

DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN IRAN

Policies for an ancient country

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Abstract. This paper examines different threats to the Iranian cultural heritage posed by development and globalization in the recent decades. It aims to show how sometimes the concept of development has been at odds with the conservation of built heritage. The lack of updated legislation and efficient organizations has caused legal and administrative difficulties for the safeguarding of such heritage. In recent decades, Iran has accelerated its rate of development; however, the unsustainable progress programmes created several debates. The investment in the study on the vernacular and traditional ‘art of building’, learning from the past, and rethinking the concept of development are essential to put an end to the crisis of the protection of cultural heritage in a country with thousands of ancient sites and historic buildings.

1. Introduction

The Iranian Parliament had approved the law on antiquities in October 1930 more than two decades after oil was discovered in the southwest of Iran. The discovery, first in the Middle East, changed the fate of this ancient region; with the extraction of every barrel from the ground, the country could provide fuel for its development and modernization process. But since then, in many cases the concept of progress has been standing in contrast with the conservation of cultural and natural heritage. Injecting oil money into the economy before establishing the essential infrastructures of development pushed it farther away from sustainable development, which is meant to respect natural and cultural resources and use them as a driver for further development. Although the eight years Iran-Iraq war, 1980-1988, with irreversible damages to built heritage, halted the process of development, the post-war reconstruction phase started at an accelerated pace, which created new threats to historic centres, archaeological sites and cultural landscapes.

The 1930 law on antiquities remained as the main source for the next legislation on preservation of cultural heritage. These laws have not been reviewed and renewed for decades and cannot deal properly with both the necessity of the preservation of cultural heritage and the development of the country. The lack of updated legislation and effective organizations has caused legal and administrative difficulties for the safeguarding of such heritage. In some cases, the existing laws do not support the conservators against the destructive development plans. There are many instances that are in sharp conflict with any supporting laws in which administrative organizations plan and carry out

development programs without considering the conservation criteria. The numerous dam construction projects all around the country and the urban development plans, such as the metro system in the historic center of Isfahan, are among these examples.

A century after the inception of modernization in Iran, a holistic approach that can compromise and strike a balance between development and preservation has not been widely adopted; and still the necessity of rethinking the concept of development exists in a country with thousands of ancient sites and historic buildings.

2. Development and its challenges for Cultural Heritage

Although modernization was adopted in the Qajar period, mainly by Nasser al-Din Shah (1831-1896), but by the 1920s and 30s, it had reached its major development. As modernisation and nationalism were two important bases for King Reza Shah Pahlavi’s reign, reigning from 1925 to 1941, a new architectural style was coined inspired by ancient Persian architecture and was applied in modern public buildings like Banks, Police headquarter and stations, National museum, administrative buildings and schools.

Although in this period attention was paid to the preservation of ancient architectural heritage, historic centres became the victim of urban development programmes. Tehran lost its historic gates and fortification, and in other cities new high roads split the integrity of the historic centres (Makki 1945, 449). Of course, archaeology, research and conservation of monuments received considerable attention, and this could be used as an important showcase for the country (Rouhani 2009), but development programmes did not take account of the integrity of city centres and their local habitants.

