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Original Research Article

Recognition of Functionality of Ritual-Centric Axis as a Driver for Culture-Based Urban Regeneration (A Case Study of the Zeynabieh and Hosseinieh Azam to Imamzadeh Seyed Ebrahim Axis in Zanjan City)*

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Abstract

Problem statement: In the strategies for culture-based urban regeneration, the cultural-social and economic impacts of activities and events, as well as the physical-spatial characteristics of the host spaces, are of great importance. Ritual-hosting spaces encompass a range of environments that must possess specific physical, cultural, social, economic, and managerial attributes. Urban regeneration through ritual functionalities can challenge the conditions of spaces, facilitating the formation of social space, fostering solidarity, enhancing the sense of place, and increasing citizen participation. Zanjan city is renowned for its ritual functions, especially during the religious and national ceremonies in the month of Muharram. Therefore, it is expected that the spaces manifesting these religious ceremonies align with their ritual functions and that the deterioration, decay, and decline of these ritual axes would significantly impact the quantity and quality of solidarity, sense of belonging, identity, and more.

Research objective: This study aims to identify the role of ritual-centric axes as drivers of regeneration along the Zeynabieh and Hosseinieh Azam to Imamzadeh Seyed Ebrahim (PBUH) axis in Zanjan city.

Research method: The study employs explanatory methods based on novel future study techniques. The factors were evaluated by 30 urban planning experts using environmental scanning and cross-impact/structural analysis. The specialized future studies' software, MICMAC, was used to identify the functionality of the ritual axis as a driver for urban regeneration.

Conclusion: The results indicate that the dispersion of the influential variables suggests system instability. Out of 29 factors analyzed, 10 key factors were identified as critical influencers on the ritual-centric axis, consistently appearing in both direct and indirect methods. These key factors—alignment with historical context, sense of place, dynamism and sustainability, physical continuity, mental role creation, environmental signification, organization derived from religion and culture, physical-social continuity, adaptability, and spatial dynamism—are crucial in the regeneration of the Zeynabieh and Hosseinieh Azam to Imamzadeh Seyed Ebrahim axis in Zanjan. Enhancing the quality of these key factors will significantly improve the quality of interactions and solidarity among individuals with the environment.

Keywords: *Urban Regeneration, Driver, Ritual-Centric Functionality, Culture-Based, Zanjan City.*

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Introduction

Attachment to a place or city results from a complex and often indistinct series of factors. Urban rituals, as symbolic tools, play a significant role in creating a sense of belonging to a place. They establish a deep connection between people and their environment, making individuals feel as though they are part of the space. This fosters greater interaction between the built environment and its users, ultimately leading to social sustainability and the enhancement of urban spaces. If a city is perceived as the site for the formation and display of rituals and symbolic performances, their significance as gatherings of people and the recognition of their functions is amplified (Mirzakhani et al., 2021, 1). Regeneration, by emphasizing the ritual functions of urban spaces, can promote the challenging conditions of these spaces, by focusing on the enhancement of identity in such historic areas, the creation of social spaces, solidarity, and the improvement of the sense of place and citizen participation (Uğuz, 2008). In culture-based urban regeneration strategies, it is crucial to pay attention to the cultural-social and economic impacts of activities and events, as well as the physical-spatial characteristics of the host spaces. Ritual-hosting spaces encompass a range of environments that must possess specific physical, cultural, social, economic, and managerial characteristics. The synergy between culture and urban spaces, as intrinsic and valuable community resources, forms the foundation for the regeneration of urban spaces (Lotfi et al., 2022, 175 & 176). In this context, cultural factors are of high importance as drivers for revitalizing the historical cores of cities and enhancing their livability (Noring, 2019). Recent literature emphasizes that the creation of ritual axes with cultural functions in the historical cores of cities can introduce these areas as ritual brands, attracting various groups, including residents, domestic visitors, and international tourists (Mehanna & Mehanna, 2019). In many Iranian cities, a similar pattern of ritual landscapes has driven the development of the city and its neighborhoods around these sites. These areas, characterized by shared cognitive and symbolic features stemming from their ritualistic, social, and meaningful nature, play

a prominent role in the perception of the landscape by residents in neighborhoods and cities, becoming a part of the city's distinctive physical and cognitive identity (Abarghouei Fard et al., 2018, 6). Zanzan city, as the symbol of the city of Hossein's fervor and wisdom, is particularly known for its religious and national ceremonies during the month of Muharram. It is believed that the ritual axis spaces in Zanzan are not only in need of physical and economic regeneration approaches but that attention to their cultural functions as drivers in the urban regeneration process can more effectively demonstrate a sense of solidarity and value of place than other functions. Therefore, it is expected that the spaces where religious ceremonies are held are consistent with their ritual functions and that the deterioration, decay, and decline of the ritual axis would have a significant impact on the quantity and quality of solidarity, sense of belonging, identity, and more. According to Gamba & Cattacin (2021), urban rituals function as spaces of memory and belonging, allowing participants to engage in civil society. Hence, the primary research question is:

What are the effective drivers in the culture-based urban regeneration process along the Zeynabieh and Hosseinieh Azam to Imamzadeh Seyed Ebrahim (PBUH) axis in Zanzan city?

