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## An Investigation into the Role of Ritual Landscapes in the Identity of Iranian Cities

Hamide Abarghouei Fard<sup>\*1</sup>, Parichehr Saboonchi<sup>2</sup>, Ahmadali Farzin<sup>3</sup>

1. Landscape department at college of fine arts, university of Tehran, Iran.

2. Ph.D. Condidate in landscape architecture, college of fine arts, university of Tehran, Iran.

3. Ph.D. Condidate in landscape architecture, college of fine arts, university of Tehran, Iran.

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### Abstract

For centuries, ritual spaces have played an important role in shaping the cities landscapes and cultural foundations of human societies. Some historians believe that one of the main causes of the city's formation is due to its ritual and spiritual performance. Thanks to the experience of spatial co-participation, ritual spaces are considered as the strongest collective space experiences in Iranian culture which have created positive environmental qualities for interactions and social relationships by having a close relationship with the natural factors such as the water and tree, and enjoying a collective and ritual nature; consequently, they have created the possibility of the formation of a single mindset in the inhabitants of different cities. Since the beginning of the Islamic era, ritual landscapes have continued in a particular way in the landscape and identity of Iranian cities.

The present study aimed to investigate the effects of ritual landscapes on the identity of Iranian cities through integrating their common form (natural) and subjective (social) content.

at first, the common pattern of their naturalistic and social meanings was investigated and then their impact on the identity of cities was studied as the social and semantic milestones. After that, considering the concept of the spatial organization of cities, the scope of the influence of these landscapes on the identity of cities was investigated at the three levels of the centrality of city in the ritual cities (macro), a network of ritual neighborhoods in the city center (middle), and the independent religious neighborhoods (micro).

similar pattern of ritual landscapes has caused the development of cities and their neighborhoods, and these common characteristics and effects due to their ritual, social, and semantic nature play a prominent role in the field of perception of the cities' mental and conceptual aspect.

**Keywords:** *Ritual landscape, Identity, Rite, Iranian city, Islamic city, Naturalism.*



\*. Corresponding author: hamide.abarghouyi@gmail.com  
+989126998223

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## Introduction

The framework of cities, their various functions and applications reflect the mental structures of their inhabitants. Through reviewing the common features of cities, the structures of their inhabitants' beliefs and their interactive and shared influence on the landscape of cities can be identified. The identity of a city, which is the common perception of its inhabitants about the city, is formed from the integration of the physical and mental content of that city in the minds of the citizens. The higher the representation of the residents' worldview in the formation of the city, the greater the physical quality affecting the perception of the city's inhabitants and the users of that space, and consequently, more highlighted form of the city's identity.

Among the many factors that have influenced the structures of Iranian cities over the time, religious thoughts have played an important role in the form of ritual landscapes. Rituals are considered as a way of representing the myths believed by the human societies that can serve as a guide for the continuation of the concept of social life in cities through expressing the basic thoughts of human beings about the life. Ritual landscapes are the reflection of the effect of rituals on the lives of human beings and the bodies of cities; they are based on the naturalistic beliefs and have close relationships with the natural elements in the Iranian culture, and have shaped a certain type of ritual landscapes with the social and identity results.

The gravitation towards the subjective concepts of rituals, in the form of ritual landscapes, expanded to the extent that some historians like Mumford regard the spiritual and ritual issues as one of the main causes of the formation of cities. Therefore, what that has stabilized the physical existence of a city has been the human beings' gathering with the common beliefs and their agreement to hold ritual events in this common platform.

With the continuity of the close relationship between the ritual landscapes and the nature in the cities of Iran, the common structure of these landscapes

was preserved in the Islamic period and with their placement in the context of cities and neighborhoods, their identity role was doubled. Ritual landscapes in the Islamic era, as the center of gravity of religious life and the generator of social behaviors in different domains and levels, have influenced the landscape of the Iranian cities. The common pattern based on the close relationship with the natural factors has also contributed to the greater success of these spaces as the collective spaces and as a result, they received a significant part of the perception of citizens from the landscape of Iranian cities. In this study, it has been tried to investigate the impact of ritual landscapes on the identity formation of Iranian cities through considering the background of the ritual landscapes and examining their common features, such as the natural characteristics of the formation platform, as well as the spatial qualities and their social effects.

