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Original Research Article

Urban Landscape Reading of Contemporary Development in Khuzestan Based on the Conceptual Model of Place and Spatial Organization (A Case Study of Bandar Imam Khomeini)*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary urban development in Khuzestan Province over the past century has been largely influenced by the industrial and economic growth of the region. This has led to extensive challenges for the cities of Khuzestan, such as informal settlements, social inequality, environmental degradation, lack of urban identity, and, more generally, the failure to achieve the quality of "place" in these cities. In this context, the present study seeks, through an analysis of the urban landscape of Bandar Imam Khomeini, to examine the effects of the absence of "place" within the spatial organization of the city. The main research question is: How has the failure of Bandar Imam Khomeini in being an urban place manifested in the urban landscape arising from its spatial organization? The study is based on the hypothesis that industry-driven development, a resource-based economy, and neglect of the dimensions of place have led to the reflection of the city's placelessness in its urban landscape. This qualitative research was conducted using a descriptive-analytical method. Data were collected through field observations, unstructured interviews with citizens and urban managers, and library and document studies. Data analysis was carried out using the conceptual model of place and the theory of spatial organization. The findings indicate that the components forming the city's spatial organization, due to the dominance of industrial activities and transit networks, lack meaningful connections with the natural environment and have been shaped in an identity-less, fragmented, and unbalanced manner that ignores the human scale. These components have been primarily designed according to industrial development requirements, and therefore, they lack significant and valuable aspects for the city's inhabitants.

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Introduction

The discovery of oil and the emergence of oil company activities, along with the construction of extensive infrastructure such as railways, ports, and oil facilities in partnership with the Iranian government over the past century, have driven rapid contemporary urban development in Khuzestan Province (Hein & Sedighi, 2016; Mojtahed-zadeh et al., 2024). This urban expansion has included the creation of several new towns across Khuzestan, most of which were established in previously undeveloped areas lacking a tradition of urban settlement (Zandieh et al., 2021). Currently, these cities face numerous sustainability challenges. A study conducted by the Center for Research and Development in Project Management of the Petrochemical Industries found that, despite experiencing significant growth in past decades due to industrial development and population increases from migration, these cities were not developed sustainably. As a result, they now contend with informal settlements, poverty, erosion of social capital, unemployment, social inequality, environmental degradation caused by industrial air and seawater pollution, inadequate healthcare facilities, lack of potable water, and other pressing issues (Mombeni & Kalantari, 2021). Given these circumstances, urban life in many of these cities is marked by severe challenges, prompting widespread migration from these areas to other parts of the country (Mansouri, 2023). These problems have hindered Khuzestan's cities from becoming genuine urban places environments that simultaneously satisfy both the material and symbolic needs of their residents and have instead transformed them into placeless environments. It is important to note that creating a sense of place in urban spaces is not achieved solely through physical construction. A city also requires historical continuity, identity, and meaningful connections. Ignoring these aspects can render urban spaces fragmented and soulless (Sabouri & Saboonchi, 2022). Fundamentally, a city is a form of place that emerges from the settlement and collective evolution of fundamental ideas shared by a community of people (Mansouri, 2010). The concept of "place" itself refers to locations where individuals can establish continuous relationships with various layers of their existence, derived from their interactions with the built environment, nature, and other humans (Habibi, 2008). Considering the failure of Khuzestan's cities to achieve genuine placemaking, this study seeks to examine, through the lens of the urban landscape as citizens' perception of their city (Maqhsoudi et al., 2020), how the lack of "place" manifests in these contemporary cities. The analysis focuses on both the objective and subjective components of the urban landscape. For this purpose, Bandar Imam Khomeini is selected as a case study. This port city, located in southern Khuzestan near Musa Bay, was founded approximately one hundred years ago as part of the region's industrial-economic development. Despite its crucial role in the national economy, Bandar Imam Khomeini currently faces major environmental, economic, and social challenges, which have contributed to its failure to become a meaningful urban place.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The primary research question this study seeks to address is: How does the lack of "place" in Bandar Imam Khomeini a city that emerged as a result of industrial-economic development in Khuzestan Province manifest itself in the urban landscape when considering both its objective and subjective components?

The study is based on the hypothesis that, due to the industrial-economic approach underpinning contemporary urban development, the objective and subjective elements of Bandar Imam Khomeini's urban landscape have developed in a flawed and incomplete manner, reflecting the city's lack of a meaningful sense of place.

