

A Big Lost Fragment; Evaluating Socio-cultural Considerations in Mehr Housing Project, Case Study Analysis of Manzarieh

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Abstract

Being part of their identity, housing is accounted as the core of activity of the people. With regard to lifestyle as well as the more time spent at home, the issue is of multiple importances in Iran. The quality of recent mass housing developments in Iran however is affected by market, codes and lack of urban designers, consequently disregarding socio-cultural status of inhabitants. While being at the young population peak, the needs for mass affordable housing drove 9th government toward commencing a national wide policy called Mehr Housing Project in which large number of affordable housing units is built within a short period of time. The result of the accelerated project has exposed in various forms. It seems that the issues originate in ignoring socio-cultural trends of the users, especially cultural traditions and lifestyles. The paper presents findings from observations along with study of historical background of inhabitants of newly constructed units in Manzarieh (Shahre-Kord), the main compound occupied by Bakhtiary community in west of Iran. While the Mother city inhabitants are doing rather well socio-economically, the same cannot be said of Mehr dwellers. In terms of behavioral and socio-cultural background classification, results suggest that socio-cultural factors related to social cohesion, familiar design elements along with gender and economic support, are inadequately reflected in the location and design of the units and their public spaces as well, resulting in abandonment and modification. These findings have implications for future housing policies in the country.

Keywords: Affordable housing; Mehr housing projects; Manzarieh shahrekord; Socio-cultural considerations

Introduction

Rising significance of housing owing to urban population growth, necessitating proportionate design approach. Due to young population peak of Iran on one hand and housing shortage for low income people on the other hand, 9th government has involved in another mass affordable housing project after various previously failed projects such as leased housing. Mehr housing project that of which a national wide policy trying to provide affordable housing for low-medium income people in suburbs wasn't accepted by most of the users as their own "home" despite extensive financial support by the government. Many of them left the dormitory like residential complexes immediately after earning money, immigrating to the main city, others still waiting for so. For those who have to stay, it's been a crucial to modify or transform the houses. While the most of similar Mehr housing projects around the country intend to shelter the people with variety of socio-cultural situation, this paper has explored Manzarieh as the case study with the users from rich socio-cultural background. This paper focuses on socio-cultural incompatibility as the main factor of either immigrating or not being attached to the housing environments from urban design standpoint. The methods of observation along with a socio-cultural background study of the settlers in Manzarieh as one of the largest cases of Mehr housing projects, is carried out as a case study for the failed projects. The findings are expected to inform future policy making for housing in the country.

The Review of the Literature

Affordable housing

According to statistical center of Iran, a housing unit is defined as a place, space or environment in which one or more households reside while it is connected to one or several entrances. While the term reflects government attitude toward housing, it underestimates other impressive aspects. According to researchers, housing possesses hidden aspects in addition to economic and technical features [1,2]. Quoting from Bourdieu [3] the so called "cultural capital" that has capacity to transform to other capitals during the life can crucially

associate with individual lives in housing. Rapoport [4] on the other hand defines housing as a place including concepts of identity, dignity of inhabitants, privacy and a behavioral environment. Possessing various names and forms ¹in different countries, affordable housing is not of unanimous define due to different income level and approach toward housing in various areas in the world. Each country has its own criteria to determine a house as affordable while the United States as well as Australia are of the role models in evaluating affordable housing. Construction quality, community and cultural considerations however are of commonplace criteria in different countries. It is argued here that creation of home place is as important to urban poor classes as to other more fortunate citizens. There are two aspects to be stated at the outset in order to understand the significance of socio-cultural factors in the low cost housing environment. Firstly, home making is more critical in low cost housing environment for the sheer lack of space and the constraints caused by standardization of design. Due to this, the outdoor near-home space of low cost housing area plays significant role in complementing the dwelling and supporting the home making endeavor. Secondly, such processes, in turn, constitutes an important component that generates of the vitality and social life of the otherwise dreary housing environment and this is what urban design obligation is about.

Socio-cultural features of housing

Beside the physical context, the residents of a low cost mass

¹ Public housing, social housing, shared ownership etc

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housing also need to confront the social contexts in order to create their home place. The high density condition of such housing compels residents to engage in or regulate interactions with the people living close by. Social interaction plays a substantial part in defining how an individual regards the housing environment and experiences the home. Social context also provides potential social support and social network particularly important in low income community. What constitutes social network however is largely dependent on the way the people think, social norms and lifestyles together with culture. Social and cultural factors shape an integral relationship in most areas of housing as Chiu argues. Rapaport [4] defines culture as “people’s ability to effectively interact”. Many researchers believe that socio-cultural matters are integral part of residential environment since it defines the way settlers behave and use resources.

