

Case Study

An Examination of Place-basedness Indicators in the Neighborhoods of Dezful City with Emphasis on the Role of the Dez River (Case Study: Qaleh Neighborhood in Dezful)*

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Abstract

In the structure of historical Iranian cities, the formation of neighborhoods has always been closely linked to natural elements and defensive necessities. Dezful, as a prime example, developed through interaction with the Dez River and the surrounding topography, resulting in a defensive, self-sufficient, and identity-forming urban structure. The Qaleh neighborhood, as the original core of the city, embodies this place-based structure. Today, with rapid physical and social transformations, historic neighborhoods like Qaleh are at risk of losing their semantic and identity-based connections, which underscores the importance of identifying and analyzing the components of place-basedness to help preserve them. This study, focusing on the Qaleh neighborhood and based on field studies, resident interviews, and library resources, investigates the influence of the Dez River on place-basedness indicators in this neighborhood. The findings show that place-based elements can be categorized into three dimensions: physical, functional, and semantic. In interaction with the river's natural features, these dimensions play a crucial role in maintaining spatial cohesion, historical identity, and residential continuity in the neighborhood. Ultimately, the continued existence of place-basedness in Qaleh depends on maintaining a balance of dynamism and stability within the elements of place in relation to the Dez River—an interplay that strengthens residents' sense of belonging and identity.

Keywords: *Place-basedness, Qaleh Neighborhood of Dezful, River, Identity and Meaning, Sense of Belonging.*

Introduction

In many historical cities of Iran, particularly those facing military or geographical threats, passive defense has played a key role in the siting and formation of initial urban cores. Utilizing natural elements such as mountains, rivers, islands, and lakeshores as natural defensive barriers has been one of the main strategies.

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Dezful stands out as a unique case in this regard; a city whose original core, the Qaleh neighborhood, was established during the Sassanid era and has remained intact so far. One of the primary reasons for this continuity is the city's intelligent location along the Dez River and the strategic use of natural features such as river-overlooking topography. These elements functioned not only as natural resources but also as parts of a defensive system. The positioning of Qaleh in this setting gave it a self-sufficient and independent structure, allowing residents to meet

most of their needs within the neighborhood itself. The neighborhood has retained its name and identity over centuries, with its defensive structure rooted in the integration of physical form, nature, and human function. In this context, the role of the Dez River as a life-giving element in shaping the spatial organization of the neighborhood is of special significance (Fig. 1). Therefore, focusing on the concepts of “neighborhood” and “place,” and identifying the components of placemaking, can lead to a more precise analysis of the connection between the river and urban structure. This qualitative research, relying on field observations, interviews with residents and shopkeepers, library sources, and lived experience, seeks to identify the place-based indicators of the Qaleh neighborhood in relation to the Dez River. Accordingly, the study raises the following questions:

- What elements have contributed to the formation of place-basedness in the Qaleh neighborhood of Dezful?
- How is the relationship between the Dez River and the spatial structure of the neighborhood defined?
- And ultimately, what is the secret behind the neighborhood’s longevity and sustained residential appeal over time?

Research Background

Studies conducted in the fields of place-basedness, neighborhood identity, and the role of natural elements - particularly rivers – in shaping the structure of historic cities have provided a valuable theoretical framework. Several studies have addressed the role of rivers from

physical, functional, and semantic perspectives. For instance, Amanpour et al. (2016), in their analysis of passive defense considerations, introduced the Dez River as a significant element in the defensive site selection of Dezful. While this approach emphasizes the river’s protective function, it overlooks the analysis of lived experience and the semantic aspects of place. Pakzad (2011), by focusing on the spatial coherence of historic cities, analyzed the interrelationship between form, culture, and function, offering a theoretical basis for understanding neighborhood cohesion from a morphological perspective. However, his analysis does not specifically address the role of natural elements at the neighborhood scale. Similarly, Hayati & Ameri (2023), in their study of neighborhood morphology in Dezful, identified features such as neighborliness, territoriality, and spatial boundaries as indicators of social sense of belonging; aligning with this study’s objectives, though they did not examine how these indicators relate to natural settings like the Dez River. On the other hand, the works of Falahat & Shahidi (2015) & Falahat et al. (2017) have provided a foundational framework by proposing a triadic model - physical, functional, and semantic - for analyzing place. This study seeks to apply that conceptual model within the specific context of Dezful. Additionally, research by Mazaherian et al. (2021) has emphasized the importance of rivers in the revitalization of urban landscapes, though their focus remained on visual and spatial aspects.

