



***Role of Historical Monuments in Promoting the Sense of Place in Neighborhood Residents Using a Phenomenological Approach: A Case Study of the Historical Building in 3-Gonbad Neighborhood in Urmia, Iran***

Farhad Rajaei<sup>1\*</sup>, Nazanin Yazdanpanah<sup>2</sup>

1-PhD Candidate, Department of Architecture, College of Art and Architecture, Islamic Azad University, Hamedan Branch, Hamedan, Iran

2-PhD Candidate, Department of Architecture, College of Art and Architecture, Islamic Azad University, Bushehr Branch, Bushehr, Iran

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**\*Corresponding author**

Farhad Rajaei

Email:

[fartline.rajaei@gmail.com](mailto:fartline.rajaei@gmail.com)

Tel:

+989144093001

ORCID ID:

0000-0003-3502-4777

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**ABSTRACT**

The sense of place is one of the main issues in urban design and urban planning. Considering that humans need to communicate with the environment, today with the modern urban planning, the "sense of place" has lost its place among spaces, and purely economic and functional attitudes towards environmental design have weakened the emotional relationship of individuals to the environment, as well as declining persuasions for continued presence in urban neighborhoods. Hence, the review of this issue can help designers in providing solutions to enhance the sense of place in residents of residential neighborhoods. In this research, we tried to study phenomenological methodology with an emphasis on the qualitative and descriptive aspects of the place on whether the historical construction of 3 Gonbad of Urmia has been effective in promoting the sense of place of the inhabitants of the neighborhood. The results were obtained by direct observation, interviewing and descriptive reports of the place and receiving its hidden meaning in order to understand and understand the normal aspects and familiar artistic environment. The method of this research is descriptive-analytical and case study and the method of collecting library, documentary and field information (observation, questionnaire and interview). The achievements of the paper prove that the location is sensational and meaningful in terms of its physical and historical dimensions and its specific characteristics, and the existence of the monument of 3 Gonbad has been able to play an effective role in promoting the sense of place.

## 1. Introduction

In this descriptive study, we evaluated the two phenomena of sense of place and sense of belonging to a place based on the theoretical framework of phenomenology using a qualitative approach in the neighborhood residents of 3-Gonbad in Urmia, Iran. Phenomenology is derived from the Greek root '*phainein*', which means showing and displaying and has also been translated as phenomenology. Phenomenology has gained importance in the philosophy of the twentieth century, exerting tremendous effects on philosophical thinking. Although the term 'phenomenological' has been detected in the manuscripts of eighteenth-century philosophers such as Lambert, Herder, Kant, Fitzgerald, and Hegel, Edmond Husserl (1889-1976) is primarily known as the 'father phenomenology', who proposed an utterly novel approach in philosophy [1].

The phenomenological approach that emerged from the late seventies in the twentieth century, which was translated by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Gaston Baclayer to be incorporated into urban planning and architecture, is a descriptive approach in qualitative research. The crisis of meaning in urban spaces and the shortcomings of the quantitative approach to achieving the sense of place have been attributed to the return to qualitative approach and phenomenology [2]. Therefore, as a method to obtain the structures and meanings in the world, phenomenology emphasizes on the changeability and adaptation of the structure of a place as

opposed to the identity and spirit of the place in a given period through examining the environmental and physical qualities of urban and architectural spaces [3]. The greatest goal of phenomenology is to return to the nature of objects. From the cognitive perspective, it means to be away from abstract concepts and face the reality of phenomena genuinely [2].

Christine Norberg Schultz (Norwegian theorist and architect) has been influenced by the ideas of Heidegger and Husserl and is known as the 'phenomenological architect' to the international community. In his viewpoint, the meaning of a place could identify this concept and promote the transformation of architectural space into an architectural place [4]. A place of residence is associated with a high level of sense of place, which plays a key role in the benefits and continuity of human presence in a place. Coming to a particular location based on the sense of place is beyond the awareness of being deployed in one place. This sense leads to a the transplantation of the individual with the place, making them part of the place and creating a mental image of the place based on the experiences, maps, meanings, functions, and personality, which eventually creates a sense of respect for the place in the individual [5].

