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Research Paper

A Comparative Investigation of The Social Stability and Sociability of Public Green Space in Social Housing in Niayesh District of Bushehr Province

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Abstract
The provision of social housing is a core responsibility of governments, closely tied to promoting equity, improving quality of life, and fostering social welfare. Adequate housing is recognized as a fundamental human right and a key element in achieving social inclusion and urban sustainability. In many regions, particularly in rapidly urbanizing or developing areas, housing has increasingly been treated as an economic asset, resulting in a dominant focus on cost-efficiency, especially regarding land acquisition and construction. While this economically driven approach may address the quantitative need for housing, it often overlooks essential qualitative aspects, such as social cohesion, cultural relevance, and community well-being. When planning prioritizes economic concerns at the expense of social and cultural dimensions, urban development risks become disconnected; these environments typically lack the physical and social infrastructure necessary to foster interaction, engagement, and a sense of belonging among residents, especially in newly developed areas where people from diverse backgrounds are brought together. The absence of meaningful public spaces inhibits the formation of social networks, which are crucial for building "social cohesion", defined as the strength of relationships and mutual trust within a community. Without opportunities for shared experiences, communities may struggle to develop solidarity and resilience, leading to increased isolation and reduced social capital. One of the most effective means of promoting social sustainability is through the creation of "public green spaces"—parks, gardens, and recreational areas that serve as communal gathering points. These spaces provide more than just environmental benefits; they are vital for encouraging casual encounters, recreational activities, and inclusive social life. Green spaces enhance mental and physical health, improve urban aesthetics, and serve as catalysts for building social capital. In newly planned urban areas, where community identity and connections are still forming, green spaces are especially critical. They can foster a sense of place, bridge cultural differences, and create shared public realms that support social integration. This study explores the impact of public green space on social relations in the "Niayesh District" of Bushehr Province, a developing urban area in Iran. The research investigates how public green areas influence residents' satisfaction, social behavior, and quality of life. By analyzing the role of these spaces, the study aims to demonstrate how intentional urban design can foster social sustainability in newly emerging cities. Ultimately, the findings underscore the importance of integrating green public spaces into urban planning strategies, not only to enhance environmental quality but also to build stronger, more cohesive, and more resilient communities.

Keywords: *Green space, Socializing, Public space, Social dwelling, Neighborhood park.*

INTRODUCTION

Urbanization is among the most transformative global trends of the 21st century, profoundly reshaping societies and living environments. In Iran, the rapid urban shift, where the rural population has declined to less than one-third, has led to significant housing pressures and the emergence of marginalized communities. In response, policymakers have promoted the development of new towns and social

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housing schemes. However, many of these initiatives have focused narrowly on physical infrastructure, neglecting vital social dimensions. As a result, these new districts often suffer from weak social identity, limited interaction, and a diminished sense of community (Pazhuhan et al., 2015).

Among various components of urban form, public green spaces play a pivotal role in enhancing not only environmental quality but also social sustainability. They offer settings for informal encounters, cultural expression, recreation, and collective memory, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and strengthening community bonds (Francis et al., 2012; Gehl, 2012). However, the safety within these public spaces remains a decisive factor in determining their effectiveness. The concept of perceived safety, derived from theories such as CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) and environmental psychology, extends beyond the mere absence of crime. It encompasses a subjective feeling of comfort, control, and predictability within a public environment (Nasar & Jones, 1997).

The concept of sociability is defined as the capacity of spaces to foster positive interpersonal connections. Public green spaces, such as parks and plazas, are central to creating vibrant and inclusive urban environments. When designed with sociability in mind, public green spaces can enhance mental well-being, strengthen neighborhood ties, and contribute to a sense of belonging (Bonaiuto & Bonnes, 2000; Mansuri & Jahanbakhsh, 2016).

They provide access across demographic groups (Anastasiou & Manika, 2020; Francis et al., 2012). Yet, most prior research has emphasized the ecological or maintenance dimensions of green spaces, with limited attention to their social function, especially within the context of social housing developments (Dade et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2025).

