http://doi.org/10.22034/2.4.30 *Revitalization School*, *2*(4), 32-39, Autumn 2024

Original Research Article

Exploring the Place-making Role of Native Green Landscapes in Urban Landscape Development

(Case study: River Cities of Dezful, Shush, and Shushtar)

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 10 December 2024
Revised: 22 December 2024
Accepted: 09 January 2025
Online available: 20 January 2025

Keywords
Green landscape
Place-based development
River city
Khuzestan

ABSTRACT

Urban green landscape as a part of the urban landscape has multiple impacts on various aspects of citizens' lives. For that reason how it is developed is of great importance. In contemporary development plans, green landscape is regarded merely as a decorative phenomenon for recreation, and its environmental benefits are considered, in the sustainable development approach, economic and social aspects are also emphasized. The development of contemporary green space in the vicinity of Khuzestan Rivers has reduced the multiple functions and identity role of the river and green landscape to recreational elements in the city, and as a result, the separation of these two from the residents' daily lives. In recent development plans, a comprehensive model is often presented for all cities, while the place's capacities and residents' needs are considered a determining factor in the development process. The river cities of Khuzestan also have their characteristics and capacities that determine the style of green landscape based on the needs of residents in these cities. Therefore, understanding this style and its characteristics is essential for place-based development. This study identified the features of the landscapes through field observations using the exploratory method, and in some cases, examined historical documents. The results of the observations showed that the green landscape organization in the cities of Dezful, Sush, and Shushtar, serving as an oasis to adapt to the climate, has contributed to the connection between pause and focal points of the city and daily activities. Moreover, the selection of native Palm and Jujube trees for sacred status either as single or mass planting has enabled the multifunctionality of the green landscape. Such a landscape, in continuous connection with people's lives, has met the needs of residents and has been created based on the functional, climatic, cultural, social, economic, and identity capacities of the place. Therefore, the native green landscape of these cities, with its place-making components, can play a fundamental role in place-based development, which needs to be considered in the development process.

* This article is extracted from the Research Project entitled "A placed-oriented Approach in the Spatial Planning of Khuzestan Provice" which was conducted under supervisionof Dr. "Seyed Amir Mansouri" by the research team of NAZAR Research Center in Khozestan province in 2024.
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Introduction

River cities have long been the center of civilization and human development. Cities whose initial cores were formed along rivers have benefited from countless benefits such as access to drinking water, irrigation of agricultural lands, water transportation, and energy production, and the river was considered a defensive factor for the city, including the cities of Dezful, Shush, and Shushtar. Rivers have played a decisive role in the formation of urban fabric, people's lifestyle, and ultimately the identity of the city as the vital arteries of these cities. In the past, waterfronts were multifunctional and played various roles in people's lives, including social, environmental, recreational, identity, and aesthetic functions, today, the waterfronts in the cities of Dezful, Shush, and Shushtar have become purely recreational spaces similar to urban parks with the construction of Extensive non-native green spaces. This is while the native green landscape is of special importance to the people of these cities and is inextricably linked to their daily lives. In the beliefs and convictions of the people of the area, trees are not merely decorative elements but have a higher status and dignity. The type of native landscape and its location in different parts of these cities are based on the needs of the people and the capacities of the place. The repetition of the style of green space of contemporary parks on the waterfront and urban spaces of Dezful, Shush, and Shushtar, without considering the spatial capabilities, has changed not only the function of the native green landscape but also the waterfronts, and the role of these two vital factors in people's lives has been reduced to a recreational function. This type of development does not meet the various needs of residents and is not compatible with the characteristics of the place. Analyzing the characteristics of the native green landscape and its role in the development process can determine the style of green landscape development appropriate to the river cities of Khuzestan and the needs of residents.

Research Questions

- How can the native green landscape be effective in the place-based development process of the Khuzestan River Cities?
- What are the benefits of utilizing the native green landscape as an oasis instead of a large-scale and dense linear green space?
- What are the initiatives and strategies of the residents of the Khuzestan River cities to create harmony in their living environment using the urban green landscape?