Sense of place and belonging to a place has suffered due to the inappropriate development of biological complexes, which has in turn changed the feelings of individuals about places. In addition to physical elements, the environment contains messages and passwords that are comprehended and judged based on the roles, expectations, motivations, and other factors affecting individuals. Sense of

place is an important factor in the adaptation of the individual to an environment, better exploitation of the environment, user satisfaction, and the continued presence of the individual [6].

In order to eliminate the loss of the objective character of the environment, which is considered to be a specific quality of identity, the concept of existential space has been proposed to combine the basic relations between man and the environment. In this regard, phenomenology seeks to create the basic conditions and their relation with the form of coherence until the real objective foundation is incorporated into the theoretical foundation of architecture [7].

Sense of place, necessity, and infrastructure should be integrated into various dimensions of urban planning, as well as its spiritual aspect, so that cities would evolve toward humanization. In this context, the greatest emphasis is placed on the degree of belonging to a place in the residents of urban neighborhoods [8].

Since in the modern perspective, the over-emphasis on performance has diminished many perceptual aspects of architectural spaces in relation to the audience, the concept of vacuum appears to be more prevalent in today's societies. Postmodernism, which emerged as a solution to this shortcoming of the modern view, mainly focused on the physical aspect of meanings, failing to provide a comprehensive overview of the architecture of architectural spaces. Considering the changes in urban design and urban planning, such developments have become more economical, and cannot make sense of the location of the neighborhood in most cases. This is

considered to be an important factor in the effective communication of individuals and their sense of identity [9].

In different disciplines, sense of place has been widely explored and involves various components, such as spatial affection, spatial identity, and spatial dependence. Despite various definitions, the attachment of a place to one's experience refers to a place and forms affections toward the place. Although several studies have been conducted in architecture, urban sociology, and environmental psychology, no major research has been carried out on the impact of historical elements on the sense of place in Iran. Various environmental, emotional, and psychological factors affect sense of place; for instance, recognizing a rural location requires the consideration of the physical and emotional factors that are involved in the emotional and psychological interactions of rural communities [10].

In order to examine the possibility of authenticating and revising the identity of urban places, a phenomenological approach specifies that there is no need for a new style of design, and we should seek the meanings and values in architecture and urban planning, particularly in traditional urbanization, viewing a brief revelation of the matters influencing the world, objects, and places [11].

In a study entitled the "Phenomenology of the Aesthetic Experience of Place: A Case Study of Naghsheh-Jahan Square" in Isfahan (Iran) [12], the findings indicated that the aesthetic experience of the participants depended on a minimum 16 main categories based on their experience in living in a specific place, which was determined as the role of Naghsheh-Jahan

Square. As a distinct architectural site, Naghsheh-Jahan Square has many unique features that create an aesthetic experience for individuals in the forms of texts, artwork, and even myths.

In another study entitled the "Phenomenology of Place: Revising the Historical Identity of Historical Texture" [13], the researchers aimed to recognize the sense of place in the historical context of urban space. According to the findings, the historical texture is manifested in the indicators and characteristics of space, establishing a favorable relationship between man and the environment.

In a research entitled the "Phenomenology of Identity and Location in Historical Texts" [14], the authors attempted to discern the nature of identity and place using a phenomenological approach with an emphasis on historical texts, aiming to provide a conceptual model to create spatial identity. A strong, reciprocal link between the perceptual organization and designation of urban space increases the readability and improvement of the perceptual organization, strengthens communication with the urban environment, improves the readability of urban elements, clarifies the meaning of places, and promotes personal and social identity.

## **2. Methodology**

This descriptive-analytical, qualitative research was conducted using a phenomenological approach and library, documentary, and field study (observation, questionnaire, and interview). Data were collected via interviews with the locals and attending the site in the final stage by the

researcher in order to record his personal experience of the space through observation at various intervals. Furthermore, the researcher attempted to identify the location of historical elements promoting the sense of place in the inhabitants.

The recorded data were interpreted and analyzed. An important stage in the interpretation phase was to consider the analysis and interpretation of the data as a combination of horizons between the collaborators and researcher. In the current research, data analysis was performed analytically and phenomenologically using common methods of analysis in qualitative research [12].

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Studied Neighborhood**

Urmia is one of the major cities in Iran, which is the capital of West Azarbaijan province. According to the 2010 census, Urmia is the tenth largest city in Iran with a population of 667,499. Urmia is more than 3,000 years old, as well as the most ancient city in the northwest of Iran, which remains thriving. Additionally, Urmia has been registered as the 19<sup>th</sup> historical city of Iran in UNESCO.