The innovative contribution of this research lies in its socio-spatial analysis of a post-revolutionary, state-planned neighborhood where urban form, social dynamics, and community-building intersect in unique ways. The findings aim to inform policy decisions on green space planning in transitional low-income housing environments in urban settings, emphasizing the need for socially responsive design strategies.

The analysis was guided by two primary research questions:

1) What is the general level of perceived social sustainability in the Niayesh green space as evaluated by residents?

2) Which spatial attributes of the park contribute most significantly to residents' sense of community and social comfort?

URBANISM AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN IRAN: KEY CONCEPTS AND VISUALS

The development of new cities in Iran has followed two distinct approaches, as shown in Figure 1. Before the revolution, new cities were welcomed by the population, with livelihoods concentrated within a single urban center. These cities were designed to meet fundamental needs, including economic, commercial, defense, and agricultural requirements, while prioritizing collective and environmental values. This approach resulted in a rich diversity of architectural styles and urban structures. "After Revolution": Globalization and Homogenization. The onset of globalization in the early 20th century marked a shift toward homogenization in urban areas. This new perspective emphasized functionalism in urban planning, aiming to decentralize large-scale projects and absorb surplus collective wealth (Ziari, 2017).

However, this monolithic approach, driven by population growth, often leads to the neglect of urban identity and the alienation of individuals from their surrounding environment (Ziari, 2017).

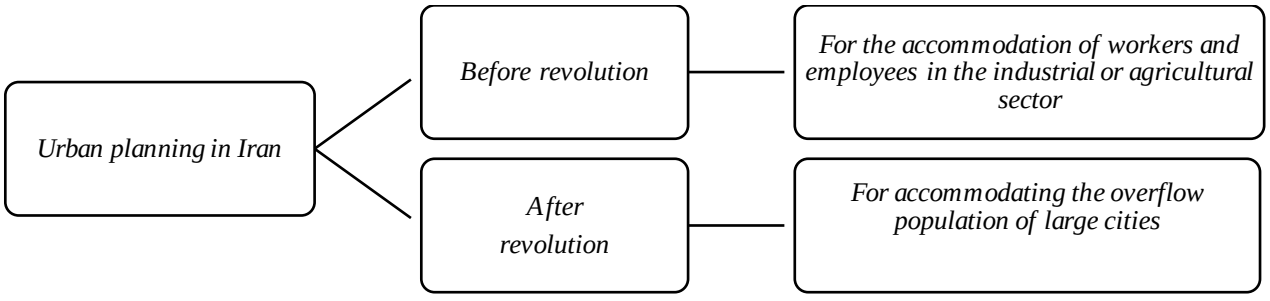

Fig 1. Urbanism's Functional Development in Iran Across Time (Source: Authors)

Sociability of Space

To achieve social sustainability, it is necessary to increase the frequency of social interactions, reduce tension, and enhance the sense of belonging within communities" Creating opportunities for collective participation, encouraging human interactions, elevating the level of responsibility, utilizing human and physical-spatial capacities, and fostering motivation can strengthen social cohesion, leading to the creation of collective events (Mansuri & Jahanbakhsh, 2016). The sociability of urban spaces is initially an objective factor, influenced by the quality of the physical appearance. The urban environment is initially apprehended through its physical structure. However, it is the emotional and psychological disposition of the people that imbues it with meaning (Bonaiuto & Bonnes, 2000). The emotional and transient dimensions of individuals within their environment are inextricably linked with the interactions they have with that environment. This demonstrates the continuity of people's lived experiences and their understanding of those experiences (Enric, 2001).

In public urban areas, the patterns of social interaction and spatial capabilities are of particular importance. The formation of social networks within public spaces facilitates the integration of diverse groups, thereby establishing these locations as hubs of collective life and identity (Kamalipour et al., 2014; Lang, n.d.).The presence of social and collective behaviors is fostered and motivated in sociable environments, whereas antisocial environments impede social development (Osmond, 1957).

