

Viewpoint/ Critical Review

The Impact of Non-Place-based Development on the Cultural Landscape of Villages; Destruction of Heritage, Values, and Identity

(Case Study: Villages of Kuhdasht County)*

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Abstract | The cultural landscape, as a subsystem of the landscape, is influenced by rural development as a process towards village advancement. In recent years, the villages of Kuhdasht County in Lorestan, as villages caught between the duality of city and countryside, have been damaged by colonial development plans that, although adopted with the promise of rural improvement, have led to the destruction of the village identity. This article examines three villages—Khosrowabad, Pai Astan, and Abolvafa—in Kuhdasht County, Lorestan Province, through field observation. It appears that the development plans, without consideration of the village's cultural landscape or merely objective attention to cultures, have undertaken actions under the illusion of development but have gradually altered or destroyed the heritage, values, and identity of the people. To protect the cultural landscape of villages as a form of development, it is necessary for development plans to be place-based and to consider the diversity and differences of cultures, with actions tailored to each specific area.

Keywords | *Village cultural landscape, Development plan, Place, Non-place-based.*

Introduction | What influences the damages caused by the development process on the cultural landscape in the villages of Khosrowabad, Pai Astan, and Abolvafa in Kuhdasht County?

Rural development, as a process aimed at improving the sustainability of the quality of life and livelihoods of rural people (Tuolaninezhad, 2020, 140), is not always the cause of village survival and, due to its impact on the audience's perception of the environment, it affects the village landscape. The cultural landscape of the village, as part of the landscape, has been formed by the understanding and perception of villagers over time. The cultural landscape stems from an element called culture, which is the main factor of social differences and removes uniformity from communities (Roberts, 2007, 136), thus acting as heritage, value, and identity for the village. The cultural landscape of Kuhdasht County, located at the end of Lorestan, adjacent to the provinces of Ilam and Kermanshah, is the result of the life of nomadic people who were forced to settle during the Pahlavi era (Heydari Yeganeh, 2015, 5). Thus, a blend of nomadic and rural cultures can be seen in the culture of the people of

this region. The nomadic and rural heritage of the cultural landscape of Kuhdasht villages narrates how the Lors and Laks interacted with their surrounding world over time and is an expression of individuals' perception of the environment, encompassing tangible and intangible values and heritage and this is considered the unique characteristic of this land. Based on field observations, it appears that the villages of Kuhdasht are on the path to resembling other villages in the country that are under the invasion of homogenizing plans, and the concept of place is being forgotten, putting the unique cultural landscape of this land at risk. The importance of protecting the cultural landscape necessitates identifying the cultural landscapes of the lands and re-examining how and why they are damaged, alongside exploring how to protect them while maintaining the dynamism of the landscape. The aim of this study, on a micro level, is to analyze the causes and nature of damages to the village's cultural landscape due to the development process, and on a macro level, to investigate the necessity of protecting the cultural landscape and considering the concept of place in development plans. Finally, a strategy is proposed for adopting a place-based approach in development plans.

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Problem Statement and Literature Review

Culture is the identity-forming element of a land. Culture is a complex and extensive collection acquired by humans in the process of their social and historical evolution within the environment. The cultural landscape is a subsystem of the landscape composed of cultural elements, resulting from the interaction between humans and nature over time. Culture encompasses the set of customs, arts, laws, beliefs, and capabilities acquired by humans from society throughout history and its manifestations, traditional events, artworks, and societal behavior patterns (Mansouri, 2020, 5). The concept of cultural landscape has roots in the texts of German historians and French geographers from the mid to late 19th century, but the term “cultural landscape” was first introduced in the early 20th century by Professor Carl Ortwin Sauer¹ in the United States. According to Sauer, the cultural landscape is the result of the interaction between culture as an agent and nature as a framework over time, making it a dynamic entity due to the dynamism of its two components (Sauer, 1929). According to The Cultural Landscape Foundation² (TCLF), cultural landscapes are shaped by the interaction between nature and humans and narrate the identity of the land. Since 1992, the first international laws regarding the recognition and protection of cultural landscapes have been proposed by the World Heritage Convention (Rossler Chief, 2006, 335). The cultural landscape, as a reservoir of cultural and social life, requires protection.

