

## The Determining Elements of 'City Center' and the Related Urban Changes in the Central Area of 'Gorgan City'\*

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### Abstract

The historical monuments and remained travelouges proves the long history of Gorgan city. The urban core of the current city is formed around the three neighborhoods of 'Maydan', 'Nalbandan' and 'Sarcheshmeh', t gradually new areas have been created around them. The lined-street during the reign of Rezakhan, separated the historical context of the city in two parts and the urban physical growth around the new streets started to begin. The central area, which has always had a key role in citizens' social actions and corresponded their needs, has been affected by these changes over time.

Relying on the field observations and library studies, this study assumes that the current city center of Gorgan, that in someway represents an urban landscape, is changing in the mind of citizens and the urban identity. A landscape is an 'objective-subjective' phenomenon, a general whole, that is composed of body and soul or physical body and meaning.

As a result, to find the concept of 'city center' as a landscape, it is required to pay attention to its objective-subjective implications. To find the form and extent of this change, relying on available sources and field semiotics, we identified some effective elements in turning a place into a center, including the urban tangible (objective) and intangible (mental/subjective) elements. By performing field study, the result showed that the collected data were in line with the effective elements of centrality.

**Keywords:** *City Center, Influence Urban Area, Gorgan City.*

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## Introduction

The city center, [briefly known as central] is the most important element of the space organization and is considered as an abstract and subjective matter; It is a concept that has its place and characteristics; it is the kind of urban core that resembling the whole city and is known as the essence of it, which is the consequences of its events. A 'city center', is the initiating point of a city, based on it an urban is gradually formed through the interactive process with different components around it. 'The role of an 'urban core' is to extent that the dependency of different urban elements on it, is easily recognizable '(Mansouri, 2007, 51). In other words, a city center can be considered as a landscape; It is an objective-subjective concept that its objective dimension would be emerged in the physical and activity layers, and accordingly its subjective dimension would be appeared in the semantic layer arising from the collective memory, the sense of belonging to a place, the city identity, and its landmarks. The quiddity and identity of a city appear in the "center" and it is recognized by the citizens as an urban 'Landmark'.

A city center resembles the memory and heart of an urban social life; the place of public activities and a location for production of collective and place memories to improve the quality of a city (Pamir, 2015). "In a traditional city of Iran, the semantic and functional events normally were used to be overlapped in one place, and the concept of centrality was then being created following those locations, which was not necessarily the geometric center of the city. The arrangement of neighborhoods around [this city] center and their relationship with each other through the physical structure was branched off from the center; The aggregated areas with religious, economic, social and political uses, the presence of public buildings and the intersection of roads all were focused on the concept of the city center as the physical and metaphysical heart of the city (Mokhles, 2017). The assembling of 'Bazaars', 'Mosques',

'Hosseinieh' (Hussainiya<sup>1</sup>), 'Tekyeh', 'Schools', 'Ab-Anbar' (A traditional water reservoirs), 'Timcheh', 'Caravanserais', and other similar locations in a complex together, was following a structural logic, that caused the government centers, including Nazmieh [A traditional law enforcement] and court offices, to be established around this complex. The gathering of these urban services in the context of the ancient cities of Iran, was creating a significant and an important point in the context of the city that effecting the daily movements of the city. In this combination, the neighborhood centers had an appropriate and logical relations both with each other and with the city center as well.

Along with the city expansion, technological advances, and changing the consumption patterns, the urban centers became larger in scale compared to the bazar and the activities were available around it. The city center in new constructed city became a condensed area with approximate dimensions consisting of contemporary elements that were corresponding to their primary counterparts. In line with changing in the environment of the center, a new communication and social interactions also took placed. Allocating a place to get informed of news, urban protests, daily interactions, economic and commercial activities, rituals and other human-related activities in the city was no longer available, and the concept of city center was emerged in another identified urban location.

The central part of the city is the essence of every small activity, intention, and action that might be existed in the whole city. The city center is the location of hidden urban activities; In ancient cities, the city center was used to form in the heart or on the edge of the old texture of the city. Despite the importance of historical dimension for a place to be a city center, bypassing time and becoming part of the history, the place that was "new" at the beginning, turned into the contemporary textures and they were eventually classified as the old textures of a city. The

changes and relocation of the city center usually do not happen all at once and are well perceived over time.

Relying on the historical documents, the primary core of Gorgan city was formed around the bazaar and Masjid-e-Jāmeḥ (the Grand Mosque), which was consisted of the neighborhoods of 'Meydan', 'Sabzeh- Mashhad', and 'Nalbandan'. Gradually, other neighborhoods were also formed around these three neighborhoods, and the natural growth of the city continued to start until the end of the Qajar era. In the first Pahlavi era, coincided with the Rezakhan's interventions in most cities of Iran, building the new streets were under construction in Gorgan city similar to other parts. The growth of the east-west and north-south urban arteries in this city simplified the urban accesses and led to the expansion of the city. With the transformation of the city, the establishment of the main urban elements in Gorgan was also changed accordingly.

According to the shreds of evidence obtained from field observations, it seems that the current center of Gorgan is somehow overlapped [matched] with its historical center; both are located in the same conceptual area and are moving east and southeast without significant change.

