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Original Research Article

Facade, Display of Power
(Case Study: Facades of the Old Fabric of Qom City)*

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ABSTRACT

The developments in urban construction over the past few decades, especially in architectural materials and styles, have heightened the need to pay attention to the organization of urban facades. Facades, as important visual elements in the city's appearance, play a key role in citizens' perception of the urban environment. In the meantime, the distinction between "city image" as a physical body and "cityscape" as a mental and perceptual experience of citizens doubles the importance of paying attention to the quality of facade design. The city of Qom, with its historical and religious significance, has undergone extensive physical changes in recent years under the influence of development measures, which have had both positive and negative impacts on its appearance and, consequently, its landscape, especially in the historical context. Studies have shown that, despite their promotional goals, the existing guidelines for organizing urban facades in Qom have not been effective in practice. This inefficiency has led to confusion, a lack of identity, and disorder in the city's appearance. This research, using a qualitative strategy based on document analysis, previous studies, field observations, and an open-ended questionnaire, examines the status of the city's cityscapes and shows that the urban landscape results from the interaction of various political, economic, and social forces. The weakness of urban institutions in recognizing and managing these forces is considered the main factor in the current disorder. As a result, empowering urban management to recognize and correctly redistribute the effective forces will be a necessary condition for improving the quality of the cityscape and, subsequently, the landscape of Qom.

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Introduction

Lack of identity, disorder, and visual chaos are among the most significant criticisms of the cityscape today. The landscape of today's cities in Iran is also disordered, chaotic, and disorderly, and this is due to the heterogeneous and incongruous coexistence of body, activity, and space (events within the city) on a general scale and on smaller scales, due to the lack of coordination and proportion in the combination of elements (components and pillars) of buildings that have formed together and shaped the city landscape (Atarod & Kashi, 2018). The developments of the last few decades, whether in materials, in the diversity of styles, or in the speed of construction, have led to the need to pay attention to facades and the organization of urban bodies and facades (Khakzand et al., 2014). Urban facades are considered an important part of the city landscape. The word "image" emphasizes the city's visual aspects. In fact, the image refers to the object's external form, without reference to its meaning or interpretation, so that it can be described regardless of the observer's perception and presence, even in his absence. Therefore, the image refers to anything that is visually observable and perceptible. In fact, the image of the city is the same as the city's physics and body, a visual entity that includes all the elements that, when combined, create the external appearance of the city space, and is a different concept from the "city landscape". Meanwhile, the facades of buildings are also part of the body of the city and are among the first elements to come into view, becoming part of human consciousness as one walks through the city. The cityscape, however, arises from human experience in urban space, includes the events and memories of citizens, and is related to form and body. The cityscape is the knowledge of the city concept among citizens who have lived in that environment throughout history and have developed a semantic connection with the natural and artificial bodies of the environment. Since the urban landscape encompasses both the body and the quality of the city, the perception of the city is the interpretation of the urban landscape that arises from human experience within it. The urban landscape is the citizens' perception of the city, shaped by its symbols (which include urban views). Therefore, it can be said that the urban landscape is a "whole" whose objective and subjective aspects cannot be separated and are revealed through human experience and in the interaction between humans and the environment. Although the urban landscape emerged from the city's original semantic dimension, in a realistic perspective, it recognizes the city's functions and body as means of controlling and guiding the urban landscape. Therefore, facades are a means of improving the perception of the city, and improvements to the city's bodies and views can enhance the quality of the urban landscape by shaping citizens' perceptions and creating diverse experiences. Another importance of addressing the issue of facades in cities is that the discussion of facade construction in buildings and the construction of the urban body is an identity and cultural discussion (Zarif et al., 2022). Facades and urban walls are part of the city's body and play an important role in each city's identity; the existence of rules and regulations governing their creation should lead to a harmonious whole. The implementation of these rules should improve the city's image and, subsequently, its landscape. Therefore, paying attention to the principles of facade and urban wall design, along with adherence to rules that coordinate with local identity, can significantly improve the quality of the urban landscape and, subsequently, the cultural identity and visual experience of citizens.

The city of Qom, one of Iran's important historical and religious cities, centered on the shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma (PBUH), has changed over the years due to development initiatives. Naturally, these measures have led to changes (both positive and negative) in the city's image, including its facades. Reflection on the current state of the image of this city, especially its facades, as well as the opinions of experts, indicate that the facades of this city, especially in its historical context, which in fact constitutes the identity card of this city and plays a key role in the perception of the residents of this city, are not in a desirable condition. It seems that instructions such as the "Guidelines and Regulations for the Facade and Image of the City of Qom" and the "Guidelines for Organizing the Facades of the City of Qom," which were created to improve the image and landscape of the city of Qom, have not been effective in practice, despite their existential philosophy. In this regard, it seems that urban management, which should be responsible for shaping the city's image, has lacked the necessary authority. The dispersion of urban management actions has led to disorder, a lack of identity, and a chaotic image of the city (Figs. 1 and 2). This article aims to identify and analyze the factors affecting the formation of

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Fig. 1. The most important issues of the city of Qom, derived from an analysis of the content of news available in the media and the opinions of experts and managers of the city of Qom. Source: Authors.

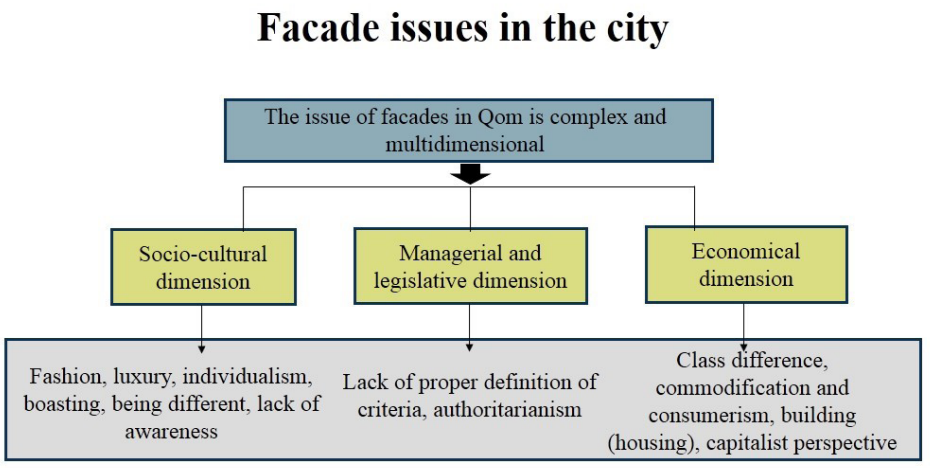

Fig. 2. It seems that the most important issues of the city of Qom exist in three dimensions: socio-cultural, managerial and legislative, and economic. Source: Authors.

disorder in the urban appearance of Qom, focusing on the facades and examining and explaining how the relationships and powers that govern them are represented based on relevant theoretical approaches, to answer these questions: What are the most important causes of disorder in the image of the city of Qom? What powers dominate the facades of the city of Qom? In this regard, this research is based on the assumption that a kind of powerlessness prevails in the management of the city of Qom's facades, which has naturally also affected the city's landscape. The lack of power and the dispersion of actions have led to the ineffectiveness of regulations and, as a result, to disorder, a lack of identity, and chaos in the city of Qom.

