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Original Research Article

Intentional Destruction of Historical Buildings: The Combined Application of Infill Design and Reconstruction in Response to Demolished Sections

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ABSTRACT

The intentional destruction of historical buildings is a global issue that poses a threat to cultural and historical heritage. These demolitions, caused by human factors, can have various motivations. In cases where parts of a structure have been demolished, actions such as reconstruction and infill design may provide a way to address these destructions. This research aims to offer strategies for combating the intentional destruction of historical buildings and identifying its motivations to effectively manage the reconstruction process of historically demolished structures over time. The study seeks to answer the question: What actions should be taken in response to the demolished sections and remaining parts of historical buildings to prevent such unfortunate events? This research employed a qualitative, descriptive-analytical method to gain a deep understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of individuals regarding the intentional destruction of historical buildings. This study also focused on the methods of preventing and reconstructing remaining sections, as well as infill design for completely demolished areas. The focus was on the central area of Mashhad city, including the historical fabric surrounding the holy shrine of Imam Reza (AS) and the adjacent area in the Sarab neighborhood. This method was based on the analysis of primary texts and qualitative interviews with individuals involved in these demolitions, along with expert analysis in this field. This research examines the factors influencing the intentional destruction of historical buildings and demonstrates that economic motivations and poor management policies are among the main reasons for the destruction of these structures in the central area of Mashhad, specifically in the Sarab neighborhood. Most individuals experience regret after demolition. Instead of complete destruction or abandonment of semi-demolished buildings, infill design for demolished sections and reconstruction of remaining parts can be an effective solution that not only aids in the revival of these structures but also considers economic factors, social dimensions, collective memories, and urban development.

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Introduction

In Iran, many historical buildings have been subjected to destruction due to neglect, deterioration, and sometimes intentional actions. While wars and natural disasters have significantly contributed to the destruction of this valuable heritage, the deliberate demolition of historical sites by human agents is considered one of the main factors in the degradation of historical architecture. The preservation of ancient artifacts as invaluable legacies of a society's history, culture, and identity has always been a matter of concern, and maintaining the related documents and scientific evidence holds particular importance. However, the intentional destruction of historical buildings in Iran by owners—especially for some structures nominated for World Heritage status—has gained alarming momentum. Numerous accidental and semi-intentional demolitions of historical buildings in areas with increased density potential in metropolitan cities, particularly Tehran, Mashhad, and Shiraz, have marked the beginning of a silent alarm without preparedness for Iranian architecture. This is because the approach to dealing with demolished historical sites within the discourse of reconstruction in Iran remains unaddressed and lacks serious scientific discussion.

In semi-demolished structures, there are challenges in addressing both the demolished sections and the remaining parts that require appropriate responses befitting the building's significance. The importance of semi-demolished buildings lies in the fact that, in many cases, the remaining parts of the structure also face abandonment and gradual decay, or lead to the complete demolition and reconstruction of the entire building. Protecting the remaining sections can itself be a solution to prevent the spread of a culture of intentional destruction on a larger scale. Additionally, the nuances of preserving and revitalizing the remaining parts alongside reconstructing the demolished sections present many technical subtleties for architects specializing in restoration and reconstruction. Therefore, the sustainability of a historical building and the continuation of its identity necessitates its proper and scientific preservation. Reconstruction is one example of principled protection that is typically employed for rebuilding after disasters, wars, or natural calamities. However, assessing the feasibility of restoring life to these semi-demolished buildings through the reconstruction of their remaining parts may prove effective in preserving history and identity. The deterioration of spaces and the creation of ruins lead to unsafe environments conducive to social harm. This underscores the necessity for the reconstruction and revitalization of these buildings. Restoring historical structures not only helps preserve them for future generations but can also enhance tourism appeal and improve social and economic conditions in historical areas. Overall, this research aims to propose strategies for addressing the intentional destruction of historical buildings by identifying the motivations behind such demolitions. Accordingly, the main research questions are as follows:

- What measures should be taken to prevent intentional destruction of historical buildings?
- In dealing with semi-demolished structures, what actions should be undertaken regarding the demolished and remaining sections of historical buildings?

