

Study of the Identification and Sense of Place in New Environments

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Abstract— This research investigates the process of identification and sense of place in new environment, with special reference to Hashtgerd as a new town in Iran. The identification process and sense of place are founded on the basis of continuous interaction between community and environment over time. In relation to this process and through the study, four criteria have been considered in the theoretical framework: 1. legibility and character, 2. social interactions, 3. memory and 4. attachment and belonging to place. Moreover, the study proves that the length of residence and satisfaction are significant factors in the process of identification and promotion of sense of place, especially in new environments, such as new towns.

On the basis of findings, the situation of Hashtgerd new town, that its construction and settlement of people have been established since nearly two decades ago, is between weak (bad) and moderate (according to five-level Likert Scale) in relation to the identification and sense of place. However, this situation in the first phase of this town is close to moderate status, meaning that it is better than the second phase (status between weak and moderate). In addition, the third phase of Hashtgerd has a weak identity. The main reason for these different situations is related to the four mentioned criteria for evaluating and analyzing the process of identification and sense of place in the three phases.

The process of Identity formation in new towns requires time and opportunity. It is necessary to use strategic and effective plans for this issue. Identification and promotion of sense of place can be achieved through clear vision on key criteria, including legibility and character, social interactions, memory, attachment and belonging to place, as well as residents' satisfaction. Designing central points, symbols and specific spaces for social interactions, are necessary to improve identity and sense of place in the environment of new towns. Provision of public facilities is the most important factor to accelerate the process of identification and sense of place.

Keywords-component; Process of Identification; Identity; Sense of Place; Environment; Community; New Town;

I. INTRODUCTION

The subject of the built environment, as a powerful communication field, includes meanings and messages that people can decode and understand them by their rules, preferences, motivations and other factors. This concept is derived from the perceptual and associational dimensions of the environment and is very significant factor for person to

create and maintain a clear narrative of his life [12]. New urban environments created in the pattern of the new towns, as one of the main world's urban policies, are significant challenge and question in this regard. Hence, the study and evaluation of the identification situation and their problems in this field are essential. The present paper investigates the identification in new environments as creation and promotion of sense of place, attachment and belonging (rootedness) among residents. Moreover, the relevant criteria for evaluating and analyzing this concept are studied. Furthermore, the situation of new towns as new environments for residence and habitation, are considered with special reference to Hashtgerd new town in Iran as a case study.

Hashtgerd New Town in Iran is located in some 65 kilometers distance on the west of Tehran, the capital. This town is one of the first and the largest new towns of Iran (with an area of about 4500 ha). Its locating plan was approved in 1989 and its comprehensive plan was adopted in 1993. The city now has a population of about 25000 people. Currently, the construction and development of Hashtgerd is ongoing in 5 phases and districts. However, phases one, two and three, have been mainly developed and the population is living in them [2]. For this reason, these three phases of Hashtgerd are considered for evaluation of identification process in this study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The concepts of the Identity and the Identification of Environment

Identity means “who or what somebody/something is”, “the state of being very like or the same as somebody/something” and “the state of being closely involved with or part of something” [7]. Giddens believes that identity indeed as reflexive awareness and consciousness is what that person has knowledge of it. So this concept means the continuity of person in time and place [5].

Norberg-Schulz, borrowed from the ideas of Heidegger about “question of being”, says that man chooses a settlement when he is able to adapt with the environment and identify with it. Thus, the settlement is more than shelter and indicates areas in which life can be realized in true meaning as place. The place is the totality of real things and consists of objects, materials, shapes, textures and colors. These elements define

the character of environments that is the nature of place [11] and [6]. Relph believes that in the place phenomenology, experience is the most important element. People is integrated in the experience of place and this emotional feeling is called the sense of place that is created unconscious [13].

In Lynch's view, the simplest form of the mean of settlement and city is Identity. Identity is an extent that a person can recognize a place as distinct place from other places with specific and unique character. Place identity is closely linked to personal identity, because meaningful and understandable places are a good basis for personal memories, feelings and values. The meaning and identity of place is related to shape and the quality of urban space as well as culture, nature and position of viewer. One of the significant criteria is how common is the image of place among the people. The settlement must provide the basis and context of emergence of meaning. This means simple and regular structure which creates new meanings by experience. The regularity should be further over the time. Through this, the residents have owned the world [9].