In this context, the creation of public spaces that are suitable for the climate and site capabilities, and which take into account cultural characteristics and the social and economic context, encourages active public participation and strengthens collective life. Otherwise, it may result in unmet resident demands, which could give rise to significant issues. In order to provide the social dimension of public spaces in residential complexes, it is necessary to gain an understanding of both the residents' space-related needs and the physical features of the space by examining the related theoretical foundations and the insights of experts. It can therefore be posited that the sociability of a space is comprised of physical, human, and social dimensions that are mutually reinforcing (Amin, 2008). The sociability of a space is determined by several factors, but the main ones (Figure 2) in this paper are:

1. Environmental comfort: The level of comfort and ease with which different age groups are able to engage in activities and utilize public spaces.
2. Playability: The set of social activities that encompasses an individual's social development.
3. Multi-functionality: A place that serves multiple purposes or functions and is adaptable.
4. Identity: Identity in public space can be defined as the set of distinctive characteristics and qualities that make a particular public space unique and recognizable, influencing how people perceive and interact with it.
5. Accessibility: This aspect concerns the location of the social space and the means of accessing the public space.
6. Security: This term refers to the provision of safe spaces that facilitate social and public enjoyment without the fear of harm or criminal activity.

Social Stability

Woodcraft identifies the social sustainability factors of a city as participation, local democracy, health, quality of life, well-being, the eradication of social exclusion, social capital, social interaction, safety, fair income distribution, social order, a sense of social belonging, cultural traditions, and social organizations (Woodcraft, 2012). Tien and his Colleagues, in a paper prepared for DFID and the World Bank, DFID, mimeo, introduce sustainable social development, including four main criteria: social justice, social solidarity, participation, and security. In summary, the social dimensions of human beings are fundamental indicators for evaluating social sustainability.

In 1992, at the Rio Conference, three factors (environmental, economic, and social) were defined for sustainable development. Therefore, "social stability" is recognized as the right to lead a suitable life for both present and future generations, to create wellbeing and promote social participation, and to maintain the stability of social components to enhance integration and cohesion. However, most of the dimensions considered for social sustainability encompass aspects of human desires and needs, requiring interaction and communication among individuals and the collective growth of human societies (Caribbean Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2015)

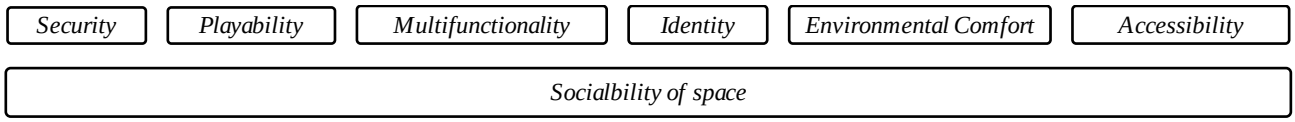

Fig 2. The Interrelationship between the Physical Components of Sociability in Space

In this manner, the components that contribute to satisfaction for both individuals and the environment are classified into four categories. These components contribute to satisfaction in the context of social belonging, social identity, social sense, social interaction and social participation. In examining the components of participation and social interaction, it becomes evident that communication between individuals is inextricably linked to collective growth and the manifestation of social solidarity; therefore, elements are regarded as indispensable aspects of social stability (Rabbani et al., 2010) (Figure 3).

The concept of social sense can be defined as a member of a social group and the creation of mutual relationships with other members of the group. The formation of social belonging is contingent upon the strengthening of social sense and mutual understanding. This is a pivotal factor in assessing the extent of social stability, indicating the degree to which an individual is reliant on society. Conversely, social identity is contingent upon the cultural, social, and personality characteristics of the individual, as well as the human and physical environment. The coexistence of these dimensions is conducive to urban sustainability (Ziari, 2017).

Conceptual Model: Connecting Green Spaces to Social Sustainability

This research is guided by a conceptual model that explains the connection between the physical features of urban green spaces and aspects of social sustainability. As shown in the model (Figure 4), key attributes like design quality, accessibility, and multifunctionality act as independent variables. These elements influence important mediating factors such as how often green spaces are used, the types of social interactions, and the strength of attachment to a place, which in turn impact larger outcomes like social cohesion, a sense of belonging, and the long-term sustainability of urban communities.

