

Critical Studies in Applied Research

Introduction

Following a commission by the Organization for the Renovation, Development, and Beautification of the Environs of the Holy Shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh (PBUH), a research team from the Nazar Research Center—comprising four senior researchers and four research assistants—conducted a strategic problem-identification study on the “Policies for the Qualitative Enhancement of Qom’s Urban Landscape” from January 2024 to December 2025. The Organization’s policy of leveraging national scientific expertise for strategic-level problem formulation represents an uncommon practice among municipalities. A review of urban management regulations and conventions reveals that municipal departments typically function as mere executive arms, whereas the responsibility for ideation and conceptualization is often relegated to external entities.

The Organization’s initiative to engage external academic institutions in re-evaluating urban and municipal challenges served as a highly effective catalyst. Beyond highlighting the most critical issues facing the city of Qom, this approach provided the urban management sector with a novel opportunity to obtain an objective assessment of its current procedures. Rather than relying on internal personnel or affiliated contractors and consultants, the evaluation was conducted through the lens of a professional, scientific body with profound expertise in urban affairs. Should this approach be sustained, it will constitute a genuine paradigm of civic participation in urban governance, fundamentally devoid of populism and performative gestures.

The integration of independent experts into the realm of urban policymaking through rigorous problem formulation represents one of the most efficacious paradigms of citizen participation in urban governance. In the city of Qom, this initiative was proactively realized, driven by the initial mandate of the Organization for the Renovation, Development, and Beautification of the Environs of the Holy Shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh (PBUH). Responding to the imperative of problem formulation in Qom’s urban management, the Nazar Research Center team proposed a novel re-evaluation of the city’s primary challenges within the context of its developmental trajectory.

To achieve this, rather than addressing all viable domains of study, the research team strategically selected a focal theme that exerts the most profound impact on citizens’ perceptions and their overall evaluations of the urban environment. In contemporary scientific discourse, this thematic focus is defined as the “urban landscape.” Crucially, within this theoretical framework, the urban landscape is distinctly differentiated from the urban appearance or cityscape, which merely encompasses the physical and structural form of the built environment. The profound significance of civic perception lies in its direct correlation with residential satisfaction and its capacity to establish a foundation for active public participation in urban management. Fostering a coherent and interconnected comprehension of the urban environment renders the city more tangible, identity-rich, and consequently, more acceptable to its inhabitants. Conceptualized as a “place” emerging from both its physical morphology and historical vitality, the city acts as a spatial receptacle that must remain congruent with its content. Ultimately, this content comprises the daily lives and dynamic activities of the citizens; therefore, their spatial satisfaction is directly correlated with their cognitive apprehension of the city.

Consequently, the perception of the city is not regarded as a mere romantic or sentimental phenomenon; rather, its functional dimension is predominant. Citizens’ perception of the city is mediated through its physical manifestation. Therefore, the concept of perception is considered homologous to the urban landscape. Another dimension of the research team’s proposal involved investigating the correlation between the urban landscape and the concept of Qom’s urban identity. In philosophical discourse, identity is defined as the continuity of an entity’s essence over time, existing independently of temporal fluctuations. The essence (quiddity) of a city comprises its “whatness”—the collective attributes shaped by the worldviews, beliefs, and behaviors of its citizens, which fundamentally construct the urban environment. Inherently, the essence of a city is a value-laden construct, deeply intertwined with the cognitive and ideological perspectives of its inhabitants. The perpetuation of this essence over time establishes its “whoness” (distinctive character). This “whoness” represents the historical and temporally bound identity of the essence.

Consequently, within the construct of identity, the duration and temporal continuity of a phenomenon’s attributes take precedence,

operating independently of its normative or value-based dimensions. Thus, while “essence”—which denotes “whatness”—is a value-laden phenomenon, “identity”—which refers strictly to the historical continuity of these attributes—is fundamentally value-neutral. Erroneously, in conventional and colloquial discourse, identity is often conflated with the mere preservation of historical values. By way of illustration, if an ancient idolatrous city maintained its polytheistic attributes throughout its history, it would still be classified as a city possessing an “identity.” This is because, in addressing its “whoness,” it distinctly references a specific historical trajectory of idolatry.

Synthesizing these two conceptual frameworks—the “urban landscape” as the civic perception of the city, and “identity” as the historical continuity of urban attributes—the research team proposed a comprehensive investigation into the “Identity of Qom’s Urban Landscape.” This objective was operationalized and executed through five independent research studies. The core content of the current issue comprises four selected focal articles: “The Multidimensional Center as an Agent of Urban Sustainability: Evaluating the Evolution of Qom’s City Center in Consolidating Urban Identity and Function”; “Elucidating the Role of Communal Street Spaces in Enhancing Qom’s Urban Landscape: A Cross-Case Study of the Shah Hamzeh Neighborhood Passage, Eram Pedestrian Mall, and Salariyeh Square”; “The Safe Neighborhood Core as a Catalyst for the Regeneration of Qom’s Deteriorated Urban Fabrics: An Analysis of its Spatial Particularity”; and “The Facade as a Manifestation of Power: A Case Study of Architectural Facades in Qom’s Historical Fabric.”

