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# Public Squares and Their Potential for Social Interactions: A Case Study of Historical Public Squares in Tehran

Asma Mehan

**Abstract**—Under the thrust of technological changes, population growth and vehicular traffic, Iranian historical squares have lost their significance and they are no longer the main social nodes of the society. This research focuses on how historical public squares can inspire designers to enhance social interactions among citizens in Iranian urban context. Moreover, the recent master plan of Tehran demonstrates the lack of public spaces designed for the purpose of people's social gatherings. For filling this gap, first the current situation of 7 selected primary historical public squares in Tehran including Sabze Meydan, Arg, Topkhaneh, Baherstan, Mokhber-aldole, Rah Ahan and Hassan Abad have been compared. Later, the influencing elements on social interactions of the public squares such as subjective factors (human relationships and memories) and objective factors (natural and built environment) have been investigated. As a conclusion, some strategies are proposed for improving social interactions in historical public squares like; holding cultural, national, athletic and religious events, defining different and new functions in public squares' surrounding, increasing pedestrian routs, reviving the collective memory, demonstrating the historical importance of square, eliminating visual obstacles across the square, organization the natural elements of the square, appropriate pavement for social activities. Finally, it is argued that the combination of all influencing factors which are: human interactions, natural elements and built environment criteria will lead to enhance the historical public squares' potential for social interaction.

**Keywords**—Historical Square, Iranian Public Square, Social Interaction, Tehran.

## I. INTRODUCTION

PUBLIC squares are fundamental features of cities, so knowing more about them as social arenas which is enabling contact between different groups is necessary. In fact, they represent sites of sociability, face-to-face interaction and at the same time their quality is commonly perceived to be a measurement for social quality of urban life. The concern of this research is how to ensure that public open places use their potential for enhancing social sustainability.

The study of Iranian cities from the ancient period especially after the Islamic era indicates that public Squares had always an effective presence in the cities. However, In Contemporary Iranian cities, a common image of Iranian Square is referred to as a type of traffic "Roundabout" which is formed by crossing streets and usually has some greeneries,

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water fountains, etc. in the middle [1]. Considering the fact that, these kind of public squares that do not create any reasonable relationship with man, his movement and his meaningful presence, suggesting strategies and solutions to enhance social interactions in Iranian Public Squares seems critical. In this regard, Tehran has been chosen as the main concern, while in its short history of being as the capital of Iran, the city has been hosting several critical transformations; first because of constant urban developing during Qajar Dynasty and rapid growth of city during the late Pahlavi era. The second reason is the dominant culture of rapid renovation and reconstruction in contemporary public spaces, however few studies have been framed within the social context of urban space in Iran especially in English literature. Research methodology in this research has inductive qualitative approach. Theoretical foundations have been collected through library studies. In addition, historical interpretations have been used for investigating the historical potentials of selected public squares.

## II. SOCIAL INTERACTION AND PUBLIC OPEN SPACES

Face-to-Face interactions are the basis of all social interactions. All different social interactions can be divided in two categories including verbal communication and non-verbal communication (or body language) [2]. Goffman [3] described mechanisms and rules that govern how social gatherings are structured and how people interact in these situations as "The Concept of Occasion, Situation and Encounter"; Fig. 1 shows the general ideogram of this concept.

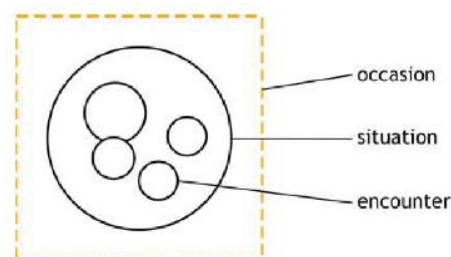


Fig. 1 Concept of Occasions, Situation and Encounter

The most important factor in social interaction is being "situated", which means that they have time-space convergence [4]. The 'Occasion' provides the reason for gathering, which can be interpreted as 'Place'. In relation to

space and place theory, ‘Situation’ is similar to ‘space’, which refers to physical qualities of a physical environment [5]. Goffman argued that any kind of focused interaction is ‘encounter’, which is constituted a major part of our daily life [2], [6]. However, [3] presented two stages (Active/ Passive Social Interactions) and four levels of Social interaction including Co-Present, Co-Attention (Passive Stage) and Co-Exchange, Co-Attention (Active Stage). Fig. 2 shows four levels of Social Interactions.