Literature Review

Urban development and its influencing factors in Khuzestan Province have been extensively studied and form an important context for this research. Among the most notable studies, Mare and Maleki (2024) examined the role of natural factors in shaping and guiding the development of residential areas across Khuzestan. They identified rivers, the southern coastline, and wetlands as the most significant natural determinants of urban settlement locations and growth. Rostampour et al. (2014) focused on the role of oil in the modernization of Khuzestan, analyzing how industry-driven urban development transformed the identities of rural and nomadic communities. Similarly, Ziari et al. (2022) investigated the spatial organization of settlements, emphasizing the role of the oil industry as a primary mechanism shaping Khuzestan's spatial structure over the past century. They highlighted outcomes such as imbalances in urban hierarchies, the emergence of marginalized communities on city peripheries, and the transformation of villages into key sources of migration to cities. Darkatanian et al. (2016), using a historical-descriptive approach, assessed the impact of Khuzestan's regional development plan prior to the Iranian Revolution on Dezful, evaluating the social, economic, and construction-related effects of the plan. Other studies have focused on the broader impacts of urban development in Khuzestan, often employing quantitative methods and mathematical models to examine these effects from a sustainability perspective. For instance, Ziari and Shahsavari (2018) evaluated social vulnerability in cities with populations exceeding 10,000, identifying Bandar Imam Khomeini as a city with a high vulnerability index. Firoozi et al. (2011) addressed unsustainable urban development and

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informal settlements, proposing strategies to empower residents in these communities. Maleki et al. (2015) used quantitative models to study urban hierarchy and population distribution in Khuzestan before and after the Revolution and during the 1380s, concluding that while the pre-Revolution urban order was more structured, it gradually became imbalanced afterward, with increasing centralization in larger cities partly due to the Iran-Iraq War. Similarly, Nazmfar & Alibakhshi (2017) conducted a comparative analysis of Khuzestan's counties across two periods, focusing on sustainable development, classifying relevant indicators, and evaluating sustainability quantitatively. Taheri et al. (2019) analyzed the urban network of Khuzestan from 1956 to 2016, showing that the urban hierarchy became increasingly imbalanced, with population concentrating in major cities. A review of the literature indicates a significant research gap: while much has been studied about urban development in Khuzestan, no research has specifically examined the urban landscape resulting from contemporary urbanization. That is, there has been no study focused on interpreting the urban landscape of Khuzestan's cities as a product of modern urban development. This study seeks to fill that gap by extending the literature on urban development in Khuzestan and advancing research on urban landscape studies in the province.

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative and adopts a descriptive-analytical approach. Descriptive-analytical research seeks to provide a detailed account of a phenomenon or subject while explaining its underlying characteristics and dynamics (Barati, Davoudpour & Montazeri, 2013). Given the aim of this study to systematically describe the current conditions, features, and qualities of the urban landscape of Bandar Imam Khomeini this approach is particularly appropriate. Data were collected using a combination of three methods: field observation, unstructured interviews, and library/document analysis. To this end, the authors conducted field visits to Bandar Imam Khomeini on the 7th and 8th of March 2025, during which they observed the city and engaged in conversations with residents to understand their lived experiences. Unstructured interviews, lasting 15 to 20 minutes, were conducted with participants aged 25 to 60. This age range was selected because individuals within it tend to have deeper lived experiences in Bandar Imam Khomeini and a more comprehensive understanding of the city's spatial organization. All interviews were conducted during field visits across various parts of the city. The sample consisted of 30 participants, including 18 men and 12 women. Participants were asked to express their perspectives on the components of the city's spatial organization and the challenges arising from these elements that impact urban life. Additionally, the authors visited the Bandar Imam Khomeini Municipality and held meetings with the mayor and other city officials to collect the opinions and insights of these key urban stakeholders. After data collection, the researchers analyzed the information using the conceptual model of place in conjunction with the theory of urban spatial organization. The goal was to provide a comprehensive reading of the urban landscape of Bandar Imam Khomeini, considering both its objective and subjective dimensions, and ultimately answer the study's research question. The analysis employed a bottom-up coding approach. In this method, rather than using pre-determined codes, coding is developed based on the actual words and expressions of participants, allowing the analysis to emerge directly from the collected data and ensuring that the interpretations reflect the perspectives of urban stakeholders.

Theoretical Framework

• Conceptual Model of Place

Place is generally understood as a physical-symbolic phenomenon that emerges from historical and human events within a defined physical space, making its essence a combination of spatial form and human perception (Mansouri, 2010).

Several models have been proposed to explain the concept of place. One widely cited model is Canter's (1997), which defines place as composed of form, activity, and meaning, corresponding to three dimensions: physical, functional, and perceptual-cognitive. Relph (1976), a key figure in phenomenology, described place as encompassing both natural and built environments alongside human actions and associated meanings, which can manifest at multiple scales. Carmona (2021), an architect and urban planner, proposed that place is the result of an interaction between form, activity, and individual perception. Similarly, Cresswell (2009) explained place as a combination of material, meaning, and action. Gieryn (2000) emphasized three defining characteristics of place: a unique geographic location, physical form, and identity, which includes meaning and value. Based on these definitions, place can be understood as comprising three core dimensions: physical form, function or activity, and meaning.

