

# Investigating Elements of Identity of Traditional Neighborhoods in Isfahan and Using These Elements in the Design of Modern Neighborhoods

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**Abstract**—The process of planning, designing and building neighborhoods is a complex and multidimensional part of urban planning. Understanding the elements that give a neighborhood a sense of identity can lead to successful city planning and result in a cohesive and functional community where people feel a sense of belonging. These factors are important in ensuring that the needs of the urban population are met to live in a safe, pleasant and healthy society. This research paper aims to identify the elements of the identity of traditional neighborhoods in Isfahan and analyzes ways of using these elements in the design of modern neighborhoods to increase social interaction between communities and cultural reunification of people. The neighborhood of Jolfa in Isfahan has a unique socio-cultural identity as it dates back to the Safavid Dynasty of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and most of its inhabitants are Christian Armenians of a religious minority. The elements of the identity of Jolfa were analyzed through the following research methods: field observations, distribution of questionnaires and qualitative analysis. The basic methodology that was used to further understand the Jolfa neighborhood and deconstruct the identity image that residents associate with their respective neighborhoods was a qualitative research method. This was done through utilizing questionnaires that respondents had to fill out in response to a series of research questions. From collecting these qualitative data, the major finding was that traditional neighborhoods that have elements of identity embedded in them are seen to have closer-knit communities whose residents have strong societal ties. This area of study in urban planning is vital to ensuring that new neighborhoods are built with concepts of social cohesion, community and inclusion in mind as they are what lead to strong, connected, and prosperous societies.

**Keywords**—Development, housing, identity, neighborhood, policy, urbanization.

## I. INTRODUCTION

A city is comprised of a cultural and physical complex that is formed on the basis of the needs, activities and behavior of its inhabitants. People work according to their individual needs and offer their own behavioral patterns.

Spaces, on the one hand, mirror the full range of activities and behavioral patterns of a community. On the other hand, they have a profound effect on the activity and behavior of their inhabitants. The traditional neighborhoods do not belong solely to the inhabitants of those neighborhoods, but by having unique elements that are of a physical nature, which stem from the history of the past and identity, they belong to the people of the city and even to the entire country.

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Today, standardization is used in the design of spaces and buildings, technology is used in construction and designing the type of materials needed, and as a result of overlapping of cities and urban spaces with each other has caused people to feel less attached to the neighborhood they live in [1]. Given the sense of anonymity and detachment that neighborhoods now reflect more than ever before, we are witnessing the displacement of people from one neighborhood to another, and even from one city and country to another [2].

Within the context of preceding periods in history, the following has been known to be effective in identifying the elements of a city and a neighborhood: the unique historical, cultural, social and physical characteristics along with memorable events and events that make it possible to distinguish a place from another place and different spaces that contain memories for people.

The desirability of urban spaces and architecture of traditional urban texture was dependent on people's collective needs [3]. A neighborhood was formed in the shape of a city "cell", and within the traditional city was a reflection of society and included concepts such as identity, unity, readability, harmony, adaptability, and contained many other concepts [4]. Gradually, with the influence of modern architectural styles of the neighborhoods, solidarity and identity and independent personality were lost, and the concept and values of the neighborhood were discredited [5].

In Iran, the transformations of cities began from the Pahlavi Era beginning in 1925. The industrial revolution was at the forefront of this transformation by making fundamental changes in production and transforming the society during the post-World War II reconstructions. Changes took place without regard to the social, economic, cultural and other characteristics of the cities in those countries [6]. Contemporary urban texture has caused many dilemmas and disadvantages without any correlation to traditional and meaningful urban textures. A quick look back at old neighborhoods is a strong testament to the claim that these neighborhoods have a distinct and valuable identity [7].