In fact, the integrity of historic centres was an obstacle for modern urban planners, who believed that geometrical grid system had to be adopted by the historic fabrics. The result was “crucified cities”, as Guglielmo De Angelis d'Ossat (1971, 6) defined it; the cities that were ripped by the new streets and squares. In Isfahan, the former capital of the Safavid dynasty with an exemplar urban design from the 17th century, the oldest historic square of the city, Atiq Square, was split into two parts by the new and modern streets. Since then, the square became a marginal place in the city's life. This has also happened in other cities like Kashan, Hamedan, Qazvin and Yazd. All of these cities had the best-preserved examples of the vernacular and traditional architecture, and were compatible with regional climate and environment. In Kashan, a city situated on the edge of the central desert of Iran, the earthen architecture and organic urban design, created a harmony for defeating hot weather, dry air and lack of water. A modern 60m wide road was constructed exactly in the heart of the historic center by demolishing the historic buildings alongside the road. The new roads, in Kashan and other cities, soon became the important focal point for constructing new buildings and attracting the investors (De Angelis d'Ossat 1971, 10-12). Like the example of Isfahan, the historic centers that remained behind the modern developed roads and zones, were turned into abandoned and marginal spaces. The original populations of these districts left them and migrated to new parts of the cities. The abandoned city spaces were and are the houses of marginalized people, with high rates of crime. In this period, urban development tried to turn a blind eye on the historic centers and drew a line around them. It seemed that what had remained from the past, especially the examples of the vernacular architecture, did not deserve being integrated into the new life. The exceptions were the magnificent monuments and ancient sites, which had the ability of demonstrating the “golden past era”.

The 1960s and 70s were the golden ages for economic growth and ‘progress’ before the Islamic Revolution. Iran's petroleum production reached its highest level and provided a good opportunity for development plans.

Again in this period, enough attention was paid to conservation and restoration of built heritage but it was limited to what were considered as very important monuments and sites. With the activities of IsMEO, Italian Institute for Middle and Far East, scientific restoration was applied in ancient sites like Persepolis and some monuments of the Islamic era in Isfahan (Zander 1980), but on the other hand vernacular architecture and traditional techniques were neglected. Development in this period was equated with globalization. Modernist architecture and international style soon dominated the skyline of the cities. Soon, glass buildings were erected in a

country with long and hot summers. Iran, proud of its high rate of petroleum production totally forgot the traditional ways for adaptation to the physical environment, saving energy and using local craftsmanship and materials.

The ‘magnificent historic monuments and sites’ were restored in order to show the ‘glorious past’, but the important lessons that could be learnt from the vernacular and traditional buildings were dismissed. With various climates, ranging from arid to subtropical with very cold winter in the northwest and hot summer in the south, Iran has a long tradition in sustainable architecture. The best examples of earthen architecture in the Iranian plateau, which show a genius understanding of the relation between man and nature, are found in the cities such as Yazd, Kashan, Kerman, Dezful and Shushtar.

Iran has always been praised for its genius system of Qanat or Kariz, which is an underground system of water supplying dating back to 2,700 years ago. Qanats that are constructed as a series of vertical shafts into the ground, connected by a sloping tunnel or channel, are able to deliver water from a long distance to the surface (Kheirabadi 2000, 88-93). In fact, this ancient technology was a human response to the environment in such an arid area. By applying this technique, many cities were developed in the past, far from main resources of water. However, these tunnels need maintenance and dredging. From more than 38,000 Qanats that were in use in Iran until 1966, half of them are destroyed or out of use (Ahmadi, Nazari Samani, and Malekian 2009, 135). In many cities, like Tehran, Yazd and Isfahan, sewage and wastewater have entered the Qanat channels. Instead of using this traditional water supplying system, city managers dismissed them and turned them to sewage system.

3. Dam construction a new threat for the ancient sites

During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), cultural and natural heritage in both countries were impacted by the direct and indirect effects of the conflict. Because of the war, low production and low price of petroleum and also international sanctions, development programmes in Iran were stopped for a decade. Restarting in the 1990s, the accelerated development programme had a greedy appetite to compensate its long stop. During this time, both natural and cultural resources were ignored by decision makers and planners.

The country reached one of the highest rates of dam construction in the world (Rahimi 2011). Pointing out this high rate, the technocrats believed that the dam construction is one of the most important factors for progress in such a region with irrigation difficulties and high demand for electricity.

