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Urban Image as a Reflection of Urban Identity A Study of the Link between the Concepts of Urban Image and Urban Identity in the Historical Texture of Gorgan*

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Abstract

The city of Gorgan is an epitome of the historical urbanization of the northern regions of the country. It is aesthetically distinguishable from the cities located in the deserts of central Iran. The recent processes of urban renewal have deteriorated the aesthetic identity in the historical texture of the city as they have created new architectural and urban patterns lacking identity. This study can be of significance as it explores the issue of urban identity and the role of neglecting it in the renewal processes of the historical texture of Gorgan. Concerning this issue, this paper endeavors to investigate the following questions: What factors or factors are involved in the development of Gorgan's urban image? How can the consequences of neglecting the aforementioned factors be interpreted in the processes of historical texture renewal of Gorgan? This paper is of the descriptive-analysis type and the data used to answer the research questions was gathered through both field and library research. The key conclusion of the research was that the urban identity is affected by climate and regional parameters which are envisioned in the urban image and neglecting such factors in the process of urban renewal can lead to deterioration with regards to the inhabitants' sense of space and belonging.

Keywords: *Urban Image, Urban Identity, Urban Landscape, Historical Texture, Gorgan.*

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Introduction

Cities can perhaps be considered among humanity's most significant achievements in history as their establishment created a safe environment for human beings to gather and demonstrate their ideas regarding their ways of life. To satisfy the common desire for safety, stability, comfort, prosperity, and peace for human societies, innumerable cities have been built throughout history. Despite the more or less shared motivation behind their creation; different cities each have a distinguishable urban image of its own. There can be identified as a unique type of habitat for every city ever built by human beings. In other words, as every human being is unique and no two completely identical people can exist, their physical creations and the fruits of their intellectual abstractions are also unique and it seldom happens that two artifacts made by humans are wholly identical (Daneshpour, 2004). This lack of resemblance among different habitats has led to a gradual unique identity for each one of them over time (Ibid). So it can be said that different urban images simultaneously convey and demonstrate different identities. To put it in simple words, what distinguishes different peoples is their clothing and what distinguishes different cities is their urban image (Zahedan & Lavasani, 2014). That is why a desert city and a mountain city each envision a different identity as the urban image of each of these man-made landscapes is different and by examining their urban image, their urban identity can be distinguished. The issue of identity and the different factors involved in its formation with regards to how it shapes urban image has become an important topic. This issue is doubly significant concerning historical cities as their historical textures are interfered with under the pretense of renewal which in most cases is carried out with little regard for the concept of the urban landscape, urban image, and its identity-making elements resulting in the deterioration and destruction of distinct urban images and consequently urban landscape.

Research Questions

In the light of the points elaborated earlier concerning

urban image and identity this paper explores the following questions:

- What factors affect the identity of a city's urban image?
- How can the consequences of neglecting the aforementioned factors in the process of urban the historical texture renewal of Gorgan be interpreted?

Methodology

To answer the first research question, the concepts of urban image and urban identity will be elaborated and identity-making elements will be pointed out. A descriptive analysis of the concept of urban image and the process of its formation according to identity-making elements will follow. To answer the second research question, the measures taken in the process of renovating the historical texture of Gorgan will be examined critically. The data used in this research was collected using two methods: The library research method was used for a better understanding of both theoretical concepts discussed in the paper and also the historical texture of the city of Gorgan. However, in examining the different elements of the urban image, data was collected mostly through field observation and employing photographic and croquis sketches.

Theoretical Concepts

• Urban Image

Urban image is one of the topics closely linked to the concept of the urban landscape. In other words; the urban image is one of the components of the cityscape (Ibid). To elaborate on the concept of the cityscape, Cullen points out visual elements such as land, shape, category, and use, on the one hand, and non-structural characteristics involving sense, emotion, and values, on the other hand (Cullen, 2007, 28). That is to say, Cullen believes in a structural and non-structural aspect for the cityscape. This is the same characteristic Mansouri (2004) relies on in his definition of the urban landscape as "the citizens of a city's sense of understanding derived from its various symbols (structural aspects)

and the meanings (mental and connotative aspects) they connote.” According to this view, urban landscape consists of two parts: one is the structural (objective), and the other is the non-structural (subjective) aspect. Urban image is essentially the part of an urban landscape that can be visually observed and seen; In other words, it includes all its structural elements, surfaces, and crusts (Fig. 1).

