

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v6i4.1034

Citation: Allahdadi, M. (2017). Explaining the Criteria of Designing Urban Furniture and Landscape, with a Cultural-social Design Approach. Journal of History Culture and Art Research, 6(4), 165-175. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v6i4.1034>

Explaining the Criteria of Designing Urban Furniture and Landscape, with a Cultural-social Design Approach

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Abstract

Attention to the deep relationship between human personality and the place in which he lives causes the place to play a crucial role in cultural transformations and prevalence of human life style and formation of values, connections and human activities. Cities are not just a place of transit, but they are also environments that must have mutual communications with the inhabitants in order to realize the meaning of citizen, as there is a distinction between the status of citizenship and urbanization. Urban furniture is one of the elements of urban space that its quantity, beauty and durability play a major role in achieving a healthy and favorable city and satisfies the needs of citizens in terms of performance and beauty. Accordingly, the present study, using descriptive-analytical method and with data collection tools including library and documentary studies, examines the concept of product ecology and answers to the questions whether urban furniture can start or support social interaction or positively affect the roles of citizens? In this paper, the relationship between social-cultural design in urban furniture and the disturbances regarding uneven distribution of elements are identified, and finally the criteria of designing urban furniture and landscape are expressed with a social-design approach.

Keywords: Urban furniture, Cultural-social design, Design criteria and elements.

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Introduction

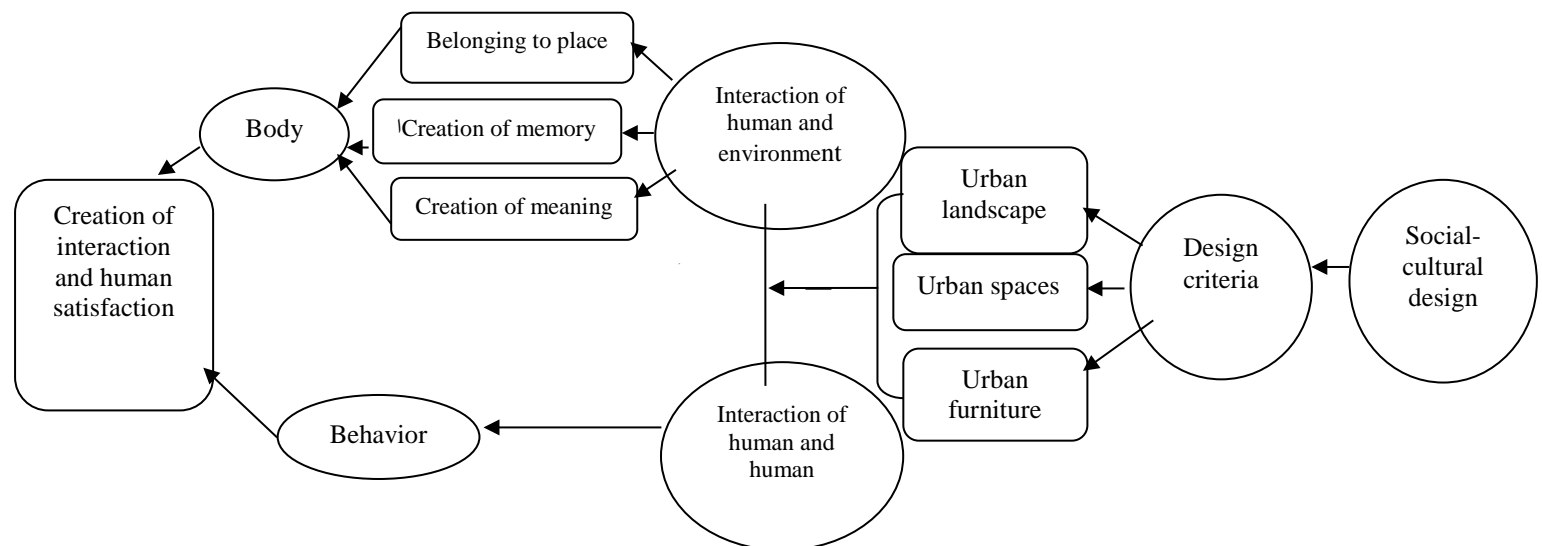
Considering the relationship between environment and human as well as the impact of environment on human, we will find that the place and space surrounding human life have important implications for life style and appearance of behaviors, mental and psychological characteristics, and satisfaction of individual and social needs. So, by considering place as part of human identity and transferring of hidden values of place to human, we find that place plays a fundamental role in cultural changes and prevalence of human life style and formation of human values, connections and activities (Naghizadeh et al., 2010). Therefore, there are many positive and negative consequences as a result of matching or mismatching between form and function of buildings and design of other elements used by citizens and their quality and arrangement in urban spaces. Therefore, paying attention to proper design of the environment, equipment and furniture needed by citizens is of great importance such that it can lead to calmness, sense of belonging, growth and improvement of behaviors and increase of human interactions with environment and with others, or in another way lead to anonymity, demoralization, and depression of citizens. Psychology of environment believes that environment can play a role in human behavior. Words such as “fit”, “afford”, “synomorphy”, and “congruence” have all been used to explain the relationship between patterns of behavior and patterns of physical environment, and these words are used to provide qualitative relationship expression (Lang, 2007: 132). On the other hand, people must also be competent to understand the capabilities of the environment. The state of people, their motivations, experiences, values, or their aesthetic interpretation of the surrounding environment, determines the extent of use of environment, equipment and furniture (ibid, 2007: 117). In this article, the concept of social-cultural design in urban spaces and equipment especially urban furniture are examined by using an analytical-descriptive research method; and finally, by using field studies, furniture design criteria are mentioned with a socio-cultural design approach.

