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The Importance of Urban Elements with Emphasis on Iranian-Islamic Identity and Their Role in Strengthening Tourism (Case Study: Azadi Tower, Tehran)

Mehshad Bakhtiari

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PhD in Urban Planning, Lecturer at Islamic Azad University, Tehran South Branch, , Tehran, Iran.

* **Corresponding author:** mahsha.bakhtiari@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Formation of Cities and the Role of Urban Elements in Identity and Tourism Cities are continuously connected with various elements that sometimes lead to improvement and other times to destruction and decline. During times of improvement, citizens build monuments or urban elements in different parts of the city based on significant events to commemorate and pass these memories to future generations. Since foreign tourists do not have full awareness of these events, by observing these urban elements, they come to understand the city's identity and the events that have taken place there. It is as if urban elements give identity to the city, distinguishing it from other places and bestowing unique beauty and grandeur upon it. In fact, many countries are recognized and identified by the names of these landmarks. The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between urban elements and the Iranian-Islamic urban identity and their role in attracting tourists, with an emphasis on Tehran's Azadi Tower. The research method involves reviewing and analyzing relevant texts and resources. The results indicate that in today's world, amid a highly competitive tourism market, symbol-making in cities aligned with the culture of the country gives identity to the city and acts as a factor for success in attracting tourists.

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Introduction

In recent decades, profound changes have occurred in various social, economic, and cultural fields. The speed of these transformations, especially in developing societies, has caused ruptures in urban development. The rapid pace of changes and emerging new needs have left little room to properly utilize authentic and deeply rooted symbols that have evolved over many years. The topic of urban elements is extensive and important, reflecting the identity, culture, customs, and sometimes events influenced by people, which manifest symbolically in the city as reflections of days from which the land's identity is borrowed.

It is remarkable that some of these urban elements have been so powerfully and effectively designed and implemented that their traces remain identifiable in cities and even countries after many years. For example, due to widespread demonstrations and the efforts of people towards the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran in Tehran's Shahyad Square (now Azadi Square) before 1979, an element called Azadi Tower was constructed in this square. It commemorates the people's struggles and victories of that era, becoming a symbol of identity for Tehran. Today, many tourists recognize Iran by the Azadi Tower.

Definition of a Sign

It seems that among all creatures, humans have a strong tendency to create meaning, which they obtain through the production and interpretation of "signs." In other words, humans can only think through signs. Signs usually appear in the form of words, images, sounds, smells, tastes, movements, and objects, but these things are not inherently meaningful. They become signs only when meaning is assigned to them. Nothing is a sign unless it is considered a "signifier," referring to or pointing to something other than itself. In this case, it can be a sign. The understanding of signs occurs almost unconsciously through associating them with familiar systems of norms and social conventions. This meaningful use of signs is at the core of the importance of semiotics. (Chandler, 2007: 45)

City

The word "city" (*shahr*) linguistically means "a town, a country, and a collection of many houses where people reside. A settlement that includes many houses, streets, squares, and markets and has administrative and security organizations." (Dehkhoda Dictionary, under the entry "City")

Although in the modern era, material and quantitative indicators are used as distinguishing features of a city compared to other types of human settlements, it should not be overlooked that throughout history, the spiritual, cultural, and qualitative dimensions have also played a significant role in the definition of a city. Moreover, the intellectual developments of human society, along with scientific progress and the presentation of new theories, are of great importance. Viewing the city as a living entity is one of the discussions in this field, which reflects the manifestation of the collective spirit of society in the urban body and spaces and organizes the relationships between them. (Naghizadeh, 2006: 56-58)

Historically, a city is a point where the maximum concentration of power and culture of a society becomes evident. In fact, the city is the form and symbol of cohesive social relations and the place of centers and social, economic, political, and other activities. Human experiences turn into lasting signs, symbols, behavioral patterns, and systems of order, and civilization issues concentrate there.

Rituals and ceremonies occasionally transform into a vibrant drama of a completely heterogeneous and self-aware society. Cities are products of time, and time becomes visible within them. Compared to scattered artifacts in non-urban areas, buildings, urban elements, and public pathways increasingly stand out before human eyes. Time confronts and conflicts with place. Habits and values transfer beyond contemporary human groups and layer with the temporal strata characteristic of each distinct generation. Past eras layer by layer preserve themselves in the city as long as life continues. (Mumford, 2006: 21-30)

Therefore, a city forms based on the needs, activities, and behaviors of its inhabitants. Every behavior performed by humans fundamentally relies on culture. Culture, as the collection of spiritual and material achievements of a society (including values, traditions, customs, level of knowledge, technology, etc.), influences architecture and urban spaces. In fact, they are the tangible embodiment of this mindset. The mental image plays an important role in recording signs. The school of mental thought and its components and perception from this perspective are involved in the process of creating the mental image. The close relationship between perception and mental image and their interweaving is undeniable. The mental image results from multiple factors that create influential components in the shared mental images of the city and also represent urban elements. (See diagrams 1 and 2)

