

Viewpoint/ Critical Review

# Vulgar Pragmatism and Non-rational Definition for “City” in Iran

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## ABSTRACT

Since the advent of Iranian society into the so-called modern era, cities in Iran have been the centre of attention for a large group of people, experts, and professionals inside and outside the country. Cities have indeed served as a chessboard where, on one side, there has been a game between the people and the government, and on the other side, the entire Iranian society with non-Iranian societies, especially developed Western societies. This four-sided game ultimately failed to meet the national interests of Iranians. Iran, with a long history of shaping human culture and civilization, not only had nothing to say in the face of modern civilization and the imposed external development by the global capitalist society but also continuously experienced a path of decline and decadence in recent centuries compared to its glorious past. In this critical essay, an attempt has been made to review and open some dimensions of the phenomenon and approach of “urban planning” in Iran, discussing the factors shaping the current conditions and potential solutions to move beyond it briefly and concisely.

## Introduction and Problem Statement

Should the city be defined? What is the current definition of a city? What is the basis of this definition? How can cities be defined in Iran today?

The importance of cities, especially in contemporary societies, goes far beyond their physical appearance. Cities are the result of the accumulation of knowledge and culture of societies and a real scene of the capabilities, arts, capacities, capital, and intelligence of the people. Cities reflect the reckless manner of the relationship between residents and their managers and officials. Moreover, each city must also display its relative position with the outside world through various and different means. A deeper look reveals the significant role and position of each city in the domestic and foreign economic system. The astonishing complexity of the city necessitates a vast system of planning, design, and management of urban space to engage in a complex process of decision-making and determination regarding the mode of intervention and comprehensive and pervasive development. This is while in Iran, due to specific conditions, the above process under the unconventional name of “urban planning” is only used as a rigid template for intervention and development in urban spaces. A template that has now become an insignificant surplus in the structure of civil and architectural plans. A part that civil and architectural consultants have metaphorically named “phase zero”. A prefabricated framework for the realization of architectural and construction projects, reducing the subject of urban development to a formalistic framework derived from positivism and objectivism, and the bias towards quantifiable and physical aspects, have to some extent marginalized the rightful position of the city in Iran throughout history.

The question of how we got here, and the implications of such conditions is the central theme of “urbanization and its management” in this text. This essay critically examines the significant issue of “city and urbanization” and its management. The main focus of this essay is on the significant issue of “urbanization and city management” and its implications. In this essay, the critique is focused on a very important, determinative, and vital subject, “definition” and “definition of a city”. Definition, not only identifies and distinguishes any phenomenon in the discovered world but also

clarifies its essence and determines its internal and external influential factors. Concerning cities and urban environments, the definition is capable of specifying the foundations, power relations, the nature of interaction between humans and the environment, as well as human-to-human interaction within the environment, and the methods of intervention and organization within it. The concept and “definition” of a phenomenon are miraculous achievements of language, which subsequently facilitate the formation of “discourse” and “dominant discourse”. Therefore, the greatest practical and theoretical challenge in the field of urban planning and management in Iran at present lies in the ambiguity, incompleteness, and even fallacy of the “definition” of a city, which gives rise to numerous subsequent problems. This brief essay undertakes an analytical critique of the “definition of a city in Iran.”

## Critique Body

Since cities entered a phase where human intervention became necessary, there arose a need to define them. These definitions attributed specific characteristics to cities, making it possible to intervene, plan, and predict their development. Disciplines such as geography, economics, sociology, politics, environmental studies, and ... and construction and architecture, and each offered different definitions of the city from their respective perspectives. The characteristic of these definitions was that they reproduced the city within the realm of knowledge and philosophy of their respective fields in a way that allowed intervention, critique, identification of potential shortcomings, and the creation of solutions tailored to the specific views of those disciplines. In Iran, particularly, definitions derived from the fields of architecture and construction took precedence over other definitions. This led to a specific narrative and interpretation of architecture, which naturally focused on the physical and structural aspects of the city and emphasized them over other interpretations. Over time, this inclination towards reinterpreting the city also brought its own paradigm and perspective. The Housing Organization, and later the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, which later changed its name to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, continued the legacy of this physical outlook on the city. For disciplines