The significance of urban image (visual) is because it enables the viewer to read an environment as they would read a text. Only through a system of signs provided by the urban image can the less-concrete aspects of the urban landscape be understood and critically examined. Such aspects of the urban image include civil life, wealth and poverty, the hegemony of values of institutions, taste and aesthetic values of subcultures, historical depth, safety and security, adherence to social norms and codes (Golkar, 2008) The urban image can be considered a sophisticated whole consisting of structural signs whose examination can reveal the social, economic, and cultural characteristics of a society. Urban image of habitat can act as the grounds on which its inhabitants and visitors can perceive, cognize, and assess their living environment; a process that leads to the reading of the urban landscape (Ibid).

• Identity

In his article on urban identity, Piran (2005) points out that the word identity is generally considered to signify meanings such as the state of complete resemblance, sameness and oneness, uniqueness, and the personal characteristics of a certain individual (individuality). These concepts refer to states of being that make a phenomenon, entity, or individual distinguishable from

another. They are moreover linked to characteristics owing to their existence to the actions performed by the aforementioned phenomenon, entity, or individual and reveal its essential attributes manifest in its visual and structural form (Nasr, 2017). Identity can be thus considered the externality through which distinction and individuation are possible; a collection of signs, symbols, physical, biological, cultural, and psychological effects that distinguish an individual, group, ethnicity, or culture from another (Moharrami, 2004, 67, as cited in, Atashinbar, 2009). Identity is then inferred from a set of visual and non-structural characteristics whose unified effect is a certain abstract and connotative quality, which helps with the process of distinguishing and differentiating phenomena from one another. This process is referred to as “identification” which helps an observer identify phenomena in their mind. In other words, distinguishing characteristics and attributes, which helps shape the identity of a phenomenon not found in other phenomena creating a sense of uniqueness and originality. It is notable; however, this process relies on subjective aspects of a phenomenon (Va’ezi & Alimardani, 2018); (Fig. 2).

• Urban Identity

There can be named two different approaches regarding a city. The first would be the mechanistic approach whose view of a city is a mere structural one concerned with the four main functions of shelter, work, recreation, and transport. This approach is rooted in Le Corbusier and CIAM’s views towards the functionalist city, and their globalist and internationalist outlook on urban planning. The proponents of this approach claim that through omitting the cultural, geographical, economic, and social characteristics, identical cities can be constructed throughout the world. Naturally, the cities constructed with this approach in mind were indistinguishable. Following the mechanistic approach and its results, a new approach emerged emphasizing the role of non-structural aspects of cities and other man-made habitats in understanding them. This approach viewed the city as a living system (organism) consisting of not only

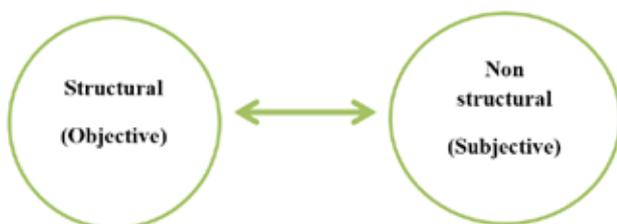


Fig. 1. The different aspects of the urban landscape. Source: Authors.

structural aspects, but also the relationships between the inhabitants, their experiences, the social processes, and also of nature (Park, 1984 as cited in Atashinbar, 2009) and argued that the city as the manifestation of a society's thought and culture cannot emerge identically in different civilizations (Negarestan, Teymouri & Atashinbar, 2010). The city thus possesses a unified quality that individuates it among other landscapes or cities and this distinguishing quality is referred to as its identity (Lynch, 1984, as cited in Shi'eh, 1997, 4). So each man-made environment, as is the case with each human being, entity, or phenomenon, possesses a unique identity affected by environmental factors providing the possibility to individuate and distinguish one element from another (Daneshpour, 2004). Urban identity and individuality are derived from the general image or in technical terms, the landscape of a city (Zahedan & Lavasani, 2014). Urban image, as a component of the urban landscape, can thus be said to be of key importance to Urban identity.

