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Editorial

The Landscape of Suffering: The Afflictions of Outsider-led Development on the Local Community

The genesis of this research dates back to the winter of 2025, when the Architecture Group of the Howzeh Honari (Artistic Domain) of the Islamic Propagation Organization commissioned the Nazar Research Center to study "Camp B" in Bandar-e Imam Khomeini. "Camp B" was the name given by the Japanese constructors of the Iran-Japan Petrochemical Company (IJPC) to a section of their workers' residential complex, located 15 kilometers from the petrochemical plant. At that time, Bandar-e Mahshahr was the largest residential area near the plant, and urban life had not yet taken root in the lands that now constitute Bandar-e Imam Khomeini.

Bandar-e Imam (formerly Bandar-e Shahpur) was selected for the construction of the petrochemical facilities because its khors (tidal inlets or creeks where the sea advances into the land) enabled navigation closer to Ahvaz, the logistical hub of Khuzestan Province. The oil industries, established in Khuzestan since the late Qajar period, had made Ahvaz their primary logistical center connecting to the mainland, and Bandar-e Shahpur served as the nearest outlet to international waters. Consequently, the Bandar-e Shahpur-Ahvaz railway was constructed a direct line whose modern-day perceived insignificance belies its historical rationale, as it navigated around every natural or social obstacle in its path with the logic of a pons asinorum. This is the very same line that the Allied forces, by connecting it to Bandar-e Shah on the Caspian Sea during World War II, established their "Bridge of Victory" against the Axis powers and their allies.

Thus, a distinct advantage was created for Bandar-e Shahpur as the primary access point to the Iranian mainland, placing it in a superior position compared to other ports along the country's two-thousand-kilometer southern coastline.

In 1973, the Japanese commenced the construction of the petrochemical complex at this location. Their objective was to multiply the value-added of the oil industries by leveraging several key factors: cheap labor, tax exemptions, minimal overhead costs owing to low land and infrastructure prices, and, most significantly, the elimination of the need to transport vast quantities of crude oil by processing it at the source. It was in this context that Bandar-e Shahpur renamed Bandar-e Imam Khomeini after the Islamic Revolution—was born, emerging as one of the most important ports in the country today.

The objective the proposal by the Art Bureau's Architecture Group aims to decipher the stark contrast between Bandar Imam's lucrative history and the current condition of the most prominent remnant of what was once one of the city's largest economic activities. Camp B serves as a perfect mirror (āyeneh-ye tamām-namā), reflecting the conflict between sectoral, fragmented development and place-based development that involves the territory as a whole. This conflict is so systematic and deeply rooted in administrative and managerial laws and relations that, despite the 45 years that have passed since the Islamic Revolution—for which justice was a primary demand the horrifying contrast persists: the poverty of Camp B on one side, and the petrochemical economic microsystem with its "greenhouse" existence, detached from its surroundings and boasting astronomical financial turnover for its employees and the corporation, on the other.

Camp B can be considered a showcase of sectoral development in the Third World countries that, through a process in which they are stripped of their agency, sacrifice their own people for the developmental goals of others. Based on the geographical attributes of Bandar-e Imam, a city was created to support the accelerated and sustained plunder of territorial resources. This city, too, was made to serve this plunder, while it received the smallest share from its position on this path. The manner in which this occurred is the subject of the articles compiled in this book.

The primary concern in planning this research is the why, what, and how of the actualization and persistence of this contradiction. The study's title, "The Landscape of Suffering: The Afflictions of Outsider-led Development on the Local Community," signifies a constellation of inequalities, discriminations, and systematic, methodical shortcomings that have been created and sustained with the support of the law.

The study's approach focuses on the capacities of the "place" of development, conceived as an amalgam of nature and the achievements of human life, in which the local community and its destiny are the principal actors in the development process. Following this, the research examines the damage that unilateral development has inflicted upon the nature and geography of the territory. Finally, it aims to evaluate the futile cost of this type of development for its own supposed beneficiaries.