### City Center

In the precedent pattern of Iranian city, 'Bazaar' was considered as the primary core and the 'urban backbone'. Most of the important 'urban organs' in the historical city of Iran were established and formed around the bazaar, and the first neighborhoods in the city were formed by maintaining their connection with this urban identity as a landmark. "The bazaar area was not only dedicated to trading jobs but also was a place for public gatherings, strikes, holding ceremonies, making decorations on special days and was a place allocated for similar events, with the participation of different people" (Mansouri, 2010). A city center, contrary to some beliefs that

characterize a city center merely based on the physical manifestations, has strongly a social nature<sup>2</sup>. It is a place with special qualitative characteristics that make it a center composed with the unplanned (and sometimes non-targeted) gatherings, commercial, political, social, and cultural activities of the general public and additionally as a place for people to passing through.

In other words, "A city center is a cultural and civic center that is an identical symbol for an urban society" (Pamir, 2015). The quiddity and identity of a city would be emerged in the center and be known by the citizens as an urban identity. The center of a city is the memory and the heart of its social life and is a place for public activities where the collective memories are created (Mokhles, 2017).

Since a city center is determined by the gradual adoption of the community, will not necessarily correspond to the physical and geometric center of the city ;instead, over time, according to its audience, it will change either in form of a general movement from one place to another one, or in a slight motion experiences a minor displacement or expansion while keeping its coverage with the previous center. The center of a city contains all the components are required to 'receive and comprehend' [perceive] the existence and identity of a city, which is recognized by the 'collective will' and is consolidated by the presence of authority.

### The Historical Background of 'City Center' in Gorgan

The old urban texture of Gorgan, similar to many historical cities, is an intertwined physical body of passages, pathways, Tekyeh, and urban squares, that the urban neighborhoods are interconnected like members of a whole body. In 1932 (1311 SH) and during the Pahlavi I era, the first interruption occurred within the historical context of this city, and its texture was divided in two areas, following the construction of Pahlavi Street (now known as Imam

Khomeini) (Katooli, 2009).

The evolution process of what at present time is now known as Gorgan indicates the initial aggregation of three main neighborhoods including ‘Sabzeh Mashhad’, ‘Maydan’ and ‘Nalabandan’, which have gradually expanded in different directions, especially to the east and southeast parts until now (Khanlari & Mirsaedi, 2019). The end of the Qajar and the whole time of Pahlavi era, are coincided with the entrance of modern elements into the cities of Iran. One of these elements is the emergence of streets in cruciform and perpendicular pattern. These streets by being made on either the old and historical part of the city or on its towers and ramparts, were preparing situations for the presence of other urban locations such as ‘Shahrbani’ (the old police office), the municipal buildings, ‘Marizkhaneh (the sick bay), the Cinema Halls, and other places in their vicinity. The construction of Gorgan’s main street, that is [located between] ‘Abbas Ali Square’ and the ‘Central Square’ (The present Municipality Square or Vahdat), where is now called Imam Khomeini Street, started with demolition of the house buildings along the street in 1932 (1311 SH) and ended in the year of 1935 (1314 SH) (Mousavi Sarvineh Baghi, Moradi, & Ranjbar, 2015).

The Gorgan city center during its different urban life has been included the areas of ‘Nalbandan’ neighborhood. The expansion of the city at different times and in multiple directions has kept its connection with this area.

The bazaar, the former city center, and the intersection of main urban arteries that ended to the city gates are of those factors that have preserved this concentration and integrity of the city over the various historical ages.

Moreover, in the old neighborhoods of Gorgan city, similar to many historical cities in Iran, there have been centers for organizing physical dimensions, leading social interactions and public spaces on a small scale in the forms of neighborhood’s center.

The network of relations between these centers and neighboring areas forms a larger integrated part that constitutes the old center of Gorgan City. The development of neighborhoods initially started from the three main regions of Maydan, Nalbandan, and Sabzeh-Mashhad in the central part of the city and gradually sub-neighborhoods were formed around these three areas (Fig. 1).

### The Determining Elements of ‘City Center’

The economic, political, governmental, neighborhood, social, cultural, and other related systems all have representatives in the city center, which represents the whole nature of these systems in the city. Moreover, some factors like the communicational patterns, the urban accesses, and the geometric ratio of the center to the city are also involved in turning a place into a “city center”.

According to ‘Jan Gehl’ view, a high-qualified urban public space encompasses three dimensions of ‘essential’, ‘selective, and ‘social’ activities (Gehl, 2014).

According to this theory and considering the multiple identities of the city center, the activities that make



Fig. 1. The Gorgan city development over time; Blue area (A): The old urban texture, Brown area (B): City development within Pahlavi era; Red area (C): City development until the end of the 90’s (70’s HS). Source: Katooli, 2009.

a successful urban center can be defined in the following conditions:

- The variety and extent of basic usage (including residential use);
- A relative presence of local and trans-local businesses, especially stores;
- An idea of 24-hour use of space;
- Providing a set of essential activities;
- The existence of cinema, theater halls, coffee shop, restaurant, and other cultural places for public visiting that will offer a range of price and quality;
- The existence of spaces such as gardens and squares to provide a space for public gathering and other lively cultural activities;
- Offering different land ownership, from self-motivated developments and small-scale investments to large-scale projects;
- Representing a dynamic street life, with a balance between pedestrians and rider's goings-on and the availability of small activities on the street sides.

