

## Historic Urban Landscape and Development Issues in Iran

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### Abstract

Urban development and conservation of built heritage are often reflected as two conflicting forces of city planning. It is in this sphere that heritage management should protect cultural heritage resources. However, the insufficiency of updated legislation as much as lack of effective organizational structures, breeds legal and administrative difficulties for safeguarding of built heritage and often it is with little or no integration in the broader urban development considerations. Therefore, an integrated approach for urban management was developed since 2011 to bring together the two seemingly contradictory agendas. Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) is a systematic approach and a management strategy that has been successfully applied in a number of cities around the world, aimed at safeguarding their built heritage within development initiatives. Iran is an accelerated developing country with hundreds of historic urban landscapes that are threatened with the crisis of urbanization. This paper explores challenges for conservation of built heritage in Iran from the perspective of HUL strategies.

**Keywords:** Historic Urban Landscape; Urban Development; Iran

### Introduction

Before 20th century, urban transformation in Iran was gradual and limited in size. Unless occasionally, governmental bodies were not involved in the developments; on the contrary, urban facilities and public settlements were established and maintained by private sector [1, pp. 42-45]. Religious sites were developed and tended through charities, such as Waqif, and based on Islamic law regarding protection of sacred sites [2], [3]. Through this period, new projects were sensibly situated within their context harmoniously [4].

Transformation of urban environments in Iran, was intensified soon after establishment of a centralized state in early 20th century, when the governmental bodies became involved in planning and they invested in urban scale development projects of the cities and their historical cores [5]. During 1920s, authoritarians upgraded legislation system in Iran according to modern movements and incorporated planning and urban management into that, while it

reduced those religious and private sector involvements [6]. In this paradigm, many of the historic quarters and traditional settings were demolished [7, pp. 463-475] under the dominance of modernization trends [4]. Consequently, until mid of 20th century, over half of the historic settlements in Tehran for example were destroyed for city development and modernization [8].

In the second half of 20th century, the conservation of built heritage was assimilated into the development programs, due to the raise in awareness and under the influence of western scholars [2], [9]. Conservation plans were initiated for historic quarters in Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz; however, it was not successful in action and conservation projects were restricted to selective monuments [10]. Furthermore, conferences were held on conservation of historic sites and structures, and some adaptive-reuse projects were carried out in historic cities of Iran [11, pp. 16-21], [12].

In 1986, Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization (ICHO) was established, under Ministry of Islamic

Guidance, by merge of 17 institutes working in the field of cultural heritage [2]. This was a new paradigm in management of historic quarters in Iran as it was followed by change of attitude from monumental approach in conservation to landscape concerns. Later in 1997, Urban Development and Revitalization Organization (UDRO) was established with the goal to coordinate regeneration projects and conservation plans in historic cities of Iran. The reformist movements of this new agency were the first attempts for a balance between sociocultural policies and aspects of political and economic developments [13]. In addition, seven regional committees and regeneration companies were set in different provinces by this new administrative change. Furthermore, The Third National Development Plan (2000-2005) considered the new regulatory reforms, integrated cultural policies, recognized the role of local authorities and adjusted the hierarchical management setting in historic cities [5]. Cultural Heritage Organization in 2004, merged with Tourism Organization and separated from Islamic Guidance Ministry, shaping an independent organization (ICHHTO). These administrative changes were accompanied by decentralization policies which shifted the role of UDRO from executor to regulator. Currently, the responsible agencies in the management of built heritage in Iran are: ICHHTO dealing with regeneration and urban plans in governmental commissions at national level, and UDRO as the authority regulating the strategies at regional and local level.

### Research Methods

The Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) is a holistic approach and an interdisciplinary framework for inclusive management of heritage resources in dynamic and constantly changing environments. It is grounded on the identification of the layers and inter-connection between natural and cultural, tangible and intangible, international and local values present in any city. Understanding our cities within this concept can equip with knowledge to guide planning decisions and manage urban changes. So,

HUL is both an approach for integration of urban conservation into an overall sustainable development framework, and also to comprehend the city vice versa. Then, this could contribute to diagnosis of the historic environment and leading to recognition of the complex elements that make our cities distinctive and create the sense of identity [14].

HUL in theory requires to adopt a range of interdisciplinary tools, which could generally be classified into four distinct groups:

- Regulatory systems constitute legislations and administrative framework for the management of both tangible and intangible dimensions of the built heritage.
- Knowledge and planning tools should help to preserve the integrity and authenticity of the built heritage values. Following identification of cultural significance, monitoring and management of change is provided. Through the cycles of impact assessments, the process of decision-making is supported aiming at sustainable development.
- Civic engagement should include a broad cross-section of stakeholders, and let them understand the heritage values in their built environment. Furthermore, it should authorize them to grow ideas, develop some goals, and correspond to the decisions made for safeguarding their built heritage.
- Financial strategies which may address building capacity for innovative income-generating development, rooted in the heritage. Besides, those funds provided by national and international agencies, financial tools should foster private investment at the local level [15].

### Results and Discussion

Throughout the recent decades, Iran witnessed a sharp increase in urban developments that has put historic urban quarters under the pressure of new threats. In this context, insufficient management strategies for the control of transformations have shown disruptive impact on the significance of the

cultural resources. From the perspective of HUL and by using the toolkit, some aspects of the inadequacies that are systematically rooted are discussed in each section.

**Regulatory Systems:** Apart from the two major organizations that are closely involved as the regulatory bodies for Iranian cultural heritage, there are a number of other agencies and diverse institutions who are engaged with the procedure of decision making and approval of plans for the historic quarters. Also, for the implementation there are Islamic Council of City and Village as well as the Municipalities that get involved. Each of those require their own expectations, priorities and opinions concerning whichever of the historic quarters. Consequently, lack of an integrated system for decision-making and urban management contributes to unsuccessful management of the built heritage in Iran [5].

