Participation in urban renewal projects in Iran: An initial review of Mashhad, Shiraz and Tehran

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This paper considers participation and collaboration in urban renewal projects in three cities in Iran. Based on this initial research we will make suggestions for future urban regeneration studies. Goal 11 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development defines sustainable cities and human settlements and highlights the need for citizen participation and inclusion in planning (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Urban planning in Iran can be traced back to ancient times, for example to 2700 BC in the city of Shoush, and reached its peak during the period of the Safavid Empire (1502-1736) with the construction of roads, mosques, bazaars and public buildings (Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar and Badarulzaman, 2013).

Today, in Iranian urban planning, the past and the present vie for dominance and although some efforts are being made towards preserving the cultural heritage, centrally planned modernisation continues to dominate and contemporary urban planning and management suffer from a lack of participation from stakeholders, residents and private organisations as Bahrainy and Aminzadah (2007) found:

In Iran, large cities such as Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Tabriz, the decision-making and implementation of urban projects are not typically consultative.

Methodology

This review examines recent examples of urban design in Iran as a preliminary to engaging Mashad residents, local government and planning experts in identifying urban needs. We will then evaluate proposed prototype designs of specific neighbourhoods in the city. Digital participation tools will be used to engage residents. The emphasis of the study is public participation and the interrelationships between residents, government, planners and the market and how they affect the process and product of urban renewal projects.

Urban change

Urban areas are complex and dynamic reflecting processes that drive physical, social, environmental and economic transition. The historic cores of Iranian cities encompass many valuable buildings, historic landscapes and monuments. These areas are the product of a complex process of interaction between humans and the physical environment which has taken place over many centuries. Until the early twentieth century, the historic core of these ancient cities had been in a continuous process of slow change creating a sense of continuity and cohesiveness. Even large-scale interventions carried out by rulers, maintained a degree of respect for, and adaptation with, the past. Modern developments in the early twentieth century, however, changed this integrated, adaptive and evolutionary process (Izadi, 2008).

Sustainable urban regeneration

Today, sustainable urban regeneration is a priority of many development policies (Alpopi and Manole, 2013) moving beyond the aims, aspiration, and achievements of urban renewal which essentially is a process of physical change, urban development and urban revitalisation. Although urban revitalisation suggests the need for action, it fails to specify a precise method of approach. Urban regeneration implies that any approach to tackling the problems encountered in towns and cities should be planned with a longer-term, more strategic, purpose in mind (Roberts, 2008).

Lang’s (2005) model of urban regeneration (see figure 1), suggests that the process entails a simultaneous focus on physical regeneration, social regeneration, environmental and economic regeneration. This broader focus on four dimensions of change embraces a greater set of factors than just the architectural and infrastructure issues of urban design.

Figure 1: The concept of urban regeneration (Lang, 2005)

Strategy and partnership in urban regeneration

The challenge of the 1990s was to ensure that the questions of who benefits and who should benefit were placed at the forefront of discussion on urban regeneration (Robinson and Shaw, 1991). Frameworks relating to governance, use of partnerships and networks, and collaborative planning indicate the possibility of more inclusionary and effective approaches to strategy-building for urban regeneration (McCarthy, 2007). A strategic vision and framework needs to emphasise a genuine multi-sectoral working partnership
and co-ordinated and integrated initiatives, rather than focussing on single issues. In particular, it requires a long-term commitment, rather than stressing short-term outputs and costs; and the development of local regeneration strategies (Carter, 2008).

Community participation

Arnstein (1969) considers that participation with citizens may equate to citizen empowerment. However, in lower levels of participation the action is only formal, with no true power handed to citizens (Abbaszadegan, 2010). In focussing on partnerships in relation to community participation for regeneration, community development, and empowerment, it is useful to focus on three models of partnership, drawing upon the work of Mackintosh (1992).

- The synergy model suggests that by combining knowledge, resources, approaches and operational cultures, partner organisations will be able to achieve more than working on their own.
- The budget enlargement model is based on the knowledge that by working together the partners will gain access to additional funds that neither could access on their own.
- The transformational model (with a somewhat different focus) assumes that there are benefits to be gained by exposing the different partners to the assumptions and working methods of other partners (that is, it will stimulate innovation as part of a continuing process of development and change).

As the three examples show, they have applied the synergy and budget enlargement models. Transformational models, which challenge existing institutional and political arrangements and practices, are not evident. This study aims to explore the transformational space with digital tools.