Although the above items were mentioned to introduce the various features of a city center, however, it only would be perceived as an integrated whole, through the experience of presence. Therefore, "centrality"

would be affirmed by reviewing its constituents and supporting factors. For this reason, in this research article, these elements have been divided into two groups of tangible and intangible elements in terms of the physical and conceptual aspects; by providing documents for the existence of each, the modern center of Gorgan will be perceived.

The Tangible elements in this research include "market connection", "access orders", "residential dimension" and "functional multiplicity", while the intangible elements comprise "power's presence" and the "social role"(Fig. 2).

### The Tangible Elements

#### • Market Connection

"Bazar is a place where different social, ethnic, racial, and cultural layers interact with each other, where subconsciously affect each other and make the cultural elements and events expanded from one cultural domain to another" (Asgari Khaneghah, 2001). It has functionality similar to city centers of ancient cities in Iran, and since its economic life has also been dependent on society's needs, it relies more than any other element on public economic activities

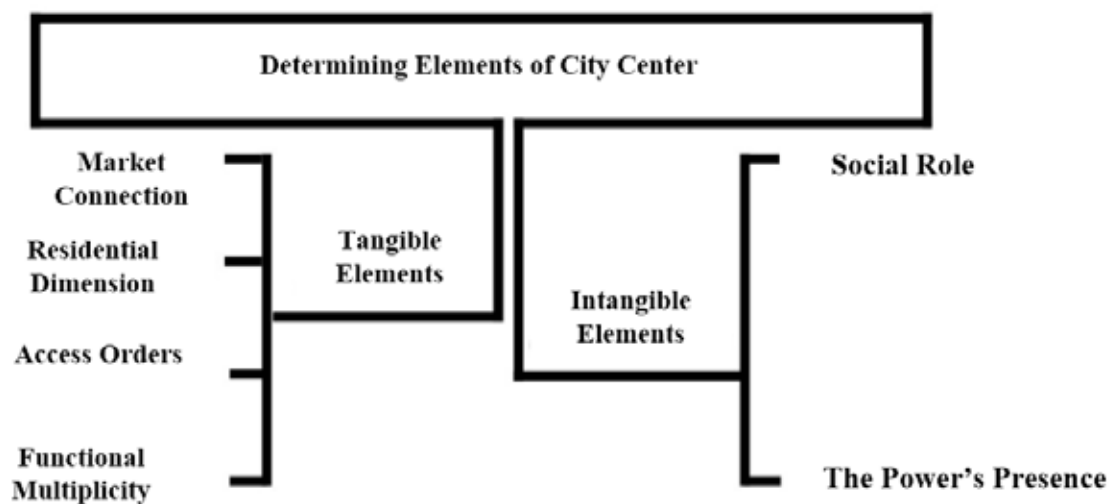


Fig. 2. Diagram of dividing tangible and intangible elements in determining 'city center'. Source: authors.

(Rajabi, 2008). Bazar in the spatial structure of ancient Iranian cities is not considered merely as a set of functional activities for economic and commercial purposes; Instead, it represents a structural body in the urban spatial and physical organization that expands an organ-shape texture around the neighboring areas hierarchically and communicatively.

“The centrality of ‘Gorgan Spatial Organization’, has been placed in a specific area around the Masjed-Jame [Grand Mosque] and the ‘Nalbandan’ Bazar by keeping its life within various historical times” (Mansouri, 2020). The Nalbandan Bazaar in Gorgan is the main urban core where the public social relations were used to happen in this historical city. In addition to the presence of various economic activities in Nalbandan area, other ritual ceremonial events line ‘Togh Bandan’<sup>3</sup>, daily and Friday prayers in the Gorgan Grand Mosque, mourning ceremonies both in Tekyeh of Nalbandan and in the traditional bath (Hammam-e Ghazi) were also held around the Bazar. The bazaar’s order as the backbone of the city was used to determine the neighborhoods areas and the city religious/ritual places in an integrated connection; it was additionally used to play a role as the origin of urban socio-economic-religious life. Following the urban expansion and constructing new streets (the Imam Khomeini St. and Valiasr St., their current name) that was initiated from the first Pahlavi era, and after the development of the residential urban texture toward the south part, and despite the low prosperity of residential textures of historical areas, the urban’s traditional bazaar-alleys (Nalbandan Bazaar) survived and kept alive the economic-socio-religious role of the Bazar.

Following the construction of Imam Khomeini and Valiasr streets in 1932 (1311 HS) and the urban expansion on the south side following the recent urban planning procedures, the sides of the main streets turned into new shopping centers and became symbols of new economic life in the city of Gorgan. The formation of microeconomic activities on the

sides of Imam Khomeini Street, and by increasing the economic prosperity of the surrounding shops between Vahdat Square (Shahrdari Sq. [Municipality] and the local area of Meydan, all have formed as the results of the traditional bazar’s influence and its proximity to the mentioned areas, which is, in turn, a two-way communication; while the new economic situation gets improved under the influence of historic bazaar texture, strengthens the traditional bazaar and empowers the Bazar-alleys leading to Imam Khomeini Street.

