

Persian translation of this paper entitled:
بازتعریف هستی‌شناختی مکان به‌مثابه امر شهری-رابطه‌ای
is also published in this issue of journal.

Original Research Article

Redefining the Ontology of Place as the Urban-Relational*

Reza Basiri Mozhdehi¹, Seyed Abdolhadi Daneshpour^{2**}, Mehran Alalhesabi³

1. Ph.D. candidate in Urban Design, Iran University of Science and Technology, Tehran, Iran.
2. Associate professor, School of Architecture and Environmental Design, Iran University of Science and Technology, Tehran, Iran.
3. Associate professor, School of Architecture and Environmental Design, Iran University of Science and Technology, Tehran, Iran.

Received: 21/09/2019 ; revised: 07/03/2020 ; accepted: 14/06/2020 ; available online: 21/11/2020

Abstract

Problem statement: The contemporary metropolis faces two sometimes conflicting roles through the discursive and paradigmatic developments in the world: role-playing at the national/transnational level and meeting local-level expectations. Similarly, and because of the multiplicity and diversity of relations between these two levels and the different subjects underlying these dual roles, the ontological definition of “place” in this metropolis has to be changed. Here, we are considering a conception of the existence of the place in which it can adopt the aforementioned complex communications and the probable and unseen conflicts within it as a quasi-object (the contained), and manage it as a quasi-subject (container) and accommodate it.

Research objective: Redefining the ontology of place in such a way that it can mediate as an intermediate layer, i.e. “the urban-relational” between these two role-playing levels: place as a quasi-object / place as a quasi-subject.

Research method: The research paradigm focuses on post-positivist schemata and the post-structuralism approach, and follows the ontology of place as an urban-relational entity in today’s metropolis. The method of this research is qualitative and its type is developmental-exploratory. This research seeks to present a new ontology of the concept of place in metropolis through the review of library documents and the description, analysis, and extension of ideas and theoretical approaches.

Conclusion: place as a quasi-object/ quasi-subject must be a communicative mediator (the urban-relational) between the two different levels of role-playing, thereby regulating the communications of multiple and sometimes heterogeneous subjects and adjust conflicts between them. The mediation coordinates of this urban-relational intermediate layer allow for four spectral states for the level of place-ness: towards minimal place-ness; towards maximal place-ness; towards some extent of place-ness; the probability of anarchy and disorder.

Keywords: *Place, Intermediate/ Mediator, The Urban-Relational, Quasi-Subject, Quasi-Object.*

* This paper is derived from “Reza Basiri Mozhdehi”’s doctoral dissertation entitled “Explaining concept of place as the urban-relational in contemporary metropolis” that is supervised by the

“Dr. Seyed Abdolhadi Daneshpour” and “Dr. Mehran Alalhesabi” in 2018/09/23 at the IUST.

** Corresponding author: +989121263347, daneshpour@iust.ac.ir

Introduction and problem statement

Today's metropolis must inevitably play a two-tier role, in the sense that it must be both parts of an integrated national-transnational network and also resort to local origins. This dual role-playing, as well as the interaction or confrontation of different subjects on these two levels, affects an entity called the place and its ontology. The place in the metropolis, on the one hand, faces the requirements of preserving local identity, and on the other hand, it is concerned with a new paradigm that goes beyond the limits of spatial boundaries and, for example, in the words of Castells (2006), it deals with the space of flows in a global network and the transnational values that follow it (Fig. 1).

This duality has its subjects that, while having two-ways communication with each other as well as with the place (as a quasi-subject and also quasi-object), demand their desired values from it and, in a way, having an influence on the process of production of place (Lefebvre, 1992). In many cases, these values are in conflict or expropriated in favor of more influential subjects. It is this one-sided domination that excludes some of the strata and values they demand and, in a sense, leads to the extinction of place (Augé, 2009; Relph 1976; Heidegger 1971). In other words, based on a "gradient" point of view (Southworth & Ruggeri, 2015, 792), it leads to a decrease in the degree of place-ness. Therefore, it seems that, like any conflict, a mediator is needed to mediate it.

But what we encounter today in the context of some contemporary metropolises is the lack

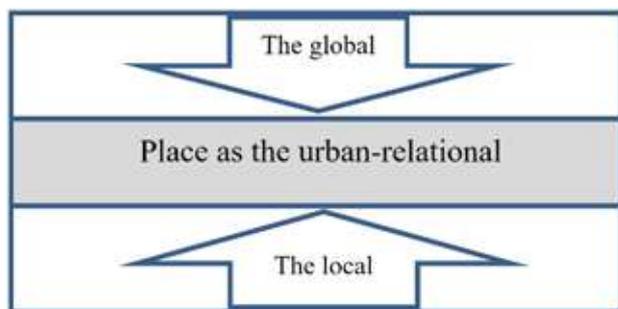


Fig. 1. Place as an intermediate layer (the urban-relational). Source: authors.

or dysfunctional presence of this intermediate level in a way that the macro-level (the national/transnational) and its mainly political-market values completely dominate the micro-level (the local) and its often collective and social values. Thus, the gain of active subjects and agents at the local level from urban places is confronted with a constant quantitative and qualitative decline. In this regard, we need an analysis of these levels and an explanation of the necessity for a mediating level, which we refer to it as "the urban", based on Lefebvre (2003). This layer by manifesting in place as a quasi-object (also a quasi-subject) can be a good communicative interface for the synergistic assemblage of values projected by the macro level and introjected by the micro. The place as the urban-relational which, from a psychological perspective (Bion, 1963), is both a container and also the contained, and seeks a balanced right not only for active subjects at the macro-level (governmental institutions, capitalists, influential political and economic interests, and so on), but also for subjects at micro-level (the public and specifically citizens, and non-humans, including nature and the environment, etc.), relying on the "actor-network" theory (Law, 2000; Latour, 2005) as well as the "Cyborg" theory (Haraway, 1991). The place is the contained that like an object has been produced and regulated by the relations between the subjects of these two levels, and, on the other hand, it is a container that produces and regulates these relations.

