

# A Review on Development of Historical City Center and Revitalization Process in Isfahan/Iran

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**Abstract**—The need to protect our cultural heritage was stressed on revitalization of historical city centers in communities. The main aim of this research is to attract finance and activities to the historical city centers through the citizens and municipalities participation while cities expanded their boundaries toward suburban areas. Today the main problems which facing to the most historical city centers, is loss of their centrality through effect of urbanization on any point of the cities which is the most important issue on neglect and abandonment of the historical central area by decentralizing living, commerce and public areas. This article evaluate the ways in which city center revitalization can be effect on vitality and viability of the central area in case of Naghshe Jahan square which situated at the center of Isfahan city, Iran. Constructed between 1598 and 1629, it is now an important historical site, and one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites.

**Keywords**—City centers, revitalization, urban development, vitality and viability.

## I. INTRODUCTION

CITY centers always have been changed during the last decades which were not totally comparable with contemporary ones [5], [7], [10]-[12].

"City centers throughout the world are being subjected to major revitalization operations. This revitalization includes, among other aspects, housing improvements, retail modernizations, infill and brownfield redevelopment, public space improvements, streetscaping and pedestrianization schemes" [4]. Department of Environment [6] in the UK, defined the city center as a term which mostly used to identify those "city, town and traditional suburban centers, which provide a broad range of facilities, services and function as a focus for both the community and public transport". Historical centers, as combination of architectural and historical valuable buildings and monuments, known as identity of cities. The concepts of revitalization and regeneration have been used with the same principle which conserving the existing, and protecting context for the next generations. So it is the part of cultural heritage's preserving strategy to preventing of demolishing of un-renewable resource as a part of history. The purpose of this research is to examine the holistic strategy of the development and revitalization process of historical centers to attract tourists, foster economic development and enhance the quality of public realm in urban space. The

method of the study is considering the whole area revitalization proses instead of a building-by-building analysis is this study during different historical period is the main approach to use the city's area and preserve its identity currently.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### A. Historical City Centers

Due to the geopolitical changes which effects on both economic and social changes of the city, the central areas are the most sensitive urban areas in cities. "City centers now have to compete with other activity centers, but they can only remain livable if they reinforce their uniqueness and sense of place, which come from their public space and the organic mix of diverse uses" [9]; [18]. "They should diversify their anchors (entertainment venues, public markets, retail stores, cafes, restaurants, etc.), not only to attract people to city centers, but also to keep them there at different times of the day and different days of the week" [17]. Some people believe that advanced technologies alongside growth of cities toward suburban leads to the city decentralization phenomenon. As Whyte (2009) notes; "The decentralization trend that is sending the back – office work of the center to the suburbs is strengthening" [24]. However, "due to a variety of reasons many city centers have lost their livability and have become mono-functional places" [4]. Cities have grown bigger and spread wider, urban functions have fragmented and public spaces, which are important to a democratic and inclusive society, have lost much of their significance in urban life. Also peoples have been moved towards suburbs, they don't live in city center, houses are empty, and buildings lost their function, shops become to close, also most of the entertainment activity move away from city centers which have transformed the area to an unsecure place especially at night [19]. "Taken to the extreme, this can be portrayed as a spiral of decline or obsolescence that can be characterized as the 'urban doughnut effect'—a Hole (lack of activity) in the city center surrounded by a ring of suburban development" [7, 23 Quoted in 4]. In this sense; the phenomenon makes the city lost the vitality and viability at the center which includes social, functional, physical, and financial factors.

### B. Urban Revitalization

Urban revitalization is a complex issue in meaning and agreement. "One of the first problems encountered by those who work in urban revitalization is the lack of agreement on the right concepts, their definitions and the absence of a single accepted theory" [20]. The Handbook on Urban Regeneration,

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edited by Peter Roberts & Hugh Sykes (2000), “identifies the evolution of urban regeneration as a constant movement from reconstruction in the 1950s to revitalization in the 1960s, renewal in the 1970s, redevelopment in the 1980s and regeneration in the 1990s [4]. This paper selected the term of “Urban Revitalization” refers to “Urban Regeneration” which called by Roberts (2000): “A comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change”. In this case with the lack of any single definition for Urban Revitalization, leads to review on different theories, such as neighborhood life-cycle theory in Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s. This theory is based on analogies of natural systems, and describes the changes in neighborhood life cycle. “In orthodox interpretations of this theory, urban revitalization policies at the local and national levels would attempt to invert these stages through different types of interventions in order to ultimately increase property values and revitalize the neighborhood” [4]. These types of explanation have been collected by Grigsby which quoted in Balasas into four categories which could be used as combination or single [4];

- 1) Market stabilization
- 2) Dispersal of low-income populations
- 3) Containment/revitalization; and finally
- 4) Reduction in the size of low-income populations, i.e. reduction of poverty.