Theoretical Foundations

Drawing on global literature and recognizing the importance of rituals, this section attempts to converge concepts such as rituals and regeneration in the urban context. Rituals are a set of rules that define the behavioral characteristics of individuals (Meseci, 2007). They are not separate from daily life but function to shape social structures and interpersonal connections (Quantz & Magolda, 1997; Meseci, 2007; Campbell & Moyers, 2010). Rituals, as symbolic displays, not only demonstrate institutional unity and cooperation but also manage differences such as hierarchy, status, function, and power (Meseci, 2007). Moreover, it is argued that rituals may strengthen collective identity by emphasizing their communal nature, which fosters recognition among individuals in collective

spaces (Hertz & Cattacin, 2015). The city, as a large collective space, is also the site of rituals. Urban rituals are considered links between the history of a city or neighborhood and the personal and collective memory of participants. The sense of belonging that stems from urban rituals creates symbolic legitimacy for city users (Bhandari et al., 2010). Urban regeneration, as an innovative and supportive approach, is proposed for creating places, meanings, and shared memories in cities (Jahanbakhsh et al., 2015). This approach emphasizes the role of memory in social life and political culture (Rose-Redwood et al., 2008). The public perception of the outcomes of urban regeneration projects in recent years, accompanied by inevitable and forced displacement, has led to a weakened sense of place for residents (Vanclay, 2017; Wang et al., 2020, Pan & Cobbinah, 2023). A sense that fades away and is forgotten as a result of changes. Urban regeneration programs often focus on physical reconfiguration and social destruction, while neglecting their impact on residents' attachment to place and using "distress rhetoric" to justify their economic objectives. In contrast, recent studies have considered the urban regeneration process as a comprehensive and structural action aimed at improving the quality of urban spaces with an emphasis on social-cultural values, which in turn can enhance the physical, economic, and environmental conditions (Chiu et al., 2019). Thus, as illustrated in Fig. 1, the intersection of the concepts of regeneration and

rituals in urban spaces lies in the process of enhancing social and cultural values through group solidarity, increased interactions, and the intensification of stimuli for presence, on the one hand, and the formation of connection, continuity, diversity, and spatial adaptation with ritual axes, on the other (Collins, 2004).

Research Background

In light of the significance of the cultural approach in urban regeneration and the role of rituals in the development of culture and social life within human settlements, including cities, several studies can be referenced. For instance, Lotfi (2011) explored the application of cultural foundations and actions in urban regeneration within inner-city areas and central cores. Izadi et al. (2017) investigated the application of a culture-based approach as an integrated, facilitating, and driving force in urban regeneration. Likewise, Lak & Hakimian (2019) focused on culture-based regeneration through the enhancement of collective memory. However, the role of ritual spaces and axes in the process of urban regeneration remains underexplored. This approach is further supported by theorists such as Durkheim, Goffman, and Collins, who have contributed to ritual theory, emphasizing its role in expressing identities, values, and social structures (Alhajri, 2019). Theorists like Stewart, Strathern, and Victor Turner have highlighted the aesthetic qualities of rituals, their

