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Editorial

Place- and Human-Centric Urban Planning: The Way Forward

Adam Smith once noted: "The desire of bettering our condition… comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave" (Hirschman, 2012, 13). This observation aligns perfectly with the history of human existence. Similarly, in Iranian culture, "transcendence" and "uninterrupted movement" forward and upward are regarded as fundamental pillars and principles of human life (Barati et al., 2019). Interventions in the human environment aimed at spatial organization, amelioration, development, and the like can be understood within this very context. Fundamentally, global spatial and urban planning systems have consistently sought to lay the groundwork for shaping social and urban life with the highest levels of quality and productivity.

However, throughout the evolutionary trajectory of this discipline, early misconceptions regarding the human environment and appropriate intervention methods coupled with the dominance of a mechanical-engineering approach to urban development fostered the assumption that the built environment could be mechanically regulated to create settlements suitable for acceptable human habitation. Consequently, this approach prioritized the physical body and structural form of the city. Subsequently, as numerous complications arose, scholars in the field heavily criticized this mechanical perspective, demonstrating that the correct path requires placing the "human" and "humanity" at the absolute center of both focus and action (see Jacobs, 2024).

Consequently, the shift from modern, mechanical urbanism and city planning to a "human-centric" paradigm has already taken place in the developed world, a transition consistently validated by contemporary theories and methodologies. Human-centric urban development sometimes referred to as "place-centric" development operates on two main fronts. On the one hand, it integrates the quantitative and physical expansion of the city with non-physical dimensions, including economic and socio-cultural development, the promotion of socio-spatial justice, transportation and communications, infrastructure, rational land-use policymaking, optimal urban governance, livability, public health, and, ultimately, the resilience and sustainability of urban environments. On the other hand, it underscores the reciprocal relationship between humans and their environment, asserting that the core of this interaction must remain on a trajectory of continuous and systematic transcendence.

In such a context of shaping comprehensive and inclusive growth, the urban environment is not perceived as a lifeless and meaningless entity. Furthermore, the primary catalyst for urban transformation is no longer confined to real estate speculation, building commodification, surplus value generation, and the extraction of social rent by specific privileged groups.

Within the framework of "place-centric" and "humanistic" development, the city is not merely a repository of iron, steel, cement, asphalt, and assorted physical structures. Rather, as Relph observes, it is a space that yields an amalgamation of setting, landscape, ritual, pathway, other individuals, and personal experience (Relph, 2011).

In the contemporary era, cities are compelled to evolve toward a horizon where the urban environment is dynamic, vibrant, eventful, and inviting. It must be memorable, identity-forging, narratable, and legible, possessing the inherent capacity to transform into a rich lived experience and a vital component of collective social memory. This is imperative because the city serves as the ultimate foundation, crucible, and academy for civilization and civilizational development. Two key issues can be highlighted in the remainder of this brief discussion:

- One of the pivotal phenomena influencing the current discourse was the marginalization of the concept of "Being" by thinkers and philosophers following the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Intellectual shifts emerging from anti-clerical and, subsequently, anti-religious movements culminated in the complete dismissal of metaphysical and spiritual discourses that eluded empirical verification in the material world. In this context, Heidegger posits that the discourse on "Being" and metaphysics followed a consistent trajectory from Plato to Nietzsche, and thereafter, the central inquiry of philosophy shifted toward the concept of "entities" or "beings" (Heidegger, 2025). This intentional oblivion to "Being"

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undeniably paved the way for material and empirical advancements; however, this approach simultaneously reduced the world to a mere instrument for maximum exploitation. Heidegger further asserts that Western civilization, through its profound "forgetfulness of Being," has descended into a crisis-ridden world.

- Secondly, following the aforementioned intellectual and philosophical developments and the emergence of Cartesian philosophy, the transition toward atomism, reductionism, and the oversimplification of environmental phenomena reached its zenith. Even within the material realm, this paradigm exacerbated the dichotomies between matter and meaning, objectivity and subjectivity, and subject and object. The proliferation of this worldview within the domains of environmental management, urbanism, and spatial planning precipitated the rise of positivism, physical determinism, and fragmented, sectoral approaches. This framework operates on the flawed premise that decision-making and interventions regarding humans and their environments can be executed in a simplistic, linear, and reductionist manner. In our contemporary society, the primary impediment to institutionalizing holistic, place-centric approaches is the transformation of the comprehensive planning doctrine from a conventional, contestable methodology into a "hegemonic ideology." Undoubtedly, an essential prerequisite for progress is the demystification of this obsolete comprehensive planning approach. Within this outdated framework, the environment is reduced to dead atoms randomly assembled, and the human being is relegated to a mere "object" akin to other physical elements that can and must be governed through top-down mechanisms within a static and rigidly controlled urban environment. Ultimately, the realization and implementation of human- and place-centric development in our country depend exclusively on transcending the physical, materialistic, and positivistic legacy of the comprehensive plan.



Fig. 1. New cities are based on machine and mechanical developments. In these cities, humans play no role in creating spaces or establishing a 'sense of place,' acting merely as players within predetermined environments. Such cities are generally not event-oriented and only manage social presence within pre-designed spaces. Consequently, the possibility of creating 'place' is weakened, and the city is managed based on planned activities and land uses. Source: https://shahrmardomdaily.ir.

The cover image features the Square Louise Michel in Paris, an example of a dynamic, human-centric urban space. It is a place with a flexible urban vantage point where the human role enables the creation of events and collective memories. This approach establishes a reciprocal relationship between the citizen and the urban fabric, ultimately solidifying urban identity through participatory and dynamic placemaking. Source of cover image: Farnoosh Mokhles Archive, 2018.

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