Doubts and ambivalences

Are the classical definitions of the concept of place applicable in today's metropolis? In this role-playing at two separate levels of social totality, what is the place and what does place-ness mean? Does tying up with the national-transnational aspects of this two-tier role, necessarily lead to placeless or non-place-ness? The metropolis acts in its macro-role under a national/transnational level and influences the urban spaces by communications,

actions, and interactions under different urban systems. At the same time, on a micro-scale, the metropolis deals with the everyday life of citizens who always find themselves in conflict with values embedded in the macro role, trying to occupy their own space and place; in many cases, they will inevitably succumb to this unequal confrontation (Harvey, 2016; 2017). Taking all the above mentioned into consideration, what is the proper ontological definition of an urban place? And with which role of a metropolis should the definition be linked? In the contemporary metropolis, the relation between these two levels of role-playing is currently a conflicting one, and as a result, the place from which it is produced inevitably has such a conflict, because the values derived from the macro role, not only do not have a significant correlation with the values derived from the micro-level, but they may also be at odds with each other. Can activity, meaning/ imaginations, and physical form (Canter, 1977; Punter, 1991; Montgomery, 1998) and even “ecosystem” (Golkar, 2001, 56-58) and “social considerations” (Zekavat & Dehghan Sadat, 2016, 218) explain the definition of place in today’s metropolis? These multiple elements must, on the one hand, meet the expectations of the local, and, on the other hand, must conform to the aspirations of the national/ transnational. The conflicting values arisen of these two separated levels of expectations will lead to the deterioration of place-ness in the metropolis, stemming from the lack of an interface level that can establish a dialectical and synergetic relationship between macro-level and micro one. This recognizes the necessity of a procedural view and not merely a substantive view of the ontology of place.

How should a place that interacts with different and conflicting roles be a safe haven for its residents and respond to the values they demand, as well as play a role in national and transnational equations and respond to its following values? The benefit of a citizen requires that his/ her place of residence be a safe haven of comfort and convenience, while the

benefit may conflict with the benefits demanded of a metropolis in relation to its national-transnational role (benefits of, for example, locating governmental institutions, military facilities, law enforcement agencies, large multinational corporations, giant commercial centers, and urban superstructures in the metropolis) and it inevitably imposes significant costs on citizens (challenges such as increased traffic jam and congestion, air pollution, time and resource consumption, inequality, etc.). Should the redefinition of the ontology of the place be accompanied by the resort to national-transnational benefits, in spite of all criticism of it? Or must we nostalgically approach the concept of place by resorting to cultural and local origins? Should the terminology use to conceptualize the process of place-making, along with the changes that have taken place in the economic and social spheres, lead to the creation or result in production? In the metropolis, where the exchange value has surpassed the use-value and everything has become a commodity, how can one hope for concepts such as the creation and ignore the concept of production? These questions raise serious doubts for authors in the face of the concepts of place and place-ness in the context of today’s metropolis.

Research paradigm, the ontology and the methodology

The post-positivism paradigm that post-structuralism is one of its approaches, believes in the impossibility of neutral recognition and the lack of immutable and objective laws and considers reality to be relative, and in a way rejects the objectivism and credits subjects; it is contrary to the paradigm of positivism that believes in the possibility of immediate cognition, the existence of objective and detectable immutable laws, and considers the use of reason and experience in cognition (Askari & Behzadfar, 2016, 198-205). The latter gives credibility to the object and rejects the subjective view. From what has been said, the current research paradigm seeks to validate the subjects of place at both the macro

and micro levels, and even addresses place as a subject (a quasi-subject). Based on this paradigm, the entity of place in the metropolis is defined as the urban-relational existence. The place as an urban synthesis consists of a “quasi-object/ quasi-subject”, the subjects attached to it, and the relations between them. In this descriptive-analytical view, the place has an objective-subjective or material-social nature that does not overlook the subjective aspects attached to an object, playing a mediating role (Fig. 2).

The present paper, developmental-exploratory research, seeks to redefine the ontology of place in the metropolis employing the qualitative method, and by reviewing documents and describing, analyzing, and developing theoretical approaches.

Literature review and analysis

• The national/ transnational and the local: a conflict

The contemporary metropolis, on the one hand, should be integrated with a global network and has to be embedded in local origins, on the other hand

(Southworth & Ruggeri, 2011, 495-509). During such a situation, the concept of place is exposed to duality and inside-outside conflict. In describing this dichotomy, numerous theoretical examples can be cited.

Heidegger (1971, 166) believed that as transportation and communications technology overcame distances, a uniformity of near and far resulted, with everything “lumped together into uniform distancelessness”. Norberg-Schulz (2003), who is indebted to Heidegger’s ideas, also believed that qualitative connections and meaning in the metropolis have undergone a kind of tolerance and negligence, and accordingly, placeless has led to non-identity, in turn, it has led to lack of understanding of a particular image of place. Disneylands, fast food restaurant chains such as McDonalds and Burger King, chain stores such as IKEA, etc. are examples of this common belief of Heidegger and Norberg-Schulz. Regardless of the local context, they are the same everywhere in terms of the form and materials used. This means the lack of place character and, consequently, the lack of values embedded in place. On the contrary,

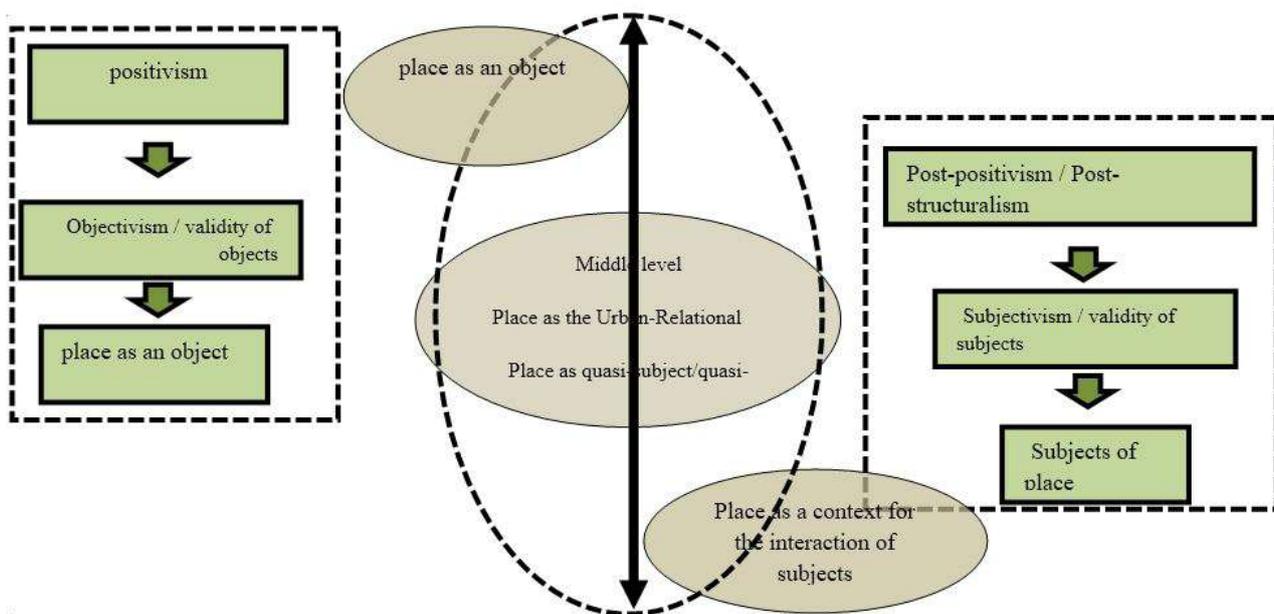


Fig. 2. conceptual research model. Source: authors.

this uniformity for the advocates of globalization is conceived as branding and the creation of shared images in the users around the world.