Research Background

Considering the multifaceted nature of the subject, this research examines the history and background of studies conducted on the intentional destruction of historical buildings and approaches to reconstruction and infill in three sections:

Section One. Throughout history, humans have always been recognized as the primary agents of destruction of their predecessors' works. Numerous authors and researchers have studied the destruction of historical heritage. In one study, Karampour & Behnam Kia (2021) demonstrate that in Tehran, over 4,000 hectares of historical gardens have been intentionally destroyed to construct high-rise residential buildings. In another article, Dogar et al. (2023) address the destruction of cultural heritage in Swat during armed conflicts due to attacks by Taliban forces. Akcay et al. (2020) also examined the reconstruction process of the Sari Kishla barracks, which were destroyed due to human factors. This study contributes to the field by providing a set of methods for reconstructing a historical building, taking into acco unt its original form and utilizing its geometric and material characteristics.

Section Two. In the background of research related to post-disaster reconstruction, the earliest documented approaches in this field were

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introduced in the book "Reconstruction following disaster" by Haas et al. (1997), which examined technical and engineering methods. Furthermore, Shahrokhian (2010)'s research indicated that decision-makers' unfamiliarity with reconstruction principles in old contexts has led to a decrease in the willingness of locals to reside there and has caused social problems. Fallahi (2012) explored various reconstruction approaches in an article, concluding that "owner-driven reconstruction" is the best approach. Labibzadeh (2021) identified and categorized reconstruction approaches in post-war architecture.

Section Three. In the field of infill architecture within historical contexts in Iran, numerous studies have been conducted over the past fifty years that address various aspects of infill development. The book " New constructions in historic context" by Ghadiri (2007) is an important resource that discusses new buildings within historical contexts by analyzing their advantages and disadvantages. Researchers such as McConnell & Wiley (2011) have examined the economic role of this development, while Ooi & Le (2013) have focused on its impact on local housing prices. Additionally, researchers like Zangi Abadi et al. (2015) have emphasized the necessity of protecting historical contexts and integrating approaches for their revival, especially in cities like Yazd.

Given these points, various topics have been addressed in books, official news agencies, and numerous articles. However, no research has provided solutions for preventing or addressing such intentional destruction of historical buildings by human agents. This is while this study seeks to explore the motivations behind such destructions and propose strategies to prevent similar actions in cases where parts of a building have been demolished.

Theoretical Foundations

• Intentional destruction of historical buildings

Urban destruction in city structures has increased over recent decades due to the gradual deterioration of cities and the rising population (Aly & Attwa, 2013). The preservation of cultural heritage against human-induced damage has been one of the primary reasons that fundamentally shaped the concept of conservation and restoration. As noted in the history of conservation and restoration, the authoritative and sometimes conscious protection of certain structures, alongside the deliberate destruction of others—especially in the nineteenth century amid the growth and development in an industrializing world—highlighted the necessity of considering human behavior in the process of building destruction. This has consistently been introduced as a damaging factor in conservation-focused studies, emphasizing the need to move away from such destructive practices (Keyhanpoor, 2018). Investment decisions regarding the demolition and reconstruction of buildings can extend beyond financial and economic criteria when compared to the restoration of existing structures. A critical decision-making step for all institutions is choosing between scenarios of demolition and reconstruction versus upgrading built heritage (Locurcio et al., 2022).

• Reconstruction

Reconstruction refers to rebuilding as closely as possible to the referenced form from the past, using new materials (ICOMOS New Zealand, 2010). In this type of intervention, redesigning a building or previous entity is undertaken based on physical evidence or documentation that existed in the past (Wong, 2017). Today, what is meant by reconstruction is the creation of contemporary urban space or a new and harmonious spatial organization that can reflect a creative dialogue between the past and the future. In reconstruction, there is not only no obligation to preserve the past, but also three actions—demolition, clearance, and rebuilding—are carried out in a reconstruction process to create new living and spatial conditions (Fig. 1).

• Infill design

Infill design is a development that occurs on a plot of land or a limited number of small plots in vacant sites, either without development or in areas where demolition has taken place. Infill design plays a crucial role in the reconstruction of cultural heritage or historical buildings that have been destroyed by creating a balance between urban development and heritage preservation. This approach emphasizes the integration of new structures within historical

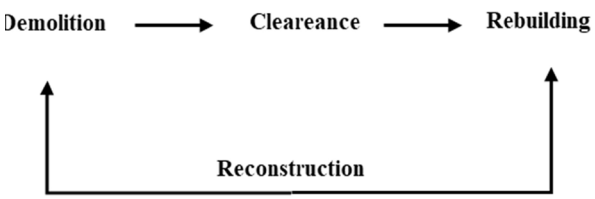

Fig. 1. Reconstruction Process.
Source: Authors based on Habibi and Maghsoudi, 2020.

