

## Collective Space, A Declining Concept Assessing the Social Quality of Urban Spaces in the Historic District of Gorgan\*

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### Abstract

The study of social nature of urban spaces has been considered in different literature and approaches. Urban space and public space are defined based on the physical and functional aspects of space and the right of presence and equal use for all people; But collective space, as a newer concept, does not rely on physical dimensions- space versus mass - and functionality - the presence of individuals and is defined based on the formation of social interactions and joint activities. Today, with the diminishing social dimension of space in contemporary cities, most collective spaces have been reduced to public spaces. The importance of evaluating space social inefficiency in the historic district of cities such as Gorgan is due to the vulnerability of this part of the city and the positive effects of successful collective spaces on the social dynamics. Assessing the social dimensions of urban spaces located in historic district of Gorgan, the historical position, scope of public, collective spaces in the city's space, social life organization and the study of changes in these spaces following recent developments and management measures provide the opportunity to discover the current social nature. This study aimed at investigating the evolution of urban spaces in the historic district of Gorgan, based on physical, functional and semantic components. In this regard, the social developments of space have been measured and examined in accordance with the consequences of internal developments and external measures applied to the context. Markets and neighborhood centers are types of urban spaces in the historic district of Gorgan, each of which has varying degrees of social status due to changes. The city's central market still has a social impact due to its economic role and features such as functional diversity and accessibility. However, the neighborhood center space has lost its social role due to gradual changes in texture over the past hundred years, including a lack of alignment with the development process, an inability to meet the daily needs of residents, and a change in demographic structure. Restricting the managerial measures to physical measures, and the mere continuation of the collective space center's semantic aspects, focusing on their ritual function, have perpetuated social life as a memory of the past albeit periodically and temporarily.

**Keywords:** *Gorgan urban landscape, Public Space, Collective Space, Social Relations, Neighborhood Center, Mmarket.*

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## Introduction

One of the factors in the emergence of cities is the eternal need of human beings for gathering and social interaction. The necessity of being together to meet various human needs such as trade, production and many other factors has led human beings to social life (Revault, 2010). The evolution of lifestyles over time has affected the social role of urban spaces, especially in the historic district of cities. The city of Gorgan, dating back to the Zoroastrian period (Kiani, 1987), is an example of the historical continuity of social life in the context of urban spaces. Space can be considered as a tool through which social relations occur. Space is a social product and production, and each society produces a specific type of space based on its unique characteristics (Lefebvre, 2016). Thus, the contexts that underlie human social life are formed in different ways and allow different degrees of socialization. In the historical cities of Iran, social life has been mainly in the centers of neighborhoods including urban complexes such as plazas and markets. The historical district of Gorgan is no exception to this rule and is formed from the gathering of three green neighborhoods of Sabze Mashhad, Maidan and Naalbandan (Khanlari & Mirsaidi, 2010) with a focus on the main market and its side routes. Due to the role of neighborhoods as semi-independent social units, part of the social life of the historic district of Gorgan has been formed as spatial order of these neighborhoods and their centers. Given Gorgan's economic importance as a market for Iranian and Turan goods since ancient times (Moeini, 1965) and the social value of the market in all Iranian-Islamic cities, another level of social life in the main Gorgan market and its sub-orders has always been going on.

The present study examined the different types of urban spaces with social function in the historic city of Gorgan and seeks to answer the following question:

What are the internal and external components and

factors affecting the social status of urban spaces in the historic district of Gorgan and what trend have they gone through in their lives?

## Research Methods

It is a qualitative case study with a holistic view and detailed observations of various factors (causes) including components, environmental factors, processes and events that affect the social (effects) characteristics of urban spaces in the current situation. In the first step, to explain the literature and define the concepts of public space, collective space and their various dimensions, library data collection method is used. Then, to clarify the process of evolution of social spaces, historic districts of Gorgan are examined using field study method.

## Literature review

Social relationships are established through space and are limited by space. Social spaces are characterized by the presence of people and are optional environments. In the literature of the cities, the contexts that underlie social interactions have emerged with different definitions, functions, and components, and have undergone an evolutionary process. In defining urban space, the main criterion for measurement is physical characteristics, and based on the contrast between space and mass, urban space is presented as a gap among building masses. Public space is one feature distinguishing democracy from urbanization, the main feature of which is universality and equal right to access and presence for all members of society. Collective space is a newer and more productive concept of urbanization defining society as a set of individuals interacting with each other. How social spaces work socially is the subject of study by various specialists, including designers, environmental psychologists, and sociologists. Each specialist considers different factors and characteristics necessary for the

socialization of urban spaces, which in a general summary can be classified into three categories of physical, functional and semantic features (Fig.1). In this paper, the evaluation of urban spaces is based on the components extracted from previous research to clarify how the social nature of urban spaces has changed.