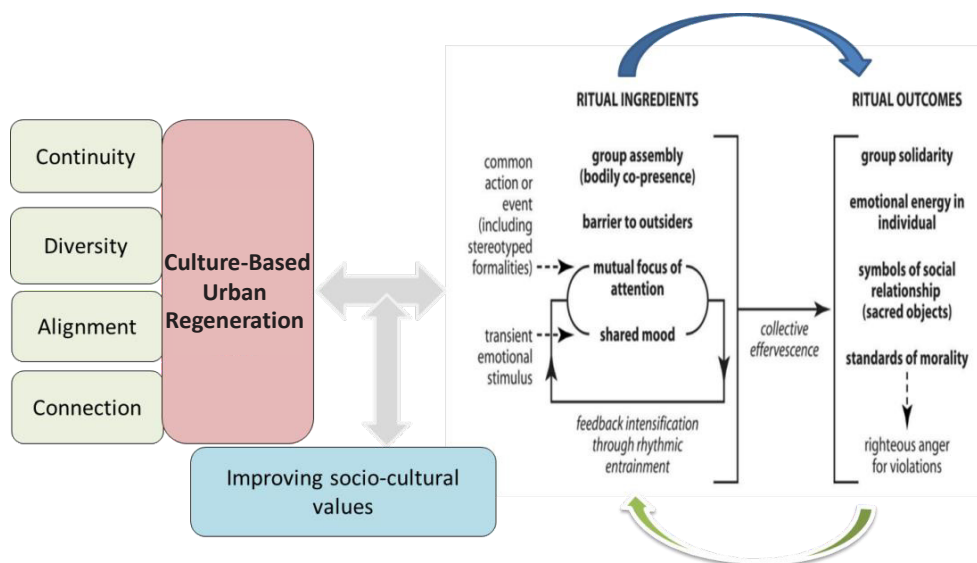


Fig. 1. Requirements for Ritualistic Functions as Drivers of Urban Regeneration. Source: Collins, 2004.

relationship with art forms, and their role in cultural transformations. Additionally, anthropologists like De Martino, Malinowski, Van Gennep, and Fortes have examined the social and cultural functions of rituals, underscoring their importance in maintaining societal cohesion and transmitting traditions within cities (Stephenson, 2022). This study aims to introduce effective drivers for enhancing the quality of ritual axes through a new planning perspective, utilizing specific foresight methods. Table 1 illustrates the interaction between collective rituals and urban structures from the perspectives of various theorists.

Research Methodology

The research methodology in this study is based on modern future studies methods. To gain the necessary theoretical insights and review the relevant literature and data, a documentary research approach using library resources was employed. After identifying the relevant factors, they were selected in two rounds by 30 urban planning experts. These factors were then evaluated using environmental scanning and structural/matrix impact analysis. Less significant variables, according to the experts, were eliminated in subsequent stages. Additionally, the specialized future studies software MICMAC was utilized to recognize the function of ritual axes as a driving force in urban regeneration. The overall process of model implementation is conducted in three stages:

- Step 1. Identification of initial parameters or factors.
- Step 2. Inputting the factors and information into the MICMAC software.

Step 3. Examination of the extent and nature of the relationships between variables.

Step 4. Identification of key factors (Na’imi & Pourmohammadi, 2016, 56).

Research Area

Zanjan, the first and largest urban center of the province with a population of 430,871 according to the 2016 census, covers an area of approximately 6,400 hectares. It is located 319 kilometers northwest of Tehran and 280 kilometers southeast of Tabriz. The city is divided into four municipal districts. The religious sites of Hosseinieh and Zeynabieh Azam in Zanjan, which are located in the central and slightly western, and southern parts of the city, are among the Shia religious places with a history of over a century, making them ancient mosques in the Zanjan province (Zanjan City Statistical Yearbook, 2018). The rituals begin at the mosques of Hosseinieh and Zeynabieh Azam and continue along a pedestrian route ending at the Imamzadeh Seyyed Ebrahim (PBUH) in Zanjan. This axis is recognized as a site for gathering and forming local communities during religious ceremonies. Fig. 2 illustrates the ritual paths and domains within Zanjan city.

Research Findings

• Identification of influential criteria of ritual Axes for enhancing the prestige of place

In this study, environmental scanning was employed with a group of experts to identify the initial variables influencing the recognition of the function of ritual

Table 1. Interaction between Collective Rituals and Urban Structures from the Perspective of Theorists. Source: Authors based on Habib et al., 2009, 119-121 & Shieh, 2010.

| Theorist | View on the Interaction between Collective Rituals and Urban Structures | Inferential Criteria (Ritual Features) |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Aldo Rossi (1966) | He believes that rituals have a collective nature that ensures their continuity and permanence, pointing out that old buildings in a city play an important role in their emergence and carry narratives (Pakzad, 2007, 338). | Temporal Continuity, Collective, Permanent, Meaningful |
| Amos Rapoport (1999) | He examines the structure of a residential complex through cultural characteristics and believes that cultural factors, especially religious beliefs, are the foundation of human settlements (Shieh, 2010) | Regulates Settlements, Symbolic, Place-Oriented |
| Lewis Mumford (1950) | The city is a form of social organization in space, which should be regarded as a constant producer of culture. | Identity, Unique, Vibrant, Active |
| Camillo Sitte (1889) | Influenced by the natural growth of medieval cities, he proposed returning to the artistic style of the Middle Ages (Shieh, 2010) | Rich Design |
| Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1996) | He speaks of tradition as an immutable principle with a celestial origin, applicable in different times and places (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 2001, Preface). | Adaptation to Events and Experiences |