Research Method

Due to the nature of the study, the research design of the study is exploratory. This study employed field observations and theoretical foundations derived from library studies served as the basis of the analysis. Since it was mentioned earlier, the objective-subjective nature of the green landscape requires an approach that can be used to evaluate this phenomenon in all dimensions. The landscaper's approach to the city was a holistic approach in which objectivity and subjectivity are inseparable and the perception and mind of the spectators play a major role in it (Majidi et al., 2019). In this research, first, through landscape reading, the style and characteristics of the green landscape of the river cities of Dezful, Shush, and Shushtar were identified. Then, the suitability and compatibility of this style with the capacities of the place and the perception of the residents of these cities from the place were analyzed based on the collected field documents. The field observations included two main sections: green landscape components and landscape-based strategies.

Case Study

Khuzestan Province is located in the southwest of Iran and is one of the oldest civilization centers in Iran and the world. Due to its rich water and soil resources, this province has long been the site of the settlement of great civilizations such as the Elamites. Khuzestan also plays a key role in the country's economy, as most of the country's oil and gas resources are located in this province.

Dezful is located in the north of Khuzestan and on the slopes of the Middle Zagros. This city is considered an important center for agriculture in the region due to the passage of the Dez River and the presence of fertile lands. According to the report of the Iranian Meteorological Organization (داده‌های هواشناسی ایران, n.d.), the average minimum temperature in the coldest month of the year (January) is about 7 °C and the average maximum temperature in the hottest month of the year (July) is 43 °C. The existence of the Dez dam, which is one of the oldest modern dams in Iran, has contributed greatly to the development of agriculture and water resource management in this region (گزارش بارش و ..., n.d.). The dominant plant species in Dezful include Palm and Jujube, both of which are well-adapted to the hot climate of the region. The city's traditional architecture also includes Shavadans, which are designed to cope with the heat.

The historic city of Shushtar is one of the most important cities in Khuzestan in terms of history and

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culture. The city is known for its historical water structures, which are registered on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Shushtar's water systems, including mills, canals, and dams, are an outstanding example of ancient water engineering. Shushtar's climate is warm and humid, and in the autumn and winter seasons, it has a pleasant climate, making these periods ideal for tourism activities.

Shush is one of the oldest known settlements in Iran, with a history that dates back several thousand years. The city is located near the Karkheh River, which provides suitable water resources for agriculture and residence. The Chogha Zanbil ziggurat, one of the most important archaeological sites in Iran, is located near Shush, indicating the historical importance of the area. The climate of Shush is hot and dry, with low average annual rainfall (داده‌های هواشناسی ایران, n.d.).

Theorical Foundatin

• Place, landscape, and urban landscape

Place is a space that has meaning for an individual or individuals (Moazzeni Khorasgani & Haghighatbin, 2023). Human perception of a place depends on both its physical characteristics and the experience that he or she gains from that place. The combination of "space and human perception of space" constitutes the nature of a place (Mansouri, 2010). The components that make up a place are the "body, activities, and meanings" that form the objective and subjective layers of a place (Moazzeni Khorasgani & Haghighatbin, 2023). Landscape is a type of place (Mansouri, 2010). Landscape is a place-based nature that arises from human experience in space and is an objective-subjective, dynamic, and relative phenomenon that is formed in interaction with history and nature (Mansouri, 2005). Landscape can narrate the human experience of place and therefore has a direct connection with the sense of place and its continuity (Moazzeni Khorasgani & Haghighatbin, 2023). The city is also a type of place. The city is the product of the social dimension of man and the development of basic concepts in his mind (Mansouri, 2010). The city is a space in which man resides and the material and spiritual elements of his life are placed in it. This space is the context in which man experiences his perceptions of the world (Athshinbar, 2009). The city is a hypertext that has a visual form and texture of visual signs that carry meaning (Majidi et al., 2019). Since the city is the embodiment of the collective soul of the city and its citizens, its body cannot be separated from its semantic dimensions, which have a kind of integrated coexistence (Noroozitalab, 2010).