## Hypothesis

Since the beginning of the Islamic era, the common and naturalistic pattern of ritual landscapes has evolved from the social thoughts of Islam and popularization of these spaces; this has led to the formation of a common mindset of the city and its neighborhoods in the minds of the citizens and the identity evolution of Iranian cities at different levels due to the increased sense of social belonging and collective behaviors.

## Research Method, Background, and Questions

This is a descriptive-analytic research in which the data were collected using the library and field method. The library method has been used to explain the concept of the ritual landscape, its history and elements, and the common mental effects influencing the identity of Iranian cities, and field and historical studies have been reviewed to adapt it to the case studies. So far, studies on the ritual landscapes have addressed different aspects of the form and mind, including the naturalism and social aspects of these landscapes. In his articles, Javadi has pointed out to the continuation of the role of natural elements as

One of the characteristic features of ritual landscapes in the Iranian culture, which despite the constant transformation in the post-Islamic period and their changing role from the main elements into the intermediary elements, they have always been presented as a constant pattern and transformed only in terms of the content. Accordingly, in some other articles, the ritual landscape is regarded as a link between the urban life and nature in the form of in-urban and sub-urban pilgrimage and behavioral sites. In his studies, Farzin also emphasizes the narrator, memorabilia, and semantic role of the ritual landscapes in the establishment of the social and religious centers in the city's landscape, and believes in the increasing role of the social impacts in the Islamic era.

The present study focuses on the continuity of naturalism in all periods as a permanent pattern and the social and popular role of ritual landscapes in the Islamic period as a common mental result, and investigates the identity impacts of these landscapes in the Iranian cities.

- How and in what ways the ritual landscape has shaped part of the identity of Iranian cities during the time?
- What are the common features of the form and the mental effects of ritual landscapes after Islam in the Iranian cities?
- What is the impact of ritual-Islamic landscapes on the identity of Iranian cities at different levels?

### **Ritual Landscape and its Background in the Iranian cities**

In the pre-Islamic era, ritual centers were presented as separate spaces in the context of cities and in some cases outside the cities as the fire temples, Mithraea, and Tetrapylons. In the city, Achaemenid temples of the ritual centers went beyond merely placing in the center of the city and put the city in the shadow of their ritual dimensions, which can be seen in cities such as Persepolis and Choga Zanbil. The common feature of ritual landscapes in this era is that they changed into the ceremonial spaces belonging to a

specific stratum in the landscape of Iranian city over time; this issue highlighted in the Sassanid period by placing the fire temple in the center of the city and the formation of flux based on the hierarchical class (Fakouhi, 2004).

However, with the beginning of the Islamic era and the downfall of the Sassanian Empire, ritual centers (in the form of mosques and shrines) are attached to the context of the cities in a unique way and they played a political and social role while belonging to all different classes of the society. That is to say that the construction of mosques, or change in the function and use of other ritual centers was the first thing done at the beginning of the conquest and construction of each city. The Iranian city is the result of the Iranian thought and tradition, which its spaces are defined in connection with the function associated with the sacred matter and it belongs to the public (Mansouri, 2010). Following the historical journey of Imam Reza (AS) to Iran and offspring of other Imams, the formation of shrines and other roles of ritual spaces could be identified; for instance, the neighborhoods and towns that were shaped with the influence of the collective, natural, and ritual nature of the shrines, which they have played a key role in shaping the common perception of the inhabitants of the city and its identity formation (Fig 1).

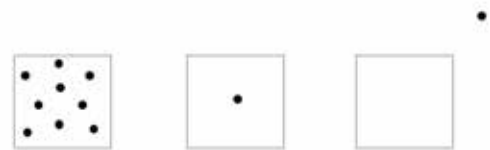


Fig.1. The Increase and Inclusion of Ritual Landscapes in the Context of the Iranian city and its Social Life in the Post-Islamic Period. Source: authors.

