

INVESTIGATING the QUALITY of MEANING of URBAN PUBLIC PLACES in the PERCEPTIONS OF YAZD'S CITIZENS

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Abstract

The Meaning quality of urban public places is a matter of big concern. Various indices shape the quality of meaning of urban public places. Some indices have greater roles in relation to perceptions of quality and some of these play lesser roles. Finding these indices could help planners and designers improve the quality of meaning from the perspective of citizens. The main question of this paper is: What are the main indices of meaning quality of urban public places in the perceptions of citizens of Yazd (Iran)? And what are their priorities? To answer this question, this paper deployed the survey analysis method, with 376 participants to answer questioners. The process of the survey started with a literature review to determine meaning quality indices and SPSS was used to analysis data: T-test for evaluating best indices, and Friedman's test for rating them. The results indicate that among the 22 indicators, three (Efficiency, Walkability, and Environment for all) have the greatest effect on perceptions of meaning quality. The conclusion is as follows: The quality of urban public places can be easily enhanced by relying on these three indices. And if a place like Amir Chakhmaq or Besat Square does have a rich culture, according to past values or historical backgrounds, and these are more effective for understanding the quality of their meaning, then those are the three top indices. So, in the process of obtaining perceptions of quality, some indices are more general that could have greater priority, and the priority of some others are defined on basis of the special characters of that place (such as cultural and historical backgrounds). Those indices—which refer to form and physical aspects—are important for all citizens. And when places have cultural and historical aspects, the priorities change. This means that quality judgment has certain levels. Some levels are shaped by form and physical indices, which are general for all places, and some of these are not general, and vary from one place to another.

Key words

Place, Urban Public Places, Meaning of Quality, Citizens' Perceptions, Yazd, Iran.

1. Introduction

Recognizing how places embody various meanings, senses, ideas, and perceptions is particularly crucial for investigating place-making in urban planning and design. Unfortunately, meaning is a notoriously difficult concept to operationalize in the human sciences, as evidenced by the multiple, overlapping, and conflicting positions embedded within and among philosophy, linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, communication, and rhetoric. Rather than engage directly such complex philosophical terrain, place researchers have often sought handy refuge in some previously established operational definition (e.g., as a cognition or attitude), regardless of its suitability to the question under investigation [1]. Not only has this contributed to frequent lamentations over terminological confusion and inconsistency in place research [2], more importantly, it has forestalled much-needed critical refinements of the conceptual and empirical literature. Rather, what is required is that investigations should be more clearly embedded in conceptually coherent frameworks that guide any given investigation of the meaning of place. The aim is not to eliminate multiple conceptions of place, but rather to acknowledge plurality and position, so as to avoid leaving the faulty impression (a) that a satisfactory accounting of meaning is accessible through some singular methodology and (b) that methods function as passive instruments for rendering place meanings, when, in fact, they impose structures on observations, which shape what counts as meaning [3]. The discussion below can be read as a call for a more rigorous and transparent explication of philosophical commitments and implications of one's chosen methodological standpoint.

Physical structure and function lead to place. Place is defined by imagination and memory. Today, urban spaces are placeless. There are no citizens' perceptions. The purpose of this article is to propose effective indicators in the perceptions of citizens in urban places. Fig. 1 shows the steps to reach this purpose.

