and meaning-oriented process serving identity formation, sustainable development, and cultural interaction within the urban context.

In line with these objectives, this article addresses the following main questions:

How can the graphic branding of Alborz Province be designed in a way that is both aligned with the region's cultural-social context and integrated as a system?

Which visual elements (logo, color palette, typography, and symbols) have the greatest impact on improving recognition and consolidating the Alborz Province brand?

What implementation framework and roadmap can be developed for comprehensive graphic branding according to available resources?

Which criteria and indicators can be used to evaluate the impact of graphic branding on improving the tourism appeal of Karaj?

## Literature Review

Over the last two decades, city branding has attracted scholarly attention as an effective strategic tool for tourism development and for improving the economic and cultural position of cities. The research literature shows that purposeful visual identity design and coherent advertising campaigns play a central role in creating a positive and distinctive mental image of a city among citizens and tourists. In Iran, numerous studies have been conducted in this field, focusing on environmental graphic design, tourism branding, and the realization of new urban concepts. Some case studies indicate the influence of visual elements and graphic design on physical regeneration and the enhancement of place identity. For example, Parvari Moghadam (2025) concluded in his article "The Role of Graphic Design in Redesigning Urban Spaces: A Case Study of the Cultural Pedestrian Regeneration Project of Rasht Municipality" that environmental graphic design, by combining artistic, architectural, and visual communication dimensions, plays an effective role in improving visual quality, strengthening place identity, and increasing social interaction in urban regeneration processes. The findings of that study emphasize the importance of coherence between cultural elements and visual order in improving the citizen experience and enhancing social capital. In several studies, branding has also been examined as a strategy for increasing urban attractiveness and economic development. Nazari (2024), in the study "Identifying Factors Affecting Urban Tourism Branding: A Case Study of Kermanshah," shows that effective branding strategies play a vital role in the economic and cultural development of cities and in strengthening tourism appeal, while also shaping a positive perception of the city and increasing regional competitiveness. Some strategic studies have linked branding to new development goals. The research article by Fawadian et al. (2022), entitled "Identifying Factors Affecting the Success of City Branding toward the Realization of the Creative City: The Case of Damghan," focuses specifically on the relationship between city branding and the concept of the "creative city." Using a qualitative Delphi method, this study extracted seven key categories for branding success: improvement of the urban environment, flourishing spaces, strengthening the city's international position, continuous and purposeful management, vision formulation, urban attractiveness and security, and stabilization of branding status. These findings emphasize the importance of integration among the knowledge-based economy, culture, and physical infrastructure in creating a competitive urban brand. However, previous studies have often been limited to specific urban cases or to the detailed examination of

individual visual identity elements. The present study, by focusing on comprehensive graphic branding for the entire Alborz Province, adopts an integrated and systemic approach and aligns all components of visual identity, including the logo, color palette, typography, and graphic symbols, with aesthetic, functional, and cultural indicators. In addition, the presentation of implementation guidelines makes visual coherence at the provincial level possible and provides a model for other provinces, thereby increasing the novelty and practical value of urban branding.

## Theoretical Foundations

### • City branding

City branding, unlike product branding, designed for the development of goods, is a marketing strategy implemented to strengthen communication and create a positive image of a city in the minds of visitors and citizens. This strategy is guided by urban authorities as one of the strategic actions of urban management, and its purpose is to introduce a place or country at the national and international levels. Researchers consider city branding an effort by the government to shape the identity of a place or region and promote it to the public, both domestic and foreign (Chan et al., 2021, 331). This approach is not only effective in attracting investment and tourism but also contributes to strengthening local identity and preventing social exclusion. As a strategic tool, city branding plays a decisive role in introducing competitive advantages and shaping the mental image of the city. This process not only helps market urban identity and strengthen environmental and cultural attractions, but also improves quality of life, increases citizens' attachment, and stabilizes the image of the city in the collective memory of audiences (Zhang & Zhao, 2009, 245).

City branding goes beyond a simple marketing concept and, as a strategic tool, shapes the overall identity and image of the city in the minds of internal and external audiences. This process requires a deep understanding of urban identity, because identity forms the core of the city brand and determines how citizens and visitors experience and relate to urban spaces. By using urban identity in advertising campaigns, redefining landmark symbols, and organizing cultural and social activities, city branding can strengthen distinction, uniqueness, and cultural coherence; help preserve place quality and citizen welfare; and create a sustainable and understandable image of the city. Consequently, successful city branding requires coordination among identity, image, and the visual representation of the city so that urban attractiveness increases and a sense of

belonging, ownership, and brand sustainability forms among stakeholders.

### • Urban identity

Urban identity, by enabling the evocation of collective memories and shared experiences among citizens, creates a basis for the formation of belonging and attachment. This attachment causes individuals to see themselves not merely as "residents" of a city, but as active citizens who participate in social, cultural, and even urban decision-making processes. Therefore, although the identity of a city changes over time, it can strengthen the process of citizen formation and play an effective role in shaping judgments, values, and criteria related to urban participation among residents.