### Historical form of collective spaces in the historic district of Gorgan

The spatial organization of the city is the result of the crystallization of the mentality of the citizens in their living space or the order between the roles of the elements that introduce the city as a whole and system (Mohammadzadeh & Mansouri, 2017, 21). Elements of the spatial organization of the Iranian city, including small towns (urban complexes and neighborhood centers) and the communication structure of the city (often the market and its sub-orders) have a social role and nature. Today, in the historic district of Gorgan, neighborhoods have a little social role, but the city's old bazaar and its order still affect the district's social life due to its active economic role. Accordingly, we will continue to examine and evaluate the role of markets and

neighborhoods in shaping the social life of the historic district of Gorgan.

### Market as dynamic context of social relations formation

In the past, many important social, economic, political, religious and cultural activities of Iranian cities were formed in the market. In Middle Persian language, the market was named vachar which was not the only center for buying and selling goods. In general, Vachar was commonly referred to as places where the people of each city met several times a year to address social issues, as many social movements emerged from the markets (Pirnia, 2013). Market is the backbone of the Iranian city and the foundation of its socio-economic development.

The numerous functions available in the market created an integrated performance system in Iranian cities that provided a significant portion of the various social and economic needs of the people of the city. In other words, the market space was not only for trade and business activities, but also as an important highway for the city including important urban functions such as the Grand Mosque, religious schools, monasteries, baths and other urban

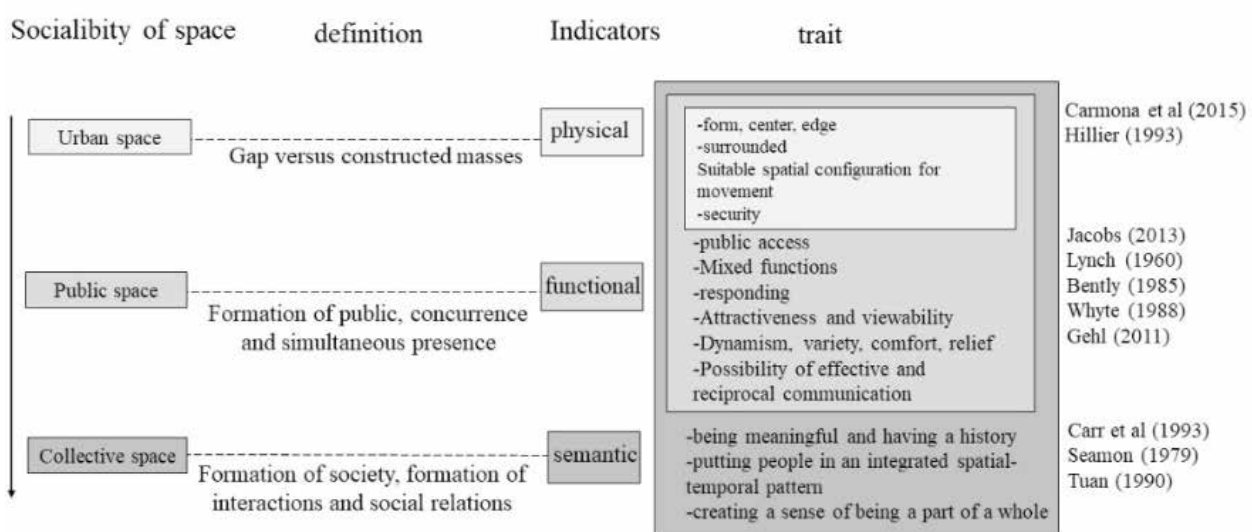


Fig. 1. Summary of findings on the characteristics necessary for the formation of collective space. Source: Authors.