Research Background

This article has focused on two groups of studies. The first group of studies has addressed facades and their relationship to the cityscape. For example, Atarod and Kashi, in an article, examined the constituent elements of urban facades and walls and showed that ignoring the harmony and proportion between the physical components of buildings has caused visual confusion in the image of Iranian cities. They have emphasized that facade design should be done with respect for the context and a clear understanding of the visual elements to improve the urban landscape (Atarod & Kashi, 2018). Ghiabi (2022) states in an article titled "The Role of Facades and Walls in the Urban Landscape with an Emphasis on Environmental Aesthetics" that the rapid growth of urbanization and the use of disparate solutions in urban design have led to ugliness and confusion in the landscape of cities. He divided the aesthetic indicators of facades into two categories: objective (e.g., skyline, height control, facade background) and subjective (e.g., continuity, proportion, color, order), and highlighted their roles in enhancing

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the urban landscape. Martinelli (2019) believes that the facade is not simply a two-dimensional surface but a habitable space that forms the wall between two worlds - private/public, architecture/city. The facade becomes a space that enables connection with the building's external or internal environment through real presence and interaction. This view highlights the social and space-making aspects of the facade and acknowledges that it can be a tool for urban interactions and the experience of communal life at the scale of the building and the city. Alishah et al. (2016) examined the role of facades in the urban landscape. They showed that building facades, more than just a covering for the structure, play an important role in conveying urban identity messages and strengthening people's psychological connection with the environment. They believe that properly designed facades can maintain the city's visual harmony and foster a sense of peace and belonging among citizens.

The second group is research examining the relationship between facades and power in the city. In this context, the article "Investigation and Analysis of Elements of Urban Power in Historical and Contemporary Periods" (Rahimi, 2018) analyzes how political power shapes the structure and form of urban spaces across different periods of Iranian history. In this research, the city is examined as a mirror of political, economic, social, and cultural changes in different societies. Heffernan (2024) analyzes how urban design and architecture are used as tools of power in three cities: Paris, Algiers, and Vienna, and introduces urban facades as one of the key components in this context. He argues that urban facades not only have aesthetic aspects but also act as tools for exercising power and social control. In this article, urban facades are introduced as "material shells" that can shape and limit human behavior. Finally, he emphasizes that urban design and urban facades are not only representations of a city's cultural and historical identity, but also tools for exercising power and social control. Therefore, analyzing urban facades can contribute to a better understanding of power structures and social relations in cities. Jones (2011) believes that architecture is not simply an aesthetic activity, but also an arena through which political power and cultural identity are represented. Indeed, architecture is a key field for entering into the discussion of the construction and consolidation of communal identity. He believes that governments or powerful institutions often commission architectural projects; these projects are not only intended to serve as places for official activity but also to reflect political-economic changes and signal a society's adherence to certain values and identities. Using Bourdieu's theoretical framework, he sees architecture as an arena for symbolic struggle and social reproduction. In this view, architecture is a tool for legitimizing power relations and recreating social order. Facades, as part of architectural form, are also a medium of power and identity. Rodger (2023) specifically addresses the role of urban facades in the construction of communal memory in Victorian cities. The author examines how simple decorations on residential facades, such as emblems, dates, house names, and symbolic images, act as "symbolic clues" in urban space. These small details help to shape place identity, memorability, and a sense of belonging. For example, elements such as family crests or identity symbols on facades transmit concepts of power and cultural heritage—these small elements are carriers of cultural and symbolic capital. Alcaraz (2024) examines how the government (in non-democratic systems) uses architecture and facades as tools to consolidate power. The author shows that in the construction of government housing, the combination of materials with symbolic images, such as Chávez's face on city walls, has led to the integration of material and symbolic control. This combination emphasizes that the facade can carry ideology in addition to its functional role and reinforce power at the urban level. Pula & Perna (2023) argue that architecture is a "metaphor," a visual translation of political will in urban space. Facades are markers of political ideology through form, style, and external finishes. Facades are therefore considered one of the tools for creating a visual ideological message. Benkovičová (2024) theoretically examines how architecture—of which facades are a part—is connected to four social power networks (i.e., ideological, economic, political, and military). She proposes four ways to understand the facade of power, including: how architecture is used to gain power; how power is displayed; the impact of the built environment on controlling individuals' behavior or even their thoughts; and facades as indicators of power change. She also states that features such

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as volume, decoration, demarcation, location, and monumentality are important signs of power.

Research Methodology

This article is applied research in terms of its purpose, and its strategy is qualitative. The research method is generally logical reasoning. The data collection techniques in this research include three stages: the first stage is the use of documents and library studies. In this stage, sources on urban facades, the relationships between facades and the urban landscape, and between facades and power in cities were reviewed, and theoretical foundations were developed around these concepts. In this stage, considering the scope of the research, which is the city of Qom, upstream documents of the city of Qom, including two documents that were specifically related to facades, including the "Instructions for Organizing the Facades of the City of Qom" and the "Instructions and Criteria for the Urban Facade and Image of City of Qom," were reviewed. The findings related to this section were collected and analyzed using the logical reasoning method. The second stage consisted of field observations conducted with researchers present in the city of Qom (specifically in the old area and around the shrine of Qom), along with photographing the facades. The information obtained from this stage was used to adapt to the previous stage. The analysis of the findings in this section also relied on matching the research literature's criteria with the authors' observations and reasoning. The third stage of data collection involved administering an open-ended questionnaire to two groups. The first group included professors of architecture, landscape architecture, and urban planning from various universities in the country, including Tehran, Imam Khomeini International University, Shiraz Art University, and Bu-Ali Sina University of Hamadan and Mazandaran. The second group of interviews was conducted with several urban managers, university professors in Qom, and active architects in Qom, who were expected to have more information about facade issues in Qom and to be more involved in related issues. The questions were designed in an open-ended manner so that opinions could be fully expressed and factors could be identified in an interpretative-exploratory manner. The third stage of data collection was conducted to connect theoretical foundations with existing realities. The sampling method at this stage was purposive, selecting participants with greater expertise and experience in this field. Finally, the findings from these three sections were analyzed, summarized, and concluded using logical reasoning.

