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Original Research Article

Rethinking Urban Development in Pilgrimage Urban Fabrics with Emphasis on a Place-Based Approach

An Analysis of Spatial Structure Transformations in the Area Surrounding the Shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh (S) in Qom*

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ABSTRACT

Urban development transformations in the vicinity of sacred sites extend beyond physical interventions and significantly influence the spatial structure, social identity, and economic system of cities. The city of Qom, as one of Iran's major religious centers, has experienced extensive interventions in the area surrounding the shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh (SA) in recent decades. These interventions have largely been undertaken with the aim of enhancing pilgrimage capacity and organizing service infrastructures; however, they have produced multilayered consequences for the spatial structure and the lived experience of local residents. The main objective of this research is to explain how the process of urban development in Qom has influenced the spatial structure surrounding the shrine within the framework of a place-based development approach. The study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology, drawing upon the analysis of historical and contemporary documents, maps, approved urban plans, and previous urban studies. The theoretical framework of the research is based on three principal dimensions of place-based development: the socio-cultural, physical–spatial, and economic–functional dimensions. The analysis of transformations was conducted in three stages: reconstruction of the historical development process, comparison with theoretical indicators, and identification of the dominant pattern of intervention.The findings indicate that the prevailing direction of development in the study area has primarily focused on enhancing the physical capacity and service infrastructure for pilgrimage. As a consequence, the balance among the social, spatial, and economic dimensions has been disrupted. Changes in demographic composition, the weakening of local social networks, the replacement of fine-grained urban fabric with large-scale developments, and the transition from a neighborhood-based economy to a capital-driven model are among the most significant outcomes of this process. The results emphasize that the continuation of such interventions without recalibration based on the principles of place-based development may lead to the erosion of historical identity and the quality of place experience. Accordingly, strengthening residents' participation, supporting endogenous local economies, and emphasizing the human scale in spatial design are proposed as key requirements for reconfiguring development policies in religious–historical urban contexts.

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Introduction and Problem Statement

The concept of urban development has undergone numerous theoretical and practical transformations throughout its historical evolution. Since the 1960s, horizontal urban expansion has become one of the fundamental issues in the growth of metropolitan areas—a phenomenon observed not only in North America, Western Europe, and Japan, but gradually also in the major cities of developing countries (Zhao, 2011, 96). This pattern of development, often lacking a comprehensive framework aligned with infrastructural, environmental, and social capacities, has led to the formation of dispersed settlements, increased land consumption, reduced efficiency of urban services, weakened social cohesion, and rising costs of urban management. The consequences of this trend have not been merely physical; through the redistribution of population and the transformation of urban spatial structures, they have also reshaped broader patterns of urban development. In Iran, prior to the advent of modernity, urban development was largely based on endogenous patterns that were compatible with climate, culture, and social structure. However, following the Constitutional Revolution—particularly in the early 1920s—a fundamental rupture occurred in urban planning practices. Modernist approaches, largely inspired by Western models, gradually replaced the historical and organic structures of Iranian cities (Habibi et al., 2011, 16; Hosseini et al., 2021, 253–254). These transformations accelerated with the growth of industry and technology in the early twentieth century, as the physical development of cities increasingly came under the influence of human and technological factors, extending beyond natural and historical determinants (Ghdami & Yousefiyan, 2015, 63). Within such a context, guiding the process of urban development and preventing rapid and unplanned urban expansion has become a central concern of urban planning systems. Uncontrolled development not only threatens natural resources and the livability capacities of cities, but also places the physical identity and historical character of traditional urban fabrics at serious risk (Thatakoo, 2006, 32; Habson, 2023, 11). The city of Qom has not been immune to these transformations.

The demographic and physical growth of this city remained relatively slow until 1925 (the end of the Qajar period). However, during the Pahlavi era—particularly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution—Qom experienced significant transformations in both its spatial extent and urban organization. The construction of radial streets such as Azar and Chahār Mardān, along with the creation of axes such as Ammar Yasir, constituted part of these structural interventions (Vnerandi et al., 2021, 864–865). At the center of these transformations lies the area surrounding the Shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh (SA)—a historical–religious urban fabric that once maintained an organic relationship between the pilgrimage space, the everyday life of residents, and the traditional urban structure. However, the implementation of urban renewal projects, street widening, density reduction, the expansion of commercial and tourism-related land uses, and the replacement of historic fabrics with new constructions have fundamentally altered this historical cohesion. Although these interventions have largely been undertaken with the aim of enhancing pilgrimage capacity, improving infrastructure, and reorganizing the physical environment, evidence suggests that in practice they have led to spatial and functional discontinuities, reduced environmental legibility, weakened structural continuity, and changes in the lived experience of both residents and pilgrims. What has received less attention in this context is a systematic analysis of the consequences of these development processes on the spatial continuity, physical identity, and historical order of this area. Moreover, the dominance of centralized, top-down approaches in urban planning, combined with an increasingly commodified perception of urban space, further highlights the need to reconsider prevailing intervention models. Accordingly, the present study focuses on the urban fabric surrounding the Shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh (SA) and, drawing upon a place-based development approach, seeks to examine the impact of urban development processes on the spatial–landscape structure of this area. By integrating the physical, social, and cultural dimensions of development, this approach enables a deeper understanding of the consequences of recent interventions and may provide a basis for redefining sustainable planning policies in religious–historical urban contexts.

Research Question

How has the process of urban development in Qom

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influenced the spatial structure and landscape experience in the area surrounding the holy shrine?