Socio-cultural concept however includes following:

- Achievement to understanding culture, identity, values, norms and lifestyles of target groups and their inter relation
- Involve related groups in determining priorities, design, implementation and evaluation of development projects

While a fragment of artificial environment called, housing plays an important role in sustainable development of the cities, sustainability of its own is totally depended on intertwined social, cultural and economic aspects. In the way that sustainability could be accounted as social preconceptions that are necessary to support environmental sustainability.

Accordingly, urban design defines the relationship between artificial environment (buildings, streets and plazas) and socio-cultural structures that are critically correlated. Generally, two main scenarios exist to express the way people link themselves to affordable housing: firstly, by means of kinship and tradition, they interact, secondly the perspective that argues they socialize based upon personal interests. To meet the needs of the earlier, urban designers should consider collective needs of settlers, and to meet the latter needs they have to put less stress on sense of community by which sustainable social relationships won’t shape.

Mass affordable housing in Iran

Looking at after revolution period, mass housing projects entered Iran in terms of 5 years programs. It wasn’t until the third program that housing found its status as an independence part. Promotion of using concrete, generation of prefabricated industries in large cities, land use efficiency and financial resources reinforcement have always been emphasized by the programs. Some of them providing residential needs of the people inside the city as “Land Preparation Projects” others however generated residential complexes in suburbs by which rough housing environments created. The new housing complexes outside the cities have always lack identity, safety and social network formation. In these programs each stage have had its particular goals while no one reached to optimum stage as once anticipated due to lack of facility and not being accepted by the users. The procedures continued until the latest mass affordable housing called Mehr project, siting kindness as a core strategy. Despite construction of 28000 housing units and large budget allocation, quality criteria remained unsolvable similar to previous projects. Many experts slammed it as “a small house made on a large land”. Satellite housing, unmixed dwelling of low income people, high density housing in suburbs, monotonous and lifeless spaces were practically a significant failure for the superficially true decision.

Mehr housing projects are constructed within 2 phases: firstly

technical matters such as excavation and making buildings structures are implemented by cooperative companies. Elaboration of houses such as tiling and coloring is partially conceded to the owners as citizen partnership in the second stage.

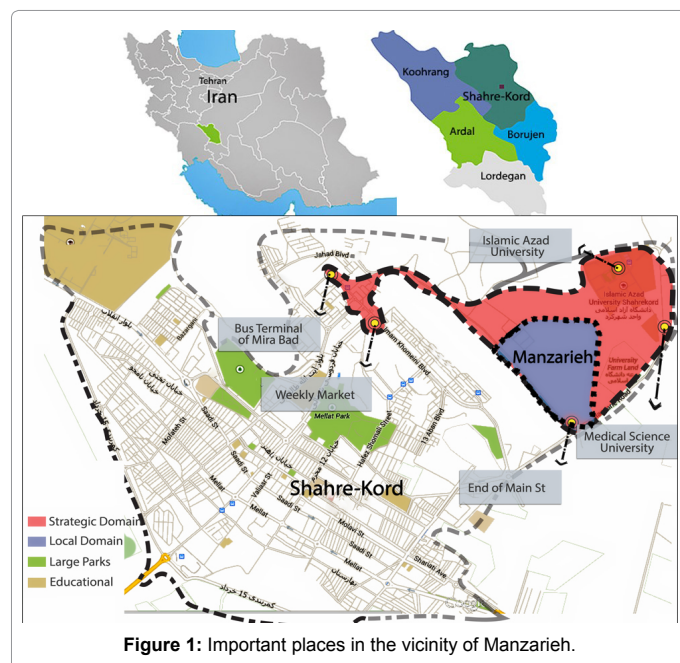
The common problem: Lack of shaping identity for environment as well as settlers as a substantial crisis is accounted as the most outstanding issue in the newly constructed residential complexes of Iran. The factor that has always been underestimated despite highlighted attention to basic needs. As noted short-term dwelling is the primary intersection of all dwelling groups in housing projects of Iran. The users seeking an opportunity to immigrate or displace while others have to stay and modify their housing environment to comply with their lifestyle needs. Investigations have made it clear that most of the groups have short-term planning (5-10 years) since have not accepted the new complexes or towns as their home place [5]. the new housing projects are of similar spatial as well as physical structure while locating around the country known as the land of diversity. Consequently, the new projects have not met socio-cultural demands of the contexts. Though urban design perspective that highlights user-oriented design is able to fill such gaps.