In this regard, urban identity can be understood as a multilayered and complex concept that forms over time and includes the physical, natural, historical, and socio-cultural characteristics of the city (Rifaioğlu & Sahin Güçhan, 2007, 1099). Understanding the identity of any city requires examining both its objective and subjective dimensions. On the objective side, elements such as the structure and form of the city, public spaces, economic functions, and spatial organization are studied. In contrast, the subjective dimension of urban identity relates to the cultural, social, and psychological factors of city residents, including the level of social awareness and perception, collective consciousness, expectations, and demands of citizens, and their sense of belonging to their living environment (Mirzaei-Nasab Fahadan, 2013, 115). Therefore, as mentioned earlier, "urban identity" is a complex, relative, and multidimensional phenomenon resulting from the interweaving of the objective and subjective dimensions of the city.

### • Graphic branding

In today's highly competitive business environment, the importance of visual communication and branding is more prominent than ever. As consumers face an ever-increasing volume of information and options, a brand's ability to differentiate itself and create a lasting impression becomes a vital factor for success. In this context, graphic design plays a central role and functions as a powerful tool for building a brand image, strengthening brand identity, and increasing public recognition.

Graphic branding is a systematic process for creating and managing a brand's visual identity through the use of design elements such as logos, typography, colors, and images to define the personality of the brand and establish it in the mind of the audience. This process includes research, ideation, preliminary design, refinement, and finalization, and close

collaboration with stakeholders is an inseparable part of it. Effective branding in graphic design is not only a factor of differentiation in crowded markets; by creating lasting emotional connections, it also increases brand recognition and loyalty over time (Nasir et al., 2023).

Since the principles and functions of graphic branding are not limited to commercial environments, this approach has gained importance at larger scales, such as the city. At this level, graphic design acts as the city's "visual language" and, within the framework of city branding, becomes a tool for meaning-making, identification, and representation of the city's cultural and spatial identity. Visual elements such as the logo, color, typography, pictograms, environmental signs, and wayfinding systems together create a coherent and recognizable identity for the city and make its experience more understandable for citizens and tourists.

The study by Wahyurini & Wardani (2012) shows that graphic design in city branding goes beyond the creation of isolated signs or logos. These researchers argue that urban brand identity is a holistic visual system that must reflect the values, culture, and spirit of place. They also emphasize the need for graphic designers to be present in the early stages of brand strategy formulation and argue that limiting the designer's role to the final execution of visual elements is a strategic mistake. The participation of designers as creative consultants and the use of design thinking can transform city branding from a merely aesthetic approach into an analytical, interdisciplinary, and participatory process. Such a process can lead to a real, sustainable, and effective representation of urban identity only through collaboration among designers, urban managers, marketers, universities, and city residents.

#### • Fundamental elements of graphic design in shaping visual identity

Visual identity, whether in commercial brands or urban brands, is formed through a set of fundamental elements, each of which functions as part of a broader communication system. These elements are not only responsible for conveying the brand message to the audience, but must also create an integrated, recognizable, and meaningful experience. The logo, color palette, typography, pictograms, and other components of visual communication each carry part of the brand personality and, despite their distinct roles, acquire meaning through interaction with one another. Coherence among these elements causes the brand's visual identity to be established in the audience's mind, increases recognizability, and enables the creation of deeper emotional and cognitive connections. From this

perspective, every visual element is not merely an isolated part of the graphic structure, but part of an "architecture of meaning" that directly affects the perception and experience of audiences.

#### - Logo

The logo, as a graphic sign, represents the identity of a company, organization, product, or service in a condensed, recognizable, and meaningful form. This visual symbol is not only aesthetic; it also carries the message, personality, and culture of the brand and can create mental associations and emotional reactions in the audience. In other words, as the visual representative of the brand, the logo is responsible for creating a specific and lasting mental image in the minds of audiences, enabling them to identify the brand and distinguish it from competitors (Rajab-Bolukat, 2011, 163).

Logo design is a creative and purposeful process in which the designer, through an accurate understanding of the subject, values, organizational culture, and audience needs, selects the most suitable form, symbol, color, and typography so that the brand message is conveyed in the simplest and most effective way. From this perspective, the logo is one of the main components of the brand. It is not only an effective tool for communicating brand identity and message at the global level, but it can also convey the brand's unique characteristics to the audience and play a decisive role in forming recognition and loyalty (Foroudi, 2019, 271–272).

In summary, the logo is a symbol that combines both the identity and communication dimensions of the brand in a single sign and stabilizes the audience's experience of the brand by creating a mental image and emotional associations.

#### - Color palette

A wide range of colors exerts a profound and sometimes unconscious effect on our perceptual system. Color can therefore be considered one of the most important physiological and psychological stimuli in human visual experience. No visual element can stimulate emotions and feelings or generate strong expressiveness as effectively as color (Jabbari & Khezrian, 2017, 52). According to Berry and Martin, the four main functions of color in graphic design are attracting the audience's attention, creating focus on the work, transferring information, and increasing the retention of information in memory. By performing these functions, color becomes one of the most effective communicative tools in graphic design (Kolahkaj, 2022, 52). In graphic design, choosing the color palette is one of the most important stages, both aesthetically and in terms of message transmission.