In the study's synthesis, the "territory"—as the "place" where multidimensional economic, social, cultural, geographical, and environmental events unfold—becomes the "subject" for assessing the impact of sectoral development. In such an approach, which refrains from merely comparing specific profit figures without appraising the costs imposed upon the territory, and instead takes the

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difference between the two as the criterion, not every form of development can be deemed desirable—even if it proves profitable in its own private accounting.

The structure of the book consists of six independent articles that are brought together by a thematic unity and a common objective. The articles are presented in a general-to-specific order, with historical and documentary analyses preceding case-specific and causal investigations. The nature of this study relies on observation and inference. Archival and library documents were utilized to investigate foundational data and to draw inspiration from previous studies. However, from the very outset of the study, the research team presented the hypothesis above—the conflict between a sectoral approach to development and national and territorial interests—and oriented its line of inquiry and documentation toward discovering the causes of this conflict and the mechanisms through which they have shaped the present situation.

The first article examined the impact of national development plans and regulations on Bandar-e Emam from its inception to the present day. The study identified a scalar conflict between the port's development policies and the civic requirements for the local community's development as a missing link throughout the entire history of policymaking for Bandar-e Emam. A significant finding of this article was the discovery of the agency of an "othered" development within the national development plans for the port. In the macro-policies affecting Bandar-e Emam's development, the local community and the port itself have always been decoupled. The active agent and the beneficiary of development advantages has consistently been the petrochemical industry and its ancillary activities. The crucial conclusion of this paper is the identification of a foundational principle for a solution: for place-based development to succeed, the locus of development (in this case, Bandar-e Emam) must transform from a passive actor in the plans to an active playmaker in the development process. Consequently, any proposal by a beneficiary (here, the petrochemical industry) to enhance its own activities gains legitimacy only if it is in alignment with the interests of the place and its local community (both nature and society), rather than running parallel to or in conflict with them.

The second article focused on the experience of specific development programs in Bandar-e Emam. This study was conducted at the meso and micro scales, in contrast to the first article, which analyzed development plans at the macro and strategic policy level. The documents under review were development records from Khuzestan Province, specifically those about Bandar-e Emam. The most significant gaps arising from the implementation of these programs, which notably lacked strategic coherence, were identified across several decades. These include a lack of adaptability to contextual conditions, a top-down and non-participatory nature, a disregard for spatial and social justice, and institutional and policy weaknesses that rendered their implementation infeasible. The defining characteristic of the meso-level and sectoral urban and territorial development plans for Bandar-e Emam has been a duality: on one hand, the authoritarianism of central decision-makers and their disregard for local context, and on the other, the limited capacity of the central government, as the sponsor of these plans, to fulfill its obligation to the local community.

The third article evaluated law as a tool of governance in informal settlements, and through this lens, it investigated the role of legislation in creating asymmetrical conditions in Camp B. This study conceives of the legal text and the management of its enforcement as an integrated package, which, within Iran's governance system, plays a pivotal role in realizing either top-down directives or grassroots demands. In other words, the inhibitory and restrictive role of the law and its enforcers has been more influential in shaping the camp's situation than any constructive and agential role.

Numerous laws and various programs, susceptible to broad and elastic interpretations by managers who possess high levels of legal and traditional authority yet lack the expertise commensurate with their responsibilities, and who can assume diverse roles within a corrupt bureaucratic environment, are a significant factor in the emergence and perpetuation of hardship within the urban landscape of Camp B and Bandar Imam. Through a meticulous historical analysis and a phased examination of the development of marginalization in Camp B, this paper documents the role of law in each of the classified stages of its study. The principal finding of the paper is the imperative to return to the rule of law as the ultimate arbiter and the sole factor for ensuring sustainable development. This entails a law that is rooted in informed understanding, serves the public interest, is implemented by expert administrators, and operates within a transparent and accountable framework.

