

CASE STUDY

The role of façades in the formation of physical identity in the Iranian cities

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ABSTRACT: The physical identity in the urban areas can be considered as a concept which is influenced by the way of arranging the urban body. As a matter of fact, the appropriate coordination and the compatibility of physical components, such as the urban façades, can definitely facilitate the reorganization of the urban environment for being more identifiable; this issue is so obvious in the historical Iranian cities which have proper identities in their physical structures. Nowadays, the dominance of contradictory approaches and the absence of a convenient orientation have unfortunately produced inadequate urban façades and have annihilated the physical identity in Iranian cities. Also, the process of globalization and elimination of the cultural differences have greatly undermined the possibility of creating the traditional and contextual memories. In fact, the Iranian urban developments with the lack of comprehensive, endemic, and contextual plans and actions, increasingly decline the urban identity in any aspect and dimension. These types of flaws have specifically brought severe problems such as poor beauty, weak legibility, lack of unity, inappropriate physical integrity, etc., which eventually result in the non-identifiable and depersonalized urban bodies. Thereupon, this article needs some visual information which can intuitively assist to scrutinize the deterioration factors of the physical identity in the Iranian cities. Hence, by choosing the field study method is tried to reach some empirical investigation in order to collect the required visual information through photography. Moreover, at the end of this article is attempted to offer several solutions and arrangements for promoting the physical identity and also healing the depersonalization in Iranian cities.

KEYWORDS: *Depersonalization; Iranian Urban Development; Physical Identity; Urban Bodies; Urban Façades; Visual Disturbances*

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning, many of the urban trends have presumed the "Identity", as a comprehensive concept, in related issues and different urban practices. In actuality, this concept has been emphasized as one of the most important measures in many approaches such as "Garden City and New Town Movement", "Symbolism and Semiology", "Behaviorism", "Traditionalism", "Contextualism", "New Urbanism", "Urban Village",

"Traditional Neighborhood Development", "Urban Sustainability", "Just City", "New Urban Design Theory" and so on (Walters and Brown, 2004; Bahrainy and Bakhtiar, 2016). Also, the urban environment, as a context including the various urban elements in different physical dimensions such as buildings, objects, and spaces as well as individuals, events, and the relationships between them, definitely needs a conscious consideration of the identity integration; because the identity is also being considered as one of the most vital

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values of the urban environment that has always been relating to the context (Madanipour, 1996; Camprag, 2014; Heidari and Sattar zad, 2017). It should be noted that there are also economic, social, cultural, and even political identities in today's urban environments (Kay, 2005), but this issue is more apparent in terms of physical aspects such as the façades. Thus, it seems that the façades as one of the physical components of the urban environments can play a decisive role in inspiring the identity in urban areas.

The identity and its relation to the façades can actually be investigated in the importance of the word "Cityscape" (Cullen, 1971; Heidari and Sattar zad, 2017). For this reason, it is imperative to examine the process of evolution of the term cityscape and the significance of conceptual issues in it.

The word cityscape was first used by Thomas Sharpe in 1948; however, the visual analysis of it belongs to John Nash's effort at the beginning of the 19th century, as well as in the work of Camillo Sitte at the end of the 19th century (Carmona *et al.*, 2010). Over time, Gordon Cullen linked the visual aspects of the cityscape to the conceptual values. Therefore, the cityscape connected to the identity-related subjects (as the conceptual values) in the urban studies (Cullen, 1971). Through these actions, the concept of identity was injected into the urban environments and physical dimensions, and also its prominence was taken into consideration by the relevant specialists.

As time passed by, with the prevalence of the modernism in Iran, the Persian architecture and urbanism almost completely lost their identities (Ekhlesi and Rafati, 2015). Nowadays, the structures of the current Iranian cities, specifically the metropolises such as Tehran, Karaj, etc., are suffering from the weak physical identity because of the unrelated façades and inappropriate features.