Literature Review

The development of religious cities and their urban fabrics has yielded diverse outcomes. These outcomes can be examined across various dimensions, including religious tourism, morphological changes in urban structures, and socio-cultural impacts. Recent studies on the development of religious cities and its impact on the surrounding urban fabric indicate that various factors contribute to the formation of these spaces. Specifically, Emad et al. (2022) demonstrated that the concepts of hierarchy, orientation, pathways, and geometric order exert the greatest influence on fostering a sense of spirituality within the fabric surrounding religious spaces. Regarding the development of religious tourism, religious cities have historically served as primary destinations due to the presence of holy sites and shrines. The expansion of these cities can lead to a significant increase in the influx of pilgrims and tourists. However, this surge necessitates meticulous planning for traffic management, the provision of accommodation facilities, and the preservation of cultural authenticity (Yin & Xu, 2014; Al-Daini et al., 2020). In particular, the advancement of religious tourism can stimulate the local economy and pave the way for sustainable growth. Structural and physical urban transformations constitute another consequence of developing religious cities. These modifications can profoundly impact the morphological and structural characteristics of these urban environments. Such alterations encompass new constructions, infrastructure development, and land-use changes. In certain instances, these changes lead to the deterioration of the city's historical and traditional fabric. Renewal and modernization initiatives may eradicate older neighborhoods, replacing them with new structures that are incongruent with the city's religious identity (Zhang & Wei, 2017; Alfasi & Ganan, 2015). Indeed, historical fabrics, with their unique physical characteristics and heritage identity, play a pivotal role in attracting cultural tourists. For example, the old fabric of Shiraz, which underwent modernization starting in the first Pahlavi era, exemplifies fundamental transformations in traditional urban structures that have driven out-migration and demographic shifts within the city core. These modifications have directly impacted intangible cultural heritage, reducing the historical fabric—with the exception of the bazaar—to a mere museum of tangible artifacts rather than a living representation of the city's cultural identity (Esmaeeldokht, 2021). Furthermore, the socio-cultural ramifications of developing religious cities deeply affect their underlying social and cultural frameworks. Population growth, the influx of new cultures, and lifestyle changes are among these impacts. On the one hand, these shifts can foster cultural exchange and enhance social interactions; on the other hand, they may precipitate social tensions, erode traditional values, and alter the cultural identity of the city (Yin & Jia, 2024; Kubbah & Hankawi, 2024; Mandic & Delic, 2024). Consequently, effective urban planning and management are imperative for the optimal development of religious cities. Such planning must address the needs of pilgrims, enhance the residents' quality of life, protect the environment, and preserve the integrity of the historical fabric. The application of traditional Islamic urban planning paradigms can prove highly effective in the design of urban spaces and building architecture (Al-Daini et al., 2020; Ben-Hamouche, 2009). Previous research on the development of religious cities has predominantly relied on quantitative, descriptive, or strategic planning approaches, primarily focusing on the transient and broad impacts of tourism development and physical renewal. These studies have frequently encountered limitations, particularly in providing an in-depth representation of the spatial, social, and cultural structures of historical and religious precincts. Moreover, the role of active stakeholder participation has received inadequate attention in such literature. In contrast, the present study employs a qualitative-interpretive approach and contextual analysis, enabling a multifaceted, profound, and systematic examination of the spatial-physical structure and social interactions surrounding the holy shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh. This research investigates development through the lens of place-based development—an approach that emphasizes local characteristics, capacities, and site-specific needs—and proposes strategies for sustainable development and the preservation of cultural identity through extensive stakeholder engagement. Therefore, the approach adopted in

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this study is more comprehensive, localized, and participatory than previous research, deliberately shifting away from superficial and generalized analyses.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach with an interpretive research orientation. Given that urban development transformations in religious–historical urban fabrics emerge from the interaction of spatial, social, and economic dimensions, their analysis requires a context-sensitive and theory-oriented approach. The research method is based on Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA). The data used in this study include approved urban development plans for the area surrounding the holy shrine, historical and contemporary maps of the city of Qom, aerial images from different time periods, urban study reports, and relevant academic sources. These documents were collected with the aim of reconstructing the structural transformation process and identifying the dominant orientations of development interventions. The analytical framework of the study is structured around the theory of place-based development and operationalized through three principal components:

- Socio-cultural dimension
- Physical–spatial dimension
- Functional–economic dimension

In this research, the indicators associated with each component were extracted from the theoretical literature and used as an analytical lens for interpreting the documents. In other words, physical transformations, land-use changes, and population shifts were not examined as isolated phenomena; rather, they were interpreted in relation to these three dimensions.

The analytical process was conducted in three stages:

Stage 1: Historical–spatial reconstruction of transformations in the study area from the 1950s onward, based on maps and aerial imagery.

Stage 2: Comparison of the observed changes with the three components of place-based development in order to evaluate the degree of balance among different development dimensions.

Stage 3: Identification of the dominant development orientation and interpretation of the prevailing pattern of intervention.

A stakeholder analysis was also conducted based on the examination of the institutional structure of development plans, land acquisition patterns, and the implementation mechanisms of development projects. In this section, the positions of the main actors were analytically identified within the conceptual framework of power–interest, based on documented evidence. This analysis relied on institutional data and did not involve field surveys or interviews. To enhance the validity of the findings, cross-referencing of sources was employed. The results derived from map analysis were compared with official documents and previous studies in order to ensure interpretive consistency. Overall, this methodological approach enables the analysis of transformations in the area surrounding the shrine as a multidimensional and theory-informed process, without claiming statistical analysis or quantitative coding.