• Identity-Making Elements in Urban Image

In the light of what was discussed earlier, the identity of every city can be considered to embody itself in its urban image which consists of different elements such as streets, communication networks, texture, cityscape, turning points, form and shape of buildings, scale, gradation, mass to space ratio, density, permeability, urban furniture and signs, materials, executive details, and color. Each of the said elements can individually reflect the urban identity and be affected by it (Kasravi, 2012).

However, the important question to consider is which factor or factors are capable of altering elements of the

urban image to create a certain identity in an objective individuality. The appearance of a city can in the first observation be said to be affected by natural elements and its geographic locality. Therefore studying the climatic parameters of the context of human activities can help us understand and analyze such activities better. This is significant since different lifestyles and human activities are factors in shaping the urban image of a habitat. Climatic parameters are affected by geographic and environmental factors and can be considered the first identity-making factor affecting the urban image of a city and its various components. These factors can include the following: precipitation, temperature, humidity, wind, surface and groundwater resources, geological structure, typography, fauna, etc (Gharab, 2011). Another factor that can be involved in shaping the urban image of a city is regional parameters including the anthropological, cultural, economic, and social aspects of a region. Sciences, technology, skills, systems of thought, means of production, customs and traditions, and religious beliefs all belong to this category (Ibid, 59); (Fig. 3).

Research Findings

The old city of Gorgan is situated in the central part of Turkmen Sahra/Gorgan plain and is considered the most important part of this cultural region. In Sassanid Era, Gorgan used to be a military fort equipped with tall towers and battlements. Throughout the earlier centuries of the Islamic and Ilkhanate Periods, it continued to function as a city and served as an important hub under the rule of the Alid, Zyarid, Samanid, and Seljuq dynasties of Islamic monarchies. The Qajar Period is a peculiar part of this city's history and the flourishing it enjoyed during this period cannot be merely due to convenient climatic position of Gorgan and its proximity to the Silk Road but can be assumed to be also the result of the Qajar shahs' foreign policymaking with regards to the Russian Empire (Ghelichkhani, Etessam & Mokhtabad Emraei, 2014). Examining the evolution of what is considered the



Fig. 2. The process of identification. Source: Authors.

texture of Gorgan indicates it was the juxtaposition of the three earlier neighborhoods of Sabzehmashhad, Meydan, and Na'lbandan that has been to date expanding in different directions especially the east and the southeast. Mosques, schools, bathhouses, tekyehs, bazaars, historical monuments, and Imamzadehs are significant elements found in the city's old texture. In 1932 the historical texture of Gorgan was recognized as part of the country's national heritage in Iran National Heritage List. The areas covered in the list coincide with Qajar territory of the city. During this period, Gorgan boasted six large neighborhoods including Sarpir, Darbenow, Sarcheshmeh, Mikhchehgaran, Na'lbandan, Sabzehmashhad, and Meydan each consisting of smaller neighborhoods (Fig. 4). Each of these neighborhoods that mostly survive to date, could have been considered independent urban entities boasting not only their bazaar, but also their mosque or tekeh, bathhouse, school, and exclusive ab Anbar (Mousavi Sarvinehbaghi, Moradi & Ranjbar, 2015). In this texture, the residential part housed most of the population requiring active city services. The original spatial organization of the city follows an organic star pattern with the great mosque and the square nearby at the center and residential areas built along the main routes stemming from the main body (Behzadfar & Rezvani, 2015).