The model combines ideas from urban design, landscape architecture, and environmental behavior research and pays particular attention to context-specific factors like cultural norms and governance structures that shape perceptions and use of green spaces. In doing so, the study recognizes that the social value of green infrastructure is not inherent but depends on its spatial layout and users' experiences.

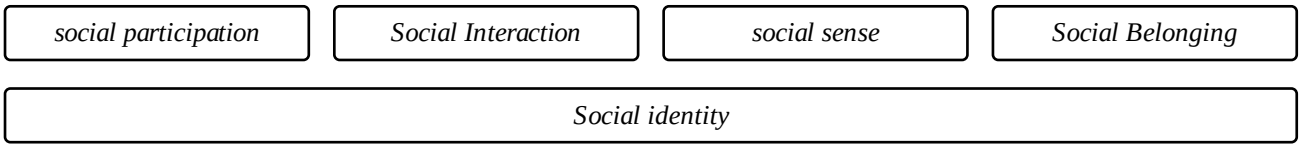

Fig 3. The Social Sustainability Components in Fostering Satisfaction among Individuals and in Protecting the Environment

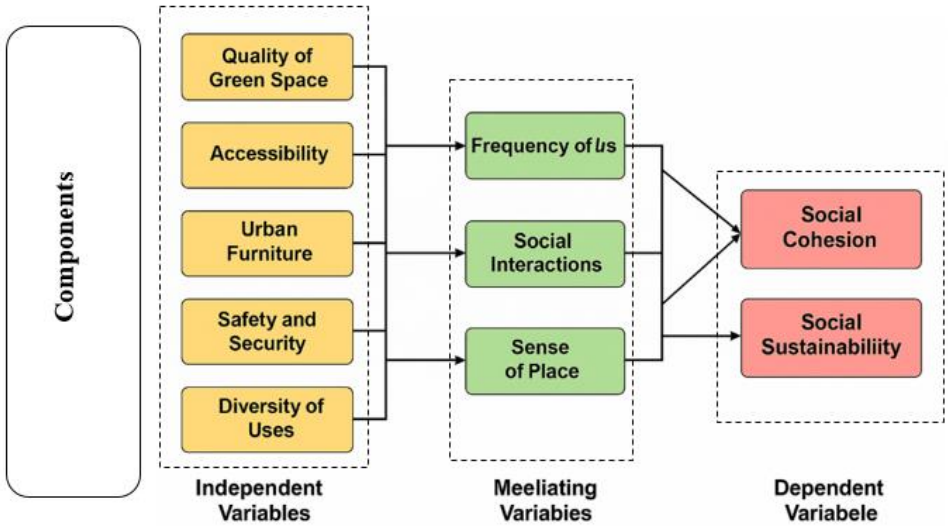

Fig 4. Conceptual Model Illustrating the Relationship Between Green Infrastructure Components and Social Sustainability (Source: Authors)

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-method exploratory approach, with an emphasis on quantitative comparison supported by descriptive analysis. The primary aim is to assess the perceived social sustainability of green public spaces in the Niayesh residential district, using a simple but targeted evaluation framework based on resident feedback.

Data Collection

Data were collected through structured face-to-face interviews with 100 residents aged 20 to 35, conducted over a one-week period in November 2023. The interviews utilized a standardized questionnaire containing closed-ended questions measuring residents' levels of satisfaction with various aspects of the public green space, such as accessibility, safety, comfort, identity, and opportunities for social interaction. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “poor” to “excellent”.

Analytical Strategy Using Microsoft Excel

Given the scope of the study and the nature of the data, a descriptive comparative analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel. The tool was employed to organize, summarize, and visualize the data. The analysis aimed to reveal general patterns of perception among users regarding the social performance of the green space, rather than to perform inferential or predictive statistical modeling. The goal was to offer an accessible yet structured overview of the relationships between design elements and perceived social cohesion in a transitional urban setting.

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Observational Support

To enrich the findings, field observation was conducted concurrently during the interview period. The green space was observed daily between 12:00 and 17:00 for signs of social activity, usage patterns, and spatial behavior. Observations were documented through field notes and used to contextualize the quantitative data.