In Iranian graphic design, the choice of colors usually goes beyond decorative aspects, and designers tend to select colors that carry cultural, symbolic, and

identity-related meanings. The harmonious use of colors creates visual coherence in the work, and the correct combination of colors can strengthen the design message and communicate meaning more clearly. In addition, strong and saturated colors are used in many graphic and environmental works to increase visual impact and to help represent cultural and semantic layers (Kolahkaj, 2022; Shibani et al., 2025). Overall, color in graphic design functions as a language that communicates meaning, culture, and identity to the audience in visual form.

#### - Typography

Typography, as an important branch of graphic design, has special significance because it is the visual representation of spoken language. Since written language has a broader media context, greater impact, and more general accessibility than speech, the designer can purposefully transform meaning through the arrangement of letters and words. This change becomes possible through the format, form, and visual structure of letters and words. Thus, typography not only carries meaning, but can also produce new visual meaning and move meaning beyond the purely verbal level into the field of visual perception. In this way, typography can strengthen communication, convey the message more powerfully to the audience, create an inviting or discouraging atmosphere, stimulate the audience's imagination, and leave a lasting impression in the mind (Afrouzi, 2023, 36).

Given these capacities of typography, its use in city branding becomes especially important. To create a powerful and distinctive image of a city brand, the use of unique typefaces aligned with local values and philosophy is essential, because typography can communicate local identity and create unique visual characteristics for the city (Suprpto & Purwanti, 2020, 10). In other words, typography, as a visual tool, serves as a bridge between the brand message and audience perception and can provide a distinctive and recognizable character for urban identity.

### Research Method

The present study is qualitative in nature and applied-developmental in terms of purpose. It uses an analytical-comparative approach to examine the possibility of designing a comprehensive graphic branding system for Alborz Province. The qualitative method was selected due to the nature of the research topic, which is based on the analysis of identity concepts, visual semiotics, urban perception, and cultural-place elements. These concepts have an interpretive nature and cannot be fully measured within quantitative methods.

Data were collected through documentary and library

research as well as the analysis of visual and environmental sources. At this stage, valid domestic and international theoretical sources in the fields of city branding, urban identity, environmental graphic design, and visual semiotics were studied. Successful examples of city branding at national and international levels were also selected and examined as case studies to extract common patterns, design approaches, and success criteria.

In addition to written sources, urban images, maps, and existing graphic elements in the public spaces of Karaj, such as signs, symbols, environmental advertisements, and wayfinding elements, were used as visual data. These data made it possible to analyze the current state of the city's visual identity and identify graphic disorder and inconsistencies.

During the contextual analysis stage, the cultural, historical, geographical, natural, and social characteristics of Alborz Province and the city of Karaj were analyzed as the basis for visual identity design. The purpose of this analysis was to extract identity-making components of the city and identify symbols, colors, forms, and narratives that could be visually represented in the urban branding system. This stage included the examination of natural symbols, such as the Alborz foothills and the Karaj River; historical and cultural symbols, such as landmark buildings and heritage spaces; and contemporary symbols, such as university spaces and modern urban projects. Attention was also given to the relationship of these elements with the mental perception of citizens and tourists. After contextual components were extracted, the main visual identity elements—including the logo, color palette, typography, pictograms, and graphic patterns—were analyzed using a comparative approach. In this analysis, each visual element was evaluated according to indicators such as compatibility with the city's cultural and historical identity, recognizability and visual distinction, readability and functionality in urban spaces, reproducibility, and coherence across different scales. This stage enabled the identification of the strengths and weaknesses of existing designs and the potential capacities for creating an integrated visual identity system.

### Analysis of Findings

#### • Graphic branding design in the city of Karaj

Karaj, as the capital of Alborz Province, has a multifaceted identity formed through the combination of history, culture, economy, and nature. The city's rich history and strategic location along the Silk Road have created significant cultural and historical heritage, forming an important part of Karaj's historical identity. Ancient structures such as caravanserais and other

historic monuments not only recall the city's past but also preserve the continuity of its historical identity within today's urban fabric. In addition, the economic role of Karaj as an industrial and agricultural center of Alborz Province strengthens the city's economic and social identity and has a considerable impact on urban culture and citizens' social interactions. The city's natural and green spaces, including parks and mountainous foothills, contribute to calmness, urban aesthetics, and the quality of environmental experience. Their presence in the daily life of citizens is one of the indicators of the city's urban identity.

Graphic branding design for Karaj becomes meaningful when it is based on a coherent and recognizable visual identity—an identity that simultaneously relies on visual distinction and similarity and can represent the city's unique personality through visual elements. Contrary to common perception, visual identity is not merely a set of colors and symbols; it is a structured system that ensures the internal coherence of graphic elements and makes it possible to reproduce the visual message across urban spaces (Moradi Sanjani, 2023, 88). In other words, visual identity becomes meaningful when a form of semiotic integration exists among color, image, form, type, and signs, and when this coherence can be registered in the audience's mind as the identity of the city (Mirzaei-Nasab Fahadan, 2013, 118).

From the perspective of urban planning, visual identity also plays a decisive role in the daily experience of citizens as part of the city's perceptual structure. A city without a clear visual identity is perceived as an ambiguous and lifeless space, weakening the sense of belonging and social continuity. By contrast, a city with a coherent visual identity creates a familiar, meaningful, and emotionally reliable experience for citizens. Moreover, global studies in the field of city branding show that visual identity becomes sustainable and effective when it is organized as a designed and manageable system capable of symbolically and recognizably representing the historical, cultural, and natural characteristics of the city (Zhang, 2016).