• Urban Spatial Organization

Urban spatial organization theory adopts a systemic perspective, treating a city and its components not merely as a sum of physical parts but as a meaningful whole (Mansouri, 2013). The significance of the city emerges from the order, proportion, and relationships among its elements (Mokhles et al., 2022). According to this theory,

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a city's spatial organization consists of four interconnected components that collectively give the city coherence and purpose as a dynamic system (Mansouri, 2020). These components are: territory, center, structure, and neighborhoods (or smaller units).

Territory is defined as a clearly delineated boundary that separates the city from its surroundings, playing a key role in maintaining urban cohesion. It functions as the interface between urban and non-urban spaces and reflects the city's evolution as an independent entity within its surrounding context (Abarghouei Fard & Mansouri, 2021).

The center is not only the city's original core but also its most significant spatial element, embodying the city's identity. It acts as a hub for social and economic activities and serves as a focal point for collective memory, social interaction, and the enhancement of urban life quality (Mansouri, 2022).

Urban structure refers to the city's movement network, providing a physical-functional framework that connects different parts of the city. This element organizes urban spaces while directly influencing residents' perceptions of their environment (Maghsoudi et al., 2025). Because the urban structure facilitates connections among key components territory, center, and neighborhoods its function extends beyond the physical dimension to include cognitive and perceptual aspects of urban spatial organization (Mansouri et al., 2020).

Finally, neighborhoods, or smaller urban units, act as sub-systems representing components of the larger city. Physically, a neighborhood is composed of houses, streets, and scattered services that may initially seem fragmented. However, the observer's perception of these elements can unify them, giving the neighborhood meaning as a coherent whole. Thus, a neighborhood can be understood in two dimensions: its physical components and the spatial organization of these elements, which confer identity and cohesion (Mansouri et al., 2020).

• Concept of Urban Landscape

The urban landscape refers to the reality perceived by individuals through the tangible and physical aspects of the city, such as buildings, public spaces, activities, sounds, smells, and other sensory experiences. It represents the dynamic perception of the city by its residents, reflecting not only its physical form but also its historical context and associated social events (Maghsoudi et al., 2024).). Consequently, the urban landscape encompasses more than just the city's visible, built elements or its visual appearance (Karimi et al., 2023). It is a phenomenon shaped by human perception and consists of two interconnected dimensions: the objective-subjective or physical-meaningful aspects (Sabokro et al., 2022). This duality arises as citizens interpret the physical elements of the urban environment based on their experiences, memories, emotions, and perspectives accumulated over time (Mansouri, 2010).

Factors Influencing the Urban Landscape of Bandar Imam Khomeini

The urban landscape of Bandar Imam Khomeini has been influenced by a combination of natural, economic, and social factors. Each of these elements has affected the city's spatial structure and urban development in distinct ways. In certain cases, these influences have created challenges for urban planning and management (Table 1).

• Physical and Spatial Transformations

Historically, the region now comprising Bandar Imam Khomeini and Bandar Mahshahr was known as Musa Bay. Before this name became common, the area was referred to as Bandar Machol. In his travelogue, Ibn Battuta describes the port's maritime and terrestrial activities during the 7th and 8th centuries AH (Battuta, 1982, 200). Musa Bay region, which today encompasses Bandar Imam Khomeini (Fig. 1), was primarily engaged in fishing activities from the late Qajar period under Mozaffar al-Din Shah (Mirian, n.d., 284). Subsequently, in 1925, with the construction of the first wooden pier, the port officially began its commercial activities, marking the formal start of its role in regional trade (Ghayyem, 2017).

During the Pahlavi era, the construction of the national railway, alongside the expansion of maritime activities, laid the foundation for the city's initial urban core. With the completion of the country's transnational railway in 1928 SH and the establishment of two wooden piers at the end of Musa Bay, a port area emerged, which became known as Bandar Shapur. The port experienced rapid growth, and by 1948, under the directive of the Ministry of Finance, the customs office at Bandar Shapur was placed under the direct supervision of the Central Customs Administration in Tehran (Ghayyem, 2017). The port's strategic location, linking it to northern regions via the railway, further enhanced its significance, drawing the attention of the central government as well as foreign powers. Consequently, in September 1320 SH, during World War II, British forces occupied the area to utilize its logistical capacity (Ghayyem, 2017). In the post-war period, the expansion of port activities and economic growth triggered a large migration of workers from across the country, particularly from neighboring provinces. Temporary worker settlements, referred to as camps, were established for various groups, including Turks, Algu-Darzi, Kurds, Ali Jafar, and the Bist Family (Nazemabad). These early residential areas in Bandar Shapur, lacking basic urban infrastructure, resembled temporary encampments (Fig. 2). The primary construction materials for these settlements were wood and timber, transported to the area by ship. The lack of essential facilities, such as piped water and

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Table 1, Key factors affecting the physical urban landscape of Bandar Imam Khomeini source: authors.