Iran, with 1,648,195 km² area and more than 75 million population, has just an average annual precipitation of about 250mm. It means that the country is in dire need of water management and water saving. The response to this demand in the recent decades is only given by the industry of dam construction. The number of dams only in the past two decades has increased by 10 times and reached a total number of 190 dams, while hundreds of other dam projects are still in the design phase or under construction (Almasvandi 2011). But this hastily industry has persistent critics, who believe that this is a harmful and unsustainable approach to development. This approach to dam construction has been challenged by environmentalists and archaeologists, who are worried about irreversible damage to ancient sites and to the environment. Many important archaeological sites have been threatened by these projects or have been submerged in the lake of the dams. According to ICOMOS World Report 2004-2005 on monuments and sites in danger, from 85 dams under construction many had potential threats to Iranian cultural heritage (110). Sivand, Seymareh, Karun-3, Kalan, Alborz, and Malayer dams are among these ambitious projects. Some of these projects threatened the ancient dams too. The oldest remaining evidence of dam construction in Iran dates back to the Persian Empire or Achaemenid period, ca. 500 BC (Sadigh 2007). This process continued in the Sassanid period, 224-651 AD, especially in the Khuzestan plateau in the southwest of modern Iran (Pacey 1997, 8-13). Some of these ancient dams were constructed in the best geographical location that enabled them to save water (Farshad 1983, 252-265). As modern dam designers and engineers also had to choose these strategic points, lots of archaeological remnants of ancient dams have been threatened by new constructions. In Saveh, a 2700 years old region, new Al Qadir dam destroyed the 700 years old "Band-e-Shah Abbas" dam (Tehrani 2006). The other example is the ancient Sassanid dam of Jarreh in Ramhormoz, southwest of Iran, which is in danger by new dam construction. In many cases, including Jarreh and Saveh, the rescue operation and archaeological surveys have not been carried out before submerging the ancient structures, or the operations were not successful.

Apart from the historic dams, many pre-historic and ancient sites are also under threat by dam construction. The dam of Seymareh, in western Iran, submerges many sites, including Paleolithic, Bronze and Iron Age sites and also Parthian, Sassanid and Islamic period architectural remains. In April 2011, the state-owned Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization permitted the process of filling the new dam with water to be started. K. Abdi, an Iranian archaeologist who worked in the Seymareh region, told Hamshahri Newspaper that the rescuing mission of the endangered sites started too late and it would not be able to save more than 10 percent of the whole area

(Barikani, 2011). He and other archaeologists believed that if the rescue project had been started at the right time, many ancient sites in the Seymareh region would have been saved.

Dam construction also has negative effects on natural resources and landscapes. Many have blamed dam construction as one of the important reasons for the lake Urmia's desiccation in recent years. This salt lake in the north-west of Iran is the biggest inland lake of the country and the third biggest salt lake in the world. It has a cluster of about 50 tiny islands, which are the homes of wildlife. Since 1976, the lake is inscribed on the UNESCO Biosphere Reserves list. These reserves are more than just protected natural zones as "they are nominated by the UNESCO to promote and demonstrate a balance relationship between people and nature" (UNESCO 2010, 1). The lake is integrated in the life of millions of people living in the Azerbaijan and Kurdistan provinces of Iran, and its disappearance may negatively affect agriculture. The cultural landscape of the lake is consisted of more than 300 sites from Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze, Iron, Historical and Islamic periods (Niknami, Amirkhiz, and Jalali 2009). The environmental crisis of the Lake Urmia is compared with the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which has been shrinking since 1960s after that Soviet Union diverted the rivers that fed it for irrigation projects. Another type of development projects that put the cultural heritage sites at risk is road construction. Bishapour, an ancient Sassanid city founded in 266 by Shapur I (241-272) in Fars province, is endangered by a transit road project (Mehr News Agency 08 March 2011). The explosions required for the project may damage the famous rock relief of Sassanid king Shapur II at Tang-e Chowgan gorge, close to Bishapour. The project aims to change a rural road, passing through the ancient city, into a high transit way. Archaeologists are worried that increasing the congestion damages the ruins, including the temple and the cross-shaped hall with outstanding mosaics.