The continuation of thriving in the traditional bazaar within the Gorgan’s historical context and the emergence of commercial units added to the street structure, in addition to locating the occasional bazars in the city center, all indicate the active presence of economical dimension in this place and confirm the tangible element of “market/ bazar connection”.

#### • Access Order

Identifying the city center apart from the economic and social components is highly dependent on having knowledge over the urban physical structure. The urban geometric structure can be considered as one of the constituents that is significant in identifying the city center. The urban geometric structure role in identifying the city center does not necessarily refer to the physical gravity center of a city, but instead it is the meeting point of the most important connection routs outside the city that comprises the urban accesses including streets, alleys, bazar order and other similar locations. Within the cities historical context, all the alleys and passages are formed for a reason and there is always a two-way connection between a ‘starting point’ and an ‘ending point’ known as destination. The most important destination point in the historic cities of Iran is the city center, because all the citizens needs such as ritual, social and commercial activities are responded in this place. The city center is also considered as the urban equilibrium point, and the intersection of external routes and urban entrances; similar to the historical context of Gorgan.

“The expansion of Gorgan structure has been increased over time. It has made a connection route between the urban gates and the small entities with the city center and so has integrated the whole city. Among the axes forming urban structure, the line of Bazar and the orders that directly make a connection between the city center and the urban gates were of great importance” (*ibid.*).

Since the formation of a public place is relying both on passing the passengers through it and the attendance of people over there, and given that an urban texture is defined more based on the presence of its alleys rather than the urban grains, so the characterization of a city center is not merely affected by the essential grains but rather, it is influenced by recognizing the important, historical and semantic passages of the city.

The old city of Gorgan had four main gates: The ‘Gate of Mazandaran’, ‘Baštam’, ‘Chehel Dokhtaran’, and ‘Sabzeh-Mashhad’ (*Imanian, 2017*). These urban gates that were establishing the connection between Gorgan and other cities, were being used dependent on the significance of the destination city, the number of connection points and their distance to Gorgan city. One of the most important gates was called ‘Baštam Gate’, which was used for entering and exiting from the current ‘Naharkhoran’, ‘Shah-Kooh’, ‘Baštam’, ‘Shahrud’ and ‘Khorasan’ state (*ibid.*). The urban gates, at the ‘objective-subjective’ crossing point of the city, located in the ‘Nalbandan’ area, near the ‘Baštam Gate’, around the bazaar area, and near to the city’s Grand Mosque and the famous Tekyes, at the center of the historical city of Gorgan are playing a significant role. In the historical context of Gorgan, the urban neighborhoods were connected by paths with an organic structure corresponding to the land slope of the area. In the historical context of Gorgan city, the urban neighborhoods were connected to each other through the routs with organic patterns, in consistent with the land slope. These urban routs sometimes were constituting a line of bazar, and

sometimes were forming the alleys of an urban area. This strong network of communication, like the arteries of the body, were branching out from the center of the city, as the urban beating heart and forming a whole entity of the urban physical body.

During the first Pahlavi era and within the year of 1932 (1311 SH) along with street construction in different Iranian cities and creating a modern (new) urban texture, similarly two main streets were created in Gorgan, which at present time known as Imam Khomeini and Valiasr Streets. Following these street constructing, a new urban texture began to form and Gorgan city was expanded from the south area. Although, parts of the urban historical texture were removed by constructing the streets of Imam Khomeini and Valiasr, but the internal connection of texture was preserved due to the constancy of the surrounding alleys. The high permeability of the historical urban texture of Gorgan formed the new streets’ sides under its influence, as the access to the historical texture is still done through the alleys of the city, in an organic pattern, and through the Imam Khomeini Street sides.

The new urban texture in the south of the historical texture was formed under the influence of this powerful street with high [urban] permeability, and new accesses to the recent urban texture was created through the Imam Khomeini Street sides.

The presence of the city’s external connections in Gorgan is another evidence for this claim; The most important one of these external accesses of Gorgan city is expanded from east to Mashhad city along the Imam Khomeini St., and from west to cities of Behshahr and Sari; This rout leads to Turkmenistan from the north parts along the Valiasr St. and from the southern parts to Naharkhoran and ‘Ziarat village’, as one of the most important tourist attractions of Gorgan. The outcome of these access routes is overlapped with the crossing points of the intra-city access ways.

Although the new streets have been constructed in

a straight line pattern, different from the historical organic texture, the alleys of texture which are using as passing routes and place for public presence, have been formed with high urban permeability on the street sides. The main intersection of Imam Khomeini St. with the Valiasr St. in Shahrdari Square (Vahdat), as a crossing point with expanded connections and high urban permeability, is identified physically and semantically as a supporting point for both the historical context and the new urban grains, on the one hand, and as the intersection of the most important external urban accesses of Gorgan city, on the other hand.

#### •The Residential Dimension

The presence of a residential factor in the city center is significant because the residents make expansion the level of activity and create a Bazaar for a variety of uses; they bring together a group of people to benefit from the services and the qualified infrastructure in the public sector (Pamir, 2015).