The different elements of this texture, according to natural factors such as water, land, and sunlight, as well as social, cultural, and economic elements, have preserved their unique urban image to date, which distinguishes them from their counterparts in other cities in other areas such as those situated in the central region of the Iranian Plateau.

• Urban Façade

Façades can be considered one of the most important elements in which identity can manifest itself in a city's urban image. Moughtin & Tiesdell (1999) suggests dividing the visual façade of a building into three horizontal parts (Fig. 5):

- 1- The podium or base that connects the building to the ground and street which generally attracts the viewer's attention
- 2- The middle zone including the main floors and windows
- 3- The roof, which connects the building to the sky through the roofline

The podium or base is mostly made of bricks and stone to protect the higher sections of the building from the high humidity of the earth in Gorgan and simultaneously reinforcing the walls. In the middle zone, adobe mortar and brick are used. The materials used in the mortar are locally procured and the substance is used to both protect the building from rainfall and to

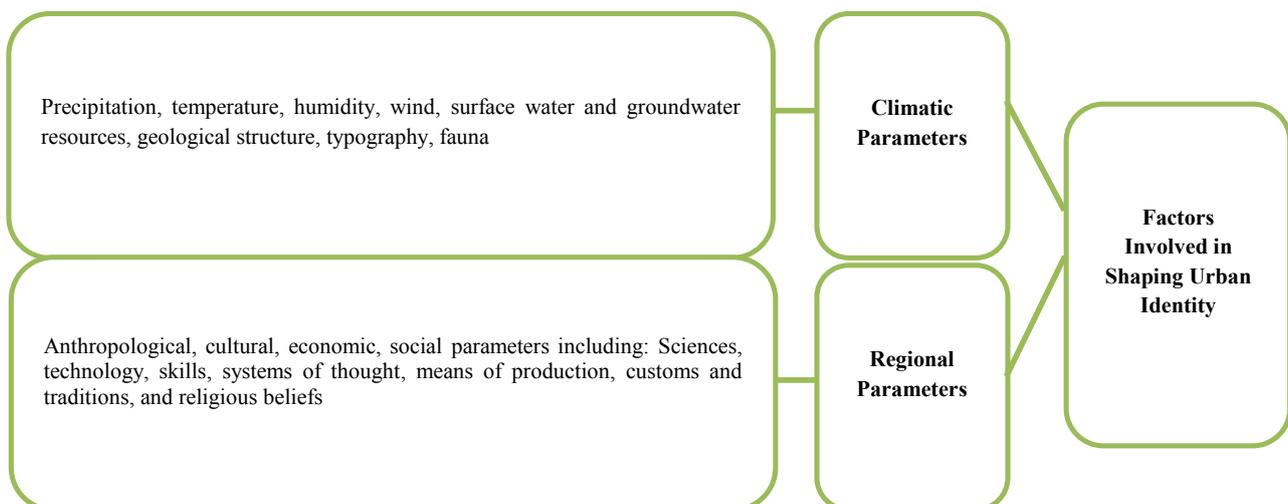


Fig. 3. Factors influencing the different elements of urban image. Source: Authors.

decorate. In this section of the façade one of the key elements is the use of openings in the walls and also in the balconies which help create a semi-open space and thus an extrovert tendency in the structure contrasting the introvert characteristics observed in the cities in the central regions of the Iranian Plateau. The said extrovert quality in the urban façades of buildings in Gorgan can be attributed to the city's climate and the demanding necessity for natural ventilation. Extrovert designs help form a pleasant visual link between the inhabitants and the outside wooded landscape surrounding the city and enhancing the. Moreover, the openings and balconies in the façade add an element of variety and appeal to the urban image of the city as a whole. This is further emphasized through the proportioning of these

openings and balconies as they tend to stretch vertically thus creating a semi-open atmosphere and also lead the view towards the roofline. The roof features a skyline consisted of both horizontal and diagonal lines and is generally covered with clay covering. The edges of the roof façade tend to have a protruding element called "shirsar" which is a roof gutter to protect the roof against the heavy rainfalls common in the region. Since it is built parallel to the lowest section of the roofline, shirsar not only helps drain the excess rainfall on the roof but also protects the façade of the building from direct rain and snowfall. It, furthermore, functions as a canopy casting a pleasant shadow over the openings in the façade and balancing the light in the interior space. In addition to these practical functions and thanks to its