In his book “Place and Placelessness”, Relph bemoans the loss of place-ness in the post-industrial city (Southworth & Ruggeri, 2011, 501). For Relph, contemporary places have not authenticity and these are so-called “other-directed places” that have been made to attract outsiders and comply with Disneyfication (Relph, 1976, 92–105). In this regard, Augé (2009) in his book non-places referred to situations that seem to be familiar, which are in fact the non-place for destroying identities rather than a place for the birth of an identity. Highways, airport transit lounges, large commercial complexes, and large hotels are clear examples of this so-called urban non-places (Tavakkolimehr, 2017).

In other words, because of these thinkers, place characters have inextricable connections with local contexts and pre-given mentalities of the inhabitants. Therefore, any conceptual sharing that considers place as an identical entity and at the same time can appear in several different contexts, in the same way, is condemned and described as non-place or placeless. Inversely, in explaining the place there are examples that have shown more flexibility and support a more integrated view of the connection with the outside, although they are not unaware of the local authenticity of the place.

Massey (1994, 146-148) took a critical look at Heidegger and Norberg-Schulz, and described the identity of the place as a mixture of dynamic and multiple social relations. The definition of urban design provided by Madanipour (1996, 117) has a more comprehensive and integrated view of the process of production of place. He considered urban design as a part of the economic, political, and cultural process of production of place and introduces place as the final product of this process. Arguably, unlike proponents of introversion who have a limited view, the second group sees the place not as isolated in indigenous communications with a “tribalism” view (Madanipour, 2014, 41), but

considers it as a product of interactions between the local (micro-level) and the national/ transnational (macro-level). The latter conceives the identity of place not as a manifestation of being that is static, but as of becoming in line with the socioeconomic transformations of society in the integrated global network. From this perspective, the place in today’s metropolis is the product of the interactions of the systems that go far beyond its immediate realm, and the place trapped in its boundaries is doomed to extinction.

While Relph (1976) sees the world in dualities, places either have an identity or they do not, they are either authentic or inauthentic, Southworth & Ruggeri (2011, 501) acknowledge that the dichotomy of place versus placelessness does not capture the complex and multifaceted contemporary city, which presents many degrees and shades of placeness. Hence, they use the term “multi-faceted gradient” to explain the concept of place and place identity in the metropolis. Thus, it appears as if places exist in registers of intensities (Metzger, 2014, 91). Appadurai’s classification (1990, 296) of modern landscapes of today’s metropolises (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes) also gives witness to this belief. (Table 1) compares two introverted and integrated approaches from five different aspects.

To mitigate the conflicts between these two

Table 1. Comparison of two approaches to place. Source: authors.

	introverted	integrated
quiddity	being	becoming
identity	static	dynamic/ multifaceted gradient
value	use / social / identity and ...	use + exchange + political + ...
concept	non-place/ placeless	different degrees of place-ness
domain	physical boundaries	space of places + space of flows

attitudes and to create a relative balance in a way that the place in the metropolis can meet the values and norms arisen from the national/ transnational while fulfilling the values of the local, it should be interpreted as an intermediate urban-relational layer and redefined as a moderating context; a quasi-subject/ quasi-object (both container and the contained). We will continue to explain these concepts and the need for such a view.

Explaining the place as the urban: an intermediary layer

Place in the metropolis can be considered as a product of economic and political functions. The foundations of this view can be traced back to the thoughts of Lefebvre in his two books, “The Urban Revolution” (1970) and “Production of Space” (1974), as well as the movement of Situationist International, and especially Debord (1967) as the pioneer of the movement.

Lefebvre (2003, 1) began the theory of the urban revolution with the following hypothesis: “Society has been completely urbanized. Urban society is a society that results from a process of complete urbanization”. Urbanization has superseded industrialization as the leading force, spatial as much as social, shaping late capitalism (Lefebvre, 2000, 101-113). He made a clear distinction between city which is a concrete fact, and the urban which is defined by relations and communications (Torkameh, 2014, 19). Lefebvre described the urban as an intermediate level of a social totality that “no longer merely expresses social relations, it produces and reproduces them as well”. “He saw the social totality as a dialectical articulation of three levels. At the top, he identified the global level (G) –the far order of society – by which he means universal and abstract logics that dominate the other levels below: namely, neo-dirigisme and neo-liberalism, that is to say, the logics of state and market. At the bottom lies the level of everyday life (EL) – the near order of society. Lefebvre considered everyday life as a reservoir

of revolutionary energy – of human subjectivity not fully colonized by the global level (G), and so capable of resisting and transcending its abstract logics. Between these two levels, he located the crucial urban level – a mediating level between the global and everyday life (U/ M). It is projected by the global level and, while retaining the relative autonomy of its own forms-functions-structures, introjects the contested dynamics of the vital level of everyday life beneath it (Goonewardena, 2015, 103 & 105).

The interactions and relationships at the upper level (the far order of society) in which mind is an agency, seek to mentalize space and place in a way that false consciousness is created. This level has its subjects and agents and gives birth to huge administrative, political, and financial buildings, commercial giant complexes, highways, and urban superstructures, military and security lands and real estate, and everything else that for Lefebvre (1992, 33-39) could be conceptualized as “representations of space” or “conceived space”. In terms of the physical instantiations that appeared in the urban intermediate layer, such super-structures are defined under the “spatial practices” or “perceived spaces”. In his special terminology, Soja (1996, 53-60) used the terms “second space” and “first space”, respectively. These spaces and places are the physical representation of the economic, political, and ideological state of society. In other words, they are the projection or embedment of the “far order” on a concrete reality called the city (in this sense, city embodies the far order) and this takes place via a communicative interface called “the urban” (urban relations). Citizens are less likely to intervene in these spaces, and conversely, the possibility of the intervention of the ruling power - the political/ ideological authority and the powerful institutions that organize and govern society - is far greater to attain political and market values.