Over time, urban planners and urban designers began to mimic the model and physical pattern of old neighborhoods and implement them in new neighborhoods, which due to environmental differences not only did it weaken the identity of these new neighborhoods but had the opposite intended effect [8]. Only the model of the traditional values of old neighborhoods seems to solve a large part of the disturbances in contemporary urban neighborhoods.

This research attempted to investigate the extraction of identity elements in traditional neighborhoods and explore ways to transfer the spirit of these elements with the help of a novel mechanism to modern neighborhoods. To this end, using field observation techniques, questionnaires and capturing the mindset of residents as well as tourists visiting the Jolfa neighborhood, this information was analyzed and presented through different frameworks in order to strengthen the new urban construct with regards to its identity meanwhile respecting the sanctity and sustainability of the old neighborhoods.



Fig. 1 A view of "Vank" Church is a striking symbol in the Jolfa neighborhood

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Cities symbolize identities; they represent living and dynamic phenomena. Identity is, in fact, the source of life and vitality in cities, and it exists in various forms which are mainly manifested in social, cultural, economic and, eventually, physical aspects [9]. Creating an urban identity means maintaining a specific structure and organization that can be understood and enjoyed by different people. Since different people use different ways to create and organize their surroundings, thus, the organization or structure of a city environment is not dependent on a single factor but the various factors affecting this structure are placed in different layers and penetrate each other so that the network and the whole can be created with meaning and significance [10].

Cities and urban spaces in the past had independence, personality and a unique identity. A sense of belonging and a sense of citizenship were the concepts that came to mind with the mention of the word "city" and urban spaces, while nowadays the word "city" paints a mental picture in our minds of a set of tall buildings, streets, offices and parks. Understanding the identity of a city should be based on the components of that city's personality, for example the natural, artifact, and human components [11].

Lynch defines identity in his book *A Theory of a Good City*, as follows: "identity means (the meaning of a place) identity means the extent to which a person can recognize a place as a distinct location from other locations so that it has a distinctive, unique, or at least specific character [12]. He also recognizes the identity of a place merely as something that distinguishes it or its individuality from other places and

serves as the basis for recognizing the place in a distinctly existing resistance. This merely means that each place has a unique identifier and is identifiable". The author generalizes this notion and acknowledges that the "identity of a place depends on the number of people who live there". He arrives at this conclusion because he argues that identity is in the experience, mind and intention of the viewer and to the same extent it exists in the physical appearance of the city or landscape [13].

Evidently, identity denotes more than a simple address in a neighborhood or being a point on the map as a basic feature of our experience of locations. Therefore, mere recognition of a place is not important, but the identity that an individual or group associates with that location is important. In summary, people experience different places as either stranger or familiar [14].



Fig. 2 Jolfa Square in Isfahan is a symbol of the identity that residents of the neighborhood uphold; also known as a place for social interaction

Identity is described by the following parameters:

- (1) Firstly, components of the identity of the place;
- (2) The sense of identity associated with the place;
- (3) Individual and collective communication circles and grandiose perceptions of places and their identity, and ultimately the ways in which identities are created, preserved, and changed [15].

As clearly articulated and carefully discussed in the theoretical discussions and ideas of the scholars, the breadth of the views and theories about the identity of the subject indicate its importance in various disciplines. In fact, identity is an interdisciplinary concept that is applicable in all fields and is now considered critically important given the identity crisis that individuals are experiencing for various reasons [16].

As previously stated, the concept of identity can be used to examine the views of theorists from different perspectives and to further clarify their concepts [17]. Studies on identity show that, despite different foundations, there is a proximity and convergence behind the differences of sights and a variety of interpretations [18]. In fact, urban planners emphasize identity in their studies as one of the basic qualitative criteria of urban environments [19]. Mostly, in their view, urban environments must first of all be visually sound and have a strong visual identity, so that they can be distinguished from other places,

but this is just one aspect of the features of identity that urban environments need to possess [20].