Based on this approach, graphic branding design in Karaj should rely on the analysis and extraction of the city's identity-making components. As the center of Alborz Province, Karaj has a multilayered identity formed through the interaction of history, nature, culture, economy, and modern urban spaces. The city's historical heritage—including caravanserais, bathhouses, and palaces from different periods—preserves the historical memory of Karaj and can serve as a rich source for creating authentic and rooted visual signs. Alongside this, the city's economic role in industry

and agriculture, together with its natural and green appearance, contributes to the formation of a dynamic and multidimensional identity. Natural spaces such as the Alborz foothills, the Karaj River, and urban parks are among the most important perceptual components for citizens and can be used in city branding as nature-based visual identity symbols.

#### • Urban symbols of Karaj

The symbols of Karaj, as recognizable elements representing the city's identity, can be divided into three main categories. First, the Alborz Mountains and their surrounding nature, as the city's natural symbol and landmark landscape, shape the visual identity of Karaj and evoke the dynamism and beauty of the city's natural environment. Second, cultural and historical symbols, including religious and historic structures such as the Jameh Mosque of Karaj and the old bazaar, reflect the city's culture, history, and heritage and maintain citizens' connection with their historical past. Third, modern urban and symbolic projects, including bridges, squares, and public spaces designed in recent decades, play a symbolic role in the urban image and citizen experience and display a combination of tradition and modernity in the cityscape. This diversity of symbols provides a valuable opportunity for designing urban branding elements and a coherent visual identity, and can affect the spatial experience and recognition of the city for citizens and tourists.

To design comprehensive graphic branding for Karaj, it is first necessary to identify and analyze landmark urban places and spaces to determine their potential for representing the city's visual identity. presents some of the most important attractions and urban spaces of Karaj, along with their characteristics, cultural or historical value, and potential use in graphic branding elements. This analysis can help graphic designers and urban planners use the characteristics of each place to employ appropriate symbols, colors, and visual elements in Karaj's visual identity system (Table 1).

#### • Natural symbols in the branding of Karaj

Natural symbols are among the main components of Karaj's visual identity and play an important role in strengthening the sense of belonging, psychological calm, and coherence of the urban environment. The Alborz foothills, parks, urban green spaces, rivers, and gardens, as natural indicators of the city, are significant not only ecologically but also as recognizable visual symbols used in branding and urban graphic design.

The use of these natural elements in the branding of Karaj is multidimensional:

**Representation of the city's natural and environmental identity:** The Alborz foothills, with their natural green

Table 1. Analysis of natural symbols and their application in the urban branding of Karaj. Source: Author.

Natural symbol	Description	Application in branding	Related color palette	Aesthetic/experiential effect	Practical example
Alborz Foothills	The Alborz mountain range has distinctive slopes and lines that shape Karaj's natural landscape.	Using the logo and motifs to evoke grandeur, security, and deep attachment to nature.	Natural green; modern gray	Creating calmness, a sense of scale, and connection with nature.	Minimal mountain forms in the logo and promotional posters.
Karaj River	The river flowing through the center and margins of the city symbolizes life and dynamism.	Using graphic lines and icons to show dynamism, transparency, and the flow of life in the city's visual identity.	River blue	Creating a sense of transparency, flow, and visual calm.	River-flow lines in patterns and informational posters.
Urban Parks and Green Spaces	Public gardens and green spaces of Karaj serve as recreational and social places.	Using motifs and backgrounds to strengthen calmness, health, vitality, and the quality of urban life.	Light green	Strengthening calmness, vitality, and environmental well-being.	Leaf and tree patterns in urban visual systems.
Local Gardens (tulip, rose, etc.)	Native flowers and symbolic gardens of the city.	Inspiration for motifs and graphic patterns to represent tradition, authenticity, and natural aesthetics in urban symbols.	Green; turquoise blue	Representing cultural identity and natural aesthetics.	Floral patterns and decorative designs in brochures and urban symbols.
Walking Routes and Surrounding Nature	Tourism and walking routes in nature.	Design of icons and guide maps to encourage activity, exploration, and active connection with nature.	Natural green and modern gray	Creating a sense of guidance and connection with nature.	Route icons in urban signs and tourism guides.

and brown tones, convey a sense of pristine nature and environmental authenticity, and are represented in logo design, posters, and promotional packaging through simple and minimalist forms. These elements help preserve the visual connection of citizens and tourists with Karaj's natural environment and present a calming experience of the city to the audience (Fig. 1).

**Color palette harmonized with nature:** The main colors of Karaj's branding include natural green, Karaj River blue, and modern gray. In combination, these colors represent nature, water, and the modern urban environment. They are used not only in the logo and graphic elements, but also in posters, billboards, brochures, and municipal information websites. Green symbolizes life, ecosystem, and positive energy; blue conveys calmness, flow, and transparency; and gray depicts the city's modern and industrial character (Fig. 2).