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contexts while highlighting the importance of the cultural and architectural values of the fabric. In many countries, guidelines for infill design are implemented to ensure that new constructions are harmonious in scale, form, and materials with their historical environment.

Through infill development, vacant spaces and gaps within the site are filled (Pourmohammadi et al., 2014). This approach can include creating entirely new architecture, replacing an old and abandoned building that has an unsafe structure and lacks historical value, or extending the existing building (Zamri et al., 2023). To comply with international heritage conservation guidelines, various approaches to designing infill buildings exist, with varying levels of compatibility and harmony with the fabric of historic urban areas. Generally, these approaches can be divided into three categories: high compatibility, balanced compatibility with the context, and low compatibility (ibid.). Therefore, these approaches are briefly summarized in Table 1.

Research Methodology

This research employed a descriptive-analytical method aimed at gaining a deep understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of individuals regarding the intentional destruction of historical buildings, as well as methods for preventing and reconstructing remaining parts and designing demolished sections. The study area was focused on the central region of Mashhad, including the historical fabric surrounding the holy shrine of Imam Reza (AS) and its adjacent areas, the Sarab neighborhood (Fig. 2). Through qualitative interviews with individuals involved in this field, a set of influential factors in intentional destruction was identified and categorized based

Table 1. Summary of infill building design categorization based on compatibility levels in urban heritage areas. Source: Authors based on Zamri et al., 2023.

Approaches to Designing Infill Building		Design Features	Consequences
High Compatibility Infill Building Design	- Pastiche - Literal replication - Traditional method	- Focus on the physical characteristics of the historical fabric is the primary concern - Less concern about contemporary features - Prioritization of compatibility with the site while minimizing distinctive features -Adherence to the existing character of the site with minimal repetition	- Architectural design development may be aesthetically unpleasing. - Potential for misunderstanding and confusion between the historic building and the new intervention.
Medium Compatibility Infill Building Design	- Invention within the Style - Abstract References - Contextual Simplification - Contextual Abstraction - Contextual Nullification	- A balance between "distinctiveness" and "compatibility" - Emphasis on a cohesive urban landscape - Preservation of the character of the historical environment -Avoidance of replication while emphasizing the interpretation of the site's character	-Welcoming innovation in design and technology while maintaining the character of the historical urban fabric.
Low Compatibility Infill Building Design	- Contextual Juxtaposition - Context pretense - Intentional opposition	- Consideration of a radical design approach for new interventions in a historical environment, intentionally provoking the character of the site in the design. - Emphasis on "distinctiveness" rather than "compatibility" with the historical fabric by highlighting "contemporary architecture." -Strong opposition to literal replication from the context.	- Can lead to the degradation of the character and identity of the historical urban fabric.

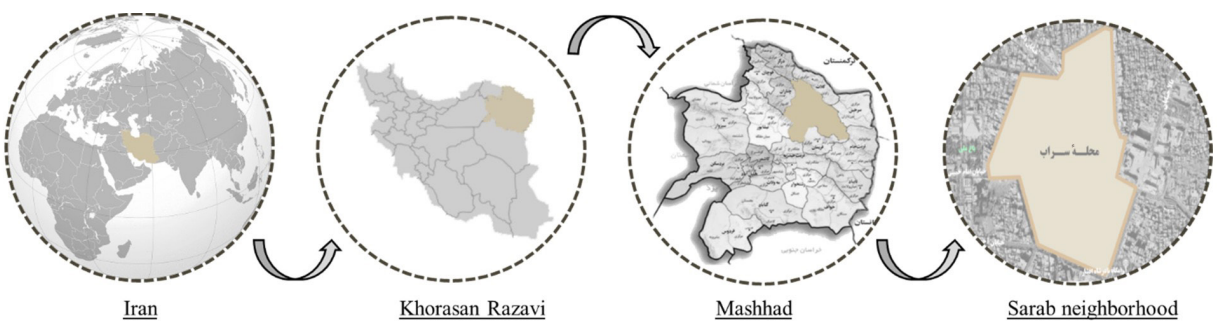

Fig. 2. Study area of the research. Source: Authors.

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on the insights of interviewees and experts in this area. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with individuals such as architects, project managers, cultural heritage experts, owners of historical buildings, and even local residents. In these interviews, open-ended questions were posed to explore motivations, challenges, and proposed solutions. The results of the qualitative interviews were compiled through narrative analysis.