Factors	Influential Forces	Spatial Impacts
Natural	1. Musa Bay (Generating Factor): The bay served as the initial foundation for the city's formation and, as a generating force, enabled its early life and growth.	Access to open waters enabling the development of maritime and commercial activities. Access to water resources and maritime trade routes supporting the growth of petrochemical industries.
Economic	2. Construction of Railway, Establishment of Commercial Port, Special Economic Zone (Directing Factors): These factors have guided the city's development, shaping physical patterns according to industrial and commercial needs.	The city's western coastline is monopolized by petrochemical industries and the port, resulting in a lack of connection between the city and Musa Bay. The city is constrained on the eastern side by the railway line. A highway was constructed through the city to facilitate the transit of goods and heavy vehicles. 39% of the city's area is allocated to vehicular transport networks, with little attention to pedestrian infrastructure. Rapid development of industrial and commercial infrastructure in the city, without consideration of the human scale.
Social	3. War and Migration (Weakening Factors): Large-scale migrations and cultural diversity have hindered social cohesion and cohesive urban development, leading to a heterogeneous and unstable urban fabric.	Population growth and the expansion of informal and peripheral settlements. Formation of laborer habitats without proper urban infrastructure, often in the form of temporary camps. High demographic diversity, leading to changes in housing patterns.



(B) (A)

Fig. 1. A) Location of the port relative to Musa Bay. Source: Authors, 2025. B) View of Bandar Shapur (Imam Khomeini) in the 1950s. Source: Abrishami, 2017.



(B) (A)

Fig. 2. A) Wooden seaside cottages along the edge of Bandar Shapur (Imam Khomeini), 1963. B) Coastal market of Bandar Shapur (Imam Khomeini), 1962. Source: Abrishami, 2017.

sewage systems, posed considerable challenges for residents (Ibn Rahman, 2007). In 1973, to improve living conditions and support the port's development, residents were relocated from the waterfront to a newly developed area called Sarbandar. This relocation involved the establishment of a planned urban settlement 15 kilometers from Bandar Shapur, designed to accommodate 1,500 households of workers and port staff according to urban planning principles and systematic physical development strategies (Abrishami, 2017).

After the Islamic Revolution, Bandar Shapur was renamed Bandar Imam Khomeini in 1982 and became one of the country's key commercial and industrial hubs (Ghayyem, 2017). With the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), a significant migration of people from war-affected areas, particularly Abadan and Khorramshahr, led to a sharp increase in the city's population, reaching 14,431 by 1980. This rapid growth, corresponding to a 13.5% increase, resulted in unplanned and uneven residential development. Between 1980 and 1991, Bandar Imam Khomeini experienced another wave of informal settlement expansion. Large parts of the city developed without adherence to urban planning standards or technical regulations, producing irregular streets, unconventional dead-ends, and poorly designed intersections (Fig. 3). During this period, several residential neighborhoods emerged without formal planning, including Sadoughi, Sabbaghan (Camp B), Moghadad, Dastgheib, Jorf al-Melh, and Nizar (Bani-Saeed, 2011). In 1991, the establishment of a special economic zone near the city triggered a new wave of migration, attracting workers and skilled laborers from different regions. Within five years, the population surged to 55,936. This influx, combined with the arrival of economically disadvantaged migrants from nearby and distant cities, once again led to the uncontrolled growth of informal settlements (Bani-Saeed, 2011).

• Functional and Operational Transformations

The functional and operational changes in Bandar Imam Khomeini can be analyzed at two levels: formal and informal. In the formal sector, the establishment of the Special Economic Zone and the expansion of petrochemical industries have served as key drivers of the city's economy. By attracting significant investments and

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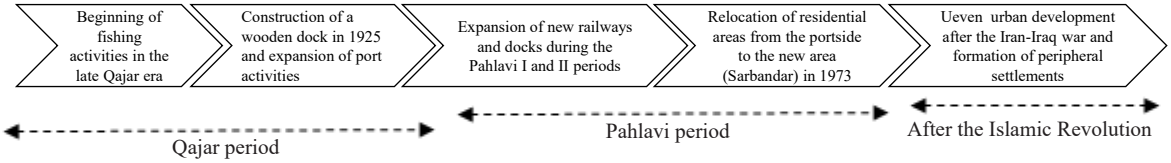


Fig. 3. Physical transformations and urban development of Bandar Imam Khomeini. Source: Authors.

establishing industrial infrastructure, these industries have reinforced Bandar Imam Khomeini's position within the national economic network and played a critical role in the supply chain and export of petrochemical products. However, employment opportunities in these sectors have largely been concentrated in specialized and technical roles, with limited capacity to absorb unskilled labor, who represent a substantial portion of rural migrant workers seeking jobs (Sabokro et al., 2024). Consequently, alongside the growth of formal industries, the informal economy has expanded, drawing large segments of the population those excluded from the formal urban economy into informal service jobs and street vending. This trend, closely linked to extensive migration and uneven urban development, has contributed to economic and social tensions in the city (Molaei & Farjian, 2023).