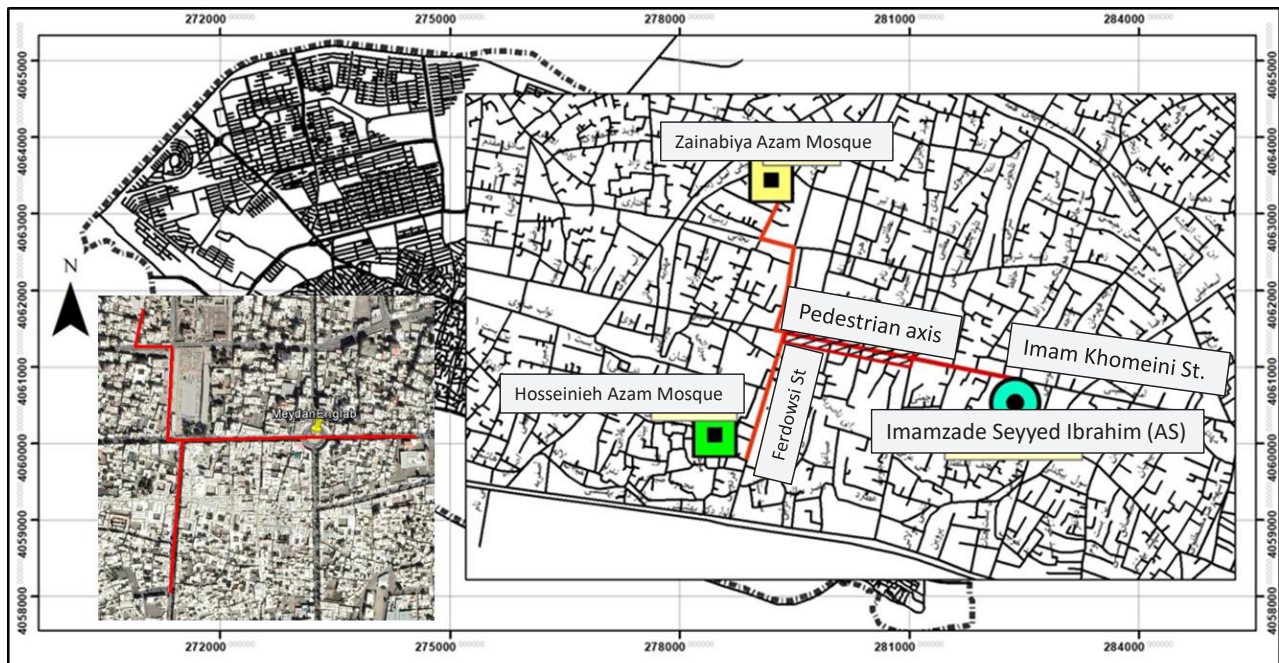


Fig. 2. Research Area (Procession Route of Hosseinieh and Zeynabieh Azam in Zanjan). Source: Zanjan Municipality.

axes as a driving force in urban regeneration. In this step, experts were asked to select the initial criteria influencing the research topic in two rounds. After screening the variables, 29 variables were selected as the initial variables influencing the criteria of ritual axes affecting the enhancement of the prestige of place, as shown in Table 2. These variables were classified into four groups: continuity, diversity, alignment, and connectivity, based on the research background.

• System environment analysis

As mentioned earlier, 29 variables were identified in four areas—continuity, diversity, adaptability, and connectivity—as factors influencing the status of ritual axes as drivers of urban regeneration. These variables were analyzed using structural/matrix impact analysis with MICMAC software to extract the main influencing factors. Given the number of variables, the matrix dimensions were 29 × 29, organized into four different domains. The matrix was iterated twice, with a matrix fill degree of 95%. Out of 810 possible relationships in the matrix, 31 were scored as zero, 299 as one, 373 as two, and 138 as three. The matrix was optimized through two data rotations, achieving a desirability and optimization level of 100, indicating the high validity of the questionnaire and responses.

Table 2. Factors Influencing the Recognition of Ritual Axis Functions as Drivers of Urban Regeneration. Source: Authors.

| Classification | Variable |
|----------------|--|
| Continuity | - Coordination with historical context |
| | - Sense of place |
| | - Sense of time |
| | - Dynamism and permanence |
| | - Continuity of time and place |
| Diversity | - Physical continuity |
| | - Temporal continuity |
| | - Vibrancy and activity |
| | - Gatherability |
| | - Collective participation in space |
| Alignment | - Variety and diversity |
| | - Social interaction |
| | - Continuity of physical and social space |
| | - Compatibility |
| | - Spatial dynamism |
| Connection | - Alignment with events and experiences |
| | - Alignment with needs |
| | - Connection with place and collective interactions |
| | - Alignment of place with beliefs and human intentions |
| | - Alignment of form with activity and culture |
| Connection | - Interaction between humans and physical space |
| | - Identity |
| | - Symbolism |
| | - Nostalgia |
| | - Mental role creation |
| Connection | - Identity influenced by events |
| | - Meaningfulness to the environment |
| | - Sense of belonging |
| | - Organized by religion and culture |

Tables 3 & 4 show the preliminary data analysis and their level of desirability.

