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Regenerating Regional Identity for Sustainable Tourism Development Case Study: Eslami Island, Iran

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Abstract

Recent efforts dedicated to the further development of tourism have significantly increased awareness and boasted the economic growth of Iran. Accordingly, Eslami Island project aimed at advancing the regional and national tourism. Regional identity was the key factor in the design process for Eslami island tourism developments, meeting its obligation as a sustainable system. This article explores the importance of 'regional identity', and its' use to regenerates the project, thus portraying other principles of sustainable tourism.

Keywords: Identity; sustainable design; tourism development; Iran

1. Introduction

In recent years, inquiring built-environment characteristics and identity has been the focus of different types of sustainable designs. The quest for regional identity has been a challenging issue for sustainable designers; yet, such difficulty has been more for developing countries including Iran. Architecture and urban design have been through serious challenges since the arrival of industrialization in this country. Apart from obscurity and confrontation with rapid changes, serious economic problems have been a difficult issue for built-environment design in Iran.

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Government institutions have made constant attempts to develop the tourism industry. They have recognized various touristic regions, paths, and poles with different magnitude and potential. One of such notable touristic development projects was for the North West of Iran, the Eslami Island. This island locates next to the Urmia Lake, which is the most visited place in the North West of Iran. This project plan covers a large area of about (1100 acres) and provides general services and activities, including restaurants, hotels, camping units, research centre for ecotourism, etc.

The project aimed to design a tourism complex for overflowing tourists from Sharafkhaneh port, the nearby touristic centre in Uremia Lake. The main aim in design of this project was to propose sustainable tourism planning with especial interest to 'regional identity'. Because, there have been few studies within this scope in the tourism industry of Iran. Identity and a sense of belonging are decisive factors in attracting tourists to a place. If a tourism project does not have a sense of belonging, its users will abandon the place at the end. This study used two strategies to distinguish and regenerate the regional identity. Firstly, study focuses on the principal factors affecting the transformation of identity such as 'culture', 'economy', and 'natural landscape' of the region. Secondly, the research team observed various people's behaviours and reflected them in the design project.

The main objective of this project is to cover the needs of four different types of tourisms: medical tourism, recreation tourism, sports tourism, and ecotourism. The other objectives focused on finding relationship between tourism marketing and users' behaviour. The last objective was to improve the quality of nature by increasing green area close to the Lake. The result was to have a touristic complex, which the locals accepted and used. Such recognition is crucial, and it will significantly improve the quality of lives in the North West of Iran.

2. Regional identity

The Oxford Dictionary defines identity as *"who or what sb/sth is, state of being the same"*. Identity gives us an idea of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world in which we live (Woodward 1997, p.1). In the words of Passi (2002), "…'Identity' is a form of categorization, where boundaries are used to distinguish one area domain or social collective from others".

Identity or sense of belonging is as one of the basic needs of a human being in Maslow (1970) hierarchy. Being as one of the primary needs for individuals indicates the importance of identity in wellbeing and quality of life. Such a significant role for identity has persuaded many scholars during the last decades to work through inquiring identity in the built-environment.

Because of its dynamic characteristics, it is not possible to define identity precisely and, therefore, it is not possible to recommend proper identity for specific built-environment. As Lin (2002) states identity has multiple levels and it is changeable depending on various circumstances. Regarding to its dynamic nature, Hall sees identity as a '*"production", which is never complete, always in the process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation'* (Hall 1997). Correa also in a supportive statement in reply to the question what is identity says, *"It is a process, and not a "found" object. It may be likened to the trail left by civilization as it moves through history…"*. (Correa 1983)

There are various types of Identity, such as personal identity, group or social identity, cultural identity, national identity and regional identity. Although all built-environment should respond to the needs for all, or various types of identity, regional identity recently has been at the centre of attention for architects and urban designers. Working through regional characteristics has been the main aim of designers, in a bit to increase awareness to the numerous problems of rapid industrialization and globalization affecting develop and developing countries.