Overall, while each of these studies has addressed the concepts of place, identity, or the role of natural



تصویر ۱. رابطه محله قلعه شهر دزفول با رودخانه دز. مأخذ: نگارندگان.

elements in partial ways, what has been less explored is an integrated analysis of place-based indicators at the neighborhood scale within a historically rooted and real-world context such as the Qaleh neighborhood of Dezful; a place that, through long-term interaction with the Dez River, embodies multiple layers of physical, functional, and semantic values. Addressing this gap, the present research combines theoretical perspectives with field data, including unstructured interviews with 20 residents and shopkeepers of Qaleh, to investigate the role of the Dez River in the formation and continuity of place-basedness in the neighborhood. The study aims to offer a deeper understanding of the relationship between natural setting and urban lived experience.

Theoretical Foundations

• The concept of the neighborhood and its defining characteristics

In Iranian cities, the neighborhood (mahallah) has traditionally served as the primary building block of the traditional city and the main locus of settlement for specific ethnic, tribal, religious, or sectarian communities. These neighborhoods, rooted in tribal systems, evolved into cohesive units over time and came to be recognized as distinct spatial and social entities. Both before and after the advent of Islam, various tribes and ethnic groups, based on familial bonds, shared interests, and kinship networks, would establish their own separate neighborhoods within the city.

From the Islamic era onward, the neighborhood became

known as the fundamental “cell” of the traditional city, often possessing clearly defined physical boundaries and experiencing spatial and social segregation. This segregation reinforced the importance of kinship and self-sufficiency in the delineation of neighborhood territories, contributing to a strong sense of belonging among residents and fostering organic social relations within each community. A hierarchical structure in spatial access and the provision of essential daily services through neighborhood centers remained a characteristic feature of Iranian cities up until the end of the Qajar period (Abdollahi et al., 2010).

Different academic disciplines - including urban sociology, social sciences, urban and social geography, and urban planning - have proposed various definitions of the term “neighborhood” (Table 1). These definitions typically address both the physical characteristics of the place and the social group residing within it.

Overall, across the various definitions provided by different disciplines, several key characteristics of a neighborhood can be identified. These include: clearly defined boundaries, a sense of solidarity and mutual relationships among residents, collective identity and shared goals, spatial and functional cohesion, relative self-sufficiency, and an appropriately scaled population; all of which are common themes in defining the concept of a neighborhood.

• The relationship between the City and the river

Water, in its various manifestations - particularly rivers

Table 1. Perspectives of various disciplines on the concept of neighborhood. Source: Authors.

Discipline	Definition / Perspective
Geography	A neighborhood consists of adjacent homes within a specific geographical area. Families perceive their neighborhood with the same emotional attachment as their own home. Upon entering the neighborhood, they feel they are in a familiar and intimate environment, similar to being at home (Shakui, 1985, 49).
Urban Planning	Urban planning science, from this perspective, considers a neighborhood to be a relatively large part of the city that possesses uniform and similar characteristics (Lynch, 2016, 123). These characteristics are continuous throughout the neighborhood and are interrupted wherever the neighborhood ends, and they can be embodied in certain elements of the neighborhood. According to Kuan, from the viewpoint of the New Urbanists, the neighborhood is one of the key components in the organization of the city, and the neighborhood, as a social term, refers to the social interactions of individuals within a spatial container (Cown, 2005, as cited in Abdollahi et al., 2010).
Sociology	In urban sociology, neighborhoods are viewed as social units that have emerged somewhat incidentally over time and eventually gained a stable and defined identity. These neighborhoods are made up of individuals who share similar cultural, social, religious, and economic characteristics, fostering social bonds and mutual relationships. These commonalities lead to a sense of belonging to a specific group, allowing individuals to rediscover their identity within a familiar and “owned” territory (Gasemi & Negini, 2011, 109; Sheykhi, 2003, 40).

- has had a profound impact on the spatial structure, architectural patterns, gardens, and agricultural lands of Iranian cities and villages. The presence of water in urban environments has always been considered a vital natural element due to its foundational role in shaping both the physical structure and identity of cities. Water contributes significantly to the formation of the urban landscape and appears across various urban scales (Sheibani & Farahani Fard, 2013). The presence of a river in a city forms a prominent mental image for its residents; so much so that the river does not belong to the city alone but to all its inhabitants. This shared sense of ownership deepens an individual's sense of belonging to the city over time (Mardani, 2015).