Methodology

One of the most significant methods to study user-environment compatibility is to observe and analysis of settlers behavior in exterior housing environments. The main method used in this paper is a descriptive analysis relying on observation and inhabitant background study through which people aspiration in public spaces enclose. In detail the paper was undertaken by analyzing 2 selected public spaces of Manzarieh and the use of qualitative research methods. The main data collection is conducted using the ‘unobtrusive observational method’, which tracks human behaviours in space through ‘disguised field analysis’. Numerous repetitions of similar observations are undertaken at different times of the day and night in order to increase the validity of the results and given suggestions. The repeated behavioral tracking of the 2 selected public spaces of Manzarieh with different uses and activities are analyzed based on ‘evaluative observational variables’ to ensure valid conclusions based on collected observations [6]. Observation of pedestrian behavior together with historical records of Bakhtiary community are carried out to complement what do the inhabitants preconcept about Manzarieh housing environment. The interview approach may not be responsive for these environments since people may not tell the truth either due to lack of trust to local government or counsel.

The Case Study: Introduction

Province of Chaharmahal-o-Bakhtiary is accounted as one of those located in mountain area in center of plateau Iran. Shahre-Kord in which Manzarieh is located at northeast, is the highest city due to its 2150 meters altitude while being capital city of the province. (Figure 1) People of the province are classified into two ethnics, the so called Chaharmahali (with Persian and Turk ethnics) and Bakhtiary (Lor ethnic) with most of them from Bakhtiary ethnic [6-9]. There are number of significant elements including the two universities, weekly market, main road and bus terminal that affecting Manzarieh local domain and introducing strategic scale domain. Being affected by production methods diversity, Bakhtiary crafts are various and outstanding by some of them known as global such as woodcarving and locksmith (Figure 2) Traditional economy of Shahre-kord’s people is based upon handy crafts such as carpet weaving, felting and gathering then drying herbs. These activities however has transmitted to the women these days to help family economy. Most of men working



on industrial sectors, some still preserving their historic activities such as farming [10-14].

Socio-cultural background of Bakhtiary community

Archaeological findings have illustrated that Bakhtiary community as a Persian ethnic originates in Shushtar around 6th or 7th century B.C. [7]. The province has been under Caliphs ruling system. Historical surveys have elucidated that Bakhtiary community with Khans at the head have had a cohesive social as well as ethnic system due to particular Geographical and ethnic territory. In terms of settling traditions, most of historic residential buildings made by Bakhtiary community are elaborated with woodcarving, colorful sashes with coarse and fine glass pieces, ornamental plastering together with close relationship with nature configured the way they resided. Symbolic elements such as "stone lion" as the sign of territory defining for houses or villages are abundant in their history and collective memory as a common phenomenon. More luxurious houses have however referred to Khans in form of fortresses with being larger and more luxurious, siting their courage and gallantry in hunting, equitation and archery [15-17]. The community has had various ceremonies established in different times of the year. Some communal to national ceremonies including grieving in Ashura or in time of a dear life lost or Norouz ceremony in which people visit each other despite being in hostility while wearing

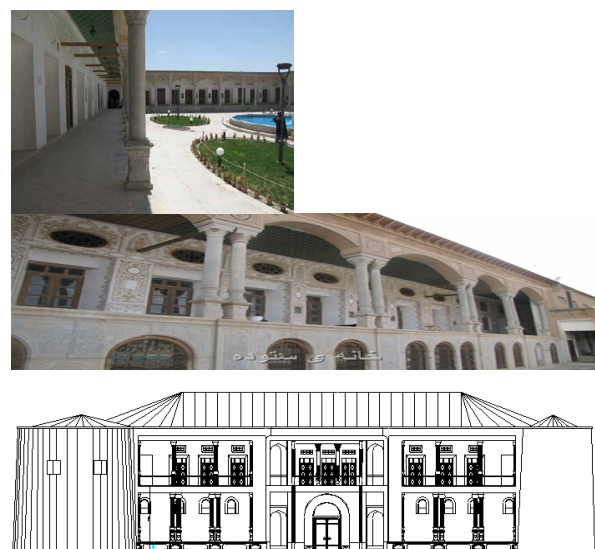
new dresses. Various beliefs have associated with their lives, affecting their behavior in routines and are part of their culture. The beliefs are inherited from one generation to other, some of which include:

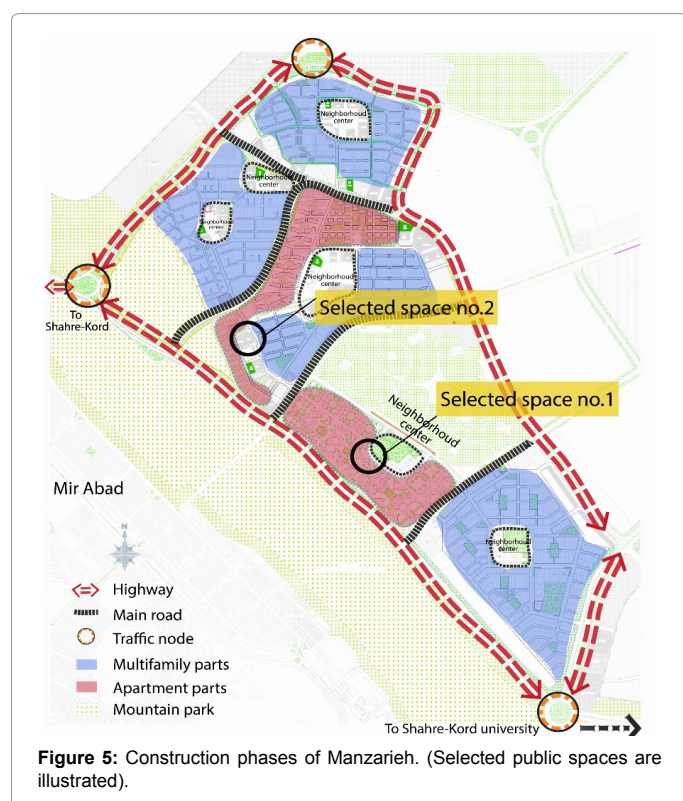
- A green tree with foliage on it shouldn't be cut.
- They have an especial attention toward color of green, they wear green bands on their wrist.
- Their lengthy and loud greetings are well-known.
- They accentuate kinship relationships.

They have had special kind of clothes either for women or men (Figures 3 and 4). Having numerous as well as intertwined social units is one of outstanding features of Bakhtiary's social structure. Such a social units are environments in which the real solitary is happening whether in conflicts or in their routine productive activities. In terms of economic activities, pastoralist and agriculture has been core activity of them in the past century. Many of Manzarieh residents remain the same beliefs and the way their ancestors lived as is observable in the case study. In addition to 4 residential pieces of 33, 61, 39 and 47 hectares, there have been cultural, religious, sport and urban facilities that have been considered for this new residential complex, although some of them not being constructed yet. In this 180 hectare area there are 6770 housing units built, while some parts are under construction. This provides dwelling for 27124 individuals mostly from Bakhtiary community mixing with Chaharmahalis [18] (Figures 5-9).