Research Literature

• Landscape or image? examining the substantive difference between landscape and image

In the field of urban design, the term landscape is more commonly used as "cityscape" and "city image." Therefore, experts sometimes distinguish these terms from each other and, based on Kevin Lynch, who first added this concept to the specialized literature of urban design in his book "The Image of the City" in the second half of the twentieth century, it was translated into Persian as "city image" and places special emphasis on the visual aspects of the landscape. The word "image" has been used in certain cultures to mean face, appearance, sign, and form. Image refers to the appearance of an object without reference to its meaning or interpretation so that it can be described regardless of the observer's perception and presence, and even in his absence (Kasravi & Hashemizadegan, 2023). Therefore, an image refers to anything that is visually observable and perceptible; that is, all the visual information the observer receives from the space. In fact, the city's image is the same as its physics and appearance, and includes all the elements that, when combined, create the city's spatial image; it is a different concept from the cityscape (ibid.). The cityscape, however, arises from human experience in urban space, includes the events and memories of citizens, and is related to form and body. Since the cityscape encompasses the city's body and quality, it can be argued that the perception of the city is equivalent to the interpretation of the urban landscape (Atashinbar, 2009). The cityscape is the perception of city residents, as reflected in its symbols (Mansouri, 2010). In fact, the city view, as a type of view that concerns the city and urban life, seeks to establish criteria for improving the quality and desirability of cities and for people to understand them correctly. Also, this approach, which considers culture and context and maintains historical continuity, gives the city an identity and keeps it connected to its history (Zandieh &

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Goodarzian, 2014). Therefore, the city landscape is our perception of the city and an "objective-subjective" phenomenon revealed through human experience and interaction with the environment. Therefore, humans and their perceptions of the city play a decisive role in understanding the urban landscape, and neither is meaningful without the other. Although the cityscape emerged from the city's semantic dimension, from a realistic perspective, it recognizes the city's functions and body as means of controlling and guiding the cityscape (Mansouri, 2010). Therefore, the landscape refers to the city's physical aspects and can be described independently of the observer's presence. It has an objective nature and results from the combination of the city's physical elements. The city landscape, however, is the result of human subjective and perceptual experience of the urban environment. It includes the perceptions, memories, symbols, and meanings that citizens receive from the city. The cityscape is a combination of form, function, and meaning that is shaped in the observer's mind. It is subjective and interpretive, arising from human interaction with the urban environment. In other words, the city image is "what is seen," and the cityscape is "what is perceived." The focus of this article is on the city image and its role in the cityscape.

• The role and importance of facades and urban walls in the cityscape

Facades are the dominant part of city buildings and, in the initial view of citizens, play a pivotal role in conveying urban messages. Facades and walls, as the boundary between the inside and outside of buildings, are the main focus of evaluation by passersby and residents of public spaces in cities and have a significant impact on citizens' mental image (Esmaili et al., 2020). Facades (as part of the city's image) are the dominant face of the city's body. These urban bodies are considered among the most effective factors shaping the quality of urban spaces. The juxtaposition of building facades forms the image of the city, and improvements to the bodies of buildings can enhance the quality of the cityscape (Khakzand et al., 2014). Facades and urban walls are actually the connection point between architecture and the city. When these elements are visually harmonious with the environment and aesthetic values, they significantly enhance the urban landscape (Ghiabi, 2022). Facades are among the most effective elements shaping the city's visual perception and, given their greater social visual importance, should be considered among the main components of urban bodies. A facade that can present a suitable image of itself can also play a social role and promote urban identity. The facade and urban appearance contain the first messages from the perspective of citizens. Therefore, since the city landscape is the perception of citizens of the city through its symbols, facades, as the first components of the city that are placed in front of the eyes of citizens, play an important role in the city landscape.

- Criteria affecting the quality of the facade on the cityscape based on the goals of the cityscape

A) Physical components (visual, aesthetic): This category is related to the objective and observable characteristics of the facade. These components are examined and measured in various studies with several criteria. First, proportions and scale, which are related to the coordination of the dimensions of the building with human dimensions and the scale of the surrounding fabric; the ratio of height to street width, and the rhythm of repetition of elements. Rhythm and repetition are the second criterion, which concerns the regular or varied arrangement of openings, columns, balconies, and other details in the urban body (Cullen, 1961). Materials and texture refer to the selection of materials based on durability, harmony with the historical fabric, and visual legibility (Lynch, 1960). Color, visual harmony, and coherence refer to the use of a color palette appropriate to the local climate and culture, avoiding disturbing contrasts (Porta & Rene, 2019). Architectural elements and details address the use of active facades, shading, glazing, stucco, and vernacular elements, which are considered physical components of the facade (Trancik, 1986). In general, visual coherence, diversity, visual connection to public spaces, and the presence of active doors and windows (such as shops and cafes) affect the quality of facades.

B) Activity, functional, and behavioral components: Facades are not just a beautiful shell, but also play an important role in the functioning of space and urban interactions. Interaction with public space is one of the functions of the facade (Gehl, 2010; Martinelli, 2019). The transparency and visual permeability of the facade at street level are particularly important for inviting passers-by. Focusing on the social aspect of the facade,

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Martinelli (2019) considers the facade not simply a two-dimensional surface but also a habitable space that forms the wall between two worlds - private/public, architecture/city - and believes that the facade enables the experience of communication with the external or internal environment of the building through real presence and interaction. Jacobs (1961), referring to the principle of "eyes on the street", believes that the design of the facade should be such that urban spaces are bright and can be monitored, which pays attention to safety and security. Some researchers have also focused on facade sustainability, particularly in relation to climatic characteristics (Yeang, 2006). The ability to change use and adapt the facade to future needs without destroying the overall identity is another issue some researchers have mentioned, indicating flexibility and adaptability to conditions (Dovey, 2016). Facades should not create visual conflicts. Active and dynamic walls enhance the security and attractiveness of the urban environment, improving citizens' quality of life.