Just taking a few steps in today's Iranian cities are sufficient to figure out the depth of this drawback. Just looking at the façades make it clear and it doesn't matter whether you are an architect, urban planner, designer or an ordinary inhabitant; because this problem is so obvious that even a normal citizen can recognize it. In fact, the urban appearances, such as the façades, have a significant role in strengthening or deteriorating the identity of the urban environment in

the physical dimension (Fig. 1).

Moreover, the shortage of responsiveness on the one hand and the population growth on the other hand cause the frequent and repetitive urban constructions in the current Iranian cities. Thus, the face and the identity of the Iranian cities have been deteriorated and the urban environments and physical elements of them are generally formed without required qualities such as connection, cohesion, and continuity (Shieh, 2010). For example, the major percentage of newly constructed buildings and their façades in Iran are unpleasant or based on the personal and the economic interests which have ignored the invaluable existing context. Also, in other cases, the historical, identifiable, and well-designed façades are being destroyed due to the deformation and uncontrolled developing processes in the urban affairs (Fig. 2).

This should not be forgotten that the façades as the most prominent part of the physical urban system can be assumed as a part of the urban body (Bahrainy, 2012; Khakzand *et al.*, 2014). The unplanned and uncontrolled recent urban constructions create unsightly façades, reduce the attractiveness, and also eliminate the physical identity of the urban environments (Paumier, 2004); while the proper design of the urban bodies can perform as a quality which can bring the suitable physical identity and legibility (Pakzad, 2007).

This issue is so apparent in the old urban areas which always had an identity that gradually formed in response to the local needs. In fact, the sensitivity to the urban environment can create valuable places with efficient physical components (CABE, 2000) and thus these places can accomplish a pivotal role in the formation of the physical identity in the urban areas (Clayton and Opatow, 2003).

Now, how we can promote the physical identity of the urban environment? What is the role of façades in restoring or strengthening the physical identity? What are the reasons for the deterioration of the physical identities in the Iranian cities? In fact, these questions force us to find out a solution for eradicating the mentioned flaws, as much as we can. Hence, this article aims at presenting a better understanding of the role of façades in the formation of the physical identity in urban areas and its consequences, as well as the ways of its improvement in the Iranian urbanism processes.



Fig. 1: The revival of a historical façade within one of the sides of Hassan Abad Square in Tehran. This façade has currently been regenerated over the modern building which had been built during the Pahlavi period. This action has obviously strengthened the physical identity of the existing historical façade and also the surrounding urban environment



Fig. 2: Inappropriate façades in the Iranian cities; from left to right: (a) Repeatedly produced and unplanned façade; (b) Seemingly beautiful façade without suitable identity which is unrelated to the existing context and follows the economic interests and personal preferences; (c) Historical and old valuable façade which has been destroyed nowadays

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Identity

The term identity is a complex set of meanings that derive from Erik Erikson's work in the 1950s. By the 1970s the word used in this sense had acquired a highly successful life of its own in ordinary language and many science disciplines (Fearon, 1999). Indeed, the identity is objectively defined as a location in a certain world and can be subjectively appropriated only along with that world. In fact, it can be assumed as a sense of self in relation to something else which exists in our surroundings (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burke and Stets, 2009). In the late 1980s and 1990s, because of the postmodernism, the historians, anthropologists and most of all humanities scholars relied ever more heavily on identity (Fearon, 1999). Stets and Biga (2003) stated that the identity is a set of meanings attached to the self that serves as a standard or reference that guides behavior in diverse situations. On the other hand, Mason (2013) argued that each of us has

multiple identities that are developed and activated in different places, social structures, and relationships. He noted that the set of meanings we attach to each identity operates as an individual point of reference that guides how we perceive different situations and respond to them.

Thus, it is noticeable that the identity has a complex and extensive essence and it can be clearly attributed to all the phenomena in the world. Also, it generally defines and characterizes each topic and thus can affect many environmental, social, economic, cultural, and political factors. For example, the identity can affect the environmental qualities of the urban spaces in many aspects (such as the physical dimension), and over time it can change the future of the city and the process of the urban development.