Theoretical Framework*

Development, as a multifaceted process, has consistently been a focal point for policymakers, planners, and researchers. In the modern era, development paradigms have shifted from an exclusive focus on economic growth to encompass social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. This paradigm shift has given rise to concepts such as sustainable development, human development, and regional development. In the Persian urban planning literature, development is defined as a process that transcends economic parameters, governing the transformation of social, spatial, and institutional structures. Habibi (2009) conceptualizes urban development as a process wherein physical, economic, and social dimensions are simultaneously organized within the framework of spatial justice. From this perspective, development becomes meaningful only when it enhances the urban quality of life and facilitates the equitable distribution of services and opportunities across the city. Similarly, emphasizing the nexus between development and regional planning, Ziari (2011) asserts that development is a process in which endogenous capacities, socio-economic structures, and the environmental characteristics of each region must serve as the foundation for policymaking. This approach perceives development as a context-dependent and spatially contingent phenomenon. Place-based development is a multidimensional approach rooted in the specific characteristics of

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each locale. By integrating physical, economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and institutional capacities, it targets the sustainable improvement of urban and regional spaces. Within this framework, urban development emphasizes the unique attributes, needs, and capabilities of each location, prioritizing local, historical, cultural, and social components over generalized, one-size-fits-all policies. Based on the theoretical underpinnings of place-based development, the local community plays a pivotal role; therefore, the development process must be executed through their active participation, while respecting spatial identity and adhering to the principles of environmental, economic, and social sustainability. The urban fabric, serving as the spatial-physical structure of the city, comprises elements such as neighborhoods, thoroughfares, and urban centers that distinctly reflect the urban identity. In cities like Qom, diverse urban fabrics coexist—including historical, modern, and peripheral fabrics (such as the immediate precincts surrounding the holy shrine)—each confronting its own specific challenges and characteristics. From this viewpoint, place-based development can function as an effective strategy for ameliorating these fabrics in a manner that preserves their local identity and distinct features. Consequently, the present study investigates the impacts of the urban development process on the spatial-physical structure of Qom, with a particular focus on the urban fabric surrounding the holy shrine. As a historic and religious city, Qom possesses a unique spatial and physical configuration, and its trajectory of urban development has exerted manifold impacts upon this structure.

• Concept of development

In scientific literature, development is recognized as a multidimensional and dynamic process that transcends a mere focus on economic growth to encompass social, cultural, institutional, and physical dimensions. In urban studies, this theoretical evolution has been accompanied by an emphasis on the socio-spatial nature of development. Under the classical approaches of development economics, development was predominantly defined by indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), industrialization, and capital accumulation. However, from the 1980s onwards, severe critiques were leveled against the reduction of development to mere economic growth. Amidst this paradigm shift, the "capabilities" approach, introduced by Amartya Sen, redefined development as the expansion of fundamental human freedoms and the enhancement of individuals' capabilities to choose a desirable way of life (Sen, 1999). This perspective emphasizes that development is not merely an increase in income but fundamentally encompasses the enhancement of quality of life and social justice. In the realm of urbanism and urban planning, a key concept that has increasingly garnered attention is the distinction between space and place. Space is defined as the physical setting for urban activities and relations, whereas place extends beyond a mere physical location to include identity, social experiences, and cultural values generated by residents and users. The analysis of place entails understanding the social, historical, and structural layers that transform "space" into "place," distinguishing it from a purely geometric context. This distinction has been emphasized in recent research as the theoretical foundation for place-based urban planning and development approaches, illustrating that place encompasses not only physical attributes but also social and semantic connections that play a determinative role in urban processes. Recent developments in urban planning literature indicate that the concept of Place-Based Planning has emerged as a prominent theoretical framework in urban research. This approach asserts that urban development strategies must be grounded in spatial realities, existing social conditions, historical values, and local participatory networks, rather than relying on uniform, top-down policies. Place-based planning emphasizes active interaction among various stakeholders—including the government, local community, private sector, and social institutions—to ensure that the specific needs and capacities of each locale are accurately identified and reflected in the design and implementation of development strategies (Tauran et al., 2025; Sabonchi & Rafiei, 2025). Within this framework, urban development processes are viewed as context-specific, participatory, and site-oriented. Instead of generalizing broad models, the focus lies on tailoring policies to the unique characteristics of each place. In numerous recent studies, this approach has been introduced as an effective strategy for addressing social, physical, and

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institutional challenges within urban fabrics, thereby paving the way for a deeper discourse on Place-Based Development. Therefore, within the context of this article, the concept of development is defined not as a unidimensional economic parameter, but as a complex and multilayered process that emphasizes the intricate interactions among people, structural frameworks, and specific urban locales. This theoretical understanding provides the necessary foundation for a more detailed discussion on place-based development in the subsequent sections.

• Place-Based development

Place-based development is an approach within urban and planning studies predicated on the assumption that the specific characteristics of each locale play a decisive role in the formation, progression, and impact of development processes. Consequently, developmental policies and interventions must be meticulously tailored to the social, economic, institutional, and cultural attributes of that particular location. Within this paradigm, analyzing and designing development based solely on generalized, one-size-fits-all strategies cannot adequately address the diverse needs of different regions; rather, spatial sensitivities at the local and indigenous levels must be fundamentally integrated. Drawing inspiration from the theories of "sense of place" and "place identity," the place-based development approach demonstrates that places are the product of complex interactions among physical structures, social processes, and institutional orders. These characteristics imbue the collective and individual experiences of users within the built environment with profound meaning. In other words, a place is not merely a physical setting, but rather the manifestation of social interactions, values, and meanings that have evolved and consolidated over time (Lefebvre, 1991). Within the framework of place-based development, planning and policymaking must emphasize a deep understanding of the local context, potential capacities, and the genuine needs of the local community. By leveraging the active participation of stakeholders—including residents, local institutions, the private sector, and governmental bodies—place-based approaches shift the decision-making process away from strictly top-down methodologies toward bottom-up and participatory models. Consequently, development strategies are formulated based on the authentic knowledge and lived experiences of the local community, thereby ensuring a more effective and nuanced response to the specific needs of the locale (OECD, 2025). A fundamental principle of place-based development is its paramount focus on local capacities and potentials. This implies that programs must be highly context-sensitive, designed with a precise understanding of the specific characteristics, resources, and challenges of each locale to effectively meet local development needs and capitalize on site-specific opportunities (ibid.). Furthermore, place-based development strongly emphasizes spatial justice, asserting that the allocation of resources and opportunities must be executed in a manner that explicitly recognizes the varying needs of different regions and actively mitigates the unequal distribution of opportunities. Ultimately, place-based development provides a robust theoretical and scientific framework that inherently incorporates the physical structure, social processes, and institutional capacities of each locale. It facilitates the active participation of the local community and enables the design of developmental strategies that are genuinely responsive to the actual realities and needs of the place.