A second theory is based on the concept of successive regimes of accumulation by the regulatory school which is; “each regime develops an accompanying mode of regulation” [16]. Regimes, in the words of Stone (1989), consist of “informal arrangements by which public bodies and private interests function together to make and carry out governing decisions”. Finally, urban revitalization is concerned, institutional and organizational dynamics of urban change management. Thus focuses on institutional theory toughest aspects of the social structure. It is believed that the process by which organizational structures, including the rules, routines and procedures that established as guidelines for institutional actions [14]. The first single source of examination on urban regeneration theory which offered by Roberts, argued that the urban regeneration as an activity rooted in practice than in theory [20]. Then go to the main elements of the urban regeneration summarized as follows:

- 5) An interventionist activity
- 6) An activity which straddles the public, private and community sectors
- 7) An activity which is likely to experience considerable changes in its institutional structures over time
- 8) A means of mobilizing collective efforts,
- 9) A means of determining policies and actions designed to improve the condition of urban areas [20].

Moreover, today there are many strategy that are used in terms of urban revitalization such as Business Improvement District strategy (BID), Town Center Management strategy

(TCM), Place Making Management strategy, Cultural Development Strategy and etc. which each one used in terms of specific details.

### C. Why Isfahan?

The proem of Pahlavi period (1925-1979) coincided with the inappropriate for quite often historic cities of Iran. “Modernization plans” had caused major problems in urban renewal of this period. A new season of urbanization, increased amounts of urban problems in city such as physical urban growth and growing population of the cities, thus in Followed by growth of problems, forced of new urban desires on the city centers As far as they were not accomplished of helm them anymore. On the other hand, with the advents of modernization and motorization, old pattern of cities had been changed in order to create transportation paths along many physical variation in the heart of historical cities. When the city center used as a heart of social life, historical part of city became to traffic lines. Effects of such revolutions, not only changed the condition of historical cities, rather changed the economic and customary life of people [22]. “Within the modernization perspective, the non-monumental old was undesirable, while the new was the sign of development and progress. Many of the old historic structures of the cities in Iran such as Isfahan, Yazd, Shiraz, Hamadan etc. were destroyed to make space for new urban plans. The physical structures that had been developing during the centuries were destroyed just in a few decades” [21]. One of the most important parameter related by modern urban variation was vehicular transportation system. In this case, most of the transportation development in historical parts of cities devastated the identity of such areas. Isfahan which is a historical city, located in the heart of Iran by a dramatic modernization transformations which started in 1920s. The urbanization history of Isfahan related to centuries ago. Isfahan with a great background in the architecture and art in the Islamic world, become a unique topic for researchers [2]. Today, by increasing the number of renewal programs, the historical parts of Isfahan have got major influence. Otherwise, the similar trend in the urban renewal strategy is being used yet. The physical transformations have been done regardless of its effect on the social communications of city. The main part of construction process in Isfahan turn to renew the old part of the city and demolition-construction development can change the historical identity of Isfahan.

## III. CASE STUDY

### A. Naghshe Jahan Square

One of the most illustrious periods of the urbanization and urban design in Persian cities is related to Safavi period. Shah Abbas the king of Safavid dynasty transferred their capital from Qazvin to Isfahan and built a royal city in south of the old city that connected the old city center with the new one via Isfahan Grand Bazaar, also extent the city toward Zayanderod River [19]. As Ashraf (1974) mentioned; “in the design of the new city, Abbas mobilized certain element of architectural

past to generate a new Iranian imperial identity in the name of Safavid religious, commercial, and political ideals" [3]. Isfahan is one of the largest cities in Iran (Persian territory) which has a unique city center. From geographical and political perspective, the Capital was (Isfahan) located at the center of commercial transit road, from China to Ottoman Empire and Europe. Because of this strategy, Isfahan had been known as a commercial centre [19]. During the period which Shah Abbas I was the king, he had a specific attention to urban and urban design, according to Habib (2008), "more capital and labor were put into bridge, roads, and caravanserais to build and facilitate trade" [13]. Historically, the origin city center of Isfahan before Safavid era had narrow widening streets, and the orientation of the main square (Meydan) was towards Mecca. When Shah Abbas had decided to build a new city center, his designer, planned the city and its street based on orthogonal grid pattern, which was not oriented to Mecca. As it mentioned before, the old square connected to the new one with covered Grand Bazaar (2 km long) which name was Qeysariye Bazaar. (Fig. 1) Where the bazaar met the median, there are more buildings except shops to eliminate people's need such as; public bath, hospital, caravanserai, school (Medresse) etc. [19].