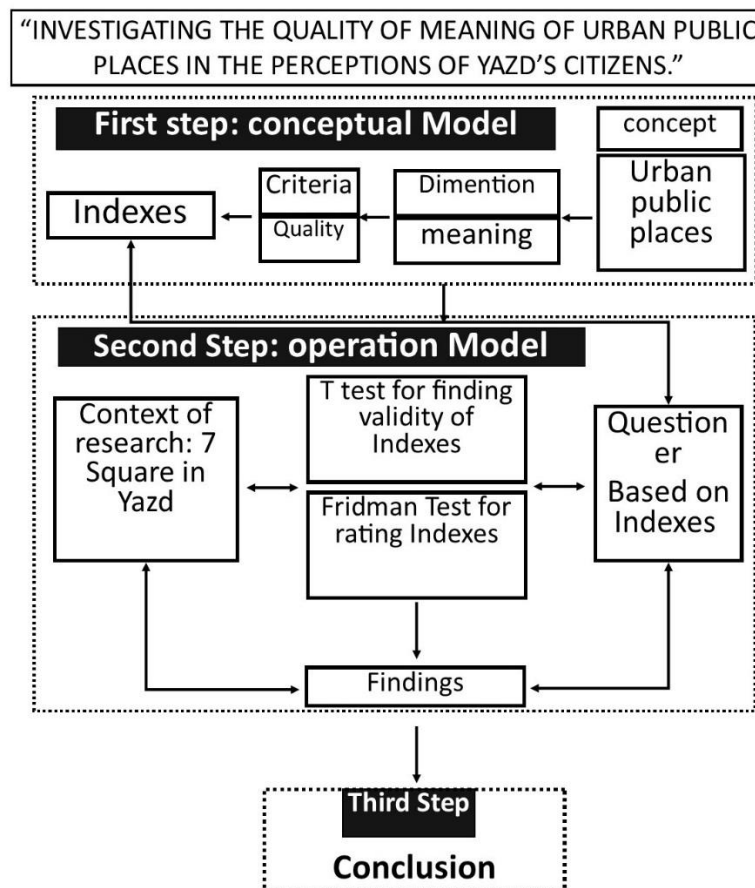


Fig.1: Process of Article (Graphical abstract)

2. Research Method

a. Methods and Materials

The aim of the research is to introduce and rate indices relating to the perceptions of the quality of urban public places (squares) in the view of the citizens of Yazd (Iran). Hence, the research method is analytical, and the survey analysis method was used. Firstly, the literature was reviewed because of the proposed indicators. In order to analyze indicators by considering the total population of Yazd (656,474 persons) and the error coefficient of 0.6, the sample size is 376. Hence, a total of 376 questionnaires were filled. On the other hand, T-test and Friedman's test was used in SPSS to analyze the data. According to the research study, the questionnaire has been simplified as much as possible to come close to understanding different individuals and groups. In order to assess the impact of each indicators on the citizens' perceptions of the quality of places, questions were proposed in the Likert scale. The questionnaire asked citizens to select the places with the highest quality among the public places of Yazd. The score range of each indicator of the meaning of quality indices is between 1 and 5. The answers to the questionnaires were described using descriptive statistics and were then analyzed by one-Sample T test and Friedman's test in SPSS software.

b. Area studied

Public places belong to all the citizens and provide for their inherent needs for face-to-face social relationships within the social and city frameworks. So, it is necessary to assess how the experience and understanding of these places can be considered as one of the most important criteria for measuring the quality of urban places

This article has been conducted on the geographical domain of Yazd city. The case study is the evaluation of public places on an urban scale in Yazd city. One of the main categories suitable as a context in this case is the "square." Following the opinions of urban experts, Amir Chakhmaq, Besat, Baghmeli (Azadi), Mujahideen (Shahid Beheshti), Mar Kar, Atlasi, and Farhang (Nal Asbi) have been selected as comprising the area under study.

