

Viewpoint**Development eastward as a solution offered by the urban management of Mashhad to relocate the Holy Shrine to the center?!**

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Abstract

The development of the city of Mashhad in terms of shape and geography has been northwestward for various reasons. Currently, the city has a northwest-southeast extension. In recent years, the authorities in charge of the city management of Mashhad, for known and unknown reasons, have attempted to impose the development of the city towards the east. Among the reasons mentioned for this big decision in the city's spatial organization is relocating the shrine from the center to the margin of the city. Based on the concept of centrality, this paper attempts to critique the approach of Mashhad's urban management in making such metropolitan decisions and explain how the lack of technical perspective adopted by the managers in understanding the concept of "center", has reduced this concept to a simple matter such as "being in the middle" in the city. With the city's development towards the southeast, relocating the Holy Shrine to the center (middle) of the city has been the authorities' intention. However, the "center" has a mental and abstract concept beyond its place in the organization of the city space. The opportunity created by this urban management approach can promote justice in its various dimensions, such as spatial justice and economic justice, and bring attention to marginal areas. Nonetheless, any planning, design, or intervention on the scale of the city requires specialized investigations and a holistic view of the city. Otherwise, it will be doomed to failure, so it will have no result other than wasting resources.

Keywords: *Mashhad, Development, Center, Urban Landscape.***Introduction and statement of the problem**

For some time, the local media has frequently discussed the development of the city of Mashhad toward the east. The primary necessity mentioned in these sources is the expansion of marginalization eastward by relocating the shrine from the center to the west in recent years due to the city's growth, and the promotion of spatial justice. This note seeks to answer this question: Will the development to the east be the correct solution to solve the mentioned problems? Assuming the city's expansion towards the east, will the Holy Shrine return to the center of the city? Is centrality synonymous with

being in the middle of the city? Intending to clarify the hidden dimensions of this critical decision, the authors of the paper examine the problems raised using a holistic and systematic analysis. It critiques the approach of urban management to solving them. For this purpose, each issue is briefly mentioned. The reasons for their occurrence are examined, and then, focusing on the concept of the center from an urban landscape perspective will raise criticism from this point of view. According to the general nature of the city as a dynamic system, any planning, design, and intervention at the scale of the city require a single and general understanding of its components. In other

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words, knowledge of the city requires understanding it as a connected whole consisting of interconnected parts. To gain such knowledge, it is necessary to analyze all the components of the system and integrate them into a coherent whole. Otherwise, any intervention will lead to the birth of an incomplete and ineffective part of the city. Moreover, examining the different influencing layers is required for any sustainable development. Regarding the first and third stated necessities for development eastward, the emergence of the problem of marginalization in the east and the occurrence of spatial injustice in the city can be a result of various reasons. Reasons include economic inequality in the distribution of wealth and economic resources (United Nations, 2020); unemployment and a lack of access to jobs can lead to marginalization (International Labor Organization, 2020).

These reasons and more will cause massive migration from less privileged villages and cities to big cities and will increase marginalization in the city.

Among the other prominent cases expressed in the necessity of development to the east are the removal of the shrine from the center (being in the middle) of the city and its extension to the marginal part of the city due to the city's development westward in recent years (Fig. 1). This paper critically analyzes the mentioned proposition by explaining the concept of centrality in the city from the perspective of landscape expertise.

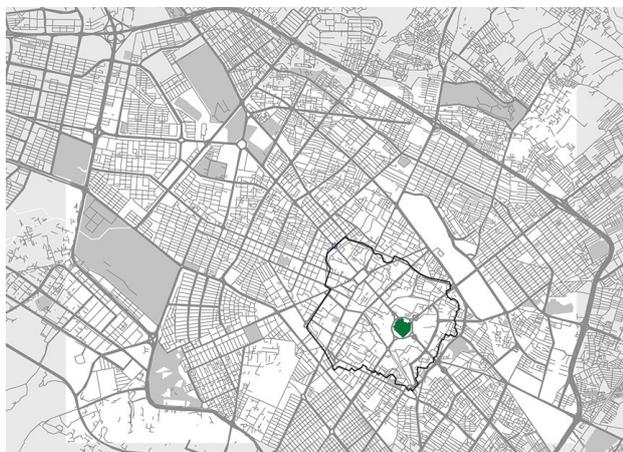


Fig 1. The geographical location of the Holy Shrine in the spatial organization of Mashhad at present. Source: Author.

Criticism of Structure

In the tradition of Iranian cities, meaningful and functional events coincided spontaneously in one place, and the concept of centrality with its location, which was not necessarily the geometrical center of the city, creates centrality (Abarghouei Fard & Mansouri 2021,55, Mansouri, 2019, 53). The city center is an objective-subjective concept crystallized in physical, activity, and meaning layers arising from the collective memory, the sense of attachment to the place, the city's identity, and its symbols. The nature and identity of the city emerge in the "center" and are recognized by the citizens as the city's identifier (Mokhles, 2017, 16) (Fig. 2). The citizens' constant connection with the center of the city as a religious, social, and functional complex highlights its role of centrality in the spatial organization of the city and makes the shaping order of the city undeniable.