Naghsh-e Jahan complex which has been known as the new city centre "is a clear and beautiful expression of symbolism and innovation in city planning" [13]. The complex is a compilation of a Great square (1700-525 ft.), Ali Qapu (government centre), Imam Mosque (Masjed- Jame- Abbasi), Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Qeysarie Bazaar, public buildings (i.e. bath, school, pool, and etc.), ChaharBagh Garden, ChaharBagh Street and residential quarter. (Figs. 1, 2)

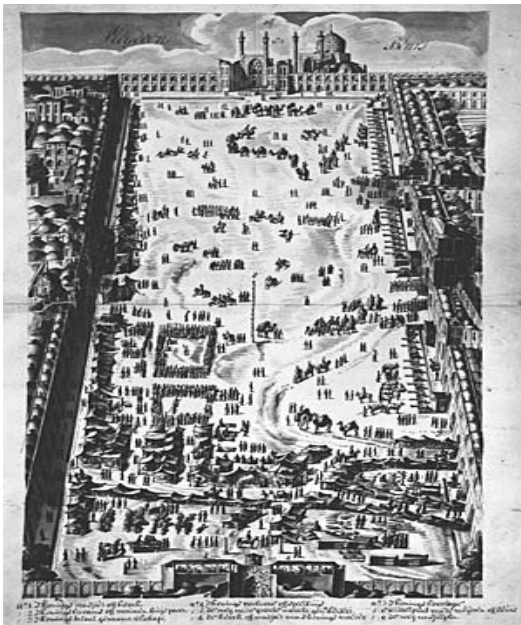


Fig. 1 City center activity in Safavi era, [8]



Fig. 2 Naghshe Jahan Square in Safavi era as city center, [8]

### B. Transformation of Naghshe Jahan Square after Safavi Period until Now

#### 1. Gajar Era

Naghsh-e Jahan square after Safavi period In the Qajar era, in the overall structure of the city center (Naghsh-e Jahan Sq.) had not much changed, but in all aspects which included the construction of buildings, urban activities and the economics of the place loss dramatic prosperity. The most important document in this field was in the late Qajar period which had been shown in a map of the Sultan Syed Reza khan in 1302 AD (1923). According to Ojhen Finlanden and Rene Dalman, French and Germany explorer in Qajar era, most of the shops around the which worked in Safavi period was demolished and some of them used as Storage, stable and coffee house. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3 Quality of Naghshe Jahan Square in Qajar era, [8]



Fig. 4 Naghshe Jahan Square as military camp in Qajar era, [22]

Some of the shops rented by foreign traders but generally

because of high cost of them, low income traders rented the spaces in square and created an open air Bazar. At the end of the Qajar period most of the green area and trees was damaged and square mostly used by military for military parade and drill the troops (Fig. 4). Therefore, the social rule of the public space in the Naghshe Jahan square was very pale and there was not any attention to the public realm, image and comfort of the square.

In general, during the Qajar era, Naghshe Jahan square experienced a dramatic period to loss the quality of urban spaces and identity as powerful city center (Fig. 4).

## 2. First Pahlavi Era

First Pahlavi era can be considered as one the most important historical periods of Naghshe Jahan square after Safavid era. As it mentioned before, city center loss its physical, social, economic, cultural and historical identity during the Qajar period but with the rise of Pahlavi era there was more attention to revitalization of monuments and urban spaces as one of the government's policies which one of the most important project was about regeneration and revitalization of historic city center (Naghshe Jahan Sq.) with the participation of municipality and government's supports (Figs. 3 and 5). The first step in this way was the registration of Naghshe jahan square by the number of 102 in National Heritage list in 1310 AD (1931). The most important achievement was connecting vehicle accessibility to square and make a connection between square and grid street pattern which was taking shape in the whole of the city. By this achievement, vehicle accessibility inside of the square make access from one point to other point (Fig. 5). There was some negative point in these propos such as remove and demolished two part of the square's physical body (east and west side) and also cut the historical grand bazar from two point to passing the streets. On the other hand lack of hierarchy of accessibility to the space which has sever contradiction with the aesthetic value and semantic access in the Safavid period. This approach which has been produced modern thinking to the urban spaces, conserved and renewed historical building just as monuments and not more. By these changes, square that in the past known as pedestrian access, playing some sports such as Choghan and different public events changed to traffic node which motor vehicle and pedestrian can accessed to the space and all over the square. One of the other proposal for space was creating green space and a pool in the middle of the square in order to environmental control due to hot and dry climate of Isfahan which until the last century except surrounding trees and stream of water, there was not any urban landscape and design in the central space of square. This project was under the design and control of Mr. Godard in 1932-1934 which changed the square's open spaces to a decorative space combined with vehicle access all over the area [1] (Fig. 5).