3. Literature review

a. *Perceptions and meaning of space*

Many definitions have been proposed for "place," but generally the term "place"—as opposed to space—expresses a strong affective bond between a person and a particular setting [4]. In other words, place is mixed with human values and principles. As a result, place is a particular space covered with meanings and values by users. Places play an essential and vital role in human life. Each place has its own unique character, which is an important issue in social science [5]. The studies that have been reviewed reveal that places are not only important elements in developing and maintaining self and group identity but also play a significant role in the behavior of human beings and their mental health. Rapoport (1990) [6] argued that places—in addition to physical features—include messages and meanings that people perceive and decode, based on their roles, experiences, expectations, and motivations. Therefore, the sense of place refers to the particular experience of a person in a particular setting. It is the general way in which someone feels about a place. A sense of place is an important factor in maintaining the quality of the environment. It is also an important aspect in integrating user and place. It contributes to better use, satisfaction, and attachment to places. The seminal literature reviewed reveals that in contemporary societies, thanks to the growth of human societies, changes in people's lifestyles, and technological advances, places convey no meanings anymore, and people suffer from a sense of "placelessness." Relph (1976) [7] explained that the term "placeless" refers to the settings which do not have any distinctive personality or sense of place. Relph (1976) [7] claimed that when places cannot be culturally recognized, they suffer from lacking a sense of place; in this case, people are faced with placelessness. Therefore, being placeless can be explained as the physical characteristics of non-place, which is a culturally unidentifiable environment that is similar anywhere [4]. In this respect, Relph argued that designers who ignore the meanings that places bring to people's minds try to destroy authentic places and make inauthentic ones [7, 5].

In the meantime, scholars have pointed out that since one of the main goals of urban design is to create a sense of place, architects, designers, and planners should pay more attention to the quality of places and built environments.

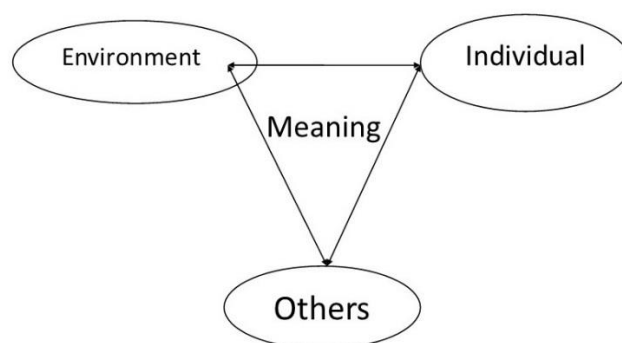


Fig. 2: Meaning perceived by three domains [5]

b. Meaning Approach

Empirical research into the meanings of place has focused on different kinds of places and used different methodological approaches. In a large study entailing some 300 interviews of Canadian cottagers, Jackson (1986) [8] investigates what recreation homes mean to their owners. He identified 10 “broad themes of meaning”: duality between routine and novelty, inversion of everyday life, back-to-nature, identity (identification with the location of the cottage, but also a “cottager identity”), surety, continuity and sense of place, work, elitism among cottagers, aspirations that differ from those of the locals, and time/distance away from ordinary city life. Jackson positions his study within the field of tourism research, believing that it may contribute to the distending of second-home domestic tourism. In my view, several themes in his analysis are also important for the meanings of place, more generally. Some of the themes, however, seem vague, and, at times, overlapping, and some appear to belong to different analytical levels.

Twigger-Ross and Uzzell [9] use a different approach in their interview study of place and identity processes among residents in the London Docklands. In a creative adaptation of identity theory, they investigate the ways in which the place attachment of their respondents expresses the principles of identity described by Breakwell (1986, 1992) [1]:

- (1) *Distinctiveness*: Respondents use place identification to distinguish themselves from others;
- (2) *Continuity*: The place provides a sense of continuity of the self, as respondents have lived at the same place for a long time, or have lived at the same type of place [1];
- (3) *Self-esteem*: Respondents feel proud of the place where they live;
- (4) *Self-efficacy*: Qualities of the residential area facilitate respondents’ everyday life in various ways.

Public space is one of the necessary elements of urban daily life and the most important section of cities. It is a scene that shows social life. “The characteristic of public space represent social life, urban culture and daily issues and meanwhile impacts on them” [1]. It is called a space that is accessible by all public members, but individuals are not free to do what they wish—they should obey the norms and laws [1]. General space empowers us to experience and understand the existence of other people, to be identified with their viewpoints, which is necessary for the survival of life in human society [1]. Public space is the space of the city and the artificial body of an environment, which citizens should assess without any limitations. This assessment should be skeletal, visual, and social. In this space, people experience togetherness, and represent the social life. Such social life can be represented in the form of various functional and ritual activities. These spaces are multipurpose, such that their control, management, and preparation are a duty and administrative responsibility [1]. A public space is a place to enjoy experiences, hobbies, and different urban activities, a place to exercise, play, eat, engage in political usage and, more importantly, as a place for walking and resting [13].