C) Semantic components (identity, cultural, historical): This group of components is related to values, memories, and a sense of place. Researchers such as Relph (1976) believe that local identity and culture, in the sense of reflecting local history, culture, and building traditions, are of particular importance in facades. Therefore, non-imitativeness is important in facades. Familiarity and repetition of familiar landscapes in urban public spaces eliminate the sense of alienation and anxiety, help people navigate, and prevent possible loss and the fear that comes with it. In fact, familiarity means being understandable to humans. Facades can serve as familiar elements in the city and help people better read it. Readability basically refers to the degree of understanding of a space and its clarity, and to whether the space in question has a coherent pattern. When a space is legible, it contributes to a sense of comfort and security; conversely, when it becomes confusing, security is reduced. Urban facades and walls must be understandable, coherent, and recognizable to create a desirable perceptual experience for citizens. The ability of a facade to help identify a place and navigate the city is particularly important (Lynch, 1960). Facades, with their landmark function in the city, play an important role in this legibility and can create a sense of belonging. The sense of belonging and the creation of ownership and attachment among residents to the urban space are important factors in evaluating facades (Carmona et al., 2021).

The issue of "power" in the city and its relationship with urban landscapes

Cities are not simply administrative or economic units; they are also the main arena of struggle and exercise of power between governments, capitalists, and people (Parker, 2003). Power is an internal or capacity concept, meaning the ability to do something (Nezhadbahram & Jalili, 2020). Power means influencing the behavior or conditions of others, and can be legitimate or illegitimate, just or unjust. This concept differs from domination, authority, and force. Domination involves a kind of sovereignty and control. A stable and institutionalized relationship of power in which one party has continuous control over another. Max Weber believes that domination means "the possibility of a group of people obeying a certain order". Authority refers to the normative sphere and implies consent and freedom. In fact, it is a form of power that has gained legitimacy. Force is a part of power, but it is not the same as power; rather, it is the direct use of physical coercion or threat. So, in short, power is the ability to act, influence others, and control resources; authority is power that is legitimate and accepted; domination is the enduring relationship of obedience and submission; and force is the direct use of force to impose a will. Foucault sees "power" as both a negative concept, grounded in the use of force, and a positive, empowering one. A concept that produces knowledge and believes that knowledge and power are mutually inclusive (Nezhadbahram & Jalili, 2020). Foucault also reminds us that power is never about a simple dichotomy between those who dominate and those who are dominated; rather, power is internalized and transmitted through material and discursive practices that construct normative categories of belonging (such as race and gender). Power is transmitted not only structurally, but also through human actors. From this perspective, people do not act as passive consumers and are not just regulated transmitters of power (Majidi & Hashemizadegan, 2025). Accordingly, it can be said that urban landscapes are not simply "expressions of values, conventions, customs, and practices of a state," but rather the values of the dominant group(s) in

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each country (ibid.). Based on this concept, urban facades, as previously stated, are an important part of the urban landscape and are no exception. The relationship between urban facades and power in cities is an important topic in urban planning studies, urban sociology, and critical geography. Because the facade is not only a physical element for the protection and beauty of a building, but also a meaningful layer in the representation of power, identity, and social relations in urban spaces, from this perspective, the relationship between facade and power can be examined in several general categories: facade as a tool for representing power, facade and cultural hegemony, and facade and symbolic capital.

- Facade as a tool for representing power

In his theory of power, especially in his 1970s works, Foucault provides a conceptual framework for analyzing urban space. Although Foucault himself did not directly write "urban theory," his ideas about power, space, and the body have been widely used in urban studies, critical geography, and architectural theory. He sees architecture and space as a means for exercising and representing power. Michel Foucault also notes that power is not only at the level of the state but also in everyday micro-relationships. Therefore, the facades of residential units can also serve as "social surveillance" and as a means of controlling actions. Lefebvre believes that facades can be read as "texts." Facades carry signs that represent power. At this level, facades are a medium for "expressing power"; Both political and economic power. In Lefebvre's (1991) theories on the "production of space," space is a social product shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces. Landmark facades (such as government buildings, towers, or large shopping malls) effectively become tangible symbols of power in the city. Facades, with their specific forms and materials, are also tools for demonstrating the authority of governments or economic institutions. For example, in late capitalist cities, the use of glass and steel in towers not only has a structural function, but also demonstrates the "transparency of power" or "the authority of capital" (Harvey, 2008). Space is always a field of opposing forces. Facades are, in this regard, "instruments of stabilization" of the dominant order, because they design the appearance of the city in a way that makes the legitimacy of power tangible (Lefebvre, 1991).

- Facade and cultural hegemony

Semiotic studies in architecture and urban planning show that facades and urban structures carry a semantic load beyond mere utility; they carry ideological, cultural, and political meanings. In many cases, urban spaces reflect the dominant discourse. For example, during the Pahlavi era in Iran, the use of neoclassical and modern architecture in government facades was a sign of modernization and alignment with the West (Khosravi, 2010). Foucault (1977) also shows how the urban body can be a tool for control with the concept of "surveillance". Facades designed in social housing projects or public squares can affect not only the aesthetics but also the behavioral patterns of residents and passersby. Sharon Zukin (1991) argues in her book "Landscape of Power" that urban structures and facades can carry political messages and symbols of power; examples include monuments, government centers, and even cities themselves, which serve to consolidate hegemony or produce communal identity. Facades narrate communal identities. States often use facades as tools of "nation-building" by reflecting historical, traditional, or modern symbols in the urban landscape. This is where Bourdieu's (1984) discussion of "cultural hegemony" makes sense: facades consolidate class differences and social tastes, becoming a kind of cultural capital.