The initial development of local areas in Gorgan city started from the three main neighborhoods of 'Maydan', 'Nalbandan', and 'Sabzeh-Mashhad' in the central part of the city, and gradually more sub-neighborhoods were formed outside these three locations. The operation of street construction in the Pahlavi era divided the old part of Gorgan city and passed through the mentioned neighborhoods. However, their gathering spaces were preserved and are considered still as a vital factor in these residential areas (Mousavi Sarvineh Baghi et al., 2015).

Today, these areas are not as dynamic as before, but despite decreasing their local prosperity, they are still considered as the effective factors informing the city center of Gorgan. The alleys leading to the bazaar in the city center with small independent neighborhood clusters are still inhabited and have relative dynamics due to the presence of their residents. These residents improve the interactive aspect of the city center with their daily presence in this area. Besides, the residence of people in the neighborhoods within the connected

area of the central part of Gorgan, provides security in the area and prevents the evacuation of the active population at night. Therefore, the central area, due to the presence of residents, preserves its relevance at the end of peak hours in the city. In other words, degradation of the neighborhood's texture and decline in their prosperity makes the city center a place for activities that are limited to daily administrative and commercial affairs, and in most cases, decreases the role of the center in the city.

#### Multiple Functionality

The central part of a city, by having old buildings, has multiple functions, that in addition to responding to the daily requests of the inhabitants, also represents people's social life. In line with technology advancements and by the emergence of new needs, the old city centers were no longer able to physically satisfy these requests; so other utilities following these new conditions were created alongside or in the vicinity of these old areas. In Gorgan city, the new urban facilities are located near the old city center. In the early time of the Pahlavi era and with the construction of new streets, a proper condition was provided for exploiting public utilities such as the old police office (Shahrbani), municipality, cinema, and other related facilities in its vicinity. The concentration of this building around the main square and the connection of the main urban streets with this square created a functional link between the components of the city, as this happening incorporated the government spaces into the public area and eliminated the separation of the government district from other parts of the city (ibid).

With the formation of new ways of governing society, the official buildings according to new structures were created in all cities around the country. Inside the historical center of Gorgan, the buildings of 'Municipality', 'Banke Melli', 'Education Department', 'Governorate' and 'Law enforcement stations' are those examples that have been located in



the municipality square along the streets of Pasdaran and Valiasr, that are the representatives of the central and local government.

As previously pointed to Bazar, the economic dimension has survived in this area and has also adapted to new requirements. The existence of several commercial centers, including 'Sadra Mall', 'Kourosh', 'Iranshahr', Laleh, and other trading centers, close to each other on Valiasr Street in Gorgan, signifies the importance of economic function in this area. On the other hand, banks and financial institutions support the economic and administrative activities of citizens by attending there.

The public open spaces near to and inside the old city center of Gorgan, have been constructed as the center of neighborhoods in the forms of pre-planned parks; their presence ensures the survival of some urban social aspects in the center of Gorgan. The surviving of these public centers, within the core of the historical center of this city, has been emerged in the City Park of Gorgan in 1964 (1343 HS).

Of another (urban spaces) that has been added to the old city, structure is the emergence of cinema in line with the city development. Cinema, as one of the first cultural centers in Iran, has been located close to the city center in most cities. (For instance) "Cinema Capri", as the first cinema in Gorgan city was opened in 1967 on Valiasr Street (The former Shali Koubi St.). The two other cinemas in the city, known as '22-Bahman' and 'Resalat' cinemas, are also placed at a short distance from the center. By moving toward southern parts of Valiasr Street, which is connected to the Naharkhoran Boulevard, the diversity of public facilities for all sections of society reduce, and single-use urban space such as shopping malls increase, that finally leading to the urban recreational area.

## **Intangible Elements**

### **• The Power Presence**

A city center is a favorite place for people to participate in social events, where the possibility of

seeing and hearing the mutual demands of citizens and the government authorities is higher (compared to other locations). Within the historical center of Gorgan, there is physical evidence of this interaction as a realized concept.

In the historical records of a city, this presence can be characterized by the existence of Government, Justice, Finance, Police, and Municipality official buildings. However, at present time, it has been physically distant from the government buildings, as in some cases, to recognize their presence in the center, analyzing their implications, which have a low appearance and high influence is required.

In the multifunctional part of the city center, as it has been said before, the banks' buildings are located on the margin of Vahdat Square to support the administrative and economic sector. This presence neither has been established as a bank branch in a city nor a form of the official buildings around it; rather, the various bank buildings such as 'Saderat', 'Tejarat', 'Melat' and other similar banks, are located around the 'Vahdat Sq.' in form of high-rise building, completely different with their background and peripheral urban texture. The commercial ads. for using bank facilities can be observed near to them; Placing cars as prizes (for customers) in front of the large commercial units, and the presence of banks and financial institutions to encourage people for using their services, all take place on the main urban street in Gorgan, not that much a huge city, where the large crowd of visitors is daily passing through.