4. Urban projects

Cultural heritage sites are not only threatened by dam and road constructions, but they are also in danger as a result of different urban development projects. In historic cities, urban development plans have not yet reached a balance between safeguarding historic-cultural values and responding to the new necessities of the citizens. In Isfahan, metro construction has become a real concern for the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, conservators and media, because the project has created high risks for the famous historic bridge of Si-o-Se Pol and the 16th century Safavid monuments like Charbagh School, as it passes underneath these monuments. Si-o-Se Pol (the 33 Bridges) or Allahverdi Khan Bridge, built

in 1603 in Isfahan, is one of the most important bridges in Iran, and is a part of Shah Abbas's urban plan in his capital. The bridge is built on the Zayandeh Rud River, the largest river on the central plateau of the country, at the termination of the Chahar Bagh, the main boulevard of Shah Abbas' urban project. It spans 300 meters, linking the city to New Julfa, the new Armenian neighborhood (Blair and Bloom 1994; Michell 1978).

In September 2011, the cultural heritage activists and bloggers from Isfahan published some new photos from the bridge that showed the cracks in different parts of the historic structure. They claimed that the Superintendent office of Historic Monuments in Isfahan was covering the cracks by fillers, before carrying out any structural analysis to distinguish their types. Although scientific analysis has not been carried out in order to distinguish the main reason of the cracks and its typology, many in Isfahan claim that they are the result of underground construction. The construction of the underground in Isfahan started in 2002. In a part of its route, the underground passes under the historic center of the city and the river. This part of the project has been objected to by the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, the experts of conservation and many activists. They believe that it may cause damages to the irreplaceable historic structures of the city.

The metro construction was stopped once at the request of the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, but later the president of the city council revealed that Iran's Interior minister has ordered the construction to be resumed.

In September 2009, the Tunnel-Boring Machine (TBM) that was working under the river was redirected and diverted 40m from its main way and approached the bridge, because of a technical problem. A cultural heritage activist at that time claimed that the extracted rubbles from the machine, when it was working near the bridge, were a mixture of different materials with different colors, and it might have been a result of hitting the foundation of the bridge (Sepanta 2009). However, this was rejected by both the "Isfahan Urban Railway Organization" and the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization. On 28th August 2011, an expert from the Isfahan Office of Historic Monuments, who wanted to remain anonymous, told the Shargh Newspaper, there is no doubt that the TBM has caused damages. However, these claims cannot be proven unless scientific analyses can be done by an independent organization.

There was also the ground subsidence at a short distance from the bridge. On 30th August 2011, Abdollah Jabalameli, the supervisor of the bridge's project told the ISNA News Agency that he was not able to recognize the reason of the bridge's subsidence, because it needed scientific analyse,

which has not been done yet. He believes that when in the future, the underground trains start working, further concerns and worries will be evoked. The underground trains will run every 5 min and produce the kind of vibrations that may have destructive effects on the bridge.

Again in Isfahan, another urban project raised concerns for the historic Atiq Square. The square, that was the historic core of the city's expansion and development, had been torn by Abdul Razzaq Road about 50 years ago. But in recent years, another urban project was jeopardised again. The development project of the square aims to turn it into a big shopping and business centre with an underground road and a multi-storey car park. The heavy construction of the project is faced with two major objections by both the archaeologists and architects. Given the historic background of the square, the archaeologists believe that before starting any operation, which could destroy the ancient evidence of the city development, archaeological surveys had to be carried out, and the findings should be documented. On the other hand, there are many architects, who believe that such kind of development project in the heart of the historic centre may undermine the cultural and historic values of the area. The Atiq square is located next to the Jameh Mosque of Isfahan, which is one of the oldest mosques of Iran and is a result of continual construction; therefore it is a showcase of the progress in architectural creativity.

Now, the most important question is why the historical and cultural values of thousands of monuments and sites, like in Isfahan, are not considered in such development projects, including dam, underground and road construction?

5. Lack of updated legislation

Cultural heritage, in its vast meaning from tangible to intangible, can effectively participate in the development process of the country and meanwhile remain safe and respected, only when it is supported by protective and updated laws.