Façades and the physical identity

An urban body that cannot act as a source of identity is an unplanned or inadequate location. Rob Krier implied that the physical identity in the urban areas

relies on the physical attributes of the man-made environments; for example, the suitable diversity of façades can create a strong and influential physical identity (Krier, 1979). Moreover, the traditional old urban areas with valuable façades can significantly enhance the attractiveness of urban bodies and can boost the presence of people in the urban environments in order to walk on paths and understand the identity (Hellier et al., 1983). In fact, a part of the urban identity has been tied up with the past of the city, and when we are removing the memorable historical places, we have also eliminated the identity of the city. Hence, the memorable monuments, urban spaces, and generally the urban environments can make the city more identifiable through today's urban life and the continuity of past events (Abbasi, 2017). Thus, many of façades have been designed due to the historical buildings to preserve the local physical identity and the character of the urban environment (Kim, 2000).

The cityscape containing the urban façades is all that is witnessed on the horizontal and vertical levels of the city. It is a mixture of physical, geometric, and natural components of the urban spaces, which is created due to the aesthetics and the proportionality of the urban environments. Now, the façade as one of the main elements of the cityscape is not a separate category of architecture and urbanization, but at the same time, it is neither architecture nor urbanization. In fact, it is a combination of the art and the city components

(Rahnamayi, 2003). The façades create solidarity and structural order in the urban environments and thus affect the identity (Cullen, 1971); hence, the deterioration of valuable façades directly leads to the degradation of the physical identity in the urban areas. On the other hand, the lack of diverse designers and the lack of attention to all aspects of the city and the environment during the design process of the façades are also declining this type of identity (Brolin, 1980).

After a concise literature review of the word "Identity" from different perspectives, as a concept and in combination with other elements, it should be discussed further that the identity can be assumed in a hierarchical relationship in urban affairs. Follows from previous studies and the theoretical sources, it should be clarified that the natural environment involves the urban environment and its components, and the urban environment includes the urban façades. Similarly, it should be noted that the physical identity appearing in the façades can affect the urban identity and thus it influences the identity of the environment (Fig. 3). More precisely, the urban façades, as one of the main physical parts of the urban environment, certainly require a suitable identity to characterize the urban and also the environmental identities. In that way, the necessity of preparing this article as well as the importance of studying the concept of identity in the physical part of the city can be justified by previous statements.

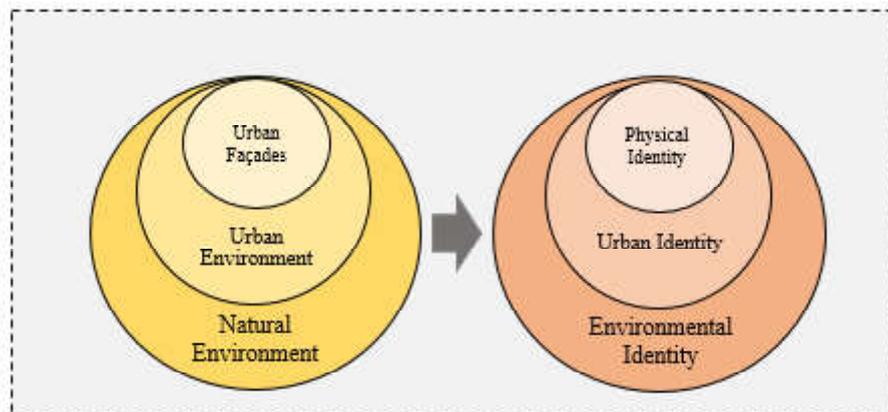


Fig. 3: The concept of identity in a hierarchical relationship with the natural environment, the urban environment, and the urban façades