Figure 2: The map of Iran, showing Tehran, Mashhad and Shiraz, the three study cities (Source Google Maps: fin)

The current urban planning system in Iran

The structure of Iranian institutions which formed and reformed through time is characterised by a powerful centralised system. The comprehensive and detailed planning model that has prevailed in Iran since the Second World War has been criticised on both theoretical and practical grounds for its many deficits, and from the 1960s, has been replaced in Western countries with more appropriate models such as strategic and participatory planning (McCarthey, 2007) and incremental planning (Turner and Wakely, 2015). However, in developing countries such as Iran, comprehensive planning continues to be used, as it has for five decades, remaining the officially preferred urban planning paradigm. Many of the criticisms levelled at the comprehensive model focus on the rigidity and stagnancy of its plans. Other concerns include the lack of interest in public participation; the reliance on model planning frameworks; raising land-use maps to the status of final documents; the lack of engagement with the real and changing world; and the lack of concern for the ability of the town to implement the plan (Farhoodi et al 2009).

Urban renewal projects in Mashhad

Mashhad is the second largest metropolis in Iran and is a city of great religious significance with millions of global and local pilgrims visiting the holy shrine of Imam Reza (AS) each year. Many have settled around the shrine (Rahnama, Kharazmi and Amini, 2016). As a city of religious significance, the political, economic and religious benefits rather than public or private benefits play a key role for any kind of development (Izadi, 2008).

Mashhad has 2,300 hectares of damaged areas along with problems such as heavy traffic, growing population, unsafe structures as well as historical elements (Rahnama, Kharazmi and Amini, 2016). The Supreme Council of Architecture and Urban Planning shows that about 3200 hectares of Tehran are in need of urgent renovation (Azizi, 2014). The central regions of Mashhad, which are considered damaged areas, still act as the linchpin of the city’s urban economy due to the holy shrine. But Samen region, which is the district surrounding the holy shrine and is the original urban core of Mashhad, provides a very poor quality of life and is considered an improper area for citizens to live in’ (Javadzadeh, 2013). The redevelopment of this region is one of the important urban projects in Mashhad.

Redevelopment in Samen district of Mashhad

To assess the sustainability of urban renewal projects in Mashhad questionnaires were randomly distributed among the 380 people residing in Mashhad city. Samen district has been developed in parallel with the holy shrine but with different policies based on the different political and social views of the holy shrine and distressed areas. The Mehran Comprehensive Plan adopted in 1992, considered the old, historic physical structures around the holy shrine were unworthy and were targeted for bulldozing. As a result of the urban redevelopment plan the district has lost most of
its old buildings, local business, historical urban spaces and local residents which have been replaced by modern hotels, shopping malls, new urban spaces and streets (Sarkheyl, Rafieian and Taghvae, 2016). Thus conventional demolition and modernisation processes are proceeding as before.

Social considerations in this redevelopment plan were very weak and the only form of participation was financial partnerships with temporary and permanent exhibitions held to advertise investment opportunities and investment packages. Anecdotally the level of the residents’ trust in the municipality and the redevelopment plan declined and many residents left the district (Asghapur Masule and Behravan, 2010). Before the recent renewal program, the district’s population was estimated at 58,000 with about 13,000 residential, retail and official plots (Asghapur Masule and Behravan, 2010). By 2011, the population had declined to 32,851 due to displacement and compulsory acquisition of land by the Mashhad Municipality (Sarkheyl, Rafieian and Taghvae, 2016).

The results from the study area led us to conclude that during the past decade there had been no intention or specific systematic and targeted programs to control, guide or organise the urban spaces. Municipality managers’ actions were limited to physical control and provision of services. Our study shows that public participation was low and the need for green spaces is emphasised (Ghesmi Shah Goldie, Ullah Farhoudi and Allah Ezati, 2015).

Redevelopment in Tehran

Tehran is a strategic and symbolic city at the intersection of the historic east–west (Silk Road) and north–south trading routes, and at the foot of Mount Damavand, which at 5,678 meters is the highest peak in Iran. After the city’s decline in the Middle Ages, it came to prominence when chosen as the capital of the Persian empire in 1785 (Madani, 1999). Over the last 50 years Tehran has experienced rapid population growth and physical expansion and rundown neighbourhoods are common. To address the deterioration of the built environment of the inner city, Tehran municipality established a principal renovation organisation which implemented a number of renewal projects (Abbaszadegan, 2010). But renewal was undertaken without consideration of its consequences resulting in an increase in urban problems. Today, regeneration plans for deteriorated zones is one of the main challenges to urban management (Azizi, 2014).

In 2008 the Renovation Corporation of Tehran established local renovation offices in dilapidated neighbourhoods with the aim of facilitating the residents’ participation in the renovation process. Members of these offices are from local district boroughs, local counsellors, local clergy, members of local stakeholders such as women’s leaders, local retail representatives. The scope of work of these offices is:

- Facilitation: to recognise stakeholders and making regular meeting with residents.
- Publicising and promotion: to enhance economic and social status.
- Institutionalisation: to promote organising social as well as economical groups that advocate renovation and rehabilitation of the deprived neighbourhoods.

