

The impact of modernization on traditional Iranian cities the case of Kerman

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Abstract: Historical urban centers in Iran are significant because of their population density and location, but also because of the major functions of the central buildings that are very often historical monuments and valuable urban ensembles. Historical urban quarters are special places not only because of the cultural heritage they house, but also because of their urban pattern.

Widening streets to facilitate automobile access to the historical fabric of the city has had a deleterious impact on the network of paths through the city, and has caused the spatial coherence of the ancient fabric to fracture.

The study of urban history reveals that a variety of factors have influenced the development of ancient cities, with one of the most important factors being the economy. In fact, the very survival of a city was highly dependent on its economic power. As the most significant pedestrian network and backbone of a city, the bazaar plays an important role in the development and livability of traditional Iranian cities.

Located along the Silk Road, Kerman, which was once a trading metropolis of international renown, has one of the most historical bazaars in Iran. Kerman was chosen for its location and the role its bazaar once played in the formation of the city itself. This paper analyzes two examples of where modern construction and the old urban bazaar intersect, and discusses how the old urban texture is being lost.

Keywords: bazaar, traditional cities, modernization, street, Iran, cultural heritage, Kerman, transformation, neighborhood centers.

1. Introduction

Old urban areas are valuable constituents of cities and generally tend to be located in the central area. In Iranian cities, these areas formed the hub of the city before the onset of urban planning, development, and design in the 20th and 21st centuries. Old bazaars as the main commercial centers and mosques as religious centers are located here.

Cities evolved from concepts that maintained the city walls which defined the cities' positive shape in space and their correspondence with cosmic laws. They preserved the concept of a center but a center as a single point in space that moves in time and creates the line, or the linear element, of the bazaar. This orientation towards a moving point introduced a more vital planning concept

which, even today, accepts growth and change as natural phenomena of existence. Cities and buildings, analogous to the forms of nature, appear complete and beautiful at every stage of their growth. As vital forms they have within them the heritage of their past and the seeds of their potential future [1].

The study of urban history reveals that a variety of factors have influenced the development of ancient cities, with one of the most important factors being the economy. In fact, the very survival of a city was highly dependent on its economic power. The economy also played an important role in the development of Iranian cities, and of the diverse public spaces used for economic and commercial activities, the bazaar is considered to be the most important. The bazaar, a traditional public space in Iranian cities, has always accommodated a wide

variety of commercial activities in urban life. The history of the bazaar and urbanization are interrelated and in fact, no Iranian city can be imagined without its bazaar. The word "bazaar" is an old Persian word that is now an integral part of Iranian culture. The word has a very long history indeed and historical documents indicate that the concept of a bazaar in Iranian towns and cities dates back to 3000 B.C.

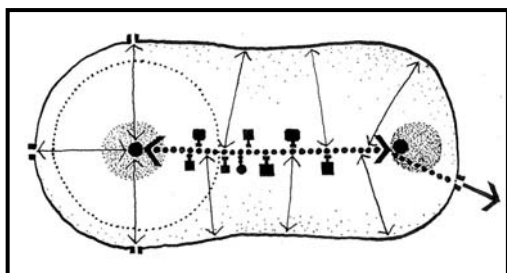


Fig1. The concept of point and line
The center as a single point in space moves in time and creates the line or the linear concept of the bazaar.

Urban sociologists, urban planners and designers generally explain the bazaar as the very heart of the Iranian city. On the spatial level, the bazaar is seen as the center of the spatial system in Iranian cities.[2] The bazaar is usually linear in shape and public and socio-cultural spaces are positioned through this linear form. In the west, the meaning of the word "bazaar" has changed from it being a place where a wide variety of artifacts and services are to be found and traded, to it being a place of disorder. In truth, the traditional Persian bazaar was a highly organized commercial and financial center and linked to the mosque, the seminary (*Madrassa*), the religious club (*Takiya*), the caravanserai, and the bathhouse (*Hammam*), it was the spiritual and cultural heart of the Iranian town. This arrangement was not always apparent to the casual visitor. The bazaar is where important political events are celebrated, or where indeed they are deliberately not celebrated in order to express political disagreement. Moreover, the bazaar is the main urban space where important ritual ceremonies are conducted.