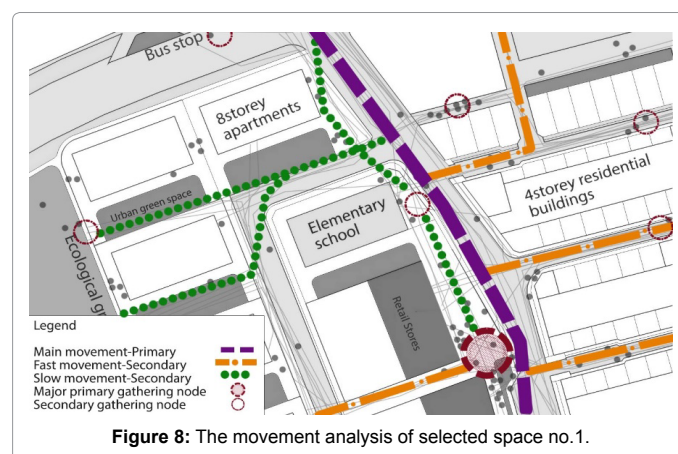
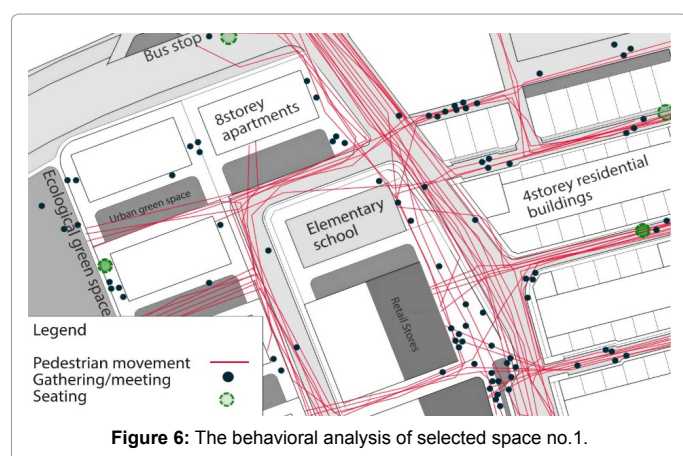
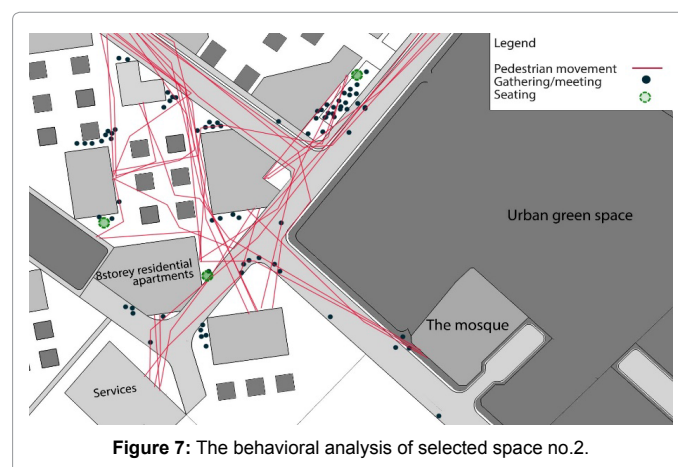
Results and Discussion

This paper relies on the observational survey from urban design

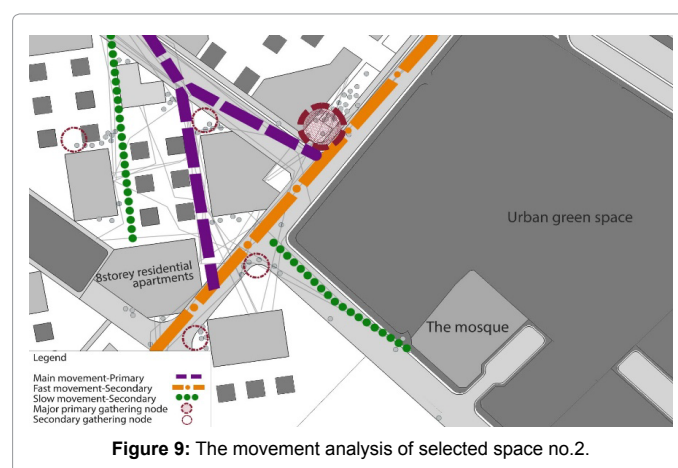




in the southern part, characterizes with 8-10 storey apartments, settling most of Bakhtiary ethnic. Both sites portray by vast monotonous asphalt areas together with modern delineation apartment buildings, raising no spatial potential for socio-cultural activities. As is illustrated in public space no.1 the primary movements occur in front side of the 8storey apartments with the gathering points mostly alongside of the blocks. In space no.2 retail stores at the eastern side remain the major gathering/meeting point while the northern edge (front side of the 8storey blocks) acts as transient route. The number of people interacting with vegetation feature (at the southern edge) rises significantly in normal weather conditions in western part of public space no.1. The