The lack of coordination within the city's economic structure has further fueled informal employment, particularly street vending a phenomenon reflecting both the social and economic disparities in Bandar Imam Khomeini and the impact of large-scale migration, especially after the Iran-Iraq war. The forced displacement of residents from war-affected cities such as Abadan and Khorramshahr, coupled with the city's limited capacity to integrate these populations, led to the growth of peripheral settlements and the proliferation of informal activities like street vending. Many street vendors in these areas are unskilled, married, and financially responsible, and some particularly women are migrants from Shadegan. The high proportion of youth aged 19 to 30 in these jobs highlights the urban economy's inability to provide adequate employment, pushing many toward informal work, especially street vending (Bani-Saeed, 2011).

While municipal authorities often view street vending as a challenge to urban order, residents mainly migrants living in peripheral areas see it as a vital source of income and an integral part of the city's economic and social life (Interviewee Nos. 5, 6, 10, 22). In response, urban management has implemented various measures over the past decades to regulate street vending. These initiatives include the establishment of a dedicated market, Sadooghi Market, allocation of kiosks to street vendors throughout the city, and construction of small bazaars such as Kish and Kuwait Bazaars (Bani-Saeed, 2011). Nevertheless, ongoing labor migration from nearby and distant cities, particularly Shadegan, combined with the expansion of the challenge for urban governance. The presence of street vendors, often using trucks to distribute vegetables, fruits, and other produce along the main axis adjacent to Sadooghi Market, remains highly visible (Fig. 4).

• Socio-Identity Dimensions

Bandar Imam Khomeini lacks a cohesive urban identity due to its extensive cultural and regional diversity, as well as economic and social disparities resulting from industrial and port development. In other words, the relationships among the city's residents are not based on inherent social cohesion and trust. Instead, they are largely shaped by cultural conflicts, social differences, and income inequalities, leading to minimal emotional attachment. This has weakened residents' sense of belonging, reduced social cohesion, and hindered the formation of a unified collective identity. In fact, industrial and economic development in Bandar Imam Khomeini, rather than generating collective welfare, comfort, or broad-based economic benefits, has deepened social inequalities. Today, many residents perceive the city, much like its early days, as a temporary settlement appended to industrial activity, with little benefit derived from ongoing economic growth (Interviewees Nos. 1, 2, 4, 6, 9, 13, 16, 17, 18, 22). Consequently, many residents particularly migrants and low-income inhabitants of peripheral neighborhoods such as Sabaghan Town (Camp B) or Sadooghi Town, the third most populous district of Bandar Imam Khomeini (Mandan Consulting Engineers, 2015) believe they have no stake in the city's industrial and economic activities and feel explicitly excluded from the urban economic cycle. This sense of exclusion, combined with infrastructural deprivation, poverty, unemployment, and social isolation, has contributed to the emergence of high-crime areas and an increase in theft, addiction, and other social problems within Bandar Imam Khomeini (Interviewees Nos. 3, 6, 7, 12, 22).


Fig. 4. Street vending along Shahid Sadooghi axis. Photo: Somayeh Sabouri, 2025.

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It can therefore be argued that development in Bandar Imam Khomeini has been accompanied by a form of conflict and duality, with stark disparities between wealth and poverty clearly visible across different parts of the city. In this context, Nakhoda Abbas Daryanavard1, a local poet of Bandar Imam Khomeini, describes the city's distressing conditions in his poetry (Ibn Rahman, 2007) as follows:

They ask me why I aged so quickly/ And why I grew old in Bandar Shapur.

Behold, your vile companions have perished/ Yet you remain, like a donkey stuck in the mud.

I am weary of this authority and my office/ Despairing of these affairs and my post at the port.

How long must I endure and suffer thus/ Surrounded by so many pests around me?

Ultimately, the socio-identity transformations in Bandar Imam Khomeini demonstrate that economic development without social justice not only fails to foster progress but also exacerbates social crises. Addressing this situation requires policies aimed at reducing inequality and strengthening urban identity.