“Tosa’eh”, the Farsi equivalent for development, in its lexical sense, derives from the root “Tosa’a”, meaning to expand and broaden (Gharib, 1977, 306). In the Cambridge Encyclopedia, development is defined as a change that leads to progress (Cambridge ALD, 2006). Development is a process that increases, improves, or advances in areas such as social, economic, physical, and environmental aspects. To address both the current and future needs of society and its historical identity capital, development is inevitable for the continuity of the rural landscape. Successful rural development cannot be achieved through purely development-oriented approaches aimed at revitalizing rural structures without considering the heritage significance of these assets. One of the main approaches to development is preservation. Conceptually, preservation encompasses a wide range of interventions and programs aimed at protecting heritage. However, when a preservation approach based solely on maintenance, restoration, and pure conservation—also known as “museum preservation”—is adopted, it prohibits any form of intervention and design within the structure, thus preventing constructive activities. This results in a severe decline in the quality of life (Hanachi et al., 2007, 58). Museum preservation reflects a narrow perspective on the village, focusing solely on preserving the physical structure and sometimes its functions without considering the current audience. Preservation does not mean blindly maintaining

the original structure and fabric but ensuring its survival and vitality. Preservation means mobilizing and continuing, not freezing the past. Revitalizing a village with superficial and cosmetic interventions under fragmented management, with a focus on physical and superficial restoration, cannot improve quality.

Place is a complex concept that, as a type of physical space, is drawn into a social system and reconstructed as a collective concept of a whole (Vakili, 2021). According to Auge (2008), a place has three characteristics: identity, connection, and history. Eje defines a place as having a defined boundary, protected by users, and featuring elements of individual perceptions such as stories of the past, intellectual documents, and narratives about the name and reason for the place’s existence. A place is the result of imbuing an object with meaning. Development should be adopted in alignment with the concept of the land and the values of the place to ensure human and societal satisfaction (Mansouri, 2023, 3). Protecting the cultural landscape of the land, which serves as a cultural and social reservoir for the village, is essential for the development and enhancement of the village landscape in the face of the urban-rural duality.

Body of Critique

• Examination of cases

Kuhdasht County, an area inhabited by Lors and Laks in western Lorestan, is considered a special land due to its nomadic and natural heritage. However, in recent decades, changes resulting from various interventions in the nomadic and rural landscape, including enforced settlement and the duality of urban and rural life, have led to the implementation of development plans for villages, the failure of which to enhance the quality of villages is evident. Analyzing the cultural landscape of Pai Astan, Abolvafa, and Khosrowabad villages and identifying the damage to their cultural landscapes highlight the neglect of the cultural landscape in current development plans. In the following, this study proceeds to describe and analyze the damage to the cultural landscape of several villages in the Kuhdasht area based on field observations, adopting a holistic view of how and why development plans have failed to impact the villages effectively.

- Pai Astan Village

Pai Astan (Pai Asin) village, located in western Lorestan, is a part of the Tarhan district in Kuhdasht County, with a population of 208 according to the 2016 census. Field observations reveal a carved stone within a white metal enclosure sheltered by a roof, which, according to the village head, is a valuable and heritage stone cherished by the people, a relic from one of the local Khans of Kuhdasht, and a document of the village’s establishment. In the landscape, the ancient Khan castle is visible at the base of the mountain. The development plan aimed at preserving this heritage has merely provided a museum-like protective enclosure for

the stone. The stone's placement within the village is poorly connected to the village's fabric, turning it into an auxiliary element. These plans, without considering the existing potential to enhance the village's landscape and view, have treated the stone and castle as mere cultural objects with a museum-like approach, overlooking their essence as valuable heritage (Fig. 1). The analysis of the Hadi plan (rural development guideline) map indicates a lack of attention to the stone's location and the adoption of unrelated uses around the heritage site, such as village facilities and equipment (water reservoir, mortuary, etc.), focusing solely on the historical significance of the Mozaffari Castle. The Hadi plan does not consider the village's heritage landscape or the preservation of its heritage. Heritage sites and the systematic connection of historical artifacts are place-making indicators. The development plans for Pai Astan village, due to the neglect of historical artifacts beyond their historical dimensions and organizational connections and the mere focus on physical preservation in its weakest form, are considered non-place-based plans.