facilities. In recent decades, the market has lost its main place as the beating heart of the Iranian city and the prosperity of this social space has diminished. The social role of the market varies depending on its position in the city's spatial organization. Nalbandan Bazaar, as the main structure of the old Gorgan, is located next to the Grand Mosque (Rezvani & Habibi, 2014, 7) and is the main bazaar of the city and an important part of its space organization - a good connection with other components including the territory, small whole and center. Despite the changes in the surrounding texture, this market reaches one of the most important neighborhoods or streets on each side and is the connection point of different neighborhoods. This synergistic relationship not only strengthens the Nalbandan market as a collective space, but also affects the center of the surrounding neighborhoods and improves their social functioning. Diverse uses and accessibility have not been ineffective in continuing the social role of this market (Fig. 2). During the Safavid era, with the expansion of the city and the formation of new neighborhoods such as Maidan neighborhood, around 952 AH, Emadiyeh school was built on the eastern side of the center of Darbno neighborhood (one of the sub-neighborhoods of Maidan neighborhood). The school, along with the water depot, cemetery, baths, various shops, Golshan Mosque, multi-use complex of Takaya and major elements of the Darbano neighborhood, include part of the texture of the old bazaar of Astarabad (<https://www.eligasht.com>). In the current situation, Maidan Bazaar is a sub-order of the city's historical bazaar and operates on a different scale from Nalbandan Bazaar in Maidan neighborhood. Also, the construction of Rajaei Street - as a kind of amputation - has destroyed its connection with the market of Nalbandan and other neighborhoods and has prevented its social growth and dynamism. The market position of Maidan in the city's space organization has weakened and its social role has gradually diminished.

Comparing these two markets, we can conclude

that in the historical cities of Iran, the position of a collective space in the city's space organization and its relationship with other components of the city is one of the factors of its social success. The more collective space, as a part of a city's infinite components, is related to more components, it will be more successful in its social role.

### **Gradual decline in the social role of neighborhood centers**

Instead of being limited to a simple concept and existence, the city only makes sense if it is divided into smaller units on the basis of distinctions and the reduction of space. The neighborhood in the Iranian city is a physical-social unit that is usually formed as a union or ethnicity. Independence in managing daily affairs and self-sufficiency in meeting needs have made neighborhoods known as independent complexes. The common feature of all neighborhoods in Iranian cities is to have a social, functional and semantic center that has provided services at the neighborhood level.

After the arrival of Islam, the Gorgan Spatial organization had an organic star model. It includes the Grand Mosque in center and residential areas along the routes branching from center (Tabarsa, Pasian Khomri & Hosseini Foujerdi, 2018, 9). The cohesive neighborhood network has a special social system in the historic district of Gorgan, and the center for neighborhoods has been a place for gatherings, visits, and mass ceremonies (Rezvani & Habibi, 2014, 7). Currently, the physical structure of the historic Gorgan district is based on the neighborhood system, but the neighborhood centers do not function as they did in the past. The reasons for this inefficiency include the following:

- **Gradual loss of user diversity**

Multiplicity is the source of the socialization of urban spaces. The multiplicity of situations and the variety of ongoing activities are the drivers that socially change the character of the space, and



Fig. 2. Continuation of social life in the historical market of Nalbandan, Gorgan, Photo: Seyyede Yeganeh Nabaei, 2019.

provide a variety of uses and facilities as a way for all segments of society to be present (Amin, 2008). The mixed uses and diversity of activities in the physical organization of urban spaces is the basis for the presence of individuals and by providing the possibility of continuous use of space and making it spectacular, it plays an important role in the prosperity of collective spaces (Jacobs, 2013, 35).

Whyte (2005) cited the influence of external factors on the formation of social relations, and considered external stimuli to be intermediaries that establish a communication between strangers<sup>4</sup> (Whyte, 2005). Functional diversity is a factor in sustaining the social role of individuals in the region and where they live. In Iranian cities, neighborhood centers played an important social role at the neighborhood level by being located at the intersection of main thoroughfares and having service facilities and spaces. Gorgan's old texture neighborhoods with different functions such as bazaar, market, takiyeh, graveyard, water storage, mosque, etc. (Mirkatoli & Modanloo Joybari, 2012), respond to the daily needs of residents and are platforms for the formation of events and social relations. However, today, the diversity of uses in Gorgan's historic district neighborhood center is not enough to meet the daily needs of individuals. Jobs and service functions that contribute to the day-to-day dynamism and vitality

of neighborhoods by providing day-to-day services have been removed from downtown neighborhoods, and the few uses in the current form are productive, such as blacksmithing and tool sales. Most of the uses around Gorgan's downtown squares have become rigid and lifeless façades, and in some cases, small-scale and multiple uses have been replaced in favor of large-scale uses including the performance of Mosalla on the south side of Sabzeh Mashhad square which is probably located instead of a few smaller uses and has disturbed the scale of the space. The combination of these factors has diminished the presence of individuals and the establishment of social interactions in these neighborhoods (Fig.3).

