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Villa Development in a Theoretical Vacuum: The Need for a Holistic Understanding of the Iranian Villa

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of villa development in a theoretical vacuum—a phenomenon that, despite its unprecedented expansion in Iran, still lacks a scientific definition, a coherent conceptual framework, and an indigenous system of evaluation. In the Iranian context, unlike its Western meaning, the villa is a product of large cities' inability to meet residents' qualitative needs of living, whereby the "second home connected to nature" has evolved into a social demand. However, the growth of this demand in the absence of policy-making and capacity assessment has led to structural consequences, including ruralization, pressure on water and soil resources, the spread of informal construction, the emergence of pseudo-villas, and the intensification of spatial inequalities.

From the perspective of this research, the core problem lies in the fact that the villa has been left to market dynamics and everyday media discourse without being defined as a socio-spatial phenomenon, making informed decision-making impossible in the absence of basic conceptual tools. In the Iranian experience, the villa represents a leisure-oriented, non-permanent form of dwelling dependent on surplus capacity, distinct from courtyard houses or second homes in one's place of origin. Lacking theory, indicators, and spatial typologies, villa development has expanded in energy-intensive, low-durability, and nature-adverse forms, thereby limiting opportunities for scientific intervention. The article emphasizes the necessity of conceptually defining the "Iranian villa," developing environmental and social criteria, and designing responsible implementation models as prerequisites for managing this national issue.

Keywords: Villa phenomenology; escape from the city; social right; social reality.

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Are the ecological, spatial, and social crises associated with villa development less the result of villa construction itself than the product of an epistemic denial of the villa and the absence of a theoretical framework for understanding and guiding this phenomenon?

Extended Abstract

In recent decades, villa development in Iran has shifted from a limited, elite-oriented practice into a widespread and influential issue shaping the country's spatial, social, and environmental structures. Despite this unprecedented expansion, the "villa" still lacks a clear conceptual definition, a coherent theoretical framework, and an indigenous evaluation system, and is often treated only through market-driven narratives or narrow administrative lenses. By introducing the notion of "villa development in a theoretical vacuum," this article argues that, in the Iranian context—unlike the Western model—the villa is not primarily a symbol of luxury, but rather a social response to the inability of large cities to provide key qualities of life such as tranquility, leisure, privacy, and renewed contact with nature. In this sense, the villa functions as a leisure-oriented, non-permanent form of dwelling dependent on surplus capacity, and has become a broad social demand, particularly among the urban middle class.

The rapid growth of this demand—occurring in the absence of policy guidance, territorial capacity assessment, and scientific understanding—has produced multiple structural consequences: mounting pressure on water and energy resources; degradation of agricultural land and natural landscapes; expansion of informal, low-durability construction; the emergence of "pseudo-villas"; and the intensification of spatial–social inequalities and tensions between local residents and non-local users. The article further maintains that fragmented, sectoral institutional perspectives on the villa have prevented a comprehensive, integrated response to the phenomenon. Accordingly, it emphasizes the need to recognize the "Iranian villa" as a socio-spatial reality, to develop locally grounded environmental and social indicators, and to design responsible implementation models as prerequisites for the sustainable governance of this national issue.

The central argument of this article is that the crisis of villa development in Iran is not merely the result of increased construction, but rather the consequence of a theoretical vacuum and the epistemic denial of the villa as a socio-spatial reality. In the Iranian context, the villa has emerged as a response to cities' inability to provide essential qualities of life and has gradually become a social right. Yet, in the absence of a clear conceptual definition, indigenous indicators, and an analytical framework, villa development has been left to market forces and fragmented decision-making. The article argues that without recognizing the "Iranian villa" and establishing environmental and social criteria, any policy intervention in this field will remain ineffective and potentially destructive.

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