### **An Introduction to the Ritual Landscape**

The landscape as a product of human's interaction with the environment has always been shaped by the human's consciousness or subconscious use of the tools and intermediaries in the direction of being a

part of the environment. These tools have shaped a variety of landscapes depending on the various spiritual, mental, and material needs of human. Rite is a subset of culture, and it makes a landscape which is called the ritual landscape (while being a cultural one) due to the importance of ritual symbols (Mansouri, 2013). Rites have been presented as the means of transferring the human beliefs over the time that physical representation of the human activities to preserve them shape the ritual landscapes. These landscapes are of great importance due to their link with the human's past rites and beliefs which provides a context for the preservation and continuity of the identity of societies.

According to Rolf, the formation of the concept of identity in the human environments results from the integration of the physical characteristics, functions and activities, and their understandable meanings and concepts (Daneshpour, 2004). The multiple identity of the city is the result of the merger and the interaction between the content of the form and the mental content of the same spaces. These spaces strengthen the integrated existence and identity of the city through their functions and similar effects on the objective-subjective structure of the city and this will result in the highlighted common social, cultural, and religious characteristics. Ritual landscapes create a strong identity in the cities by having the above mentioned attributes. From the beginning of Islam in Iran, ritual landscapes have become an integral part of the Iranian cities and their close connection with the nature is considered as their recognition factor. These landscapes were shaped by the continuity of form content associated with the Iranian naturalistic culture and its integration with the ritual functions based on the collective spirit of Islam as an integrated network of general milestones and formed the common thoughts of different aspects of the city's landscape in the minds of the inhabitants. Due to the importance of the semantic attributes of the sacred matter along with the physical and functional dimensions, part of the identity of Iranian cities is defined in relation to the religious characteristics and

spatial qualities obtained from them in the context of ritual scenarios, which on the one hand, are affected by the similar physical pattern and on the other hand, affect the perception of citizens from the city.

### **The Similar Physical Pattern**

Considering the role of the will of residents in the urban landscape and the effect of this will in the shape of the city, the identity of the city's landscape is dependent on its body (Atashinbar, 2009). The physical effect of the ritual landscapes in the Iranian cities is seen from the angle of the common form content, that is, the relationship between the sacred place and the natural elements. Respect for the natural elements and their sanctification and reverence has been seen among the various nations around the world and it has a very long history. These elements have existed in the Iranian culture in the pre-Islamic period as a symbol of holiness and respect for nature in the vicinity of Tetrapylons and fire temples, where people practiced ritual ceremonies (Javadi, 2013). The common pattern of ritual landscapes has continued in the form of communication with natural elements in the Islamic period, and with the multiplication of these landscapes and the formation of their social nature, they are developed in the form of collective, recreational, and ritual arenas. The integration of this similar pattern into the context of the Iranian city and its continuation in the historical memory of citizens allows the formation of the integrated content of the city and its social life in the minds of residents of the Iranian cities.

### **Social Identity Resulting from the Ritual Landscapes**

A part of each city's identity is defined in relation to the social identity of its inhabitants, which is the result of a group of individuals' effort to maintain their distinction between material and spiritual life. The most fixations is the result of the individual's psychological connections with the place in terms of social events that he relates them to his lifestyle and thinking, and it is called the social belonging to the

place. According to Rolf, rituals are important factors in creating the sense of belonging and durability in place (Pirbabaei & Sajadzadeh, 2011). In the Islamic period, the continuity of the sacred places accompanied by the respected natural elements in Iranian culture, such as water and trees, provides the required local quality for socialization, and it triggers social events by integrating with the mental quality and social affiliation derived from Islamic collectivist beliefs. Among the effects of these ritual landscapes of the Islamic period on the social identity of Iranian cities is the tradition of recreation-pilgrimage, which in parallel has influenced the formation and orientation of the material and spiritual life of the citizens, with its long history in Iranian culture. In addition, pilgrimage as a personal and religious affair demands a separate culture and its own behaviors in the city. But what makes the Islamic ritual landscape unique is the fixation of all social groups irrespective of the individual, social and class differences in the shadow of the Islamic pluralist view. Therefore, the sense of social membership resulting from presence in ritual-Islamic landscapes is not just an abstract subject, but a collective experience due to the presence in a spiritual atmosphere. The emergence of this in the form of a similar and naturalistic model realizes a two-way relationship between individuals, the sacred place and God in a collective way (Fig 2).

