



## Successful public places: A case study of historical Persian gardens



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### ABSTRACT

Public open spaces today are considered important urban environmental elements that offer a positive contribution to quality of life. They are vital ingredients of successful cities that can help to build a sense of community, civic identity and culture, and facilitate social capital, economic development and community revitalization. Accordingly, the perceived values and qualities of successful public places are acknowledged as crucial. Efforts have been made to evaluate public space conditions (i.e., physical, spatial, visual, social, functional, and etc.) for users and a series of indicators – physical–environmental qualities (i.e., scenic beauty, seating, lighting, paths, amenities, etc.) and subjective qualities (i.e., being comfortable, passive and active engagement, and etc.) – have been demonstrated. Using the case of historical Persian gardens, this paper examines how and why these gardens as the first examples of Iranian green spaces are still being actively used by contemporary urban dwellers. Accordingly, the research investigated the popularity, diversity, distinctiveness, attractiveness and comfort of the gardens as success indicators through applying mixed method approaches. Obtained results suggested that historical Persian gardens could be categorized as successful public places due to their historical, natural, functional (social and recreational) and emotional related aspects. The results have direct implications for urban planners and policy makers, landscape architects and environmental designers and provide guidance for planning, improving and designing successful public places.

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### Introduction

Quality of life for people in urban areas is the outcome of the interaction of people with the urban environment (Das, 2008). Place is recognized as the constituting aspect of communal life (Galway and Mceldowney, 2006). The importance of public spaces and their efficiency for residents have been discussed in various disciplines. Many studies have shown that public open spaces (POS) are one of the important elements of the urban environment (Shirvani, 1985) that makes a positive contribution to the quality of life (Madanipour, 1999). Public spaces serve as a reflection of individual behavior, social processes, and our often conflicting values (Francis, 1989). They reflect us, our private beliefs and our public

values (Berman, 1986), a common ground where public culture is expressed, and community life is developed. That is, public spaces are the inevitable components of the city that mainly influence the quality of the local environment (Karlíková, 2009) with not only their physical and ecological roles but also by contributing to the mental and psychological health of human beings in various forms (Thompson, 1998). Accordingly, the idea of making a place and how it affects people has been proposed by researchers for more than 30 years. Examples include the making of better places by reviewing a substantive dimension of urban design such as morphological, visual, temporal, and perceptual (Carr et al., 1992; Carmona et al., 2003; Carmona and Tiesdell, 2007) and offering valuable insights into the need for clear space and a deep appreciation of the urban grain, the built form and the components that play important roles in the morphological aspects of urban settings.

It is unclear to what extent these mechanisms are relevant in different contexts, such as in Iran, which appears to lack public open spaces that are suitable for today's lifestyles. Based on recent studies, Iranians are not eager to use the parks frequently as before (Hami et al., 2011) despite all the benefits and

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importance of this activity for improving quality of life (Miller, 1988). It seems that quantity and quality of public open spaces are not responsive to contemporary Iranian society needs. That is, the imitation of European gardens, chiefly French ones since 18th century, resulted in parks and public places that are not suitable for the Iranian culture and climate; consequently, the use of those areas by urban residents has been reduced. Nonetheless, historical gardens are still being actively used by urban residents. Historical Persian gardens' current popularity and liveliness raised the following research questions: first, why these historical gardens are still being actively used by contemporary urban residents? Second, to what extent can the gardens be categorized as successful public places? And finally, what are the main indicators of success of garden? Thus, this study attempts to examine four popular Persian gardens among existing samples and to collect related information that could be applicable for improving contemporary urban green spaces.

#### *What makes a successful public place?*

In spite of all of the researches and debates about the importance of public spaces and their qualities, it is still difficult even for experts to define what makes a good public space (Trip, 2007). Multiple dimensions regarding the quality of public space have been identified through past research, design and management practices (Whyte, 1980; Francis, 1987, 1988).

A number of architects, urban designers, and sociologists have long investigated public space attributes that facilitate social interactions (Lynch, 1960; Whyte, 1980; Carr et al., 1992; Francis, 2003; Gehl, 2006). Architect Jan Gehl identified a number of important physical elements of public space such as traffic reduction schemes, walking paths, seating and spatial qualities. He emphasizes the importance of first defining why and how people use public space (Gehl, 2006). Quality features of the physical environment including the presence of focal points such as public art, food outlets, connected path ways and seating (Evans, 2003; Bedimo-Rug et al., 2005), nature (Coley et al., 1997; Kuo et al., 1998), attractive buildings and landscapes (Nasar, 1994; Butterworth, 2000; Lund, 2002), and the absence of incivilities such as graffiti and litter (Francis, 1989; Perkins and Long, 2002; Kruger et al., 2007) are other criteria that has been theoretically or empirically associated with influencing social interaction in public spaces. In addition to physical environmental features, urban designers and architects often refer to more subjective qualities such as being comfortable, supportive, democratic, meaningful, and providing passive and active engagement (Carr et al., 1992). Related research also clarifies the relationship between various types of activities in the built environment associated with re-creation of high quality, vital and viable places.