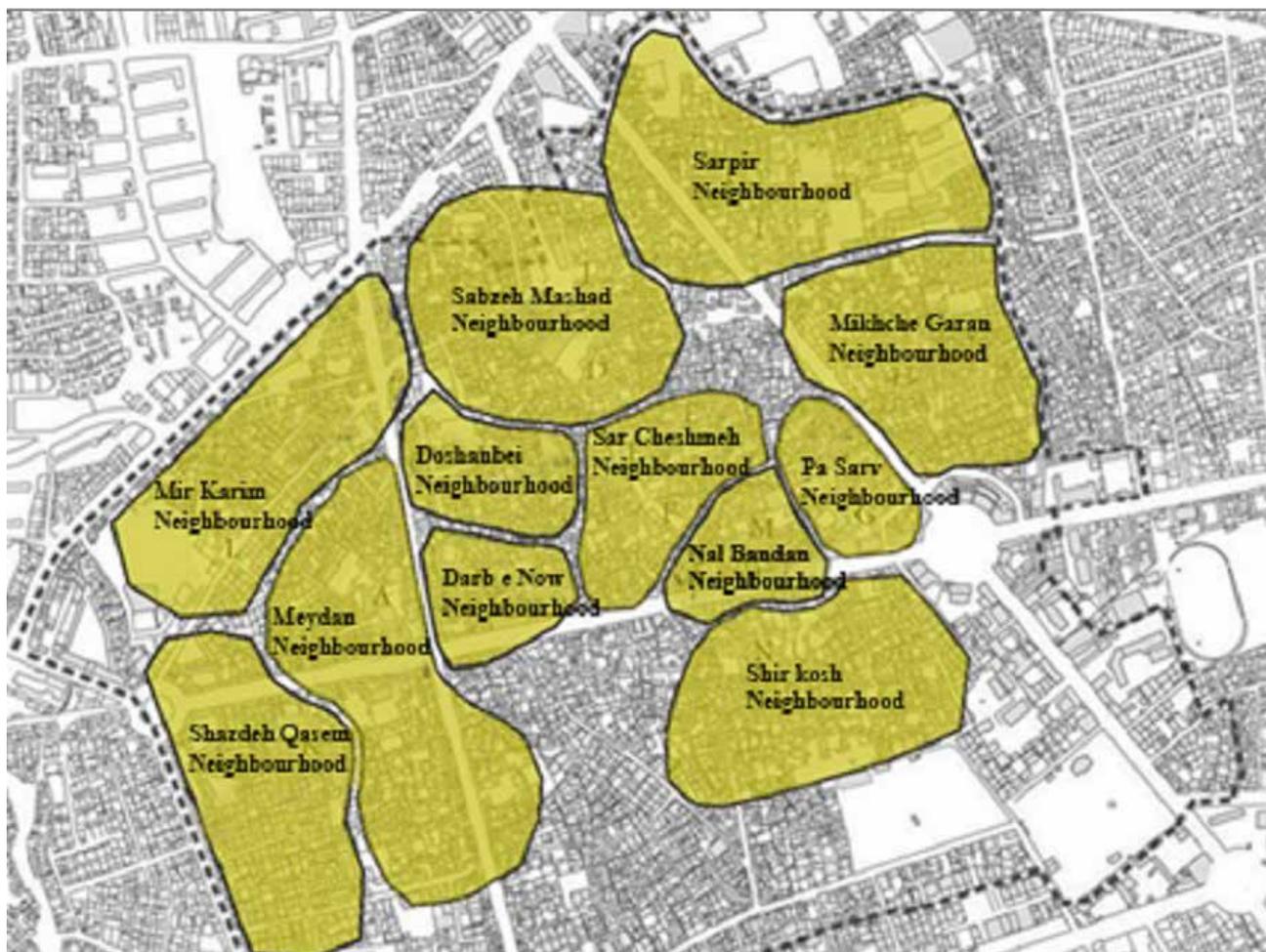


Fig. 4. The current situation of the historical texture of Gorgan. Source: Mousavi Sarvinebaghi, et al, 2015.