In relation to the definition of identity among urban planners, it should be noted that while one cannot rule out any of the ideas expressed in this regard as false comments, but neither can be considered as a comprehensive definition to be readily accepted [21]. In each of these definitions, only some aspects of this complex and broad concept are mentioned [22]. Therefore, it seems the best way to define, this concept is to link these definitions to each other and obtain a definition based on the points in each of them [23].

### III. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTION

In order to know more about the Jolfa neighborhood and to utilize the mental image that the residents of this neighborhood had and to examine the elements of identity from their point of view, 100 questionnaires were prepared

and given out to individuals based on the following categories:

There were 100 questionnaires handed out:

- 20 questionnaires for women (25-40 years old);
- 20 questionnaires for teenagers (13-19 years old);
- 20 questionnaires for middle-aged people (40-60 years old)
- 20 questionnaires for male youth (18-25 years old) and
- 20 questionnaires for female youth (18-25 years old)

The questions that were asked in the survey were the following:

1. What is your neighborhood's name?

Most respondents knew that their neighborhood was called Jolfa.

2. What goes through your mind when you hear your neighborhood's name, Jolfa?
3. What do you see as signs or symbols of your neighborhood?

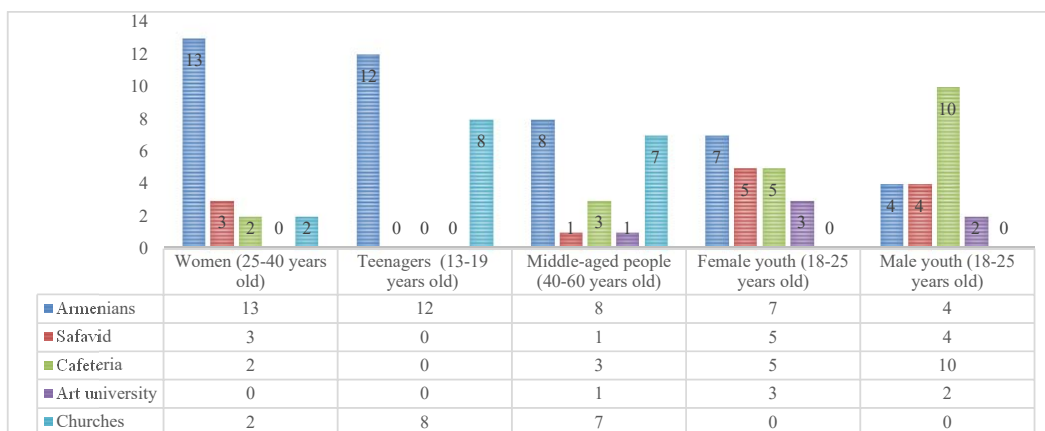


Fig. 3 Participants' response to Question 2

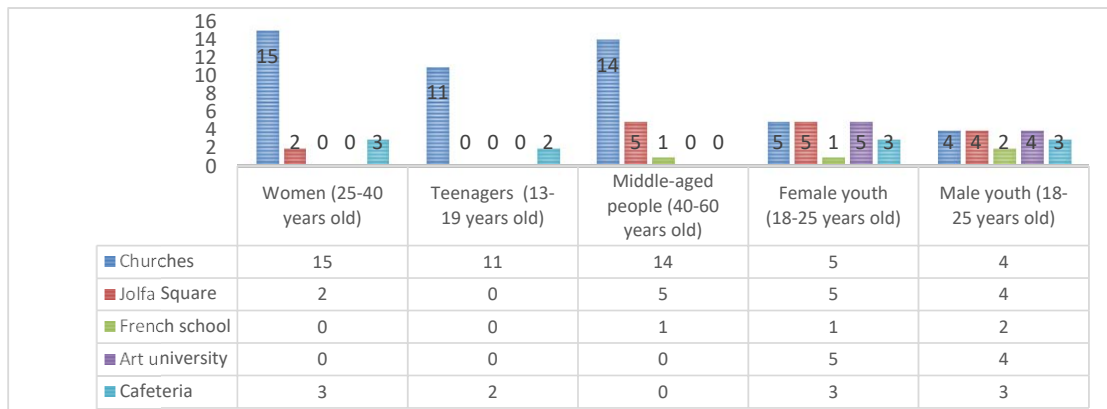


Fig. 4 Participants' response to Question 3

4. "Where are you from?"