Examples of the lower level or “near order” in today’s metropolis can be distinguished in social

interactions of citizens in the heart of public places and urban spaces, in cultural symbols such as museums, in monumental or religious places, in natural leisure spaces such as parks and finally in dwellings as a private safe haven. Such places are interpretable, flexible, and open, and provide manifestations of the possibility of citizen intervention and participation. They are often unpretentious spaces that can be summed up for Lefebvre (1992, 33-39) under “representational spaces” or “lived space” and for Soja (1996, 53-60) as “Third Space”. These kinds of places play a role in the urban layer through the body agency and present themselves in the form of bodily practices in space such as strolling, walking, shopping, meeting friends, interacting with others, playing, gathering, and urban carnivals and so on. Understanding and capturing the city emerges in this way. The prevailing values at this level are the use ones or the collective values in general, that belong to society as the whole.

The urban can be defined as a synthetic mixture of two levels, or in other words, two layers, which have both the mentality of the macro and the physical materiality of the micro. This intermediary layer is the interface between the near order and the far one. The urban is not the same as the physical space of the city, but it is the layer that provides a situation for the practices of the other two layers in Lefebvre’s concept. As the product of spatial communications, actions, and practices, the urban signifies both the lived space of the everyday life and the mental space of the macro level. What makes a difference in the type of relationship between these actions and spatial practices in upper and lower layers, is their relational medium (mind and body). For Lefebvre (1992, 33-39), “spatial practice” or “perceived space”, and in the terminology of Soja (1996, 53-60) the term “first space”, represent this layer. The mission of the urban can be defined as follows: striking a balance between political-exchange values and use ones.

These three levels have an interesting correspondence

with the city image presented in the two works of Debord, i.e. “Report on the Construction of Situations” (1957) and “The Society of the Spectacle” (1967). Debord believed that the capitalist city is like a stage of theater that is constantly performing a play, and that calls citizens to watch. These citizens as passive spectators are merely identifying with the heroes of this mesmerizing play, i.e. the political and ideological groups of the ruling power. He suggested that for getting rid of the spectacle, construction of situations have to be done. For him, the most pertinent revolutionary experiments are those which have sought to break the spectators’ psychological identification with the hero through the situation-constructing (Debord, 2006, 14).

The macro-level of social totality (the far order of society) is the dominant layer that Debord referred to as the stage that enchants its passive spectators with a mesmerizing spectacle and captures their mentality (medium of mind). The micro-level (the near order of society) can be considered synonymous with the layer that Debord saw it as a location for revolutionary movements that construct situations and for activating the spectators to change their lives (medium of the body). Finally, the middle level (the urban) in the theory of social totality is the same layer that, according to Debord, is a basis of situation-constructing through communicative practices (both mediums). Here is a battlefield where fighting for situation-constructing has happened; one the one hand, by the force of the macro-level (more powerful and influential subjects) and by the energies coming from everyday life (humans, non-humans and the natural environment), on the other. In the intermediate level, demands and interests of the macro-level might be compromised with norms and values of everyday life. Hence, it leads to a relative balance (Figs. 3 & 4).

As an intermediary layer entitled “the urban”, place requires a synthetic, comprehensive, multifaceted relationship between subjects and agents of two lower and upper levels. As long as such relationship

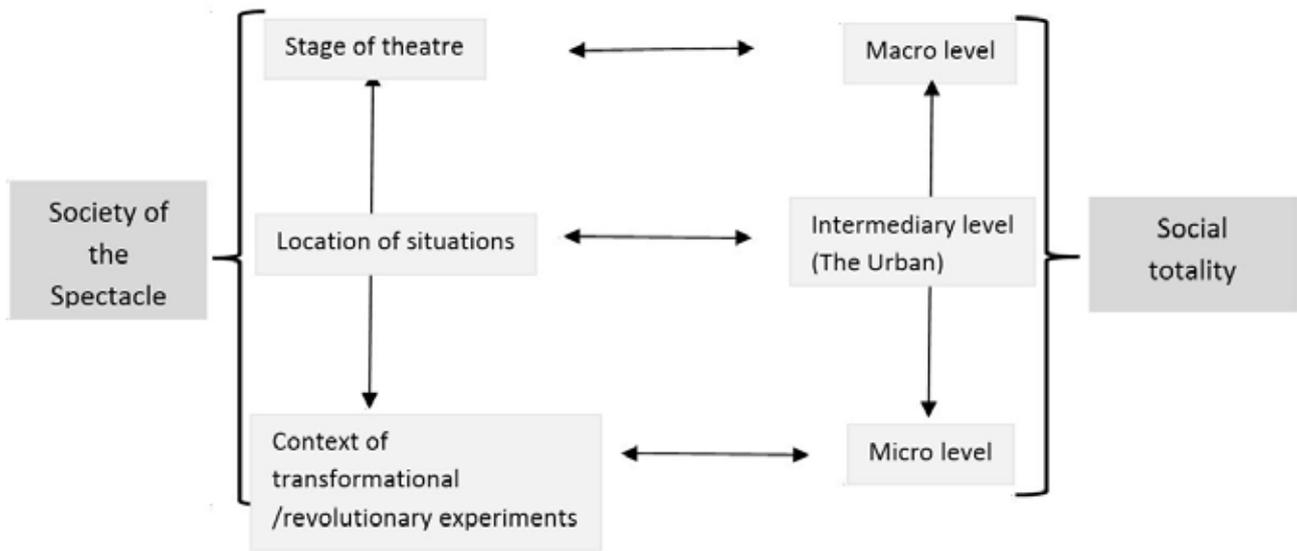


Fig. 3. Explaining “The Urban” in relation to the concept of “Situation” in the Society of the Spectacle. Source: authors.