The bazaar traditionally begins at the palace precincts which symbolize the spiritual head of the body, and grows in

an apparent natural pattern towards its symbolic heart (Great Mosque) and then proceeding to the opening of one of the city gates. The bazaar develops as the vital backbone of the city and the pedestrian streets leading into the city's body proper insert themselves as ribs. Within this structure, the vital organs of the city i.e. bathhouses, schools, caravanserais, bakeries, water cisterns, tea houses and numerous merchant and craft stores evolve and flourish. Together, all these 'organs' represent the religious, political, financial, and social integration of the traditional city. The city walls and gates define and protect the mass of the body proper. As the linear system of the bazaar grows and the residential areas spread out from the main spine, the old skin is shed and a new layer is created. The identity and boundaries of man, his city and his universe are once again established [1].

Located along the Silk Road, Kerman is a city of strategic, historical and political significance. Commercial trading with adjacent cities was easy as Kerman lies on a vast plain. Kerman is the most remote of Iranian cities in the chain of cities that cut through the central plateau in the east of the country. The Kerman bazaar was part of the Silk Road, the oldest and most important trading route in eastern civilization. This made it a very international bazaar indeed. Since ancient times, this city has been one of the most important points that connect west to east, and north to south.

This particular attribute has had a remarkable influence on the construction and development of the bazaar, in such a way that the commercial zones of the city have expanded to the outskirts. As a result, the commercial axis and city plan have been designed based on the main commercial lines. The south-north and east-west lines link important commercial gates to each other. This kind of plan justifies its important role and makes the architectural plan of the commercial axis a cross-shaped intersection which made the bazaar in Kerman into one of the most beautiful bazaars in Iran. Moreover, this development made for easy access between the bazaar and the old quarters of the city.

The bazaar is today still the commercial hub of Kerman, thanks to its location and the fact that it continues to have an essential commercial function. The shops and *sarāys* in the bazaar house numerous trades, crafts, and service providers. There are both itinerant retail traders and permanent retail establishments, and private and public services. Wholesalers, agents, export and import businesses, finance and credit services, crafts and trades and all the related brokerage activities are to be found here. One major positive development is that the bazaar has acquired a new commercial function as a tourist destination, visited for its sights and sounds as well as for its goods and services. This has resulted in a proliferation of shops that specifically cater for tourists by making, buying and selling traditional craft products, some of which only survive because the main clients are tourists.

2. Problem Formulation

As described above, the bazaar played a significant role in the social life of the city, and the many activities found here made it an exciting, bustling place, in fact the most lively place in the city. Widening the streets from the mid twentieth century onwards resulted in morphological and functional disruption to the historical urban structure. These wide streets affording free traffic access to different parts of the city were eminently suitable for shops and commercial spaces. This created numerous problems for the old bazaar because both consumers and shopkeepers prefer to have shops near streets rather than shops in a covered bazaar with no automobile access.

It was at this time that a comprehensive program of external city expansion was started. The old urban districts fell into decay and rapidly became slums. And population movements in recent decades speeded up this process. The prosperous classes moved to the newer parts of the city, and a flood of rural migrants in need of cheap accommodation and jobs in the 'informal sector' of the economy found their way to these areas. This influx of people led to overcrowding, often with

several families living in one house, and sometimes in a single room. Used in this way historic buildings soon fall into ruin. The result has been social and economic segregation: high class and educated people only live, work, and shop in modern parts of cities. The historical parts are used only by immigrants who have gone there to work and save money for their families. Many inhabitants of old quarters have little interest in conservation, and even less in restoring the buildings in which they live because they cannot afford to do so. Moreover, these residents reach a point where they no longer appreciate the heritage surrounding them and are willing to forsake it at the first opportunity for some more modern type of housing. In addition to the old residential centers going to rack and ruin, old public buildings such as bathhouses, caravanserais and so on remained unused because more modern service centers were developed and put to use.