Statement of problem

Currently, most of Iran’s urban furniture is simply an imitation of Western societies, and in Iranian architecture, especially in urban landscapes, similarities to foreigners and other nations are seen. In other words, in their design and planning, not much attention has been paid to the local, climatic and cultural conditions, such that scientific resources related to this issue are very rare and there is a very tangible lack of a comprehensive source that can provide new ideas to readers (Naghizadeh et al., 2010). Presently, contemporary Iranian architecture is confused and idiosyncratic, and weakness in identifying insider culture,

educational problems, foreign culture propaganda, lack of coherent and efficient rules and regulations, weakness of urban management solutions in architecture and urbanization, play role in the crisis of the cultural identity of Iran's architecture and urban planning (Abdi et al., 2014). It should be noted that in the contemporary period, the problems of metropolitan cities are not limited only to the increase in population, traffic, expensive costs and environmental disruptions, but also a variety of behavioral abnormalities, social problems, and mental and psychological pressures resulted from the unpleasant visual landscape are also enough reasons for increase of the problems of modern urban life and a more difficult arena for today's society. Certainly, the calmness which is resulted from appropriate urban landscape following proper use of urban furniture will not be ineffective in the life of today's citizen, such that sometimes this feeling resolves the fatigue of a human tired of daily work and effort and commotion and conveys him home with a steady calmness. During the past decades, simultaneous with prevalence of many of the above mentioned problems, concepts such as increasing the quality of environment in various social, physical and economic dimensions have been proposed in order to confront these problems (Nahibi et al., 2014). With regard to the mentioned material, the problem of this research is to answer this question: Can the design of urban furniture and equipment in contemporary period affect social and cultural interactions? To answer this question, the conceptual model of Chart 1 has been used.

Chart 1: Conceptual model of research process; (source: author)



Literature review

Given the subject of this research, there has been a comprehensive approach to the issue of designing urban furniture and landscape and its cultural and social impacts, and its results and impacts on lifestyle, behavior and psychosocial characteristics of citizens have been

highlighted. In reviewing the subject literature, several articles have been done based on one of the aspects of urban furniture and landscape and most of them have not have the required comprehensiveness. Therefore, some of them are referred to in two parts of urban furniture design and cultural influence in that:

A: the importance of urban furniture design:

In 2016, Gupta and his colleagues in a research entitled “The importance of street furniture in urban view” discussed the design and integration of urban furniture elements in order to create a sense of place for the users, and have provided an effective insight for the designers of outer spaces (Gupta et al., 2016). It is important to provide solutions to suit the city’s landscape by designing urban furniture with architectural and creative quality that can be effective in enriching the identity of place in the city and providing services and creating peace and comfort for the citizens, that this issue has been emphasized by Amini and his colleagues in 2006 in an article entitled “Urban furniture designing and fitting”. Also in another study titled “Managing and organizing urban furniture” urban furniture in different cities of Iran has been analyzed and it has been concluded that organization of none of the cities is in accordance with the favorable standard and some recommendations has been made in order to achieve the favorable standards (Zeinali et al., 2015). Finally, in a study in Shiraz, “Testing and measuring citizens’ satisfaction of urban furniture” Zafar Abadi concludes that urban furniture have not been located in suitable places, and there isn’t a positive relationship between the quality and quantity of urban furniture in the viewpoint of more than half of the respondents of the survey (Zafarabadi et al., 2015).

