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Evolution of Policies and Approaches to the Revitalisation of Iranian Historic City Centres

Abstract

It has always been a challenge for the developing countries to develop a unified approach towards dealing with their issues of historical environment. There has always been a conflict of interest between dynamic technology- driven modernisation and the appropriate respect and conservation of historical fabric. After the advent of twentieth century, the Iranian cities were undergoing change in a traditional and gradual process over a long period of time. However the desire of modernisation in the twentieth century changed this slow and adaptive process in favour of more dynamic, assertive and often centralised and authoritarian approach until more recently when a more balanced and integrated approach and institutional framework was at least partially adopted. This paper aims to review the evolution of approaches in policies to urban revitalisation in Iran at national level and identify their process of evolution and outcome, It also strives to identify the driving forces behind the changes in approach to revitalisation of historic city centres in Iran during the last two decades.

Keywords: Revitalisation, Urban transformation, Historical city centres, Modernisation, Iran.

1. Introduction

The historic core of Iranian cities is the physical expression of cultural and architectural identity. Until the early twentieth century, the historic cores were developing and changing along with the rest of city fabric. But it was happening at a slow and gradual pace over a long period of time. The outcome of this change was adaptive and respectful to its underlying culture with emphasis on consensus and cohesion. The large scale interventions by the rulers, also was without respect to the tradition of the past.

From the late 19th century however, the process of urban transformation in Iran changed drastically. The modern intervention were large scale, fast and often discontinued unlike traditional modification which were adaptive and slow. Until the beginning of the 20th century, when a centralised and authoritarian state came into being, the governments were not very actively involved in the urban

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development projects. Since the early decades of the twentieth century, a move towards centralisation started which lasted till the present time to expand the authority of the government throughout the country at various spheres of life. During this period, the major development programs were carried out by the largest and most powerful development agency, the central government. The government strongly relied on the planning and implementation of large-scale urban development or re-development projects which had major impacts on the transformation of the cities and their historic cores.

During the last decades however, the attempts to revitalise the historic environment in Iran have gained a new driving power. The development and strengthening of institutional and organisational capacities, integrating policies, setting up legal and regulatory structures, decentralising responsibilities and enhancing the role of professionals have opened a new path to city centre regeneration. This new approach toward urban revitalisation somehow had more positive effects on the life of historical urban city centres.

This paper, besides a brief review on the historic background of the approaches to the revitalisation of historic city centres attempts to identify the factors that have shaped the new trend of urban regeneration in Iran during the last decades. In order to achieve the said aim, this study thus employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. The types of information are distinguished into primary and secondary source of evidence. Primary means first or original sources including interviews of the actors involved in these processes, direct observation of the events and circumstances of the different cases and projects, original documents, maps and photographs. Secondary sources present information that have already been processed or interpreted including the published and unpublished materials about different projects regarding city centre regeneration in Iran. These sources of information include descriptive and quantitative as well as analytical and qualitative materials, published by government, the consultants of the projects and other private institutions. Another source of information is the personal knowledge of one of the authors about the process of urban conservation and regeneration in Iran. This source of information has primarily been used in support of the information and data that is obtained from the other sources.

2. City Centre Transformation in Iran: Historic Background

Large scale interventions in the physical environment of the urban centres in Iran were excersized by the ruling monarchs in the past centuries. Abdulac (1984) suggests that the reason for such interventions were mostly political, though sometimes the whim and personality of the ruler was also a force. The interventions were made to demonstrate the power of the king or assert his authority or religion belief. The form, scale and grandeur of their interventions symbolised high level of authority and power, which intended to create an awe in the population and shape the society in their idealised beliefs [2] [3].

Abbas Shah, the powerful Safavid King (1587- 1629) tried to make Isfahan a great capital to celebrate the triumph of Shiits in Iran and his interventions could be quoted as an example of royal addict in city planning [4] [5] [6]. The royal square planned by him was the focal point, which also acted as a transition between the old and the new area. (Figure-1).

During the Safavid dynasty the large scale interventions were made in Shiraz, Mashhad and Kerman. The Zands (1750-94) and Qajars (1796-79) also followed the tradition of adaptive interventions in city planning, either by their own power or those of their family members. However, inspite of the autocratic nature of such changes there was a balance between the old and the new structures which were created against each other in some harmony, showing a respect for the past [7]. However, this harmony of urban transformation was lost from the late 19th century.