In addition to the bold presence of banks, appreciation banners are being raised around Vahdat Square, by people to thanking the members of the 'City Council', group congratulating on the appointment of an official person and other similar items. In conveying the urban message by the city managers to the people, this area has been chosen as a way of expressing by both of these groups. The efforts of people and the government to exploit this area are not limited to this showing presence.

The promoters of the ‘Urban Development and Improvement Company’ in their housing plan project that have caused damage and unorganized conditions in different city centers and their historical contexts from the 2000s onward (since the 80s Hs), have also affected the large parts of the Gorgan city center under the name of ‘Aftab Project’. The two mega building projects known as ‘Aftab-2’ and ‘Aftab-3’ are located at a short distance from the main street of the city, in a situation where they are not commercially efficient. The ‘Taradis Commercial Complex’ (Aftab-2) is the largest shopping mall in the north of Iran, with 624 commercial units on eight floors, according to the relevant broadcast advertisements (Figs. 3 & 4). By visiting the area, it has been reported that except for the 32 allocated units to the unions (mainly clothing and cosmetics), the rest of the commercial units were left unoccupied.

The purpose of addressing these indications in this area is not to criticize urban development policies, but it aims to show the attempts of government

agencies for being presented there.

### The Social Role

The most important factor in determining the centrality of a city is the availability of the social interaction among the citizens in that specific area. In a way that by removing this factor, the other contributing elements will lose their effect, and gradually the areas’ prosperity that was created by the continuous movement of society and other related factors disappear. In other words, the success of this public space is related to the level of its usage and the people’s presence in this urban space (Behzadfar & Tahmasebi, 2013).

The reliability of a city center is dependent on its social aspect. The lack of social capacity in an urban area also determines the success or failure of the corresponding urban planning. In Gorgan city, during the current urban management, due to performing some actions and interventions in the historical context, the urban population has gradually



Fig. 3. The close up view of the abandoned lands around the ‘Taradis commercial complex (Aftab 2), as part of the ‘Aftab’ project plan, located in the historical center of Gorgan city. Photo: Ghazal Nafisi, 2019.

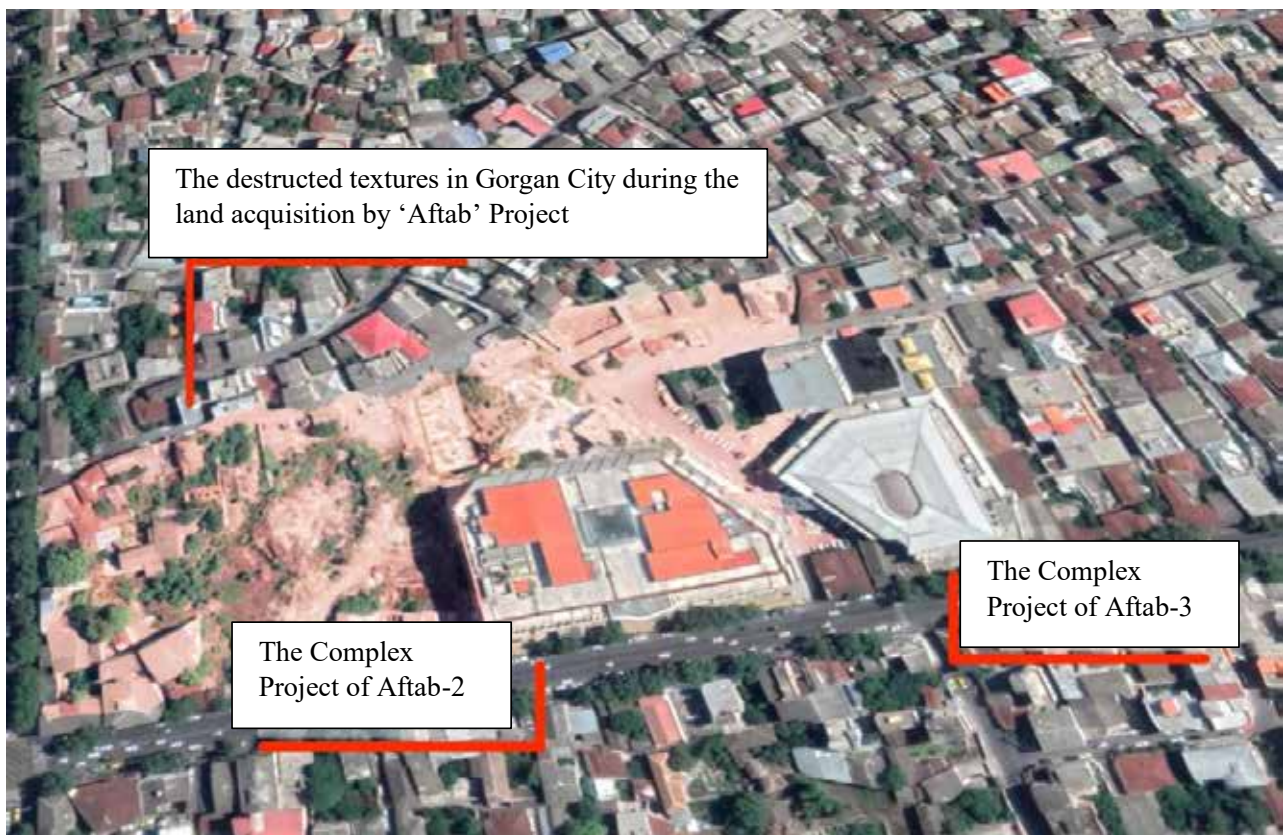


Fig. 4. The aerial view of the abandoned lands around the 'Taradis commercial complex (Aftab-2) as part of the 'Aftab' project plan, located in the historical center of Gorgan city. Source: authors.

moved to be presented in this area.