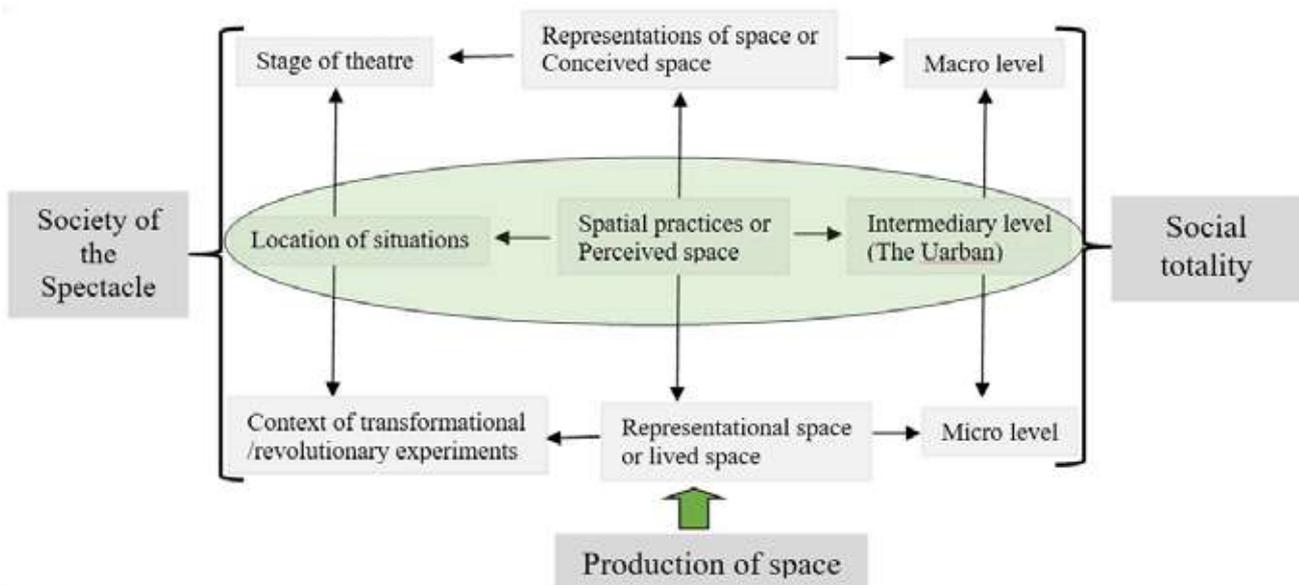


Fig. 3. Explaining “The Urban” in relation to the concept of “Situation” in the Society of the Spectacle. Source: authors.

is not optimally formed from the bottom-up, the concept of the mediating place is not complete. Moreover, such a place itself has a subjective role, and is not a mere object.

Explaining the place as the relational; the superiority of objectivity, the domination

of the subjectivity, or a relation between them?!

The ontological nature of place always faces two fundamental questions. Does the place have a pre-supposed structure? Or is it produced under socio-economic and political conditions?

Metzger (2014, 91) argued that grappling with

the challenging ontological status of place has taken place as either an “objective” entity or as a “subjective,” individual human sentiment or private experience. In the first case, which could be called an objectivist reductionism, all the aspects of places that are apprehended as “soft” or “subjective” are removed from attention. In the second case, what could be called a subjectivist reductionism, place is instead made intelligible through a turn away from the world and solely into the internal realm of individual human psyches. Leading relational geographers such as Massey (2005) and Thrift (1996) instead argued that spatial entities, such as places, can best be understood by focusing on the relations that constitute them—further understanding these relations as being always both social and material.

Abandoning the quarrel over whether to locate the place on either the “social” (subjective/ inter-subjective) or “material” (objective) side of a taken-for-granted division between these, this new view instead proposes to investigate how the agency is produced in the world through the interactions of elements that are normally categorized as belonging to either side of this division; in many cases, these elements are different and heterogeneous.

The traces of this perspective of place can also be found in the concept of “assemblage” by Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 4). The basis of work is a heterogeneous assemblage, avoiding any pre-given distinction between the social or material aspects. An assemblage means a collection of heterogeneous parts or elements in the form of a united body; a whole that emerges from the interrelation of different components and the currents and connections between and among them. Assemblage focuses on the processes of the relationship between heterogeneous things (multiplicity is inherent in it); relations between people, between people and buildings, between public space and private one. Here, there is a cluster of interconnections. It is akin to a “place” in the sense that it is a socio-spatial territory with

some form of identity, however fluid. Assemblage theory cuts across any separation of subject and object; it is fundamentally socio-spatial (Dovey, 2014, 49-50). The concept of “thrown-togetherness” with Massey (2005, 149) follows the same meaning. According to Metzger (2014, 94), independent and heterogeneous elements join together as an assemblage.

The emphasis of the theorists on the socio-material synthetic view means, in a sense, the necessity of the existence of the same intermediate layer that must mediate between the macro (conceived) and micro (lived) levels. The place as “the urban” and as a mediating layer must be able to establish a balanced relationship between the conflicting and heterogeneous values and demands of the subjects located in the two macro and micro levels. Now a question could be posed that if place as the urban is a set of heterogeneous social-material relations (a heterogeneous assemblage), what keeps the components of this heterogeneous set together and gives it cohesion and identity? In other words, what makes a particular place possible as an entity that has a level of integrity? To clarify this ambiguity, we can use the epistemology of the feminist philosopher, Barad in explaining the concept of the “phenomenon”.

Drawing on Bohr’s concept of phenomenon, Barad (2003, 819) wrote that, the primary epistemological unity is not “independent objects with inherent boundaries” but “phenomena” consisting of both subject-effects and object-effects in “dynamic relationality”. As Barad elaborates, “phenomena do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of ‘observer’ and ‘observed’; rather, phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting ‘components’”. Thus, to Barad, *relata* do not preexist relations; rather, *relata*-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions (Metzger, 2014, 93).

From the analysis presented by Barad, and in view of the foregoing material on the urban, a significant correspondence can be made between

place as the urban and place as a phenomenon. As stated in the explanation of the concept of the urban, the relationship between the two conceived and lived layers of society totality in the context of a mediating layer called the urban, is the basis of this concept and such a connection is also evident in the concept of the phenomenon. In fact, the relationship itself (as an intermediary and mediating concept) is a fundamental component that takes precedence over the relation. In such an understanding, the place is also a relational phenomenon that is both objective and subjective. In this sense, and relying on the psychological point of view of Bion (1963), the place is the union between the subjective container and the objects contained. Bion assumes an object that acts as a container aimed at including something that needs to be included (the contained). Through this relationship, both container and the contained are transformed, and a new, third product is born, which has both a subjective and an objective side, or, with the help of Serres' terminology (1995, 88), is a quasi-object (and so is a quasi-subject).

According to Serres, it may be gainful to understand or investigate places as a type of quasi-object (Metzger, 2014, 95). It is "a constructor of intersubjectivity" around which subjects coalesce (Serres, 2007, 225). Serres believed that the conventional object of modern thought lies precisely outside of the relational circuits that determine society. Thus, he attempted to think a new object, multiple in space and in time that is the relational, a quasi-object. Serres used the example of a ball that although has certain particular physical qualities, it is fundamentally a "relational object" rather than an object with its own distinct and separable being. The ball is the core of the team organization and movements and positions are influenced by it. The ball is a focus point around which a network of communications and exchanges of information is shaped, and the ball itself is part

of this network. Hence, it reveals itself to be "more of a contract than a thing". It is a mistake to imagine that the ball in a game is a being that simply manipulated by human subjects; rather the ball itself is creating the relationship between subjects. It is in following its trajectory that a team is created. If the ball is a "quasi-object", as a tracker of the relations in the fluctuating collectivity around it that actually makes it the "true subject" of the game, then the skilled player is perhaps only a quasi-subject in that he "knows that the ball plays with him or plays off him". In such a way that S/ he gravitates around it and fluidly takes the position it takes, but especially the relations it spawns". She/he is a constellation of relations and becomings rather than a being (Salisbury, 2006, 41-42). What Serres wants to highlight is that how an object such as a place, and the group of subjects that sense that object in similar ways, are deeply entangled. So it could be said that the phenomenon of place always appears in the world with its subjects attached, whether willingly or not; caring or not (Metzger, 2014, 95). This relation-based understanding, in which we see the assemblage of independent and heterogeneous elements, considers the phenomenon of place as the product of two-ways interaction between place as an object/ quasi-object and place as an image constructed from different subjects that different elements interact with each other within it.