Among the primary reasons for the initial formation of urban cores near rivers are the need for drinking water, agriculture, mills, defense, and other essential functions. One of the most notable examples of strategic river use is the defensive role rivers have played, often resulting in cities being built on one side of the river to use it as a natural barrier during warfare. For this reason, typically only one bridge was constructed over the river, allowing access in both peace and wartime, while maintaining strategic control (Mazaherian et al., 2021).

• The nature of place and place-based indicators

“Place” is an abstract concept referring to a specific portion of space that acquires a distinct identity through the elements it contains. Generally, a place can be either natural or man-made. A man-made place refers to a human-constructed environment formed through the organized elements of architectural space. A place becomes meaningful when it is imbued with human values and significance (Falahat & Shahidi, 2015). The sense of place arises from the internal connection between a person, their mental perceptions, and the characteristics of their environment. It is rooted both in subjective experiences and in the objective, external conditions of the setting, which together produce diverse associations with a given place (Falahat et al., 2017). According to Canter, a place consists of three interrelated components that give it specific meaning: the physical environment,

individuals' internal psychology, and social processes (Canter, 1977, as cited in Sajjadzadeh, 201). Canter also posits that place is formed through form, activity, and meaning; corresponding to its physical, functional, and perceptual-cognitive dimensions.

Relph (1967, as cited in Alalhesabi et al. 2017) views place as a synthesis of natural and man-made environments interwoven with human meaning and activities, created through experience across different scales. Carmona defines place as the result of the interaction among form, activity, and personal perception. Similarly, Cresswell (2010, as cited in *ibid.*) considers place to be a combination of materiality, meaning, and practice. Place is not merely a physical quantity that can be fully captured in a single image; rather, it is the product of the interaction between human intention and the characteristics of the site and land (Zandieh & Jaferman, 2010). It appears that in all the theorists' models mentioned, place-basedness begins at the personal level and expands to encompass broader layers of collective lived experience. Based on this, place-based indicators in a neighborhood may include a combination of physical, functional, and semantic elements that reinforce identity and a sense of belonging. By influencing perception, social interaction, and lived experience, these indicators transform a neighborhood into a place with unique characteristics.

Case Study and Its Analysis: Qaleh Neighborhood of Dezful

Since the city of Dezful was established during the Sassanid era, its structure and urban framework are based on the Kuhandiz (citadel) and Sharestan (main city) of the Sassanid period. Accordingly, the Qaleh neighborhood of Dezful, due to the presence of a defensive fortress, represents the role of the Kuhandiz, the other older neighborhoods that formed around it represent the Sharestan, and the agricultural lands surrounding the Sharestan played the role of the Rabad (outer zone). In the historical fabric of Dezful, the farther one moves from the Qaleh neighborhood

(Kuhandiz), the less defensive the urban planning becomes (Amanpour et al., 2016). Therefore, it appears that the city's location was chosen in a way that the greatest protective and security measures were concentrated in the Qaleh neighborhood. This neighborhood was situated on the highest point of the region, and all surrounding natural valleys were used as natural barriers to protect the neighborhood and its citadel. The historic urban fabric is composed of neighborhoods and a set of adjacent community zones and public spaces, shaped based on familial, occupational, religious, and other forms of affinity (Hayati & Ameri, 2023). Neighborhood activities, territoriality, and spatial privacy are still present in Qaleh. Every space within the neighborhood maintains its boundaries. Accordingly, residents' lives in the neighborhood are divided into three zones: public, private, and semi-private (Pakzad, 2011). The historic fabric of Dezful - especially the Qaleh neighborhood - is famed for its traditional architecture, including interior and exterior brickwork (known as "khunchini" and "gereh-chini"), narrow and winding alleyways, high walls on both sides (sometimes up to three stories), and the presence of "sabats" (covered passages), which are masterpieces and symbols of Dezful's vernacular architecture. Because of these characteristics, Dezful has been dubbed the "Brick City of Iran." One of the most beautiful thoroughfares of Dezful's old texture is Saffar Alley, located within the Qaleh neighborhood. It stands out due to the presence of the Sabats of Zhoobin, Saffar, and Ketabi, its winding path, the tall walls flanking it, and the historic houses lining the alley (Hayati & Ameri, 2023). Based on field observations conducted during a three-day visit to the historic fabric of Dezful, a summary of findings is presented in Table 2.

Based on field observations in the historic fabric of Dezful and with a particular focus on the Qaleh neighborhood, it appears that - according to the theoretical foundations of this study in the field of place-basedness - a "place" is composed of form, activity, and meaning, encompassing three dimensions:

Table 2. Examples of neighborhood relations and spatial-physical connections in the historic fabric of Dezful. Source: Authors.