In a sense, the city center is a landscape, an objective-subjective concept whose objective aspect is crystallized in the physical and activity layers and its subjective aspect in the semantic layer arising from the collective memory, the sense of attachment to the place, the identity of the city and its symbols. The essence and identity of the city emerge in the center and are recognized by the citizens as the city's identity. The center is the memory and the heart of the city's social life; It is a place for public activities, the production of collective memories, identification of the city, and a place to improve the city's quality. In the traditional city of Iran, semantic and functional events coincided spontaneously in one place, and the concept of centrality with its location, which was not necessarily the geometrical center of the city, created centrality. The arrangement of the neighborhoods around the center and their connection with each other through a physical structure that branched off from the center, the consensus of uses, religious, economic, social, political, and public interest buildings, and the intersection of the roads on the concept of the center as the heart, emphasized the physical and metaphysical nature of the city.

The description of the city center can be classified based on scientific articles and historical sources under the three

main headings of gathering public spaces, markets, and squares, each of which emphasizes specific dimensions of the center's identity.

Combining concepts from the above dimensions makes the meaning of the center as a landscape that relies on objective and subjective aspects more apparent (Mansouri, 2019, 51).

The lack of proper knowledge of urban management regarding the concept of centrality in the city's spatial organization causes a mistake in understanding the place of the shrine in the city. Indeed, the primary core and reason for the existence of Mashhad City lie in the location of the Imam Reza Court around which the structure of the city and its grains have been formed. Therefore, the holy shrine is the center, and pilgrimage is the main function, the reason for the city's existence, through which the main meaning and identity of the city have been defined. However, the interventions in the area around the shrine over the past few decades, due to the detailed approach of the comprehensive and detailed plan and the weakening of the main core of the city, new centers were gradually formed in the city. These interventions removed the centrality of Mashhad from the shrine and disturbed the spatial organization of the city.

As a result, the city of Mashhad has been considered less as a whole and more as a collection of nearby habitats, and thus the heart of the city has been separated from its body. In other words, the loss of the credibility of the "centrality" of the Holy Shrine in Mashhad has been mainly caused by the extensive interventions of the municipality in the context around the Holy Shrine and the widespread destruction of the structures and systems governing this area over the last three decades, rather than the city expansion north-eastward. Historical and sociological studies show that powerful political and social groups have always sought to seize power in the center of cities to dominate society. This matter has appeared in the center of Mashhad due to the accumulation of power and wealth more than in other cities. This government effort can be read in the period after the Islamic Revolution.

Just as evacuating the areas around the shrine from

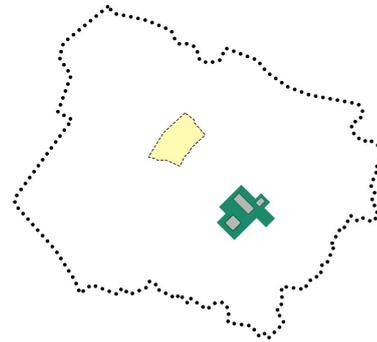


Fig. 2. The location of the shrine and the center of Mashhad city in the spatial organization of the Qajar period city. Source: Authors.

residents and citizens can be the root of many social problems, the uni polarization of the center (Holy Shrine) and the dominance of the political view on the management of affairs in the current era, gradually create a social gap and result in the confrontation of social forces. Moreover, it has become a government in Mashhad, which can be seen in creating new civic centers in the city. In fact, before the unilateralist behaviors and actions, the Holy Shrine, as a center of historical milestones used to be a place of gatherings, demonstrations, and civil protests of the people of Mashhad. However, in recent years, only religious-governmental gatherings have been witnessed in this area, and political and social protest gatherings are observed in the new centers of the city (Ahmadabad - Vakilabad). This event shows the separation of the religious center from the city center and represents the social divide in the city.

Conclusion

The center is considered the most important element in every city's spatial organization. That might explain why its strengthening or weakening will affect the entire city. Social and civic centrality is one of the criteria for being a center in a city. A center where a good variety of social species can be found encourages people's contribution. The loss of credibility of the centrality of the Holy Shrine in Mashhad can be considered one of the results of the dominance of mandated and sovereign interventions. The holy shrine and its surrounding areas, which have been the center of all social strata and tastes, have been separated from the city due to tough decisions and

measures such as the indiscriminate expansion of the borders and the physical expansion of the shrine with the aim of political and economic display. Moreover, by taking power from the social forces in favor of the ruling forces, it has lost its prestige and dignity as the “city center” to a great extent.

Therefore, the homogenous structure of the city, which was based on the market and the organic axes connected to the shrine, has been broken, and the center as a religious pole is physically developed to serve the pilgrims, pushing the neighbors to the marginal of the city. If the existing deficiencies are removed, the opportunities facing this urban management approach can promote spatial justice, and bring attention to marginal areas or poor and deprived areas of cities. Addressing the social, and economic needs of the areas, and their infrastructure development will lead to the improvement of citizens’ lives and the reduction of social inequalities. However, its weakness is the simplistic nature of the problem and the need for action by planning, landscape, and urban geography specialists because the city cannot be managed by order. The geographical development and expansion of the city have their own basics and specialized requirements that should be included in this speech. In any case, what is clear is that the argument of relocating the shrine from the center to convince the people (especially the religious class) to develop to the east is false and demagogic.

Suppose urban management seeks to establish spatial justice and solve the problem of marginalization instead of imposing its demands on urban development plans. In that case, it should seek scientific and practical solutions and programs by asking specialists. However, from the writer’s point of view, rejection of authoritarianism, favoring pseudo-science, the predominance of political views instead of expertise, a lack of transparency, and the hidden speculations of the land by super-owners can be followed behind such comments and decisions.

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