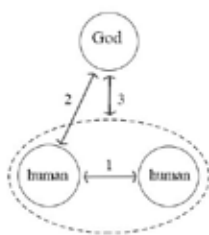


Fig.2. The model of the formation of relationships due to the ritual landscapes of the Islamic period in the context of nature: 1- Interactive relationships among humans (recreation) 2- Spiritual relationship of each person with God (pilgrimage) 3- The collective relationship between people and God (pilgrimage- recreation). Source: authors.

### The Semantic Role of the Ritual-Islamic Landscapes

The appearance of city is like a text full of objective

and subjective symbols which are considered as the cultural, religious, and social characteristics of the people who live there. These symbols have formed based on the intellectual principles of the people of that community; they are capable of negotiating with members of the same community and can make the city a familiar place for them (Soltani, 2009). The meaningfulness of the city's atmosphere depends on the degree of clarity of individual perceptions and is directly related to the historical and collective memories and events. Due to the form similarity of the physical and natural platform, the symbolic role of the ritual-Islamic landscapes in the Iranian city enjoys an objective aspect and in the higher level, due to the occurrence of similar collective and interactive events, enjoys the subjective and perceptual value. The numerous landscapes in some Iranian cities have created a network of similar and familiar symbols in the form of similar and repetitive patterns, which, if they are sufficiently taken into account their role in the city as a whole, will allow for a unified view of the city. In some cases, the presence of these ritual landscapes in a city or a neighborhood can put other aspects of the identity features in its shadow and become a turning point in the perception of the inhabitants of the city or neighborhood of that area.

### Investigating the Impact of the Ritual Landscapes on the Identity of City at Different Levels

Considering the physical, social and semantic influences of ritual landscapes on the identity of Iranian cities and their symbolic role in the residents' perception of their own city, they can be considered as elements that affect the spatial organization of the Iranian city. In the Islamic period, these elements can be distinguished in two main categories of nucleus or centrality, and smaller ones, to the centrality of semi-autonomous spaces such as neighborhoods (Mansuri, 2007). Accordingly, and with respect to the different domains of influence of these landscapes in different scales, the case studies selected for the analysis of