• Components of Place-Based development

In scientific literature, Place-Based Development refers to design and planning predicated on the specific characteristics of each locale, indigenous capacities, and human-environment interactions. In contrast to holistic and standardized models, this approach emphasizes that development must emerge from local contexts and inherently preserve the socio-cultural identity of the space (Barca et al., 2012; Andrés Rodríguez, 2018). Within this framework, a precise understanding of "place" is essential, as place extends beyond mere space and physical location to encompass human experience, lived memory, social structure, and cultural values. Philosophical perspectives on human space also underscore this concept. For instance, Heidegger demonstrates that humans dwell in a "place" rather than in an empty space; place is the locus of meaning-making and living, and it is this meaning-making that endows space with identity (Heidegger, 1971). Similarly, in his theory of the "production of space," Lefebvre posits that space and place are the products of socio-economic and political relations, rather

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than merely structural and physical entities (Lefebvre, 1991). Furthermore, Mansouri et al. illustrate that human-environment relations, lived experience, and collective memory are inextricable components of understanding place, and development cannot be adequately evaluated without analyzing these semantic layers. From this perspective, just as a territory is not merely a geographical boundary, a "landscape" is not solely a visual image; rather, it is the intertwining of the objective and subjective dimensions of the environment that shapes human experience and must serve as the foundation of any developmental policy (Maghsoudi et al., 2024). In another study, Hoseinzadeh and Mansouri point out that the comprehension of an optimal urban landscape is achieved only when the analyst considers the synthesis of physical, mental, and symbolic dimensions, rather than focusing exclusively on functional aspects. Such an approach aligns seamlessly with place-based development, as it examines each locale not as a "simple container" but as a perceptual-experiential totality embedded with social and cultural layers (Hoseinzadeh & Mansouri, 2025). Accordingly, the key components of place-based development must be defined based on the integration of physical transformations, socio-cultural structures, and socio-economic functions, ensuring that the identity and context of each place are centralized as the core axis in development design and policymaking. Therefore, the three primary components are as follows.

- **Socio-cultural Component**

Development achieves success when social capital, local community participation, and a sense of place attachment are reinforced. From a philosophical standpoint, a place acquires meaning only when its users actively participate in shaping it and recognize their socio-cultural heritage (Putnam, 2000; Healey, 1997). Furthermore, Mansouri emphasizes that the human understanding of the environment, lived experience, and local culture are integral and inseparable elements of any spatial planning endeavor.

- **Physical-spatial Component (Space and Landscape)**

This dimension underscores the imperative that the physical structure must be congruent with the socio-cultural fabric and the lived experiences of the people. Lefebvre posits that space is fundamentally a product of social relations and cannot be analyzed independently of society (Lefebvre, 1991). Moreover, perspectives within landscape architecture highlight that the urban landscape is a synthesis of the objective and subjective dimensions of the environment, which collectively shape human perception; in essence, space is simultaneously an experience and a structural entity (Hemmati & Saboonchi, 2021).

- **Functional-economic Component**

This component highlights the necessity of integrating diverse land uses to foster urban vitality, economic sustainability, and social coexistence. Jacobs (1961) demonstrates that a diversity of activities drives the dynamism of socio-economic networks. Similarly, regional development research asserts that leveraging endogenous capacities—such as indigenous frameworks, local enterprises, and socio-economic interactions—constitutes the foundational basis of place-based development (OECD, 2009; Rodríguez, 2018). In historical-religious urban fabrics, such as the immediate environs of a shrine, this component translates to the strategic amalgamation of service, cultural, and commercial uses to enhance around-the-clock vitality and ensure the sustainability of social activities.

Within the theoretical framework of place-based development, these three components play a prominent, synergistic, and context-oriented role. They facilitate a deeper understanding of how development planning and policies can be formulated—not relying on generalized, top-down prescriptions, but rather grounded in a profound comprehension of the social structures, human experiences, and the physical-economic functions inherent to specific places.

Study Area

The city of Qom, recognized as one of the major religious metropolises of Iran and the capital of Qom Province, is situated in the central region of the country along the Tehran-Isfahan transit corridor. Spanning an area of approximately 112square kilometers, the city has historically served as a primary epicenter for pilgrimage and Islamic theological education in Iran, owing to its distinct religious, historical, and cultural significance. The spatial structure of Qom is fundamentally centered around the Holy Shrine of Fatima Masumeh, and throughout history, the physical development

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of the city has evolved in alignment with the expansion of the shrine's sphere of influence and its associated networks. Geographically, Qom is positioned in the central plateau of Iran, situated between the Alborz mountain range to the north and the Zagros mountain range to the south. Its strategic location along the Tehran-Isfahan route and the national north-south transit corridor has established it as one of the most critical connective and pilgrimage nodes in Iran. The region is bounded by the counties of Pakdasht and Saveh to the north, Kashan and Delijan to the east, Tafresh and Ashtian to the west, and Naraq and Mahallat to the south (Fig. 1).

