

Factors Weakening the Recreational Activities of the Third Spaces: The Case of the Tigris River Bank, Iraq

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Abstract

A third space is a public space in which optional activities are held; the most important are the recreational activities such as social and psychological events. When viewed this way, the Tigris River in Iraq could be seen as a third space. It is a third space because it is a public place that often includes recreational activities. However, the Tigris River bank in the city center of Baghdad in Iraq, is neglected; it does not work as a meaningful third space.

In this context, this research intends to uncover the most important factors that deter the recreational activities of the river bank. Its objective is to draw the attention of the authorities concerned with urban development to enhance the river bank. The research is based on the assumption that people (residents, workers, passers-by, and visitors) living near the river bank are able to diagnose the weaknesses of it as a third space.

The research adopted a qualitative approach within the constructivist view to explore the main factors that contribute to the weaknesses of the third space. The data was collected by employing face-to-face interviews with samples relevant to the study, and an open-ended questionnaire to uncover the reasons for the delay in the riverbank performance, according to the respondents' point of view.

The research discovers that, there are four factors that contribute to the absence of recreational activities on the river bank. Each factor has five indicators of different impacts. The first is that it lacks functions such as restaurants and cafes. It also lacks appropriate furniture with lighting and services. The second is safety and security: the poor performance of the place is due to the poor presence of people on the river bank and its security reputation. The third is accessibility; it shows the weakness of recreational performance due to the lack of permeability and obscured view of the river bank. The fourth shows the weakness of the land use along the circumference of the river bank. In conclusion, the paper recommends that the authorities implement an appropriate plan of action to rejuvenate the river bank as a third space.

Keywords: third space, the river bank, recreational activity, weakness, Tigris River

Introduction

Numerous studies and research have dealt with public space. They mostly represent the open and publicly owned spaces that have easy access and a democratic public presence (Beqaj, 2016; Carmona & et al, 2003; Woolley & Rose, 2005). The spatial presence (the physical component and urban settings) of a public space reflects the spirit of the community; it is the mirror of identity, values, and civilized heritage of a community (Pacheco, 2017).

Public spaces are planned in relation to democratic values and reflect the culture and structure of a place and the social hierarchy as well as the way they are controlled and used. Democracy reflects the cultural and social values of an urban spatial structure and its occupants, and thus as an expected outcome, it reflects the identity of a community. Public places are places owned by the public and are unlike private places. They are created to serve the general public from their occupants. They serve the public interest and work on the formation of the urban social fabric, in which people interact with each other and achieve social communication, feelings and common rights within the urban fabric. An urban space is the nucleus of the fabric, whose goal is to serve its occupants in terms of providing a livable environment (Kohn, 2008).

Matthew Carmona* points out that public space, in its broadest definition, relates to all the constituent parts of the built and natural environment, public and private, indoor and outdoor, and urban and rural, where the public enjoys freedom, although it is not necessarily characterized by unrestricted access. They include all streets, squares, and other rights of way, whether comprising residential, commercial, or community/civil uses, open spaces, and parks. Open countryside and both indoor and outdoor "public/private" spaces where public access - if controlled, such as private shopping malls or railway and bus stations. They also include the interiors of major public and civic buildings such as libraries, churches, or city halls (Matthew, 2008). They often welcome the public. That means public spaces are everything related to usable and accessible urban space, where public access is unrestricted at least during the daylight hours. In addition, they provide the opportunities for social interactions between members of a community within an urban fabric.

A third space represents a picture of "public spaces", where these spaces are described as havens necessary for social communication and achieving the characteristics of democracy within the local community.

A third space in its general form is a social product and it is a space for the "other" or "the different". It develops from the context of the existence of both, a process of renegotiation in the formation of borders and cultural identity, and the creation of space results from the focus in a space of openness towards the "real" physical space and the imaginary space. This space is derived from the collection of diverse contexts of sociology, history and spatial issues addressed in one time without the consideration of one factor without the other factors.

Third places are important because they act as intercessors between an individual and the community and increase the feeling of belonging to the neighborhood and the community. Numerous social researchers suggest that everyday incidental interactions of third places improve relationships between neighbors; decrease loneliness and isolation; improve the perception of safety; build social capital and create a sense of place (Oldenburg, 1999).

Some of the examples of third spaces are the banks of rivers and the extent of the riverfront, just as the banks represent public spaces that can be used and accessed and are open to everyone. It is supposed to be a democratic, interactive, attractive and comfortable space, reducing work stress and housing isolation.

