Accompaniment of Natural and Artificial Urban Elements in the Creation of Urban Aesthetics
(Case of Study: Isfahan City)

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Abstract: *The objective of this article is to present the established components with regard to the visual quality and legibility of Isfahan city according to Lynch's theory. Data was gathered in Isfahan mainly by way of observation and interviews. Additional information was obtained from historical data and urban documents. In the opinion of the citizens, the Zayandehrood River, as a natural urban component, plays the most prominent role in the image-ability and legibility of the city. Moreover, the Siose and Khajoo Bridges, being symbolic urban components built on the river, play a vital role in the visual quality of the city. Thus, it can be said that a creative mix of natural and man-made urban components could advance the impression of the city and also instil the citizens of Isfahan with a feeling of pride.*

Keywords: *Visual quality, readability, natural urban signs, artificial urban signs, urban aesthetics.*

Introduction

Urban signs and their aesthetic features can have a crucial function in enhancing the visual quality of cities and also in responding to the needs of the citizens with regard to space, sensitivity to beauty, and a sense of connection to a place. Urban signs actually play an important role in forming a clear impression of the city in the minds of the citizens. Thus, since these urban components determine the legibility and image-ability of a city, they can give rise to a feeling of security among the citizens. Urban signs can be categorized as natural, graphical and symbolic. Graphical signs are defined as urban components that assist in forming a legible and clear impression of a city in the minds of its citizens. In fact, graphical signs, such as urban advertisements that appear on billboards or urban screens, directly affect the minds of the citizens, both psychologically and mentally. If the aesthetic features in graphic elements are not in accordance with the culture of each society, then the citizens will find the city to be unbearable and beyond their understanding. A sense of connection will be instilled in the citizens by the appropriate use of form, colour and material in graphical signs. Graphical signs are based on three major goals comprised of the supervision of people in urban spaces, a rise in urban attractions, and providing citizens with information concerning urban events.

Another type of sign, known as symbolic signs, play an important role in differentiating one city from another by assigning certain features to each city. It should be mentioned that the cultural, historical and social aspects of a society are expressed symbolically as urban historical frameworks. Symbolic signs are actually an indirect reflection of the characteristics of a community. According to Peirce's theory, signs in themselves are not important but the meanings that they conjure in the minds of people are of great significance, more so when it comes to symbolic signs. Symbolic signs are rooted in folklore and thus changes and transformation take place gradually and irregularly. Due to their consistency and durability, people often turn to them when seeking direction in cities. According to Lynch (1960), signs are definite urban elements that can create a memory in the minds of citizens. The final type of sign, known as natural signs, comprises green areas, rivers, lakes, and mountains in an urban backdrop. Lynch (1960) was of the opinion that natural urban elements can play a crucial role in the construction of a city's image in the minds of citizens and also create connections and urban aesthetics.

Mehdizadeh (2006) held that there are two different dimensions to aesthetics, namely the spiritual and the physical (material) dimension, both of which are interdependent. As such, urban elements should be attractive in a physical

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and spiritual sense. Colour and light, form and material are some of the key factors for the creation of attractive urban areas. Colours add life to urban areas and also create contrasts at various times of the day (Mahmoudi & Shakibamanesh, 2005). Another key factor in achieving urban aesthetics is light, which is especially important at night as it helps to form a clear impression of the city in the minds of its citizens. According to Bahreini (1998), the lighting of areas should be synchronised with their functions. For instance, roads and pavements need a certain type of lighting for the purpose of urban security and aesthetics. Another key factor in the attainment of attractive urban areas is form, which is the "manifestation of a phenomenon that has exposed itself for judgment" (Pakzad, 1999, p.15). Form must be able to communicate meaning. Furthermore, form should match the socio-cultural characteristics of a society so that it can be easily identified by the people. Lastly, material should be regarded as another key factor in the attainment of urban aesthetics because the use of appropriate materials that match the local climate and spaces can boost the visual quality of urban areas. Moreover, the use of local material can play a crucial role in differentiating one city from another.