Study Area

The city of Bushehr is situated at a geographical coordinate of 28 degrees, 59 minutes, and 3 seconds latitude and 50 degrees, 51 minutes, and 15 seconds east longitude, relative to the Greenwich Meridian. According to the most recent statistics from the country's Population Organization, the population of the city is approximately 1,201,900 people. The province of Bushehr is located on a peninsula, with only one point of access from the east. Consequently, the city's development and expansion are contingent upon growth from the eastern side. In 2016, the law for organizing and supporting housing production and provision was introduced, marking the commencement of one of the city's most significant construction projects. The project was initiated in the eastern part of the city in 2017.

The Niayesh district was designed in two phases, with the objective of accommodating 3,190 residential units (approximately 12,000 people) (*Bushehr Management and Planning Organization*, n.d.). The initial phase has already been concluded, with a population of over 2,300 individuals and 440 units of social housing. As shown in Figure 4, the initial phase of the social housing in the Niayesh district development comprises a public green space. The form of a square, surrounded by residential buildings on three floors (Figure 6).

Fig 5. Geographical analysis of the distribution of residential areas in Bushehr province. The yellow zone represents the downtown area and the old part of the Bushehr port. This is where the city of Bushehr first began to develop, and it now serves as the main part of the city. The red point, currently, the Bushehr Navy and Air Force bases are situated in this secured area, separated from the city by walls and fences. This area also contains the residential quarters for personnel from both organizations and the city's main airport, which is also under protection. Information regarding these facilities is not permitted for public release. The blue point marks the Niayesh area, a new section of Bushehr city intended for development.

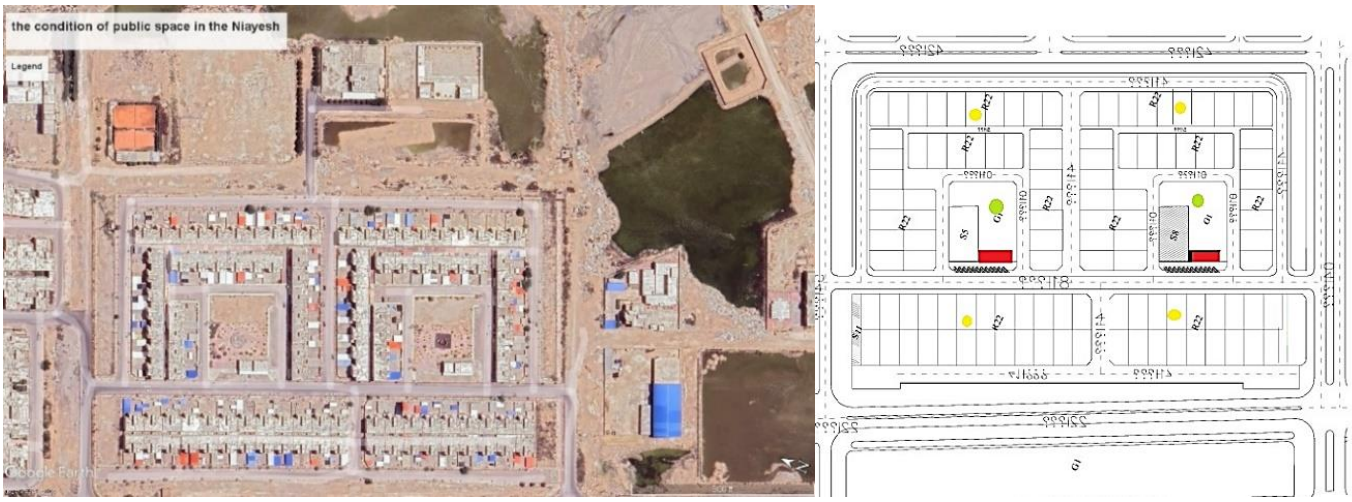

Fig 6. The condition of public space in the Niayesh. Left: This image displays the location and condition of the layout of social housing in the Niayesh district. The public green space is in the center as a square. Right: This image has been simplified for a better understanding of the situation. A yellow point indicates a house. A red point indicates a child's open space. The green point indicates public green space.