#### • The evolution of the demographic structure and the decline of the social capital of the texture

With the creation of Piercing streets<sup>5</sup> in the historic district of Gorgan, newer uses have been formed along them, and this has led to the evacuation of neighborhoods from residents (Fig. 4). With the rise of the Qajar dynasty and the introduction of Western models and its imposition on the fabric of the city, the body of the historic district of Gorgan gradually disintegrated. These changes became more severe with the beginning of Reza Khan's rule. So far, many old neighborhoods, such as Pasaru Sarkhajeh and Naalbandan neighborhoods, have become dilapidated problematic areas; Residents are forced to leave the texture or are willing to endure the current situation due to lack of sufficient capital (Rezvani, Behzadfar & Habibi, 2017). Such a transformation led to the transformation and decline of the social capital<sup>6</sup> of the six formerly cohesive neighborhoods, and as social dimensions diminished, the centers of the neighborhoods declined from being collective to public space for people who did not have much contact and interaction with each other.

#### Pathology of historic district management actions

The historic district of Gorgan, with an area of



Fig. 3. Large-scale and non-service use of Mosalla in the center of Sabzeh Mashhad square, Photo: Ghazal Nickzad, 2019.



Fig. 4. Placement of new uses along the Piercing streets of the Pahlavi period, Source: Ranjbar, Moradi & Mousavi sarvine baghi, 2015.

about 200 hectares, is the oldest historical district registered in the list of national monuments (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/>). The set of measures taken to modernize the historic district of Gorgan and its collective spaces has remained only in the area of hardening measures such as flooring and wall construction, and in the field of management, the implementation of sidewalks of the historic district has been limited to superficial measures due to lack of proper infrastructure.

#### • Failure to build sidewalks on the texture

Motion space and social space are closely related. The more prevalent the pedestrian movement in a space, the more social that space will be. This attitude is in harmony with the role of the street as a social space. At the same time, the social space and the motion space are manifested in the form of mobile pedestrian streets that connect the destinations and buildings and carry out activities in the space (Cermona, 2015, 73). The connection between locations and their integration contributes to the diversity of pedestrian movement and the better quality of public spaces (Hillier, Penn, Hanson, Grajewski & Xu, 1993). In general, routes are more popular than stops such as Park and Plaza which are places for certain groups of people, and routes such as streets and boulevards are places where the majority of the community feel comfortable (Thompson, 2002).

However, a purely physical approach to routes makes moving in urban spaces a purely experiential movement. In the historic district of Gorgan, although at first sight restoration measures and arrangements are pedestrian-centered, historical district alleyways have become parking lots. due to lack of infrastructures such as the existence of public parking lots and uses that encourage the presence of pedestrians, arrangements have become anti-self and despite the efforts for facilitating the presence of pedestrians and encouraging social interactions, the space has practically become a space with a

riding priority (Fig. 5).

- **Physical construction instead of landscaping**

From a phenomenological point of view, public spaces are seen in two forms: regular spaces and non-regular spaces. Unlike normal spaces, unrestricted spaces lack a clear design and order and are free from “functional tyranny.” Discovered and abandoned spaces are among the uncovered spaces. These spaces often respond to people’s needs in a more comprehensive way and are socially successful and inclusive (Dovey, 2000; Rivlin, 2000). In the historic district organization of Gorgan, a series of measures have been taken to address a number of physical details, such as furniture and planting plans. Although this has led to visual improvement, it has challenged the specific character of the texture. It can be said that addressing the physical details in the chain of management measures to improve social life has been the last step, and in the historic district of Gorgan, more important issues such as paving the way for the presence of individuals by revealing the semantic potential of the environment have been neglected (Fig. 6).

- **Current situation; The semantic continuity of temporal collective space**

Symbolic agreement in showing the general and social aspects of life is one of the characteristics of collective spaces (Francis, Giles-corti, Wood, & Knuiman, 2012). Successful public spaces increase the opportunities for participation in public activities. In this case, collective spaces will be a container of common meanings and beliefs (Carr, Francis, Rilvin, & Stone, 2011, 344). As mentioned above, Gorgan, like other historic cities in Iran, is based on a neighborhood system. Takaya, as one of the main elements of the neighborhood center, are identifying and unifying factor to the surrounding uses and the stability of the historic district of this city (Nazif, 1390, 2). The social spaces of the city are the place of continuous production of symbols and places that give the culture of existence, framework



Fig. 5. Purely physical measures for pedestrian and social construction of Gorgan historical crossings, Photo: Ardalan Tayefeh Hosseinlou, 2019.

and meaning (Goheen, 1998). The Takayas of the Qajar period were the social spaces of the cities, the gathering centers of the residents of the neighborhood and the center for the promotion of local identity. In fact, Takaya were the social bases of the neighborhood centers that were used during the days of mourning. Gorgan, as one of the most important cities of the Qajar period, has important reliefs formed by the old neighborhoods around the city; These Takayas include Tekiyeh Pasroo, Tekiyeh Nalbandan, Tekiyeh Mikhchegaran, Tekyeh Sabz Mashhad, Tekyeh Sar Pir known as Abbas Khani, Tekyeh Dushanbe, Tekyeh Darvazeh No, Tekyeh Abbas Ali, Tekyeh Bani Karimi (Mousavi Sarvinch Baghi, Moradi & Ranjbar, 2015) (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6. Purely physical measures and landscaping in the renovation plan of Sabzeh Mashhad neighborhood, Photo: Hedieh Boroumand, 2019.