Background of the study

As mentioned before, the visual role of façades (in the cityscape) in influencing the urban dimensions has been discussed by some people such as Camillo Sitte, Gordon Cullen, etc. For example, Paul Zucker has declared that there should be an appropriate visual connection between the volume and the façade of buildings to achieve more efficient aesthetic qualities (Zucker, 1970). As time passed by, the conceptual values (such as the identity) became more important rather than only the visual ones and thus many people have been discussing the importance of the role of façades in shaping the urban bodies influencing the identity-related subjects in the urban environments. In this case, Kevin Lynch in 1960, with the definition of the mental image, indirectly referred to the concept of identity and its constructive factors, including the physical part of the urban areas. Later in the book of *Theory of Good City Form*, he introduced the identity and defined it as one of the components constructing the meaning in the urban environments. He has argued that the main elements of the city, such as symbols, can play a pivotal role in making the physical identity, and also in promoting the legibility and beauty in the physical attributes (Lynch, 1940, 1960). In fact, he has contended that the urban appearances should include multiple functional needs which can bring the suitable physical identity in any urban aspect (Khakzand *et al.*, 2014).

Edmund Bacon has stated that there should be a proper relationship between the physics of adjacent buildings in order to strengthen the identity of the existing context (Bacon, 1967). Next, due to the importance of the contextual issues, Colin Rowe, Fred Koetter, and also Roger Trancik have tried to develop the urban identity and also the conceptual values in the physical parts of the local contexts (Rowe and Koetter, 1978; Trancik, 1986). On the other hand, Richard Hedman and Andrew Jaszewski have discussed the fundamentals of the urban design and have attempted to indicate that providing the unity and integrity in the design of the urban façades can establish the appropriate physical identity in addition to the desirable beauty and also the physical attractiveness (Hedman and Jaszewski, 1984). Furthermore, Leon Krier has stated that combining the façade with the functional requirements, such as windows, doors, etc., should essentially seek to generate a coherent complex with exquisite proportions, vertical and horizontal components, materials, colors, and decorative elements; therefore, the proper physical urban

identity can be achievable in that way (Krier, 1992). In another case, Ian Bentley and his colleagues have emphasized the importance of the regular skyline, the proper details of the walls, the suitable colors and physical patterns, etc., in constructing the façades and have stated that the observance of such cases could be effective in enhancing the contextual values and preserving the physical identity of the city (Bentley *et al.*, 1985).

Also, in order to revive the lost urban and physical identities, many scholars in Iran have endeavored to propose some solutions and criteria to improve the status of the façades in the Iranian cities. As Pakzad has expressed, the façades should be considered as an integral part of the urban environment as they directly affect the identity-related issues. He remarks that the façades should present their individual identity and also be fully consistent with the existing context (Pakzad, 2003, 2015). Also, Habib believes that the efficient façades should be memorable thus they can create a suitable identity and in this way they can regulate the human activities and even can increase the collective memories and group communications (Habib, 2006).

Moreover, Safamanesh emphasizes the importance of cultural issues and he notes that the immaterial values can play a decisive role in the formation of the physical urban identity (Safamanesh, 1994). On the other hand, Tavassoli describes that the desirable façade should have some features such as order, unity, combination, scale, fit, and harmony. Also, he deduces that a façade with some qualities such as balance, proximity, symmetry, continuity, contrast, etc., can produce the appropriate physical identity (Tavassoli, 1990). As the last example, Pourjafar and Alavi also point out that the observance of clarity in designing the components and elements of the urban façades can be effective in engendering a proper physical identity as well as the beauty and the legibility (Pourjafar and Alavi, 2012).

Methodology

This article is represented as a qualitative investigation because it intends to identify the reasons for the deterioration of physical identities in the Iranian cities, as well as the role of façades in this process. In fact, a qualitative study helps to explore a wide array of dimensions (Mason, 2002) through an interpretive and naturalistic approach; this means that the qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena

in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Ospina, 2004). Thus, a qualitative article makes it possible to give the statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it (Flick, 2013). Hence, an effort is made to utilize the field study method as the qualitative one to generate the qualitative information through empirical investigation and observation. The field study method is assumed as a general way of collecting data in natural conditions or/and physical environments, through a careful observation and photography (Coffey, 1999). Thus, in this method, the observational related actions are the essential elements in the program development and collecting information. In fact, the observation is appropriate to collect direct information, to understand an ongoing event, and to see physical evidence (Taylor-Powell and Steele, 1996).