In the current research, the study site was the Tower of 3-Gonbad (Three Domes) in Urmia, located in the southeastern corner of the city on Dastgheib Avenue and in one of the alleys leading to the Ostad Barzagar Street. This building is made of brick with a cylinder structure and dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD. The building was constructed on the orders of a Seljuk kings and is currently located at the center of the neighborhood.



**Figure 1.** Historical Texture and Heritage Sites of Central Area in Urmia [15]

### 3.2. Physical Condition of 3-Gonbad Neighborhood

When we enter the alley from the “Janbazan” street, we can see the surrounding buildings, which are regularly located towards the tower of 3 Gonbad. Some landowners have attempted to reconcile the building materials with historical building materials by using bricks in the facade. In the first encounter with the side of the alley, due to the unclassified parts and brick facades, we unconsciously looked for the main part with a small derby, which makes it possible to simultaneously look at the side of the fences toward the entrance. We had

to go around the building from the back of the metal fences.

Inside the stone floor and around the building, which is perfectly compatible with the other materials used in the structure, and with the historical gems at the entrance, which are considered as a stone museum, there is a combination of a special green space and historical monument. Certainly, the lack of compatibility of the historical elements in the tower with the surrounding buildings attracts the attention of viewers.

In terms of the materials, the distinctive features of the tower include the skyline, color, structure, form, and green area near

the surrounding buildings. However, the historical features of the building add dignity and weight, while the presence of modern elements around the monument may pose challenge to the viewers' mind as if they should not exist in this environment; this issue was prioritized by the researcher. Upon entering the neighborhood, the construction of 3-Gonbad neighborhood attracted our attention.

### **3.3. Architectural Information**

The 3-Gonbad monument is a cylindrical and circular platform with the diameter of five meters and height of 13 meters. The current building has two floors, and there are valves on four sides. The circular, cylindrical structure has a dome, the upper part of which is transformed into a masonry building containing a tomb space. Its entrance is embedded in a molded architectural design and enclosed in the

cylindrical body of the tower. The entrance port is located in the middle of the arches and has been decorated with architectural features. It should be noted that the main roof and walls of the dome are intact.

The decor of the head at the entrance to the tomb is uniquely decorated with gypsum and stone pieces with geometric designs and inscriptions in Kofi. There are three inscriptions in Kofi script, which are located at the entrance of the tower, the upper part of which consists of Muqarnas designs and three rows. One of the rows is immediately above the top, the other row is above the arch, and the third row is on the rectangle. The lower parts of the building are 3.6 meters high and are made of gray-colored rocks, and from this point on, all the materials are made of four-corner bricks.



**Figure 1.** Frontal View of 3-Gonbad Building



**Figure 3.** Aerial View of 3-Gonba Neighborhood



**Figure4.** Street Entries to 3-Gonbad Neighborhood



**Figure 5.** Map of 3-Gonbad Neighborhood

In the interviews, the participants were enquired about their perceptions toward the sense of place in their neighborhood, and the factors amplifying or threatening the phenomenon were exploited. Average duration of the interviews was 45 minutes. Each interview was conducted through coordination with the interviewees in the area and recorded afterwards. They interviewees were assured that their narratives would be recorded and used for research purposes only without noting personal details. In cases where the

### 3.4. Sense of Place

In the applied method in the present study, a deep understanding of the experience of individuals requires the provision of an opportunity, so that they could narrate their experiences. The study population consisted of the residents of 3-Gonbad neighborhood in Urmia. Meanwhile, a sample of two gender groups was selected from different age groups (young to elderly) and occupations.

Moreover, some questions were asked indirectly to address the main objective of the research (i.e., sense of place). The interview transcripts were reviewed and interpreted to collect the opinions of the participants about the sense of place and sum up the contents as the perceptions of the individuals toward the sense of place and its promoting factors (Table 1).

participants were not comfortable with sharing their experiences with the interviewer, the interviews were conducted in groups or in the presence of the family members or locals.

Following the interviews, the participants were described in the study to have an overview of the provided contents.

**Table 1.** Contents of Interviews

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**Question:** *"In your opinion, what are the factors that encourage the residents to stay in the neighborhood?"*

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**Response 1:** "Most of us (neighbors) have a certain sense of this place. Now, I do not know whether the construction of 3-Gonbad makes the residents stay in the neighborhood."