- Facade and symbolic capital

The views of people such as Manuel Castells and David Harvey consider the city to be a reflection of relations of production and of capitalism, and a means of reproducing social inequality (Parker, 2003). Bourdieu (1984) also proposes the concept of "symbolic capital". In cities, facades, as part of the urban landscape, as symbolic capital, enable "social and class distinction". For example, luxury facades in uptown areas are often constructed with expensive materials and complex designs to demonstrate socio-economic superiority. These facades are a kind of "investment in image" that is directly related to economic power and social status. From Roland Barthes' perspective, facades create "myths"; that is, they naturalize socio-political values. For example, glass-and-metal towers in metropolises are introduced as symbols of technological rationality and capitalist superiority. In Harvey's view (2008), facades are also part of the process of "commodification of space." In fact, at this level, facades become a tool for marketing and competition. Because buildings are built not only for use, but also for display and

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sale. For example, luxury facades in upscale areas are an example of "capital power": land value and real estate investment are reinforced by flashy facades.

Finally, to summarize this section, it can be said that urban facades are symbolic texts of power that operate on several levels (political, economic, cultural, and social). From this perspective, the city is not simply a physical body, but also a battlefield of meanings, and facades are the surfaces on which this battle is clearly visible.

• Case Study: Qom City

The urban landscape of Qom has undergone major changes over the past few decades. These developments have been due to rapid population growth, increased migration, infrastructure development, and cultural changes. In the past, the city's landscape was more influenced by the historical and religious context, but over time, the inconsistency between new architecture and the traditional context has increased. This inconsistency has weakened the city's visual identity and created chaos in its landscape. The city of Qom, with a history of more than 7,000 years, has long been a center of human gatherings. The city's historical context includes neighborhoods with traditional architecture, narrow alleys, central squares, and religious spaces. Over time, especially in the contemporary era, urban development has occurred horizontally and in a scattered manner, leading to major changes in the city's physical structure. These developments have included the expansion of residential, commercial, and administrative areas, increased building heights, and changes in land use. The facades of Qom have also undergone major changes in recent decades, often leading to a lack of harmony with the city's historical context and religious identity. To address these challenges, criteria and guidelines for facade and wall design have been developed to preserve the city's visual identity. The areas studied in this study include the historical context and the area around the shrine of Qom (including Shah Hamzeh, Chaleh Lu'lu, Chaharmardan, and Eram).

Findings and Discussion

• Theoretical assessment

- Upstream urban documents

Two upstream documents, including the "Guidelines for Organizing Qom City facades," compiled in 2014 by the Qom Municipality, and the "Guidelines and Criteria for Qom City Image and Landscape," compiled in 2019 by the Qom Municipality, are the main documents regarding Qom's city facades. The first document was created to improve the quality of Qom's urban images and landscape, and focuses more on the substantive dimension of facades. The second document, which outlines the criteria and regulations for improving the city's image and landscape, focuses more on how to carry out the work and therefore on the procedural dimension of facades. An examination of the laws governing facades in these documents, across two substantive and content dimensions and a procedural and executive dimension, shows that, in terms of substance, the existing criteria and clauses indicate the absence of a specific theoretical base in this area. This means that there is no correct definition or recognition of the issue of facades in these documents. The general summary of the rules and clauses shows the lack of correct problem identification. On the other hand, this document lacks specific visions and goals. But the process is stated almost clearly. The procedural dimension of these rules can be examined from three aspects: "design", "evaluation and approval", and "implementation and after implementation". In the design section, the evaluation of the rules and clauses indicates their interpretability. For example, in the clauses: "The design and implementation of the facade of buildings must be in a way that is proportionate and in harmony with the urban landscape and its components, including the street, etc." or: "Side facades overlooking the main thoroughfare must be framed and implemented with an appropriate design," words such as proportional or harmonious can be interpreted personally. These rules are not transparent and are even mandatory in some cases. For example, in the clause "Windows should preferably be harmonious and in proportion to the lines of the neighboring facades, and are recommended to be rectangular or square. The use of forms that are out of proportion or inconsistent with authentic Iranian architecture is prohibited. The use of Islamic forms and Iranian motifs for fences and windows is recommended." Words such as 'proportion' are not transparent and are open to interpretation, and things such as emphasizing Islamic forms or square and rectangular shapes are mandatory. On the other hand, no specific patterns have been provided for the criteria. In the evaluation and approval section, three guidance and control

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processes, the workflow process, and the facade committees, can be examined, which seem to be weak in the guidance and control section of these criteria, but have a more appropriate process in the other two sections. In the implementation and post-implementation sections, the monitoring, appeal, post-implementation supervision, and financial incentive processes are practically non-existent, and the feasibility of the criteria appears very weak based on the results. Fig. 3 briefly presents the evaluation of the dimensions of the facade-guiding rules in the city of Qom.

Finally, based on the study of the facade regulations in the city of Qom, seven problems can be identified in the theoretical evaluation of these regulations. First, these regulations lack a specific theoretical and philosophical basis, and second, their goals are not clearly defined. Goals are indeed mentioned at the beginning of these documents, but they are very general. Third, there is no transparency: first, in the content, and second, in the process. Fourth, in many cases, the regulations have been limited to generalizations and have not gone into details. Fifth, in some cases, the clauses are mandatory and have deprived the architect and designer of the possibility of creativity and innovation. Sixth, no model has been provided for the designs. Seventh, many clauses are generalizable, meaning they can be implemented in any other city and are not specific to Qom, given its cultural, historical, social, and climatic characteristics. Therefore, the most important flaw in these documents appears to be the "methodology" (Fig. 4).

• Practical (executive) evaluation

In this section, to evaluate the city of Qom's facades during field monitoring and observation, views were assessed using components and criteria grounded in existing theoretical foundations. Due to the large number of cases to be examined and the limitations of the article, only a few cases for each criterion have been examined and evaluated (Table 1).

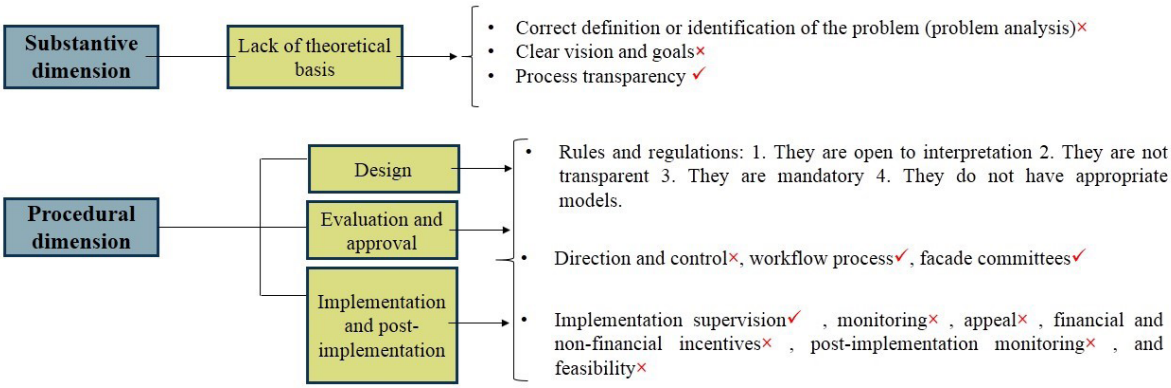

Fig. 3. Evaluation of the guiding rules of the facade in the city of Qom. Source: Authors.

