

The Third Place in Iran's Urban Landscape: Theory, Practice, and Contemporary Perspectives; Case Study of the Urban Landscape of Hamedan

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Date of submission: 2025/10/30 Revision: 2025/12/28 Acceptance: 2025/12/31

Detailed abstract

Introduction

The twentieth century reshaped Iranian cities through modernization schemes that privileged motorization and efficiency over human-scaled sociability. In Hamedan, one of Iran's historically walkable and culturally layered cities, mid-century interventions introduced car-oriented infrastructure, altering both spatial continuity and communal behaviors. These transformations displaced "third places" informal public sites where everyday sociability traditionally occurred through encounters in bazaars, squares, courtyards, and shrine precincts. This paper investigates how such interventions reconfigured Hamedan's urban morphology and weakened its socio-spatial networks that previously sustained place attachment and social capital. "Third places," conceptualized by Oldenburg (1989) and contextualized here through Iranian urban experience, occupy the intermediary zone between home and work, providing affordability, inclusion, and collective identity. Historically, these spaces were organically embedded within Hamedan's compact urban fabric, offering multi-generational sociability under climatic, cultural, and spatial harmony. The onset of vehicular modernity introduced radial street geometry optimized for throughput, producing discontinuities that now challenge everyday pedestrian life. The study situates this transformation within debates on urban justice, post-automobile urban design, and cultural sustainability, arguing that human-centered spatial repair is critical to reconstituting social infrastructures under contemporary urban pressures.

Materials and Methods:

An interdisciplinary mixed-methods approach grounds the inquiry. Archival and cartographic analyses reconstruct Hamedan's historical morphology—its organic lanes, mixed-use parcels, and fine-grained pedestrian networks. Spatial metrics including accessibility and visibility measures quantify connectivity changes between historical and modernized layouts. Behavioral observation and systematic activity mapping across nine representative public spaces provide empirical data on social use patterns before and after infrastructural transformations. Complementary citizen surveys and semi-structured interviews capture residents' perceptions of safety, comfort, and social vitality. The data were integrated through an assessment framework that operationalizes "third place quality" across four measurable dimensions:

Spatial Accessibility:

proximity and permeability for pedestrians.

- **Environmental Comfort:** shade, seating, and climatic adaptation.
- **Social Diversity of Use:** generational, gender, and activity mixes.
- **Institutional Support:** maintenance regimes and local stewardship.

Using this composite framework, the research produced a comparative typology distinguishing between *resilient*, *latent*, and *degraded* third places, translating morphological and behavioral data into actionable policy insights.

Findings:

The analysis identifies multi-layered consequences of Hamedan's car-oriented transformation:

- **Spatial Fragmentation:**

Extensive street cutting and the imposition of a ring-and-spoke geometry ruptured historical pedestrian linkages. Accessibility metrics show enhanced vehicular connectivity but decreased pedestrian permeability, leading to lower local centrality and diminished spatial continuity.

- **Decline of Informal Sociability:**

Behavioral mapping reveals steep declines in unprogrammed uses—conversational clusters, lingering, cross-generational gatherings—in areas most affected by the new street network. Dwell times shortened, and activities shifted toward transit mobility rather than social participation.

- **Environmental Degradation:**

Interviews highlight perceived losses in comfort and safety due to inadequate seating, shade, and lighting. Noise, pollution, and thermal stress discourage lingering, eroding conditions for spontaneous interaction.

- **Governance Gaps:**

Industrial efficiency and functional mobility dominated planning agendas, sidelining social, cultural, and maintenance priorities. As a result, community stewardship and participatory management of public spaces declined, weakening civic presence within everyday landscapes.

Despite these structural pressures, the study identifies **resilient pockets** of third place vitality—markets, shrine courtyards, and historic squares. These sites maintain continuity of social capital through mixed land uses, embedded local institutions, and micro-scale design elements conducive to comfort and

sociability. Such locales exemplify how cultural persistence and morphological resistance can sustain inclusive civic life even amid motorized urban systems.

