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The Crisis of Framing in the Problematisation of the "Urban Landscape Crisis"

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Abstract

In contemporary professional and managerial discourse in Iran, the condition of the city's appearance is frequently described in terms of an "urban landscape crisis"—a crisis articulated through concepts such as disorder, visual chaos, and loss of identity. Within this framework, analyses are typically grounded in a linear "symptom–damage–treatment" model: the heterogeneity and multiplicity of façades are identified as the "symptom," individual tastes as the source of "damage," and normative and regulatory interventions—manifested in rules and design codes—as the proposed solution.

Adopting a critical perspective, this article argues that such a framing, rather than adequately explaining the urban landscape crisis, is itself indicative of a deeper crisis in its conceptualisation. It demonstrates that the dominant diagnostic framework, relying on specific epistemological assumptions, reduces the urban landscape to its purely visual aspects, and ultimately to building façades. This reductionism—rooted in technocratic and modernist representations of the city, as well as in a governance logic predicated on visual control—overlooks the spatial, social, environmental, and experiential dimensions that shape the perception of urban landscape. Consequently, policy responses are limited to the superficial regulation of the city's image.

On this basis, addressing the issue of urban landscape requires, first and foremost, a critical rethinking of the conceptual frameworks through which it is understood.

Keywords: Urban Landscape, Urban façade, Urban crisis, City image, Disorder.

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To what extent does the so-called “urban landscape crisis” in contemporary professional and managerial discourse in Iran reflect an objective condition of the city, and to what extent is it itself the product of a reductionist and problematic framing in the understanding and interpretation of this phenomenon?

Extended Abstract

This article critically examines the notion of the “urban landscape crisis” within contemporary professional and managerial discourse in Iran. In this discourse, the condition of the city’s appearance is frequently described using terms such as disorder, visual chaos, and loss of identity. Analyses are typically structured around a linear “symptom–damage–treatment” model, in which the heterogeneity of façades is identified as the symptom, individual taste as the source of damage, and regulatory frameworks and design codes as the proposed solution. The paper argues that this framing not only fails to adequately explain the problem but is itself indicative of a deeper Crisis in the understanding of urban landscape. The dominant framework, grounded in specific epistemological assumptions, reduces the urban landscape to its purely visual aspects, ultimately equating it with building façades. This reductionism—rooted in modernist traditions, technocratic representations, and a governance logic based on visual control—overlooks critical dimensions such as lived experience, social interactions, environmental qualities, and the symbolic layers of urban space.

As a consequence, policy responses are confined to the superficial regulation of urban appearance, particularly façade control, rather than engaging with the multidimensional complexity of urban landscape. This approach marginalizes the lived experience of citizens and reinforces a static and simplified understanding of the city, thereby limiting the effectiveness of interventions.

The article demonstrates that the core issue lies not merely in the “disorder” of the urban landscape, but in a Crisis in its conceptual framing. Accordingly, any meaningful attempt to improve urban landscape quality requires a fundamental rethinking of dominant conceptual frameworks and a shift toward a multidimension.

What is commonly referred to as the “urban landscape crisis” is, above all, rooted in a deeper crisis in the way this phenomenon is conceptualized and framed. The dominant discourse surrounding this crisis—structured around a “symptom–damage–treatment” model—reduces the urban landscape to its visual dimension, particularly building façades, and seeks to identify its “defects” within them. In doing so, it overlooks the spatial, social, and experiential complexities of the city. By attributing “damage” to façade producers (i.e., citizens), it conceals the underlying regimes that shape and produce the urban landscape, ultimately proposing superficial forms of control as the final remedy.

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