Research Findings

• Examination of motivations behind the intentional destruction of historical buildings

A part of this research aims to investigate and analyze the motivations behind the intentional destruction of historical buildings through in-depth qualitative interviews with various groups, including owners of historical buildings, architects, project managers, cultural heritage experts, and local residents. These interviews led to the identification and understanding of the complex factors and motivations that drive the decision-making process for the intentional demolition of these structures. One of the most significant reasons extracted from these interviews is the owners' fear of their property being registered as a national heritage site. Many owners believe that registration as a national heritage can lead to severe legal restrictions, making any alterations or renovations to the property difficult and costly. This fear of losing complete control over their property has become one of the main factors in the intentional destruction of buildings, as some owners have concluded that by demolishing the structure before it is listed as a national heritage site, they can evade these restrictions.

Mismanagement by responsible authorities and lack of transparency in processes related to the preservation and restoration of historical buildings is another important motivation for intentional destruction. Interviewees pointed out bureaucratic issues and administrative complexities that often prolong the process of obtaining permits and result in a lack of clear and uniform guidelines for restoration. These problems lead owners to conclude that demolishing the building and using the land for new purposes is a simpler and more cost-effective solution. In some cases, negligence and ignorance on the part of owners regarding the cultural and historical value of their properties have also led to intentional destruction. This group of owners, due to insufficient knowledge about how to maintain and restore historical buildings or due to a misunderstanding of the historical significance of their structures, decides to demolish them. This ignorance and negligence are particularly exacerbated when buildings require ongoing repairs and maintenance.

Economic pressures also play a significant role in these intentional demolitions. Owners seek quicker and greater profits and therefore believe that demolishing the building and using the land for new commercial or residential projects will yield more financial benefits. Additionally, the high costs of maintaining and repairing historical buildings are unbearable for many owners, pushing them toward demolition. Urban development and the new needs of populations and modern usages are also influencing factors in this process. Changes in urban structures and the need for new commercial and residential spaces turn historical buildings into obstacles for development, pressuring owners to demolish these structures and utilize their land for new projects, similar to development plans around the sacred precinct of Imam Reza, where the government purchased homes in that area against the will of most owners for project implementation.

Finally, the lack of adequate financial and legal support for the preservation and restoration of historical buildings is another significant motivation for the intentional destruction of these structures. Many owners feel that due to the absence of facilities and financial incentives for restoring and maintaining historical buildings, demolishing these structures and using the land for other purposes is a better option. This lack of support and incentives, especially when owners face financial challenges, leads to decisions to demolish buildings. Therefore, based on these qualitative interviews, Table 2 presents a collection of components and subcomponents derived from the motivations and factors that lead owners to intentionally demolish historical buildings for various reasons.

In general, the motivations and factors behind the destruction can be categorized into four main components: economic, managerial, social, and cultural. Considering this categorization, economic discussions hold greater significance (Fig. 3).

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Table 2. Components and subcomponents derived from motivations and factors leading to the intentional destruction of historical buildings by owners, extracted based on qualitative interviews. Source: Authors.