The quality of public urban spaces and influential factors: The crisis of the quality of public places is one of the most important issues of our cities. This issue, on the one hand, causes mental and behavioral abnormalities and also decreasing social activities, and, on the other, leads to a decreasing quality of the urban environment and declining social, cultural, and visual values in urban places. The improvement of the quality of urban public places influences the daily and social activities of people who are habitant in the city [1]. Francis Tibaldez believes that learning from the past, compounding users and activities, the walkability of pedestrians, accessibility to the public, providing transparent

and persistent environments, controlling and compounding methods, are principles and criteria, such that by applying them, one can increase the quality of public places of the contemporary cities [1]. In Kurosh Golkar's idea, the qualities of livelihood, readability, visual character, sense of time, sensual richness, dependency, learning, influence and movement, formal and user compound, generality, general quality, climate welfare, security and safety, flexibility, coordinating with nature, energy efficiency, and environmental clearness are called the qualities of urban design.

C. Quality of meaning of urban public places

While we see the space as an open and abstract extension, place is a part of space that is occupied by a person, or has something valuable and a meaningful load [12]. To people, space is an abstract concept, and what they are interacting with is place. Inhibition area, alley, street, square, city center and so on are places to people—and each place has a meaning, so that the expectation of a place only belongs to that place [1]. The characteristic of place is of more importance than space, and mixing it with human values and characteristics of space is its abstraction than place [1]. The individual facing a place sees him/herself in historical, cultural, physical, emotional, and conceptual relations with the environment, so that it causes the sense of dependency in him/her, which can help him/her attain peace and welfare. Rapaport defines place as one of the four defining factors of space which, when compounded with the meaning, time, and communication, composes the human's environment [2]. Ralf considers places as the central meaning of environment, which are composed of personal experiences. By converging space and meaning, people individually, or in group form, change space to place [16]. In his idea, the meaning of place lies in mental images and people's memories, and is the most important factor in the identity of a place. Until the meanings of places occur in the physical structure and activities, nothing can be found, but the meaning should be searched for in mental pictures and experiences of humans [13].

Again, Lynch specifies three factors: "Skeletal form," "activities," and "meaning of special order" as the three main factors of place identity. The sense of place does not exist inside these factors, but it shapes them because of the mutual relationship of a human being with these factors [13]. Dependency on place arises from activities and interactions between human-place and human-human in a spatial place and by mutual influence of sensitivity; urban design creates suitable urban places and increasing the quality of current places requires "recognition and quality evaluation" of public places [17]. Public places are places to hold rituals, economic exchanges, and social interactions between various people with different features and cultures. The good function of a place serves as an important element in our public and social life. Public Places Projects, by evaluating the quality of public places by many people around the world, considers the success of these places in terms of the four following key qualities: Assessment and communication: accessibility of public space; user and activity: cooperation and involvement of people in public space activities; relief and imaginability: the sense of relief in space and creating a good mental image from public spaces; sociability of public space: a place where people can get together to meet each other [2].

Proposed indicators

Based on the research method, at first, scientific studies have been reviewed. Hence, indicators have been arrived at from some ideas, such as those of Lynch (1984) [2], Violich (1983) [2], Bentli (2005) [2], Coleman (1987) [2], Alen Jacobs & Appelyard (1987) [2], Southworth (1989) [6], Greene (1992) [2], Haughton & Hunter (1994) [2], Punter & Carmona (1997) [3], and Carmona (2006) [3]. Also, national and international institutions such as PPS [21], theoretical issues about the quality and the quality of the survey, have been developed during the past few decades. Table 1 shows the components of urban space quality in terms of scientific ideas.