The city is a phenomenon of landscapes; Fluid among concepts and physics and the product of human perception of their living environment, the urban landscape is also a type of landscape and a category of quality (meaning) that emerges through quantitative elements (body) (Majidi et al., 2019). In other words, the city landscape is initially an objective matter that is formed through the quality of the appearance of the city's physical factors and is perceived through the body and emotions, and with the passage of time and repetition, it has become a common (mental) element that connects the people of the society. Therefore, what gives meaning to the urban landscape is the citizen's mentality (Athshinbar, 2009). The urban landscape is the knowledge of recognizing the concept of landscape among citizens who have lived in that environment throughout history and have produced a meaningful connection with the natural and artificial bodies of the environment that plays a fundamental role in the continuation of their reasonable life (Mansouri, 2010).

• Urban green landscape and place-based development

Based on what was said about the urban landscape, the urban green landscape is also an inseparable combination of physical and semantic elements or objectivity and subjectivity. Just as the urban landscape is examined with a landscape approach, the native green landscape, as a subset of the urban landscape, is examined with a landscape reading concerning the characteristics of the place and strengthens the aesthetic and identity values of cities. This is because the native green landscape is dependent on the place and in place-based development, the main attention is on the "place". Research results show that one of the main reasons for the low quality of contemporary green space is the lack of connection between the components and elements of green space with other urban structures (Saboonchi et al., 2018). Therefore, the organization and location of the green landscape in the urban structure in the development process directly affects its quality. Each place has its meaning and significance, and if it is to be developed, it must be based on the needs, capacities, strengths, and weaknesses of each context and, in general, the characteristics of that place. Place-based development based on the landscape approach is a systemic and holistic approach in which the unique characteristics of each place, including geographical location, history, culture, and natural resources, combined with the components of sustainable development, are considered in the planning and development of that place. River cities, as one of the manifestations of

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the interaction between natural elements and human structures, play an important role in sustainable urban development. These cities, which are formed along water flows, are not only important from an economic and social perspective but are also environmentally valuable and, as life-giving arteries, provide a link between the natural space and the urban environment. Rivers are the main identity feature of many cities (Francis, 2012). Intra-urban rivers are special environmental ecosystems within cities that, in addition to outstanding ecological features, have environmental, human, and economic values and can be exploited as local development corridors (Mahmoodi et al., 2013). This development can go beyond sustainable development and become place-based development based on the characteristics of the place and help protect the native green landscape. Trees, water, and arches, this Iranian landscape triad as a natural-cultural combination, have long been a place-making factor in the formation and development of Iranian settlements (Abarghoei Fard, 2019) and have long played a prominent role in improving the quality of urban life as providers of climatic and functional needs. In the history of human life in different tribes and nations, plants have always had a mythological and sacred position that has spiritual and religious reasons, and for this reason, natural elements, especially plants, are always observed in the art culture of these people (Sabouri & Javadi, 2022). In the worldview of the ancient Iranian people, water is not only considered a vital element in the material aspects of daily life but also a sacred element that can give meaning to the universe and is considered a symbol of goodness and blessing, therefore it has a continuous presence in the culture, beliefs, and rituals of Iranians (Mansouri & Javadi, 2019). Therefore, considering that it can be said that trees and water are two main components in the structure of the green landscape of the rivers of Khuzestan, evaluating these two components in the process of developing the green landscape is essential.

Components of The Green Landscape

Field observations in the cities of Dezful, Sush, and Shushtar indicate the existence of the Iranian landscape triad, and the green landscape acts as a living force for the development of the city as a place-making element. The presence of the Imamzadeh (four-arched) near perennial trees, and possibly water, is also proof of this claim. Because in the past, religious and sacred places were usually built next to this triad. Therefore, water and trees were evaluated as components of the green landscape in these cities. In addition to the environmental features stated in various studies, the presence of trees in key points of the urban space connects them with people's daily activities. This connection can include pilgrimage, social interactions, and recreation. Such a continuous connection leads to increased respect and sanctity for trees, turning them into ritual and identity-giving elements in the urban environment. Increasing the semantic layers of trees in the green landscape of cities not only enhances the beauty of these elements in the eyes of citizens but also creates a sense of belonging to the environment. Trees that respond to the needs of residents and are aligned with their spatial capacities and perceptions of the urban environment contribute to place-based development. It is the characteristics of the place that shape a specific type of urban green landscape that is compatible with the needs of residents and environmental conditions. Accordingly, trees and water as landscape elements, in addition to creating beauty, also help to strengthen the social and cultural identity of the community and establish a deeper connection between residents and their environment. Therefore, considering the potential of tree and water elements to become landscape elements to restore, protect, and enhance the perception of place is essential in place-based development.