Building modern shopping centers next to modern streets places business – the most important function of the bazaar – in jeopardy. The fate of many old bazaars in Iran over the past few decades has been that they have been abandoned and left derelict. Large areas of most old urban centers are becoming desolate wastelands of empty stores and buildings hostile to life.

With their often thousands of years of history, old towns are living witnesses to the process of civilization. They give their inhabitants identity and facilitate social and cultural cohesion. If old historical urban districts are destroyed by ruthless modernization, urban identity is lost. The conflict between old and new is the most intense in city centers. When cities grow, they usually expand around an initial urban nucleus and consequently the bigger the city becomes the more internal its old center. Old centers are therefore usually located in the most strategic part of the city, conveying a significant element of every society's urban identity. At the same time, old cores are not capable of accommodating the requirements of contemporary life in a modern city

center since they were generated by social and environmental circumstances that are different from those that prevail today.

3. Pattern Analysis

Today, the role of the bazaar has declined because the considerable and rapid changes Iranian society has undergone have diminished its importance as a public space. Retaining the bazaar's importance and its heritage would require substantial revitalization. When applying revitalization strategies in traditional cities in Iran, it is the bazaar, as the most important and life giving part of the city, that should be given precedence as the main artery that carries life (or damage) to other parts of the city.

This paper analyzes the structural and spatial changes that have taken place over the past few decades in the central district of Kerman. This analysis looks at the impact building new roads has had on the old bazaar and at what has in fact been done where new urban constructions and the old city fabric and the bazaar intersect. Two aspects of Kerman city are taken as examples and examined in this paper. The first aspect explores the impact of modern streets on neighborhood centers and their components, and the second aspect discusses the intersection of the modern street with the most important pedestrian network of the old city, the main bazaar.

3.1 First case study: the impact of new streets on old neighborhood centers

Neighborhood centers play an important role in the social and cultural life of a city, and in the past each neighborhood had its own shopping and service center which made the district dynamic and lively for local residents. Apart from its role in the district itself, the neighborhood centers were shaped around a *bāzārča*, or small bazaar, a branch of the main bazaar and it connected nearby districts to the main bazaar. These neighborhood passages were like arteries distributing lifeblood to all parts of the body, carrying the life and dynamism of the main bazaar, as the main commercial and social element and the structural backbone of the city to other districts even those quite far away. These pathways in Iranian cities are of secondary importance to the main bazaar, and render residential

quarters accessible through a system of paths peripheral to each walled quarter. Normally four to five meters wide, these pathways lead through the encircling walls through gateways. Constantly kept in the shade by the surrounding high walls, these paths are today cool channels for pedestrian circulation even in the hottest of summers.



Fig2. Aerial photo, Kerman 1956
1. *takiya* 2. wrestling center 3. mosque
4. bathhouse 5. bazaar

The photograph above shows a small bazaar that was built in conjunction with the main bazaar and it also acts as a passageway to link nearby neighborhoods with each other and so to the main bazaar. Apart from a few shopping areas and service centers such as the mosque as the religious center, a bathhouse, wrestling center and *takiya* with its open public space at the front were also built along the passage which made it a bustling hive of activity.

In 1979, a street was built in the middle of this passage and as a result nearby neighborhoods no longer have pedestrian access to the main bazaar. Furthermore, the service centers along this passage also encounter a number of problems: the bathhouse and mosque continued to operate because they were connected to the main bazaar, but the wrestling center experienced difficulties because it is located right next to the newly built street and was isolated from the neighborhood and residential areas. Somehow *takiya* did continue to be active, but because it was no longer connected to the mosque, the main religious centre of the bazaar, it could not perform its duty as it should.

The photograph in figure 3 was taken in 1994. The intersection of the street and the passageway has not changed and no

special design changes have been made. As a result of structural and social change, nothing of the neighborhood center remains. The bathhouse has been abandoned without there being any plan to restore or renovate it. The building causes numerous problems for local residents because it is no longer structurally safe and many drug dealers and thieves also perpetrate their crimes here.