This research paper arises from an important question: what prevents the river bank in Baghdad, Iraq from playing its role as a third public space within the city center, and therefore what are the factors that weaken and marginalize the role of the third space (the river bank) as an integrated part with the urban fabric??, The research problem came from the weakness of the urban performance of the river banks as third and public spaces. Thus, the research assumed that the river bank possesses the characteristics of a third space, and that the factors that weaken its role within the urban fabric of the city is related to the factors that weaken these characteristics.

The aim of the research paper was to shed light and reveal the most important factors causing the weakness of the third space and thus weaken the urban performance of the bank of the Tigris River in the center of Baghdad. Between Al-Sinak Bridge and Al-Ahrar Bridge as a potential other case study.

Theoretical Ideas

Characteristics of a third social space

Oldenburg defined the features and characteristics of a third space or "the wonderful and good space" through his book "The great good place" (Oldenburg, 1999). They reflect the main ideas about the 'third' social spaces.

1. Conversation is the main activity

It is the main objective of the existence of this space, and what distinguishes it from the rest of the public spaces. The style of this activity is usually characterized by a light tone that carries a sense of humor, fun and parties, reflecting the positive energy that members of a society obtain from those who frequent such spaces. Even though the place can be a place to drink, play sports or play, and where conversations always happen. This mixing and multiplicity of functions within the space gives the idea of hybridity. An example of this and the presence of a space that provides a space for dialogue and acquaintance within a hall to practice sports as hybridization, is one of the most important properties of the existence of the third spaces.

The most important function of this space should be creating the sparks of dialogue between the citizens followed by the environmental awareness and social intelligence enhancement of the citizens (Ebrahimi, Gharehbaglou & Farshchian, 2017:170).

2. Neutral ground

It is a public space that does not have any kind of restriction or obligation regarding the presence of people in it. They do not have any financial, political or legal restrictions, and they are free to come or go and move within the space (Oldenburg, 1999). Here, it can be noted that this characteristic refers to the neutral space between the aforementioned "in-between". Everyone is welcome, and no one plays the role of "host".

3. Equality of treatment

The three spaces deal with a degree of equality between the members of the community of their visitors, and they work to settle the social and material differences between them, as it does not give importance to the individual's position in the society. This dealing helps to build bridges of common psychological communications between its visitors. As there are no pre-requisites, conditions or criteria that would determine the acceptance or reference in this social space. It is an adjective that reflects the concept of accepting and containing the "other" and the existence of "both together".

Texts about sustainability highlight the importance of social diversity as a principle for promoting spatial equity, where all the social groups have equal access to the basic services and resources (Low, Taplin & Scheld, 2005).

4. Accessibility and accommodation

These spaces are characterized by openness, accessibility and permeability for those who occupy them, as well as providing their needs. All the people should have access to the place in the easiest way with place varying from crowded to uncrowded parts (Peterson, 2013).

5. Humility

In the philosophy of creating these spaces, it is characterized by humility, as it is not arrogant or class-based, but rather accepts all the types and components of a single community (Oldenburg, 1999). Through this, the occupants of these spaces possess feelings of warmth, belonging and rootedness within the space.

6-Regularity

It consists of a set of regular elements that lead to creating a kind of harmony and resetting the mood of the component (Oldenburg, 1999). These regular elements in the occupancy of these spaces are working positively to win new arrivals by creating conditions that provide feelings of welcome and assimilation for these arrivals.

Literature review

Soja refers to the third, hybrid space as a concept that is steadily expanding to include the "other," allowing space for competition and renegotiation of borders and cultural identity. In this, he largely agreed with Homi Bhabha's third space theory, where "all forms of culture are constantly in the process of 'hybridization' (Rutherford, 1998). Thus, the third space provides a new product composed of supporters of contradictions within a principle that Bahba calls "dualities" or "contradictions." The idea of duality sees that culture consists of opposing perceptions and dimensions (Bhabha, 1994). Based on that, the third space in between, is this overlooked and ignored space, a space that includes both the philosophical and social/material as well as the space in between. While there are those who considered that the "Third Space" is nothing but a flexible and temporary understanding of the continuous transformations in ideas, thoughts, events, and meanings (Lefebvre, 1974). According to Murrani (2016), these spaces are articulated through insulating concrete walls. Although its spread within the city of Baghdad (found after the 2003 invasion), which defines the urban context and creates more conflict between Iraqis socially and culturally, they dealt with the possibilities of life on the margins of those walls, which lead to the emergence of counter-social structures that adapt to the continuous transformation and forced presence of the walls in the city of Baghdad. Thus, Murrani argues that the massive impact of these walls on the existing social structures and communities as a result of the wall strategy results in the third spaces in the margins of the neglected spaces generated by the spread of those walls between the spaces of the urban fabric of the city. Murrani's arguments have similarities with those of Lefebvre, who accepts that Third space has alternative readings of spatial variation and becoming in the world. The "third" in the third space refers to the spatial "other", as opposed to what is "lived" and what is "conceived", real and imagined (referring to Henri Lefebvre's conceptual triad between spatial practice, space representation and spaces of representation) (Lefebvre, 1974).