Fig. 2 Four levels of Social Interactions

In other study, unfocused interactions and focused interaction are presented as two major social interactions [7]. Unfocused interaction happens through non-verbal communication and focused interaction happens through verbal communication and face-to-face interaction. Proximity, homogeneity, density, location and purpose are the primary influencing factors on Social Interaction of People [8]. Spatial proximity is another major influencing parameter for enhancing social interaction, but presence of a lot of people in a small space can be a threatening factor for psychological perception of person. So, public open spaces play an important role in fulfilling social needs of individuals, Social interaction and improving the individual and social relationships [9].

Social interaction has been studied by many urban-psychological researches. Gehl [10] discussed that there is a relationship between activity and physical setting. He used direct observation and found a relationship between quality of design and type of activity. He identified three types of activities: Optional activities, Necessary activities and Social activities. Gehl [10] found out that quality of outdoor space has a direct relationship with social activities. Table I illustrated the Relationships Between the Quality of public space and Outdoor Activities.

TABLE I  
RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC SPACE AND OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES [10]

Type of Activities	Poor	Good
Necessary activities		
Optional Activities		
Social Activities		

Necessary activities include those that are pretty much compulsory, happens in everyday life. Depending on the ‘Occasion’ and if ‘Situation’ allows, Optional activities can take place in public open space. Social Activities are often ‘resultant’ activities and are likely to ‘encounter’, and

therefore create co-exchange and co-action [5]. People’s relationships in open spaces have been studied based on different Human needs and activities like “Social Interaction”, “Citizen Participation” and “Sense of Community” [11]. Hajmirsadeghi et al. [12] show that there is a positive relationship among behavioral & psychological aspects of design factors and social interaction in Public Square via users’ perception. Catell et al. [13] argued that the relationship between people and public space is crucial for improving the quality of life in Britain. Seeland et al. [14] searched the relationship between young people and open green spaces and social interactions in Zurich. Peters and others [15] searched the urban green space elements, which influenced social interactions. Table II shows the effect of social interaction and influencing factors (Threatening and Reinforcing) on public space based on reviewing related literature.

TABLE II  
INFLUENCING FACTORS ON SOCIAL INTERACTIONS’ IN PUBLIC SPACES

Threatening factors	Reinforcing factors
Congestion	Population Density
Failure to comply with privacy	Spatial Proximity
Untenable spaces	Cozy Spaces
Illegal activities and vendors	cultural and artistic activities
Irregularities in the organization and design elements	Natural elements and Landscape
Motion Spaces	Stop and Pause Spaces

### III. SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND PUBLIC SQUARES’ DESIGN

Urban spaces (Such as squares, streets, parks, squares and others) are part of the environment, which can be understood through user’s inceptions [16]. Regarding this fact, interaction between environmental perception and user’s behavior can lead to create a social urban space. There are two major categories of contributing factors on urban landscape design including subjective factors (human relationships and memories) and objective factors (natural and built environment) [17]. Table III categorizes the contributing factors on Urban Space Design. On the other hand, Social interaction is one of the important elements on formation of social capital of the city [15]. Therefore, public open spaces in general and public squares in particular, have a significant role in enhancing social interaction of citizens. Based on previous studies [12], [18]-[20] there is a positive relationship between psychological and behavioral aspects of design factors and social activity types and social environment perception.

TABLE III  
CONTRIBUTING FACTORS ON URBAN SPACE DESIGN

Urban Landscape		
Subjective Elements	Objective Elements	
Human relationships and Collective memories (Such as: Human Interactions, Historical and National Events, etc.)	Natural Elements (Such as: Green space, fountains, etc.)	Human Built Environment (Such as: urban facilities, building’s form, Symbols, etc.)