Besides of need for an assimilated heritage management system, lack of up- to-date legislation by the Iranian Parliament and other involved institutions on the cultural heritage is problematic. Ambiguity in definitions, laws and the penalties even sometimes bring about interruption of built heritage integrity [16]. Those cases of changes in function of historic buildings in the Iranian heritage quarters, illegal developments, and disregard of restrictions limitation in the buffer zone of a UNESCO World Heritage such as in Golestan Palace of Tehran [17], are just a few examples.

Above that, Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization has made changes in the policies that it does not inscribe any new buildings to the national heritage list without consent of the building's owner. As a consequence of that, historical properties will be potentially less under protection by the legislations of cultural heritage. In this situation, a large number of historical bazaars in Iran, which belong to the private owners are under threat of demolition, alteration or any interventions that impact their signifi-

cance upon the will of the landlords, just after claiming for deletion of their properties from the national heritage list [18].

Another issue is that Iranian regulations for cultural heritage are outdated. Most of those were compiled when the sustainability concerns were not of priority at all. As a result, the approaches to safeguarding built heritage is not always parallel with protection of historic quarters in the cities, leaving urban heritage vulnerable to natural and human factors of deterioration. Although, in absence of such restrictive regulations, demolition of historic urban quarters is justified by the municipality. According to Article 171 of the Fifth Development Plan in Iran adopted in 2011, The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and the municipalities are obliged to rehabilitate at least 10 percent of historic deteriorated fabrics each year, however not explicitly defined. The Fifth Development Plan also could have been more applicable and influential, only if that put stress on conservation projects concerning urban heritage. Furthermore, the responsibility of the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization is not transparent in this procedure. Updated legislation is necessary in order to assist the ideas as well as approaches for conservation of built heritage, as a driver for sustainable development.

**Knowledge and Planning:** After the armed conflict between Iran and Iraq in 1990s, an accelerated development program in Iran initiated with a keen desire to compensate for its long stop. Therefore, a large number of natural and cultural resources were neglected by decision makers and planners [19]. During this period, Iran was one of the most dam constructing countries in the world [20]. The technocrats deemed this will be one of the most important dynamics for development in Iran as it can tackle the irrigation obstacles and it can respond to high demand for electricity power. As a result, many of the pre-historic and ancient sites went under threat of this rapid dam constructions. For instance, the dam of Seymareh, in western Iran, submerged sites of Palaeolithic, Bronze and Iron Age and also

Parthian, Sassanid and Islamic period architectural remains [19].

Some other urban development projects, also, impose on built heritage with insufficient knowledge and planning. For example, subterranean activities for subway construction project in Isfahan imposed acute risk on the built heritage. Historic monuments suffered physical damages, like the famous historic bridge of Si-o-Se Pol and the 16th-century Safavid monument of Charbagh School, as the project spread beneath those heritage sites [19]. In another example, by city expansions in recent decades, Tehran the capital of Iran witnessed roads and highway constructions at the price of built heritage destructions. One of the major cases for this was the establishment of the north-south Imam Ali Highway that happened to be constructed on the remains of the ancient Rey [21].

**Civic Engagement:** Lack of non-governmental involvement is one of the major issues in the management of built heritage in Iran. One of the prominent private institutions that is active in conservation of architectural heritage in Iran is The Office for Historic Building Restoration. It is supported financially with funds of private sector including the public and relevant agencies. Until 2018, this office could manage to list only 800 properties for conservation, out of over 31.000.000 historic assets that were registered on the national heritage list of Iran. Even though, out of those 800 buildings, by 2019, execution of the conservation projects initiated only for less than 300 cases [22].

Public awareness plays a vital role in civic engagement. There are insufficiencies in holding educating and promotional programs, which can help to advance understanding of the values in built heritage resources. Common inheritance has been shaped in the complex nature of relationships and responsibilities between the core community, authority decision-makers, ethnic groups, users, etc. however, at the end the local community are those who must get along with the results of the management plan.

That is why the participation of a wide range of stakeholders is emphasized and cultural heritage managers, after all, are informed and directed with the public opinion. Mutual understanding is the key to successful conservation results and should be founded in raising awareness and education programs. These programs should begin at schools and universities to raise visual and cultural awareness so that to enhance interpretation of our heritage, in addition to exclusive programs for training of experts.

**Financial Strategies:** Economy of Iran has been more or less influenced by international sanctions and isolations in different periods. In Iran, share of tourism revenue as a source of income that can relevantly sponsor the conservation of built heritage is really insignificant. According to UNESCO reports, Iran is the top 10th country by the number of World Heritage Sites [23]. However, in 2018, just above 7 million international tourists came to Iran that puts Iran as the 89th country in the world in terms of international tourists' arrival [24]. The reason could be traced in the consequences of sanctions, political views, adverse advertisements, restrictive rules for women, etc.

## Conclusion

This study attempted to elaborate on some challenges that development strategies in Iran bring about, which negatively affect the historic urban quarters. One of the most recent recommendations by UNESCO that marries between urban development strategies and conservation of built heritage is Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) that inspired the purpose of this research. Using the toolkit of HUL approach, this paper identified some gaps within the four criteria of regulatory systems, knowledge and planning, civic engagement, and financial strategies. It is understood that lack of integrative management structure and outdated legislations are the primary issues. Accelerated development plans fuelled by degraded priority for protecting built heritage sites is another problem. Clearly, in the context of Iran as a

developing country with thousands of ancient and historic sites, keeping built heritage safe must be situated at the centre for decision-making. Therefore, attempts to explain the gaps aim at stepping towards building capacity in the future with respect to the universal strategies.

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