Furthermore, a fifth article titled “Rethinking Urban Development in Pilgrimage Contexts with an Emphasis on a Place-Based Approach: An Analysis of Spatial Structure Transformations Surrounding the Holy Shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh (PBUH) in Qom”—derived from a master’s thesis conducted at the University of Tehran—was incorporated into this collection due to its profound thematic affinity. Together with the present editorial statement, which serves as an action-oriented synthesis and conclusion, these contributions constitute the comprehensive content of this journal issue. The primary methodological phases of this research encompassed a comprehensive review of supporting documentation, including scientific literature and technical records; conducting interviews with administrators, subject-matter experts, and the general public; direct observation and spatial experience of the urban environment; presenting interim findings to panels of experts and municipal authorities to solicit critical feedback; and, ultimately, drafting scholarly articles that articulate the research team’s interpretations across each of the aforementioned domains. The present editorial statement—which has overseen the methodological coordination of the diverse research teams since the project’s inception—aims to synthesize the most salient empirical findings. Furthermore, it seeks to distill these novel conclusions to provide strategic guidance for urban managers and planners, while concurrently laying the legislative and regulatory groundwork required to steer the city’s future developmental frameworks. Consequently, it is anticipated that this innovative body of urban research will substantially bridge the existing dichotomy between theoretical discourse and practical implementation within the specific context of Qom’s urban landscape.

The overarching methodological framework employed across the studies was grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), tailored to the specific thematic focus of each respective article. To operationalize this approach, two relatively distinct reports were compiled for each study: the first traced the historical evolution of the subject matter, while the second delineated the contemporary strategies adopted by the urban administration. Subsequently, aligned with the envisioned objectives of the “urban landscape”—predicated on the scientific conceptualization elucidated earlier in the text—the logical contradictions between historical trajectories and modern planning initiatives were systematically identified. Following this diagnostic phase, and drawing upon cutting-edge scientific paradigms, specific operational goals were established for each respective domain. Ultimately, both historical and prevailing urban management practices were subjected to rigorous critique by benchmarking them against these newly formulated operational objectives.

Synthesis of Findings

• The Article: “The Multidimensional Center: A Catalyst for Urban Sustainability”

Adopting a systemic approach grounded in the theory of Iranian-Islamic city spatial organization, this study examines the transformations and the role of Qom’s city center throughout its establishment and evolution as an urban system across various historical periods. A primary finding is the historical continuity of the principles governing the center’s evolution from Qom’s inception until the contemporary era. Conversely, this highlights a rupture in the structural logic of the center’s position within the urban system during the modern period, driven by centralized interventions from urban development initiatives, notably the Comprehensive Plan. The fundamental components regulating this central core comprised its access, social, and functional (activity) systems, all intrinsically linked to the broader urban macrostructure. Historically, these interconnected systems served as the primary catalysts for preserving

the city's spatial integrity and unity, both within the physical urban landscape and in the cognitive perception of its citizens. In contrast, during the contemporary era, these foundational systems were largely marginalized. This neglect stemmed from the disregard for urban cohesion in comprehensive planning and the erosion of Qom's historical spatial organization paradigm among modern planners and policymakers. Consequently, this paradigm shift has led to the functional degradation of the traditional center within Qom's current context, reducing its significance merely to a historical relic.

In analyzing the marginalization of the center within Qom's urban structure, the study also addresses the role of the Holy Shrine complex. The functional competition between the Shrine and the city's traditional socio-spatial and mobility core—and their subsequent spatial segregation despite a deep historical symbiosis—ultimately precipitated the collapse of the “center” concept in the citizens' cognitive maps and spatial perception. This spatial dislocation is identified as a pivotal factor in the erosion of identity within Qom's urban landscape. Currently, the citizenry perceives modern Qom as lacking a unified focal point for social, functional, and access activities; what persists in the historical core are merely vestiges of Qom's past vitality, now almost exclusively oriented around the Holy Shrine.

• **The article, “Elucidating the Role of the Street as a Collective Space in Enhancing the Urban Landscape of Qom,”**

This paper re-evaluates the role of the street as a collective space and a primary locus for citizens' social life. By focusing on the concept of collective space as a prerequisite for social cohesion and societal construction, this study investigates the street's potential to generate a “collective place”—a dedicated arena for social formation and interaction—through a dual-track approach. First, it examines the historical lived experience of streets as collective spaces, both within the Iranian context and globally, elucidating critical lessons derived from historical precedents. Second, it emphasizes the theoretical dimensions of the street's capacity as a collective space, facilitating the planning and formation of local and wider urban communities.