In relation to places, this insight signifies how a disparate group of subjects might all have a concern or care for a specific place, and how it might be possible that they all carry only partially connecting or even totally conflicting articulations of a place (Metzger, 2013). Mol (2002, 84) called this type of thing a "multiple objects", a thing which "hangs together, but not quite as a whole. It is more than one and less than many". Metzger (2014, 96) argued that in analyzing multiple versions of place that are articulated by various subjects, an objectivist reductionist would

generally consider some (or all) of the versions to be simply incorrect while arguing that there is one correct way - beyond subjectivity - as to how the place should be defined. The subjectivist reductionist would, on the other hand, argue that everyone is right to assert their individual version of the place, claiming that any version is as true as any other since they are all anyway just arbitrary projections of the sentiment onto unknowable, mute matter. However, a relational-materialist perspective recognizing the role of subjectivity, drawing upon Barad would argue that, far from being arbitrary, places as multiple objects can rather be appeared as complex, malleable and sometimes volatile coming-togethers of heterogeneous elements assembled. If subjectivity is always a relational and situated/ placed effect, there can be no “view from nowhere” (Nagel, 1986) - that signifies an objective attitude arisen from unsituatedness of subject - to describe place “accurately” - and any pretention at this, positing an epistemological privilege of object (it means that there is possibility of intermediate recognition of the place as an object without subjects’ bias). Table 2 provides a conceptual classification that implies the need for a coherent relationship between subject and object.

Based on what has been mentioned, it seems that there are different versions of the place which can be partially stabilized depending on the changing position of the subject attached to each version (different degrees of placeness/ gradient view of the place). Of course, the conflicting and different versions of a place for different subjects attached to it, does not necessarily mean an irreconcilable, conflicting, and antagonistic view, as Schmitt (2016) believed, which leads to the elimination of the rival as an enemy and outsider, but it means that there is always the risk of encounters and conflicts over the place, and in this sense, the place, in the words of Mouffe (2005), requires an agonistic view (rivalry; friendly enmity). As Massey (2005, 141) wrote, place as the “thrown-together”

needs negotiation within an intermediary level. It means the same as the urban-relational.

Result and Conclusion: providing an ontological framework

• Place: a quasi-object and quasi-subject as the urban-relational

Today’s metropolis is confronted with new aspects and realities of the concept of place that cannot be ignored in presenting a new formulation of place and its production. Information and communication technology (Castells, 1996, 97-98), capital circulation by urban places or urbanization of capital (Harvey, 1985), multicultural and intercultural relations (Nussbaum, 1997) derived from ethnic and racial differences and diversity in cities (Appadurai, 1990, 1991), and the gradient view of place identity (Southworth & Ruggeri, 2011), all indicate the emergence of new aspects of the concept of a place that differ and even conflict with the classical conception of the place, which has been the concern of many culturalists and contextualists, and even with the perception of the pioneers in definition of place models, which had a substantive view of the place. In the light of these new aspects, the way that place is produced and developed, and that how it is promoted or declined, must undergo serious changes.

The role-playing of the metropolis at both the local and national/ transnational levels leads to a conflict between them over place arising from the active various subjects at these two levels, a conflict between more powerful and weaker subjects. In such a definition, place is the cradle of the influence of both its upper and lower levels (the place as the contained/ a concrete object); a cradle for the emergence of functional and physical effects derived from these two levels either in the form of large-scale structures and functions influenced by the roles of political and ideological sovereignty and its more powerful subjects, or in the form of spaces and activities resulting from the local

Table 2. Categorization of conceptual implications for objectivity and subjectivity of place simultaneously. Source: authors.

thinker	year/area	concept	Significations
Niels Bohr	1927/ Quantum Physics	Phenomenon & complementarity	The ontological inseparability of object and subject under a dynamic relationality
Wilfred Bion	1963/ Psychology	Container- Contained	Combining container (subject) and the contained (object) in the form of a new synthesis
Thomas Nagel	1986/ Philosophy	view from nowhere	Criticism of the unsituatedness of subject and the need to avoid a neutral and objective attitude
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari	1987/ Philosophy and Psychology	assemblage	The aggregation of different heterogeneous elements in the form of a single whole that emerges from the interaction of those heterogeneous elements and the relationships between them
Michel Serres	1995/ Philosophy	quasi-object	The relational object as a subject/ entanglement of the subject and the object
Doreen Massey	2005/ Geography	thrown-togetherness	A multiplicity of different trajectories of heterogeneous elements that converge on a same time and place

role and the lived experiences of the weaker subjects. Modifying the object-oriented view of the place, which is currently in the macro layer, and strengthening active subjects in the microlayer, the new ontological definition of the place as an intermediate layer under the name of the urban-relational seeks to establish a synthetic and dialectic relationship between the two layers (levels) to moderate their conflicts which over time, if the intermediary layer does not work properly and effectively, it will lead to a decrease in the place-ness degree in today’s metropolis. In this sense, the place can be considered as the main propulsion in the changes and transformations of the metropolis, which can also play the role of the subject (place as a container/ an abstract subject). The place is both the content (the contained) that is shaped and influenced by the heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting relationships around it, and container (procedure) that, as Bion (1963) and Serres (1995, 88) put it, like a subject shapes the same relationships, and

in aggregate, borrowing from the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 4), it creates a mediating assemblage consisted of a set of heterogeneous elements.

When this propulsion is in control of the macro-level (the far and hidden order of society), it dictates the supremacy of power over places, whether in the exclusive and explicit up-down form of power that seeks to suppress the lower layers, or according to Foucault (2016; 2018a; 2018b; 2018c), in the form of the dominance of a ubiquitous network - and perhaps hidden and imperceptible - which structurally and somehow fluidly influences the fabric of diverse social relations and people’s lives and leads to concepts such as bio-politics and bio-power, and or even in a hegemonic form, as Gramsci (1983, 2017) believed and it is associated with the influence of a superior group on an inferior dominated group which is to some extent satisfied with and convinced of this domination, without repression and resort to force. The superiority of power in its

various forms at the macro-level of social totality seeks to reinforce the users' abstract conceptions of space through representations of space and to move urban places more and more toward the purposes and manifestations of power, in which case, the urban place loses its actual function and quality, alienating the lived experience of the everyday life of the citizens. Then, we will gradually be witnessing the decline of the degree of the place-ness from a gradient point of view. In this sense, and in a practical realm called the urban as a constructor of inter-subjectivity, a place dominated by subjects of the far order of society and their relationships (the contained in concrete terms) becomes a quasi-object and also a quasi-subject simultaneously, and shapes and organizes other subjects including citizens, as well as the communicative network and exchange of information between them based on its hidden intents (an abstract container).