At the macro level, the city of Qom comprises two primary divisions: the central historical fabric, which is concentrated around the Holy Shrine, and the newly developed areas, which have predominantly expanded across the northern and eastern sectors of the city. The central fabric of Qom, characterized by high density and profound historical-cultural values, has undergone the highest degree of urban intervention and regeneration in recent decades. The heavy concentration of commercial, religious, and tourism activities within this zone has constantly subjected this part of the city to significant physical, traffic, and demographic pressures. The specific study area of this research encompasses the central urban fabric of Qom, with a particular focus on the immediate environs of the Holy Shrine of Fatima Masumeh. As the historical and spiritual core of the city, this zone plays a pivotal role in shaping the spatial organization and identity framework of Qom. Spatially, this precinct is bounded by Eram Street and Astaneh Square to the north, Moallem Street and the Qomrud River corridor to the south, Taleghani Street to the east, and Azar Street and Imam Khomeini Square to the west. Within these boundaries lies a complex of prominent physical, functional, and cultural elements. These include the Holy Shrine, the historical bazaar, traditional corridors (such as Eram and Taleghani), newly constructed courtyards, and ancient neighborhoods (namely Astaneh, Khaneqah, and Lab-e Chal), which collectively constitute the central, identity-defining core of the city (Fig. 2). Due to the intensive concentration of pilgrimage, commercial, and cultural activities, the immediate environs of the Holy Shrine have served as the focal point for major urban development and renewal initiatives in recent decades. However, extensive physical interventions and diverse land-use changes in this district have precipitated severe urban challenges. These include the decline of indigenous residential populations (local displacement), the alteration of the cultural landscape, and the erosion of spatial continuity within the historical fabric. Consequently, investigating the urban development processes within this specific boundary provides a lucid understanding of how overarching development policies impact the physical-spatial structure and the cultural identity of Qom.

Findings

Relying on the theoretical framework derived from the place-based development literature, the analysis of transformations in the immediate environs of the Holy Shrine of Fatima Masumeh

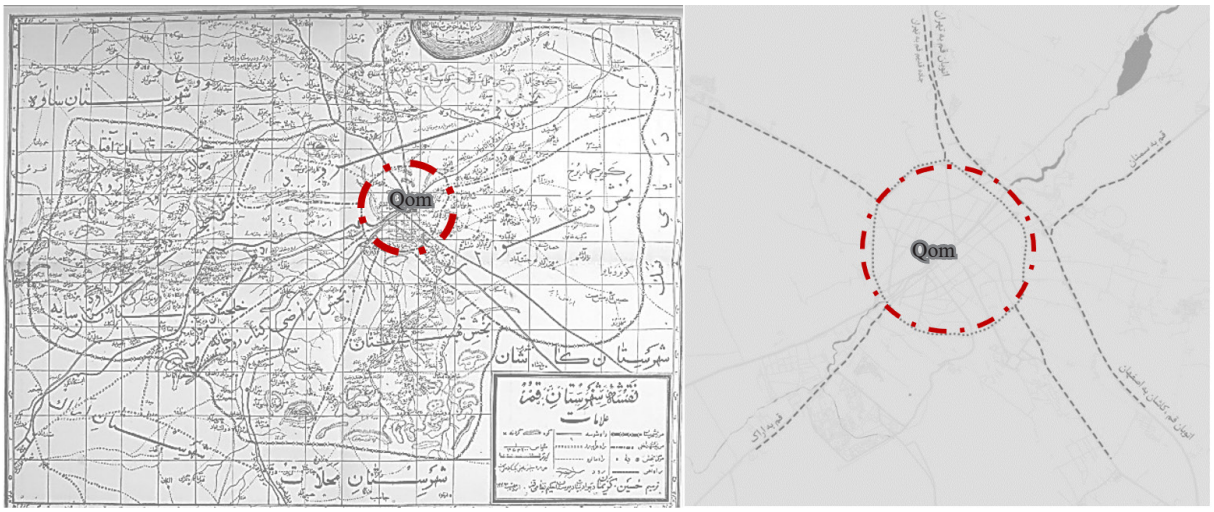

Fig. 1. Strategic location of Qom relative to major surrounding regions. Source: Authors.

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in Qom was structured around three primary components: “socio-cultural,” “physical-spatial,” and “functional-economic.” This analytical approach initiates at the macro-level of the urban development structure and progressively scales down to the micro-levels of lived experience, spatial organization, and activity patterns. Consequently, the findings are articulated not as isolated descriptive observations, but rather within a cohesive theoretical framework. At the macro level, the intervention pattern in the area surrounding the Holy Shrine can be characterized as “physical capacity-driven development”; a paradigm whose primary priorities have been augmenting pilgrimage capacity, widening thoroughfares, expanding courtyards, and establishing service infrastructures. As illustrated in the subsequent figures, the city of Qom has experienced spatial fragmentation within its central core structure from the Qajar era onwards (although the temporal focus of this article is from the year 1328[Solar Hijri / approx. 1949CE] onwards). This fragmentation is primarily attributable to the construction of various new streets, coupled with the impacts of diverse policy-making initiatives that have influenced this historical core, ultimately culminating in profound structural alterations in the shrine’s immediate vicinity. Notable among these transformations are the establishment of Chaharmardan Street and the subsequent degradation of the National Park situated opposite the shrine and adjacent to Astaneh Square, Hazrati Street, and the margins of Eram Street. Furthermore, in recent decades, the construction of large-scale courtyards within the central core has precipitated a discernible fragmentation in both urban identity and the traditional religious spatial fabric (Fig. 3).

