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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Role of social indicators on vitality parameter to enhance the quality of women's communal life within an urban public space (case: Isfahan's traditional bazaar, Iran)

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Abstract

Vitality is a quality that makes a public space operational and attractive throughout the day in relation to ongoing activities. This parameter can be evaluated through measures such as collective people presence, mixed-use functions, diversity of activities, and other related supportive physical elements. The aim of this research is to evaluate women's communal life in terms of vitality measures within public spaces. The commercial setting of Isfahan's traditional bazaar was selected as the study area. To enhance the credibility of the results, several data collection methods, for example, semi-structured individual interviews ($n = 24$), semi-structured focused group interviews (five groups including 28 middle-aged women), direct observation, snap photography, and unobtrusive behavioral observation of women in communal life within the selected study area, were employed. To analyze the collected data, qualitative content and descriptive analyses were used. Our results indicate that by increasing the vitality of a public space through its related measures, women's presence will grow, and through this growth, the quality of their communal life would be enhanced.

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1. Introduction

Social interaction and experience of daily urban life, as two vital parameters, enhance the importance of public spaces. The characteristics of these spaces help different groups of

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people to engage with each other regardless of their social class, ethnicity, race, gender, and age (Bibeve, 2012). Additionally, they affect people's different activities, based on their culture (Rapoport, 1978). These concepts help us to understand the different meanings of urban life that are related to the variables mentioned above.

By considering the fact that women constitute half of society's population and that their new roles are increasing because of the growth in their cultural and social activities (Greed and Roberts, 1998; McDowell, 1999), the presence of women in urban spaces has become a necessity (Reza Zadeh and Mohamadi, 2009). Paying attention to women's environmental needs, socio-cultural values, and rituals can improve the quality of urban public spaces and consequently influence the presence of women within urban social, religious, cultural, and commercial settings (Farokh Seresht, 2011).

Historically, male politics, economy, and religious issues have affected urban studies and the quality of public spaces (Garica et al., 2004; Greed and Roberts, 1998; McDowell, 1999). In fact, urban public spaces have been created to meet the needs of males, who are free from the concerns of particular social groups (Bondi, 2013; Javidaani, 2012). As can be seen in Table 1, urban public spaces have more influence on women's everyday life than men's. Women have a closer relationship with their urban environment (Krenichyn, 2004; Mohammadi, 2009) because they have a communicative view to the world around them, while men adopt an instrumental view (Young, 2000). Therefore, women need to be present in an urban environment based on the way they relate to such setting and the ethics governing their behavior in public urban spaces (Wekerle, 2005; Young, 2010).

Given the rapid social and economic changes through modernization (Jin et al., 2017; Ramezani and Hamidi, 2010), the quantitative dimensions of the planning system of modern Iranian public urban spaces have overcome the qualitative importance of a living environment and cultural roots of society (Ferdowsian, 2002). Hence, there is an imbalance between women's communal needs and the existing community spaces within the modern Iranian urban public spaces. Neglecting the importance of the

environmental possibilities for women to perform optional and social activities have decreased the frequency of women's presence in modern Iranian urban public spaces (Masoudi Nejad, 1998).

Hence, there is an absence of interaction between women's socio-cultural rituals and other values in modern Iranian urban spaces (Behzad far et al., 2009). Other results of this disconnection are the absence of attentiveness to women's conveniences; absence of conducive communal setting; and carelessness to women's physiological and safety needs for their cultural, religious, and daily social activities. As a result, a majority of Iranian women have to experience non-conducive public spaces and suffer the absence of vitality. Thus, women prefer to use outdoor spaces only for their necessary activities (Barati and Zarin Ghalam, 2013). Figure 1 shows some characteristics of the current modern urban public spaces in Iran.

Therefore, Iranian women are more comfortable to perform their socio-cultural and religious rituals within traditional Iranian Bazaars. However, there are many modern commercial complexes in their environment. This study aims to analyze women's communal life in Iranian traditional bazaar, explore the design values of women's related communal setting within the traditional bazaar, and suggest possible recommendations that can help designers improve modern market places based on the learned values.

1.1. Women's communal life in Muslim countries

Based on Shariati (2015), dividing Muslim countries into Arab and non-Arab Muslim categories will help in the understanding of cultural issues. This is because understanding the Islamic agenda in theory and practice are strongly related to people's cultural roots. According to Jafari (2001), the cultural background causes the formation of different behaviors and needs among Muslim people in different Arab and non-Arab countries. Muslims in Arab societies have a different concept of public and private space and also communal life from those in Western and non-Arab societies. "Public space," which is called *Umma* in

Table 1 Differences of Iranian men and women's requirements in public spaces (adapted from Ganji (2011) and Nekuei Fard (2012)).

Differences of requirements in urban public spaces in Iran

<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
<i>Instrumental view toward urban public spaces</i>	<i>Communicative view toward urban public spaces</i>
No preference between closed and open spaces	Avoids being in closed spaces
Privacy is not a major need for men	Private spaces visually and physically
Visual access is not a determining factor	Visual access is a very important factor
Using space by group is not a determining factor	Possibility of using space by group
Surveillance is not a determining factor	Necessity of existing official surveillance (natural and artificial)
Proportion of users is not a determining factor	Necessity of proper proportion of men and women's presence
One purpose space can be sufficient	Necessity of possibility to perform different activities
Minimum number of equipment is enough	Necessity of proper furniture and equipment
Visual uncontrollability of space can be good	Space must be controllable visually
Accessibility even by car or on foot	Sidewalk accessibility is very important

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