According to Soja, "Third Like Another" is an open spatial and social system with expansion beyond "permanent constructions". Thus, Murrani views Soja's concepts of "thirthing" and "third space" as a mixture of being and becoming existential and epistemological, linked to the "limiting" constructs of Baghdad's power and social structures. Instead, Al-Khazraji (2023) argues that the third space in the Iraqi traditional city is closely related to the type of events held in it, which are entertainment activities, as it is a space linked to the concept of spatial joy. This is consistent with what Oldenburg adopted about the concept of the third space.

Referring to studies that have dealt with the problems of the Tigris River bank spaces, which also include the third spaces, Ali (2010) points out to the lack of available academic local studies in the field of developing the riverine urban landscape of the city of Baghdad, and the weakness of activating local studies in developing and reviving it. It has been said that the confusion in the urban landscape and thus confusion in the sense of place in the banks of the rivers needs to be developed because it is neglected and ineffective and mechanisms directed towards activating the mental image of the city and linking the spaces of the river with the spaces of the city. Al-wehab has argued that there is no universal approach to dealing with areas adjacent to riparian spaces. He indicated that there is an imbalance in the distribution of land uses surrounding the Tigris River with illegal encroachments, which negatively affects the environmental, economic and social development of the city of Baghdad. There are those who pointed to specific aspects of the problems of these spaces. For example, Khion (2019) shows that the weak ecological value of urban river banks within cities, and the lack of studied treatments at the urban level would cause weak ecological impact and overlap between the river and the city. Khion's arguments are similar to those of Abd al-Rahman, who point out the lack

of comprehensive studies explaining the environmental beauty in the outer spaces of the river's edge and the lack of natural urban integration in creating the environmental beauty of riverbanks and waterfronts. Thus, he embodied the problem of the lack of integration of functional and aesthetic solutions for the banks of the Tigris River through neglecting and isolating the river from the city, which has made it to lose the aesthetics of environmental balance (Abd al-Rahman, 2016). We conclude from these previous local studies that there are multiple problems that the banks of the Tigris River suffer from, including: the river is isolated from the urban built environment, and therefore it is isolated from the daily life practices of the residents of the city of Baghdad. As there is a weak connection between the open spaces of the banks of the Tigris River and the city's spaces in the built environment, and that there is a clear weakness in the nature of urban uses of the banks of the Tigris River and the nature of the appropriate activities. Although the river and its waterfronts and spaces have an important role in achieving a sense of belonging, a sense of place and a cohesion of the urban landscape, this role is almost absent with the Tigris River in Baghdad. Indeed the spaces of the river are inert and neglected, and there are many legal abuses in use and construction, since they have not adhered to the basic plan or urban design standards.

Research Methodology

According to the constructivist view, the study relied on a mixed method approach (quantitative and qualitative methods). People are the ones who give meaning to life through their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Thus, the research has an interpretive method employing interviews. One open-ended question was posed to the respondents through face-to-face personal interviews. The question revolved around the reasons for the weak use of the Tigris River bank in the city center of Baghdad as a recreational place by people. The common responses with the highest frequency were taken to explore the reasons behind the weak urban performance of the case study.

Although the selected sample was specialized, they were randomly selected. The sample size was proportional to the amount of content in the case study area. Accordingly, the Tigris River bank (the case study area) was visited for four days at peak times, which were confined between 4.00 pm until 7.00 pm in a moderate spring weather on 8-11 March, 2022.

On the first day, the residents were interviewed face to face, in approximately 60 dwellings (while the rest of the dwellings in the area have been turned into warehouses). The number of residents who were administered the questionnaire was 20 residents of the houses (heads of households) Therefore, it is considered a specialized sample due to the small number of homeowners who accepted the interview, which was approximately 24 samples (four were excluded due to their weakness) with a rate of (33.33%), which is a statistically acceptable percentage. While on the second day, shop owners were interviewed using the questionnaire, and the number of those shops was 45. However, those who accepted the interview were 20 people, with a rate of 44.44% return. Accordingly, it is a specialized sample for all shop owners. On the third day the pedestrians, were chosen as the sample. Sampling was random. A small number of pedestrians were recorded, and for two days, the number was twelve and eight people, respectively. On the fourth day, specialists and experts were chosen as the sample. They were specialized in architecture and urban planning who lived far from the river bank. In order to standardize the numbers of elected samples for statistical purposes, twenty people were selected from university professors and employees of the municipal institutions to find out their point of view on the performance of the river bank.