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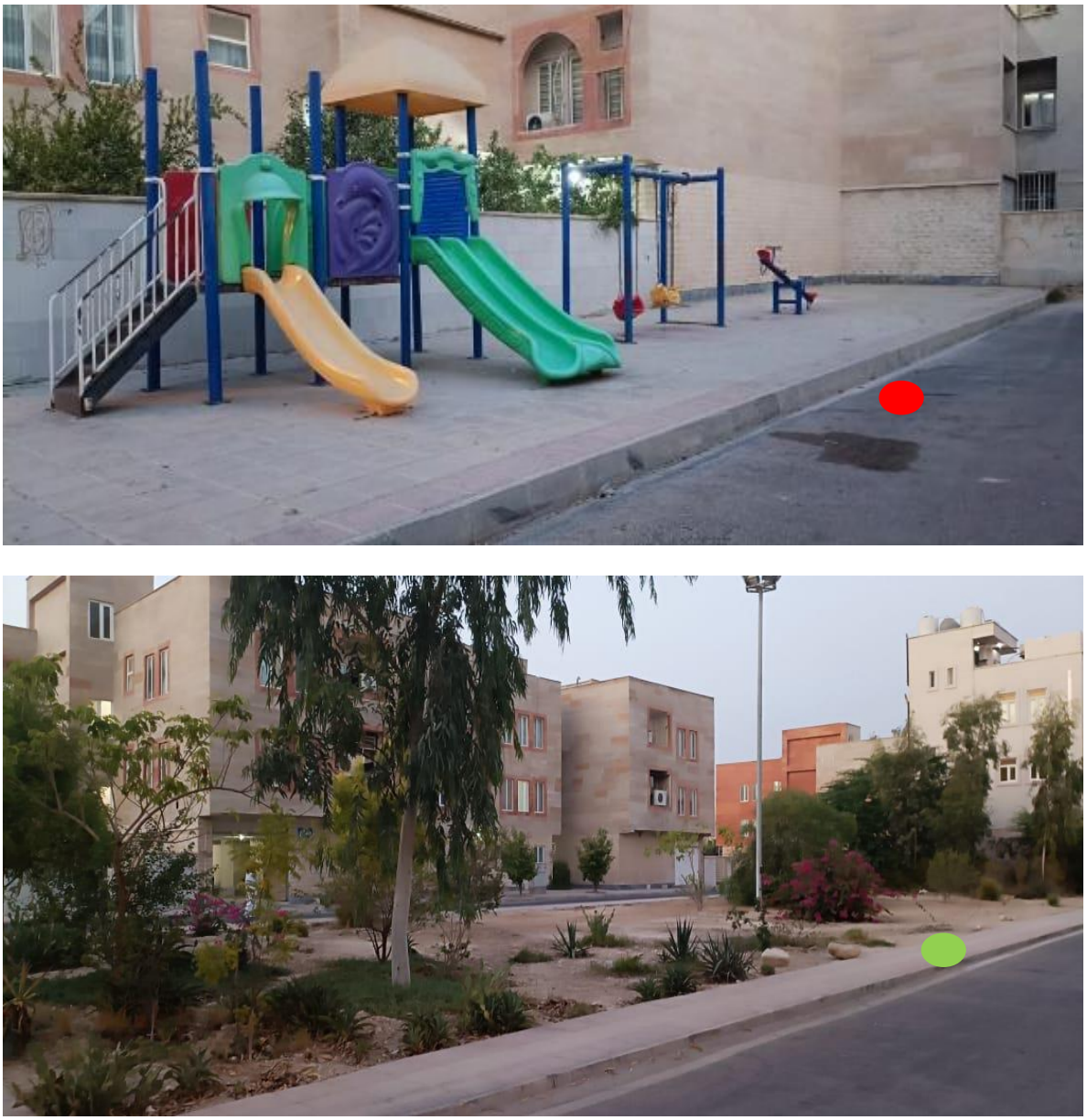

Fig 7. Location and Facilities of the Public Green Space in the Niayesh District

One potential solution to the aforementioned concerns is the development of green spaces as common social areas. It is, however, important to note that the current density of green spaces for residential units, whether private or public, in Iran is between 7 and 12 square meters per person. Jacobs posits that green spaces should be integrated into the fabric of urban life, where culture, commerce, and residential activities flourish. In accordance with Jacobs' principles of 'centrality, hierarchy, and access', green spaces should be situated in a central location within neighborhoods, districts, or urban areas and adapted to their corresponding physical structures.