Examples	Figure
Material uniformity of the urban fabric	
Pause spaces, social gatherings, and neighborhood interactions	
Architectural thresholds and pause points (Sabats)	
Winding pathways	
Connecting passageways	
Spatial diversity within the fabric	

physical, functional, and perceptual-cognitive. According to this definition, the physical elements of the historic fabric - such as architectural and urban structures, pathways, and materials - fall under the physical dimension of place. Elements such as history, narratives, memories, identity, sense of belonging, and attachment fall under the perceptual and meaningful dimension. Meanwhile, functions, accessibility, and activities pertain to the functional dimension of place. Fig. 2 effectively illustrates this tripartite classification. The continuity of place-basedness in the Qaleh neighborhood of Dezful - through the three key indicators of function, meaning, and physicality - is contingent upon the simultaneous presence of dynamism and stability. In other words, stability in the relationships and positions between elements, and dynamism within the elements themselves, are essential to perceiving this continuity. Furthermore, in the continuation of the meaning of place, the stability of relationships between elements and components is more significant than the mere permanence of those components. Detailed analysis of lived experiences has also revealed that, among the relationships between components of place, the connection between human and space carries the most semantic depth and mental persistence. The Dez River, as a natural and life-giving element, plays a pivotal role in shaping place-basedness across all three dimensions: physical, functional, and meaningful.

- In the physical dimension, elements such as site selection and topography, the traditional water supply system “Qomesh”, and intermediate structures like Sabats and “Kats” are key components in shaping the built environment and the neighborhood’s relationship with the river.

- In the functional dimension, the river’s influence is reflected in elements such as defensive measures and access control, evident in the construction of a bridge over the Dez River and the placement of the neighborhood on a hilltop. Additionally, the river as a source of livelihood and the creation of a microclimate are functional indicators shaped by its presence.

- In the meaningful dimension, the river’s impact is evident in symbolic dualities such as “endurance against threats” and “source of life”, both of which enhance the neighborhood’s sense of identity. Seasonal water cycles, the sound of gentle waves, and scenic river views evoke historical continuity, rooting the community in collective memory. Simultaneously, daily coexistence with the river - through water collection, walking along the riverbanks, and ritual ceremonies held near shrines - has fostered a psychological bond between the residents and the natural environment.

Based on this perspective, the components of place-basedness in relation to the river - across the three dimensions of function, meaning, and form - are presented in Table 3.

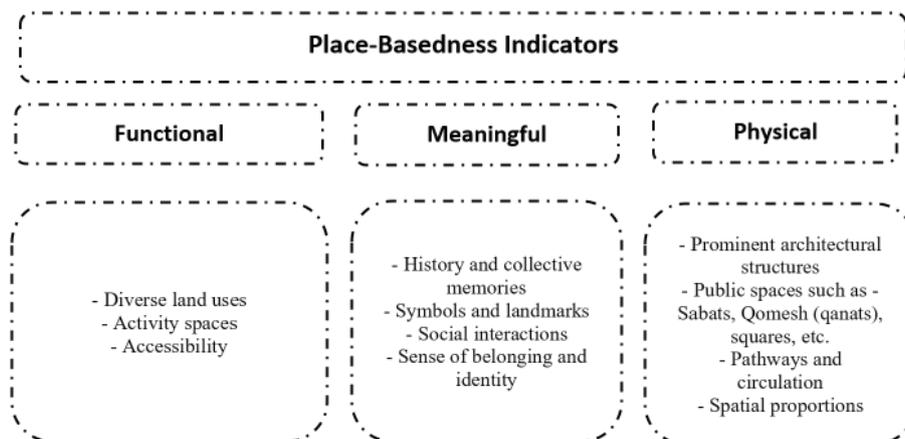
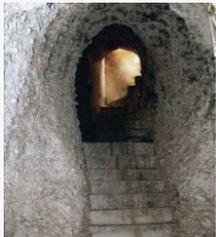


Fig. 2. Indicators of place-basedness based on theorists’ perspectives in the field of place cognition. Source: Authors.

Table 3. Key elements of the three dimensions of place-based identity in the Qaleh neighborhood of Dezful. Source: Authors.