However, the promising success in this regard is dependent on the coexistence of the public tendency and urban management policies.

So an urban space as a single factor can limit the production of an urban [public] space; Therefore, a group of planners and designers would not be able to individually make decisions on behalf of the other people. The urban renovation and producing the public spaces in built areas will not be possible without the participation of people (Mohammadi Shemirani, 1997) (Fig. 5).

One of the indications for a place to be city center is the ability of that place in accepting different social layers, in a way that each of the citizens would consider the place not merely as a permanent area to passing through, but rather as a "destination" point with a sense of belonging to it. The social combination of

this area is composed of all groups of society due to the presence of old bazar and the existence of Takaya and religious buildings. Moreover, the physical appearance of different people that roughly indicate their various social groups can be seen among the population who are presented in the city center of Gorgan.

According to the field observations data and following the conversations with citizens who were presented in the city center, the political demands and social gatherings usually occur in this area of Gorgan city. In November 2009, the area of Vahdat Square and the streets of Shohada and Imam Khomeini have become places for public protests. The activities of the presidential election campaign in Gorgan also take place in this area. This public presence has a lower density at the intersection of 'Sarkhajeh' and 'Imam Khomeini' streets where the diversity of

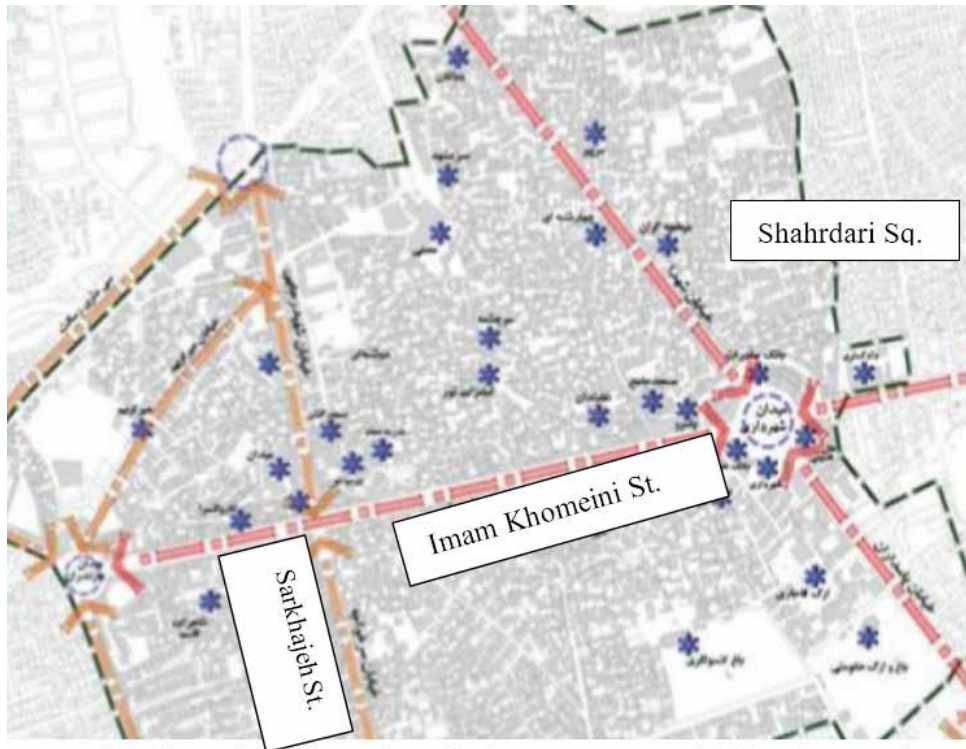


Fig. 5. The functional and activity centers within the study area. Source: authors.