Therefore, instead of a clear definition, the efforts of authorities have revealed a list of important factors and elements as indicators of a successful public place. The Urban Land Institute (2004) underlined four criteria including "location, size, programing and design" as the main principles that make a good public place. Similar findings were reported by Trip (2007), while adding people and social safety as two more criteria. Trip (2007) considered people as the single most important factor due to the reality that there can be no public spaces without public. That is, the success of a particular public space is not solely in the hands of the architect, urban designer or town planner; it relies also on people adopting, using and managing the space.

The organization Project for Public Spaces (PPS), in evaluating thousands of public spaces around the world, has found that successful public spaces have four key qualities, they are: accessibility, engagement of people in activities, the comfort and good image of the place, and finally, the space as a sociable place where.

Accordingly, PPS defined "sociability uses, activities, access, linkage, comfort, and image" as the main factors of a successful place that affects the key outcomes such as the feelings, satisfaction and community cohesion of the residents (Karlíková, 2009). That is, successful public places are easy to access and connected to the surrounding community, contain a range of activities for a variety of users, feel safe, clean, and attractive, with adequate seating, and most importantly, act as venues for people to interact socially (Project for Public Spaces (PPS), 2000). Based on the literatures, it can be concluded that a successful public place is a place conducive to social interaction that attracts many visitors (Whyte, 1985), where a wide range of activities occur (Rivlin, 1994) involving individuals or a group (Gehl, 2002), informal and suitable for recreation (Whyte, 1985; Project for Public Spaces (PPS), 2000), democratic and non-discriminative (Carr et al., 1992), and accessible for all classes and ages of people (Gehl, 2002). Successful public spaces fill the needs of many different types of people, provide opportunities for discovery and challenge, and actively encourage manipulation, appropriation and transformation by the users.

#### *Background on historical Persian gardens*

Garden and garden making are the subjects that are close to people throughout history and it is one of the principle themes of Iranian society. Persian gardens are considered as the practical solution of overcoming and relieving extreme climate during summers and winters in the Iranian plateau. Design of the Persian gardens along with its ability to respond to extreme climatic conditions, is the original result of an inspired and intelligent application of different fields of knowledge, to be precised as water management and engineering, architecture, botany and agriculture (UNESCO, World Heritage Convention). Persian gardens apparently have widely influence on Iranian life and its artistic expression such as music, calligraphy and carpet design and chiefly on extensive domain of Persian poetry and literature.

Persian gardens evolved and adopted to different climate conditions, while retaining the main principle, "Chahar Bagh", that have its root in the times of Cyrus the great, 6th century BC, when the idea of earthy paradise spread through Persia. This type of cross plan – Chahar Bagh (Literally mean Four Garden) – is a divided garden of four sectors, with water playing an important role for both irrigation and ornamentation, was conceived to symbolize Eden and the four Zoroastrian elements of sky, earth, water and plants. The term "Pardis" that were used for Persian gardens were borrowed from Median "Paradaeza", meaning garden (Dehkhoda Dictionary). The term is used twice in Avesta (Zoroastrian book), and composed of two sections as "pairi" which means around and circuit, and "daeza" which means accumulation and walling. As the world expresses, Persian gardens are mostly surrounded by walls to provide relief from the extremes of the climate and sand storms, a paradise on earth to provide a protected relaxation either spiritually or leisurely. The word was Hellenised as "paradeisos" and then incorporated into various modern languages as "paradise" meaning Heaven.

Indeed, the inducement of resembling a perfect place, leads to creation of beautiful gardens all over the world. Persian Gardens have been associated with the idea of earthly Paradise, forming stark contrast to its desert setting. Accordingly, to create such paradises on the earth the intelligent and innovative engineering solutions (geometry and symmetry of the Chahar Bagh Scheme) and a sophisticated water-management system, "Qanat", and water distribution as well as the appropriate choice of flora and its location in the garden layout seem to have influenced the design of all Persian gardens.

The oldest evidence indicates that Persian gardens may have originated as early as 4000 BC, as manifested in decorated pottery

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