Also, it can be stated that the selected buildings and their façades are specifically located in the large cities of Iran as the metropolises because the identity crisis is more evident in these cases in each aspect. It is worth noting that after investigating the literature and the background of the study at the previous stages, in the next section will endeavor to identify the underlying problems in the façades which have undermined the physical identity. Subsequently, the façades contain-

ing these kinds of problems will be selected, and then they will be criticized. In fact, the information will descriptively be analyzed to identify the shortcomings and further investigation for proposing some solutions and policies to overcome these shortcomings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The urban environments undoubtedly require a coherent system; so, this system preserves the connection between each individual component. In fact, the solidarity between environmental components is essential (Krier, 1979; Grutter, 2004). As a matter of fact, the structure of a city is a substantial component of the urban environment; hence, the body of the city makes it possible to identify the identity of the urban environments (Changizi and Ahmadian, 2013). Nowadays, the cities might be lost their physical identities due to similarity or excessive differences in their façades (Daneshpour, 2004), as well as many intangible factors that deteriorated the identity of the urban environment; more specifically, the problems that affect the physical part of the city in an intangible and non-physical way of action. Hence, as the first results, these general factors and their negative consequences can be seen in Table 1. These are interconnected and also affect each other, therefore, it is essential to study the effects together.

Table 1: General factors of the physical identity deterioration

Factors	Negative consequences
Wrong policies	Incorrect identification of the physical identity/ Setting inappropriate goals toward identity protection/ Bringing financial constraints
Unrelated plans	Incompatibility with the endemic and contextual identities/ Destroying the historical identity and the monuments/ Eliminating the physical equilibrium
lack of regulations	Irregularity and chaos in the construction of buildings/ Intervening the personal interests in shaping the façades/ Lack of the supervision and the protection of the physical identity/ Eliminating the physical equilibrium
Unplanned land uses	Depersonalized and incompatible façades/ Inappropriate public advertisement on the façades/ Environmental and visual pollution
Imbalanced scales	Visual imbalance/ Irregular heights of the buildings/ Depersonalized façades/ Depersonalized landmarks/ Degradation of the physical solidarity

As seen in Table 1, the visual disturbances are prevalent in the content of all mentioned factors and their consequences. As a result, the non-contextual actions and also the unlimited diversity and disorder in the urban façades certainly degrade the physical identity in the urban areas. The major part of this problem results from uncontrolled personal desires and interests, as well as wrong urban policies and plans, whereas in this article is only attempted to analyze the physical problems of the façades which can lead the visual disturbances. According to Fig. 4, authors have decided that the main factors of the visual disturbances related to the façades can generally be collected in three categories, including irregular skyline, uncontrolled variation in colors and materials, and inappropriate details.

In fact, the appropriate implementation and organization of those three factors can be effective in improving the status of the physical identity in the urban areas; but unfortunately, these factors are not properly planned and implemented in the Iranian cities. Therefore, it can be seen that inappropriate planning and designing of these three factors can negatively affect the physical urban qualities and can deteriorate the identity. Therefore, these factors are carefully considered and analyzed at below in two metropolises of Tehran and Karaj, which have the majority of these kinds of problems.

Disorderliness in the skyline and misalignment at the building heights

The skyline is the average height of the buildings which has a great role in defining the visual order and coordination in the façades. The beautiful and regular skyline is presumed as an urban quality that has an influential role in the regulation and definition of the physical identity. Unfortunately, this quality rarely exists in today's urban façades in Iran. The skyline of buildings should always create a prominent type of identity, as well as the pleasant and the beautiful façades. For example, in today's Iranian façades, there is no attempt to create a suitable skyline with acceptable physical identity and seems that there are no specific regulations for them (Fig. 5).

This is a fact that the new constructions should be executed through integrating the skyline, not to detach it. According to Fig. 6, it can be observed that this type of problem, in the Iranian cities, is because of the unplanned developments and inefficient urban decisions in the last few decades; for instance, the irrelevant construction of high-rise buildings can exacerbate this issue. Most of these constructions have solely been implemented for the financial interests, hence the physical values of the urban environments are neglected. Therefore, the order of the skyline is deteriorated and the physical identity surely vanishes. This problem is also intensified by single constructions specifically between low-rise buildings.