The distribution and spread of variables in the scatter plot indicate the stability or instability of the system.

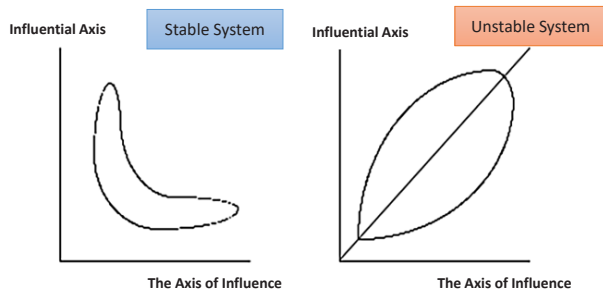


Fig. 3. Pattern of Stable and Unstable Systems. Source: Godet, et al., 2003 as cited in Na’imi & Pourmohammadi, 2016.

Table 3. Initial Analysis of Cross-Impact Matrix Data. Source: Authors.

| Area | Index | Matrix Dimensions | Number of Repeats | Number of Zeros | Number of Ones | Number of Twos | Number of Threes | Total | Filling Degree |
|-------------|-------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|-------|----------------|
| Ritual Axis | Value | 29 | 2 | 31 | 299 | 373 | 138 | 810 | 95% |

Table 4. Degree of Matrix Desirability and Optimization. Source: Authors.

| Area | Rotation | Influence | Being Influenced |
|-------------|----------|-----------|------------------|
| Ritual Axis | 1 | 95 % | 95 % |
| | 2 | 100 % | 99 % |

Table 5. The Extent of Direct and Indirect Influence of Variables on Each Other. Source: Authors.

| Area | Variable | Final Score | | Achieved Ranking | |
|-------------|---|------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| | | Direct Influence | Indirect Influence | Direct Influence | Indirect Influence |
| Ritual Axis | Coordination with historical context | 438 | 435 | 1 | 1 |
| | Sense of place | 424 | 419 | 2 | 2 |
| | Dynamism and permanence | 397 | 395 | 3 | 3 |
| | Physical continuity | 397 | 393 | 4 | 4 |
| | Mental role creation | 383 | 384 | 5 | 5 |
| | Meaningfulness to the environment | 376 | 379 | 6 | 7 |
| | Organized by religion and culture | 376 | 375 | 7 | 6 |
| | Continuity of physical and social space | 370 | 370 | 8 | 8 |
| | Compatibility | 363 | 363 | 9 | 9 |
| | Spatial dynamism | 363 | 360 | 10 | 10 |

Table 6. Distribution of Variables Based on Their Classification. Source: Authors.

| Classification | Variable |
|---------------------|---|
| Influential Factors | Sense of place, Physical continuity, Dynamism and permanence, Meaningfulness to the environment, Spatial dynamism, Continuity of physical and social space, Compatibility |
| Dual-role Factors | Mental role creation, Organized by religion and culture, Coordination with historical context |
| Affected Factors | Identity, Symbolism, Continuity of time and place, Alignment with events and experiences, Connection with place and collective interactions, Alignment with form to activity and culture |
| Independent Factors | Sense of belonging, Alignment with needs, Interaction between humans and physical space, Variety, and diversity, Sense of time, Temporal continuity, Vibrancy and activity, Connection of place with beliefs and human intentions, Nostalgia, Gatherability, Social interaction, Collective participation in space, Identity influenced by events |

As shown in Fig. 3, in the context of structural/matrix impact analysis using MICMAC software, two types of distribution are generally defined: stable systems and unstable systems. In stable systems, the distribution of variables forms an L-shape. Conversely, in unstable systems, the situation is more complex, with variables scattered around the diagonal axis of the scatter plot (Godet, et al., 2003 as cited in Na’imi & Pourmohammadi, 2016).

• Evaluation of direct and indirect influences of variables

In this section, the influences of variables were analyzed using MICMAC software, and the extent and degree of direct and indirect influences of the

variables on each other were determined based on Table 5. Due to the differing distribution and spread of influential variables, the dispersion of factors in Fig. 4 indicates system instability. As a result, the factors can be identified in five categories: influential factors, dual-role factors, regulatory factors, influenced factors, and independent factors, as described in Table 6.