2.1. The First part of Transformation: Dictatorial Modernisation

During the periods of the earlier monarchs the traditional, social and spacial aspects of interventions were not irritating to the traditions [3]. But during the region of Reza Shah (1925-41), this trend could not continued [2] [3] [9] [10]. During this time, the city became the symbol of Shah's political power [7] [11]. Reza Shah followed an ambitious plan of nationalism, secularism and modernisation, which dominated his activities. The Followings are the main feature of his efforts to achieve his goals:

a) creating a new army, government bureaucracy and court patronage to consolidate his power.

b) Promoting the industrial production for employment and creating a new industrial working class.

c) Improvement of the communication network by developing the transport system, such as the railways, roads and import of vehicles.
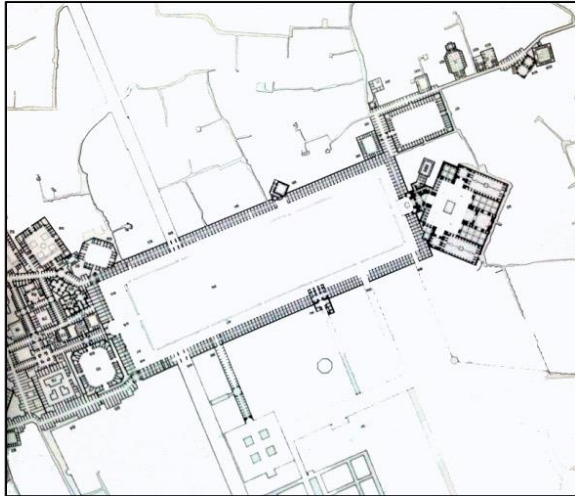
d) Modernising economic affairs, trade, involvement of state in changing social pattern from production to consumption [6] [7] [12] [13][14] [15].

Modernism was displayed by destroying the historic urban fabric. Old city walls were demolished in Isfahan and other cities. The tiled gates of Qajar period were

ruined to the ground in Tehran and wide roadways were driven through the existing pattern of muddy lanes [16].

The large scale program for modernisation of cities was followed by superimposing new street patterns and city plans on the traditional tree shaped layout. Old cities were expanded by construction of new structures to accommodate new needs [17] [18].

The modern changes were large scale, rapid and destructive as compared to the traditional changes, which were gradual and adaptive. Urban uniformity gave way to heterogeneous developments both in urban function and urban culture [11].

The policy of urban clearance for construction of roads and highways which started in Tehran,   soon became the model for development of smaller cities and towns too. For the old and historic cities, this policy was more harmful. It caused the isolation of old cores and further deterioration of the traditional structures. Municipalities were not used as sources of local planning but as controlling bodies for implementation of ideas of Reza Shah to support his ideas of modernisation [19]. New laws and regulations were formulated, such as Municipal Law 1930, the Compulsory Purchase Act 1930 and Street Widening Act 1933, which provided basis for these changes[20] [21].

2.2. New move towards Modernisation - Westernisation

During 1950s, 1960s and 70s Iran faced an economic, political and cultural transformation mainly due to the rapid oil-based economy which started in mid 1950s.

Due to the blight of agricultural economy and migration from small towns into urban areas, particularly the large cities there was a huge demographic changes. This led to the vast physical expansion of the urban areas. The old historic centres became major parts of expanding cities and lost their social, economic and physical importance. There was a great contrast between the newly developed areas and the older parts of the cities in terms of facilities, density of population, physical appearance and the socio-cultural importance [3].

In 1960s under Iran's third development plan (1963-68) preparation of a master plan for all the cities started. These plans were made by foreign consultants and had three outputs: building bylaws and heights, road networks and land use. These proposals reduced the attention towards old city centres even more. There was hardly any concern in the master plans for the traditional urban settlement patterns or the local culture of the majority of people living in the old quarters. As a result, rectilinear grids of roads were superimposed on a number of settlements, designed for the motor vehicles. The government also offered tax exemption to those who would replace their old house with a new building [8]. This law became a threat to the historical quarters, many of which were demolished or subdivided into plots and replaced with multi-storey buildings for financial benefits.

2.3. The Post-revolutionary period: revival of Traditional Values?

From the Islamic Revolution in 1979 to the end of Iran Iraq war in 1998 was the period of political and social reformation. There was a return to traditional values in accordance with the revolution goals of reclaiming past cultural heritage and promoting the Islamic authenticity. However most of the policies that threatened the old cities in the pre-revolutionary period, remained the same. The flight of immigrants towards the cities from the rural and war-stricken areas and rapid growth in population increased the urban population during this period [24] [25]. The new settlements which were the result of this influx created an imbalance between various parts of the cities and the historic parts suffered from decay, disinvestment and abandonment. The historic cores shrunk in size and were reduced in Tehran to 2.83%, in Mashhad to 1.7%, in Isfahan to 6.05%, in Tabriz to 1.82%, in Qom to 1.08% and in Kermanshah to 2.85% [3].

2.4 The Post-war Reconstruction Period

The first decade of the post revolutionary period suffered from war related damages, insufficient investments and lack of development plans. After the first decade there were concerted efforts to improve the economic social and political situation of the country. However this effort resulted in a new centralization of power. A centralized system of planning, policy and decision making and implementation was the result. A number of development agencies were developed in the public and semi public sector which worked on commercial lines with a profit generating objective. More than 16 large scale projects began in 12 cities during 1994 and 1996 to reorganize the 'obsolete' urban fabrics due to the increased demand for housing. The National Land and Housing organization started buying lands and properties in these areas to build new and modern residential and commercial complexes. But due to economic stagnation and financial crisis due to low oil prices, this scheme faced several problems. The problems of these areas increased due to suspension of these programs for a long period. A lot of areas were partially or completely demolished, Increasing the problems of the inhabitants. They became centres of illegal activities and safe havens for the drug addicts.