Discussion and Conclusion:

The transformation of Hamedan epitomizes the broader tension between *human-centered urbanism* and *vehicular urban efficiency*. The geometric logic of modern motorization introduced spatial outcomes antithetical to everyday sociability: fragmentation, perceptual disconnection, and ecological stress. Reversing these effects requires multi-scalar interventions that simultaneously engage spatial form, mobility systems, and governance cultures. Strategically, urban policies must **rebalance mobility priorities**. Pedestrian networks and public spaces should regain precedence through street reclamation, sidewalk widening, cycle lanes, and traffic calming. Investments in transit systems—particularly bus rapid transit and equitable public transport—can mitigate car dependency and restore spatial justice across neighborhoods. Tactically, **place-based design** should enhance sociability affordances through incremental pedestrianization of market streets, installation of climate-responsive furniture, shaded seating, water elements, and human-scaled night lighting. Flexible micro-platforms for cultural programming and gatherings can nurture intergenerational interaction and revive civic vibrancy. Critical to sustainability is the reactivation of **participatory governance**. Local associations, municipal councils, and cultural groups must co-manage sites through adaptive stewardship programs, ensuring public spaces remain dynamic and inclusive over time. The study thus positions third places as essential civic infrastructures—a convergence of spatial design, ecological sensitivity, and social justice. At a theoretical level, the findings reaffirm that third place degradation is not merely a morphological problem but a manifestation of governance and cultural neglect. Resilient third places operate at the intersection of *form, function, and feeling*—they are spatial configurations animated by collective participation and everyday cultural performances. Reconstituting them in Hamedan requires design interventions deeply rooted in local identity yet agile enough to adapt to socioeconomic transitions. The policy framework emerging from this study is organized through a **prioritized action matrix**, aligning spatial typologies (resilient, latent, degraded) with corresponding design and governance measures. Resilient sites call for reinforcement and community programming; latent sites for infrastructural upgrades; degraded sites for structural reclamation and renewed civic stewardship. Implementation must be staged and evaluated longitudinally to track changes in accessibility, interaction density, and user satisfaction. Ultimately, the restoration of third places embodies a **socially just urban agenda**. By enhancing equitable access to public amenities, supporting traditional livelihoods through market revitalization, and fostering inclusive participation, Hamedan can heal its fractured urban landscape. The convergence of landscape architecture, urban design, and participatory policy marks the pathway toward a balanced, humanized city in Iran's modern urban context.

Declarations:

This research was conducted under a strictly independent and self-funded framework (Self-Funded). It is imperative to explicitly state that zero direct or indirect financial grants were secured from governmental bodies, municipal infrastructure development agencies, private construction conglomerates involved in large-scale urban projects, or any commercial entity whose interests might be directly impacted by the findings and critical analysis presented herein. This non-reliance on external financial sources was a deliberate methodological decision designed to insulate the critical assessment of car-centric planning consequences—particularly the erosion of vital social capital spaces—from any potential external pressures or vested interests. All operational expenditures, including the logistical costs associated with extensive field surveys in Hamedan, the acquisition and digitization of historical cartographic records, and the licensing fees for specialized spatial analysis software (GIS/Metrics), were covered entirely through personal resources or the internal, unearmarked research allocation budgets of the principal investigator's associated academic unit. This financial autonomy was critical, empowering the research team to investigate sensitive topics, such as the adverse outcomes of infrastructure strategies that prioritize vehicular flow over pedestrian connectivity, without the inherent constraint of maintaining patron relations. The integrity of the critique rests firmly upon this foundation of financial independence.

The author(s) of this manuscript formally declare the absence of any material, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could be reasonably perceived to have influenced the objectivity, methodology, or interpretation of this study's results. This declaration specifically negates any financial ties to manufacturers of urban furniture, traffic management system providers, urban planning consultancies holding substantial contracts with the Municipality of Hamedan, or any other organizational body that stands to gain or suffer detriment based on the adoption or rejection of this study's conclusions. The theoretical and empirical framework of this research is exclusively anchored in established scientific principles derived from Urban Landscape Knowledge, Landscape Architecture, and Environmental Sociology. The commitment to research honesty mandates that the findings, however challenging they may be to incumbent urban planning paradigms that favor radial-circular street geometries, must be reported without bias stemming from personal allegiances or financial incentives. Any perceived critique of current infrastructural investment is a direct, unbiased consequence of spatial data metrics and observed behavioral mapping, not a reaction to external organizational demands.

Keywords': Third place, Urban landscape, Local heritage, Historical identity, Urban design.



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