- **River**

Rivers have great importance in the urban landscape due to their multiple functions in the fields of urban spatial organization, nature connectedness, ecological and social benefits, and their fundamental role in the formation of collective memories of residents. The presence of water for planting trees, the opportunity for physical and sensory connection with nature at the waterfront, and its ecological benefits are among the factors that have led to the creation of contemporary green spaces mainly along the river axis. Contemporary green spaces have been created in the form of areas with mass planting of non-native plants, including Conocarpus and Mesquite, in the vicinity of rivers for recreational purposes, and other aspects of them are not considered in this type of development. This is while both the native green landscape and the waterfront are multifunctional elements with a deep connection to different aspects of life, and both water and trees have deep roots in the culture, rituals, and beliefs of the residents of this region. It can be said that by reducing the green landscape to a recreational green space and transforming the waterfront into a

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green area solely for recreation and leisure, the place-making role of the green landscape and the river, which is considered the axis of the city's perception, is simultaneously distorted. This type of green space development causes the forgetting and destruction of authentic native trees and the style of green landscape compatible with the capacities of the place. Also, the identity, perception, social, and landscape role of the waterfront is weakened and it becomes merely a decorative element with a recreational function in the city (Fig. 1).

• Tree

The selection of trees used in the green landscape of the rivers of Khuzestan has also been shaped based on spatial factors. The residents of this area have chosen specific trees that have a deep meaning in their beliefs and mindsets for this purpose. The Jujube tree, with its ability to provide shade (with a density of branches that does not prevent the passage of air) and provide climatic comfort for residents who need such comfort under the scorching sun in this hot and dry climate, as well as its edible fruit, in addition to its visual beauty, is one of the features that have led the city residents to choose this tree. Like the Jujube, the Palm tree is also considered one of the selected native trees, with its visual beauty and edible fruit that has an economic function (Fig. 2). These trees are not only adapted to the climate and weather of this land and tolerate adverse environmental conditions such as drought and heat, but also play an important role in meeting the economic, social, aesthetic, and welfare needs of the residents. Trees that meet the various needs of residents in terms of function and are deeply connected to their historical individuality in terms of identity, over time, by creating collective memories and being present in people's daily lives, acquire a sense of respect and sanctity and play an important role in creating a sense of belonging to the place. Therefore, native trees that residents choose based on spatial capacities and to meet their daily needs play an important role in the development of the urban landscape, the neglect of which reduces the function of the urban green landscape to urban green space.

A review of historical documents also confirms the continuous presence of Jujube and Palm trees in the landscape of Khuzestan. The presence of these trees near sacred places indicates the sacred status of these trees among the people. In the sketches of Madame Jeanne Dieulafoy's travelogue (Dieulafoy, 1998), specimen Jujube trees in the plain can be seen as a shelter from the scorching sun. The presence of palm trees near the tomb of Daniel the Prophet and the old Jujube next to the Imamzadeh can also be seen in these sketches (Fig. 3). In this travelogue, it is mentioned that "tent-dwellers who are forced to follow their flocks leave their provisions at the sacred tomb and their agricultural tools at the tree because, after the planting season, the tools remain useless until the next year." This entrusting of the means of livelihood to the tree indicates the sanctity and respect of this tree in the beliefs and convictions of these people so that they are confident that their property will be safe with

Fig. 1. Transforming the waterfront into a park-like space with recreational functions and its separation from urban life, Dezful. Photo: Babak Abdi, 2024.

Fig. 2. The Jujube and palms of selected native trees are present from public spaces to home yards. Photo: Babak Abdi, 2024.