Fig3. Aerial photo, Kerman 1994
1. takiya 2. wrestling center 3. mosque
4. bathhouse 5. bazaar

The mosque and *takiya* are still active because of their religious function and thanks to the financial aid they receive from the government. The wrestling centre is being restored. It is still considered to be a fine example of traditional wrestling centers but again, because it is isolated from the main bazaar, it is not visited by tourists who are attracted to the main bazaar every day.



Fig4. Land use map of the area, 1994

The map above shows the impact of the new street: numerous shops are located along this modern street, and the shopping centers around the old passageways no longer operate, the new

street interrupts the pedestrian network and we can see that no restoration work has been done at the intersection.

3.2 Second case: the impact of the new street on the southern part of the main bazaar

The Kerman bazaar has been and still is the liveliest place in the city. And it continues to exert considerable influence on the cultural, economic and social life of the town.

In this case study the influence of a new street on the main bazaar will be demonstrated and analyzed comprehensively and its impact on the network of pathways in the city is discussed. Figure 5 shows the southern part of the main bazaar in Kerman in 1956. The main bazaar was the most important thoroughfare through the city and in some parts open public spaces were created along the covered bazaar. This open space was generally located where the main bazaar and the minor pathways meet.



Fig5. Aerial photo, Kerman 1956
1. bazaar, 2. open public space, 3. open space of the takiya, 4. mosque

There are also other public spaces where the main bazaar intersects with a secondary pathway; in this photo we can see a mosque and a *takiya* with its open spaces that were located at the intersection point. Once the wide street had been built near the previous secondary passage, the continuity of the main bazaar was lost and the main thoroughfare in this area is no longer the bazaar. The main bazaar

broke up into two parts and unfortunately these two parts were no longer connected to each other because some parts were demolished when the street was being widened. The open public space now had no purpose. The original idea for an open space alongside the covered bazaar is now irrelevant because the street is now much wider than this old square and the covered bazaar itself is no longer a continuous whole.

The last photo, taken in 1994, shows that the previous problems still exist and no specific design changes have been made at the intersection point. Many shopping centers are located along the new street and as can be seen in the photograph, many parts of the residential quarter behind the main bazaar are falling into disrepair and apart from the buildings right next to the street, the other areas of the quarter are structurally desolate.

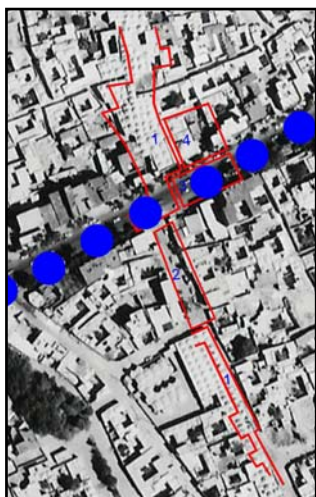


Fig6. Aerial photo, Kerman 1994

4. Conclusion:

Cities change and develop as time passes. This transformation is a continuous and dynamic process during which the physical environment and spatial spaces increase in number and change in quality. If this process occurs rapidly and without a plan or program, we will face spatial and structural problems in urban areas. As an illustrative case for other traditional Iranian cities, Kerman has encountered serious problems during this transformation process. The bazaar in the old city of Kerman was the main thoroughfare which also linked the main city gates to each other and many public centers were located around the main bazaar. Building modern streets in the

old city of Kerman was somehow inevitable, but what is vital for the structure of historical quarters is where the New and the Old intersect.

In previous case studies the most destructive factor of the modernization process occurred at the intersection points, new constructions were designed and built without any attention being given to the spatial and functional components of the old. There was no restoration or spatial design, and the old quarters lie abandoned and dilapidated. Unfortunately, modernization trends in Iranian cities only attempt to find space for automobiles, and no public place or pedestrian pathways are designed or restored in this process. The result is that our cities die on the inside. There is no longer any social or cultural activity in the historical parts of the city, and only a few important monuments function as museums for visitors – they do not play a role in the social life of local residents.

A sustainable and developed city is the city that, during its growth and expansion and the building of new urban spaces, makes an attempt to find a logical connection between the old and the new. The most important step to develop strategies to restore the historical parts of Iranian cities is to analyze how modernization affects those places where the new converges with the old urban backbone and find ways to diminish its destructive impact.

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