But if this propulsion approaches the level of everyday life (the near and obvious order of society) (Lefebvre, 2000), one can hope for the lived experience of users of public spaces and of represented urban places in the form of actions to reclaim the city by near order and what ultimately raises the level of place-ness. This is what Debord (1961, 1967, 2006) called situation-construction and "Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life" and quoting Goonewardena (2015, 100-101) is realized at the heart of strategies such as wandering and derive *dérive* in urban spaces, detournement of urban spaces and, in a way, the interpolation, seizure, confiscation of them.

The urban-relational is both subjective and objective; in a sense, a quasi-object and also a quasi-subject. Its character depends on meaningful and value-oriented links in this dichotomy. The heterogeneous and multiple subjects have interactions in a network of functional systems and social relations in sense of an assemblage in the words of Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 4). The benefits and costs of urban places for these subjects should be in a way that they do not feel overwhelmed by the macro-level, nor, in the

words of Madanipour (2014, 41), lead to the form of conservatism and tribalism.

Undoubtedly, in all of the metropolises, there are both the above-mentioned levels and the subjects associated with them, and each is trying to gain a greater share of place. What can strike a balance between these upper and lower layers is the role-playing of the place as a quasi-object/ quasi-subject as an intermediate urban-relational layer that can maintain the independence of forms, functions, and meanings of spaces in everyday life level, while meeting expectations of the macro level. The coordinates of place mediation as the urban-relational indicate that the greater the power of far order in various forms, the lower the level of place-ness in a form of the spectrum, depending on the effectiveness and efficiency of the urban-mediated mediation; but with increasing role-playing of near order, and provided that there is the active mediating of the urban-relational, level of place-ness in a form of the spectrum is increased. Of course, it should not be overlooked that increasing the role-playing of near order, if it is accompanied by a reduction in the effectiveness and efficiency of mediating of the urban-relational, may have consequences such as disorder and chaos (Fig. 5); this is where the public sector mechanism whether as a conceptual subject or in the form of an urban institution of governance seems necessary; the subject or institution, as a result of the layer in which it plays a role, must be the intermediary between the active subjects at its both the upper and lower levels and establish balance to attain public good (Table 3).

This ontological redefinition of the place as an intermediate layer requires the making of a specific type of negotiated relational agreements to justify the interaction of different subjects involved in it and the formation of a mediating assemblage as a quasi-object / quasi-subject. With an intermediary view, these agreements emphasize on convergence on the end results rather than aligning based on fundamental and theoretical principles, and this is an introduction to the future researches of the authors.

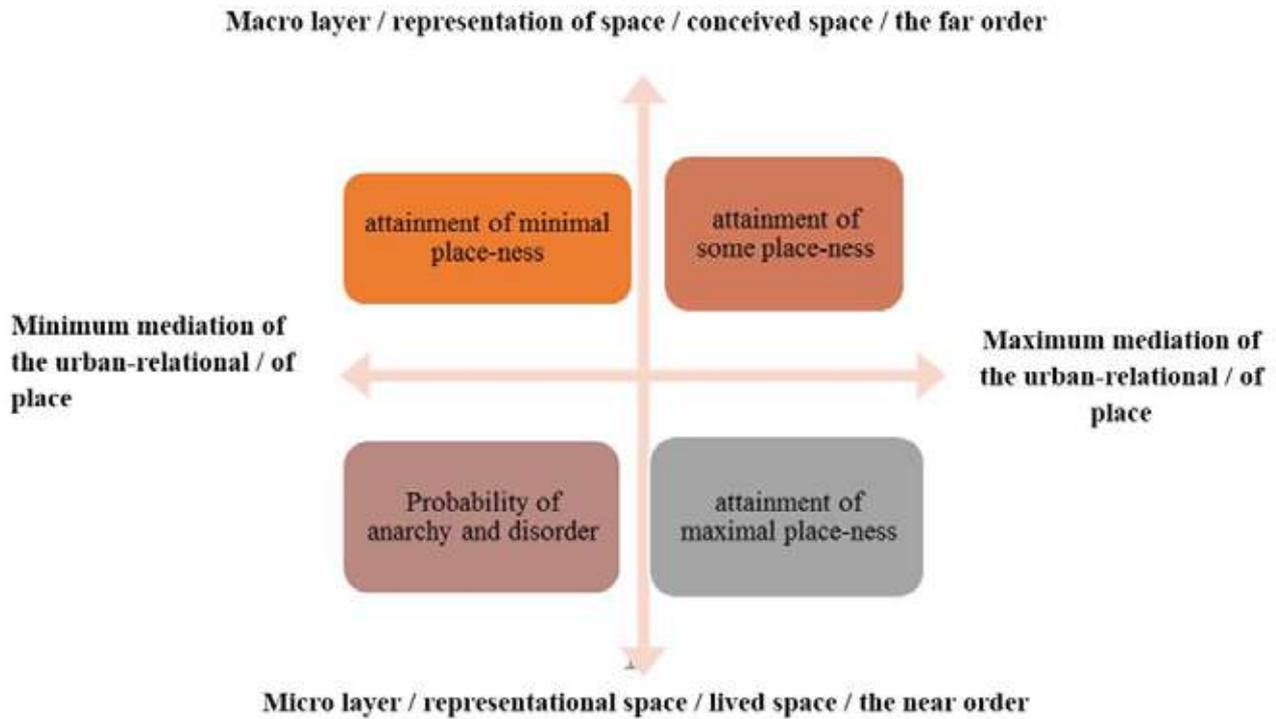


Fig. 5. Coordination of the urban mediation in relation to place-ness. Source: authors.

Table 3. Formulation of place as the urban-relational in relation to macro and micro levels of role-playing. Source: authors.