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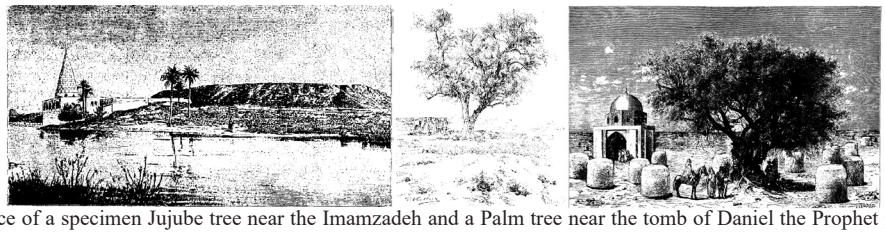

Fig. 3. The presence of a specimen Jujube tree near the Imamzadeh and a Palm tree near the tomb of Daniel the Prophet indicates the sacred status of these trees. Source: Dieulafoy, 1998.

the sacred tree. In addition, the placement of this tree in a sacred place and its association with religious ceremonies and pilgrimages adds to the sacred status of these trees. This association and continuous presence of these sacred trees in religious beliefs and ceremonies are linked to the identity of the residents, and the role of these trees in the lives of the residents becomes an identity-giving element beyond just a natural and plant element.

Landscape-based Strategies

Organization and site selection of the green landscape in each place are formed based on its capacities and the perception of its residents. The reading of the landscapes carried out by the authors from the green landscape of the river cities of Khuzestan showed that in the cities of Dezful, Sush, and Shushtar, an almost similar style of this type of green landscape is followed in these cities, which has its own specific and unique characteristics. The origin of these characteristics is the climatic, functional, aesthetic, cultural, and social capacities of the place. The residents of these cities have organized and created urban green landscapes to meet the various needs of society based on their perception of the place. Creating oasis green spaces at the city's multifunctional turning points using selected native species compatible with the capacities of the place is a common feature of the green landscape of the river cities of Khuzestan, which determines this specific style of green landscape. This repetition of the method and strategy of creating green landscapes in these cities indicates the climatic, cultural, social, and ideological similarities in these cities. The innovation and strategy that, with the wisdom and intelligence of the inhabitants of this area, created this style, while taking into account the capacities of the place in various dimensions, also meets the needs of the residents.

• Organizing a climate-friendly oasis

In hot climates such as Khuzestan, the approach to the green landscape is different. Field observations show that the development of the green landscape is concentrated in the form of oases, while contemporary models of green space design are carried out in areas (such as large parks) without considering the limitations of water resources and sustainable irrigation methods, such as rainwater and local resources, microclimates and native plants. This green oasis landscape is not only climate-friendly, but also pays attention to spatial capacities. This type of green landscape development, due to its structure, leads to optimal water consumption considering the hot climate of Khuzestan, and also, by combining with native plants by creating shade, improves climatic comfort and creates a sense of belonging to a place that is proportionate and compatible with the capacities of this place and, as a result, helps to improve the quality of life of residents (Fig. 4).

• Site selection in the focal points of the city

In cities with such a climate, trees have a special place in the collective memory and mentality of citizens because living during the day is not possible without the shade and ventilation provided by trees. Therefore, these elements are of particular importance in shaping citizens' experience and recognition of the green landscape of their city and their deep understanding. In the assessments carried out, the concentration of green space in the case study cities can be said that the green space plays a significant role in neighborhood pause points and focal points such as the intersection of local access axes, urban landmarks such as Imamzades, and mosques (Fig. 5). What was investigated in the field studies shows that this pattern has not only contributed to the visual beauty of the city but also, due to their location in places that are the context of residents' interactions, they have been linked to the daily life and social activities of individuals and have increased the sense of belonging. Meanwhile, contemporary green spaces are usually designed in isolation and separate from the daily life of citizens and only for a specific recreational activity and are located in less important places, such as the edges of streets and minor crossing points. This approach not only reduces the social and cultural richness of green spaces but also ignores the real needs of residents, while the design of green landscapes should be integrated into local life and respond to the real needs of the community and be formed based on it.