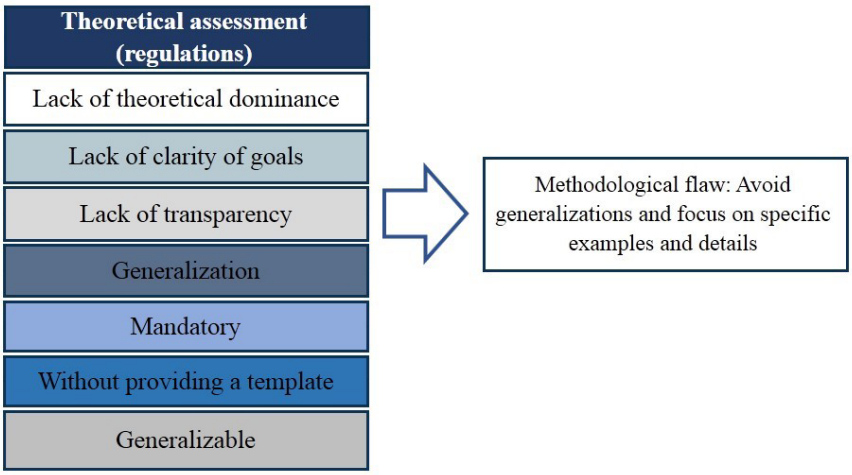

Fig. 4. Evaluation and criticism of existing regulations regarding facades in the city of Qom. Source: Authors.

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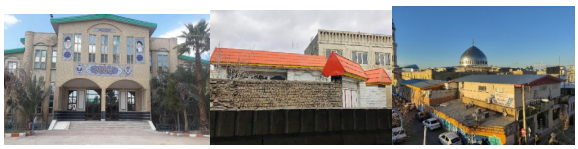
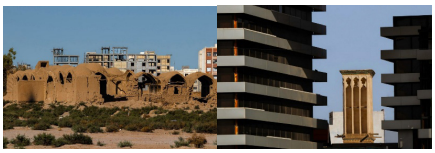
Table 1. Study of physical, activity, and semantic dimensions in the city of Qom. Source: Authors.

Row	Dimension	Criteria	Photo/Evaluation
1	Physical (visual, aesthetic)	Materials and textures	
			Poor ■Average□Good□Excellent□
			Using materials that are not appropriate for the fabric and background, and the abundance and multiplicity of available materials
		Visual harmony and unity	
			Poor ■Average□Good□Excellent□
			Lack of visual harmony and unity in materials, colors, and architectural style
		Proportion and scale	
			Poor□Average Good□Excellent□
			In some cases, proportions are proportionate to the human scale and the surrounding context; in others, they are not.
2	Activity, function, and behavior	Climate	
			Poor Average□Good□Excellent□
			The use of sloping roofs and inappropriate colors and materials, in some examples, indicates a lack of attention to the climate.
		Neighborhoods	
			Poor Average□Good□Excellent□
			Inappropriate neighborhoods on some streets have created a mix of incoherent functions.
3	Semantic components (identity, cultural, historical)	Legibility	
			Poor Average□Good□Excellent□
		Local identity and culture	
			Poor Average□Good□Excellent□
			The new facades in the old fabric of Qom have been designed and built without regard for Qom's cultural and local identity. The facades are uniform, and diversity has been eliminated.

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In general, from an executive and practical point of view, the facades of Qom can be assessed as incoherent and disproportionate, and in some cases even contradictory to the approved facade regulations. It seems that, despite the existence of specific design and implementation criteria, the facades did not follow them; as a result, these criteria have not been very successful in practice. According to the theoretical assessment discussed in the previous section, the connection between the theoretical and practical parts is assessed as weak in terms of realizability. Some problems are observed in the evaluation of the facades: the design does not follow a specific process, and the findings are evaluated in different directions, which could be due to the lack of a philosophical base and specific goals in the theoretical part. A lot of dispersion is observed in the facades. This dispersion does not mean plurality, but rather chaos. The feasibility of the criteria is also assessed as weak, as some problems identified in the criteria have not been successfully addressed. Finally, it seems the guidance for the facades was applied randomly and unmanaged, indicating a lack of mastery of urban management in their implementation. Therefore, in general, the facades of the city of Qom in its old context are evaluated as being visually and perceptually chaotic and disorderly (Fig. 5).

In the second part of the field study, several open-ended questionnaires were sent to two groups: the first, experts in architecture, urban planning, and landscape architecture; and the second, officials, urban management professionals, and university professors in Qom. The expert questionnaire was developed to identify nationwide issues and problems with facades and to examine the relationship between the concept of power and facades. The questionnaires were divided into two groups, and each included four main sections. The number of questionnaires was based on theoretical saturation: 12 for experts and 14 for officials, urban managers, and university professors in Qom. The questionnaires were analyzed using content analysis. The content analysis method is a basic qualitative analysis method used to examine complex, detailed concepts. This method focuses on identifying and explaining explicit and implicit ideas. Then, the main theme codes are used for a deeper analysis of the data. The nature of this analysis is interpretive. In this method, data are coded in three stages: open, axial, and selective. The experts' questionnaires were analyzed and coded at three levels. The coding results are shown in Table 2.

Finally, the themes of the experts' questionnaire were identified in the following six themes:

Theme 1: "Facade as a vehicle of power": Urban facades carry political, economic, and cultural discourses, from government buildings to private buildings.

Theme 2: "Confusion as a crisis of governance and culture": The responses show that the chaos of facades is not simply a matter of aesthetics, but rather the product of the intersection of three crises: weak urban governance, the shift of public culture towards consumerism and luxury, and the lack of professional ethics. This perspective takes the chaos to a larger level than "facade design"; namely, the issue of "urban and cultural policymaking".