While this approach is comprehensible in response to the growing demand from pilgrims, from the perspective of place-based development, it is deemed sustainable only when it concurrently and symmetrically reinforces the social, spatial, and economic layers. In the socio-cultural dimension, the shift in the demographic composition of the peripheral area—from stable indigenous residency to the temporary and seasonal presence

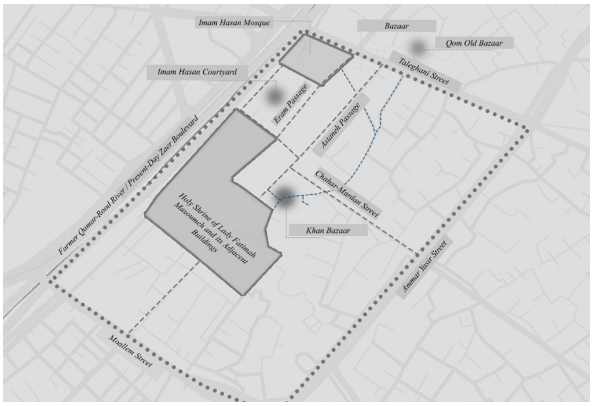
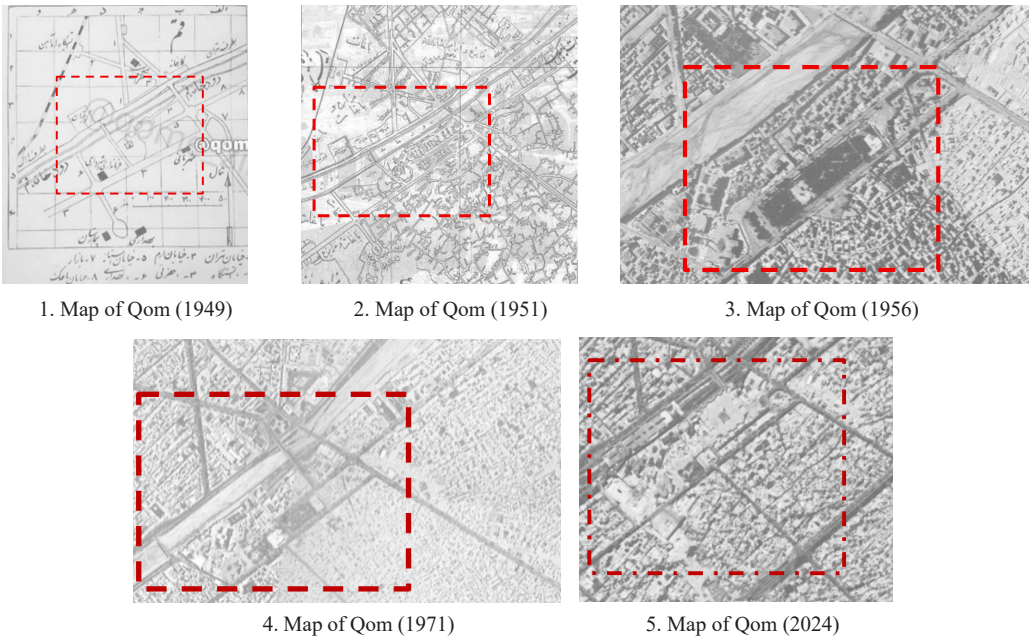


Fig. 2. Location of the study site. Source: Authors.



1. Map of Qom (1949) 2. Map of Qom (1951) 3. Map of Qom (1956)

4. Map of Qom (1971) 5. Map of Qom (2024)

Fig. 3. The evolutionary trajectory of the environs of the Holy Shrine of Fatima Masumeh from 1949 to the present. Source: Authors, based on a comparison of the available historical maps of Qom.

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of pilgrims—has led to the erosion of local social capital. Neighborhood networks, which had previously formed within the context of ritual corridors and traditional bazaars, have suffered disruption due to extensive land acquisitions and the displacement of local residents. The diminished role of inhabitants in the decision-making process and the concentration of power within formal institutions have effectively transformed the locale from a "lived space" into a "managed space." The installation of control gates along the Eram axis can be considered a prime manifestation of a function-oriented intervention in the spatial structure surrounding the Holy Shrine—an intervention designed to manage crowds and enhance security, yet one that has generated spatial consequences extending far beyond its primary function. From the standpoint of place theory, the quality of a ritual space is not solely dependent on the destination but is deeply intertwined with the "gradual process of entry" and the continuity of the movement experience. Prior to the installation of the gates, Eram Street facilitated a layered transition from the city to the shrine; a kinesthetic experience wherein social interactions, micro-economic activities, and the pilgrim's mental preparation coalesced simultaneously. The control gate reduces this continuity into a rigid, managerial threshold, transforming interactive engagement into a strictly controlled passage process. As articulated by place theorists, this can lead to the weakening of the semantic bond between space and lived experience (Fig. 4).

Furthermore, in the phenomenological literature of place, Relph, in his seminal work Place and Placelessness, emphasizes that a place acquires meaning when the continuity of experience, memory, and social presence within it is preserved. Severing spatial continuity and replacing it with rigid control mechanisms can culminate in the emergence of a form of "placelessness"—a condition in which a space functions operationally but loses its semantic depth (Relph, 1976). In the case of Eram Street, the control gate has altered the fluid and gradual movement of the pilgrim into intermittent pauses and controlled crossings, thereby curtailing and compressing the process of mental and social preparation prior to entering the shrine. The findings of this research indicate that the requisite balance among development components has suffered an asymmetry during these recent evolutionary trends. In the physical-spatial dimension, the implemented interventions have metamorphosed the historical organic structure into a more open, vastly expansive, and large-scale configuration. Although the widening of thoroughfares and the creation of large open spaces have facilitated spatial legibility and crowd control, they have simultaneously diminished the spatial continuity of traditional corridors and the ritual gradualness of the procession toward the shrine (Fig. 4). The replacement of the fine-grained urban fabric with large-scale blocks, alterations in the height of street facades, and a reduction in spatial diversity have collectively weakened the sense of human scale and decreased the stratification of the urban landscape. Consequently, the experience of movement within this precinct has shifted from a gradual, multi-layered, and interactive experience to a direct, predominantly function-oriented one (Fig. 5).