A salient contribution of this research is the categorization of effective interventions aimed at enhancing the social dimensions of the street into two distinct typologies: physical interventions and programmatic strategies.

The ultimate conclusion of the paper is action-oriented, addressing how urban management can transition the conceptualization of the street from a unidimensional thoroughfare—functioning merely as a conduit for access and mobility—into a multidimensional arena for vibrant social life. Achieving this necessitates the adoption of a holistic and ontological approach to the street concept, thereby uncovering its latent capacities for building and sustaining societal cohesion. Within the framework of this article, the street is posited as the paramount urban space; essentially, it serves as the physical crystallization of the societal essence and a fundamental precondition for its emergence.

• **The article, “The Safe Neighborhood Core: A Catalyst for the Regeneration of Qom's Distressed Urban Fabric,”**

This article adopts a concurrent approach to address both the citizens' perception of the city (the urban landscape) and the critical necessity of regenerating dilapidated urban fabrics—one of the most pressing challenges facing the city of Qom. In doing so, it examines the specific conditions of Qom's historical distressed areas, highlighting a unique characteristic: despite severe physical deterioration, traces of authentic urban and social vitality remain palpably visible. This enduring vitality forms the foundational strategy of the research team for enhancing Qom's urban landscape through the regeneration of its historical fabric.

Consequently, the paper's overarching approach focuses on revitalizing and sustaining the historical life of these distressed urban areas by eliminating barriers to their realization and integrating contemporary urban needs. The most significant obstacle in this trajectory is the proliferation of automobiles and the consequent demand for vehicular access and parking within the historical urban fabric. To address this, the researchers advocate the application of the “Safe Neighborhood Core” (هسته (امن محله) theory as a viable and highly applicable strategy for Qom.

According to this theory, establishing a “Safe Neighborhood Core” at the center of each historical neighborhood in Qom would not only accommodate contemporary requirements for vehicular access and mobility but also foster a renewed focus on neighborhood centers. This reinforces the spatial configuration of the neighborhood as a cohesive physical-social unit. As a result, simultaneously resolving the functional constraints of modern life within a historical physical framework paves the way for enhancing environmental quality. This is achieved through the infusion of contemporary activities, meticulously centered on the neighborhood's historical structure and spatial organization.

The practical guideline offered by this study to urban management involves the precise spatial allocation of these “Safe

Neighborhood Cores.” Rather than relying on parallel or ancillary studies, these optimal locations are identified directly based on the authentic historical centers of the neighborhoods. Ultimately, visually oriented developmental interventions, aimed at preserving and strengthening the neighborhood’s spatial organization, can be effectively executed through novel urban management programs.

• **The Article: “The Facade: A Display of Power”**

This article assumes the critical responsibility of resolving prevalent misconceptions regarding building facades and urban appearance (townscape). The semantic conflation of “appearance” (Sima) and “landscape” (Manzar) in vernacular discourse has permeated the technical domain to such an extent that, apart from a select few specialized references, the fundamental distinction between the two concepts remains largely unrecognized.

In its introduction, this paper delineates the objective, physical nature of urban appearance as opposed to the subjective, perceptual essence of the urban landscape. It posits that while the urban appearance exists and is comprehensible independent of an observer, the urban landscape is intrinsically the observer’s interpretation of the visual scene. This interpretation is not only uniquely constructed by each individual observer but is also subject to temporal variations for that same observer.

The pervasive substitution of the landscape concept with mere appearance has reached a point where, in numerous major Iranian municipalities, “Facade Committees” have assumed strategic authority and approval rights over building exteriors. The underlying rationale for this intervention is often articulated as the preservation of urban identity and the safeguarding of ideological and historical values. However, as established earlier, identity is inherently a neutral concept, denoting the continuity of a historical or past meaning irrespective of its specific content. Consequently, one can objectively discuss polytheistic, Islamic, Buddhist, or other territorial, religious, historical, and ethnic identities without the mere attribution of “identity” conferring any inherent superiority or preference to them.

Moving beyond the erroneous conflation of appearance and landscape, the article titled “Facade: The Display of Power” investigates the ultimate objective behind urban management’s drive to control the design and construction processes of building facades. By engaging in analytical discourse, adopting a Critical Discourse Analysis approach towards facade control and guidance documents, and drawing upon interviews with administrators and experts, the research identifies the consolidation of “power” as the teleological aim of prevalent efforts to dominate facade aesthetics. Concurrently, by highlighting numerous architectural contradictions in facades constructed under the directives of these committees, the study concludes that the underlying desire to manifest “power” in these specific instances has ultimately failed. Another significant contribution of this research is the elucidation of six factors contributing to the visual chaos within Qom’s urban appearance; these factors are analyzed even when temporarily operating within the paradigm of “appearance” rather than the more nuanced concept of “landscape.”