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**Response 2:** "The historical elements in the houses distinguish this neighborhood from the other neighborhoods, making us feel comfortable in this area."

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**Response 3:** "When we see domestic and foreign tourists around asking who the authorities are or taking pictures, it makes us happy to be living here."

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**Response 4:** "We are accustomed to the existence of this building. I think if we decide to leave this neighborhood one day, it will be hard for us to hear from it."

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**Response 5:** "When we walk around this building, we enjoy ourselves, the greenery around it, and its elements (museum gems)."

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**Response 6:** "I always have a pleasant feeling about the neighborhood, and the recollection of the past memories in the neighborhood doubles the pleasure."

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**Response 7:** "Since the stone museum has been added to the complex and the kiosk has become responsible for providing information and tickets, the value of the place has increased; therefore, the residents have a better sense of place as well."

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**Response 8:** "There is a particular peace and calm in this place that I cannot feel in other neighborhoods."

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Considering the lack of familiarity with the concept of sense of place or other issues regarding the subject matter of the present study, the responses provided by the interviewees could not be classified into a single category. Nevertheless, the mentioned viewpoints contained the main components of sense of place, which could be interpreted in relation to sense of place.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

The present study was conducted in accordance with ethical codes to obtain the experience of the environment in relation to the phenomenon of sense of place based on the principles of qualitative-descriptive reporting. The theoretical foundations of phenomenology and discussion on sense of place were the basis of the current research. Aiming to interpret the sense of place in the residents, the researcher expressed the associated theoretical concepts and integrated them into the field interviews to draw conclusions.

In terms of physical conditions and specific historical features, place associates with a sensory and semantic load. In the minds of the audience, this long-term sense is manifested in the form of a memorable place, maintaining the structure of the sense of place. With the development of cities and lack of meaning in built spaces, the qualitative

characteristics of spaces and influence of various perceptual issues on neighborhoods have attracted the attention of designers.

Assessment of the effects of built spaces and spaces on human behavior and emotions is considered essential in this regard, which leads to the discussion on sense of place as one of the significant influential factors in the semantic qualities of an environment. In fact, this phenomenon is a form of conceptualization and trade-off between the human emotions and environment, which is the basis of the continuity of human presence in an environment with sufficient experience.

In the present study, the significance of the phenomenology of the shared experiences was in achieving several components, such as the emotions and perceptions of individuals toward 3-Gonbad neighborhood and formed meanings over time, which were used indirectly by the locals to define sense of place. Although some of the field findings of the current research were in congruence with the theoretical findings in philosophy and previous studies regarding the experience of sense of place, the phenomenology of sense of place experiences in the participants of the present study in the analysis stage revealed the components

that enhanced the sense of place in the inhabitants of 3-Gonbad neighborhood, as follows:

- The existence of an ancient historical element in the central neighborhood promoted the aesthetic aspect of the neighborhood.
- The impact of a green space in the center of the neighborhood improved the visual quality of the neighborhood.
- The elderly locals enjoyed a leisure space for sitting in the historical complex.
- The Museum of the Stone added to the historical elements and raised the value of the neighborhood.
- Distinctions between the tissues and bodies of the neighborhood with the other neighborhoods were pointed out by the residents of 3-Gonbad neighborhood.
- Different body of the historical elements than the surrounding buildings was mentioned by the participants.
- Place readabilities
- Level of commitment of the local residents to preserving the monument and neighborhood was highlighted in the responses.

- Lack of criminal behaviors in the neighborhood
- Appointment of governmental institutions added to the value of the historical complex.
- The presence of domestic and foreign visitors from the building promoted the identity of the place.

According to the results of the present study, 3-Gonbad neighborhood in Urmia is an urban space in terms of the aforementioned features, as well as a work of art associated with a strong sense of place for the residents. The narratives of the participants about the neighborhood indicated their profound bond with the neighborhood as an environment evoking memories and emotions.

Findings of the current research could inspire urban planners and architects. It is also hoped that they broaden horizons toward the phenomenon of sense of place, especially in the context of similar neighborhoods, from a philosophical perspective. Using an utterly qualitative approach and phenomenology, we could elaborate on the experiences of the inhabitants without bias.

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