In the functional-economic dimension, although religious tourism-related activities have

Fig. 4. Installation of the shrine entrance gate, resulting in the creation of a managed space along the Eram Street corridor. Source: Vahid Rafiei Dehaghani, 1404.

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ROW	Replacement of fine-grained urban fabric with large-scale parcels over different periods		
	Evolution	Past	Present
1	Hazarati Street and the adjacent fine-grained fabric, which were removed under the new development plan and eventually replaced by Imam Hasan Askari Square.		
2	Demolition of the fine-grained urban fabric surrounding the shrine and its transformation into the Payambar-e Azam (Great Prophet) Courtyard.		
		Present	
3	Replacement of a direct, function-oriented experience with a gradual one		
4	The increased height of building edges and the reduction of land-use diversity, which have weakened the sense of human scale.		

Fig. 5. The replacement of the fine-grained urban fabric with large-scale developments across successive decades. Source: Authors.

flourished, the local economic structure has transitioned from a micro-scale, indigenous model to a capital-centric and centralized paradigm. Traditional bazaars, which formerly served dual socio-economic functions, have been supplanted by large-scale commercial complexes that prioritize consumption over social interaction. While this shift has augmented financial turnover, it has concurrently precipitated the gradual marginalization of the local economy and a notable reduction in the diversity of neighborhood-level activities. Furthermore, the street facades and edges of Eram and Chaharmardan streets, the environs of Astaneh Square, and the perimeters of the historical Sheikhan Cemetery—all constituting the primary access routes to the Holy Shrine—exhibit a relatively low and homogenized functional-activity diversity. The predominant commercial activities in these areas (e.g., souvenir shops, ticketing agencies, and eateries) are exclusively tailored to the needs of pilgrims (Fig. 6). Conversely, commercial functions catering to the daily necessities of the indigenous population have significantly diminished along these edges. Consequently, the urban fabric under study has been overwhelmingly appropriated by pilgrims and religious tourists, leading to a notably diminished and marginalized presence of the local community within this precinct. From the perspective of place-based development, such a trajectory, if devoid of mechanisms to regenerate endogenous capacities, threatens to render

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the space mono-functional, thereby critically undermining its economic resilience (Fig. 7).

A simultaneous analysis of these three dimensions reveals that the core issue is not "development" as a necessity, but rather the "unbalanced trajectory of development." The dominant focus on enhancing physical and service capacities, without a commensurate reinforcement of social capital and the indigenous economy, has caused spatial development to detach from its socio-cultural context. In other words, the organic nexus among space, society, and activity—which constitutes the theoretical foundation of place-based development—has experienced a relative rupture within this precinct. Furthermore, from the perspective of power structures, the stakeholder analysis demonstrated that formal institutions and economic investors wield the highest decision-making authority, whereas indigenous residents hold a minimal share in the policy-making process (Table 1). This power imbalance elucidates the physically driven orientation of the development and the marginalization of its social dimensions. Consequently, the research findings suggest that redefining intervention policies in this area necessitates restoring the active role of the local community and bolstering participatory mechanisms, thereby transitioning development from a project-oriented to a process-oriented paradigm. Ultimately, it can be concluded that the environs of the Holy Shrine of Fatima Masumeh are undergoing a transition from a "historical-social place" to a "pilgrimage service hub with physical dominance." Should this trend persist without integrating the tripartite social, spatial, and economic considerations, there is a substantial likelihood of diminished spatial sustainability and a decline in the quality of the pilgrimage experience. Accordingly, the place-based development framework serves not merely as an analytical tool, but as the foundational basis for readjusting future policies in this precinct—a

Fig. 6. Mono-dimensional land use exclusively catering to pilgrims; right) Chaharmardan Street; left) the perimeter of the Holy Shrine. Source: Vahid Rafiei Dehaghani, 1404.

Fig. 7. Traditional bazaars transformed into spaces characterized by luxury architecture, disregarding their semantic identity. Source: Vahid Rafiei Dehaghani, 1404.

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Table 1. Stakeholder analysis of the area surrounding the Holy Shrine of Lady Fatimah Masoumeh based on power and susceptibility to development interventions. Source: Authors.

Group of stakeholders	Level of power / decisionmaking	Level of impact sensitivity to interventions	Placement within the matrix	Contribution to development orientation
Official institutions of urban and religious administration	Top	Top	High Power – High Benefit	Setting Physical Policies and Priorities
Investors and economic stakeholders	Top	Medium to High	High Power – High Benefit	Guiding CapitalOriented Development and Commercialization
Resident locals	Bottom	Top	Low Power – High Susceptibility	Influenced by land acquisition and displacement; minimal involvement in decisionmaking
Pilgrims	Bottom	Top	Low Power – High Susceptibility	Service user; no direct role in policymaking

framework that strongly emphasizes the alignment and equilibrium of spatial structures, social networks, and economic activity systems.

The classification results indicate that the concentration of power lies predominantly within formal institutions and economic investors, while indigenous residents, despite being directly affected by the interventions, possess a distinctly limited share in the decision-making process. This asymmetry in power distribution elucidates the dominance of a physical and capital-centric approach in the development of the shrine's peripheral area and the consequent attenuation of its socio-cultural dimensions.