B: culture and its impact on urban furniture design:

Naghizadeh and his colleagues in a research entitled “Cultural considerations in shaping urban views, relying on the structure of Iranian urban figments in Islamic era” have addressed the mutual interaction between urban views and culture and the role of social-belief values and indigenous achievements in shaping the views of Iranian city in the Islamic era. In another study titled “An approach to the impact of cultural events on urban temporary template quality”, it has been concluded that urban temporary template is the cornerstone of emergence of interactions of citizens with the living environment and with others that leads to creation of memories and meaning and sense of belonging in citizens, and through sociocultural events has a potential impact on improving and promoting their behavior (Cheshmeh Ghesabani et al., 2011). Esfahani Moshbaki according to researches done in his research on the role of localization in promoting urban identity, shows that there is a significant relationship between variables of physical environment quality, citizen participation and sense of belonging to place and relations of neighbors in a district and the

variable of urban identity; and this is a direct and two-way relationship (Moshbaki Esfahani, 2014).

Theoretical literature of the research

The relationship between city and culture

Culture in a general sense is a method of living and thinking. One of the approaches to studying the relationship between human-built environment and culture introduces city as a social organization, a culture producing space, and a suitable platform for the process of culture-building, and examines two components of urban culture (habits and behavior of living and residence in city, which is flowing in relationships and body of the city) and cultural city (a city where culture can be observed in social relations, works of the past, traditions, rituals, symbols, language, social relations, body and all its cultural elements) as complementary components. In the event of a breakdown in the relationship between city and culture, city will find a patchwork identity, and culture of the inhabitants, given the influence of environment in human mind and psyche, will find a confused identity, and ultimately an alien identity. With the increase of neighborly relations, citizens' participation, sense of belonging and quality of physical environment of a place as a result of proper design of urban furniture, urban identity of the place will increase, and vice versa (Moshbaki Esfahani, 2014). Nowadays all around the world, the design of urban environment and furniture is in the area of identity and culture of society and citizens. For example, the red phone booths in London and metro entrances in Paris have become a reminder and a necessity of the identity of these cities (Gupta et al, 2015); and in Iran also urban furniture design is on the basis of beliefs, views and culture of the community. In fact, urban furniture design arises from the thoughts and identity of a community such that it merges with art and creativity and becomes eternal and sustainable such that affects all groups of society. As was mentioned, among the important characteristics of urban furniture components is their dependence on culture. The issue of where to put each of the urban furniture and how much this layout is consistent with the country's culture and the technical standards that we use in public space is a controversial discussion. Urban furniture, like any other element, influences city's image, and we should move in this area, with detailed designs and plans, in accordance with culture and customs of people. Urban furniture has its own different types, each of which, in terms of urban design, takes steps in line with the identity of city and its image, and is a mirror of city's culture; among these types of furniture, chairs and benches, bus stations, trash bins, billboards, urban elements and symbols, and other cases can be mentioned that the unique characteristics of each of these furniture is also of particular importance, because with proper and suitable

design of each of them according to the characteristics and proper location, they can play an effective role in meeting the needs of citizens and increasing their social spirit and induction of identity (Mousavi, 2014). Undoubtedly, the status of urban symbols and signs in urban spaces and furniture is of particular importance. Urban open spaces, urban furniture, and presence and use of residents have a direct and interconnected relationship. Therefore, in addition to the visual image and beauty of the environment and the landscape, the urban symbols which are considered a kind of urban furniture and are reminiscent of many memories of the ancestors, are commonly associated with the traditions of people such that sometimes even an ancient tree (including the Imam Zadeh Saleh of Tehran) is a memorial for many people living in that area (Zandieh et al, 2006).