3. New approaches toward sustainable urban conservation and development

From the late 1990s there were various attempts to revitalise the historic environment in Iran. A new wave of reforms commenced in 1997, following the victory of Reformist group in the national elections. Their greatest achievements in this regard were establishment of elected local councils and introduction of NGOs and other civil society organizations. The institutional and administrative capacities were increased, legal frameworks were established and responsibilities were decentralized. The role of professionals in the policy making and implementation opened a new path to historic city centre regeneration. Still there

were a variety of approaches ranging from market-based autocratic approach to conservation-led regeneration projects by the newly empowered local authorities.

3.1. Establishment of Institutional Framework.

The Urban Development and Revitalization Company (UDRC) was formed in 1997 to plan the regeneration and development and to motivate new investors into distressed historic urban areas. Within the next two years the UDRC developed its policy, legal framework and financial and technical capacity. They avoided the large-scale projects and focused on limiting direct involvement and promoting public-private partnerships [33].The UDRC also encouraged the private sector by offering tax relief and incentives. A policy of decentralization was followed for devolution of responsibilities and resources on municipalities, specially from 2000 onward.

3.2. Policy to restrict horizontal urban growth and plan for historic city centres.

 In order to address the critical issue of urban sprawl, The Supreme Council of Architects and Urban Planners (SCAUP) made a new policy to restrict city boundary expansion. It prohibited city expansion until it an approved population figure. This policy emphasised optimal density levels, special integration and compact city [35]. City centre regeneration became one of the focal points of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MHUD).

A detailed regulatory framework was prepared by UDRC which required the municipalities to obtain a building permit for all owners of property seeking to construct, alter, repair or demolish a structure. This was in addition to other strategies including land-use access, building height and building density limits and other urban regulations [36] [37]. The proposal and plans for new schemes are prepared by private consulting engineers and planners and after technical evaluation and ratifications are sent to the municipality for implementation. Currently detailed plans are being proposed for all areas defined as the historic districts.

3.4 The policy of de-centralization in urban governance

The Third National, Economic, Social and Cultural Plan (2000-2005) called for the decentralisation of administrative functions, the shifting of public service responsibilities to municipalities and 50% the development budget being decided by the development planning committees at provincial level. According to the Article 1 of the third plan a public and private decision making structure was formed including the ministries of housing and urban development, ministry of interior Cultural heritage and tourism organisation with councils of architects and town planners. They are working hand in hand with municipalities and city councils and other advisory bodies (figure-2). The first urban municipal elections were held in 1999 and the second in 2003. The council elections have established a local government system for the first time in modern Iranian history [40] [41].

According to Article 100 to 106 of the Constitution, the city councils are representatives of the local citizens and are responsible for most of the planning and implementation role over all social, cultural and technical urban activities [43].

3.5. The role of tourism industry and professionals in public and private agencies

After 1997 urban conservation and tourism development were seen as closely related factors. It was in response to a call by the President to re-introduce the Iranian cultural heritage to the world, called " The dialogue between civilisations". Iran Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organisation (ICHTO) was formed which gave major responsibilities of developing the tourism industry to the private sector. Its own role was limited to policy making and strategic planning. A large number of local and professional experts got involved in the private development agencies including university professors and graduate students at different levels to work as consultants. These local agencies played a vital role in the city centre revitalisation. The replacement of central private consulting engineers and planners with local experts increased the efficiency and competence of the local authorities. The mentioned factors were a series of reforms in the economic, administrative and fiscal areas along with the evolution of conservation and regeneration policies during the last two decades (Table1). The combination of regeneration and conservation practices will lead to a more integrated urban revitalisation approach.

4. Conclusion

This paper attempted to address the identification of the dominant approaches to the revitalization of historic cities in Iran that were exercised by the urban authorities. The large-scale major interventions were discussed from a historic perspective. It was revealed that the objective of such attempts was invariably modernization of existing historic urban structures and environment. The planning and implementation of such programs was initially in the hands of the state and its powerful agencies having access to financial resources and the authority of decision making. The large-scale physical transformation programs, carried out under this framework intensified the existing problems and increased the rate of deterioration of existing city centers. During the last two decades however, this trend changed considerably due to certain reforms. These reforms were the result of devolution of power to local municipalities and bodies resulting in community based conservation and regeneration policies. Legal and regulatory frameworks, enhanced role of professional, devolution of authority, development and reinforcement of institutions and administrative capacities were the hallmarks of this new approach. The new integrated approach of conservation-led regeneration of the historic city centers needs to be further strengthened in Iran.

5. References

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