The accelerated rate of development in Iran has necessitated the review of the actual law on cultural heritage. However, not only the review has not taken place by the Iranian Parliament and other responsible organizations, but the vacuums in the present law open the way for further damages to such heritage.

In post-conflict reconstruction period in Iran, started in 1990s, the municipality of Tehran applied a new policy for increasing its economic income, which was a necessity for the urban development (Lalami and Hosseini 2007). In this process, both the approved detailed plan of the city and the protective recommendations for the historic urban fabrics were ignored by the municipality and the city managers. They went the approved city density limit by selling the density to the applicants. This caused major constructions in Tehran, especially in the northern part of

it, famous for its natural landscapes and gardens. In a few years, the gardens of Shemiran, the northern district of the capital, disappeared and were replaced by modern skyscrapers.

It is more than 80 years that the Iranian archaeologists, architects and experts of cultural heritage, keep on updating the National Heritage List, with the hope that this register, as an effective legal instrument, safeguards the cultural properties. But the reality is that now the register is faced with a legal challenge, which has undermined its objective. In 2010, a supreme court removed several historic buildings from the National Heritage List, because the property owners had claimed that their ownership right had been violated by the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization. In this case, the ownership right was the permission to destroy historic properties and to construct modern buildings. The destruction of some of these properties has started now. On the other hand, the Cultural Heritage Organization, which is formally the only responsible authority for registering monuments and sites on the National Heritage List, has declared that from now onward it would not inscribe any monument without the owners' consent and permission. This means that in future less valuable historic properties, especially houses, are going to be protected by law, as many owners prefer to destroy their historic houses and construct multi story apartments.

The process of removing properties from the National Heritage List has just started but it is not clear when and where it would stop. It is also questionable that if other private owners intend to remove their inscribed properties from the NHL, how many monuments and historic buildings will lose their legal protection? Considering the fact that there are still many historic bazaars in Iranian cities, each of them containing numerous historic shops, caravanserais and *teemchehs* (a kind of small passage with shops inside a bazaar), concerns about these places would be escalated, if their owners decide to follow the new opened way for removing their properties from the NHL. The demolition in the historic center of Shiraz, which started thirty years ago, has been accelerated now because of the legal vacuum, and is legitimated under the necessity for the urban development and rehabilitation of the historic center.

6. Heritage and development: a crucial debate

After analyzing the most crucial elements of an unsustainable development, which threatens cultural and natural recourses in the country, now the question is how a developing country such as Iran, can create a balance between the necessity of development and the protection of cultural heritage? And how this heritage can become

a driver for the development in the country? Turning to the initial point, the first domestic law on cultural heritage was approved more than 80 years ago, and the next legislation was formed on the basis of the primary law. The vacuums in the legislation, as shown above, have led to removing cultural properties from National Heritage List. The inefficient structure of the responsible organizations for the protection of cultural heritage has permitted development projects to ignore the economic, social and cultural values of the historic city centers.

The first and the next laws on cultural heritage in Iran were approved when still the idea of sustainable development was not globally introduced. Therefore, the approach to the cultural heritage, embodied in these laws doesn't provide a creative way for such heritage to participate in the development process of the country. This is especially true for the historic urban fabrics and city centers. Although the law emphasizes the necessity of the protection of these centers, but it is not successful in providing a strategy for safeguarding them. Therefore, city managers always complain that for the protection of these historic centers they need an over budget fund, which is not ever available. Consequently, these urban fabrics are left defenseless against different natural and human-made factors of deterioration, and when they are deteriorated or useless, their demolition is justified by the city managers.

