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A Critique of Reductionism in Intercity Freeway Construction and the Invalidation of the Road's Meaning-Making Capacities in Iran

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Abstract

In the Iranian–Islamic tradition, the road has been more than a mere route of passage; it has provided a setting for lived experience, the production of meaning, social interaction, and the gradual perception of the landscape. In recent decades, however, the dominant approaches to intercity freeway construction in Iran, informed by technocratic logic and quantitative measures of efficiency, have reduced the road to a purely functional and engineering-based infrastructure. Drawing on the phenomenology of place (Heidegger, 1977; Norberg-Schulz, 1980) and the theory of non-place (Augé, 1995), and examining the Tehran–Qom, Qom–Kashan, and Tehran–North freeways, this article argues that the prevailing model of road design in Iran has diminished the road's perceptual, cultural, and existential capacities. Using a qualitative–interpretive approach, the study concludes that redefining the road as a space of experience is both a theoretical and practical imperative for rethinking Iran's territorial infrastructure.

Keywords: Road; Freeway; Non-place; Phenomenology of place; Territorial landscape; Travel experience.

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The central question of this study is how reductionist approaches to intercity freeway construction in Iran have eroded the semantic and existential capacities of the road as a space of experience and identity formation, resulting in the emergence of "non-place."

Extended Abstract

In the Iranian–Islamic intellectual and cultural tradition, the road has long been more than a mere transportation corridor; it has functioned as a lived spatial experience through which meaning, social relation, and territorial perception are gradually formed. However, in recent decades, the dominant paradigm of intercity freeway construction in Iran has increasingly reduced the road to a technical and utilitarian infrastructure, privileging speed, efficiency, and quantitative performance indicators over experiential, cultural, and existential dimensions. This article critically examines this reductionist tendency and its implications for the transformation of the road into a form of "non-place."

Drawing on the phenomenology of place, particularly the works of Heidegger and Norberg-Schulz, as well as Augé's theory of non-place, the study argues that the contemporary freeway model in Iran disrupts the road's capacity to mediate between human beings and landscape, thereby weakening its role in place-making and identity formation. Through a qualitative-interpretive approach, the article analyzes selected intercity freeways, including Tehran–Qom, Qom–Kashan, and Tehran–North, to demonstrate how technocratic logic has prioritized movement over dwelling, transit over encounter, and engineering efficiency over meaningful spatial experience.

The findings suggest that the road, once embedded in a broader cultural and perceptual framework, has been systematically stripped of its semantic depth and reduced to a linear infrastructure of passage. As a result, the freeway no longer supports the gradual reading of the landscape or the formation of existential and social connections, but instead contributes to spatial homogenization and the erosion of territorial identity. The article concludes that rethinking intercity freeway design in Iran requires a fundamental shift from a purely functional understanding of infrastructure toward a phenomenological and culturally grounded conception of the road as a space of experience, meaning-making, and human-territorial interaction.

This study has shown that the reductionist approach to intercity freeway construction in Iran, with its emphasis on quantitative indicators of speed and engineering efficiency, has reduced the concept of the road to a purely functional and technical infrastructure. This approach has led to the neglect of the deeper and more meaningful dimensions of the road as a space for lived experience, the formation of meaning, social connectedness, and the gradual reading of the landscape.

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