The Case study

The study area is located in the center of the capital, Baghdad, on the side of Rusafa, in an area of about 83,000 square meters in the form of a rectangle. Its length is about 580 meters and width 143 meters. It is bordered on the northern side by the Al-Rasheed Commercial Street, and is surrounded by residential neighborhoods that extend along its length.

The street is parallel to the bank of the Tigris River from its southern side and connects the parts of Al-Rusafa region with its other parts of the Karkh region through both Al-Sinak bridges from the East and the Al-Ahrar bridge from its Western side.



Fig. 1: The site and surroundings.

Source: Author

The Al-Rasheed Street includes various activities (shops selling construction tools, spare materials, commercial offices and administrative buildings). It is linked to the river bank through some narrow and winding alleys leading to spaces characterized by buildings suffering from urban deterioration and large areas used irregularly as car parks with no view of the river through walking and shopping in the main street adjacent to the study area.

The Procedures

The sample selection

The study employed interviews with random sampling used to choose the respondents. the sample was classified into four groups, they were as follows:

Group A: represents those who inhabit the area near the Tigris River bank. They were 20. They encounter the reality of the river and are the first concerned with the region. They have the ability to diagnose the causes of the lag and the weaknesses in the recreational activities of the third space on the bank of the Tigris River.

Group B: represents those who work near the Tigris River bank. They were 20. They are people who work there. They are able to diagnose the non-use of the Tigris River bank for recreational activities. They can also point out reasons that the residents of the region did not pay attention to.

Group C: represents those who pass by near the Tigris River bank. They were 20. As passers-by near the river bank, they make observations that help build a mental image of the study area, as well as visit the area for specific purposes during alternating periods. This in itself may give way to mentioning the obstacles behind the poor use of the river bank for optional activities.

Group D: represents those experts and specialists in architecture and urban planning who live outside the region. They were 20. They depend on previous experiences and their knowledge of the place or area studied.

The four samples were randomly selected, with only one question being posed to the respondents, as follows:

What are the reasons for the poor use of the Tigris River bank in the area between Al-Jumhuriya Bridge and Al-Sanak for recreational activities? Mention three main reasons from your personal point of view.



Fig. 2: The river bank situation.

Source: Author

The question was open ended to allow the respondent to diagnose the reasons, but at the same time, it was specific to the number of reasons in order to avoid unjustified expansion of the answers and in order to facilitate the calculation of the response's repetitions later.

Responses from the direct interviews with people were collected, fixed, and recorded on paper (Table). Then the number of recurrences for similar reasons was calculated and classified within one general indicator which is coded by ($X_i, i = 1, 2, \dots, 20$). Subsequently, the indicators with similar content were collected in the results table and made under a general factor.

The results

The overall results, including indicators, frequencies, and deduced factors were collected in an integrated table (1) as follows:

Table 1: The indicators, frequencies, and deduced factors.

Source: Author

o.	groups responses Reasons and Common responses						Conclusions Main Factors
1	A place that people don't mostly go to. It is unsafe place	1		3	1	4	Safety and security
2	A place seems empty after 3:00 p.m.	3				0	
3	In the evening, the place is occupied by the loafers and drunks.	3			5	4	
4	Some of the buildings parallel to the river bank are abandoned.	1				1	

5	The bank is not insured against drowning accidents.					8	
	A total score of safety and security factor					87	
6	No regular parking.	1				1	Accessibility
7	Traffic jams at peak time.				1	7	
8	No permeability towards the river bank.	6	1			4	
9	Riverside's arrangement is not conducive to walking.	0			0	7	
10	River transport is not activated			1	3	8	
	A total score of the accessibility factor					77	
11	Most of the buildings overlooking the river are privately owned.					9	Land use
12	Most of the buildings overlooking the river have official functions such as banks.	1	0			3	
13	Some of the floors of the buildings overlooking the river bank are commercial stores, and some of them are deserted.	3			2	0	
14	Lack of residential use and the spread of commercial and administrative activities on housing.				3	0	
15	Some shops sell specific commodities such as firefighting equipment, and some of them are sewing shops for special military clothing.	3		1		7	
	A total score of the land use factor					69	
16	There are no restaurants and cafeterias on the river bank or any attractive activities.	3	1	2		4	Urban space setting
17	Not enough lighting at night.	4	2			2	
18	There is no furnishing for the river bank such as seating, umbrellas, trees, etc.	5	0		3	2	
19	Lack of infrastructure.	0	3			9	
20	There are no sidewalks or terraces.				4	6	
	A total score of the urban space setting factor					93	

Findings

From the table 1, it was noted that all the reasons are important and influential in the weakness of not activating the Tigris River bank. At the same time, there are some indicators people identified that have a great influence. They had a 44 score, like X1, X3, X8, X16. The highest score pointed to the following conclusions.