• Final selection of key factors influencing the recognition of the function ritual axes in urban regeneration

As indicated above, the overall analysis of the system environment initially identified 29 criteria of ritual axes affecting regeneration within the framework of foresight methods. The extent and nature of the influence of these factors on each other were analyzed using both direct and indirect methods. Ultimately,

out of the 29 factors examined, 10 main factors were selected as key influencers. These factors were consistent across both direct and indirect methods (Fig. 5). Table 7 presents the key factors influencing the recognition of the function of ritual axes in urban regeneration using direct and indirect methods.

Discussion and Conclusion

Urban spaces that play a vital role in defining identity, particularly those hosting religious and national ceremonies, serve as the cradle for collective memories and public solidarity. The courtyards of mosques, Hosseiniehs, and other communal spaces are prominent public domains that historically attracted attention as venues for religious-ritual events. The gathering of individuals with shared beliefs in these ritual pathways brings unique

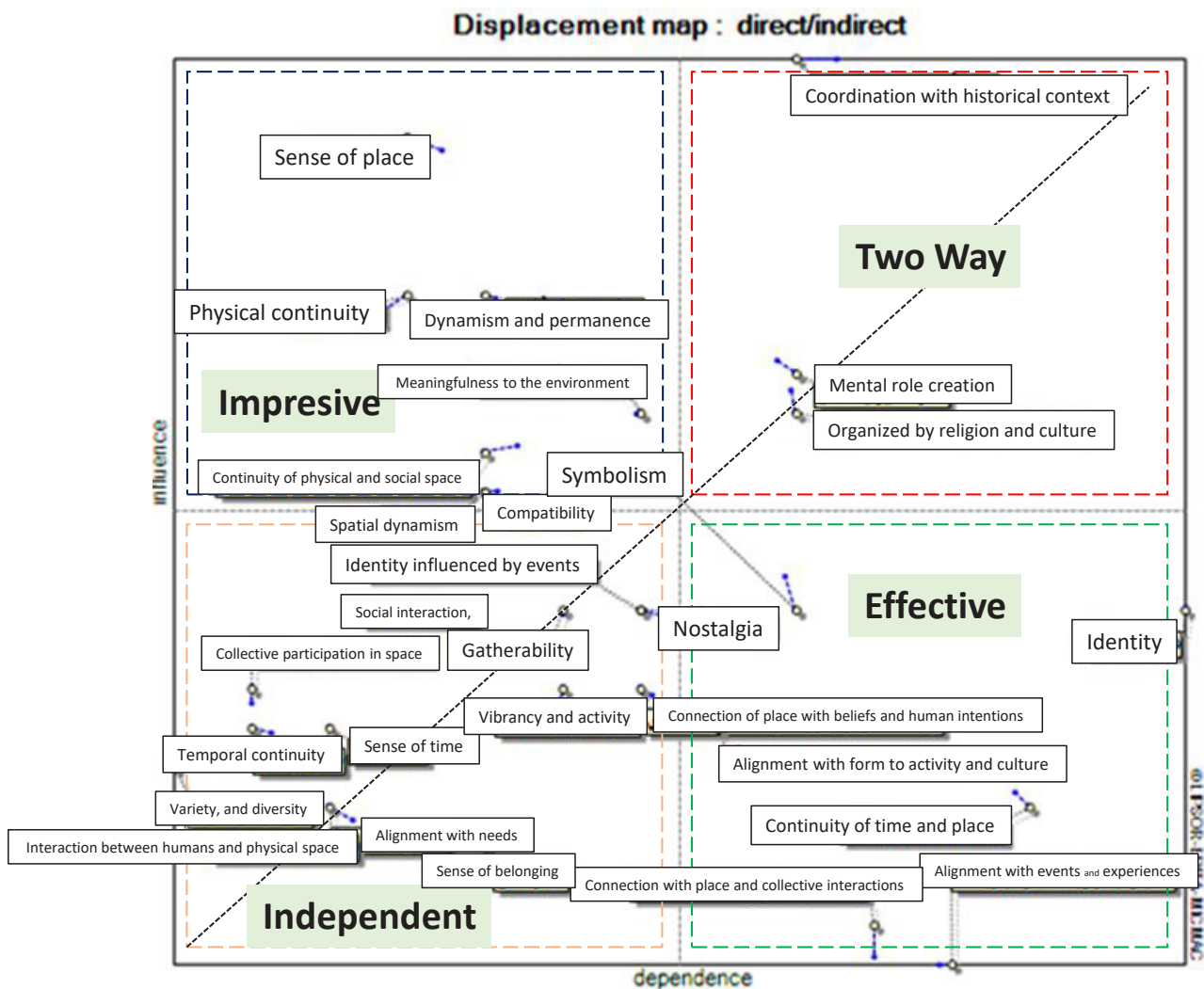


Fig. 4. Dispersion of Variables in the Influence and Impact Plan. Source: Authors based on Software Calculations.