A further pivotal aspect to be taken into account with regard to green spaces is that of accessibility. It is recommended that urban public spaces be accessible from all four directions via the communication network, thus enhancing usability, social monitoring, and security. Such a design permits the visual appreciation of the space's aesthetic qualities by passers-by from all directions.

The physical and social aspects of public spaces are inextricably linked to the psychological experience of those who utilize them. The proximity of residential blocks to human-scale public spaces has facilitated the use of these areas as pedestrian crossings, thereby fostering a sense of readability and belonging. It is therefore evident that the role of socialization in the context of space is of significant importance in achieving social sustainability.

RESULTS

Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 100 residents participated in this study, comprising 54 women and 46 men, aged between 20 and 35. Most participants had resided in the Niayesh district for less than five years, reflecting the neighborhood's recent development. Approximately 68% were tenants, while 32% owned their units. The majority were employed in service-sector or informal jobs, with limited access to nearby workplaces. Nearly half of the respondents reported minimal interaction with their neighbors, and only 27% had participated in any form of community activity within the last year.

Sociability Indicators Analysis

Respondents rated various spatial features of the central green space based on six sociability variables: environmental comfort, playability, multifunctionality, identity, accessibility, and safety (Figure 8). The analysis revealed that while accessibility was rated relatively high, other factors such as comfort, playability, and sense of identity were evaluated as average or weak. Most notably, safety was perceived as a major deficiency, particularly during late evening hours.

The low performance of the space on sociability indicators suggests limited engagement opportunities for residents. The green area currently lacks diverse infrastructure (e.g., seating, shade, vegetation, and well-designed areas) that could accommodate a broader age group and activity range.

The low level of spatial sociability correlates with the district's limited social infrastructure and underdeveloped sense of place. Many residents expressed detachment from the neighborhood, citing a lack of informal gathering opportunities and community events. The transient nature of the population, characterized by frequent turnover, further hinders the formation of stable social networks and shared neighborhood identity.

In addition to the physical inadequacies, the absence of programming (e.g., cultural events, seasonal festivals, shared maintenance efforts) has limited the potential of green spaces to serve as community hubs. Consequently, the district remains functionally residential but socially fragmented (Figure 9).