Theme 3: "Multiplicity of power and the conflict of symbols": Facades are the arena of conflict between diverse powers: the state and official

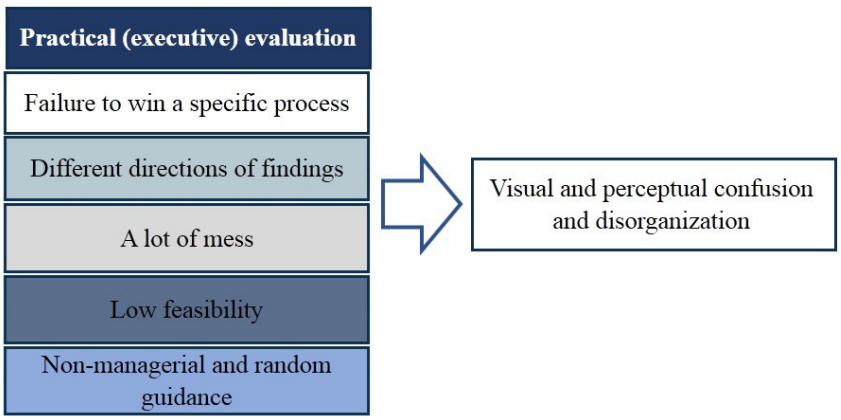

Fig. 5. Summary of the practical and operational evaluation of the facades. Source: Authors.

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Table 2. Coding of the experts' open-ended questionnaire in three stages: open, axial, and selective coding. Source: Authors.

Axial category	Open codes	Selected theme
Conflicting factors	Lack of rules, corruption, taste, fashion, and class imitation	Visual disturbance due to structural and cultural weakness
Power and facade	Political, economic, cultural/religious, specialized	The facade as a media and a reflection of power networks
Nature of the relationship	Symbolic, functional, combined	The predominance of the symbolic dimension over the functional
Consequences	Positive (cohesion, justice) / Negative (alienation, vulgarity, imposition of values)	Double-edged power: cohesion or identity crisis
Rules	Ineffectiveness of regulations, imposition, and the necessity of education and ethics	The necessity of revisiting the criteria and relying on culture and participation

ideology, capitalists and real estate developers, religious institutions, and even designers or global fashions. Each of these powers uses the facade to establish itself. As a result, the city has become a scene of a plurality of symbols; a plurality that often manifests itself without coordination or management and that, in turn, fuels chaos.

Theme 4: "The dominance of symbol over function": Most respondents consider the relationship between power and the facade to be symbolic. The facade has moved away from its past climatic and structural functions and has become a theatrical tool: a display of sovereign authority, individual wealth, or cultural fashion. This change has led to both "visual vulgarity" (Roman facades) and "formal and prescriptive representations" that limit freedom.

Theme 5: "The legitimacy of power": In evaluating the effects of power, two tendencies are seen:

1. Critical view: power = imposition, monotony, corruption, alienation.
2. Conditional view: power, if it is expert-oriented and ethical, can create coherence and justice.

This dichotomy shows that the main issue is "how power is exercised" and "the level of power exercised," not its very presence.

Theme 6: "Regulations as inadequate tools": Most respondents pointed out the ineffectiveness of facade regulations: either a factor of uniformity and reduction of beauty, or ineffective due to the lack of enforcement guarantees. They are only evaluated positively if they have a "facilitative" role and allow for controlled diversity. That is, regulations should change from "imposition" to "participatory governance."

Respondents generally believe that urban facades are not simply physical elements, but also a medium for representing power. This power in Iran today is more in the hands of economic forces (employers and capitalists) and political forces (government institutions), and is less guided by cultural or social forces. This has led facades to play a greater role in displaying individuality, wealth, and imposed ideologies than in strengthening communal identity. Visual chaos is not the result of diversity, but of the lack of comprehensive management, balanced criteria, specialized education, and public culture. Respondents emphasized that facades should serve as a medium for strengthening identity, shared aesthetics, and social cohesion, rather than as a tool for class competition and power projection. Ultimately, the current criteria were deemed ineffective and more prescriptive. The proposed solution is to move from formal control to education, promotion of professional ethics, and public participation in shaping facades. Next, the questionnaire on urban management and university professors in Qom was analyzed and coded at three levels. The coding results are shown in Table 3.

In response to the question: How do you evaluate the facades of Qom?

- Dominant assessment: confused, disjointed, unrelated to the context; "incoherence and confusion", "confusion without regard to context", "lack of attention to meaning".
- Local exceptions: "Around the shrine," there is some form/skyline integrity.

In response to the question: What factors contribute to the chaos of the facades?

- Structural: Changes in elevation and uncontrolled walls, disregard for mass-space proportions.
- Economic/cultural: Illusion, profiteering, fashion, and social networks.
- Regulatory/executive: 2014 regulations with gaps in implementation and supervision; "very little observed".
- Ethical/professional: Weak public/professional ethics, "relationships" are overridden by rules.

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Table 3. Coding of the open-ended questionnaire of urban management and university professors in Qom city, in three stages of open, axial, and selective coding. Source: Authors.

Axial category	Open codes	Selected theme
Lack of physical-spatial continuity	Visual incoherence/confusion, break from religious/historical identity, lack of attention to context, and lack of meaning	Unstructured formalization
The spectacle economy and consumerism	Differentiation from other facades, display of wealth, following fashion under the influence of social media	Attention economy and desire for distinction and show-off
Multicentric governance and the regulation-enforcement gap	Dualism about the facade standard itself, the necessity of a deterrent policy accompanied by encouragement, disagreement with the facade standards and their ineffectiveness, failure to comply with laws and regulations	Weak governance with unbalanced powers
Ineffective or useless regulations and rules		
Ecological and ethical imperatives	Weak public and professional ethics, precedence of relationships over standards	Ethics

In response to the question: How is "power" manifested in the facades?

- Religious/symbolic power: In the historical core, strict rules of following the skyline and the shape of the walls; representation of the religious aspect of the city.
- Economic/market power: In other areas, the desire to display capital/status (stone Roman, exaggeration of form).
- Managerial power (ineffective bureaucratic): Committees and regulations without enforcement, mostly on paper.

In response to the question: How effective have the regulations and bylaws been?