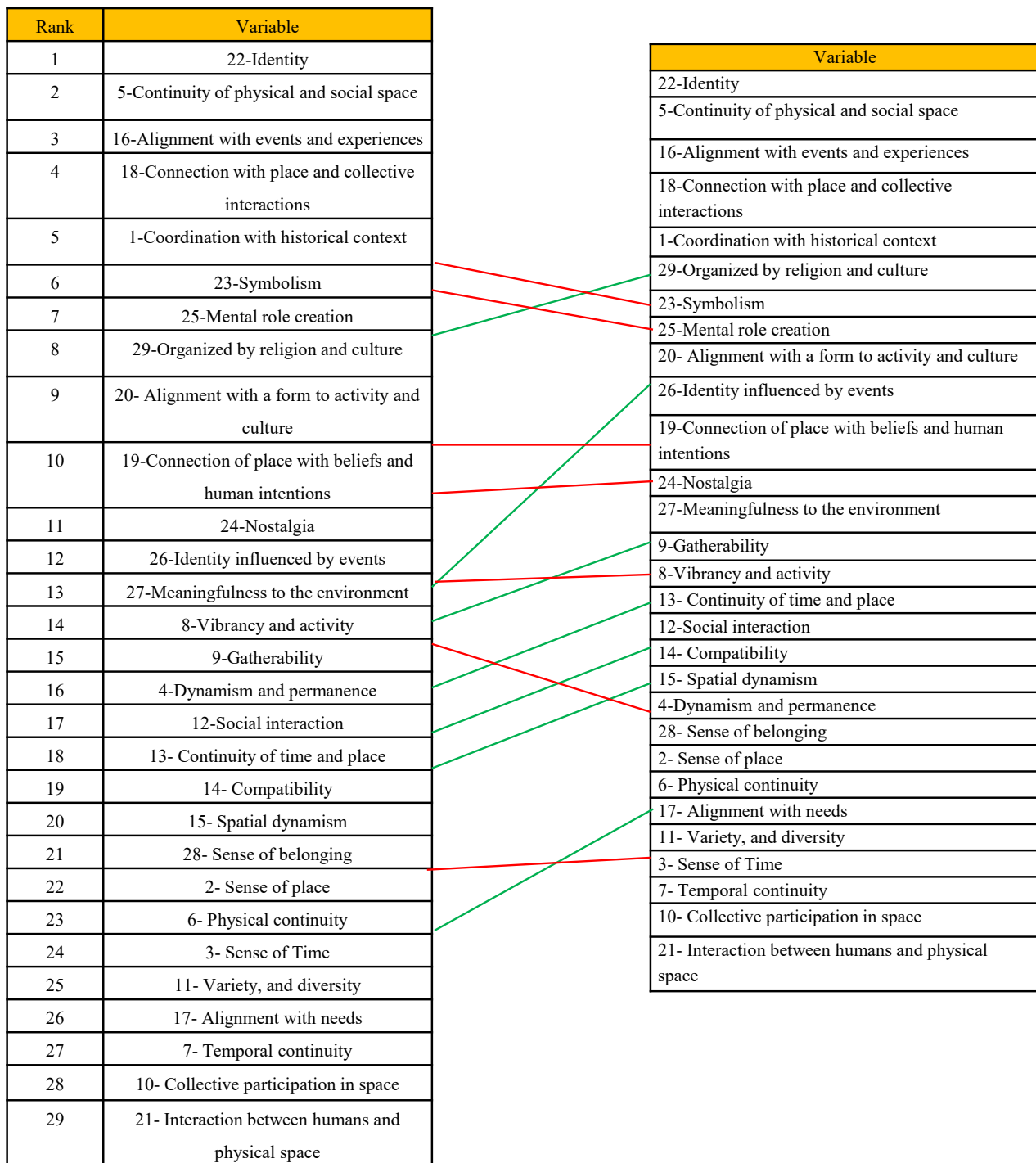


Fig. 5. Classification of Direct and Indirect Influences of Factors on the Recognition of Ritual Axis Functions in Urban Regeneration. Source: Authors based on Software Calculations.

significance to local, national, and international events. It is important to recognize that not all urban events and popular gatherings can be attributed to the same meaning; rather, they are deeply rooted in their historical and cultural contexts, shaped by the intellectual conventions of society. Given the decay and deterioration of these ritual pathways, it

is anticipated that revitalizing their functions will lead to the resurgence of these spaces. This study builds on previous findings, which emphasize the functional and social aspects of rituals within urban spaces, proposing that the cohesion between space and individuals depends on the alignment with a structured framework. In other words, rituals are

Table 7. Key Factors Influencing the Recognition of Ritual Axis Functions in Urban Regeneration. Source: Authors based on Software Calculations.