Theoretical Framework

This study is relying to Kevin Lynch's theory as one of the pioneering theories in shaping humanistic urban spaces. The urban spaces which are match with needs, demands and expectations of citizens. Indeed, Lynch in his theory considered cities not only as physical objects but also as places that should fulfill various needs of citizens such as feeling of safety. Accordingly, Lynch considers two fundamental features that lead to shaping humanistic urban settlements including of imageability and legibility. He defined imageability as visual quality of urban objects that help to shape a strong image of the city in mind of citizens. Additionally, based on Lynch (1960) legibility is a feature that makes urban spaces more clear and readable for citizens. Legibility is an important feature for increasing of vitality and dynamism of urban spaces because it will lead to feeling of safety in citizens so that they do not fear from attending in urban spaces. Lynch, considered five elements for realizing of urban legibility and also imageability including of landmarks, paths, nodes, districts and edges. This study only emphasized on landmark element as an important factor in the urban orientation and also realization of urban aesthetic. It is because; landmarks are urban objects that are able to response to multiple needs of urban spaces including sense, aesthetic and providing of safety and calmness simultaneously. So, it seems that landmarks are separable from the other elements that mentioned by Lynch. Indeed, landmarks can consider as cultural vehicles that can increase visual quality of urban spaces and then sense of beauty as one of the intrinsic needs of human. Accordingly, the city of Isfahan studied based on a humanistic approach and with emphasizing landmarks' impacts on Isfahan's urban aesthetic.

Research Methodology

This study was carried out according to qualitative methods. Thus, the basic technique employed for the collection of data in the city of Isfahan was by observation with Figuregraphy. Besides that, interviews were conducted to explore what the citizens thought of the visual quality of Isfahan. The rest of the required information came from a review of historical and urban documents. As a matter of fact, an anthropological approach was taken for this research process.

Location of Research Area

This paper has been arranged to depict the most essential factors in the promotion of the visual quality of Isfahan city as the Iranian capital for art and culture. The city of Isfahan played an important role in the teaching of science as well as the institution of philosophy and art schools at one time and Isfahan's School of Architecture is one such example that is grounded in mathematics, geometry and religion. Historical records date the history of the city back to the Pishdadian Era, and the proof of this claim lies with the primeval names of some of the villages, such as Mirgan and Atashgah in Isfahan (Beykmohammadi, 2007). The growth and development of Isfahan city can be traced back to the Safavid Era, specifically during the Shah Abbas period, when the city was selected to be the capital of Iran. The foundations for the urbanism of Isfahan were actually laid during the Safavid Era. The pattern of Isfahan Urbanism can be regarded as the realization of Utopia for the Safavids, where the characteristic patterns in the city of Isfahan were regarded as a model for other cities. The characteristics of Isfahan Urbanism include spatial harmony, adherence to hierarchy, being human-focused, and also with consideration being given to the square as an important space in urban areas with other urban components such as the mosque, school, and bazaar and so on located around it. In addition, it should be noted that the city of Isfahan is not only renowned for its culture, but also for its economy and trade because of its strategic position. The city is surrounded by several huge factories and companies, and is also a centre for handicrafts, such as the Persian carpet, in Iran.

Graphical Signs in Isfahan

Graphical signs are one of the most significant urban components that have an impact on the urban landscape as they can raise or reduce considerably the degree of readability as well as the aesthetics of urban spaces. Moreover, Salehi (2007) maintained that graphical signs can reduce deviant conduct as well as urban crimes. Additionally, they are urban entities that can help to increase social exchanges as well as the liveliness of urban spaces, whereby their capacity to influence will definitely be determined by their form, colour and situation. Furthermore, graphical signs, if used appropriately, can raise the level of public awareness and culture. For instance, the design of a billboard warning of the risk of using a handphone while driving can help to significantly reduce the number of accidents. Many governments make use of the influential power of urban graphics to steer public opinion in favour of their policies and programs through graffiti art and advertisements on banners, billboards and urban information boards. For instance, during the elections period, the mood in urban areas can be transformed by various types of propaganda. This example indicates the importance of graphic signs and their location in urban spaces. In fact, graphic signs are not merely physical objects but are objects that are capable of transforming a society, so great care should be taken with regard to their design and applications.