- Abolvafa Village

Abolvafa Village, located in the central part of Kuhdasht County, has a population of 382 according to the 2016 census. The presence of ancient graves with stepped shapes indicates the heritage value of the village site. Analysis of observations and interviews with local people reveals the presence of the triad of the Iranian landscape in this village. The combination

of three elements—spring (water), a tree that existed in the past but is absent today, and the Imamzadeh Abolvafa (char-taqi and sacred place)—suggests the presence of the identity of Iranian space in this village, perceived together as the Iranian landscape. Reading the landscape of Abolvafa village indicates the role of the Imamzadeh as the center of the villagers' understanding. The symbolic value of the Imamzadeh has led to the expansion of the courtyard and the integration of the graves with the paving in detailed actions. However, a purely atomistic approach focusing only on parts has not added value to the place as a whole. Field observations reveal a non-systematic view of the Imamzadeh as the village center. The development plan, with a physical intervention to facilitate access to the Imamzadeh, has implemented a wide path that does not harmonize with the village landscape, emphasizing only the physical aspect of the Imamzadeh. This approach neglects the sacred value of the Imamzadeh as a holy place and its connection with its elements as a system. In the village's Hadi plan, the spring, as one of the triads of the Iranian landscape, has been distanced from the sacred place, and its outlet is located in a place unrelated to the Imamzadeh as a sacred architectural element. The importance of water in Iranian life and livelihood led to a reverent attitude towards this element, which, along with the tree and the sacred place, forms the Iranian landscape triad (Mansouri & Javadi, 2018) (Fig. 2). However, this distancing from the sacred place has



Fig. 1. Analysis of the heritage site within the area of the ancient castle and historical stone in the village of Khosrowabad, and the village's viewpoint capacity over the heritage site. Source: Author based on Google Earth.



Fig. 2. Lack of interpretation of the Imamzadeh and the spring's outlet as a landscape in the Hadi plan of Khosrowabad village. Source: Author, using Google Earth.

affected the sanctity of water, and the people who once considered water sacred no longer make an effort to keep the spring water basin clean. These issues indicate that the Imamzadeh has been treated merely as an object in the Hadi plan, and its existence and systematic role in the village landscape have not been examined. Being a center is a key place indicator. The development plans for Abolvafa village, due to the neglect of centrality and the village center as a whole, are considered non-place-based plans.

- Khosrowabad Village

Khosrowabad Village, part of the Kuhnani district in Shahameh Gorge, has a population of 1,200 according to the 2016 census. The village's proximity to the ancient regional road and the presence of numerous historical artifacts indicate the heritage value of the village site. The landscape reading of Khosrowabad village reveals systematic relationships among the village's heritage elements. Based on these systematic relationships, it can be inferred that Mil Square was the center of the village. The placement of Mil³ near heritage elements such as the village's fire temple, which is considered a Mithraic altar based on its architecture, the ancient caves on the mountainside, and the ancient cemeteries, indicates the value of this place in the minds of past inhabitants. Additionally, the association of Mil with Davoud Gavkosh, a symbol of Mithra, and the locals' practice of offering water to travelers in the square highlight the importance and sanctity of this place in the villagers' minds. The sanctity and presumed centrality of this place suggest that it should function as a place and a communal space in the villagers' minds, with key village elements like the mosque nearby and an area for holding special events and ceremonies. However, according to observations and interviews, this space is not currently perceived as a venue for events, and ceremonies are held in another village square next to the mosque. Observations suggest that the village entrance square next to the mosque has been designated as the main village square due to development plan interventions, and over time, the mosque's proximity has turned it into the village center and event venue (Fig. 3).

Event hosting and the holding of rituals are key indicators of placeness. Mil Square, as a symbolic value and event venue for villagers, has been overlooked and neglected in development plans, with only the 'museum preservation' of Mil's structure. The existence of the square as a center has not been explored. Thus, these development plans are considered non-place-based.