Layers & Levels	contents	actors / subjects	type of value	space produced	cognitive basis	cognitive tools
Macro layer		governmental institutions; influential political groups; and capitalists (knowledge and money)	political and exchange values	conceived/ representation of space	power, science and knowledge	mind
place as the urban-relational (quasi-object/ quasi-subject)	various interactions, relationships, actions and reactions projected by above and introject below	public sector (and its agency to strengthen the subjectivity of the place itself)	public good	perceived/spatial practice	activities, actions and daily relationships	mind and body
Micro layer		community (citizens and local interests)	use value (collective values)	lived/ representational space	values, meanings, and symbols	senses (body)

Reference list

- Askai, M. & Behzadfar, M. (2016). Be-souye yek goune-shenasi-ye olgouvar-e'i dar me'mari va shahrsazi [Towards a typology of paradigm in architecture and urban planning]. *Methodology of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 22(89), 195-228.
- Augé, M. (2009). *Non-Places: Places Introduction to an Anathropology of Supermodernity* (M. Farhoumand, Trans.). Tehran: Daftar-e Pazhouhesh-ha-ye Farhangi.

- Castells, M. (1996). *Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture: The Emergence of Networking Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castells, M. (2006). *Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture: The Emergence of Networking Society* (A. Aligholian & A. Khakbaz, Trans.). Tehran: Tarh-e No.
- Debord, G. (1961). *Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life*. Paris: The Internationale Situationniste.
- Debord, G. (1967). *The Society of the Spectacle* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). New York: Zone Books.
- Debord, G. (2006). *Report on the Construction of Situations*. Retrived from <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/report.htm>
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dovey, K. (2014). Incremental urbanism: the emergence of informal settlements. In T. Haas & K. Olsson (Eds.), *Emergent Urbansim* (pp. 45-53). London & New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (2016). *Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Trans. F. Valyani). Tehran: Hermes.
- Foucault, M. (2018a). *L'archéologie du savoir* (N. Sarkhosh & A. Jahandideh, Trans.). Tehran: Nashr-e Ney.
- Foucault, M. (2018b). *Surveiller ET punir: Naissance de la prison* (N. Sarkhosh & A. Jahandideh, Trans.). Tehran: Nashr-e Ney.
- Foucault, M. (2018c). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lecture at the Collège de France* (R. Najafzadeh, Trans.). Tehran: Nashr-e Ney.
- Golkar, K. (2001). Components of urban design quality. *Soffeh*, 11(32), 38-65.
- Goonewardena, K. (2015). Critical urbanism; space, design, revolution (R. Basiri Mojdehi, Trans.). In T. Banerjee & A. Loukaitou-Sideris (Eds.), *Companion to Urban Design*. Tehran: Tahan.
- Gramsci, A. (1983). *Lettere dal Carcere* (M. Alavinia, Trans.). Tehran: Agah.
- Gramsci, A. (2017). State and civil society. In *Selections from the prison notebooks* (A. Milani, Trans.). Tehran: Akhtaran.
- Haraway, D. (1991). A cyborg manifesto: science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In D. Haraway (Ed.), *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (pp. 81-149). London: Free Association Books.
- Harvey, D. (1985). *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Harvey, D. (2016). *Social Justice and the City* (M. R. Ha'eri, Trans.). Tehran: Tehran Municipality ICT Organization.
- Harvey, D. (2017). *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (K. Kalantari & P. Sedaghat, Trans.). Tehran: Agah.
- Heidegger, M. (1971). *Poetry, Language, Thought* (A. Hofstadter, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Law, J. (2000). On the subject of the object: narrative, technology, and interpellation. *Configurations*, 8(1), 1-29.
- Lefebvre, H. (1992). *The Production of Space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Lefebvre, H. (2000). *Writings on Cities* (E. Kofman & E. Lebas, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc..
- Lefebvre, H. (2003). *The Urban Revolution* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press
- Madanipour, A. (1996). *Design of Urban Space: An Inquiry into a Socio-Spatial Process* (F. Mortezaei, Trans.). Tehran: Sherkat-e Pardazesh-e Barnamerizi-e shahri.
- Madanipour, A. (2014). Creativity, diversity and interaction: urban space and place-making. In T. Haas & K. Olsson (Eds.), *Emergent Urbansim* (pp. 37-43). London & New York: Routledge.
- Massey, D. (1994). *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Massey, D. (2005). *For Space*. London: Sage.
- Metzger, J. (2013). Raising the regional Leviathan: A relational-materialist conceptualization of regions-in-becoming as publics-in-stabilization. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37(4), 1368-1395.
- Metzger, J. (2014). The subject of place: staying with the trouble. In T. Haas & K. Olsson (Eds.), *Emergent Urbansim* (pp. 91-99). London & New York: Routledge.
- Mol, A. (2002). *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the Political (Thinking in Action)*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Nagel, T. (1986). *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Norberg-Schulz, C. (2003). *Architecture: Meaning and Place* (V. Norouz Borazjani, Trans.). Tehran: Jan-e Jahan.
- Nussbaum, M. (1997). *Cultivating Humanity: a Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Punter, J. V. (1991). Participation in the design of urban space. *Landscape Design*, (200), 24-27.
- Relph, E. (1976). *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion Limited.
- Salisbury, L. (2006). Michel Serres: science, fiction, and the shape of relation, *Technoculture and Science Fiction*, 33(1), 30-52
- Schmitt, C. (2016). *The Concept of the Political* (Y. Jeyrani & R. Namazi, Trans.). Tehran: Ghoghnoos.
- Serres, M. (1995). *Genesis* (G. James & J. Nielson, Trans.).

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- Serres, M. (2007). *The Parasite*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Soja, E. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Southworth, M. & Ruggeri, D. (2011). Beyond placeless-ness: Place identity and the global city. In T. Banerjee & A. Loukaitou-Sideris (Eds.), *Companion to Urban Design* (pp. 495-509). London: Routledge.
- Southworth, M. & Ruggeri, D. (2015). Beyond placeless-ness: place identity and the global city (N. Pourmohammadreza, Trans.). In T. Banerjee & A. Loukaitou-Sideris (Eds.),

Companion to Urban Design (pp.783-802). Tehran: Tahan.

- Tavakkolimehr, N. (2017, August 26). Dar jostojou-ye hoviyat dar namakan-ha-ye shahr [Exploration of identity in urban non-places]. *Shargh*. p. 11.
- Thrift, N. (1996). *Spatial Formations*. London: Sage Publications.
- Torkameh, A. (2014). Yaddasht-e motarjem [Translator's note] to *Dialectical Materialism* by Henri Lefebvre (A. Torkameh, Trans.). Tehran: Nista.
- Zekavat, K. & Dehghan Sadat, Y. (2016). Dimension to develop quality in public realm and a management model for creation of places. *Armanshahr*, (17), 215-224.

COPYRIGHTS

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with publication rights granted to the Bagh-e Nazar Journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Basiri Mozhdehi, R., Daneshpour, A. & Alalhesabi, M. (2020). Redefining the ontology of place as the urban-relational process. *Bagh-e Nazar*, 17(90), 5-20.

DOI: 10.22034/bagh.2020.202498.4316

URL: http://www.bagh-sj.com/article_118421_en.html