Therefore, about the concepts of the identity and identification, we can say that identity is the factor for recognition and turns the environment into the specific and distinct place and location. The city identity is objectivity with subjectivity. On this basis, the identification process means the integration of external and visual elements with images, memories and values in residents' mind. Thus, this process is the product of social relations and interactions in the place as well as visual factors.

B. Views and Theories on the Identity and the Identification of Environment

Alexander believes that, to define the identity as specific quality in buildings and cities, we must understand that identity of each space is created by continuous repetition of certain patterns of events in that place. The identification process of space is step-by-step evolution and metamorphosis in which the whole precedes the parts and components and creates them progressively [1]. Lynch says that several factors are contributing to an effective place to make meaning and identity. Among these factors, recognition and high familiarity that lead to a sense of place are very significant. Events and occurrences, that make the urban space memorable, are effective in this regard too. In addition, the structure, composition and communication of the elements are remarkable [9].

Place attachment and identification are correlated components. Semantic contents related to the environmental perception are described in respect to different levels of attachment and identification. Researches confirmed that high level of identification are connected to a positive representation of the social group, on the contrary, low levels of identification lead to more fragmented images. Aspect of identity has some elements related to the place. Place attachment is predicted by the conative and social dimensions, intended, respectively, as participation in local activities and the presence of significant relationships in the town. On the other hand, the identification with inhabitants is directly affected by the length of residence [14].

Chapman believes that, in new environments, including new towns, the construction of community facilities, leisure

and recreation are delayed. This challenge results to the alienation among the people. New towns, sometimes due to the uniformity and simplicity of their plans and designs, are criticized. However, due to the formation of a variety of spatial experiences, identification process and identity formation can be started [3]. Urban planning studies should be included this fact that the construction of new towns takes time. Nevertheless, dissatisfaction for the early stages can't be compensated with unfounded promises. The new town is alive and must have all functional elements required for its balance and growth. These functions must be able to interact with each other for foundation of dynamic system of the city [10].

Studies of ENTP (European New Towns Platform) expresses that the new town is like a child, it should be allowed to grow naturally. In first stages, facilities are provided for living in the city but people play the final role. Residents need to keep their attachment and belonging to specific place. Accordingly, the city must be changed and transformed on the basis of residents' images, thoughts and needs. Public spaces should also be considered and the creation of specific places for social interaction as far as possible is essential for the planning and design of the new towns [4].

Kulberg believes that those, who are not familiar with new towns, describe them lifeless and without diversity. This description and picture is old and outdated. The interaction of residents with the environment can create life and vitality. This matter needs to the time and the emergence of later generations. However, only functional thinking about planning and design of new towns will lead to the undesirable environments [8].

Thus, the new towns should be given opportunity and time. The Identification of new environments can be achieved over time and through the formation of functional elements. Considering to the feeling of residents and promotion of their satisfaction is essential in this context. Thinking about the physical planning and design only, and neglecting social facilities, make identification difficult. Emphasis on public spaces, social communication and wide opportunities for interaction with the environments will be useful in this regard.

C. Theoretical Framework: the Process of the Identification and Its Key Criteria

According to the concept of identity and in relation to the new environments, including new towns, the identification is found on the basis of continuous interaction between community and environment over time. This process is affected by the objective and visual aspects of the environment. On the other hand, it is rooted in the subjective experiences of community. In this sense, the concept of identity isn't predetermined but formed through the action and reaction among people and place. In this view and based on the studies, the process of the identification in new environments and its key criteria are presented in the Figure 1. Accordingly, four criteria have been considered in this regard. These criteria can explain the mentioned process and is useful for evaluating and analyzing the situation of new urban environments, including new towns. These criteria are:

1. Legibility and Character,

2. Social Interactions.
3. Memory,
4. Attachment and Belonging to Place (Rootedness).

Moreover, the length of residence and satisfaction are considerable and important factors from the point of having significant correlation with the identification in new environments.