Urban Landscape Reading of Bandar Imam Khomeini

• Territory

Musa Bay represents one of the most significant natural assets surrounding Bandar Imam Khomeini. Due to its geographical location, it provides access to open waters and supports the development of industrial, commercial, and maritime activities (Fig. 1). According to historical documents, in 1925, studies conducted by a team of engineers led by an American consultant named Poland identified Musa Bay, after surveying an area of one thousand square kilometers, as the most suitable location for a port in southern Khuzestan due to its direct and easy access to the Persian Gulf (Gerami, 1989, 107). Following the establishment of the port and the construction of the national railway, industries and areas associated with maritime and petrochemical activities gradually emerged along the Musa Bay coastline. These infrastructures eventually facilitated the creation of Bandar Imam Khomeini city, approximately 15 kilometers from the edge of the estuary. Today, despite industrial-economic development and the city's proximity to the western side of Musa Bay, Bandar Imam Khomeini visually and physically lacks a strong and meaningful connection to the sea and estuary. This critical asset, which could have served as a significant spatial element in the urban organization, has been neglected due to industrial expansion. Additionally, the railway line passing through the eastern areas of the city further shapes the concept of territoriality within the urban fabric. Currently, the city's eastern edge is defined by the railway transit route. Considering these features, it can be argued that the territorial element in Bandar Imam Khomeini is primarily formed by the railway network on one side and the port and petrochemical facilities on the other. This configuration has turned the city's edges into areas largely inaccessible to residents, serving only functional roles. As a result of this purely functional role, citizens are unable to perceive or establish meaningful connections with the city's territory (Interviewees Nos. 19, 21, 24, 26, 28, 29) (Fig. 5). Thus, the urban territory of Bandar Imam Khomeini is predominantly shaped by industrial, economic, and transit functions and lacks any substantial physical, identity-based, or symbolic dimension for its residents (Table 2).

• Urban Core

Analysis of aerial photographs of Bandar Imam Khomeini from 1965 reveals that the city's initial core developed between Kouy Abazar and Shahid Sadooghi Town. Today, the Abadan-Mahshahr Highway, which plays a vital role in the transit of goods and transportation of petrochemical products from Bandar Imam Khomeini, divides the city into eastern and western sections, creating both spatial and functional separation. Commercial and service activities are concentrated in the eastern section, particularly around the 700 Devices neighborhood, effectively establishing it as the city's commercial-service center. Key urban spaces in this area include Imam Khomeini Street, one of the city's busiest thoroughfares, along with the Block Market and Hosseiniyeh Ali Jafar, serving as an important religious and ceremonial center. In contrast, the Fish Market and Sadooghi Market in the western section, despite ongoing activity, have limited interaction with other parts of the city. The highway's presence has not only disrupted the functional and spatial cohesion of the city center but also hindered residents' perception of these spaces as part of a unified urban core (Interviewees Nos. 4, 5, 8, 11). As a result, Bandar Imam Khomeini lacks a central identity-forming space, and what is considered the "city center" is largely a fragmented geometric hub focused mainly on commercial and service activities. Residents report a significant shortage of collective and event-oriented



Fig. 5. Formation of the urban edge based on industrial, economic, and transit elements, highlighting the lack of meaningfulness in the urban landscape. Source: Authors.

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spaces in the center, which could otherwise foster strong connections with the main urban structure and meet social needs (Interviewees Nos. 13, 15, 16, 22, 23, 26, 30) (Fig. 6).

This physical division has also intensified social and economic disparities in the central urban area. The western 700 Devices neighborhood, shaped by company-planned development, is more physically advanced than eastern neighborhoods such as Shahid Sadooghi Town and Sabaghan (Camp B). This imbalance has widened the social-spatial gap, preventing the formation of a cohesive and meaningful city center for residents. Consequently, Bandar Imam Khomeini remains deprived of its primary identity-forming element within the urban structure: an integrated city center (Table 2).

• Urban Structure

Bandar Imam Khomeini's urban layout is generally organized as a regular grid, with streets that are mostly straight and lacking curves. This network appears to prioritize the transit of goods and industrial traffic over the daily needs of the city's roughly 80,000 residents. A key indicator of this imbalance is the large proportion of land devoted to streets: approximately 39% of the city's total area is occupied by the road network (Mandan Consulting Engineers, 2015). Compared with typical urban standards, this figure highlights an oversized, vehicle-focused street system that disrupts the distribution of urban services and results in functional imbalances. Municipal authorities report that a significant portion of the city's budget and administrative resources is currently dedicated to maintaining the road network (Fig. 7).

This situation largely stems from the network's design, which was oriented toward industrial and economic functions, mainly connecting industrial facilities and

Table 2. Examination of the Relationship Between Urban Spatial Elements and the Concept of Place. Source: Authors.