In this project which was known by the name of "National Garden" there was not any responsibility to historical pattern and origin of the space, on the other hand the process had much positive effects of city center attraction than past

situation which had not any vitality in urban life. Likewise changed the area as the most powerful public space to attract citizens and visitors. Also there was more attention to the restoration of historical buildings and facade of the square as well as revitalization of the urban space. Architectural revitalization had much effect on the public and commercial activity of the city center which missed in Qajar era as a strong city center.



Fig. 5 Naghshe Jahan Square Bird view in 1937, [24]

## 3. Second Pahlavi Era

Major development which took place in city center during second Pahlavi policies than First Pahlavi was more connections of vehicle access (Sadi St. and Posht Matbakh St.) to the square as one way street. In relation to landscaping and urban public spaces, just landscape's design of the north part of the square has changed according to "National Garden" which proposed for the south part. So combination of green space, vehicle and pedestrian access expanded throughout the square (Fig. 6).

Revitalization proses during this period was the same as last one, continued the way on restoration of monumental building such as Great mosque (Jame Abbasi Mosque) and Sheikh Lotfollah mosque in professional and also other work such as Ali Qapo followed restoration strategy with participation of Izmeo group by headed Mr. Ojino Galdini [15].

## 4. After Islamic Revolution

Naghshe Jahan square during the first years of Islamic revolution in 1358 AD (1979) recorded as first historical complex of Isfahan in the world and fined its identity as the most important square and public space of Isfahan city and used by the name of Imam Khomeini square (Fig. 7).

One of the most important revitalization projects during these years until now was limitation in car accessibility inside of the square and increase pedestrian accessibility, remove car parking of the north side of the square and shifted out of the square, increase lighting quality, sitting area, changing the street's pavement to use as bike and pedestrians. Finally

according to decisions of supreme traffic council of Isfahan in April of 2014, entry of any motor vehicle such as car, bus and motor cycle to the square was forbidden. (Fig. 8) So after passing around 80 years, Naghshe jahan square returned back to the origin condition from accessibility perspective and use as powerful historical city center in Isfahan. Also by this action most of the unworthy urban elements from visual view will remove.



Fig. 6 Increase of vehicle accessibility in Naghshe Jahan square in Pahlavi era, [26]



Fig. 7 Naghshe Jahan square in 2014, [26]

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Revitalization is a complicated issue in terms of conserving, renewing and revitalizing of the urban area with specific focus on historic context. City centers always have been changed during the last decades and they were being subjected to major revitalization process throughout the world to conserve as powerful and livable area for local people and visitors. Naghshe Jahan square since the inception from Safavied era acts as powerful urban square of Isfahan which always has a specific presence in the urban structure and activity system as a city center. Although the time from the late of Safavied era until Pahlavi era can be considered as recession of the square, but from the beginning of the First Pahlavi, city center was considered at the national level and revitalized from different aspects. Since then the square always has been considered as one of the main tourist attraction focus

of Iran and also, currently known as the most important and valuable Isfahan's urban public spaces. With evaluation of historic periods, it is clear that Safavied era was the peak of prosperity and glory of the space from social, political, financial, religious and touristic perspective.

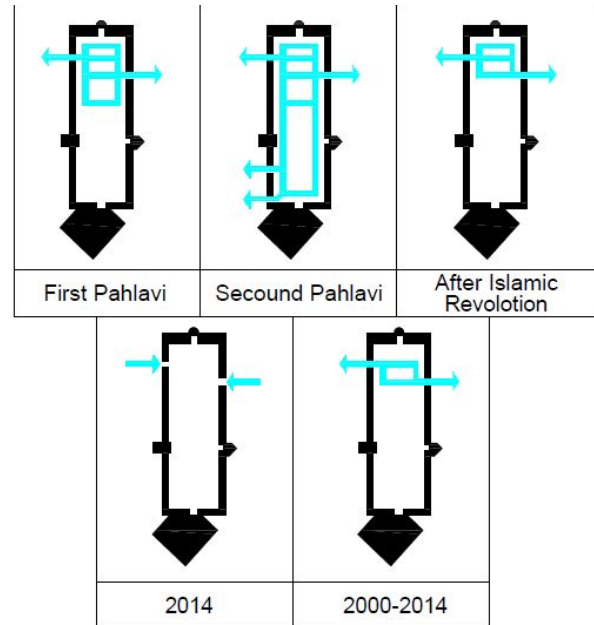


Fig. 8 Naghshe Jahan Vehicle accessibility during different periods, [Drawing by author]

With the advent of Ghajar, Naghshe Jahan square faced a long slump until revitalization period in First Pahlavi which is continuing until the last decade. Revitalization process like; preserve and renewing of the historical building, landscaping design, make vehicle and pedestrian accessibility, increasing of public realm and comfort of the space give a new and well characteristic to the space. Also with the limitation in car accessibility in 2014, square will find the main characteristics which were in the past. (Fig. 8) Toward this decision in the future most of the deep problem of the space will remove.

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