Redevelopment in Khoobbakht district of Tehran

The selection of Khoobbakht in the district of Imam Ali (AS) in Tehran as the case study is important as a wide range of renewal models have been tested there (Sajjazadeh, Parto and Palizi, 2016). For the first time in Iran a participatory renewal procedure was introduced and will hopefully be a pioneering example for future projects. Our research was carried out to evaluate the level of participation in Khoobbakht project.

We found that there had been local participation, most of which occurred in the planning and implementation phase. In the stage of diagnosing and future perspectives of the district, participation was less, mostly because of the professional nature of this stage. There was no participation in supervising the implementation (Samineh and Andalib, 2016). Some claim the intervention approach of this project was technocratic, authoritarian and top-down (Abbaszadegan, 2010) but what is important is that there was a decision to move to a more participatory approach to planning.

Other related research about the effects of the urban renewal project on residential satisfaction concluded that in decentralised renewal projects, residents’ satisfaction increased with indices of green and public space, population density, access to leisure centres and value of residential units (Sajjazadeh, Parto and Palizi, 2016).

Redevelopment in Shiraz

Shiraz is one of the six prominent ancient cities in Iran and is known as its cultural capital and the destination for local and overseas tourists. Since 1997 the historic core of Shiraz and its quarters have been under significant reconsideration by the local authority and a new system of city centre management was established to engage a number of institutions and organisations alongside the local authority to resolve the issues of the city. In part this was a reaction to the brutal changes driven by the central government and the rapid urban sprawl and loss of vegetation. This changed the direction of the city centre planning and management and involved local empowerment and decentralised decision-making.

Sang-e Sia redevelopment

The program for regeneration of Sang-e Sia quarter, the historic core of Shiraz, has been the initial outcome of the trend of decentralised decision-making (Izadi, 2008).

The local authorities established a partnership among all major stakeholders involved. At local level this allowed for the mobilisation of the local resources and an opportunity to reconcile divergent interests and secure consensus among all stakeholders. The local authorities offered a set of practical policies, a comprehensive financing strategy, and an integrated approach dealing with both development and conservation concerns. The new approach was more
sensitive to local needs and a convergence between different approaches concerning the historic environment (Hanachi and Fadaei Nezhad, 2010). This new style of project management saw the planning as a process whereby the program could be adapted during its implementation. It was an innovative way of planning, deciding and acting which considered a series of practical factors regarding the changes and also local potential in each stage (Izadi, 2008). The main idea was to introduce a dynamic plan of action that was adaptive and flexible.

Although several creative strategies utilised by the local authority in this program to involve various public development agencies, we found that there was still a lack of direct involvement of residents and community groups in the process of decision making, planning, design, and implementation (Izadi, 2008).

Conclusion

For 50 years Iran has been using imported planning theories and government structures to deal with modern urban development. This is valuable in providing solutions for some urban issues, however, the shortcomings of development plans, government structure, and practical approaches have raised concerns and resulted in valuable inner-city areas falling into decline. The problem is one of governance which does not allow diversity and enrichment of institutional capacity. This is true from decision-making through to providing services (Farzaneh, 2011).

Generally, although urban development consultant engineers and architects are involved in the development plan for cities’ comprehensive plans as part of a special participation sector, they are not given the chance to participate in the decision-making process; the same applies to public opinion. Currently, the ways the private sector can participate in development planning and urban reconstruction is not clear. At this stage instead of giving priority to the needs and purposes of the public and giving powers to the municipality or to public participation, the demands and politics of central government remain an unalterable backdrop. Priorities are given both to the local actors, (in the terms of reference); to the experts (during plan making), and to the central government itself (in terms of final sanction) (Farhoodi et al 2009). This is also true of urban renewal projects in Iran.

The government, urban planners, and architects should act as facilitators and catalysts in the planning and design process to create an apparatus for people-centred planning to promote the feeling of locality and foster a more place-focused public reconstruction policy. We also conclude that in an activity as complex as urban design, particularly in a traditional context such as considering the old textures of Iranian cities, application of a thorough process may serve a significant goal by itself in capacity building, empowerment, education, and public awareness (Bahrainy and Aminzadeh, 2007).

We will test these theories in the next stage of our research. As Iranian people are interested in modern digital methods of communications, digital participation will be used for engaging both citizens and stakeholders in the urban regeneration projects. This allows them to apply strategies in a more integrated, flexible way and allow for longer-term approaches.

These methods and insights will be applied to this project. Readers are invited to contact the authors to learn more about the forthcoming analysis and results.

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