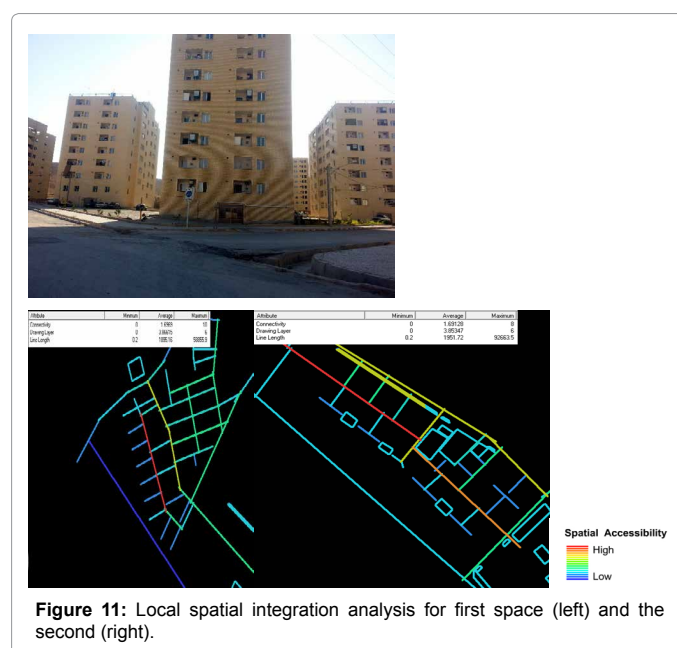
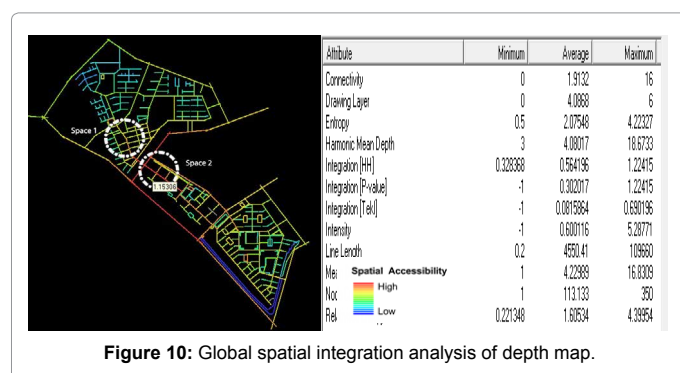
point of view along with study of socio-cultural records of Manzarieh inhabitants to give some indications about socio-cultural aspiration of the people. The analysis below is a summary of findings of these observations. The current section of the paper would look into the spatial behaviours within the newly constructed Manzarieh public realm in order to identify indicators for socio-environmental values. The two selected public spaces are the most congested places in Manzarieh with the first one located in the center of the complex with the main commercial uses and the second chosen space near the main mosque of Manzarieh. Pedestrian movement pattern locating was carried out by some architecture students of Azad university of Shahrekord who volunteered contributing to the research. By observation, public space no.1 seem to be “active” in terms of human activities with most of retailing premises located here. Aside from being most accessible, the location of Imam Hassan elementary school behaving like a focal point for the area. The second public space with Imam Hadi mosque located



movement paths of pedestrian is mostly found through front areas of the blocks (where is expected to be a gathering point mostly) while the stationary activities occur in the side edges of 8 storey blocks. The use pattern of both selected spaces reveal that the socialization related activities, frequently occur in ecological areas (compliant with bakhtiary/Charmahali background) In 8 storey residential areas however, the spaces between the point towers is the place that many women socialize and children play as observed. This is the case for men in night times while women inside. Apart from these busy locations, the internal residential enclave areas are less active in terms of socialization activities as observed. Interestingly, numerous meetings/gathering nodes of women along with children playing areas occurs in condominium inner spaces of 8 storey apartments of public space no.2 (mostly stairs). However, this is not the case in the 4storey apartments in public space no.1 with most social activities happening in their blind communal alleys by women of Charmahali flatterer a rug and sitting in the alleys. The 3 mosques of Manzarieh are strategically located within the new town. However, they do not act as focal points and look deserted in times of praying, even in holy days of mourning. Global and local spatial integration of Manzarieh was analyzed using Depth map x with various attributes illustrated in Figures 10 and 11 respectively to compare expected pedestrian behavior with the real for both selected spaces. As space syntax theory states, the most human movement and activities occurring in spaces with higher spatial accessibility (from blue for least accessibility to red for the most). Predictably as shown in global spatial integration the 3 red lines in the middle of the compound embrace higher human congestion with various activities (movement/stationary). Meanwhile in local scale, the two red lines expected to have most human activities along with retail and other movement depended uses in them. (with retail stores in space no.1 and Imam Hassan mosque in no.2.) As observed main pedestrian routes occur in the linear space with IV 10 as expected. Though there are gathering points and transient routs in the blue areas (IV average 4) in space 2, outside the most integrated spaces. In space no.2, the highest integrated spaces are dedicated to residential enclaves with pedestrian movement the same as surrounding streets as illustrated in Figure 7. In terms of global spatial integration, most of alleys with less IV, having least movement pattern while trigger more stationary activities (gathering/meeting) as observed and illustrated in Figures 7 and 8. This issue highlights Bakhtiary people tendency to socialize in spatially isolated spaces rather than integrated, perhaps due to Chaharmahal's presence in their territory. Aside, social isolation of the people in Manzarieh is also affected by environment design. As illustrated in global IV, clustering design of residential area has resulted in zoned land uses and separated movement in a socially mixed compound.