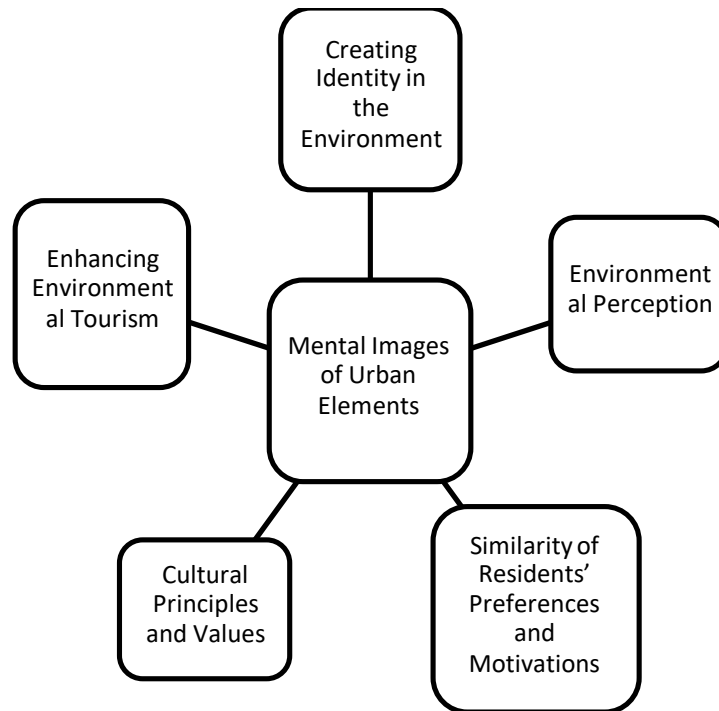


Diagram 1. Influential Components in Mental Images of Urban Elements

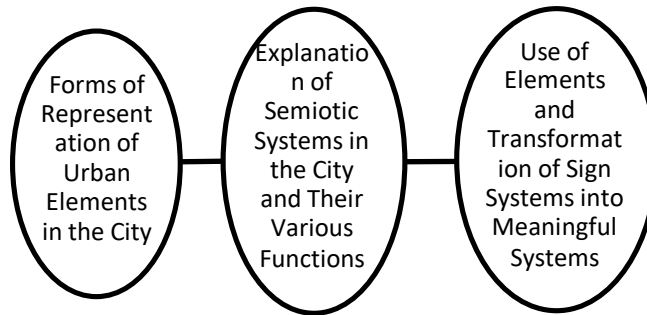


Diagram 2. Forms of Representation of Urban Elements in the City

Principles of Urban Element Design

The rapid growth of population, rising awareness levels of individuals, increasing needs of citizens, and the necessity of standardizing urban life—especially in metropolises—have prompted officials to focus on designing and beautifying urban spaces. Since a wide range of people with different needs and desires use these spaces, the success of urban planners and designers depends on addressing the needs of individuals in utilizing urban furniture and elements. However, given the significant differences in tastes and needs among people, key needs common to all users must be identified and incorporated into the designs. The emphasis of all users on these spaces revolves around three main principles: safety, security, and comfort. Ignoring these needs and desires in design can lead to irreparable consequences. (Pakzad, 2006: 39-45)

Azadi Tower: An Urban Element of Iran’s Capital

Azadi Tower is one of the urban landmarks of Tehran, designed and constructed in 1970 (1349 in the Iranian calendar) by the Iranian architect Hossein Amanat. Originally named Shahyad Aryamehr Tower, it was built to commemorate the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire. To date, no official document regarding the construction costs has been published. Currently, the cultural and artistic complex of Azadi Tower is managed by the Rudaki Cultural and Artistic Foundation.

This tower is an example of an urban element whose distinctive architecture combines pre-Islamic architectural arches (from the Achaemenid and Sassanid periods) with post-Islamic styles, transforming it into a beautiful architectural symbol. In this design, great attention was paid to the details of the building’s execution and the arrangement of the facade stones.



Figure 1. Azadi Tower during Construction (1970 / 1349 H.S.)

This three-story building contains four elevators, two staircases, and 286 steps. Beneath the Azadi Tower complex, there are several halls including exhibition halls, a gallery, a library, a museum, and more. The length of the building is 63 meters, its height from ground level is 45 meters, and its height from the museum floor is 5 meters. It is said that forty-six thousand cut and polished stone pieces were used in the construction of Azadi Tower.

The architect of the building states:

"This structure looks back to the glorious past of Iran's history; to an era when Iran excelled in literature, art, architecture, handicrafts, various sciences, and more."

The main arch in the center of the tower symbolizes the Arch of Khosrow (Taq Kasra) from the pre-Islamic Sassanid period. The upper arch, which is a pointed arch, represents the post-Islamic era and the influence of Islam in Iran. The decorative patterns filling the space between these two arches are Iranian in origin and inspired by the domes of Iranian mosques. In these domes, which reflect Iranian ingenuity, ancient architects transitioned from the square base of the structure to the circular dome using beautiful muqarnas and ribbing techniques.

The geometry of the building is a rectangular square that rotates on its four bases to form a 16-sided polygon, ultimately culminating in a dome shape.