### IV. HISTORICAL PUBLIC SQUARES IN TEHRAN

During the Iranian history, Maydans (Public squares) were

important places for improving social interactions of citizens and enhancing quality of urban lives. Traditionally, squares served multi-purpose functions. They were activity zones for all kinds of events, from public gatherings to daily markets and public celebrations [21]. As traditional city went into modernization, its details and components changed as well. Tehran, the capital of Iran has experienced different styles of modernization during the five last decades. Since the Qajar dynasty (1785–1925), it has confronted Western ideological concepts. Upon the demise of the Qajar, Both Reza Shah (1921-1941) and his son and successor king, Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979), forcefully modernized the society that had been rooted in pre-Islamic past, Islam, and metaphysical ideology. Such radical changes were employed in all aspects of everyday life of the society, from ideological to physical transformations [22]. The modern squares in the urbanism of 20<sup>th</sup> century were just traffic nodes with function of transportation. Therefore, public squares transformed to an unknown territory which people pass their time without any enthusiasm. Some of old squares with rich history and imposing monuments became to traffic intersections or boring parking lots [23].

Tehran is a 200 years old capital and most of its primary squares were built during the modern period. With historical Analysis of Urban Squares in Iran, it can be concluded that Space and people had interaction together. However, School of Urban Design for both Isfahan and Tehran cities, suggested new approaches, which became leading patterns for other Iranian cities. In result, urban spaces that created in these times had quality and coherence in urban environments. During modernism era, official and (commercial functions stabilized in urban spaces, but recreational aspect missed in the cities. Significant problems in modernism era were lack of mixed used approach and functional balance especially according to users' perceptions. For finding related case studies in primitive historical squares of Tehran, general characteristics of primitive squares of Tehran, during the modernization (from Safavid Era to Pahlavi Era) have been analyzed. Table IV presents General characteristics and history of primary built squares in Tehran.

TABLE IV  
GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS AND HISTORY OF PRIMARY BUILT SQUARES IN TEHRAN

Historical Era	General Characteristics	Built Squares in Tehran
Safavid Dynasty (Till 1869)	Enclosed, Introvert, Compact Without order, Narrow	Sabzeh-Maydan Arg Maydan
Qajar Dynasty (1869-1925)	Geometrical Shape, Vast Scale, Enriching perspective and vision	Top-Khane Maydan Baharestan Maydan
Pahlavi 1 (1925-1933)	Extrovert, Homogenous urban edges, Use of Glass, metal and concrete, Square in the intersection of main streets	Mokhber-Al-Doleh Rah-Ahan Maydan Hasan-Abad Maydan

## V. ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PUBLIC SQUARES

In Tables V and VI, SWOT analyses of all selected historical squares have been compared. For further Studies,

general attributes of these squares have been compared.

**Sabzeh Maydan Square and Arg Square** are two primitive public squares in Tehran, which dates back to Safavid era. They located near Grand Bazaar of Tehran, religious buildings and governmental palace. Both of these squares designed in enclosed, compact area, which adopted with surroundings. Nowadays, both of these squares are used as Pedestrian Plaza with great accessibility in heart of historical city. However, constant people congestion, air pollution, sound pollution, visual barriers and removing historical elements of these squares are some important factors that decrease the possibility of social interaction in these historical squares.

**TopKhane Square** (literally the place of canons) is one of the key historic squares in Tehran. Placing cannons before the palace initiated in the Safavid period, first to indicate supremacy and victory and later to prevent attacks on the citadel. Later, some buildings surrounded this open space to accommodate guards, thus, a new urban space was formed. Adjacent to the royal citadel, this space functioned as a military, public and governmental urban space [24]. Nowadays, subway accessibility and restoration of historical parts provide a good opportunity to enhance social interaction in this historical city square, although visual barriers and absence of vast space in middle of square for social activities are some negative influencing factor in social life of the square.

**Baharestan Square** has a special location near the first Iranian Parliament building, Sepahsalar Mosque and Negarestan Garden, which is the first modern focal point in Iranian's Political and social life [1]. Today, it's vast space in middle of square for various functions gave this historical square a great opportunity for holding cultural and religious gatherings, however, absence of underpass for separating car flows and pedestrian movements and absence of appropriate urban furniture for user of this space and visual barriers in different parts of the square are some major weak points in usability of this historical public square. Table V represents (Strengths and Weaknesses) in SWOT analysis of case studies.