**Creating visual harmony in graphic elements:** Forms and motifs inspired by nature, such as mountains, trees, and river lines, are used as patterns and backgrounds in urban designs. In addition to aesthetics, these patterns ensure visual coherence among the logo, urban signs, metro stations, and city symbols, creating an integrated experience of urban identity.

**Impact on citizens' psychological experience:** Aesthetic and urban studies show that the use of natural elements in branding and urban graphics can increase calmness,

reduce stress, and create a sense of belonging among citizens. Therefore, integrating these symbols into graphic designs is not merely aesthetic; through a human-centered and experience-oriented approach, it also improves the quality of urban life.

**Integration with historical and cultural elements:** Natural symbols have been combined with other branding elements, such as historical buildings and cultural symbols, so that Karaj's visual identity is rooted in local history and culture while remaining aligned with the city's nature. For example, logo and poster designs may combine the form of the Alborz Mountains with traditional architectural patterns such as palaces or floral motifs. This combination creates a distinctive and recognizable identity for Karaj.

**• Historical and cultural symbols of Karaj**

With its wide range of historical-cultural monuments and places, Karaj provides a rich foundation for city branding with a meaning-oriented and sustainable approach. Given the diversity and number of historical places in Karaj, four of the most well-known examples have been selected so that, while preserving cultural identity, they can be used in the process of city branding. The selection criteria included central geographic location and ease of access for citizens and tourists in order to create a coherent environmental and cultural experience and strengthen direct connection with the city's history

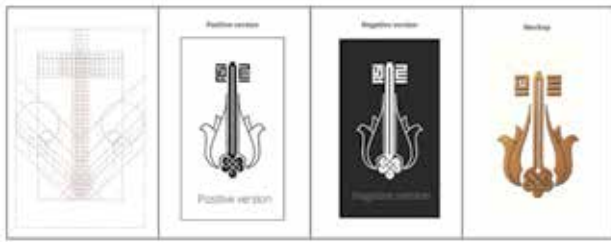


Fig. 1. The logo of Karaj, inspired by the phrase Allah Akbar, the tulip flower, and a bird as symbols of peace and friendship. Source: Author.

and culture. These choices were not based solely on surface aesthetics; rather, they aimed to facilitate an integrated cultural-historical experience and strengthen the audience’s direct connection with the city’s identity narratives.

The historical and cultural symbols of Karaj include landmark buildings and works that not only have architectural and historical value, but also carry the city’s cultural identity. Buildings such as Soleymanieh Palace, Morvarid Palace, Shah Abbasi Caravanserai, and Mesbah Bathhouse are outstanding examples of traditional Iranian architecture and art. They can be used in the design of the city’s visual identity in the form of icons, logotypes, backgrounds, posters, and urban identity symbols (Table 2).

These symbols can be used in design through the following methods:

**Form simplification and extraction of semantic essence:**

The process of minimalizing and extracting the key forms of these buildings for the design of urban logos and icons is not merely an aesthetic act; it is an effort toward “semantic condensation” and the creation of symbols that, despite their simplicity, have the capacity for deep recognition and the transmission of identity concepts. This approach enables a recognizable visual experience through minimalist forms (Fig. 3).

**Integration with Iranian and contemporary visual language:** The combination of traditional typographic elements, such as Kufic and Nastaliq scripts, with modern styles not only increases readability and visual attractiveness but also acts as a tool for cultural synergy. In this way, deep Iranian-Islamic identity is connected with the language of contemporary design, and the cultural narrative is strengthened.

**Designing narrative-based graphic backgrounds and patterns:** Decorative elements and architectural motifs of these buildings form the basis for meaningful graphic backgrounds. These backgrounds are not merely visual motifs; they function as a platform for reflecting the historical and cultural narratives of the city across different layers of visual spaces, including posters, brochures, and public environments, and they lead to a sustainable aesthetic experience.

**Use of icons and environmental elements to guide the urban experience:** Architectural symbols are used as wayfinding icons in urban signs, direction signs, and public transportation stations. This approach not only helps create an integrated environmental experience and visual guidance but also stabilizes and continuously reminds the audience of the city’s historical identity.

This meaningful and strategic approach to using historical and cultural symbols will lead to the creation of a coherent, recognizable, and deeply rooted visual identity for Karaj. This visual identity is not only aligned with the city’s rich heritage, But, by offering a tangible, meaning-oriented, and educational experience, it contributes significantly to strengthening historical knowledge, cultural narrative, and local values in a modern and attractive form. As a result, designers can rely on these symbols to advance city branding in line with the overall strategy of the research: improving identity, aesthetics, and tourism.