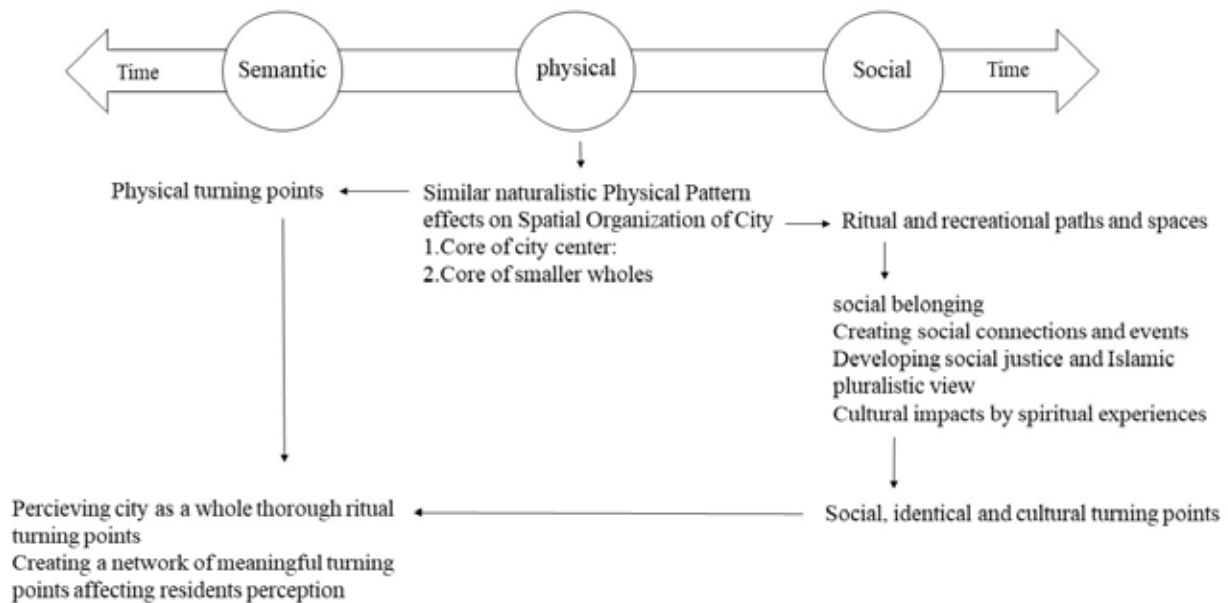


Fig. 3. Different aspects of the influence of ritual landscapes on the Iranian city's identity. Source: authors.

theoretical foundations, have been studied at three macro, middle and micro levels:

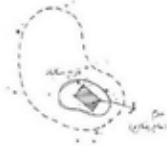
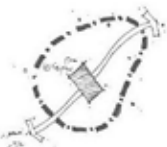
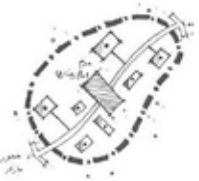
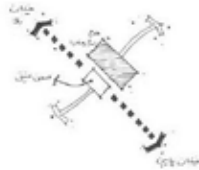

### Macro Level

The extent of the influence of the ritual-Islamic landscapes on the development of Iranian cities is to such an extent that in some cases we see the formation of pilgrimage towns whose historical footprints, as cities, can be followed since the arrival of Islam in the fourth century. In cities like Mashhad, Qom, Astaneh Ashrafieh and Shahreza, the influence of the ritual aspect on the formation of the identity of the city is so much that the city is known by that; in some of these cities, the ritualistic aspect goes beyond the mental dimension of the identity of the city and is reproduced by placing the tomb in the central body of the city and the arrangement of the other spaces around it. How this impact on the urban spatial organization, such as Mashhad, can be verified.

After the funeral of Imam Reza (PBUH) in 203 AH, Sanabad became gradually expanded and initially turned into a religious settlement called Mashhad Reza and Mashhad Tous, and then it became a great city called Mashhad, so that the names of Sanabad and Noghan, and even Tous overshadowed (Qassabian, 1998). At the beginning of the formation of Imam Reza (AS) shrine ritual landscape, the connection of the holy place with natural elements was created in the form of gardens and aqueduct of the village which has been located near the shrine. This content of form, in combination with the holy and collective nature of the space, has brought about the emergence of the core of the current Mashhad in the form of a physical and social turning point. So that, in the following periods, the formation of various physical and social aspects of the city is centered around the shrine's space (Table 1).

Research findings on the identity of Mashhad

Table1. Description of the physical, social, and semantic effects of Imam Reza shrine ritual landscape as the center of Mashhad. Source: authors.

Historical area	Description of physical changes	Effects and Results	Schema
<b>203 AH</b>	The Importance of Sanguabad Noghan after the burial of Imam Reza (AS) (Etemad al-Saltanah, 1783) and the change of the name of the village of Sanabad to Mashhad-al-Reza (Estakhri, 2006: 205). The proximity of the tomb with natural elements of trees and springs (Ibn Battuta, 1982)	Changing the name of the village of Sanabad as a result of the ritual landscape of Imam Reza (AS) shrine	
<b>Seljukian</b>	Construction of market and rampart around the Shrine (Rezvani, 2005: 220)	The proximity of the market as an economic-social institution and the main artery of the city with the shrine	
<b>Teymourian</b>	The construction of Goharshad Jame Mosque and Chaharbagh Regiment building along the Market and rampart (Alizadeh et al., 2015)	Organization of the mosque, citadel and school as the main institutions of the city according to the location of the shrine	
<b>Safavian</b>	Construction of streets around the shrine along the Isfahan school as a new skeleton (high street and down street) The expansion of Old Courtyard as the city's center of gravity (Najib, 2015).	Placing the recreational and social artery in the vicinity of the shrine The advent of the courtyard as a ritual-social arena	
<b>Pahlavi</b>	first	The construction of Hazrat Square and the cruciate streets (Tabarsi, Tehran, Pahlavi, and Shah Reza) and the focus of commercial, economic and developmental applications of the shrine (Motavali Haghighi, 2013, 2: 459)	Emphasis on centrality, relying on new arteries and accessions Strengthening social dimensions through economic prosperity
	second	The plot for the development of the shrine (the plot of Hazrat Square) - the destruction of all the surrounding tissue and locating the shrine structure among a green ring (Rezvani, 2005: 270)	Emphasis on the symbolic role of the shrine Strengthening the recreational - pilgrimage tradition
<b>Contemporary</b>	The plot of developing the shrine and the plan of renovating and restructuring the space around the shrine	The identity finding of Mashhad as the capital of the Islamic world	