Components	Subcomponents	Descriptions
Fear of National Registration of the Building	Concerns about Reconstruction Limitations	Owners are worried about legal limitations in the reconstruction and maintenance of historical buildings after they are registered in the national heritage list.
	Resistance to Cultural Heritage Laws	Some owners oppose strict laws regarding cultural heritage protection and resort to intentional destruction.
	Increasing Maintenance Costs	National registration may require adherence to specific standards in the maintenance and repair of the building, which can be costly.
	Restrictions on Sale or Change of Use	After national registration, legal restrictions may lead to a decrease in the economic value of the property or limitations on changing its use.
Mismanagement by Responsible Institutions	Lack of Transparency in Ownership and Property Rights	Responsible institutions may not provide sufficient information about owners' rights and responsibilities.
	Complex and Lengthy Bureaucracy in Reconstruction	Complicated and time-consuming processes for obtaining permits and approvals for the reconstruction of historical buildings can lead to owners' frustration and ultimately intentional destruction.
Indifference and Lack of Awareness Among Owners Regarding Historical Value of the Building	Lack of Awareness of Historical and Cultural Value	Many individuals, due to a lack of awareness about the historical value of the building or indifference to its maintenance, resort to its destruction to prevent potential future problems.
	Lack of Technical Knowledge for Maintenance and Reconstruction	The absence of technical knowledge and expertise in maintaining and reconstructing historical buildings drives owners towards destruction.
	Neglect in Protection and Maintenance	Some owners, due to a lack of awareness and motivation, do not prioritize proper maintenance and protection of their historical buildings.
Economic Issues	Need for Quick and Higher Profitability	Owners may prefer to demolish their historical buildings for quicker and higher economic gains, optimizing land use for commercial or residential projects.
	High Maintenance and Repair Costs	Costs associated with maintaining and repairing historical buildings may be excessive for some owners.
	Increased Land Value Through Demolition	In some cases, the economic value of the land increases after the demolition of a historical building, freeing up space for new construction.
Change of Use and Urban Development	Pressures from Urban Development	Changes in use and rapid urban development in historical areas compel owners to demolish old buildings to utilize the land for modern constructions.
	Changes in Urban and Population Needs	Changes in urban and population needs may lead to historical buildings being perceived as obstacles to development, prompting owners to demolish them.
	Need for Modern and Commercial Uses	Owners may feel the need to change the use of historical buildings into more modern and commercial spaces, which involves demolition.
Lack of Financial and Legal Support	Absence of Financial Support and Facilities	The lack of adequate financial support and facilities from the government and relevant institutions discourages owners from preserving historical buildings. The absence of appropriate financial and legal support for the preservation and maintenance of historical structures pushes owners towards demolition and alternative uses of their properties.
	Insufficient Financial Incentives for Maintenance	The lack of sufficient financial incentives for maintaining historical buildings leads owners towards their demolition.
Social and Cultural Pressures	Changing Cultural and Social Values	Social and cultural changes, along with a decline in cultural values related to preserving historical structures, may drive owners toward their destruction.
	Local and Familial Pressures	Local and familial pressures may lead owners towards demolishing historical buildings, especially if these structures are seen as obstacles to development or economic interests.
Technical and Maintenance Challenges	Inconsistency in Laws Related to Preservation and Reconstruction	Dispersed and inconsistent laws regarding the preservation and reconstruction of historical buildings may cause confusion and frustration among owners.
	Legal and Inheritance Issues Related to Ownership	Legal disputes and ownership issues may result in decisions to intentionally demolish historical buildings.

Discussion and Conclusion: Approaches to Dealing with Destroyed and Remaining Parts of Historical Buildings in Intentional Destruction

Based on interviews conducted with specialists, managers, experts, owners of historical buildings, and local individuals, various perspectives and approaches have been identified regarding how to deal with these semi-destroyed and sometimes completely destroyed structures. Diverse

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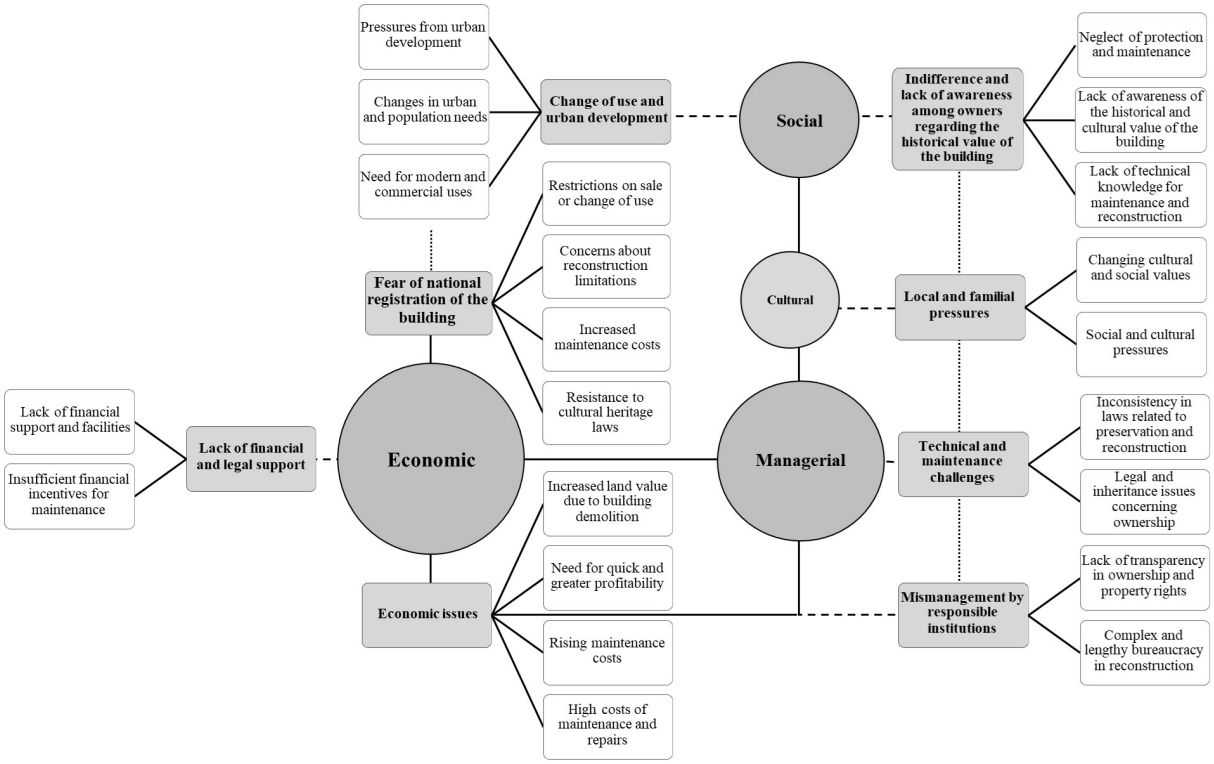