Fig. 7. Gorgan city settlement during the Qajar period. Source: Ma'tuofi, 1996, 327.

Today, the semantic role of neighborhood centers as collective spaces in historic Gorgan district is seen as a memory of collective space that is used temporarily.

According to the people, during religious days such as Muharram, certain paths are formed between these centers of the neighborhoods and great social-ritual events are held. These events indicate the importance of the semantic dimension of collective spaces, which are manifested in Iranian cities such as Gorgan, in the form of ritual spaces. Although these centers are deserted most days of the year, they have not lost their value due to the strong events and concepts that take place in them, and they are still a priority in selection of the people of the neighborhood to form collective events. On religious occasions, numerous social and participatory activities take

place in these places, and these activities remind the meaning and concept of these neighborhood centers as collective spaces (Fig. 8).

## Conclusion

Collective spaces in the historic district of Gorgan have historically existed in the form of markets and neighborhood centers. Today, they have changed in the long run due to macro-level management measures such as street construction and the lack of facilities to meet the daily needs of residents. However, among the components affecting the success of collective spaces, semantic and functional characteristics have a more lasting role than physical characteristics, respectively, and are less affected by external actions and developments. Today, in the historic district of Gorgan, with the exception of special cases, there is no collective space, and urban spaces, in the most optimistic case, have only a public aspect. Only the footprints of the city's former social life can be seen in the city's central bazaar, which continues to be active and socially influential due to its historical role and functional and service aspects, and neighborhood centers, thanks to their previous role, are shaded and reminiscent of collective spaces which are active during certain time periods such as rituals and mourning (Table1).



Fig. 8. Forming social and public space interactions in Gorgan's historical centers, photo from: <https://www.nabro.ir/>.



Table 1. Developments of collective spaces in historical district Gorgan, Source: Authors, 2018.

Spaces	Characteristics	Internal factors of evolution	External factors of evolution	Present role
Markets	-Communication role -Number of uses and multifunctional nature -Putting people in an integrated spatial-temporal pattern	-The position of the city space organization becomes less important -Limiting the sphere of influence	Recent developments in texture, including street constructions	daily public space while maintaining the historical role of services
Center of neighborhood	-Service uses -Responding to daily needs -Conveying a common meaning for all residents -Creating a sense of being a whole	-Gradual loss of user diversity -Not keeping pace with the needs of the day -Developing demographic structure	Success of management actions: -Physical (wall construction only) -Functional (presence of pedestrians)	public space Suitable for ritual performance

## Endnote

- Public space was first proposed by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in the 1970s to solve social rises, and is largely based on the general understanding of the public as a set of individuals who claim to be so and so and has been formed as one of the principles of democracy (Mansouri, 2015).
- Indicative indicators of the city's space organization, based on research conducted in articles (Mansouri, 2013; Mansouri, 2007) are: centrality (historical memory and the point of activity and mental gravity of the city), small wholes ( Semi-independent neighborhoods and complexes within the city), structure (physical and communication element connecting other components) and territory (area with which residents feel a sense of reciprocity) (Mohammadzadeh & Mansouri, 2017, 22).
- Takaya (the plural noun of tekyeh) are the places of religious ceremonies in Iranian cities.
- White refers to this as the process of triangulation. External factors such as benches, fountains, telephones, sculptures, etc. can help in this process (Whyte, 2005).
- The construction of Piercing Street is an orderly action by the city administration to carry out political, social, cultural, economic and other reforms. These streets have been built in old and impenetrable textures and have often been criticized for their negative impact on the mechanism of urban areas (Atshinesbar, 2015, 55). In the first Pahlavi period, with the adoption of the first urban management law called "construction and development of roads and streets" in 1933, the construction of influential streets began in many cities of Iran, like Gorgan; It consisted of construction of Imam Khomeini and Falah Shahr-dari streets in the first Pahlavi period and the construction of 15 Khordad Street in the second Pahlavi period.
- Social capital is the norms and networks of communication in civil society that facilitate collaborative actions among citizens (Putnam, quoted in Civil Society, 1988).

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