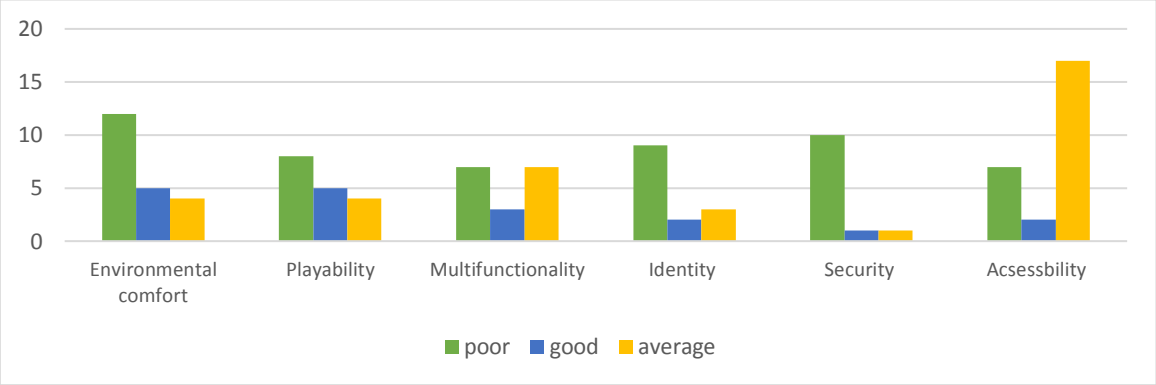

Fig 8. Residents' Evaluation of Sociability Indicators in Niayesh Green Space

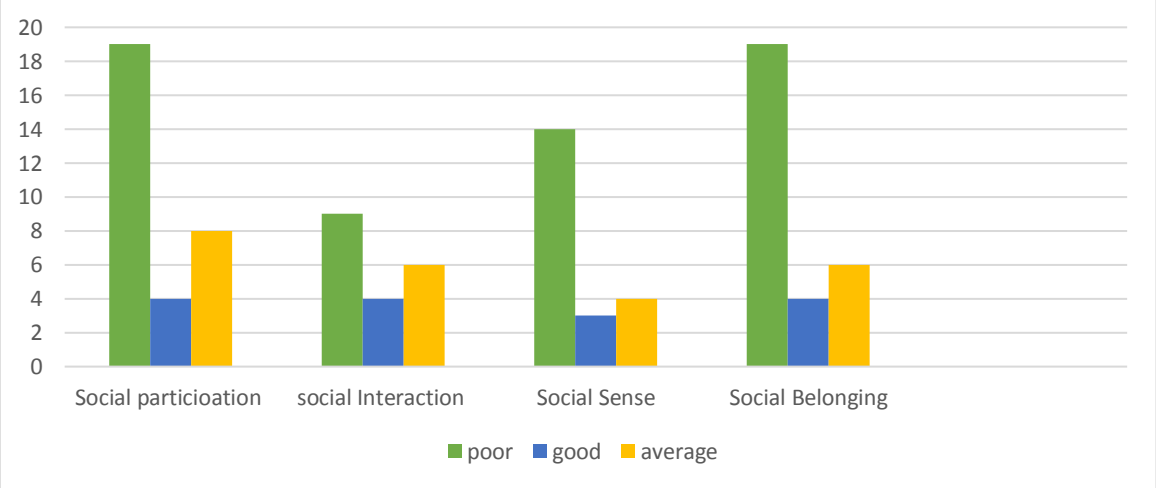

Fig 9. Respondents' Evaluation of Social Participation, Interaction, Sense, and Belonging

Practical Recommendations

To enhance sociability and social stability within Niayesh, several practical interventions are recommended:

Introduce flexible infrastructure: Modular seating, shaded areas, and play equipment should be integrated to support varied uses and age groups.

Organize community-led activities: Weekly events such as gardening clubs, open-air movie nights, or sports tournaments can encourage interactions and foster a sense of belonging.

- Improve lighting and security: Installing proper lighting and creating lines of sight from residential blocks can enhance the perceived safety of the green space.
- Establish shared maintenance groups: Involving residents in maintaining and co-designing spaces promotes stewardship and pride in the community.
- Such strategies can transform green areas from passive landscapes into active platforms for social bonding and neighborhood resilience.

CONCLUSION

The Niayesh district, as a rapidly developing urban area, faces considerable challenges in building social cohesion and fostering a collective neighborhood identity. The lack of community-oriented programming and underutilized green spaces has limited opportunities for meaningful social interactions among residents. Although public green spaces possess inherent potential to serve as hubs of community life, their current design and functionality fall short in meeting the social needs of the population.

This study underscores the critical role that well-designed, inclusive, and multifunctional public spaces can play in enhancing social connectivity and place attachment. Findings revealed that sociability indicators such as environmental comfort, safety, and identity were generally rated poorly, reflecting a disconnect between the built environment and its users. Additionally, low levels of social participation and belonging indicate the need for targeted interventions that address both spatial and social deficits.

To address these challenges, a two-pronged strategy is recommended: First, physical enhancements of green spaces should prioritize comfort, accessibility, and flexible infrastructure to accommodate diverse age groups and uses. Second, regular community programming, including cultural events, physical activities, and creative workshops, should be implemented to stimulate engagement and reinforce a shared sense of belonging.

If adopted, these measures can transform Niayesh into a socially vibrant and resilient neighborhood, where public spaces not only support leisure and recreation but also function as active catalysts for community cohesion and sustainable urban living.

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