- Summary of answers: "Low effectiveness" due to the lack of field supervision and enforcement; sometimes even the "mandatory regulations" themselves lead to resistance and circumvention.
- Diverse views: from "deterrence with encouragement" to "I do not agree with the formal regulations at all, and they are not effective."
- Only "around the shrine" is part of the formal restrictions implemented more than elsewhere.

Finally, the themes of the expert questionnaire were identified in the following six themes:

Theme 1: "Formation without structuring": Most responses say that the problem with Qom is not "the facade itself"; the problem lies in the higher layer of shaping the space, the mass-space proportions, and the connection of the fabric. When the structure is wrong, "no amount of arches and vaults" will not create identity, and focusing on the shell will only exacerbate the chaos.

Theme 2: "Weak governance with unbalanced powers": The responses indicate that despite the existence of laws and committees, they lack "executive and supervisory support"; hence, they are either ineffective or merely tie the designer's hands and feet in obtaining permits and are "dictators," without their results being seen in the city. Near the shrine, the religious power imposes specific rules (integrating into the skyline); outside that, the logic of the market/owner prevails. The result is a fragmented and contradictory image.

Theme 3: "The economy of attention and the desire to distinguish and boast": "Illusion", the fashion for "Roman stone facades" and the role model of social networks have turned the facade into a "tool for displaying status"; but it is incompatible with the climate of the city of Qom and sometimes even poses a safety risk. In contrast, some respondents prefer a "simple, functional, scale-appropriate, and eco-friendly (brick)" model.

Theme 4: "Ethics": Some respondents also considered the reference to "weak public/professional ethics" and the dominance of "relationships" over regulations as problems with facades in the city of Qom.

Discussion and Conclusion

The urban landscape is not simply an arena for the presence of opposing forces, but rather the result of the collision of forces (political, economic, and social). The city is a constant battleground between economic, political, and social powers. Not only elites and investors, but also ordinary people play a role in shaping urban policy. Therefore, paying attention to the city as a battleground of forces requires simultaneous attention to political, economic, and social powers. The facade is a superstructure expression of environmental, economic, social, and political forces within built masses and urban open spaces. In this regard, urban facades in Iran today are a stage for the simultaneous representation of the "lack of unified governance" and the "multiplicity

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of powers." The existing chaos is not merely visual, but also a manifestation of the "lack of semantic order" in the connections among sovereignty, capital, culture, and society. On the one hand, official powers (government, religious institutions) try to impose their values on the facades. Still, because they lack executive and cultural mechanisms, the result is mostly resistance and chaos. On the other hand, economic and social powers, using fashion and the market, promote specific styles (Roman, neoclassical, composite) that are incompatible with the local climate and identity. Meanwhile, designers and experts either give in to the market or remain on the sidelines, and professional ethics and education are neglected. As a result, the outcome is a city with multiple facades, but not in the sense of creative plurality, but rather in the form of chaos, identitylessness, and distancing of citizens from their city environment. It seems that to break out of this cycle, it is better to form multi-level and participatory governance over the urban landscape instead of "prescriptive rules for facades"; strengthen general and specialized education, and return the role of the facade from a "dramatic shell" to a part of the spatial and cultural structure of the city.

Therefore, in this regard, and to answer the questions of the article: What are the most important causes of the disorder of the image of the city of Qom? And what powers dominate the facades of the city of Qom? After field surveys and examining the opinions of experts, the disorder of the image of Qom is recognized as the result of six forces:

1. The level of intervention (focusing on the shell instead of the structure), 2. Polycentric, weak, and unbalanced governance with a supervisory vacuum, 3. Show economy, 4. The existence of cultural problems resulting from inadequate or even absent education, 5. The dominance of ideological power, and 6. The lack of ethics, both professional and public. These six factors create a self-reinforcing cycle that repeats constantly. Therefore, in total, there are four influential powers: 1. Economic powers exerted by investors and employers. 2. Religious ideological powers exerted by governing structures. 3. Management powers exerted by upstream institutions. 4. Social and cultural powers that can be influenced both through the people and through designers (Fig. 6). Considering the analyses and the forces involved, management institutions must be able to: 1. correctly identify these powers and 2. redistribute them appropriately. When forces are not correctly identified, weakness, chaos, disorder, and failure result. Therefore, the hypothesis is proven: a kind of powerlessness prevails in the management of the city of Qom's facades, which has naturally also affected the city's landscape. In fact, this lack of power and the dispersion of actions have rendered the regulations ineffective and, as a result, led to disorder, identitylessness, and chaos in the city of Qom. Here, power is not considered a negative or positive factor. Still, rather an inevitable one, and powerlessness means an inappropriate distribution of power, an inappropriate balance in the level of application and influence of power, and weakness in its management.

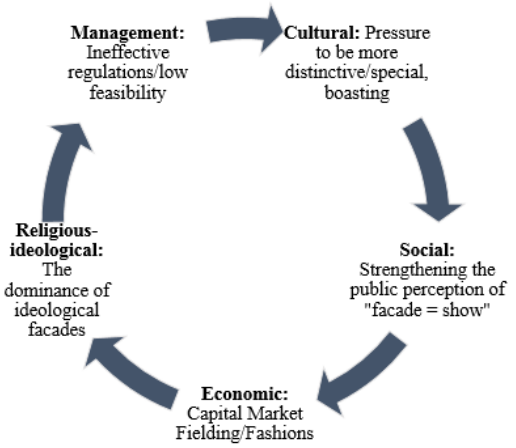

Fig. 6. The recurring cycle of different types of power in the city of Qom, which ultimately causes chaos and disorder in the city. Source: Authors.

Finally, we can offer some suggestions and solutions to prevent the disorder of facades and solve its problems in the city of Qom:

1. Changing the scale of intervention: from "facade-oriented" to "mass-space"; Volumetric guidelines/setbacks and not just the shell,
2. Implementation guarantee and field supervision: Executive annex of the Facade Committee (phased visits, supervision during execution, fines/stoppage of work), plus incentives for compliant projects,
3. Mainstreaming the subject of education to manage the "design market" and promote aesthetic literacy: introducing and presenting suitable eco-friendly alternatives and models and organizing awareness-raising campaigns as well as public education at both the citizen and management and investor levels,
4. Making a change in methodology: changing the methodology from mandatory criteria to participatory and particularly promotional methods (based on education),
5. Hiring of specialized personnel: from the planning stage to design, supervision and execution,
6. Professional ethics/rule of conflict of interest: binding code of ethics and transparency of approval processes.

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