Urban furniture and its importance

Urban furniture as one of the most tangible and most accessible elements of urban spaces, is one of the important elements of urban design and planning, and as part of the whole city, defines urban identity and structure and in practice, is directly connected with the citizens and its importance is so much that it is assisted by all groups and specialties in its design, which itself implies the interdisciplinary nature of urban furniture. What gives the city an identity and brings comfort for the residents of the city are urban landscape, park and furniture; and these features distinguish cities from each other. The most basic measures necessary to give identity to urban spaces are the special attentions given to designing the location of elements and equipment of the city (Ghasemi, 2011). Failure to observe necessary principles can result in the product being inoperative, confusion and visual pollution, and early destruction that will lead to loss of confidence of citizens in use of such products. By reviewing the essential elements involved in designing urban furniture, needed information for purchase, installation and even production of these products should be presented. By examining these points, one can find out the strengths and weaknesses and capabilities of each of these products and, depending on the circumstances, make an order to build or make the right purchase. It will also be possible to modify or remove the possible defects of a product at the location and installation phases. However, beyond comfort, the goal of choosing the right furniture is to offer a place with personality and identity in order to encourage people to enjoy open spaces (Gupta et al., 2015).

Criteria and indicators of cultural-social design in urban furniture

Culture is manifestation of style and method of life of a social group and includes all social relations and information that is passed from one generation to the next (Kidi, 2002: 5). This definition is close to the first scientific definition of culture that was presented in 1871 by the

British anthropologist, E. B. Taylor: “Culture is the mood gained by the people of a community”. Taylor adds that: culture is the complex whole which includes information, beliefs, art, law, ethics, customs, and any ability and character that is acquired by people. In fact, culture has two social and artistic aspects. In the definition given by Kid, the social aspect of culture is proposed; all patterns, customs, rituals, values and lifestyles of a social institution. In an artistic view to the definition of culture, it has been described as the highest and the best intellectual works created in its age. Hall believes that: culture is not a collection of things, such as objects, writings, illustrations, TV shows and comics, but is a series of actions. Culture is more related to production and exchange of meaning and giving and receiving it; a production and exchange among members of a group or community (Hall, 1997: 2). An understanding of the interaction of culture and design can also be deduced from the studies of Souza and Dijan. They believe that: culture and designing (urban furniture) products are interdependent. This is a reciprocal process. Culture affects product design, usage, and understanding. Meanwhile, product has a reciprocal effect on culture; they cause change in the habits, values, and modes of meaning production. Functional-cultural products play a special cultural role in particular social geography. A striking example of this is the red post counter the British Empire during the Queen Victoria period which shows performance alongside the cultural 150 years history of royal postal services (Warren, 1987). The post counter of England has gained a very significant position after all these years, both as an artwork (cultural) and an element of urban furniture.

Regarding the design of urban elements, for example, a bus station shelter can be defined at the level of obvious implication of this type: “A place for embark and disembark”. With a little attention, it can be seen that the designer, using extruded aluminum profiles, alongside some special components, has tried to transmit more messages to the user; a modern structure that represents the contemporary cultural movement in designing and architecture of the Western world namely high-tech. Eventually, and at the level of myth, the viewer can combine the design of shelter with an idea that admires and reminds works of Sir Norman Foster (Figure 1) (Mortazayee, 2014: 33).



Figure 1: bus station shelter; design of Foster and partners. Source: (Mortazayee, 2014: 33)

Also, attention to user behavior in designing the features of appearance and location of urban furniture, avoiding creation of barriers and obstacles in urban space, attention to personal

spaces and providing an appropriate platform for creation and development of social communications are among the strategies of social-cultural design regarding urban furniture elements (Asl Fallah, 2010: 10). Locating the furniture place, sequencing, and arrangement of that has a positive influence on the visual quality of space. In order to improve quality of urban environment, it is also important to observe attributes for environmental graphics and urban furniture design. These include observing the necessary principles and standards for the welfare of users, use of suitable design and materials in order to increase durability and stability of this type of furniture, applying the principles of beauty and environmental harmony in designing these elements. In the following, some important criteria in designing and selection of urban furniture with a cultural-social design view have been briefly introduced.