Table 1: Components of urban space quality in terms of scientific ideas

Reference	Proposed criteria
(Lynch, 1984) [2]	Vitality, meaning, adaptability, accessibility, control, justice, efficiency
(Violich, 1983) [2]	Social life versus private life, freedom of choice, motivation through contrasting urban forms, preservation of native cultural resources
(Bentli, 2005) [2]	Permeability, variety, robustness, adaptability, richness, efficiency, livability
(Trancik, 1986) [2]	Connectivity, enclosure, attached ledge, control of axis
(Coleman, 1987) [2]	Urban restoration, historical preservation, design for walkability, vitality and

	variety, natural and cultural contexts, regard for architectural values
(Alen Jacobz & Appelyard, 1987) [۳۶]	Vitality, identity, accessibility to opportunities, meaning, social life, environment for all
(Southworth, 1989) [۳۷]	Legibility, structure, form, sense of place, identity, landscape, human scale
(Greene, 1992) [۳۸]	Four components: function (connectivity, safety, and variety), discipline (including cohesion, clarity, coherence, and balance), identity (unity), attractiveness (including scale, rotation, visual and performance, vitality and harmony)
(Houghton, 1994) [۳۹]	Variety, centralization, democracy, robustness, security, appropriate scale, organic design, appropriate economic, flexibility, partnership of users
(Punter, 1997) [۳۰]	Urban design issues, urban form, environment sustainability quality, urban landscape quality, urban form quality, building form quality, public space quality
(ODPM, 2005) [۳۱]	Accessibility, attractiveness, vitality, functional, security, flexibility
(Carmona M. , 2009) [۳۲]	Accessibility, soft and hard space, security, urban landscape, density and mixed land use,
(Golkar, 2005) [۳۳]	Experimental esthetic components (personalization, sensory richness, sense of time, visual character, legibility), environmental aspects (harmony with nature, energy efficiency, clean environment), performance (permeability and movement, mixed land use, quality of the public, climatic comfort, safety and security, compatibility, flexibility)
((PPS), 2012) [۳۴]	Main four components: sociality (social reaction, variety, cooperating, friendship), accessibility (continuity, proximity, legibility, walkability, availability), image of city (security, walkability, historical, attractive), land use (activity, vitality, functionality, sustainability, native, festivals)

Also, Table 2 proposes final indicators with a functional and conceptual definition.

Table 2: Meaning of place quality indicators

Indicator	Conceptual definition
Eco-friendly form	The importance of respecting the environment in the form of a square
Visual compatibility	Visual discipline forms factors of the square in the perceptions of residents
Visual character	Unique understanding of the square
Accessibility	Ease of access to the square and its places
Permeability	Ease of entry to different parts of the square is possible
Walkability	The perceived ease of use in the minds of pedestrians
Environment for all	Square is available at different times
Social reaction	Social place for improving social reaction
Variety land use	The square should be proposed for varieties of land use
Customizable	People feel comfortable in doing so
Efficiency	Efficiency and performance must be appropriate Square
Welcoming	The square should be welcoming
Richness	Strong sense of aesthetics is created in the perception
Friendly	Familiarity perception is created
According to past values or historical	Exploration of previous learning with cultural and historical meanings in the mind's communication
Legibility	Make clear map in the mind
Learning	Associated with previous knowledge
Personalization	Be consistent with the ideas and expectations
Security	It leads to perceptions of security
Sense of time	It is updated
Cultural	It is associated with the cultural learning of persons
Meanings, manifestations and spiritual themes	Neglect of God is prevented and attention is paid to the spiritual realm

4. Research Findings

a. Descriptive findings

In terms of gender structure, around half of the respondents were male, and half were female. Also, more than half of them were single and others were married. The average age of the subjects was 34 years. In terms of education, some 40 percent of respondents had a Master's degree and 30 percent of participants had a Bachelor's degree. The birthplace of half of the respondents in this study is Yazd city and others were born in other cities. The participants resided in Yazd city. Table 3 shows the relative distribution of respondents in accordance with the context of the features.