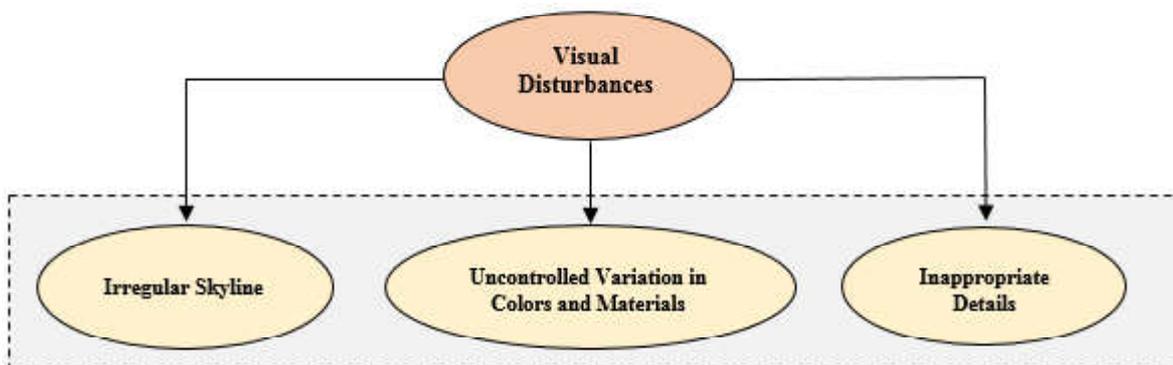


Fig. 4: Three categories of the visual disturbances as the main factors of the physical identity deterioration



Fig.5: The inappropriate skyline which is created due to the lack of attention of administrators and also the inefficient regulations; Sangelaj Neighborhood, Tehran



Fig.6: The deterioration of the skyline due to the lack of balance in the building heights and densities; Golshahr District, Karaj

Adding inappropriate details into the views of buildings

The appearance of each building defines its essence and also its related physical identity. Thus, the appearance of the buildings should be preserved rather than being covered with various and new secondary details such as windows, billboards, balconies, as well as adding the new floors to the buildings and the installing new façades on the old ones (Figs. 7 and 8).

Inappropriate and unsightly details cause the visual disturbances in the urban façades, more than anything else. Unfortunately, the inhabitants add some things new to their buildings based on their personal interests, thus they disturb the city and so the physical identity disappears. In fact, the secondary details of the buildings should follow a particular order to generate a suitable physical identity, and also to preserve the visual beauty.

Uncontrolled variation in the colors and materials of buildings

Specifically, the importance of the non-physical subjects, such as the cultural and the contextual design of building materials, is so obvious in this part. In fact, it can be achieved by following the right examples of cultural and contextual patterns; thus, in this case, the proper physical identity should be imagined and visualized before constructing the façades. However, if the façades were built, the flexible plans and schemes should be utilized to control and apply the appropriate modifications such as the small-scale actions. Creating the relationship between building structures and maintaining their physical identities are one of the most important values in resolving the visual disturbances. Thereupon, another factor causing the visual disturbances and the identity deterioration in the urban environments

The role of façades in the formation of physical identity

is the unlimited and uncontrolled variety of the colors and materials that are applied in the building façades (Figs. 9 and 10). Obviously, the diversity needs to be prevented from the uniformity and the simplicity, but it should be considered that a beautiful variety consistently originated from awareness.

Thus, the materials of façades should be designed and be coordinated with each other in order to maintain and reinforce the physical identity. Moreover, the colors of the façades should have harmony with each other, and the soulless and dead colors should be avoided.