show that the mental structure of citizens passes through the central parts of the main city. This means that in the mental collective image, the main paths begin from the historical center of the city (the shrine and its surrounding areas) and extends to the outside (Kalantari Khalil Abad et al., 2014).

### Middle Level

The other influence level of the ritual-Islamic landscapes in Iranian cities is related to the small and semi-autonomous regions, which created the whole of the city with the same and repetitive pattern and formed a network of semantic elements and physical and social turning points. The influence range of such

ritual landscapes is the whole city, which provides a unified view of the city landscape and its spatial organization in the form of a network of milestones. Examples of these cities include Baghshahr in Natanz and Naragh in which the centers of the neighborhoods are repeated throughout the city as ritual turning points consisting of triple elements of water, tree, and holy place in the form of a similar

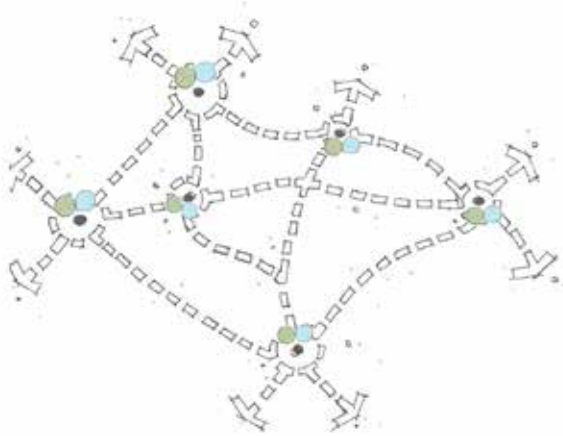


Fig. 4. The schematic pattern of the ritual turning points' network (center of ritual neighborhoods) in Baghshahr of Natanz. Source: authors.

mental pattern (Fig. 4).

### Micro Level

The third level of influence of ritual landscapes on the Iranian city's identity is limited to a neighborhood which shapes the perception of the inhabitants of their own neighborhood by influencing the cultural stability, the sense of social belonging, and physical impact, such as the formation of functions, main arteries, ritual paths and recreational arenas (Fig. 5). Ritual landscapes of this level include the shrines and the small scale ritual elements, such as Hosseiniah (a place where the martyrdom of Imam Hossein is mourned for), Takaya (Theatre of passion plays), and Saghakhaneh (holy drinking place); however, these small scale ritual elements do not, in their turn, create the center of the neighborhoods, but can serve