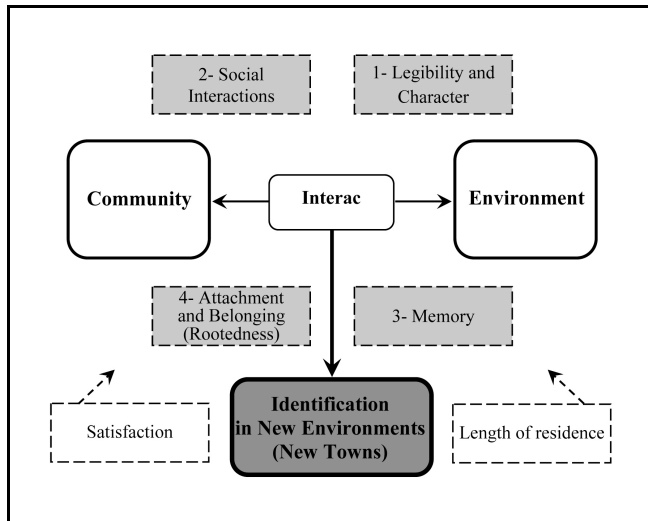


Figure 1. The process of the identification in new environments and its key criteria

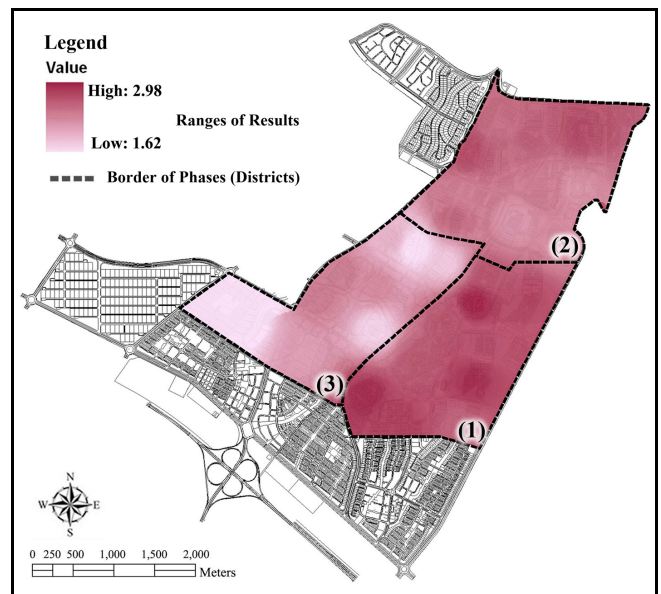
III. METHODOLOGY

The situation of the identification of each phase (each district) of Hashtgerd new town is evaluated by weighting the scores of the criteria. For this purpose, four criteria of “Legibility and Character”, “Social Interactions”, “Memory” and “Attachment and Belonging” have been combined by “Analytic Hierarchy Process” (AHP). The score of each criteria has been assessed on the basis of residents’ view by questionnaire according to the five-level Likert Scale (1-Very Weak, 2-Weak, 3-Moderate, 4-Good, 5-Very Good). In this regard, seven questions are designed for legibility and character, six questions for social interactions, three questions for memory and five questions for attachment and belonging. Indeed, these questions are sub-criteria in order to achieve the status of the mentioned criteria. Moreover, a number of questions were considered for the study of significant correlations between the “length of residence” and “satisfaction” with the identification. In total, 100 questionnaires with 90% validity and confidence were completed. Of these, 30 questionnaires are for the third phase (due to relatively lower population compared to the other two phases) and 35 questionnaires dedicated to each of the first and second phases.

IV. RESULTS

The scores of four criteria and the combination of them that represents the identification situation of Hashtgerd new town are showed in the Figure 2. It results from the synthesis

of “Legibility and Character”, “Social Interactions”, “Memory” and “Attachment and Belonging” based on the AHP method. The final output that means the identity situation, based on questionnaires completed by residents, has been presented in the Map 1 by using the “Interpolate Analysis” in “Arc Map” software.



Map 1. The identity situation in Hashtgerd new town (by synthesis of four criteria)

The score of the identity in total is 2.53. This indicates that the situation of Hashtgerd new town is between weak (bad) and moderate in relation to the identification process. This level in its first phase zone is close to moderate status (score 2.85), meaning that it is better than the second phase zone, status between weak and moderate (score 2.58). The third phase zone has a weak identity (score 2.12). So, the phase 1 zone of Hashtgerd new town has provided more suitable context for the above process, rather than Phases 2 and 3 zones.