1. From X1 and X3, that the place is not used by people or is not inhabited because it is an unsafe place. The attractiveness of a place depends on the security reputation of the place.
2. From X8 and X16, that a place cannot be seen or is difficult to reach will be unsuitable for entertainment activities. A place that does not have attractive social gathering activities will be a negative space.
3. Through the similarity of the repeated indicators in content and meaning, the research concluded four main factors were related to the 20 indicators affecting the employment of the the river bank for recreational activities. These are

respectively, from the highest to lowest: urban space settings, safety and security reputation, accessibility, and land use.

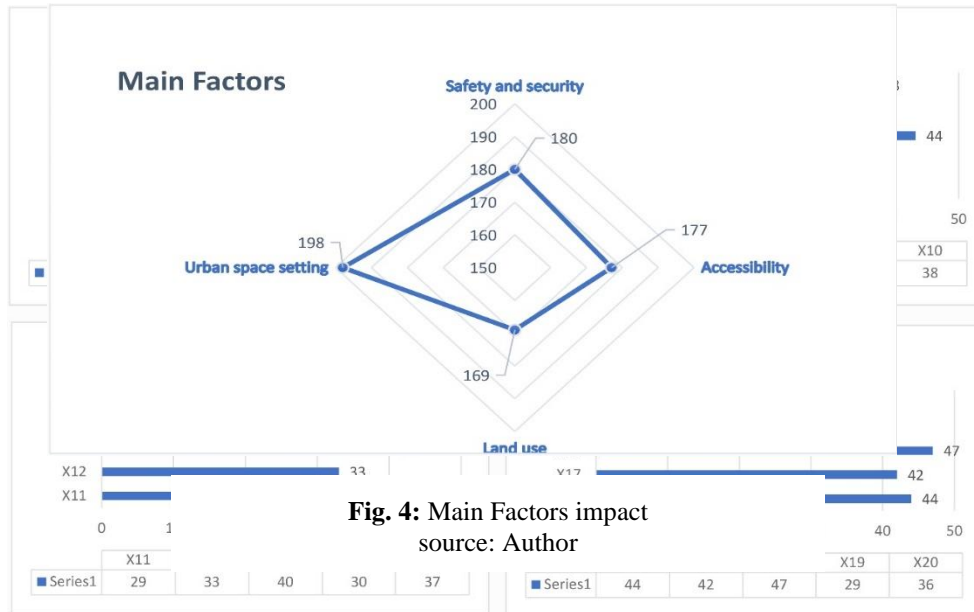


Fig. 3: Conclusions Main Factors.
source: Author

Through the results and the diversification of the respondents, the research found that people have an insight into the reasons for the lack of recreational activities on the Tigris River bank. The responses arise according to their priorities. People are looking for a place designed with components that indicate and identify the nature of the activity, to achieve their various purposes which include entertainment. People also make those components a definition of the third space. In addition, their access to the required services and recreational activities depends on the extent to which security and safety are achieved. These are key factors. The ease of accessibility with the diversity and multiplicity of activities (land use) for the areas adjacent to the river bank are considered helping factors in activating the third space.

Conclusions

The banks of the rivers can be public places available to all. They include various recreational activities. Thus, they can be considered as third spaces. Recreational activity is an optional activity based on several practices, behavior and events that make the place attractive to people. The greater the number of visitors to the place, the more lively, effective, and attractive it is, and *vice versa*. People recognize spaces through their components and activities to be as places. The components make them usable. Thus, places designed to perform an activity are often known to others, but with conditions, the most important of which is that these places are safe and accessible.

The river bank has many advantages to be a third place, through the quality of its design, in which the components are distributed such as trees, seating areas, umbrellas, steps, fountains, fishing places, river transport places, etc. with social activities such as restaurants, cafeterias, etc., which makes it suitable for recreational use and knowledge of a third space. The ease of accessibility and the diversity of activities adjacent to the river bank increases the effectiveness of the urban performance of the third spaces.

Accordingly, it is concluded that whenever a third place is devoid of people and components, is not designed and difficult to see and reach, and its surroundings are inactive, the more likely it is an inert and negative space. This is what happens to the river bank in Iraq.

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