wooden and decorated design, it enhances the aesthetic quality of the building. It is worth noting that wood is extensively used in not only shirsar but also the openings and balconies discussed earlier and this is due to the abundance of this material in the region (Fig. 6).

• Urban Thoroughfares

Alleys, gathering places, and neighborhood centers form the structural basis of thoroughfares in the historical texture of Gorgan. In this structure, the alley is considered the main passage connecting gathering places and centers of the neighbors. The width-to-height ratio in these alleys is higher than in their counterparts in central Iranian cities such as Yazd while their length tends to be shorter. There is a practical function behind this as the climate demands increased natural ventilation in the building. The openings, protruding balconies, and the canopy-like shirsars on the façade of the buildings create a visual rhythm leading the observer's view horizontally and vertically at different points. Moreover, thanks to the variety of forms in the urban façades different combinations of light and shadow can be observed during the day. It is worth mentioning; however, that despite the aforementioned varieties in the elements of the urban image of the thoroughfares, harmony and balance are preserved thanks to the homogeneous and visually harmonious materials

used in building them (Fig. 7). Another important point regarding the urban thoroughfares of Gorgan is its function in the ritualistic and religious aspects of the citizens' lives. This is observable through the abundant presence of religious symbols and elements along urban thoroughfares such as tekyes and saghakhanehs, which are drinking fountains endowed/devoted to public service as a religiously-driven act of charity. The organization of the urban spaces follows an organic geometric pattern dictated by various factors affecting the positioning of each building with regards to the thoroughfares. These factors include property ownership, economic status of the citizens, access to groundwater sources, orientation relative to the sun, and also the natural landscapes around the city.

• Spatial Pattern of Buildings

The spatial pattern of the buildings in the historical texture of Gorgan is a combination of closed and open spaces formed as masses and yards. There are notable similarities between this pattern and the pattern observable in the central Iranian Plateau, with the key difference being the multiplicity of the yard element in a variety of dimensions found in Gorgan. This is expected to be due to the necessity of ventilating the building as dictated by the region's humid climate, but providing landscape in a private

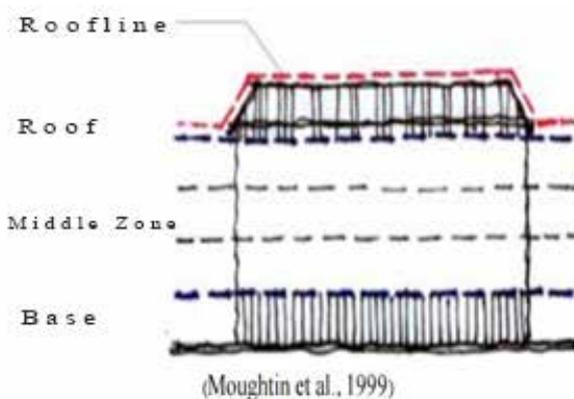


Fig. 5. The different parts making up the façade according to the model proposed by Moughtin (1999). Source: Authors.

space of the buildings and natural light could be listed as different functions of the said yards. The ratio of open spaces to mass is thus higher in the buildings in the historical texture of Gorgan as opposed to those found in the central regions of the country (Fig. 8).