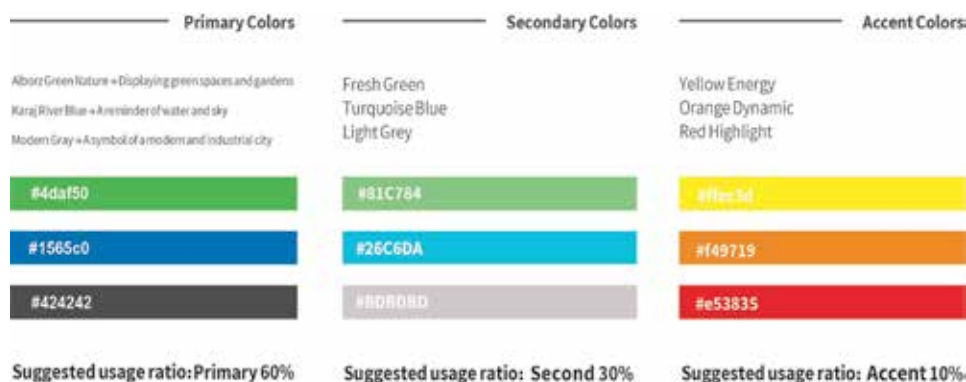


Fig. 2. The color selection was inspired by three colors: green, blue, and gray. Green is derived from the nature of Karaj, blue from the rivers of Karaj, and gray from the mountains and industrial settlements of the city. Source: Author.

Table 2. Historical and cultural symbols of Karaj and their application in city branding. Source: Author.

Historical/cultural symbol	Description	Application in city branding	Related typography/graphic style	Aesthetic/experiential effect	Practical example
Soleymanieh Palace	A historical building with traditional Iranian architecture and prominent decorative elements.	Logo design as the main symbol of the city's visual identity; icons for representing key cultural-historical components; patterns, posters, and brochures.	A combination of Kufic script with a modern style.	Narrates historical authenticity and architectural grandeur; creates a recognizable visual experience.	Minimal form of the palace in logos, promotional posters, and urban wayfinding.
Morvarid Palace	A valuable historical building with an Iranian architectural facade and floral/decorative motifs.	Creation of promotional graphic elements such as posters, infographics, and digital visual materials for cultural introduction and identity building.	Nastaliq combined with a modern typeface.	Displays historical aesthetics and artistic delicacy.	Floral and decorative palace patterns in brochures and city cards.
Shah Abbasi Caravanserai	A historical caravanserai and a place of cultural and commercial exchange on the Silk Road.	Urban signs, logo and logotype design, and icons to give identity to events and service spaces inspired by its architecture, motifs, or history.	Minimal Kufic script.	Creates a sense of route and historical experience; recalls commercial and social roles.	Minimal caravanserai icon in wayfinding systems and tourism apps.
Mesbah Bathhouse	A historic bathhouse with Iranian architecture and traditional decorations.	Design of backgrounds, logos, environmental elements, and posters.	Modern Nastaliq.	Communicates popular culture and urban history.	Simplified bathhouse form in the logo and environmental patterns.

• Cultural and University Symbols

The university and educational centers of Karaj, including Kharazmi University, the Faculty of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Islamic Azad University of Karaj, and the National University of Skills of Alborz Province, are among the most important cultural and scientific symbols of the city. These spaces are not only educational and research centers, but also identity-making urban elements with valuable capacity for use in visual identity design and the branding of Karaj (Table 3).

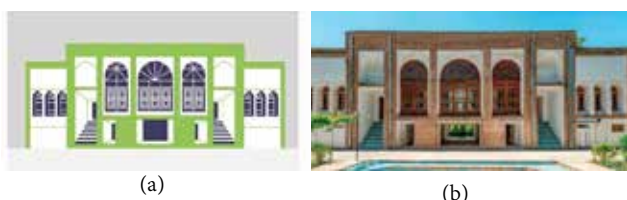


Fig. 3. An example of using a simplified architectural form in the design of urban graphic elements. The image shows how simplifying building forms, minimalizing details, and using Iranian lines can help produce coherent urban icons, patterns, and visual elements. a) Comparison of the original design of Soleymanieh Palace, b) with a visual element aligned with the identity of Karaj. Source: Author.

In the process of city branding, these centers can be transformed into graphic elements, minimalist icons, and recognizable visual components. The distinctive architectural forms of university buildings, such as historic entrances, geometric building lines, or the modern architecture of some faculties, can be simplified and transformed into visual signs. These signs can be used in urban logos, wayfinding, tourism maps, cultural posters, visual identity patterns, and urban merchandise (Fig. 4).

The simultaneous use of university symbols alongside historical and natural symbols creates a multidimensional identity balance for Karaj. Many cities rely on only one identity dimension—for example, historical, natural, or industrial—but Karaj has the capacity to present a combined and multilayered identity. The presence of reputable universities in the city makes it possible for Karaj to be seen not only as a city with cultural heritage and remarkable nature, but also as a city with active scientific, research, and cultural potential.

When university symbols are incorporated into urban graphics, for example, in the form of icons, maps, wayfinding elements, cultural posters, or visual identity

Table 3. Scientific and cultural symbols of Karaj. Source: Author.