Form	Function	Meaning	Image
Sabat	Sabat structures provide shade and a cool resting place for passersby. Due to their semi-covered form, they create a breeze in summer, making the interior cooler than the exterior. Notable examples in the Qaleh neighborhood include Sabat-e Moein Khan, Safar, and Ketabi.	- Creates a sense of proximity, neighborhood bonding, and a shaded space for rest and social interaction.	
Dez River	It serves defensive, economic, and scenic functions for the people of Dezful and the residents of the Qaleh neighborhood.	- Symbol of resilience and life in the city.	
Houses and Shavadans	Shavadans are deep underground cellars built several meters below the surface, developed in Dezful due to its hot and humid climate. An example is the historical Qotb House and the revival of its Shavadan.	- Symbol of water preservation and security.	
Alleys	The Safar alley, with its uniform materials, creates harmony, unity, and a pleasant feeling for passersby.	- Sense of belonging and unity.	
Dead-end Alleys	A cul-de-sac (dead-end alley) is a private passage among several properties, used only by the residents for passage, such as Darband alley.	- Reinforces neighborhood bonding and unity.	
Qomesh (Water Canals)	Qomesh were urban water supply canals in Dezful, constructed to transport water from the river into the city. These underground channels, sometimes over 12 meters deep, ran below the residential fabric and Shavadans. They provided water access within the Shavadans and other parts of the city. The movement of river water through these canals also cooled the interior spaces significantly. Horizontal channels connected the Shavadans to the riverbank, bringing in both water and a cool breeze—enhancing the cooling function. Examples include Qomesh-e Momenoon and Qomesh-e Choqabafan.	- Symbol of life, shade, and water preservation.	

Rest of Table 3.

Form	Function	Meaning	Image
<p>Dead-end Streets</p>	<p>A dead-end street is a private alley that exists between several properties, and only those properties can use that alley for their movement and interaction, similar to a dead-end in Darband.</p>	<p>- Strengthening the sense of neighborliness and unity</p>	
<p>Kats (Rock Shelters)</p>	<p>In the Dezful dialect, “Kat” refers to cave-like shelters, either man-made or natural, carved into the rocky riverbanks of the Dez River. In earlier times, these served as cooling refuges for people to escape the summer heat.</p>	<p>- Symbol of refuge, security, and comfort.</p>	
<p>Materials</p>	<p>Dezful is known as the “city of bricks.” These materials are aesthetically and functionally applied across all parts of the neighborhood and architectural elements. They contribute to visual harmony and are a key structural and aesthetic component—e.g., Tizno House.</p>	<p>- Symbol of unity and cohesion.</p>	
<p>Skyline</p>	<p>The historical area of the Qaleh neighborhood has a uniform skyline, where only the domes of religious buildings stand out.</p>	<p>- The sky is framed by brick elements. - The combination of brick color and sky blue unconsciously defines the boundary between the celestial and the earthly realms.</p>	
<p>Shrines and Mosques</p>	<p>Residents feel a deep sense of belonging to the shrine of Imamzadeh Sabz Qaba, son of Imam Musa al-Kazim. This site is a key landmark in the neighborhood. These spaces serve religious, ritual, and cultural purposes. Other notable spaces include Shah Rokn al-Din’s shrine and mosque.</p>	<p>- Symbol of belonging and identity.</p>	

Conclusion

Khuzestan Province - and particularly the city of Dezful - exemplifies the profound influence of rivers on urban structure, where the river serves as the backbone of citizens' spatial and perceptual understanding of the city. Findings from this study indicate that the river, especially in Dezful, plays a role far beyond that of a natural element. It acts as a structural agent in location-making, spatial organization, and the formation of urban identity. The case study of the Qaleh neighborhood reveals that the presence of the Dez River has not only influenced the orientation and structure of the urban fabric but has also contributed to the formation of the city's defensive walls, the spatial distribution of functions, and the creation of meaningful relationships between people and their environment. Field observations and qualitative analyses show that the river-human relationship carries the highest semantic value and cognitive permanence among environmental elements, reinforcing spatial continuity and a sense of belonging in the neighborhood. The integration of natural and man-made elements in an organic structure has resulted in a dynamic, place-based landscape capable of adapting to environmental and social conditions. In response to the research questions, it can be concluded that the Dez River - with its multi-layered role from initial settlement to defensive structure - has played a key part in the formation and continuation of Dezful's place-based identity. This deep-rooted relationship serves as a model for understanding the spatial structures of many historic riverfront cities. Accordingly, it is recommended that urban planning and historic preservation efforts redefine and reinforce the river's role as a structural and identity-shaping element. Furthermore, a balanced model between spatial stability and functional dynamism - especially in historic neighborhoods like Qaleh - should underpin sustainable development policies. Lastly, lived experiences and the historical memory

of neighborhoods should be recognized as valuable resources in urban decision-making.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in the conduct of this research.

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