The operational recommendations of this article aim to terminate the municipality’s current flawed practices, which infringe upon public rights by depriving citizens of the autonomy to select the desired facade for their legally owned properties. This pragmatic focus not only serves as an immediate, actionable output for executive application but also acts as a necessary prelude to realigning the city’s appearance—and subsequently, its landscape—with its authentic trajectory. Ultimately, it advocates for an urban environment that emerges organically as a byproduct of the natural and customary lives of its inhabitants, rather than being imposed as a state-constructed manifestation of the city.

• **The article, “Rethinking Urban Development in Pilgrimage Contexts,”**

This study examines the conflict between two developmental approaches in pilgrimage cities. Historically, upon their establishment, shrines functioned as the primary center of the city or neighborhood. This centrality emerged either from their initial placement in core urban areas or through their subsequent magnetic effect, attracting public services and civic activities. The prosperity of the shrine was intrinsically aligned with the flourishing of surrounding urban activities, leading to the formation of a city center characterized by a dual service-pilgrimage nature. The expansion of spaces and services associated with either pole—the shrine or the city—ultimately reinforced the city center. This process fostered a shared perception among citizens regarding their city center in connection with the shrine; in other words, it shaped an urban landscape defined by a religious-service core.

This paradigm persisted until the contemporary era. Consequently, pilgrimage cities were consistently recognized as cities with a strong identity, as the spatial organization was mutually understood by both the public and the shrine administration as a unified center comprising the shrine and civic services.

However, in the contemporary era, this historical continuity was disrupted in the city of Qom. The two management bodies—the administration of the shrine (Holy Shrine of Hazrat Ma’sumeh) and the municipal government—have each moved toward spatial divergence by monopolizing spaces for their respective exclusive services. Since the shrine’s location was immutable, this confrontation ultimately resulted in the displacement of Qom’s city center from its historical location. The continuation of this trend yielded two outcomes that contradicted the perceptual unity of both the citizens and pilgrims of Qom:

- Pilgrims perceived the city of Qom exclusively through the lens of the shrine and its active affiliated spaces, a perception that stood in stark contrast to the actual reality of the broader city.

- Conversely, with the shift of the city center away from the shrine's territory, citizens lost their perceptual connection to the historical collective memory of Qom's residents.

The new city center of Qom was not only relocated but also fundamentally lost its inherent essence as a multifaceted service, social, and accessible hub within the city. By elucidating the trajectory of spatial segregation between the shrine and the city, the findings of this paper highlight the unintended strategy of de-identifying the city of Qom through the destruction of the spatial nexus between the city center and the shrine. By acknowledging this issue and articulating it to other stakeholders involved in the city's future, particularly the shrine's custodianship, the municipal administration of Qom can take fundamental steps toward revitalizing the city's landscape identity.

Conclusion

1. The erosion of Qom's urban identity and its reduction to mere decorative and semiotic symbols constitute a significant barrier to citizens' satisfaction with their urban environment.

2. Among the urban challenges in Qom, citizens' cognitive dissonance regarding a unified perception of the city plays a pivotal role in engendering dissatisfaction with their living environment. Consequently, urban landscape management—grounded in a scientific, objective approach rather than subjective preferences—emerges as a viable strategy for cultivating a shared sense of place among residents.

3. At a strategic scale, effective urban landscape management is contingent upon the identification, conservation, and revitalization of the city's spatial organization. The regeneration of the city center, achieved by resolving sectoral management conflicts between the shrine's administration and the municipality, serves as the fundamental strategy at this level.

4. Fostering residents' social connectivity through public urban spaces represents a socio-physical strategy that not only bolsters social cohesion but also facilitates the public recognition of historical identity, thereby enhancing overall civic satisfaction.

5. The regeneration of Qom's historical fabrics, while currently presenting a significant socio-national challenge, simultaneously offers a crucial opportunity to reinforce the city's spatial organization. This can be achieved through the revitalization of its authentic, localized entities—specifically, the historical neighborhoods.

6. The "street" has become a marginalized element in contemporary urbanism—a crucial arena where social life and civic bonds are traditionally generated and nurtured. In the paradigm of modern urban planning, streets have been reductively treated as mere conduits for vehicular access. Reconceptualizing the street as an opportunity to revitalize social interactions, thereby elevating its existential status from a uni-dimensional transit corridor to a multi-dimensional place, is an imperative for sustainable urban development

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