Table 3: The relative distribution of respondents in accordance with the context of the features

SD	M	%	F	Variable		SD	M	%	F	Variable	
-	-	54.5	-	Single	Marital status	-	-	50.3	189	Male	Gender
		45.5	171	Married				49.7	187	Female	
		100	376	Total				100	376	Total	
-	-	17.6	33.67	Diploma or less	Education	12.7	33.67	35.4	133	Less than 25 years	Age
		7.7	29	Associate Degree				19.1	72	25–30 years	
		35.1	132	Bachelor's degree				45.5	171	Over 30 years	
		39.6	149	Master's Degree or higher							
		100	376	Total				100	376	Total	
-	-	80.1	-	Yazd	Residence	-	-	50.3	189	Yazd	Birthplace
		19.9	75	Other cities				49.7	187	Other cities	
		100	376	Total				100	376	Total	

b. Analytical findings

- *Measuring the perception of residents (in terms of divided squares)*

The participants were asked to express their judgments about the quality of urban public places in order to evaluate the effects of the 22 indicators on the perceptions of respondents and their judgment about the quality of meaning. Answers were analyzed using one-sample T-test; the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Analyzed indicators

	Permeability	Meanings, manifestations and spiritual themes	Cultural aspects	Sense of time	Security	Personality	Learning	Legibility	According to past values or historical background	Friendliness	Richness	Welcoming attitude	Efficiency	Personalization	Varieties of land use	Social reactions	Environment for all	Walkability	Accessibility	Visual character	Visual compatibility	Eco-friendly form	<i>indicator</i>
	2.92	1.69	3.02	3.07	2.95	2.88	2.12	2.9	2.18	3.43	2.89	3.49	3.14	2.45	3.09	3.24	3.39	2.12	2.66	1.90	1.90	2.79	M
	1.38	1.04	1.57	1.42	1.41	1.52	1.18	1.16	1.15 ^Δ	1.18	1.39	1.41	1.25	1.36	1.30	1.41	1.38	1.16	1.23	0.94	1.02	1.35	SD
	-1.080	-24.26	0.197	0.975	-0.730	1.555	-14.47	-1.73	-13.70	7.010	-1.47	6.801	2.13	-7.8	1.27	3.28	5.048	-14.58	-5.272	-22.64	-20.66	-2.97	T
	0.281	0.001	0.844	0.330	0.466	0.121	0.001	0.084	0.001	0.001	0.141	0.001	0.033	0.001	0.205	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.003	P-Value

The values—more than three for each indicator—represent significant effects on the quality of judgment in the perceptions of citizens. According to this analysis, these indicators, i.e., varieties of land use, social interactions, sense of time, environment for all, welcoming and friendly, cultural efficiency have averages above three, and have been effective in understanding the meaning of place quality in Yazd city. The results showed that other indicators are not effective in respondents' perceptions of the quality squares.

- *Respondents' prioritization of the quality of meaning indices*

Achieving the importance of each indicator in shaping the perceptual quality of the squares was an important result of this study, which will be used in future by others. To prioritize the respondents' perceptions of meaning quality indicators, Friedman's test was used. Table 5 shows the results of this analysis: It consist of total values and per square values.

Table 5: The results of Friedman's test

Square Index	Total	Azadi	Mar Kar	Beheshti	Farhang	Atlasi	Besat	Amir Chakhmaq
	MR	MR	MR	MR	MR	MR	MR	MR
Eco-friendly form	13.06	15.03	13.24	12.63	14.78	15.01	10.24	6.5
Visual compatibility	11.94	11.26	14.18	12.22	9.07	9.53	11.97	12.44
Visual character	13.10	10.45	15.61	10.68	11.14	9.31	11.45	14.11
Accessibility	12.76	14.07	14.32	13.21	13.69	14.43	12.91	10.81
Walkability	14.43	11.02	10.59	10.97	14.23	10.86	11.80	11.29
Environment for all	13.49	13.87	10.14	11.85	13.82	15.25	12.31	13.38
Social reactions	10.75	11.42	8.98	11.92	13.08	11.56	12.28	14.56
Varieties of land use	7.53	11.60	9.49	12.11	12.32	13.12	10.48	9.44
Customizability	13.33	9.07	9.46	9.99	8.93	10.22	9.35	7.27
Efficiency	14.28	13.51	10.38	13.14	12.64	13.66	12.36	11.67
Welcoming attitude	12.76	12.20	11.72	11.92	14.67	13.36	9.90	12.05
Richness	11.28	10.65	15.17	12.76	11.24	11.42	10.48	14.35
Friendliness	11.50	11.59	10.34	10.41	13.75	12.45	10.32	5.03
According to past values or historical backgrounds	12.33	10.96	14.40	11.90	8.18	7.80	13.43	15.98
Legibility	9.41	11.74	13.73	12.04	11.32	11.05	11.86	12.24
Learning	11.68	10.39	11.42	10.51	7.12	8.72	13.13	11.1