Discussion

The historical texture of Gorgan and its unique urban image has been subject to much alteration since the late Qajar and early Pahlavi periods parallel with the introduction of modern elements to Iranian society. These alterations in the form of renewals carried out in different historical periods have led to a decline in the urban identity of the aforementioned texture. The first move to mark the beginning of this destructive process was the construction of new perpendicular streets in this texture going through old neighborhoods. The emergence of these streets not only disrupted and deteriorated the structural integrity of the historical texture but also deeply altered the hierarchical structure of its thoroughfares and functional elements (Behzadfar & Rezvani, 2015). Moreover, in the light of the changes in the lifestyle of the city's inhabitants in the recent decades and the subsequent changes in their needs, economic factors affecting the renewal process, alteration of the alleys, and the construction of new residential blocks have all contributed to the deterioration or destruction of the urban image of the said historical texture. This process has turned the homogeneous traditional and historical texture into scattered and disconnected parts without the character and identity characteristic of a neighborhood. It has furthermore led to the emergence of a different architectural trend featuring patterns in façade, form, and shape aesthetically and ecologically inconsistent with the background and lacking. This inconsistency has furthermore brought forth an incongruent and chaotic combination of elements, forms, and facades in the historical texture causing significant aesthetic and visual damage to the urban image. Adherence to

aesthetic values such as rhythm, symmetry, balance, and continuity in the organization of the elements is essential in creating aesthetically pleasing urban landscapes (Ibid). As a result of the renewal, processes discussed earlier; however, such aesthetic elements in the city's urban image can no longer be perceived. In Table 1 instances of such aesthetic damage have been pointed out.

The inadvertent damages sustained by the urban image as a result of renewal processes in different periods are not; however, limited to mere structural and visual disarray. As pointed out earlier, urban image is affected by a variety of natural and content factors, which contribute to shaping a unique identity for a city distinguishing it from other human habitats. Consequently, the destruction or alteration of the urban image in a historical texture is to be considered equivalent to the destruction and deterioration of identity in it. As discussed in *Architecture: Choice or fate* (1999) by Krier and Mumford, modern urban renewal lacks structural and spatial character and identity is a primary issue in modern urbanization. They further argue that cities in the previous historical periods featured visual unity and through their progressively more sophisticated forms contributed to the evolution of their inhabitants' societies. Thanks to modern urbanization; however, a rigid order brought forth through pervasive practical protocols has replaced the variety found in earlier cities each with their unique character. This uniqueness of character is no longer an element found in cities as the modern variants have evolved into indistinguishable masses (Krier, 1999, cited in, Daneshpour, 2004, 63) in which no cultural, social, natural, or ecological characteristic of their context is reflected. The lack of this reflection leads to gradual de-identification of the urban image as can be observed in many other instances of newly constructed urban textures. This is noteworthy as urban image and its components are manifestations of character, function, attitude, and culture of a city's inhabitants. Since one of the most significant grounds on which human



Fig. 6. The different parts of an urban façade according to the Moughtin model. Photo: Amin Maghsudi, 2020.

identity is authenticated is through the examination of human beings' link to their creations and the cultural, natural, and structural components of their habitats, any alteration in the urban image and its elements will consequently result in the alteration or discontinuity of the said identity (Atashinbar, 2009). Moreover, through the citizens' inability to discern a unique identity from their habitat's urban image, their sense of space and belonging to their city will deteriorate as such affective processes towards the habitat correspond to its identity (Golkar, 2008). Consequently, deteriorating the identity of the urban image in a city's historical texture results in the subsequent decline of the inhabitants' sense of belonging and attachment neglecting the cultural aspect of an urban landscape (Fig. 9).

Conclusion

As discussed in the previous passages, factors forming a certain identity for the urban image of a city are affected by regional and climatic parameters. It could be said that the climatic factors play a more significant role in this dynamic as human beings seek to form a harmonious relationship with the climate and environment they call their habitat. By examining the historical texture of Gorgan, the effect of this climatic element on the formation of urban identity becomes evident as most elements of the urban image are human responses to the geographical location of the city even though



Fig. 7. Visual balance and creating patterns of light and shadow in urban thoroughfares. Photo: Amin Maghsudi, 2020.

cultural, social, and economic factors do contribute to this. Moreover, as a result of attempted renewals of the historical texture, the city's unique urban image has undergone alterations. These alterations have led to not only structural damage and inconsistency in the texture but also to the destruction of the sense of space and consequently a sense of belonging and attachment for citizens.