Conclusion

Spatial capacities include physical and non-physical

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characteristics, residents' needs, and residents' perceptions of the place in general. The river cities of Khuzestan also have their spatial capacities, and the development of the landscape of these cities must be based on these capacities so that the development process is compatible with the place and meets the needs of residents in different dimensions. The urban green landscape, as a part of the landscape in these river cities, has its own special and unique characteristics that have been created based on these capacities (Table 1). The urban green landscape in the cities of Dezful, Sush, and Shushtar has been created in a way that, by the climate of these cities, provides their climatic needs, such as creating shade and providing climatic comfort, in the form of an oasis. In addition, the location of these oases is located in urban focal points where social interactions and daily activities of residents take place, therefore the urban green landscape has been formed in continuous connection with the life context of the city residents. The trees planted at these landmarks are selected native trees that have a deep connection with the minds, identities, and beliefs of the residents, and their merely visual aspect has not been considered. With the multifunctionality of trees and the increase in the semantic layers and the role of trees in people's lives, these trees act as an element in the landscape, and this type of native green landscape has an aesthetic perception in the minds of the residents, and as a result, it causes a sense of belonging to the place. Finally, it can be said that the native green landscape in the river cities of Khuzestan meets the needs of the residents due to its compatibility

(a) (b) (c) (d)

Fig. 4. Examples of organizing the native green landscape as an oasis. A) A green oasis in front of the tomb of Daniel the Prophet of Shush, B) Organization of an oasis in the area of the tomb of Shah Rokneddin of Dezful, C) Remaining trace of the green oasis landscape of the Grand Mosque of Shushtar, D) A Jujube specimen tree next to the symbol of organizing the oasis of Dezful. Photo: Babak Abdi, 2024.

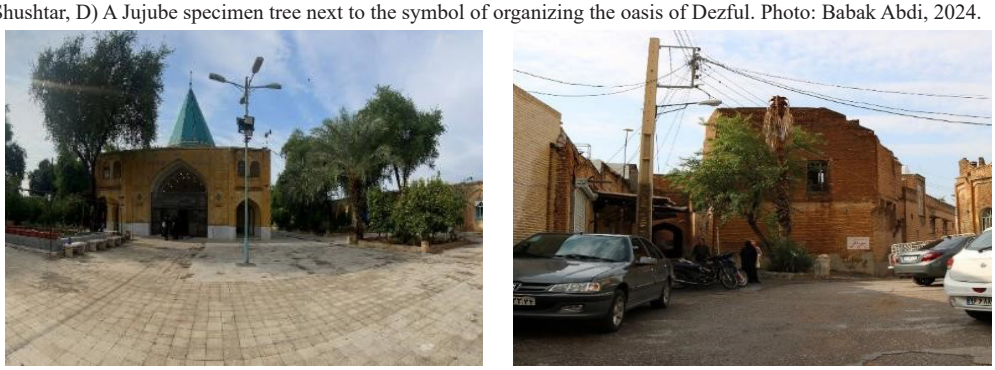

Fig. 5. Planting trees at urban landmarks. Photo: Zeinab Rezaei, 2024.

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Table 1. Differences in the style characteristics of the native green landscape of Khuzestan River cities with contemporary green space. Source: Authors.

Urban green space style	Landscape-based strategies		Components of the Green Landscape	
	Organization	Site selection	Tree	River
Native green landscape	Oasis	Pause spaces and focal points	- Specimen - Multi-functionality and sacredness - Native trees (Jujube and Palm)	- Water as a sacred element - Multifunctional waterfront in connection with everyday life
Contemporary green space	Extensive and linear	Isolated points and crossing points, waterfront	- Mass and row planting - Recreational and ornamental function - Non-native trees	- Water as a decorative element - Recreational function of the waterfront

with the capacities of the place, and with its place-making components, it is considered a vital part of place-based development that requires attention in the development process. Meanwhile, the contemporary green space in the vicinity of rivers, by reducing the role of the green landscape to a recreational green space and transforming the river edge into a park-like space, has caused the loss of the multiple functions of the river and its identity role, and as a result, the simultaneous separation of the green landscape and the river from the daily lives of the residents.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there was no conflict for them in conducting this research.

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE
Abdi, B., Rezaei, Z., Nosratian, R., & Mehrabadi, M. (2024). Exploring the Place-making Role of Native Green Landscapes in Urban Landscape Development (Case study: River Cities of Dezful, Shush, and Shushtar). *Journal of Revitalization School, 2*(4), 32-39.
DOI: http://doi.org/10.22034/2.4.30
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[DOI: 10.22034/2.4.30]