Most of the respondents said they were from Isfahan, while some of them identified themselves as being from the neighborhood of Jolfa in Isfahan and several respondents also gave unrelated responses.

5. "What factors align with feeling a sense of identity and

belonging to your neighborhood?"

Survey options included:

- The existence of the church
- Religion type/affiliation
- Appearance (visual appeal)
- Historical monuments

- Friends and relatives
- Colors and odors/smell
- Continuity and habit
- *Safety and peace*

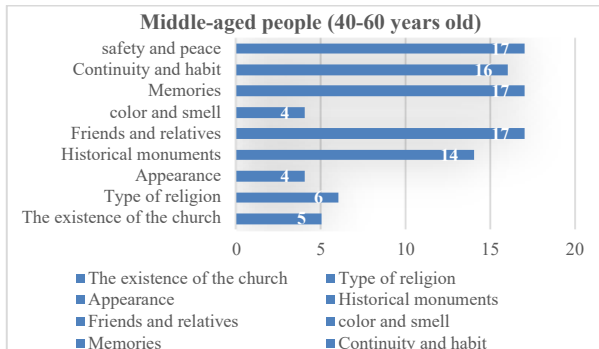


Fig. 5 Participants' (Middle-aged people) response to Question 5

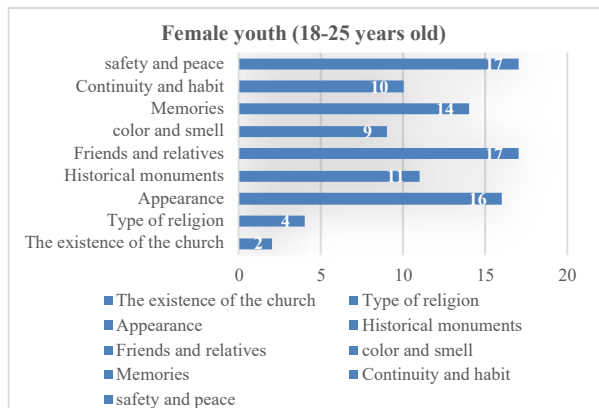


Fig. 6 Participants' (female youth) response to Question 5

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Considering the general concepts and theoretical framework as well as studying the Jolfa neighborhood, three major goals were set to construct a neighborhood with a sense of identity:

- Improve the quantitative and qualitative aspects of identity-enhancing functions
- Encourage a sense of identity by improving aesthetic quality (visual appeal) of neighborhoods
- Improve environmental quality of surroundings
- Promote identity by improving the quality of people's perceptions

The key results that were observed for a traditional neighborhood to maintain its identity [24] when constructed into a modern neighborhood had to meet the following criteria:

- (1) Building and maintaining religious institutions such as mosques, churches or temples that epitomize a certain image and affiliation
- (2) Upholding the integrity of festivities and ceremonies within the neighborhood
- (3) Strengthening face-to-face interactions between people and building relationships
- (4) Improving existing cultural values
- (5) Reinforcing people's social participation

through supervisory measures (6) Establishing and organizing parks and focal points for leisure of the neighborhood (7) Strengthening and organizing the main pillar of the neighborhood and highlighting the role of its residents. (8) Strengthen memororable and meaningful points (9) Attention to places and events and objective and subjective indications in neighborhood design (10) Indicating structural elements that are collective memories.

Therefore, it can be deduced that the elements that make up the identity of a neighborhood are important as they shape the community and can ultimately contribute to strengthening or weakening societal ties and urban development of a region.

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