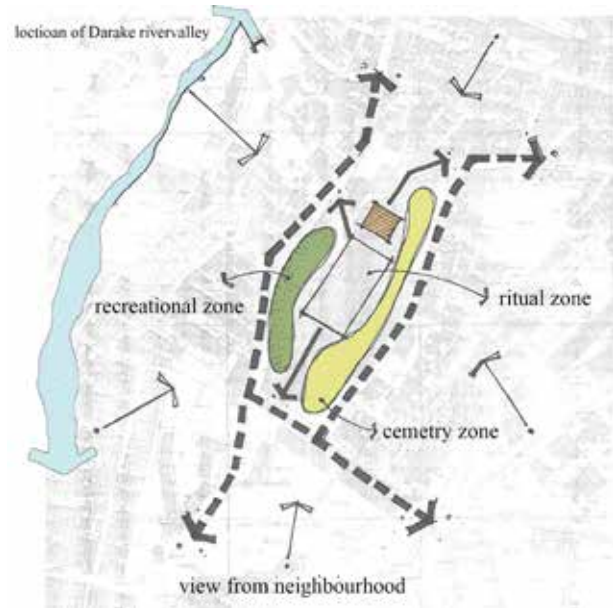


Fig.5. The presence of a shrine in the center of Lavizan neighborhood and the emergence of ritual paths and cemeteries in relation to it. Source: authors

as a complementary element to form the indices and symbols of a neighborhood and cause enhancing the experience of the spiritual sense and social identity

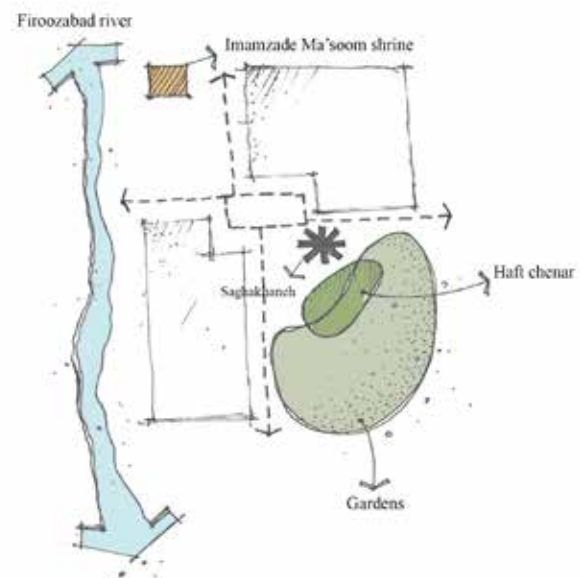


Fig. 6. Ritual landscape of a shrine in the center of Haftchenar Neighborhood and its saghakhaneh (holy drinking place) as a complementary ritual space on a small scale. Source: authors (retrieved from Zandi, 2015).



of the residents of the neighborhood (Fig. 6). Furthermore, as an instance of the way these landscapes influence the social identity and cultural characteristics of the inhabitants of a neighborhood, we are witnesses to the existence of cemeteries in the vicinity of the most ritual and pilgrimage landscapes that changes the look at fundamental issues such as death, it makes the cemetery landscapes more acceptable, and reduces unconventional aspects of the presence of these places in residential neighborhoods.

### Conclusion

Using the naturalistic physical pattern and a social nature, ritual landscapes have always played an important role in identifying the Iranian cities. With the multiplicity and popularity of ritual landscapes in the Islamic period, a part of the idents' perception of the city has been shaped as a continuation of the common pattern of these landscapes at different levels of the city's spatial organization. The overlapping effect of the common thoughts, the Islam's collective thoughts, and the naturalistic thoughts of the previous periods on these landscapes has provided positive environmental and behavioral qualities for the formation of social interactions and it has influenced the social life of the inhabitants. It can be said that ritual landscapes have been changed into an integral part of the city's historical memory and collective life, as the result of the voluntary act of citizens in reflecting their thoughts and beliefs, have benefited from a common physical pattern and a definite position in the space organization of the city, and then, by organizing the important collective events and ritual ceremonies in a naturalistic context. As a result of this persistent mutual physical and mental influence over time, which is directly related to the social life of the inhabitants, the identity of many Iranian cities has been influenced by ritual landscapes. The magnitude and way of this influence have a direct impact on the formation of the city's spatial organization and, consequently, on the social life and the citizens' mentality of the

city, which sometimes by placing in the city center brings its identity and existence in its complete control; and sometimes by placing in the center of the smaller regions, in addition to giving identity to the neighborhoods, defines the city's identity as a network of similar landscapes. In today's conditions, which many Iranian cities faced with social, cultural and identity crises, by recounting the forgotten role of the ritual landscapes and paying attention to them as communal and popular spaces, a great step can be taken to solve these crises and redefine the identity of the city.

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