"Inside the tower, there are two floors: one above the main arch and another below the dome, accessible by elevator. The floor designed as an exhibition space is covered by a white concrete dome. This dome executes Iranian muqarnas in a new way, and its height extends above the roof of Azadi Tower, covered with Iranian turquoise mosaic tiles. The use of white concrete in this section and in the reception hall was a novel technique in Iran at that time."

Interior Space of the Tower

The interior decorations of the tower combine tradition and modernism, especially the ceiling of the second floor. At the entrance of the tower, each stone door leaf weighs about 3.5 tons. These stones are made of granite. The tower has a second elevator that ascends along the walls of the tower. The first elevator travels two floors and reaches the concrete ceiling, after which the second elevator is used. None of the ceilings are closed off, allowing access to higher spaces.

Square Architecture

Gardens and flowerbeds form the patterns of the square, all inspired by the interior design of the dome of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan, although the circular geometry of the dome has been

transformed into an ellipse. There are fascinating logarithmic relationships in the geometry and dimensions of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque dome, which demonstrate the profound mathematical knowledge of Iranian architects in past eras. The design of the fountains and water features is also inspired by traditional Persian gardens. Likewise, the slope of the square has been carefully designed with a specific purpose.

The height limit of Azadi Tower is 45 meters, and since it is near Mehrabad Airport, it cannot be built taller than this. The ground beneath the tower is completely flat, and when this flatness combines with the slope of the square, it creates interesting curved lines.

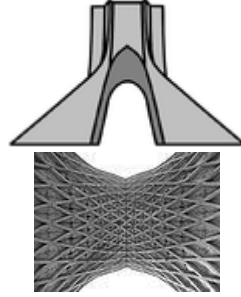


Figure 3. View of Azadi Tower



Figure 4. Azadi Square

The Role of Urban Elements in Attracting Tourism

Each city in the world has its own unique form, structure, and function. Various factors exist in every city, including the capacity for construction, the type and accessibility of facilities and services, comfort and convenience, visual attractiveness, vitality and health, diversity and harmony, among others, which contribute to attracting and retaining tourists in the city for longer periods.

Among these factors, the role of symbols and urban elements in strengthening urban tourism is particularly significant. An element (or “urban element”) means a symbol or sign, and from ancient times, urban elements have served as the identity cards of cities, distinguishing one city from

another. Depending on the history and culture of each city, these elements take various forms. According to urban researchers, an urban element is a feature or space that evokes a shared memory for the city's residents—a memory that, when visited, creates a lasting impression in the tourist's mind.

Sometimes, over the course of history, certain features become urban elements, such as an old building, a site where many people died in war or earthquake, or an extinct species of plant or animal. At other times, designers and city officials decide to create a modern urban element, and this is where the values of the city's residents become important. Symbols must be chosen in a way that gives meaning to the city and enhances its legibility. Symbols always serve as reminders of a city's identity.

Urban elements are highly visible in cities and are usually easy to find, which helps prevent tourists from getting lost in city streets, especially in smaller cities. Choosing the right symbol is essentially the city's expressive language and identity, which ensures the city's lasting impression in the tourist's mind over time. (Bahrini, 1998: 67-72)

Today, much effort is made in urban tourism development to create meaningful symbols. The more unique a symbol is and the more it aligns with the past and present values and characteristics of the city and its people, the more lasting it becomes in the tourist's memory and the easier it is to recall. At the same time, it increases the tourist's desire to revisit the city. Cities are distinguished from each other by their symbols. For example, tourists who visit Paris always want to see the Eiffel Tower, even if it is their multiple visit to the city. Similarly, Tehran has long been associated with the Azadi Tower. (Dinari, 2005: 54-56)



Figure 6. Eiffel Tower, the Urban Element of Paris



Figure 7. Taj Mahal Mosque, the Urban Element of Delhi



Figure 8. Big Ben Tower, the Urban Element of London

Lighting Alongside Urban Elements as a Factor to Strengthen Tourism

Light has always been considered an element that meets both the spiritual and physical needs of humans. Today, the growth and development of lighting technology and creativity in this field have made the use of light possible in various domains. Lighting inherently possesses two aspects: artistic and technical. The artistic aspect involves designing different spaces to create beauty, while the technical aspect focuses on the optimal use of modern technologies.

Lighting in cities can significantly help attract tourists. Many cities worldwide are now famous and attractive to tourists because of their nighttime illumination and lighting. A French lighting

specialist considers lighting the most important factor in the beauty of cities and their global recognition. This principle has been widely acknowledged in countries around the world, where city lighting creates attractiveness for both domestic and international tourists to visit.

Conclusion

The conclusion is that urban elements contribute to the vitality and mental well-being of citizens. In today's highly competitive global tourism market, symbol-making in cities is considered a successful factor in attracting tourists. Our country's advantage lies in its vast area, thousands of years of history and civilization, rich culture, climatic diversity, and natural variety, making it undoubtedly easier to recognize or create symbols for our cities.

It is sufficient, for the sustainable development of tourism (even domestic tourism) and the preservation of the identity of Iranian cities—which are constantly changing—to carefully select the most appropriate symbols for Iranian cities based on some study.

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