Fig. 3. Categorization of motivations for the destruction of historical buildings derived from interviews within the four main components. Source: Authors.

suggestions for future actions in addressing these types of buildings have been extracted from them. The target community for the interviews was composed of 12 individuals, selected to achieve a diverse mix of stakeholders and experts in the discussed field, motivated by various social, economic, and environmental factors.

One of the main approaches derived from these interviews emphasizes complete or partial reconstruction of the buildings. Many specialists and owners believe that restoring historical buildings can help preserve their authenticity and historical identity while maintaining memories associated with them. In this approach, using original techniques and materials for reconstructing the destroyed sections is of great importance. This perspective holds that precise reconstruction can not only aid in preserving history and culture but can also enhance the economic value and tourism appeal of the area. Conversely, some interviewees mentioned infill design as an appropriate approach. In this approach, efforts are made to design new structures alongside or within historical buildings in a way that creates a suitable coexistence between the new and old sections. These designs are carried out so that both parts mutually enhance each other's values. This approach not only helps preserve the remaining parts but also leads to the creation of a dynamic and contemporary space that can align with today's societal needs. Infill design encompasses various methods, including those that intentionally aim to maintain a similar architectural context through imitation and repetition, as well as methods that are deliberately in contrast and opposition to the context (Fig. 4). An important and debatable issue can be expressed as follows: perhaps there is no definitive best or worst among these approaches; however, the worst possible approach towards these destroyed historical buildings could be indifference to the damaged structure. Each of these approaches, if chosen correctly, can highlight the historical building and draw attention to it, improve urban living quality, preserve historical identity, and create modern and efficient spaces within historical environments.

Alongside these two main approaches, some interviewees emphasized the importance of protecting the remaining parts as a memorial. They believe that even if reconstruction or infill design is not feasible, the remaining sections can be preserved as a symbol or memorial of the past. This action can serve as an educational and cultural tool for future generations, helping to recall history, local identity, and preserve memories associated with those structures. Additionally, in cases where reconstruction or infill design may not be

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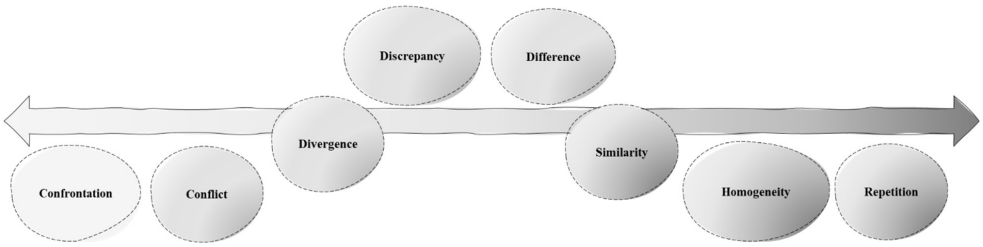

Fig. 4. Spectrum of infill design methods. Source: Authors.

feasible or cost-effective, some others suggested changing the use of the buildings. For example, creating educational or cultural spaces within these structures could help preserve historical sections while providing a new function for them. This change of use could lead to increased community interaction with historical buildings and strengthen cultural values. Ultimately, a group with a more pragmatic outlook has concluded that in some cases, complete demolition of structures and repurposing the land for new uses could be the best solution. This approach has been suggested mainly in situations where reconstruction is not possible due to severe damage and high costs or where there is a lack of necessary financial and legal support making it economically unjustifiable.