<i>Personalization</i>	12.34	12.54	10.50	11.73	11.33	11.67	10.38	12.86
<i>Security</i>	9.11	12.19	12.14	13.93	11.94	12.77	11.47	11.39
<i>Sense of time</i>	5.33	11.22	10.08	10.5	11.70	13.67	9.22	7.43
<i>Cultural aspects</i>	11.38	10.80	8.01	10.14	11.74	8.37	13.99	15.04
<i>Spiritual meanings</i>	10.27	6.71	8.53	7.56	5.66	7.31	11.28	12.85
<i>Permeability</i>	11.22	10.71	10.56	11.32	10.84	11.44	12.38	11.21
Chi-Square Test	915.06	702.14	1154.45	481.15	1420.45	1294.7	476.69	1890.18
Significance Level	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001

The results of the Friedman test confirms that there are significant difference between the impacts of 22 indicators on the quality of meaning of the perceptions of places. It should be noted that the most important indicator in the formation of the quality of meaning are the welcoming attitude, efficiency, and the environment for all.

5. Conclusion

Analyzing the quality of meaning of urban public places by means of a quantitative approach and survey methods is an approach used to identify the overall level of quality. Meanwhile, access to reliable results close to reality can be used for planning and decision-making around the proceeding strategy and for physical and non-physical interventions in public places. The purpose of this article is to define and rate effective indicators in perceptions of citizens about the quality of meaning of urban public places. Because of this purpose, the following questions arise: What are the main indices of the quality of meaning of urban public places in the perceptions of the citizens of Yazd (Iran)? And what are their priorities? According to findings, and T test (Table 4), eight of 22 indicators (variety of land use, social interactions, sense of time, environment for all, welcoming attitude, friendliness, cultural aspects, efficiency) are more effective in perceiving the meaning quality of urban public places in Yazd city. According to Table 5, it can be found that the most powerful aspects of the quality of meaning of Yazd public spaces are affected by walkability, efficiency, and environment for all, in the perceptions of residents. Interestingly, the other indicators make no great contributions to the perceptions of citizens and their qualitative judgments. But results can be better explained by comparing the Friedman test values in Table 5 for each square.

It can be concluded that in the context of a square like Amir Chakhmaq or Besat, where cultural and historical values are asked, the quality of meaning in citizens' perceptions is shaped on the basis of past values and historical legacies as well as cultural aspects. But in other squares, which do not have any historical or rich cultural background, the quality of meaning is shaped in effect by those more general indexes like efficiency, walkability, and environment for all: These general indices could bring a level of quality for all squares. But if a square does have past values, a historical background, and a rich culture, it could have greater quality of meaning.

This result indicates that two levels of meaning indicators exist—general and special. The first group are explicit ones and the second ones are implicit. Explicit indicators refer to form and physical aspects—more specifically, shape, quality of meaning, judgments, and are common, but when places have cultural and historical aspects, the priority changes. And between two public places, one that has a rich cultural and historical character has greater quality of meaning. So, if urban public places provide the ability to perceive the implicit indices, the implicit indexes caused by the relationship with the context of the audience meaning are allocated greater contributions in perceived quality.

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