Fig. 7: Installing the inappropriate billboards on the façades; Golshahr District, Karaj



Fig. 8: Visual disturbances caused by extensions; Lalezar Street, Tehran



Fig. 9: The uncontrolled and unrelated variation of materials; Lalezar Street, Tehran

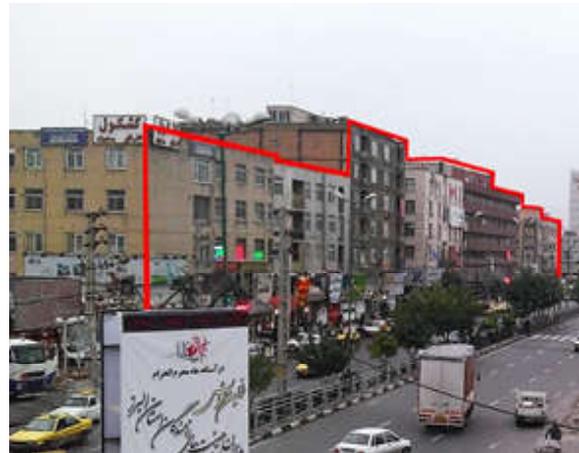


Fig. 10: The inappropriate spiritless colors used in the façades; Golshahr District, Karaj

Recommendations and arrangements

As shown in [Table 1](#), there are more comprehensive factors which can deteriorate the physical identity of cities, however, this article specifically addressed previous three factors which have a greater physical aspects. Now, as a final discussion, there are some general ways to strengthen and preserve the physical identity in the urban areas, but it should be mentioned that all these actions should be implemented in relation to the existing urban environments and also the related identity. These recommendations and arrangements are often proposed as the solutions for intervention in the façades and urban appearances, which are as follows:

- Managing and implementing the contextual improvement plans for the urban façades;
- Regulating and controlling the long-term actions rather than short-term ones;
- Integrating the environmental components and urban façades with each other;
- Adjusting the balance between physical structures of the façades in the urban environments;
- Paying attention to the quality rather than quantity to regenerate the steady unity between physical components of the façades;
- Trying to use the contextual and natural elements for improving the qualities of the urban environments;
- Organizing the newly created urban façades according to the old texture, the identity, and also the historical architecture;
- Avoid increasing the building density and preventing the formation of diverse height system;
- Beautification of the urban environment by utilizing the color and the light in a related and suitable way;
- Creating the planned and regular murals and also the urban graphics on the façades;
- Strengthening and preserving the historical buildings and monuments in relation to new buildings;
- Organizing the land uses and transferring inappropriate ones to the internal fabric.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the identity in the urban areas can be defined in a wide range of social, economic, cultural, and even political dimensions in spite of the physical part of the city; while the urban identity is highly tangible and visible, and is clearly perceptible in the urban façades which refer to the physical identity of the urban environment. What has been repeat-

edly mentioned in this article is that the urban environment is such a context that contains the physical part of any city. Also, the urban façades are a major part of the physics of city and cannot be separated from the urban environment. Thus, the proper design of the façades and generally the physical part of each city can directly affect the physical urban identity. Thus, the physical values in the urban bodies should be implemented properly and in relation to each other in order to restore the identity of the physical parts of the urban areas.

Also, this can be concluded that each city has many inner potential to strengthen the lost physical identity. In fact, the physical identity will flourish when it is close to the current ideals and the existing potential. The existing defects in the façades can be recognized by examining three main factors of visual disturbances. These three types of disturbances include the disorderliness in the skyline and misalignment at the building heights, adding inappropriate details into the views of buildings, and uncontrolled variation in the colors and materials of buildings. Hence, according to the close relationship between physical identity and the urban façades, it can be declared that the perceptible physical identity can be achieved through the proper management of the façades and by eliminating these three factors of visual disturbances.

It was also clearly shown in this article that the situation of the physical identity in the Iranian cities, specifically the metropolises, have been catastrophically affected by visual disturbances. For this reason, the organization of the urban façades in Iran with respecting three factors of visual disturbances can greatly restore the physical identity and also over time, can provide the required context for the appearance of the urban identity in all dimensions. As the last words, the urban designers should be aware of the physical values and make their efforts in relation to the existing physical identity in order to enhance the vitality and livability of urban spaces and places. Also, these actions should be executed toward reaching the memorable experiences, as well as preserving the specific identity assigned to any urban area in the world.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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