Based on the related questions (sub-criteria) to the legibility and character, it can be said that the situation of Hashtgerd is weak in relation to memorial, focal and familiar elements for its residents. Study of the social interactions shows that the interactions of residents with each other are moderate. The status of public and communal spaces is between weak and moderate in terms of quantity and quality. The communication of municipal authorities with people is weak. The potential of city, in relation to the memory and public ceremonies and events that can enhance it, is poor. The attachment and belonging criteria is between weak and moderate. Views and judgments of most residents show that Hashtgerd new town is almost dormitory settlement, not live and perfect environment with good sense of place. According to the findings resulted from other sections of the questionnaire, access to services and facilities is between weak and moderate. The satisfaction in terms of comfort and security is moderate. Overall, these challenges affect the identification of Hashtgerd as a new environment and have led to the current situation.

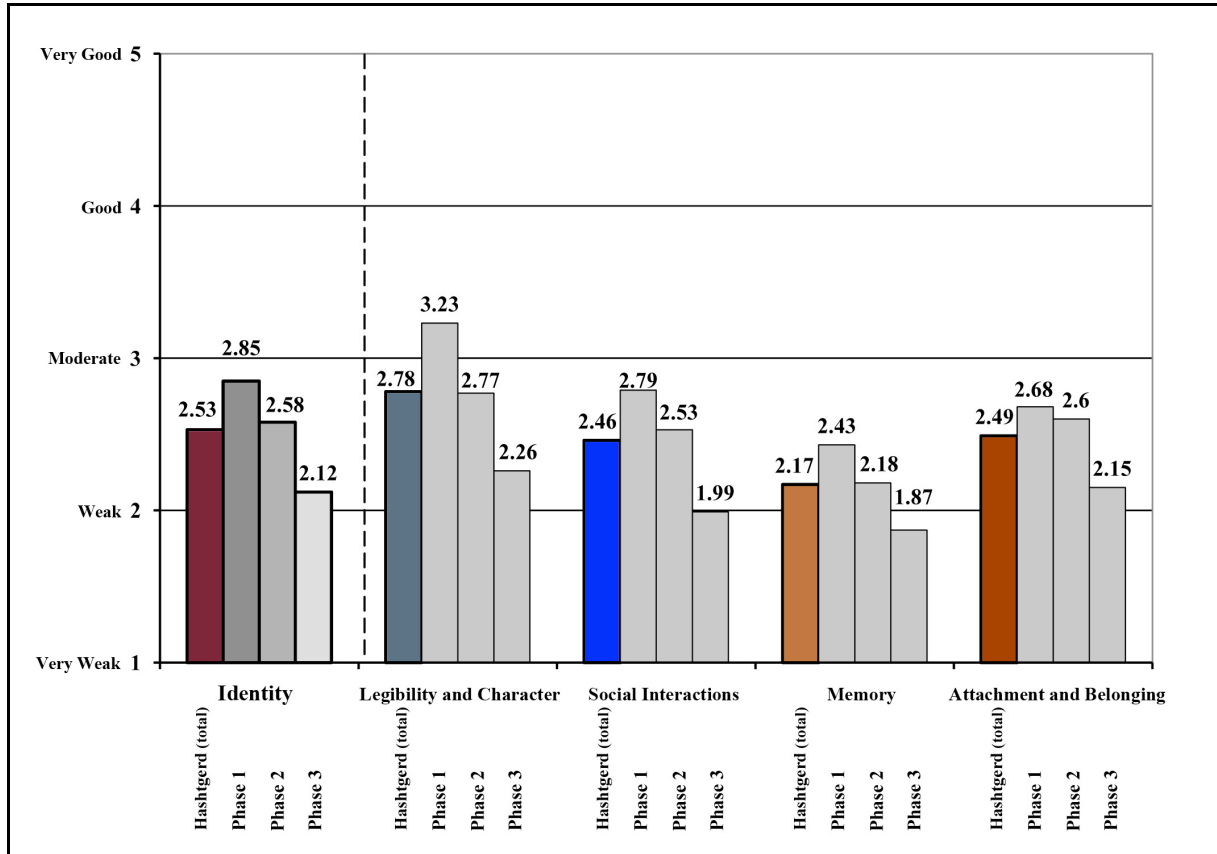


Figure 2. The identification situation and four criteria in relation to it (in three phases of Hashtgerd new town and in total)

The analysis of 100 samples based on the “Spearman Correlation Coefficient” also reveals that the identification has a positive significant correlation with time as the length of residency. The correlation coefficient of it is 0.735.