University/ educational symbol	Description	Application in city branding	Related typography/ graphic style	Aesthetic/ experiential effect	Practical example
Kharazmi University	The oldest university center in the region, with a historical-modern hybrid architecture; a symbol of formal and rooted education.	Icon design, scientific city logo, visual identity for cultural-scientific events, and urban maps.	Formal typography with modern geometric typefaces, combined with simple Kufic lines.	Creates a sense of scientific credibility, educational heritage, and university-based identity.	Simplified entrance form and clock tower in wayfinding and urban posters.
Faculty of Agriculture and Natural Resources	A specialized scientific center related to the environment and natural resources, with a distinctive campus architecture.	Use in ecological branding, nature-related patterns, and logos for scientific-environmental events.	Organic typography, curved and minimalist lines.	Suggests the connection between science, nature, and sustainability.	Leaf, grain, or building-form icon in patterns and environmental signs.
Islamic Azad University, Karaj Branch	One of the largest scientific centers of the province, with modern architecture and distinctive geometric volumes.	Urban-university logo design, information icons, and scientific brochures.	Modern typography with angular forms and geometric structure.	Communicates dynamism, innovation, and scientific breadth; emphasizes urban development.	Minimal building facade forms in posters, information signs, and urban maps.
National University of Skills, Alborz Province	A center of innovation and skill training with contemporary architecture and technological functions.	Use in the city's technology-oriented visual identity system and production of innovative icons.	Technological and modern typography; simple, square, and readable lines.	Suggests a future-oriented, innovative, and skill-based identity for the city.	Use of digital forms and network lines in patterns and urban graphics.

patterns, the audience subconsciously receives a message that the city has knowledge infrastructure and a dynamic scientific environment. This message can:

Change the city's mental image from a merely tourist or transit center into a scientific and cultural destination, Strengthen feelings of trust, future-orientation, and development among audiences, Help the city brand present a dynamic, multilayered, and progressive identity rather than a one-dimensional identity, Highlight the city's role as a hub of knowledge, research, and innovation for students, researchers, and knowledge-based businesses.

In urban graphics, the presence of these symbols also



Fig. 4. An example of graphic simplification of scientific and cultural centers. a) The original image on the, b) The minimalist. This comparison shows how distinctive architectural forms can be transformed into recognizable graphic elements in city branding. Source: Author.

forms a visual message: Karaj is a city that contains not only the past and the present, but also moves toward the future. This approach has great value in city branding because it moves public perception away from the idea of Karaj as merely a dormitory city or transit city and establishes it as a city with a scientific, cultural, and development-oriented identity.

### Conclusion

The visual identity of Karaj can be effective and lasting only when all of its elements—including the color palette, typography, and logo—are designed and applied in a coordinated, purposeful, and integrated framework. In this regard, coordinating visual identity elements with the natural and cultural symbols of Karaj provides a strong foundation for city branding. However, the sustainable and inclusive success of this brand depends on a deep understanding and reflection of the city's social and cultural diversity. As a metropolis with a dynamic population composition and diverse social layers, Karaj needs a branding approach that goes beyond fixed cultural and natural symbols and can integrate the tastes, experiences, and multiple identities of citizens within a single brand framework. Therefore,

designing an effective visual identity for Karaj requires a comprehensive stakeholder analysis, understanding of local and social identities, and the creation of a space for accepting and reflecting diversity so that the city brand can create a deep and inclusive sense of belonging among all residents. The selected color palette not only reflects Karaj's natural environment and environmental characteristics, but also, through its relationship with the urban structure and modern elements, creates visual coherence in media, urban spaces, and information tools, and provides a pleasant and understandable experience for the audience.

Typography, as one of the key pillars of visual identity, enables the smooth, effective, and coherent transmission of messages through the selection of readable and modern Persian and Latin fonts. This type of design not only improves content comprehension and readability but also aesthetically strengthens the rhythm and visual coherence of texts in the urban environment and digital media, while making the presence of Karaj's visual identity possible in international contexts.

The logo, by drawing on the natural, historical, cultural, and scientific characteristics of the city, functions as the central core of visual identity, and its symbolic role in strengthening recognition and recall of the city is highly significant. The design of this logo, with emphasis on simplified forms of historical buildings, symbolic mountain lines, river flow, and scientific symbols, establishes a relationship between

tradition and modernity and creates a coherent, understandable, and recognizable image of Karaj.

The implementation of this coordinated and integrated combination, in addition to improving the beauty and coherence of the urban environment, transforms the mental image of Karaj among audiences. A city previously known merely as a passageway or dormitory city is now presented as a place with cultural authenticity, scientific capacity, and independent character. This designed visual identity both strengthens citizens' sense of belonging, loyalty, and urban identity and presents tourists and external audiences with a clear, coherent, and memorable image of Karaj that can be easily recognized and connected with.

These findings show that comprehensive visual identity design functions not only as a tool for beautification and environmental coherence but also as a strategic factor for representing urban identity, enhancing social capital, and developing sustainable city branding. Specifically, the emphasis on understanding social diversity and integrating it into visual identity, along with the need for coordination and integration of design elements, can be considered a conceptual and adaptable framework for other cities and provinces in their city branding processes.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding this study.