According to this research, although the urban screens that have been set up in the main squares of the city are able to provide information to the citizens concerning various issues, their size is unsuitable for the width of the streets and the area of the squares, such as the urban screens that have been installed in Enghelab Square and Imam Hossein Square (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the different urban signs that have been located near to each other have resulted in visual pollution. Moreover, it was observed that many of the urban traffic signs had been set up in inappropriate places so as to be unreadable (see Figure 2). According to Lynch's theory (1960), urban signs should be sharp and transparent so as to raise the degree of legibility and image-ability of the city. Therefore, it can be said, that the graphical urban signs in Isfahan city are not used for urban aesthetics and for raising the level of readability of the city (see Figure 3). In fact, these signs are unable to assist the citizens and especially strangers in finding their correct bearings in the city.

Figure (1): Enghelab Square - Isfahan, uncoordinated urban screen with its location and also visual pollution

Figure (2): Chahar Bagh-e Bala Avenue, unclear urban traffic signs

Figure (3): Chahar Bagh-e Paeen Street, visual pollution by placards and urban traffic signs

Another category of graphic signs that was examined in the city of Isfahan was announcement boards. According to the investigation that was carried out, announcement boards can be divided into two separate groups, one group being vertical announcement boards without any particular design that are installed on walls (see Figure 4), and the other being columnar announcement boards (see Figure 5). On the whole, it can be said that although these types of graphical urban signs help to keep the walls and the image of the city clean, the lack of a specific design,

especially in the first group, lowers the visual quality of the city. Khodabakhshi (2003) stated that harmony and conformity in both the functional and aesthetic aspects between every type of urban furniture with their surroundings are necessary in order to have pleasant urban spaces. Thus, it can be assumed that attention was only given to the functional aspects of announcement boards during their design and installation in Isfahan city.

Figure (4): Chahar Bagh-e Bala Avenue

Figure (5): Allameh Majlesi Street

Figure (6): Chahar Bagh-e Paeen Street

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Lastly, Isfahan city failed to use its status as a historical city and also as the hub of Iranian-Islamic arts to advance the visual quality of the city appropriately, for instance, by using certain statues in harmonization with the cultural position of the city to help in the creation of more attractive sites in the city. This is because statues are urban components that are capable of enlivening shared memories and also forming a pleasant and clear image of a place in the minds of the citizens. Furthermore, the use of graffiti art in accordance with the concepts proposed by the Isfahan Art School could help to maintain the concepts of the school while providing Isfahan with urban aesthetics because ideas will never disappear once they have been given an opportunity to be expressed. Actually, a creative mix of architecture and graffiti art could help to advance the visual quality of Isfahan city, especially in the ancient feel of the city.

Natural Urban Signs in Isfahan

The Zayandeh Rood/River is one of the largest rivers in the central plateau of Iran. It springs from the summit of the Zard Kooh-Bakhtiari Mountain and winds through 360 km before reaching the fields of Isfahan. The name of the river has been changed over the years. For instance, it was once known as the Zendeh Rood, the Zandak Rood and the Zarineh Rood and these names reflect the importance of the river due to the lack of water resources in this area. The river passes through the middle of Isfahan city, thus dividing the city into two separate urban textures. This study shows that the river plays a vital role in moulding the mental image of the citizens such that the majority of those interviewed were of the opinion that the river is the most important feature in the landscape of Isfahan (see Figure 7). This result conforms to Lynch's studies conducted on three American cities in which it was indicated that natural elements are held in high regard by the citizens. In fact, according to Lynch's studies, natural urban components positively influence the minds of citizens. Therefore, it can be claimed that the application of natural elements in urban spaces can advance the positive aspects of cities and also help in the creation of an artistic landscape. It should be further mentioned that the position of the Zayandeh Rood/River has been enhanced by the green spaces surrounding it, which have been appropriately arranged and designed (see Figures 8 and 9).