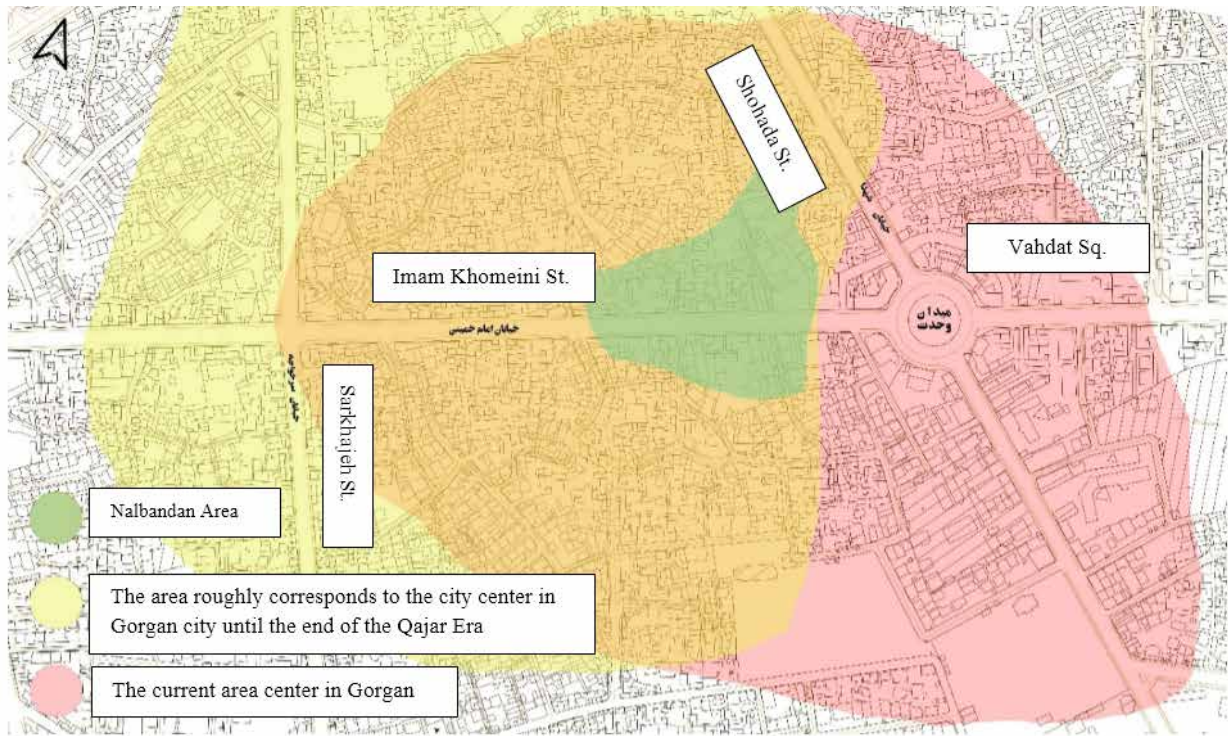


Fig. 6. The movement of 'central area' based on the movement of balanced social composition and the multiple functions [of an urban area], from the intersection of 'Sarkhajeh' and 'Imam Khomeini' streets toward the east and south parts. Source: authors.

social layers is more limited and the weight of single-user is heavier. In opposition, the mentioned [urban] composition expands from the Bazar area in the north of Imam Khomeini Street toward the ‘Shohada Street’ in the south area of ‘Vahdat Square’, and moves from the areas that are surrounded by the old neighborhoods and the primary urban core toward the east and south parts (of the city) (Fig. 6).

## Conclusion

The city center of Gorgan, during a different time of history, has been surrounded by the historical elements of the city, known as the ‘Grand Mosque’ and the ‘Nalbandan Bazaar’, located in one of the old urban neighborhoods of the city. The conceptual stability of the center in the spatial organization of the city, as one of the oldest and the most significant urban organization, has led to perceive the concept of an urban as a whole and also the continuity of its meaning and identity throughout history. According to what has been mentioned here in this article, the current city center of Gorgan corresponds to its previous center and is moving toward the east part of the city with a slight change in its position. The reason for this change can be reviewed from three aspects as below:

The first reason that confirms the authors’ presumption as well, is the urban shape and the physical changes that happened during the first Pahlavi era, which has led to the emergence of new urban uses on the street sides and the emergence of new requests from the citizens. This double event in mutual relation has affected its components and has moved the conceptual center of the city from the citizens’ view to the expansion of supporting urban bodies located in the southern parts of the ‘Vahdat Square’.

The second reason that emerged during writing this study is the effect of performing large-scale activities such as constructing large shopping centers within the small areas on driving out the center area from its original location. The importance of the city

center in Gorgan has provided the conditions for different groups of people and the power to present their requests in this urban location. The improper presence of interventions in the historical context of Gorgan city has led to the partial destruction and evacuation of this urban texture. Following the relocation of the active population and the residents of this area, the western front of this texture has lost its historical unity, turn out in a porous shape, and finally become socially inefficient.

The third reason is focusing on the partial concentration of the ritual ceremonies in the west part of the historical urban context, that along with the relocation of old inhabitants of the ‘Maydan’ area, has turned this neighborhood into a ritual place that lacks the center’s daily function.

So, it seems the second and third reasons outweigh the first one and the rate of changes in the center area has been accelerated from the ‘Pushing area’ (west) to the ‘Absorbing area’ (east). Accordingly, the current city center of Gorgan has been disconnected from its historical center (that was located between ‘Sarkhajeh’ and ‘Shohada’ streets and the north part of ‘Imam Khomeini’ Street); Therefore, its conceptual area includes the north and south parts of Imam Khomeini Street and the north and south areas of Vahdat Square located in Shohada Street.

## Endnote

1. A congregation hall specifically for performing ritual ceremony in Muharram
2. The ‘City Center; is a word used to describe the heart of any city or town. The center is smaller than the central area and includes valuable land, intensive building expansion and the high density of pedestrians and cars (Seyf al-Dini, 2009).
3. Togh Bandan; is a ritual mourning ceremony that is held for Imam Hussein in the month of Muharram, during it a tall stick with ritual decorations is being raised up.

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