Moreover, when the level of residents’ satisfaction is increased, the identity is promoted and its correlation coefficient is positive and 0.772. The Figures 3 and 4 show these significant relationships.

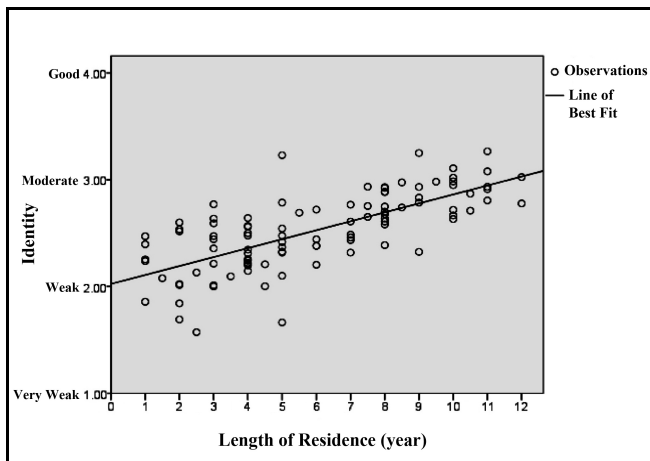


Figure 3. The significant correlation between the identification and length of residence

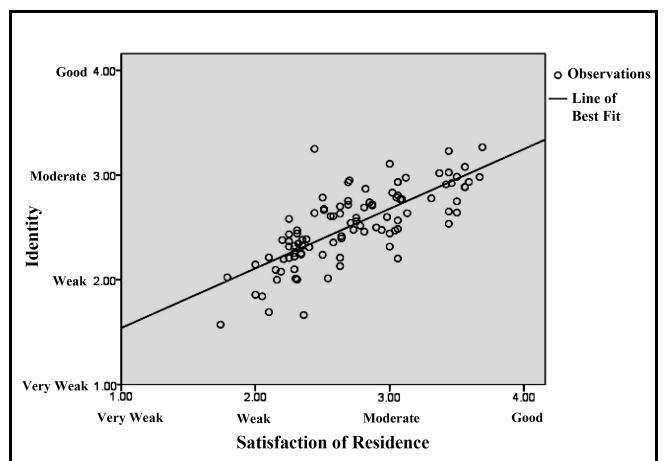


Figure 4. The significant correlation between the identification and residents’ satisfaction

V. CONCLUSION

This research investigated the process of identification and sense of place in new environments with special reference to Hashtgerd new town in Iran. The identification process and sense of place are founded on the basis of continuous interaction between community and environment over time. This process is affected by the objective and visual aspects of the environment. On the other hand, it is rooted in the subjective experiences of community. In this sense, the concept of identity isn't predetermined but formed through the action and reaction among people and place. In relation to this process and through the literature review, four criteria were considered in the theoretical framework: 1. legibility and character, 2. social interactions, 3. memory and 4. attachment and belonging to place. Moreover, the study proves that the length of residence and satisfaction are significant factors in the process of identification and promotion of sense of place especially in new environments, such as new towns. The identity is promoted with increasing the length of residence and residents' satisfaction.

The research findings show that, the situation of Hashtgerd new town, established and constructed since two decades ago, is between weak (bad) and moderate (according to five-level Likert Scale) in relation to the identification and sense of place. However, this situation in the first phase zone of this town is close to moderate status, meaning that it is better than the second phase zone (status between weak and moderate). In addition, the third phase zone of Hashtgerd has a weak identity. The main reason for these different situations is related to the four mentioned criteria for evaluating and analyzing the process of identification and sense of place in the three phases. The first phase has provided more suitable context for the above process, rather than the second and third phases. Since there is a positive and strong correlation between the length of residence and people satisfaction with the identification process, the different conditions and effects of these two criteria on the mentioned aspects should be considered.

The process of Identity formation in new towns requires time and opportunity. It is necessary to use strategic and effective plans for this issue. Identification and promotion of sense of place can be achieved through clear vision on key criteria, including legibility and character, social interactions, memory and attachment and belonging to place, as well as residents' satisfaction. Designing central points, symbols and specific spaces for social interactions, are necessary to improve the identity and sense of place in new environments including new towns. Provision of public facilities is the most important factor to accelerate the process of identification and sense of place. Other strategies are needed to address, mitigate and solve the challenges in this regard. It can be claimed that development of sustainable urban environments requires attention to issues and dimensions beyond housing production.

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