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From Neighborhood Making to the Possibility of Neighborhood Becoming: A Critique of Historical Representation and Neighborhood-Oriented Administrative Policies

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Abstract

The concept of the neighborhood has occupied a prominent place in the literature of architecture, urban planning, and urban policy in Iran, where it is simultaneously regarded as both a historical legacy and a framework for addressing contemporary urban challenges. Within part of this body of literature, the traditional neighborhood is represented through concepts such as social cohesion, place attachment, face-to-face interactions, and local centers, and its revival is proposed as a means of restoring collective urban life. In contrast, neighborhood-oriented policies often redefine the neighborhood as an administrative unit with fixed boundaries, a physical center, and institutional governance. Adopting a critical perspective, this paper examines these two approaches and argues that, despite their apparent differences, both assume the neighborhood to be a pre-existing entity that can either be reproduced or reconstructed. The paper contends that the neighborhood is neither a historical form to be recovered nor a managerial unit to be created; rather, it is a relational, temporal, and plural process that emerges through the continuity of presence, lived experience, and collective action. Accordingly, neighborhood-oriented policy should shift its emphasis from directly producing local communities toward creating the conditions for neighborhood becoming, by expanding public agency, strengthening equitable access, and fostering enduring opportunities for social presence and interaction.

Keywords: Neighborhood, Neighborhood-oriented approach, Local community, Relational place

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Can the reproduction of the historical neighborhood model through top-down policy frameworks adequately respond to the realities of the neighborhood in the contemporary city?

Extended Abstract

The concept of the neighborhood has re-emerged as a key principle in Iranian urban planning and policy, particularly in response to the limitations of large-scale planning approaches. At the same time, the historical neighborhood has increasingly been represented as an ideal model characterized by social cohesion, place attachment, face-to-face interaction, and locally embedded institutions. These two tendencies, historical revivalism and neighborhood-oriented governance, appear distinct but share a common assumption: that the neighborhood is a pre-existing entity that can either be reconstructed from the past or produced through planning and administrative intervention.

This paper critically examines both perspectives through a conceptual review of Iranian urban studies and contemporary theories of place and neighborhood. It argues that the historical neighborhood should not be transformed from an analytical reference into a normative model for contemporary urban intervention. Likewise, neighborhood-oriented policies should not assume that administrative boundaries, neighborhood centers, or governance institutions can directly generate local communities. Instead, these interventions merely create the conditions within which social interaction may occur. Drawing on relational theories of place, the paper reconceptualizes the neighborhood as a relational, temporal, and plural process rather than a fixed spatial unit. Neighborhoods emerge through repeated presence, lived experience, everyday encounters, and collective action, while their boundaries, identities, and meanings remain dynamic and socially negotiated. Physical design and public spaces can facilitate encounters, yet they cannot guarantee trust, belonging, or collective responsibility. Similarly, participatory governance becomes meaningful only when residents possess genuine decision-making power rather than merely implementing predetermined agendas.

The paper concludes that neighborhood policy should shift its focus from making neighborhoods toward creating the conditions for neighborhood becoming. Rather than evaluating success through the establishment of institutions, neighborhood centers, or completed projects, policies should be assessed by their capacity to expand public agency, ensure equitable access, sustain everyday presence, and enable the gradual formation of social relationships and collective action. In this perspective, planning cannot produce community directly; it can only strengthen the social and spatial conditions through which neighborhoods continuously become.

The neighborhood should not be understood as a fixed and pre-existing entity that can be revived simply by reconstructing its historical elements, such as the neighborhood center, streets, or public spaces. Rather than being the product of a physical structure, the neighborhood is a relational and temporal process that emerges through sustained presence, lived experience, everyday interactions, and the gradual formation of social relationships among residents. Consequently, merely reproducing historical urban forms cannot guarantee the re-emergence of neighborhood life in the contemporary city.

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