### References List

- Afrouzi, M. (2023). تایپوگرافی فارسی به‌مثابه رسانه بصری [Persian typography as a visual message medium from the perspective of perceptual grouping principles]. *Journal of Graphic and Painting Research*, 6(13), 33–54. [in Persian]. <https://doi.org/10.22051/pgr.2024.46110.1237>
- Chan, A., Suryadipura, D., & Kostini, N. (2021). City image: City branding and city identity strategies. *Review of Integrative Business and Economics Research*, 10, 330–341.
- Fawadian, M., Karkehabadi, Z., & Kamewa, S. (2022). شناسایی عوامل مؤثر در موفقیت برندینگ شهری در راستای تحقق شهر خلاق مورد مطالعه: شهر دامغان [Identifying the factors affecting the success of urban branding towards the realization of a creative city (case study: Damghan city)]. *Journal of Geographical Studies of Mountainous Areas*, 3(1), 199–217. <https://dor.isc.ac/dor/20.1001.1.27172325.1401.3.1.11.4>
- Foroudi, P. (2019). Influence of brand signature, brand awareness, brand attitude, brand reputation on hotel industry's brand performance. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 76, 271–285. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2018.05.016>
- Jabbari, S., & Khezrian, S. (2017). هویت بصری شهری در حیطه طراحی گرافیک [Urban visual identity in the field of graphic design]. *Honar-ha-ye Ziba: Visual Arts*, 22(3), 47–56. [in Persian]. <https://doi.org/10.22059/jfava.2017.63167>
- Kolahkaj, M. (2022). تحلیل بسامدی رنگ ایران در پوستره‌های گرافیک با موضوع ایران [Frequency analysis of Iranian colors in graphic posters on the theme of Iran]. *Peykareh*, 11(27), 48–65. [in Persian]. <https://doi.org/10.22055/pyk.2022.17614>
- Mirzaei-Nasab Fahadan, M. (2013). جایگاه گرافیک محیطی در هویت بصری شهر [The place of environmental graphics in the visual identity of the city]. *Chideman*, 2(4), 1–6. [in Persian]. <https://ensani.ir/fa/article/download/325280>
- Moradi Sanjani, E. (2023). تحلیل مؤلفه‌های شاخص شهر اراک جهت طراحی هویت بصری [Analysis of the distinctive components of Arak city for visual identity design]. *Applied Arts Journal*, 3(2), 83–97. [in Persian]. <https://doi.org/10.22075/aaaj.2024.33037.1202>
- Nazari, P. (2024). شناسایی مؤلفه‌های تاثیرگذار بر برندسازی شهر کرمانشاه [Identifying the factors influencing urban tourism branding (Case study: Kermanshah city)]. *Urban Economics and Planning*, 5(1). [in Persian]. <https://civilica.com/doc/2063445>
- Nasir, M. N. F., Effendi, W. M. S., & Sharif, F. M. (2023). The

Importance and Challenges of Graphic Design Branding: An Overview and Discussion. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(11), 1113-1117. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v13-i11/19428>

• Parvari Moghadam, R. (2025). The Role of Graphic Design in Redesigning Urban Spaces Case Study: Rasht Municipality Cultural Pedestrian Zone Regeneration Project. *Urban Planning Knowledge*, 9(4), 20-41. <https://doi.org/10.22124/upk.2026.30896.2037>

• Rajab-Bolukat, R. (2011). طراحی لوگو و لوگوتایپ برای موسیقی [Logo and logotype design for music]. *Musical Maqam*, 5, 159-179. [in Persian]. <https://www.noormags.ir/view/fa/articlepage/1034658>

• Rifaioğlu, M. N., & Sahin Güçhan, N. (2007). The concept of identity and its identification process in urban conservation projects. In *International Conference of CSAAR: Regional Architecture and Identity in the Age of Globalization* (pp. 1099-1111). Tunis.

• Shibani, H. R., Shoaleh, M., & Nikouei, M. (2025). نقش رنگ‌های اشباع‌شده در طراحی فضاهای شهری معاصر [The role of saturated

colors in the design of contemporary urban spaces]. *Studies in the World of Color*, 15(3), 359-375. [in Persian]. [https://jsw.icrc.ac.ir/article\\_82106\\_0373af880f861213470926c3e99bc7b9.pdf](https://jsw.icrc.ac.ir/article_82106_0373af880f861213470926c3e99bc7b9.pdf)

• Suprpto, R., & Purwanti, R. (2020). Study of Typography Design as Elements in Developing the Visual City Branding Identity of Cities in Indonesia. *Proceedings of the 1st Conference of Visual Art, Design, and Social Humanities*. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.2-11-2019.2294925>

• Wahyurini, O., & Wardani, K. (2014). Brand identities for cities: Enhancing graphic designer expertise in city branding practice. *International Journal of Design Management and Professional Practice*, 7(1), 13-31. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2325-162X/CGP/v07i01/38597>

• Zhang, Ch. (2016). The Importance of Visual Identity Graphic Design in Cities. In *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Social Science and Technology Education* (pp.708-714). Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/icsste-16.2016.130>

• Zhang, L., & Zhao, S. X. (2009). City branding and the Olympic effect: A case study of Beijing. *Cities*, 26(5), 245-254. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2009.06.003>

#### COPYRIGHTS

Copyright for this article is retained by the authors with publication rights granted to Tourism of Culture journal. This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



#### HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Sarhadi, M. (2026). A Comprehensive Graphic Branding Design in Alborz Province (Creating a Sustainable Cultural and Aesthetic Urban Landscape to Improve the City Image and Strengthen Tourism Appeal). *Tourism of Culture*, 7(24), 16-27.

DOI: [10.22034/toc.2026.564774.1216](https://doi.org/10.22034/toc.2026.564774.1216)

URL: [https://www.toc-sj.com/article\\_243910.html?lang=en](https://www.toc-sj.com/article_243910.html?lang=en)

