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Urban Branding and Speculative Constructions: A Critical Analysis of Khamir Port, Hormozgan Province

Mehdi Hosseinzadeh
PhD in Landscape Architecture, University of Tehran

Abstract

In recent years, Khamir Port (Hormozgan Province, Iran) has been promoted and marketed by several institutions and companies active in the field of urban branding, primarily on the basis of its "mangrove forests and wetland" assets. However, this one-dimensional reliance on a single ecological component—and its transformation into the central motif of the city's brand identity—reflects a fragmentary, reductionist, and at times speculative approach to urban branding. Such an approach risks undermining sustainable development and distorting a holistic understanding of the city.

Adopting a holistic and ontological perspective toward the phenomenon of the city, this study argues that a credible and sustainable interpretation of urban branding becomes possible only when the city's landscape system is examined in its entirety.

The research methodology follows a qualitative approach grounded in the systematic reading of the urban landscape. Three analytical pathways were pursued:

1. Review of intellectual and historical documents (travelogues, archival texts, local reports) to identify the intrinsic elements shaping the city;
2. Field observations aimed at understanding lived experience and the actual landscape elements beyond promotional narratives;
3. Interpretive–critical content analysis to uncover the structure of the whole.

Findings reveal that the triad of mountain, plain, and sea constitutes the foundational landscape and the spatial–morphological identity of Khamir Port. Sustainable development and the formation of a resilient urban brand are attainable only through balanced attention to this integrated whole. While the mangrove wetlands represent a new comparative advantage for the city, an exclusive focus on them—aligned with certain reductionist models of urban branding—may disrupt the equilibrium of the city's natural and human landscapes and lead to unsustainable outcomes.

Following the researcher–practitioner perspective, the study concludes by proposing a set of overarching strategies for understanding and guiding the urban branding of Khamir Port; strategies that emphasize distancing from one-dimensional approaches and returning to a systemic perception of the city.

Keywords: Urban Branding, Urban Landscape, Holistic Approach, Reductionism in Urban Development, Urban Identity.

Email: Mahdi.hoseinzadeh@ut.ac.ir

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How do the existing urban branding approaches in Khamir Port represent the city's identity elements, and what indications of reductionism or one-dimensionality can be observed within these approaches?

Extended Abstract

Bandar Khamir, a historic port along the Persian Gulf, has recently gained national and international visibility through the recognition of its wetland ecosystem and mangrove forests, particularly following its designation as a "National Wetland City" and later as a UNESCO "Learning City." These titles have encouraged local institutions and branding initiatives to foreground the wetland landscape as the central symbol of the city's identity. While ecologically and culturally valuable, this singular emphasis risks producing a reductionist brand image that neglects other natural, historical, and spatial components essential to the city's landscape. Such one dimensional framing may ultimately hinder the development of an authentic and sustainable city brand.

Adopting a holistic landscape perspective, this study draws on an ontological understanding of place to identify the foundational elements shaping Bandar Khamir's identity. Contemporary city branding literature shows a shift—over the past two decades—from marketing driven, product based approaches toward systemic, participatory, and socially embedded frameworks. Scholars now heavily critique reductionist branding practices that condense complex urban realities into simplified images while overlooking lived experience, cultural diversity, and socio spatial relations. Within this theoretical context, the concept of urban landscape provides a robust lens for interpreting the city as an integrated system of natural, historical, and perceptual elements. Historical analysis, especially through Sadid al Saltaneh's travel accounts, indicates that wetlands and mangrove forests were not historically identity forming for Bandar Khamir; rather, they often impeded settlement and commercial activity. Their contemporary significance is therefore a recent reinterpretation shaped by environmental awareness, tourism, and global conservation discourse. By contrast, the city's ontological structure has long been rooted in a triadic landscape of mountain, plain, and sea.

Field observations and residents' contemporary perceptions reveal that, although marine landscapes have gained prominence, the other two elements remain vital to ecological and spatial balance. Overemphasis on the wetland risks disturbing this equilibrium and generating various forms of urban imbalance.

Consequently, the study argues that branding and development strategies for Bandar Khamir must rely on a comprehensive understanding of the city as an integrated landscape system, preserving historical meaning and reinforcing the structural interplay of mountain, plain, and sea to ensure authenticity, sustainability, and social legitimacy.

Urban branding attains authenticity and credibility only when it emerges from the integrated perceptual, historical, and identity-based totality of place—a totality formed through the continuity of identity and the interrelation between spatial structure, lived experience, and place meaning. Any reduction of the brand to a single-dimensional narrative or a promotional construct creates a rupture between the city and its lived reality. A credible urban brand requires a deep, interpretive understanding of the place's inherent capacities.

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