Elements of Spatial Organization	Dimensions of Place (Form, Function,) Meaning	Explanations
Territory	Form: Geographic and physical boundaries of the city, including road and rail networks, petrochemical industries, and the port	The territory of Bandar Imam Khomeini has been shaped primarily by industrial transport networks and lacks well-defined, identity-bearing physical boundaries.
	Function: Movement of goods and industrial-transit connectivity	The focus on economic and industrial functions, without considering the social-urban role of the territory, has limited its ability to create connections between the city and its surrounding environment.
	Meaning: Identity tied to economy and industry rather than social interactions	There is no meaningful connection between the city and the sea, even though Musa Bay's strategic location was a fundamental factor in the formation of Bandar Imam.
Center	Form: Fragmented, two-part structure with unclear geometry	The city center is fragmented due to the passage of the main highway connecting Mahshahr and Abadan, dividing it into eastern and western sections.
	Function: Functional separation caused by the highway, uneven service distribution, and concentration of commercial and service uses in the eastern part of the city	The center lacks social and cultural functions, preventing the formation of a unified and meaningful urban core.
	Meaning: Lack of identity in the city center due to the absence of social interactions	The scarcity of collective and event-oriented spaces has hindered the city center from serving as a hub of identity and social interaction.
Structure	Form: Grid-like street network with inadequate hierarchy and limited green spaces	Streets are designed without attention to human scale, are poorly aligned with residents' needs, and lack integration with neighborhoods, being oriented primarily toward vehicular movement.
	Function: Focus on vehicular movement rather than human connectivity	The urban structure is more compatible with transit and industrial functions than with the daily needs of citizens.
	Meaning: Absence of social and cognitive connections between city sections	The city's structure lacks elements that define coherence and identity, so residents do not experience a continuous or integrated movement system.
Neighborhood	Form: Lack of service centers; linear and uniform layout	Neighborhoods in Bandar Imam Khomeini resemble industrial settlements and lack diverse and dynamic spatial patterns that could foster social interaction.
	Function: Absence of collective spaces and social interactions	The spatial disorganization of neighborhoods prevents social flows and inter-neighborhood connections from forming.
	Meaning: No neighborhood identity, emergence of duality, and social stratification	Due to the one-dimensional nature of spaces and the absence of multiple defining elements, residents are unable to generate or perceive meanings related to their neighborhoods, and collective identity has not developed within these areas.

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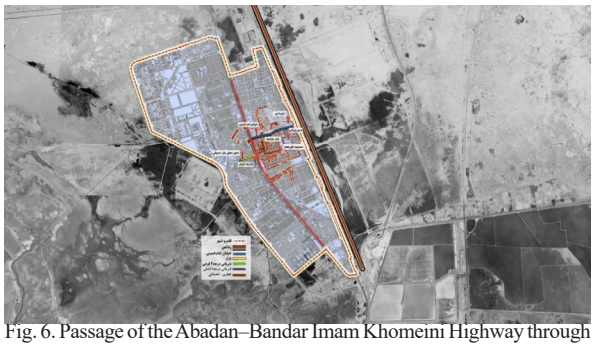


Fig. 6. Passage of the Abadan–Bandar Imam Khomeini Highway through the urban fabric and its impact on the city center. Source: Authors

companies to other cities. A striking example is the Mahshahr–Abadan Highway, which, at nearly 60 meters wide, slices through the city like a blade, dividing it into eastern and western sections and limiting connectivity between them. Most streets are excessively wide and designed to accommodate vehicle traffic, with little consideration for pedestrians. Moreover, along many primary streets, the relationship between building facades and the street network is poorly integrated. Most facades are solid, with minimal openings, doors, or windows. The streets also lack greenery and public spaces, creating visual and environmental discomfort. Overall, Bandar Imam Khomeini's urban fabric lacks a clear hierarchical street network, which reduces safety, generates defenseless urban spaces, and has effectively transformed the city into a car-oriented environment. The city's structure prioritizes vehicular circulation over meaningful connections between residents and their urban environment (Interviewees Nos. 7, 14, 16, 19) (Fig. 7) (Table 2).

• Neighborhoods or Small Units

Initially, Bandar Imam Khomeini comprised five main neighborhoods or camps: Turk Camp, Pattern-Weavers Camp, Kurdish Camp, Ali Jafar, and the Twenty Families Camp. These neighborhoods were developed as segregated units, reflecting social stratification and industrial-focused urban planning approaches of the past, functioning essentially as separate townships. Today, the city has expanded to include 23 neighborhoods or townships (Mandan Consulting Engineers, 2015). Physically and spatially, these neighborhoods are characterized by coarse and uniform divisions. Their layouts follow a repetitive, linear cell-like pattern rather than a socially interactive, community-oriented design. As a result, these neighborhoods lack central hubs, and social flows or interactive public spaces have not emerged within them (Fig. 8).