| Area | Variable | Final Score | | Achieved Ranking | |
|-------------|---|------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| | | Direct Influence | Indirect Influence | Direct Influence | Indirect Influence |
| Ritual Axis | Coordination with historical context | 438 | 435 | 1 | 1 |
| | Sense of place | 424 | 419 | 2 | 2 |
| | Dynamism and permanence | 397 | 395 | 3 | 3 |
| | Physical continuity | 397 | 393 | 4 | 4 |
| | Mental role creation | 383 | 384 | 5 | 5 |
| | Meaningfulness to the environment | 376 | 379 | 6 | 7 |
| | Organized by religion and culture | 376 | 375 | 7 | 6 |
| | Continuity of physical and social space | 370 | 370 | 8 | 8 |
| | Compatibility | 363 | 363 | 9 | 9 |
| | Spatial dynamism | 363 | 360 | 10 | 10 |

socially constructed processes, grounded in structured activities and events, that yield tangible outcomes within the spatial domain. We argue that due to their qualitative and culture-based nature, the functions of ritual axes can act as drivers for the urban regeneration process, enhancing the sense of solidarity and place more effectively than other functions. Ritual functions, therefore, are seen as drivers and shared values that draw people into urban spaces through national and religious ceremonies. Additionally, the physical and functional characteristics of these ritual axes significantly contribute to strengthening and enhancing social cohesion. As demonstrated, the findings of this study align with previous research, such as Lotfi (2011) on the importance of historical continuity through the integration of content and function within urban spaces, Ahari (2015) on the role of religion in organizing social ceremonies and its significance in the social life of spaces, and Izadi et al. (2017) on the culture-based approach as a driver

for urban regeneration. This study also corroborates with Abarghouei Fard et al. (2018) regarding the collective and ritualistic nature of urban spaces, similar to the ritual landscapes in Iranian cities, and with Lak & Hakimian (2019) on the continuity and reproduction of ritual axes through the reinforcement of collective memory in urban spaces. Furthermore, the study is consistent with the findings of Chahardowli & Sajadzadeh (2022) on the relationship between tourism-driven economic approaches in urban spaces and the regeneration of historical and culturally valuable areas, and with Moeini et al. (2014) on the impact of social cohesion in enhancing the sense of place. Finally, the study also aligns with Shakoor et al. (2018) regarding the role of physical structures in shaping social cohesion within urban spaces. Moreover, drawing from previous findings that emphasize the functional or social process nature of rituals in urban spaces, it is believed that the cohesion between space and individuals is contingent

upon alignment or adaptation to a specific structure. In other words, rituals, through socially structured activities and events, produce the necessary outcomes and effects within a space during the functional phase. Thus, given the positive impacts of collective rituals and the challenges faced by old and valuable urban fabrics, these rituals can be viewed as a potential asset for the city. By creating supportive environments and implementing and enhancing the effects derived from these rituals, they can be utilized for the physical and functional regeneration and revitalization of the old urban fabric.

This study explores the symbolic meaning, memories, and collective ritualistic and national interactions within the axes of the Hosseinieh and Zainabieh A'zam to the Imamzadeh Seyyed Ebrahim (A.S.) in Zanjan city. Despite the fact that rituals and national ceremonies have historically centered around these pathways and urban development has gradually expanded around these routes, there is a need for renewed attention towards their rehabilitation and revitalization. As expected, the functions of these ritual axes, rooted in their historical context, play a significant role in enhancing social cohesion, imbuing the environment with meaning, improving physical quality, and shaping collective behaviors, all of which contribute to the regeneration of the studied axis. The key factors identified as crucial in recognizing the functions of ritual pathways and axes include historical continuity, sense of place, dynamism and sustainability, physical continuity, mental engagement, environmental meaning, religious and cultural order, physical-social cohesion, and spatial adaptability and dynamism.

Research Recommendations

- Allocate funding for the maintenance and restoration of unique historical and cultural buildings with global and national significance at the ceremonial sites of the Zainabieh and Hosseinieh A'zam in Zanjan.
- Establish integrated management through local councils and related organizations, such as the municipality, trustees, traffic council, and cultural

heritage departments, to ensure transparency, communication, oversight, coordination, and management.

- Develop a comprehensive plan for ritual functions centered around Zainabieh and Hosseinieh A'zam in Zanjan, focusing on religious and cultural order in harmony with the historical context.
- Enhance accessibility and strengthen the sense of citizenship by organizing national and cultural events in spaces like Sabzeh Meydan, which facilitate social interactions.
- Resolve pedestrian-vehicular conflicts in Enghelab Square by using paving materials with distinctive designs and colors to create mental engagement.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there was no conflict for them in conducting this research.

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