The fourth article addressed the theory-practice gap, using Camp B as a case study. Framed as an "autopsy of development failure," it delves into the conflict between planners' perspectives and on-the-ground reality. The innovation of this article lies in identifying the clash between conventional planning assumptions and the problem-generating realities of Bandar-e Emam. By orienting itself towards providing context-specific solutions, the paper moves beyond linear and traditional approaches. Relying on field analysis and problem tree analysis, it articulates a method for directly confronting the reality of the issue. The documentation of instances of misalignment between technical and financial solutions and the imperatives of stakeholder participation, substantiated with numerous codes, constitutes the significant quantitative contribution of this study.

The fifth article, adopting a close-up and intimate perspective, situates the urban landscape of Bandar-e Emam as a product of contemporary development—within the conceptual model of a "place-in-progress." In this research, the holistic concept of Bandar-e Emam as a "place" supersedes the mere "visage and form" of its components. The study focuses on the citizens' perception and their overall feelings about the quality of their living environment. The interpretation of this perception leads to a negative expression of their lived experience, a finding that is novel and unparalleled in its independence from a city's conventional physical attributes. The

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article's most significant finding is the dominance of a machine-like, functionalist order in all urban dimensions, overriding the potential for a tranquil, human-scale existence. Examples of this conflict are elaborated upon throughout the paper. The study concludes that this process has resulted in a lack of spatial organization, creating a disconnected, incoherent, and fragmented city.

The sixth article, adopting a meso-level approach, studies the issue of "participation and action" in the case of Camp B, evaluating the role of stakeholders in urban policymaking. A crucial finding of the paper is the evolution and instability of stakeholder roles across different urban development programs, along with an elucidation of their causes. Notably, the Housing Foundation (Bonyad-e Maskan), the primary custodian of the study area (Camp B), played the most significant part in the exclusion of other key actors—including the municipality, local institutions, and residents—from the decision-making process. This centralized and top-down policymaking approach even removed the local branch of the Housing Foundation itself from the participation loop, assigning all roles to its central office in Tehran. Consequently, the Foundation's recent actions, intended as a solution involving the forced relocation of Camp B's residents to the newly constructed "Shahrak-e Rezvan" neighborhood on the city's edge, failed from the very outset.

Synthesis

The studies from six research groups on the relationship between development outcomes, a context-based approach, and the local community—conceptualized under the title of place-based development—revealed several primary causal factors. These include:

•Extreme centralism and the disregard for participation and the local community, often justified by relying on laws.

•A construction-oriented and sectoral approach to projects, rather than initiating a cycle of activity and revitalizing the urban environment.

•The exclusion of local individual and institutional actors from the decision-making and policy-formulation cycle.

These were identified as the most significant factors in creating the dichotomies of poverty and wealth and the socio-economic conflict observed in the hinterlands of development projects within the Bandar-e Emam case study. To halt the cycle of widening socio-economic gaps in development processes, it is first necessary for the theoretical framework of development to be reformed, shifting from a purely economic development model to one of place-based development. Should this occur, the other constituent components of place—chief among them the local community—will emerge as the primary criteria for deriving development strategies. The implementation of such strategies will play the principal role in achieving spatial equilibrium.

Conclusion

Development is a multifaceted concept, its various forms not necessarily encompassing the interests of the community. Sectoral developments, proposed as economic projects in industrial, agricultural, civil, and cultural fields, are often oriented towards securing profits for their owners and maximizing societal benefits only within specific, narrow domains. This stands in contrast to the principle that the maximum benefit of society as a whole should be the primary yardstick for the legitimacy of any development program.

The most critical approach that can guarantee the safeguarding of the public interest in development plans is place-centeredness. Whereby, not only are the environmental capacities for accommodating a new development program a key criterion, but the fate of the local community and its share in the future gains of development—as the principal territorial actor—becomes the main determinant for the plan's acceptance. In such a framework, there would be no need for the sectoral "attachments" (e.g., cultural or environmental impact assessments), whose ineffectiveness has been proven in current development processes. Instead, the very essence of planning becomes focused on upholding the interests of the local community and the natural values of the land. This is something that, while inherently pursued in a place-based approach, is merely applied as an add-on program and subjected to external oversight in conventional development methods.

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