**Mokhber-Al-Doleh and Rah Ahan Square** are two squares from first Pahlavi Era (1925-1933), they designed to fulfill the aim of car transportation surrounding with modern institutions like railway stations, offices and stores [25]. Use of glass, metal and concrete in exterior façade of buildings, homogenous urban edges and extrovert design are some architectural features related to first Pahlavi era. Although, in contemporary Tehran, both of these squares became roundabout traffic nodes instead of Squares, constant congestion, heavy traffic, air pollution and sound pollution are other major current problems in designing these squares.

**Hasan-Abad Square** was built in the 1930s in a neo-classical style. Its four corners were originally occupied by four identical buildings, but in 193 the southeast segment was demolished to make way for a bank. The present redevelopment of the square is offered as a more appropriate treatment of the inherited built fabric. The program has included the renovation of the approach to the square -

through the metro station and road underpass - and the provision of new office space within a modern glazed addition set on top of one of the old masonry structures [26]. Recently, restoration projects in this historical public square increase the possibility of social interaction among citizens although they are still some problems remain in usability of this historical square like stock tool market and Fire station next to this place, absence of green space, absence of appropriate urban furniture. Table V and VI represent SWOT analysis of selected case studies.

TABLE V  
SWOT (STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES) ANALYSIS OF SELECTED SQUARES

Square	Strengths	Weaknesses
Sabzeh-Maydan	1. Vast Space in middle of square for various functions 2. Sidewalk Pavement	1. Removing historical elements of square with no signs of its past
Arg (15 Khordad)	1. Pedestrian Plaza 2. Sidewalk Pavement 3. Vicinity to Golestan Palace; 16 <sup>th</sup> historical Palace, Arg Historical Mosque and The First National Park of Tehran	1. Removing historical elements of square with no signs of its past 2. Absence of Urban Furniture 3. Visual Barriers
ToopKhaneh	1. Restoration of historical parts 2. Regeneration of Urban Space 3. Improving traffic flow	1. Absence of Accessibility to the middle of square 2. Absence of Integration in surrounding buildings facades
Baharestan	1. Vast Space in middle of square for various functions 2. Fountain and Green space combination in middle of square	1. Absence of underpass for separating car flows and pedestrian movements 2. Absence of Urban Furniture 3. Visual Barriers
Mokhber-Al-Doleh	1. Restoration of historical Facades 2. Eliminating of Visual barriers	1. Visual barriers like huge pedestrian bridge 2. Absence of Green Space 3. Absence of Integrity in surrounding facades
Rah-Ahan	1. Organization of traffic nodes in square 2. Optimization of Visual barriers	1. Absence of Green Space and Fountain 2. Visual barriers
Hasan-Abad	1. Restoration of historical parts 2. Pedestrian Sidewalk 3. Control of Car flow by underpass	1. Absence of Green Space 2. Absence of Urban Furniture 3. Removing historical elements of square with no signs of its past

## VI. STRATEGIES AND SOLUTIONS FOR IMPROVING SOCIAL INTERACTIONS IN HISTORICAL PUBLIC SQUARES

Considering this fact that natural elements help to create focal points for people gatherings and social interactions, field investigation of Author shows that in some historical public squares (like Mokhber Al-Doleh, Hasan-Abad and Rah-Ahan) absence of green space and natural elements are major designing weaknesses. Table VII represented some strategies and solutions for improving social interactions in historical Squares of Tehran. As mentioned before, in other public squares like Baharestan, heterogeneous functions such as car

repair, Police Station and warehouses cause disorders in usability and social function of the square. Visual barriers like traffic lights, huge pedestrian bridges and electricity pylons are other threatening factor for social interaction in some of historical squares such as Baharestan, Arg and Rah-Ahan squares. Removing historical elements of square is another significant problem in some historical public squares such as Baharestan, Arg and Hasan-Abad. Considering the fact that revival of collective memory and socio-historical value of the square will not be possible without the aim of its historical elements.

Constant congestion, heavy traffic, sound pollution, noise pollution and air pollution are other significant problems in current historical squares of Tehran which organizing pedestrian flow and car flow and in a few cases using underpasses are some designing solutions in some public squares like Hasan-Abad Square.