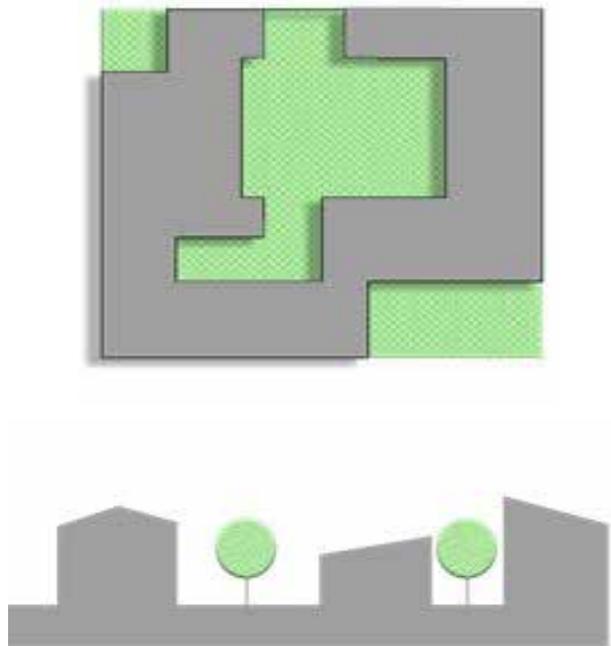
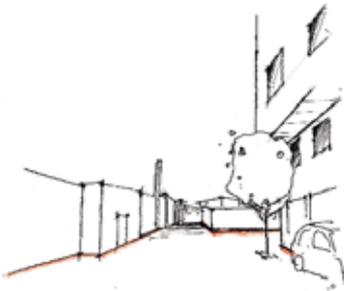


Fig. 8. The spatial pattern of the buildings in the historical texture of Gorgan. Source: Authors.

Table 1. Examples of the structural damage and disfiguration inflicted on the urban image of the historical texture of Gorgan as observed around Sarpir neighbourhood. Source: Authors.

Visual Instance	Manner of Impact	Aesthetic Damage
	<p>Inconsistency in horizontal and vertical proportions in both the façade elements and the main lines of the structure such as the roofline has created imbalance in the urban facade.</p>	Imbalance
	<p>The depressions formed in the texture due to increasing the width of the street creating disorder in the alley's image. The formation of irregular distances in adjacent units has undermined the continuity of the texture.</p>	Discontinuity
	<p>Extremely disproportionate height has created inconsistency and visual discontinuity in the landscape.</p>	Asymmetry
	<p>Inharmonious variety of colour in the materials used and disregard for the regional architecture is ubiquitous in the neighbourhood of Dabaghan. Each unit seems completely independent from the rest and a meaningful pattern or consistency is lacking.</p>	Incongruent Composition

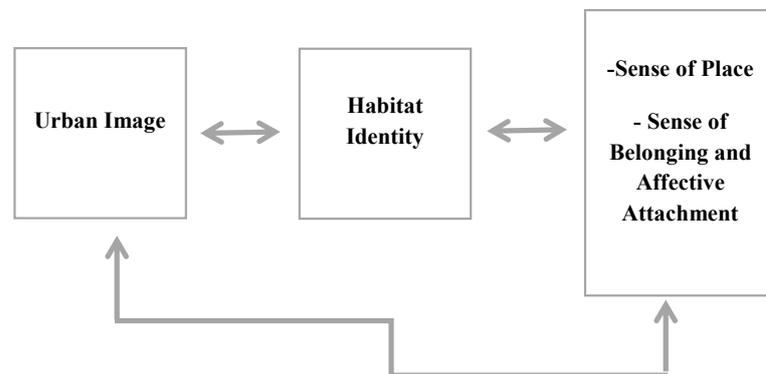


Fig. 9. The relationship between urban image, identity, and the concepts related to habitation. Source: Authors.

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