The criterion of quality and welfare of users: the general use of furniture, which more than anything else is directly linked to the mass of people, requires careful and in-depth studies for its design, construction and installation, especially in certain cases such as design for the disabled, children and the elderly (Amini et al., 2006). Quality has different definitions. The latest definition of quality has been expressed as responding to customer needs. Therefore, the priority of planning in urban design and its furniture is to recognize and satisfy the expected needs of the users (citizens). Ease and convenience of using, quick access, and providing satisfaction and comfort of citizens should be ahead of economic factors or situations such as welfare of the same authorities. Urban furniture, in addition to being memorable, must meet the physiological and physical needs of all sectors of society, including women, men, the old, the young, the disabled and the veterans. When people describe the quality of places, they refer to the words of security, charm and invocation, and often tend to go to those spaces. In reviewing more than a thousand urban public spaces around the world, four key qualities of “accessibility, vitality and presence of activities, comfort and sociability” have caused success in designing these spaces (ibid, 2006).

Criteria of locating: In general, urban furniture components should be located in space such that urban spaces will be as respiratory spaces and a space for interaction of social incidents for citizens. Matching between form and function that complement each other is important, and the issue that how and in what places this design, based on the identity of the city and the community, will be designed, is itself as an important consideration for the items we choose in urban furniture design. For example, if a pedestrian bridge is not located in front of a hospital that is a crowded place for different groups of people, and will be installed far away from the hospital entrance, few will use it and safety of citizens will be compromised (Gupta et al, 2015).

Criteria of social communication: in today's world where people are getting farther and farther away, one of the functions of urban furniture elements is behavior-creation and facilitation of people's communication, which is recommended in the design of new furniture, arched designs, semicircular, spiral and next to each other; because they develop social communication. Urban furniture elements have new functions in the field of psychology, sociology and social communication that designers should not overlook (Abdi et al, 2014).

Criteria of safety: safety is another point that should be considered in the design of urban furniture. An urban furniture element should not be any harmful to its users when used. Non-use of sharp edges and avoiding the use of harmful chemical materials and colors are among the general solutions in this regard (Sadeghi et al, 2011).

Vandalism: vandalism means uncontrolled destruction of valuable cultural objects and works or public property, which is considered a social disorder and several reasons have been mentioned for it. Tendency to demolish public property, green space, roads, walls, telephone kiosks, buses, road blocking, ruining the walls, breaking glass shops, and breaking down stadiums mostly by youth and adolescents are considered as vandalism. In a closer look at this issue, the dimensions of human complications can be seen much higher. Vandalism is one of the most important factors in the field of urban furniture and elements. The effect is so profound that the design of a product, without observing anti-vandalism tips, is in practice unworkable and only as a beautiful tune for museums of the city (Abdi et al, 2014). It goes without saying that everyone in essence tends to respect an environment that is attractive and well preserved, so an appropriate design, with full consideration of vandalism and a proper understanding of the local culture and conditions of the area of use, and the user person, gives less time to destructors for further damage and degrade. Good design increases sense of belonging and social commitment compared to individual ownership (Amini et al., 2006).

Conclusion

According to the above, in order to promote quality of urban environment, the design of urban furniture and landscape should be carried out with a comprehensive and systemic look and designers should pay special and expert attention to the important and constructive criteria of the city based on the different needs of citizens. The related literature shows that few studies have been done in this regard in Iran, and regarding the existing researches, each has focused on one aspect of the subject, and they lack a comprehensive view of urban design. It is clear that urban environment has widespread effects on human behavior, communication and morale; and disorder and congestion on the face of city, and in the existing elements needed

by the community, cause confusion and intellectual and spiritual disorientation of human and reduce quality of human life; and in another hand, beautiful design and planning in accordance with the community's tastes, needs, culture and rooted identity, considering the climate of each region, causes happiness, physical comfort and mental relaxation of individuals. Creativity and innovation in the design of urban landscape in accordance with well-known criteria, in addition to its practical aspects, will lead to creation of a space in which people can come together and share and unite in common memories and experiences of life; and this plays a major role in giving identity to urban spaces. Quality of urban space is the result of mutual interactions between human culture and characteristics of natural environment, and urban furniture creates a space for rest, sitting and eating, and social encounters with others. In such a space, citizens feel comfort, and they prefer to be present in the streets and public areas of the city to sitting at home. The present study shows that a large number of weaknesses in planning the urban furniture elements, such as lack of proper placement of various elements of urban furniture, excessive density of furniture, and environmental disturbances, are associated with unbalanced distribution of elements, and sometimes vandalism is also one of its results that in addition to encouraging people to participate in such plans by detailed programs and advertisements, citizens' civilian awareness also must be increased. The important criteria of designing urban furniture and landscape emphasized in this study are quality-orientation, cultural-social design, safety and security, location and welfare of users.

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