TABLE VI  
SWOT (OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS) ANALYSIS OF SELECTED SQUARES

Square	Opportunities	Threats
Sabzeh-Maydan	1. Proximity to Tehran historical Grand Bazaar 2. Restricting Car Accessibility	1. People Congestion 2. Sound Pollution, Visual Barriers
Arg (15 Khordad)	1. Proximity to Tehran historical Grand Bazaar	1. Constant Congestion 2. Absence of Vast Space in Middle of square for social activities
ToopKhaneh	1. Subway Access 2. Appropriate historical and cultural background 3. Spatial Pattern of "Place of Cannons" in Iranian Architecture	1. Visual barriers 2. Absence of Vast Space in Middle of square for social activities
Baharestan	1. Special Location in heart of historical city 2. Appropriate Political Background 3. Appropriate historical and cultural background	1. Heterogeneous functions such as car repair, Police Station and warehouses 2. Sound Pollution, Visual barriers
Mokhber-Al-Doleh	1. Subway Access 2. Special Location near historical and commercial part of the city	1. Transformation of Historical Square to Traffic Intersection 2. Air Pollution, Sound Pollution
Rah-Ahan	1. Subway Access 2. Approximity to Railway Station 2. Portal of entering to city for travellers	1. Transformation of Historical Square to Traffic Intersection 2. Constant Congestion 3. Air Pollution, Sound Pollution, Traffic
Hasan-Abad	1. Vast pedestrian space 2. Decrease the car flow in square 3. appropriate historical and cultural background	1. Stock Tool Market and Fire station next to historical square

## VII. CONCLUSION

Historical Public squares, as important parts of urban public spaces in contemporary Tehran, have a major effect on increasing citizens' social interactions and improving social life. On the other hand, face-to-face interaction is an important factor in creating social relations between people.

TABLE VII

STRATEGIES AND SOLUTIONS FOR IMPROVING SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

<i>General Strategies</i>	<i>Suggested Solutions</i>
<b>Organizing natural elements of square</b>	1.Plant trees with the ability to provide shade in summer 2.Use of focal element such as outdoor vases, natural and water elements
<b>Designing appropriate Urban Furniture</b>	1.Using multiple individual benches to enhance social activities 2.Providing Appropriate lightings at night 3.Providing Interactive kiosks for tourists and water bubblers in squares 4.Eliminating visual obstacles across the square
<b>Restoration of Historical Façade</b>	1.Creating integration and unity in surrounding facades
<b>Organizing Car flow</b>	1.Separating roadway from footpaths 2.Reducing speeds in squares 3.Using underpasses
<b>Organizing Pedestrian movements</b>	1.Multifunctional Pavements for different uses 2.Accessibility to middle of square for using vast spaces 3.Creating suitable pause spaces for traffic control 4.Increasing physical activities through pedestrian walkways and elimination of cars
<b>Optimizing Surrounding Uses</b>	1.Decreasing Compulsory uses like stations and offices in square's surrounding 2.Increasing selective uses like restaurants, art galleries, local markets and others 3.Organizing Social and Cultural activities in Square 4.Physical reviving of the historical axis like Old Grand Bazaar in Tehran
<b>Revival of collective memories, Identity and socio-Cultural value of Square</b>	1.Using Urban billboard which represents the changes of the square 2. Nomination of historical parts of square to some previous historical events 3. Regeneration of historical facades of the square in order to create a single identity, either historical or contemporary 4. Holding cultural and religious events, theaters, Persian performances and music concerts in the square 5. Holding national ceremonies and athletic events in the square

From the analysis of selected historical public squares in Tehran, it can be concluded that their current situations are not ideal for enhancing social life, therefore, some general strategies and guidelines related to Subjective elements (like Revival of collective memories, Identity and socio-Cultural value of Square) and Objective design elements (such as: Organizing natural elements of square, Designing appropriate Urban Furniture, Organizing movements in square, Restoration of Historical Façade and Optimizing surrounding uses) are some proposed general strategies to enhance social interactions, which can be an alternative guidelines for other historical public squares in different contexts that the rapid modernization changed their current social importance.

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