like civil engineering (later urban engineering) and architecture, what was visible in the city and had value and significance were primarily the buildings, structures, and networks that linked them together. However, building professionals in rapidly expanding cities also considered the distribution, arrangement, and performance of buildings. When this approach became closely associated and intertwined with the highly centralized political-administrative system in Iran, an ideological framework and interpretation emerged. According to this framework, all cities were expected to conform to a rigid framework, largely based on Western models, established at the centre of decision-making. This path quickly turned into a rigid and inflexible railroad track that seemingly had to continue indefinitely. To establish a kind of sustainable continuity for this mindset, many definitions, concepts, regulations, and relevant institutions had to adapt. Of course, in a centralized decision-making system, this was both possible and necessary and unavoidable. Consequently, the structure of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (later Ministry of Roads and Urban Development after the revolution), municipalities, governorate offices, universities, professional communities, architectural consultants, and other elements all became completely aligned and associated with this overarching worldview over time. An ideal and utopian city model emerged, which all relevant institutions were obligated to impose on all cities in Iran, disregarding their differences. The next step was for this extensive and rigid apparatus, while continuously insisting on this approach, to never allow room for alternative opinions, methods, or directions. Thus, this form of dealing with intervention in cities, under the guise of “urban planning,” remained untouched for decades. So much so that not even a significant revolution could have an impact on its survival. However, in recent years, fields such as economics, geography, and social sciences have repeatedly attempted to change the course of urban spatial development from the current rigid trajectory, drawing on developments that have occurred in this field in developed countries. Yet, the entrenched network prevented such actions, especially since the country’s political and executive management system strongly supports this nearly century-old trend and has tied its interests to it. It’s strange that

while architecture seeks its identity, power, and capacity from the endless diversity of innovative and creative designs and forms, when it comes to cities, which are much more complex and potentially diverse than a single building or even a group of buildings, it staunchly defends such an approach to intervention in urban spaces and is unwilling to change its methods, principles, and approaches. While dogmatism and rigidity dominate urban planning in Iran, profound intellectual, philosophical, and theoretical transformations have occurred in urban planning worldwide.

## Conclusion

Defining the “city” within current frameworks is almost impossible. Various fields, in attempting to confine and control urban spaces according to their own abstract definitions, have proven to be entirely unsuccessful. No hegemonic conceptual framework has been able, or can, subjugate the city under its authority within old paradigms and shut the door to criticism from other disciplines, tendencies, and ideologies. In Iran, considering the history of “modern or semi-modern urban planning,” we have now reached an “anti-definition.” In fact, current trends are working in the opposite direction. The definition now is an expression of the interests of urban managers in power, along with the interests of vested capitalists and the group interests of those who consider themselves urban planners. The intersection of these three spectrums shapes and perpetuates the actions of urban construction and physical growth, creating a vicious cycle. This interpretation of the “city” and interventions arising from it are indeed a significant and noticeable step towards the goals and tendencies of “neo-colonialism” linked to the global capitalist system. Because the result of such conditions is the “endless longing” of urban dwellers in our country, who constantly compare the unbalanced, chaotic, identity-less, and low-quality conditions of their cities with the corresponding spaces in developed countries, predominantly western cities.

This phenomenon undoubtedly serves the interests of the capitalist society in the West, which requires Iran, an oil-based society, to be highly consumeristic and deeply inclined towards the West. If Iranian society ever wakes up and seeks to break free from this self-made trap, it may

find itself without a way out because accepting the notion that the city is indefinable and, given the current political conditions, definitions of the city essentially lean towards a form of “anti-development.” It is advisable to understand the city as the result of rational interaction between

different and sometimes conflicting “discourses” and, based on this understanding, strive for a renewed recognition of cities. Along this new path, we should shape processes of intervention and development in urban spaces.

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