Discussion

The transformations surrounding the Holy Shrine of Fatima Masumeh can be considered an exemplar of the tension between "capacity-based physical development" and "context-based development." While intervention policies have been formulated with the primary aim of enhancing operational efficiency and responding to the escalating pilgrim population, an examination of the structural changes reveals that the dominant logic governing this process has been rooted more in an executive-project paradigm than in a comprehensive reading of the socio-historical context. This trajectory diverges significantly from what is continuously emphasized in the planning literature regarding the critical necessity of attending to place identity and the continuity of historical structures. In Iranian urban studies, particularly in Mansouri's research concerning "urban identity" and the "Iranian urban landscape," it has been underscored that the historical continuity of space is reproduced not merely within its physical morphology, but crucially through the structure of social relations and activity systems (Bagheri & Mansouri, 2018). Accordingly, any developmental intervention that weakens the nexus between the spatial structure and the social lifeworld will inevitably lead to a reduction in spatial cohesion in the long term. The findings of this research demonstrate that in the environs of the Holy Shrine, this organic nexus has been subjected to profound redefinition; ritual functions and local interactions have been largely supplanted by a spatial organization predicated on crowd management and the intense concentration of commercial activities. Furthermore, in the literature on urban regeneration in Iran, studies such as those by Habibi (2009) and Pakzad (2011) have highlighted the imperative of preserving fine-grained morphology, functional diversity, and social participation within the renewal process. What is observed in the study area is a profound scale shift in interventions, culminating in a stark reduction of spatial diversity and an increase in physical homogenization. While this shift may be justifiable from the standpoint of spatial control and administrative organization, it carries significant and concerning implications regarding social sustainability and the qualitative perception of place. In the realm of urban economics, several domestic studies concerning pilgrimage cities (e.g., research conducted on Mashhad and the environs of Imam Reza's Shrine) have demonstrated that excessive reliance on a pilgrim-centric economy can lead to the erosion of indigenous residency and render the local economic structure highly vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations (Alavian Sadr et al., 2024). The findings of the

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current study similarly indicate that alterations in ownership patterns and the proliferation of non-local investments have transitioned the economic structure of the precinct from a traditional "bazaar-neighborhood" model to a "complex-capital" model. This transformation, in addition to its direct economic impacts, entails cascading socio-spatial consequences that deeply disrupt the tripartite balance of the place. From the perspective of urban governance, the literature on participatory planning in Iran (Mahdavinejad & Amini, 2011) indicates that the absence of effective participatory mechanisms critically diminishes the sense of belonging and social responsibility towards the urban space. The stakeholder analysis conducted in this research corroborated that the concentration of decision-making power within formal institutions and economic investors has severely marginalized the role of the local community. While such centralization undoubtedly facilitates the rapid advancement of large-scale projects, it is fundamentally incongruent with the logic of place-based development, which relies heavily on endogenous capacities and the active interaction of local actors. In contrast to certain studies that have examined each of these dimensions in isolation, this research demonstrates that these three domains operate simultaneously and in constant, dynamic interaction. In other words, a shift in spatial scale is not merely an architectural or physical transformation; rather, it inherently leads to the reconfiguration of social networks and the profound readjustment of economic activity patterns. Consequently, the primary challenge facing the environs of the Holy Shrine can be identified not as a lack of development, but precisely as its unbalanced trajectory. Development that hyper-focuses on physical infrastructure and carrying capacity may appear efficient in the short term, but it severely risks compromising spatial quality and social sustainability in the long term.

Conclusion

An analysis of the transformations surrounding the Holy Shrine revealed that the primary issue in this precinct is not the "existence of development," but rather its "structural configuration." What has transpired in recent decades, rather than being a gradual process emerging from the socio-historical context of the place, constitutes a series of accelerated interventions aimed primarily at increasing the capacity of pilgrimage services. Although this trajectory is comprehensible in response to the growing demand from pilgrims, it has, in practice, culminated in a fundamental alteration of the relationship among space, society, and activity. The findings indicate that the spatial structure of the precinct has shifted from an order predicated on fine-grained morphology, gradual continuity, and face-to-face interactions to a configuration that is more open, yet significantly less diverse and highly function-oriented. This metamorphosis is not merely a physical alteration; it has been accompanied by the displacement of the indigenous population, the weakening of neighborhood networks, and shifts in ownership patterns and economic activities. In other words, concurrent with the increase in physical capacity, a substantial portion of the social and semantic capacity of the place has diminished. In the economic domain, the propensity towards concentrating pilgrim-centric activities and large-scale investments has gradually steered the local economic model from a pluralistic, neighborhood-oriented structure toward a dependent and mono-functional one. Although this condition may generate higher economic returns in the short term, it threatens to reduce the precinct's resilience against demand fluctuations in the long term and weaken its organic integration with the everyday life of the city. The synthesis of the three dimensions—social, spatial, and economic—demonstrates that the internal equilibrium of the place is undergoing a profound redefinition. If development is not pursued as a contextual and participatory process, there is a critical risk that the environs of the shrine will devolve from a "living urban fabric" into an "exclusively service-oriented domain"—an arena that functions operationally but suffers from the severe erosion of its deep social and identity-based bonds. Therefore, rethinking the developmental policies of this precinct necessitates a paradigm shift: transitioning from an approach that reduces development to merely increasing the building footprint, widening thoroughfares, and expanding service spaces, to one that integrates the quality of social relations, historical continuity, and the diversity of local activities as primary evaluation metrics. Such an approach requires bolstering authentic participatory mechanisms for residents, supporting micro-economic activities, and prioritizing the human scale in

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physical interventions. Ultimately, the experience of this precinct illustrates that sustainability in religious urban fabrics is achieved not by halting development, but through its balanced regulation—a mode of development capable of simultaneously meeting the needs of pilgrims while preserving livability and indigenous identity. Returning to a place-based logic, in this sense, is not merely a theoretical choice, but an absolute practical necessity for ensuring the continuity of the spatial and social quality of this precinct.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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