Socio-cultural background

While there are large amount of wastelands in the area, number



of retail stores are inadequate with respect to access radius (about 1.2 kilometers in northern areas) and roads steep as well. This is more highlighted when it comes to Bakhtiary habits to buy their daily needs of retail stores rather than at once. In terms of access paths arrangement, settlers of Manzarieh apparently are in favor of housing developments with no vehicle traffic inside since they believe strangers coming to heart of their colony having a purpose. The configuration of access roads has led to lack of any speed reduction mechanism for the vehicles coming inside the enclaves. Dead end alleys in multifamily parts of the complex, are accounted as great places for informal interactions in which women gather and socialize by carpet flattening and sitting in the alleys with their children playing around. The form of socializing also is classified into women and men by presence of women in public spaces in groups at the time of men's absence and vice versa. This case is not typical socialization way in Bakhtiary ethnic. These issue resulting in lack of social mix and its benefits.

Being typical urban scenario of Manzarieh, the most balconies and verandas in both selected spaces literally used for woman economic activities (such as drying and selling vegetables or making handy crafts). It is common in Manzarieh and other areas of Shahre-kord for women to help family economy with secondary activities. Particular spaces are needed to do so, such as cuisine or greenhouses. Absence of such spaces together with small home plans, has resulted in transformations by changing balconies to the place of herbal flattening, cloth drying, making handy crafts or so, using temporary structures.

These temporary structures in some cases are a response to privacy especially near main roads due to their religious beliefs to cover against strangers, while the solution has led to natural air ventilation prohibition in some cases.

While semi-public spaces have always played a significant role in previous houses with wide porch functioning as a joint, open to close spaces ratio is not of proportionate amount and it is now confined to "pokey apertures" in Bakhtiary language. In terms of urban form, the two selected compounds lack physical symbols and elements, compatible with inhabitant historic image, displacing with monotonous environment covered with pale yellow bricks, free of Shahre-kord traditional architecture. Even the names of the places do not originate

in the people culture and history that brought them to call spaces in numbers not the names of the martyrs as is. Many of the residents have come from cities with ethnic rivalry and conflict. Everyone knows his or her territory in such environments. While in Mehr housing projects there is inevitably coexist in multistory apartments with no privacy defined and no attachment to the place is formed. The consequence marks ignoring environment maintenance by dumping waste materials in public spaces and the conflicts caused by so, except for lower rise multifamily parts that marking their common public spaces with planting.

Participation and economic support

Mehr housing projects are constructed in a way that owners have no participation in the process. On one hand, shaping social cohesion is a challenge due to the way housing units are conceded. Various organizations concede their exclusive housing units to their own employee. On the other hand students of the University of Shahrekord have recently renting some particular areas of the complex, contributing to social exclusiveness in some parts.

In terms of socio-cultural education, no enterprise or supportive organ is doing a favor to remain and declare culture, traditional habits and local arts of Bakhtiary residents of Manzarieh that could promote economic, consequently social status of Manzarieh. Social anomalies act as another issue in absence of citizenship behavior. In some cases breaking lighting equipment and damaging public facilities, also graffiti are accounted as teenager hobbies while there are no learning materials neither in public spaces nor public media for education matters.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the socio-cultural situation of one of the cases of national wide Mehr affordable housing project within Shahrekord from observational urban design point of view. It should be noted that at this stage the research is based only upon an observational survey along with background study, which may not be exactly representative of the whole population. However, it should be enough to provide some indications about the socio-cultural aspirations of the people. Along with compulsory settling in the area, it is noted that Bakhtiary people have remained their traditional life style and trying to adopt with the new unaccountable built environment. Children and women are another lost fragment in the design of public realm in this project. The concept of housing especially is in close relationship with home patch and a nature associated design for Bakhtiary residents,

while the concept is not shaping due to lack of socio-cultural studies for all Mehr housing projects around the country. These ideas could form a base for an action plan to promote and revive Mehr housing projects.

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