Figure 7: Zayandeh Rood/River

Figure (8): Chahar Bagh-e Paeen Street

Figure (9): Chahar Bagh-e Bala Avenue

Symbolic Urban Signs in Isfahan

According to this study, the Khaju and Siosepol bridges are the two most important constructions that have formed an impression of the city in the minds of its citizens (see Figures 10 and 11). This can be attributed to the creative mix of artificial and natural components as well as the situation of the bridges in the city. However, the historical location of the bridges should not be overlooked as they depict the historical identity of the city and also links the citizens to the previous generations. Moreover, the bridges are favourite sites for the holding of certain national ceremonies and, according to Lynch (1960); events can play a significant role in highlighting the significance of

places and also their shared memories. As such, it can be said, that the attraction of the citizens to these bridges date back to their memories as well as the link between these bridges and the components of nature, such as the Zayandeh Rood/River. It should also be stated here that at night the reflection of the bridge lights on the Zayandeh Rood/River creates an image that is beyond comparison for any spectator. So, the lighting of monuments can enhance their role in publicising the visual quality of the city as a vital factor in shaping the mental impressions of the citizens.

Figure (10): Khaju Bridge

Figure (11): Siosepol or Siose Bridge

The Naghsh-e Jahan Square is another historical construction in the city of Isfahan that could form part of the citizens' mental impression depending on their residence. The square is regarded as a symbol of spatial cohesion as well as a creative mix of the spiritual and non-spiritual facets of human life. This is because the square incorporates the Ali Qapu Palace and the Bazaar, that are associated with the non-spiritual issues of human life, and also two magnificent mosques, the Lotfollah Mosque and the Jame Abbasi Mosque, that are regarded as sacred sites linking the people to God. According to Lynch, multiple landmarks have a greater impact on the minds of citizens compared to single landmarks. Therefore, it can be said that the citizens have a distinct impression of the Naghsh-e Jahan Square imprinted in their minds because of the multiple landmarks that are positioned around the square. Furthermore, it should be noted that the landmarks that have been positioned in squares as urban nodes have a greater chance of being remembered and of giving significance to an area because according to Lynch (1960), squares, being a type of urban node, are well-designed points that are accessible to the citizens and which can help them gain their bearings in the city. As such, they play a crucial role in the legibility and image-ability of urban spaces.

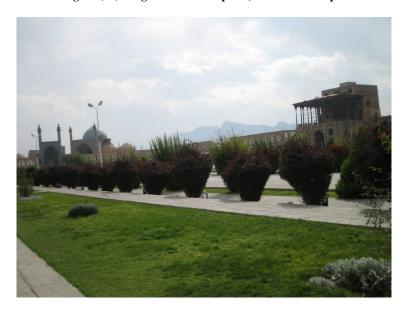**Figure (12): Naghsh-e Jahan Square, Lotfollah Mosque**

Figure (13): Naghsh-e Jahan Square, Ali Qapu Palace and Jame Abbasi Mosque

Conclusion

Based on this study, the visual quality of urban spaces hinges on the different types of urban signs, including graphical, natural and symbolic urban signs. Graphical signs can help to promote urban spaces if they are used in combination with the local characteristics of the community in order to be easily noticed by the citizens. Besides that, the elements of colour, form and size should be taken into consideration in the designing of graphical signs so as to raise the degree of clarity and the aesthetics of urban spaces. It was revealed in this study that the graphical signs of Isfahan are not in harmony with the cultural status of the city, and thus these signs can be regarded as being detrimental to the visual quality of the city. Investigations that were conducted in the city of Isfahan indicated that natural components as well as multiple landmarks that increase the visual cohesion in urban spaces can improve the visual quality of the cities considerably. This is because the natural urban sign of the Zayandeh Rood/River and the symbolic urban signs of the Khaju and Siosepol Bridges with the Naghsh-e Jahan Square could create a strong impression in the minds of citizens and also enhance the visual quality of the city. These results indicate that a creative and cohesive mix of urban components, both natural and artificial, can advance the visual quality of the city and also create a marked and clear impression in the minds of citizens.

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