Conclusion

The results of this research indicate that dealing with semi-destroyed historical buildings requires a multifaceted approach tailored to the specific characteristics and conditions of each building and region. Therefore, selecting the appropriate approach for the reconstruction and revitalization of these buildings must consider local potentials, including factors such as the extent of damage, the historical and cultural value of the building, the needs of the local community, and available financial resources. Semi-destroyed buildings should not be forced into one of two fates: complete demolition for the construction of high-rise buildings (due to increased density) or abandonment as derelict spaces. Instead, by utilizing the principles of infill design, it is possible to reconstruct the damaged sections and restore the remaining parts. This approach not only aids in preserving and revitalizing the structure but also enhances and improves the surrounding environment in terms of economic, social, collective memory, and urban development aspects. Infill design and reconstruction can occur simultaneously in a way that maintains and revitalizes historical values while leveraging past threats as opportunities for the future. These approaches can play a significant role in redefining and revitalizing these structures by integrating innovation and authenticity, providing comprehensive and sustainable solutions to the challenges facing semi-destroyed historical buildings. Thus, they can transform these buildings into valuable resources for the future while preserving their historical identity. Given the importance of the studied area and the location of the Sarab neighborhood within the historical context surrounding the holy shrine of Imam Reza (AS) and its vicinity, it is crucial that any intervention be conducted with consideration for the context in design, which should be a primary concern for the infill architect. Decision-making regarding the type of approach is important in subsequent stages. In other words, preserving the identity of the context should come first, followed by adopting a practical approach towards the target context (Fig. 5). Proposing policies to reform existing processes, as well as designing incentives and regulations, along with creating an attractive economic environment to halt or at least reduce the rate of intentional destruction of historical buildings by owners, requires extensive and in-depth research that will be the subject of future studies and scientific reports.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there was no conflict for them in conducting this research.

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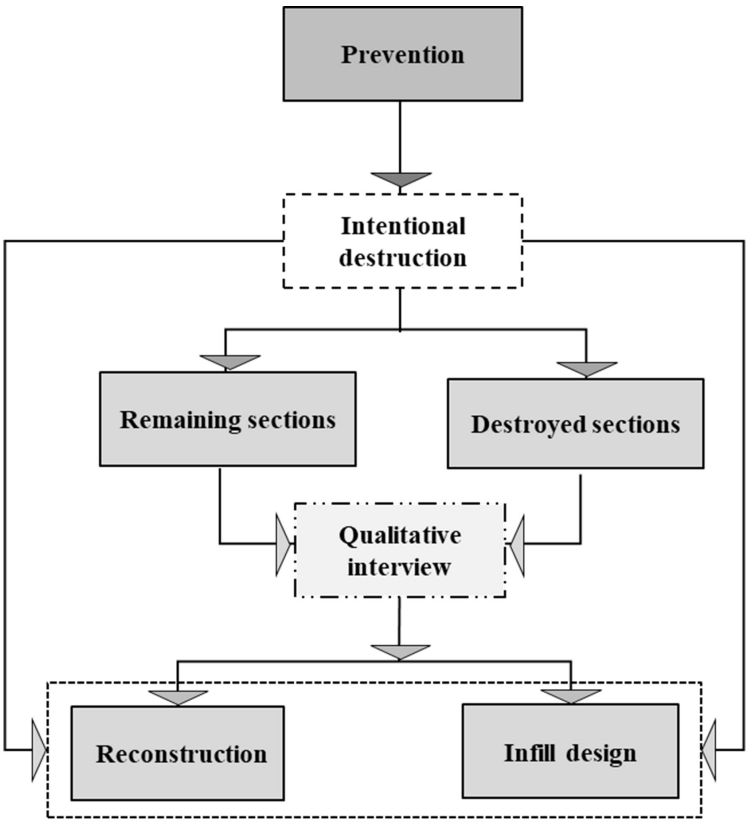

Fig. 5. Approaches to Dealing with Semi-Destroyed Buildings. Source: Authors.

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