• Evaluation

The review of observations and landscape analysis of the cases indicates the indirect impact of development plans on the cultural landscape of villages. Development plans, through physical interventions aimed at the structure of the village, create changes that, due to a lack of consideration for the residents' perception of the village's physical reality, gradually influence and alter the cultural landscape of the village. These plans approach villages from a purely physical perspective, lacking a holistic view, and implement uniform plans across different villages without acknowledging the fundamental differences between them. Consequently, villages become increasingly homogenized, while damaging the cultural landscape. Additionally, within the urban-rural dichotomy, development plans progressively push villages towards urbanization. This trend manifests even in minor aspects of the cultural landscape, such as clothing, causing villagers to distance themselves from the cultural identity of their village and lean towards urbanization. Policies centered on urban governance encourage villagers to prefer urbanization, reducing their demand for preserving the cultural landscape. Over time, villagers who equate development with urbanization no longer value or strive to preserve their nomadic and rural heritage, values, and identity. The adoption of non-place-based development plans, the lack of demand from villagers, and a misguided interpretation of development as merely 'museum preservation' of heritage and values negatively impact village quality and threaten rural identity. Preserving the concept of the village's cultural landscape is essential for the survival of each village as a homeland, not just a piece of land.



Fig. 3. The recent square replacing Mil Square as a historical and ceremonial heritage center of the village. Source: Author, using Google Earth.

Strategy: Ontology of Cultural Landscape in Development Plans

Based on the review and analysis of the cases, it appears that development plans in the study phase only recognize the essence of the cultural landscape in its most basic form, and in the planning and execution phases, they merely settle for a 'museum preservation' of that essence. The essence of any phenomenon pertains to its inherent nature, which is shaped by its context. If a cultural phenomenon is to sustain the life of a community, it must be in harmony with its time and society, or, in other words, be "a child of its time." Relying solely on 'museum preservation' of the cultural landscape's essence only presents a historical exhibition to people, which does not allow today's villagers to align their lives with the dynamic, evolving nature of their past culture. Consequently, due to the rapid pace of changes and the inability of culture to adapt, villagers gradually lose their values, heritage, and identity, leading to the erosion of the concept of homeland. The village thus becomes mere land, losing its unique characteristics in the pursuit of urbanization.

The missing and neglected component in these plans is the existence of phenomena. These plans adopt an epistemological approach to the cultural landscape, focusing only on the essence of heritage and the preservation of its physical form. However, in addressing the landscape, it is essential to consider the reasons behind phenomena to sustain the concept of life. Existence, as the essential essence of any phenomenon, can endure and continue. For example, the fire temple or Mithraic sanctuary in the village of Khosrowabad is a result of preserving its existence. Protecting the stones of a structure while emphasizing its sanctity in the villagers' minds by raising a green flag indicates the continuity of the place's existence despite the physical essence being destroyed. A development plan can

be "a child of its time, yet standing on the shoulders of its ancestors" when it strives to preserve existence. To achieve this goal, the cultural landscape must be understood as a whole in the realm of existence with an ontological perspective beyond mere epistemology. Development plans should, in the first phase of studies, go beyond the essence and read the existence of the cultural landscape. In subsequent phases, from planning to execution, they should adopt ontological approaches to preserve the cultural landscape of a land.

Conclusion

Development plans, as schemes aimed at improving the quality of villages, must be place-based. In this study, based on the analysis of examples, three indicators—centrality and center, the presence of heritage sites and their systematic relationships, and the hosting of ceremonies and events—are identified as place-making indicators. Neglecting these indicators turns development plans into non-place-based schemes, leading to the destruction or negative alteration of the cultural landscape. Preserving the cultural landscape, as one of the development approaches, should be mandatory in the development of each village to ensure that the cultural landscape of Iran's villages is preserved and that they continue to thrive. This necessitates reading each village as a whole. Development plans must go beyond merely historical epistemology to understand the existence of the village and the reasons behind its essence, striving to protect and preserve the concept of the homeland. Additionally, it is crucial to educate people about the unique value of their cultural landscape so that they do not settle for the superficial preservation of cultural landscape elements, but rather become advocates for the protection of the cultural landscape as a whole. Development plans aimed at protecting the cultural landscape of a village should be planned and implemented based on the landscape of that land.

Endnotes

* This article is extracted from the Research Project entitled "Place-Based Development: Rural Landscape Reading in Kuhdasht County" which was conducted under supervision of Dr. "Seyed Amir Mansouri" by the research team of NAZAR Research Center in Hormozgan province in 2023.

1. Theoretician in the field of geography and cultural landscape and professor of geography at the University of California.
2. An association founded in 1998 by Charles A. Birnbaum with the aim of promoting people's belonging to place and place-based development.
3. Ancient guiding towers for travelers.

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