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Development Disconnected from the Nature of Place: A Critique of the Prevailing Development Model in Religious Landscapes :Elucidating the Mechanisms of Spatial Organization, Waqf, and Governance through Evidence from the Urban Fabric Surrounding the Razavi Shrine in Iran

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Abstract

In prevailing development paradigms, the success of urban interventions in religious landscapes is often assessed through quantitative criteria such as increased physical capacity, improved mobility networks, expanded pilgrimage services, and greater investment attraction. Yet such interventions may erode the historical, social, spatial, and symbolic relations that constitute the character of place. This study addresses this structural challenge by conceptualizing the erosion of place relationality as a critical lens through which to examine the project-based development model. The study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in a guided conceptual-critical review and thematic analysis of selected documents and sources. The area surrounding the Razavi Holy Shrine is examined not as a conventional case study, but as an illuminating case investigated through secondary evidence. The analysis indicates that reducing spatial organization to movement and accessibility networks, treating the waqf institution primarily as an economic asset, and reducing governance to coordination among dominant actors substantially diminish the capacity of place to reproduce the connections between shrine and city, pilgrim and resident, pilgrimage and everyday life, and the pilgrimage economy and local livelihoods. From this perspective, place erosion is not merely the deterioration of historical fabric; rather, it entails a disruption in the capacity of place to mediate and connect the material, activity-based, symbolic, and collective-memory dimensions of place with its institutional structures. Ultimately, place-based development can be achieved only when spatial continuity, the social function of waqf, and meaningful stakeholder participation are preserved and adaptively reconfigured in response to ongoing transformations. The principal contribution of this study is to advance analytical critique toward a conceptual and operationalizable framework for evaluating urban development in sacred landscapes.

Keywords: Place erosion; Segregation; Place-based development; Religious landscape

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Through what mechanisms does the project-based development model in sacred landscapes contribute to the erosion of place relationality, and according to what criteria can place-based development mitigate and recalibrate this destructive process?

Extended Abstract

Background and Objective: Religious landscapes are multilayered systems where sacredness is reproduced through interactions among built form, movement, ritual, residence, economy, collective memory, and social institutions. Yet dominant development paradigms often assess interventions by quantitative indicators such as increased physical capacity, improved accessibility, expanded pilgrimage services, and investment attraction. Such project-based development may weaken the historical, social, spatial, and meaningful relations that constitute place. This study conceptualizes "erosion of place relationality" and asks how project-based development erodes place relationality and how place-based development can mitigate and recalibrate this process.

Methodology: The study adopts a qualitative, conceptually critical approach combining conceptual-critical review with deductive–inductive thematic analysis. A corpus of 43 specialized sources on place theory, religious landscapes, spatial organization, waqf, governance, and transformations around the Razavi Holy Shrine was analyzed. Each proposition linking a development intervention to spatial, social-functional, meaning-temporal, economic, or institutional dimensions of place constituted the unit of analysis. The area surrounding the Razavi Holy Shrine was used as an illuminating case based on secondary evidence rather than as an independent field study.

Findings: The analysis identifies three interrelated mechanisms. First, reducing spatial organization to movement and accessibility disrupts pilgrimage routes, intermediate spaces, local activities, and gradual perception of the sacred core. Second, reducing waqf to an economic asset weakens its social role when resources are disconnected from public services, local residence, everyday needs, and local economies. Third, reducing governance to coordination among dominant actors concentrates decision-making and shifts development costs toward residents and small businesses. Together, these mechanisms weaken the capacity to reproduce relations between shrine and city, pilgrims and residents, pilgrimage and everyday life, and pilgrimage economy and local livelihoods.

Conclusion: Place-based development should therefore be evaluated not by physical improvement alone, but by its capacity to preserve and recalibrate spatial continuity, the social function of waqf, mean-

The project-based development model, by reducing spatial organization to accessibility, waqf to an economic asset, and governance to coordination among dominant actors, weakens the historical, social, and symbolic relations that constitute place and thereby leads to the erosion of its relationality. By contrast, place-based development can recalibrate the relationships among the material, activity, and meaning dimensions of place by maintaining spatial continuity, sustaining the social role of waqf, ensuring stakeholder participation, and orienting governance toward the public interest. In doing so, it can strengthen the capacity of place to reproduce itself.

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