According to Article.171 of the Fifth Development Plan of Iran (2011), the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and all the municipalities annually have to rehabilitate at least 10 percent of deteriorated urban fabrics. Here, the law is not explicit about the historic centers and cultural heritage. It just refers to the "deteriorated urban fabrics" that is not precisely historic center or built heritage. Although the strategy for rehabilitation of the useless urban fabrics and centers is an appropriate policy for using these urban spaces, but it could be more effective if the law and the Fifth Development Plan had a particular emphasis on the revitalization and rehabilitation of historic urban centers. Questionably, the role of the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization (ICHHTO) is not considered in this process. This unique opportunity, predicted in the Fifth Development Plan, would have been a solution for safeguarding the historic centers and integrating them into the contemporary life of the cities, if the participating of the governmental and non-governmental cultural heritage organizations had been considered.

On the other hand, the government has "permitted" all the governmental organizations, ministries and offices to buy historic buildings in order to save them. In this case, the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism organization should undertake the conservation and restoration projects of these properties. One amendment in this legal provision might be changing the "permission" clause to

the “obligation”. Annually, the state-owned organizations spend parts of their budget to obtain, buy or build new premises. If the law obliged them to dedicate a part of this budget, obviously not whole of it, to buy and reuse the historic buildings, a large number of these properties could be saved. Clearly, this solution cannot rescue all historic buildings and centers, but is able to provide a strategy to reuse the valuable buildings. The strategy has economic, social and cultural benefits. Comparing the cost of reusing a historic building with the cost of a new construction, economically will balance this legal approach. The cultural and social benefits of this decision are not deniable, as it helps in safeguarding the cities’ historic features and the connection of people and citizens with their common heritage.

Iran has passed the period in which the energy consuming could be extremely cheap. In 2011, after decades of subsidies, the government cut the subsidies to energy and thus the prices have risen sharply. The country has to bid farewell to the thoughtless consuming of the energy in all its different sectors. For many years, thanks to the cheap energy, building constructions and the architectural designs were not energy-friendly and permitted a great loss of valuable amount of energy. The modern full glass buildings, in the hot and always sunny cities, and extremely poor thermal insulated constructions, are two major reasons for energy wasting. According to the Iranian Energy Productivity Organization, the country consumes electricity 17 times more than Japan and 8 times more than all the European countries,. Twenty percent of the total amount of the electricity is used for air conditioning (Mohazzab Torabi 2011). In 1990, Iran published the National Building Code, which in its 19th chapter dealt with energy saving in the buildings. However, the code remained optional for more than 14 years, and after that, became compulsory only for the state building constructions and the buildings that are located in Tehran. Now the situation must change, otherwise the country will face the lack of energy in the next years.

Apart from applying the new code for energy saving in building constructions, there are many essential lessons that can be learnt from traditional and regional architecture in Iran. The first simple but sadly forgotten lesson is compatibility with environment, climate and nature. The typology study on the traditional and vernacular architecture of the country reveals that the creative architectural forms in the Iranian plateau have always been linked to the climate variety. Therefore, a wise reflection on this heritage would result in emergence of a new understanding of local architecture. The poor copy-pasted architectural patterns, diffused carelessly all around the country, are not only inconsiderate of the environment and climate features, but also waste energy. By establishing again a link between architecture and its surrounding, environment and nature, the result would be

variety in architectural patterns, which creatively respond to today’s necessity. Obviously, this doesn’t mean a non-creative imitation of the traditional forms and structures, but rather this should be based on an understanding of the relationship between human and nature.

However, the changes in the present attitude should be supported by an updated legislation, which reflects the necessity of accepting the heritage as a driver for sustainable development. Yet, the legislation should carefully oblige all the development projects to include cultural and natural heritage surveys in their planning phase in order to prevent any possible damages to this heritage. Preparing the archaeological database of the ancient sites in Iran would have been a scientific platform for legislators and heritage experts obliging project planners to pay attention to these sites and prevent potential damages. But the database, started three decades ago, has not had an outstanding achievement. The cultural heritage in Iran now faces a legislative and administrative crisis that has threatened its continuity. Once these challenges are resolved, the lesson derived from this heritage would help carry forward the concept of sustainable development in the country.

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