Moreover, these neighborhoods do not possess independent service centers. Residents are largely dependent on the city's central commercial-service hub to meet daily needs (Interviewees Nos. 2, 3, 6, 25, 28). However, the vehicle-oriented urban structure, combined with weak connectivity between infrastructure



Fig. 7. Grid-based structural system influenced by vehicle-oriented movement in the urban fabric of Bandar Imam Khomeini. Source: Authors.

and neighborhoods, makes access to these services challenging. This monotonous and mechanical layout not only fosters a sense of uniformity and lack of identity but also inhibits the formation of social and ethnic ties. The absence of diverse spatial and functional elements prevents residents from experiencing a sense of cohesion and community within their living environment (Interviewees Nos. 11, 12, 23, 24, 29). In other words, these neighborhoods lack the spatial and social conditions necessary for meaningful human interaction, limiting the development of collective activities, events, and communal identity. Furthermore, they continue to reflect the segregationist policies from the city's early planning stages, struggling to establish meaningful social connections with one another. Simultaneously, a clear socio-economic divide persists: some neighborhoods are inhabited by affluent residents, while others house low-income, underprivileged populations lacking sufficient resources (Table 2).



Fig. 8. Neighborhoods with a cell-repetition formation pattern and linear arrangement with no central identity-defining points in each neighborhood. Source: Authors.

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Conclusion

Analysis of Bandar Imam Khomeini's urban landscape, considering the objective and subjective components of the concept of urban landscape and based on the city's spatial organization elements (territory, center, structure, and neighborhood) within the conceptual model of place (form, function, and meaning), indicates that the three dimensions of place are only partially realized in the city's spatial organization. The findings, while confirming the hypothesis proposed earlier, show that the elements of Bandar Imam Khomeini's spatial organization which form the core framework of the urban landscape have developed in a flawed manner due to the predominance of an industrial-economic development perspective. These elements are incomplete both objectively (physical-functional) and subjectively (in terms of the meanings they generate), which negatively affects the perception of placeness among the city's residents. Regarding the physical dimension, the city's spatial elements—like many twentieth-century modern cities—have been shaped more by industrial, transport, and economic functions than by social and residential patterns. Musa Bay, the region's most significant natural resource, has played a key role in industrial siting and urban formation. However, this natural asset has not been reflected in the spatial organization of the city; instead, it has remained under industrial control, and its potential contribution to environmental and social development has been overlooked. Unlike traditional port cities that maintain an organic and meaningful connection with the sea, Bandar Imam Khomeini lacks both an identity-based and functional link to its coastline and surrounding ecosystem. Functionally, the city's spatial organization was shaped solely around industrial and economic needs. Rather than balancing human and environmental spaces, spatial relationships have been defined unilaterally to serve industry, leading to fragmentation and discontinuity across different urban areas. From a semantic perspective, the dominance of a purely physical view of the city and its spatial elements means that Bandar Imam Khomeini currently lacks meaningful elements that convey social significance and identity (Fig. 9).

Overall, Bandar Imam Khomeini is a city where industrial priorities dominate other aspects of urban life. Rather than achieving balanced, human-centered development and becoming a meaningful social place, the city reflects an imposed, machine-oriented order. Despite having geometric order in its physical structure, the city lacks the social and spatial organization necessary to establish meaningful connections among territory, center, structure, and neighborhoods. In this context, revising the urban development pattern and striving to balance industrial, residential, and social needs to promote place-based development is essential.

To enhance placeness in the city's spatial organization and reflect it in Bandar Imam Khomeini's urban landscape, the following recommendations are proposed, addressing the weaknesses of the city's spatial elements:

- Where feasible, allocate part of the industrial-economic edge near Musa Bay for public use, transforming it into a space for direct engagement with the waterway and reinforcing its physical and symbolic role in the urban landscape.
- Strengthen the city center by designing or redesigning urban spaces within the original city core, dedicating them to event-oriented, human-centered activities.
- Redesign streets according to a hierarchical movement system, emphasizing pedestrian-friendly spaces, integrating areas for planting greenery, and increasing per capita urban green space.
- Improve connectivity between the eastern and western parts of the city by providing movement infrastructure along the Mahshahr–Abadan Highway.
- Develop and upgrade urban infrastructure in less advantaged neighborhoods.
- Establish neighborhood centers to serve residents' social and service needs, while creating a network to connect these centers within the city's spatial organization.

Conflict of Interest

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

Footnotes

1. This courageous captain was the first naval commander of the Iranian Navy ship Mozaffari. He can also be regarded as the "Christopher Columbus of the port," as historical evidence indicates he discovered the Musa Bay maritime route leading to Bandar Imam Khomeini. His proposal led to the establishment of port facilities at the current location. According to his written memoirs, he spent many years at the port and assisted the newly founded city in taking its initial steps (Ra'in, 1971, 739).



Fig. 9. Lack of Public Spaces in Bandar Imam Khomeini. Photo: Somayeh Sabouri, 2025.

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